

Sophistry and Wisdom in Plato's *Meno*

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Professor Boyles has presented us with a bold and provocative set of theses concerning the *Meno* and its pertinence for understanding the enterprise of education. His most general contention, that Socrates' intention in the slave boy episode should be taken ironically, deserves serious consideration inasmuch as Socrates frequently seems to adopt an ironic persona. I take Professor Boyles to be arguing: (1) that Socrates believes genuine teaching and learning to be threatened by the peculiar form of the fraudulent claim of the Sophists to provide knowledge; (2) that Socrates shows the counterfeit character of the Sophists' manner of teaching by engaging in it himself with the slave boy; and (3) that far from legitimizing sophistry, Socrates' use of it shows its limits and points the way to a genuine manner of teaching, which will bring true knowledge, and presumably, wisdom. Evaluation of these claims centers on what is meant by "sophistry," and so it is to this question that I want to turn.

THE MEANING OF "SOPHISTRY"

Professor Boyles is surely right to emphasize the theme of sophistry. After all, that Socrates himself is a sophist is an accusation he confronts at his trial in Athens in 399.¹ The dramatic date of the *Meno* is probably no more than a few years prior to that of the *Apology*.² *Meno* is, by Socrates, associated with his countryman Gorgias, who was a well-known Sophist, and visited Athens in 427 to notable acclaim. Thus, the issue of sophistry and its claims, and of who is a Sophist, is surely present in the *Meno*, even if it is not explicitly thematic. Naturally, we want to know what the term "Sophist" meant, not just in the general idiom of the time, but especially to Socrates. Whereas previous usage of the term meant any person possessing professional expertise including seers and poets, in Socrates' time, the term identified those who claimed the ability to teach or transmit this expertise, and in particular, to teach knowledge of human excellence or *areté*.³ Professor Boyles calls attention to the claim of Sophists to possess a *techné*, an art, which enables one to excel in "memory, performance, and persuasion." The last attribute is especially relevant inasmuch as it would imply, in Socrates' mind, a rhetorical strategy of making a weak argument pose as stronger than it in fact is. Sophists are not only ignorant of the essential nature of the phenomena they profess to teach, they practice deception. As Socrates understands them, they are not concerned to know and teach the way things really stand, but only to prevail over others in speech, merely to persuade, without provoking their listeners to desire *epistémé* of "the greatest things."⁴

Professor Boyles' emphasis on "performance" as an essential characteristic of sophistry also seems right, if by this term he means to indicate a singular desire to impress or please an audience with one's sure grasp of a subject, and the ease with which one is able to convey this understanding to others. Sophistry is deficient insofar as it panders to the desire of the unwise, untutored, and unreflective for quick

acquisition of knowledge. If one had enough money, one could with great speed acquire knowledge about, for example, political affairs together with the ability to speak persuasively on virtually any subject.⁵ In order to fulfill this desire, a technique that can be formalized and acquired relatively easily is needed. Professor Boyles's characterization of transmission of this technique as "mere training" instead of genuine education is persuasive. The question is whether the questioning by Socrates of the slave boy can accurately be characterized as sophistical in its manner of proceeding. It is clear that Socrates himself is most skeptical of this supposed art or skill.

SOCRATIC SOPHISTRY IN THE *MENO*?

The preceding observations prompt an obvious question: If Socrates thinks so ill of Sophists, is so concerned to dissociate himself from them at his trial, why would he deliberately employ sophistry himself? If, as Professor Boyles argues, he does so in order to show the defects of sophistry, then he is surely playing a dangerous game. He would be giving his accusers just the evidence they need to justify the charge of sophistry against him. (Socrates says at his trial that he takes no money nor has anything, any "doctrine," to teach.) We should note that Anytus is present in the *Meno*, and that Anytus is one of the three accusers of Socrates in the *Apology*. These accusers are incapable of recognizing one who, while *appearing* to employ sophistry, is really attempting to turn his listeners toward something quite different, namely, the love of *sophia*. But the accusers — indeed the majority of Athenians — are incapable of engaging in the search for *sophia* in large part because they do not love it. So they are unpromising candidates to benefit from any calculated engagement in sophistry. The same considerations apply to Meno. Consequently, it seems *prima facie* implausible that Socrates would engage in sophistry for their sake.

There is a related difficulty with seeing Socrates as an ironical Sophist. To attribute the use of sophistry to Socrates, *as Socrates understands it*, seems unacceptably problematic. There are two reasons for this: First, leading the slave boy to understand that the diagonal of a square is incommensurate with its side takes too long to qualify as sophistry. The demonstration unfolds slowly and hardly by steps that lend themselves to easy memorization. Nor emerge any pithy formulae suitable for dispensing to others quickly and easily. What we have is a rather labored procedure, designed to produce an initial perplexity, yet eventually to lead to insight into the truth of things.

Second, this episode does not seem to be an instance of "making the weaker argument appear to be the stronger." The demonstration of the incommensurability thesis is of course perfectly sound. Perhaps, then, it is the recollection thesis that Socrates presents by sophistical sleight-of-hand as being strong while it is in fact weak. This possibility presupposes (a) that Socrates knows that the episode with the slave boy constitutes a weak argument in support of the recollection theory; (b) that he presents it anyway as a sound proof; (c) that he knows either in what a stronger argument consists or that there is no strong argument; and (d) that he dissimulates this last conviction. To show that these presuppositions obtain requires specific textual evidence. Though I am open to the possibility, I am not convinced that there is any. It seems to me that Socrates means the slave boy episode to *suggest* — but

not in any definitive sense to demonstrate — that learning cannot occur except by means of some kind of prior understanding of what is to be learned. In other words, the intent of the episode might be to provoke us to entertain the view that learning somehow presupposes “recollection” as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition. Whether acknowledging this commits one to accepting the theory of the Forms, or *eide*, is another question. This is a complicated issue that deserves discussion. It has intriguing implications for how we set about our task as teachers, which implications we might well wish to explore.

If Socrates is right that learning involves some sort of recollection, then the kind of teaching Professor Boyles recommends would seem highly appropriate. The role of the teacher is that of “midwife” to her students, and Socratic *elenchos* is the appropriate “method” for bringing to clarity for the student what is already there in the student, though obscurely and inchoately. I am in much sympathy with this line of thought. I would, however, even here like to raise three questions for further reflection: First, if we are to be Socrates to our students, won’t it be the case that (a) we have no subject matter to teach them and that (b) it is at least deeply problematic to accept their money? We are, I take it, uncomfortable with these implications.

Second, to what extent is the Socratic method something that can be taught to prospective teachers? That is, can teachers be taught to be teachers? More precisely, can teachers be taught to be teachers of virtue? (I submit that Socratic teaching itself cannot, strictly speaking, be taught; it can only be shown and then imitated. Socratic teaching does not comprise a *techné*, and so does not constitute a “method.”)

Third, can the “method” for which Professor Boyles contends at the end of his paper be used for every subject — for, say, physics, biology, mathematics, and history no less than for philosophy? Is it appropriate for teaching philosophy, or for inquiry into the highest things? My experience is that while students both like and respond well to the Socratic manner of teaching philosophy, at some point they become frustrated with it. They want to know “what it all comes to,” whether anything has been established at the end of a Platonic dialogue, or at the culmination of, say, a discussion of ethics. To meet this query always with more questions, à la Socrates, risks compounding their frustration, risks blunting the desire to learn we try to nurture in our students. Are there not some things that must simply be mastered by the student in a direct, straightforward, and unquestioning way: foreign terms, technical vocabulary, pivotal distinctions, controlling definitions, the structure of an argument, classic objections and difficulties? Must these not be taught by the teacher and memorized by the student as necessary prerequisites for the more exciting and fruitful dialectical engagements we think constitute the enterprise of learning in the deepest sense? If so, the Socratic model of teaching and learning, valuable as it is, must be augmented by another kind of model.

1. See *Apology* 18b-d, where Socrates notes that in addition to the formal and specific charges facing him in the Athenian court, other accusations concerning him have circulated for many years, including the accusation that he is a “wise man” (*sophistes*) who “makes the weaker argument appear the

stronger.” This accusation Socrates associates with the putative wise men who charge a fee for their instruction, naming three well-known Sophists, Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. See *Apology* 19e. Aristotle emphasizes even more strongly the intent to deceive. “Since in the eyes of some people it is more profitable to seem to be wise than to be wise without seeming to be so (for sophistic art consists in apparent and not real wisdom, and the sophist is one who makes money from apparent and not real wisdom), it is clear that for these people it is essential to perform the function of a wise man rather than actually to perform it without seeming to do so.” *On Sophistical Refutations* 165a20-25, trans. E. S. Foster (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955).

2. See W. R. M. Lamb’s introduction to his translation of the *Meno* in the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 263.

3. For relevant discussion see Jacqueline de Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

4. “But, men of Athens, the good artisans also seemed to me to have the same failing as the poets; because of practising his art [*technē*] well, each one thought he was very wise in the greatest things [*ta magista*].” *Apology* 22d, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (slightly revised) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914).

5. De Romilly says of the Sophists: “They knew everything and taught everything, even the sciences. And in every case, what they offered was not a slow meditation upon principles, but immediate results: all you had to do was learn. It was so simple and it worked so fast.” *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, 35. One of the most vivid exemplifications of this profile of the Sophist is found in the character of Thrasymachus, who gives an extraordinarily brief and audacious explication of justice as the interest of the stronger, and then demands immediately, without subjecting himself to critical evaluation, that Socrates praise him. See *Republic* 337c.