

Sample Essay #2

Question #1: Was Socrates overall mission to define virtue? Or was the overarching theme to reinforce Meno's (and everyone's) ignorance? Is this in itself virtuous?

In the beginning, Meno asks Socrates how can he acquire virtue. Socrates says that one cannot ask how to obtain virtue without conjuring up a proper definition first. When Meno fails repeatedly at providing an adequate definition, Socrates uncovers Meno's ignorance on the subject. Meno faces this conundrum with denial and unease, he even attempts to blame Socrates for leading them down this path of discussion in the first place. Socrates backtracks and begins to question the entire purpose of this exercise anyway to perhaps appease Meno. He claims that he too, isn't knowledgeable on the concept, but later sharply contradicts himself by mentioning the myth of recollection. The myth of recollection states that a man is born with innate knowledge and that he just needs to retrieve it from his soul, however, how would man ever acquire this knowledge initially if it weren't for teaching? This conundrum is baffling and serves to create a paradox in the play. However, Socrates later contradicts himself again by saying, "can you mention any other subject in which those who claim to be teachers not only are not recognized to be teachers of others but are not recognized to have knowledge of it themselves, and are thought to be poor in the very matter which they profess to teach? Would you say that people who are so confused about a subject can be effective teachers of it? No by Zeus, I would not" (Plato, 96b). This belief of teachers not having the right knowledge or experience to teach, contradict his myth of recollection theory earlier, which claims that everyone is born with prehistoric knowledge. Socrates also denounces his role as a teacher, by saying that a teacher confused about his or her own subject should not teach the course, yet he appears equally baffled as to what virtue is and continues to implicitly teach it to Meno. Socrates is a walking contradiction between wanting to know and giving up, and admitting ignorance but wanting to understand virtue. I thought this entire concept was interesting. Towards the end of the text I wondered if the true theme was really about virtue, or if that was even part of a larger whole (like Socrates stated to Meno when he was trying to define virtue). I presumed the text had to do more with accepting and overcoming ignorance as opposed to anything else, especially when the ending was unsatisfactory. Socrates spent the entire play implying that virtue means embodying goodness, yet he was deceitful in unveiling everyone's ignorance. If Meno would've provided a whole definition, would it have been enough to please Socrates?

Question #2: Can virtue be flawed? Does true virtue even exist?

Socrates implies that virtue is equivalent to goodness, he then quotes the poet Theognis, who debates whether the concept of virtue can be taught or not. He cites, "you will learn goodness from the good. If you mingle with bad men you will lose even what wit you possess" (Plato, 95e). This oversimplification on the demonstration of virtue does not satisfy the overall debate. Socrates understands that good and bad aren't exactly binary, but can at times be intertwined. Earlier in the play, he speaks of a man named Themistocles, who has the qualities of virtue, but begrudgingly chose not to pass those characteristics down to his son. This selfish act contradicts the assumption that Themistocles is entirely virtuous because he chose not to share that knowledge with his child. Furthermore, in an earlier example, when Meno defined virtue as

the power to attain good things, Socrates responds by saying “then to provide these goods would not be virtue any more than not to provide them, but apparently whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and what is done without anything of the kind is wickedness,” (Plato, 79a). This explanation intrigued me because the definition of good and evil is vastly complex. Someone can believe that they are being virtuous and just, but in reality, the consequences of their actions are seen as wicked or detrimental to the cause. For example, Socrates attempts to guide Meno towards defining virtue, but he fails to make Meno understand, demonstrating that even someone as virtuous as Socrates can’t save Meno from his own ignorance and tyranny.