On the Platonic Meno in Particular and Platonic Dialogues in General[1]

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When we face a Platonic dialogue, we tend to face it as a book. That is where the difficulty begins. The first thing I should like to say is that a Platonic dialogue is not a book. It does not speak by itself. One can start reading at page one, go through all the other pages, and come to the end without getting any answer to any question. This un-bookish character of the Platonic dialogues was perfectly understood in antiquity. Aristotle, most of the time a reliable authority, says in his *Poetics* (in the beginning of the first chapter) that there is a certain affinity, a certain kinship between mimes and Socratic dialogues, although there is no common name for these two literary genres. As to Socratic dialogues, Plato is not the only one who composed them. Quite a few people composed Socratic dialogues, that is to say, dialogues in which Socrates appears as a person. As to the term 'mime', it covers a wide range of dramatic literature written for stage performance. At one extreme, mimes were obscene farces of a kind that no burlesque show today would dare produce. At the other extreme, mimes were comedies of a rather high level, mostly—but not always—in prose. They depicted specific situations or individual persons. It is, apparently, with this latter kind of mime that Aristotle compares Socratic dialogues. We gather from Aristotle's statement that Platonic dialogues—most of which are indeed Socratic dialogues—are dramas verging, to say the least, on comedies and that to understand them means above all to understand what *goes on* in them. Now this going-on takes place in the medium of the spoken word only, and that is where the difficulty in following a Platonic dialogue lies. The root of this difficulty is that, in a Platonic dialogue, the spoken word has a double function. One function is argumentative: opinions are presented, arguments are advanced; these opinions and arguments are refuted; certain theses are put before us and are argued about according to accepted standards of inference. But the spoken word has also another function in a Platonic dialogue: it presents us with a definite action. This function is mimetic. It is up to us to disentangle these two functions of the spoken word, of the logos, of a Platonic dialogue. It is up to us to weave our own thread into the texture of this twofold logos. This means that no Platonic dialogue can take place without us participating in it. If we do not participate in the dialogue, the dialogue is indeed at best a book, and books, as you know, can be dead things.

There are strange incongruencies, or even apparent contradictions, in a Platonic dialogue. These incongruencies and contradictions reflect the ambivalent function of the spoken word in a dialogue. To ignore this ambivalence means to ignore the double function of the spoken word. Let me digress for a moment. There is a vast Plato literature which would not only fill this room but probably spill over to the outside. In the last hundred-fifty years or so classical scholars have chosen a very special point of view in their investigations of Platonic dialogues: they are primarily interested in finding out the chronological sequence of these dialogues. I am sure that you have all heard that there are early dialogues and dialogues which belong to Plato's middle age, and finally dialogues of the old Plato. This chronology can indeed be established to a large extent, and on the whole there is now a consensus about it. The only trouble is that this kind of investigation does not help us to understand what is said and done in any single Platonic dialogue. It is perfectly possible, and even likely, that Plato, in the course of his life, changed or "developed" his views, put different emphases on different things, but the assumption that this change of view and emphasis is necessarily reflected in various Platonic dialogues is unwarranted. It is unwarranted precisely because a Platonic dialogue is above all a mime, that is to say, intends to imitate an action.

The actions presented differ from dialogue to dialogue. There is no master-key to the understanding of a

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[1] A Speakers' Club Lecture given by Dr. Jacob Klein, Tutor and former Dean, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland, on May 7, 1963 at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. [Edited by Burt C. Hopkins. Minor typographic errors have been removed, Greek terms have been written in the original, initial words in questions have sometimes been capitalized, words mentioned (rather than used) have been placed in single quotes, and one insertion has been placed in pointed brackets. Otherwise, the presentation of Klein's talk here replicates the typescript, which may be found among Klein's papers at the St. John's College Library in Annapolis, Maryland. The editor wishes to thank Elliot Zuckerman and Robert B. Williamson for permission to publish this talk here for the first time.

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Platonic dialogue. If one sees what kind of action is presented to us in one dialogue, it doesn't follow that one can see the action presented in another. I shall nevertheless venture to distinguish three different kinds of action, three kinds of mime embodied in the dialogues.

One can be characterized by a word coined sixty or seventy years ago, namely by the word 'ethological', from the word ethos, which in this particular case has the meaning of 'character'. That is to say that in some Platonic dialogues a man's character is revealed by what that man does and says. There is indeed always the claim that when Socrates talks to people, he strips their souls naked. If this is what happens in a Platonic dialogue, we face an ethological mime.

Other Platonic dialogues present to us a mime which, for want of a better word, I shall call a "doxological" mime, from doxa meaning 'opinion'. A doxological mime is an imitation of an action in which we are made to face certain opinions; but these opinions are not presented simply and directly; they are presented through the people that utter them, and the opinion which is being talked about is *acted out* in the course of the dialogue. This is, for instance, the case in the *Theaetetus,* the *Sophist* and the *Statesman.*

There is still another type of mime that, again for want of a better word, I shall call "mythological" mime, by which I do not refer to any of the myths told by Socrates or by somebody else in the course of the dialogue. The Platonic dialogues abound in such myths, but I do not mean them; I mean rather that a dialogue in its entirety may imitate an action which itself is either a myth or which replaces a well-known myth by a new one. This is the case of the *Phaedo,* for instance.

Do not think that I have just given an exhaustive classification of Platonic dialogues. Not only is there no master-key, there are no master-keys for the understanding of a Platonic dialogue.

[. . .]

Let us now turn to the Platonic dialogue *Meno* itself. The dialogue begins with a question put by Meno: "Can you, Socrates, tell me—is human excellence arete something teachable? Or, if not teachable, something to be acquired by training? Or, if it cannot be acquired either by training or by learning, does it accrue to man at birth or in some other way?" The word arete is usually well translated by 'virtue', except that our connotations are rather different. `Virtue' is a solid and venerable word and its root is the Latin word *vir,* so that originally the word meant manliness. In Homer, for example, it usually connotes `courage'. Later on it is identified with all the good qualities that men can have. The present use of the word 'virtue' does not quite cover the whole range of meaning that the Greek word arete has. It is better, therefore, to translate the word arete by the English word 'excellence'. What Meno is asking Socrates is to tell him how any excellence that a man might have accrues to that man, whether he is born with it, or whether he acquires it by learning, or by some kind of training, or in some other way. Now this is an absolutely universal question, and this question is asked today too, only in a somewhat different way. When Mr. < William > Lensing introduced me, he mentioned my studying and working at different places. I take it he wanted to say that this studying and working do me credit, because I must have learned something, and that a certain excellence I possess stems from my having learned something at the places he mentioned. Thus Mr. Lensing's introduction answered Meno's question in a certain way. But this answer is a doubtful one. It is doubtful that I am excellent to begin with, but even supposing that I were, the question how that excellence came to me persists. How is it that some people are good men, excellent men? What makes them excellent men? Are they born that way? Or does somebody infuse something into them? Is there some subtle influence which makes them excellent? Or are they transformed by some strenuous exercise into excellent men? This is a question which is faced in any age, at any time. And to answer this question is difficult and perhaps impossible. It seems that Socrates had an answer to that question. I shall give you that answer because it is rather well known anyhow. Socrates is supposed to have said that arete is knowledge, that is to say, that the excellence of men consists in their "knowing." Now this is a very dark and paradoxical answer, not only because "excellence" and "knowledge" are identified, but because of the very grave difficulties which the term 'knowledge' presents. We have a familiar way of stating that we "know" various things. Such a statement seems meaningful to us. But in the Socratic statement 'knowledge' seems to be taken as a *whole.* However dark the meaning of knowledge is, we are not inclined to assume that any man possesses the whole of knowledge. We have to conclude therefore that—in Socrates' terms—no man possesses complete excellence. And yet this strange, paradoxical statement of Socrates, that human excellence is knowledge, is written in invisible ink, as it were, over every Platonic dialogue. Every Platonic dialogue, directly or indirectly, deals with arête. It is questionable whether the *Meno*

brings up this theme more significantly than the other dialogues do. The question asked by Meno is, at any rate: How do men acquire excellence?

Socrates' immediate answer is an evasive one. He claims that he cannot possibly answer this question because wisdom has left Athens and has emigrated to Thessaly whence Meno comes. The irony of this claim is very transparent because Thessaly is known as a rather wild and licentious country. But Socrates claims in addition that no man in Athens would be willing to answer Meno's question because everyone would reply: I don't know what it is to begin with, I don't know what it is at all. You will realize that, in all likelihood, not a single soul in all of Athens would have made this reply except Socrates.

Meno is very surprised and asks whether Socrates really does not know what human excellence is: Should he and his retinue (there seem to be quite a few people about him) report this about Socrates back home? Let us consider the implications of Meno's reaction to Socrates' reply. Does Meno mean something that so many parents mean when they tell their naughty children indignantly: "Don't you know how to behave?" I am pretty sure that your mothers have on some occasion used this phrase: "Don't you know how to behave?" Did they not imply that, if you knew how to behave, you would behave accordingly? Does not Meno imply the same thing? Doesn't he imply that, if Socrates does not know what human excellence is, he himself cannot have any excellence? Doesn't he thus imply the very thing Socrates is said to assume—that excellence is knowledge, more precisely, that excellence is the knowledge of excellence?

Socrates confirms that he does not know what human excellence is, and adds that he has never met anyone who did know. Meno is again surprised and asks: "Have you not met Gorgias?" I shall read Socrates' reply, partly at least, in Greek. To say it in English first, Socrates' reply is roughly as follows: My memory is not too good, and so I cannot tell you right now whether Gorgias seemed to me to know or not to know what human excellence is; it may be that he knew, and that you know what he said; tell me then what he said, or, if you like, say it yourself, for it seems that his and your opinion are the same. Now this statement in the original is full of puns. It is very hard for me to make you hear them, or, for that matter believe that they are there. (You should not believe what I say—try to find out for yourselves.) I shall read to you the first sentence in Greek and ask you to listen to the sounds of the words. [. . .]

It is incumbent upon us to watch whether the relation of "Meno" to "memory" is to be found in the action of the dialogue.

The next sentence is no less significant. It says in English: It may be that Gorgias did know what human excellence is and that you know what he said. In Greek the two coordinated clauses are held together by a little particle which corresponds to the English word 'both'. The English translation should consequently read as follows: It may be that both of you know—Gorgias, what excellence is, and you, what he said that it is. You see immediately that the knowledge referred to in the two clauses is a different one. It is suggested that Gorgias may know what human excellence is, and it is intimated that Meno, at best, knows only what Gorgias said, that is to say, remembers what Gorgias said. Here again something is put before us that we have to watch carefully in the dialogue, namely the relation between knowing something, remembering something and opining something. The dialogue as a whole deals with the relation between knowledge and memory. And it is of prime importance to understand that when I use the words 'memory' and 'remembering' I do not mean 'recollecting'. The middle part of the *Meno* takes up the Myth of Recollection. Let us say a few words about this.

Recollecting is not remembering. That which is common to both is that both refer to the past. I remember things which happened in the past, and I recollect things which happened in the past, but it must be noted that we have no power over our memory. For people who have a poor memory, there is no way of remembering well. We have no power to keep "in our minds" what was once there. On the other hand, *we* are able to recollect things of the past by making an *effort* to do so. Let's take an example. You are looking for the keys of your car. They are not in the pocket they used to be in, and you simply do not know where the keys are now. At this moment you realize that you have forgotten something. Note, please, that when you do not remember something, you are not aware that you have forgotten. But when you become aware that you have forgotten something, which in itself is very strange, you begin — at this very moment—to make the effort of recollecting.

The dialogue presents these two, memory and recollection, as opposed to each other. Meno himself is

represented as having an excellent memory. After not being able to understand the full impact of Socrates' question "What is human excellence?" he quotes Gorgias and adds: and I *too* say the same thing. These words 'I too' run through the entire first part of the dialogue. Gorgias says something, and "I too" say it. A poet says something, and "I too" say it. At some points Socrates playfully imitates Meno by using this phrase 'I too' in a conspicuous way. This phrase points to the functioning of memory. But there is another phrase running through the first part of the dialogue: "Make an attempt!" Socrates enjoins Meno over and over again to make an attempt to recollect what Gorgias said concerning excellence. Meno is unable to do that for the very good reason that Gorgias himself apparently never made the attempt to state what excellence is. Interestingly enough, Meno is not aware that he is ignorant about excellence. He seems to assume that the answer is a very simple one. He has talked to many people, he says, and has done that very often and has done it very successfully, and now Socrates has made him deaf and dumb, as it were, has benumbed his tongue, which he thinks is an outrageous thing to do. That is why he decides, after two unsuccessful attempts (attempts not to recollect but to repeat what other people have said on this subject), to retaliate and to make Socrates appear ridiculous, too. He compares Socrates with a torpedo fish which benumbs other living beings that touch it. And it is at this point that Meno brings up something terribly important. Socrates had just suggested that they try together, that they make the attempt together to find what excellence is. Meno's reaction to this suggestion is the statement that it is impossible to find out, to *learn* anything. His argument is as follows: Either you know or you don't know; if you know, you don't need to learn; if you do not know, how can you know what you have to learn, what you have to find out? Even if you found it, you wouldn't now that the thing you have found is that which you were supposed to find. This argument (which, by the way, is also a *remembered* argument, as far as Meno is concerned) raises the fundamental question: How is learning possible? This is a question that any student, anywhere on this planet, cannot avoid asking himself at some point.

Socrates' Myth of Recollection is an apparent answer to this question. Let us not forget that Socrates tells the myth from hearsay, that is to say, he tells it from memory, while the myth itself amounts to saying that learning is recollection.

Meno is pleased to hear that myth. Meno is pleased to add something to the treasures of his memory. Meno is a "well-educated" person. He remembers so much. The remembrance of what other people say is indeed what we usually call education. Among other things, he remembers his lessons in geometry. He is now intrigued by Socrates' Myth of Recollection because he can incorporate it into his vast store of memories and because, above all, he seems to interpret Socrates' myth as saying that there is not teaching and learning but just remembering. Yet he asks Socrates to teach him more about recollection. We readers may feel like saying at this point: "But don't you see, Meno, that you are involving yourself in a contradiction?—Socrates has just told you that learning is recollection and that there is not 'teaching.' How then can you ask him to teach you?" Socrates, however, does not raise this objection. He puts it differently. He says: I see, Meno, what you are after. You want to put *me* in the position of contradicting myself. I have just said that we men cannot be taught, and you want me to teach you. That is precisely what I cannot do. Let us understand the full implication of Socrates' words: the Myth of Recollection precludes any *telling* of what the truth is. Truth cannot be "infused" from the outside.

But Socrates is willing to satisfy Meno. He presents Meno with an action, just as Plato presents us with an action in the entire dialogue. He offers Meno the spectacle of a slave-boy "recollecting" a certain truth, namely the truth about the side of a square which is the double of a given square. The side of this double square is the diagonal of the given one. And this diagonal is incommensurable with the side of the given square. Socrates does not "prove" that learning is recollection. He merely exhibits an action which may lead Meno and us to infer within us that learning is recollection. This exhibition consists in questioning the slave-boy and eliciting answers from him. The boy actually has only four answers. He either says "yes," or he says "no," or, since he can count, he says something like "two times four is eight" or "four times four is sixteen"; and finally he also says "I don't know." In his questioning, Socrates sometimes elicits wrong answers deliberately. What, then, does this questioning and answering amount to?

You must have asked yourselves when you read this passage: "Doesn't Socrates put the answers into the boy's mouth?" He does that indeed. But it must be equally clear to you that whenever the boy says yes or no, it is not Socrates who is answering but the boy himself. It must be clear to you since you yourselves, within

yourselves, are checking the boy's answers and know well when he is right and when he is wrong. What is presented to the boy stems from Socrates, there can be no doubt about that. Without Socrates the boy would never have found out that the diagonal is the side of the double square. But the *assent* to the statement does not stem from Socrates; it stems from the boy—as our assent, or dissent, stems from us. Everything depends on the way in which we human beings answer yes or no. You do realize that most of the time our yes and no does not really mean yes and no. It means something like: "Well, let me see, yes, yes, no, no." Whenever we say "yes" and "no" seriously and genuinely, it comes from us. This is what the "exhibition" of the slave-boy purports to show: the boy gets his "yes" and "no" from himself; to get something out of oneself is what we call recollecting. And this recollecting seems indeed to be learning.

Is not this process of recollecting and learning exhibited in the slave-boy also exhibited, though negatively perhaps, in the person of Meno? Is not the questioning and answering that goes on while Socrates converses with Meno supposed to show whether or not Meno learns anything? Having concluded his conversation with the slave, and even before that, Socrates keeps asking Meno: Don't you see that the boy's answer must have come from him? Don't you see that the boy merely utters his own opinions? And Meno answers throughout in the affirmative. In fact, he says "yes," if I am not mistaken, five times in a short space of time. If Meno's assent were a genuine one, he ought to understand at this point that his original question is meaningless. For if it be true that the opinions elicited by Socrates were "in" the boy, it must also be true that what can be learned must in some way be already known. That is to say, Meno's assent implies that what is learnable by men is already give to them, in some way at least, from birth, or, as we say, by nature, and furthermore that only that which is given from birth can be learned. It turns out that Meno does not see this at all. After Socrates and Meno have reached agreement that the boy's true opinions were "in him," Socrates again suggests to Meno: Since learning is possible, as you see, let us find out together what human excellence is. By all means, says Meno, but he proceeds: I would prefer, however, to come back to my original question—how does excellence accrue to man? As something taught or as something give by nature?

We understand now that while the slave-boy has learned his lesson, Meno has not learned his.

Why has Meno not learned his lesson? Is he perhaps altogether incapable of learning? And is not his inability to learn the very consequence of his powerful memory? Why should his memory interfere with his learning? Is it not because something is missing in his memory? It is true that we could not learn anything if we did not remember. But it is equally true that remembering or "memorizing" without learning leads to nothing. What Meno lacks is the *effort* of learning. Mythically speaking, he is not capable of recollecting. This is revealed to us by the action presented in the dialogue.

Let me come back to a point I made previously. The drama of the *Meno* is a mime of a certain kind, to wit, an ethological mime. What is revealed in the dialogue is the character of Meno, his ethos, the nature of his soul. Meno's soul is revealed as incapable of learning. To be incapable of learning means to have a very special kind of soul. Let us not forget, most people learn something. It is strange that they do, but they do. Meno, on the other hand, is presented to us as having a soul of a unique sort. I am sorry to say that I cannot go into detail now in describing this soul. Let me only briefly state that it doesn't seem to have three dimensions. It has only two dimensions. It has no "inside." It is as flat as a pancake. Do not be surprised at the way I have just described Meno's soul. Plato's imagery of the soul is infinitely more subtle, but even he cannot avoid talking about the soul in terms and images taken from the world we live in. Plato has also a special phrase to characterize a soul such as Meno's. He calls it a "little soul."

Let us discuss this.