Meno

Plato

Rendered in blank verse by Rob Bocchino

Meno, who is from Thessaly, visits Socrates in Athens.

Meno. I'm hoping you can tell me, Socrates,
Of virtue: Is it something that is taught?
Or is it something that requires practice?
Perhaps it's something else, that men possess
By nature, or achieve some other way?

Socrates. A long time, Meno,[1] have Thessalians
Been known among the Greeks for horsemanship
And wealth; but now it seems that you've increased
Your fame, by adding wisdom to its scope.
Not least it seems the fellow citizens
Of Aristippus of Larissa[2] have.
The reputation they enjoy is due
To Gorgias,[3] who visited your city
And found that leaders of the Aleuadae,[4]
Your lover Aristippus one of them,
Received his wisdom eagerly, as did
The other leading men of Thessaly.
From him you learned to give a bold response
To any question that you might be asked,
As experts do. Indeed, he, for his part,
Would answer any Greek who questioned him,
And answered every question. Here in Athens,
Dear Meno, I'm afraid the opposite
Is true, and wisdom is in short supply.
It seems to have departed for your shores.
If we are asked this kind of question, we
Just laugh and say, "Good stranger, you believe
I'm happy if you think I know such things
Of virtue, how it's taught and whence it comes.
Indeed, I am so far from knowing them
That I don't even know what virtue is."

For my part, Meno, I'm as poor as these,
My fellow citizens, upon this point.
Regarding virtue, I plead ignorance.
Not knowing what it is, how could I know
What qualities it has? Or do you think
That one who doesn't know who Meno is
Could know he's handsome, rich, or pedigreed,

[1] Pronounced MEH-noh. Meno was a leading citizen of Thessaly.

[2] Pronounced a-ri-STIP-pus. Aristippus was a leading citizen of Larissa, in Thessaly, and an intimate relation of Meno.

[3] Pronounced GOR-jee-as. Gorgias was a philosopher and teacher of rhetoric.

[4] Pronounced al-YOO-a-day. The Aleuadae were a powerful family from Larissa; Aristippus was a member of this family.

Or know, of one of these, the opposite?
Do you think that is possible?

Meno. I don't.
But Socrates, is what you're saying true,
That you don't know of virtue? Must I tell
My friends at home that this is what you said?

Socrates. That's right; but tell them more: Say I believe
That I have never met a man who knew.

Meno. How's that? Did you not meet with Gorgias
When he was here?

Socrates. I did.

Meno. And did you not
Believe he knew?

Socrates. I cannot quite remember;
So I can't tell you, Meno, what I thought
On meeting him. It's possible he knows;
And you're familiar with what he has said.
So please remind me what it was. Yourself
Please tell me, if you're willing, for I think
You share his views.

Meno. I do.

Socrates. Then let us set
This Gorgias aside, since he's not here.
Say, Meno, by the gods: What do you think
Yourself that virtue is? Do not hold out.
Please show me, if you can, that I was wrong
In saying that I never met a man
Who knew of virtue; for I've met both you
And Gorgias, and maybe you both know.

Meno. I'll tell you, Socrates. This is not hard.
Consider first the virtue of a man.
That's easy: It consists in managing
Affairs of public, so to benefit
His friends and to confound his enemies,
While taking care he doesn't harm himself.
Consider next a woman's virtue. There
Is likewise little difficulty here.
It means to manage all affairs of home,
Conserving its possessions, to submit
To what her husband says. And if you want
The virtue of a child, a boy or girl,
That is another thing; and so is that
Of one who's elderly or one who's free,
Or one who is a slave. And there are more,
So many other virtues one can cite,
That it's not hard to say what virtue is.
There's virtue for each act and phase of life,
Each task that we take up, each one of us;
And, Socrates, of course the same is true
For wickedness.

Socrates. It seems I am in luck,
Dear Meno. Here I seek one kind of thing,
One virtue, and I've happened on a swarm.
Continuing the image of a swarm,
Suppose I asked, of bees, "What is their nature?"
Suppose you said that there are many kinds.
How then would you respond if I asked this:
"Do you mean they are different as bees?
Or do they differ in some other way,
In beauty, say, or size, or something else?"
On hearing this, what would your answer be?

Meno. I'd say they are no different as bees.

Socrates. Suppose I were to say, "Please tell me this.
What is the property that is the same
In all of them, so that they do not differ?"
Would you be able to respond to that?

Meno. I would.

Socrates. Well, then, the same is true of virtues.
They may be many and be various;
Yet all of them partake of the same form,
The form that makes them virtues; and it's right
To think of this when asked to clarify
What virtue is. Or don't you understand
What I am getting at?

Meno. I think I do.
However, I confess I do not grasp
The meaning of your statement in the way
I'd like to.

Socrates. I'm just asking, do you think
It's only as to virtue there is one
For man, and there's another one for woman,
And so on for the other kinds of virtue;
Or does this situation hold for health,
For size and strength, so that there is one health
For man, and yet another one for woman?
Or, in the case of health, is there one form
That governs all the cases, whether man
Or woman, or in any other case?

Meno. In health a man and woman seem the same.

Socrates. And what of size and strength? A man is strong;
A woman's strong; the strength each one of them
Possesses is the same, it has one form.
By saying it's the same, I mean it does
Not differ in the way that it is strength,
Because it's in a woman or a man.
Or do you think that there's a difference here?

Meno. I don't see any difference.

Socrates. And is there
A difference when the attribute is virtue?
Is virtue one, or is it different,
When it is present in a woman, man,

Or child?

Meno. It seems to me this case is not
Like those you have just mentioned, Socrates.

Socrates. How so? Did you not say that, for a man,
His virtue is in city management,
While women's is in managing a home?

Meno. I did.

Socrates. And do you think it possible
To have success in city management,
Or household management, or any kind
Of management, unless one acts in ways
That we consider moderate and just?

Meno. I don't think that. I think the opposite.

Socrates. Therefore it seems successful management
Needs justice and needs moderation.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So man and woman, if they're any good,
Both need these things.

Meno. It seems to me they do.

Socrates. Now what about a child, or one who's old?
Can they be good if they're intemperate
And fail to act with justice?

Meno. No, they can't.

Socrates. But if they're moderate and just, they can?

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. So men are good in just this way:
The qualities they need are all the same.

Meno. It seems that's right.

Socrates. And they would not be good
This way unless their virtue was the same.

Meno. That's right, they wouldn't be.

Socrates. Since it's one thing,
The virtue they possess, please now recall
And tell me what it is, what Gorgias
And you decided that this one thing is.

Meno. You're asking for a single attribute?
I'd say that it's the capability
Of ruling over people.

Socrates. Yes, indeed,
That's what I asked. But, Meno, we have said
That virtue is the same when it's a child
Or slave that's virtuous; how can it be
That ruling gives them virtue? Do you think
That one can rule and yet remain a slave?

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

Socrates. And I agree, my friend, it isn't likely.
Consider now this further argument:
If virtue is the capability

To rule, should we not qualify the claim
And say the capability to rule
With justice, not injustice, is what counts
As virtue?

Meno. Yes, I think so, Socrates.
For virtue is equivalent to justice.

Socrates. Do you mean "virtue," Meno, or "a virtue"?

Meno. What do you mean?

Socrates. The situation is
Just like in other cases. For example,
Consider roundness. I'd say it's a shape;
But I'd refrain from saying that it's shape.
The reason is that there are other shapes.

Meno. Quite right. And, as to justice, I say this:
While it's a virtue, there are other virtues.

Socrates. What are the other virtues? Let me know.
Just as, if asked, I'd mention many shapes,
Please list some other virtues that exist.

Meno. I think that courage should be on the list;
And moderation; and munificence;
And wisdom; I could list out many more.

Socrates. I fear that we're in trouble, as before,
Dear Meno, though it's in a different way:
While looking for one virtue we have found
A cluster of them, and we cannot tell
Which one of them encompasses the rest.

Meno. Yes, Socrates, it pains me to agree:
I cannot find what you are looking for,
One virtue that can cover every case.

Socrates. It seems that is the situation. Yet
I'm eager to make progress, if we can,
Now that you understand one form applies
To every case. If someone were to ask
About what we discussed not long ago
And said, "Please tell me, Meno, what is shape?"
And if you answered him that it is roundness,
And if he asked what I have asked before,
"Is roundness shape, or is it just a shape?"
I think you'd tell him that it is a shape.

Meno. That's true, I would.

Socrates. I think that is because
You know of other shapes.

Meno. Indeed, that's so.

Socrates. And if he asked, "Please tell me what they are,"
You'd tell him?

Meno. Yes, I would.

Socrates. And if he asked
What color is, and you said it is white,
And he responded, "'color,' or 'a color'?"
You'd say it is a color, for you know

Of other colors?

Meno. Yes, that is the case.

Socrates. And if he told you, "Name some other colors,"
You'd mention others that, no less than white,
Are colors?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. What if he then took up
The argument I made? He might say, "We
Arrive again at many; do not speak
This way to me. Instead, since all these things
Go by a single name, and since you say
Each is a shape, although they're different things,
Please tell me what it is that can apply
To round in just the way it does to straight.
Please tell me what it is that you call shape,
When saying that the round and that the straight
Are equally referred to as a shape."
Or don't you say that both of these are shapes?

Meno. I do.

Socrates. When saying this, do you assert
The round is no more round than it is straight,
The straight is no more straight than it is round?

Meno. Of course I do not say that, Socrates.

Socrates. Yet you don't say the round is more a shape
Than straight is, or the straight more than the round.

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. What is it, then, we say is shape?
Explain it to me. If you answered him,
The man who asked of color and of shape,
"I do not understand what you have asked,
Or what you mean," he'd probably say this:
"You do not understand I ask of that
Which is, in all these cases, just the same?"
Would you still think, "There's nothing I can say,"
If, Meno, you were asked, "What property
Applies to round and straight and other things
Called shapes, and which is common to them all?"
Please try to say it now, so to prepare
The answer that you'll give concerning virtue.

Meno. I cannot do it, Socrates, unless
You tell me.

Socrates. You want me to tell you this?

Meno. I do want that, indeed.

Socrates. And if I do,
Will you then give the answer as to virtue?

Meno. I will.

Socrates. Then let's continue. It is worth
The time we spend investigating this.

Meno. It surely is.

Socrates. So let us try to see
What shape is. See if you'll accept it's this.
Let's say that shape is that which, of what is,
Alone, when color's there, is there as well.
Is that sufficient answer, or are you
Still looking for it in another place?
I'd like to hear you do the same for virtue.

Meno. I think that answer's foolish, Socrates.

Socrates. How so?

Meno. You say that shape is always found
Where color is. But what if someone said,
"I do not know what color is," and he
Had just the same confusion as to shape?
If he said this, what answer would you give?

Socrates. I think I'd give an answer that is true.
And if my questioner were one of those
Who likes to spar with words and to dispute,
I'd say, "That is the answer that I give.
If you think it is wrong, try to refute it."
But if I'm in discussion with a friend,
As you and I are, then the answer must
Be gentle and be more amenable
To thoughtful dialogue. By this I mean
The answers, in addition to their truth,
Must be in terms familiar to the one
Who asks the questions. I will try to speak
In terms like this. Consider, now, "the end."
When I say this, I mean a boundary,
A limit, for I say these are the same.
It's possible that Prodicus[5] would not
Agree with this; but surely you must say
That something's finished or completed. That
Is what I want to say, and nothing more.

Meno. I do say this. I think I understand
Your meaning.

Socrates. Further, in geometry
You call something a plane and something else
A solid?

Meno. Yes, I do.

Socrates. From this you'll see,
I think, the meaning that I give to "shape."
For I say this of every shape: A shape
Is that which bounds a solid. In a word,
A shape is just the limit of a solid.

Meno. And what of color, Socrates? What do
You say about it?

Socrates. You're outrageous, Meno!
I'm old; you pester me with all these questions;

[5] Pronounced PRO-di-kus. Prodicus was a sophist who insisted on defining words precisely. Socrates implies that Prodicus might object to defining "limit" and "boundary" to mean the same thing.

And yet you are not willing to recall
What Gorgias has said concerning virtue,
And tell me of it.

Meno. Once you've answered this,
I'll tell you, Socrates.

Socrates. A man who's blind
Would know, on hearing you, that you are handsome
And you have lovers.

Meno. Why is that?

Socrates. Because
You're always giving orders in discussion,
The way that people do when they are spoiled
And act, when they are young, as tyrants do.
Perhaps you sense that handsome people have
Advantage over me. If so, I'll deign
To answer you.

Meno. By all means, grant that boon.

Socrates. Would you like me to answer in the way
Of Gorgias, so you can understand
Most easily?

Meno. Of course that's what I want.

Socrates. Do you and he both recognize that things
Have substances that flow away from them,
As stated by Empedocles?[6]

Meno. We do.

Socrates. And do you hold as well that there are channels
Through which the substances can flow?

Meno. Of course.

Socrates. Some flowing substances fit in some channels,
While others are too big or are too small?

Meno. That's so.

Socrates. And there is something you call sight?

Meno. There is.

Socrates. As Pindar[7] said, "Please comprehend
What I am telling you," when I say this:
That color is a substance, and it flows
From shapes; it fits the sight and is perceived.

Meno. That answer, Socrates, seems excellent.

Socrates. It seems I gave the answer in the way
To which you are accustomed. And, from this,
I think you can determine what is sound,
And what is smell, and many things like this.

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. The answer is theatrical;[8]
Therefore you like it, Meno, more than what

[6] Pronounced em-PED-oh-cleez. Empedocles was a physical philosopher.

[7] Pronounced PIN-dar. Pindar was an ancient Greek lyric poet.

[8] Because it refers to Empedocles and Pindar.

I said concerning shape?

Meno. Yes, I agree.

Socrates. I do not think, son of Alexidemus,[9]
That it is better; rather I believe
The other is. I think you would agree
If it were not required that you leave
Before the mysteries, as yesterday
You told me that it was, but you could stay
And be initiated.

Meno. Socrates,
If I could hear more things like this, I'd stay.

Socrates. If it were up to me, I would impart
Such things, both for your sake and for my own.
However, I may not have many things
To tell you. Now it's time that you fulfill
Your promise and explain what virtue is.
Explain it as a whole; do not construct
The many out of one, as one might say
In jest of one who breaks some crockery.
Instead let virtue keep integrity
And tell me what it is, what single thing,
In light of the examples that I gave
Concerning color and concerning shape.

Meno. In answer, Socrates, I tell you this:
I think that virtue, as the poet says,
Is "finding joy in what is beautiful
And exercising power." So I say
That virtue means to want what's beautiful
And to be able to acquire it.

Socrates. Do you contend the man who says, "I want
These things because they're beautiful" is one
Who wants good things?

Meno. Most certainly I do.

Socrates. And do you think some people want bad things,
While others want the opposite, what's good?
Or do you think, my friend, that every man
Desires what is good?

Meno. I don't.

Socrates. So some
Want bad things?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Do you mean they believe
The bad things are good things? Or do they know
They're bad and, knowing this, desire them?

Meno. I think both situations can occur.

Socrates. Do you think, Meno, there exists a man
Who knows bad things are bad and, seeing them,
Proclaims, "These things are just the things I want"?

[9] Pronounced al-ex-i-DEE-mus.

Meno. Yes, certainly I do.

Socrates. What do you mean
By "wanting"? Does it mean to wish to get
A thing so one can have it for oneself?

Meno. It does.

Socrates. And does that man see benefit
In having these bad things, or does he know
That having them will make him suffer harm?

Meno. Some men believe they give a benefit,
While others see the harm that they create.

Socrates. And do you think that one who says, "These things
Are beneficial" knows the things are bad?

Meno. I can't believe that statement.

Socrates. So it's clear
That those who do not know the things are bad
Cannot be said to want what's bad; instead
The things they want are things they think are good
But are not good in fact; instead they're bad.
It seems, therefore, those who are ignorant
Of what is bad, believing that it's good,
Want good things for themselves. Is that not so?

Meno. Yes, that is likely.

Socrates. What of those you say
Want bad things, knowing of the harm they cause?
They know that having them will cause them harm.

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. And don't they know that being harmed
Will cause them to endure a misery?

Meno. I think that's true as well.

Socrates. And misery
Is cause for one to feel unhappiness?

Meno. I think so.

Socrates. Is there anyone who wants
Such misery, and such unhappiness?

Meno. No, Socrates, I don't think such a man
Exists.

Socrates. Then, Meno, no one wants what's bad
Unless he wants to suffer in this way.
For what is it to be miserable
Unless to want and then to have bad things?

Meno. Yes, Socrates, I think you're right. No one
Can want what's bad.

Socrates. Did you not say just now
That virtue is desire for good things,
And power to acquire them?

Meno. I did.

Socrates. The wanting part is common to us all.
So no one man is better than his fellows

In this respect?

Meno. I think that is the case.

Socrates. So if one man is better than another,
He must be better at acquiring
The things he wants.

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. This, then, is virtue,
According to the argument you've made:
The power of acquiring good things.

Meno. Yes, Socrates! That neatly states the case.

Socrates. Then let us see if what you say is true,
For you may well be right. You say that this
Is virtue, the capacity to get
And hold good things?

Meno. Yes, that is what I say.

Socrates. You say good things include both health and wealth?

Meno. I do; and precious metals, gold and silver,
The city's honors and its offices.

Socrates. By "good things" you don't mean some other things?

Meno. That's right. I mean things similar to these.

Socrates. All right. This Meno, guest-friend of the Great King,[10]
Has said: That virtue means acquiring
Both gold and silver. Do you add to this
The qualifiers "justly," "piously"?
Or are you unconcerned if one secures
Such things unjustly? Is it virtue then?

Meno. I would not call that virtue, Socrates.

Socrates. Perhaps you'd call it wickedness?

Meno. I would.

Socrates. It seems then that the acquisition must
Be done with justice or with moderation
Or piety, or other part of virtue;
If not, it isn't virtue, even though
The things that it secures for one are good.

Meno. If done without these, how could it be virtue?

Socrates. Then failing to acquire gold and silver
In cases where to do this is unjust,
To benefit yourself or aid another,
Is this not also virtue?

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. So acquisition does not in itself
Amount to virtue, any more than does
A failure to acquire. What is done
With justice will be virtue; what is done
Without that quality is wickedness.

[10] The Great King is the King of Persia. Socrates implies that, because Meno is a close associate of such a powerful ruler, he is a person of high importance.

Meno. I think the case is just as you describe.

Socrates. We said not long ago that each of these
Is part of virtue: justice, moderation,
And other things like this?

Meno. Indeed we did.

Socrates. Then, Meno, you are stringing me along.

Meno. How is that, Socrates?

Socrates. Just now I asked
That you not break up virtue into fragments.
I gave examples showing what I wanted.
You didn't heed them; rather you insist
Of virtue that it's the capacity
To get good things, and do it justly. This,
You say, is part of virtue.

Meno. Yes, I do.

Socrates. It follows from your statements that to act
With any part of virtue counts as virtue.
You say that justice is a part of virtue;
You say this, too, of other qualities.
And when I asked of virtue as a whole,
You didn't tell me anything of that.
Instead you said an action counts as virtue
When done with part of virtue. You assumed
I knew the concept "virtue as a whole"
And still would know it, after breaking up
This concept into parts. You can't escape
The question that I asked you, my dear Meno:
If every action done with part of virtue
Is virtue, what is virtue? For it's this
One says when one proclaims, "An act that's done
With justice counts as virtue." Don't you think
The question asked demands an answer still?
Or do you think it's possible to know
A part of virtue when one doesn't know
What virtue is itself?

Meno. I don't think that.

Socrates. Remember, when we spoke before of shape,
We said no answer is acceptable
That rests on on terms that we have not defined
And are the subject of our inquiry.

Meno. I think that we were right in saying this.

Socrates. Then surely, my good man, you cannot think,
When virtue as a whole is what we seek,
Its nature is the subject we discuss,
That answering according to the parts
Of virtue clarifies to anyone
The nature that it has, or that to speak
This way can show us anything at all.
Instead the question asked is present still:
What do you mean by virtue when you say
These things? Or do you think there's little point

In what I'm saying?

Meno. No, I think it's right.

Socrates. So answer me again, from the beginning.
What do you and your friend say virtue is?

Meno. Before I ever met you, Socrates,
I used to hear of your bewilderment:
That you were in this state, and that you brought
Your hearers to this state along with you.
And now I see your spell is cast on me,
For I am all bewildered. If a joke
Is apt, I think that in the way you look,
And every other way, you call to mind
The broad torpedo fish;[11] for just like it,
When one approaches you and gets too close
And touches you, at once he goes all numb.
Indeed, this is what you have done to me:
My mind and tongue are numb, so that I have
No answer left to give, despite the fact
I have held forth on virtue fluently,
So many times before assembled crowds.
My speeches, so I thought, were very good;
But now I find, when asked what virtue is,
I cannot say. I think that you are wise
To stay in Athens. In another city,
If you, a stranger, acted in this way,
You'd be cast out for doing sorcery.

Socrates. You rascal! You are trying to deceive
Me, Meno, and it nearly worked.

Meno. How so?

Socrates. I know why you depicted me this way.

Meno. You do? Why did I?

Socrates. So that I'd create
An image of you, correspondingly.
All handsome men rejoice when they can see
Their likenesses, as well I think they should,
For images of them are beautiful.
However, I will not consent to draw
An image for you. The torpedo fish,
If it makes others numb by being numb,
Resembles me but doesn't otherwise;
For when I baffle others, I don't have
An answer; rather I am more perplexed
Than those in whom I cause perplexity.
You see I do not know what virtue is.
Perhaps you knew before you spoke with me;
But now you act like one who doesn't know.
Despite all that, I want to work with you
To learn what it may be.

[11] The common torpedo is a species of electric ray found in the Mediterranean Sea and the eastern Atlantic ocean. It can deliver an electric shock of up to 200 volts. Its shape is broad, flat, and round. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_torpedo.

Meno. How can you do
This, Socrates, not knowing what it is?
How do you plan to search for such a thing?
Not knowing it it at all, how will you know,
On finding it, that it is what you seek?

Socrates. Debaters make this kind of argument.
A man can't search for anything he knows
Or anything he doesn't. If he knows,
There is no need for searching. If he doesn't,
How can he know what he is looking for?

Meno. Do you believe the argument is sound?

Socrates. I don't.

Meno. Why not?

Socrates. I'll tell you. I have heard
Wise men and women speak of the divine.

Meno. What did they say?

Socrates. Their speech, I thought was true
And beautiful.

Meno. Who were they? What was said?

Socrates. They were among the priests and priestesses
Devoted to explaining what they do.
This kind of speech appears in poetry
By Pindar, and in other verse as well.
I'll tell you what they say; see whether you
Agree with it. About the human soul,
They say it is immortal: That at times
It meets an end, which we perceive as death,
And that at other times it is reborn.
But never does it perish; therefore one
Must live one's life with utmost piety.

"In nine years shall Persephone release
The souls of those from whom she will exact
A punishment for ancient miseries;
And from those souls a line of kings will come.
Their strength and wisdom will be unsurpassed;
Forever will men call them sacred heroes."

The soul, immortal, has seen many births;
It has seen all things in the underworld
And here. So there is nothing which it has
Not learned. Thus we should hardly be surprised
That it remembers everything it knew
Of virtue and of many other things.
As nature is related to itself,
And as the soul has learned of everything,
A man can study anything he wants
And learn it and discover it himself,
So long as he is diligent and does
Not tire, for learning is just recollection.
We must, therefore, reject the argument
Made by debaters, lest it make us idle;
The ones who heed it are the faint of heart.

What I say has the opposite effect:
It makes men energetic, keen to search.
I think that this is true, and so I want
To work with you to find what virtue is.

Meno. Yes, Socrates, I think we should do that.
But what is this you said? We do not learn?
We call it learning, but it's recollection?
Will you please teach me this? I want to know.

Socrates. I said you were a rascal; I was right.
You're asking me to teach you, when I say
There is no teaching, only recollection.
I think that what you're asking is a trap,
To make me contradict myself.

Meno. By Zeus,
That isn't what I had in mind at all!
It's just a habit, Socrates. If you
Can show me that these things are as you say,
Please do it.

Socrates. I do not believe it's easy;
For your sake, though, I'll do the best I can.
Tell one of your attendants to come here,
Whichever one you like, so I may prove
The truth of what I say concerning him.

Meno motions to one of his attendants.

Meno. Of course. You, there, come here.

Socrates. Is he a Greek?
Does he speak Greek?

Meno. He does indeed. He's from
My household. He was born and brought up there.

Socrates. Then pay attention. See whether you think
He's recollecting or he learns from me.

Meno. I'll pay attention.

Socrates draws a square as shown in Figure 1 and shows it to the attendant.

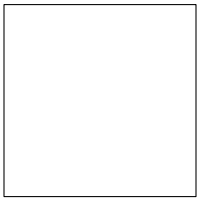


Figure 1.

Socrates. Tell me, boy: You know
This figure that I've drawn here is a square?

Attendant. I do.

Socrates. And it's a square because its sides
Are equal?

Attendant. Yes indeed.

Socrates draws lines through Figure 1 as shown in Figure 2.

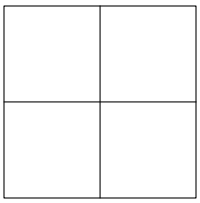


Figure 2.

Socrates. And if we draw
These lines bisecting it, they're also equal?

Attendant. That's right.

Socrates. And such a figure could be larger
Or smaller?

Attendant. Certainly.

Socrates points to two adjacent sides of the square in Figure 2.

Socrates. And if this side
Were two feet long, as were this other side,
How many feet would lie inside the whole?
Consider this: If this way had two feet,
And that way had but one, the figure would
Be once two feet in size?

Attendant. Yes, I agree.

Socrates. But if that way were also two feet long,
The size would be twice two?

Attendant. I think it would.

Socrates. How many feet is that? Would you compute
The answer, please, and tell me what it is?

Attendant. Four, Socrates.

Socrates. Consider now a figure
That's twice the size of this one, with its sides
All equal, as the sides of this one are.
How many feet will lie inside that figure?

Attendant. Eight feet.

Socrates. Now try to say how many feet
Are in each side of that one. This one has
Two feet on either side. What of that one
Whose size is twice as big?[12]

Attendant. Well, Socrates,
It's obvious: Each will be twice as long.

Socrates. See, Meno? I don't teach the boy a thing.
I question him. And now he thinks he knows
The side-length of a square that's twice as large.
Do you agree?

[12] The answer is $2\sqrt{2}$, or around 2.8.

Meno. I do.

Socrates. And does he know?

Meno. Of course he doesn't.

Socrates. He says, "twice as long"?

Meno. He does.

Socrates. Now watch him recollect the things
That one must recollect. Boy, do you say
A figure twice as large must have a side
That's twice the length? I mean a square like this,
Not long on one side, shorter on the other,
But equal on all sides, as this one is,
And twice as large, that is, an eight-foot square.
Do you persist in thinking that its side
Is twice as long?

Attendant. I do.

Socrates. Now if we add
Another line of equal measure here,
Its length increases so it's twice as long?

Attendant. It does.

Socrates. And if each side is just that long,
The square that they surround will have eight feet?

Attendant. It will.

Socrates draws the diagram shown in Figure 3.

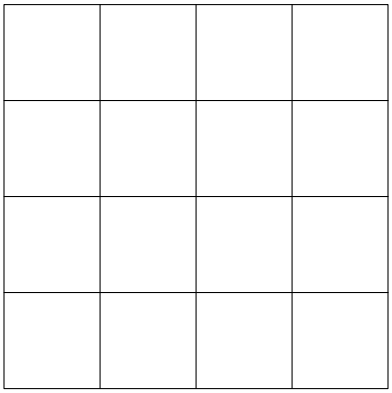


Figure 3.

Socrates. Well, let us draw a square like that.
You say this figure is an eight-foot square?

Attendant. I do.

Socrates. Inside this figure are four squares,
Each equal to the four-foot square.

Attendant. That's true.

Socrates. How big is this one? Is it not four times
As big?

Attendant. It is.

Socrates. So do you think this one
Is twice the size?

Attendant. I don't think that, by Zeus.

Socrates. What is the size comparison?

Attendant. Four times.

Socrates. Therefore when we increase each side to twice
Its length, the square that we produce is not
Two times, but is four times as big?

Attendant. That's right.

Socrates. And four times four is sixteen, is it not?

Attendant. It is.

Socrates. So then how should we draw a line
To make an eight-foot square? With this line here
The square is four times bigger, is it not?

Attendant. That's right.

Socrates. Each side of this, the four-foot square,
Is based on this line here, at half the length?

Attendant. It is.

Socrates points to Figure 2 and then to Figure 3.

Socrates. All right. Now is the eight-foot square
Not twice the size of this and half of that?

Attendant. That's true.

Socrates. Therefore it must exceed this one
In length, but must not be as long as that.

Attendant. I think that's right.

Socrates. Good, answer what you think.
Now this we said was two feet long and that
Was four feet?

Attendant. That we did.

Socrates. So then the line
That bounds the eight-foot square exceeds in length
The two-foot one but yet is shorter than
The line that has four feet?

Attendant. That must be so.

Socrates. So tell me then: How long must be this line?

Attendant. Three feet.

Socrates draws the diagram shown in Figure 4.

Socrates. All right. Then let's increase each line
By half, for here are two feet; adding one
Makes three. And over here it is the same:
To two we add the one, and we have three.
With that our figure is as you suggest.

Attendant. It is.

Socrates. Now if it's three feet on this side
And three on that, how large will be the whole?
Three feet times three?

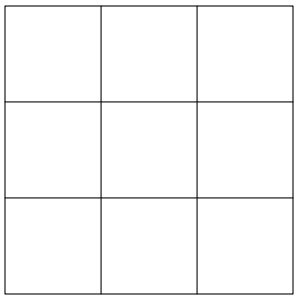


Figure 4.

Attendant. That's how it seems.

Socrates. How much
Is three times three?

Attendant. Nine feet.

Socrates. How big was it,
The double square? How many feet?

Attendant. Eight feet.

Socrates. Therefore the three-foot side cannot create
The square we want?

Attendant. It can't, apparently.

Socrates. So how long should it be? Please be exact.
Please give a number or a diagram.

Attendant. By Zeus, I must admit I do not know.

Socrates. See, Meno, how the recollection goes.
It's clear he never knew how long it was,
The side-length of the eight foot square. At first
He thought he knew, and spoke as if he did.
He didn't tell himself, "I'm at a loss."
But now he does think that: He doesn't know,
Nor does he think he knows.

Meno. I think that's true.

Socrates. Has he proceeded to a better place
Regarding what he doesn't know?

Meno. He has.

Socrates. And have we done him harm by making him
Perplexed and numb, like the torpedo fish?

Meno. I'd say we haven't.

Socrates. Rather it would seem
We've helped the cause of knowledge, for he knows
He doesn't know, and wants to see the truth.
Before he may have thought that he could make
Fine speeches to large crowds, saying "The square
Of double size has twice as long a side."

Meno. That seems to be the case.

Socrates. And do you think
He would have sought the answer that he thought

He knew, but he did not, before he fell
Into bewilderment and thereby saw
He didn't know, and therefore wished to know?

Meno. I don't think that he would have, Socrates.

Socrates. Has numbing him then benefited him?

Meno. I think it has.

Socrates. See now how he'll escape
Bewilderment by joining up with me
And searching. I'll do nothing more than ask
Him questions. I won't teach him. See if you
Observe me teach or tell him anything
Instead of asking him, "What do you think?"

Socrates turns to the attendant and points to Figure 2.

Please tell me, is this not a four-foot square?
You understand?

Attendant. I do.

Socrates draws the diagram shown in Figure 5.

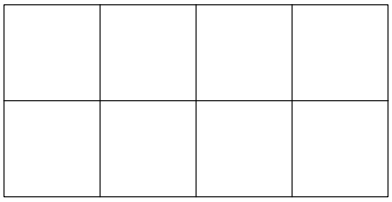


Figure 5.

Socrates. We add to it
This figure which is equal to it?

Attendant. Yes.

Socrates draws the diagram shown in Figure 6.

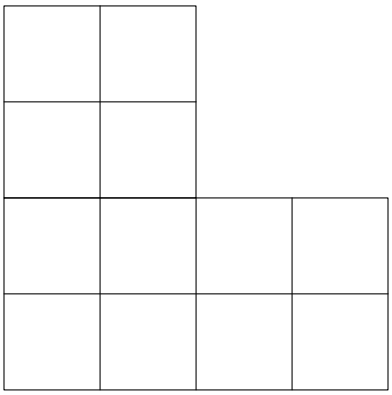


Figure 6.

Socrates. We add this third one, which again is equal?

Attendant. Yes.

Socrates. What is left here is a corner space
Which we can fill?

Attendant. We can.

Socrates adds the remaining four-foot-square to Figure 6, reconstructing Figure 3.

Socrates. So here we have
Four equal figures?

Attendant. Yes.

Socrates. Please tell me now:
How many times does this large square exceed
In size each of the smaller squares?

Attendant. Four times.

Socrates. The square we wanted was but twice as large.
Or do you not remember?

Attendant. Yes, I do.

Socrates draws the diagram shown in Figure 7.

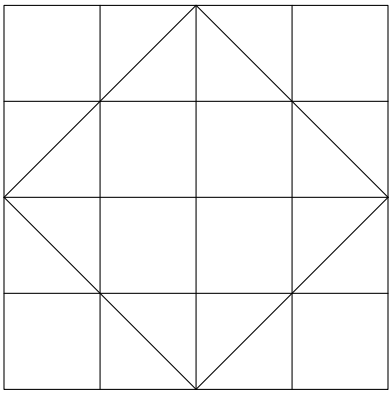


Figure 7.

Socrates. What of this line that starts here at one corner,
And goes to that one opposite? Does it
Not cut each of these smaller squares in two?

Attendant. It does.

Socrates. So then four equal lines enclose
This inner figure?

Attendant. Yes.

Socrates. Consider now:
How big is it, this inner figure here?

Attendant. I do not understand.

Socrates. In each of these
Four squares, each line bisects it, does it not?

Attendant. It does.

Socrates. How many four-foot squares are here?

Attendant. Four squares.

Socrates. How many four-foot-squares are in
The inner figure?

Attendant. Two.

Socrates. How do we say
That four relates to two?

Attendant. We say it's double.

Socrates. How many feet are in the inner square?

Attendant. Eight feet.

Socrates. What is the line that forms its side?

The attendant points to the diagonal line.

Attendant. This one.

Socrates. That is, the line that goes from here,
One corner of the four-foot square, to there,
The other corner?

Attendant. Yes.

Socrates. The clever men
Refer to it as "the diagonal."
Now knowing that this is its name, do you
Believe the side-length of the double square
Is this, the line which is diagonal?

Attendant. Yes, Socrates. I think exactly that.

Socrates. What say you, Meno? Has he, in his answers,
Said anything that was not his opinion?

Meno. No, everything he said was what he thought.

Socrates. And yet, not long ago, he did not know?

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. So the opinions that he had
Were in him all along — or were they not?

Meno. They were.

Socrates. Therefore the man who does not know
Has true opinions in himself of things
He does not know?

Meno. That is how it appears.

Socrates. We saw the boy's opinions were stirred up
As in a dream; and what if he were asked
Repeatedly of them? Do you believe
That in the end his knowledge of these things
Would be as accurate as anyone's?

Meno. That's likely.

Socrates. And this boy won't have been taught,
But only questioned, and this boy will find
The knowledge in himself?

Meno. He will.

Socrates. And is
Not finding knowledge that is in oneself
A kind of recollection?

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. Consider what that knowledge is. He must
At some time have acquired it, or else

Have always had it?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And in the case
He always had it, he'd always have known.
If he obtained it, on the other hand,
He didn't do that in his current life.
Or has someone taught him geometry?
Regardless, what he'll do is just same
In any subject, in geometry
Or any other one. Has someone taught
Him everything? That's something you should know,
As he was born and brought up in your house.

Meno. I know no one has taught him.

Socrates. Yet he has
The opinions that we've seen, or doesn't he?

Meno. I do not doubt he has them, Socrates.

Socrates. If they are not a product of this life,
He must have learned them at some other time.

Meno. That seems to be the case.

Socrates. When was that time?
When he was not a human being?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Then if, when he exists and he is not
A human being, he has true opinions,
And these opinions, stirred by questioning,
Turn into knowledge, is it not the case
His soul will have been learning all this time?
For clearly all this time he must exist,
As man or in some other way.

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. And if the truth about reality
Is always in our soul, which is immortal,
Then you should not give up, instead should seek
To recollect whatever you don't know —
That is, what you have not yet recollected?

Meno. Yes, Socrates. I think that is correct.

Socrates. I also think so, Meno. I don't claim
My arguments are uniformly right;
At all costs, though, I do believe in this
In word and deed, as much as I am able:
We're better men, we're braver and less idle,
If we believe in searching for the things
We do not know, instead of doubting we
Can find what we don't know, so that we should
Not look for it.

Meno. In this I also think
You, Socrates, are right.

Socrates. Thus we agree
That one should strive to find what isn't known.
Therefore shall we join forces and attempt

To find what virtue is?

Meno. I think we should.
But, Socrates, I'm waiting still to hear
The answer to my question from before:
Is virtue something teachable? Is it
A natural gift? How does it come to men?

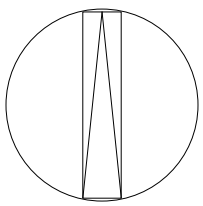
Socrates. If I directed our discussion, Meno,
I'd say, "Let's not investigate this question,
'Is virtue teachable?' before we know
What virtue is itself." But you don't seek
To regulate yourself, and thus be free;
Instead you want to rule me, and you do.
Therefore I'll go along with you, for what
Can I do otherwise? It seems we must
Investigate a thing we do not know
By nature, seeking out its qualities.
I'll ask you this, however: Please relax
The rule that you've propounded and agree
To using a hypothesis as we
Determine whether virtue can be taught.
By this I mean the way geometers
Pursue investigations. For example,
If asked, "Here is an area and here
A circle. Is it possible to find
A triangle inscribed inside the circle
That has that area?" a geometer
Might say, "I do not know if that is true.
I have, however, a hypothesis
That seems to be of service to this problem:
Inscribe a square inside the circle. Now
Suppose the given area not more
Than half that of the square.[13] Then in this case
I'd say that what you asked is possible;
And otherwise it isn't. So the answer
Depends on whether this condition holds."
Let's speak in just this way concerning virtue.

[13] This is my gloss on Plato's text. Here is the Grube translation, with my gloss interpolated: "If that area is such that when one has applied it as a rectangle to the given straight line in the circle [i.e., when one subtracts it from the area of the the square inscribed in the circle] it is deficient by a figure similar to the very figure which is applied [i.e., at least half the area of the square is left], ..."

Here is some basic mathematics supporting this interpretation. Let C be a circle, let S be a square inscribed in C, and let A_S be the area of S. From elementary geometry, we have the following facts:

1. A_S is the largest area of any rectangle inscribed in C.
2. For any area A with $0 < A \leq A_S$, we can inscribe a rectangle R with area A in C, by making R thin enough.

Therefore, as Socrates says, a triangle of area A_T can be inscribed in C if and only if $2A_T \leq A_S$. Indeed, if this condition holds, then we can inscribe a rectangle R of area $2A_T$ in C, and we can inscribe a triangle of area A_T in R. See the diagram below. If it doesn't hold, then any triangle of area A inscribed in C will lie in a rectangle of area $2A$ inscribed in C. Since $2A \leq A_S < 2A_T$, $A \neq A_T$.



We don't know what it is, what qualities
It has; therefore let us investigate
Our question, whether virtue can be taught,
By using a hypothesis, like this:
Of all things that are present in the soul,
What kind of thing is virtue? Do we think
It is a kind of thing that can be taught?
Let's first assume that virtue isn't knowledge.
In this case, is it teachable? If so
It must be able to be recollected.
Let's not distinguish now between these terms:
To teach or recollect. Or is it clear
That knowledge is, alone, what can be taught?

Meno. I think it is.

Socrates. If virtue is a form
Of knowledge, then, it's clear it could be taught?

Meno. Of course.

Socrates. We ascertained that rapidly,
That if it's of one kind, it can be taught,
While, of another kind, that it cannot.

Meno. We have indeed.

Socrates. The next point to take up,
It seems to me, is this: Is virtue knowledge,
Or something else?

Meno. I also think that this
Is what we should consider next.

Socrates. Well, now,
Do we proclaim that virtue in itself
Is something good? Will this hypothesis
Stand up for us, that virtue is a good?

Meno. Of course it will.

Socrates. If there is anything
That's good and also separate from knowledge,
It's possible that virtue is that thing.
But if there's nothing like this, nothing good
Outside the realm of knowledge, we'd be right
To think that virtue lies inside that realm.

Meno. That's so.

Socrates. Does virtue make us good?

Meno. It does.

Socrates. And if we're good, then we bestow a good;
For all that's good provides a benefit.
Is that not so?

Meno. It is.

Socrates. And therefore virtue
Is beneficial?

Meno. Yes, I think that follows
From all that we have said.

Socrates. Then let's examine
What things bestow a benefit on us.
Let's take them one by one, starting with health.
That's one; then strength and beauty; also wealth.
We say these things, and other things like these,
Are beneficial to us, do we not?

Meno. We do.

Socrates. But then we also say these things
Can harm us sometimes, too. Do you agree?

Meno. I do.

Socrates. Then let us ask: What, in each case,
Determines whether benefit or harm
Occurs to us when we possess these things?
Does not the proper use of them create
A benefit, while misuse causes harm?

Meno. That's true.

Socrates. Look now upon the qualities
Inherent in the soul. There's something we
Call moderation, something we call justice;
Intelligence, and generosity,
And memory, and other things like that?

Meno. There are.

Socrates. Consider which of these you think
Is different from knowledge: Do they not
Sometimes cause harm, sometimes a benefit?
Take courage, for example. There are times
That courage is a form of recklessness,
Not wisdom. When a man impulsively
Reacts, in ways he does not understand,
He's harmed, whereas he'd gain a benefit
From action based on understanding.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. With moderation and acuity
The same is true: When they are taken up
And used with discipline and understanding,
They bring a benefit; but using them
Unwisely causes harm?

Meno. I think that's so.

Socrates. So we must say that if the soul takes up
A thing, and doing this it guides itself
With wisdom, happiness is the result;
But if the path it treads is ignorance,
The opposite occurs?

Meno. Yes, that is likely.

Socrates. Therefore if virtue is an attribute
That's found within the soul, and if it brings
A universal benefit, it must
Be knowledge, since the qualities we find
Inside the soul are neither, in themselves,
A cause for harm or cause for benefit;

Instead, they give a benefit when they
Are paired with wisdom, while when they are paired
With foolishness the opposite occurs.
The argument we've made establishes
That virtue, which must give a benefit,
Must be a kind of wisdom.

Meno. I agree.

Socrates. Moreover, as to other things that we
Discussed just now, wealth for example, these
Are sometimes good, while sometimes they cause harm.
We said as to the other qualities
Found in the soul, if wisdom is the guide
Then they are beneficial, whereas harm
Results when folly leads. So in the case
Of wealth and other things, a benefit
Results when they are used the proper way,
While use that's incorrect will cause us harm?

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. The soul that's wise directs good use?
The soul that's foolish does the opposite?

Meno. Yes, I agree.

Socrates. Therefore let us say this:
All human acts depend upon the soul;
The soul itself needs wisdom to direct
Those acts so that they give a benefit.
According to this argument, what gives
A benefit is wisdom. And we say
That virtue gives a benefit?

Meno. We do.

Socrates. So virtue must, in whole or part, be wisdom?

Meno. Yes, Socrates, that statement seems correct.

Socrates. If that is so, it must not be the case
Good men are good by nature?

Meno. No, they're not.

Socrates. For if they were, then things would be like this:
Men would exist who knew which of the young
Were good by nature; those they pointed out
We'd set aside in the Acropolis.
We'd guard them vigilantly, more than gold,
Preventing them from seeing anyone
Who might corrupt them, so that when they reached
Adulthood they'd confer a benefit
Upon their cities.

Meno. That sounds right to me.

Socrates. If it is not the case that men are good
By nature, can they learn and thus be good?

Meno. I think so, Socrates. For we have said
That virtue is a kind of knowledge; so
It seems it can be taught.

Socrates. Perhaps, by Zeus.
However, could it be that we have erred
In reaching this conclusion?

Meno. It seemed right
When we concluded it.

Socrates. If it is sound,
It must be right not then alone, but now
And always in the future.

Meno. What is wrong?
What's causing you to doubt the claim we made
Before, that virtue is a kind of knowledge?

Socrates. I'll tell you, Meno. I don't disagree
That virtue, if it's knowledge, can be taught.
I'll ask you, though, if I am justified
In doubting that it's knowledge after all.
Consider: As to anything at all,
Not only virtue, if it can be taught,
Should it not be the case that ones exist
Who teach it? Shouldn't they have students, too,
Who learn it?

Meno. Yes, that seems to be the case.

Socrates. But if in fact the teachers don't exist,
Nor do the students, shouldn't we assume
The subject is not one that can be taught?

Meno. I think that's right. But then do you believe
That no one teaches virtue?

Socrates. I have tried
Repeatedly to find someone who does.
My efforts in this area have failed,
Although I've had the help of many people,
Including those with most experience,
As I believed, in just this kind of teaching.
Now, Meno, look who's joined us: Anytus[14]
Is sitting here. Let's tell him of our search.
To do this seems advisable; for, first,
His father is Anthemion,[15] a man
Possessed of wealth and wisdom. He did not
Inherit wealth, nor was he given it,
As Ismenias[16] was, the Theban who
Obtained the fortune of Polycrates.[17]
Instead it came about through his hard work
And judgment. Nor did he have arrogance
Or give offense in any other way.
Instead he was well-mannered and polite.
And second he bestowed on Anytus,
Our friend who's sitting here, an upbringing
And education of high quality,
As most Athenians believe, for they

[14] Pronounced AN-i-tus. Anytus will be one of the accusers in the trial that leads to Socrates's conviction and death, as related in the *Apology.*

[15] Pronounced an-THEE-mee-on.

[16] Pronounced is-me-NEE-as the THEE-ban.

[17] Pronounced pol-I-cra-teez.

Elect him to their highest offices.
It seems that we, in seeking out the teachers
Of virtue, should enlist the help of men
Like him to find if any men exist
Like this and if they do, then who they are.
So, Anytus, please join with me and join
Your guest-friend Meno here, to help us learn
Who teaches virtue. Look at it like this:
Suppose we wanted Meno to become
A skilled physician. Who would be the ones
To whom we'd send him? Would we not seek out
Physicians? Would we not send him to them?

Anytus. We would indeed.

Socrates. And if we wanted him
To be a shoemaker, would we not send him
To shoemakers?

Anytus. We would.

Socrates. And so it seems
With other occupations he could have?

Anytus. That's right.

Socrates. As to this topic, let's restate:
We claim that if he wants to be a doctor,
We'll send him to the doctors. What we mean
Is, we should seek someone who knows the craft
And practices it, rather than someone
Who doesn't practice it. Also, the ones
We seek should be professionals, they should
Be ones who charge a fee for what they do.
They should, moreover, show that they are teachers,
By training those who come to them to learn.
Are these the qualities that we should seek
In choosing where to send him?

Anytus. Yes, they are.

Socrates. And what of playing flutes and other crafts?
Suppose one wanted to develop skill
In playing on the flute. Would it make sense
To shun the ones who say they teach the craft,
And teach it, and make money teaching it,
And go instead to those who do not claim
That they are teachers, ones who do not have
A single student in the very subject
Of which he wants to learn? Do you not think
This course of action is a foolish one?

Anytus. I think it is, by Zeus; and ignorant.

Socrates. That's right. Now let us speak of Meno here.
For some time, Anytus, he's said he wants
To learn about the wisdom and the virtue
By which men soundly manage their affairs,
Their households and their cities, and bestow
Their care upon their parents, that they use
To welcome and dismiss both citizens

And strangers in the way a good man should.
To whom should he be sent to learn this virtue?
Or is it obvious from what we said
That we should seek the ones who say they teach
This subject, and have been available
To any Greek who wants to study it,
And charge a fee for just this kind of teaching?

Anytus. Who do you say these men are, Socrates?

Socrates. I think you know the answer. They're the ones
That men call sophists.

Anytus. Hush now, Socrates!
By Heracles, may no one of my household
Or friends, a stranger or a citizen,
Be addled in the head sufficiently
To go to one like that, receiving harm;
For they deliver ruin and corruption
To those who follow them.

Socrates. What do you mean?
Are these men, Anytus, so different
From others who teach knowledge for a fee?
Do they not only fail to benefit
What is their trust, but also ruin it,
Expecting to make money in the process?
I find this is not easy to believe,
For one of whom I know, Protagoras,[18]
Earned more from what he taught than Phidias,[19]
A sculptor of some note, and more than did
Ten other sculptors. Surely what you say
Must cause surprise, for those who mend old shoes
And clothes would be discovered in a month
If shoes and clothes they took from customers
Were worse upon return than when received.
Such men would not be able to survive.
But all of Greece has not, for forty years,
Detected that Protagoras did harm
To those who went to him, so that they left
In worse condition than when they arrived?
I think that he was nearly seventy
Upon his passing and had plied his craft
For forty years. For all that time to now
He has enjoyed the highest reputation.
Not just Protagoras, but others too:
Some older than he was and some who are
Alive today. Do you maintain that they
Deceive and harm the young with bad intent,
Or do you think that they are ignorant?
Are we to think these men, whom some would count
Among the wisest, are in truth just mad?

Anytus. I do not, Socrates, accuse these men
Of being mad. Instead young men who pay
Their fees are mad; and more so relatives

[18] Pronounced pro-TA-go-ras.

[19] Pronounced PHI-dee-as.

Who send their young to them; and most of all
The cities who admit them and who fail
To banish any citizen or stranger
Who operates this way.

Socrates. Have you been wronged
By one of them? Is this why, Anytus,
You're hard upon the sophists?

Anytus. No, by Zeus.
I've never met a one of them. I won't
Allow my people to go near them either.

Socrates. So you have no experience of them?

Anytus. That's right, and may I stay that way.

Socrates. So how,
Good sir, can you know if there's any good
In what they teach or not, if you have no
Experience of it?

Anytus. That is not hard:
I know well what they are. I do not need
Experience with them to know of it.

Socrates. Perhaps you are a wizard, Anytus.
If not I wonder how, from what you say,
You know these things. However, let's not try
To learn of who would injure Meno here
If he were sent into their company.
Let's say that it's the sophists if you like.
But let me know, and aid your family friend
By telling him the one he should consult
In order to acquire what he seeks,
The virtue I described to you just now.

Anytus. Why not tell him yourself?

Socrates. I mentioned those
I thought could teach him virtue, but you say
That I am wrong, and maybe you are right.
You tell him whom in Athens he should seek.
Provide to him whatever name you want.

Anytus. Why give him just one name, when any man
In Athens, if he's willing to assist,
Will teach him better than the sophists would?

Socrates. And how is it that they are virtuous?
Have they acquired virtue without learning
From anyone? And can they teach this virtue
That they have never learned?

Anytus. I think that they
Have learned from gentlemen who came before them.
Or do you think this city lacks good men?

Socrates. What I think, Anytus, is many men
In Athens are adept at politics,
As many have been in the past as well;
But are they good at teaching their own virtue?
That is the point we have before us now,
Not whether men in Athens may be good

Or whether they might have been in the past;
Instead we've been discussing for some time
The question whether virtue can be taught.
And in the course of our investigation
We're asking whether good men of today
And of the past are able to impart
The virtue that they have to other men,
Or whether virtue cannot be transferred
From one man to another. It is this
That Meno and that I have been discussing
For some time now. Consider it this way,
According to the statements that you made:
Would you agree with me Themistocles[20]
Was good?

Anytus. Indeed, he was among the best
Of men.

Socrates. It follows he taught virtue well
If anyone could teach it?

Anytus. I agree
That he could teach it, if he wanted to.

Socrates. And do you think he wouldn't want to teach it
To other men, especially his son?
Do you think he withheld from his own son
The virtue that he had? Have you not heard
The way Themistocles taught Cleophantus,[21]
His son, the skill of expert horsemanship?
That man could mount a horse and, standing upright,
Could hurl a javelin from that position.
Not only this, but he had other skills
Of note, because of teaching that he had
And that his father gave him. All these skills
Required that he learn from expert teachers.
Have you not heard of this from older men?

Anytus. I have.

Socrates. So it's not possible to claim
That lack of natural talent caused the son
To fail in virtue?

Anytus. No, perhaps it isn't.

Socrates. And yet has anyone who's young or old
That you're aware of ever tried to claim
Cleophantus was just as good and wise
As was Themistocles, his father?

Anytus. Never.

Socrates. Should we believe Themistocles set out
To teach his son in all those other skills
But not to teach him in the skill he had
Himself, the skill of virtue? If indeed
Such virtue can be taught, does this seem likely?

[20] Pronounced the-MIS-te-kleez. He was an Athenian politician and general.

[21] Pronounced clee-OH-fan-tus.

Anytus. Perhaps it doesn't seem that way, by Zeus.

Socrates. And yet, as you yourself agree, he was
Among the ones we should consider great
In teaching virtue. Here's another man:
Aristides, the son of Lysimachus.[22]
Do you agree with me this man was good?

Anytus. Of course I do.

Socrates. He gave to his own son,
Called Lysimachus too, an education
In teaching, and his training was the best
That Athens has to offer. Do you think
He was, as a result, a better man
Than any other? For you've dealt with him
And seen the kind of man that he became.
Consider also Pericles, a man
Of splendid wisdom. He has raised two sons,
Called Paralus and Xanthippus.[23]

Anytus. Yes, I know.

Socrates. You know as well he taught them horsemanship.
They rode as well as any men in Athens.
He had them educated in the arts,
And in gymnastics, and in all the skills
Required to compete with other men.
But did he also want them to be good?
I think he did want that, but no one could
Teach goodness. And, so that you don't suppose
That just a few Athenians have failed
In virtue, and they are inferior,
Remember that Thucydides[24] brought up
Two sons, Melesias and Stephanus,[25]
And that he had them educated well
In everything but virtue. In the sport
Of wrestling they became the best in Athens.
One son was taught by Xanthias[26] and one
Learned from Eudorus,[27] and these two instructors
Were held to be the greatest of their day
In wrestling. Do you not remember this?

Anytus. I do remember hearing that.

Socrates. It's clear
That, having paid these men to teach his boys,
He would not fail to teach them what costs nothing —
To teach them goodness — if it could be taught.
Or was Thucydides inferior,
A man who could not boast of many friends
In Athens and its allies? No, I think
His house was great, his influence was great

[22] Pronounced li-SI-ma-kus.

[23] Pronounced PAR-a-lus and XAN-thip-pus.

[24] Pronounced thyoo-SID-i-deez. This Thucydides was an Athenian statesman. He opposed Pericles and was ostracized in 400 B.C.

[25] Pronounced me-LAY-si-as and STE-fa-nus.

[26] Pronounced XAN-thi-as.

[27] Pronounced YOO-do-rus.

In Athens and among the other Greeks.
If virtue could be taught, he would have found
The man who could have taught it to his sons,
A citizen or stranger, if himself
He lacked the time because he was concerned
With politics. But, Anytus my friend,
It seems more likely virtue can't be taught.

Anytus. I think that you too easily speak ill
Of others, Socrates. Here's my advice,
If you're inclined to listen: just be careful.
In Athens, and perhaps in other cities,
It's easier to cause an injury
To others than to give a benefit.
I think you also know this.

Socrates. I think, Meno,
That Anytus is angry. I am not
Surprised. He thinks I'm slandering those men,
And he thinks he is one of them. One day
He may perceive what slander is, and then
He won't be angry any more. For now,
He doesn't understand it. Tell me, please:
Among your people, are there worthy men?

Meno. There are.

Socrates. And do they say they'll guide the young?
Do they proclaim, "Yes, virtue can be taught,
And we can teach it"?

Meno. No they don't, by Zeus.
But sometimes they do say it can be taught,
While other times they say the opposite.

Socrates. And should we say they're teachers of this subject,
When they themselves cannot agree they are?

Meno. I do not think so, Socrates.

Socrates. And do
You think the sophists, who alone profess
To teach it, do teach virtue, as they claim?

Meno. This is, in Gorgias, what I admire
Above all, Socrates: You'll never hear
Him promise this. Instead he ridicules
The other sophists when he hears them claim
They're teaching virtue. He thinks one should train
His students to be clever orators.

Socrates. So then you think the sophists don't teach virtue?

Meno. I don't know, Socrates. Like many men,
Sometimes I think they do, and sometimes not.

Socrates. It's not just you and other public men
Who sometimes think that virtue can be taught
And other times believe the opposite.
Theognis[28] says this too, in poetry.

[28] Pronounced THAY-og-nis. Theognis of Megara was a poet of mid-sixth century B.C.

Meno. Where does he say it?

Socrates. In his elegiacs:
"These men should be your fellows. Eat and drink
With them, and strive to please the powerful:
For it is from the good you'll learn of goodness.
If you instead seek out the company
Of bad men, you will lose what wit you have."
You see he hints that virtue can be taught?

Meno. I do.

Socrates. Elsewhere he has a different view.
"If one could do a thing like this," he says,
"Instilling wisdom in the minds of men,"
The ones who did this "would receive large fees."
He also says this: "No good father would
Bring up a son who's bad, because the son
Would heed the father's wisdom. But in fact
No bad man can be made into a good one
By teaching." You can see he contradicts
Himself when writing on this subject?

Meno. Yes,
It seems that he is doing that.

Socrates. Is there
Another subject you can cite for which
The ones who claim to teach it are not held
As teachers; and not only that, but they
Are held not to have knowledge of it, they
Are thought not competent on just the subject
They claim to teach? And is there any subject
But this in which the ones who know the most
About it sometimes say it can be taught,
And other times do not? Would you agree
That people so confused about a subject
Can teach it well at all?

Meno. No, I would not,
By Zeus.

Socrates. Who then is left to do the teaching?
If neither sophists nor upstanding men
Can teach it, there is no one else?

Meno. That's right,
I think there isn't.

Socrates. If there are no teachers,
There are no students either?

Meno. I agree.

Socrates. Should we conclude that virtue can't be taught?

Meno. I think we should, if what we have discussed
Is accurate. I wonder, Socrates,
If there are good men, either; and, if so,
What is the way in which they come to be?

Socrates. I think that we are poor examples, Meno.
It seems the education you received
From Gorgias is hardly adequate;

Nor is the one that Prodicus gave me.
Therefore let's turn attention to ourselves:
Let's make it now a high priority
To find someone who, somehow, makes us better.
I say this after our investigation,
For it's absurd that we have failed to see
That men succeed not just because of knowledge.
Perhaps this is the reason we don't know
How good men come to me.

Meno. What do you mean?

Socrates. I mean just this: I think that we were right
When we agreed good men provide a good,
And that this has to be. Is that not so?

Meno. It is.

Socrates. And that they will provide a good
If they provide us guidance that's correct
In our affairs. Is this correct as well?

Meno. I think so.

Socrates. But when we concluded one,
To guide correctly, must have knowledge, we
Were likely incorrect.

Meno. How do you mean?

Socrates. I'll tell you now. Suppose there is a man
Who knows the way to travel to Larissa,
Or anywhere you like. Suppose that he
Went there and guided others. It is clear
That he would lead them well?

Meno. I think he would.

Socrates. Suppose there were a man who had a right
Opinion of the way to travel there.
Suppose, though, he himself had never gone
That way, or even knew it. Would that man
Not also lead correctly?

Meno. Yes, that's true.

Socrates. So if that man's opinion is correct,
His guidance would be just as good as that
Of him who knows. The reason is he has
A true opinion, though he lacks the knowledge.

Meno. That's true, his guidance would be just as good.

Socrates. So true opinion is in no way worse
Than knowledge as a guide to human action.
It's this that we omitted when we asked
What kind of thing is virtue, and we said
That only knowledge keeps us on the path
Of rightness: True opinion does as well.

Meno. That seems to be the case.

Socrates. So true opinion
Is no less useful to us than is knowledge?

Meno. I think so, Socrates. And yet the man
With knowledge never fails, whereas the man
Who follows his opinion will succeed
Sometimes, and sometimes fail.

Socrates. How do you mean?
Will not the right opinion cause a man
To have success, so long as it is right?

Meno. That seems to be the case. So, Socrates,
I wonder: If we are indeed correct,
Then why do men rate knowledge so more highly
Than right opinion? Are they not the same?

Socrates. Do you know why you wonder this? If not,
Would you like me to tell you?

Meno. By all means,
Please do so, Socrates.

Socrates. It is because
You don't know of the statues that were made
By Daedalus.[29] But maybe there are none
In Thessaly.

Meno. Please tell me what you mean
By saying this.

Socrates. The statues run away
Unless one ties them down; but if tied down,
They stay in place.

Meno. So what?

Socrates. If one acquires
A work of Daedalus that's not tied down,
It's worth but little, for no one can keep it.
It's like a slave who's apt to run away.
But any work of Daedalus that is
Tied down is worth a lot, because his works
Are beautiful. What do I have in mind
When saying this? I think of true opinions.
For true opinions are, while they remain,
A useful thing, and all they do is good.
But they are not disposed to do this. They
Escape the mind, so that they're not worth much
Until one ties them down with an account
Of why they're true. And that, Meno my friend,
Is recollection, as we said before.
A true opinion, once it is tied down,
Becomes a kind of knowledge, and it stays
In place. This is why men consider knowledge
To have more value than correct opinion.
The two are not the same: The knowledge differs
From the opinion, for it is tied down.

Meno. I see that, Socrates, by Zeus. It seems
That what you said must be the difference.

Socrates. I too lack knowledge; therefore I must guess.
However, I don't think it is a guess

[29] Pronounced DEH-da-lus.

To say that knowledge and that right opinion
Are different things. If there is any thing
I know (and that is not a claim I make
Of many things) then this is one of them.

Meno. You're right to say that, Socrates.

Socrates. Well then,
Do we agree that having true opinion
To guide one's actions is in no way worse
Than having knowledge?

Meno. This I also think
Is right.

Socrates. Correct opinion isn't worse
Than knowledge, or less useful as a guide
To action? One who follows true opinion
Is no less useful than the one with knowledge?

Meno. I think that is the case.

Socrates. And we agreed
Good men provide a benefit?

Meno. We did.

Socrates. And men are good and are beneficent
Not just when they have knowledge; also when
They have correct opinions. In this case
They're helpful to their cities. Furthermore,
It's not the case that knowledge or opinion
Can come to men by nature; rather they're
Acquired — or perhaps you disagree?

Meno. No, I agree.

Socrates. Then, since they do not come
By nature, men must not be good by nature.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. So goodness does not come by nature.
We also asked if goodness can be taught.

Meno. We did.

Socrates. We said the answer would be yes
If it were knowledge?

Meno. That is what we said.

Socrates. We also said that if it could be taught
It would be knowledge?

Meno. Yes, we said that too.

Socrates. And if men teach it, then it can be taught,
But if there are no teachers, then it can't?

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. And we agreed there are no teachers?

Meno. We did.

Socrates. So we concluded that it is
Not teachable and also isn't knowledge?

Meno. That follows, yes.

Socrates. But surely we agree
That virtue is a good?

Meno. Yes, that is true.

Socrates. What guides correctly is both good and useful?

Meno. It is.

Socrates. And true belief and knowledge are
The only things that guide us in this way.
A man who has them is a helpful guide.
Some things succeed by chance; this is not due
To human guidance. But where there is guidance,
And guidance is correct, we must have one
Of two things, either true belief or knowledge.

Meno. I think that's right.

Socrates. Since virtue can't be taught,
It seems it isn't knowledge?

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. Therefore we have excluded from the pair
Of good and useful things one of those things.
We have determined knowledge cannot be
The guide to action in public affairs.

Meno. That's what I think.

Socrates. It follows it is not
Through being wise that men can lead their cities,
Men like Themistocles and men like those
That we discussed with Anytus before.
This is why they cannot confer on others
The qualities they have: It isn't knowledge
That makes them what they are.

Meno. Yes, Socrates,
That seems to be the case.

Socrates. If it's not knowledge
That guides the statesmen when they lead their cites
In ways that are correct, then it must be
Correct belief. And in regard to knowledge,
These statesmen are, it seems, no different
From soothsayers and prophets. Just like them,
These men feel inspiration and speak truth
But have no knowledge of the things they say.

Meno. That's likely.

Socrates. Therefore, Meno, should we call
These men divine who, lacking understanding,
Are nonetheless correct in what they say
And do in many matters of importance?

Meno. I think we should.

Socrates. It seems we would be right
To say this of the soothsayers and prophets;
The poets too. Therefore we are correct
To call out as divine the public men
Who likewise feel the influence the gods
Provide, are also ones possessed by them.

Their speeches are important and they cause
Success, although they know not what they say.

Meno. That's right.

Socrates. And women call good men divine.
The Spartans too will eulogize someone
By saying of him, "This man was divine."

Meno. And in this, Socrates, I think they're right;
Though Anytus perhaps will be annoyed
With you for saying this.

Socrates. I do not mind.
We'll talk with him again. But if we were
Correct in the discussion that we had,
Then virtue is not something that a man
Is born with, nor is it a skill he's taught.
Instead the ones who have it have received
A blessing from the gods, a kind of gift
That's unaccompanied by understanding —
Unless there is a statesman who can make
Another man a statesman like himself.
If so, then he would do among the living
What Homer said about Teiresias
When he was with the dead, that "He alone
Among them kept his wits, while all the rest
Were flitting back and forth as shadows do."
In just this way a man who had this knowledge
Would be, as far as virtue is concerned,
The only true reality among
The shadows.

Meno. That is well said, Socrates.

Socrates. It follows, Meno, from what we have said
That virtue, when it shows up in a man,
Is there because he has received a gift
The gods have given him. We shall obtain
A clearer knowledge of these matters when,
Before investigating how it comes
To men, we understand what virtue is
According to itself. But now the time
Has come that I must go. You should convince
Your guest-friend Anytus of just these things
Of which you've been convinced yourself, so he
Is rendered more amenable to them.
If you do this successfully, you will
Confer a benefit upon our city.

References

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