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The Statues of Daedalus in Plato's *Meno*.

BY **Ben Carroll '17**

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates engages in dialogue with Meno, a man who questions whether virtue can be taught. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates and Meno grapple with the definition of virtue, whether it can be taught, how to distinguish between knowledge and true opinion, and finally the ramifications of this distinction regarding their previous questions. They finally agree that virtue is the ability to guide "rightly," or in a manner that is both good and useful; they also agree that it can be taught only if virtue comes from knowledge, and cannot be taught if it comes from true opinion. They define true opinion as correctly believing something to be right without understanding it, and knowledge as knowing something to be right due to a deeper understanding of it.

Near the very end of the dialogue, Socrates illustrates a point to Meno using the statues of Daedalus as an example. In Greek mythology, Daedalus was a brilliant architect and sculptor who built the famous Labyrinth of Crete, and whose statues seemed so real that they could run away if not chained. Socrates said to Meno:

It isn't worth a great deal to own one of [Daedalus's] creations if it's loose; like a runaway, it will not stay. But it is worth quite a great deal when bound, for his works are very beautiful. What am I getting at? This bears on true opinions. For in fact, true opinions, as long as they stay, are beautiful possessions and accomplish all that is good, but they are unwilling to stay very long. They run away from the soul of a man, so that they are not worth much until someone binds them by reflection on the reason for them. And that, my friend Meno, is recollection, as we agreed before. When bound, they in the first place become knowledge; and secondly, they abide. That is why knowledge is more to be valued than right opinion: Knowledge differs from right opinion by its bond. (31)

This brief passage encapsulates all of Socrates' argument and reveals through an apparent contradiction that Socrates may have meant rea-

son when he said recollection; both the encapsulation and revelation have implications for other parts of the dialogue.

The unchained statues of Daedalus represent Socrates's definition of true opinion. While the statue may be beautiful, it isn't worth a great deal because it isn't bound to its owner and could disappear. This corresponds to true opinion, which, although worthy to possess and virtuous in its practice, is impermanent. As a teacher cannot pass on what he does not truly know and understand, true opinion cannot be taught. Conversely, the chained statues of Daedalus represent Socrates's definition of knowledge. The statue is both beautiful and valuable because it has been secured to its owner. This corresponds to knowledge, which is just true opinion that is bound to the soul of a man by reflection on why it is true. Knowledge is therefore permanent and, as a teacher can pass on what he does truly know and understand, it can be taught.

The definition of true opinion as represented by the unchained statues of Daedalus sheds light on Socrates's brief conversation with Anytus, a prominent politician and military leader, during the dialogue. Socrates asks why some of the sons of the most virtuous and powerful men of Athens turned out to be quite unlike their fathers, spoiled and ignoble. Socrates uses this example to show Anytus that virtue cannot be taught; however, like the statues of Daedalus, we can conclude instead that the virtue of these statesmen was temporary and unchained to reality—virtue of true opinion—and so they could not pass it on to their sons because they themselves did not truly understand it.

The definition of knowledge as represented by the chained statues of Daedalus also shows what Socrates may think about reason. The chain that binds true opinion to the soul of a man, Socrates says, is recollection. However, he also defines this chain as "reflection on the reason" for true opinions (31). Here, he appears to be contradicting himself. Socrates tells Meno that true opinion becomes knowledge through recollection—remembering things that have already been learned in a past life—and also that true opinions become knowledge through reflection on the reason for them.

Examining this contradiction in light of the Daedalus statues analogy reveals that Socrates is probably talking not about recollection but instead about reason. Socrates tells Meno that he has “heard from men and women who are wise in things divine” that “the soul is immortal, and has been born many times, and has beheld all things in this world and the world beyond, there is nothing it has not learnt” (12-13). According to Socrates, these religious figures taught him the belief of recollection, and the main tenet of this belief is that all humans already know all knowledge through their past lives; therefore, what we call learning is actually just recalling something that we knew in a past life. However, later in the dialogue, Socrates classifies both religious figures and poets as those who have true opinion, as opposed to knowledge. It therefore seems that Socrates must not regard their teachings as knowledge, since they could only be telling him their opinions that are unchained to reality. Why would Socrates tell Meno something that he thinks is likely false? There must be some point he was trying to make. If we replace what Socrates calls “recollection” with reason, then the contradiction is solved: reason is the same thing as “reflection” on why things are the way they are, and Socrates’s statements to Meno are now consistent and have no contradictions.

If we assume that Socrates meant reason when he said recollection—as he may have—it makes more sense of his “demonstration” with the slave boy, another participant in the dialogue. Socrates commands Meno to “pay close attention” to “whether it appears to you that [he] recollects, or learns from me” (12). Socrates then walks the boy through basic geometric principles in regard to the area of a square. He never outright tells the boy an answer to a question, but instead guides the boy using other questions. Socrates says that the boy is recollecting these things, but his guidance makes it clear that the boy is using his reason instead of recollection to discern what is true and what is false.

Although replacing reason with recollection in this example makes more sense, a question still remains: why would Socrates call it recollection if he meant reason? One possible answer is that he wanted to teach Meno but did not think Meno would be mentally capable

of truly understanding how reason would be the chain to tether true opinion to oneself. If we assume this is true, then Socrates simply wanted to instill a true opinion in Meno. Socrates must realize that Meno will only believe this for a time, and it's interesting to note that Socrates still encourages Meno to "persuade your host Anytus here of the things of which you yourself are now persuaded" (33). Socrates knows that Meno only possesses true opinion on this matter and so will therefore be unable to teach Anytus any of what the dialogue was about, but still Socrates encourages him to try to do so.

The statues of Daedalus analogy also helps to explain why Socrates suddenly focuses on people who are "divine" (33) at the very end of the dialogue. He calls "soothsayers and seers, and the whole race of poets" as well as the politicians "divine and inspired" (33). Just before he deems them so, however, he says that they are divine because "without possessing intelligence they bring a multitude of important things to successful issue in what they do and say" (33). Socrates is therefore saying that, without possessing knowledge, all of these men are virtuous; as he only lays out two ways to be virtuous, he must then mean that holding true opinion and being regarded as divinely blessed are the same.

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BEN CARROLL wrote this paper for Professor Oona Eisenstadt's ID1, Philosophies of Education. It was one of two prize-winning papers from the Fall 2013 seminars. He currently works for Equilar, Inc., a business-to-business company, in the San Francisco Bay area.