Plato's *Meno* presents a deceptively simple surface. Plato begins by having his character Meno ask Socrates how virtue is acquired. Instead of having Socrates respond directly, Plato has him divert the conversation to the question of what virtue is. But Plato's *Meno* isn't accustomed to the rigors of Socratic inquiry, and so Plato allows him to force the discussion back toward a version of his original question. After a series of false starts and frustrations, Plato ends his dialogue with his characters unable to define virtue or to supply a persuasive answer as to how it is acquired.

The *Meno* has been called a perfect example of the essential points of Platonism.¹ If the dialogue is characteristic of Plato, however, it has as much to do with what it shows the reader about virtue as with what it tells.² Though the aggressively confident Meno certainly ends unable to define virtue, and Plato's Socrates is often said to do so, I shall argue that Plato is in no doubt as to what virtue is or the means by which virtue is acquired. I shall organize my argument around what we find in two key passages—and crucially, what we find missing. In them, Plato provides clues to the meaning of the whole, connecting the perplexity of the dialogue's two main characters with the most promising route toward the acquisition of virtue, a route that is surprisingly neglected over the course of the dialogue.

I shall also work to keep the authorial dimension in view. That is, rather than saying simply that Socrates says this or Meno says that, I shall emphasize that it is Plato who makes Socrates and Meno say what he, the author, wants to say.

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² As Klein puts it “answers can be given in a written text by the very action it presents. . . . This also confers on the dialogues the quality of completeness as against their unfinished (aporetic) character in terms of the verbal argument.” Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* [Commentary] (University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 17.

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http://gramata.univ-paris1.fr/Plato/article117.html,
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have said and be left unsaid at each point. While the importance of the literary and dramatic aspects of Plato’s philosophical dramas is now often noted, too many commentators persist in speaking of what Socrates and his interlocutors want, intend, or are feeling, rather than confining themselves to what Plato has them say. In doing so, they obscure the critical distance between an author and his creation and risk turning a carefully plotted philosophical dialogue into a psychological study of its characters. Plato uses the dramatic structure of the Meno ultimately not to support but actually to counter the apparent failure of his characters, pointing the reader in the right direction even as he has Socrates’ headstrong companion insist on pursuing the wrong way.

1.

Plato begins the dialogue abruptly:

MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue (aretê) is something teachable (didakton)? Or is it not teachable, but something acquired through practice (askêton)? Or is it neither acquired through practice nor something learned (mathêton), but comes to be present (paragignetai) in human beings by nature (phusei), or in some other way? (70a1-4)

The Meno begins without the brilliant scene setting of the Protagoras and Gorgias or even the more prosaic prelude of the Euthydemus, dialogues typically dated


4 Penner expresses precisely the essential literary quality of the dialogues I wish to emphasize: “Plato’s dialogues are most extraordinarily finely crafted and plotted pieces of work” (my emphasis), in Terrence Penner, “The Death of the so-called ‘Socratic Elenchus’,” in M. Erler and L. Brisson (eds.), Gorgias-Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum [Erler and Brisson (eds.), Gorgias-Menon] (Stuttgart: Academia Verlag, 2007), 3-19. The quotation is on p. 4. I would say that Plato makes the same point using an organic metaphor at Phdr. 264c2-5. The possibility that Plato could have been present for an actual conversation between the historical Meno and Socrates (see A. E. Taylor, Plato: The Man and his Works [Plato] [London: The Dial Press, 1936], 130) should not distract the reader from the literary character and especially the careful plotting of the dialogue as we have it.