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## Speak Up, Ignoramus! Perspectives on Ignorance in Plato's "Meno"

"I know that I know nothing" is a quote that is commonly attributed to Socrates, but scholars debate whether the Greek philosopher even said the phrase. The saying encourages people to be inquisitive yet paradoxically highlights how ignorant we are. In this essay, I argue that the characters in Plato's dialogue "Meno" represent the different facets of humanity when faced with the unknown, and how we respond to it. To support this argument, I will first examine how Anytus reacts with hostility when challenged, showcasing an unwillingness to correct himself. Then, I will explain how Socrates' open admission of ignorance creates a sense of reflection and self-criticism in the reader. Finally, I will discuss the transition between these extremes, highlighted by Meno and the slave boy Socrates interrogates, and how they represent the journey from ignorance to self-criticism.

Plato presents Anytus' wilful ignorance through indignation and open hostility, and this form of ignorance reflects a refusal to improve oneself. At the end of his conversation with Socrates, Anytus suddenly disrupts the light-hearted discussion with a threat: "...in all cities it is easier to do a man harm than good, and it is certainly so here, as I expect you know yourself." (*Meno*, 95a) Rather than refer to

Athens specifically, Anytus states that this threat is present in “all cities” as if to suggest that Socrates’ opinion is not welcome anywhere. The contrast between “harm” and “good” brings to attention the hypocrisy in Anytus’ words; he accuses Socrates of slandering Athenians yet implies that Athens is an unsafe place. Anytus, however, appears to be oblivious of this double standard, and this lack of awareness is emphasized through dramatic irony when he berates Socrates for lacking awareness. It is also noteworthy that this is the last line Anytus says in the entire dialogue, almost as if he has turned tail and fled from the conversation after being challenged. The overall image that is presented of Anytus is a very negative one, a cowardly opponent who runs away at the first sign of adversity and change.

Socrates, on the other hand, is very candid about his lack of knowledge on a topic, as evidenced by the quote: “I share the poverty of my fellow countrymen in this respect, and confess to my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all.” (*Meno*, 71b) Socrates uses heavy language to describe something as mundane as not knowing something; “shame” brings forth images of sin and crime as if ignorance is an unforgivable act in Socrates’ view and likening the lack of knowledge to “poverty” creates an impression of social taboo and inferiority to others. Carrying forward the theme of sin, Socrates describes his acknowledgment of ignorance as a confession, implying a great deal of effort was exerted by Socrates in making this profession, and he is suggesting that he has divested himself from the great evil of ignorance. An unusual comma divides the sentence into two, and I believe Plato wanted to delineate between individuals; everyone may be ignorant on some topic, but not everyone can readily admit that. Nevertheless, Socrates relates with the uninitiated, as he still refers to them as “my fellow countrymen”. In all, Socrates is not afraid to admit that he is uninformed, and he encourages others to do the same.

Beyond these opposing personalities, lies the characters of Meno and the slave boy, who represent the journey from confident blindness to self-improvement and acquiescence. After being utterly stupefied by Socrates' questioning, Meno expresses: "I feel you are exercising magic and witchcraft upon me and positively laying me under your spell until I am just a mass of helplessness." (*Meno*, 80a) Meno compares Socrates' reasoning to literal magic, demonstrating how incomprehensible it is to him, and how he feels powerless to combat it. Speaking of helplessness, Meno likens the experience to being "lain under Socrates' spell", conjuring forth the imagery of hypnosis and manipulation, which again suggests a lack of agency from Meno. The lack of punctuation in this sentence is also noteworthy, as it suggests that Meno is belting out his thoughts in rapid-fire, with little regard to cohesion. It paints Meno in a state of panic, desperately trying to reason with this feeling of helplessness. It is not all bad though, as Meno describes his state of being as a "mass of helplessness". It is left to the reader's imagination what exactly Meno is referring to, but the general impression is of a formless, shifting conglomeration of matter. While it may be gruesome to conceptualize, this amorphous blob also suggests a potential for change in Meno and a transition from a state of arrogant naivete to enlightened skepticism. The slave boy also undergoes a similar transformation, as highlighted by the quote: "It's no use, Socrates, I just don't know." (*Meno*, 84a) The use of repetition in the boy's words places him in a state of paralysis, unable to do anything other than proclaim his inability to solve Socrates' problem. Furthermore, the sentence is fragmented by multiple commas, showing a conflicted state of being, as if the boy is stuttering and stumbling over each of his words. Worse than that, the boy says he "just" does not know, implying that the boy is simply and innately incapable of grasping the truth. Once again, it is not all hopeless, as the boy refers to

Socrates directly, suggesting that he is seeking guidance in search of knowledge. To sum, Meno and the boy both experience a radical shift in their outlook on knowledge from being boldly ignorant to having the capacity for self-correction.

To summarize, I have demonstrated Anytus' flagrant disregard for his lack of knowledge and how it reflects poorly on his character. Following that, I have shown how Plato portrays Socrates as acutely aware of his intellectual shortcomings but seeking the truth regardless. Finally, I have explored how Meno and the slave boy embark on the voyage from the fog of ignorance toward an inquisitive mind. Viewing the characterization of the characters in Plato's dialogues from this perspective, I believe, allows us to better understand Socrates' philosophy of reasoning, that all wisdom begins with an admission of ignorance, and that knowledge is derived from nothing. It may also explain why Socrates sometimes arrives at contradictory conclusions throughout the dialogues, as his logic starts from a vacuum of knowledge.

[1059 Words]

#### Works Cited:

Plato, "Meno". *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton University Press, 2005.