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Reason and Persuasion
Three Dialogues By Plato: Euthyphro, Meno, Republic Book I

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Book designed by John Holbo.

The text is set in Hypatia Sans Pro.

Chapter 7 Meno: Reason, Persuasion & Virtue

1

Of the three dialogues in this book, **Meno** gives modern readers most difficulty. **Euthyphro** has cultural, legal and religious backstory that is easy to miss or misunderstand, but the basic arguments are extractable without that. Anyway, it's short. **Republic**, Book 1, is long and involved, but Thrasymachus is a good villain. If you lose track of the argument, you can watch him chew the scenery. It seems intuitive why such a person poses a challenge. But **Meno** loses readers. It's long, with an odd, three-part structure: virtue; then, a geometry lesson; then, more virtue.

The obvious question — who got geometry in my virtue? or, who got virtue on my geometry? — has no obvious answer.

Twists and switchbacks are scarcely sign-posted. Consider the juncture at which we shift from virtue to geometry (82a). Meno has made a peevish argument that it is impossible to inquire about anything. Socrates responds by going off on what looks like a tangent. He passes along mystery hearsay about reincarnation. Meno asks how Socrates knows such things. Socrates proposes that a geometry lesson, of all things, will provide an answer. But can you argue for reincarnation by investigating the area of a square? **That** doesn't sound right.

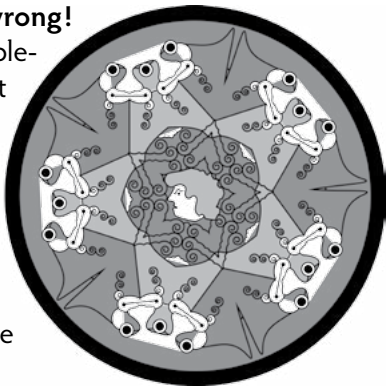
It's not just hard to track the argument, it's hard to see what the human point could be. Meno is a sophist, but the dialogue isn't a critique of sophistry (nor an advertisement for geometry, nor a promise of reincarnation.) Better: it targets the common denominator of the sophist, Meno, and the anti-sophist, Anytus (sturdy citizen with a walk-on part near the end.) But these two look like opposites, so what — who? — would the opposite of both be?

In **Meno** we confront 1) a survey-resistant sprawl of diverse content elements — characters, topics, ideas, arguments; 2) too few of which are likely to strike contemporary readers as intuitive. This chapter addresses 2), at the risk of recapitulating 1). I walk through **Meno**, seeking, point by point, the **point**. I try to find contemporary coordinates for ancient oddities. But, as Lewis Carroll jokes in **Sylvie and Bruno**, a map the same size and shape as a whole country will have drawbacks, for navigation purposes. Let me, in the next section, offer a pocket guide to complement the **Meno**-sized-and-shaped map this chapter on **Meno** shall shape up to be. Let me close this section with a word of advice. Reading **Meno**, before this commentary, or this commentary, before **Meno**, may be frustrating. Still, 'you can't get there from here,' is needlessly despairing counsel. A bit of **Meno**, a bit of commentary; more **Meno**, more commentary, might be the ticket. I hope the next section will also convey a preliminary sense of why the trouble might be worth it.

2

If **Meno** is about one thing, it is not virtue nor geometry but knowledge. Specifically, **half**-knowledge (but 'what is half-knowledge, Meno?' sounds funny.) You could also say the dialogue is about the split between ideal ways of thinking and actual ways of thinking. Virtue and geometry are cases in point, as are Meno and Anytus.

It is best, with Plato, to have some sense of how interlocutors interlock with arguments; how personalities suit problems. What **is** the common denominator of a slick sophist (Meno) and a stiff anti-sophist (Anytus)? They both think they know it all; **and** that no one really knows. About virtue (big, fine, vague word.) These views contradict, hence should collapse. But that's not how the mind works. Perhaps you yourself have at times been extremely morally self-certain, yet prepared to roll out a spot of convenient relativism if your opinion is challenged. **I know it all, and nobody knows anything anyway, so don't tell me I'm wrong!** Taken together, these attitudes form a double-shield against what Socrates is pushing: what if we **are** wrong yet we could, potentially, know better?



The human tension in the dialogue stems from difficulty Meno and Anytus have accepting this. Couldn't we learn better? This sounds so modest, yet they are incapable of processing it. They would have

to stamp on their strongest habits, bite their rhetorical tongues. Admitting they could learn means admitting they could be wrong means admitting threats to status. These are men whose status depends on projecting an air of effortless superiority — innate virtue. Can't march into battle looking confused!

Let me shift to consider that moment when virtue meets geometry (82a). You can meet a man like Meno every day, and it would be hard to walk through a crowd without bumping into several copies of Anytus. (By contrast, you don't meet Thrasymachus everyday, although I suppose everyone has a **little** Thrasymachus in them.) But the geometry lesson seems out-of-place, by design. Plato is provoking with incongruous juxtapositions, just as Socrates is provoking Meno. Meno complains he feels dumb and numb. The geometry is, partly, Socrates' way of saying this is a healthy sign. Of course, reassurance that mental paralysis is quite normal does not alleviate the discomfort of the symptoms.

How does the story end? If, in the end, Plato were pushing an alleged rational proof of a grand, unified theory of virtue, the stakes would be so much clearer. **You said you knew it all (and nothing can be known.) But here is something new and knowable! You are refuted!** But Plato has Socrates advance no such theory, not in **Meno**. So is he resting his case on a mere maybe? **Maybe** we can rationalize virtue (whatever that means!) only we can't see how yet? Such a maybe may be irrefutable; but, by the same token, disappointing. Such a long, difficult dialogue! May there be more than maybe at the end, to pay us for our pains! We pray it is so.

It is hard to say more until the reader reads more, but let me drop one last hint. In this chapter I discuss self-help; then, positive psychology. These are intended as analogs for aspects of **Meno**. But there is more. I discuss the psychologist Jonathan Haidt. He is a scholar and popular author, and he makes the following claim: ironically, Plato's desire to illuminate everything by the light of the reason blinds him to the nature of reason itself. Haidt summarizes Plato's view (in **Republic**, but it could be **Meno**): "reason must rule the happy person. And if reason rules, then it cares about what is truly good, not just about the appearance of virtue." The trouble, Haidt says, is this:

> As is often the case in moral philosophy, arguments about what we ought to do depend upon assumptions — often unstated — about human nature and human psychology. And for Plato, the assumed psychology is just plain wrong.[1]

1 Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Religion and Politics (Vintage 2013), p. 85-6. Hereafter, RM.

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Wrong how? "People care a great deal more about appearance and reputation than about reality." Haidt thinks Plato misses that real people think like — well, like, Meno and Anytus, to pick picture-perfect Haidtian specimens. The fact that people think like those two falsifies Plato's psychology, according to Haidt. Holed up in his Academy, head in the clouds, doing geometry, dreaming of Forms, Plato misses how the man on the street thinks. But obviously Plato gets it about Meno and Anytus. He has written this long dialogue, in which he perceptively dramatizing the ways in which this pair predictably cares about — and for — the appearance of virtue, not its reality, despite Socrates' best efforts to rub their noses in the latter.

In the end, Plato does not offer a rational theory of virtue. But he is on the lookout. In the meantime, he's out on the street, coming to constant grips with the thing Haidt is so sure he comprehensively misses. It's as if Plato is counter-arguing in advance: my theoretical ambitions may meet with success or failure. But if I am wrong, it won't be because I am clueless about psychology. I know how people think; how the style of theory I seek is at odds with all that. I see my geometry lesson sticking out like a sore thumb. Who could miss it? My ideas paralyze ordinary patterns of thinking without (yet) offering obviously workable alternatives. Does that prove I'm wrong?'

No point scoring a debate before starting it, of course.

3

Let me start by addressing an even more basic source of confusion than the dialogue's strange, three-part structure. Take Meno's question: "Can you tell me, Socrates, is virtue the sort of thing you can teach? Or is it not the sort of thing you can teach, but you could pick it up by practicing it? Or maybe it's neither: virtue is something that naturally arises in men, or they get it some other way?" (70a).

The Greek is **aretē**, which the dictionary tells you means **excellence** or **virtue**. 'Virtue' will do, but does a so-so job of conveying what Meno is getting at. In contemporary English, 'virtue' means admirable personal character. But the term connotes concern for moral self-restraint; specifically, sexual restraint, especially for women. Virtue is paradigmatically a matter of rightly **not** doing something you are selfishly tempted to do. These connotations are totally off the mark in Meno's case, so if 'how is virtue acquired?' puts you in mind of primly edifying Victorian matrons on pedestals of sexual propriety, kindly wipe that picture from your mind.

Also, in academic philosophy virtue ethics is often identified as one of three main currents of normative theory, the other two being consequentialism and deontology (I mention these theories in Chapter 4.) It is certainly appropriate to coordinate **Meno** with academic virtue ethics, but not to construe Meno, the man, as concerned with it. He isn't enough of a theorist, in the academic sense; or enough of a moralist, in an ordinary sense. So even academic philosophical readers may take the mismeasure of Meno, if not of **Meno** as a whole.

4

When Meno asks whether virtue is teachable, what he is getting at is basically this: can you teach **success**? Take the title of a well-known best-seller, **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People**, by Stephen R. Covey. Meno is interested in **that**: being highly effective. The way he launches in, without introduction, ticking off candidate positions — nature? nurture? something else? — shows his awareness that this is not just an issue but an established debate topic. For Meno, this **is** the debate-worthy aspect of ethics: how to get ahead.

One thing Socrates does in this dialogue is urge Meno to say what he really thinks. (He's the sort to pick a position just for fun or profit.) So let me ask you, dear reader, what **you** really think about this 'highly effective' business. Can you buy a book, read it, and expect to become … highly effective?

For the price of an over-priced coffee you can turn your whole life around? For real? What a deal!

The title of Covey's book by itself reports a result, if it is one: effectiveness a function of habit. It would seem to follow it is not something you know, theoretically, or are born with. It's something you practice. But then: can a book provide it? Perhaps it can tell you what to practice. But what is the scope of 'effective'? Effective at **everything**? (That would be a lot!) If only some things, which? Does effectiveness equal success, or do I need to take additional steps to ensure the effects of my effectiveness aren't **bad**? Seems to be some risk of means-ends slippage.

When you see a book with a title like Covey's, what do **you** assume it is about? Covey is shelved under self-improvement, inspirational, success, business, 'health & mind'. Different bookstores have different notions, it

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seems. But Covey is never shelved in the (less popular!) academic philosophy section, where you find, for example, the Plato books. How far we've come, since Meno's day!

Academic philosophers don't have much to say about the likes of Covey. He doesn't take note of academic philosophy. It is not much of an exaggeration to say we have Plato to thank (or blame), as much as anyone, for this bookstore segregation. His academy was the first attempt to secure a separate shelf for Plato's preferred sort of pure intellectual product. But Plato wants his own shelf as an independent platform from which to argue against the likes of Covey. Not that arguing against Covey is **all** Plato wants to do! But it is by no means the least thing. If Plato has won over academic readers to the point where they read dialogues like **Meno** without thinking about the likes of Covey, Plato may have academicized philosophy too well for its own good.

What is it Plato wishes Covey and co. could see? Let's try this. When Meno asks how virtue is acquired, imagine he and Socrates are in a modern bookstore, in the self-help section: 'what do you think, Socrates?' Socrates doesn't say. Instead, he drags Meno on a roundabout tour through other sections — here, the math books; there, natural science; psychology, (academic) philosophy; religion, myth! So much, all in all! If we doubt self-help books can **really** help, as much as their titles promise, that may be because we have a sinking suspicion wide-scope success must be success at **all this**. I can't be 'highly effective', period, unless I'm effective all over. How will self-help authors like Covey save me from not knowing **everything**? Covey might deflect the question: so what's **your** bright idea, Plato? Work geometry problems all day? Admittedly, that doesn't sound so good. We'll have to think.

5

Who are the ancient Athenian analogs to Covey? I mentioned them in Chapter 2. They are the **sophists**: teachers who, for a fee, promise to impart the knowledge and skills you need to get ahead. Prodicus, one of these, is mentioned at a few points in **Meno**. In another dialogue, Socrates claims to have attended his one-drachma lecture (he couldn't afford Prodicus' full course on 'the uses and meanings of words.') Meno is a student of Gorgias, who has his own Plato dialogue. Meno himself is an aspiring inspiring speaker. As he tells Socrates, no doubt padding the numbers: he must have given a thousand lectures on virtue (80b).

When Socrates says he doesn't even know what virtue **is**, Meno is shocked. Didn't he meet Gorgias when he came to town? Why should Gorgias know, of all men? Because Gorgias' claim to fame is that he can make you **effective**. Effective at what? Riding horses? Piloting a ship? Unclogging drains? No. Gorgias will make you … **persuasive**.

As Socrates says (70b), Gorgias is famous for challenging all-comers to ask any question. He had stored up/could concoct on the fly, confident, authoritative-sounding responses to anything. I don't suppose anyone thought he just plain **knew** everything. He didn't have a brain of gold but a tongue of silver. This was speech-and-debate as street theater. Staging this show was a way of self-advertising as the man with the bag of effective talk tricks (with sundry other stuff tossed in for good measure.) Students want **that**. They think they can use it to become … **effective**.

Anyway, if you want a portrait of virtue as Meno sees it (to replace that be-pedestaled Victorian frump) imagine what he sees in the mirror.

"When you look in the dictionary under 'virtue', you see a picture of **me**, baby!"

See, I **told** you! You've met this guy before!

But there's more to virtue than a winning smile. What sorts of slick talk tricks are we talking?

6

Note how Meno brightens up when Socrates mentions Empedoclean effluences [**aporrhoē**] as a possible explanation of human perception (76c). This part of the dialogue sounds like proto-natural science. When I see a red tomato, something must be 'flowing off', striking my eye. These effluences are like keys that unlock only my eyes, not my ears; which will, of course, be fitted by a different set of keys. Not much, as science goes, but it's a start, looks like.

But Meno, one guesses, is not thinking how you could get started, testing and refining this hypothesis in the lab. He is thinking 'effluence' is a fine-sounding, two-drachma word. The theory as a whole is ripe for adoption and adaptation. No obvious flaw (check); concrete enough to be vivid, abstract

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enough to be creatively applied to many different subjects (check). Has an authoritative ring and famous name attached (check). So if someone asks you why the sun is brighter than the moon, whip up something about how there are more powerful streams of effluence flowing off the sun. Maybe there could be a spin-off series of self-help titles: **The Law of Effluence**. And: **Who Stole My Oar? How To Get Moving When Things Aren't Flowing Your Way**. 'Effluence' could be like 'synergy': a word that might mean something, but whose most typical use is to sound as though it means, roughly, everything, thereby getting someone off the hook of having to know, roughly, anything.

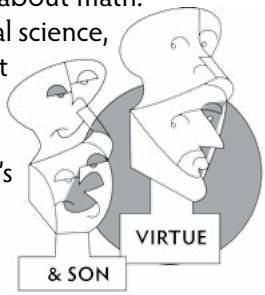
Socrates' skepticism about Empedocles is the flip-side of Meno's enthusiasm. Socrates denigrates his own effluence-based answer as 'theatrical' (76e). Why? Sure, Meno is probably scheming marketing angles. It is understandable that Socrates is skeptical about **that**. But the hypothesis is not **made** for that. Empedocles sounds more like an ancestor of modern science than modern marketing. Why not regard the existence of effluence as an admittedly speculative, preliminary hypothesis?

7

Ah! But preliminary **to what**?

Neither Meno nor Socrates (nor Plato) has any notion of empirical science as a paradigm of success in its own right. (Seven habits of highly **scientific** people? Hasn't been written!) They can't point to individuals, methods or institutions with a track record of taking plausibility and refining it into solid, reproducible results. Yet this elusive virtue of replicable success is the focus of the final section of the dialogue. Why can't virtuous fathers pass all that on to their sons, consistently (93a-95a)? This may seem, therefore, a perfect occasion to usher the scientific method onstage. Instead, empirical science turns out to be a dog that doesn't bark.

There is, however, one clear counter-example to my claim that neither Socrates nor Meno knows about science. They know about math. But if you aren't planning to make math a tool for natural science, what are you thinking it is for? Consider this. If you want to make Gorgias squirm up there on his soapbox, what question would be best? How about math? Not that Gorgias is innumerate. But if he happens not to know, it's going to be hard to bluff through with guff about 'flow'.



8

Let's finish filling out our preliminary thoughts about virtue and success. Back to the self-help bookshelf! Meno is content to paddle in effluence of plausibility. What is it that makes this **seem** like such a solid formula? I like Covey's title, but we might do better to turn back to our original self-help authority, Dale Carnegie. He is more in the Gorgiastic mold. (But friendlier.)

In Chapter 4, I cast Carnegie as a Midwestern Xenophanes — practical Protagoras, healthy Heraclitus. Man is the measure of all things, so go with the flow. 'People skills' are master tools. I critiqued this line. How can Carnegie be sure **selling** is the soul of living? We need an argument!

This ethical dilemma turned out to be, at bottom, epistemological. How can you respond, practically, to awareness that awareness is limited. How is it possible to plan a successful life of **seeming** — of frequently false belief, as opposed to knowledge? How can getting comfortable in the day-tight compartment of your Cave produce security or reliability?

How can you be an effective leader if you know you don't **know** what you are doing?

Let's work backwards. Carnegie says leadership has two components: vision; the capacity to communicate your vision to others. Communication first. People are credulous. Planting the seed of an idea means growing a sprout of belief — so long as nothing else squashes it. Let me quote from a chapter entitled, forcefully, "How To Be Impressive and Convincing". "Aristotle taught that man was a reasoning animal — that he acted according to the dictates of logic. He flattered us. Acts of pure reasoning are as rare as romantic thoughts before breakfast. Most of our actions are the result of suggestion." Thus:

> It is easy to believe; doubting is more difficult. Experience and knowledge and thinking are necessary before we can doubt and question intelligently. Tell a child that Santa Claus comes down the chimney or a savage that thunder is the anger of the gods and the child and the savage will accept your statements until they acquire sufficient knowledge to cause them to demur. Millions in India passionately believe that the waters of the Ganges are holy, that snakes are deities in disguise, that it is as wrong to kill a cow as it is to kill a person — and, as for eating roast beef … that is no more to be thought of than cannibalism. They accept these absurdities, not because they have been proved, but because the

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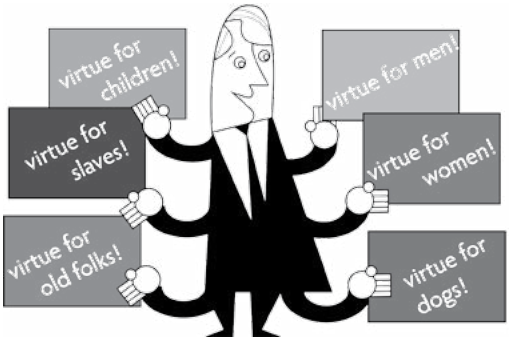
> suggestion has been deeply imbedded in their minds, and they have not the intelligence, the knowledge, the experience, necessary to question them.
>
> We smile … the poor benighted creatures! Yet you and I, if we examine the facts closely, will discover that the majority of our opinions, our most cherished beliefs, our creeds, the principles of conduct on which many of us base our very lives, are the result of suggestion, not reasoning …
>
> Prejudiced, biased, and reiterated assertions, not logic, have formulated our beliefs.[2]

We stand at a crossroads. On the one hand we see the difficult way, hard road of doubt. You could toil to acquire knowledge and critical thinking skills; study logic and argumentation to eliminate prejudice and bias; encourage others to do the same. On the other hand, an easier path: ever-flowing, ever-changing, ever-meandering river of belief. Don't apply the skeptical lesson home. You might lose your religion, then your friends. (Obviously Carnegie would never write such insulting things if he thought devout Hindus, as opposed to Christians, might be buying his books. Think how he would sound if he were consistent.) Instead, **sell**! Now that you understand your true, innate nature — man is not the rational but the suggestible animal — you know how. In the land of the blind, the man who **sees** he can't see is king!

With that sort of keen insight, you are prime **leadership** material!

This perhaps explains Meno's tendency to conflate leadership with mastery of the grey arts of product differentiation and market segmentation (70e-71a).

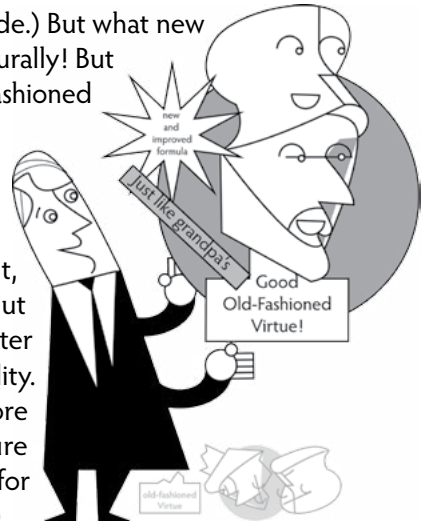


2 Dale Carnegie, Public Speaking and Influencing Men in Business (World's Work, 1945), p. 218, 9. A version of the book, lacking the chapter in question, is more recently in print: Dale Carnegie, How to Develop Self-Confidence And Influence People By Public Speaking (Pocket Books, 1956).

But let's step back. I'm saying Carnegie and Meno are much the same. I'm hinting that there's something dubious and ironic about the idea(s) they have in common. But what, exactly? In a sense, it's obvious. Stock techniques for winning friends and influencing people will largely overlap the contents of the Gorgiastic bag of tricks for answering all questions asked. To be persuasive, make people like you and **want** to believe what you say. That's 90% of the job done right there.

The irony is a bit harder to pin down.

On the one hand, we see old-fashioned notions superceded by slick and polished persuasion professionalism. (One such old-fashioned notion is Anytus. He's grumpy about his downgrade.) But what new thing does the customer want? Virtue, naturally! But that's old. So what sort of new-fangled, old-fashioned 'virtue' does the customer really get?



Is Carnegie a radical or a conservative? And doesn't he worry that his is a philosophy for benighted creatures, living by exploiting weaknesses of others? To hear him tell it, the key to teaching virtue is knowing about human nature, ergo it is not so much a matter of knowing about virtue as vice: suggestibility. (Not even a **major** vice, which is almost more embarrassing. Thus, when you loftily lecture Man, the suggestible animal, about virtue, for profit, maybe skate over that awkward bit.)

9

But seriously: Meno isn't worried about being badly in the wrong, dispensing 'virtue' viciously.

Why not? Like most people, he's normal. That is, he figures he's exceptional. Remember this? "I imagine, Euthyphro, most men don't know how things ought to be" (4b). Euthyphro agrees! Who wouldn't? But who would think to apply the lesson home? Per Chapter 4, Carnegie alternates between attitudes that make it hard to see where he's **really** coming from. The same goes for Meno. Thus, when it comes to ethics, both Carnegie and Meno assume:

1. **Everyone already knows it all (enough to lead a perfect life.)**
2. **No one knows anything (there's just belief.)**

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2) is suggested in the Carnegie passage quoted above: belief about right and wrong is a function of suggestibility, bias and uncritical acceptance, which are hardly likely to be truth-tracking. But then 1) reassures you life in the Cave will not be **so** bad. Let's review Carnegie's argument for 1), from Chapter 4.

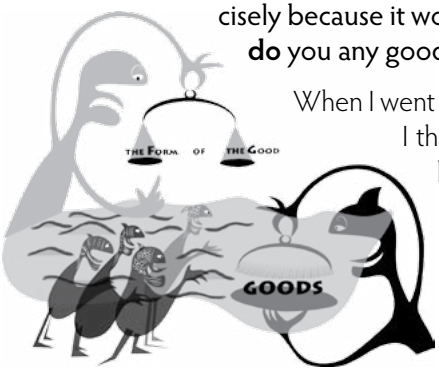
P1: You know the Golden Rule.

P2: The Golden Rule basically couldn't be wrong.

C: You know right from wrong, basically.

What about good from bad? Again, you know the basics. What do people **want**? Carnegie makes a list: 1. Health (life). 2. Food. 3. Sleep. 4. Money and material goods. 5. Salvation (afterlife). 6. Sex. 7. A good life for one's children. 8. A feeling of importance. This list appears in a chapter of **Win Friends** entitled "The Big Secret of Dealing With People". The secret, such as it is, is that item 8 is the real challenge for most people. Carnegie isn't naive about the possibility that those other things might be lacking. His point is that, in any environment in which the basics are secure, a disproportionate amount of effort is expended on 8. There will never be enough of me being the important one to go around. A lot of those other things tend to be 8 in disguise.

Think about the gap between being and **feeling** important. Lucky for Carnegie, people aim at the latter. Otherwise, supposing there were — oh, say — some Form of the Good, above and beyond the stream of human affairs, you would have to come to know it, to sell people real Goods. But precisely because it wouldn't be in the stream, knowing wouldn't **do** you any good. In the stream, goods are **feel** goods.



When I went fishing, I didn't think about what I wanted. I thought about what they wanted. I didn't bait the hook with strawberries and cream. Rather, I dangled a worm or a grasshopper in front of the fish and said: "Wouldn't you like to have that?"

Why not use the same common sense when fishing for people?[3]

3 Dale Carnegie, How to Win Friends and Influence People, revised. (Pocket Books, 1981), p. 32.

Think how eager Euthyphro is for status in the eyes of his fellow citizens (4a-6b). Socrates could have sold him **anything**, so long as it fed that hunger. Instead, Socrates disrespects him. No sale!

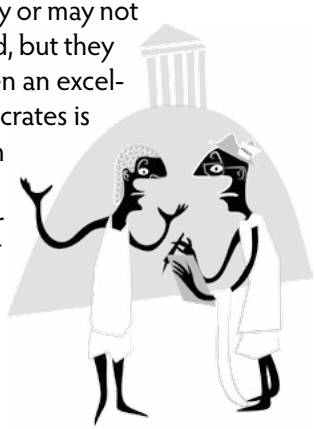
Supposedly, Plato gave one public lecture on 'The Good'. He flopped. Attendees found the mathematical parts a snooze. Plato should have told them how above-average all Athenian gentlemen are! That's the sort of moral math audiences **like** to learn! Might this explain why there is so much geometry in the middle of **Meno**? Plato just doesn't get it that readers are unlikely to want to sit through a whole math lesson? I don't doubt Plato has his failings, not infrequently in the PR department; but I'm confident he's aware what he's selling could be a drag on the market. We will return to this point.

10

The fact remains: 1) **everyone knows** and 2) **no one knows** can't both be true. Which does Carnegie truly think? Is he a convicted skeptic or a complete dogmatist? Neither, probably. I'll bet the same is true of Meno and Anytus. But how so?

Let's go back to the beginning. Socrates mock-innocently confesses he doesn't know what virtue is (71a). He adds, off-handedly, that the whole town is in the same sorry state. Meno is shocked. But why should he be? Hasn't he read Dale Carnegie (or Gorgias?) Socrates is just saying the citizens of Athens are like people everywhere. They have opinions, but those are likely to be baseless hearsay. Most people's opinions about the most important things are, after all.

Suppose a reporter went around town, asking the opinion of the man on the street about the burning issues of the day. Suppose everyone answered 'I don't know' (unless the question was something really simple — elementary math, say.) But obviously they wouldn't. People may or may not suffer from a knowledge gap, where virtue is concerned, but they don't have a belief gap. 'Do you think Pericles has been an excellent leader during his term in office?' 'Do you think Socrates is corrupting the youth?' 'Do you think the sophists teach virtue?' Anytus answers the last one with complete confidence, despite the fact that he admits he has never met any of the people he is denouncing, and none of 'his people' have either (92b-c).



Anytus is obviously not psychic but crazy; that is, normal.

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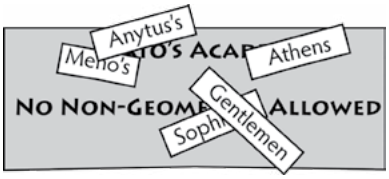
Now turn the point around. Near the end of the dialogue, Socrates remarks that if people were virtuous by nature, we would identify the good ones and guard them — more carefully than gold — until they were old enough to run the city (89b). This picture is, if anything, even sillier than the prospect of a 'what do you think?' opinion poll netting a 100% 'don't know' response. Virtue isn't the sort of thing you can securely stockpile, like gold! But notice what follows. Give up the idea that we can pick out the good ones on sight (thanks to our psychic powers or scientific instruments) and you give up the idea that we **know** how to lead perfect lives — know what that would even look like. Apparently we feel we know virtue when we see it, even when it's too far away to see. And we wonder if we know it, even when it's right in front of our noses.

It is looking increasingly likely that we **do** suffer from a knowledge gap where virtue is concerned. But not just a gap between what we believe and the truth. There's a gap between what we say and think. Anytus' suggestion that anyone who wishes to learn virtue can pick it up from any gentleman he happens to meet (92e) illustrates this. It isn't plausible every adult male citizen in Athens is excellent, as if the city were some extreme version of Lake Wobegon, where 'all the children are above average.' Then again, it isn't plausible Anytus seriously thinks this. What could Anytus' solid picture of the moral universe be: boys (no girls, I'm sure!) standing on the shoulders of Athenian gentlemen, on the shoulders of other Athenian gentlemen? After that, it's Athenian gentlemen all the way down?

For real? (Anytus will be one of Socrates' legal prosecutors, so he's really mad at Socrates, so it seems. But that doesn't really answer this question.)

Neither Meno nor Anytus can admit to being badly in the wrong about ethical basics. Faced with that status threat, they instinctively shift from foot to foot: **I know it all already; anyway, no one really knows.**

How can we call a halt to this self-protective shiftiness, which resists anyone else potentially knowing **better**? What more inquiring view will be appealing to such status-sensitive epistemic sensibilities? How about this? We **sort of** know what virtue is. Some of our beliefs are likely to be improvable even if it's hard to believe they are all utterly erroneous as they stand.



This sounds sensible, moderate, difference-splitting. Who could deny it?

But how to proceed on this basis? How can you start in the muddy middle of half-knowing what we are even talking about?

11

The main reason the geometry lesson seems doubtfully relevant, erupting in the midst of discussion of virtue, is we all surely remember this much from geometry class: you build up proofs from self-evident starting points. Meno tries this line of attack, experimentally, suggesting Socrates should be forced to define everything (75c). Socrates pushes back. This is not necessary if this is a friendly discussion, as opposed to a competitive, point-scoring debate.

But isn't it hypocritical for Socrates, of all people, to be so easy-going about definitions when it suits him? How come he's allowed to invoke common notions when convenient? He never lets anyone else do so, apparently.

How can we tell when definitions are truly necessary, at least helpful, and when demanding them is a debater's trick or waste of time? It stands to reason we need an account of the essential nature of something if we are disputing about that something and the dispute hinges on disagreement about its nature. But that still leaves us with a methodological problem. It's quite predictable that trying to move from ordinary notions of virtue to sharp definitions will lead, at best, to a regress. If you and I disagree about virtue, and I propose a definition, it will predictably employ some term that itself is potentially problematic. When we get to **Republic**, Thrasymachus seems to be making this complaint right at the start (336d).

I say 'justice' is about 'right' or 'good'. Seeing where this is going, you predictably dig in your heels about **that**. In this way, our dispute is pushed back.

Of what use, then, are definitions for settling ethical disputes between disagreeable people who only half-know what they are talking about?

How could doing geometry ever — **ever** — be a model for making advances in ethics?

The worry is that Plato is barking mad, or barking up the wrong tree.

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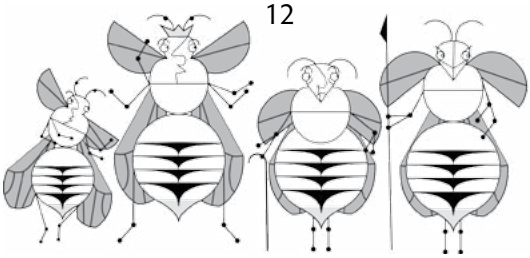
12

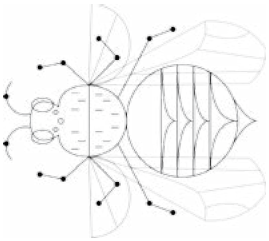


Let's read on, while trying to keep our minds open. Initially Meno says it is easy to say what virtue is. There is virtue for a man, a woman, old man, child, so forth (71e). I already mocked Meno as a promoter with an instinct for placing product in every market niche. Socrates mocks him, too. His "swarm of virtues" is likened to a swarm of bees. Socrates points out that saying bees come in different shapes and sizes, although true, does not amount to offering a general account of what a bee is.

This is two objections in one. First, examples are no good. We need a general account. Second, a general account needs to say what all X's have in common, not what may distinguish various X's from each other.

A standard rebuttal to this Socratic line is likely to occur to the reader. Offering examples is an excellent way to teach general concepts, so why not teach what virtue is by example? Children would hardly learn anything if this method did not work. If you had to wait until a child could read the dictionary to teach it anything, it would never learn what 'mommy' means, never mind 'virtue'. More deeply, there is no reason to assume, if we know X is Y, that we must be in possession of something like a formal, linguistically articulable definition of Y-ness. If I know this buzzing thing is a bee, why assume I must be able to **define** 'bee', verbally? This alleged mistake is sometimes called 'the Socratic fallacy'. Still more deeply: there is no reason to assume that, for every concept X, there is **any** essential feature, Y, that is necessary and sufficient for X-ness. It's not just that I might be competent to pick the bee out of a bug lineup without being competent to give verbal expression to the essence of **bee-ness**. There might be no such essence.

This objection is associated (all three levels of it) with a 20th Century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, but is so widely subscribed it is probably misleading to associate it with any individual critic of Plato at this point. The objection cuts deeply against the metaphysical picture presented in Chapter 3 (the view that the things of this world are imperfect copies of their ideal Forms.)



Bee-ometry needn't be like geometry. This condenses the concern that **Meno** (the dialogue) goes wrong as soon as Meno (the man) concedes he owes a definition. On this view, the geometry lesson is a symptom of the disease of thinking virtue must be definable. But let me now make suggestions about how to find **Meno** interesting and insightful even if you think a basic misstep is, in fact, taken right at the start.

13

Could Meno say what it is that all bees have in common? Meno confidently declares he could (what good student of Gorgias would promise less?) From a scholarly commentary on this part of the dialogue:

> [Meno] could perhaps. But some doubt is permitted on this point. To tell what is common to all bees, and, by the same token, what differentiates all bees from anything else, that is, to "define" what "bee" is, is not an easy task. Quite apart from the difficulty that "queens" and "drones" pose in this case, such "defining" presupposes the agreed acceptance of a much larger frame within which the defining takes place — as all known classifications of living beings show — and ultimately perhaps agreement on the structure of the entire universe. Does Socrates want us to understand the immensity of the problem by picking bees as an example? The difficulty of defining is hardly lessened in the case of "human excellence".[4]

If "structure of the entire universe" seems to cast the net wider than necessary, consider that your view of the nature of bees is conditioned by whether you believe animals evolved through a blind process of natural selection or were designed by a divine Creator. It sounds silly, but if someone asks you what a bee is, there would be a certain sense in replying that first we have to figure out whether God exists. Also, the difficulty posed by queens and drones and workers should not be set aside. Bees illustrate the weakness of what we might call 'sample thinking' as opposed to 'system thinking'. If you understand what a thing is in terms of a sample — allegedly exemplary, singular token — your thinking may be partial and confused. You cannot hold up any individual bee — which will be a queen, worker, or a drone — and say, '**this** is what bees are like; judge the excellence of bees by **this**!'

4 Jacob Klein, A Commentary on Plato's Meno (University Of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 48.

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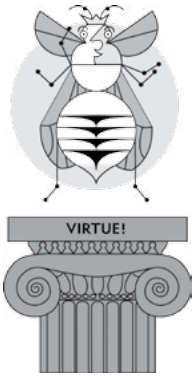
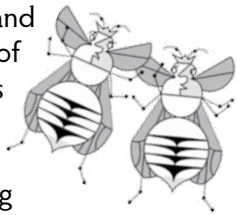
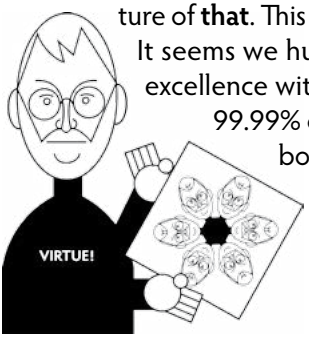


Anyone who thought doing good bee biology meant writing Great Bee biography would be crazy. You cannot understand the 'function' of an isolated bee. A queen exhibits 'excellence' in a well-ordered hive. A hive consisting of queens would not be the most excellent hive. Excellence for bees is ill-defined except against the background of a normative conception of healthy bee ecology. What any bee is, is a function of how all bees ought to be. Looking forward to **Republic**, the labor divisions of social insect societies might be regarded as a hint of things to come: ideal, three-level class structure. But sticking with **Meno**, it says something that Meno's thinking — and ours — is so sample-bound, where virtue is concerned.

Consider how easily Meno goes from invoking all the different sorts of virtues to saying (this is his first stab at actual definition) that virtue is, "the power to rule over men" (73d). Socrates points out that Meno can hardly think women, children and slaves should rule. Why is Meno incapable of remembering something he himself emphasized a minute earlier? Obviously he isn't interested in giving lectures for women and children — that would not befit his manly dignity as leader of men! Analytically crucial cases slide from view. His imagination is dominated by images of successful men. Public men! Men with power to rule over men! For Meno, investigating virtue means figuring out how to make himself one of those, in part by making himself someone who can talk persuasively about what makes one of those. All the same, it is as senseless to envision a human society populated exclusively by effective male leaders as a beehive stuffed with queen bees.



English 'virtue' has (through a series of Victorian accidents) become narrowed in its connotations. We know the word does not apply only to sexually-restrained females but somewhere along the line the picture became a picture of **that**. This is ironic. The root is the same as in 'virile' — manly. It seems we humans have a hard time thinking about human excellence without forgetting about half the humans. Indeed, 99.99% of them. Think about how the success shelf at the bookstore is dominated by biographies of successful leaders. Everyone wants to be Steve Jobs, it looks like. But not because everyone thinks **everyone** should be Steve Jobs, presumably.



What would that even look like?

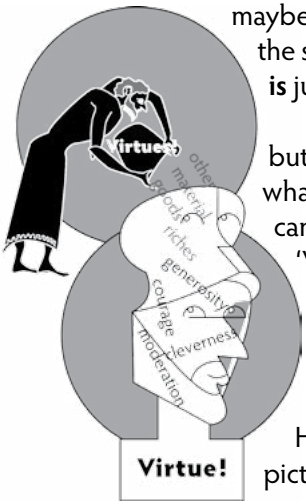
'What order and interrelations of types is optimal for a hive?' is not the same as 'who gets to be queen?, much less 'how can **I** get to be queen?' If we run these together, assuming an answer to the last is an answer to the first, we are going to back into a nonsensical pseudo-theory. This is particularly ironic in light of the fact that a clear vision of what the group should be like as a whole is what leaders presumably need. Welcome to the mind of Meno!

14

When it comes to defining 'virtue', Socrates has not the least trouble tripping Meno up, mostly by laying traps concerning parts and wholes, means and ends. Partly it's Meno's preoccupation with getting ahead (as opposed to getting his head straight.) Partly it's the word, the concept itself. If someone were to write a self-help book entitled **The Seven Virtues in Virtue of Which Virtuous People Are Highly Virtuous**, it would be easy to get turned around concerning which sense(s) of the key term are operative, sentence by sentence. Partly it's the world itself (if that's distinct from the concept.)

There is virtue, then the virtues. This is genus-species; then again, apparently not. Lions, tigers and (domestic) cats are all cats. It is potentially confusing that we use 'cat' as a name for a class and one member of the class. 'Virtue' could be like that. Courage, moderation and justice are virtues. But we also say (Meno does) 'justice **is** virtue'. Is this harmless? Or indicative of confusion? Also, you don't make a cat by combining a lot of smaller cats. But you do make virtue by combining a lot of virtues, it seems.

Is virtue like a jar into which virtues get poured? If there is more internal structure to it, does one or more of those things that go in (justice, maybe?) function to structure all the others, or does the jar do the structuring? If justice does the structuring, maybe the jar **is** justice (see 73b, 79b)?



I leave the outlines of Meno's dismantlement to the reader, but consider: Socrates places the accent on justice. Justice, whatever its virtues as master virtue, is an especially likely candidate for highlighting Meno's vices as master thinker. 'Virtue' tends to be a sample word, i.e. it encourages us to see some individual on a pedestal. 'Justice' is a system word. Justice is blindfolded against seeing persons. Her symbol is the scale. We don't imagine anyone in particular weighed in the balance. Meno is in favor of justice. He isn't an immoralist like Thrasymachus. But he's weak on pictures that are nobody in particular's portrait.

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15

Thus, even if Socrates isn't right that we can and should demand definitions for all key ethical terms, he's right not to let Meno prop up a few busts, for 'virtuous' inspiration, and leave it at that. He sees how Meno's character, and that of the subject, demand the introduction of something more, yet resist its introduction.

But consider a strong counter-argument. Meno is like one of those blind men in the parable, feeling only part of the elephant, fighting with the others about what it's like. (You've heard the story, I trust.) He mistakes part for whole and misses the Big Picture. Still, the solution is the opposite of the one Socrates is hinting at, and outright asserting by the time we are done. What the blind men need to do with their big elephant is keep groping around until they've felt all over, reporting partial results to each other, disconfirming wrong hypotheses, until they arrive at an adequate, unified, empirically-grounded overall survey. The worst thing they could do, to resolve their little 'it's a snake, no it's a spear, no it's a bunch of trees, no it's a wall' dispute is sit down, fold their hands, and get into an ingenious, logic-chopping Socratic debate about the semantics of 'elephant'. You can't figure out what an elephant is just by thinking about it. Why should you be able to figure out what virtue is just by thinking about it?

What would it look like to study virtue the way Meno wants to — concretely, in its embodied variety — but rigorously? Less theatrically? Let me quote Jonathan Haidt, describing empirical research conducted by a pair of scholars, Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson, in the field of positive psychology. What is that?

> It is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues. Positive psychology revisits "the average person" with an interest in finding out what works, what's right, and what's improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the efficiently functioning human being, successfully applying evolved adaptations and learned skills? … Positive psychology is thus an attempt to urge psychologists to adopt a more open and appreciative perspective regarding human potentials, motives and capacities.[5]

5 Quoted by K. Sheldon and L. King, in W. C. Compton, **Introduction to Positive Psychology**, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth Publishing, 2004), p. 3.

Why do psychologists need urging? Crudely: psychology finds crazy people fascinating. But normal, healthy people are important, too. How can you recognize, let alone repair, malfunction if you don't know proper function?

Here is another definition of 'positive psychology', which Haidt himself approves: "the scientific study of optimal human functioning. It aims to discover and promote factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to thrive and function" (4). Whichever definition you prefer, it is obvious positive psychology is what Meno is interested in. Indeed, it would never occur to Meno to talk about much of anything else, where 'virtue' is concerned. That is a measure of his distance, hence of the dialogue's, from Philosophy 101 moral theory, which usually isn't positive psychology.

Haidt describes Seligman and Petersen being initially assured by anthropologists that there was no prospect a universally valid characterization of virtue and the virtues, such as they sought, could be distilled out of the differences exhibited by all the world's various peoples. But these researchers persevered. Here we have an attitudinal mix of Meno and Socrates, be it noted: belief in the importance of concrete cases plus insistence on seeking the abstract general case.

> Petersen and Seligman surveyed every list of virtues they could find, from the holy books of major religions down to the Boy Scout Oath ("trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly . . . ") They made large tables of virtues and tried to see which ones were common across lists. Although no specific virtue made every list, six broad virtues, or families of related virtues, appeared on nearly all lists: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (the ability to forge connections to something larger than the self). These virtues are widely endorsed because they are abstract.[6]

As with the elephant, eventually everything **does** come together.

More or less. The elephant of virtue doesn't come together like a geometrical figure. Virtue is, and remains, a 'family resemblance' concept. That term is Wittgenstein's, which makes a nice connection with our concern about the possibility of definitions. How is it possible for me to know that X is Y, if I can't define Y? Well, perhaps I have picked up the practical knack for recognizing what sort of family the Y family is: a looser, rougher identity criterion than would satisfy Euclid, but functional for everyday use.

But Plato is not driven from the field. When things come together, they get abstract. But what does an **abstract** family portrait look like? Let's see.

6 Jonathan Haidt, The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom (Basic Books, 2006), p. 167. Hereafter, HH.

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The six families are next subdivided into 24 "character strengths." Justice, for example, is subdivided into citizenship, fairness and leadership. Here is Haidt's comment on the complete list:

> Odds are that you don't have much trouble with the list of six virtue families, but you do have objections to the longer list of strengths. Why is humor a means to transcendence? Why is leadership on the list, but not the virtues of followers and subordinates — duty, respect, and obedience? Please, go ahead and argue. The genius of Peterson and Seligman's classification is to get the conversation going, to propose a specific list of strengths and virtues, and then let the scientific and therapeutic communities work out the details. (HH 169)

What is striking here is that, in fact, the conversation Peterson and Seligman have got going is **exactly** the same as the one going on in **Meno**. Haidt is noticing what was pointed out above: everyone aspires to be/admires the queen (leader), no one aspires to be/admires the drones (followers). But it isn't the case that, ideally, **everyone** leads. Is it clear we **should** have no trouble with the list of six virtue families?

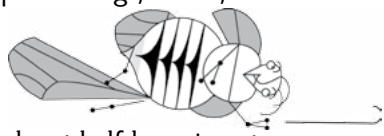
The list assumes justice is one virtue among many. Why shouldn't it be? For the reasons Socrates gives. Imagine a semi-Socratic exchange, like so.

> Do you admit someone can be a virtuous Nazi?
>
> — That doesn't sound like the sort of thing I would want to admit, exactly.
>
> But you **do** admit there could be an intelligent, perceptive, courageous, self-controlled Nazi who cares for his children, is loyal to those above him, inspires loyalty in those under him, has a sense of humor and love of music, allowing him to relax after a day of murder, so he can get up and do it again tomorrow?
>
> — No one quite like that answered our survey. We get a lot of 18-year old college students, although we try our very best to ask other people, too.

The strained possibility matters because it brings out our willingness to acknowledge that Nazis might be 'virtuous' in one sense: **effective at X**. A flexible capacity to negotiate life's interpersonal obstacles is something we value. Yet 'virtue' as a whole — the general label — is a term we withhold from Nazis and psychopaths. Highly effective moral monsters are more monstrous,

not more moral.[7] So justice **is** virtue! At least first among equals. If the other virtues collectively conduce to justice, we get virtue — part and whole; means and end. If not, no amount of generic 'effectiveness' will add up to virtue.

I don't mean to say Haidt would be blind-sided by this socratic trap. Nevertheless, it is not clear carrying on the conversation past this point is a job for empirical surveyors as opposed to socratic questioners ("members of the therapeutic community?") It's not clear what experimental data could enlighten us further. Data tell us what **is**. Ours is an **ought** question. That doesn't prove it can't be studied empirically. A biologist who thinks biology is blind evolution, no Divine Plan, is not contradicting herself if she says a bee with a broken leg is not 'supposed' to be like that. But it isn't clear the virtue case is like that. Our sense of what counts as 'positive', i.e. virtuous, in humans may not reduce, cleanly, to some mixed function of what is biologically normal and/or adaptive. It seems we might need to do some conceptual analysis, above and beyond data collection. But you can't analyze half a concept. What's a crutch for conceptually crippled beings, like us, in a state of half-knowing what's good for them?



16

Luckily we have **Meno**, which turns out to be about half-knowing at every broken-looking twist and turn!

My virtuous Nazi challenge is just an intensified version of an argument Socrates uses to confound Meno (79a). Is it virtuous to acquire the good things in life in an unjust way? Meno hastily concedes it is not. This is part of Socrates' critique of Meno's second proposed definition of 'virtue': to want the best things in life, and to know how to get them (77b). That is, "to find joy in beautiful things, and have power."

The problem is that Meno forgets to add the third leg to the stool: morality. Virtue is readily regarded as a sturdy tripod of beauty, power and goodness (righteousness). Alas, it is not clear these three automatically go together. You can have might without right, and vice versa. Are the best things sometimes a bit ugly on the outside (the best arguments?) But there is a more basic problem. Socrates attacks the first clause of the definition — "to want the best things" — by suggesting, not that it is wrong, but trivial. No doubt Meno means something like 'aim high!' 'dare to dream!' 'visualize success!' But

7 The inevitable self-help title has, however, been written. Kevin Dutton and Andy McNab, The Good Psychopath's Guide To Success: how to use your inner psychopath to get the most out of life! (Apostrophe, 2014).

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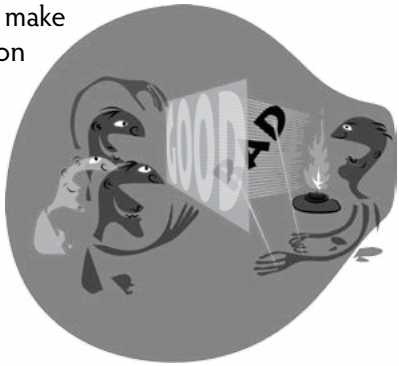
Socrates takes him more flatly (because he did ask for a definition, not a poster slogan.) Does anyone **not** want good things? Does anyone want what is **bad**? Meno concedes no one does. Everyone who is trying to get something bad is confused. They are going after the bad thing under the misapprehension it is good. This is a crucial kind of case. It comes up in **Euthyphro** (8c). Does anyone argue injustice should be done? Yes, lots of cases about this in the courts! Ah, but those aren't, strictly, cases of people advocating **wrong**, **per se**. Dale Carnegie, too, finds this sort of case so significant he puts it right on page one of **Win Friends**. He quotes a letter, hastily penned by a murderer in the midst of a gun-battle with police. "To whom it may concern, under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one — one that would do nobody any harm." Carnegie's point: accusing people of being in the wrong is a waste of time. Not that arresting killers is a waste of time. But don't bother trying to shoot holes in their ethical delusions.

It is striking how easy it would be to draw a diametically opposed conclusion. It is possible to be profoundly deluded about right and wrong. So many are! Ergo, **I** might be. Ergo we should examine ourselves — and those around us — to see who is **really** right. (Maybe the cops have the wrong guy?)

"To whom it may concern" is thoughtlessly formulaic yet oddly perfect, with guns blazing, both sides convinced they are good and would do nobody any harm. It concerns all of us. Murder is a state of mind. You can't be guilty of murder unless you exhibit, to use the legal term, **mens rea** — evil mind, wicked intent. Otherwise it's some lesser charge. So: **does** anybody? If no one wants what is bad, and murder is bad, no one wants to murder, ergo no one is a murderer. In **Republic**, Socrates sells a highly medicalized view of wrong-doing to Polemarchus (335d). 'Bad' men need help, not harm.

Even if we are not concerned with crime and punishment, we should wonder how to make sense of our own capacity for delusion and weakness. Take a simple case. I am on a diet but crave sweets. So sweets are bad — for me (let's say.) Do I **want** what is bad? Certainly. So the conclusion of Socrates' 'no one wants what is bad' argument is refuted.



But what do I really think is going on in me in such a case? Plausibly, part of me wants sweets while another does not. Plausibly, part of the murderer — the part writing the letter — wants to do no harm. Unfortunately, some other segment of his soul is an evident threat to public safety.

I am two (or more) selves in one, but I identify with one more than the other. This foreshadows themes in **Republic** — image of the soul divided. For now, since I have brought in Haidt, since we already have the right sort of beast bumping around in the dark, let me borrow a metaphor Haidt has popularized: your conscious, rational mind is an elephant rider. The rest of your mind **is** the elephant. Disciplining yourself to think, respond, **feel** appropriately, is training and steering an elephant, an often stubborn beast. Arguing with the elephant doesn't do much good; engaging it in socratic dialectic is a total waste of time. It's not much of a talker and no philosopher. The elephant's problem, when it has a problem, is that it doesn't **know** enough. It moves toward what it thinks is good, away from what it thinks is bad. Too often (but not as often as you might think!) it is wrong.

So Socrates is not refuted, after all. When I appear to want something bad — say, I am drinking far too much, straight from the bottle — that is always a case of a part of me wanting that thing, thinking it is good. The part of me that knows it is bad genuinely doesn't **want** the bad thing but isn't in control.

17

This picture of the divided self is not explicit in **Meno** but is Platonic and the most natural way to make sense of the superficially absurd 'no one wants what is bad' conclusion — which Haidt, by the by, buys. "Why do [people] fail to control themselves and continue to do what they know is not good for them" (HH 3)? Because their selves are divided. Haidt and Plato are agreeing nicely, so where does the disagreement come in?

Near the end Socrates hypothesizes that "virtue then, as a whole or in part, is a matter of mindfulness" (89a). (Note how 'whole or in part' qualifies, in case the hypothesis doesn't pan out.) 'Mindfulness' translates **phronēsis**, which the dictionary says is **wisdom** or **prudence**, so our translation is nonstandard. But 'mindful' has the advantage that it gets 'mind' in fully, maintaining clear contrast with narrower mental powers. 'Mindfulness' sounds Buddhistic. Plato is no Buddhist, but what he has in mind is similar enough to what Buddhists mean that the echo is enlightening, not erroneous: a power of memory, plus attention, enabling undistractable correct perception. (Don't assume **phronēsis** still means this when you get to Aristotle, however!)

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Socrates' argument: virtue is necessarily good, but character traits like courage, goods like wealth, honors, status, are none of them **necessarily** good. They are good or bad as well or ill-used. Take mental quickness. It means learning quickly; or never having to admit you are wrong. Take strong memory. It can allow you to retain knowledge; or turns your mind into a lumberyard of rhetorical bits and pieces. These examples are not random. The dialogue is an implicit critique of the damage Gorgias does to students, diverting native quickness and memory to bad, sophistical ends.

The only trait that is necessarily good is **mindfulness** — rational right direction. Ergo, only mindfulness can equate to virtue (88e). On this view, Meno's nearly blind second shot — justice **is** virtue — hits the bulls-eye. (This foreshadows Socrates' point that guessing right is as good as knowing; also, that it doesn't last.) If justice is mindful balancing, it is the master virtue. Also, that justice seems to us more a social than individual virtue may fit with the expansion of subject matter implied by the definitions of 'positive psychology'. Students of virtue must turn sociologists. Or turn philosophers.

Anything for Haidt to object to in all this? Yes! 'Virtue is mindfulness' can be read as highly absurd if we take Plato to be proposing that we should strive for total, rational self-awareness; as if the way to win a sprint were to become hyper-conscious of exactly where you place each foot with each step; as if you wouldn't trip over your feet if you tried. Man is mostly an instinctive beast. That's the whole point of the rider/elephant metaphor.

Haidt's tag for the Platonic Rationalist view is 'the Promethean Script', after the titan who steals fire from the gods to give to mankind. Plato would play Prometheus, spreading the light of reason over the whole mind, driving back the dark. But must we read 'virtue is mindfulness' as a formula for hyper-conscious hubris? Consider: practice doesn't make perfect. **Perfect** practice makes perfect. Behind every champ stands a coach, mindful of what the athlete does. **Virtue is mindfulness** is not crazier than **athletes need coaching**.

A passage from the dialogue **Protagoras** (320c-28c) might lend credence to Haidt's line that Plato denies the animal in us more strongly. We hear how Prometheus and his brother, Epimetheus were tasked by Zeus with making humans and beasts. Epimetheus — his name means **afterthought** — carelessly uses up all the good bits on his animal projects: teeth, claws, fur, wings, etc.

Prometheus — his name means **forethought** — is driven to steal fire, lest his poor naked, weak human creations should have nothing. Metaphorically, man's conscious, rational head is **all he has**; all he **is**.

'The Epimethean Script' is an even better name for what Haidt critiques: the notion that I essentially lack a (backwards) animal nature. But the myth is put in the mouth of Protagoras. Socrates challenges its wisdom on rather Haidtian grounds (328d). Protagoras is too flattering to our rational natures, hence his political thinking is over-optimistic.

In general, if Plato thinks Reason can micromanage all workings of the Soul he ought to advocate downsizing its divisions. Fire all workers except the Boss! Instead, he advocates harmony as his ideal. This is explicit in **Republic**, implicit in **Meno**. In Haidt terms, the rider can't replace the elephant. Still, the rider has to steer wisely. Is Plato so far from Haidt?

Or suppose Plato **is** saying perfect virtue means having only rational beliefs, plus deliberate control of all internal states and dispositions. So long as you add that humans don't have it, this might be fine. The final section of the dialogue contains arguments suggesting humans aren't virtuous. They just look that way, while their dumb luck holds. If this is Plato, he is pessimistic, not Promethean.

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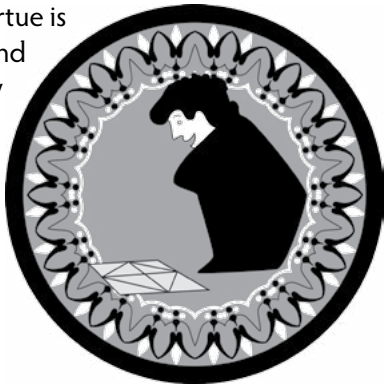
Haidt might at this point adjust his complaint: Plato's problem is he won't settle for second-best. (So he is, by turns, despairingly pessimistic and hopelessly optimistic about first-best Rationalism.) In economics, the so-called 'theory of the second best' tells us sometimes our second-best option is a slight knock-off of first-best. By all means aim high, but be prepared to hit lower. But sometimes second-best looks very different. If your first-best dinner is steak garnished with a sprig of parsley, and you forgot the parsley, plain steak is plausibly second-best. But if you forgot the steak itself, a peanut butter sandwich might be second-best. There is a point at which abandoning the original plan is better than downgrading it. A sprig of parsley, on its lonesome, is **too** inferior, as a steak dinner. In Plato terms: ideally, human minds would be something like general purpose Reason engines. But reality is so far off from that! Telling people to try to be perfectly logical is very bad advice. They'll ignore you, if you're lucky; put you to death for introducing new gods and corrupting the youth otherwise. Plato needs to give up what he can't have (rational purity) and accept second-best, which he can't avoid, which is quite different in kind (instinctive, social and appearance-minded.)

Putting the point another way: **ought implies can** means you shouldn't define 'virtue' in such a way that no human can exhibit it (just as bee scientists would be foolish to model an 'ideal' queen, to get a heuristic handle on biological function, then conclude there aren't any queens, if no real bee measures up to the toy model.) In **Meno**, the best evidence that Plato is mismodeling the mind, then reproaching reality for failing to live up to his error, is the geometry lesson. I leapt over it, to get to 'mindfulness'. Let's backtrack, to see what we can see in this interlude between bouts of virtue-seeking.

18

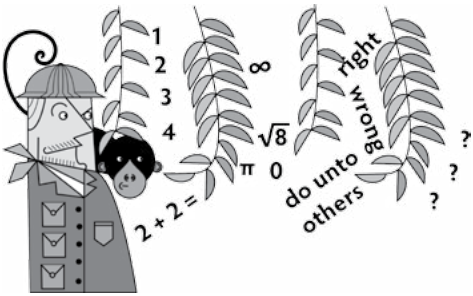
What is the point of putting the boy though his geometric paces (82d-5c)?

Not to find the length of the side of a square twice the area of a 2x2 square, **per se**. I'll assume you took geometry and know how and why the answer is √8. But Plato isn't hinting virtue is √8. Here's a better clue: a seemingly simple and concrete problem (just scratches in sand, how hard could it be?) is harder than it looks; yet not too hard, once you've made the paradigm shift to irrational numbers. The boy is on the cusp of a fundamental discovery about the nature of number itself.



Could virtue be like that? Not the square root of anything, but, like an irrational number, intellectually surprising, the first time you meet one?

If you know a bit about Pythagorean philosophy, which influenced Plato, you may object I should not be so quick to turn the math into metaphor here. The Pythagoreans attributed moral values to numbers (even=bad; odd=good.) If, as Aristotle says, they believed 'all is number', ethics should follow suit. Someone who reads number mysticism into **Meno** might be onto something.[8] But let me try to steer clear. Whether or not math is holy, it's funny. Funny **strange**. It's 'all in your head', so it shouldn't contain surprises. But intrepid explorers venture forth into that jungle of number and return bearing strange gifts. Could there, likewise, be new moral truths lurking in the abstract interstices of our **ought** thoughts, however humble our daily to-do lists look?



Virtue seems down-to-earth. But so did geometry when it consisted of techniques for measuring the most down-to-earth thing: the earth. Then it matured into a pure, abstract field. Then it got interesting! You'll never discover the strange stuff so long as geometry is mostly for real estate professionals. (Euclid's first three postulates are not: location! location! location!) Could Plato on virtue be like Euclid on geometry? You won't discover the truly strange truths until the subject is taken out of the hands of the 'practical' men? The reader who answers 'maybe?' agrees with what Plato is getting at in **Meno**. The reader who answers 'definitely not!' disagrees.

8 I am confident the appearance of Empedocles, Persephone and geometry together in **Meno** means Plato is deliberately, persistently referencing traditions of Orphic mystery religion, with which Pythagoreanism was associated. Whether this is just a 'theatrical' literary joke, running through the dialogue, or affords a glimpse of the mystical headwaters of Plato's thought — or both — I cannot say. For a fascinating, formidable, non-standard view, see Peter Kingsley, **Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and the Pythagorean Tradition** (Oxford, 1995), especially pp. 160-5.

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19

The geometry lesson is staged in response to Meno's argument that inquiry is impossible. Socrates summarizes it (80e): you cannot inquire about X because either you know what X is like or you don't. If you know, you cannot inquire. (Can't start a job that's done.) If you don't know, you cannot inquire. (You don't know where to start.) But the geometry lesson is not, then, a rebuttal to this argument. Socrates' direct response is, oddly enough, to report hearsay about priests and priestesses, plus a pinch of Pindar. Let's trace it out.

The obvious response would be that what makes inquiry possible is the possibility of **half**-knowing. But, come to think of it, how **is** it possible to half-know X? Isn't half-grasping a concept like being half-pregnant? Judo-style, Socrates uses the strength of Meno's argument against him. It's true! You never learn! What seems like learning is 'recollection'. If so, we may have a model of half-knowledge: knowledge in absent-minded, amnesiac disguise.

Meno's argument is sophistical, but with a kernel of skeptical plausibility. Socrates' response seems wild, but there might be a grain of commonsense here, too. Let me quote Nicholas Taleb, arguing along Menoesque lines:

> This point [Meno's, roughly — although Taleb is not discussing Plato] can be generalized to all forms of knowledge. There is actually a law in statistics called the law of iterated expectations, which I outline here in its strong form: if I expect to expect something at some date in the future, then I already expect that something at present.
>
> Consider the wheel … If you are a Stone Age historical thinker called on to predict the future in a comprehensive report for your chief tribal planner, you must project the invention of the wheel or you will miss pretty much all of the action. Now, if you can prophesy the invention of the wheel, you already know what a wheel looks like, and thus you already **know how** to build a wheel, so you are already on your way …
>
> But there is a weaker form of this law of iterated knowledge. It can be phrased as follows: **to understand the future to the point of being able to predict it, you need to incorporate elements from this future itself.** If you know about the discovery you are about to make in the future, then you have almost made it.[9]

Taleb isn't modeling inquiry but prediction. Not the same. Yet there is an 'either you know it or you don't' sharpness to Taleb's picture that corresponds, instructively.

9 Nassim Nicholas Taleb, **The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable**, (Random House, 2007), p. 172. (Emphasis in the original.)

Taleb's idea is that the bolded bit of the passage means you mostly **don't** know. But, on a bolder reading, any genuine ability to predict the future could be an indicator of a deep harmony between oneself and the universe. If I can know some essential feature of the universe, I **am** it. This brings us to the alleged wisdom of Socrates' priests and priestesses (81a-e), who preach a doctrine of innate ideas, based on a doctrine of reincarnation, which is also a parable of redemption-through-purification. Souls do not simply circulate eternally but, per the Pindar poem, can in some sense atone for (epistemic?) sins. In the dark, prepare to see the light! The first step is admitting you have a problem: **I don't know!** That's the proper catechism for cave-dwellers.

Meno likes this, despite the fact that, as a student of Gorgias, 'I don't know' is not in his vocabulary. He is happy to reverse his sulky 'inquiry is impossible' line, getting back on inspirational track with a 'no pain, no gain!' tale of kings winning superpowers from Persephone.[10] But these details are wild enough even Meno would like to hear a bit more before buying. Hence we get the geometry lesson (82a-86c), which is supposed to serve as something like proof-of-concept for the reincarnation concept.

20

But before we get to the question of how a geometry lesson can prove the possibility of endlessly recycled souls, a more basic question.

Does Plato himself buy this Persephonic soul-stuff Socrates is selling?

Plato believes something akin, I'll bet. He believes in souls with the capacity to grasp Being (Chapter 3). He may be a Pythagorean mystic, perhaps a sincere devotee of some Orphic religious tradition (now my shots are getting wilder, more speculative.) Still, it seems reasonable to suppose he knows very well that passing along poetic hearsay, by itself, is something between a bad argument and none. Reasons there may be, but Socrates isn't providing them here. Can it be right for Socrates (Plato) to argue so badly?

10 The Pindar reads 'swift/rushing strength' (81c) but I like Jacob Klein's portmanteau epithet, 'lightning-like strength' (p. 95): power, speed, 'Eureka-like!' enlightenment, the retinal afterglow of sudden glory; a nice contrast with the Socratic stingray's dull, paralyzing stun.

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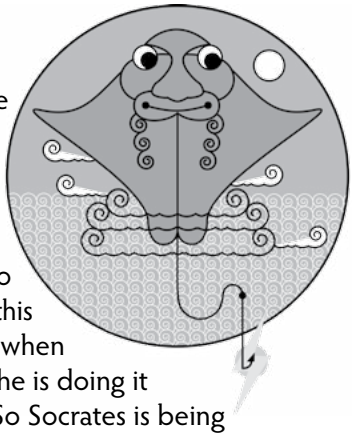


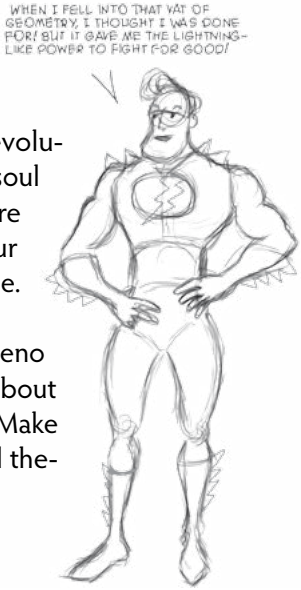
Maybe we are seeing an ironic appreciation of the wisdom of settling for second-best, after all. Entrancing Meno with Persephonic mystery science theater might be a case study in motivated irrationality.

How so? (What's motivated irrationality?)

Sometimes you put your alarm somewhere dumb so you won't roll over, turn it off, go back to sleep. How is this like the Meno case? Well, maybe Socrates is worried when his argument goes off like an alarm — warning Meno he is doing it wrong: living, that is! — Meno will go back to sleep. So Socrates is being rather round-about, devising a bad answer that might keep him awake.

Rags-to-riches metaphysics, with a touch of poetry! As Carnegie says: "why not use some common sense when fishing for people." It's common sense that people like things that don't sound commonsensical. Being let in on some esoteric Mystery makes you special. Socrates sometimes seems like he's got only his stingray sting, to combat Meno's fishy arguments. He can only stun and paralyze. But here maybe he shows he knows very well what people are like. He is giving Meno the sort of shock he might **like**.

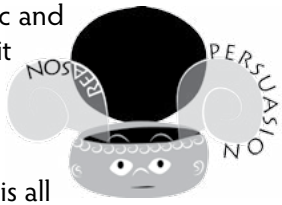
'Even if I'm not sure all this stuff is true, it's better for you to **believe** it' (81e). Power of positive thinking! Meno likes this style! To readers today the weird, murky Mystery of Socrates' reincarnation myth is off-puttingly opaque. But think about how a lot of self-help writing today gets jazzed up with alleged cutting-edge science. 'How the power of mirror-neurons helps CEO's close the big deals!' 'What evolutionary psychology tells you **not** to put on your next job application.'



I totally just made those up. But this is the kind of thing someone might click. What Socrates is saying may click with Meno as **sellable**. It seems strange that someone would want to detour through the brain, or through evolutionary history — or an endless wash-and-rinse cycle of soul reincarnations — to get ahead in business, but people are funny that way. It's inspiring to see ordinary aspects of our lives from a cosmic perspective. Even if it's maybe nonsense. (Even if it's not true, it's inspiring to believe it!)

Maybe, all things considered, it would be better if Meno went around giving sketchy speeches to large audiences about the power of geometry. Maybe kids would be inspired! Make math glorious! If a few kids graduate from the rhetorical theatrics to the real deal, maybe it will have been worth it.

Speaking of strange geometrical results: here is a creature — a boy — with a mind so constituted that, miraculously, it seems pre-attuned to the basic structure of the universe itself. It is an infinite knowledge box. It only needs to be appropriately triggered with a little bit of logic and argumentation. Provoke it with a math puzzle and watch it learn (excuse me: recollect!) the most astonishing things!



True, this creature can also be tricked into buying a brand of soap basically indistinguishable from other brands on the market. Here, too, a simple triggering is all that is required. ("Miasmaway Soap is the **Best** Soap!" Repeat, repeat, **repeat**!) **Your** idea — Meno, Gorgias, Dale Carnegie — is we ought to pursue the second path, **not** the first? You have a boy who could 1) be initiated into wonderful mysteries; 2) be tricked into buying stuff. You say 2) is the true path of virtue? Surely more heroic exploration is in order before we settle down in such a sorry Cave, forevermore!

On the other hand, isn't it ironic to trick Meno into not settling for selling soap … by selling him soul soap? Pindarian-Persephonic placebo to cure his addiction to Gorgiastic patent medicine?

Maybe it's poetic justice to fight tricks with tricks. But is that **justice**?

It could be hubris. Plato presumes to say who's got their head on straight, and to straighten it for them, with or without their consent. He's the guy with the right to lie! Does this mean Haidt is right? What a Know-It-All Plato is!

But Haidt's criticism is not, properly, that Plato was personally arrogant, to the point of pushing ideas on others in sneaky ways. The charge is that Plato wrongly advances the false proposition that it is possible to Know It All, by pure Reason. **That's** the suspect script: Rationalism with a capital-R.

Set aside mythic framing and suspicions about personal arrogance. What's left in the text that speaks to Plato's delusive dream of pure Reason?

Just a geometry lesson that is really a cognitive science experiment. How do humans learn math? Let's look and see. As experiments go, it exhibits at least one minor and one fatal flaw. The minor flaw is it is very poorly controlled (even apart from actually being fictional.) Socrates says he is not telling the boy the answer, but isn't he dropping hints? "Doesn't a line drawn from corner to corner cut each of these figures in two" (85a)? Still, this is consistent with rehabilitating the case into what is known today as a 'poverty of stimulus' argument. If I drop one coin in the slot and ten come out the bottom, there must have been coins in the machine the whole time. Perhaps we can regard the hints Socrates drops as triggers for the release of an absolutely greater volume of mathematics 'inside' the boy.

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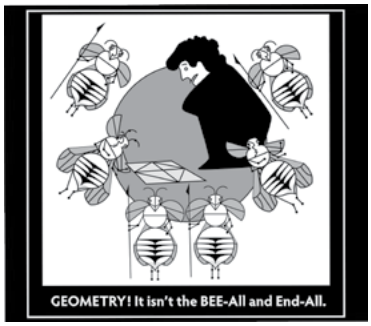
But this only gets us to the epistemic elephant in the room. Socrates' inference that what is true in this case will apply to the learning of "every other subject" (85e). Surely false! From the fact that I can 'recollect' all of geometry it doesn't follow I can 'recollect' what is going to happen tomorrow. Socrates is committing an extreme version of the fallacy he himself sees: **not every mental capacity is a master capacity.** Being quick doesn't make you comprehensively mindful; nor does having a good memory; nor, however, does being able to ace geometry pop quizzes.



21

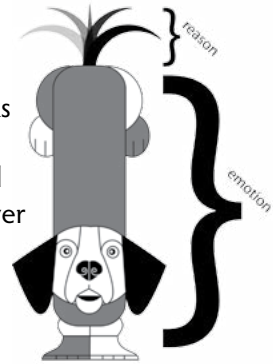
So Plato seems like the proverbial drunk, looking for his ethical keys under the streetlight of geometry, though he lost them in the alley of emotion, because 'the light is better here.' That's Rationalism all over! (Haidt would say.)

Ah, well. Smart people outsmart themselves every day. It fits with that story (from Chapter 4) about how Plato set up his academy, hanging 'no non-geometers allowed' over the door. Whether that legend is true or not, it seems likely that Plato can't envision a non-geometrical model working. Remember the problem with **elenchus** (Chapter 2)? How can testing for consistency be enough? Only if we had ethical axioms could dialectic be a positive method. Since Plato is committed to dialectic, and the goal of knowledge, he is holding out for axioms in ethics that will work like those in math.

Here we may see the negative side of the power of positive thinking. Plato over-optimistically backforms a model mind to go with his model institution, which fits his abstract vision of an idealized structure of knowledge. He hereby traps himself in a hopeless dead-end, when these ideals collapse and cascade back down in a series of failures. The mind **can't** work that way.

But are we **so** sure Plato is making this mistake? Didn't we decide, back in section 16, that Plato isn't naive about how we humans are mixes of rational and non-rational bits? Yet here he is, sounding wildly over-optimistic about geometry as a model for All-Knowing. And knowing is the model for ethics, for living. So which Plato is the real one? Naive, Rationalist geometer, or shrewd psychologist rhetorician?

Back to Haidt. Elephants are well and good; but, for zoological variety, and domestic familiarity, I introduce the reader to the emotional dog and its rational tail. Haidt is an 'intuitionist', so it should be 'intuitionist dog'. But



'emotional' will do. It's intuitive.[11] When it comes to moral psychology our minds are emotion engines. We know what we like and don't. Ethical reasoning just backs that up, like Gorgias, concocting plausible answers on the fly. This solves puzzles we started with. Why would Anytus think he knows the sophists are bad if he's never met them (91c)? Because he **wants** them to be bad. If sophists teach virtue, Anytus, the gentleman, isn't as good as he thinks. That's unacceptable! Desire, not reason, holds up the roof of Anytus' moral house.

The basic reason we suffer no belief gap, regarding ethical questions, whether we have a knowledge gap or not, is we have no emotion gap. Dogs are full of feeling; the tail is a tell-tale. But the tail doesn't wag the dog. Thus is born a rich metaphor. Reason is the tail. What people argue for, morally, is a tell as to what they want; but telling people your moral argument seldom changes a moral mind. The foundation is emotion.

I hope this gives a feel for what 'intuition' means, for Haidt: a kind of cognition, but not rational; perception-like. Another clue is the importance Haidt places on disgust responses. This subject seems far-afield from ethics, hardly the seat of wisdom. Nevertheless, Haidt argues it is central. You are revolted by something! Instantly reason is on the case, like a Gorgiastic lawyer, confabulating reasons why revulsion makes sense. Maybe: 'Zeus hates it!' (Sound familiar from **Euthyphro**?) Ethical reasoning mostly consists of **post facto** rationalizations of gut responses. The practical takeaway is: you have to take people as they are, as emotion-driven. (If even the gods fight about right and wrong, probably we can see it in their facial muscles.)

If Haidt opened a school of positive psychology in ancient Athens, maybe he would commission the architect to carve canine caryatids topped with wag-tail, pseudo-acanthus capitals, to remind students of their true natures. Reason as ornament! Emotion is load-bearing! But Haidt could still use a sign over his door. 'Curb your dog!' Students will conduct double-blind experiments, offer blind peer reviews of each others' research, to keep bias at bay. If someone submits a psychology research paper, saying she has no evidence for

11 Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach To Moral Judgment." Psychological Review (2001), 108:4, 814-834.

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her conclusion, but her 'emotional dog' is wagging its tail, Haidt will reject it. He emphasizes how heuristically reliable our emotional responses are in most situations. Still, he's a scientist; that is, a rationalist.

In science, just **feeling** you are right isn't nearly good enough. But Haidt is opposed to Rationalism, on scientific grounds. So what gives? Is he for or against reason?

Consider a famous saying of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: political philosophy takes men (people) as they are, laws (politics) as they might be. Science is like that, too. It institutes procedures, like double-blind protocols, as crutches for biased brains. Ethics, too, takes us as we are **and** might be. When Aristotle says 'man is a rational animal' it is unfair of Carnegie to say he is just wrong. This neglects the aspirational quality of the thought and opens Carnegie to an equal-and-opposite critique. We humans are not perfectly rational, yet not lacking in reason either. Thus we are drawn back to the central question of **Meno**: how does half-rationality work for the mentally mongrel likes of poor old us?

22

Let's parse 'half-rational'. 'Rationalism' denotes a descriptive view and a normative view. Descriptively, people **are** rational. Normatively, they **should be**. (We should say 'science', 'belief', 'knowledge' in addition to 'people'. But just plain people are enough to keep us busy for now.) Consider four statements:

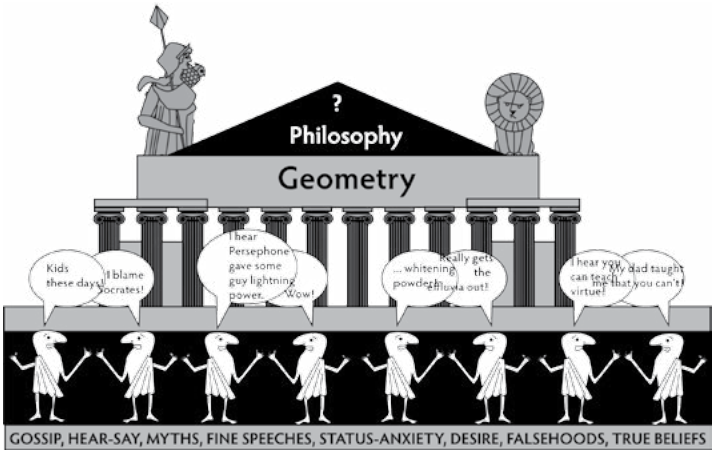
1) **People use reason to figure stuff out.**
2) **People are irrational.**
3) **People should try to be rational.**
4) **If people try to be perfectly rational, they fail badly.**

It would be hard to find anyone who denies 1-4. Yet 1) is descriptive rationalism; 2) is descriptive anti-rationalism; 3) is normative rationalism; 4) is (probably) normative anti-rationalism. We all buy all of them, it seems!

Maybe Plato fails to give 4) enough emphasis, but his divided soul model implies any human attempt to be purely rational must be, at best, aiming high, expecting to hit lower. Certainly Plato is a subscriber to 2), per the parade of incompetent interlocutors in his dialogues. By contrast, Haidt can sound shaky where 1) and 3) are concerned. He is forever quoting the 18th Century philosopher, David Hume: "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions." What Hume means are things in the vicinity of 2) and 4).

Still, Hume would never dream of denying certain senses in which 1) and 3) are obviously true. Nor Haidt. Nor any scientist.

Haidt is a scientific rationalist who defends intuitionism. Plato is an intuitionist selling rationalism. But if Haidt misses how much Plato is working the same side of the street as he is, that may be Plato's fault, too. Only a bad craftsman blames his tools. The tools of thinking are embodied human brains, with all their deep, animal, non-rational, non-conscious layers. Plato seems to blame the flesh, which does not put him in the best frame of mind for appreciating its positive potential. Meanwhile, Haidt is working with what he's got in a steadier, second-best style. It really is a very interesting architectural puzzle. How to build solid, rational structures (be they intellectual or institutional) on such weak foundations as we humans seem to be. Still, I will now argue Plato does not neglect the challenge. **Meno** contains two attempts to build on the second-best sand of our semi-rationality



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The first is aspirational, a bit vague; the second is technical, obscure and a failure, but perhaps it will shift our sense of where Plato is coming from.

A simple question (not a math puzzle, but a puzzle about math): can a geometry proof change your life? Probably not, but don't rule it out. At the ripe old age of 40-something the 17th Century philosopher Thomas Hobbes first encountered Euclid's **Elements**. He was (he said) thunderstruck at the realization that this sort of thing is possible. His style of philosophy changed. There is room for debate about whether Hobbes became a king, with lightning-like strength. But he did write a book, **Leviathan**, certainly one of the greatest, most influential works of political philosophy in the English

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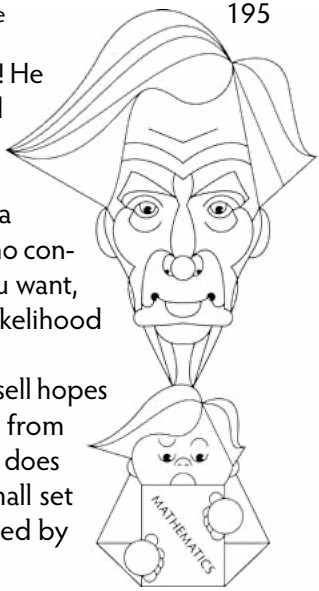
language. But — fair enough! — Hobbes was probably an intellectual outlier.[12] Best to get them before they sprout whiskers. Kids' minds are more malleable. The 20th Century philosopher Bertrand Russell has an essay, "The Study of Mathematics", about the ethical value of math study for children. It reads like one long gloss on Socrates' odd-sounding allegation that all these opinions the boy has expressed are 'his own' (85c).

In what sense 'his own', and does this determination of intellectual property rights matter? We are right to connect the phrase with cognitive science debates about innate ideas, but that isn't quite Russell's notion. He thinks mathematics at first seems authoritarian. Teachers lays down rules that seem arbitrary. What teacher says, goes.

illustration credit: Violet Holbo (age 9).

But, with luck, a paradigm shift may occur. Reason rules here, not teacher! Reason can be identified with one's own thought-processes. If reason rules, and I reason, **I** rule! It is liberating to think so. Math is the opposite of an arbitrary, external political structure. It is internal, non-arbitrary, non-political (if politics is defined in terms of interpersonal conflict.) Does increased respect for reason improve understanding of words like 'good'? Russell ends on a utopian note. It is healthy to call models of perfection before the mind's eye.

12 See Andrew Clark (ed.), 'Brief Lives', chiefly of contemporaries set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696 (Clarendon, 1898), Vol 1, p. 332.



Don't presume to cure Russell's rationalist naiveté! He jokes he is still looking for evidence man is a rational animal and singles out 'boys can learn math' as a conspicuously weak argument that Utopia is just around the corner. You can be a Rationalist **and** a political realist **and** a shrewd psychologist. There is no contradiction. Russell thinks you should know what you want, ideally, not that you should be deluded about the likelihood that you will get it, in practice.

Still, isn't his pedagogy impractical? This shift Russell hopes for is unlikely to occur. Most kids will not emerge from math class as Russellian rationalists/utopians. But math does impress its distinctive intellectual character on a small set of human characters — whose size might be increased by targeted pedagogy.[13]

The reader will not have failed to note how, in section 21, 1-4 were true because so indefinite. Sure, 'people' are rational **and** irrational. But maybe some people are a bit unusual. There could be rare breeds of emotional dog.

> People may at times reason their way to a judgment by sheer force of logic, overriding their initial intuition. In such cases reasoning truly is causal and cannot be said to be the 'slave of the passions.' However, such reasoning is hypothesized to be rare. (819)

Haidt hereby concedes rationalist rarities may manifest, "among philosophers, one of the few groups that has been found to reason well."

Do Russell or Plato need more than that?

This question of the many vs. the few brings out a tension between normality and virtue. Excellence is not averageness, but when we talk about biological function, we equivocate between what is typical and what is tip-top. The same goes for virtue. We sort of think everyone's got it **and** that only a few do. Recall the proposition that, "positive psychology revisits 'the average person' with an interest in finding out what works, what's right." Does this assume the average person is in working order as-is; is 'virtuous'?

Do we **want** to assume that?

13 "The Study of Mathematics" appeared in Bertrand Russell, Philosophical Essays (Longmans, 1910), re-issued as Mysticism and Logic (Allen & Unwin, 1919). Readers looking for Russellian barbs about bias and irrationality might sample Unpopular Essays (Routledge, 1950).

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Let me turn to the technical fix that is, I am afraid, little better than a suggestive failure, yet worth noting. **Meno** contains not one geometry problem but two. The first, the boy's, is so simple I omitted explanation. The second is so complex I cannot provide one. Socrates mentions a hypothetical method. "For example, if someone were to ask [geometers] whether a certain area can be inscribed as a triangle in a given circle, one of them might say, I don't yet know whether **this** area has **that** property, but I think I have a hypothesis that will move us forward with the problem" (87a). The details are hard to follow. Socrates may be talking shop in an attempt to entice Meno, who is always shopping for technical talk — as stage props; with the result that scholars are confused about what properties Socrates is staging. But geometry is just an analogy. Perhaps it is good enough to say Socrates' point here is that we need some way to proceed rigorously, yet hypothetically.

I call this a failure because I am sure Plato is not dreaming of getting half hypothetical enough to model the workable half-knowledge empirical science has shaped up to be in the modern era. Recall Taleb's point about the stone age thinker who either knows about the wheel, in which case he doesn't need to predict it; or doesn't, in which case he can't predict much. Plato's Cave (Chapter 3) is caveman stuff, in this sense. Plato mocks the notion that having, "the best head for remembering which shadows usually come earlier, later, and simultaneously — thus enabling predictions of the future" (517d), is some prize possession. He grossly underestimates how effective this method will prove to be. Record regularities; hypothesize continuation in ignorance of underlying causes. Still, give Plato half-credit for a wrong hypothesis (rather than none) about how scientific hypotheses should go.

The important thing is not to half-salvage Plato's reputation from the charge that he's half-savage. The point is that there is a balance to be struck between rejecting too-strong Rationalism, in some senses, assuming trivial rationalism in others, all the while exploring possible middle ground. Where do Plato and Haidt stand in this middle ground they somewhat share?

Haidt thinks Plato's brand of Rationalism entails denial of Haidt's psychological claims (hence the empirical truth of these claims refutes Plato.)

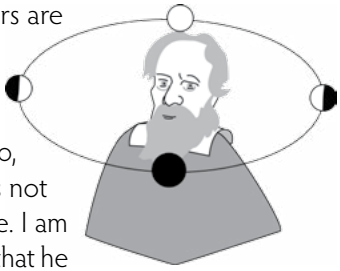
> A rationalist can still believe that reasoning is easily corrupted, or that most people don't reason properly. But ought implies can, and rationalists are committed to the belief that reason **can** work this way, perhaps (as in Plato's case) because perfect rationality is the soul's true nature. (RM, 392)

This is a fallacy. Haidt says you can't believe in pure reason unless you believe humans can, potentially, reason purely. This is as bad as inferring that psychologists are thinking illogically, from the fact that they study illogical thinking. But maybe Plato is committing the opposite fallacy (so Haidt is right to see him slip, even as he slips himself). Put it this way: natural science could have been based on geometry. Serious thinkers proposed geometry as the theoretical basis for mathematical physics. This didn't pan out, but it wasn't a bad bet. But reading that stuff, you get a lot of unhelpful conflation of how the mind must work with how science will look, ideally. But the brains of scientists were never going to turn into pure geometry engines, even if physics has shaped up to be a pure, geometrical discipline. Science might just work differently than scientists. Would that be **so** surprising?

The problem, basically, is that 'reason' is ambiguous between a pure factor, which we isolate in logic and math, and a human capacity, which is never a pure factor. Confusion about this causes arguments. You get dueling justifications; also a lot of genuinely angry fights. People get pretty worked up.

To illustrate, I quote Taleb again (although the line of thinkers eager to get in anti-Platonic licks is long.) He quotes Galileo, a very Platonic thinker:

> The great book of Nature lies ever open before our eyes and the true philosophy is written in it … But we cannot read it unless we have first learned the language and the characters in which it is written … It is written in mathematical language and the characters are triangles, circles and other geometric figures.



Taleb retorts, indignantly.

> Was Galileo legally blind? Even the great Galileo, with all his alleged independence of mind, was not capable of taking a clean look at Mother Nature. I am confident that he had windows in his house and that he ventured outside from time to time: he should have known that triangles are not easily found in nature. We are so easily brainwashed.
>
> We are either blind, or illiterate, or both. That nature's geometry is not Euclid's was so obvious, and nobody, almost nobody, saw it. (257)

Plato sees himself as a lonely thinker in a Cave crammed with shadow-chasing Talebs. Taleb knows himself to be, to the contrary, a lonely seer in a sea of Platos. "We seem naturally inclined to Platonify." Is Platonism a tacit assumption of the silent majority or a minority conclusion, silenced by the majority? Who's right about the sociology, do you think?

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Next, a spokesman for the Platonic side. John Barrow, astronomer, begins a popular book on mathematics with a dramatic passage (but some might say this opening is too … theatrical.)

> A mystery lurks beneath the magic carpet of science, something that scientists have not been telling: something too shocking to mention except in rather esoterically refined circles: that at the root of the success of twentieth-century science there lies a deeply 'religious' belief — a belief in an unseen and perfect transcendental world that controls us in an unexplained way, yet upon which we seem to exert no influence whatsoever …
>
> This sounds more than a trifle shocking to any audience that watches and applauds the theatre of science. Once there was magic and mysticism, but we have been taught that the march of human progress has gone in step with our scientific understanding of the natural world and the erosion of that part of reality which we are willing to parcel up and label 'unknowable'. This enterprise has been founded upon the certainty that comes from speaking the language of science, a symbolic language that banishes ambiguity and doubt, the only language with a built-in logic which enables communion with the innermost workings of Nature to be established and underpinned by thought and actions: this language is mathematics.[14]

This is Platonism, with a twist.

In **Meno**, Socrates suggests what goes for geometry goes for all things; Barrow relies on our sense of the uniqueness of mathematics. Where does Haidt stand? At one point he asks:

> Do people believe in human rights because such rights actually exist, like mathematical truths, sitting on a cosmic shelf next to the Pythagorean theorem just waiting to be discovered by Platonic reasoners? (RM, p. 38)

It sounds like Haidt **might** credit a cosmic shelf, at least for triangles. (But once you install such a shelf, for any storage purposes, the deepest objection to accepting transcendent ethical truth — i.e. I'd **love** it! but where would I put it? — falls away.) I am sure Haidt does not suppose he has fMRI [functional magnetic resonance imaging] data, demonstrating the non-existence of **abstracta** in the lab. But he thinks he can refute Plato in the lab. But can you refute someone, empirically, if you don't think you can refute the allegedly non-empirical basis for their position?

14 John D. Barrow, PI in the Sky: Counting, Thinking, and Being (Back Bay Books, 1992), p. 3.

Let me give you **my** opinion. Unlike Taleb, I don't think you can refute platonism by looking out the window. Unlike Plato, I don't think platonism about mathematics is fit to do the one job you would ever want it to: namely, explain.

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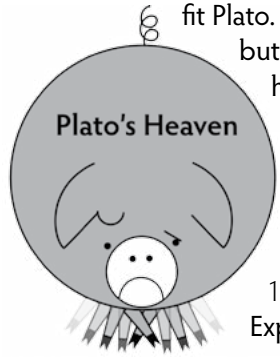
What **is** distinctive about mathematics? We know 2+2=4 without having to test the additive function on apples, aircraft carriers and anacondas; without having to travel to Australia to make sure math works there, too. That's math. But consider a more challenging calculation. Shall we say: 2248+3678=?

There must have been a time when no member of our species could solve this, or clearly conceive of what it asks. Rationally, we have come a long way. If you don't know the answer off the top of your head, you know there is one. To do math is not to be purely rational. Don't tell mathematicians intuition plays no role in math thinking! Yet (intuitive) discovery and (rational) proof are sharply distinguished. There is a purity and certainty to the subject itself, which our primitive ancestors can hardly have conceived of, but which we help ourselves to on a daily basis. Still, saying this is due to our reaching up and grasping items off some cosmic shelf is no explanation whatsoever.

Let me pull things together with a pair of jokes. (If I had an argument, I would offer it instead.) The Balkans, Winston Churchill said, produce more history than they consume locally. Plato's Heaven does the same for metaphysical mystery.

I also have a funny animal I like almost as much as Haidt's dog. There is an old American saying, 'independent as a hog on ice'. I always assumed it was a wry way of calling someone helpless. Top-heavy, frictionless trotters, getting nowhere fast. (Get the picture?) 'Plato's Heaven is independent as a hog on ice,' I would say. But it turns out I was wrong. My meaning wasn't standard. The phrase means: self-assured, prideful. That might fit Plato. Still, since a pig on a slick surface would be anything but self-assured, some explanation is in order. The best hypothesis seems to be it has to do with the Scottish game of curling, in which stones are scooted across ice towards a target, as in bowling. These stones are 'hogs' if they come up short.[15] I can play with that.



15 Charles E. Funk, A Hog On Ice & Other Curious Expressions (Morrow, 2002), pp. 3-14..

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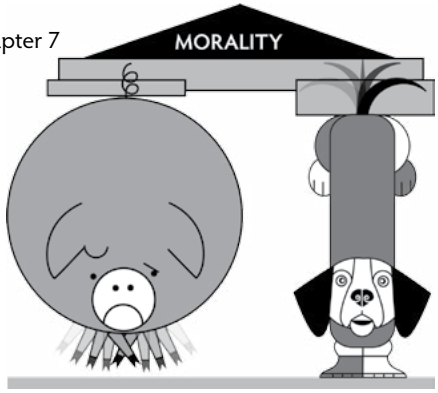

Plato's Forms are like stones that didn't make it where Plato tried to launch them. Now they sit, inert, blocking you, never helping?

If I were to found a school for the study of moral thinking, I might settle on asymmetrical architecture. Honestly, I just don't see **how** metaphysics, reason and emotion fit.

Approaching from one side, reason is thought **is** the brain; from the other, it's a pure abstraction, hence certainly not identical with the brain. Whether or not 'everything in Nature is akin' (81d) the mind seems like it must be akin to its platform, also its objects, including triangles and ethical truths.

What one thing is like all these things?

It's like those blind men and their elephant. Different approaches to the nature of moral thought produce such divergent 'results' that different investigators don't just disagree. They are incredulous of each others' reports. Haidt cannot imagine what Plato is, if not a bad psychologist. But Plato, for all his faults, isn't a bad psychologist. (I've said it so many times by now. I hope you believe me!) This should give us pause; make us try to see both sides.

Haidt is trying to distinguish reason from Reason. Lower-case-r reason is healthy. Upper-case-R Reason is illusory. But at what point does the good stuff, for everyday household use, tip over into Reason-worshipping hubris? No doubt there is room for debate. Still, as the judge said about pornography: I **know it when I see it!** Exhibit A, to illustrate the pornography of Reason, could be Socrates' preposterous allegation that 'all nature is akin', and the Soul its rational mirror, ergo you can 'recollect' all facts, including moral ones, like doing geometry. Ridiculous!

I could object that it is not clear Socrates is serious. That's true, hence important for interpreting **Meno**. But I waive this defense. The interesting question is: what if he **is** serious? If so, must the error be due to Plato pushing from view a fact that he knows but doesn't like: namely, we humans are emotional dogs at heart, especially when it comes to moral judgment?

Here is an analogy to suggest why not. Theoretical physicists debate the prospects for a GUT [Grand Unified Theory]. They dream of a formula that would, in a sense, encode all Truth about the physical universe. (A capital-T seems the least we can deploy, to celebrate such a revelation.) Ideally, this formula will be not just true but somehow self-evident. We would like to know not just **that** it is true but **why**. (That last step is a doozy, yet desirable.

If you have a formula, and it contains an apparently arbitrary constant, **k**, you have to ask: why not **k'**? Any arbitrary element cries out for explanation! It seems natural for physics to push on any seemingly arbitrary front indefinitely, in the hopes of finding non-arbitrary answers.)

It seems likely that GUT is too much for our mortal brains. Maybe reality itself isn't made for it. My amateur sense is that enthusiasm for GUT, among professional physicists, peaked at roughly the same time-t as did public enthusiasm for placing unread copies of Stephen Hawking's **A Brief History Of Time** (1988) on coffee tables. All the same, I would not presume to cite a literary fad as evidence that a particle physicist, struggling to unify the electromagnetic, weak and strong interaction forces, should give it all up as a bad job. People surely **feel with their gut** when dreaming of GUT, but that is neither here nor there with respect to the question of whether GUT research is worthwhile. Remember: not all scientific failures are, in retrospect, failures due to Reason-worshipping hubris. You win some, you lose some.

There is a sense in which doing natural science is profoundly 'unnatural'; not a thing our species evolved to get good at. There is a sense in which reasoning well goes against the grain of the brain. Haidt would not propose giving up science, although going against the grain does make us liable to run against limits and make mistakes. Science is hard. Deal with it.

In **Phaedrus**, Plato likens the soul to a chariot drawn by two horses: the bad one, a shaggy, unruly beast; and a noble, winged steed. Haidt retells this Myth, to explain Plato (but he leaves off the wings.) He sees here, once again, hubris: presumption of rational control. I see that. But I also see down-to-earth shrewdness. No aviation authority is going to OK take-off in that contraption! No self-respecting civic authority will license you even for city driving. If that is me, I'm hardly god-like. I'm an accident waiting to happen. It will be tough to buy insurance.

Lucky for us, the final section of **Meno** is about how tough it is to buy insurance!

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26

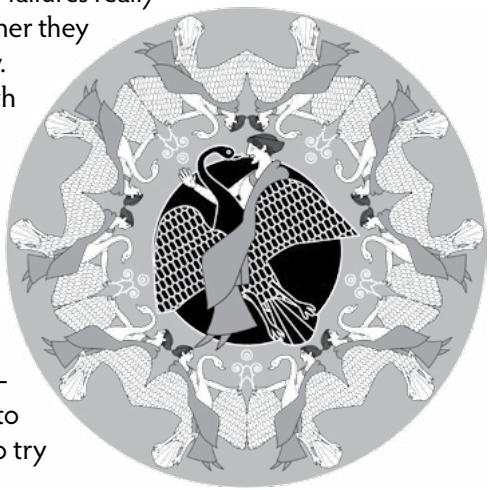
What became of Meno (the real man, not our fictional character?) Apparently he went on to become a military leader of Greek mercenaries in the pay of a throne-seeking Persian prince. In **Anabasis**, Xenophon (another writer of Socratic dialogues, and a military man himself) writes disapprovingly about how this unprincipled, ambitious rogue, Meno, would do anything to get ahead. He kept his troops in line by indulging and participating in their bad behavior. He came to a bad end, tortured to death slowly over a period of a year by Ataxerxes of Persia, after the attempted coup against him failed.

How predictable, with good old 20/20 hindsight!

In another version of the story, however, Meno was the only general spared, because he was the only Greek willing to betray his fellow Greeks. Only the slipperiest eel slips away! Makes total sense! I buy it!

Either way, we have what Taleb calls a 'black swan': a highly consequential, essentially unpredictable event that looks strangely explicable in retrospect. Taleb is concerned with markets and views financial crises, in particular, through this lens. How can you prepare for the unpredictable? The term derives from a philosophy of science case. So long as Europeans hadn't seen any black swans, it seemed reasonable to say all swans were white. Then they got to Australia where there are black swans: cautionary lesson in how it goes. Any bit of empirical science that looks law-like is a guess that hasn't gone amiss. Some things in nature are black swans because everything in nature is ultimately a black box. We don't have access to any ultimate reasons why.

Plato invented them, of course: black swans. They are those shadows on the Cave wall that, predictably, no one predicts. Then the fools go right on predicting, even though their regular failures really ought to give them pause as to whether they are capable of predicting accurately.



What does this have to do with **Meno**?

Meno's response to life's unpredictability seems skeptical. If you don't know what tomorrow will bring, just seize the day with a bit of help from the fact that no one else knows any better. Taleb takes a more circumspect approach, advocating strategies for hedging bets. Plato seems to take a third line: we have to try

to prevent black swans by penetrating to that elusive, deeper level of rational reasons why. There are surprising results in math, but no black swans. If we take math as our model for ethics, maybe we can at least avoid having lousy moral luck. Whatever else goes wrong, I can know I am a virtuous person!

The final section of **Meno** is all about black swans. Of course, the term does not occur in the text. But the final section is about 'vision' — that second component of leadership, for Carnegie. (You thought I forgot all about that, after section 8, but no.) Black swans are that which shows the limits of vision and inspiration. So that's the connection.

Let's go back to the self-help section for one final sweep of the shelf. Here's a funny title: **Leadership for Dummies**. Joke writes itself. No more anti-Platonic title can be conceived. Yet there is something Socratic about the whole "For Dummies" series. Admitting you are a Dummy — **knowing** you don't know — is a virtue. Leadership is, plausibly, a matter of knowing how best **not** to know. How to act as head when you aren't sure where you're headed. That's **every** leader's real problem, most days.

The first line of this book reads: "Anyone can be a leader, but all leadership is temporary." A quote from Napoleon backs this up: "Every French soldier carries a marshal's baton in his knapsack." These soldiers would hardly be willing to keep invading Russia if their heads weren't stuffed with dreams of glory and advancement! Here's a famous saying by Napoleon these authors don't quote: 'don't send me a **good** general, I want one who is **lucky**!' Absurd, but it raises the question: is leadership luck? That would explain why it has to be temporary. What **is** leadership? "The set of qualities that causes people to follow. Although this definition may be circular, it does demonstrate that leadership requires at least two parties, a leader and a follower."[16] And yet there is no 'followership for dummies' volume. Remember Haidt's puzzle about the virtue list. "Why is leadership on the list, but not the virtues of followers and subordinates — duty, respect, and obedience?" Obedience for dummies seems at least as sensible but will never sell.

Note that leadership, as our authors define it, is no **virtue**. (Suppose someone asks you whether pointing guns at things is a virtue. You'd ask what things they plan to point at, wouldn't you?) Causing people to follow you is good or bad, depending on whether you are leading them somewhere worth going. So, to repeat: is **good** leadership a matter of **luck**? Is **virtue** luck?

16 Marshall Loeb and Stephen Kindel, Leadership for Dummies (For Dummies, 1999), p. 9.

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27

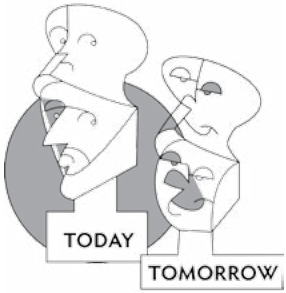
Let's back up once again. After the geometry lesson, Socrates argues for 'virtue is mindfulness'. Then he reverses course. I'll be brief, since Socrates' argument concerns that eternal education debate: reformers say traditionalists are ruining kids' minds. Traditionalists say reformers are ruining kids' minds. Why can't we figure this stuff out? What works and doesn't, educationally?

A big part of the reason is that such debates are highly moralized. How best to teach gets entangled in who we want (our kids) to be. Socrates makes the point that if we can't agree who is a teacher of virtue, or even whether there are any competent ones, it is unlikely virtue is a stable candidate for mindful attention. If we agreed on what we wanted, we'd know whether it's taught. So we must not even know what we want. (I think this is the hint.)

If virtue would be mindfulness, if anything, but no one is, Meno starts to wonder whether there are any good men (96d). Socrates suggests we need to consider the distinction between true belief and knowledge. True belief is as good as knowledge. The good men we see around us — these public men who have achieved great things for themselves, and for the city — had true beliefs about what to do. So they didn't go wrong. But, like prophets and seers, they didn't **know** what to do. They had a vision and communicated it (Carnegie's two conditions!) but didn't know what they were talking about (99d).

The problem with true belief is not that it is wrong but temporary. You can guess right but can't **keep** guessing right. If thousands of people flip fair coins repeatedly, a not inconsiderable number will amaze us by flipping heads over and over. Some of them will come to believe they have the knack for tossing coins that come up heads. They might teach the 'craft' to others. Hence, Socrates focuses on virtuous fathers who can't teach it to their sons, which offends Anytus (93b-95a). The father-son relationship is generalizable. My future selves are my children. Am I able to predict what will make future-me successful? If I seem to be doing OK today, I feel I know what I am doing. Do I?

It's perfect that we don't know what became of Meno (even if Plato could hardly anticipate our ignorance.) It's like in **Euthyphro**. We aren't told Socrates thinks Euthyphro is doing the wrong thing. Or the right thing. Saying which action would really be right would distract from the dialogue's real point: namely, whether he's right or wrong, he could be wrong **for all he knows**.



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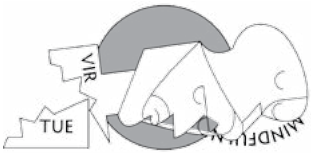

Socrates speaks in mock-admiration of the 'inspired' ones, who receive this 'gift from the gods', virtue. Meanwhile back on earth, no one in their right mind calls dumb luck 'virtue'.

QED: there is no virtue.

At this point we should re-raise the objection that it is all very well to advocate mindfulness — always doing the right thing for the right reason. Still, this is possibly the least practical **practical** advice ever peddled. There may or may not be a craft of leadership but there definitely isn't a craft of just plain always doing right. It is fair, in my opinion, to accuse Plato of thus making the perfect the enemy of the good (that is, making The Good the enemy of second-best goods.)

Still, he has a good point about the tendency to misconstrue answers to **what's a good way to get made leader?**-type questions as answers to **what makes a good leader?**-type questions. Someone who makes this slip, regularly, is probably not even your second-best pick.

Who/what **is** the best fallback pick, then?

To answer a question with a question (one we asked, but didn't answer): could ethical truth be weird, like a surprising proof result in math? Could the right way to live be totally different from what I feel it to be? Consider: there's a slave boy in this dialogue! Today we regard that as beyond the moral pale. For the ancient Greeks it was normal. I would like to think Plato is making a subversive point. Here is a boy whose mind is as fine as any, yet unfree! But I doubt it.

What do we know that the Greeks didn't, enabling us to see what they missed. Slavery is wrong! How can our moral normal be loftier than Plato's dream? Are we just smarter? That seems unlikely. Is 'slavery is bad' a complex result, akin to higher mathematics undiscovered in Plato's day? That seems unlikely. If the Greeks could be so wrong about the rightness of slavery, it seems we could be just as wrong about something we think is right. Could **you** be a moral monster and not know it?

And another question (which may answer the first.) Is anything left of 'virtue is mindfulness' at the end? "If, then, virtue is something in the soul, and necessarily useful, it must be a matter of mindfulness" (88d). No mindfulness in the soul, no virtue for people? But wait! Does it have to be **your** mind doing the minding? Maybe there's a solution if we stand back, take in the larger social scene.

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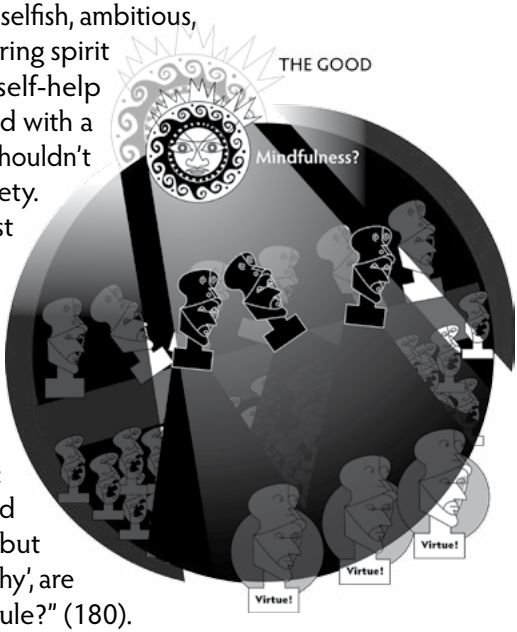
Doing so will allow me to pull together points from Chapter 4 as well: the trouble with typical approaches to personal virtue — of the 'win friends' and 'stop worrying' self-help sort — is that 'the personal is political.' These approaches suffer from a failure of the sociological imagination. This is really a restatement of the point that asking how I can get ahead is not the same as asking what it would be like if society as a whole got its head on straight.

Speaking of which, let me quote the final paragraph from **The Sociological Imagination**, by C. Wright Mills:

> Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problems that you take up for study … Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues … Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles — and to the problems of the individual life.[17]

Meno doesn't see it this way. So if society is run by Menos, the results may not necessarily be bad. But if they are good, they will be so by chance. Whether or not there is any craft of 'being effective', there needs to be a craft of thinking through what's good, not just for me but others. And not just as things are, but as they might be. The selfish, ambitious, honor and status-seeking, sloganeering spirit of excellence that dominates the self-help shelf may need to be supplemented with a theory of the good society. And we shouldn't just assume ours already is that society. Mills is an empiricist, no Rationalist star-gazer or triangle-monger. He is under no illusion that cultivating a sociological imagination promises invulnerability to error and uncertainty. But it's **necessary**. That makes Mills a Platonist … partly.



At another point Mills writes: "Were the 'philosopher' king, I should be tempted to leave his kingdom; but when kings are without any 'philosophy', are they not incapable of responsible rule?" (180).

17 C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (Oxford UP, 2000), p. 226.

29

This gets us to **Republic**, Book 1.

To pave the way, finishing off **Meno**, being fair to Haidt (whom I have criticized a lot), let me turn back to that first thing I quoted Haidt saying in section 2. "For Plato, the assumed psychology is just plain wrong."

That got us started. I've batted it back and forth. Plato is quite shrewd about how people actually think. But he does have strange notions about recollection and reincarnation. He may overestimate the aptness of geometry as a model for other sciences. But he is not obviously serious, or dogmatically insistent, about some of this. And we must distinguish between the potential existence of pure rational subjects, like mathematics, and the proposition that we humans **are** pure rational subjects, because we can do math. We shouldn't deny the former, just because we doubt the latter.

Suppose Haidt takes one last crack, like so: 'I didn't mean that Plato is dumb about rhetoric and persuasion. I mean he is wrong to think the part of me he thinks of as my 'true self' could be **simple**: rational, pure, unchanging, eternal. I can forgive him for not having read Darwin, but I can't see rightness in any theory of the mind that doesn't allow for how we are, at bottom, complex animals. It is false that we could rise above our animal natures, even in theory, hence wrong to aspire to that, normatively.

In response, let me narrate two myths from Book 10 of **Republic**. First, the Myth of Glaucus. Once upon a time there was a mortal fisherman named Glaucus. He ate a magic herb of immortality, went mad, dove into the sea, became a prophetic sea god. In other versions he's a sailor, or diver, part of Jason's crew on the Argo. The common denominator of these stories seems to be: mortal who becomes divine. Yet in the process of becoming higher than a man he also becomes, paradoxically, lower, more beast-like. Fish-like. In the water he is a man in beast's shape. He is also consistently characterized as a powerful prophet. More than a man, yet less. Very betwixt and between, this poor divine amphibian.

Socrates brings up Glaucus because he has made an argument that the soul is immortal and indestructible (so there's the connection to Haidt's complaint.) Earlier in **Republic** he has argued that the soul is a three-part compound. It's got rational, honor-loving, and appetitive parts. (More about this in Chapter 9. But it explains why the chariot from section 25 looks so hard to steer.) But now Socrates objects to his own view: things that are compound can be broken down. If the soul were complex, it could decompose. Ergo, it wouldn't be eternal and unchanging, after all. So which is it? Complex or unchanging?

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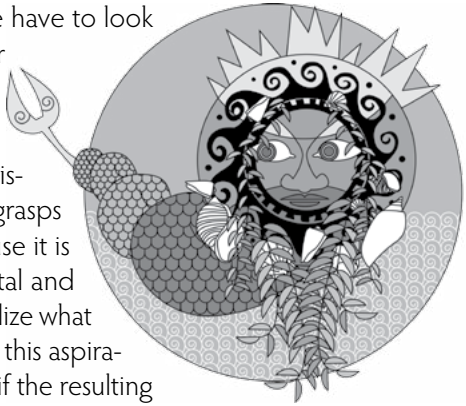
> But to see the soul as it truly is, we must not study it as it is while maimed by association with the body and other evils — as we were doing before — but as it is in its ideal state. That is how to study the soul, thoroughly and by means of logical reasoning. We'll then find it is a far finer thing than we supposed, and that we can see justice and injustice as well as all the other things we've discussed far more clearly. What we've said about the soul is true of it as it presently appears to us. But the condition in which we've studied it is like that of the sea god Glaucus, whose primary nature can't easily be made out by those who catch glimpses of him. Some of the original parts have been broken off, others have been crushed, and his whole body has been maimed by the waves and by the shells, seaweeds, and stones that have attached themselves to him, so that he looks more like a wild animal than his natural self. The soul, too, is in a similar condition when we study it, afflicted by many evils. That, Glaucon, is why we have to look elsewhere in order to discover its true nature.
>
> — To where?
>
> To its philosophy, or love of wisdom. We must realize what it grasps and aspires to relate to, because it is akin to the divine and immortal and what always is, and we must realize what it would become if it followed this aspiration with its whole being, and if the resulting effort lifted it out of the sea in which it now dwells, and if the many rocks and shells were hammered off it — which have grown all over it in a wild, earthy, stony profusion as it feasts on the supposedly happy fruits of the earth. Then we'd see what its true nature is and be able to say whether it has many parts or just one and whether or in what manner it is put together. (611c-612a)



Haidt would, I presume, take this as strong confirmation that he is exactly right about how Plato is wrong. This image of Glaucus is **almost** spot-on. (Plato gets so close!) Our moral minds **are** ancient things, mostly submerged from view; brain region on brain region, built up by waves of ocean-like selective pressures over time, making us seem like wild animals.

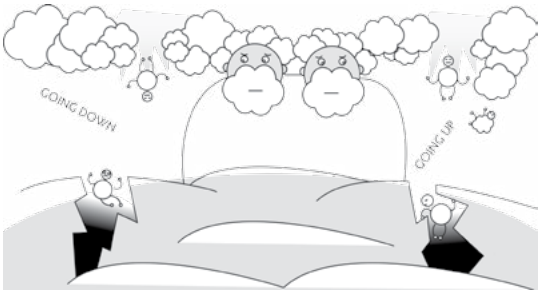
Because that is precisely what we are! There is no eternal, pure, rational **me** hidden underneath all that. I am it. It is me. In all its complexity!

Plato could reply that imagining Glaucus scoured of all that scurf is just like a biologist positing that the broken limb of a bee is not 'supposed to be' broken. Proper function is distinct from an entity's potentially highly mutilated material condition.

But that really doesn't get at the radical abstraction of Plato's posit of a pure, eternal, unchanging soul. Let's try another myth from Book 10, the so-called Myth of Er.

Who, or what, is Er?

He is a man who dies, remains curiously undecomposed, gets to see the set-up in the afterlife, returns to tell about it.



Here's the story. When you die, you stand between a pair of judges. Above them are two entrances into the heavens, all bright. Below, two entrances into the earth, dark and forbidding. Souls are coming up on the right — that is, going up into heaven and climbing up out of the underworld. On the left they are descending from heaven and descending into the underworld.

As you might guess, heaven is a reward, the underworld is punishment. There's also a cycle. Those coming down from heaven and coming up from the underworld are preparing for another go-round in the world. This is a reincarnation myth, like in **Meno**. And at this point Plato imagines something kind of funny. Everyone gets to choose their new life. There are all these lives just lying around in a field, and you shop around, pick one — examine it, select it. Congratulations! It's yours! Your lot in life. The only thing you can't see is: what the effect of your type of soul, in that type of life, will be. (Oh, and your memory will be wiped in a second, so you won't remember any of this. Ah, well. People never learn.)

A lot of the souls that just got released from the underworld pick wisely and well. Paying for their crimes was educational. But a lot of the souls that come down from heaven choose badly. They only got into heaven that first time due to a kind of dumb moral luck, not any real virtue in their souls. They happen to have lived relatively blameless lives, just because — due to

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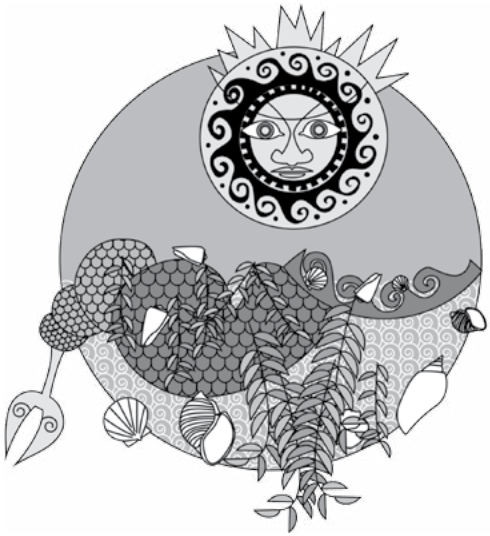
circumstances — they somehow weren't tempted to mess up. There weren't opportunities to mess up in heaven, so they didn't learn any better when they went to their reward. Heaven is no school of hard knocks! So, of course, a lot of these souls make bad choices, when given a real, hard choice.

Plato's message seems mixed. On the one hand, happy circumstances, hence good institutional design, can keep people's rather dumb natures in line. Nothing wrong with nudging people, around the margins, if they have no hope of getting their ideas all justified and straight.

Haidt can sign on to modest paternalism of that sort, and that's not nothing. But maybe he would doubt the next bit. Or regard it as unscientific.

You can't tell what's good or bad for people just by looking at how they actually live. They **could** live all sorts of ways, including ways no one has **ever** lived. It's easy to say the place for a bee is in a happy hive. Bee nature seems fixed, hence happy bee social structure. But humans, like Glaucus, are a bit more … amphibious-souled. A change could do us good.

Whether you call it my 'true self' or not, the best thing for me is to live in a way, and in an environment, that will bring out the best in me. I want optimal relations between my Soul and my Society, between the parts of me and those around me. (Did I just defend Plato against Haidt? Not really. I hinted how aspirations like Plato's might sidestep certain objections to Plato. But that doesn't make these high aspirations rational, even if they are **for** Rationality.)

On that harmonious note, we turn, finally, to **Republic**. (Or, if you haven't read **Meno** itself yet, just this commentary, you might read that next, to double-check that everything I just said makes sense.)