

Sophistry, Dialectic, and Teacher Education: A Reinterpretation of Plato's *Meno*

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Plato's *Meno* offers students in teacher education programs a means through which to not only investigate the content of *Meno*, but also a means to construct and clarify their own philosophical positions.¹ This essay argues for a rereading of *Meno*, and in the process of highlighting the overall dialogue, attempts to achieve two specific goals: (1) reviving Plato's indictment of sophistry as an important and timely way to investigate what it means to achieve a deeper sensibility of teaching and learning; and (2) demonstrating that the Socrates/slave-boy "dialectic" is actually a display of sophistry, for sophists, to demonstrate the flaws of sophistry. By offering such an interpretation as (2), an argument is made against sophistry and for authentic dialectic (versus Socratic dialectic) in contemporary schools. To have authentic dialectic in American schools, teacher-education programs should engage teachers and prospective teachers in the kind of dialectic for which this essay argues. Using *Meno* to achieve dialogue is one way to realize this point, uniquely so as *Meno* is a dialogue about dialogue.

OVERVIEW

Accounts of *Meno* are plentiful, and they attempt clarification "differently."² The point of full agreement for these accounts is that the dialogue raises a series of difficult questions: whether virtue can be taught (hence, what does it mean "to teach"); whether virtue comes through tangible means (for example, modeling, experience, innate "unfolding") or through divine dispensation or luck; and whether Socrates really means what he says when he claims not to be a teacher. Plato uses the dialogue to highlight questions of teaching and learning, but is certain to interject his Theory of Recollection and to reiterate the idealist's tenet that Forms exist *a priori*. Typically given, this essay calls these points into question in order to reveal the actual purpose of the episode: sophistry and dialectic. What results is a link of the two topics to an argument for studying *Meno* in colleges of education.

SOPHISTS AND SOPHISTRY

There are at least two interpretations of sophists. The first interpretation is generous toward them and sees them as oral dialecticians whose ability to propagate rhetoric is of great value. Seen in this light, sophists are untainted by the later Platonic (negative) interpretation of them.³ In fact, a growing number of linguists, literary theorists, and rhetoricians are mounting a small comeback of sophistry by calling attention to the oratorical and discursive merits of the tradition established by sophists.⁴ They attempt to distance the rhetorical tradition of Homer from the pecuniary sophists who came after Protagoras.

By arguing for the former, early sophists are seen as altruistic pluralists intent on honing the oratorical tradition of Homer. Donovan notes, "Long before Socrates wrangled with the sophists on [the issue of eloquence in rhetoric]...Homeric epic

had paved the way for both ways of conceiving of eloquence: either as a *techné*, that is, a discrete, particular, specialized ability or craft; or as an integral part of *areté*, overall human excellence.”⁵ Both *techné* and *areté* are vital, even though Plato suggests that sophists were primarily concerned with the kind of poetic training that aided memorization and *techné*, and that *areté* had little or nothing to do with their purposes (both teaching and living in general). Accordingly, sophists were *not* interested in achieving excellence or virtue, only the money, fame, and social status which came with the perfection of their rhetorical craft. Modern thinkers intent on revising Plato’s “slanted view” highlight the democratic pluralism inherent in ancient sophistry. For example, Neel suggests that sophistry focuses on language and language influences status quo notions of opinion and truth. Therefore, the status quo must engage in sophistry for a public voicing of both sides of an issue to exist, as sophistry is really the rhetorical tradition of persuasion.⁶ Similarly, Blair argues that “a sophistic education enables citizens to make decisions in a realm of contingency and competing [logics].”⁷ As a result, sophistry, encapsulated perhaps by Protagoras’ maxim regarding man being the measure of all things, takes power from the mantle of the *a priori* and places it with the particulars. Those arguing for a kinder historical view of sophists point to the democratic potential embedded in Protagoras’ notion.⁸ By placing power with the individual, members of a society are then made the focus of power and politics. Rhetoric and oratory find their homes within both notions of power/politics, and Homeric oratory is not only preserved, but furthered — sophistically.

For those opposed to sophistry, however, the argument for sophistry as a means for democracy is too contrived to have merit or to be authentic. Because sophists practiced rhetorical devices and poetic training, they may have increased the amount of information they memorized, but, for doing so, “diminished cognitive activities such as analysis, criticism, and the like.”⁹ Democracy without analysis and criticism would not be democracy.¹⁰ Schooling based on collected information and its transmission to passive students also goes against democracy. Hence, the second understanding of sophists and sophistry is less than kind. It views sophists as “for-hire” consultants who pass on the technical bits of information (through memorization and poetic training) for “success in life,” where “success” is measured in terms of performance, money, and fame. Sophists were more interested in persuasion than in searching for Truth (Platonic) or truths (socially constructed). Gibson concedes that sophists practiced what he calls “an adman’s view of language.”¹¹ Persuasion for the sake of persuasion is what Gibson means, and while the practice of rhetoric may be a valuable and/or necessary part of democratic life, the emphasis on it detracts from the kind of practices which provide the real foundation for democratic life (that is, critique and analysis).

Differently but related, Plato and Aristotle took a uniquely critical view of sophistry.¹² Rankin observes that both “had come to dislike the Sophists and what they represented; but neither of them... was primarily concerned with belabouring the intellectual failings of a previous generation. They were concerned by the continuing prevalence in the fourth century of fallacious arguments eristically aimed at victory, irrespective of the truth of the subject.”¹³

SOPHISTRY IN THE MENO

Because Meno is a student of the sophist Gorgias, his initial questions in the dialogue are highly significant (70a). By asking questions about virtue, regardless of the shape in which virtue comes, Meno is seeking answers to his questions. A question, then, is useful to Meno insofar as it yields a concrete response (to be practiced, memorized, and mentally stored away for the purpose of transmission at a later time). Meno has no interest in investigating the questions for the sake of the investigation or to seek truth/wisdom. Instead, he is sincerely seeking a particular response. He wants an answer. One should not be surprised by this, as sophists operate on a plane of existence which highlights least common denominators in that they seek specifics and answers and particulars. They have to seek such rudimentary particularity because their livelihood depends upon it. In order to “give” people their “money’s worth,” sophists commit themselves to a role of provision. They are tellers in the rhetorical sense and tellers in the clerical/banking sense. Those who come to sophists as customers expect of sophists, and sophists provide, *results*.

Meno continues to demonstrate his sophistry in the beginning of the dialogue when he offers three different definitions of virtue. He first does more than attempt a definition — he provides an ordered list of what virtue is: for a man, managing the affairs of his city in such a way that he harms his enemies and helps his friends; for a woman, managing the affairs of her household and obeying her husband; and there are other virtues for the likes of children, old men, freed slaves, and slaves (71e-72a). Importantly, Meno’s list is taken from his teacher, the sophist Gorgias.¹⁴ After Socrates’ discussion about the nature of virtue, Meno offers his second definition of virtue: the ability to rule (73c-74b). Such a definition is both too broad and too narrow at the same time. Allen puts it this way: “Too broad, because Meno forgets that ruling, if it is to qualify as a human excellence, must be just. Too narrow, because the definition does not apply, for example, to children and slaves.”¹⁵ The definition is also circular, so Meno offers a third and final definition: virtue is the desire for beautiful things and the ability to attain them (77b-78c). After Socrates refutes Meno (by reduction), Meno modifies his definition: virtue is the ability to acquire good things, provided this is done in a just and pious way (78c-80d). Unfortunately, this position is circular like his second definition because both piety and justice fall under the category “virtue.” It is at this point in the dialogue that Meno calls Socrates a stingray (torpedo fish) and suggests that he is numbed by the encounter. What Socrates was attempting was *elenchus* or refutation, but was intending for the refutation to clarify for Meno the problem of “answer-getting.” That is, Socrates’ point was to show the fallibility of Meno’s “list-giving” — as “list-giving” (as opposed to seeking truth/wisdom) is much of the problem itself, but Meno was too much of a sophist to overcome his own sophistry.

Throughout *Meno*, then, sophistry takes its typical forms: persuasion for the sake of persuasion, answer-getting, the seeking of particulars rather than larger or deeper meaning (truths). Plato uses the character Anytus to make the value of sophists clear: “May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers” (91c-d).¹⁶

In addition to the sophistry within *Meno*, the dialogue also includes important sections like Meno's paradox¹⁷ and the opportunity for Socrates to elucidate the Theory of Recollection (80d-81e). This interaction is followed by the scene with Socrates and the slave boy. The scene is widely understood as Socrates' demonstration of the Theory of Recollection outlined in 80d-81e. The interaction with the slave boy, however, is expanded by this essay to offer that the scene is really Socrates' last chance to achieve the level of *elenchus* necessary for Meno to understand the limitations of his sophistry.

THE POINT: DIALECTIC AS SOPHISTIC PRACTICE

It is traditionally held that the point of the conversation between Socrates and the slave boy (81e-86c) is Plato's Theory of Recollection. This essay challenges the validity of this point by expanding the interpretation of the scene to suggest a very different position — that Socrates is really demonstrating sophistry, for sophists, to refute sophistry. Within the framework of what appears on the surface to be Socratic dialectic (where a questioner questions and an answerer answers and that's it), Socrates leads the slave boy on a journey to recall geometric truths. Two points, then, stand or fall together: Socratic dialectic as non-dialectic, and the Theory of Recollection.

Socratic dialectic *is* questioning and answering, definitionally role-oriented (that is, a questioner questions and answerer answers), but the kinds of responses Socrates elicits are merely factual and come about from empirical demonstration rather than from rational means. Further, given that *elenchus* is the purpose of *psychagogia* (leading), a cleared mind does not exist without questions or without considered thought. The slave boy is only marginally participative and not only is he not seeking truth/wisdom, he always responds affirmatively and does not indicate confusion.

These concerns overlap and are better explained by recalling the text of the Socrates/slave boy scene. In the scene (81e-86c), Socrates draws one of Meno's slaves out from the gathered crowd. According to Teloh, Allen, and countless others, he proceeds to demonstrate the Theory of Recollection by showing that all nature is *suggenes* (akin or interconnected) such that if one learns one point, it is possible to "recover" all of the rest (81d). Yet, if the dialectic is reread in light of sophistic procedures and the narrowly focused content, the scene offers a new point. Specifically, if Socrates' part of the dialectic is edited out (and Meno's few lines are also eliminated), the dialectic reveals a different meaning: the dialectic demonstrates sophistry. Witness the slave boy's part of the dialectic:

I do.
Of course.
Yes.
Of Course.
Yes.
It does.
Yes.
Four, Socrates.
Yes.
Eight.
Clearly it will be double, Socrates.¹⁸

That questioning and answering are both represented in the Socrates/slave boy scene is not in dispute. The problem is that the slave boy *never* says “no.” He is, instead, the object of Socrates’ leading questions, which, while they superficially exemplify Socratic dialectic, actually represent sophistry. The questions Socrates asks are specific. They are data-oriented (“eight,” “fourfold,” “two,” etc.). They are factual. He seeks dimensions and measurements, and while the example is a theorem, Socrates reduces theorizing to a practical answer-giving exercise based on empirical drawings in the sand. As a result, Socrates demonstrates the limits of sophistry by employing sophistry in front of sophists.

Because the dialectic is now suspect, so too must be the Theory of Recollection. Recollection is the reminiscence of prior *and personal* experience. It is a matter of remembering previous acquaintance such that there is a *personal involvement* also present in the world of Forms. When Socrates attempts to demonstrate the Theory of Recollection, he says to Meno of the slave boy, “do you see the progress in recollection he’s made so far? At first he didn’t know the side required for an eight-foot figure — and he still doesn’t. But earlier he supposed he knew and answered confidently, and did not believe he was in perplexity. But now he *does* believe it, and as he doesn’t know, neither does he suppose he knows” (84a-b). A nice dance around Meno’s Paradox, there is an important irony typically overlooked. The irony of the section is as comical as it is illustrative of sophistry.

Socrates has as his subject a slave boy. The “confident answer” to which Socrates refers is the same kind of confidence a 4th grader has when affirmatively responding to leading questions about geometric proofs. It’s laughable, and that’s the point. There not only is no *personal* interest on the part of the boy, hence no recollection, there is such an emphasis on empirical demonstration of technical characteristics (symbolically evidenced by drawing in the *sand*?) that Socrates must be smirking to himself that those he is “persuading” are too sophistic to see the problems with their own sophistry.

It is possible that the slave boy realizes he doesn’t know, which clears his mind of predispositions that would hinder true learning (versus sophism). The state is one where *psychagogia* is now possible, such that Socrates, or any interlocutor, can now “lead” the other to questions which, when repeated and repeated, define the search for wisdom. Clearing the mind in this way, however, does not mean the slave boy (or whoever) would be focused on the kinds of specific responses that instrumentalize the verbal exchange. Indeed, the mark of sophistry is that *the* Form is present in the material, not in the boy. It is because the *material* is already “informed” that the boy has no chance of being or becoming “informed.” A slave to Meno, the boy is also a slave to the material. Thus, the boy actually illustrates the limitation of sophistry because sophists not only do not have cleared minds, what keeps their minds cluttered is predispositional endpoint inquiry: they ask the kinds of questions which presuppose specific answers, and they ask those questions in order to *get* the answers. It may be the case that a questionless slave boy is better than a questioning sophist, but given the success of the slave boy in having a clear mind, more is required from him.

A LINK TO TEACHER EDUCATION AND AMERICAN SCHOOLS

For schools, the Socrates/slave boy passage is hauntingly appropriate in that teachers and schools give lip service to student questions and student participation. Such a truth, however, is not solely the fault of teachers and schools. The culprit is sophistry and the degree to which sophistry has infected the very social mentality that expects contemporary teachers and schools to be sophistic. The parallels result from social influence and include the following: sophists and teachers engage in the type of authoritarian transmission of data which puts learners in passive rather than active roles; sophists and teachers use poetic schemes and memorization (by way of notetaking) as methods for “teaching and learning”; sophists and teachers are intent on covering material that students “get” and can “utilize”; sophists and teachers are expected (and therefore expect of themselves) to have answers; sophists and teachers operate on the assumption that utilization of information (instrumentalism) is the litmus test for successful teaching and learning. In both cases, societal expectations inform and/or define the roles just outlined, so blame is a fleeting waste of time. The point is to ask of society *and* teachers whether what they are perpetuating is actually education or mere training. If it is training, confusing education with training is a disservice to both notions, but this essay argues that American schools should use *Meno* as a means to change from sophistic training to education.

Emphasis on skills and job preparation for international competition is the same quest for certainty, superiority, and materialism the sophists sought in Athens. Preparing Athenians to speak well, sophists were much less concerned about the topic’s depth and importance. The substance of the talk was not as important as the outcome and the performance. Similarly, contemporary teachers (and society) expect students to “get” or “have” the kind of information that can be positively (and competitively) represented on a variety of norm-referenced tests. Performance and outcomes are publishable in print media, just as performances were publicly seen in the open forums of Athens. If it is persuasive, it is true.

Yet this essay submits a different point: by understanding another interpretation of the Socrates/slave boy scene in *Meno*, the value of authentic dialectic is set against the illustration of sophistry embedded in the Socrates/slave boy scene. Authentic dialectic requires the slave boy to be an active questioner *with* Socrates. Further, authentic dialectic requires for the slave boy the opportunity to say “no.” Without authentic dialectic, training institutionalizes itself, and as a result, non-critical citizenship and political as well as capitalist hegemony flourish. The very people best poised to counter such a spread are teachers: the very people who currently (and ironically) reinforce the hegemony of a language of technique (also known as sophistry). Simon puts it this way, “Where I come from, when we talk about teaching we usually talk about specific strategies and techniques to use in order to meet predefined, given objectives. It is talk carried out in the language of technique, and usually its purpose is to provide doable suggestions that can be tried out in the classroom the very next day.”¹⁹

Teacher education programs, however, offer a means through which to challenge the status quo. Studying *Meno*, for example, focuses scrutiny on dialectic —

what it is and what it is not. Dialectic in a non-sophistic way means rejecting the language of technique in favor of critical interaction. To be a part of a dialectic about dialectic, though, requires of prospective and practicing teachers the kind of *elenchus* which is rarely comfortable and unable to be fit nicely in traditional pedagogy courses. Said differently, students in teacher education programs intensely demand the very language of technique that is the antithesis of authentic Socratic dialectic. Giroux's concern is that such "students are very comfortable with defining themselves as technicians and clerks. For them to be all of a sudden exposed to a line of critical thinking that calls their own experience into question...is very hard for them. They don't have a frame of reference [other than sophistry] to articulate the centrality of what they do."²⁰ Therein lies the beauty of *Meno*. It, at one and the same time, is a dialogue about dialogue which questions what dialogue really means.

Study of the *Meno*, moreover, requires deep and wide readings, contemplation, self-evaluation, and critique. It also requires the abandoning of the pedagogical predisposition toward sophistry: that is, "tell me about the *Meno*, tell me what I need to know, tell me when the paper on it is due, and tell me how many pages it should be." Such questions are realistic, not cynical, and those who raise such questions are not to blame. The questions represent the answer/particular/endpoint/result emphasis of sophistry. They are reminiscent of the ethos which informed the slave boy's responses of "yes," "yes," "yes, Socrates," "I think so," "yes," "yes," etc. in that they are result-oriented questions presupposing a result-oriented result. This essay argues for authentic dialectic which, as such, has no presupposed (or supposed) form other than the dialectic itself.

1. Two translations of the *Meno* are relied upon: *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 151-86; and *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1984), 28-68.

2. See, for example, Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 133-50; and Michael Welbourne, "Meno's Paradox," *Philosophy* 61 (1986): 229-43. Allen and Welbourne both agree that the "paradox" is more of an eristic puzzle to divert attention to the Theory of Recollection, but both come at their discussions of the "paradox" in distinct ways: Allen uses other dialogues of Plato, and Welbourne contrasts Cartesian "enquiry." Murray's angle is to re-write the entire dialogue in specific terms of teacher education. See Frank B. Murray, "*Meno* and the Teaching of Teachers to Teach Excellently," *Journal of Teacher Education* 45, no. 5 (November-December 1994): 379-90.

3. Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), xv. Untersteiner briefly, but clearly, alludes to the "original" positive understanding held in pre-Platonic times. For support of this earlier understanding, see Rosamond Kent Sprague, ed., *The Older Sophists* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1972). See also, George Grote and Eduard Zeller's 1905 book *A Textbook in the History of Education*; Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, vol. 1 and 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944); and James L. Jarrett, ed., *The Educational Theories of the Sophists* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1969).

4. See Walker Gibson, "In Praise of the Sophists," *College English* 55, no. 3 (March 1993): 284-90; Kristine L. Blair, "Isocratean Discourse Theory and Neo-Sophistic Pedagogy: Implications for the Composition Classroom" (Paper presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 19-21 March 1992), EDRS, ED 352672; Brian R. Donovan, "Eloquence as Virtue in Ancient Theory" (Paper presented at the 43rd Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 19-21 March 1992), EDRS, ED 346515; and Steven B. Katz, "From Poetry to Prose: Sophistic Rhetoric and the Epistemic Music of Language" (Paper presented at the 40th Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 16-18 March 1989), EDRS, ED 333423.

5. Donovan, "Eloquence as Virtue in Ancient Theory," 8.
6. Jasper Neel, *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).
7. Blair, "Isocratean Discourse Theory and Neo-Sophistic Pedagogy," 4.
8. See G.B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Kerferd seeks a more judicial interpretation of sophistry because the writings of sophists are so scarce and the writings about sophistry upon which we rely come from a "profoundly hostile Plato" (1).
9. Henry Teloh, *Socratic Dialogue in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), 151. Thomas Davidson's 1894 text *The Education of the Greek People*, and Ellwood P. Cubberly's 1920 text *The History of Education* are similarly critical of sophists.
10. See, for example, S. I. Benn and R. S. Peters, *Social Principles and the Democratic State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959); and R. A. Dahl, *Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).
11. Gibson, "In Praise of the Sophists," 286. Interestingly, Gibson advocates looking again (and more kindly) at sophists and sophistry.
12. Neither Plato nor Aristotle would argue against sophistry because of its lack of democratic tenets. In other words, Plato was not a democrat. Their critique of sophistry, harsh or extreme though it may be, is, however, very helpful when interpreting contemporary questions about teaching and learning in a (purported?) democracy. See also, Rene Vincente Arcilla, *For the Love of Perfection: Richard Rorty and Liberal Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
13. H.D. Rankin, *Sophists, Socrates, and Cynics* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 20. The reference is remarkable in its timeliness to present concerns about justice, jury systems, and members of the Bar.
14. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 136. Allen reinforces the point that sophistry is about "passing on" information/data. Meno may not understand or know the meaning of the lists he provides, but he *need not* understand or know, as sophistry is concerned with memory, performance, and persuasion.
15. *Ibid.*, 137-38.
16. The Rouse translation has Anytos [sic] identifying sophists in a more colorful way as "the manifest canker and destruction of those they have to do with" (57).
17. If you know what it is you are inquiring about, you need not inquire, for you already know. If you do not know what it is you are inquiring about, you are unable to inquire, for you do not know what it is into which you are inquiring. See 80d-e.
18. The rest of the slave boy's "part" is as follows: I do. Of course. Yes. Of course. Yes. Certainly. Surely not. Fourfold. True. Yes. Yes. Yes. I agree. Yes. Yes, I think so. Yes. It must. Three feet. Yes. That follows. Nine. Eight. It certainly isn't. Socrates, I really don't know. I do. Yes. Yes. Of course. Yes. Four times. Of course. Yes. We have. I don't know. Yes. Four. Two. Double. Eight feet. That one. Yes. Yes, certainly.
19. Roger I. Simon, "Empowerment as a Pedagogy of Possibility," in Holtz, ed., *Education and the American Dream* (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1989), 135. See, also, Hugh G. Petrie, *The Dilemma of Enquiry and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
20. Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.