

# ***Meno and Symposium: Knowledge vs. Correct Opinion on Virtue and Beauty***

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## **I.**

In a brilliant display of irony, Plato portrays Socrates – easily one of the Western world’s most preeminently virtuous and wise persons – as someone who knows nothing. Plato’s depiction of Socrates’ characteristic disavowal of knowledge is so complete that in the *Meno*, Socrates claims to have no knowledge of virtue, a claim that shocks his interlocutor, Meno. Socrates continues to adhere to his principle of ‘Socratic Wisdom’ – that his only true knowledge is “that his wisdom is worthless” (2000a, p. 116:23b2) – in the *Symposium* and takes the position of interlocutor to Diotima, who instructs Socrates about Beauty and Love, filling him “with admiration for her [your] wisdom” (2000c, p. 257: 206b5). Though Socrates claims to have no knowledge, he is certain, a rare admission for him, that “right opinion is a different thing than knowledge” (2000b, p. 212: 98b2). Socrates’ assertion is crucial to his investigation with Meno; but more importantly, it is a key aspect of his quest for the good life. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the difference between knowledge and correct opinion, and ruminate on its importance to Socrates.

## **II. Knowledge and Correct Opinion**

In both the *Meno* and the *Symposium*, Socrates discusses knowledge and correct opinion, often referred to as true opinion. The difference is important to Socrates, and not immediately apparent to the interlocutors, a part Socrates himself plays in the *Symposium*. As a result, a considerable amount of deliberation occurs. As is typical of Socrates’ method of tailoring each discussion to fit the individual interlocutor, the examples of the distinction between knowledge and correct opinion set forth in the *Meno* differ

from those of the *Symposium*. Let us explore knowledge and correct opinion in the *Meno* first, and then examine them in the *Symposium*.

In the course of Socrates's and Meno's discussion on whether virtue is an instructable medium, Socrates and Meno encounter a problem. If virtue is teachable, it must be knowledge; but since there are no teachers of virtue, it is not knowledge. What is knowledge and what is not knowledge but might be confused to be such?

To begin with, Socrates depicts the distinction between correct opinion and knowledge in his reply to Meno's Paradox, Meno's assertion that one cannot inquire into things that one does not know because either one knows it and does not need to inquire, or one does not know it and cannot inquire. Socrates tries to refute Meno's assertion through a geometrical demonstration with Meno's slave. While a probe of this geometry deserves further attention at another juncture, it is worth noting that Socrates shows that the slave had true opinions about geometrical theorems. Meno's slave had, of course, not been taught any geometry; and Socrates concludes that the slave had recollections of true opinions that the soul gained before it joined Meno's slave's body. These recollections are different from memories, which regard everyday activities and not knowledge of the soul. Socrates hints at the nature of knowledge by stating that repeated and varied questioning will turn true opinion into "knowledge about these things [that] would be as accurate as anyone's" (2000b, p. 204: 85d).

Socrates and Meno return to the differentiation of knowledge and correct opinion. This time, Socrates fully divulges the criteria for distinguishing between the two. Socrates notes that knowledge and correct opinion appear very similar in terms of the actions they produce, and he illustrates that idea by imagining a traveler on the road to Larissa. To clarify Socrates' example, I will apply the argument to our own campus. Like most philosophy students, I have never been to the Industrial Technology Building. Now, I can visit the building if I have either knowledge of the path to the IT Building, or if someone with knowledge of the path to the IT Building guides me there. But a correct opinion, or a recollection of information from my soul regarding the path to the IT Building, will be

equally effective in reaching my destination. If my opinion that the IT Building is west-northwest of the philosophy office near Barstow Avenue is correct, and if I convince new students to follow me on my path to the IT Building, then to an outside observer, there would be no noticeable difference between the tour I lead and the tour led by paid student guides who have previously traveled to the Industrial Technology Building and have intimate knowledge of maps of our campus. Socrates states that “correct opinion is no less useful than knowledge” (2000b, p. 213: 97c3) precisely because it does not produce different actions. But knowledge is different than correct opinion. How does one recognize the difference?

For Socrates, knowledge is different from correct opinion because the person with knowledge knows the why behind the truth, whereas the person with correct opinion knows only the truth. The difference is rooted in the permanence of knowledge. The ability to give an account – tell the why at the crux of the truth – is how the mind retains knowledge, securing it for future use. Correct opinion, however, is like the untied statues of Daedalus that “run away and escape if one does not tie them down” (2000b, p. 214: 97d7). It is grasped by the mind only fleetingly before it is forgotten, corrupted, or lost. But when secured by “an account of the reason why,” (2000b, p. 214: 98a3) knowledge, like the statues of Daedalus, is highly prized and beautiful, both for the information imparted and its ability to be utilized endlessly in the future. Socrates connects beauty and wisdom with his example of the statues of Daedalus, a connection that will resurface in the *Symposium*. Today, we can consider this distinction by imagining the truth as a balloon. The person with knowledge ties the balloon to a chair, or the wrist of a young child, and in this manner secures it for future enjoyment. The person without knowledge sets the balloon down, only to recoil in horror as the balloon floats out of reach and disappears in the clouds. With luck the person without knowledge will find another balloon. But in the interim, that person is deprived of the balloon (truth). Thus, by securing one’s correct opinions, or recollections, one can have knowledge. So, though Meno’s slave does not have knowledge of geometric theorems, he can acquire it by learning the reasons behind the answers he

surmises. And in all subjects, true opinions can be upgraded to knowledge by learning the account of why some fact is true.

In the *Symposium*, the tables are turned and Socrates becomes the instructee, learning from Diotima the distinction between knowledge and true opinion. As in the *Meno*, knowledge is different from correct opinion because knowledge includes the reasoning that supports the truth. Unlike the *Meno*, however, Diotima defines the difference without the analogies that Socrates uses.

Socrates and Diotima begin their inspection of knowledge and correct opinion by examining Socrates' false dichotomy. Diotima asserts that Love (Eros) – whom Socrates says is a god – is not beautiful or good. Socrates, in shock, understands this to mean that Diotima proposes that Love is ugly and bad. In reply, Diotima chastises Socrates for obfuscating the possibility of middle ground, and she asks him if this true for wisdom and ignorance, whether there is the “possibility that there is something in between wisdom and ignorance” (2000c, p. 252: 202a4).

Diotima maintains that something does exist between wisdom and ignorance. This is correct opinion: “judging things correctly without being able to give a reason” (2000c, p. 252: 202a6). Correct opinion cannot be wisdom or knowledge because it is without an accompanying rational process. In this case, Diotima connects knowledge with the process of thinking. But correct opinion cannot be ignorance either, since the opinion is correct. Truths about things by definition cannot be erroneous. The holder of these opinions is not ignorant of the truth. Therefore, correct opinion is somewhere in the expanse between wisdom and ignorance. Correct opinion differs from knowledge in that knowledge has a rational process, an account, attached to the truth.

In conclusion, in the *Meno*, the criterion for distinguishing knowledge from correct opinion is the *logos* – the ability to give an account of the why behind the truth. One has knowledge if one is able to give an account (*logos*) of the truth that one knows. The *Symposium* clings to this definition, showing where correct opinion fits in to the ‘Continuum of Truthness.’ On one end of this continuum is knowledge, which is most prized because it has truth and an account; next, is correct opinion, which, at least, has truth;

and finally, error, or ignorance, is the worst because it has neither truth nor an account of the reasoning involved.

### **III. Why Socrates Cares**

Why is this important to Socrates?

In both the *Meno* and the *Symposium*, Socrates engages in discourse about knowledge and correct opinion not for the sake of this distinction – though he does believe there is value in it – but for the sake of how the correct opinion can progress to knowledge of the ideal, of Forms. Forms are the pattern which the things in the world are based on and judged against. They are independent of the world, of humans, and of consciousness; they are eternal and unchanging. The intellect can approach any particular Form through a dialectical process, which increases knowledge about the true nature of the Form inherent in the things of that type. For example, Chair can be discerned by studying individual chairs with the senses. The intellect manipulates this information and discovers more knowledge from it – until the distorted version of Chair in other chairs is recognizable.

Socrates is on a quest to ascertain that which makes a life worth living. To do this, he must examine that which is of value. For Socrates, this is virtue and beauty, which he examines in the *Meno* and the *Symposium*, respectively, and knowledge is necessary to obtain both.

### **IV. Knowledge and Virtue**

In the *Meno*, Socrates and Meno set out to decide if virtue (being virtuous) is teachable – not for pedagogical purposes, but for the purposes of showing others, particularly Meno, how to acquire it. Socrates yearns for virtuous living because it is “something beneficial,” (2000b, p. 206: 87e4) and because it “the good of the soul” (2000b, p. 206: 88a5). Virtue improves the soul, and consequently, the whole person. But this seems self-evident; pursuing virtue is to desire virtuous action, and things, and when acquired it will produce the good life. Aside from the epistemological concern, what does differentiating between knowledge and correct opinion have to do with Socrates’ search for virtue?

Differentiating between knowledge and correct opinion is imperative for Socrates’s search for virtue. As Socrates

already demonstrated, correct opinion is fleeting. It is with us today, but gone tomorrow. Correct opinion divulges only situational truths to the holder. That person is unable to transfer these truths to general situations, unless s/he stumbles upon another correct opinion relative to the new situation. The problem is that we can have correct opinion about virtue. This is no small matter, like correct opinion about the path to the IT Building; this concerns the fate of the soul. In short, how can we live the virtuous life if we does not know virtue?

Correct opinion will never show us the ideal of virtue. It can only show situational virtues. But the good life and the fate of the soul depend on continuous striving for virtue. Correct opinion cannot enlighten this path. We can have correct opinion about virtue, but cannot have virtue or live the virtuous life. Therefore, to gain virtue, we must learn to account for the all of the virtues that transpire through correct opinion and recollection. Refinement of this knowledge about virtues will lead to an encounter with the Form virtue. This is what the soul desires, and what Socrates thirsts for. Understanding how knowledge is distinguished from correct opinion puts us in a better position to create knowledge about virtue, and thereby discover virtue.

Though in the *Meno*, Socrates draws an aporetic conclusion that virtue is “a gift from the gods,” (2000b, p. 216: 100b3) it is unlikely he believes this. The conclusion is unstated, but his guidance through the dialogue implies that virtue is discoverable through knowledge and intellectual pursuit of the truths hidden in the soul.

## V. Knowledge, Beauty, and Love

Beauty is as important to Socrates as virtue, and he often uses beauty and good somewhat interchangeably. When discussing wisdom in the *Meno*, Socrates connects Daedalus’s statues with wisdom, creating an aesthetic epistemology through that analogy. In another example, this time from the *Symposium*, Diotima demonstrates that good and beautiful are interconnected since both lead to happiness. The final part of this paper will focus on how knowledge leads to good/beauty.

As part of Diotima’s lesson on the pitfalls of dichotomies, she begins by discussing the nature of love – though she is

ambiguous about whether she means the actual emotion or the spirit throughout this dialogue. Socrates again falls prey to a false dichotomy and declares that love must be a god or a mortal. Diotima counters that Love cannot be a mortal because love is eternal, though he sometimes waxes and wanes between life and death. Simultaneously, Love cannot be a god because Love desires beautiful and good things, yet a god does not. Gods have no need for such desires – they already are beautiful and good, and they already have beautiful and good things. It follows, then, that gods have knowledge and are wise, for “wisdom is extremely beautiful” (2000c, p. 255: 204b4).

Gods may have wisdom and beauty inherently, but humans are not excluded from attaining knowledge and wisdom, and we can know of and participate in beauty. The quest for beauty must begin with an examination of the beauty in an individual person. After we acquire thorough knowledge of this individual, we gain a distorted vision of Beauty, and we “become lovers of all beautiful bodies” (2000c, p. 260: 210b4). After knowing beauty in worldly things, we should turn our attention to the beauty of people’s souls, which typically involves cultivating beauty in others’ souls. As our knowledge of beauty progresses, it will lead to knowledge of the beauty of ideas, of theories, of science, of craft, and of wisdom. At this point, we are sufficiently prepared for discovering beauty itself. Discovering beauty as the eternal, unchanging Form requires a prepared mind, with honed intellectual abilities from rigorous participation in the dialectical pursuit of beauty. Through this dialectical pursuit, one can get in touch with beauty.

Knowledge of beauty is important because it shows us what to value. In this instance, Socrates shows, through the mouth of Diotima, that the value of the good life is to be able to obtain that which is worth valuing. In this manner, knowing beauty could be more important than knowing virtue, since knowing what is valuable and how to get it would encompass virtue. Beauty is necessary because when we look at beauty “in the only way that beauty can be seen – only then will it become possible for us to give birth not to images of virtue (because we are in touch with no image),

but to true virtue [virtue] (because we are in touch with the true beauty)" (2000c, p. 260: 212a4-6).

## VI.

The *Meno* and the *Symposium* show two instances of Socrates's search for wisdom. In the process, they demonstrate that wisdom is important not just for itself, but also because wisdom and knowledge serve a function for the soul. Overall, knowledge serves to guide the actions of the soul and the body toward the good life, and away from the things which might be desired that will be harmful. The life worth living is the life of worth, and knowledge is the vehicle for discerning, desiring, and drumming up beauty, virtue, good, and all that is of worth.

## REFERENCES

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