

Plato's 'Meno'

The 'Meno,' written after Socrates' death (398BC) and clearly after some of the smaller dialogues were written, as can be inferred from the progression of the main question pursued by all of these, the question of the nature of virtue, was perhaps written c. 380 B.C.

This is a complex dialogue, though not dramatically complex — there are only 4^{characters}, & two of these make only cameo appearances (Anytus & Meno's slave boy). The complexity arises from the nature of the topic: the teachability of virtue.

To appreciate the novelty of this dialogue, & of Plato more generally, we need to consider several things:

- (1) The character Socrates vs. the historical Socrates: but this is to understand Plato, as ~~a~~ disciple and artist and philosopher, as well as Plato the man.
- (2) The larger influence of Socrates (e.g. on Xenophon, Antisthenes, Ascines, the cynics, & others).
- (3) Socrates' position in Greek history:
 - (a) 5th-c Athens politically/militarily
 - (b) classical culture & new democracy

c) The Sophists

(A) Socrates' & Plato's contributions to logic, and the related idea of math. An analysis of the dialogue will be required here.

To appreciate the import of Plato's focus on virtue / Greek arête, we must consider first the context: The immediate context was Socrates' execution, 399 BC, which was seen by all his friends & followers as a gross misunderstanding of both the man & his teaching, as well as a sin (not to use the word crime, which is disavowed in the 'Euthyphro').

Socrates' trial & death came in his old age (he lived roughly 469-398 BC), but the symbolic significance emerges if we consider the ~~the~~ political turmoil in Athens at the close of the 5th-c.

The Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) had just ended, & Sparta imposed terms: Athens was to be stripped of its defensive walls, its fleet, & its overseas empire, which had been acquired by Pericles (495-429) during his tenure (461-429) as leader of the democratic party of Athens.

Pro-Sparta oligarchs were imposed, & overthrown 403 BC, and democracy was re-instated, but the effects of war had deteriorated precisely the heart of the

Athenian democracy, the moral character of the citizenry. This is eloquently described in Thucydides' account of the war. Thucydides was an Athenian general of aristocratic descent, relieved of duty (423) & exiled for 20 years among Sparta & her allies, probably because of the maneuvering of political enemies back home in Athens (even the war hero Themistocles (524-459) was thus exiled).

Quote pages 400-401 (power, class-war, justice, Melian dialogue), & 406 (Pericles),

Socrates: principal tenets:

- (1) natural philosophers were merely conjecturing (T. p. 32), & lacked both intellectual vigor & empirical foundations
- (2) medicine, on the other hand, Socrates championed, mainly b.c. of its reliance on experience (cf. also Thuc. line)
(G. ^{too top} V. I.)
- (3) gym (T. p. 34, VII
35)
- (4) exhortation (protreptikos) (p. 38, T. V. II)
examination (elenchos) (example)
(logical)
- (5) care for one's soul (cf. Juvenal, mens sana in corpore sano)
(over money)
- (6) concepts, logic. → Pheno