

SOCRATES AND PLATO

“THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING.”

— Socrates (469-399 BCE)

“WHAT WE ARE DISCUSSING IS NO SMALL MATTER,
BUT THE MANNER IN WHICH WE OUGHT TO CONDUCT OUR LIVES.”

— Plato (427-347 BCE)

“HUMANS, BY THEIR NATURE, DESIRE TO KNOW.”

— Aristotle (384-322 BCE)

[8] PHILOSOPHICAL & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE PRESOCRATICS

Philosophy began as a search for knowledge that was *systematic*. It hoped to understand the world as orderly and law-like, and to explain it in wholly natural terms. Philosophy (and science in general) began as the search for necessary, non-arbitrary causes of phenomena, and because the gods were commonly thought to act arbitrarily and capriciously, these causes were sought elsewhere than in the divine will or wills. In the western world, the move away from arbitrary and supernatural accounts of the world erupted in Miletus of the 6th century BCE. But first, the back story.

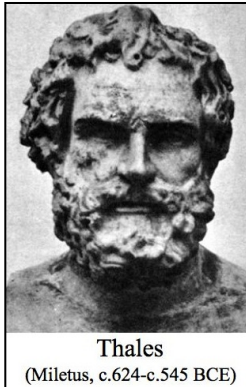
The Mycenaean culture — named for the ancient city of Mycenae — was the world of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Agamemnon was king of Mycenae). They called themselves Achaeans, and they had migrated south into the Greek peninsula around 2000 BCE, becoming the dominant force on the Greek mainland from around 1600 to 1200 BCE. Unlike the earlier Minoan people centered in Crete and whom they eventually replaced, the Mycenaean’s were Greek speakers, and their descendants are referred to as Ionian Greeks. During the 15th century BCE, with their population and power expanding, the Mycenaean’s began establishing colonies along the Mediterranean coastline, especially up and down the coast of Asia Minor (what is now Turkey), and it was here, on the south-west coast of Asia Minor, that the colony of Miletus grew into a wealthy harbor city, enjoying a material prosperity built upon trade and manufacture, and that led to it founding some fifty satellite colonies. It was in this wealthy city, now already over 500 years old, that a new way of thinking took its first breath, a way of viewing both ourselves and the world around us that formed the basis of the philosophy and science



that was to follow.

It was at this place and time — Miletus of the early 6th century BCE — there arose the idea that the natural world can make sense on its own terms, that we humans are part and parcel of that world, and that we can understand it and ourselves without reference to the gods. W. C. Guthrie, the noted scholar of ancient Greek thought, wrote that:

For religious faith there is substituted the faith that was and remains the basis of scientific thought, with all its triumphs and all its limitations: that is, the faith that the visible world conceals a rational and intelligible order, that the causes of the natural world are to be sought within its boundaries, and that autonomous human reason is our sole and sufficient instrument for the search. [Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (1962), i.29]



Thales
(Miletus, c.624-c.545 BCE)

The first of these philosopher-scientists,¹ **Thales** (c.624-c.545 BCE), lived in this harbor city of Miletus. He was a remarkable man with many remarkable feats of ingenuity ascribed to him — everything from predicting a solar eclipse (May 28, 585 BCE) to making a financial killing by cornering the market on olive presses. His most important contribution to western philosophy and science, however, was his claim that everything in the universe, in some ultimate sense, consisted of water.

It might seem foolish to believe that everything is made of water, and even more foolish that such a claim is considered important in the history of ideas. But trying to reduce all phenomena to a single naturalistic principle marked a significant turning away from those accounts based on the desires and actions of the gods. And if one considers the many apparent transformations to and from water that surrounded Thales, such an idea does not appear far-fetched at all. Living on the sea coast at the mouth of a river, Thales found the river water turn into earth when it met the sea (namely, the delta caused by silting); he also found earth turn back into water (think of water welling up out of a spring), and air turn into water (when it rains), and water turn back into air (when water evaporates), and water come from fire (the steam given off by burning wood), and water being required of anything alive — add it all up and, if you were looking for a single element underlying everything else, water wouldn't be a bad first guess.

More important than Thales's answer, however, was the *kind* of answer he gave. First, he appealed to natural, rather than supernatural, forces for his explanation of natural phenomena. Second, his explanation violated the way the world initially appears: this stuff *looks* like dirt, but it's really a kind of water. Thus began the important distinction for both science and philosophy between the way things appear to us (the so-called *manifest image*) and the way that they really are (the *scientific image*). Thales had followers, also from Miletus, who worked along similar lines, but who — because of different emphases in their arguments — came to different conclusions regarding the basic stuff of the world. **Anaximander** (c.610-c.546 BCE) believed that the ultimate stuff had to be in-

SOUL BROTHERS

“For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”

Jesus of Nazareth (4 BCE-29 CE,
as recorded in *Matthew* 16: 26).

“I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to, or as strongly as, the best possible state of your soul.”

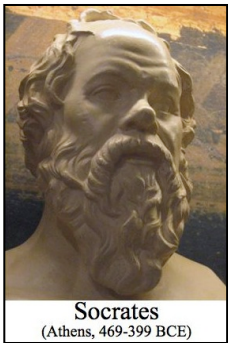
Socrates of Athens (469-399 BCE,
as recorded in Plato's *Apology*, 30a-b).

¹ At this point philosophy and what today would be called natural science were really one and the same thing, and up until the last century or so, what we call “natural science” was known as “natural philosophy.” A remnant of this is found in our educational degrees: Up until the early 1800's, most universities in Germany had four academic faculties or colleges: Philosophy, Law, Medicine, and Theology. Pretty much all the subjects taught in an undergraduate college today were included in the Philosophy faculty (physics, history, geology, anthropology, mathematics, metaphysics, logic, rhetoric, poetry, foreign languages). A holdover of this system remains in the fact that PhD's (doctorates of philosophy) are awarded in these various areas, as opposed to the JD (doctor of law), MD (doctor of medicine), and DD (doctor of divinity).

definite, without properties (he called it *to apeiron*, the boundless) — after all, how can something that is wet (water) underlie something that is dry (e.g., dust)? **Anaximenes** (c.588-c.526 BCE) believed that the ultimate stuff was neither water, nor the boundless, but instead *air* — which might sound like just another stupid guess, except that he offered an interesting theory to back it up, namely, Anaximenes noticed that air, unlike water or stones, is compressible, and he believed that it was through this mechanical process that air changed into other kinds of substance. He was also impressed by the role of air in animals, serving as the “breath of life.”

There were many more, and quite different philosophers than these three Milesians. A canonical list would include **Xenophanes** of Colophon (c.570-c.480 BCE), **Heraclitus** of Ephesus (c.544-c.480 BCE), **Pythagoras** of Samos (580-500 BCE), **Parmenides** of Elea (c.515-c.450 BCE), **Zeno** of Elea (c.490-c.430 BCE), **Empedocles** of Acragas (c.483-c.423 BCE), **Anaxagoras** of Clazomenae (c.499-428 BCE), and **Democritus** of Abdera (c.460-c.370 BCE). But discussing these would put off for too long the main subject of this chapter: Socrates.

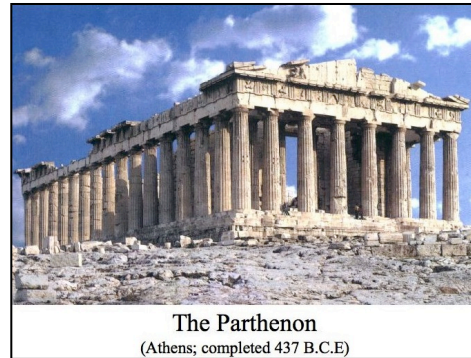
ATHENS OF THE 5TH CENTURY BCE



Socrates
(Athens, 469-399 BCE)

Socrates (469-399 BCE) lived in Athens during the time of Greek city-states, and was born into the Golden Age of **Pericles** (495-429 BCE), the dominant political leader in Athens from 460 until his death (from the plague) in 429. The tragic poet **Aeschylus** (525-456 BCE) was fifty-five when Socrates was born, and was about to write some of his most famous plays (*Prometheus Bound* in 462, the *Oresteia* trilogy in 458). The tragedians **Sophocles** (496-406 BCE) and **Euripides** (484-406 BCE) were only twenty-seven and fifteen, respectively. The Parthenon in Athens was built during Socrates’ lifetime (begun in 447, dedicated in 432). The Persians had recently been defeated in 490 at the battle of Marathon, and then again in 479 at Plataea and Mycale, with a complete Athenian victory in 449. Athens was the undisputed ruler of the eastern Mediterranean.²

This golden age, however, was followed by a twenty-six year war with neighboring Sparta (the Peloponnesian War, 431-404), resulting in the eventual and absolute defeat of Athens in 404 BCE. During this war, Athenian politics was a turbulent and dangerous affair. The “Tyranny of 400” ruled for a brief period (411-410 BCE), during which the four-hundred in power worked towards dismantling the democracy and limiting Athenian citizenship to an oligarchy of 5,000. The democracy was eventually restored, but was again dismantled after Athens’ defeat in 404 when the Spartan victors placed into power the “Tyranny of Thirty”; this led to the political exile of many of Socrates’ friends, even though two of his pupils, Critias and Charmides, were among the thirty tyrants, with Critias serving as their leader (cf. *Apology*, 32c-d). The oligarchy (literally, “rule by a few”) fell after a year’s time, and democracy was again restored.



The Parthenon
(Athens, completed 437 B.C.E)

What is known of the life and thought of Socrates comes to us primarily through the writings of several younger contemporaries: The playwright **Aristophanes** (445-380 BCE), the historian and general **Xenophon** (430-356 BCE), and the philosopher **Plato** (427-347 BCE). Aristophanes satirized Socrates in his comedy *The Clouds* (performed first in 423, when Socrates would have been forty-six), while Xenophon and Plato, both devoted disciples of Socrates, wrote dialogues that presented him in a more favorable light. Plato was by far the most famous and influential of these three sources, and his various dialogues in which Socrates is the main interlocutor give us our most detailed account of the man and his thought. The earliest of these Platonic dialogues — written in the decade following Soc-

² Athens was the main city of Attica, a peninsula bordered by mountains to its north and roughly the size of Rhode Island, although only half as populated, with its four or five hundred thousand inhabitants. About half of the Atticans lived in Athens, and of these two-hundred-thousand, only about twenty-thousand were citizens; the remaining 90% of the population consisted of women, slaves, and foreigners.

rates' forced suicide in Athens — are considered to be fairly accurate portrayals. The later dialogues, although most of them include Socrates as an interlocutor, generally involve him in name only.

THE LIFE OF SOCRATES

Socrates' father was a stonemason and his mother was a midwife. But above all else, he was a citizen of Athens, the most flourishing city-state in the Greek world following the defeat of the Persian forces in the middle of the fifth century. He served as a hoplite³ during the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, fighting in the battles of Potidaea, Delium, and Amphipolis. He chaired the Council in 406 at the time when the citizens demanded (and eventually obtained) the trial and execution of the Athenian generals who fought at Arginusae. All this he did in fulfillment of his duties as a citizen; but, for the most part, Socrates led a politically quiet life, passing his days in the market and chatting with whomever happened along.

Prior to Socrates, most philosophical speculation concerned the nature of the universe (what it was made of, where it came from, how it operated), and most of what these Presocratics did would today be called “natural science.” With Socrates we have one of the first focused efforts on understanding the social and ethical realms. Rather than asking about the nature of the world, Socrates asked about the nature of justice and of the good, of piety, courage, and beauty. Xenophon wrote of Socrates that he...

... did not discuss that topic so favored by other talkers, “the nature of the Universe,” and avoided speculation on the so-called “Cosmos” of the professors, how it works, and on the laws that govern the phenomena of the heavens. Indeed, he would argue that to trouble one's mind with such problems is sheer folly.... Rather, his own conversation was always about human things. [*Memorabilia*, I.i.11-16]

Perhaps even more significant than this shift away from speculation about the natural world to the moral and social world is a corresponding shift away from the philosopher as wise sage imparting truths, toward a philosopher seeking truths. Socrates had many more questions than he had answers, and this was perhaps something radically new. Far from being a learned prophet or sage, Socrates claimed to know nothing at all. What he *did* have to offer was a new *method*, a way to improve oneself and others.

Two phrases that perhaps best characterize Socrates are “Know thyself” (the words of Apollo inscribed on the portals of the temple at Delphi, which housed the famous oracle) and “The unexamined life is not worth living”

“ALL PHILOSOPHY IS JUST A SERIES OF FOOTNOTES TO PLATO...”

So wrote the famous logician, metaphysician, and polymath Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) — and to a large extent his claim is true, for Plato's writings have defined the subject matter of philosophy.

Plato (427-347 BCE) was Socrates' most gifted follower, without whom Socrates' fame would never have spread so widely. Not only was Plato an acute analytic thinker, he was a gifted stylist whose prose has won praise from ancient and modern readers alike.

Plato began a school on the outskirts of Athens in 370 BCE — the Academy, named after the demigod Academicus in whose grove of woods it was built. This was the first and also the longest lasting institution of higher education in the history of the West, having stayed open for 915 years. It was here at Plato's Academy that a seventeen-year-old Aristotle first came to get an education. Aristotle stayed on as a teacher, and in general the Academy attracted some of the most talented minds of the Greek world.

Plato's writings are all dialogues (except for a few letters that have been preserved). It is believed that the early dialogues represent Socrates and his views fairly closely, but the middle and later dialogues — although many of them have Socrates as the main interlocutor — are explorations of Plato's own views.

³ The hoplites were the heavily armed infantry, typically outfitted with a bronze helmet, a corselet of either bronze or leather, occasionally arm guards, a circular shield of wood or stiffened leather faced with bronze, a sword, and a thrusting spear. Unlike modern armies, these men had to provide their own equipment, so only those of some financial means could serve in this capacity.

(*Apology*, 38a).⁴ Socrates was primarily interested in questions of morality and the proper way to live one's life, and he would go to public places in Athens, such as the marketplace, and engage passers-by in a discussion of relevant issues. A trademark of these dialogues, as recorded for us by Plato, is that Socrates' interlocutor would begin by claiming knowledge or wisdom about some abstraction, such as justice, but by the end of the dialogue would either admit that he was utterly ignorant of what he thought he knew, or else storm off angrily claiming that Socrates had tricked him. It was the latter sort of outcome that helped lead to Socrates' demise, for the people he argued with were often from the upper-crust of Athenian society. Indeed, after reading the dialogues, one almost wonders that the Athenians didn't poison him sooner.

THE RISE OF THE SOPHISTS AND THE NEED FOR AN EDUCATION

The sophists were wandering teachers of the Greek world, moving from city to city and teaching for a fee. They taught various subjects thought useful among the upper-crust of society, but most importantly they taught rhetoric, the art of persuasion.⁵ Aristotle explains that the widespread need for speaking skills arose with the institution of direct democracy in 5th century Athens and Syracuse. Being able to persuade large audiences became a requirement for anyone with political ambitions, but even ordinary citizens needed some training in order to protect their lives and property before courts of law. No

professional class of lawyers existed in Athens; rather, each citizen spoke his own case before the assembled jury (numbering as large as 501 jurors, as was the case in Socrates' trial). Consequently there was a keenly felt need for the services of these wandering sophists. They normally traveled from town to town, accompanied by a retinue of students if the sophists were any good, setting up a temporary school in someone's home and charging a fee to anyone wanting to come and learn what they had to teach. Because of this practice, Plato disparagingly referred to them as "shopkeepers with spiritual wares." Although Socrates was occasionally taken to be a sophist, he noted that he *never* took money, and would even deny that he taught anything; what is more, he seldom traveled, choosing instead to remain in his native Athens (cf. *Apology*, 33a-b).

The sophists practiced as individuals. There was no organization or particular doctrine that bound them all together, and they surely did not think of themselves as a group. But for a number of reasons the teachings of all these individuals that we now label

THE SOCRATIC DIALECTIC

Also known as the **elenchic method** or the **Socratic method**, this dialectic is normally a series of **modus tollens** arguments, viz., "If P, then Q; not-Q; therefore, not-P" (where P and Q are propositions). The interlocutor claims some P, then Socrates points out that "If P, then Q" (that is, he points out a necessary consequence of the original claim). They then agree that at least some of these consequences are absurd or obviously false (not-Q), which then implies that the original claim is false (not-P); this is the *elenchus* (or refutation). The interlocutor then alters P in some fashion so as to avoid the undesired consequences, and the dialectic begins all over again. Just like his mantic sign, Socrates' dialectic lets him know only when he is wrong (40a).

SLANDERING SOCRATES

Strepsiades: Now learn what education can do for *you*. Pheidipides, there is no Zeus.
 Pheidipides: No Zeus?
 Strep.: None. The Convection-Principle is in power now. Zeus has been banished.
 Pheid.: Drivel!
 Strep.: Take my word for it, it's absolutely true.
 Pheid.: Who says so?
 Strep.: Socrates. And Chairephon too, the famous expert on flea feet.
 Pheid.: Are you so far gone on the road to complete insanity you'd believe the word of those charlatans?

— from Aristophanes, *The Clouds*

⁴ The writings of Plato and Aristotle have established paginations that are useful in referring to and finding passages, regardless of the edition being used. This pagination normally appears in the outside margin. For Plato, the marginal pagination includes a page-number and a letter for the page-subdivision ('a' through 'e'); these refer to the 1578 Greek edition of Henri Etienne (Stephanus), and so this numbering is called the "Stephanus pagination." For Aristotle, the pagination is always a page-number, a letter for the column ('a' or 'b') and a line-number (running from 1 to around 40); these refer to Immanuel Becker's edition of the Greek text (Berlin, 1831).

⁵ The word 'sophist' referred to any of these professional teachers. It was only after Plato and Aristotle that the name acquired a negative meaning as purveyors of verbal trickery.

as ‘sophists’ were tinged with a kind of **skepticism**, both intellectual and moral, and such skepticism began to bring them into disrepute. Their emphasis on rhetoric was likely a result of their intellectual skepticism, in which they claimed there was no truth but what each human made it to be — the famous sophist **Protagoras** claimed that “human beings are the measure of all things,” that is, that each person is the measure of what will count as true or false, good or bad. As Socrates pointed out, the sophists had a reputation for “making the worse argument appear the better” (*Apology*, 18b, 19b), and in fact they often claimed that equally good arguments could be found for any belief and its opposite, and thus that either side might as well be defended as the other.

This intellectual skepticism was often coupled with a kind of moral skepticism that held there is no good or bad, right or wrong, except for what the human law declares as such — and that this human law is itself arbitrary. The sophists distinguished between *phusis* (nature) and *nomos* (law), claiming that all humans are by nature selfish and self-seeking, constantly pursuing their own gratification at the expense of their neighbors so far as the political law allows them. There is no higher moral law than the law of the state, and these political laws differ from country to country. Such moral relativism stood at odds with the traditional view of a universal moral law, established by the gods.

Like the sophists, Socrates was also skeptical of the received opinions of his day, but he nevertheless seemed to believe in some absolute truth, even while he wasn’t sure we could ever obtain it in our inquiry. In short, Socrates was skeptical that any of his fellow citizens really grasped the nature of justice or virtue, for instance, while the sophists doubted there was such a thing as justice or virtue at all.

Another contrast is between the sophist’s use of **rhetoric** and Socrates’ use of **dialectic**. Whereas rhetoric involves a single person making a speech before a crowd (the aim of which was to persuade or change opinion), Socrates’ dialectical method was always a dialogue between two people, with the aim not of persuading but to discover the truth. This method involved checking to see if a claim contained any internal contradictions (if it did, then it was false). This *dialectical method* for arriving at the truth, as Plato noted later, was entirely *negative*: the most it could do was lead to an *elenchus* (Greek for ‘refutation’) by finding a contradiction in a position — thus it was also called the “elenchic method.” It was able to show that a belief was false, but never that a belief was true.

Given this negative method, the Socratic dialogues all conclude with the recognition that we do not know something that we thought we did. A typical dialogue would

[Poem]

WHEN DEATH COMES

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

— Mary Oliver (1935-)

begin by asking for some definition, proceed to examine and reject possibilities, and then end without finding any answer. But this lack of a positive method for finding the truth hardly made Socrates' efforts worthless. As he himself noted, it is far better to be ignorant and to know that one is ignorant, than to be ignorant and to not know even that much. Only then, in recognizing one's ignorance, is one prepared to be a student and to learn.⁶ So the general attitude that Socrates presents to us is a deep reverence for the truth combined with a profound humility regarding our ability for ever finding this truth.

[9] APOLOGY

In the Socratic dialogue titled "Apology," we find Socrates called before the court on charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. This dialogue (actually, it is more of a monologue) was given the Greek title *apologia*, and it has traditionally been translated into the English cognate 'Apology'. But *apologia* and the archaic English 'apology' have nothing to do with asking forgiveness. Rather, an apology in this sense was a defense, and in confronting the high court, Socrates was in no sense apologetic. Instead, he offered a rather spirited defense of himself and of his way of life.

Trials in Athens involved two parts: the determination of guilt or innocence, and the determination of the penalty should the defendant be found guilty. The three speeches comprising the *Apology* follow this pattern. First we hear Socrates' defense against the charges leveled against him. The jury then finds Socrates guilty and, since there was no set penalty in Athenian Law for these crimes, the prosecution and defense each proposed a penalty. The prosecution proposed death, and in Socrates' second speech we hear his counter-proposal. The jury then voted for the death penalty and, while the court officials were finishing up their business, Socrates made a third and final speech to the jury-men.

DEFENSE AGAINST THE CHARGES OF ATHEISM AND SOPHISTRY (17A-28A)

Socrates notes that he really has *two sets* of accusers, namely, those who have been slandering him for a long time (such as the playwright Aristophanes), and those who have just recently brought him to trial: Meletus (on behalf of the poets), Anytus (on behalf of the craftsmen and politicians), and Lycon (on behalf of the orators).

Of the earlier slandering, there have been two sorts of claims made (17a-20c): first, that he's engaged in perfectly useless speculations about the world which ultimately lead to atheism ("a student of all things in the sky and below the earth"), and second, that he's a sophist, "who makes the worse argument appear the stronger" (18b-c, 19b).

In reply to these accusations of atheism and sophistry, Socrates claims to have never denied the existence of the gods, nor to have taken money for his words (19d, 31b-c, 33a-b). But he must also explain *why* people have so slandered him, that is, how he came to be so disliked. Here he speaks of his way of life, and how he came to live it. He relates the tale of the Delphic oracle, and how he attempted to disprove her claim that he was the wisest of men by questioning anyone who claimed they possessed wisdom (20d-21d). In doing this he angered those whom he ques-

Socratic Irony

Irony involves a conflict of two meanings — one apparent, the other real — where the apparent meaning is eventually discovered for what it is, thus revealing the true meaning which is often the opposite, or nearly so. Life itself can present itself as ironic, but normally irony occurs as a verbal trope, and an early master of this was Socrates, for whom a special form of irony has been named. Especially in the early Platonic dialogues, we find Socrates denying his own abilities and praising those of his interlocutor — all with great ironic effect that the reader immediately understands but the interlocutor never does.

⁶ Of course, many of the Sophists did not think ignorance was possible, since ignorance is meaningful only in contrast to knowledge, and they did not think knowledge was possible. But the dialectical method clearly shows that some sets of opinions are worse than others, since they are plainly inconsistent.

tioned for their wisdom. He also came to realize that the oracle was *right*: for while everyone was ignorant, at least Socrates was aware of his ignorance (21d-23b). He further realized that the oracle had given him a mission: that of a *gadfly* to the people of Athens. Socrates was to goad the Athenians into seeing their ignorance, and thus to encourage them to examine their lives and to pursue knowledge and the good (29d-30e).

Socrates then turns to the charges brought against him by Meletus and the others, arguing (in a way characteristic of the Socratic method of dialectic) that he has not willingly corrupted the youth (24b-26b) and that he is not an atheist (26b-28a).

DEFENSE OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL WAY OF LIFE (28B-34B)

After finishing with Meletus, Socrates defends what is *really* on trial here: the philosophical way of life. There are two competing visions of this life. The first is to view the philosopher as a kind of hermit: this is a merely reflective life where one keeps to oneself, seeks the truth and right action alone, and is concerned only with one's own actions.

The other conception of the philosopher, and the one being defended by Socrates, is where the philosopher is a gadfly (30a-e). Here the reflective life is traded in for an active vocation as public critic, examining the standard beliefs and customs of the community. Philosophy's purpose, on this view, is to *serve* society, to benefit not only the philosopher, but society as well.

In living out his life as a philosophical gadfly, Socrates appeared to have two goals, one intellectual and the other moral. First, Socrates was trying to awaken the Athenians *intellectually* by getting them to recognize their ignorance — “it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know” (29b-c). Second, and more important, he was trying to awaken them *morally*, that they might lead better lives, that they might, indeed, pursue “the good life” (28b, 29d-e). An excellent example of this is found in the *Euthyphro*: by the end of this dialogue, we come to realize that Euthyphro's great failing wasn't that he thought he knew what piety was when in fact he did not; rather, his failing was that he valued praise and power more than he valued knowledge and virtue, and these misguided values stood as obstacles to his search for truth.

“I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of the peace.”
— Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677)

This belief is explicit in a reply that Socrates makes to Gorgias in Plato's dialogue of the same name:

“What kind of man am I? One of those who would be pleased to be refuted if I say anything untrue, and who would be pleased to refute anyone who says anything untrue; one who, however, wouldn't be any less pleased to be refuted than to refute. For I count being refuted a greater good, insofar as it is a greater good to be rid of the greatest evil from oneself than to rid someone else of it” (*Gorgias*, 458a).

Arriving at the truth requires the proper character, or moral stance, as well as an adequate intellect. Similarly in the *Apology*, Meletus's failing was not just that he did not know what benefited the youth of Athens, but that he did not care enough about their well-being to discover what actually benefits them (24d, 25c, 26b).

VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE

Socrates was interested in cultivating both our intellectual and our moral lives, and this was expressed rather tidily in his claim that “virtue is knowledge.” The Greek word that gets translated as ‘virtue’ is *arête*, which more fundamentally means the efficiency or skill used in carrying-out some function. For example, the Greeks might speak of a knife as virtuous if it is efficient in performing its function well, that is, if it has a sharp edge for cutting. Consequently, when Socrates and his philosophical descendants spoke of *human virtue* they meant something like carrying out the proper function of human beings, and doing it as efficiently as possible; this was “the good life,” and pursuing the good life required knowledge of what our proper function *was*. Once our function was known, then we

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to confront only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”
— Henry David Thoreau (1817-62)

would automatically do what is virtuous, since no one — according to Socrates — willingly pursues the bad. Thus the dictum that “virtue is knowledge.” (This claim is discussed further in the *Meno*, below.)

Finding the true function of human beings was a central problem for Greek ethicists, as well as for many ethicists today. Some philosophers claim that human beings, unlike knives or toasters, have no function or purpose at all. As it turns out, what you believe here will have a profound influence on most of your other beliefs about human beings and their place in the universe.

PLATO ON THE EDUCATION OF PHILOSOPHERS

In book seven of his long and most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato offers us four different explanations or causes of knowledge, each wrapped in a different image: the Simile of the Ship (488a-e; explaining what it is that embodies knowledge, namely, the philosopher), the Analogy of the Sun (505a-509d; explaining the ultimate goal of knowledge, namely, the Good), the Divided Line (509d-511e; explaining how knowledge differs from other epistemic states, such as belief and opinion), and the Allegory of the Cave (514a-517a; explaining what brings about knowledge, namely, education). This last image is perhaps the best known of the four, and provides a compelling account of the situation in which beginning students of philosophy typically find themselves. The root meaning of ‘educate’ is to *lead forth*, and Plato offers us an image of prisoners being led forth out of their cave.

Imagine prisoners spending their entire life chained in a dark cave, where all they have ever seen are the various shadows on the cave wall caused by guards walking back and forth in front of a torch. Now imagine one prisoner breaking her bonds and standing up to catch a glimpse of the torch producing this light — won’t the light be painfully bright to her unaccustomed eyes? And if there are fellow prisoners who have likewise spent their entire lives chained in the cave — if she turns back to them, will they believe her story about this torch that they’ve never seen? Now imagine the freed prisoner making her way up and out of the cave; if the torch was bright, imagine how much brighter must be the noonday sky, so bright that she at first has to close her eyes against it. And then, finally, imagine her learning to look at the sun itself.

Having accustomed her eyes to this new light, imagine now our prisoner returning to her old friends in the cave, wanting to bring them the good news that there is this whole other world, much brighter and more interesting than anything they’ve experienced down below. When she re-enters the cave, she will be blinded again, but now by darkness, rather than by light. Where before she could see easily, now she can see nothing, and when she reaches her friends, they laugh at her, and at her tales of another world. Why, she can’t even see the shadows on the wall anymore! And so, Plato concludes, it often is with the newly educated returning to the uneducated: Dazzled by the newness of what they have seen, and equally confused when re-confronted with the old way of life, they appear to be worse off than before their education. But this is a temporary blindness, and is a necessary step toward finding the truth.

ANSWERING MACBETH: UNDERSTANDING LIFE AND DEATH

Why does Socrates’ lifestyle strike so many moderns as eccentric? It’s not his emphasis on acting virtuously, I doubt, since a virtuous action for Socrates was merely any action that maximized the fulfillment of one’s interests, something like the modern idea of “enlightened self-interest.”

What strikes us as strange is that Socrates’ primary interest or value was *intelligibility*, or the acquisition of wisdom — even to the point of dying for it. More than anything else, Socrates wanted to understand life; he wanted to understand the world and how he fit into it. He thought that the unexamined life was not worth living; to pass through life without understanding what was happening and why — this was to live as a mere animal, and was for him intolerable.

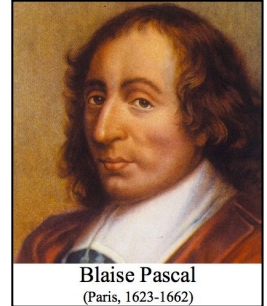
Over 2000 years later we hear very much the same attitude expressed in Sartre’s short story, “The Wall.” Here **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980), a 20th century French author and existentialist philosopher, echoes Socrates with the claim that “the *dishonest life* is not worth living.” As the narrator of the story explained: “I didn’t want to die like an animal, I wanted to understand.” The narrator finally came to realize that his impending execution



Jean-Paul Sartre
(Paris, 1905-1980)

was not what terrified him — after all, he had to die someday. What struck him as so terrible was having to live without any understanding of death.

We find these same concerns at work in the writings of **Blaise Pascal** (1623-1662), a French mathematician, scientist, and Christian apologist of the seventeenth century. At his death, Pascal left behind a collection of notes that he had been piecing together for a book (later published as his *Pensées*) and several of these notes concern death and human understanding. In note #165, he compares our lives with a play on the stage: “The last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw dirt over your head and it is finished forever.” Elsewhere he writes of our condition as that of “a man in a dungeon” (#163-64). But Pascal finds human salvation partly in the fact that humans can *understand*; on this ability rests human worth and dignity. Man, he writes, is a “thinking reed”:

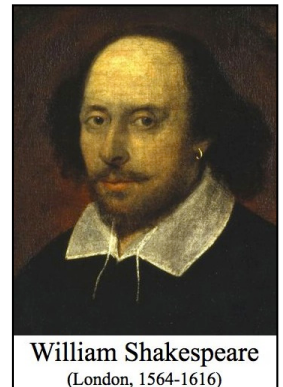


Blaise Pascal
(Paris, 1623-1662)

Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer, because he *knows* that he is dying and the advantage the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. Thus all our dignity consists in thought. ... Let us then strive to think well. (#200)

It is not in space that I must seek my human dignity, but in the ordering of my thought. It will do me no good to own land. Through space the universe grasps me and swallows me up like a speck; through thought, I grasp it. (#113)

The suffering and finitude of life can all be salvaged with even the smallest scrap of meaning. As long as life possesses some reason, and human existence possesses some claim to dignity and worth, then most of us can make do with the barest of comforts, or even no comfort at all, save for the comfort that this life, somehow, makes sense. But when we are pulled up short and find no meaning? This existentialist malaise is not new to the 20th century; the Elizabethan **William Shakespeare** (1564-1616) captured all too well this view of the human predicament with Macbeth’s disgusted lines:



William Shakespeare
(London, 1564-1616)

Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. [*Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5]

Answering Macbeth has remained the larger and more compelling part of philosophy’s task.

[10] MENO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thessaly is a region of the Greek peninsula south of Macedon and north of Athens and the rest of Attica, and in Socrates’ day it was known for its horsemanship. Meno was a young Thessalian nobleman and general in his late teens or early twenties. In 401 BCE he took part in the famous and ill-fated expedition of the ten thousand against the King of Persia, in which Meno was captured and put to death. Xenophon wrote of this expedition and described Meno as a treacherous, greedy, ambitious, self-seeking fellow. He is depicted in Plato’s dialogue as being exceptionally self-confident and arrogant, having studied under Gorgias, the leading sophist of the time.

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

There are at least three different levels for reading an early Platonic dialogue: (1) as a piece of literature (namely, as a drama), (2) for the substantive issues raised (that is, various philosophical claims), and (3) as an example of philosophical method (that is, on how we ought to carry out our philosophical investigations).

Plato's early dialogues may well have been written for the stage to be acted out before an audience. The dramatic time for the *Meno* is likely 402 or 401 BCE, shortly after the restoration of the democracy in Athens, and a few years before Socrates' trial and execution. Four characters make an appearance: Meno, Socrates, one of Meno's slave boys, and Anytus, a powerful Athenian politician. Anytus was possibly the most powerful person in the democratic government of Athens at the time, and would later be the moving force among the three plaintiffs bringing charges against Socrates that led to his trial and execution. The significance of Socrates

baiting Anytus near the end of the dialogue (89e-94e) would not have been lost on Plato's contemporary audience.

Most of the dialogue occurs between Meno and Socrates, and the topic of discussion is virtue. The dialogue opens with Meno, a student of Gorgias, asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught. Socrates replies that he isn't sure what virtue even *is*, much less whether it can be taught. Thus the first part of the dialogue (70a-79e) is an attempt to define virtue. After several unsuccessful attempts at this, Meno raises the paradoxical claim that nothing can be learned at all, and, in the second part of the dialogue (80a-86c) — the so-called "slave boy passage" — Socrates explains and defends his theory of recollection, a theory designed to allow for the possibility of learning. Having done this, Socrates moves to take up again the search for a definition of virtue, but Meno insists on his previous question regarding the teachability of virtue. So, in this third and final part (86c-100b), Socrates acquiesces to Meno's demands and pursues the question of whether virtue can be taught and, if not, how one acquires it. They ultimately conclude (although Socrates only ironically) that virtue is unteachable. A backdrop to all this is Gorgias's widely-known claim that virtue cannot be taught.

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

The **definition of virtue** is the overriding concern of the dialogue from the dramatic or surface structure. This definition is pursued in the first part of the dialogue (70a-79e) but, as is typical of the Socratic dialogues, an adequate definition is never found. Socrates' **theory of recollection** (and the immortality of the soul) is discussed in the middle part of the dialogue. This is presented by Socrates as a myth, and so perhaps was not taken by him as literally true. The distinction between **knowledge and true belief** is discussed in the third part of the dialogue (at 97a-99c). Finally, Plato's important theory of **forms** makes a brief appearance (72c-e). All four of these topics will be discussed more fully below.

One famous and paradoxical claim of Socrates is that **we desire only the good**, that we never willingly do what is bad. This claim is briefly discussed and defended in the first part of the dialogue (77c-78b), where the idea that virtue is a kind of knowledge is discussed. It involves the denial of *akrasia* (incontinence, or "weakness of the will"), and is still widely debated to this day. Socrates claims that no one knowingly chooses the bad; and when

XENOPHON ON MENO

Meno the Thessalian was manifestly eager for enormous wealth — eager for command in order to get more wealth and eager for honor in order to increase his gains; and he desired to be a friend to the men who possessed greatest power in order that he might commit unjust deeds without suffering the penalty. Again, for the accomplishment of the objects upon which his heart was set, he imagined that the shortest route was by way of perjury and falsehood and deception, while he counted straight-forwardness and truth the same thing as folly. Affection he clearly felt for nobody, and if he said that he was a friend to anyone, it would become plain that this man was the one he was plotting against. He would never ridicule an enemy, but he always gave the impression in conversation of ridiculing all his associates. Neither would he devise schemes against his enemies' property, for he saw difficulty in getting hold of the possessions of people who were on their guard; but he thought he was the only one who knew that it was easiest to get hold of the property of friends — just because it was unguarded. Again, all whom he found to be perjurers and wrongdoers he would fear, regarding them as well armed, while those who were pious and practiced truth he would try to make use of, regarding them as weaklings.

— Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 2.6.1

someone chooses what appears to us as obviously bad — for instance, an alcoholic choosing to drink a glass of scotch in the morning — the bad thing being chosen appears as a good thing to the one choosing. Later, of course, the person may regret the choice, but at that moment, drinking a glass of scotch seems better than any other alternative.

In the context of the *Meno*'s discussion of virtue, this Socratic belief implies that to be *taught* or to *learn* what is virtuous is actually to *become* virtuous. As Socrates argues elsewhere (e.g., the *Protagoras*), “knowledge is virtue, and virtue knowledge”: all that we need in order to do the right thing is to know what is right. This suggests that Socrates believed one of two things about human desires: either we have no irrational desires (all desires spring from our knowledge of the good) or we have irrational desires, but a knowledge of the good is

able to overwhelm them. In a discussion with Protagoras about hedonism (the view that pleasure and the good are identical), in which Socrates rejects hedonism, we hear him saying the following about knowledge and the good:

Come now, Protagoras, and reveal this about your mind: What do you think about knowledge? Do you go along with the majority or not? Most people think this way about it, that it is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler. They do not think of it in that way at all; but rather in this way: while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else — sometimes desire, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being utterly dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave. Now, does the matter seem like that to you, or does it seem to you that knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to save a person? [*Protagoras*, 352a-c]

Both Plato and Aristotle believed that we *do* have irrational desires, and neither believed that mere knowledge of the good was adequate to overcome these desires. They did believe that there was a kind of knowledge of the good that could overwhelm all irrational desires, but that acquiring this knowledge presupposed considerable training.

Socrates doesn't spell out this position in the *Meno*, but it is clearly being assumed. In worrying whether virtue can be taught, he is worrying whether people can be made virtuous: if only they can be taught what is right, they will act accordingly. (The apparent conclusion of the *Meno*, that virtue is *not* knowledge, will be discussed below.)

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The importance of **defining one's terms** before discussing a topic is stressed in all of Plato's early dialogues, but nowhere quite so strenuously as in the *Meno* (e.g., at 70a-71b). Here Meno wants answers to questions about virtue, yet he lacks the patience and intellectual diligence to determine what exactly he means by 'virtue' in the first place. Of the five or so definitions that Meno suggests, all are fairly worthless, and Plato uses these as a foil for displaying a few common problems that beset proposed definitions, namely, that they are too broad or too narrow (including or excluding more than they should; 73d), or that they are circular (defining a term with a part of itself; 79b-c). (Plato most explicitly discusses the proper form of a definition in the *Euthyphro*, discussed below.)

As already noted, Socrates practiced an **elenchic method**, a method of refutation where a person's views are closely examined for inconsistencies. The usefulness of such a method is highlighted to great effect in this dialogue, particularly in the middle part (the “slave boy” passage, 80a-86c). The point here is that until one is brought to a realization of one's own ignorance, then learning is impossible. The first step towards enlightenment is to become

SUBSTANCE & METHOD

Within any discipline, a distinction can be drawn between substantive claims (what we believe) and methodological claims (how we decide what to believe). **Substantive claims** are the “facts” constituting the discipline (e.g., that the pressure and volume of a gas are inversely related), while **methodological claims** are strategies or methods for discovering and evaluating these factual claims (e.g., believe only what you can repeat under controlled conditions). Studying the latter is necessary to become practitioners of the particular discipline. Typically, one first learns the substantive claims of a discipline, and only somewhat later learns to recognize and reflect upon the methodological claims as well. A liberal arts education will mention substance, but concentrate on method. Method guides the collection and evaluation of substance.

aware of one's own unenlightened state. Indeed, in the education of humanity, surely some Socrates must first appear and do his work. This is the first step in all education: to demonstrate to the student that he *is* a student, that he is ignorant and does not know what he thinks he knows. For until the need for enlightenment is felt, there will be no attempt to answer this need, and the would-be student's mind will remain as an empty room with a locked door, full of nothing and admitting no one. (See the parallel texts at 80b and 84a comparing Meno with the slave boy: "Up to now, he thought he could speak well and fluently, on many occasions and before large audiences.")

As with various other dialogues, the *Meno* also displays **various logical inference patterns**: here we find in particular the hypothetical syllogism (87b-c, 87d-88d), modus tollens (89d-e, 98d-e), and the disjunctive syllogism (99a) (see the "Overview of Deductive Logic," above, for these forms). There is also a brief mention of **conversational etiquette** (75c-d). Finally, the **hypothetical method** is displayed near the end of the dialogue (86c-96d). In this method, as used by geometers, an assumption is made, and then the consequences of this assumption are examined.

DEFINITIONS OF *VIRTUE* (71E-79C)

Meno first offers as his definition of virtue a mere list (71e-72a): the virtue of men, women, children, the elderly, free men, and slaves. But such a list of examples fails to say what all these kinds of virtue have in common, such that they are virtues at all. Here Socrates assumes that general terms must be picking-out some quality that is shared by all individuals denoted by that term, for example, that all cows have something in common that makes them all cows.⁷ Meno next defines virtue as "the capacity to govern men" (73d). But this definition is both too narrow and too broad. It is too narrow because it excludes children and slaves from being virtuous (since they lack the "capacity to govern men"); yet surely these individuals are capable of virtue. And it is too broad because it would include unjust tyrants as virtuous. Defining virtue as "desiring the good" (77b) fares no better, since *everyone* desires the good (77c-78b). Such a definition is worthless, making all people equally virtuous. Meno's fourth attempt is nearly as worthless; here he defines virtue as "the power of acquiring the good" (78b-c). It quickly becomes obvious that the acquisition must be *just* if it is to characterize virtue. Finally, Meno lands on the definition that whatever is accompanied by justice is virtue (78e). But justice is itself a virtue, and so a whole is made equal to one of its parts. In other words, Meno's definition is circular, defining virtue with one of its parts (79b-c).

PARADOX OF THE LEARNER (80D-E)

At this point Meno is *perplexed* — the very goal of Socrates' elenctic method. But Meno trivializes this perplexity, and tries to avoid further work by invoking what Socrates refers to as an old debater's trick, the so-called "paradox of the learner": We can never learn anything new, for if we don't know what a thing is already, then we won't know whether we've found it or not. Even if we chance across it, we won't know whether it's that which we wanted. This paradox also occurs in two other of Plato's dialogues: the *Euthydemus* (276d) and the *Theaetetus* (199c). It views inquiry as a goal-oriented activity; thus, if there is no goal (due to ignorance) then inquiry cannot take place.

Plato takes this problem seriously. How, for instance, can we collect a group of favorable instances under a concept unless we can first identify the favorable instances, and how can we do this unless we already understand the concept (i.e., know the criteria that define the concept)? For example, it doesn't seem that we could ever acquire the concept "COW" by induction, since in reviewing various individual items and sorting them into favorable and unfavorable instances (i.e., cows and non-cows) we would first need the concept "COW" to do the sorting (so that we could recognize that an individual is indeed a cow).

Suppose we simply want to sort individuals by similar appearance. Then all individuals that "look the same" will go into one group, and then we will apply an arbitrary name to that group — such as the word 'cow' — by which

⁷ Meno later provides a second list of virtues at 74a (courage, moderation, wisdom, munificence, "and many others"); how should we characterize the difference between these two lists? Perhaps that the first list includes proper roles for different kinds of people, while the second list includes qualities that anyone, regardless of their role, should embody?

they will henceforth all be known. But how do we determine when two individuals “look the same”? Sameness, after all, is always “sameness in some respect”; in this example, the sameness is with respect to “kind of animal,” perhaps, and so we are back with needing knowledge of animal kinds or concepts before we can do the sorting. Another example is with recognizing geometric figures, like circles: Imagine a collection of chalk drawings on the blackboard, some of which appear — more or less — like circles. Now suppose that you do not possess the concept of a circle: would you be able to see that they are circular, and to gain from them the concept of a circle? Keep in mind that no one ever experiences a perfect circle — how then do we gain access to such a concept, when we never experience a proper example of one?⁸

THEORY OF RECOLLECTION (81C-82B)

Socrates believes the learner’s paradox can be resolved by appealing to his theory of recollection⁹ (which involves the claim that “nothing can be taught, it can only be recollected”), and he tries to support this theory with the “Slave Boy” example, where a slave boy is caused to “remember” a geometric truth. Socrates’ (or Plato’s) theory is that, before we are born, our souls are in direct communion with the “Forms” or pure items of knowledge; we forget this knowledge at birth, but through the right kind of experiences (education) we slowly recall what we forgot. This theory has the added benefit, claims Socrates, of proving the immortality of the soul (for it requires that the soul exists prior to inhabiting this body, which offers some evidence that it might survive the body’s dissolution, as well).

Actually, however, the underlying claim here is that all knowledge is *innate*. Socrates can’t be claiming that we learned various things in a previous existence, and that we now need simply to recollect them — for the learning paradox would apply in the previous existence just as much as it does in the present. The point, really, is that we *never* learn anything; rather, the knowledge is already “built into” our minds as innate. Yet once this is realized, the need for an immortal (or, at the very least, a pre-existing) soul dissolves. Knowledge can be innate regardless of the durability of the soul.

THE HYPOTHETICAL METHOD (86C-96D)

The third part of the *Meno* (86c-100b) showcases the hypothetical method, applying it to the question of whether virtue is teachable. Dramatically, the topic is introduced by way of Meno’s foolish insistence that they attempt to answer this question even though they have yet to define virtue (as Socrates puts to him, “you do not even attempt to rule yourself, in order that you may be free” — 86d).

This method allows us to develop an argument using premises that we aren’t certain are true. We hypothesize that *if* these premises are true, then the conclusion will follow. Our next step is to develop arguments in which each uncertain premise is the conclusion. If we need to call on uncertain premises for *those* arguments, then we simply continue the process, until we eventually arrive at arguments in which all the premises are known to be true. In this way we work backwards, beginning with what we want to prove. In Plato’s example here, the conclusion we want to prove is that “virtue is teachable,” which he thinks we can prove if we assume that virtue is a kind of knowledge, which he then can prove by assuming that all virtues are good.

KNOWLEDGE VS TRUE BELIEF (96D-99E)

Ever since Plato, knowledge has been characterized as true belief “with some account” (*doxa meta logos*). The theory of recollection was Plato’s first candidate for the “account” (85c-86a). The difference between knowledge and belief is explored in greater detail in the discussion on Descartes (below); here we will consider only those aspects peculiar to the discussion in the *Meno*.

⁸ An entirely different take on this paradox: Learning is impossible until one understands one’s own ignorance; without the *elenchus*, learning is impossible.

⁹ The theory of recollection is further developed in Plato’s *Phaedo* (72e-76e), a dialogue written several years later, and then it disappears from his writings.

The difference between true belief (or opinion) and knowledge, according to Socrates, is that knowledge stays “tied down” (98a) whereas mere belief does not. We tie down the knowledge with a *logos*, a reason or account of what makes the belief true. It is a point of human psychology that we can remember facts much more easily if we understand why they are true (that is, why we should believe them, how they fit into a larger system of facts, and so on). Consider this simple analogy of two number series (A and B). Which series is easier to remember?

A: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19.

B: 9, 3, 17, 5, 11, 13, 19, 7, 15, 1.

Clearly the A-series is easier to “tie down” in our memory, since it follows a simple rule — for example, “the first ten odd numbers” or “count ten times by twos, starting with one.” The B-series, on the other hand, is wholly random, and must simply be memorized. The rule or *logos* of the A-series helps us keep hold of the series in our minds.

But this is just an analogy. An example of what Plato had in mind might be something like this: Merely *believing* that “whales are mammals” (imagine having been taught to believe this as a child, without ever being told why you should believe it) is quite different from *knowing* that “whales are mammals,” where you believe this to be true because, for instance, whales give live birth to their offspring and then feed them with milk, and these are defining features of being a mammal. It would be much easier for someone to dislodge your belief if you didn’t have good reasons for believing it. They might point out that whales live their entire life in the water, just like fish, and have fins like fish, and therefore are fish, not mammals.

Socrates makes the further point that either of these can serve as adequate “guides of action” (96e), with the claim that current statesmen all possess virtue only as detached beliefs (obtained by way of divine inspiration) and not as items of knowledge (where they understand what virtue is and why).

This account of knowledge, however, is clearly flawed. It seems that Socrates has the role of memory backwards: He claims that recollection is itself the *logos* that ties-down the true belief and turns it into knowledge (86a, 98a). What he perhaps meant to say was that the reasoning used to bring about this “recollection” is the *logos* — that would probably be closer to the truth. And on his account we have beliefs of which we are not conscious or aware (everything that has yet to be recollected). Providing a proper account of knowledge has exercised philosophers for the last two millennia.

CONCLUSION

What are we to make of Meno, the student of Gorgias? Primarily that he is intellectually lazy and shallow, that he cares little for truth. The dialogue begins abruptly with Meno posing a popular philosophical question that presupposes knowledge he assumes he has, but in fact does not. Yet rather than pursue this assumption with any vigor, he instead poses a stock debater’s question (the “learner’s paradox”), and after Socrates resolves this paradox, Meno again presses his first question without bothering to first discover the definition of virtue. The French scholar Alexandre Koyré sums-up the situation quite nicely:

First of all, Meno does not know how to think. He does not know what a definition is nor a vicious circle. It is in vain that Socrates explains it to him, he is incapable of learning it. Thus, he does not notice that Socrates, proposing to identify virtue with “true” or “right” opinion, makes sport of him (but not of us); how, indeed, could one tell that an opinion is “true,” that is, in accord with the truth if one does not possess it, in other words, if one does not have knowledge? We understand it, but Meno does not... Meno understands nothing, not even the ferocious irony of the comparison between the Athenian statesman and

WHAT GORGIAS BELIEVED ...

- Virtue cannot be taught.
- Truth is whatever you believe it to be; reality is simply how things appear.
- There is no difference between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion (*doxa*).
- Gorgias promised to teach the ability to persuade anyone of any proposition — or its opposite.



the soothsayers and of the statement that the virtue of the former is a gift of the gods. When Socrates sets up in contrast to these false statesmen the image of a true statesman, who possesses knowledge, “Well put, Socrates” is his sole comment.... Meno, friend and disciple of Gorgias, has not learned correct reasoning, but only persuasive discourse. He is not a philosopher; he is merely a rhetorician. Truth matters little to him. What he seeks is not truth, but success.

[...] Virtue is not taught, but it can be taught. ... Meno has not understood the lesson, because in his soul there are no longer any living vestiges of the idea of good. Thus, the dialogue’s unformulated conclusion, an answer to Meno’s question, stands out in bold relief — yes, virtue can be taught, since it is knowledge, but it cannot be taught to Meno. [Alexandre Koyré, *Discovering Plato* (Columbia University Press, 1945), pp. 15-17.]

Similarly, some students are students in name only, and suffer much as Meno did. Many of these are ignorant even of their own ignorance, and are deeply irritated by anyone who tries to arouse them. Still others are aware of their ignorance, but only in a limited sense, for although they seem aware of how little they know, they believe that knowledge of the sort they are lacking is not to be found in this world. And so they lounge about happily in a kind of magnanimous indifference, living and letting live, agreeing to disagree — because, after all, there is no true or false to be found here, but only mere opinion.

[11] EUTHYPHRO

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

As with the *Meno*, we can study the *Euthyphro*’s dramatic content, its substantive claims, and its methodological innovations. Dramatically, the *Euthyphro* occurs fairly late, just before the trial and execution of Socrates; historically, it was likely written quite early in Plato’s career, in the decade following the death of Socrates, and so it is one of Plato’s first. The only characters on stage are Socrates and Euthyphro, and their respective natures are quickly drawn. Note Socrates’ use of irony, and Euthyphro’s unbridled egoism and tendency to self-praise.

As to the plot, Socrates meets Euthyphro at the law court, where Socrates has come to face charges by Meletus of corrupting the youth and of atheism. The dialogue quickly turns to Euthyphro’s reason for being at the court, and his defense of prosecuting his own father, which results in Socrates’ question as to the nature of piety. Here begins the search for a proper definition of ‘piety’ or ‘the pious’, and this search is pretty much the whole plot of the dialogue — although there is ample comic relief thrown in at appropriate moments.

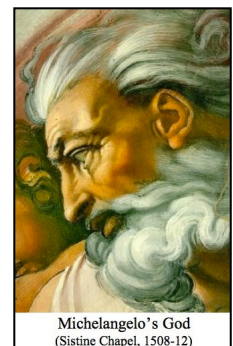
SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

You might say that the nature of piety is the major and most obvious substantive problem in the *Euthyphro*, and we will look more closely at some of Euthyphro’s attempted definitions later on. Other than the nature of piety, there are three other important substantive issues discussed or mentioned: the ability of humans to have knowledge of divine matters and the anthropomorphism that typically accompanies claims of such knowledge, Plato’s Theory of the Forms, and the relationship between religion and morality.

Against anthropomorphism (6a)

The word *anthropomorphism* comes from two Greek words — *anthropos* (= human) and *morphe* (= shape) — and first appears in the writings of the Presocratic **Xenophanes** of Colophon (c.570-c.480 BCE). Unlike the Milesians before him, Xenophanes was less interested in giving a comprehensive account of the physical world, concentrating instead on matters of theology. Here he disparaged the traditional gods as found in the works of Homer and Hesiod, arguing that the gods did not have bodies and they were not at all like human beings. Here are a few relevant fragments from his writings:

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and



Michelangelo's God
(Sistine Chapel, 1508-12)

reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other. [...] Mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own. [...] The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair. [...] But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.

Xenophanes's own belief was that there is a single non-anthropomorphic god, unmovable and everywhere, which he struggles to describe:

One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought. [...] Always he remains in the same place, moving not at all; nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times, but without toil he shakes all things by the thought of his mind. [...] All of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.

This is one of the first philosophical conceptions of the divine, and is close to the position that Plato would later adopt as his own.

Religious Epistemology

Related to Socrates' rejection of an anthropomorphic conception of the divine is his general skepticism regarding our ability to know anything about the gods in general. At several points in the dialogue, Socrates' ironic asides suggests that he found such knowledge limited at best: "For what are we to say, we who agree that we ourselves have no knowledge of them?" (6b), "tell me ... what proof you have that all the gods consider that man to have been killed unjustly" (9a), "You obviously know since you say that you, of all men, have the best knowledge of the divine" (13e). Socrates appears sympathetic with the views of **Protagoras**, a sophist about twenty years his senior, who said:

Concerning the gods I am unable to know either that they are or that they are not, or what their appearance is like. For many are the things that hinder knowledge: the obscurity of the matter and the shortness of human life.

Plato's theory of Forms (6d-e)

For the early Greeks, knowledge was to be of what is real, and the real was unchanging. Therefore, knowing some X was to know the underlying unchanging reality that made X what it was. **Heraclitus** (c.544-c.480 BCE) was a Presocratic philosopher famous for his belief that everything is in constant flux: "you can't step in the same river twice." Heraclitus had a disciple by the name of Cratylus, and in Plato's dialogue named after this disciple, we find Plato (through Socrates) responding to this impermanence, arguing that such constant change is true of the world of appearances, but not, Plato insists, of the reality underlying those appearances:

Nor can we reasonably say, Cratylus, that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist. [*Cratylus*, 440b]

PLATO ON BEAUTY'S FORM

"You see, the man who has been thus far educated in matters of love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of loving: he will suddenly catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that is the reason for all his earlier labors: first, it always *is*, and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, not beautiful at one time and ugly at another; nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there. Nor will he perceive the beautiful in an image, like a face, or hands or some other part of a body. Nor will he find it in a theory or in any scientific understanding. It is not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else. But itself by itself with itself, it is always one in Form; and all the other beautiful things share in that Form, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, the Form does not become the least bit smaller or greater, nor suffers any change."

Plato, *The Symposium* (210E-211B)

Plato's theory of Forms was one of the first attempts to provide an account of knowledge that spoke to this need for permanence. By its very nature, the theory played a double-role, both epistemological and ontological. Namely, the theory helped explain how knowledge is possible (the epistemological role), as well as why things are as they are (the ontological role).

Plato's Forms are unchanging and eternal, making knowledge of the changing things in the world possible. The world of the senses (that is, of appearance), is constantly changing; and since true knowledge must be of what is unchanging, there must be something permanent of which we have knowledge that underlies the appearance of the world — and that permanent world, of course, is the world of Forms. These are the exemplars, the standards, by which we measure and name the items of sensible experience. Nowhere do we ever experience a perfectly round circle, yet we can easily identify imperfect circles *as* circles because we can compare them to the “perfect circle” (namely, the Form Circle).

Similarly, the Forms are what make a thing what it is. A goat is a goat because this lump of matter has embodied the Form GOAT (and what we know best about this bit of matter is that it is a goat). It is the form embodied by a thing that we are trying to capture with our definitions.

One important motivation mentioned in the *Euthyphro* for developing this doctrine of Forms is to provide a “decision procedure” for settling disputes (7b-d): we often disagree whether an action is pious or impious, virtuous or vicious, etc. But if we had a clear vision of the Forms for Piety and Virtue, then such disputes could be readily resolved simply by comparing the sensible action before us with the Form, and noting to what extent it measures up. The doctrine of Platonic Forms is mentioned in this dialogue, but it is developed in much greater detail in several of Plato's other dialogues, especially the *Phaedo*.

Morality and religion (10a)

Is morality independent of religion? Is something good (or morally correct) because the gods love it? Or do the gods love it because it is good, as Socrates believes? To put it in monotheistic terms: Is killing the innocent wrong because God forbids it? Or does God forbid it because it is wrong? If the latter is the case, then we can present a moral critique of a religion by checking it against these moral principles, with the presumption that we would reject any immoral religions. This gives us an authoritative leverage against particular religions, which would seem to be especially important in cultures where several religions are competing, or where a new religion is emerging to replace a traditional one.

The German philosopher **Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz** (1646-1716) argued against the notion that right and wrong are determined by God's will, for this would ...

... destroy all of God's love and all his glory. Why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the exact contrary? Where will his justice and wisdom reside if there remains only a certain despotic power, if will holds the place of reason, and if, according to the definition of tyrants, justice consists in whatever pleases the most powerful? (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §2)



Gottfried Leibniz
(Hannover, 1646-1716)

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUE: DEFINITION

There are various issues of “philosophical method”; one of these is the nature of definition, and it is this that Plato is working out in the *Euthyphro*.¹⁰ Getting clear on what counts as an adequate definition is obviously of great importance; for example, little can be said about virtue (who has it, how to get it, and how to teach it, etc.), until we first understand what ‘virtue’ means. Over the course of the dialogue, Euthyphro suggests four different definitions of ‘the pious’ (*hosion*):

¹⁰ Although it isn't always clear in Plato's dialogues which ideas were Socrates' and which are innovations made by Plato, we are likely safe to say that Socrates held to an account of definition like the one given here. Aristotle (Plato's pupil) wrote: “two things may be fairly ascribed to Socrates — inductive arguments and universal definition — both of which are concerned with the starting point of science” (*Metaphysics*, 1078b17 seq).

- (1) “The pious is prosecuting the wrongdoer” (5d-e).
- (2) “What is dear to the gods is pious” (7a).
- (3) “The pious is what all the gods love” (9e).
- (4) “The godly and pious is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods” (11e-12e).



Each of these definitions is flawed in some way, and by working through these definitions, the reader is led to the correct method of defining terms.

Euthyphro’s first definition can be viewed as either of two possible kinds: as an ostensive definition (‘Pious’ = what I am now doing), or as a definition by subclass (‘Pious’ = prosecuting wrongdoers). Both of these kinds of definitions have problems associated with them, based on the logical principle that “extension (i.e., the individuals referred to by a term) can only *suggest* intension (i.e., the *meaning* of the term), never *determine* it.” Let’s look more closely at these two methods of definition.

Ostensive Definition (giving sufficient conditions)

I define a chair ostensively by pointing to a chair. But for this definition “to work” (i.e., for someone to understand the meaning of the word ‘chair’), the learner must overcome a number of obstacles, such as (a) understanding the nature of pointing (e.g., know that I’m not referring to the tip of my finger, or to the act of pointing), (b) being able to pick-out the desired object from its surrounding objects and knowing, among other things, that I’m not referring to a direction in space, (c) being able to derive from the object only the relevant features while ignoring what is irrelevant (e.g., the material it is made of, the number of slats in the back or seat, the number of legs, the size, weight, and color, etc).



In general, definitions by ostension are plagued by the problem that they always involve particular individuals, whereas the term itself is referring to an entire class of individuals, or to that in the individual that makes it a member of the class. The act of pointing (at some individual chair) is somehow supposed to pick-out the quality “chairness” which is shared by



all other chairs, but the person needing the definition sees only that individual chair: does ‘chair’ mean “*that* chair”? Where is the “chairness” (in Plato’s terms, the Form that makes a thing that kind of thing) in the individual chair, such that I could point to *it*? The general property of being a chair is something that is best captured verbally, rather than ostensively.

Definition by Subclass (giving sufficient conditions)

An example of this sort of definition would be the following: ‘fruit’ means “bananas, apples, oranges, and so on.” The general problem with this verbal definition is that it gives only sufficient conditions for the thing being defined. It tells us that bananas, apples, and oranges are all fruit, but it does not indicate to us that quality of fruitness such that we can fully grasp the “and so on” (i.e., be able to continue classifying other kinds of objects as being either fruit or non-fruit). We could imagine some child or foreigner learning our language respond to our definition with: “Oh, does ‘fruit’ refer to things that are edible, like bread, milk, *sushi*, and lettuce?”; or, “Oh, does ‘fruit’ refer to things that can be held in the hand, like a screwdriver, a pebble, or a frog?”

While it may be true that all actions of prosecuting wrongdoers are pious actions, the definition gives us merely a *sufficient condition* of a pious action, but not a necessary condition, insofar as there are also other pious actions which do not fit into this subclass.

Definition by Superclass (giving necessary conditions)

Euthyphro’s second definition fails on *empirical* grounds: the Homeric tradition depicts the gods in constant disagreement, so that an act might be dear to one god yet loathed by another. An obvious way to patch-up this definition is to stipulate that *all* the gods must love an act for it to be called pious. Here Socrates raises the question

whether an act is god-beloved because it is pious, or pious because it is god-beloved (10a). In other words, does the piety of an act cause the gods to love it? Or does the fact that the gods love an act make that act pious? Euthyphro eventually agrees with Socrates that it is the piety of an act that causes it to be loved by the gods. So “god-belovedness” is simply an effect, and not a cause or explanation, of piety. Put another way, being god-beloved is at best a necessary condition of piety, and not a sufficient condition. (It’s wholly possible that there might be other things that are dear to the gods besides the pious actions of human beings).

Definition by Genus and Difference (giving both necessary and sufficient conditions)

In preparing the way for the final type of definition to be explained, Socrates introduces the concept of justice into the discussion, and asks whether “all that is pious is of necessity just” (11e). Euthyphro believes that it is, and thus that justice is a necessary condition of piety. Socrates next asks whether it’s also the case that “all that is just is pious” (i.e., is justice *also* a sufficient condition of piety?) or whether “all that is pious is just, but not all that is just pious” (i.e., justice is *only* a necessary condition).

This can be illustrated with Venn diagrams. Let all *pious actions* fall in the left circle, and all *just actions* fall in the right circle, and let shading indicate that an area is empty. The claim that “all that is pious is just” will show the left circle shaded except where it overlaps with the right circle (here, justice is a necessary condition of piety). Similarly, the claim that “all that is pious is just, and all that is just is pious” will show both circles shaded except for where they overlap (here, justice is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of piety). Euthyphro agrees with Socrates that this latter claim is false, and that piety is rather a subclass of justice. Now given this, if we were to claim that “the pious is the just,” we would be giving a faulty definition insofar as there are many just actions which are not pious. This would be like defining a horse as an animal: while it is true that a horse is an animal, that still doesn’t give us a complete definition of ‘horse’, since there are many animals that are not horses. In other words, the definition only gives a superclass of which the pious is a subclass; it doesn’t tell us to *which part* of that superclass the pious belongs. What Socrates is looking for in a definition is a set of qualities that will be both a necessary and a sufficient condition, C, such that “All P are C” (or: “if P, then C”; C is a necessary condition of P) and “Only P are C” (or: “All C are P”; “if C, then P”; C is a sufficient condition of P).

After it’s agreed that justice is a necessary condition of piety, Socrates asks which part of the just will complete the definition of ‘pious’. That is, what characteristic will serve as the feature that distinguishes piety from the rest of what is just? This introduces the **genus-and-difference** form of definition, which appears to be the form of definition that Socrates has been after. By finding a second necessary condition of piety, it might be possible that the combination will be both necessary and sufficient.

An example of this genus-and-difference kind of definition is the traditional Aristotelian definition of Human Being as a rational animal. Here animality and rationality are both necessary conditions of being human. But since there are no rational non-human animals (this is disputed today, of course, but not in Aristotle’s time), the combination RA becomes a necessary and sufficient condition. “All H are RA” (RA is a necessary condition of H) and “All RA are H” (or: “*Only* H are RA”; RA is a sufficient condition of H).

Perhaps the same can be done for ‘piety’. If justice is the genus, what will the difference be? Euthyphro suggests that what differentiates piety from the rest of what is just is piety’s affiliation with the gods: piety = “justice with respect to the gods.” Unfortunately, this definition is still puzzling, for it is unclear what we mean by “taking care of the gods.” “Taking care” normally means *improvement*; but we can’t improve the gods. “Taking care” could also mean what servants do for their masters but this involves helping the master towards some end or goal of the master’s. So the question now is: What do we help do, in helping the gods? What are the goals that the gods are trying to achieve with our help? If we can find these goals, then we can probably find a proper definition of ‘piety’. But here Euthyphro gives up. He doesn’t know how to respond, and so proffers another definition which soon collapses into one of the earlier failed definitions.

What are we to make of this failure to arrive at a proper definition of piety? It could be that Plato really had no idea as to its proper definition (although we know this is not true; in the Platonic work called *Definitions*, we find