BOOKSTACKS CLASSICS

Meno

Plato (c. 428-348 BCE)

English EDITION

BOOKSTACKS EDITION

Publication record

Title	Meno
Author	Plato (c. 428-348 BCE)
Translator	Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb
Edition	Bookstacks TEI edition, based on the source electronic edition
Source	Plato in Twelve Volumes. Harvard University Press. 1924
Published	21 August 2026
Edition ID	plato_meno
Canonical URI	bookstacks.org

Rights and availability

The underlying ancient work is in the public domain. Rights in this translation and source encoding are described below. This derived TEI file is made available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License; source rights remain as recorded in sourceDesc. View the canonical license terms.

No ISBN has been assigned. The stable Bookstacks edition identifier and canonical URI above serve as the publication record for this digital edition. Bookstacks asserts no additional restriction over this generated PDF beyond the canonical source terms.

Contents

Meno 1

Meno

Men.

Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught, or is acquired by practice, not teaching? Or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to mankind by nature or in some other way?

Soc.

Meno, of old the Thessalians were famous and admired among the Greeks for their riding and their riches; but now they have a name, I believe, for wisdom also, especially your friend Aristippus's people, the Larisaeans. For this you have to thank Gorgias: for when he came to that city he made the leading men of the Aleuadae—among them your lover Aristippus—and the Thessalians generally enamored of wisdom. Nay more, he has given you the regular habit of answering any chance question in a fearless, magnificent manner, as befits those who know: for he sets the example of offering himself to be questioned by any Greek who chooses, and on any point one likes, and he has an answer for everybody.

Soc.

Now in this place, my dear Meno, we have a contrary state of things: a drought of wisdom, as it were, has come on; and it seems as though wisdom had deserted our borders in favour of yours. You have only to ask one of our people a question such as that, and he will be sure to laugh and say: Stranger, you must think me a specially favoured mortal, to be able to tell whether virtue can be taught, or in what way it comes to one: so far am I from knowing whether it can be taught or not, that I actually do not even know what the thing itself, virtue, is at all. And I myself, Meno, am in the same case; I share my

townsmen's poverty in this matter: I have to reproach myself with an utter ignorance about virtue; and if I do not know what a thing is, how can I know what its nature may be? Or do you imagine it possible, if one has no cognizance at all of Meno, that one could know whether he is handsome or rich or noble, or the reverse of these? Do you suppose that one could?

Men.

Not I. But is it true, Socrates, that you do not even know what virtue is? Are we to return home with this report of you?

Soc.

Not only this, my friend, but also that I never yet came across anybody who did know, in my opinion.

Men.

What? You did not meet Gorgias when he was here?

Soc.

I did.

Men.

And you didn't consider that he knew?

Soc.

I have not a very good memory, Meno, so I cannot tell at the moment how he struck me then. It may be that he did know, and that you know what he said: remind me therefore how he expressed it; or if you like, make your own statement, for I expect you share his views.

Men.

I do.

Soc.

Then let us pass him over, since in fact he is not present, and do you tell me, in heaven's name, what is your own account of virtue. Speak out frankly, that I may find myself the victim of a most fortunate falsehood, if you and Gorgias prove to have knowledge of it, while I have said that I never yet came across anyone who had.

Men.

Why, there is no difficulty, Socrates, in telling. First of all, if you take the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man's virtue is this—that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman's virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors, and obeying her husband. And the

child has another virtue—one for the female, and one for the male; and there is another for elderly men—one, if you like, for freemen, and yet another for slaves.

Men.

And there are very many other virtues besides, so that one cannot be at a loss to explain what virtue is; for it is according to each activity and age that every one of us, in whatever we do, has his virtue; and the same, I take it, Socrates, will hold also of vice.

Soc.

I seem to be in a most lucky way, Meno; for in seeking one virtue I have discovered a whole swarm of virtues there in your keeping. Now, Meno, to follow this figure of a swarm, suppose I should ask you what is the real nature of the bee, and you replied that there are many different kinds of bees, and I rejoined: Do you say it is by being bees that they are of many and various kinds and differ from each other, or does their difference lie not in that, but in something else—for example, in their beauty or size or some other quality? Tell me, what would be your answer to this question?

Men.

Why, this—that they do not differ, as bees, the one from the other.

Soc.

And if I went on to say: Well now, there is this that I want you to tell me, Meno: what do you call the quality by which they do not differ, but are all alike? You could find me an answer, I presume?

Men.

I could.

Soc.

And likewise also with the virtues, however many and various they may be, they all have one common character whereby they are virtues, and on which one would of course be wise to keep an eye when one is giving a definitive answer to the question of what virtue really is. You take my meaning, do you not?

Men.

My impression is that I do; but still I do not yet grasp the meaning of the question as I could wish.

Soc.

Is it only in the case of virtue, do you think, Meno, that one can say there is one kind belonging to a man, another to a woman, and so on with the rest, or is it just the same, too, in the case of health and size

and strength? Do you consider that there is one health for a man, and another for a woman? Or, wherever we find health, is it of the same character universally, in a man or in anyone else?

Men.

I think that health is the same, both in man and in woman.

Soc.

Then is it not so with size and strength also? If a woman is strong, she will be strong by reason of the same form and the same strength; by "the same" I mean that strength does not differ as strength, whether it be in a man or in a woman. Or do you think there is any difference?

Men.

I do not.

Soc.

And will virtue, as virtue, differ at all whether it be in a child or in an elderly person, in a woman or in a man?

Men.

I feel somehow, Socrates, that here we cease to be on the same ground as in those other cases.

Soc.

Why? Were you not saying that a man's virtue is to manage a state well, and a woman's a house?

Men.

I was.

Soc.

And is it possible to manage a state well, or a house, or anything at all, if you do not manage it temperately and justly?

Men.

Surely not.

Soc.

Then whoever manages temperately and justly will manage with temperance and justice?

Men.

That must be.

Soc.

Then both the woman and the man require the same qualities of justice and temperance, if they are to be good.

Men.

Evidently.

Soc.
And what of a child or an old man? Can they ever hope to be good if they are intemperate and unjust?
Men.
Surely not.
Soc.
Only if they are temperate and just?
Men.
Yes.

Soc.
So all mankind are good in the same way; for they become good when they acquire the same qualities.
Men.
So it seems.
Soc.
And I presume, if they had not the same virtue, they would not be good in the same way.
Men.
No, indeed.
Soc.
Seeing then that it is the same virtue in all cases, try and tell me, if you can recollect, what Gorgias—and you in agreement with him—say it is.
Men.
Simply that it is the power of governing mankind— if you want some single description to cover all cases.
Soc.
That is just what I am after. But is virtue the same in a child, Meno, and in a slave—an ability to govern each his master? And do you think he who governed would still be a slave?
Men.
I should say certainly not, Socrates.
Soc.
No, indeed, it would be unlikely, my excellent friend. And again, consider this further point: you say it is "to be able to govern"; shall we not add to that—"justly, not unjustly"?
Men.
Yes, I think so; for justice, Socrates, is virtue.

Soc.
Virtue, Meno, or a virtue?
Men.
What do you mean by that?
Soc.
What I would in any other case. To take roundness, for instance; I should call it a figure, and not figure pure and simple. And I should name it so because there are other figures as well.
Men.
You would be quite right—just as I say there are other virtues besides justice.

Soc.
What are they? Tell me. In the same way as I can tell you of other figures, if you request me, so do you tell me of other virtues.
Men.
Well then, courage, I consider, is a virtue, and temperance, and wisdom, and loftiness of mind; and there are a great many others.
Soc.
Once more, Meno, we are in the same plight: again we have found a number of virtues when we were looking for one, though not in the same way as we did just now; but the one that runs through them all, this we are not able to find.

Men.
No, for I am not yet able, Socrates, to follow your line of search, and find a single virtue common to all, as one can in other cases.
Soc.
And no wonder; but I will make an effort, so far as I can, to help us onward. You understand, of course, that this principle of mine applies to everything: if someone asked you the question I put to you just now: What is figure, Meno? and you replied: Roundness; and then he said, as I did: Is roundness figure or a figure? I suppose you would answer: A figure.
Men.
Certainly.

Soc.
And for this reason—that there are other figures as well?
Men.

Yes.

Soc.

And if he went on to ask you of what sort they were, you would tell him?

Men.

I would.

Soc.

And if he asked likewise what color is, and on your answering "white" your questioner then rejoined: Is "white" color or a color? your reply would be: A color; because there are other colors besides.

Men.

It would.

Soc.

And if he bade you mention other colors, you would tell him of others that are colors just as much as white?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

Now suppose that, like me, he pursued the argument and said: We are always arriving at a variety of things, but let me have no more of that: since you call these many things by one single name, and say they are figures, every one of them, even when they are opposed to one another, tell me what is that which comprises round and straight alike, and which you call figure— including straight equally with round under that term. For that is your statement, is it not?

Men.

It is.

Soc.

And in making it, do you mean to say that round is no more round than straight, or straight no more straight than round?

Men.

No, to be sure, Socrates.

Soc.

What you mean is that the round shape is no more a figure than the straight, or the straight than the round.

Men.

Quite right.

Soc.

Then what can this thing be, which bears the name of figure? Try and tell me. Suppose that, on being asked this question by someone, either about figure or about color, you had replied: Why, I don't so much

as understand what you want, sir, or even know what you are saying: he might well have shown surprise, and said: Do you not understand that I am looking for that which is the same common element in all these things? Or would you still be unable to reply, Meno, if you were approached on other terms, and were asked: What is it that is common to the round and the straight and everything else that you call figures—the same in all? Try and tell me it will be good practice for your answer about virtue.

Men.
No, it is you who must answer, Socrates.
Soc.
You wish me to do you the favour?
Men.
By all means.
Soc.
And then you will agree to take your turn and answer me on virtue?
Men.
I will.
Soc.
Well then, I must make the effort, for it is worth our while.
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
Come now, let me try and tell you what figure is. Just consider if you accept this description of it: figure, let us say, is the only existing thing that is found always following color. Are you satisfied, or are you looking for something different? I am sure I should be content with a similar account of virtue from you.

Men.
But it is such a silly one, Socrates.
Soc.
How do you mean?
Men.
Well, figure, as I understand by your account, is what always follows color. Very good; but if some one said he did not know color, and was in the same difficulty about it as about figure, what answer do you suppose would have come from you?
Soc.

The truth, from me; and if my questioner were a professor of the eristic and contentious sort, I should say to him: I have made my statement; if it is wrong, your business is to examine and refute it. But if, like you and me on this occasion, we were friends and chose to have a discussion together, I should have to reply in some milder tone more suited to dialectic. The more dialectical way, I suppose, is not merely to answer what is true, but also to make use of those points which the questioned person acknowledges he knows. And this is the way in which I shall now try to argue with you. Tell me, is there something you call an end? Such a thing, I mean, as a limit, or extremity—I use all these terms in the same sense, though I daresay Prodicus[1] might quarrel with us. But you, I am sure, refer to a thing as terminated or ended: something of that sort is what I mean—nothing complicated.

Men.

Yes, I do, and I think I grasp your meaning.

Soc.

Well then, you speak of a surface, and also of a solid—the terms employed in geometrical problems?

Men.

I do.

Soc.

So now you are able to comprehend from all this what I mean by figure. In every instance of figure I call that figure in which the solid ends; and I may put that more succinctly by saying that figure is "limit of solid."

Men.

And what do you say of color, Socrates?

Soc.

How overbearing of you, Meno, to press an old man with demands for answers, when you will not trouble yourself to recollect and tell me what account Gorgias gives of virtue!

Men.

When you have answered my question, Socrates, I will answer yours.

Soc.

One might tell even blindfolded, Meno, by the way you discuss, that you are handsome and still have lovers.

Men.

Why so?

Soc.

---

[1] Cf. *Plat. Prot. 337a.*

Because you invariably speak in a peremptory tone, after the fashion of spoilt beauties, holding as they do a despotic power so long as their bloom is on them. You have also, I daresay, made a note of my weakness for handsome people. So I will indulge you, and answer.

Men.

You must certainly indulge me.

Soc.

Then would you like me to answer you in the manner of Gorgias,[2] which you would find easiest to follow?

Men.

I should like that, of course.

Soc.

Do not both of you say there are certain effluences[3] of existent things, as Empedocles held?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

And passages into which and through which the effluences pass?

Men.

To be sure.

Soc.

And some of the effluences fit into various passages, while some are too small or too large?

Men.

That is so.

Soc.

And further, there is what you call sight?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

So now "conceive my meaning," as Pindar [4] says: color is an effluence of figures, commensurate with sight and sensible.

Men.

Your answer, Socrates, seems to me excellently put.

Soc.

---

[2]There is something of Gorgias' stately style in the definition that follows; but the implication seems mainly to be that the substance of it will be familiar to Meno because he was a pupil of Gorgias, who had learnt his science from Empedocles.

[3]Empedocles taught that material objects are known to us by means of effluences or films given off by them and suited in various ways to our sense-organs.

[4]Fr. 82 (Bergk); cf. *Aristoph. Birds 939.*

Yes, for I expect you find its terms familiar; and at the same time I fancy you observe that it enables you to tell what sound and smell are, and numerous other things of the kind.

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

It is an answer in the high poetic style, Meno, and so more agreeable to you than that about figure.

Men.

Yes, it is.

Soc.

But yet, son of Alexidemus, I am inclined to think the other was the better of the two; and I believe you also would prefer it, if you were not compelled, as you were saying yesterday, to go away before the mysteries, and could stay awhile and be initiated.

Men.

But I should stay, Socrates, if you would give me many such answers.

Soc.

Well then, I will spare no endeavor, both for your sake and for my own, to continue in that style; but I fear I may not succeed in keeping for long on that level. But come now, you in your turn must try and fulfil your promise by telling me what virtue is in a general way; and you must stop producing a plural from the singular, as the wags say whenever one breaks something, but leave virtue whole and sound, and tell me what it is. The pattern you have now got from me.

Men.

Well, in my view, Socrates, virtue is, in the poet's words, "to rejoice in things honorable and be able for them" [5]; and that, I say, is virtue—to desire what is honorable and be able to procure it.

Soc.

Do you say that he who desires the honorable is desirous of the good?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

Implying that there are some who desire the evil, and others the good? Do not all men, in your opinion, my dear sir, desire the good?

Men.

I think not.

[5] Perhaps from Simonides.

Soc.
There are some who desire the evil?
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
Thinking the evil to be good, do you mean, or actually recognizing it to be evil, and desiring it nevertheless?
Men.
Both, I believe.
Soc.
Do you really believe, Meno, that a man knows the evil to be evil, and still desires it?
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
What do you mean by "desires"? Desires the possession of it?

Men.
Yes; what else could it be?
Soc.
And does he think the evil benefits him who gets it, or does he know that it harms him who has it?
Men.
There are some who think the evil is a benefit, and others who know that it does harm.
Soc.
And, in your opinion, do those who think the evil a benefit know that it is evil?
Men.
I do not think that at all.
Soc.
Obviously those who are ignorant of the evil do not desire it, but only what they supposed to be good, though it is really evil; so that those who are ignorant of it and think it good are really desiring the good. Is not that so?
Men.
It would seem to be so in their case.
Soc.
Well now, I presume those who, as you say, desire the evil, and consider that the evil harms him who gets it, know that they will be harmed

by it?

Men.

They needs must.

Soc.

But do they not hold that those who are harmed are miserable in proportion to the harm they suffer?

Men.

That too must be.

Soc.

And are not the miserable ill-starred?

Men.

I think so.

Soc.

Then is there anyone who wishes to be miserable and ill-starred?

Men.

I do not suppose there is, Socrates.

Soc.

No one, then, Meno, desires evil, if no one desires to be such an one: for what is being miserable but desiring evil and obtaining it?

Men.

It seems that what you say is true, Socrates, and that nobody desires evil.

Soc.

Well now, you were saying a moment ago that virtue is the desire and ability for good?

Men.

Yes, I was.

Soc.

One part of the statement—the desire—belongs to our common nature, and in this respect one man is no better than another?

Men.

Apparently.

Soc.

But it is plain that if one man is not better than another in this, he must be superior in the ability.

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

Then virtue, it seems by your account, is ability to procure goods.

Men.

I entirely agree, Socrates, with the view which you now take of the matter.

Soc.

Then let us see whether your statement is true in another respect; for very likely you may be right. You say virtue is the ability to procure goods?

Men.

I do.

Soc.

And do you not mean by goods such things as health and wealth?

Men.

Yes, and I include the acquisition of gold and silver, and of state honors and offices.

Soc.

Are there any things besides this sort, that you class as goods?

Men.

No, I refer only to everything of that sort.

Soc.

Very well: procuring gold and silver is virtue, according to Meno, the ancestral friend of the Great King. Tell me, do you add to such procuring, Meno, that it is to be done justly and piously, or is this indifferent to you, but even though a man procures these things unjustly, do you call them virtue all the same?

Men.

Surely not, Socrates.

Soc.

Rather, vice.

Men.

Yes, of course.

Soc.

Then it seems that justice or temperance or holiness or some other part of virtue must accompany the procuring of these things; otherwise it will not be virtue, though it provides one with goods.

Men.

Yes, for how, without these, could it be virtue?

Soc.

And not to procure gold and silver, when it would be unjust—what we

call the want of such things—is virtue, is it not?

Men.

Apparently.

Soc.

So the procuring of this sort of goods will be no more virtue than the want of them; but it seems that whatever comes accompanied by justice will be virtue, and whatever comes without any such quality, vice.

Men.

I agree that it must be as you say.

Soc.

And were we saying a little while ago that each of these things was a part of virtue—justice and temperance and the rest of them?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

And here you are, Meno, making fun of me?

Men.

How so, Socrates?

Soc.

Because after my begging you not to break up virtue into small change, and giving you a pattern on which you should answer, you have ignored all this, and now tell me that virtue is the ability to procure good things with justice; and this, you tell me, is a part of virtue?

Men.

I do.

Soc.

Then it follows from your own admission that doing whatever one does with a part of virtue is itself virtue; for you say that justice is a part of virtue, and so is each of such qualities. You ask the meaning of my remark. It is that after my requesting you to speak of virtue as a whole, you say not a word as to what it is in itself, but tell me that every action is virtue provided that it is done with a part of virtue; as though you had told me what virtue is in the whole, and I must understand it forthwith—when you are really splitting it up into fragments! I think therefore that you must face the same question all over again, my dear Meno—What is virtue?—if we are to be told that every action accompanied by a part of virtue is virtue; for that is the meaning of the statement that every action accompanied by justice is virtue. Or do you not agree that you have to meet the same question afresh? Do you suppose that anyone can know a part of virtue when

he does not know virtue itself?

Men.

No, I do not.

Soc.

And I daresay you remember, when I answered you a while ago about figure, how we rejected the sort of answer that attempts to proceed in terms which are still under inquiry and has not yet been admitted.

Men.

Yes, and we were right in rejecting it, Socrates.

Soc.

Well then, my good sir, you must not in your turn suppose that while the nature of virtue as a whole is still under inquiry you will explain it to anyone by replying in terms of its parts, or by any other statement on the same lines: you will only have to face the same question over again—What is this virtue, of which you are speaking all the time? Or do you see no force in what I say?

Men.

I think what you say is right.

Soc.

Then answer me again from the beginning: what do both you and your associate say that virtue is?

Men.

Socrates, I used to be told, before I began to meet you, that yours was just a case of being in doubt yourself and making others doubt also: and so now I find you are merely bewitching me with your spells and incantations, which have reduced me to utter perplexity. And if I am indeed to have my jest, I consider that both in your appearance and in other respects you are extremely like the flat torpedo sea-fish; for it benumbs anyone who approaches and touches it, and something of the sort is what I find you have done to me now. For in truth I feel my soul and my tongue quite benumbed, and I am at a loss what answer to give you. And yet on countless occasions I have made abundant speeches on virtue to various people—and very good speeches they were, so I thought—but now I cannot say one word as to what it is. You are well advised, I consider, in not voyaging or taking a trip away from home; for if you went on like this as a stranger in any other city you would very likely be taken up for a wizard.

Soc.

You are a rogue, Meno, and had almost deceived me.

Men.
How is that, Socrates?

Soc.
I perceive your aim in thus comparing me.
Men.
What was it?
Soc.
That I might compare you in return. One thing I know about all handsome people is this—they delight in being compared to something. They do well over it, since fine features, I suppose, must have fine similes. But I am not for playing your game. As for me, if the torpedo is torpid itself while causing others to be torpid, I am like it, but not otherwise. For it is not from any sureness in myself that I cause others to doubt: it is from being in more doubt than anyone else that I cause doubt in others. So now, for my part, I have no idea what virtue is, whilst you, though perhaps you may have known before you came in touch with me, are now as good as ignorant of it also. But none the less I am willing to join you in examining it and inquiring into its nature.
Men.
Why, on what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at the best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?
Soc.
I understand the point you would make, Meno. Do you see what a captious argument you are introducing—that, forsooth, a man cannot inquire either about what he knows or about what he does not know? For he cannot inquire about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is in no need of inquiry; nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to inquire.

Men.
Now does it seem to you to be a good argument, Socrates?
Soc.
It does not.
Men.
Can you explain how not?

Soc.

I can; for I have heard from wise men and women who told of things divine that—

Men.

What was it they said ?

Soc.

Something true, as I thought, and admirable.

Men.

What was it? And who were the speakers?

Soc.

They were certain priests and priestesses who have studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry; and Pindar also and many another poet of heavenly gifts. As to their words, they are these: mark now, if you judge them to be true. They say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time comes to an end, which is called dying, and at another is born again, but never perishes. Consequently one ought to live all one's life in the utmost holiness."For from whomsoever Persephone shall accept requital for ancient wrong,[6] the souls of these she restores in the ninth year to the upper sun again; from them arise" "glorious kings and men of splendid might and surpassing wisdom, and for all remaining time are they called holy heroes amongst mankind."*Pind. Fr. 133 Bergk*Seeing then that the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has beheld all things both in this world and in the nether realms, she has acquired knowledge of all and everything; so that it is no wonder that she should be able to recollect all that she knew before about virtue and other things. For as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no reason why we should not, by remembering but one single thing—an act which men call learning—discover everything else, if we have courage and faint not in the search; since, it would seem, research and learning are wholly recollection. So we must not hearken to that captious argument: it would make us idle, and is pleasing only to the indolent ear, whereas the other makes us energetic and inquiring. Putting my trust in its truth, I am ready to inquire with you into the nature of virtue.

Men.

Yes, Socrates, but what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, and that what we call learning is recollection? Can you instruct me that this is so?

[6] *πένθος* (affliction) in mystic language means something like "fall" or "sin." These lines are probably from one of Pindar's *Dirges* (Bergk, fr. 133).

Soc.
I remarked just now, Meno, that you are a rogue and so here you are asking if I can instruct you, when I say there is no teaching but only recollection: you hope that I may be caught contradicting myself forthwith.

Men.
I assure you, Socrates; that was not my intention I only spoke from habit. But if you can somehow prove to me that it is as you say, pray do so.

Soc.
It is no easy matter, but still I am willing to try my best for your sake. Just call one of your own troop of attendants there, whichever one you please, that he may serve for my demonstration.

Men.
Certainly. You, I say, come here.

Soc.
He is a Greek, I suppose, and speaks Greek?

Men.
Oh yes, to be sure—born in the house.

Soc.
Now observe closely whether he strikes you as recollecting or as learning from me.

Men.
I will.

Soc.
Tell me, boy, do you know that a square figure is like this?[7]

Boy.
I do.

Soc.
Now, a square figure has these lines, four in number, all equal?

Boy.
Certainly.

Soc.
And these, drawn through the middle,[8] are equal too, are they not?

Boy.
Yes.

Soc.

[7] Socrates draws in the sand.

[8] i.e., the middle of each side of the square.

And a figure of this sort may be larger or smaller?

Boy.

To be sure.

Soc.

Now if this side were two feet and that also two, how many feet would the whole be? Or let me put it thus: if one way it were two feet, and only one foot the other, of course the space would be two feet taken once ?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

But as it is two feet also on that side, it must be twice two feet?

Boy.

It is.

Soc.

Then the space is twice two feet?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Well, how many are twice two feet? Count and tell me.

Boy.

Four, Socrates.

Soc.

And might there not be another figure twice the size of this, but of the same sort, with all its sides equal like this one?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Then how many feet will it be?

Boy.

Eight.

Soc.

Come now, try and tell me how long will each side of that figure be. This one is two feet long: what will be the side of the other, which is double in size?

Boy.

Clearly, Socrates, double.

Soc.

Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but

merely asking him each time? And now he supposes that he knows about the line required to make a figure of eight square feet; or do you not think he does?

Men.

I do.

Soc.

Well, does he know?

Men.

Certainly not.

Soc.

He just supposes it, from the double size required?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

Now watch his progress in recollecting, by the proper use of memory. Tell me, boy, do you say we get the double space from the double line? The space I speak of is not long one way and short the other, but must be equal each way like this one, while being double its size—eight square feet. Now see if you still think we get this from a double length of line.

Boy.

I do.

Soc.

Well, this line is doubled, if we add here another of the same length?

Boy.

Certainly.

Soc.

And you say we shall get our eight-foot space from four lines of this length?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Then let us describe the square, drawing four equal lines of that length. This will be what you say is the eight-foot figure, will it not?

Boy.

Certainly.

Soc.

And here, contained in it, have we not four squares, each of which is equal to this space of four feet?

Boy.
Yes.
Soc.
Then how large is the whole? Four times that space, is it not?
Boy.
It must be.
Soc.
And is four times equal to double?
Boy.
No, to be sure.
Soc.
But how much is it?
Boy.
Fourfold.

Soc.
Thus, from the double-sized line, boy, we get a space, not of double, but of fourfold size.
Boy.
That is true.
Soc.
And if it is four times four it is sixteen, is it not?
Boy.
Yes.
Soc.
What line will give us a space of eight feet? This one gives us a fourfold space, does it not?
Boy.
It does.
Soc.
And a space of four feet is made from this line of half the length?
Boy.
Yes.
Soc.
Very well; and is not a space of eight feet double the size of this one, and half the size of this other?
Boy.
Yes.
Soc.
Will it not be made from a line longer than the one of these, and

shorter than the other?

Boy.

I think so.

Soc.

Excellent: always answer just what you think. Now tell me, did we not draw this line two feet, and that four?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Then the line on the side of the eight-foot figure should be more than this of two feet, and less than the other of four?

Boy.

It should.

Soc.

Try and tell me how much you would say it is.

Boy.

Three feet.

Soc.

Then if it is to be three feet, we shall add on a half to this one, and so make it three feet? For here we have two, and here one more, and so again on that side there are two, and another one; and that makes the figure of which you speak.

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Now if it be three this way and three that way, the whole space will be thrice three feet, will it not?

Boy.

So it seems.

Soc.

And thrice three feet are how many?

Boy.

Nine.

Soc.

And how many feet was that double one to be?

Boy.

Eight.

Soc.

So we fail to get our eight-foot figure from this three-foot line.

Boy.
Yes, indeed.
Soc.
But from what line shall we get it? Try and tell us exactly; and if you would rather not reckon it out, just show what line it is.
Boy.
Well, on my word, Socrates, I for one do not know.
Soc.
There now, Meno, do you observe who progress he has already made in his recollection? At first he did not know what is the line that forms the figure of eight feet, and he does not know even now: but at any rate he thought he knew then, and confidently answered as though he knew, and was aware of no difficulty; whereas now he feels the difficulty he is in, and besides not knowing does not think he knows.
Men.
That is true.
Soc.
And is he not better off in respect of the matter which he did not know?
Men.
I think that too is so.
Soc.
Now, by causing him to doubt and giving him the torpedo's shock, have we done him any harm?
Men.
I think not.
Soc.
And we have certainly given him some assistance, it would seem, towards finding out the truth of the matter: for now he will push on in the search gladly, as lacking knowledge; whereas then he would have been only too ready to suppose he was right in saying, before any number of people any number of times, that the double space must have a line of double the length for its side.
Men.
It seems so.
Soc.
Now do you imagine he would have attempted to inquire or learn what he thought he knew, when he did not know it, until he had been reduced to the perplexity of realizing that he did not know, and had felt a craving to know?
Men.

I think not, Socrates.

Soc.

Then the torpedo's shock was of advantage to him?

Men.

I think so.

Soc.

Now you should note how, as a result of this perplexity, he will go on and discover something by joint inquiry with me, while I merely ask questions and do not teach him; and be on the watch to see if at any point you find me teaching him or expounding to him, instead of questioning him on his opinions. Tell me, boy: here we have a square of four feet,[9] have we not? You understand?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

And here we add another square[10] equal to it?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

And here a third,[11] equal to either of them?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

Now shall we fill up this vacant space[12] in the corner?

Boy.

By all means.

Soc.

So here we must have four equal spaces? BOY. Yes.

Soc.

Well now, how many times larger is this whole space than this other?

Boy.

Four times.

Soc.

But it was to have been only twice, you remember?

Boy.

To be sure.

Soc.

---

[9] ABCD.
[10] DCFE.
[11] CHGF.
[12] BIHC.

And does this line,[13] drawn from corner to corner, cut in two each of these spaces?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

And have we here four equal lines[14] containing this space[15]?

Boy.

We have.

Soc.

Now consider how large this space[16] is.

Boy.

I do not understand.

Soc.

Has not each of the inside lines cut off half of each of these four spaces?

Boy.

Yes.

Soc.

And how many spaces of that size are there in this part?

Boy.

Four.

Soc.

And how many in this[17]?

Boy.

Two.

Soc.

And four is how many times two?

Boy.

Twice.

Soc.

And how many feet is this space[18]?

Boy.

Eight feet.

Soc.

From what line do we get this figure?

[13] BD.
[14] BD, DF, FH, HB.
[15] BDFH.
[16] BDFH.
[17] ABCD.
[18] BDFH.

Boy.
From this.
Soc.
From the line drawn corner-wise across the (our-foot figure?
Boy.
Yes.
Soc.
The professors call it the diagonal: so if the diagonal is its name, then according to you, Meno's boy, the double space is the square of the diagonal.
Boy.
Yes, certainly it is, Socrates.
Soc.
What do you think, Meno? Was there any opinion that he did not give as an answer of his own thought?

Men.
No, they were all his own.
Soc.
But you see, he did not know, as we were saying a while since.
Men.
That is true.
Soc.
Yet he had in him these opinions, had he not?
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
So that he who does not know about any matters, whatever they be, may have true opinions on such matters, about which he knows nothing?
Men.
Apparently.
Soc.
And at this moment those opinions have just been stirred up in him, like a dream; but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in a variety of forms, you know he will have in the end as exact an understanding of them as anyone.
Men.
So it seems.
Soc.

Without anyone having taught him, and only through questions put to him, he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

And is not this recovery of knowledge, in himself and by himself, recollection?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

And must he not have either once acquired or always had the knowledge he now has?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

Now if he always had it, he was always in a state of knowing; and if he acquired it all some time, he could not have acquired it in this life. Or has someone taught him geometry? You see, he can do the same as this with all geometry and every branch of knowledge. Now, can anyone have taught him all this? You ought surely to know, especially as he was born and bred in your house.

Men.

Well, I know that no one has ever taught him.

Soc.

And has he these opinions, or has he not?

Men.

He must have them, Socrates, evidently.

Soc.

And if he did not acquire them in this present life, is it not obvious at once that he had them and learnt them during some other time?

Men.

Apparently.

Soc.

And this must have been the time when he was not a human being?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

So if in both of these periods—when he was and was not a human being—he has had true opinions in him which have only to be awakened by questioning to become knowledge, his soul must have had this cognizance throughout all time? For clearly he has always either been

or not been a human being.

Men.

Evidently.

Soc.

And if the truth of all things that are is always in our soul, then the soul must be immortal; so that you should take heart and, whatever you do not happen to know at present—that is, what you do not remember—you must endeavor to search out and recollect?

Men.

What you say commends itself to me, Socrates, I know not how.

Soc.

And so it does to me, Meno. Most of the points I have made in support of my argument are not such as I can confidently assert; but that the belief in the duty of inquiring after what we do not know will make us better and braver and less helpless than the notion that there is not even a possibility of discovering what we do not know, nor any duty of inquiring after it—this is a point for which I am determined to do battle, so far as I am able, both in word and deed.

Men.

There also I consider that you speak aright, Socrates.

Soc.

Then since we are of one mind as to the duty of inquiring into what one does not know, do you agree to our attempting a joint inquiry into the nature of virtue?

Men.

By all means. But still, Socrates, for my part I would like best of all to examine that question I asked at first, and hear your view as to whether in pursuing it we are to regard it as a thing to be taught, or as a gift of nature to mankind, or as arriving to them in some other way which I should be glad to know.

Soc.

Had I control over you, Meno, as over myself, we should not have begun considering whether virtue can or cannot be taught until we had first inquired into the main question of what it is. But as you do not so much as attempt to control yourself—you are so fond of your liberty— and both attempt and hold control over me,[19] I will yield to your request—what else am I to do? So it seems we are to consider what sort of thing it is of which we do not yet know what it is! Well,

[19]Socrates characteristically pretends to be at the mercy of the wayward young man.

the least you can do is to relax just a little of your authority, and allow the question—whether virtue comes by teaching or some other way—to be examined by means of hypothesis.

Soc.

I mean by hypothesis what the geometricians often do in dealing with a question put to them; for example, whether a certain area is capable of being inscribed as a triangular space in a given circle: they reply—

"I cannot yet tell whether it has that capability; but I think, if I may put it so, that I have a certain helpful hypothesis for the problem, and it is as follows: If this area [20] is such that when you apply it to the given line[21] of the circle you find it falls short[22] by a space similar to that which you have just applied, then I take it you have one consequence, and if it is impossible for it to fall so, then some other. Accordingly I wish to put a hypothesis, before I state our conclusion as regards inscribing this figure in the circle by saying whether it is impossible or not." In the same way with regard to our question about virtue, since we do not know either what it is or what kind of thing it may be, we had best make use of a hypothesis in considering whether it can be taught or not, as thus: what kind of thing must virtue be in the class of mental properties, so as to be teachable or not? In the first place, if it is something dissimilar or similar to knowledge, is it taught or not—or, as we were saying just now, remembered? Let us have no disputing about the choice of a name: is it taught? Or is not this fact plain to everyone—that the one and only thing taught to men is knowledge?

Men.

I agree to that.

Soc.

Then if virtue is a kind of knowledge, clearly it must be taught?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

So you see we have made short work of this question—if virtue belongs to one class of things it is teachable, and if to another, it is not.

Men.

To be sure.

Soc.

---

[20] The problem seems to be that of inscribing in a circle a triangle (BDG) equal in area to a given rectangle (ABCD).

[21] i.e., the diameter (BF).

[22] i.e., falls short of the rectangle on the diameter (ABFE).

The next question, it would seem, that we have to consider is whether virtue is knowledge, or of another kind than knowledge.

Men.
I should say that is the next thing we have to consider.
Soc.
Well now, surely we call virtue a good thing, do we not, and our hypothesis stands, that it is good?
Men.
Certainly we do.
Soc.
Then if there is some good apart and separable from knowledge, it may be that virtue is not a kind of knowledge; but if there is nothing good that is not embraced by knowledge, our suspicion that virtue is a kind of knowledge would be well founded.
Men.
Quite so.
Soc.
Now it is by virtue that we are good?
Men.
Yes.

Soc.
And if good, profitable; for all good things are profitable, are they not?
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
So virtue is profitable?
Men.
That must follow from what has been admitted.
Soc.
Then let us see, in particular instances, what sort of things they are that profit us. Health, let us say, and strength, and beauty, and wealth—these and their like we call profitable, do we not?
Men.
Yes.

Soc.
But these same things, we admit, actually harm us at times; or do you dispute that statement?

Men.
No, I agree.
Soc.
Consider now, what is the guiding condition in each case that makes them at one time profitable, and at another harmful. Are they not profitable when the use of them is right, and harmful when it is not?
Men.
To be sure.
Soc.
Then let us consider next the goods of the soul: by these you understand temperance, justice, courage, intelligence, memory, magnanimity, and so forth?

Men.
Yes.
Soc.
Now tell me; such of these as you think are not knowledge, but different from knowledge—do they not sometimes harm us, and sometimes profit us? For example, courage, if it is courage apart from prudence, and only a sort of boldness: when a man is bold without sense, he is harmed; but when he has sense at the same time, he is profited, is he not?
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
And the same holds of temperance and intelligence: things learnt and coordinated with the aid of sense are profitable, but without sense they are harmful?

Men.
Most certainly.
Soc.
And in brief, all the undertakings and endurances of the soul, when guided by wisdom, end in happiness, but when folly guides, in the opposite?
Men.
So it seems.
Soc.
Then if virtue is something that is in the soul, and must needs be profitable, it ought to be wisdom, seeing that all the properties of the soul are in themselves neither profitable nor harmful, but are made

either one or the other by the addition of wisdom or folly; and hence, by this argument, virtue being profitable must be a sort of wisdom.

Men.

I agree.

Soc.

Then as to the other things, wealth and the like, that we mentioned just now as being sometimes good and sometimes harmful—are not these also made profitable or harmful by the soul according as she uses and guides them rightly or wrongly: just as, in the case of the soul generally, we found that the guidance of wisdom makes profitable the properties of the soul, while that of folly makes them harmful?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

And the wise soul guides rightly, and the foolish erroneously?

Men.

That is so.

Soc.

Then may we assert this as a universal rule, that in man all other things depend upon the soul, while the things of the soul herself depend upon wisdom, if they are to be good; and so by this account the profitable will be wisdom, and virtue, we say, is profitable?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

Hence we conclude that virtue is either wholly or partly wisdom?

Men.

It seems to me that your statement, Socrates, is excellent.

Soc.

Then if this is so, good men cannot be good by nature.

Men.

I think not.

Soc.

No, for then, I presume, we should have had this result: if good men were so by nature, we surely should have had men able to discern who of the young were good by nature, and on their pointing them out we should have taken them over and kept them safe in the citadel, having set our mark on them far rather than on our gold treasure, in order that none might have tampered with them, and that when they came

to be of age, they might be useful to their country.

Men.

Yes, most likely, Socrates.

Soc.

So since it is not by nature that the good become good, is it by education?

Men.

We must now conclude, I think, that it is; and plainly, Socrates, on our hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, it must be taught.

Soc.

Yes, I daresay; but what if we were not right in agreeing to that?

Men.

Well, it seemed to be a correct statement a moment ago.

Soc.

Yes, but not only a moment ago must it seem correct, but now also and hereafter, if it is to be at all sound.

Men.

Why, what reason have you to make a difficulty about it, and feel a doubt as to virtue being knowledge?

Soc.

I will tell you, Meno. I do not withdraw as incorrect the statement that it is taught, if it is knowledge; but as to its being knowledge, consider if you think I have grounds for misgiving. For tell me now: if anything at all, not merely virtue, is teachable, must there not be teachers and learners of it?

Men.

I think so.

Soc.

Then also conversely, if a thing had neither teachers nor learners, we should be right in surmising that it could not be taught?

Men.

That is so: but do you think there are no teachers of virtue?

Soc.

I must say I have often inquired whether there were any, but for all my pains I cannot find one. And yet many have shared the search with me, and particularly those persons whom I regard as best qualified for the task. But look, Meno: here, at the very moment when he was wanted, we have Anytus sitting down beside us, to take his share in our quest.

And we may well ask his assistance; for our friend Anytus, in the first place, is the son of a wise and wealthy father, Anthemion, who became rich not by a fluke or a gift—like that man the other day, Ismenias[23] the Theban, who has come into the fortune of a Polycrates[24]—but as the product of his own skill and industry[25]; and secondly, he has the name of being in general a well-conducted, mannerly person, not insolent towards his fellow-citizens or arrogant and annoying; and further, he gave his son a good upbringing and education, as the Athenian people think, for they choose him for the highest offices. This is the sort of man to whom one may look for help in the inquiry as to whether there are teachers of virtue or not, and who they may be. So please, Anytus, join with me and your family-friend Meno in our inquiry about this matter—who can be the teachers. Consider it thus: if we wanted Meno here to be a good doctor, to whom should we send him for instruction? Would it not be to the doctors?

An.

Certainly.

Soc.

And if we wanted him to become a good cobbler, should we not send him to the cobblers?

An.

Yes.

Soc.

And in the same way with every other trade?

An.

Certainly.

Soc.

Now let me ask you something more about these same instances. We should be right, we say, in sending him to the doctors if we wanted him to be a doctor. When we say this, do we mean that we should be wise in sending him to those who profess the art rather than those who do not, and to those who charge a fee for the particular thing they do, as avowed teachers of anyone who wishes to come and learn of them? If these were our reasons, should we not be right in sending him?

An.

Yes.

---

[23] A democratic leader at Thebes who assisted Anytus and the other exiled Athenian democrates in 403 B.C., shortly before their return to Athens and the supposed time of this dialogue (about 402 B.C.). Cf. *Plat. Rep. 1.336a.*

[24] Tyrant of Samos about 530 B.C. Cf. *Hdt. 3.39 ff.*

[25] As a tanner

Soc.

And the same would hold in the case of flute-playing, and so on with the rest? What folly, when we wanted to make someone a flute-player, to refuse to send him to the professed teachers of the art, who charge a regular fee, and to bother with requests for instruction other people who neither set up to be teachers nor have a single pupil in that sort of study which we expect him, when sent, to pursue! Do you not consider this would be grossly unreasonable?

An.

Yes, on my word, I do, and stupid to boot.

Soc.

Quite right. And now there is an opportunity of your joining me in a consultation on my friend Meno here. He has been declaring to me ever so long, Anytus, that he desires to have that wisdom and virtue whereby men keep their house or their city in good order, and honor their parents, and know when to welcome and when to speed citizens and strangers as befits a good man. Now tell me, to whom ought we properly to send him for lessons in this virtue? Or is it clear enough, from our argument just now, that he should go to these men who profess to be teachers of virtue and advertise themselves as the common teachers of the Greeks, and are ready to instruct anyone who chooses in return for fees charged on a fixed scale?

An.

To whom are you referring, Socrates?

Soc.

Surely you know as well as anyone; they are the men whom people call sophists.

An.

For heaven's sake hold your tongue, Socrates! May no kinsman or friend of mine, whether of this city or another, be seized with such madness as to let himself be infected with the company of those men; for they are a manifest plague and corruption to those who frequent them.[26]

Soc.

What is this, Anytus? Of all the people who set up to understand how to do us good, do you mean to single out these as conveying not merely no benefit, such as the rest can give, but actually corruption

[26] Anytus' vehemence expresses the hostility of the ordinary practical democrat, after the restoration of 403 B.C., towards any novel movement in the state.

to anyone placed in their hands? And is it for doing this that they openly claim the payment of fees? For my part I cannot bring myself to believe you; for I know of one man, Protagoras, who amassed more money by his craft than Pheidias—so famous for the noble works he produced—or any ten other sculptors. And yet how surprising that menders of old shoes and furbishers of clothes should not be able to go undetected thirty days if they should return the clothes or shoes in worse condition than they received them, and that such doings on their part would quickly starve them to death, while for more than forty years all Greece failed to notice that Protagoras was corrupting his classes and sending his pupils away in a worse state than when he took charge of them! For I believe he died about seventy years old, forty of which he spent in the practice of his art;

Soc.

and he retains undiminished to this day the high reputation he has enjoyed all that time—and not only Protagoras, but a multitude of others too: some who lived before him, and others still living. Now are we to take it, according to you, that they wittingly deceived and corrupted the youth, or that they were themselves unconscious of it? Are we to conclude those who are frequently termed the wisest of mankind to have been so demented as that?

An.

Demented! Not they, Socrates: far rather the young men who pay them money, and still more the relations who let the young men have their way; and most of all the cities that allow them to enter, and do not expel them, whether such attempt be made by stranger or citizen.

Soc.

Tell me, Anytus, has any of the sophists wronged you? What makes you so hard on them?

An.

No, heaven knows I have never in my life had dealings with any of them, nor would I let any of my people have to do with them either.

Soc.

Then you have absolutely no experience of those persons?

An.

And trust I never may.

Soc.

How then, my good sir, can you tell whether a thing has any good or evil in it, if you are quite without experience of it?

An.

Easily: the fact is, I know what these people are, whether I have experience of them or not.

Soc.

You are a wizard, perhaps, Anytus; for I really cannot see, from what you say yourself, how else you can know anything about them. But we are not inquiring now who the teachers are whose lessons would make Meno wicked; let us grant, if you will, that they are the sophists: I only ask you to tell us, and do Meno a service as a friend of your family by letting him know, to whom in all this great city he should apply in order to become eminent in the virtue which I described just now.

An.

Why not tell him yourself?

Soc.

I did mention to him the men whom I supposed to be teachers of these things; but I find, from what you say, that I am quite off the track, and I daresay you are on it. Now you take your turn, and tell him to whom of the Athenians he is to go. Give us a name—anyone you please.

An.

Why mention a particular one? Any Athenian gentleman he comes across, without exception, will do him more good, if he will do as he is bid, than the sophists.

Soc.

And did those gentlemen grow spontaneously into what they are, and without learning from anybody are they able, nevertheless, to teach others what they did not learn themselves?

An.

I expect they must have learnt in their turn from the older generation, who were gentlemen: or does it not seem to you that we have had many good men in this city?

Soc.

Yes, I agree, Anytus; we have also many who are good at politics, and have had them in the past as well as now. But I want to know whether they have proved good teachers besides of their own virtue: that is the question with which our discussion is actually concerned; not whether there are, or formerly have been, good men here amongst us or not, but whether virtue is teachable; this has been our problem all the time. And our inquiry into this problem resolves itself into the question: Did the good men of our own and of former times know how to transmit to another man the virtue in respect of which they were good, or is it

something not to be transmitted or taken over from one human being to another? That is the question I and Meno have been discussing all this time. Well, just consider it in your own way of speaking: would you not say that Themistocles was a good man?

An.

I would, particularly so.

Soc.

And if any man ever was a teacher of his own virtue, he especially was a good teacher of his?

An.

In my opinion, yes, assuming that he wished to be so.

Soc.

But can you suppose he would not have wished that other people should become good, honorable men—above all, I presume, his own son? Or do you think he was jealous of him, and deliberately refused to impart the virtue of his own goodness to him? Have you never heard how Themistocles had his son Cleophantus taught to be a good horseman? Why, he could keep his balance standing upright on horseback, and hurl the javelin while so standing, and perform many other wonderful feats in which his father had had him trained, so as to make him skilled in all that could be learnt from good masters. Surely you must have heard all this from your elders?

An.

I have.

Soc.

Then there could be no complaints of badness in his son's nature?

An.

I daresay not.

Soc.

But I ask you—did you ever hear anybody, old or young, say that Cleophantus, son of Themistocles, had the same goodness and accomplishments as his father?

An.

Certainly not.

Soc.

And can we believe that his father chose to train his own son in those feats, and yet made him no better than his neighbors in his own particular accomplishments—if virtue, as alleged, was to be taught?

An.

On my word, I think not.

Soc.

Well, there you have a fine teacher of virtue who, you admit, was one of the best men of past times. Let us take another, Aristeides, son of Lysimachus: do you not admit that he was a good man?

An.

I do, absolutely, of course.

Soc.

Well, did he not train his son Lysimachus better than any other Athenian in all that masters could teach him? And in the result, do you consider he has turned out better than anyone else? You have been in his company, I know, and you see what he is like. Or take another example— the splendidly accomplished Pericles: he, as you are aware, brought up two sons, Paralus and Xanthippus.

An.

Yes.

Soc.

And, you know as well as I, he taught them to be the foremost horsemen of Athens, and trained them to excel in music and gymnastics and all else that comes under the head of the arts; and with all that, had he no desire to make them good men? He wished to, I imagine, but presumably it is not a thing one can be taught. And that you may not suppose it was only a few of the meanest sort of Athenians who failed in this matter, let me remind you that Thucydides'[27] also brought up two sons, Melesias and Stephanus, and that besides giving them a good general education he made them the best wrestlers in Athens: one he placed with Xanthias, and the other with Eudorus—masters who, I should think, had the name of being the best exponents of the art. You remember them, do you not?

An.

Yes, by hearsay.

Soc.

Well, is it not obvious that this father would never have spent his money on having his children taught all those things, and then have omitted to teach them at no expense the others that would have made them good men, if virtue was to be taught? Will you say that perhaps Thucydides was one of the meaner sort, and had no great number of

[27] Thucydides (son of Melesias, and no relation of the historian) was an aristocrat of high principle and conservative views who opposed the plans of Pericles for enriching and adorning Athens.

friends among the Athenians and allies? He, who was of a great house and had much influence in our city and all over Greece, so that if virtue were to be taught he would have found out the man who was likely to make his sons good, whether one of our own people or a foreigner, were he himself too busy owing to the cares of state! Ah no, my dear Anytus, it looks as though virtue were not a teachable thing.

An.

Socrates, I consider you are too apt to speak ill of people. I, for one, if you will take my advice, would warn you to be careful: in most cities it is probably easier to do people harm than good, and particularly in this one; I think you know that yourself.[28]

Soc.

Meno, I think Anytus is angry, and I am not at all surprised: for he conceives, in the first place, that I am speaking ill of these gentlemen; and in the second place, he considers he is one of them himself. Yet, should the day come when he knows what "speaking ill" means, his anger will cease; at present he does not know.[29] Now you must answer me: are there not good and honorable men among your people also?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

Well then, are they willing to put themselves forward as teachers of the young, and avow that they are teachers and that virtue is to be taught?

Men.

No, no, Socrates, I assure you: sometimes you may hear them refer to it as teachable, but sometimes as not.

Soc.

Then are we to call those persons teachers of this thing, when they do not even agree on that great question?

Men.

I should say not, Socrates.

Soc.

---

[28] Anytus goes away. His parting words show that (in Plato's view) he regarded Socrates as an enemy of the restored democracy which, he hints, has popular juries only too ready to condemn such an awkward critic.

[29] This is probably not a reference to a prosecution of Anytus himself, but a suggestion that what he needs is a Socratic discussion on "speaking ill," for "ill" may mean "maliciously," "untruthfully," "ignorantly," etc.

Well, and what of the sophists? Do you consider these, its only professors, to be teachers of virtue?

Men.

That is a point, Socrates, for which I admire Gorgias: you will never hear him promising this, and he ridicules the others when he hears them promise it. Skill in speaking is what he takes it to be their business to produce.

Soc.

Then you do not think the sophists are teachers of virtue?

Men.

I cannot say, Socrates. I am in the same plight as the rest of the world: sometimes I think that they are, sometimes that they are not.

Soc.

And are you aware that not only you and other political folk are in two minds as to whether virtue is to be taught, but Theognis the poet also says, you remember, the very same thing?

Men.

In which part of his poems?

Soc.

In those elegiac lines where he says—"Eat and drink with these men; sit with them, and be pleasing unto them, who wield great power; for from the good wilt thou win thee lessons in the good; but mingle with the bad," "and thou wilt lose even the sense that thou hast."*Theognis 33-36 Bergk*Do you observe how in these words he implies that virtue is to be taught?

Men.

He does, evidently.

Soc.

But in some other lines he shifts his ground a little, saying—"Could understanding be created and put into a man"*Theognis 434-438 Bergk* (I think it runs thus) "many high rewards would they obtain""" "for he would have followed the precepts of wisdom: but not by teaching wilt thou ever make the had man good"*Bergk 434-438.* You notice how in the second passage he contradicts himself on the same point?

Men.

Apparently.

Soc.

Well, can you name any other subject in which the professing teachers are not only refused recognition as teachers of others, but regarded as not even understanding it themselves, and indeed as inferior in the very quality of which they claim to be teachers; while those who are

themselves recognized as men of worth and honor say at one time that it is teachable, and at another that it is not? When people are so confused about this or that matter, can you say they are teachers in any proper sense of the word?

Men.

No, indeed, I cannot.

Soc.

Well, if neither the sophists nor the men who are themselves good and honorable are teachers of the subject, clearly no others can be?

Men.

I agree.

Soc.

And if there are no teachers, there can be no disciples either?

Men.

I think that statement is true.

Soc.

And we have admitted that a thing of which there are neither teachers nor disciples cannot be taught?

Men.

We have.

Soc.

So nowhere are any teachers of virtue to be found?

Men.

That is so.

Soc.

And if no teachers, then no disciples?

Men.

So it appears.

Soc.

Hence virtue cannot be taught?

Men.

It seems likely, if our investigation is correct. And that makes me wonder, I must say, Socrates, whether perhaps there are no good men at all, or by what possible sort of process good people can come to exist?

Soc.

I fear, Meno, you and I are but poor creatures, and Gorgias has been as faulty an educator of you as Prodicus of me. So our first duty is to

look to ourselves, and try to find somebody who will have some means or other of making us better. I say this with special reference to our recent inquiry, in which I see that we absurdly failed to note that it is not only through the guidance of knowledge that human conduct is right and good; and it is probably owing to this that we fail to perceive by what means good men can be produced.

Men.

To what are you alluding, Socrates?

Soc.

I mean that good men must be useful: we were right, were we not, in admitting that this must needs be so?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

And in thinking that they will be useful if they give us right guidance in conduct: here also, I suppose, our admission was correct?

Men.

Yes.

Soc.

But our assertion that it is impossible to give right guidance unless one has knowledge looks very like a mistake.

Men.

What do you mean by that?

Soc.

I will tell you. If a man knew the way to Larisa, or any other place you please, and walked there and led others, would he not give right and good guidance?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

Well, and a person who had a right opinion as to which was the way, but had never been there and did not really know, might give right guidance, might he not?

Men.

Certainly.

Soc.

And so long, I presume, as he has right opinion about that which the other man really knows, he will be just as good a guide—if he thinks the truth instead of knowing it—as the man who has the knowledge.

Men.
Just as good.
Soc.
Hence true opinion is as good a guide to rightness of action as knowledge; and this is a point we omitted just now in our consideration of the nature of virtue, when we stated that knowledge is the only guide of right action; whereas we find there is also true opinion.
Men.
So it seems.
Soc.
Then right opinion is just as useful as knowledge.
Men.
With this difference, Socrates, that he who has knowledge will always hit on the right way, whereas he who has right opinion will sometimes do so, but sometimes not.
Soc.
How do you mean? Will not he who always has right opinion be always right, so long as he opines rightly?
Men.
It appears to me that he must; and therefore I wonder, Socrates, this being the case, that knowledge should ever be more prized than right opinion, and why they should be two distinct and separate things.
Soc.
Well, do you know why it is that you wonder, or shall I tell you?
Men.
Please tell me.
Soc.
It is because you have not observed with attention the images of Daedalus.[30] But perhaps there are none in your country.
Men.
What is the point of your remark?
Soc.
That if they are not fastened up they play truant and run away; but, if fastened, they stay where they are.

Men.
Well, what of that?

[30] Cf. *Plat. Euthyph. 11.* Socrates pretends to believe the old legend according to which Daedalus, the first sculptor, contrived a wonderful mechanism in his statues by which they could move.

Soc.
To possess one of his works which is let loose does not count for much in value; it will not stay with you any more than a runaway slave: but when fastened up it is worth a great deal, for his productions are very fine things And to what am I referring in all this? To true opinion. For these, so long as they stay with us, are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one makes them fast with causal reasoning. And this process, friend Meno, is recollection, as in our previous talk we have agreed. But when once they are fastened, in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more prized than right opinion: the one transcends the other by its trammels.

Men.
Upon my word, Socrates, it seems to be very much as you say.

Soc.
And indeed I too speak as one who does not know but only conjectures: yet that there is a difference between right opinion and knowledge is not at all a conjecture with me but something I would particularly assert that I knew: there are not many things of which I would say that, but this one, at any rate, I will include among those that I know.

Men.
Yes, and you are right, Socrates, in so saying.

Soc.
Well, then, am I not right also in saying that true opinion leading the way renders the effect of each action as good as knowledge does?

Men.
There again, Socrates, I think you speak the truth.

Soc.
So that right opinion will be no whit inferior to knowledge in worth or usefulness as regards our actions, nor will the man who has right opinion be inferior to him who has knowledge.

Men.
That is so.

Soc.
And you know that the good man has been admitted by us to be useful.

Men.
Yes.

Soc.
Since then it is not only because of knowledge that men will be good and useful to their country, where such men are to be found, but also on account of right opinion; and since neither of these two things—knowledge and true opinion—is a natural property of mankind, being acquired—or do you think that either of them is natural?
Men.
Not I.
Soc.
Then if they are not natural, good people cannot be good by nature either.
Men.
Of course not.
Soc.
And since they are not an effect of nature, we next considered whether virtue can be taught.
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
And we thought it teachable if virtue is wisdom?
Men.
Yes.
Soc.
And if teachable, it must be wisdom?
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
And if there were teachers, it could be taught, but if there were none, it could not?
Men.
Quite so.
Soc.
But surely we acknowledged that it had no teachers?
Men.
That is true.
Soc.
Then we acknowledged it neither was taught nor was wisdom?
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
But yet we admitted it was a good?

Men.
Yes.
Soc.
And that which guides rightly is useful and good?
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
And that there are only two things— true opinion and knowledge— that guide rightly and a man guides rightly if he have these; for things that come about by chance do not occur through human guidance; but where a man is a guide to what is right we find these two things—true opinion and knowledge.
Men.
I agree.
Soc.
Well now, since virtue is not taught, we no longer take it to be knowledge?
Men.
Apparently not.

Soc.
So of two good and useful things one has been rejected: knowledge cannot be our guide in political conduct.
Men.
I think not.
Soc.
Therefore it was not by any wisdom, nor because they were wise, that the sort of men we spoke of controlled their states—Themistocles and the rest of them, to whom our friend Anytus was referring a moment ago. For this reason it was that they were unable to make others like unto themselves—because their qualities were not an effect of knowledge.
Men.
The case is probably as you say, Socrates.
Soc.
And if not by knowledge, as the only alternative it must have been by good opinion. This is the means which statesmen employ for their direction of states, and they have nothing more to do with wisdom than soothsayers and diviners; for these people utter many a true thing when inspired, but have no knowledge of anything they say.

Men.
I daresay that is so.
Soc.
And may we, Meno, rightly call those men divine who, having no understanding, yet succeed in many a great deed and word?
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
Then we shall be right in calling those divine of whom we spoke just now as soothsayers and prophets and all of the poetic turn; and especially we can say of the statesmen that they are divine and enraptured, as being inspired and possessed of God when they succeed in speaking many great things, while knowing nought of what they say.
Men.
Certainly.
Soc.
And the women too, I presume, Meno, call good men divine; and the Spartans, when they eulogize a good man, say—
"He is a divine person."

Men.
And to all appearance, Socrates, they are right; though perhaps our friend Anytus may be annoyed at your statement.
Soc.
For my part, I care not. As for him, Meno, we will converse with him some other time. At the moment, if through all this discussion our queries and statements have been correct, virtue is found to be neither natural nor taught, but is imparted to us by a divine dispensation without understanding in those who receive it, unless there should be somebody among the statesmen capable of making a statesman of another. And if there should be any such, he might fairly be said to be among the living what Homer says Teiresias was among the dead—"He alone has comprehension; the rest are flitting shades." [31] In the same way he on earth, in respect of virtue, will be a real substance among shadows.

Men.
I think you put it excellently, Socrates.

[31] *Hom. Od. 10.494*

Soc.

Then the result of our reasoning, Meno, is found to be that virtue comes to us by a divine dispensation, when it does come. But the certainty of this we shall only know when, before asking in what way virtue comes to mankind, we set about inquiring what virtue is, in and by itself. It is time now for me to go my way, but do you persuade our friend Anytus of that whereof you are now yourself persuaded, so as to put him in a gentler mood; for if you can persuade him, you will do a good turn to the people of Athens also.

This offline edition was generated from the canonical TEI text.

bookstacks.org