

**What role does the thesis that virtue is knowledge play in the *Meno*? Is the thesis paradoxical?**

In this essay we will discuss the notion that virtue is knowledge. We will do this by following Plato's own route into the discussion – a refutation of Meno's misconception of knowledge. The argument Plato provides to this end gives us crucial contextual information and allows us to see how Plato derives his doctrine that virtue is knowledge. We will look at the terms Plato uses to define virtuous and non-virtuous actions and analyse the connotations these held for him. I will then provide an exposition of the traditional formulation of the platonic 'moral paradox' before arguing that this paradox only exists if one misinterprets Plato's own text.

1. Desire for the good

Plato's *Meno* focuses on the issue of virtue – its nature and its properties. During the dialogue several definitions of virtue are discussed. However, the definition that seems to be settled upon entails the doctrine that virtue is knowledge. This definition is proposed as a response to Meno's suggestion that virtue is a term encompassing two elements: firstly that virtue is the desire for good things and secondly that it is the ability to obtain good things. By way of answer, Socrates suggests that, in fact, everyone desires the good. As virtue is not present in all men, virtue cannot be the desire for good things. Socrates' argument for everyone desiring the good categorises man's desire as either a desire for good things, or a desire for bad things. It is then suggested that frequently when man desires something bad it is in the mistaken belief that the object is good. For the person that actually seems to desire the bad in the knowledge that it is bad, Socrates proposes that the desire is due to a belief that the person will benefit. However, this is seen as a confusion as no one can benefit from what is bad and

therefore the desire exists because of a mistaken belief that what is bad is actually good.

One may argue that there in fact exists another category of desire – the desire for the bad knowing that one will not benefit from it. However, Socrates provides an argument that seems to refute this claim. If a man, X, desires bad things knowing that these things are bad then X knows that the bad things will be harmful to him. If X is clear about this, then X will also know that whatever harms him will make him miserable and wretched. However, Socrates now asserts, with Meno's agreement, that no person desires to be miserable and wretched: "Soc: So is there anyone who wants to be wretched and unhappy? *Meno*: Not in my opinion, Socrates."<sup>1</sup> From this assertion, Socrates draws the conclusion that our subject, X, does not in fact desire bad things but can only desire that which is bad in the confused belief that it is good.

## 2. 'Kaka' and 'agatha'

This analysis of desire rests upon the assumption that bad things (*kaka*) always cause harm in he who attains it and that good things (*agatha*) always cause benefit. However, it seems clear that there exist cases where evil does not harm the 'possessor' of the evil thing but actually benefits him. For example, we can imagine a case whereby a criminal escapes justice in a courtroom and therefore receives an unjust reprieve of his due punishment. The reprieve is evil as it is unjust, however the criminal who, "by obtaining this evil possesses it, is not harmed by it."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Meno* 78a

<sup>2</sup> Nakhnikian, *ibid*

This counterexample may seem to refute Socrates' argument, however I believe that this refutation is invalid. One may make two points about the cited example that diminish its relevance to the extent that it does not serve as a valid criticism of Socrates. Firstly, one may respond that, in fact, the criminal is caused harm by the reprieve in punishment. This harm is due to the fact that punishment is beneficial to the prisoner as it may cause him to see that his crime was evil or to undergo a kind of catharsis. Thus punishment serves to make him a more virtuous person. Therefore a lack of punishment where it is deserved does cause harm to the criminal in that it further instates a criminal instinct and makes him a less virtuous person where there was potential for the converse to occur.

In response to this point one may argue that there could be cases where the criminal is incurably wicked. If this were the case, then any potential for improved virtuosity as a result of the punishment is removed and the evil of reprieved punishment ceases to cause any harm to the criminal. One is still able to make the weaker point that where the criminal has not been punished he has not paid for his crime. Therefore he is made a worse person through his lack of punishment than he would have been had he paid for it. However, the idea that an individual can be made a better or worse person solely through the action or inaction of others seems dubious and a stronger point must surely be made to refute the criticism of Plato entirely. To this end, one can formulate another response to Nakhnikian – this time one that he has failed to anticipate. Socrates does not specify whether harm caused by the possession of an evil can only be thought of solely in terms of an individual basis. It seems clear that harm can be suffered by multiple people as the result of a single action. The sum of these harms forms a total harm of a group of people. This notion can be extended to cover an entire society. I believe that it is consistent with Plato to argue that one can speak of actions benefiting or damaging a society as a whole given the total of the positive and negative effects the action has upon the members of the society. Given this extension of the Platonic doctrine, one can consistently argue that the reprieve in punishment does cause harm in the possessor of the evil –

i.e. the society – as the reprieve allows the criminal to commit further crimes and has no deterrent effect on other criminals.

In addition to this argument, the fact that the assumption of causing harm or benefit is never argued for and it seems to be somewhat definitional that *agatha* benefit anyone who has them and *kaka* harms. Others have suggested that Plato assumes “conceptual relation” between evil and harm to its possessor. “As between being red and being coloured – one does not know what it is for something to be red if one does not know that nothing can be red and not coloured.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Socrates suggests that if one does not know what it is for something to be evil, one does not know that nothing can be evil and not harmful to its possessor: “Those who desire bad things... doubtless they know that they will be harmed by them.”<sup>4</sup>

In view of this, ‘evil’ and ‘good’ may be said to be bad translations of the terms ‘*kaka*’ and ‘*agatha*’. Whilst upon further analysis the terms ‘evil’ and ‘good’ may capture the meaning of Plato’s choice of terms, the fact that there is potential for confusion means that a more perspicuous translation may be ‘things good for one’ and ‘things bad for one’<sup>5</sup>

### 3. A new conception of virtue

Given this retranslation of Plato, Socrates seems to have conclusively shown Meno’s definition of virtue to be fallacious, he is now able to provide argument for what, in fact, he takes virtue to be. We have seen that Socrates believes that all people desire good things, but that some people actually pursue bad things. We have also seen that Socrates believes the only reason for this pursuit is confusion and ignorance. This leads us to the Socratic definition of virtue as

<sup>3</sup> Nakhnikian, ‘The first Socratic paradox’ in Day ed., *Plato’s Meno in Focus*

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Meno 77e*

<sup>5</sup> Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato’s Early Dialogues*

knowledge. We can clearly see how Socrates' refutation of Meno takes us towards a definition of this sort. If one has knowledge of what is truly good then one is able to remove the confusion that otherwise leads people to mistakenly pursue bad things. This knowledge leads to an ability to be virtuous. As all people naturally pursue what is advantageous for them, a knowledgeable person will naturally and automatically be virtuous.

Let us examine the Socratic argument that virtue is knowledge in more detail. The argument has two parts. The first reformulates the notion that we have just discussed. We are told that virtue is something good. As all good things are advantageous, it follows that virtue is advantageous. Socrates then states that all non-psychological qualities, such as wealth and beauty, can be either advantageous or harmful. It is knowledge that makes such qualities advantageous. In addition to this, all psychological qualities, such as courage and moderation, apart from knowledge are also neutral in themselves. It is knowledge of how to use these qualities that makes them advantageous – and, conversely, ignorance of how to use them that can make the harmful. Therefore knowledge is the only psychological quality that is advantageous. Virtue is clearly a psychological rather than non-psychological quality. As we have seen virtue is advantageous. Therefore, virtue must be knowledge.

#### 4. Paradox in Socrates' definition of virtue?

This leads us to a supposed paradox in Socrates' doctrine. That virtue is knowledge together with the fact that people who commit injustice do so involuntarily – as a pursuit of *kaka* is, as we have seen, the result of confusion – does indeed seem to lead to problems. Santas suggests that the doctrine of virtue being knowledge takes the form of the biconditional “If one had knowledge one is virtuous; if one is virtuous one has knowledge”<sup>6</sup> Here, ‘knowledge’ is taken to mean ‘knowledge of virtue’. This means that the antecedent of the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

biconditional is actually “If one has knowledge of virtue one is a virtuous man”. One can infer from this that if one is not virtuous, or acts in a non-virtuous manner, one does so in ignorance of the fact that the action is not virtuous.

However, it seems to be an empirical fact that people frequently do act in a non-virtuous manner whilst also being in the knowledge that they are acting without virtue. This is what creates paradox in the doctrine, as the statement ‘If one knows what is virtuous, one will do what is virtuous’ can both be derived from it, and refuted by empirical fact. This is generally considered to be Plato’s moral paradox, and is assumed to legitimately derive from doctrines found in Plato’s own writings. Specifically, these doctrines are that men desire only good things, that they act for the sake of possessing good things and that virtuous behaviour always benefits the agent – whereas non-virtuous behaviour always harms the agent. From this, we are supposed to derive that knowledge that an action is just is sufficient for performing the action and, more than this, for desiring to perform the action.

I believe that the paradox in its traditional formulation cannot be legitimately derived from platonic doctrine. Plato does not argue to the end that there is a necessary connection between recognition of virtue in an action and a desire to perform the action. Rather, Plato argues that there is a necessary connection between recognising an action as beneficial and desiring to perform it. This notion follows from the proposal that “if a man knows which actions are just (and which unjust) and also knows that it is always better for him to do justice rather than injustice, then he will desire to do what is just”<sup>7</sup>. Further evidence for this is taken from the *Gorgias*, where Socrates claims that no one does injustice willingly. The three stated doctrines are cited and Polus tries to provide counter-examples to the derived doctrine in the form of extreme wrongdoers. However, here the discussion focuses on whether the wrongdoer believed he would benefit from his wrongs. The issue of whether he knew or believed his action was unjust

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<sup>7</sup> Santas, *ibid.*

is not even mentioned. This suggests that Plato believes that people carry out wrongs because they do not know that these wrongs will result in misfortune on their own part – rather than an appreciation that the action in itself is wrong.

This reformulation of the Platonic account of virtuous action avoids the traditional conception of the platonic paradox. More than this, it also seems to be truer to Plato's texts than the original formulation. Therefore, I would argue that whilst Plato does argue that virtue is knowledge, this knowledge has a two-fold meaning – knowledge of what is virtuous and knowledge that virtue is always beneficial. This twofold meaning avoids any paradox and thus makes the platonic definition of virtue more plausible than it is traditionally held to be.