

MENO

PLATO

TRANSLATION BY G. SALMIERI BASED ON
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MENO'S QUESTION AND SOCRATES'

MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught? Or is it acquired by practice, rather than teaching? Or, if it's neither of these, do men have it by nature or in some other way? 70

SOCRATES: Meno, the Thessalians have long been famous and admired among the Greeks for their horsemanship and their wealth; but I think they are admired for wisdom as well— especially the Larisaeans, your friend Aristippus' people.¹ You have Gorgias to thank for this; for when he came to that city the leading men of the Aleuadae (including you lover Aristippus), and the Thessalians generally, fell in love with wisdom. Moreover, he has gotten you in the habit of answering any all questions in a fearless and munificent manner, befitting those who know. He sets an example by offering himself to be questioned about by any Greek who pleases about anything he pleases, and he has an answer for everybody. But here the opposite is the case, Meno: there is, as it were, a drought of wisdom, and it seems as though wisdom had deserted our borders in favor of yours. All you have to do is ask one of our people a question like that, and he'll laugh and say: "Stranger, you must think I'm blessed, if you think I can tell whether virtue can be taught, or how it comes about. I'm so far from knowing whether it can be taught or not, that I have no knowledge whatsoever of what virtue itself is!" b 71

I myself am in the same situation, Meno; I share my townsmen's poverty on this issue: I have to reproach myself for my utter ignorance about virtue. If I don't know what something is, how can I know what it's like?² Or do you suppose that someone who

¹ Meno is a young aristocrat visiting Athens from Thessaly. It becomes clear later in the dialogue that his host is Anytus, an Athenian statesman who would later be one of the accusers at Socrates' trial. The dialog is probably set in 404 BC when Meno was in Athens on his way to lead a military campaign against the Persians. The campaign ended badly, and Meno and the other generals died. His conduct is reported to have been unjust and traitorous, though there is some debate over the details and the extent of his wrongdoing.

² In English, when we ask what something is like, we might be asking what other things are like it, as an orange is like a tangerine. But someone who asks you what a tangerine is like is probably not asking you for a list of similar fruit; more likely he wants to know such things as what color and shape tangerines are, whether they are sweet or sour, easy or difficult to peel, etc. It is in this usage that "what it's like" can be used to translate the phrase ("*poion ti*") that appears at this point in Plato's Greek. In a later dialogue (*Theaetetus* 182a), Plato coined a new noun ("*poiotēs*") based on the key word in this phrase. (The word is "*poion*"; it has no exact English equivalent, but

doesn't know at all who Meno is, could know whether he is handsome or rich or noble, or the opposite of these? Do you think that's possible?

MENO: No, I don't. But, Socrates, is it true that you don't even know what virtue is? Should we report this to the people back home about you? c

SOCRATES: Report not only that, but also that, in my opinion, I haven't ever met anyone who knew.

MENO: What? Didn't you meet Gorgias when he was here?

SOCRATES: I did.

MENO: And you didn't think that he knew?

SOCRATES: I don't have a very good memory, Meno, so I can't tell you now how he struck me then. It may be that he did know and that you know what he said, so remind me how he described it. Or, if you prefer, make your own statement, for I expect that you share his views. d

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Then let's leave him out of it, since he's not here. But do tell me, Meno, for the gods' sake, what you yourself say virtue is. I'll be delighted to find that I was mistaken, and that you and Gorgias do really have this knowledge, when I've just been saying that I've never met anyone who had.

MENO'S INITIAL ACCOUNTS OF VIRTUE

MENO: It won't be hard to answer your question, Socrates. First, let's take the virtue of a man: he should 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. If you want the virtue of a woman, that's not hard to explain either: she should manage her house well, preserving its contents, and obey her husband. And there's another virtue for a child (there's one for boys and another for girls); and there's another for the elderly. There's one for freemen, if you'd like that, and another for slaves; and there are lots of other virtues as well, so it's not perplexing to state what virtue is. For there is a virtue for each of the actions and ages and for each job each of us has. And the same goes for vice. e 72

SOCRATES: How lucky I am, Meno! I'm looking for one virtue, and I've found a whole a

means something like "which sort".) In order to translate this word into Latin, Cicero introduced the word "*qualitas*" (based on "*qualis*", the Latin equivalent of "*poion*"). This Latin word was, in turn, adopted into English as the word "quality." Thus today we might speak of the *qualities* of a tangerine—e.g., its orange color, sweet taste, and easiness to peel.

swarm of them in your keeping. But, Meno, to follow up the image of a swarm, suppose I asked you about bees what their substance is and you replied that there are many bees of all sorts. I'd reply: "Are you saying that, by being many and of all sorts, they differ from each other *in being bees*? Or are they no different in this way, but rather in some other way—for example, in beauty, size, or shape?" How would you answer? b

MENO: I'd answer that bees are no different from one another in being bees.

SOCRATES: What if I went on to say: "Then this is what I want you to tell me, Meno, what do you say this thing itself is in which they are no different but are all the same?" Would you be able to answer? c

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: So with the virtues, if they're many and of all sorts, they all have one and the same form that makes them virtues. And it is right to look to this when you're asked to make clear what virtue is. Don't you understand what I mean? d

MENO: I think I understand the question, but not as fully as I'd like to.

SOCRATES: Do you think it's only in the case of virtue, Meno, that one can say there is one for a man, another for a woman, and so on with the rest, or is it the same in the cases of health and size and strength? Do you think that there is one health for a man, and another for a woman? Or does it have the same form everywhere, if it is indeed health, whether it's in a man or in anything else? e

MENO: I think that a man's health and a woman's are the same.

SOCRATES: What about size and strength? If a woman is strong, it will be by to the same form and the same strength; for by "the same" I mean that strength does not differ insofar as it is strength, whether it's in a man or in a woman. Or do you think there is a difference?

MENO: I don't think so.

SOCRATES: And will virtue, insofar as it is virtue, differ at all whether it's in a child or an adult or in a woman or a man? 73

MENO: Socrates, it seems to me that this case is somehow different from the others.

SOCRATES: Why? Didn't you say that a man's virtue is to manage a city well, and that a woman's is to manage a house?

MENO: I did.

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

MENO: Certainly not. b

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

MENO: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: Then, in order to be good, both a woman and a man must have the same things: justice and temperance.

MENO: Evidently.

SOCRATES: And what about a child or an old man? Can they ever hope to be good if they are licentious and unjust?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Only if they're temperate and just? c

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So all people are good in the same way; for they become good by acquiring the same things?

MENO: so it seems.

SOCRATES: And, presumably, if they didn't have the same virtue, they wouldn't be good in the same way.

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Since everyone's virtue is the same, then, try to tell me, if you can recollect, what Gorgias (and you, agreeing with him) say that it is.

MENO: It's simple: the power of ruling over people; if you're looking for something that covers all cases. d

SOCRATES: That's just what I'm looking for. But, Meno, is a child's virtue the same, or a slave's? Is it an ability to rule over his master? Do you think that someone who rules is a slave?

MENO: No, Socrates, I don't think that at all.

SOCRATES: Indeed it's unlikely. Consider this further point: you say that it's "being able to rule"; shouldn't we add "justly, rather than unjustly"?

MENO: Yes, I think so; for justice, Socrates, is virtue.

SOCRATES: Is it virtue, Meno, or *a certain* virtue? e

MENO: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean the same thing I would about anything else. For example, take roundness if you like: I'd say that it's a certain shape but not simply that it's shape. I'd describe it this way because there are also other shapes.

MENO: Quite right, just as I say there are other virtues besides justice.

SOCRATES: What are they? Tell me. As I could tell you the other shapes, if you asked, tell me the other virtues. 74

MENO: Alright. I think that courage is a virtue, and temperance, and wisdom, and munificence, and there are many others.

SOCRATES: We have the same situation again, Meno; we have found many virtues when looking for one (though not in the same way as before), but we are not able to discover the one that runs through them all.

MENO: Socrates, that's because I'm not yet able to follow your line of search and find a single virtue that's common to all, as one can in other cases. b

SOCRATES' MODEL ACCOUNTS OF SHAPE AND COLOR

SOCRATES: That's likely. I'll try to help us progress, if I can. You understand, of course, that it's the same way with everything: Suppose that someone asked you the question I did just now, "What is shape, Meno?" and you replied "Roundness," and then he asked (as I did) "Is roundness shape or a certain shape?" Surely you'd answer that it's a certain shape.

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: That would be because there are other shapes? C

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if he proceeded to ask, "What other shapes are there?" you would tell him.

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: What if he asked you what color is and when you answered "white", he replied: "Is white color or a certain color?" You'd reply "A certain color", because there are other colors besides white.

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: And if he asked you to tell him the other colors, you would mention others that d

are colors as much as white is.

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now suppose he pursued the issue as I do and said: “We always end up with many things, but this isn’t what I want. Since you call these many things by a single name, and say they are all shapes, even when they are opposite to each other, tell me what this thing is, which applies the round no less than to the straight, and which you call shape, since you say that round is as much a shape as straight is—or don’t you say this?” e

MENO: I do

SOCRATES: And in speaking this way, you don’t mean that the round is no more round than it is straight or that the straight is no more straight than it is round?

MENO: Of course not.

SOCRATES: What you mean is that the round shape is no more a shape than the straight one and that the straight one is no more a shape than the round.

MENO: Right.

SOCRATES: Then what can this thing be that has the name “shape”? Try to tell me. Suppose that, someone asked you this question by someone, either about shape or about color, and you replied: “I don’t understand what you want, sir, or even what you’re saying.” He’d probably be surprised and he’s say: “Don’t you understand that I’m looking for the thing which is the same in all these cases?” Or would you still be unable to reply, Meno, if you were asked: “What is it that applies to the round and the straight and all the other things we call shapes and is the same in them all?” Try to tell me, so that you can practice for your answer about virtue. 75

MENO: No, Socrates; you tell me. b

SOCRATES: Do you want me to do you this favor?

MENO: By all means.

SOCRATES: And then you’ll tell me about virtue?

MENO: I will.

SOCRATES: Then I’ll do my best; it’s worth it.

MENO: It certainly is.

SOCRATES: Come on then, let me try to tell you what shape is. See whether you’ll accept this: Let’s say that shape is the only thing in existence that always accompanies color. Are you satisfied, or are you looking for something different? I’d be satisfied if you told me c

about virtue in this way.

MENO: That's foolish, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What do you mean?

MENO: Because, according to you, shape is that which always accompanies color. Alright, but if a person were to say that he doesn't know what color is anymore than what shape is, what sort of answer would you give him?

SOCRATES: A true one. And if the questioner was one of those skilled and contentious debaters, I'd say: "I've made my statement; if it's wrong, it's your job to examine and refute it." But in the case of friends who wanted to converse with each other as you and I are doing now, one ought to reply in a milder and more conversational way. It is more conversational perhaps for the reply to be not only true, but also to be based on things the questioner accepts as knowledge. This is how I'll try to answer you. d

Tell me, is there something you call an "end"? I mean by this a limit or extreme. I mean the same thing by all these words. Perhaps Prodicus would distinguish them, but you surely call something limited or ended—this is what I mean, nothing complicated. e

MENO: I do call something an "end", and I think I understand what you mean.

SOCRATES: Alright then, do you speak of a surface and also of a solid—the terms used in geometrical problems? 76

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Then you can understand from this what I mean by shape; for I say this of every shape, that a shape is that which limits a solid—or, more concisely, a shape is the limit of a solid.

MENO: And what do you say of color Socrates?

SOCRATES: It's insolent of you, Meno, to pester an old man with demands for answers, when you won't bother to recollect and tell me the account Gorgias gives of virtue! b

MENO: When you have answered my questions, Socrates, I will answer yours.

SOCRATES: Meno, even someone who was blindfolded, could tell from your conversation, that you are handsome and still have lovers.

MENO: How so?

SOCRATES: Because you always speak in orders. Like all beauties, when they're in bloom, you are tyrannical. And perhaps you've noticed that I have weakness for the handsome people, so I'll indulge you and answer. c

MENO: Please do

SOCRATES: Then would you like me to answer in the manner of Gorgias, which you would find easiest to follow?

MENO: Of course I'd prefer that.

SOCRATES: Don't both of you say there are streams of some sort that flowing out from things, as Empedocles held?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And there are passages into and through which these streams flow?

MENO: Definitely.

SOCRATES: And some of the streams fit into some passages, while others are too large or too small?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: And there is something that you call "sight"?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Alright then, "comprehend my meaning" (as Pindar says): color is a stream flowing out from figures, which fits with sight and is perceptible.

MENO: I think that's an excellent answer, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Perhaps that's because it's put in the way you're used to. And, at the same time, I suppose it occurs to you that you can say in the same way what sound is and smell and many other such things. e

MENO: Indeed.

SOCRATES: It's a theatrical answer, Meno, and so you find it more pleasing than the one about figure.

MENO: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: Nevertheless, son of Alexidemus, I'm inclined to think the other was the better of the two; and I think you would agree, if you did not have to go away before the mysteries, as you were saying yesterday, but could stay and be initiated.

MENO: But I would stay, Socrates, if you'd give me many more such answers. 77

SOCRATES: Well then, for my own sake as well as for yours, I'll do my best to continue to tell you such things, but I'm afraid that I won't be able to tell you many.

MENO'S ACCOUNT OF VIRTUE AS A WHOLE

SOCRATES: Now it's your turn to try to fulfill your promise by telling me what virtue is as a whole. You must stop making many things out of one, as jokers say when someone breaks something; leave virtue whole and sound, and tell me what it is. I've given you a model. 77b

MENO: Well, in my view, Socrates, virtue is, as the poet says, "to rejoice in admirable things and have power." That, I say, is virtue: to desire what is admirable and have the power to get it.³

SOCRATES: Do you say that a person who desires admirable things is a person who desires good things?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then are there some people who desire bad things and others who desire good ones? Don't you think all men desire the good? c

MENO: No, I don't.

SOCRATES: There are some who desire bad things?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do you mean that they think the bad things are good, or that they actually recognize them to be bad and desire them nonetheless?

MENO: I think there are both sorts of people.

SOCRATES: Do you really think, Meno, that anyone who knows that bad things are bad can still desire them?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: What do you mean by "desire"? Do you mean that he desires to possess it?

MENO: Yes, what else could it be? d

SOCRATES: Does he think that the bad things benefit those who possess them, or does he know that they harm them?

MENO: There are some people who think that bad things are beneficial and others who know that they're harmful.

SOCRATES: And do you think that those who think that bad things are beneficial know that

³ "*Kalos*", the word translated "admirable" is very wide in its meaning. It is often translated "beautiful", but in addition to aesthetic beauty, it encompasses nobility, rightness, and a range of related positive qualities.

they are bad?

MENO: No, that I can't entirely believe.

SOCRATES: Obviously, people who don't know that the things are bad don't desire bad things, but only things they thought were good (though they were really bad). So those who are ignorant and think the things are good really desire good things. Right? e

MENO: So it seems in that case.

SOCRATES: What about the people who you say desire bad things believing that bad things harm their possessors—do these people know that they will be harmed by them?

MENO: They must. 78

SOCRATES: Don't they think that those who are harmed are miserable in proportion to the harm they suffer?

MENO: That also must be.

SOCRATES: Aren't the miserable unfortunate?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Then is there anyone who wants to be miserable and unfortunate?

MENO: I suppose not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then no one desires bad things, Meno, if no one desires to be like this. For what is being miserable but desiring what's bad and obtaining it?

MENO: It seems that what you say is true, Socrates, and that nobody desires what's bad. b

SOCRATES: Well, you were saying a moment ago that virtue is the desire for good and the power to attain it?

MENO: I was.

SOCRATES: The desiring part of this statement is common to everyone, and no one is better than anyone else in this respect.

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power to attaining it?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then it seems that virtue, on your account, is the power to obtain good things. c

MENO: I entirely agree with your current understanding of the issue, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then let us see whether what you say is true, since you're likely right. You say that virtue is the power to attain good things?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And by "good things", don't you mean such things as health and wealth?

MENO: Yes, and I include the acquisition of gold and silver and of political honors and offices.

SOCRATES: By "good things" you don't mean anything other than these?

MENO: No, but I mean all such things. d

SOCRATES: Very well: virtue is the acquisition of gold and silver, according to Meno, the ancestral friend of the Great King.⁴ Tell me, Meno, do you add that this acquisition must be done justly and piously, or does this make no difference to you? If someone attains these things unjustly, would you call that virtue all the same?

MENO: Certainly not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: It would be vice?

MENO: Yes, of course.

SOCRATES: Then it seems that justice or temperance or piety or some other part of virtue must accompany the acquisition of these things, otherwise it will not be virtue, though it provides one with good things. e

MENO: Yes, without these attributes, how could it be virtue?

SOCRATES: What about not attaining gold and silver, when it would be unjust to do so? Isn't this a virtue?

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: So attaining such goods won't be virtue any more than not attaining them; but it seems that whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and whatever is done without any such thing will be vice. 79

⁴ The "Great King" is the king of Persia. Meno's relation to the king is unclear, but this statement alleges that his family was connected to the Persian monarchy, and given the context, it could be taken to imply that Meno was in the pay of the Persians.

MENO: Agreed; it must be as you say.

SOCRATES: Weren't we just saying a little while ago that each of these things—justice and temperance and the others—was a part of virtue?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then you're toying with me, Meno.

MENO: How so, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Because after I begged you not to break up virtue into pieces, and after I gave you a pattern on which you should answer, you have ignored all this, and now tell me that virtue is the power to attain good things with justice. And justice, you tell me, is a part of virtue? b

MENO: I do.

Socrates: Then it follows from the things you've accepted that anything one does with a part of virtue is itself virtue; for you say that justice is a part of virtue as are all such things. Why do I say this? Because after I asked you to speak of virtue as a whole, you didn't say a word about what it is in itself, but rather told me that every action is virtue if it is done with a part of virtue—as though you had already told me what virtue as a whole is, and I could understand it even when you break it up into fragments! Therefore, Meno, I think that you must face the same question all over again: What is virtue, if every action done with a part of virtue is virtue (for that is the meaning of the statement that everything done with justice is virtue)? Or don't you agree that you have to meet the same question again? Do you think that anyone can know a part of virtue when he does not know virtue itself? c

MENO: No, I don't.

SOCRATES: And I'm sure you remember, when I answered you a little while ago about shape, how we rejected the sort of answer that is based on things that are still under investigation and have not yet been accepted. d

MENO: Yes, Socrates. And we were right in rejecting it.

SOCRATES: Well then, while what virtue as a whole is still under investigation, you must not suppose that you can make it clear to anyone through a response about the parts of virtue or any other such manner of speaking. You'll just have to face the same question over again: What is this virtue of which you're speaking all the time? Or don't you see the force of what I'm saying? e

MENO: I think you're right.

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

THE MENO PROBLEM

MENO: Before I met you, Socrates, I used to be told that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt. And now I think that you are bewitching me with your spells and incantations, which have reduced me to utter perplexity. And, if I may make a joke, you seem in appearance and in every other way just like the flat torpedo fish; for it numbs anyone who approaches and touches it, and you seem to have done something like this to me now.⁵ Indeed, my soul and my tongue are numb, and I do not know how to answer you. Yet I've made a great many speeches about virtue thousands of times before large audiences—and I thought they were very good speeches—but now I can't even say what it is. I think that you are wise not to voyage or go away from home; for if you went on like this as a stranger in any other city, you would be arrested for sorcery. 80
b

SOCRATES: You are a rascal, Meno, and you almost deceived me.

MENO: What do you mean, Socrates? c

SOCRATES: I can tell why you made a likeness of me.

MENO: Why?

SOCRATES: So that I would reciprocate. I know that all beautiful people like to have their likenesses made. I suppose it's to their advantage, since likenesses of the beautiful are beautiful. But I will not reciprocate.

As to my being a torpedo fish, if it is numb when numbs others, then I am like it, but not otherwise; for I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself. I don't know what virtue is; and, though you may have known before you touched me, now you too are certainly like someone who doesn't know. d
Nevertheless, I'd like to consider it and to inquire with you into what it is.

MENO: And how, Socrates, will you look for it, when you don't know at all what it is? Which totally unknown thing will you inquire into? And even if you find it out, how will you know that it is the thing you didn't know?

SOCRATES: I understand what you mean to say Meno. But do you see what an contentious argument you're introducing? You say that man cannot inquire into either what he knows or what he does not know: he cannot inquire into what he knows, since he knows it, so there is no need for an inquiry; and he cannot inquire into what he does not know, since he doesn't know what to look for. e

MENO: Well doesn't that seem to be a good argument, Socrates? 81

SOCRATES: No to me.

MENO: Can you say why?

⁵ The torpedo fish is a type of electric ray.

SOCRATES: Yes, I will.

THE THEORY OF RECOLLECTION

SOCRATES: I have heard from certain wise men and women who spoke of divine things divine that...

MENO: What did they say?

SOCRATES: Something that I think is true and beautiful.

MENO: What? And who were they?

SOCRATES: They were certain priests and priestesses, who have taken care to be able to give an account of their practices. Pindar also said it and many others among the divine poets. This is what they say (see whether you think they speak the truth): they say that a man's soul is immortal; and that, though it sometimes reaches an end, which is called dying, at other times it is born again, but it is never destroyed. Therefore, one must live one's life with the utmost piety: b

For from whomsoever Persephone shall accept requital for ancient wrong, 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.⁶ c

Since the soul is immortal, and has been born many times, and has seen everything here and in the underworld, there is nothing that it hasn't learned, and it's no wonder that it can recollect everything that it used to know about virtue and other things. Everything is related, and the soul has learned everything, so after it has recollected one thing (a process that men call "learning"), nothing prevents it from recollecting everything else. If, that is, one is brave and does not give up the inquiry, for inquiring and learning are just recollection. So we must not give credence to that contentious argument: it would make us lazy and only wimpy men enjoy hearing it. But the other account makes us active and keen to inquire. I believe that this is true and I'd like to inquire with you into what virtue is. d
e

MENO: Yes, Socrates; but what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, and that what we call learning is only recollection? Can you teach me how this is?

SOCRATES: As I just said, Meno, you are a rascal. You're asking whether I can teach you, when I'm saying that there is no teaching, but only recollection. You're doing it so that I'll appear to contradict myself. 82

MENO: By Zeus, Socrates, that wasn't my intention; rather I spoke from habit. But if you

⁶ Pindar (Fragment 133)

can somehow show me that it is as you say, please do.

SOCRATES: I won't be easy, but I would still like to do my best for your sake. Just call one of your many attendants—whichever you like—so that I can demonstrate it in his case. b

MENO: Certainly. Come here, boy.

SOCRATES: Is he Greek? Does he speak Greek?

MENO: Yes, indeed; he was born in my house.

SOCRATES: Now pay attention and see whether you think he's learning from me or recollecting.

MENO: I will.

SOCRATES: Tell me, boy, do you know that a figure like this is a square?

BOY: I do.

SOCRATES: And you know that a square figure has these four lines equal? c

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And these lines which I have drawn through the middle of the square are also equal?⁷

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: A shape of this sort can be larger or smaller?

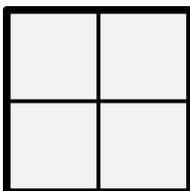
BOY: Of course.

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

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But since this side is also two feet, it must be twice two feet? d

⁷ Socrates has drawn a square with lines through the middle like this:



BOY: It must be.

SOCRATES: Then the square is of twice two feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how many are twice two feet? Count and tell me.

BOY: Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Now couldn't there be another shape twice the size of this one, but with the lines equal like this one?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how many feet would that be?

BOY: Eight.

SOCRATES: And now try and tell me how long each side of that shape would be. The side of this one is two feet long; how long would the side of that one be?

BOY: Clearly, Socrates, it would be double.

SOCRATES: Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions; and now he thinks he knows about the line required to make shape of eight square feet, doesn't he?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And does he know?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: He just guesses it, from the double size required?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now watch him recollecting things in order, as one must recollect.

Tell me, boy, do you say that we get a double space from a double line? The space I'm talking about is not long one way and short the other, but equal each way like this one, though double the size—eight feet. Now see if you still think we get this from a double length of line.

BOY: I do.

SOCRATES: But this line is doubled, if we add here another of the same length?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And you say we'll get our eight-foot space from four lines of this length?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Let's draw such a shape.⁸ Isn't this the shape that you say is eight feet? b

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And here, within it, don't we have four shapes, each of which is equal to the figure of four feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then how large is the whole? Four times that space, isn't it?

BOY: It must be.

SOCRATES: And four times is not double?

BOY: No, indeed.

SOCRATES: How much is it?

BOY: Quadruple.

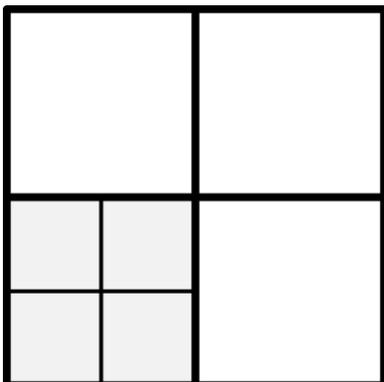
SOCRATES: So, boy, from the double line we get a space that is not double the size but c
quadruple the size.

BOY: True.

SOCRATES: Four times four is sixteen, isn't it?

BOY: Yes.

8



SOCRATES: What line would give us a space of eight feet? This gives a quadruple space, doesn't it?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the space of four feet is made from this like of half the length?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Good; and isn't a space of eight feet double the size of this one, and half the size of the other?

d

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Won't it be made then from a line longer than this one and shorter than that one?

BOY: Yes, I think so.

SOCRATES: Excellent; always answer just what you think. And now tell me, isn't this line two-feet and that line four-feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the line on the side of the eight-foot shape, should be more than this two-foot line and less than that four-foot line?

BOY: It should.

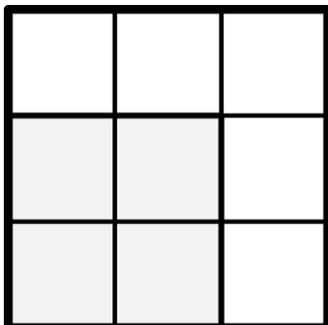
SOCRATES: Try and tell me how long you say it is.

e

BOY: Three feet.

SOCRATES: Then if it's three we'll add a half to this two-foot line to make it three-feet. For here, on this side we have two plus one more, and on that side there are two plus one more, and this makes the shape you're talking about.⁹

⁹



BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But if there are three feet this way and three feet that way, the whole space will be three times three feet?

BOY: So it seems.

SOCRATES: And how much is three times three feet?

BOY: Nine.

SOCRATES: And how many feet was the double square supposed to be?

BOY: Eight.

SOCRATES: So we fail to get our eight foot shape from this three foot line.

BOY: Indeed.

SOCRATES: What line will we get it from then? Try to tell us exactly. If you don't want to work it out, just show me what line it is.

84

BOY: But by Zeus, Socrates, I don't know.

SOCRATES: Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection? At first he didn't know what line forms the shape of eight feet, and now he still doesn't know; but then he thought he knew, and he confidently answered as though he knew, and was aware of no perplexity; whereas now he feels the perplexity he is in, and in addition to not knowing, he also doesn't think that he knows.

b

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: Isn't he better with regard to the thing he doesn't know?

MENO: I that he is.

SOCRATES: By perplexing and numbing him like the torpedo fish, have we harmed him?

MENO: I don't think so.

SOCRATES: And we have probably helped him towards finding out the truth about it: now, though he does not know, he wants to inquire, whereas then he thought he could easily make many fine speeches before many people about how the double space, must have a line of double the length for its side.

c

MENO: It seems so.

SOCRATES: Do you think that he would have ever tried to seek or learn what he thought he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, before he was reduced into the perplexity of

realizing that he did not know, and longed to know it?

MENO: I don't think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then he benefitted from being numbed?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Now notice how, as a result of this perplexity, he will go on and discover something by inquiring with me, while I merely ask questions and do not teach him. And be on the watch to see if you ever find me teaching him or expounding to him, instead of questioning him on his opinions. d

Tell me, boy, don't we have here a square of four feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And here we add another square equal to the former one?¹⁰

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And a third, which is equal to either of them?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Should we fill up the vacant corner?

BOY: Sure.

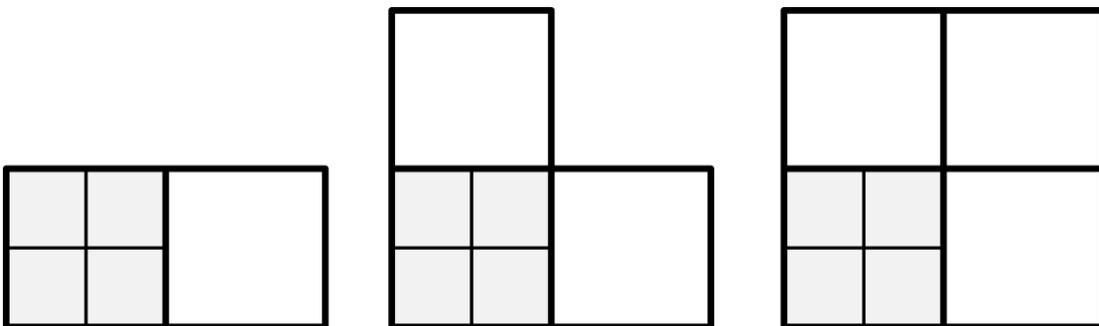
SOCRATES: Here, then, there are four equal spaces?

BOY: Yes. e

SOCRATES: And how many times larger is this whole space than this other?

BOY: Four times.

¹⁰For this and the following steps, the progression is as follows:



SOCRATES: But it was supposed to be only, remember?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And doesn't this line, reaching from corner to corner, cut each of these spaces in half?¹¹

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And so we have four equal lines that contain this space?¹²

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now consider how large this space is.

BOY: I don't understand.

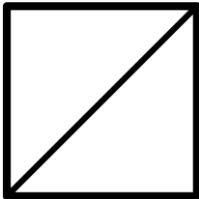
SOCRATES: Hasn't each of these inside lines cut off half of each of these four spaces?

BOY: Yes.

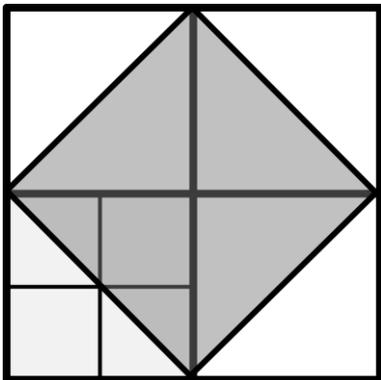
SOCRATES: And how many of these spaces are in this shape?¹³

BOY: Four.

¹¹



¹² "This space" refers to the square (shaded below) whose sides are the diagonals of the four two-foot squares.



¹³ That is: how many of the triangles created by dividing each of the initial two-foot squares on the diagonal are there in the square bounded by the diagonals of those squares?

SOCRATES: And how many are there in this?¹⁴

BOY: Two.

SOCRATES: And four is how many times two?

BOY: Twice.

SOCRATES: So how many feet is this space?¹⁵

b

BOY: Eight feet!

SOCRATES: And from what line do you get this figure?

BOY: From this one.

SOCRATES: From the line drawn from one corner of the two-foot shape to the other?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: The sophists call this the diagonal, so if this is its name, then you, Meno's boy, say that the double space is the square of the diagonal.

BOY: Certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What do you think, Meno? Weren't all of these answers given from his own opinions?

MENO: Yes, they were all his own.

c

SOCRATES: And yet, as we said before, he did not know?

MENO: Right.

SOCRATES: So these opinions were in him, weren't they?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Therefore, within a person who doesn't know about something, there are true opinions about the things he doesn't know.

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Right now 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 ways, you know that in the end he would finish with knowledge as exact as anyone's.

d

¹⁴ That is, how many of the triangles are in the initial two-foot square.

¹⁵ That is, the square bounded by the four diagonals.

MENO: It seems so.

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

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And isn't this recovery of knowledge in himself and by himself recollection?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then he must have either acquired the knowledge he now has at some time or else have always possessed it?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: 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 with all geometry and every branch of knowledge. Now, can anyone have taught him all this? You must know, especially since he was born and raised in your house.

MENO: And I am certain that no one has ever taught him.

SOCRATES: And yet he has these opinions, doesn't he?

MENO: Evidently, Socrates, he must have them.

SOCRATES: But if he did not acquire them in this life, it is obvious at once that he had them and learned them during some other time? 86

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Which must have been the time when he was not a human being?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So if in both of these periods (when he was and was not a human being) he had had true opinions in him which just have to be awakened by questioning to become knowledge, then his soul must have been learning throughout all time? For clearly he has always either been or not been a human being.

MENO: Evidently.

SOCRATES: If the truth of everything that exists is always in our soul, then the soul must be immortal, so you should be confident, and, whatever you do not happen to know at present—that is, whatever you don't remember—you must try to inquire into and recollect? b

MENO: I think, somehow, that what you're saying is right.

SOCRATES: So do I, Meno. I might not stand by much of the rest of my account; but that we will be better and braver and less helpless if we believe that we must inquire into what we don't know (rather than that we cannot find it out and mustn't look for it)—this is something that I'm determined to fight for to the best of my ability both in word and in deed. c

MENO: In this also, I think you're right Socrates.

THE HYPOTHETICAL METHOD

SOCRATES: Then, since we agree that one should inquire into the things one doesn't know, should we try to inquire together into what virtue is?

MENO: By all means. But still, Socrates, I would prefer to consider that question I asked at first, and hear your view as to whether in pursuing virtue, we should regard it as a thing to be taught, or as a gift of nature to mankind, or as something that men come to have in some other way. d

SOCRATES: If I was in charge of you, Meno, and not only of myself, we wouldn't have considered whether virtue can or cannot be taught until we had first inquired into what it is. However, since you don't even try to take charge of yourself (so that you can be free), but try to take charge of me and are in charge of me, I'll capitulate to you—what else can I do?

It seems, then, that we must consider what something's like without yet knowing what it is. Will you at least loosen your reigns a little and allow whether it comes about by teaching or in some other way to be considered from a hypothesis. By "from a hypothesis", I mean they geometers often consider whatever anyone asks them.¹⁶ For example, when asked whether a certain area can be inscribed as a triangle in a given circle, they reply "I don't yet know whether this is so, but I do think I have a hypothesis, as it were, that's relevant to the issue: If this area is such that when applied to the given line of the circle it falls short by a space similar to that which has been applied, then it seems to me that there's one conclusion, and there's another if it's impossible for this to happen. So I'd like to tell you my conclusion about inscribing this thing in the circle hypothetically."¹⁷ 87 b

¹⁶ "Hypothesis" is a Greek word that has been adopted into English. In Greek it's a noun form of the verb "*hupotithēme*", which means "to place under". ("*Hupo*" means "under", and "*tithēmi*" means "place".) So a *hypothesis* is something that's placed under something else. In an extended meaning, the verb means to offer, suggest or propose something, and so a hypothesis can be an offer, a suggestion, or a proposal. In geometry it came to mean something proposed or as a premise from which one might prove or explain something else—something that is not yet known, but is proposed and assumed for the sake of argument, so that we can consider what follows from it. This is the sense in which the term has been taken up into English, and the phrasing in the translation is a little awkward because in English the word only has this technical meaning, whereas in Greek it was a normal word that was just coming to have a specialized geometrical meaning. This is why Plato has to explain what he means by it, and it's why the geometer in the example (below) speaks of "a hypothesis, *as it were*"; he's signaling that he's using the word in a specialized, somewhat metaphorical way.

¹⁷ In the example, the geometer is given a particular rectangle and a particular circle and asked whether it is possible to inscribe in the circle a triangle that has the same area as the rectangle. He does not know whether it is possible to

Let's speak about virtue also in this way. Since we know neither what it is nor what it's like, let's consider hypothetically whether or not it can be taught. If virtue were which of the things in the soul would it be teachable or not teachable? First off, if it is another sort of thing than knowledge, is it teachable or not—or recollectable, as we were just saying; it makes no difference what name we use—is it teachable or not? Or isn't it clear to everyone that nothing can be taught to human beings other than knowledge? c

MENO: I agree.

SOCRATES: Then if virtue is some sort of knowledge, it is clear that it must be teachable.

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: We've gotten off the hook quickly: it's like this it's teachable, but if it's like that it's not.

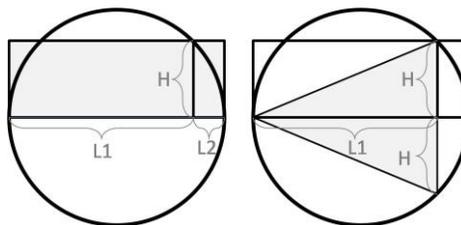
MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: After this, then, it seems we must consider whether virtue is knowledge or something other than knowledge.

MENO: Yes, it seems to me that that's the next thing to consider. d

inscribe such a triangle, but he realizes that if he knew a certain other thing (which he also does not know) he would be able to prove that it is possible, and that if he knew that this other thing was false, he would be able to prove that it isn't possible to inscribe the triangle. As a result, though he still cannot directly answer the question put to him, he can answer it *hypothetically*. That is, he can put forward a hypothesis and say "assuming this is true, then the answer is 'Yes'; but if it's false, then the answer is 'No'."

The preceding is all that is important for our purposes, but for those of you interested in the geometry, the hypothesis amounts to the following: "One can draw two adjacent rectangles of shared height (H) on the diameter of the circle, such that: (a) one of the new rectangles has the same area as the rectangle from the initial question, (b) the combined lengths of the new rectangles (L1+L2) exhaust the diameter of the circle, and (c) the two rectangles are similar (i.e., the lengths of their sides are proportional— $L1:H :: H:L2$)." If such rectangles can be drawn (as in the first diagram below), then it is easy to draw the inscribed triangle requested in the initial question. Each rectangle will have two corners on the circumference of the circle, and the diagonal connecting these two corners of the rectangle that is equal in area to the one in the initial question, will form one leg of an isosceles triangle of this area. A second leg can be formed (as in the second diagram below) by extending the line (H) shared by the two rectangles until it meets the circumference of the circle again, and the third line can be formed by connecting the ends of the first two. The result is an isosceles triangle inscribed in the circle. The triangle's area is clearly equal to that of the rectangle, because one half of the triangle is one half of the rectangle (that is, it is formed by two sides of the rectangle and its diagonal.)



ARGUMENT THAT VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE (AND, THEREFORE, TEACHABLE)

SOCRATES: Well now, surely we call virtue a good thing, don't we? Will this hypothesis stand for us: that it is good?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Now, if there is any other good separate from knowledge, virtue might not be a sort of knowledge; but if there isn't any good that knowledge doesn't encompass, then we'd be right to suspect that it's a sort of knowledge?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: And surely it's through virtue that we're good?

e

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if we are good, then we are beneficial; for all good things are beneficial?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then virtue is beneficial?

MENO: That must follow from what has been admitted.

SOCRATES: Then let's consider the things that benefit us, taking each up in turn: health, we say, and strength, and beauty, and wealth; we call these and other such things beneficial?

MENO: Yes.

88

SOCRATES: But we say that these same things also sometimes harm us, or do you say otherwise?

MENO: No, that's that I say.

SOCRATES: Then consider what directs each when it benefits us, and what directs it when it harms us? Aren't they beneficial when they're used correctly and harmful when they're not?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Alright then, let's consider the things that pertain to the soul. There's something you call "temperance", and there's justice, courage, education, memory, munificence, and all such things?

b

MENO: Surely.

SOCRATES: Now consider those of these that you think aren't knowledge but something other than knowledge: aren't they sometimes harmful and sometimes beneficial? For

example, courage (if courage is not wisdom, but a sort of boldness).¹⁸ Isn't a bold man harmful when he lacks understanding; and isn't he beneficial when he has understanding?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the same goes for temperance and education: when learned and disciplined with understanding they're beneficial, but without understanding they're harmful.

MENO: Very true.

SOCRATES: Summing up, then, everything that the soul undertakes or endures ends in happiness when wisdom directs and the opposite when folly does.¹⁹ c

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Therefore, if virtue is something that's in the soul, and it must be beneficial, then it has to be wisdom, because all the things that pertain to the soul are neither beneficial nor harmful in themselves, but when attached to wisdom or folly become either beneficial or harmful. Then, according to this argument, virtue, which is beneficial, must be a sort of wisdom. d

MENO: It seems that way to me.

SOCRATES: And indeed, the other things we were just talking about—wealth and such things—are sometimes good and sometimes harmful. The soul makes them beneficial by using and directing them correctly, or it makes them harmful by doing so incorrectly, just as in the other case wisdom's direction makes the things in the soul beneficial whereas folly's makes them harmful. e

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: In fact, a reasonable person would direct them well and an unreasonable one erroneously?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: Therefore we can say this about everything: whether any other thing is good for a human being depends on his soul, and the things in the soul itself depend on wisdom. So by this account, the beneficial is wisdom, and we'll say that virtue is beneficial. 89

MENO: Certainly.

¹⁸ The word for "wisdom" here (and often below) is "*phronēsis*," rather than "*sophia*," which is translated "wisdom" elsewhere in our readings and is a root of the word "philosophy." Plato usually uses these two terms synonymously. In Aristotle, who distinguishes between them, "*phronēsis*" is traditionally translated "prudence," or in some contexts as "intelligence."

¹⁹ The word translated "folly" here is the grammatical negation of "*phronēsis*."

SOCRATES: Then we'll say that virtue is wisdom, either altogether or in part?

MENO: I think the things you're saying are right.

SOCRATES: But if so, then good men are not this way by nature.

MENO: I don't think they are.

SOCRATES: If they were then this would follow: if good men were so by nature, we surely would have had men who could discern which of the young were good by nature, and we would take the ones they pointed out and guard them in the Acropolis, sealing them up much more securely than gold so that no one could corrupt them, and when they came of age they would benefit the city. b

MENO: Yes, Socrates, that's likely.

SOCRATES: Then since it is not by nature that good men become good, is it by learning? c

MENO: I think it has to be, Socrates. Clearly it is according to our hypothesis: if virtue is knowledge then it is taught.

SOCRATES: Perhaps, by Zeus. But what if we were not right to agree to that?

MENO: It certainly seemed right then.

SOCRATES: But it must also seem right now and later if it's at all sound.

MENO: So? What's do you have in mind that's bothering you and making you doubt that virtue is knowledge? d

ARGUMENT THAT VIRTUE ISN'T TEACHABLE (AND, THEREFORE, ISN'T KNOWLEDGE)

SOCRATES: I'll tell you, Meno. I don't withdraw as wrong the statement that it's teachable if it's knowledge, but consider whether you think it's plausible to doubt that virtue is knowledge. If anything whatsoever, not only virtue, is taught, doesn't it have to have to be both teachers and pupils?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: And conversely, if something has neither teachers nor pupils, wouldn't we be right to suppose that it isn't teachable? e

MENO: Sure, but do you think that there aren't any teachers of virtue?

SOCRATES: I've often inquired into whether there were any, and in spite of all my efforts, I can't find one. Yet I've searched with many people, and particularly those who I think are best qualified for the task. And now, Meno, in the nick of time Anytus has come to sit with

us and take part in our search. We should ask for his help, because, first of all, Anytus is 90
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 (the Theban, who has come into the fortune of
Polycrates), but as the product of his own wisdom and diligence, and has a reputation for b
good conduct and manners rather for being insolent towards his fellow citizens or arrogant
and annoying. Further he gave his son here a good upbringing and education—so most
Athenians think: they’ve elected him to the highest offices. This is the sort of man we can
look to for help in the inquiry into whether or not there are teachers of virtue, and, if so,
who they are. So please, Anytus, join with me and your houseguest Meno in our inquiry
into who the teachers of virtue are. Consider it this way: If we wanted Meno here to be a c
good doctor, who would we send him to for instruction? Wouldn’t it be to the doctors?

ANYTUS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Or if we wanted him to be a good cobbler, wouldn’t we not send him to the
cobblers?

ANYTUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And so forth?

ANYTUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now let me ask you something else about these same cases. We say that we’d
be right to send him to the doctors if we wanted him to be a doctor. When we say this, do d
we mean that we’d be wise to send him to people who practice the art rather than to people
who don’t, and to people who charge a fee for this as self-proclaimed teachers of anyone
who wants to come and learn from them? Isn’t it with this in mind that we’d be right to
send him?

ANYTUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the same goes for flute playing and the rest? If we wanted to make e
someone a flautist, we’d be very foolish if we were unwilling to send him to those who
undertake to teach the art and earn money at it, but willing to hassle others by sending him,
seeking to learn about this, to people who don’t claim to teach and have no pupils of the
subject we expect him to learn about! Don’t you think this would be very foolish?

ANYTUS: Yes, by Zeus, I think it would be, and stupid as well.

SOCRATES: Very good. Now it’s possible for you to deliberate with me about your guest 91
Meno. He’s been telling me, Anytus, that he longs for the wisdom and virtue by which
men order the state or the house well, and honor their parents, and know when to receive
and when to send away citizens and strangers, as a good man is expected to. Consider to b
whom would we be right to should we send him to learn this virtue. Or is it clear from
what we just said that he should go to the people who undertake to teach virtue and
proclaim themselves to teachers of all Greeks who want to learn, and who set and charge a

fee for this.

ANYTUS: Who do you mean, Socrates?

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

ANYTUS: By Heracles, Socrates, hold your tongue! I hope none of my relatives or friends, whether townsmen or foreigner, will go crazy enough to ruin himself by consorting with those people; for they are clearly the ruin and corruption of those who frequent them. c

SOCRATES: What, Anytus? Of all the people who purport to know how to do us good, are these the only ones so different from the others that they not only don't benefit those who we entrust to them, as others do, but they also destroy them? And for this they clearly expect to earn money?! d

No, I can't believe you. For I know one man, Protagoras, who amassed more money from this wisdom than did Pheidias (who was so famous for the beautiful works he made) and ten other sculptors.²⁰ How can it be as you say, when people who fix old shoes or restore clothes couldn't go undetected for thirty days they returned the clothes or shoes in worse condition than they received them? If they did this they'd soon starve to death, but all of Greece failed to notice for more than forty years that Protagoras was corrupting those who frequent him and sending his pupils away in a worse state than when he took charge of them! For I believe he died about ay seventy years old and spent forty of those years practicing his art, and during all that time he enjoyed a good reputation, which re retains undiminished this day. And it's not only Protagoras; there are many others, some who lived before him and others who are still living. e 92

Now are we to take it, according to you, that they knowingly 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 as crazy as that?

ANYTUS: They're far from crazy, Socrates. Much more crazy are those young men who give them money, and even more so are the relatives who entrust their young to them; but most of all are the cities that allow them to enter, and doesn't expel anyone, citizen or stranger, who tries to do anything like this. b

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

ANYTUS: No, by Zeus, I have never associated with any of them, nor would I let any of my people do so.

SOCRATES: You have no experience whatsoever of these people?

²⁰ Phidias was a sculptor. His "Statue of Zeus at Olympia" was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and his "Athena Parthenon", a massive statue of Athena, was the center piece in the Parthenon. Neither of these works (nor any other complete original Greek sculptures) survived into the modern period.

ANYTUS: And may I remain that way!

c

SOCRATES: How then, sir, can you tell whether a thing has any good or bad in it, if you are have no experience of it whatsoever?

ANYTUS: Easily, for I know what they are, whether I have experience of them or not.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you're a magician, Anytus. For from what you yourself say, I wonder how else you could know about them. But what we're inquiring now into now isn't whose company would make Meno wicked (let that be the sophists if you like). But tell me, and do you family friend here a service by telling him, in such a large city, who should he go to in order to acquire a worthy degree of the virtue I was just now describing?

c

ANYTUS: Why don't you tell him yourself?

SOCRATES: I've mentioned the men I thought were teachers of these things; but I turned out to be wrong, so you say, and perhaps you're right. Now you take your turn, and tell him to which of the Athenians to go to. Give us a name—anyone you like.

e

ANYTUS: Why should he be told the name of some one man? Any Athenian gentleman he comes across, without exception, will do him more good, if he will do as he's told, than the sophists.²¹

SOCRATES: And did those gentlemen grow spontaneously into what they are? Without having ever learned from anybody are they nevertheless able to teach others what they never learned themselves?

93

ANYTUS: I imagine that they learned it in turn from the gentlemen who came before them. Haven't there been many good men in this city?

SOCRATES: Yes, certainly, Anytus; and we also have many good statesmen, and have had them in the past as well as now, but have they have also been good teachers of their own virtue—not whether or not there are or have been good men here amongst us, but whether virtue is teachable; this is the issue we've been considering. What Meno and I have been inquiring into for a while is whether the good men (both of today and of the past) know how to impart the virtue that they themselves have to others, or is this something cannot be imparted or received from one man to another. Consider it this way, from what you've said: Wouldn't you say that Themistocles was a good man?

b

c

ANYTUS: Certainly, he was the best of them all.

SOCRATES: Then if anyone has ever been a good teacher of his own virtue, he especially was a good teacher of his?

²¹ The word translated "gentleman" is a phrase which literally means "good and noble man." Thus in calling someone a gentleman one is literally saying (among other things) that he is good. This is relevant to the argument that follows.

ANYTUS: I think so, if he wanted to be.

SOCRATES: But don't you think he would have wanted some other people to gentlemen, especially his own son? Or do you think he was jealous of him, and deliberately refused to impart the his own virtue to him? Haven't you 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 standing this way, and perform many other wonderful tricks in which his father had had him trained, so as to make him wise in everything that could be learned from good masters.²² Surely you must have heard all this from your elders? d

ANYTUS: I have.

SOCRATES: Then we can't blame the son's nature for his being bad?

ANYTUS: Probably not. e

SOCRATES: But have you ever heard anybody, old or young, say that Cleophantus, Themistocles' son, was a good and wise man with the same accomplishments as his father?

ANYTUS: No, never.

SOCRATES: And can we believe that his father chose to train his own son in those tricks, and yet made him no better than his neighbors in his own particular accomplishments—if virtue can indeed be taught?

ANYTUS: By Zeus, no.

SOCRATES: Well, there you have a teacher of virtue who, you admit, was one of the best men of the past. Let's take another, Aristeides, son of Lysimachus—do you not admit that he was a good man? 94

ANYTUS: I do, absolutely, of course.

SOCRATES: Well, didn't he train his son Lysimachus better than any other Athenian in all that teachers could teach him? And in the result, do you think he's turned out better than anyone else? I know you've been in his company and have seen he's like. Or take another example—Pericles, who has such munificent wisdom.²³ As you know, he brought up two sons, Paralus and Xanthippus. b

ANYTUS: I know.

²² You might notice that this is an odd use in English of the word "wise". The Greek them ("*sophos*") would be more naturally translated "skilled" here, but it is the word that is translated "wise" in other contexts, and I am translating it that way here too in order to give you a sense of the range of contexts in which it was used.

²³ Pericles was an Athenian statesman from the early fifth century. He lead the Greeks to victory over the Persians, and created an Athenian empire that encompassed many of the smaller surrounding cities. He supported the Athenian democracy and the intellectual life of the city, and built many public monuments.

SOCRATES: And you also know that he taught them to be the foremost horsemen in Athens, and trained them to excel in music and gymnastics and in all the other arts. And, with all that, did he have no desire to make them good men? I suppose that he wanted to, but presumably it's not something that one can be taught. And so you don't think that it's only a few of the lesser Athenians who failed in this matter, remember also that Thucydides had two sons, Melesias and Stephanus.²⁴ Besides giving them a good general education, he trained them in wrestling, and they were the best wrestlers in Athens; he placed one with Xanthias, and the other with Eudorus, who were thought to be the best wrestlers of the time. Don't remember? c

ANYTUS: I've heard of them.

SOCRATES: Well, isn't it obvious that this father would never have spent his money on having his children taught all these things, and then neglected to teach them at no expense the other things that would have made them good men, if virtue could be taught? d

Perhaps you'll reply that Thucydides was an inferior person without many friends among the Athenians and allies? He, was of a great family and had a lot influence in our city and all over Greece, so that if virtue could be taught he would have found the man, whether it was a townsman or a foreigner, who was likely to make his sons good, if he were too busy to do so himself with public affairs. But no, Anytus my friend, it looks as though virtue is not something that can be taught. e

ANYTUS: Socrates, I think you speak ill of people too easily. If you will take my advice, I'd would warn you to be careful: in most cities, it is probably easier to hurt people than the benefit them, and this is particularly so in this one, as I think you know.²⁵ 95

SOCRATES: Meno, I think Anytus is angry, and I am not at all surprised: in the first place, he thinks, in the first place, that I am speaking ill of these gentlemen; and in the second place, he thinks that he is one of them himself. If he ever realizes what "speaking ill" means, he'll stop being angry, but he doesn't know it now. Now you must answer me: aren't there gentlemen among your people also?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Well then, are they willing to put themselves forward as teachers of the young, and do they claim that they are teachers and that virtue can be taught? b

MENO: No indeed, Socrates, I assure you: sometimes you hear them say it's teachable, and sometimes that it's not.

SOCRATES: Then should we call these people teachers of this thing when they don't even

²⁴ The Thucydides in question, who was not related to the famous historian of the same name, was a political rival of Pericles. In effect Socrates is giving Anytus an example from the other side of the political spectrum, in case he's opposed to Pericles.

²⁵ It's easy to hurt someone because anyone can bring anyone to trial, as Anytus and others eventually to in Socrates' case. Anytus himself, incidentally, was put on trial after he lost an important battle; he was rumored to have bribed the jury.

agree on that great question?

MENO: I don't think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And what about the sophists? Are they the only teachers of virtue, as they claim to be? c

MENO: That's why I admire Gorgias, Socrates. You'll never hear him promising this, and he ridicules the others when he hears them promise it. He says rather that they make men clever at speaking.

SOCRATES: Then you don't think that the sophists are teachers?

MENO: I can't say. I'm like everyone else: sometimes I think they are and sometimes that they aren't.

SOCRATES: Do you know that it's not only you and other politicians who sometimes think it can be taught and sometimes that it can't? Theognis the poet says the same thing; do you remember? d

MENO: Where?

SOCRATES: In his elegies:

Eat and drink and sit with the mighty, and make yourself agreeable to them; for from the good you will learn what is good, but if you mix with the bad you will lose the understanding which you already have.²⁶ e

Do you see how he implies here that virtue can be taught?

MENO: Clearly.

SOCRATES: But in some other verses he shifts about. "If understanding could be created and put into a man," he says, "then they would have obtained great rewards" and "Never would a bad son have sprung from a good sire, for he would have heard the voice of instruction; but not by teaching will you ever make a bad man into a good one."²⁷ Notice 96
how in the second passage he contradicts himself on the same point.

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: Well, can you name any other subject in which those who claim to be teachers are not only refused recognition as teachers of others, but regarded as not even understanding it themselves, and are thought to be poor in the very thing that they claim to teach? Or is there anything else about which even the acknowledged "gentlemen" are sometimes saying it is teachable and sometimes saying that it is not? When people are so confused about something, would you say they are teachers in any proper sense of the b

²⁶ These are lines 33-36 of Theognis' elegies (as numbered in the Diehl edition).

²⁷ Theognis 434-438.

word?

MENO: No, indeed I wouldn't.

SOCRATES: But if neither the sophists nor the gentlemen are teachers, clearly there can be no other teachers?

MENO: No.

SOCRATES: And if there are no teachers, neither are there pupils?

c

MENO: Agreed.

SOCRATES: And we have admitted that a thing cannot be taught if it has neither teachers nor pupils?

MENO: We have.

SOCRATES: And there are no teachers of virtue to be found anywhere?

MENO: Right.

SOCRATES: And if there are no teachers, there can't be pupils?

MENO: So it appears.

SOCRATES: Then virtue cannot be taught?

MENO: It seems not, if we've considered it correctly.

AN ACCOUNT OF WHAT VIRTUE IS AND HOW IT IS ACQUIRED

MENO: But, Socrates, now I wonder if there are any good men; and, if there are, in what way could they have become good?

d

SOCRATES: Meno, I'm afraid that you and I are simpletons, and that Gorgias has educated you as badly as Prodicus did me. So we must first look to ourselves, and try to find somebody who will in some way make us better. I say this in view of our recent inquiry, in which I see that we absurdly failed to notice that it is not only under the direction of knowledge that human conduct is right and good; and it is probably because of this that we overlooked the way in which good men can be produced.

e

MENO: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I mean that good men must be beneficial: we were right, weren't we, in admitting that this must be so.

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MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And what about when we thought that they will be beneficial if they direct us rightly in conduct. I guess this admission was also correct?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: But then we said that one cannot direct correctly unless he is wise. This looks very like a mistake.

MENO: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I'll tell you. If a man knew the way to Larisa, or any other place you like, and walked there and led others, would he not give correct and good directions?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And what about a person who had a correct opinion about the way, but had never been there and did not know? Couldn't he give good directions too? b

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And while he has a correct opinion about that which the other knows, he will be no worse at directing than the wise person—since, though he's not wise, what he thinks is true.

MENO: He'd be no worse.

SOCRATES: Then true opinion is as good a guide to correct action as wisdom; and this is what we overlooked just now in considering what virtue's like, when we said that only wisdom directs action correctly. True opinion does also. c

MENO: That's likely.

SOCRATES: Then correct opinion is no less beneficial than knowledge?

MENO: The difference, Socrates, is only that the person with knowledge will always hit the mark; whereas the person with correct opinion sometimes will and sometimes won't.

SOCRATES: What do you mean? Won't someone who always has a correct opinion always be right, as long as his opinion is right?

MENO: It appears to me that he must. But then I wonder, Socrates, if this is so, why knowledge is far preferred to correct opinion and what the difference is between them. d

SOCRATES: Do you know why you wonder or should I tell you?

MENO: Please tell me.

SOCRATES: It's because you've never paid attention to the statues of Daedalus. But perhaps there are none in your country.

MENO: What does that have to do with what we're talking about?

SOCRATES: If they are not tied down, they run away and escape, but if they are tied down they stay put.

MENO: So what? e

SOCRATES: It's not worth much to have acquired a loose work of his, because, like an escaping slave, it won't stay put. But once it's tied down it's worth a lot, because his works are very beautiful. How does this relate to what I'm saying? It relates to true opinions: as long as they stay put, they're beautiful and useful and produce everything good. But they don't want to stay put for long, and they escape out of a man's soul, and so aren't worth much until one ties them down with an account of the cause. And this process, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. But when once they are tied down, in the first place, they become knowledge, and in the second, then they are stable. And that is why knowledge is preferred to correct opinion: knowledge differs from correct opinion by being tied down. 98

MENO: By Zeus, Socrates, something like that is likely.

SOCRATES: I'm also speaking without knowing, but only guessing. But I don't think it's just a guess that there is a difference between correct opinion and knowledge; I claim to know this. I don't claim to know much, but I would definitely put this down as one of the things that I know. b

MENO: Yes, Socrates; and you're correct in saying so.

SOCRATES: Aren't I also correct in saying that being directed by true opinion perfects the result of each action no worse than being directed by knowledge?

MENO: There again, I think what you say is true.

SOCRATES: Then correct opinion isn't any less beneficial in action than knowledge is, nor is a man who has correct opinion any less beneficial than one who has knowledge. c

MENO: That's so.

SOCRATES: And we agreed that the good man is beneficial?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then since it is not only through knowledge that men are good and beneficial to their cities, when they are, but also through correct opinion. And since neither of these two (knowledge and true opinion) come to men by nature, but are acquired... Or do you think d

that either of these comes about by nature?

MENO: I don't.

SOCRATES: Then if they do not come about by nature, neither do good men come about by nature?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Since it's not by nature, we've considered next whether it is taught.

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And we thought that if virtue was wisdom, it could be taught?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that if it is teachable, then it is wisdom?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And if there were teachers, it could be taught, but that and if there were no teachers it could not be taught? e

MENO: Right.

SOCRATES: But then we agreed that there are no teachers of it?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: We agreed, therefore, that it is not taught and that it's not wisdom?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: But yet we agreed that it is good?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that that which directs correctly is beneficial and good?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And that there are only two things—true opinion and knowledge—that direct correctly, and that a man directs correctly if he has these. (For things that happen by chance do not occur through human direction, but where there is correct human direction, it is through these two—true opinion and knowledge.) 99

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Alright then, since virtue isn't teachable, it no longer seems to be knowledge?

MENO: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: So of two good and beneficial things one has been rejected: knowledge cannot be our guide in public affairs. b

MENO: I don't think so.

SOCRATES: Therefore it was not by any wisdom, nor because they were wise, that the sort of men we spoke of directed their cities—Themistocles and the rest of them, to whom our friend Anytus was referring a moment ago. And this is why they were unable to make others like themselves—because it is not through knowledge that they are this way.

MENO: It is likely as you say, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then if it is not through knowledge, what remains is that it's through good opinion. This is what statesmen use to correct their cities. And they're as far from having wisdom as fortunetellers and prophets; for these people utter many true things when they're inspired, but they do not know what they're talking about. c

MENO: I'm afraid so.

SOCRATES: Then, Meno, it's appropriate to call these people divine, who, without understanding, have many great accomplishments, both in actions and in speech.

MENO: Certainly d

SOCRATES: Then it's correct to also call the fortune tellers and prophets we just mentioned divine, and all the poets, and especially we can say that statesmen are divine and enraptured, since they're inspired and possessed by God when they speak and accomplish many great deeds without knowing what they're talking about.

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And, Meno, women also call good men divine. And so do the Spartans; when they eulogize a good man, they say: "He is a divine person."

MENO: And they appear to be right, Socrates; though perhaps Anytus here will be annoyed at your statement. e

SOCRATES: I don't care. We'll converse with him some other time, Meno. Now, if we enquired and spoke well through this whole discussion, virtue neither comes about by nature nor is taught, but is imparted without understanding to those of us who receive it as a divine gift. Unless, that is, there is someone among the statesmen who is able to make someone else into a statesman. And if there is anyone, he could be said to be among the living what Homer says Teiresias was in Hades: "He alone kept his wits; the rest are 100

flitting shadows.”²⁸ Likewise, here, relative to virtue, such a man would be a true object among shadows.

MENO: Socrates, I think that’s excellently put.

b

SOCRATES: Then the result of our reasoning, Meno, is appears to be that it is by divine gift that virtue comes about for those who from whom it comes about. We will have clear knowledge of this when, before asking in which way virtue comes about for man, we first attempt to inquire into what itself is in itself. But now it is time for me to go. You convince our friend Anytus of the things that you have been convinced, so that he’ll be in a gentler mood. For, if you can convince him, you’ll do the Athenians a favor as well.

c

²⁸ Odyssey X 494.