

First Paper: The Meno

Due: Tues., Feb. 24th

Now that you have schematized a Platonic argument, write a short paper that both presents and evaluates this argument.

Specifications

5-6 pages, but no more than 6. Double spaced. Typed. 11 or 12 point font. No smaller than 1 inch margins. Attach the graded copy of your schema at the end. Staple everything together. Edit carefully: poor writing will affect your grade. Cite all quotations using Stephanus numbers (e.g., 80d5-7). Secondary sources should not be consulted.

Tips

Presenting the argument should be easy now that you have schematized it: explain the argument in expository prose by introducing the premises and describing how they fit together in order to deduce intermediate conclusions, as well as the ultimate conclusion: in the case of the argument against *akrasia*, the conclusion that no one wants what is bad; in the case of Meno's epistemological paradox, the conclusion that learning is impossible. So long as your schema was a success, simply follow it by providing a prose exposition. If there were problems with your schema, it would be a good idea to remedy them before beginning to write.

Next, evaluate the soundness of the argument. (I say *next* only because it is important to have the exposition of the argument straight in your mind before you evaluate it. In the actual process of writing your paper, however, it is entirely up to you whether to keep presentation and evaluation separate, or to evaluate the argument while you present it.) The evaluation of the soundness of an argument always begins by considering the best criticism of it. Criticisms of soundness always take one of two forms (naturally, since soundness has two components: validity and truth). They criticize either the truth of a premise or the validity of a deduction. Needless to say, a devastating critique may combine these in dozens of ways.

Criticizing validity is the easiest, especially with a successful schema behind you. If you found that the philosopher committed a fallacy, you need only highlight this during your presentation. But a critic of validity must always beware that the philosopher has truly committed the fallacy, and must thus be sure that the argument has not been misunderstood. More often than not when we criticize the deductions of great philosophers, someone else will vindicate them by showing that the flaws we saw there were flaws in our interpretation of their deductions rather than in the deductions themselves. (With these two arguments in the *Meno*, as with most arguments in the Platonic corpus, it is difficult to be sure whether Plato is presenting them as examples of sound arguments, or instead as examples of flawed ones to be superseded.)

Criticizing a premise is often harder. Premises can be false in many different ways. Warburton will help you to identify some of these ways. Here are a few examples: a premise may make a general claim that can be refuted by a counterexample; or, one premise may be the contrary of another one, so that they cannot both be true; occasionally we may spot even great philosophers begging the question by subtly assuming their conclusion as a premise. In short, you must offer some reason to believe that the premise is false. (Therefore, although it is worth observing when a premise has been merely asserted, without any reasons to support it, this observation alone does not constitute a criticism of the premise. Were it enough, after all, even when reasons are offered in support we could say that these supporting reason are themselves merely asserted, *etc. ad infinitum.*)

Once you have begun to evaluate the soundness of the argument in question by making a criticism, next evaluate your criticism. In other words, consider how Socrates or Meno would reply to your charge. If you criticized the validity of his argument, you can imagine how he would retort that you have misinterpreted him – ideally, you could recommend a small change that would render his argument valid, even if it requires going beyond the text. Or, if you criticized a premise, you can imagine how he would respond to your particular charge. For instance, if you offered a counterexample to a premise that made a generalization, you could imagine him making an *ad hoc* revision, or even offering a supplementary argument to the effect that although the counterexample *seems* to refute the generalization, it does not do so in fact.

If your criticism is so devastating that no reply seems imaginable (a very rare occurrence in philosophy), then develop a second objection. Or, if you wrote on Meno's epistemological paradox, you may present Socrates' following argument for the doctrine of recollection, which purports to resolve the paradox. If space allows, evaluate this argument and the doctrine it proposes. (On this score, if you are one of the three people who wrote on Meno's paradox, then you may have as much as 8 pages if you like. All others must keep to the 6 page limit.)

What am I asking you to do? In sum, to engage philosophically with the argument of a Platonic dialogue. The only limit to your engagement with the argument is your imagination, dialectical skill, and the maximum page limit. You must make at least one criticism, but what you can accomplish beyond that will depend on the argument you have chosen to schematize and evaluate, the quality of your schema, and the precision and threat of your criticism – not to mention your ability to write clearly, concisely, and cogently. You will be graded according to all of these criteria; which is to say, in the end, according to the depth and precision of your engagement with Plato's thought.