

## Turning from the Shadows: Meno, the Cave, and the Service-Learning Classroom

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*Reading Plato's Meno and the Republic's allegory of the cave in the context of a service-learning classroom involves students in a drama urging them to become self-conscious participants in the active pedagogy of the class. The Meno illustrates two competing philosophies of education as it invites students and teachers to reject traditional sophistical education and embrace a progressive Socratic education. If students can be helped to overhear and internalize Socrates's prodding of Meno, the dialogue can show them their traditional educational defaults and prepare them for a different kind of learning. And if taught in a dialectical manner, the act of teaching the Meno alongside the allegory of the cave can push teachers out of their comfort zones as well. Like Meno, not every student will be transformed, but Plato—though often perceived as an opponent of service-learning—does in fact provide pedagogical and philosophical resources in the form of engaging dialogues promoting an active service-learning pedagogy.*

Almost every classroom in which I have taught has been designed for traditional education: tables bolted to the floor, chairs face forward, and a computer and projector sit at the front of the classroom where the teacher is clearly expected to stand. After years of being trained to memorize and regurgitate by No Child Left Behind-style teaching tactics, students naturally fall into their role as passive vessels in which teachers place knowledge. And after years of taking lecture-style graduate courses, teachers have been trained to disseminate knowledge. Like Pavlov's dog responding to a bell, the whirl of the projector screen descending before the class signals to teachers and students alike to assume their traditional roles. They have been conditioned for the "banking model" of education (Freire, 1993).

Service-learning classes demand that teachers and students embrace the struggle to free themselves from traditional models of education. Howard (1998) lays out the wide array of incongruences between traditional pedagogies and academic service-learning.<sup>1</sup> I have found the biggest challenge in my service-learning classes is to move successfully through Howard's "Stages in Transforming the Classroom." Howard describes how faculty initiate the shift out of the first stage of traditional education. They must desocialize students from their traditional, passive education defaults. He suggests faculty try exercises like asking students what they have learned from a reading or community experience and "use their contributions to frame the class discussion" to get students to engage the class as active participants. The class enters the second "renorm" stage when students

become active participants. But then faculty must be weary of retreating to their own traditional defaults in the third "storm" stage. Though challenging, faculty must trust that the students are learning, and only when that trust forms can the classroom enter the final synergistic stage.

I most often become stuck in Howard's second "renorm" stage because students resist transforming from passive individuals to active communal learners. To get students unstuck, I now start my service-learning courses—and train faculty teaching service-learning throughout my institution to start theirs—by reading some of Plato's dialogues. In particular, I have found that reading Plato's *Meno* (1984) alongside the *Republic's* (2005) allegory of the cave involves students in a drama that makes them self-conscious participants in the active pedagogy of a service-learning class. The dialogues help them recognize their traditional educational defaults, and invite them to reject traditional education and embrace an active Socratic education. If taught in a dialectical manner that pushes teachers out of their comfort zones—and through Howard's third "storm" stage—the dialogues can provoke the drama that occurs as the service-learning class transitions from a traditional model of education to a synergistic one.

I have no doubt that there are other texts that could also raise students' awareness about the active pedagogy of a service-learning class. Rousseau, Dewey, Freire, and countless contemporary authors all suggest the need to embrace progressive and experiential pedagogies. But I advocate using Plato for two reasons. First, Plato places students and faculty into a

drama. As they read about Meno's struggle from seeing knowledge as content to seeing knowledge as a process, students are drawn into this struggle. They not only watch Meno become perplexed, but they also become perplexed themselves. The other texts that could raise students' self-consciousness simply do not involve the students as characters in a drama. Plato is a master teacher, making other teachers enter into his dialogue of education in a way that more didactic texts do not. There is a playfulness that comes in teaching Plato that I do not find when I teach Dewey, Freire, or more contemporary service-learning literature. The second reason I like using the *Meno* and the cave together is that they address what happens when a teacher fails to transform a student. Plato simply cannot loosen the grip of traditional education on Meno. And if Plato can't do it, then who can? Some students are simply too resistant. But Plato provides some guidance for teachers in how to handle such students to minimize the damage.

I see the value of the dialogues in their dramatic presentation of the human condition, not in their store of facts or theories. They are openings to further exploration. If we see them as a collection of theories,

the reader is left precisely in the same predicament as the characters in the dialogues are left. Nothing is settled either for him [the reader] or for them. The things they both want settled are postponed and cannot be settled until something else is done which they have not been able to do. This something has never yet been done and the dialogues give no assurance that it ever will be done. (Woodbridge, 1965, p. 42)

Reading the *Meno* and the cave forces students to wait, to give up their sophisticated desire for immediate answers. It creates a classroom drama that mirrors the textual drama. The characters (Meno and Socrates as well as the students and teacher) must fight to overcome their preconceptions, be perplexed, and be turned to see the light—and education—in a new way. I am, therefore, not writing an argument for how Plato must be read. Instead, I invite teachers to bring Plato's drama back to life in their classes.

I intend this article to turn students and teachers from the shadows of traditional education by sharing a pedagogical exercise for renorming the service-learning classroom that creates perplexity, debate, and active self-questioning. Plato's dialogues are a humanistic and pedagogical tool that can help students and teachers embrace the synergistic classroom. As a corollary argument, I show that the pedagogical use of Plato illuminates his philosophical value to service-learning. He can help turn the field from the shadows of a narrow philosophical reliance on empiricism and toward the light of a broader range

of philosophical resources, including the much maligned Plato. Rather than just being viewed as the architect of traditional education, Plato pushes students and teachers to ask the meta-theoretical questions that lead them back into perplexity about the entire task of education. And this is one of the great contributions service-learning makes; it forces all other educational approaches to rethink the ends of education. As service-learning becomes an institutionalized part of the educational landscape, it must not lose its ability to provoke meta-theoretical questions about the task of education itself.

### Teaching with Meno

I use Plato's *Meno* in two service-learning courses: "Social Ethics" as well as "Philosophy and Ethics of Education," both of which fulfill the ethics requirement in the general education curriculum at High Point University (HPU).<sup>2</sup> Both courses are capped at 20 students who serve a minimum of 25 hours a semester with one of our two partners: a Title I elementary school and a Boys and Girls Club. Though serving similar populations, the two service sites use different approaches to address different kinds of need. The content areas of the two courses differ, so the kind of service the students do correlates with the course content. But both courses strive to help students achieve (1) ethical self-understanding, which is the first learning objective on the Ethical Reasoning VALUE Rubric produced by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), and (2) civic identity and commitment, which is the third learning objective on the Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric (AAC&U, 2010). To get students to a place where they can actively investigate their own core beliefs and civic commitments, I first must motivate them to become active learners in and out of the classroom. Socrates has similar learning objectives for Meno, which makes the dialogue a fitting opener for any class with such ethical and civic learning objectives.

I believe that Plato built several layers of complexity into the *Meno* that shake students from their dogmatic slumbers and awaken them to the power of a synergistic service-learning class. At one level Socrates uses both a slave boy and Meno's host in Athens, Anytus, to help Meno overhear a critique of his preconceived view of education. At a deeper level, Plato uses Socrates to help Plato's readers overhear a critique of their preconceived notions about education. And at its deepest level, the dialogue helps me walk my students through the text without overtly telling them that they need to change their preconceived view of education. Plato's *Meno* allows students to overhear the value of an active pedagogy and discover the power of service-learning for themselves.

The *Meno* is ostensibly a dialogue about virtue.<sup>3</sup> Plato's Socrates does spend a fair amount of time thinking through the definition of virtue, but he suggests that without an understanding of education, Meno cannot answer the question, "whether virtue is taught" (70a). I wager this dialogue, like so many of Plato's others, is most fruitfully read as an exercise in exploring a different way to learn and live into the good—not to discover a "theory" about anything.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, I suggest that the point of teaching the *Meno* is not so that students can answer factual questions about it, like where Meno is from, whether Socrates actually wrote the dialogue, what virtue is, and so on. The point is to help students overhear a critique of their own educational defaults and lead them into a different way of learning from texts, experiences, and each other.

The dialogue begins when Meno comes to Socrates with questions. But Meno already seems to have in mind the kind of answer he wants. Like many students today, Socrates notes that Meno has a "habit of answering any question fearlessly, in the style of men who know" (70c). The first words out of Socrates' mouth draw a distinction between the kind of education Meno expects based on his past, and the kind Socrates is able to offer. Meno comes from Thessalonica where Gorgias—the famous sophist—has been teaching. As a student of Gorgias, Meno has been trained to ask questions and expect direct answers. "A question, then, is useful to Meno," according to Boyles (1996), "insofar as it yields a concrete response" (p. 104). Like many students in my classes, Meno wants to know what will be on the test, whether the PowerPoint slides will be online, and what information he really needs to remember. Socrates, however, begins the dialogue by refusing to play by Meno's rules. He states that he knows of no concrete response to Meno's question as to whether or not virtue can be taught. As the dialogue continues, the differences between the sophists' approach to education and Socrates' approach are drawn with increasing clarity.

The way Plato describes the education of the sophists maps analogously onto traditional, transmission models of education.<sup>5</sup> The sophists were paid to be teachers (91d), which incentivized them toward a style of teaching that disseminated knowledge—no one seemed eager to pay for a Socratic education. As Boyles (1996) argues, "in order to 'give' people their 'money's worth,' sophists commit themselves to a role of provision. They are tellers in the rhetorical sense and tellers in the clerical/banking sense. Those who come to sophists as customers expect of sophists, and sophists provide, *results*" (emphasis in original, p. 104). Hall (1996) similarly argues that "Sophistry is deficient insofar as it panders to the

desire of the unwise, untutored, and unreflective for quick acquisition of knowledge" (p. 106). Meno is initially disappointed when Socrates refuses to offer an answer to his question. And many contemporary college students who live in a collegiate culture that treats them as consumers also mirror Meno's frustration when professors refuse to exchange easy answers for pay. But the differences between Meno's educational expectations and Socrates' approach go much deeper than Meno's desire simply to pay for answers and a degree.

Meno understands education as something that must be transmitted from outside of him into his head. He is frustrated when Socrates tries to draw understanding out of him through dialectic. After much banter Socrates agrees to answer one question, "in the manner of Gorgias," and he, therefore, transmits the definition of color as "an effluence of figures, commensurable with sight, therefore perceptible" (76c-d). Meno quickly shows his appreciation for such a straightforward answer, and I can see Meno sitting alongside students today eagerly writing down Socrates' exact words, just as they appear on the PowerPoint slide. The good students will be able to replicate that definition of color on the final exam, but when asked what it means or how it helps them understand the meaning of "red," they will fall silent.

Socrates, however, is not concerned with such facts. He pushes Meno to learn differently. When Meno shortly thereafter offers a straightforward definition of virtue, Socrates questions him until he admits that the answer is inadequate. Both Socrates and Meno soon agree that they do not know what virtue is. And it is precisely at this point of confusion that Socrates brings the difference between his view of knowledge and Meno's to the surface. From Meno's perspective there is no point in proceeding with an inquiry into virtue because if you do not know something how can you inquire into it? And even if you manage to "bump right into it, how will you know that it is the thing you didn't know?" (80d). Meno suggests that knowledge must come from the external world. He—again, like many students today—has been trained to be a passive learner as someone else deposits knowledge into his head.

Socrates, however, counters Meno's traditional conception of education with his own view that knowledge comes from within. Scholars have long debated how to explain Socrates' so called "Theory of Recollection," but perhaps we can read the "theory" as a pedagogical tool (perhaps it is more than that, too, but at this point I am only interested in its value as a teaching tool).<sup>6</sup> Socrates even hedges his bet on recollection being a "theory" by naming it a "tale" that has been told by "priests and priestesses" and "poets" (81b). Socrates describes how the human soul is

immortal, so “there is nothing it has not learnt,” so “learning and inquiry are then wholly recollection” (81d). He suggests humans can inquire into things we do not “know” because deep down we do “know” them—true knowledge is already within us. Socrates affirms recollection as a “noble truth,” but his great example of recollection in the *Meno*—teaching geometry to a slave boy—is so obviously a farce that the point of the “theory” cannot really be about making a metaphysical claim, but about provoking a view of education as an active practice of discovery. The “tale” of recollection seems closer to a “noble lie” than a “noble truth.”

To demonstrate to Meno that there is no teaching, only recollection, Socrates leads one of Meno’s slaves through a geometrical problem. The geometry demonstration occurs just after Socrates gets Meno to admit that he is perplexed about the definition of virtue. Meno complains that “you’ve cast a spell on me; I am utterly subdued by enchantment, so that I too have become full of perplexity” (80a). Socrates then engages the slave boy in finding a square that is double the area of the original square. In the process he first confounds the slave boy and gets Meno to confess that it is better to be confused about something he does not know than to be confidently wrong. The first act of teaching appears to be perplexity. My experience with college students is that until they know they do not know something that they want to know, they will not work very hard to learn it. Especially in political science, business, religion, philosophy, history, and other courses where students may come in with their own theories and ideas, it is essential to first perplex them—to unsettle their minds—otherwise they may remain passive learners.

Within the first month of my service-learning classes, students have to reflect on their first impressions of their service sites. I ask students to reflect on the physical location, their feelings upon entering the site, and their immediate reactions. Without fail the students frequently include things the elementary school or the Boys & Girls Club should do differently. They say that if they were running things they would immediately change out the light bulbs, repaint the entry way, create new signage, or make the volunteer experience more seamless. It is not that the students’ suggestions are bad—it is that they do not yet even know the complexity of the problems the partner faces. The students want to come in with easy solutions and quick fixes. Like Meno, they believe they already know the answers to any questions they might ask. But if they are to understand the partners, understand their own value commitments, and understand what good citizenship entails, they first must become perplexed. I use Plato to illustrate the value of perplexity—the value of admitting that you do not yet fully understand.

Socrates has to be careful, however, about how he leads Meno into perplexity. And teachers would be wise to heed his caution. Meno—like many students today—would not take well to being told that he is wrong, and he would likely become defensive if Socrates confronted him. Scholars believe Meno was an aristocrat and a mercenary (Bluck, 1961, pp. 120-123), that he was an attractive man, at least according to Socrates (80c), and that he spoke “only to command, as spoiled favorites do, who play tyrant as long as the bloom of their beauty lasts” (76b-c). The way he forcefully asks questions of Socrates and banters with him may also lead readers to believe that he liked a good intellectual battle, just as he seemed to enjoy physical battle. Such an entitled, egocentric, and belligerent teenager or man in his early 20s [as Bluck speculates Meno would be] cannot simply be told that his way of seeing the world is wrong—and Socrates knows it. Instead of taking Meno on directly, I suggest to my students that Socrates diverts Meno’s attention to the slave boy. Socrates uses the example of “teaching” the slave boy as a way to help Meno overhear a different approach to education. I believe Plato similarly uses Meno to help his audience—all of us reading him today—overhear a critique of our educational schemas. Rather than take the reader on directly, Plato offers us Socrates’ attempt to educate Meno.

Socrates claims as he begins the geometry demonstration that “there is no teaching but recollection” (82a), but then he immediately asks leading questions, like, “Now take this line from corner to corner. Does it cut each of these figures in two?” (84e). Students are not convinced that Socrates “will only ask questions and will not teach” (84d). But they admit that the slave boy likely believes he is learning and discovering answers for himself—and that Socrates does a good thing by making him feel this way. As I continue to teach the *Meno*, I prod my students with questions like, “And if Socrates’ theory of recollection can help the slave boy claim ownership over the knowledge he is practicing, then doesn’t it seem more plausible that Socrates meant the ‘theory’ more as a pedagogical tool than a metaphysical claim?” And if I ask the question in an obviously leading manner, a student will point out how I am clearly asking leading questions, but that such questions make them feel more engaged than if I had pulled up a PowerPoint. The power of recollection may rest in its pedagogical force. It urges students to inquire into what they do not know and to trust their own capacities to learn. And it urges teachers to be guides to inquiry, not dictators of it. As Socrates concludes the section, “we shall be better men [and women, presumably], more courageous and less idle, if we think we ought to inquire into what we do not

know, instead of thinking that because we cannot find what we do not know we ought not seek it” (86b-c).

Through the slave boy, Socrates helps Meno overhear the value of being perplexed—of admitting that he does not know and should seek to learn. But Meno seems to miss the point. He almost immediately returns to his original question about whether virtue is taught. He still seeks a straightforward answer. Socrates even pleads with him to “please relax your rule over me a little” so that Socrates can answer the question by way of a hypothesis (86e). Socrates then leads Meno down another road to perplexity. He shows that “virtue is wisdom,” but within a few lines, he withdraws this conclusion, saying “perhaps it was improper to agree to that” (88a-c). Socrates pushes and prods Meno, trying to get him to engage his own question, but Meno only seeks the kind of straightforward answer that he can write in his notebook, memorize, and regurgitate on the exam.

Socrates makes one last effort to break Meno from his traditional educational schema—from the vice-grip of sophistical education—when he engages Anytus. Socrates helps Meno once again overhear a critique of the sophists by baiting Anytus. Socrates suggests to him that perhaps virtue is taught and that the teachers of it are the sophists. This causes Anytus to exclaim,

Good Lord, don't blaspheme, Socrates. May none of my own, not family, not friends, no citizen, no guest [think of Meno here], be seized with such madness as to go to these men and be ruined. For they clearly ruin and corrupt anyone who associates with them. (91c)

For several lines Meno is silent and when he begins to speak again he more openly admits his perplexity: “Socrates, I can't say. Actually, I'm just like everybody else; sometimes I think so, sometimes not” (95c, also see 97a). Socrates has again turned Meno from certainty and a desire for straight answers toward the light of perplexity. Mirroring the struggles of students in Howard's (1998) second “renorm” stage, Meno resists Socrates' efforts to transform him from a passive to an active learner (p. 25-6). Students will resist, but teachers must persist.

#### *What Happens When Service-Learning Fails?*

As great of a teacher as Socrates is, he fails to transform Meno into an active learner. Meno reverts in the end to simply agreeing with Socrates, saying things like, “True,” “Yes,” “Of course,” “That is so,” and so on (e.g., 97b-100b). He becomes passively compliant. He does not engage, refute, or challenge, but urges Socrates toward a straightforward answer. “His settled opinions prove to be unshakable,” in Daniel Devereux's (1978) estimation, “even under the pres-

sure of Socratic refutation” (p. 123). Socrates fails on two fronts. First, he argues from the beginning of the dialogue that Meno must first understand the nature of virtue and education before he can know if virtue is taught, but as the dialogue continues, Socrates gives into Meno's pressure to just answer whether or not virtue can be taught without first defining virtue. Second, by the last pages, Socrates gives up on trying to perplex Meno—he switches from a Socratic dialectical method to a method of knowledge transmission, more like that of the sophists.

Socrates ends the dialogue abruptly with a kind of *deus ex machina*. He answers Meno's original question about whether virtue is taught with the almost flippant answer that virtue comes from the gods: “virtue is neither present by nature nor taught: it comes to be present, in those to whom it comes, by divine apportionment, without intelligence” (99e). For the second time in the dialogue, Meno is satisfied with one of Socrates' answers, “I think you put it most excellently, Socrates” (100b).

Meno originally comes to Socrates wanting to learn an answer to his question, and after submitting to Socrates' multiple attempts to change his learning schema, Meno finally gets his answer and Socrates walks away. Socrates, though, does not see his answer as final or satisfactory. Socrates ends the dialogue by referring again to his original critique of Meno's question: “we shall only know that with clear certainty when, before inquiring how virtue comes to be present in men, we first undertake to inquire what virtue is” (100b). Without knowledge of what virtue is, Socrates claims he cannot give a certain answer. But he answers Meno's question—without having defined virtue—by saying that it comes from the gods. This time though Socrates walks away before Meno is given a chance to reply. It seems that perhaps Socrates wants to leave him with a seed of doubt, but it may well be the case that Meno struts merrily away with a new certainty about virtue.

The pedagogical problem that arises at the conclusion of the *Meno* is, “why does Socrates give up on Meno?” And this is a relevant question for the service-learning classroom. In my service-learning courses, I typically have one or two students for whom the traditional educational schema is too difficult to escape. And it is easy as a teacher to give into their demands and give them the straightforward answer they desire. But why does Socrates—the most revered teacher of all time—give in? Perhaps he falls back on his old schemas and bends under the weight of Meno's expectations. Or perhaps he recognizes that Meno cannot handle the Socratic method so he helps him walk away with something. If Socrates had told Meno that virtue was teachable, Devereux (1978) suggests that “Meno would probably come away with

the false opinion that it is teachable in the sophistical sense” (p. 123). If Socrates had told Meno that virtue came by nature, Meno might have tried to separate young children based on their perceived virtues. And if Socrates had told Meno that virtue was taught by practice, he might have assumed it did not require knowledge. None of the straightforward answers Meno originally proposes lead to good outcomes. But Socrates’ answer that virtue is given by the gods sidesteps such issues. It allows Meno to come away “with a true opinion, given his conception of teaching” as knowledge transmission, but it resists confirming any of Meno’s negative stereotypes (Devereaux, p. 123). Though Socrates cannot evoke true knowledge in Meno, he does at least avoid confirming Meno’s prejudices.

The challenge in the service-learning classroom is to recognize those for whom service-learning is not working and help them walk away without having their prejudices reinforced. For some students who have never worked with populations of people different from themselves, service-learning introduces a host of dangers (Blosser, 2012; Camacho, 2004; Eby, 1998; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). For instance, I have had a student who seemed to have her paternalistic attitudes about the poor reinforced by working in a school in a poor neighborhood. Despite numerous reflections, hours of service, and a good relationship with a teacher, the student had her beliefs in the laziness of poor people confirmed by the lack of community involvement in the school, the perceived laziness of the parents (many of whom were working two or three jobs, which precluded them from attending PTA meetings), and the dirtiness of the school. Though the service-learning experience itself typically ruptures such stereotypes through intentional community partnerships and guided reflections, this is not always the case. Some students resist. And Socrates shows that teachers must be ready to intervene.

If the experiential learning aspect of the course does not perplex a student and rupture her racist, sexist, or classist stereotypes, then a more didactic method may be required. I have turned to lectures and given multiple choice exams to ensure that students do not walk away more emboldened in their negative stereotypes. Such efforts may not empower students with true Socratic knowledge (or always be in line with the best practices in service-learning), but they may at least help students walk away knowing a different perspective. Plato shows teachers that active pedagogies, like service-learning, may not positively transform every student, but they should first do no harm. He challenges teachers to come up with creative didactic opinions that will at least prevent damaging stereotypes from being reinforced in the students who fail to “get it.”

### *Entering (and Exiting) the Cave*

After reading the *Meno*, I challenge my students to read Plato’s allegory of the cave in *The Republic* (2005).<sup>7</sup> Plato uses the cave as an allegory to describe education and the human condition. Basically, Socrates describes to Plato’s brother Glaucon a cave in which people are chained so that they can only look at the back wall of the cave. On that wall they see shadows of figures, which are cast on the wall by a fire and some actual figures that are behind them. To see the light, a shackled person must be unchained and turned to see the fire. Then the person must be dragged out of the cave and into the light of day. This is the process of education—the process of turning and violently dragging often-unwilling people into the light. Plato describes people as resistant to education and incapable of seeing the light on their own.

In class I ask the students to describe Meno’s place in the cave. When I use the exercise in my service-learning classes, some students begin quite certain of the answer. Though students never place Meno outside of the cave, there is usually little agreement about where exactly he is in it. Some say he is looking at shadows, others the fire, and others feel Socrates is dragging him out of the cave, but soon the students manage to drag each other into perplexity. Sure Meno does not seem to “get it” at the end of the dialogue (or the beginning, or even in the middle), which would suggest that he is staring at shadows. But he also gets perplexed, which is something one would not expect from the shadow gazers. In addition, if Socrates is his teacher and Socrates has seen the sun, then Meno is being guided by more than just an expert in shadows. I like the exercise because it allows students to take ownership of the dialogue and their education. It enacts perplexity, places students in dialogue with each other, and resists the transmission of easy answers.

After I guide a lengthy conversation, my students come to wager that Meno’s place in the cave may be described as follows: Meno begins the dialogue staring at shadows because that is all he has ever known. In fact, he is a student of Gorgias—one of the most famous deciphers of shadows—so he feels confident in a world of shadows, a world of transmitted knowledge. Socrates descends from the sun into the cave to practice the “art” of “turning around” on Meno (518d). This explains why Meno mocks Socrates so much because those who have descended back into the cave often appear rather comical to those in the cave (517d). The first time Socrates turns Meno to look at the fire, Meno’s eyes become confused (518a), he becomes “incapable of perceiving those things of which he formerly used to see only the shadows” (515c), and he is puzzled (515d). This

moment of turning occurs when Meno first admits he is perplexed during the geometry demonstration with the slave boy (84b). But just as the person in the cave after seeing the fire prefers to “shirk and turn away to the things which he could see distinctly”—the shadows on the wall—so too Meno returns quickly after the geometrical demonstration to his original desire for a straightforward answer.

Socrates turns Meno’s head several times in the course of the dialogue to perplex him with the light of the fire, but each time Meno turns back, preferring the shadows. He does not seem ready for the journey. But in all fairness to Meno, Socrates notes in the allegory of the cave that the shadow gazers, even after being turned toward the fire, have to be dragged “violently up the rough and steep ascent from the cave” by someone who refuses to let them go. . . . Socrates, however, lets Meno go (515e-516a). Perhaps he was not capable of education. Perhaps he was not worth the effort. Or perhaps Socrates was simply too tired. But as Meno nestles back into his shackles to stare at the shadows once more, Socrates comforts him with the knowledge that virtue is “a gift from the gods” (Plato, 1984, 100b). It is not the real answer, but merely a shadow of an answer—the kind of answer that shadow dwellers prefer (Plato, 2005, 515b).

I end the pedagogical exercise by asking the students to describe their own place in the cave. Where are they in the cave? Who is their Meno (e.g., a friend, parent, teacher, or service-learning partner)? Who is their Socrates? And, of course, who am I as their teacher? Some students inevitably answer that they are outside the cave—that they have seen the light, which they justify by saying they are in college. Often the service-learning partners are placed inside the cave. They are the ones the students need to save. But some students in the class will resist such paternalism. They will draw out their similarities to Meno, recognizing that they too seek definitive answers because they have been trained by their assessment-driven education. The students once again will pull themselves into perplexity, rupturing their assumptions about their superiority to the community partners, and owning their need to be turned to the light.

At some point in the conversation, a student will realize that I am guiding the conversation about Meno in the cave in the same way Socrates guided the slave boy. I will ask if that means what they have “discovered” is false. Every student, every time, admits that they think they have learned something—regardless of my leading questions.<sup>8</sup> Despite needing the active engagement of students, Plato suggests that finding wisdom through service-learning still requires a lot of the teacher’s guidance, just of a different kind. It is not a lecturing guidance, intended to teach certain facts or truths. It is a process guidance, intended to evoke a

deeper understanding of one’s self and others. In my experience the service-learning classroom cannot be wholly democratic or the resistant students can sabotage a class as they go through the difficult renorming stage. As Plato feared, the mob can win. The service-learning experience must be well guided (Jacoby & Mutascio, 2010; Mintz & Hesser, 1996).

Through the comparison of Meno and the cave, students come to see how their education has trained them to memorize and regurgitate shadows. Plato shows that true education—true wisdom—lies beyond what can be tested. Shadows can be proven true or false, tracked in standardized tests, and analyzed in pre/post-tests, but wisdom is an active practice of seeking knowledge through perplexity. Plato helps students to admit what they do not know and to realize the value of engaging and learning with others.

### *A Place for Plato in Service-Learning*

I hope I have demonstrated the dramatic value Plato can provide the service-learning classroom, and I believe this pedagogical value illuminates his philosophical value. The difficulty, however, in using Plato to support service-learning is that he is often seen as the enemy. Harkavy and Benson (1998) put it most forcibly, “Academic service learning can be conceptualized as an attempt to release the vice-like grip that the dead hand of Plato has had, and continues to have, on American schooling and education” (p. 12). The service-learning field seems pre-disposed to loath Plato because he speaks in *The Republic* of removing children from their parents, of dividing people into classes, of an aristocratic polis, of fixed eternal truths, and he rejects the fundamental value service-learning places on experience (Fairfield, 2009, p. 60). Plato is blamed for educating people into their roles in society, being anti-democratic, and advocating the separation of practical and intellectual knowledge (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Noddings, 1998).

The service-learning field is invested in developing democratic citizens, as seen in recent publications like *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012) and *“To Serve a Larger Purpose”: Engagement for Democracy and the Transformation of Higher Education* (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). So how can the aristocratic Plato possibly contribute to good democratic education? If we want a democratic society—the argument goes—we need more democratic forms of education. We need a philosophy of education like John Dewey’s that privileges the experience of the individual. Dewey learned from Plato that the kind of education system one develops contributes to the kind of society one has. But Dewey envisions a

democratic society, and thus advocates a democratic philosophy of education (Harkavy, Benson, & Puckett, 2007). The irony is that it was not Dewey the activist, but Plato the idealist, who created the on-the-ground model of education: “the remarkably influential Academy, whose elitist, idealist philosophy of education continues to dominate Western schooling systems to this day” (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2010, p. 52). Plato’s Academy and polis are not the democratic ideal most service-learning practitioners envision, and therefore, his philosophy is all too often overlooked. As Harkavy & Benson (1998) put it, “Overthrowing Plato and instituting Dewey’ should constitute the categorical imperative—the revolutionary slogan—of the service learning movement in the twenty-first century” (p. 19). These are surely legitimate concerns of which to be wary when using Plato.

The widespread resistance to Plato in service-learning is further reflected on service-learning syllabi. While it only takes a few minutes of searching on the Campus Compact syllabi database to find syllabi that include quotes from Dewey or have students read Dewey, it takes much longer to find any references to Plato. One can find passing references to Plato in a Molloy College Philosophy of Education course and an Honors course on Civic Engagement at Sacramento State.<sup>9</sup> One of the most avid uses of Plato for service-learning must be the PULSE program at Boston College where he is a regular component in every class.<sup>10</sup> And in the last few years, Plato has become a more regular fixture at HPU, especially in our Social Ethics courses. What the Boston College and HPU courses have in common is an emphasis on Plato as a provocateur of thinking, more than a theoretician. Plato becomes useful in service-learning when we read the dialogues as dramas, not theories about how things should be. What Plato teaches is that the path to wisdom involves the practice of active and self-reflective learning.

In my view service-learning scholars tend to read Plato as an idealist metaphysician. They read *The Republic* as though Plato meant it as a blueprint for how to build a city or as a ready-made curriculum for training children. Though such a reading reflects Plato’s legacy and has its place, I tend to read Plato as a practitioner of the art of education. I see the dialogues as more pedagogical tools than ideological treatises. Plato uses Socrates not to teach aristocratic ideas but “philosophy as a way of life,” in the words of Hadot (1995). Hadot suggests that “Socrates had no system to teach. Throughout, his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a new way of life, active reflection, and living consciousness” (p. 157). Hadot rightly urges scholars to focus on Plato’s works as pedagogical tools. I am less concerned, for instance, with developing a conceptually clear expla-

nation of Plato’s theory of recollection than I am with exploring how such an idea might have been used to further Meno’s education and that of Plato’s readers.

I reject the notion that Plato uses Socrates to transmit theoretical truths. Rather, in the words of Hadot (2002), Plato’s Socrates’ “philosophical method consists not in transmitting knowledge (which would mean *responding* to his disciples’ questions) but in *questioning* his disciples, for he himself has nothing to say to them or teach them, so far as the theoretical content of knowledge is concerned” (p. 27). Therefore, this paper does not engage theoretical debates about the *Meno*, like those concerning Meno’s paradox, the theory of recollection, or Plato’s conception of the virtues. Rather it is intended to demonstrate how a different reading of Plato enlivens the service-learning classroom and deepens the philosophical roots of the field.

I believe this reading of Plato makes him a powerful philosophical advocate for service-learning. By introducing Plato to students through the *Meno*, I initially sidestep the theoretical problems that arise in the *Republic*, like issues of class, gender, and social structure. And I show them a different way to approach Plato. Then when we read the *Republic*—or at least sections of it—we can read it as a drama too. I can use it to press students to recognize their own biases and recognize how political and social structures can impede justice. The dialogues prod students to answer questions about justice, good citizenship, and what constitutes a real education. Especially because students are often not satisfied with the answers Plato’s characters provide, the drama of the dialogues—the process of education into which Plato invites his students—forces students and teachers to reject traditional educational approaches. His dialogues provide a strong philosophical justification for an active and introspective approach to education that shuns definitive answers and ushers students into perplexity over meta-theoretical concerns.

Plato justifies a broader view of the value of service-learning. The great philosophical voices of service-learning demanded a need for experiential education from the margins (think of how counter-cultural both Dewey and Freire were in their days).<sup>11</sup> But as service-learning has become more institutionalized, it practices much more of the assumed mainstream philosophy of assessment-driven education, rooted in a perverted version of Dewey’s pragmatic empiricism.<sup>12</sup> Though I recognize the value of assessments both for program development and institutionalization, Plato urges educators to value the learning that cannot be assessed (what most teachers value most deeply anyway). One can certainly assess the shadows cast on the cave walls by the real artifacts of learning, but one should not confuse such shadows

for the light of wisdom the pedagogy imparts. As a field, perhaps service-learning can learn the lesson Meno did not: We cannot know if virtue is taught unless we first know what constitutes virtue. Similarly, we cannot know the learning outcomes for which service-learning should strive until we first know what constitutes education and what constitutes service. But we will not learn their true natures through assessment—we need the type of meta-reflection that someone like Plato provokes.

The philosophical debate is as old as Aristotle's disagreements with Plato. And I have no intention of solving it here. I only urge the service-learning field as it matures to continue to broaden its philosophical resources. Dewey is a great philosophical advocate and has given the field much, but his ethic is thin and his empiricism is ultimately self-refuting.<sup>13</sup> Service-learning should embrace the breadth of philosophical arguments that support its practice, like Dewey, Freire, Plato, anti-foundationalism, Continental philosophy, and religious texts, recognizing that different philosophical angles result in different kinds of research and different forms of engagement.<sup>14</sup> By embracing a range of philosophical justifications and the kinds of research they inspire, the field best embodies the fullness of its democratic impulses. And it can then challenge the educational assumptions of the wider academy in the philosophical languages that most resonate with the diversity of fields that can benefit from service-learning pedagogies.

### Conclusion

If practitioners of service-learning can look past their frustrations with Plato, I believe they will find a great philosophical advocate and pedagogical resource. I intend this article to provoke and perplex—to embody a different approach to service-learning. And I intend it to suggest a helpful pedagogical exercise. By teaching the *Meno* and the cave at the beginning of my service-learning courses, I move the class quickly from the traditional classroom and into Howard's renorming stage where students must become active learners. Plato shakes students from their traditional classroom expectations. He teaches them to expect me to come to class with more questions than answers. He teaches them to expect to be compelled to speak, to be perplexed, to inquire, and to take ownership of their own education. He models for them the practice and drama, not the theory, of education that drives the class. And he offers a powerful character, in the way of Meno, and allegory, in the way of the cave, that they can grasp and use in their papers and reflections. I believe Plato helps them overhear Socrates' message to Meno much more effectively than Plato's Socrates is able to teach Meno—and perhaps that is Plato's pedagogical

brilliance. He left the character of Meno in the shadows so that others could be turned to see the light.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Howard states that "Academic service learning is incongruent with traditional pedagogy in a number of ways:" (1) conflict of goals; (2) conflict about valuable learning; (3) conflict about control; (4) conflict about active learning; (5) conflict about contributions from students; and (6) conflict about objectivity" (Howard, 1998, pp. 23-24). The real value of Howard's work is that he walks service-learning practitioners through the two difficult middle stages a class must pass through to become a genuine service-learning class (pp. 25-26).

<sup>2</sup> Read more about the Service Learning Program at High Point University and view syllabi by visiting <http://www.highpoint.edu/servicelearning>.

<sup>3</sup> The *Meno* begins when the "student" Meno asks the "teacher" Socrates whether virtue is taught. The characters go back and forth in the dialogue examining the meaning of virtue, whether anything is taught at all or just recollected, and they use additional characters, like a slave boy and Anytus, to help prove their points. For a summary of the *Meno* visit: <http://www.classicreader.com/book/1790/1>.

<sup>4</sup> While the concept of virtue is of great importance to many in the service-learning world, I do not address Plato's views on virtue in this article because I focus here on how he helps students and teachers become self-conscious of the shift in service-learning toward a more progressive view of education. Certainly such a shift in thinking requires and reinforces virtue, but a fuller treatment of Plato's virtues and their value to service-learning is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>5</sup> The sophists were traveling teachers in the fifth century BCE who accepted payment to educate young men. Admittedly, Plato has a rather thin view of the sophists. The purpose of this article, however, is not to evaluate the historical accuracy of Plato's work, but see how Plato's advocacy of dialectical learning can raise people's self-consciousness of the need today to shift from traditional to synergistic learning.

<sup>6</sup> For more on recollection as a theory, see Ebert, 1973; Gulley, 1954; Irwin, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> The allegory of the cave is found in Book VII of *The Republic* (Plato, 2005, pp. 514a-520a). This section of the article provides only a poor description of a vibrant and rich analogy, but it is meant to give the reader a sense of the story and how students might be able to relate to it.

<sup>8</sup> Those familiar with the philosophy of education will recognize Rousseau's reliance on Plato in this regard. See Rousseau, 1979, p. 234.

<sup>9</sup> To see the syllabi go to: <http://www.compact.org/syllabi/education/philosophy-of-education/4115/> and <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/a/arnaudv/ARNAUD%20HONR%20103%20F09.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> The PULSE Program at Boston College educates students about social justice issues, using pivotal texts in phi-

losophy and theology. Visit the program website at: <http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/cas/pulse.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Though both Dewey and Freire have become fairly common in higher education today, service-learning educators should strive to maintain the radical nature of their philosophies.

<sup>12</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to demonstrate the service-learning field's indebtedness to Dewey or to show how Dewey is connected with the current assessment culture. I have made this argument more fully elsewhere, see Blosser, 2012. For more on how Dewey has shaped the service-learning field, see Giles & Eyler, 1994; Saltmarsh, 1996; Hatcher, 1997; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Benson, Harkavy & Puckett, 2007. Others, too, recognize the danger of service-learning being tamed and institutionalized, see Butin, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey is deeply concerned with ethical issues, like inequality, charity, and justice, and he has helped the service-learning field attend to such issues. Dewey's criterion for ethics and for education is that people "grow" in experience. Good education leads to more education—it leads to growth. The problem is though that Dewey cannot show empirically why growth is good. I argue that Dewey's ethics and empiricism are ultimately self-refuting: "Dewey's pragmatic empiricism argues that all assertions—including the moral criterion of growth—are empirical hypotheses waiting to be tested. But the criterion of growth seems to be implied in the empirical process itself...How can one test the validity of the criterion of growth using a test that judges based on growth?" (Blosser, 2012, p. 205).

<sup>14</sup> In addition to Dewey or Freire, service-learning scholars are now drawing on additional philosophical supports. For instance, see the diversity of philosophical supports used by Butin, 2003; Butin 2010; Fairfield, 2009; Blosser, 2012; Kliewer, 2013; and the numerous texts that suggest religious sources, like Morton & Saltmarsh, 1997; Heffner & Beversluis, 2003; Cipolle, 2010. Though these references represent just a slice of the literature, this list should continue to grow as the field matures, broadens, and deepens.

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