

On Knowledge and Wanting to Know

Introduction to the Western Ancients

This section of the book deals primarily with two questions that fascinated the ancient and medieval worlds: *How do we know what we know?* and *Why do we want to know?*

Various answers to the first question will be found in both sections from Plato. The first attempt is found in the Socratic dialogue between Socrates and Meno. In that dialogue the wily Socrates questions the learned Meno about the nature of virtue. As Meno attempts to offer definitions, Socrates pokes holes in them. Meno becomes more and more frustrated and finally demands that if Socrates is so wise why doesn't he just teach him the definition of virtue, and there Socrates explains that he can't teach him for all learning is recollection.

You will see that Aristotle does not hold the same vision as Plato and Socrates; rather, he believes that from experience humans can understand basic principles and then use those principles to reason their way to scientific knowledge. These two contrasting visions continue to undergird much of the educational tension around curriculum and instruction today.

The second question is also answered by Aristotle as he explores the thesis that all men by nature desire to know. This issue is then taken up in a debate between Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine argues that the desire to know is to be kept in check and not turned toward curiosity, while Aquinas argues that it is a natural and perfect desire for man to want to know whatever is knowable.

The answers that are forwarded by the authors in this section have been widely influential in shaping the educational endeavors in various spheres: individual, church, and state. Throughout the section you will find reflection questions between paragraphs. Take time to stop and think about the central arguments forwarded by these classical Western thinkers and how our decisions about whether or not they are right or wrong affect the way we interact in educational settings.

Can We Learn?
Why, How, and When Should We Learn?
What is the Appropriate Use of Curiosity?





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