In a controversial passage in the *Meno*, Socrates argues that virtue cannot be taught (89c-96c).¹ Such a view is hard to square with the thesis that virtue is knowledge, and for this reason there is a longstanding debate over whether Socrates' argument is meant seriously.² In this paper I shall try to determine exactly where Socrates stands on the question whether virtue can be taught, as well as on the more general question of how men come to possess virtue. What I shall contribute to the debate is not a new answer, but fresh evidence. I believe Socrates' argument cannot be properly understood without seeing its connections with other parts of the dialogue. In the first two sections of the paper I examine Socrates' discussion of the theory of recollection as it relates to the concept of teaching. I argue that one of the purposes of Socrates' discussion is to draw a contrast between two conceptions of teaching. In the final section of the paper I show how the contrast between the two conceptions of teaching is essential to understanding Socrates' claim that virtue cannot be taught.

I

After a barrage of Socratic refutations, Meno's confidence in his knowledge of the nature of virtue is shaken (80a-b). The main obstacle standing in the way of a fruitful philosophical inquiry seems to have been removed. Since they are both in a state of ignorance, Socrates suggests that they conduct a joint search for the nature of virtue. Meno, however, thinks that such a search would be utterly futile. How can they search for something of which they are ignorant? If they don't know what they are looking for, how will they recognize it if they do in fact stumble upon it?

The target of Meno's challenge is the idea of Socratic inquiry. He is not questioning the possibility of passing from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge with respect to some subject, but rather the possibility of doing this without the aid of someone who already knows.³ In other words, Meno is claiming that it is impossible to learn without a teacher. Socrates counters Meno's claim with an argument for its antithesis. In his discussion of the theory of recollection, he argues that it is not only possible to learn without a teacher, but that it is not possible to learn in any other way. All learning
consists of drawing knowledge from oneself, and there is no such thing as teaching. Socrates attempts to demonstrate this claim by questioning Meno's slave boy about a problem in geometry.

There are two particular points about Socrates' response to Meno's challenge which are puzzling. First of all, his claim that there is no such thing as teaching goes well beyond what is needed to meet the challenge. It would be enough simply to establish that it is possible to learn without a teacher. Nor is this claim required by the theory of recollection; there is nothing about the theory itself which entails the impossibility of teaching. Why, then, does Socrates make such an extreme and implausible claim when it is neither required by Meno's challenge nor by the theory of recollection?

A second puzzling point concerns Socrates' questioning of the slave boy. By answering a series of questions the boy eventually arrives at the solution to the geometrical problem. Socrates describes what has happened by saying that the boy recollected the solution without the aid of any teaching (85 d). In the course of the questioning Socrates turns to Meno a couple of times and says, "Do you notice, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy, but simply asking questions" (82 e, 84 c-d). In each case Meno agrees with Socrates. Now this is a very odd way of describing what is actually happening. It is clear that Socrates already knows the solution to the geometrical problem. It is also clear that his knowledge plays an important part in his questioning of the boy in so far as it enables him to lead the boy step by step to the solution. It would therefore be perfectly natural to describe what Socrates is doing as teaching the boy a bit of geometry. And yet Socrates claims, and Meno agrees, that he is not teaching the boy.

A simple solution to both of these puzzles is provided by the following supposition: one of the purposes of the recollection passage is to bring out the narrowness of Meno's conception of teaching (and learning), and to contrast this conception with a very different one: "Socratic" teaching. The narrowness of Meno's conception of teaching is brought out by showing in the course of the questioning that the only thing which he counts as teaching is directly telling the pupil the answers to questions. Socrates deliberately uses the term "teaching" in such a narrow sense in order to indicate this feature of Meno's conception of teaching.

The very different, "Socratic", conception of teaching is revealed by two aspects of the recollection passage. First, there is Socrates' account of what happens in any case of learning. Learning is a process of drawing knowledge from oneself, not obtaining knowledge from someone else. If there is such a thing as teaching, it must be an activity congruent with this account