

Orphic mysteries and Plato's *Meno*

"I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly."

Plato's dialogue, the *Meno*, seems to be a relatively straightforward investigation into virtue, and especially the question of how it is obtained – by teaching, by practice, or is it a “divine gift”? A discussion between Socrates and Meno, with some input from Anytus and a slave boy of Meno, on these questions seems to come to no decisive conclusion, and in this sense it is like several so-called Socratic dialogues. The *Theaetetus*, the *Lysis* and the *Euthyphro*, as examples, follow much the same path regarding knowledge, friendship and piety respectively.

Of course no Platonic dialogue is really straightforward – each carries insights caught, perhaps, only when the reader's mind carries on something which others may easily read passed. The *Meno* is no exception to this – Socrates, when challenging a position taken by Meno regarding the nature of learning, touches upon things said by “men and women who were wise, and knowing in divine things . . . priests and priestesses, such as made it their business to be able to give a rational account of those things in which they were employed.” These authorities were clearly Orphic, as we learn from the content of the verse which Socrates then quotes from the writings of Pindar. Although the dialogue moves on to less obscure matters, it is worth pausing in order to look deeper into the mysterious well from which Plato seems to have drawn inspiration.

The Orphic digression in context.

The *Meno* had reached an interesting point when Socrates made his Orphic digression: the dialogue starts abruptly with no scene setting by Meno (an aristocratic young man, educated to a suitable level, and well-connected) asking whether virtue can be taught, or, if not, how is it to be acquired? Socrates claims that he cannot answer that question, and, even beyond this, that he does not know what virtue is. How, he asks, can he know the *pathos* of virtue (that is to say what happens to virtue) when he does not know its *ousia* (its essence) – for every power to act upon something and every capacity for being acted upon arises from the essence of a thing. So a proper philosophical investigation of anything rests on grasping what the essence of a thing is, rather than simply seeing how it behaves in relation to other things. But, says Meno, how can we learn about a thing – either we already know what it is or we don't: but if we don't know what a thing is how could we ever recognize it, if we had no knowledge of it?

It is here that Socrates introduces the Orphic teaching that the soul has an inborn but latent knowledge of all things – a memory of each essence which must be *remembered* so that the almost forgotten memory of, for example, what virtue is can be brought into full consciousness. And thus, he says, “all learning is reminiscence.”

The verse quoted refers to the idea that we are living a continuing round of incarnations, our present life being one of many, and in which we build upon already known truths. The fragment of verse is translated by R E Allen as follows:

Persephone shall accept requital for her ancient grief,
Returning their souls in the ninth year to the upper light,
Their term of banishment to darkness done:
From them illustrious kings shall spring,
Lords of rushing wisdom, and strength unsurpassed.
In all remaining time they shall be known
As heroes, and be sanctified by men.

The Sydenham/Taylor translation gives a more expanded version, drawing from the wider Orphic fragments. Essentially its teaching is that we are not only moving from one earthly life to another, but that these experiences are contributing to a much greater cycle which moves the soul from its starting point as a companion of the Gods, through earthly incarnations and purifications in Hades, and finally back to our starting point, arriving as their translation says

Ne'er more on earth to live, ne'er more to die.
 Amongst the gods in starry sheen,
 Far off and wide thro' Nature seen,
 She fixes her abode;
 Assuming her celestial throne,
 To godlike state of being grown,
 A deathless demi-god.
 Thence thro' the rest of time,
 In hymns religious and in holy rhyme,
 Mortals below shall lift their lays,
 The deathless demi-god to praise;
 Who, freed from earthy dross,
 And ev'ry element of body gross,
 To intellectual bliss in heav'nly seat could climb.

In other words, we are not swinging backwards and forwards like a pendulum between earth and Hades, but that there is a third state towards which we are working – one we might call enlightenment – more or less parallel to realising *Nirvana* in Buddhism or *Moksha* in Hinduism – a liberation from the cycle of life and death.

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One of the problems which emerges in the *Meno* is that Socrates would like to know exactly what virtue is as a single thing, but when he asks Meno to tell him what that is, Meno keeps descending into multitude.

First, he lists virtues as they appear in men, women, children, slaves, and so on. As Socrates says, “I think myself much favoured by Fortune, Meno; for, when I was only in quest of one virtue, I have found, it seems, a whole swarm of virtues hiving in your mind.”

Later, as Meno attempts a more philosophic definition he falls into multiplicity in another way – saying, at first, that virtue was *the power to obtain good things*, but when prompted by Socrates, amends this to *the power to obtain good things justly*. but justice, it appears is not the whole of virtue, so it must be a part. But by necessity offering parts in a definition means introducing multiplicity because a part of a whole must be one of a number of parts.

What has this to do with Orphic teachings? We need to look at one of the most important myths in the Orphic tradition.

Dismembering and remembering Dionysus

Persephone (or Kore) was said in the Orphic version of the cycle to have been born from the union of Zeus with Demeter – their mating had taken place when they were both in a snake-form and knotted together in the way in which the two snakes appear on Hermes' Caduceus. Persephone is depicted as bearing two faces, four eyes and horns. Zeus then

mates with Persephone¹ – again in snake form – and so fathers Dionysus (or, as he is sometimes called, Zagreus or Bacchus).

Kore stays in her mother's house, guarded by the Kouretes,² although she has lost her virginity to Zeus. She weaves a flowery robe, and she is just doing a scorpion on it when she is carried off by Hades; the weaving is left unfinished.³ To him she bears the nine Eumenides.

Meanwhile Dionysus is destined for a stranger fate: young as he is, Zeus sets him on his throne, puts the cosmic sceptre of rule in his hands, and announces to the gods that this young god will succeed him in his rule of the universe. The Titans, moved by jealousy, or prompted by the jealous Hera, whiten their faces with gypsum and attempt to abduct Dionysus by distracting him with childish playthings – apples from the Hesperides, a pinecone, a bull-roarer, a ball, knucklebones, wool, and puppets; none of these toys work until they offer him a mirror made by Hephaestus; entranced by the image of himself, the Titans can lead him away.

In following the mirror they hold before him, the Titans lure Dionysus into their deep cave: here they give him a narthex (or thyrsus) in place of the royal sceptre given by Zeus.⁴ Then they slash him into seven pieces, which they boil, roast, and taste. The smell of the cooking body alerted the Olympian Gods to the treachery, and so began a war between the Olympians and the Titans. Eventually the Titans are overcome – primarily because Zeus (on the advice of Prometheus) throws his thunderbolts at them and blasting many into powdered ashes – and most of those who survived are imprisoned in Tartarus (the deepest part of Hades), although some are given tasks which remove their freedom. Atlas, for example, is forever required to hold the earth and the sky apart.

Athena finds and preserves Dionysus' heart, which is still palpitating, and takes it to Zeus in a casket; there is lamentation. Zeus entrusts Dionysus' limbs to Apollo, who gathers them up and takes them to Parnassus for interment. But from the heart a new Dionysus is given life through the skill of Athena.

The smoke from the blasted Titans deposits a soot from which Zeus creates a new race of men. There had been a golden race of men created by Phanes, and a silver race under Kronos that enjoyed as long a life as the date-palm. Zeus now creates animals, birds, and a foolish human race that does not know good and evil.

Much of the myth revolves around the splitting up of reality – the mirror separates the images from the real Dionysus. The action of the Titans is to separate out the child-god – literally dismembering him (to be re-membered by Apollo and Athene). The Titans themselves are blasted into separate ashes. Humankind under this regime have a confused mind, unable to recognize the unity of goodness.

¹ The more mainstream myth of the birth of Dionysus makes the Theban royal priestess Selene his mother – with the famous story of her fatal request to see Zeus in his full glory during her pregnancy. Since he had promised with an inviolable oath upon the river Styx to grant her any request, and since no mortal can withstand the full power of a God, she perished – Zeus plucking the unborn child from her disintegrating womb and sewing him into his own thigh. *Selene* is a Phrygian word meaning Earth.

² Or possibly the Corybantes who are often conflated with the Kouretes – the former are guardian Gods of the supermundane order, the latter of the intellectual order. See Proclus' *Theology of Plato*, IV, 13.

³ A variation on the more famous story of Persephone being abducted while she gathers flowers – the Homeric Hymn to Demeter says that Hades arose when she pulled at a deep-rooted, sweet-smelling purple flower. The scorpion is the symbol of the eighth sign of the zodiac, and traditionally connected with both death and sex.

⁴ The Narthax (also known as a thyrsus) - a fennel stalk - is often depicted on Greek vases showing scenes from the Bacchic celebrations – it is a long hollow stalk (appropriately, the hollow is divided into separate chambers) with a head which looks very like a diadem. It was used by Prometheus to enclose the heavenly fire while he brought it down to humankind.

Persephone as the queen of Hades has two particular parts in this story – the first is to be the mother of the torn-apart Dionysus, the other to possess the power over those who arrive in the underworld. She who herself has had a split existence partially in the underworld, partially in the light of Olympus. So that her own story is one of an amphibious existence, with the Eleusinian mysteries telling of her release through the agency of Zeus and Hermes.

Other Orphic references in Plato

Plato has other passages which refer to this Orphic tale. In the *Phaedo* (69d) Socrates says: “those who instituted the mysteries for us appear to have been by no means contemptible persons, but to have really signified formerly, in an obscure manner, *that whoever descended into Hades uninitiated, and without being a partaker of the mysteries, should be plunged into mire; but that whoever arrived there, purified and initiated, should dwell with the Gods.* For, as it is said by those who write about the mysteries,

The thyrsus-bearers numerous are seen,
But few the Bacchuses have always been.

And this is said while discussing the nature of virtue which when true is always attached to wisdom but when false is merely an exchange of one form of appearance for another.

In the *Laws* (672b) the Athenian Guest says, “There is a secret stream of story and report to the effect that the god Dionysus was robbed of his soul's judgment by his stepmother Hera, and that in vengeance therefore he brought in Bacchic rites and all the frenzied choristry, and with the same aim bestowed also the gift of wine.” He then goes on to explain that he is referring to the usual process that the rational creature has to go through before he or she is in possession of full reason.

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The Orphic teachings

We can see that the *Meno* – and especially the part of it which discusses the question of how we learn – has important things to say about the soul and its underlying memory. What seems to be a somewhat disjointed grasp of knowledge becomes a more unified hold when it turns to its own half-forgotten memory of immaterial ideas; particular instances and instantiations of virtues being gathered together under the overarching rule of the idea of virtue.

Further, we might suspect that the disjointed movement between a number of terrestrial lives as well as its possible experiences in Hades – as touched upon by Socrates' reference to Tiresias at 100a – may well undergo a similar unification by our strengthening of our powers to access that underlying memory.

“[Virtue] must come by a divine portion or allotment, without the intelligence or true knowledge of it; unless amongst the politicians there should be found some person capable of making another man a good politician. But if there should, he might almost be said to be such a one amongst the living, as Homer tells us that Tiresias is amongst the dead; where, speaking of him and of the rest who are in Hades, he says,

Fill'd is he only with discerning mind;
The rest flit, empty shadows, dark and blind.

Odyssey, x, 494.

Exactly the same pre-eminence hath such a man; being as it were the truth and substance of things, compared with shadows, in respect of virtue.”

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Found in the graves of what must have been Orphic initiates are a number of small gold tablets which seem, in some instances, to be short guides on how to negotiate the underworld, once dead. We can see the same emphasis on memory and the need to acknowledge the experience of material separation as being alien to our true nature. Here are four –

This is the work of Memory, when you are about to die down to the well-built house of Hades. There is a spring at the right side, and standing by it a white cypress. Descending to it, the souls of the dead refresh themselves. Do not even go near this spring! Ahead you will find from the *Lake of Memory*, cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it. They will ask you, with astute wisdom, what you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades. Say, “I am a son of Earth and starry Sky, I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink.” And they will announce you to the Chthonic King, and they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory. And you, too, having drunk, will go along the sacred road on which other glorious initiates and bacchoi travel. (Tablet 1, Calabria)

You will find to the left of the house of Hades a spring and standing by it a white cypress. Do not even approach this spring! You will find another, from the *Lake of Memory*, cold water pouring forth; there are guards before it. Say, “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory.” And they themselves will grant you to drink from the sacred spring. And thereafter you will rule among the other heroes. This is the work of Memory. When you are about to die to die . . . write this . . . enwrapped . . . darkness. (Tablet 2, Petelia)

But as soon as the soul has left the light of the sun, Go to the right [...] being very careful of all things. “Greetings, you who have suffered the painful thing; you have never endured this before. You have become a god instead of a mortal. A kid you fell into milk. Rejoice, rejoice.” Journey on the right-hand road to holy meadows and groves of Persephone. (Tablet 3, Thuri)

I come pure from the pure, Queen of the Chthonian Ones,⁵ Eucles, Euboleus and the other immortal gods. For I also claim to be of your happy race. But Moira [Fate] overcame me and the other immortal gods and the star-flinger with lightning.⁶ I have flown out of the heavy, difficult circle, I have approached the longed-for crown with swift feet, I have sunk beneath the breast of the Lady, the Chthonian Queen, I have approached the longed-for crown with swift feet. “Happy and blessed, you will be a god instead of a mortal.” A kid I fell into milk. (Tablet 5, Thuri)

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Putting these somewhat cryptic messages alongside the conversation which makes up the *Meno*, we might, perhaps, understand the dialogue as an encouragement to recover our divine nature through the exercise of gnostic and vivific continuity. The suggestion in the dialogue that virtue comes from *divine allotment* then ceases to sound like a passive response to “the will of Allah” and more like an exhortation to the soul to embrace the profound mystery of her journey. Socrates more or less says so at 76e: “I think too, that you yourself would be of the same opinion, if you are not, as you said you were yesterday, under a necessity of going away before the mysteries, but could stay and be initiated.”

⁵ This is clearly an address to Persephone. In the *Meno* we have a quote from Pindar in which the soul approaches Persephone in Hades to ask for forgiveness from her for having been involved in the dismemberment of her son – we must presume because if the human race is created from the ashes of the Titans we are in some way attached to the titanic division of Dionysus.

⁶ Star-flinger – almost certainly a reference to Zeus who threw the thunderbolt at the Titans.