

## Socrates' *Meno* for Managers: Can Virtue Be Taught?

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In the Socratic dialogue *Meno*, Socrates is asked a direct question by the wealthy and handsome Meno. Can virtue be taught or does it come from practice, working alongside virtuous people, or are some people virtuous by nature? In this paper, I present Socrates' central arguments that address Meno's questions and then apply them to modern management challenges of managing an ethical business.

I focus on Socrates' efforts to define what virtue is and his inquiry into if virtue can be taught. I also highlight Socrates' focus on encouraging Meno to *learn* virtue through inquiry as opposed to seeking someone to teach him virtue. Throughout the paper I apply Socrates' method and his arguments to what managers can do in a corporation. I draw three management lessons from the *Meno*: 1) popular but false definitions of virtue, such as gaining wealth and power, need to be questioned and tested in the workplace; 2) becoming a virtuous and good manager or employee requires diligence and wisdom and not just teaching; and 3) managers must commit themselves to helping employees *learn* virtue by making virtues a permanent part of the corporate culture.

### Defining Virtue in a Corporation

Meno is a handsome, wealthy, and impatient person who wants to be taught about virtue. His motives, however, are suspect because it appears that he wants to learn about virtue in order to gain status. The sophists have taught Meno different ideas of what virtue requires, and now he wants to learn what Socrates thinks. Socrates claims not to know what virtue is and invites Meno to join him in an inquiry into what virtue is (*Meno* 70b). Meno agrees but is not enthusiastic that he must submit to Socrates' method of questioning. He would prefer that Socrates tell him what he needs to know, or argue with him until someone wins the argument. Socrates does not submit to Meno's form of argument because he believes that inquiry and testing ideas will open Meno to learning the essence of virtue.

The word "virtue" is translated from the Greek word *arête* which means "excellence," and in the *Meno* the search is for virtue in general and not specific virtues. When Socrates asks Meno what virtue is, Meno's definitions focus on the excellences of being an aristocrat. He first defines virtue based on "every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us" (*Meno* 72a). For example, men have the virtue being able to manage public affairs so that he can benefit his friends, hurt his enemies, and do so without bringing harm to himself. Women have the virtue of managing the household well, submitting to their husbands, and preserving household wealth (*Meno* 71e).

Using the questioning method of dialectical inquiry or *elenchus*, Socrates tests Meno's definitions and eventually leads him to agree that no one can do their tasks well unless they do it justly and moderately. Socrates democratizes virtue by arguing that "all men are good in the same way, for they become good by acquiring the same qualities" (*Meno* 73c).

Meno proposes another aristocratic definition that virtue is ruling over people. Socrates then asks him to consider that virtue would require ruling "justly and not unjustly", and Meno agrees to this change because justice is part of virtue (*Meno* 73d). He later pro-

poses that virtue is “to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them” (*Meno* 77b). He amends this to virtue being the capacity to acquire good things, which he lists as “gold and silver, also honours and offices in the city” (*Meno* 78c) Socrates challenges Meno on this point and wonders if acquiring these things “unjustly” is called virtue. Meno agrees that it would be wicked to acquire goods unjustly, and then agrees that *unjustly or impiously* securing gold is not virtuous. The conclusion is that acquiring goods is not virtue, “but apparently whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and what is done without anything of the kind is wickedness” (*Meno* 79a).

Socrates continues to bring Meno back to a focus on justice, temperance, and piety, but he resists these definitions in an attempt to align virtue with wealth and power. Meno appears to be a person who wants to justify his status and the status of other wealthy individuals. Meno’s definitions are similar to some implicit or explicit corporate values that place competition, promotion, and gaining wealth and power above justice and temperance. In this section I explain how managers can challenge these values by questioning their validity for creating a virtuous company and how seeking justice, courage, and wisdom offers a more promising path for living a good life.

### Can Virtue Be Taught?

Eventually Socrates returns to the question that Meno asks at the beginning of the dialogue: “Can you tell me Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?” (*Meno* 70a). This is an important question to address for any manager. Socrates, however, does not provide a definite answer. He first argues that virtue is knowledge and therefore can be taught, and then he flips and argues that virtue is not knowledge and therefore cannot be taught. Instead of considering his specific arguments, I highlight Socrates’ primary goal: to encourage Meno to continue inquiring and seeking for virtue. The broader inquiry into how virtue can be *acquired* is more important to Socrates.

The possible methods for acquiring virtue are: teaching, being born with virtue (nature), learning virtue from peers, and/or receiving it from the gods. In this paper I briefly explain these options and how Socrates eliminates each one. What is left is that virtue can be *learned* without being taught. Learning virtue, however, requires inquiring after it by testing and refining one’s beliefs. Weiss argues that Socrates believes that true knowledge of virtue can never be acquired in our current human state (2001). In the allegory of the cave which Plato describes in the *Republic*, humans can only see shadows of what is real. In the place of knowing virtue, Socrates’ dialectical inquiry tests our ideas of virtue and brings us closer to true opinions of what virtue is.

I relate Socrates’ position and method of continual inquire to becoming a virtuous and good manager or employee. Socrates implies that virtue is gained by diligence and wisdom as opposed to merely following ethical people or taking a class on virtue. His example of a person who properly pursued something is Anthemion, the father of Anytus. Socrates states that Anthemion “did not become rich automatically or as the result of a gift ... but through his own wisdom and efforts. Further, he did not seem to be an arrogant or puffed up or offensive citizen in other ways, but he was a well-mannered and well-behaved man” (*Meno* 90a). Similarly, virtue must be pursued with diligence and wisdom.

On Socrates’ model, managers and employees must inquire after virtue with diligence, wisdom, humility, and good manners. In the paper, I describe what this looks like in a corporation.

## Tying Down the Virtues

Socrates implies that knowledge of virtue is not possible because it appears that there are no teachers of virtue. What he and Meno are left with is *true opinion* which is not as certain as knowledge, but is just as beneficial for becoming a virtuous person. Socrates explains that a person who has been to the town of Larisa *knows* the way and can lead others well. Similarly, he argues, a person who has a true opinion of how to reach Larisa can also lead others well, even though the person does not have certain knowledge of how to reach the town (*Meno* 97a-b).

A problem Socrates raises is that true opinions are more ethereal than knowledge. He compares them to statues that run away unless they are tied down. While true opinions are beneficial for becoming virtuous, they must be tied down lest they run away and be replaced by false opinions (*Meno* 97e). Socrates explains that one “ties down” these opinions by giving “an account of the reason why” they are fine and good (*Meno* 98a). In other words, dialectic inquiry ties down our true opinions about virtue.

In the corporate context, managers must make virtues a permanent part of the corporate culture. Each manager and employee has their own values and beliefs about what virtue requires. The managers must test these ideas with employees and determine the virtues that will lead to a noble and good company. Then managers must “tie down” these true opinions by creating and enforcing codes of ethics, maintaining high standards for hiring and promotions, and continually inquiring after what is good for their industry. These practices tie down the true opinions and make them knowledge.