

Carla Dedier-Woney

Dr. Jeffrey Dueck

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Reading Questions - Week 1

Plato's "Innate Knowledge" (Meno) pp. 3 - 12

1. What does Meno accuse Socrates of at the start of the reading? How does Socrates interpret this criticism?

Meno has the preconceived idea that Socrates isn't wise. It is rumored that Socrates is uncertain about what he knows and, in exchange, makes others hesitant when they talk with him. However, when Meno engages into conversation with Socrates, he pokes fun at his appearance and compares their exchange to being zapped into a trance like being stung by a "torpedo fish" or being enchanted by "a magician" (Cottingham, 2007). He is now confused, because what he thought he knew, he truly does not know.

Socrates is witty and wordy in his response to Meno (as some philosophers can be) because he knows that a torpedo fish is not attractive in appearance, but is top-heavy. He tells Meno that he will not be pulled into exchanging "the compliment," but chooses to focus upon the real topic at hand of virtue. Socrates knows that he causes mental confusion, but explains that it happens to those who are not sure of what they know. So, he takes Meno on an "enquiry" to find innate knowledge, or information that is inborn (Cottingham, 2007).

2. Explain the paradox/problem (the "Learner's Paradox") that Meno and Socrates talk about on the second page, concerning enquiry and learning and interpreting what we know.

Meno argues that you cannot go after something knowledge-wise, if you have no idea of what you are searching for. But Socrates believes in the immortality/rebirth of souls, saying that “all nature is akin” (or related), so he explains to Meno that it is possible to find out what you think you do not know by the process of remembering.

3. Explain Plato's theory of innate knowledge, and how Socrates's conversation with Meno's servant boy is an attempt to demonstrate its truth.

Plato believes that all knowledge is in you through a past life, it is only a matter of bringing things back to your remembrance. And, it is reinforced by interrogation. Socrates explains this theory by using a young, servant boy who knows nothing about mathematics. He demonstrates by giving him a question about geometry. At first, the young man relents because he does not know how to double the area of a square. But Socrates walks him through “the process of recollection” by a series of simple questions and he arrives at the conclusion that the first square forms a diagonal bottom for the other.

Aristotle, "Demonstrative Knowledge", pp. 18-21

1. In your own words, explain the deductive aspect of Aristotle's view of how we gain knowledge. What is a syllogism? What is a demonstration?

According to Aristotle, the beginning statement in an argument should be true, logical and have a follow-up assertion that supports a conclusion, as in a syllogism. A demonstration is rational, systematic proof that is true and unquestionable.

2. What point does Aristotle make about how deduction by itself doesn't lead to truth about the world?

Aristotle stated that deduction by itself doesn't lead to truth in the world. It must have tiers of reason that lead to one conclusion.

3. Present in your own words the inductive process of gaining knowledge according to Aristotle, including the role of the senses, memory and generalization.

Together, when we use our minds and senses, we can create perceptions that are based upon our previous encounters to establish a foundation for scientific understanding.

Reference

Cottingham, J. (2007). *Western Philosophy* (2nd edition). Blackwell.