

Plato, *Meno*

Translated by Sophie Grace Chappell

1. 70a-71d: Introduction

70a

Meno.¹ Are you able to tell me, **Socrates**,² whether virtue is teachable? Or if it isn't teachable, is it a habit that we get by practice? Or if it is neither learned nor got by practice, does it come to humans by nature? Or in some other way?

Socrates. Meno, in the old days the **Thessalians**³ were celebrated and admired by all the other Greeks for two things—their horsemanship, and their wealth. But nowadays, I gather, they're noted for wisdom too—especially the ones from **Larisa**,⁴ where your boyfriend Aristippus comes

70b

from. It is **Gorgias**⁵ who's transformed you! He arrived in Larisa and turned everyone in Thessaly into lovers of wisdom, especially the chieftains of your aristocratic clan the Aleaudae; and your admirer Aristippus among them.

Above all, Gorgias **has instilled in you a training** that means that, whatever anyone asks you, you can answer with a spectacular oratorical *tour de force*. Just

70c

right—for anyone who really knows the answer. This is what Gorgias himself does too: he makes himself available to any other Greek, to ask him any question he likes—and there isn't a single one for whom he has no answer.

But here in Athens, my dear Meno, we are in just the opposite state of affairs. **Here there's been a sort of wisdom-famine.**

71a

Perhaps our native wisdom has left us and emigrated to you? At any rate, you may take absolutely anyone from round here; if you try questioning him about virtue the way Gorgias likes to be questioned, he will just laugh at you, and reply like this. "My dear guest-friend, do I look to you like some being fallen from heaven? Really, as far as virtue goes—whether or not it is taught, or

¹ Meno son of Alexidemus (423-400 BC) was a famously handsome and dashing politician and soldier from Thessaly in northern Greece. If the visit to Athens and the conversation with Socrates portrayed in Plato's *Meno* really happened, that was probably in 401 BC. Meno died the next year in battle, while leading a Greek expedition against the Persian Empire.

² Socrates son of Sophroniscus (479-399 BC) was Plato's main teacher in philosophy, and is the main character in most of Plato's dialogues. **Among much else, he is famous for his claim to have no positive views of his own, and merely to be questioning other people about their views. How literally this claim should be taken is something that the *Meno* sheds much light on.**

³ The people of Thessaly in north-east Greece. As Socrates hints, they were not renowned for their intellectual sophistication—unlike the Athenians.

⁴ Then as now, Larisa is the main city of Thessaly.

⁵ Gorgias of Leontini (485-380 BC) was one of the most famous of the *sophists*, wandering professional teachers of various kinds of expertise or wisdom. He specialised in teaching public speaking. **Most sophists claimed to teach virtue**—but to judge by *Meno* 95c, Gorgias was unusual because he did *not* make this claim.

how it comes about—I fall so far short of knowing all that, that **actually I don't even know what virtue is.**"

71b

I'm in just this plight myself, Meno. I share my fellow-citizens' wisdom-starvation; I too berate myself that I don't know the first thing about virtue. If I don't know what virtue essentially *is*, how could I know what it is incidentally *like*? It would be as if someone who doesn't know Meno at all—who can't even point him out—could say whether Meno is handsome, or rich, or noble, or the opposite. Is that possible? Do you think he could?

Meno. No, I don't. But Socrates—do you really not know what virtue essentially is? Is that what

71c

we should tell them about you, back home in Thessaly?

Socrates. Yes, my sweet boy, and that's not all. You can tell them, too, that as far as I can see, I've never met anyone else who knew either.

Meno. But surely you met Gorgias when he was here?

Socrates. Indeed I did.

Meno. So didn't you think *he* knew what virtue essentially is?

Socrates. Really, Meno, I'm no good at remembering. Right now I can't tell you what I thought of him then. Maybe he knew. And maybe you still know what he said—so remind me how he

71d

spoke. Or if you prefer, say something of your own; no doubt your view of virtue is very like his.

Meno. Indeed it is.

Socrates. No. Actually let's leave Gorgias out of it, since he's not even here. No, by the gods—what do *you* say virtue is, Meno? Speak, and don't begrudge me your view. I've said I've never met anyone who knows what virtue is. If you show me that I'm mistaken, and that you and Gorgias *do* know this, what a fortunate mistake mine will turn out to be!

2. 71e-73d: Meno's first answer to the question "What is virtue?": "a swarm of virtues"

71e

Meno. But Socrates, it's not hard to say what virtue is. If you want the virtue of a man first, that's easy. **A man's virtue is to be man enough to run his city's affairs, and to run them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies—and make sure that no such harm ever comes to himself. Then if you want a woman's virtue, that's not hard to state either. What she has to do is keep house well, looking after the property and obeying her husband. A child's virtue is another thing, and it is different again depending on whether we mean a boy's virtue or a girl's. And there is a specific virtue for an old man, with further differences depending on whether he is a free old man or a slave**^[Ma1].

72a

There are any number of other varieties of virtue too. So it's hardly a problem, Socrates, to say what the definition of virtue is. **There is a specific virtue for each sort of activity and age, for each of us, in whatever we do. And similarly, I presume, for vice.**

Socrates. I do seem to be having the most remarkable luck today, Meno. I was only after *one* virtue, but to judge by your description, I have found a whole swarm. And talking of swarms—

72b

suppose I asked you about the real nature of a bee; about what a bee truly is. Suppose you replied that “There are all sorts of different kinds of bees.” Then how would you answer if I next asked you this? “Do you think they are all sorts of different things, in respect of their nature as bees? Aren’t they just the same in that respect? Aren’t they different only in other respects, like their beauty or size, or some other respect like that?” Tell me—what would you say if you were asked this question?

Meno. I’d say: “Yes, they’re all exactly the same as each other in respect of their nature as bees.”

72c

Socrates. Suppose I ask next: “Well, tell me this, Meno. What is it, this respect in which the bees don’t differ from each other at all, but are exactly the same? What do you call that?” Presumably you would have some answer to this question.

Meno. Yes, I would.

Socrates. Then do the same with the virtues. Even if there are all sorts of different kinds of virtues, still they do all have one and the same form in common, which is what makes them all virtues, and which we will presumably do well to fix our sight on, if we want to give a clear

72d

answer to the question what virtue is. Do you see what I mean?

Meno. I think so. But I don’t yet grasp your question as well as I’d like to.

Socrates. Do you think it is only where virtue is concerned that there is one sort for a man, another for a woman, and so on? Is the same true of health and size and strength? Do you think that there is one sort of health for a man, and another for a woman? Or is there the same form of health in all these cases, whatever sort of health we are talking about—men’s health,

72e

women’s health, or whatever?

Meno. Yes, I think health is the same thing in a man and in a woman.

Socrates. Isn’t the same true of size and strength? If a woman is strong, isn’t it the same form—the same strength—that makes her strong, as makes a man strong? What I mean by “the same” is this: there is no difference between a man’s strength and a woman’s strength, inasmuch as they are both cases of *strength*. Or do you think there is some difference?

Meno. No, I don’t.

73a

Socrates. So will a child’s virtue differ from an old man’s virtue, or a woman’s from a man’s, inasmuch as all these are cases of *virtue*?

Meno. Somehow, Socrates, my sense is that this time the case is no longer the same as the others.

Socrates. Why ever not? Didn’t you say that a man’s virtue is to manage a city well, and a woman’s to manage a household well?

Meno. I did say that.

Socrates. Can we manage anything well—city, household, whatever—if we don’t manage it temperately and justly?

73b

Meno. Definitely not.

Socrates. But whoever manages what they manage temperately and justly, will do so *because of* their temperance, and *because of* their justice.

Meno. Obviously.

Socrates. So both men and women, if they are to be *good* men and women, must have these same two virtues: temperance and justice.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. What about a child or an old man? How could there be a good child, or a good old man, who was intemperate or unjust?

Meno. There couldn’t.

Socrates. So they too need to be temperate and just.

Meno. Yes.

73c

Socrates. So all humans are good in the same way; and they become good when they acquire the same virtues.

Meno. So the argument implies.

Socrates. But they surely wouldn’t have been good in the same way, if virtue wasn’t the same virtue in them all.

Meno. No, they wouldn’t.

Socrates. So now that we’ve shown that there is one kind of virtue for everybody, try and recollect what you and Gorgias say that virtue *is*.

Meno. You want to have one definition covering all the cases?

Socrates. Yes, of course that’s what I want.

3. 73d-74b: Meno’s second definition: “Virtue is the capacity to rule”

73d

Meno. Well, if that’s what you want, I don’t know what to say. Except that virtue is the capacity to rule over other people.

Socrates. Does this definition include all virtue, Meno? Is this what virtue is in a child or a slave? Can the child rule over his father, or the slave over his master? If he did, would he still be a slave?

Meno. I don’t think so, Socrates.

Socrates. No, it hardly seems plausible, does it? And another thing, my fine friend: you say virtue is “the capacity to rule”. Aren’t you going to say “to rule *justly*, not unjustly”?

Meno. Yes, Socrates, I accept that amendment; after all, justice is virtue.

73e

Socrates. Virtue, Meno, or *a* virtue?

Meno. What do you mean?

Socrates. I mean exactly what I would mean in any other case. A circle, for example, is *a* shape and not merely *shape*: that’s what I should say, because there are other shapes.

Meno. Quite right; and that is exactly what I am saying about virtue—that there are other virtues as well as justice^[Ma2].

74a

Socrates. What are they? Tell me the names of them, as I would tell you the names of the other shapes if you asked me to.

Meno. Courage, temperance, wisdom, and good style are virtues; and there are many others.

Socrates. Yes, *Meno*; and now we are back in the same place as before, though this time by a different route. We've been searching for one virtue, and we've found many; but the common notion of virtue that runs through them all—that we cannot find^[Ma3].

74b

Meno. Well, *Socrates*, I still can't find the common account of virtue that you are after, in the same way that you want a common account other things.

4. 74b-76a: *Socrates* gives a homely definition of shape as an example of how to define

Socrates. That's not surprising; but I'll try to get nearer if I can, for perhaps you have grasped that there can be a common account of anything. Suppose now that someone asked you the question which I asked before. "*Meno*," he'd say, "what is *shape*?" And if you answered "roundness", he'd reply to you like I did. He'd ask whether you would say that roundness is "shape" or "a shape"; and you'd answer "a shape".

Meno. Definitely.

74c

Socrates. And you'd say this because there are other shapes?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And if he went on to ask "What other shapes are there?", you'd tell him.

Meno. I would.

Socrates. And if he similarly asked what colour is, and you answered "whiteness", and the questioner replied, "Would you say that whiteness is colour or a colour?", then you would answer, "A colour, because there are other colours as well".

Meno. I would.

Socrates. And if he said, "Tell me what they are"—you'd tell him of other colours which are

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colours no less than whiteness is.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Then if he pursued the question as I do, he'd say: "We keep coming back to pluralities, but don't offer me anything like that. Rather, since you call them all by the one name, and say that each of them qualifies as a *shape*, even though they contrast with one another—what is it that the curved shape has, just as much as the straight-sided shape? What is it that you call *shape*^[Ma4]

74e

no less in the curved ones than in the straight-sided ones?” For you *do* call both cases by the name “shape”, don’t you?

Meno. Yes, I do.

Socrates. And when you call them both “shapes”, you are not contrasting the curved with the straight-sided, for curvedness, nor the straight-sided with the curved, for straight-sidedness.

Meno. No indeed, Socrates.

Socrates. Rather, what you mean is that the curved shape is no more or less a *shape* than the straight-sided shape, nor vice versa.

Meno. You’re right.

Socrates. So—what is it that has this name *shape*? Try and say.

75a

If someone asked you “What is it that we call shape?”, or “What is it that we call colour?”, and you answered, “But my man, I don’t know what you mean, I don’t understand what you’re saying”—then very likely he would be astonished, and reply: “You don’t understand that I am seeking what is the same in all these cases?”

Or if he asked it another way, would you still be unable to reply then, Meno?—What if he asked this?— “The curved, and the straight-sided, and all the other things that you call shapes: what is it that is the same in all of them?” Try and tell me; at the very least, it will be practice for your answer about virtue.

75b

Meno. No, Socrates—you tell me.

Socrates. You want me to humour you?

Meno. Yes, absolutely.

Socrates. And *then* will you agree to tell *me* about virtue?

Meno. Yes, I will.

Socrates. Well, then, you make it worth my while. So I must give it my best efforts.

Meno. Quite so.

Socrates. All right then, let’s try and tell you what shape is. So consider whether you’ll grant that shape is *this*: “Shape turns out to be the only thing among existents that always accompanies colour.” Is this enough for you, or are you after something else? For my part, I’d be delighted if you gave me this sort of answer about virtue.

75c

Meno. But Socrates, that’s so naïve!

Socrates. How do you mean?

Meno. Well—“shape is what always accompanies colour”, according to you. But if someone said he didn’t know what colour was—that he was just as much at a loss about that as about shape—then how do you think *he* would have been answered by what you said?

Socrates. Well, at least my answer would give him the truth. And if my questioner were one of those wise men of the disputatious and combative sort, I’d say to him: “Well, I’ve stated my

75d

view. If it’s mistaken, then it’s up to you to take my statement in hand and refute it.” Or if the two discussants were friends, like you and I are at the moment, and wanted to discuss the point in dialogue together, then it would be right to put my answer rather more gently and dialectically. By

“more dialectically” I suppose I mean, *not* just answering with the truth, but also including, in the answer you give, steps that your interlocutor admits are known to him.

Well, I myself will try to address you in that way. So tell me: is there something that you call *limit*? I mean something like *boundary* or *last part*.

75e

I mean roughly the same by all three terms. (No doubt Prodicus would distinguish himself from us by distinguishing all three for us.) But *you surely say that things have limits and come to ends?* I just mean to say something like that, nothing fancy.

Meno. Yes, I do say that, and I believe I understand what you mean.

76a

Socrates. You’d also speak of a surface and of a solid, for example in geometry.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Well then, now you are ready to understand my definition of shape. *I define shape to be that in which the solid is bounded; or, more concisely, the limit of solid.*

5. 76a-77a: Socrates gives a pretentious definition of colour

Meno. So next, Socrates, what is colour?

Socrates. You are outrageous, Meno—you plague a poor old man to answer you like this, yet you

76b

can’t be bothered to remember Gorgias’ definition of virtue.

Meno. I will tell you that, Socrates—when you have answered my question.

Socrates. Even a man in a blindfold would only need to hear you talking to know that you are a beautiful boy, and that you still have lovers.

Meno. How so?

Socrates. Why, because you never say anything that isn’t an order. Just like the pampered pretty-boys, at least while they keep their looks: they act like tyrants. And no doubt you have recognised

76c

me as someone who has a weakness for beautiful boys. So I will humour you again, and answer.

Meno. Please do.

Socrates. Would you like me to answer you in the style of Gorgias, since that is what you most like to follow?

Meno. I would—of course I would.

Socrates. Well, don’t he and you say, following Empedocles, that everything that exists emits certain *effluences*?

Meno. Yes, absolutely we do.

Socrates. And that there are *passages*, into which and out of which these *effluences* pass?

Meno. That’s our view exactly.

Socrates. And some of these effluences fit into some of these passages, but some of them are too

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big or too small to fit.

Meno. That's the view.

Socrates. Now isn't there something that you call *sight*?

Meno. There is.

Socrates. So now, to use Pindar's phrase, "grasp this that I tell you":—colour is an effluence of shapes, of a size that fits with sight and can be perceived.

Meno. You seem to me to have given the best of answers here, Socrates.

Socrates. Yes, perhaps because it's expressed in the way you're used to. And I expect you've noticed that on this Empedoclean basis you could say what sound is too, and smell, and lots of

76e

other things of the same sort.

Meno. Indeed yes.

Socrates. Also, it's a high-flown poetic answer; that's why it pleases you more than the answer about shape.

Meno. Yes, that's how it strikes me.

Socrates. And yet, O son of Alexidemus, I can't help thinking that my "naïve" answer was better^[Ma5]. I'm sure that you'd come to the same view too, if you'd only stay and be initiated, and if you weren't compelled, as you claimed to be yesterday, to leave before the mysteries.

77a

Meno. No, I will stay, Socrates—if you will give lots more answers like that.

Socrates. Then I will at least try, as hard as I can, to talk that way, both for your sake and for my own. Though maybe I won't be able to give you *lots* of answers like that.

6. 77a-79e: Meno's third definition of virtue: "wanting and being able to get fine things"

Socrates. But come: now you must try to fulfil your undertaking to me. You've got to tell me about virtue as a whole, what it is. And you've got to stop making a many out of a unity, as the jokers say whenever someone breaks a vase or something. No, let virtue be a safe and sound

77b

unity, and tell me what it is. I've give you some models of how to do this.

Meno. Well, Socrates, I think virtue is—as the poet says—"to enjoy fine things and to be capable of them". I too say that this is what virtue is: someone who, wanting beautiful things, has the capacity to get hold of them.

Socrates. Do you say that the person who wants beautiful things, is someone who wants *good things*^[Ma6]?

Meno. Yes, very much so.

Socrates. So are you assuming that some people want bad things, and others want good things?

77c

My fine friend, don't you think that *everyone* wants good things?

Meno. No, I don't think that.

Socrates. So some people want bad things?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Do you mean that they think that the bad things that they want are *good* things? Or do they still want them, even though they know that those things are bad?

Meno. I think both these things happen.

Socrates. You really think, Meno, that someone can know that something bad is bad, yet still want it?

Meno. Yes, of course.

Socrates. What do you think *wanting* is? When I want, don't I want something to come my way, or happen to me?

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Meno. Yes, that's it; what else could it be?

Socrates. So does a person think that the bad things that he wants to happen to him, will do good to anyone they happen to? Or does he know that they harm anyone they happen to[Ma7]?

Meno. Well, some think that bad things will benefit them, and others know that bad things will harm them.

Socrates. And do you believe that those who think that bad things will benefit them, *know* that those bad things are bad?

Meno. No, I don't believe *that* at all.

Socrates. So isn't it clear that when people don't know that bad things are bad, they don't really want those bad things? Rather, what they want is what they *think* are good things, though really

77e

they are bad things. But if they are mistaken about those bad things, and imagine that the bad things they want are *good* things, then clearly, what they really want is *good* things. Isn't it?

Meno. Yes, that might be right about the people you describe.

Socrates. What about those who (you say) want bad things, and think that bad things harm the person who gets them? Surely they know that they will be harmed by the bad things that they want.

Meno. They must know that.

78a

Socrates. But don't they also know that when people are harmed, they are miserable in proportion to how much they are harmed?

Meno. They must know that too.

Socrates. And aren't those who are miserable, living badly?

Meno. I would certainly say so.

Socrates. Does anyone choose to be miserable and live badly?

Meno. I should say not, Socrates.

Socrates. Therefore, Meno, if there's no one who chooses to be miserable and live badly, then there is[Ma8] no one who chooses bad things. For what is it to be miserable, if not to want bad things and get them?

78b

Meno. It looks like you're right, Socrates—nobody wants bad things.

Socrates. Yet weren't you saying just now that virtue is to want good things, and to be capable of getting them?

Meno. Yes, I did say that.

Socrates. But our argument shows that everyone chooses the good. So if virtue is just *choosing* good things, no one will be more virtuous than anyone else.

Meno. Apparently so.

Socrates. So plainly what does the work is the other bit in your account. What makes one person more [\[Ma9\]](#) virtuous than another has to be: being *capable of getting* good things.

Meno. Yes, quite true.

Socrates. So your definition is really this: *virtue is being capable of getting good things.*

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Meno. Socrates, I think the way that you are now interpreting my definition is exactly right.

Socrates. Then let's see whether you are right about another point; for no doubt you were speaking well when you said it. You say that virtue is the capacity to get good things?

Meno. I do, yes.

Socrates. And the "good things" you mean are things like health and wealth?

Meno. Yes, and getting hold of gold and silver, and honours and power in the city.

Socrates. You wouldn't say that anything *else* might count as "good things"?

Meno. No; just everything of that sort.

78d

Socrates. So be it, then: as we are told by Meno, the hereditary guest-friend of the Great King, virtue means the acquisition of gold and silver. Would you qualify "the acquisition" as "the just and holy acquisition", or does that make no difference to you? Do you still call the acquisition *virtue*, even if someone acquires silver and gold unjustly?

Meno. No, Socrates, of course not.

Socrates. You call that *vice*.

Meno. Of course I do.

Socrates. *So, it seems, justice or temperance or holiness or some other part of virtue must be there*[\[Ma10\]](#)

78e

as well as the acquisition. If it isn't, there will be no virtue, even if there is an acquisition of good things.

Meno. Yes, for how could virtue come about without justice and temperance and so on?

Socrates. But suppose someone does *not* acquire gold and silver unjustly, whether for himself or for someone else. Isn't this *not* getting good things *also* virtue?

Meno. Apparently.

Socrates. So the acquisition of these good things won't in any way be more virtue than the *non-*acquisition of them. However, it seems that *whatever comes about with justice will be virtue,*

79a

and whatever comes about without justice and the other qualities like it will be vice.

Meno. I think it must be just as you say.

Socrates. But weren't we saying just a moment ago that each of these (justice, self-control, and all the others) was a part of virtue?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Well, now you're just toying with me, Meno.

Meno. Why do you say that, Socrates?

Socrates. Because a moment ago I asked you not to fragment virtue, or smash it into bits like a broken pot, and I gave you a pattern by which you were supposed to reply. And you have simply

79b

ignored it. You tell me that virtue is being able to acquire good things with justice, and you say that justice is a part of virtue.

Meno. Yes, I do.

Socrates. So don't the points that you've agreed add up to this: "virtue means doing things with a part of virtue"? For you say that justice and things like it are parts of virtue.

Meno. So what?

Socrates. What I mean is that I asked for an account of the whole of virtue. And you are miles away from telling me what virtue is, because what you say is that every action counts as virtuous, provided it is done with a part of virtue. As if you had already given me a definition of the whole of virtue, and I already knew—even when you have already smashed it into bits. But if "every action counts as virtuous provided it is done with a part of virtue", then I think you have to be

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asked the same question again from the beginning: "What *is* virtue?" That is what we need to be told first, whenever anyone says, e.g., that "Every deed done with justice is virtue". Or do you think that we don't need to go back to asking that same question? Do you think that anyone can know what a part of virtue is, who doesn't know what *virtue* is?

Meno. No, that seems wrong to me.

79d

Socrates. And if you remember,⁶ when I give you my definition of "shape" just now, I think we rejected any answer like this, that tried to answer by way of terms that we hadn't yet inquired into or agreed the meaning of

Meno. Yes, Socrates, and we were right to reject them.

Socrates. But then, you best of men, you shouldn't suppose that while we are still inquiring into the definition of the whole of virtue, we can tell anyone what it is by an answer that goes by way

79e

of the parts of virtue, or by any answer like that. Instead, what we need is to go back to the same question again. You say all these things about virtue; but what *is* virtue? Do you think I'm talking nonsense?

Meno. No, I think you're right.

Socrates. Well then, give me the answer again from the beginning. What do you say virtue is—you and your boyfriend Gorgias?

7. 79e-81a: The stingray and the paradox of enquiry

Meno. Socrates, even before I met you

80a

⁶ Another Greek pun on Meno's name, *mênôn*, and *mnêmôn*, "remembering", "having a good memory".

I was warned that you yourself are a confused person, and that all you do to others is perplex them too. And even now I can feel you casting your spell on me: dosing me with weird potions, singing me queer incantations, till I find myself brim-full with bewilderment. Indeed if I may be comic about it, Socrates, I think you're like one of those sting-rays that you find in the sea. (You even look like one.) Anyone who comes across a sting-ray is stung into numbness if they touch it; and you seem to have done something like that to me. Quite seriously I tell you that I have

80b

lost all sensation both in my thought and in my speech: I'm frozen, I have no answer for you. Ten thousand times before now I have made long and fluent speeches about virtue, to huge audiences. And^[Ma15] how well I spoke, too—as I thought at the time. Yet now I am stuck; I can't even say what virtue is. I think you're very wise to decide not to take ship and leave Athens, or go on tour. For if you went to some other city and subjected people to this sort of treatment when you were their guest—why, you'd be lynched for witchcraft.

Socrates. Meno, you're a shameless con-man, and you nearly conned me.

Meno. What on earth do you mean, Socrates?

80c

Socrates. I know why it is you offer this simile about me.

Meno. And why is it, according to you?

Socrates. To get me to return the favour with a similar flattering image about you. I know it for a fact: all you beautiful people love images—presumably because they serve your turn, since evidently beautiful objects have beautiful images. But I will make no images of you, Meno. As for myself—I am only like the sting-ray if sting-rays can sting *themselves* numb as well as other people: not otherwise. For I don't cause others perplexity while being above all perplexities myself. Absolutely on the contrary—it is because I am myself so much more perplexed than^[Ma16]

80d

others, that I make them perplexed too. Just now, for instance, I myself don't know what virtue is. Perhaps *you* knew, Meno, before you bumped into me; although by this stage you might as well have lost your knowledge. Still, with your help I want to make a joint inquiry into the question^[Ma17]: “What exactly is virtue?”

Meno. But Socrates—how will you search for something, when you do not know at all what that something is? Out of the range of *things that you don't know*, which of them will you put before yourself to be the objective of your search? Or even if, in the best case, you do stumble upon your objective, how will you know that it *is* your objective, given that you didn't know it?

Socrates. I know what you're getting at, Meno. But don't you see what a sophistical argument you

80e

are stirring up here? It is this dilemma: “No one can inquire either into what he knows or into what he doesn't know. He can't inquire into what he knows—for he knows it, and there is no need for this inquiry for anyone who knows. Nor can he inquire into what he doesn't know—for he doesn't know what it is that he should inquire into.”

81a

Meno. Don't you think this is a good argument, Socrates?

Socrates. No, I don't.

Meno. Can you say what's wrong with it [Ma18]?

81a-81e: recollection and the immortality of the soul

Socrates. Yes. I can say what I've heard from men and women who are wise about things divine.

Meno. What arguments did they give?

Socrates. They gave a sound argument, it seems to me, and a noble one.

Meno. What was the argument? And who were they?

Socrates. Some of those who give the argument are priests and priestesses who have been concerned to be able to give an account of the kind of things that the practice of priestcraft

81b

involves. And Pindar gives the argument too, as do many others of the godlike poets. And their argument is as follows—listen and see whether you think that they speak true.

They say that the human soul is immortal. At one time it comes to that end that they call dying, and at another time it comes into being again; but it is never destroyed. For this reason, they say, we must go through life in the most reverent way we can. For of those by whom

Persephone is paid pain's ancient debts,
These souls she gives back to the sunlit world,
Nine years being past; from such grow kings,
81c Noble men, splendidly strong and greatly wise;
By all times that come after they are called
Heroes most hallowed.

Since the soul is immortal and has come into being many times, and since it has seen this world and the World of the Dead and everything there is, there is nothing that it has not always already learned. Therefore it is no wonder that the soul should be able to remember everything it ever knew, about everything including virtue; for the soul already knew it all before. Everything that

81d

exists is related to everything else, and the soul always already knew everything. So once the soul has recollected just one thing in this life—this recollection is what people call *learning*—there is nothing to prevent the soul from drawing out of it everything else there is to know: if we are only courageous in our quest, and do not grow weary. And so, inquiry and learning is entirely recollection.

This is why we should not accept that sophistical argument of yours. It would make us lazy: it is sweet to the ears of the intellectual workshy. Whereas *this* argument makes us industrious and

81e

inquisitive; so this is the argument that I shall take to be true. It is because **I think it true** that I am willing to inquire, with your help, into our question: "What exactly is virtue?"

8. 81e-86c: Socrates and the slave boy

Meno. All right, Socrates. But how come you say that we do not learn, and that what we call “learning” is really recollection? Are you able to teach me how that holds true?

Socrates. Only a minute ago, Meno, I said that you are a con-man—and now you ask if I am able

82a

to *teach* you, when my whole point is that **there is no teaching, only recollection**. Your aim is to expose me straight away as someone who contradicts himself.

Meno. By Zeus, no, **Socrates, that wasn't the point of my question; it was just a manner of speaking** [Ma19]. But if you have some way to—well—*show* me that things are as you say, let's hear it.

Socrates. Well, it isn't an easy thing to do; still, I am willing to try for your sake. Call over one of your retinue—whichever slave you like—so that I can demonstrate this truth by experimenting

82b

on him.

Meno. By all means. [To a slave] Come over here.

Socrates. He is a Greek, isn't he? And speaks Greek?

Meno. Absolutely—born in the household.

Socrates. Pay attention, Meno, and see whether you think he is recollecting, or learning from me.

Meno. I'm watching.

Socrates. [Beginning to draw on the ground] Tell me then, boy, do you know that a square is a shape like this one?

Slave. Yes, I do.

82c

Socrates. So a square is a shape that has all these four lines [*the sides*] equal in length?

Slave. Yes, of course.

Socrates. Isn't a square also a shape with these lines equal too, these ones that I've drawn through the middle [*the diagonals*]?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. Now can't a shape like this be bigger or smaller, but still the same shape?

Slave. Of course.

Socrates. So if this side is two feet long and that side is two feet long, how many square feet will the square be? Look at it this way: if it was a rectangle two feet long and one foot broad, then the shape itself would obviously be two square feet, wouldn't it?

Slave. Yes.

82d

Socrates. But since this side is also two feet, won't the area be two feet times two feet?

Slave. Yes, it will.

Socrates. How many feet is two feet times two? Work it out and tell me.

Slave. Four, Socrates.

Socrates. Now there could be another square twice as large as this, with equal sides like this.

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. How many feet will the area of that be?

Slave. Eight feet.

Socrates. Really? Try and tell me: how long are the sides of this square? The sides of the first

82e

square were two feet long; so how long are the sides of the square which is double its area?

Slave. Obvious, sir—they will be twice as long.

Socrates. Do you see, Meno? I haven't taught him anything; I'm just asking questions. And now he thinks he knows the length of the side of a square with an area of eight feet, doesn't he?

Meno. So he does.

Socrates. But does he know it?

Meno. No—he's wrong.

Socrates. He's going on the doubling of the area, isn't he?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Watch him now: he will recollect one thing after another in the proper order. —So, boy,

83a

do you really think that doubling the lengths of the sides doubles the area? Remember, I'm not talking about an oblong but a square, a shape equal both ways: like this one, only twice as big, with an area of eight feet. Do you still think that doubling the lengths of the sides will give us a double-size square?

Slave. Yes, I do.

Socrates. All right. We can double this line by adding another line of the same length, can't we?

Slave. Certainly.

Socrates. And you say that a square with all its lines of this doubled length will be eight feet square?

Slave. Yes.

83b

Socrates. So let's draw this square. Is this the one that you'd say has an area of eight feet?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. Look: aren't there these four smaller squares in your "eight-foot square"? And isn't each of them just like the *four-foot* square?

Slave. Oh... yes.

Socrates. So how big really is your "eight-foot square"? Isn't its area four times four feet?

Slave. I suppose it must be, sir.

Socrates. But *four times* four feet is not the same thing as *double* four feet.

Slave. No, indeed.

Socrates. Double is multiplying by two, but four times is multiplying by what?

Slave. Four.

83c

Socrates. So doubling the lengths of the sides gives us four times the area, not double the area. Then from what length of side will we get a square with an area of eight feet? From the doubled length of side we get for times four feet, don't we?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. And from the original length of side—two feet—we get an area of four feet.

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. The eight-foot area is twice as much as the four-foot area, and half as much as the sixteen-foot area. So won't the eight-foot area be generated by a length which is in between the

83d

original and the doubled lengths of side?

Slave. That seems right... to me, anyway.

Socrates. Good; you answer with what seems right to you. Tell me, then: the original length was two feet, and the doubled length was four feet, wasn't it?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. So the area we want should be generated by a line longer than this one, and shorter than that one.

Slave. Yes, it should.

83e

Socrates. So try and say what you think its length will be.

Slave. Three feet.

Socrates. Well, if it is to be three feet, shall we take the half of this two-foot line, to make a three-foot line? Here are two feet, and here is a third foot. Likewise, here is a two-foot line, plus a one-foot line. So this square is the area that you mean?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. But if there are three feet this way and three feet that way, the area will be three times three feet.

Slave. It appears it will.

Socrates. And how much is three times three feet?

Slave. Nine.

Socrates. But what was the double area we were looking for?

Slave. Eight square feet.

Socrates. Therefore, the eight-foot square is *not* generated by a side of three feet.

Slave. No.

Socrates. Then from what length of side *do* we get it? Try and tell us exactly. If you do not want to

84a

calculate it, just show us the line in question.

Slave. By Zeus, Master Socrates, I'm sure I don't know.

Socrates. Again you see, Meno, how far the fellow has got by recollecting. To start with, he didn't know what length of side gives us the eight-foot square. He still doesn't know now. But at the beginning he *thought* he knew. He answered me confidently like someone who knew, and he did not think he was confused. Whereas now he does think he is confused. He doesn't know, and in

84b

line with that, he doesn't imagine that he knows, either.

Meno. You're right.

Socrates. Wouldn't you say he's in a better position now about what he doesn't know [Ma20]?

Meno. I think he is.

Socrates. So we haven't harmed him by leaving him perplexed—by numbing him with my stingray's sting?

Meno. I think not.

Socrates. Rather, in fact, we seem to have done him a service, helping him to see how things really are. Till now he thought that it was easy to say something sensible about the doubled area:

84c

namely, that it is generated by a line of doubled length. But now he has lost this 'knowledge', he should be happy to seek the truth.

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. So you think that, in his previous state, he would have tried to find out (or "learn") what he wrongly thought he knew? Do you think that that would have happened until he had stumbled into this perplexity, realised that he did *not* know—and begun to wish he did?

Meno. I don't believe it would, no.

Socrates. So he gained from being stung by the stingray!

Meno. It looks like it to me.

Socrates. Now watch how he recovers from this perplexity and actually finds something out from these inquiries. I'm only asking him questions—I'm not *teaching* him anything. You watch: just

84d

see if at any point you can catch me teaching him or explaining anything to him, instead of just asking him about his beliefs.

Tell me then, you. This is a square with an area of four feet, isn't it? Do you understand that?

Slave. I do.

Socrates. And this here that we add to it is another square of the same area?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. And this third square is the same again?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. Shall we fill up the vacant corner here?

Slave. All right.

Socrates. So now we have four squares all the same size?

84e

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. Very well: how many times larger is the area of all four squares together, than this, the area of just one of them?

Slave. Four times.

Socrates. But we were looking for the square which was *two* times the area of any one of these four squares—do you remember?

Slave. Yes, I do.

85a

Socrates. Now look at this line which goes from one corner of a square to the other corner. Doesn't this corner-to-corner line cut each of these squares in two?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. So now we have four lines of equal length enclosing this space?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. Now, think. What is the area of this space?

Slave. I don't understand.

Socrates. Hasn't each of these four corner-to-corner lines cut off half of each of the four small squares? —Hasn't it?

Slave. ...Yes.

Socrates. So how many halved small squares are there in this space we've cut out?

Slave. Four.

Socrates. And how many halved small squares in each small square?

Slave. Two.

Socrates. And four is how many times two?

Slave. Twice.

85b

Socrates. So if the small square has an area of four feet, what is the area of the space inside the corner-to-corner lines?

Slave. Eight feet.

Socrates. And what is the line that generates the eight-foot square?

Slave. This one.

Socrates. You mean the line which goes from one corner to the opposite corner of the four-foot square?

Slave. Yes.

Socrates. The experts call it the diagonal. So if we call it the diagonal, then your opinion—Meno's slave's opinion—is that the square on the diagonal is twice the area of any square.

Slave. Yes, sir.

Socrates. What do you say, Meno? Weren't all these answers given out of his own head?

85c

Meno. Yes, they were all his own beliefs.

Socrates. We were saying that he didn't know the answer before.

Meno. True.

Socrates. But these beliefs of his were right there in him, even then.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So a person may have within him true beliefs about things he knows nothing about.

Meno. Evidently so.

Socrates. And just now these beliefs have been aroused in him like dreams. But you can see that, if someone were to put those questions to him again and again in different ways, in the end his

85d

knowledge of geometry would be no less exact than anyone's.

Meno. Apparently.

Socrates. Won't he understand by recovering the knowledge himself, from within himself, with the help of no teacher, but merely of someone who asks him questions[Ma22]?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. This "recovering the knowledge himself, from within himself"—isn't this recollection?

Meno. Yes, absolutely.

Socrates. Well, either he gained this knowledge at some time, or else he has always had it.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. But if he has always had this knowledge, then he has always been in a state of knowledge. For if he has gained the knowledge at some time, *when*? Not in this life, unless he has

85e

been taught about this problem in geometry. But even if he had been, we could get him to do the same as he's just done with any other problem—indeed with any other branch of knowledge. But

has anyone ever taught him any of this knowledge? You are the man to know, given that he was born and bred in your house.

Meno. I'm sure no one ever has taught him geometry.

Socrates. Does he have these beliefs, or doesn't he?

Meno. He certainly seems to have them, Socrates.

Socrates. But if he didn't acquire these beliefs in this life, then isn't it clear that at *any* time he must

86a

already have had them and "learned" them[Ma23]?

Meno. Clearly he must.

Socrates. Which must include the times when he wasn't a human.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Then suppose that they were there within him at *both* times, both when he was and wasn't a human—these true beliefs which can be roused up by questioning and turned into items of knowledge. His soul must always already have learned them. For clearly, at any time, he either is or isn't a human.

Meno. Obviously.

Socrates. So if the truth of things is there in the soul at *all* times, that would make the soul

86b

immortal. And whatever you don't now happen to know—which means, whatever you don't recollect—you must boldly try to find out, by recalling it.

Meno. I can't tell you how much I like what you are saying.

Socrates. I like what I'm saying too, Meno. Some things I have said, I'm not altogether confident about. But we will surely be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we would be if we indulged in the idle fancy that there is no knowing and no use in

86c

seeking to know what we don't know. For this certainty I would make instant battle both in word and deed—if only I were a warrior.

Meno. Here too, Socrates, I think what you say is just right.

Socrates. So since we're of one mind that there should be inquiry into the things we don't know, shall we take in hand together the question what virtue is?

9. 86c-89c: "The hypothetical method: IF virtue is knowledge, then virtue can be taught"

Meno. By all means... although, Socrates, I would much rather return to the question I asked at the start, and inquire into that, and listen to you talk about it—the question whether we should treat virtue as something that comes to us by teaching, or as a gift of nature, or as coming to

86d

humans in some other way.

Socrates. Meno, if I had control over you and not just over myself, then we wouldn't be asking whether[Ma24] virtue is teachable or not before we have inquired into what virtue is. But you don't

even try to control yourself. No doubt you'd say being self-controlled goes against your *freedom*. What you want is to control me... and you *are* controlling me. So I give in. What choice do I have?

86e

It seems we are now to inquire into the **incidental qualities** of a thing whose essence we don't yet know. If nothing else, I think you should allow me at least this much: let the question whether virtue comes by teaching, or some other way, be examined by the method of hypothesis. Here's what I mean by the method of hypothesis. It's what the geometers very often do in *their* inquiries when someone asks them, say, about some area—whether a triangle

87a

of *this* area can be inscribed within *that* circle. The geometer might answer: "I don't yet know whether this triangle has that property; but I do have what you might call a hypothesis that I think may help us with this particular problem. If the triangle is such that, when you double the length of one of its sides, you will get the same area as the original triangle inscribed within the circle—then that will lead us to one conclusion; whereas if this cannot happen when you double that side, that will lead us to the opposite conclusion. So I want to start from a hypothesis, in order to tell you what follows from that about whether or not we can inscribe this triangle within this circle."

87b

It's just the same for us in our inquiry. We don't know either the essential nature or the incidental qualities of virtue. So let's ask whether virtue is teachable or not via a hypothesis. Like this: if virtue is a property—one of the properties that souls have—will it be teachable or not? And first: if virtue is something like knowledge, or something *not* like knowledge, then will it or won't it be **teachable?** (Or, as we put it just now, **recollectable**.) But don't let's be distracted by

87c

which word we use.) So then—*is it teachable?*

...Isn't this at least clear to everyone—that the only thing that people can teach, is *knowledge*?

Meno. ...Yes, that seems right to me.

Socrates. So if virtue is a kind of knowledge, clearly virtue will be teachable.

Meno. Yes, that must be right.

Socrates. So we have found a short way with this question. If virtue is in the category of *knowledge*, then it's teachable. If isn't in that category, then it's not.

Meno. Yes, quite right.

Socrates. So the next question, apparently, is, whether virtue is knowledge, or something different from knowledge.

87d

Meno. Yes, that does seem to be the question that comes next.

Socrates. Well, then—we don't say that virtue is anything but a good thing, do we? No, this **hypothesis is immovable for us: virtue is a good thing.**

Meno. Absolutely, yes.

Socrates. Now virtue might possibly *not* be any sort of knowledge, if there were any sort of good thing which was distinct and quite separate from knowledge. But if there is no sort of good thing

that does not come within the scope of knowledge, then we would be right to suspect that *virtue* must be knowledge of some kind.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. Well, isn't it by virtue that we are good?

Meno. Yes.

87e

Socrates. And if we are good, then we bring about benefits; for all good things are beneficial, aren't they?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So, then: **virtue is beneficial.**

Meno. Given what we've agreed, that follows necessarily.

Socrates. So let's consider, case by case, what are the things that benefit us. Health, we say, and strength, and good looks, and wealth—these, and things like these, we say are beneficial. Don't we?

Meno. Yes.

88a

Socrates. Yet we also say these things sometimes harm us, don't we? Or do you think we don't?

Meno. No, I agree.

Socrates. So ask yourself this. When does anyone think one of these things benefits or harms us?

Don't they benefit us when we use them right, and harm us when we use them wrongly?

Meno. Yes, quite so.

Socrates. Next, then, let's ask about the good things in the soul. Isn't there a thing you call self-control? And justice and courage, and being teachable, and having a good memory, and good style, and everything like that?

88b

Meno. Yes, I recognise all these.

Socrates. Well, take the good things in this list that you think are not knowledge, but something else. Don't you think those good things too are sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial? Like courage, at least when courage is not wisdom, but only like a sort of daring. Isn't it true that when a man is daring but doesn't act with intelligence, he gets harmed? Whereas when he is daring and *does* act with intelligence, he gets a benefit?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Likewise with self-control and teachability. When we are intelligent about what we let ourselves be taught, and about how we control ourselves, we are benefited; when we aren't, we are harmed.

88c

Meno. That's so true.

Socrates. Quite generally, in fact, isn't this true? **Whatever the soul tries to do or to put up with, if it is guided by wisdom, it leads to well-being**[Ma25]. But if it is guided by folly, to the opposite.

Meno. That seems right.

Socrates. So if virtue is one of the things in the soul, and is necessarily always beneficial, then virtue has got to be wisdom [or knowledge].⁷ Because none of the things in the soul, in and of themselves, are either beneficial or harmful; they only become beneficial—or harmful—when

88d

they are combined with wisdom—or folly. So by our argument, since virtue is beneficial, it has to be some kind of wisdom.

Meno. Yes, that seems right to me.

Socrates. Then what about the other good things, wealth and things of that sort, that we said just now are sometimes good and sometimes harmful? Isn't it just like the other case, where the guidance of wisdom makes things in the soul beneficial to the soul? Just likewise, things like

88e

wealth become beneficial when the soul uses and guides them rightly, and harmful when the soul misuses them.

Meno. Yes, absolutely.

Socrates. And the soul that guides them rightly is the wise soul; the soul that gets it wrong is the foolish one.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. Actually, can't we say the same about every case? Everything else depends upon the soul; everything in the soul, if anything is going to be *good* for it, depends upon its wisdom.

89a

So by this argument wisdom *is* benefit. And don't we say that virtue is beneficial?

Meno. Of course we do.

Socrates. Therefore we say that virtue is wisdom [or knowledge]; Greek *phronêsis*): either wisdom in general, or some part of wisdom.

Meno. And I think what we say is well said, Socrates.

Socrates. But if this is right, then it is not by nature that the good are good.

Meno. No, it seems not.

89b

Socrates. For if they *were* good by nature, then I should think something like this would have happened: there would be experts among us who can recognise even among new-born babies the ones who are good by nature. They would have pointed them out to us, and we would have kept them under lock and key in the Acropolis, so they can give their benefit to the city when they come of age. We'd have thought it much more important to stamp the city seal on *them*, to prevent *them* being counterfeited, than on bits of gold.

Meno. And how right we'd have been, Socrates.

Socrates. So the good are not good by nature. Then is it by teaching?

89c

⁷ From here to the end of the dialogue, Plato is repeatedly readier than we may be to equate words for "wisdom" with words for "knowledge". I mark these equations when they happen.

Meno. That now seems inevitable to me, Socrates. For it fits our hypothesis: *if* virtue is knowledge, then clearly virtue is teachable.

10. 89c-90b: But are there are any teachers of virtue? (Part I)

Socrates. Very likely, by Zeus... but were we right to agree on that hypothesis?

Meno. Why, just a moment ago we thought we were right!

Socrates. But it's not enough for the hypothesis only to look right "just a moment ago"; it has to look right *right now*, and in the future too, if there is going to be any soundness in it.

89d

Meno. Whatever is all this? What are you playing at, undermining our argument by starting to doubt that virtue is knowledge?

Socrates. I'll tell you, Meno. I still think it's right to say that *if* virtue is knowledge, then it is teachable.

But [Ma26] you should wonder whether it isn't reasonable for me to doubt that virtue is knowledge. Tell me this: if any given subject (not only virtue) is teachable, then aren't there necessarily teachers and learners of that subject?

89e

Meno. Yes, I think so.

Socrates. Conversely, wouldn't we be right to imagine that if there are no teachers or learners of something, that thing can't be taught?

Meno. That's right. But don't you think there are teachers of virtue?

Socrates. Why, I look for teachers of virtue again and again; I do everything to find them, but I can't find any. Even though I look at lots and lots of possible teachers of virtue, and even though I concentrate on those I think are likely to be most experienced at teaching it. But now, Meno, how opportune it is that Anytus here is sitting down with us, so that we can give him a role in our search.

90a

As well we might! For a start, Anytus is the son of a wealthy and wise father, Anthemion. Anthemion didn't become wealthy by accident, nor because someone left him the money—like that man who has just recently become as rich as Polycrates, Ismenias of Thebes... No, it was by his own wisdom and application that Anthemion got rich. Moreover, Anthemion is generally

90b

thought to be a citizen without arrogant ways, a man who is neither obstructive nor provocative, a man of propriety and accomplishment. The Athenian people must think that Anthemion did a good job of bringing up and educating this son of his Anytus; after all, they have elected Anytus to the highest political offices. Hence it is a fair question to ask men like Anytus about teachers of virtue—whether there are any, and if so who. So please, Anytus, help me and your guest Meno here to pursue our question, and find out who the teachers of virtue are.

11. 90b-95a: The dialogue with Anytus

Look at it this way. If we wanted Meno to become a good doctor,

90c

what teachers would we send him to? Wouldn't it be to doctors?

Anytus. Of course.

Socrates. Or if we wanted him to become a good shoe-maker, wouldn't we send him to the shoe-makers?

Anytus. Yes.

Socrates. And so on in similar cases?

Anytus. Obviously.

Socrates. Well, tell me one more thing about these same cases. We say that we would do well to send Meno to doctors, if we wanted him to become a doctor. When we say this, we mean that

90d

we would be showing good judgement if we sent him to people who claim that they can teach medicine, and not to people who don't claim this. And we mean that we should send him to people who charge a fee for teaching medicine, and who say they can teach it to anyone who will come and learn. Don't we? Aren't these the kind of things we ought to have in mind, when deciding where to send him?

Anytus. Yes.

Socrates. And we'd say just the same about learning to play the flute-playing, and all the other similar cases, wouldn't we? Suppose someone wanted some friend of his to become a competent

90e

flute-player, but refused to send him to those who say they can teach, and take payment to teach. Suppose he pestered other people instead, wanting his friend to learn the flute from people who don't claim to be flute-teachers and have no teaching experience in the subject that we're looking for—flute-playing. Wouldn't this be crazy? Don't you think this would be completely irrational?

Anytus. Yes, by Zeus, and stupid too.

Socrates. A good reply! And now you have the chance to deliberate together with me about this visitor of ours: Meno.

91a

He told me a long time ago, Anytus, that he longs for the wisdom and virtue by which men give good order to cities and to households; by which they honour their parents; and by which they understand when—and when not—to give citizens and foreign guests the sort of welcome that a man of standing should. So please consider: if he is to learn this sort of virtue, who would we do

91b

best to send him to? Isn't it clear from the argument we've just made that we should send him to those [Ma27] who profess to be teachers of virtue, and who announce themselves as universal teachers for any Greek who wishes to learn, in exchange for fees on the tariff that they lay down?

Anytus. Who do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates. Anytus, I should think even you know that. They're the teachers men call the sophists.

91c

Anytus. By Heracles—hold your peace, Socrates. I hope no one I know—friend or family, citizen or foreigner—will ever be crazy enough to mix with them and catch their plague. For a plague is what they manifestly are—a plague and corruption to anyone who goes near them.

Socrates. What do you mean, Anytus? Compared with all the others who claim to know how to do good to people, you think the sophists are so different that they not only do no good to anyone

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who comes to them, like the others do—they actually corrupt them [instead][Ma28][Ma29]? And when the corruption they cause is *obvious*, they see fit to charge money? I don't think I can manage to believe you on this. For I know one sophist, namely Protagoras, who has made more money out of this wisdom of his than Pheidias, who so famously made such wonderful statues—more money, in fact, than ten Pheidiases.

But what an amazing thing you're telling me—if it's true! People who repair old shoes or patch up worn-out garments—if they gave them back to their owners in worse condition than they

91e

received them, they wouldn't get away with it even for one month. And they'd starve to death if that was what they did. Yet according to you, Protagoras has been getting away with corrupting the whole of Greece for more than forty years! He's been corrupting his students—making them worse than they were when they came to him—for all that time, and never been found out. I believe Protagoras made it to the age of nearly seventy before he died, and spent forty of his years as a professional sophist. In all that time—right up to now, in fact—he has never lost his good reputation! And it's not just Protagoras, but a whole number of other sophists, who have pulled this off:

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some of them predecessors of Protagoras, and some of them with us to this day. Do you mean that we should say they corrupt and cheat their young pupils *consciously*? Or do they not even realise themselves what they're doing? Are the people who some say are the wisest of all men, really that insane?

Anytus. The sophists aren't insane, Socrates; far from it. The ones who are insane are the young men who give them all that money. Their guardians and families are even more insane, for letting

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them. And most insane of all are the cities that let the sophists in instead of expelling the lot of them, citizens and foreigners alike.

Socrates. Has one of the sophists cheated you, Anytus? What makes you so angry with them?

Anytus. By God, no. I've never spent a moment in their company. Nor would I ever let any of my family spend a moment's time with them.

Socrates. So actually, you have no experience of the sophists at all.

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Anytus. I should hope not.

Socrates. But you remarkable man—how can you know whether a thing has power for good or is worthless, when you have no experience of it whatever?

Anytus. Easily! At any rate I know what kind of men the sophists are, whether I have experience of them or not.

Socrates. Perhaps you're a psychic, then, Anytus. I wonder how else you could possibly know about the sophists, when you say yourself you've never met any. But we aren't inquiring who [the](#)^[Ma30]

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teachers are who will turn Meno into a wicked man—even if that is what the sophists will do to him, as you want me to say. Rather, tell us instead—and at the same time do a good turn to this hereditary friend of your family: who can he go to, in this great city of ours, to get a worthwhile portion of this virtue I've just been talking about?

Anytus. Why don't you tell him yourself?

Socrates. I've told him who I thought were the teachers of the virtues—the sophists. But

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according to you I was talking nonsense, and maybe you're right. So now it's your turn: *you* tell him which of the Athenians he should go to. Just give us a name—any name you like!

Anytus. Why does he need to hear the name of any particular person? If he just keeps company with *any* of the best kind of people in Athens, any of them will do him more good than the sophists—provided he listens.

Socrates. So, about these “best kind of people”. **Did they become “the best kind of people” by spontaneous growth?** You think that they became “the best kind” without having to learn how from anyone else? You think that they can teach other people how to be “the best kind”, even though they themselves were never taught how?

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Anytus. **No, I reckon they learned too; they learned from their parents, who were *also* the best kind of people.** I assume you agree that there have been many excellent men in this city?

Socrates. I certainly do, Anytus; and I think that—both today and no less in the past—we have many men who are excellent at politics. But were they also excellent at *teaching* their own virtue? That, after all, is the question we're now discussing. We're not asking whether there are or have

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been good men here; all along we've been considering whether virtue can be taught. To consider that is to consider this: **whether these good men, past or present, have also understood how to pass on that same virtue by which they themselves were good. Or is virtue a thing that can't be transmitted from one person to another at all? This is the question that Meno and I have been looking into all this** [time](#)^[Ma31].

93c

Look at it like this, taking up what you've said yourself. Would you say that Themistocles was a good man?

Anytus. Absolutely—the best man of them all.

Socrates. So if anyone ever was a good teacher of Themistocles' virtue, mustn't Themistocles himself have been?

Anytus. I should think so—**so long as he wanted to teach it.**

Socrates. But don't you think he *would* have wanted to make others into the right sort of people? Above[Ma32] all, perhaps, his own son? Do you think he would have begrudged him that, or dragged his feet about passing on to his son the virtue that made Themistocles himself so good? You

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must have heard how Themistocles made his son Cleophantus into a good horseman. Cleophantus could stay on a horse even standing upright on its back; he could throw a javelin while he was up there too, and do all sorts of other feats as well. Themistocles had him educated in all this. In fact, he made him an expert in everything that he found good teachers of. Haven't you heard all this from the older generation?

Anytus. Yes, I've heard.

Socrates. So there was nothing to blame in the nature of his son.

93e

Anytus. No, probably not.

Socrates. But then—have you ever heard anyone, older generation or younger, tell you that Cleophantus son of Themistocles was a wise or good man like his father?

Anytus. I certainly haven't.

Socrates. So what should we think? That Themistocles was willing to train his own son in all those other things, yet left him no better than the people around him in the very thing that Themistocles was so expert in—namely virtue? How could this have happened, if virtue was teachable?

Anytus. By Zeus, I suppose it couldn't have.

Socrates. For here, as you agree, was someone to teach virtue who was among the best of the men of old.

94a

Let's take another—Aristides son of Lysimachus. Do you agree that Aristides was a good man?

Anytus. Of course—he was a completely good person.

Socrates. Didn't Aristides too educate his son Lysimachus better than any other Athenian, in every proficiency for which there were teachers? But do you think that it's made Lysimachus a better man than any chance passer-by? You've met him, I think; you can see what he's like. Or if you

94b

like, there's Pericles, so magnificent in his wisdom. You know he has two sons, Paralus and Xanthippus.

Anytus. Yes, I do.

Socrates. Well, as you also know, Pericles taught them to be as good as the best horsemen in Athens. He taught them music and gymnastics and every other kind of specialist skill, and no one was better at all those things. So didn't Pericles also want to make them into virtuous men? I'm sure he did—but he thought that virtue was not teachable.

And lest you should think that it was only a few of the unworthier citizens of Athens who

94c

proved incapable of teaching such things—bear in mind how Thucydides also raised his two sons, Melesias and Stephanus. He gave them a fine all-round education, and they learned to wrestle better than anyone else in Athens. Thucydides sent one of them to Xanthias, and the other to

Eudorus, whose reputation was that they were the finest wrestlers of the day. Do you remember them?

Anytus. Yes. Well, I have heard about them.

Socrates. Now when Thucydides was spending all that money educating his sons in ways that he had to pay for, do you really suppose that he wouldn't have taught them to be virtuous men—

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for free, since he could do it himself—if only virtue had been teachable? Do you suppose Thucydides was a miser, or a man who didn't have lots and lots of friends both in Athens and throughout the empire? Of course he wasn't—he came from the best of families and from a great city, and had great influence both in that city and among all the other Greeks. If virtue had been teachable, he would have found some Athenian, or some citizen of our colonies, to make

94e

virtuous men of his sons—even if he himself could not give it his time because of his political career. Surely then, Anytus, he found that virtue was not teachable at all.

Anytus. Socrates, you seem very quick to bad-mouth people. My advice to you—if you're willing to listen—would be to watch your step. It may be true wherever you are that it's easier to do people bad than to do them good. It certainly is in Athens. And I think you know it.

95a

95a-96d: But are there any teachers of virtue? (Part II)

Socrates. Anytus seems angry, Meno. I'm not at all surprised. He thinks I am slandering men like Themistocles and Pericles and Thucydides, and what's more, he thinks he is a man like that himself. If he ever finds out what it really means to slander someone, he will put aside his anger; but right now he doesn't know. So instead, you tell me: aren't there "the right sort of people" among you Thessalians too?

Meno. Yes, certainly.

95b

Socrates. Are they willing to offer themselves as teachers of the young? Do they profess to be teachers, and do they all agree that virtue can be taught?

Meno. By Zeus, no, Socrates—one moment you will hear them say it can be, the next that it can't.

Socrates. Shall we call them *teachers*, when they don't even agree on whether or not they have any subject to teach?

Meno. I think not, Socrates.

Socrates. What about the sophists, who are the only ones who *do* announce to the world that they

95c

teach virtue? Do they look to you like teachers of virtue?

Meno. Well, this is what I specially admire about Gorgias as a sophist, Socrates—that you would never hear *Gorgias* undertaking to teach virtue. In fact, he makes fun of the other sophists when he hears them undertake to teach it. What he thinks they should do is make people into good orators [Ma33].

Socrates. Then don't you think that the sophists are teachers of virtue?

Meno. I can't say, Socrates. I'm in the same state as the general run of people: sometimes I think they are and sometimes I don't.

Socrates. You know, it's not just you and the other statesmen who have views that come and go

95d

about whether virtue is teachable. You know that Theognis the poet says the very same thing?

Meno. In which of his poems?

Socrates. In his elegiacs, where he says:—

“Eat and drink and sit and smile
With men of influence. It's worth your while,
For you will learn good habits from the good;
95e Whereas you'll lose, by mixing with the vile,
Even what goodness you once understood.”

Do you see that Theognis is writing here as if virtue were teachable?

Meno. Yes, it seems he is.

Socrates. But in another poem he makes a bit of a change. He writes (I think it goes something like this):

If goodness-manufacturers were to be had,
those manufacturers' wealth would grow and grow;
all good fathers' sons would be good also,
96a learning goodness from its makers as they grow;
but there is no making a good man out of a bad.

Do you observe how he now takes the opposite view to his own earlier view?

Meno. Evidently.

Socrates. Well, can you name a single other subject where those who claim to be teachers are not agreed to be teachers? Where it's said that they not only don't teach others, they don't even understand the subject themselves? Where the teachers are said to be worthless, themselves, at

96b

the very thing they claim to be able to teach? Is there any other subject where those who are generally acknowledged as the right kind of people can't reach a stable view about whether it can actually be taught at all? Do you think there can be real *teachers* at all, in an area where everything is in such total confusion?

Meno. By Zeus, I should think not.

Socrates. So the sophists aren't teachers of virtue; and the right kind of people aren't teachers of virtue either. And isn't it obvious that there can hardly be any *other* teachers of virtue?

Meno. No, there can't be.

96c

Socrates. And if there are no teachers, then there aren't any learners either.

Meno. That seems to be how it is.

Socrates. And we have already agreed that if there are no teachers and no learners of something, then that something is not teachable.

Meno. We have.

Socrates. But there *are* no teachers of virtue to be found—anywhere.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. And if there are no teachers, there are no learners either.

Meno. That's how it looks.

Socrates. So virtue is not teachable, is it?

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Meno. No, not if our argument has gone the right way. Yet I truly wonder, Socrates—does this mean that there are no virtuous people? And if there *are* virtuous people, and they didn't get that way by *teaching*—then how *did* they come to be virtuous?

12. b96d-100b: Knowledge and true belief

Socrates. Ah, Meno, I'm afraid that you and I are worthless people. Gorgias has educated you just as inadequately as Prodicus has educated me. Our first priority now must be to take a look at ourselves, and find someone who will make us better in some small way or other.

96e

I say this, because now that I look at our inquiry so far, I see something that we shall be ridiculed for failing to *notice*[Ma34]. This is that human affairs don't have to be guided by *knowledge* to be guided right. It is probably for this same reason that the knowledge of how good men come to be has eluded us.

Meno. How do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates. I mean this. We were right, weren't we, to say that *good men have to be*

97a

of some practical use—that it could hardly be otherwise?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And, I assume, it was fair enough for us to agree that they will be useful to us if they guide our affairs aright?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. But when we agreed that no one could guide human affairs aright unless they were wise [or had knowledge]—there we look like we've reached a wrong agreement.

Meno. What do you mean, 'aright'?

Socrates. I'll tell you. If someone who knew the way to Larisa (or wherever else you like) led others there by walking to Larisa, he would do it aright and do it well, wouldn't he?

Meno. Certainly.

97b

Socrates. What about someone who had a right opinion about the way to Larisa, but didn't know because he had never been? Wouldn't he lead you the right way too?

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. Just as long as this second man *has right opinion* about what the first man *knows*, the second man will be no worse a guide than the first man.

Meno. Yes, he will be just as good.

Socrates. Therefore true opinion is no worse a guide than wisdom [or knowledge] to rightness of action. This is the point that we have just overlooked in our inquiry about what kind of thing

97c

human virtue is, when we said that only wisdom [or knowledge] leads us to right action. For true opinion does so too.

Meno. Yes, it seems so.

Socrates. So right opinion is no less helpful to us than knowledge.

Meno. They surely differ in this much, Socrates, that the person who has knowledge should always hit on the right choice, whereas the person who has right opinion may hit on it at one time, but not at another?

Socrates. How can you say that? Won't the person who *always* has right opinion, *always* choose right, just so long as he has right opinion at all?

Meno. That seems unavoidable to me. But in that case I am puzzled, Socrates: why on earth is

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knowledge so much more highly valued than right opinion? And what *is* the difference between the two of them?

Socrates. Can you solve your own puzzlement, or should I?

Meno. You should, certainly.

Socrates. You are puzzled because you have not turned your attention to Daedalus' clockwork men... perhaps you don't have them in Thessaly.

97e

Meno. What are you talking about?

Socrates. When Daedalus' men are not kept on a string, they make off and run away. But when they are tied up, they remain still.

Meno. So what?

Socrates. There would not be much value in owning one of Daedalus' statues if it was not tied on a string. It would be like "owning" a runaway slave, for the statue would not stay put. But if the statue is on a string, then it is well worth having; such pieces of handicraft are very fine. What I am talking about is *true opinions*: just as long as true opinions do not shift, they are a fine thing to have, and bring about all sorts of goods for us.

98a

But they tend not to last very long; they make their getaway out of our minds so soon that they^[Ma35] are of little value, until we bind them with an account of *why* they are true. This account, my friend, is recollection.

When once the true opinions have been bound like this, at once they become knowledge; and later, they become permanent knowledge. This is why knowledge is more valuable than true belief; and it differs from true belief by being secure.

Meno. By heaven, yes, Socrates, the truth must be something like this.

98b

Socrates. I myself do not speak as someone who knows; this is only an image. Still, I don't think I am speaking in images when I say that true opinion is something different from knowledge. I would not claim to know many things; but this is one of the few things that I do claim to know.

Meno. Yes, Socrates, and your claim is quite right.

Socrates. Well, then, isn't this right too—that as a practical guide, true opinion is no less effective than knowledge?

Meno. Yes, I think you're right about that as well.

98c

Socrates. So right opinion will be no worse and no less useful than knowledge for our actions. And the person who has right opinion will be no worse and no less useful than the person who has knowledge.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. And surely we've agreed that the man of virtue is useful?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So it's not only by way of knowledge that there will be virtuous men, and ones who are useful to their cities (if there *are* any men like that). It is by way of right opinion too. But neither

98d

knowledge nor true belief comes to humans by nature: both are acquired. Or do you think that either of them *does* come by nature?

Meno. No, I don't.

Socrates. So if true belief and knowledge don't come by nature, neither are the virtuous *virtuous* by nature.

Meno. Indeed not.

Socrates. And since they don't come by nature, we have explored the question that comes next: whether virtue is teachable.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. If virtue is wisdom [or knowledge], then, we thought, it must be teachable.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And conversely, if virtue is teachable, then it must be wisdom [or knowledge].

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. And if there are teachers of virtue, then virtue is teachable; but if there are no teachers, it

98e

isn't.

Meno. That's how it went.

Socrates. But didn't we agree that there are no teachers of virtue?

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. So we agreed that virtue is neither teachable, nor wisdom [or knowledge].

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. But we did agree that virtue is a good thing.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And we agreed that whatever guides us aright is useful and good.

Meno. Certainly.

99a

Socrates. And we agreed that the only things that guide us aright are knowledge and true opinion: the person who has these is not led astray. These are the guides of humanity; a person who is guided by these goes right. There is *chance*, of course, meaning “whatever does not happen under human direction”. But humans are guided, in whatever they can direct towards the right, by just these two things—true opinion and knowledge.

Meno. This seems right to me.

Socrates. Now since virtue is not teachable, didn’t it turn out not to be knowledge either?

Meno. Apparently so.

99b

Socrates. So of these two good and useful things, one, namely knowledge, has been discharged from the argument. It can’t be *knowledge* that is our guide in political action.

Meno. No, I think it can’t be.

Socrates. Therefore it was not by some sort of wisdom [or knowledge], and not because they were wise, that those sorts of men guided their cities—the men around Themistocles and the others that Anytus here spoke of.⁸ And that was the reason why they weren’t able to make others into the same sort of men as themselves: because it wasn’t by way of *knowledge* that they were like that.

Meno. It seems to be just as you describe it, Socrates.

Socrates. Then if they weren’t virtuous *by knowledge*, the only other alternative is that they were

99c

virtuous *by correct belief*. It was by correct belief that these statesmen guided their cities. In fact their position, relative to understanding (*pros to phronein*), was exactly like the position of soothsayers and spiritual psychics. For they too say many true things, and lots of them: but they don’t know in the least what they are saying.

Meno. That might well be right.

Socrates. Well, Meno, wouldn’t it be right to call people “divine” when they have no understanding (*nous*), yet get all sorts of important speeches and actions just right?

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. Then the name “divine” will also fit these politicians—just now we were speaking of

99d

them as soothsayers and spiritual psychics; in fact the name will fit everyone who operates *poetically*. But we can call these politicians divine and god-possessed, inspired and taken hold of by God—particularly when they get all these speeches and actions just right, even though they have no idea what they’re talking about.

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. And I gather that women too call good men divine, don’t they, Meno?⁹ And the Spartans, when they are making a song in praise of a man of virtue—they too call him a “man divine”.

99e

Meno. Yes, and I think that they speak right, Socrates; though perhaps Anytus here⁹ is angry with you for saying this.

⁸ Actually, of course, it was Socrates who did nearly all the talking about Themistocles and the others.

⁹ *Anytos hode*: we get “Anytus here” twice in this final passage. Plato is keen to stress that Anytus did not storm out at 95a1. Silent though he may be, he is still listening right up to the end of the *Meno*.

Socrates. That's no concern of mine, Meno; we will have another exchange with Anytus, another time.¹⁰ But for now, if we have asked the right questions and given the right answers in all this conversation of ours, it turns out that virtue is neither natural nor teachable: it comes to men—when it does come—by divine gift[Ma36].

100a

And it must come without understanding (*anew non*), given that there is no one among our statesmen who is capable of making someone else into a statesman. If there *was* anyone like that, he would be, among the living, virtually what Homer [*Odyssey* 10.494] says Teiresias was among the dead: “He alone has wits, the rest are shadows that flee away.” That is what such a man would be among us: the only real thing, as far as virtue goes, among the shadows.

100b

Meno. I think that is very well said, Socrates.

Socrates. So, Meno, it seems that the result of our reasoning is that virtue comes by the gift of the gods—if it comes at all[Ma37]. But we shall only know the clear truth about virtue when—*before* we ask in what way virtue comes to humans—we try to answer the question about virtue itself: what virtue actually is.

But now my time is up, and I have somewhere to go. As for you, Meno, now that you are convinced yourself, convince our guest Anytus here also, to be less fierce. For if you do convince him, that will be some service to Athens as well.

¹⁰ Perhaps a reference to the *Apology*, where there are about 14 mentions of Anytus, who was one of Socrates' prosecutors. Socrates does engage in a discussion during his defence speech (*Apology* 24b-28a), but it is with Anytus' co-prosecutor Meletus, not with Anytus himself.