

Chapter 2:

DEFINING VIRTUE: PLATO'S *EUTHYPHRO* AND *MENO*

Historical Context

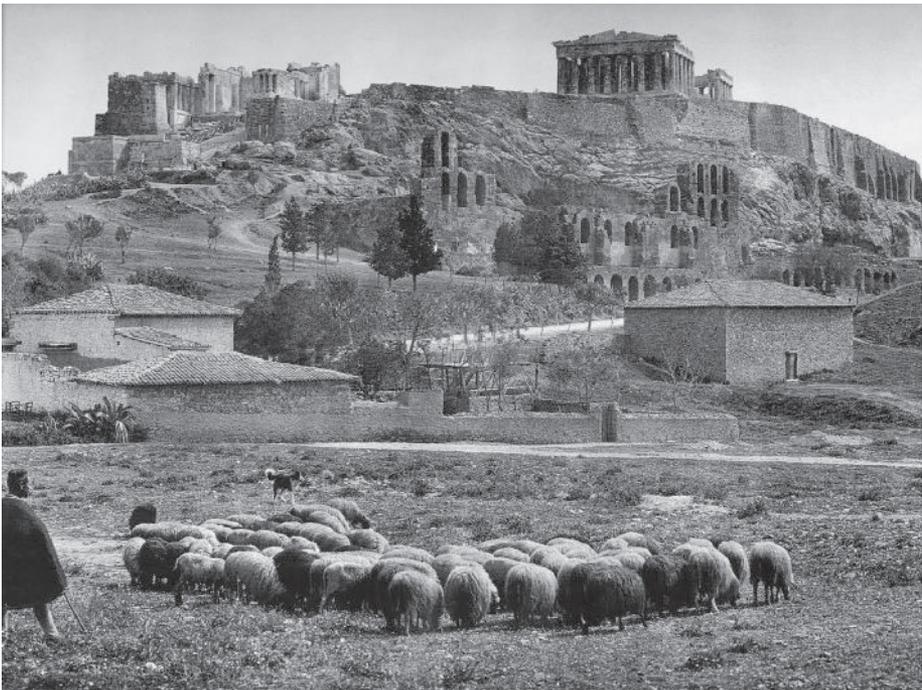
Introductory Big Question: The Quest for Definitions

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the next few chapters, we'll be lingering around the time period in which Socrates and Plato lived. By the time Socrates was born in 469 BCE, Athens was already on the rise as a major political and cultural force in the region. Athens enjoyed its "**Golden Age**" under **Pericles** between 450 and 430 BCE, during which time the great **Acropolis**—a temple to the goddess Athena—was reconstructed. (You can still visit the ruins of the Acropolis today, and they are still pretty impressive.) Around the age of twenty, Socrates entered the Athenian military and participated in the **Peloponnesian War** (431–404 BCE) against Sparta for about ten years. Plato, born in 428, grew up during this period, likely coming under the influence of his mentor and hero Socrates in his teenage years. The city of Athens

was devastated by the Peloponnesian War, but made some recovery afterward and continued to be something of a cultural and philosophical centre well into the **Hellenistic period**, which begins with the death of **Alexander the Great** in 323 BCE and ends with the rise of **the Roman Empire** in 31 BCE. After Socrates's death in 399 BCE, Plato fled from Athens and stayed in Megara for some time. He later returned and founded his famous school, **the Academy**, around 386 BCE. Part of what Plato hoped to accomplish through this school was to train politicians in philosophy. As we will see when we come to discuss Plato's *Republic*, Plato was putting into practice his (entirely reasonable!) belief that the only way to have a truly just society would be to have philosophers for rulers. Plato's Academy went through several stages during its 900+ years of history, until it was finally closed under the Christian Roman emperor **Justinian** in 529 CE.



The ruins of the Acropolis in the early twentieth century. Photograph by Frederic Boissonnas

INTRODUCTORY BIG QUESTION: THE QUEST FOR DEFINITIONS

In Plato's early, or Socratic, dialogues, we find Socrates again and again questioning others about the meanings of words, in order to stimulate them to become better educated about key ethical concepts: "What is justice?" "What is beauty?" "What is friendship?" This explains Aristotle's description of Socrates's interest in definitions:

And when Socrates, disregarding the physical universe and confining his study to moral questions, sought in this sphere for the universal and was the first to concentrate upon definition, Plato followed him and assumed that the problem of definition is concerned not with any sensible thing but with entities of another kind; for the reason that there can be no general definition of sensible things which are always changing. These entities he called "Ideas" ... (*Metaphysics*, 987b)

The question of how to define terms has been with philosophers ever since. In conversation about some topic (let *X* represent the topic), it is characteristic of a philosophically-minded person to say things like, "That depends on what you mean by *X*." Philosophers like to have their terms spelled out as clearly and carefully as possible. In Socrates's view, getting an accurate understanding of key ethical ideas was crucial for the purpose of living the good life; if a person was confused or mistaken about virtue and goodness and the other components of the good life, how would they be able to live out such a life? Since living the good life is the most important goal a person can have, the quest for clarity about what this good life consists in takes on a particular urgency for Socrates.

The search for definitions that Plato inherited from his teacher, Socrates, occupied much of Plato's attention, and resulted in his famous Theory of the Forms. (We'll have a lot to say about the Forms in upcoming chapters.) In the quotation from Aristotle I just mentioned, Aristotle links Socrates's interest in definitions to Plato's "Ideas," which is another way of saying "Forms." Several questions naturally arise in this context: What counts as a good definition? Is there a right method for acquiring definitions of terms? Furthermore, is knowing the definition of something the same as knowing the thing itself? What does it mean to know what something *is*, anyway, and how can we be sure that we do know it? These are the sorts of questions that fall under the branch of Philosophy called **Epistemology**, which means the study of knowledge.

Before going further, stop and think about a few questions. *Assuming that you know at least a few things (for example, "beavers are mammals," "the sum of 2 and 2 is 4," "the moon is not a cheeseburger"), how did you come to know these things? And how do you know that you know them?* (And how do you know that you know that you know ... alright, you get the idea.) In the two dialogues of Plato we'll be looking at in this chapter, the *Euthyphro* and the *Meno*, epistemological questions like these will take centre stage.

1. THE *EUTHYPHRO*: SOCRATIC METHOD IN ACTION

In Plato's *Apology*, we saw Socrates in the middle of his trial, giving his defense speech. The *Euthyphro* takes place outside the court, *before* the trial, where Socrates happens to run into the man after whom the dialogue is named. Euthyphro

was a priest who was also on his way to the law court, not to face charges, like Socrates, but to *lay* charges against someone else. The someone in question was Euthyphro's father, whom Euthyphro was accusing of murder. Euthyphro explains to Socrates what had happened: One of Euthyphro's father's slaves had killed another of his slaves. Hearing this, Euthyphro's father had tied up the murderer and thrown him into a ditch while he went to find out from the authorities what he should do. Meanwhile, the murderer died of exposure and thirst. After the initial stage-setting, the rest of the dialogue consists of Socrates engaging Euthyphro in the question-and-answer discussion I described in the last chapter as the Socratic Method of refutation (*elenchus* in the Greek). Recall that Plato's early dialogues give us the best representation of the actual historical person of Socrates. Studying this dialogue gives us some insight into what it would have been like to see Socrates at work, acting out his mission from Apollo, in the context of the Athenian society of the day. As you observe Socrates at work testing and refuting the beliefs of his fellow Athenians, try to see how effective his elenctic method is—does it help his interlocutors to acquire knowledge or at least to come closer to being wise?

a) Defining Holiness

As noted earlier, Socrates often appears in Plato's dialogues looking for definitions of terms or concepts, that is, for answers to questions of the form, "What is X?" The concept under examination in the *Euthyphro*, is the concept of "piety" or "holiness" (*eusebia* in Greek). For Socrates, awaiting a trial where he is being accused of impiety or unholiness, having an understanding of the concept of holiness had a good deal of practical value. If he knew clearly what holiness was, then he would have a much better chance defending himself against the charge that he was unholy. Socrates expresses his excitement at having chanced to meet Euthyphro, since Euthyphro the priest claimed to know a good deal about the holy and the unholy. Indeed, Socrates says, Euthyphro must have very precise knowledge of what holiness is—otherwise he would never be confident enough to take his own father to court. So this was a perfect chance for Socrates to learn!

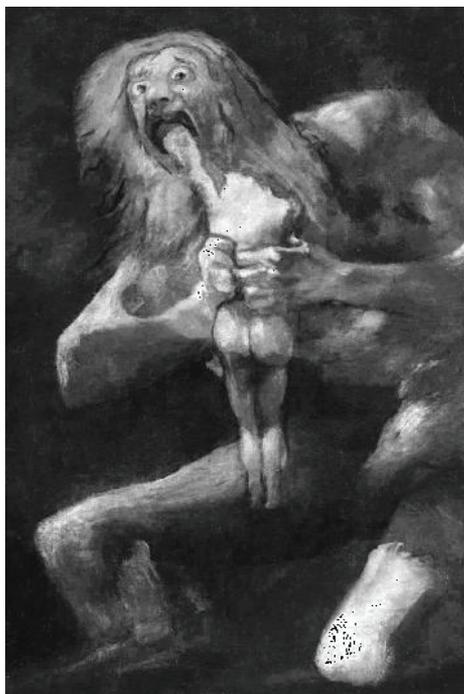
The fact that Euthyphro was prosecuting his own father is worth thinking about a bit further. For one thing, in many cultures, including that of ancient Greece, the notion of piety or holiness had to do not only with a person's respect for and duty to the gods, but also to their parents. Like the gods, a person's parents provided and protected and educated them, and in return deserved honour and respect (think of the fifth of Moses's Ten Commandments: "Honour your father and your mother"). At face value, Euthyphro's act of taking his father to court looked like a case of impiety or unholiness. For this reason, Euthyphro's claim that what he was doing was in fact pious would sound strange to Greek ears at least, if not to our own. Euthyphro, however, could justify his behaviour by appealing to the stories of

the gods that came down to the Greeks from Homer and Hesiod. If you remember our earlier discussion of Hesiod's *Theogony*, Hesiod featured the story of Kronos, who, motivated by envy, castrated his father Ouranos. As Euthyphro points out, Zeus similarly overthrew his father Kronos after Kronos "unjustly swallowed his sons" (*Euthyphro*, 6a). In response, Socrates makes the telling, ironic comment: "Maybe this, Euthyphro, is why I am being prosecuted for this crime, that whenever someone says such things about the gods, for some reason I find them hard to accept?" (ibid.). Here we see Socrates expressing a sentiment that links him to the Presocratic thinkers, who also felt the need to revise the conceptions of the divine they had inherited from the poets. Surely a genuinely divine being would not behave the way Kronos and Zeus are said to have behaved in the mythological accounts of the poets?

Indeed, as we see from Euthyphro's definitions of piety, and Socrates's responses to them, the internal coherence of inherited ideas of the gods is a central focus of the *Euthyphro* as a dialogue. Socrates, eager to learn the nature of the holy, poses his definition question at 5d: "So tell me, what do you say the pious is, and what is the impious?" The first response that occurs to Euthyphro involves pointing out examples of holy acts, and the one that seems most obvious to him is his own holy action. So he says [definition #1], "*the pious is what I am doing now, prosecuting someone who is guilty of wrongdoing—either of murder or temple robbery or anything else of that sort, whether it happens to be one's*

father or mother or whoever else—and the impious is failing to prosecute" (5d–e). Socrates is unhappy with Euthyphro's first attempt, because a definition should be sufficiently general to cover all cases. Pointing to a few instances of holy acts fails to account for what the holy is in general. Socrates needs a general formula in order to be able to identify instances of holiness and unholiness wherever they might arise. We can call this requirement for a good definition **the generality requirement**.

Euthyphro tries again [definition #2]: "*what is beloved by the gods is pious, and what is not beloved by them is impious*" (6e–7a). Euthyphro's second attempt



Kronos Devouring His Offspring (Saturno devorando a su hijo), by Francisco de Goya (1819–23)

successfully meets Socrates's generality requirement. According to this definition, any holy act or thing will possess the characteristic of being loved by the gods. But this time Socrates finds a different problem. The proposed definition fails what we can call **the coherence requirement**. Socrates gets Euthyphro to admit that the gods are in conflict with one another, as is clear from the accounts of them in Homer and Hesiod, which Euthyphro accepts. But the things that are most likely to cause conflict between two intelligent moral beings are disagreements over what is right or wrong, or what is good and bad. Given that a person will tend to love what he or she thinks is good and hate what he or she thinks is bad, we have to say that the gods will disagree with each other concerning what they love, or what is dear to them. But given that Euthyphro's second definition identifies the holy with what the gods love and the unholy with what the gods hate, we end up having to say that the gods disagree with each other concerning what is holy and what is unholy. Obviously, a good definition should not make it possible for something to be holy and not-holy at the same time, but that is exactly what Euthyphro's second definition does. Euthyphro's second definition turns out to be incoherent (it fails the coherence requirement), in that it leads to contradictions.

b) Looking for the Essence

Euthyphro then gives Socrates a third definition of "the pious" or "the holy." His third attempt is a modified version of the second, designed to remove the incoherence Socrates had pointed out. Instead of claiming that the holy is what is dear to *some* gods, Euthyphro now claims that [definition #3] "*the pious is what all the gods love*" (9e, my emphasis), so that whenever all the gods agree in loving something, that something is holy, and whenever all the gods agree in hating something, that something is unholy. Since agreement among the gods is now built into the definition, Socrates can't pull it apart by citing the fact that the gods sometimes disagree. In the case where gods disagree about whether something is holy or not, presumably, that thing would be neither holy nor unholy.

This time, Socrates takes a different approach to assessing the quality of Euthyphro's definition. He begins by asking the following question: "Is the pious loved by the gods because it's pious, or is it pious because it is loved?" (10a). Socrates tries to explain the import of his distinction by listing examples of active and passive: We can distinguish something carrying from something being carried, and something leading from something being led, etc. In every such case, the object that is receiving the action (the thing carried or led) possesses the relevant quality (being carried or led) because of the activity of another thing (the thing carrying or leading). Applying this to the cases of what is loved and what is holy, we see that these two concepts are different, so that they cannot be identical to each other, as Euthyphro's third definition requires. We can see this from the following statements, applied to each case:

1. The god-loved is god-loved because it is god-loved, that is, *because* the gods love it. (*The G is G because it is G*)
2. The holy, on the other hand, is god-loved *because* it is holy. (*The H is G because it is H*)
3. The god-loved is not god-loved because it is holy. (*The G is not G because it is H*)
4. The holy is not god-loved because it is god-loved. (*The H is not G because it is G*)

Pairing statements (1) and (4), and statements (2) and (3), we can see that opposite things are true of the god-loved (that which is dear to the gods) and the holy. The reason why the gods love holy things is because those things are (already) holy. So, prior to and independently of the gods' affections, what makes something to be holy is rooted in the nature of the holy things themselves. But what makes something have the feature of being loved by the gods is rooted in the volitional states of the beings who love it—what makes something to be god-loved is just the fact that the gods love it. The god-loved and the holy are indeed both god-loved, but for different reasons. This shows, Socrates thinks, that the two concepts are non-identical. And this shows that Euthyphro's third definition of the holy has failed to tell us *what* the holy *is*. We can call the requirement for a good definition that has not been met here **the identity requirement**. Socrates believes that a good definition must provide a formula that captures, in a complete and exclusive way, the identity of the term being defined. In other words, he wants a formula that expresses the **essence** of the thing in question.

It is common in philosophy and in speaking of definitions to explain what the "essence" of a thing is in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. A **necessary condition** for X is a condition that must hold in order for X to be the case. For instance, air is a necessary condition for human life. Without air, the maintenance of human life is not possible. Air is not, however, a *sufficient* condition for human life, because more than air is needed to sustain human life. Food, water, and a certain temperature range are also needed. A **sufficient condition** for X is a condition that, if it holds, guarantees that X is the case. Being hit head-on by a fast-moving train is sufficient to bring about the death of most mammals. Given that a mammal has been hit head-on by a fast-moving train, you are guaranteed that the mammal in question is dead. But being hit by a train is not a *necessary* condition for mammalian death, since a mammal can die in many other ways, for instance, due to old age. In order to provide the sort of definition Socrates is looking for, we would have to provide a condition for X—in this case, for something's being holy—that is **both necessary and sufficient**. Clearly, this is a tall order. We find such definitions rarely. One common example is the definition of water as H₂O. Arguably, being H₂O is both necessary and sufficient for being water. If something is not H₂O, then it's not water. And if something is H₂O, then you've

got a guarantee that it's water. This is because the chemical formula H_2O uniquely picks out water—it captures the *identity* of water.

Clearly Socrates's standards for a good definition, represented by the three requirements I have described (the generality, coherence, and identity requirements), give us a high standard that would be difficult to meet. We might object, "Is it really true that unless we can define something in a way that meets all these conditions, we don't know what the thing is?" Can't we know, for example, what a cheeseburger is so long as we can reliably point one out at McDonald's, even if we can't list off the necessary and sufficient conditions of cheeseburgerness? Recall Socrates's claim, in the *Apology*, that he does not know anything. Of course, Socrates knew many things in a rough and ready sort of way, and Euthyphro also presumably knew enough to get by in everyday life. But the question Socrates is interested in is the question of complete, or comprehensive, knowledge, the sort of knowledge of things one would expect God to have. It seems clear that Euthyphro does not have such knowledge of holiness. Socrates thinks that without this knowledge, a person should be hesitant to make bold claims, like the claim that one should prosecute one's father for murder for unintentionally causing a criminal slave to die. This sort of perspective raises interesting questions for us, too. We are often quick to pass judgement on other people. We identify others as being morally bad or evil, judging them by our own standards of good and bad. But do we really know what the good and the bad *are*? Could we provide a definition of what is morally good or bad that is capable of meeting Socrates's three requirements? If we can't, does that tell us something about the limits of our knowledge, and the need for us to exercise caution? Or is it okay to ignore such questions and forge ahead with decisions and judgements about good and evil regardless of our ignorance?

c) *An Inconclusive Conclusion*

After pinpointing the failure of Euthyphro's third attempt to define holiness, Socrates urges Euthyphro to keep trying. Socrates even tries to help him get on a track more likely to succeed by suggesting that perhaps holiness is a part of the virtue of justice. Euthyphro picks up the trail for a while but ends up bumbling his way back to his third answer again—which they had already agreed did not work. Socrates refuses to be discouraged. He tells Euthyphro,

Then we must examine again from the beginning what the pious is, as I am determined not to give up until I understand it. Do not scorn me, but by applying your mind in every way, tell me the truth now more than ever. Because you know it if anybody does and, like Proteus, you cannot be released until you tell me. Because unless you knew clearly about the pious and impious there is no way you would ever have, on behalf of a hired laborer, tried to pursue your aging father for murder. Instead you would have been afraid before the gods,

and ashamed before men, to run the risk of conducting this matter improperly. But as it is, I am sure that you think you have clear knowledge of the pious and the impious. So tell me, great Euthyphro, and do not conceal what you think it is. (15c–e)

To Socrates's dismay, Euthyphro says he's in a hurry and will have to meet Socrates's request some other time. Trying to locate necessary and sufficient conditions for being holy proves to be too tall an order for Euthyphro. As frequently happens in the early dialogues, the *Euthyphro* ends without providing an answer to the dialogue's main question, "What is holiness?"

If we were to read this dialogue as purely negative, in the sense of merely negating or refuting various answers, it would be easy to understand this Socratic conversation as the same sort of thing the Sophists were up to. The Sophists, you might remember, would engage in disputations and would win arguments using debating tricks, tripping up their opponents and making them look bad. Is this the lesson we should draw about Socrates from the *Euthyphro*, that Socrates is just like the Sophists? I don't think so. The Socratic method does include refutation as a component. But for Plato's Socrates, refutation is only a means toward education. It is a necessary first step to become educated to realize that you don't know what you thought you knew. Euthyphro doesn't get there. But the reader—that means you—has the opportunity to learn something even if Euthyphro doesn't. For one thing, many people in Socrates's day would have felt that defining holiness or piety as "what the gods love" made good sense. Plato's dialogue appears to show us that this common conception of holiness has some problems. But if that's not what holiness is, then what is it? Plato has not given us the answer, but he has given us a clue. Holiness has something to do with justice in the relations between human beings and the divine. Is there a way of pursuing this suggestion that would allow us to make headway, instead of collapsing as Euthyphro did?

The *Meno* shows even more clearly that what Plato actually does and says in his dialogues is not the end of the story. Plato is using this form of writing to draw his reader into a conversation as an active participant. When you read a Platonic dialogue you are supposed to start asking yourself questions. If what I always thought holiness was isn't really what it is, then what is it? Once you start asking such questions, you've arguably taken the necessary first steps on the journey toward a philosophical education.

d) The Euthyphro Dilemma

There is one last thing I'd like to point out before we move on from our consideration of the *Euthyphro*. Socrates's question, "Is something loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" has been understood by thinkers after Plato to pose a dilemma. The Euthyphro Dilemma faces anyone who wants to suggest a basic connection between religion and morality.

This suggestion typically posits a connection between the will of God and the morally good, so that what is good (moral action for example) is identical to what God wills. Why is murder wrong? Because God says so. Again, check the Ten Commandments, number six. The view that God's will and morality are deeply related has different names: Divine Command Ethics and Divine Voluntarism being two of the most common. The Euthyphro dilemma appears to pose a significant challenge to any such position. It is called a dilemma because there seem to be only two options, but no matter which of the two options you take, you run into serious problems.

Substituting "moral goodness" for "piety" in the expression of the dilemma, we can put it like this: Either (a) what is morally good is good because God wills it, or (b) God wills what is morally good because it is good. But either option seems to be problematic. If we accept (a), and claim that goodness derives purely from the will of God, then morality seems to become arbitrary. If God had willed and commanded that people should torture kittens for fun, then it would be morally right for people to torture kittens for fun, because that would be God's will. But that just seems wrong! Let's say we accept the other horn of the dilemma, (b), instead. God wills what is good *because* it is good. The problem here is that now we are pulling apart morality and the will of God. What is good is good, we are saying, *in itself*, not because of the fact that God wills it. But that seems to mean that moral standards are independent of God, and this contradicts the original intention of the divine command ethicist, who claimed that morality and God's will were inextricably related.

Diagram 1

<i>If...</i>	<i>Moral goodness is essentially tied to God's will</i>	
<i>Then either ...</i>	<i>What is morally good is good because God wills it.</i>	<i>God wills what is morally good because it is (independently) good.</i>
<i>Which would mean ...</i>	<i>Religious morality is arbitrary.</i>	<i>Religious morality is superfluous.</i>

There have, of course, been a number of responses to the Euthyphro Dilemma through history by thinkers who wanted to maintain the link between God's will and morality. Some of them, wanting to preserve the absolute freedom of God, have accepted the first horn of the dilemma, (a), denying that there really is any problem involved in accepting (a). It just is the case, these trueblood voluntarists would say, that God's choice fully determines what is morally good, and that is the end of the

story. We're glad that God did not command us to torture kittens, but if He had, then it really would have been the right thing to do. Others have rejected (a) and embraced a modified version of (b). Even if morality is in a sense independent of God's will, these more subtle voluntarists argue, that does not entail that morality is independent of God. Instead, we can say that God finds the reasons for willing and commanding what he wills and commands within His own nature, which is, in fact, good. This way, morality does not depend on God's arbitrary choice, but on something else about God's nature—say, His intellect or His character.

The question of the relationship between religion and morality is just one of the issues that comes down to us all the way from classical Greece, and was formulated with particular clarity by Plato. This partially substantiates the twentieth-century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's assertion that "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."¹ As we look at the next few dialogues, we will find a few more reasons to think that Whitehead may be right about this.

2. THE *MENO*: SOCRATES, THE TEACHER OF VIRTUE

I trust that you've been finding your reading of Plato enjoyable so far. Since this is a book about "core readings," part of what you're supposed to be getting out of it is a chance to actually sit down and read some of the best philosophical literature the Western tradition has to offer. Of course, you could skip the primary sources and just read the chapters of this book instead, but that would defeat the purpose.

Our next dialogue, the *Meno*, shares elements with the early or Socratic dialogues of Plato. Socrates is the leading character and he guides Meno through systematic questioning and eventual refutation of Meno's various attempts to answer the question, "What is virtue?"—and they fail to reach a conclusion about it in the end. The bulk of the dialogue actually centres on another, related question posed by Meno in the opening line of the work: "Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?" (*Meno*, 70a). As we will see, this question does get (some sort of) an answer at the end of the work, but I'll be arguing that we can't simply accept this "answer" at face value.

In other ways, the *Meno* is unlike the early dialogues. The Socrates who appears in the *Meno* goes beyond simply questioning and answering others, and actually proposes some views of his own, which actually seem to do some work in moving the conversation forward. These views include Plato's famous Doctrine of Recollection, as well as the belief in reincarnation and in the existence of human souls prior to our present lives. This positive presentation of views that the historical Socrates

1 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 39.