

Plato, *Meno* (70a-79e)

Meno. Can you tell me this, Socrates: Is virtue something that can be taught? Or is it something that can't be taught but can be acquired through practice? Or is it something that can't be either acquired through practice or learned, but arises in people by nature or in some other way?

Socrates. My dear Meno, in the past the Thessalians were famous and admired among the Greeks for their horsemanship and their wealth. [70b] But now, it seems to me, they are also admired for their wisdom; and this holds true above all of the Larissaeans, the fellow-citizens of your companion Aristippus. Gorgias is responsible for this, for when he came to the city he took as lovers of wisdom the foremost men both of the Aleuadians—including your lover Aristippus—and of the other Thessalians. And he got you people into the habit of answering in a fearless and grand manner if anyone asks you a question, as is appropriate for [70c] those who know, just as he himself volunteers his services to any Greek who wants to ask something, whatever it is each one wants, and there's no one to whom he refuses an answer. But here [in Athens], my dear Meno, things have turned out quite the contrary. It's as if a dearth of wisdom has come about, and it's likely that [71a] wisdom is leaving these parts to go to you. At any rate, if you want to pose your question to any of the people here, there's no one who won't laugh at you and say, "Stranger, it's likely that in your eyes I seem to be a fortunate man, or at least a man who knows whether virtue can be taught or arises in some other way; but in reality I'm so far from knowing whether or not virtue can be taught that, as it happens, I don't even know what in the world virtue is at all." [71b] Well, Meno, I myself am in the same state as well: I am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I condemn myself for not knowing about virtue at all. And if I don't even know *what* virtue is, then how could I know *of what sort* it is? Do you think it's possible for someone who doesn't know who Meno is at all to know whether he is handsome or wealthy and well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that's possible?

Meno. I certainly don't. But as for you, Socrates, do you *truly* [71c] not know what virtue is? Is this what I should report about you when I go home?

Socrates. Sure—and you should report not only this, my friend, but also that, in my opinion, I have never met anyone who *did* know.

Meno. What? Didn't you meet Gorgias when he was here?

Socrates. I did, in fact.

Meno. Well, didn't you think he knew?

Socrates. My memory isn't quite that good, Meno; I can't tell you now what I thought of him back then. But perhaps he did know, and perhaps you know what he said. In that case, remind [71d] me how he spoke; or, if you want, speak in your own voice, for no doubt you hold the same opinion as he did.

Meno. I do, in fact.

Socrates. Well then, let's leave Gorgias alone, since he's not here anyway; but as for you, Meno, what in the name of heaven do *you* assert virtue to be? Speak out and don't be grudging. That way it will turn out that I was very fortunately in error, if you and Gorgias prove to have this knowledge, whereas I stated that I had never met anyone who did. [71e]

Meno. Why, it's not hard to say, Socrates. First off, if you mean the virtue of a man, it's easy. This is the virtue of a man: to be competent in managing the affairs of the city, and to do good to his friends and to do evil to his enemies while ensuring that he suffers no such thing himself. But if you mean the virtue of a woman, that's not hard to explain either. She ought to administer the household well, keeping things safe inside and being obedient to her husband. Again, the virtue of a child (whether male or female) is different from that of an older man, and (if you will) the virtue of a free man is different from that [72a] of a slave. And *all* virtues are distinct from each other, so that there's no difficulty in saying what virtue

is. After all, each of us possesses virtue only in accord with a given activity and time of life and in relation to a particular task, and I think the same applies to vice as well, Socrates.

Socrates. It seems to me that I've stumbled upon a great piece of luck indeed, Meno! I was only looking for a single virtue, but now I've uncovered a whole swarm of virtues in your keeping. But, Meno, to follow up on this simile [72b] of swarms, suppose that I asked what in the world the essence of a bee is and you replied that there are many different kinds of bees. What answer would you give me if I posed the following question: "Would you assert then that these many different kinds of bees differ from each other in respect to their being bees? Or do they not differ at all in respect to their being bees, but rather in other respects such as beauty or size or some other thing like these?" Tell me, what answer would you give if I posed the question this way?

Meno. Why, I'd answer that they don't differ from each other at all in respect to their being bees. [73c]

Socrates. Suppose now that I added another question: "Tell me this, then, Meno: could you state for me in what respect bees do not differ at all from each other, but are all the same?" Presumably you would be able to give some answer?

Meno. I sure would.

Socrates. Well, that's just how it is with the virtues too. Even though there are many different kinds, they have a single form which is the same for all of them, on account of which they are virtues. And if the responder pays proper attention to this form, he will doubtless be able to show the questioner what [72d] virtue happens to be. Do you understand what I mean?

Meno. At least I *think* I understand; but I haven't yet gotten as good a hold on the question as I want.

Socrates. Do you think it holds true of virtue only, Meno, that there is one kind for men and another kind for women and the rest, or does this hold true similarly also for health and size and strength? Do you think that men have one kind of health and women another? Or is the form the same everywhere, provided only that it is in fact health, [72e] regardless of whether it is in a man or in any other individual?

Meno. Yes, I suppose health at any rate is the same in both men and women.

Socrates. And isn't it the same with size and strength? If a woman is strong, won't she be strong by virtue of the same form and the same strength [as a man]? By "the same" I simply mean that strength doesn't differ in regard to strength, whether it's in a man or a woman. Or do you think it does differ in some way?

Meno. No indeed. [73a]

Socrates. And will virtue differ at all in regard to virtue, whether it is in a child or an old person, whether in a woman or a man?

Meno. It seems to me at least, Socrates, that this case is somehow no longer similar to those other ones.

Socrates. How so? Didn't you say that the virtue of a man is to manage the city and that of a woman to manage the household?

Meno. I did.

Socrates. Well then, is it possible to manage either a city or a household or anything else well without managing it temperately and justly?

Meno. Certainly not. [73b]

Socrates. So if they in fact manage these things justly and temperately, they will manage them with justice and temperance?

Meno. Necessarily so.

Socrates. Then both the woman and the man need the same two things—justice and temperance—if they are to be good.

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. What about a child and an old man? Surely they could never be good if they were undisciplined and unjust?

Meno. Certainly not.

Socrates. But only if they were temperate and [73c] just?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So all people are good in the same way, for it is by possessing the same things that they become good.

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. And doubtless they wouldn't be good in the same way if they didn't possess the same virtue.

Meno. They certainly wouldn't.

Socrates. Well then, granting that virtue is the same for everyone, try to state and recall what Gorgias and you, following him, say that virtue is.

Meno. What else than the ability to rule over human beings? [73d] That is, assuming that you're looking for a single thing applicable to every instance.

Socrates. Of course that's what I'm looking for. But, Meno, do a child and a slave too have the same virtue—the ability to rule over their master? And do you think that the one who rules would still be a slave?

Meno. I certainly don't think that, Socrates.

Socrates. Of course not; for it's implausible, my good man. Let's examine this a little more still. You assert that virtue is the ability to rule. Shouldn't we add to this a qualifier: "justly, and not unjustly"?

Meno. I certainly think so, Socrates, since justice is virtue.

Socrates. Is it *virtue*, Meno, or *a particular virtue*?

Meno. What do you mean by that?

Socrates. Just as with any other thing. Suppose, for example, I said that roundness is *a particular shape*, and not simply *shape* unqualifiedly. The reason I would put it that way is that there are other shapes as well.

Meno. You'd be speaking correctly, of course, since I too say that justice is not the only virtue but that there are others as well. [74a]

Socrates. What are the other ones? State them. Just the way I would state for you the other shapes if you should bid me, so you too state for me the other virtues.

Meno. Well, I think that courage is a virtue, and temperance, and wisdom, and magnificence, and many others as well.

Socrates. We've fallen into the same plight as before, Meno. Earlier we looked for a single virtue and ended up finding a bunch, and the same thing happened just now; and we can't come up with a single virtue which is distributed through all of these.

Meno. That's because in this case, Socrates, I simply can't [74b] find what you're looking for—a single virtue applicable to all instances—as I can in the other cases.

Socrates. That's quite understandable. But I, for my part, will do the best I can to make progress. For surely you understand that this is how things are in every case. Suppose someone should ask you the same thing I was saying a moment ago: "What is shape, Meno?" Suppose you replied to him, "Roundness," and suppose he said the same thing I did: "Is roundness *shape* or *a particular shape*?" No doubt you would say that it is a particular shape?

Meno. I certainly would. [74c]

Socrates. The reason being, of course, that there are other shapes too?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And if he went on to ask you of what sort they are, could you say?

Meno. Absolutely.

Socrates. Again, suppose he asked you in a similar fashion what color is, and you said that it is whiteness, and suppose the questioner then pressed further: "Is whiteness *color* or *a*

particular color?” Wouldn’t you say that it is a particular color, because it so happens that there are other colors too?

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. And if he bid you to state the other colors, you would state [74d] the others, which happen to be colors just as much as white?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Suppose then that he, like me, pursued the argument and said, “We keep ending up with many things, even though that’s not what I was after. Well, since you refer to all these things by a single name and assert that all of them are shapes, even though they are contrary to one another, what is the thing which equally embraces the circular and the straight, which you really call *shape*, [74e] so that you affirm the circular to be *shape* no more than the straight?” After all, isn’t this what you say?

Meno. It certainly is.

Socrates. And when you say this, are you then asserting that the circular is not more circular than straight, nor the straight more straight than circular?

Meno. Definitely not, Socrates.

Socrates. You’re only asserting, of course, that the circular is no more *shape* than the straight, and vice versa.

Meno. Quite correct.

Socrates. Then what in the world is the thing which has this name *shape*? [75a] Try to state it. Suppose that someone asked you this kind of question about shape or color, and you answered, “I don’t understand what you mean, fellow, and I don’t know what you’re saying.” He might well be surprised and say, “Don’t you understand that I’m looking for the thing which is the same in all these cases?” Or wouldn’t you be able to answer (sticking with these things) if someone should ask you, “What is the same in the circular, the straight, and all the other things which you call *shapes*?” Try to state it, for this will be good practice for you in giving an answer about virtue. [75b]

Meno. But I’d rather you state it yourself, Socrates.

Socrates. You want me to humor you?

Meno. Yes indeed.

Socrates. Will you be willing, for you part, then, to speak to me about virtue?

Meno. I will.

Socrates. In that case I must be eager to comply, for it is worth our while.

Meno. I fully agree.

Socrates. Come then, let me try to tell you what shape is. Consider whether you accept this answer: Let us take shape to be the only existing thing which always accompanies color. Is this a sufficient answer for you, or are hunting for something different? For I would [75c] be content if you could define virtue this way for me.

Meno. But this is such a naive definition, Socrates.

Socrates. What do you mean?

Meno. On your account, somehow shape is that which always accompanies color. That’s well and good, but suppose someone asserts that he does not actually know color and that he’s as puzzled about *color* as he is about *shape*. What sort of answer do you think you’ve given him?

Socrates. A true one, at least. And if the questioner were one of those clever people who are argumentative and contentious, I would say [75d] to him, “I’ve made my statement: now if I’m speaking incorrectly, it’s your task to take up my account and refute it.” But if they wanted to discuss the question with each other as friends, in the way you and I are doing now, then of course it would be necessary to answer in a somewhat milder and more dialectical way. And perhaps the more dialectical way is not only to give a true answer but also to do so by means of things which the questioner acknowledges that he is familiar with. This is precisely the way I will try to speak to you. [75e] For tell me this: is there something

which you call a 'limit'? I'm referring to something like a boundary or extremity—I mean more or less the same thing by all these words. Perhaps Prodicus would take issue with us on this point; but you, at any rate, speak of things as being 'bounded' or 'limited'. This is the sort of thing I mean—nothing abstruse.

Meno. Yes, you're quite right, and I think I understand what you mean. [76a]

Socrates. Well then, isn't there also something you call a 'plane' and something else you call a 'solid', as these terms are used in geometry?

Meno. Yes, there is.

Socrates. Then surely you can now understand from these instances what I mean by *shape*. For in the case of every shape I say that '*shape* is that at which a solid terminates.' And to make this more concise I would say that '*shape* is the boundary of a solid.'

Meno. And how do you define 'color', Socrates?

Socrates. You're an insolent man, Meno! You browbeat an older man into answering you even though you yourself are unwilling [76b] to recall and state what in the world Gorgias says virtue is.

Meno. I'll tell you, Socrates, once you answer my question.

Socrates. Why, even a blindfolded man could tell just from hearing your talk, Meno, that you are handsome and still have lovers.

Meno. How so?

Socrates. Because you simply lay down the law when you're speaking—just like spoiled people who are tyrants as long as they are in their prime. [76c] And at the same time you've probably noticed that I am unable to resist beautiful people. So I'll have to humor you and answer you.

Meno. By all means, go ahead and humor me.

Socrates. Alright; do you want me to answer you in the manner of Gorgias, so that you can follow along very easily?

Meno. I do, of course.

Socrates. Well then, don't the two of you, in the manner of Empedocles, talk of certain 'effluences' of things?

Meno. Absolutely.

Socrates. And you also talk of 'pores' into which and through which these effluences flow?

Meno. Certainly.

Socrates. And you say that some of the effluences fit in some of the [76d] pores, while other effluences are too small or too large?

Meno. We say this too.

Socrates. Now, there is also something which you call *sight*?

Meno. Of course.

Socrates. From this, then, "Grasp my meaning," to borrow Pindar's phrase. Color is an effluence from shapes which is commensurate with sight and is perceptible.

Meno. This answer you've given seems to me an excellent one, Socrates.

Socrates. Probably because I phrased it in accord with your customary style. And I'm sure you recognize that in the same style you could explain what sound is, [76e] as well as smell and many other things like these.

Meno. Absolutely.

Socrates. For this answer is a theatrical one, Meno, and so it pleases you more than my former answer about shape did.

Meno. It certainly does.

Socrates. And yet it isn't any better, son of Alexidemos, in my opinion: the former answer is the better one. And I suspect that you wouldn't hold to your opinion if you weren't obliged (as you mentioned yesterday) to depart before the mysteries, but if you should stick around and get initiated. [77a]

Meno. I *would* stick around, Socrates, if you could give me many answers like these.

Socrates. There certainly won't be any shortage of eagerness on my part to give answers like these, both for your sake and for mine; but I fear that I'll lack the ability to give many such answers. All the same, come now and try to fulfill your own promise to me by stating in general terms what virtue is, and stop 'turning one thing into many'—as smart alecks say about those who are always shattering something or other—but state what virtue is while letting it be, whole and sound. [77b] You've now got examples from me.

Meno. Well, Socrates, I think that virtue is (as the poet says) "to delight in noble things and have power." I too say that this is virtue: when a man desires noble things and is capable of procuring them.

Socrates. Do you say, then, that a person who desires noble things is desirous of good things?

Meno. I certainly do.

Socrates. Implying that there are some people who desire bad things and others who desire [77c] good things? Don't you think, my good man, that all people desire good things?

Meno. No, I don't.

Socrates. Rather some people desire bad things?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. Do they suppose the bad things to be good, or know them to be bad yet desire them all the same?

Meno. Both, I think.

Socrates. So you really think, Meno, that a person knows bad things to be bad yet desires them all the same?

Meno. Absolutely.

Socrates. And what would you say he desires? To obtain them?

Meno. Yes, of course. [77d]

Socrates. Does he suppose that bad things help anyone who possesses them, or does he know that they harm anyone who gets them?

Meno. There are some who suppose bad things to be helpful and others who know them to be harmful.

Socrates. Do you really think that the very people who suppose the bad things to be helpful know that they are bad?

Meno. I definitely don't think that.

Socrates. So it's clear that people who are ignorant about bad things don't desire bad things [77e]; rather, they desire the things which they suppose to be good though they are actually bad. So those who are ignorant about bad things and suppose them to be good clearly desire good things—don't they?

Meno. Perhaps they do.

Socrates. Well then, presumably those who both desire bad things, as you claim, and suppose bad things to be harmful to their possessor know that they will be harmed by them? [78a]

Meno. Necessarily so.

Socrates. But don't they suppose that people who are harmed are wretched to the degree that they are harmed?

Meno. This too is necessary.

Socrates. And don't they suppose that wretched people are ill-fated?

Meno. I suppose they do.

Socrates. Well then, is there anyone who wants to be miserable and ill-fated?

Meno. I think not, Socrates.

Socrates. Well, Meno, if no one wants to be in such a condition, then no one wants bad things. After all, what does it mean to be miserable, if not to desire and obtain bad things?

Meno. Perhaps what you say [78b] is true, Socrates, and no one desires bad things.

Socrates. Now didn't you say a moment ago that virtue is to wish for good things and be able to obtain them?

Meno. Yes, I did.

Socrates. But if this is granted, then the wishing belongs to all people, and one person is no better than another in this respect?

Meno. So it seems.

Socrates. For it's clear that if in fact one person is better than another, he would be superior in capability.

Meno. Of course.

Socrates. It seems then that, according to your argument, virtue is [78c] the capacity to procure good things.

Meno. In my opinion, Socrates, it is in every respect just as you now take it to be.

Socrates. Let's consider this too, then, and see if what you're saying is true; it's quite possible that you're speaking correctly. You assert that virtue is the capacity to procure good things?

Meno. I do.

Socrates. And no doubt by 'good things' you mean things like health and wealth?

Meno. I mean the acquisition of gold and silver, as well as civic honors and magistracies in the city.

Socrates. Don't you include any other things besides these under 'good things'?

Meno. No; [78d] but I say that all things of this kind are 'good things'.

Socrates. Very well: virtue is the procurement of gold and silver—according to Meno, the hereditary guest of the great king. Would you add a qualifier to this procurement, namely 'justly and piously'? Or does it make no difference to you? Even if someone procures these things unjustly, do you call it virtue all the same?

Meno. Certainly not, Socrates.

Socrates. Instead, you call it vice.

Meno. Absolutely.

Socrates. It seems then that justice or temperance or [78e] piety or some other part of virtue must also appertain to this procurement—otherwise it will turn out *not* to be virtue, even if it succeeds in procuring good things.

Meno. Of course: how could it be virtue without these?

Socrates. And to *not* procure gold and silver either for oneself or for another when such procurement would be unjust—isn't this very lack virtue?

Meno. It appears so.

Socrates. So the procurement of such goods is not virtue any more than the lack of them is. It seems rather that whatever occurs with justice is virtue, and whatever [79a] lacks all such things is vice.

Meno. In my opinion, it's necessarily as you say.

Socrates. And didn't we assert a little while ago that justice and temperance and all other such things are each a part of virtue?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. So you're toying with me, Meno?

Meno. Why in the world do you say that, Socrates?

Socrates. Because even though I asked a little earlier that you not shatter or chop up virtue into pieces, and even though I gave you examples of the kind of answer you ought to give, you've gotten careless about this, and you're telling me that virtue [79b] is the capacity to procure good things with justice, and you're asserting that this is a *part* of virtue?

Meno. I am.

Socrates. So from what you're acknowledging it turns out that doing whatever one does with a part of virtue *is* virtue—for you assert that justice and every other such thing is a part of virtue. What's my point here? That even though I asked you to talk about virtue as a

whole, you're not even close to stating what it is, and you assert that every action is virtue provided that it is [79c] done with a part of virtue—as though you've talked about virtue as a whole and as though I must now know what it is, even though you've chopped it up into parts. So it seems to me, my dear Meno, that you need to start all over again from the starting-point of this investigation—with the question 'What is virtue?'—if every deed done with a part of virtue is virtuous; for this is what is meant when anyone says that every deed done with justice is virtue. Don't you think that you need to start this investigation over again? Or do you think that anyone can know what a part of virtue is without knowing what virtue itself is?

Meno. I don't think that. [79d]

Socrates. No; and I'm sure you remember that when I gave you my answer about shape a while ago, we rejected the sort of answer which tries to answer by means of things that are still under investigation and not yet mutually agreed on.

Meno. And surely we were right to do so, Socrates.

Socrates. Well then, my good man, you too certainly mustn't suppose that, when we're still investigating what virtue as a whole is, you will clarify virtue to anyone by answering in terms of its parts or by stating anything else in the same [79e] fashion. Instead, you'll have to start the same investigation all over again with the question 'What *is* that virtue about which you say the things you say?' Or do you think I'm talking nonsense?

Meno. What you say is quite right, in my opinion.

Socrates. Then answer me again from the beginning: what do you assert virtue to be, you and your companion?

Meno. Socrates, before I even got together with you [80a], I kept hearing that as a matter of fact you are a doubter yourself and you make other people doubt. And now it seems to me that you are beguiling and bewitching and simply enchanting me, making me full of doubt. And, if I may be allowed a joke, I think that both in your appearance and in other respects you are exactly like the electric ray of the sea. For it too benumbs the person who repeatedly approaches and touches it; and I think that you have done something like this to me just now, benumbing me. For I am really numb [80b] in both soul and mouth, and I can't make any reply to you. The fact is, I've made a great many speeches about virtue countless times and to many different people, and I did so very well—at least that's what I thought. But now I can't even say what virtue is at all. And I think that you're well advised in not sailing off or going out of town; for if you were to do these kind of things as a stranger in another city, you would very quickly be taken into custody as a wizard.

Socrates. You're a rascal, Meno, and you almost deceived me outright.

Meno. What in the world do you mean, Socrates? [80c]

Socrates. I know why you made a simile about me.

Meno. And just why is that, do you think?

Socrates. So I might make one about you in return. I know this to be a fact about all beautiful people: they enjoy it when similes are made about them. It works to their profit, because (I suppose) similes about beautiful people are beautiful as well. But I won't give you a simile in return. As for me, if the electric ray is numb itself even while it benumbs others, then I am similar to it; but otherwise I am not. For it's not that I'm full of answers myself even while I make other people to doubt. On the contrary, I am most thoroughly in doubt myself, even while I make other people [80d] doubt. Now when it comes to what virtue is, I myself do not know; as for you, you probably knew the answer earlier before you made contact with me, but now you're like one who doesn't know. All the same, I'm willing to examine and investigate with you what virtue is.

Meno. But how are you going to investigate it, Socrates, if you don't what it is at all? Out of all the things you don't know, what kind of thing are you setting out to investigate? And even if you really and truly hit upon it, how will you know it to be the thing you don't know? [80e]

Socrates. I understand what you're getting at, Meno. But don't you see what a disputatious argument you're spinning out—that it's simply impossible for a person to investigate either what he knows or what he doesn't know? He can't investigate what he knows—after all, if he knows it, he has no need to go investigating it—nor what he doesn't know: for he doesn't know what he's supposed to investigate. [81a]

Meno. So this argument strikes you, Socrates, as well-spoken?

Socrates. Not me.

Meno. Can you say why?

Socrates. I can: for I've heard from men and women who are skilled in divine matters—

Meno. What argument do they make?

Socrates. A true and noble one, in my opinion.

Meno. What is it, and who are the people who make it?

Socrates. Some of them are priests and priestesses who studied how to [81b] give a reasoned account of the matters they deal with; but Pindar did so too, along with many other poets who were divinely inspired. Now here is what they say; decide for yourself if you think they are speaking the truth. They say that the human soul is immortal: at one time it comes to an end—this of course is what people call 'dying'—and at another time it comes into existence again and never perishes. For this reason it is necessary to lead one's life in the holiest possible way... So then, since the soul is immortal and has come into existence over and over and has seen the things here and the things in Hades—in fact all things—there's nothing it hasn't learned. So it comes as no surprise that the soul has the ability to recollect virtue and other things besides, which it has known also previously. For since [81d] the whole of nature is akin, and since the soul has learned everything, there's nothing to prevent someone, once he has recollected a single thing (this is of course what people call 'learning'), from discovering all the rest—provided that he is courageous and does not grow weary in the investigation. For investigating and learning are entirely recollection. So we should not pay any attention to that disputatious argument [of yours], for it would make us idle and it is sweet to the ears of people who are soft. *This* argument [of mine], on the other hand, [81e] will make us disposed to work hard and keep investigating. Confident that this is true, I'm willing to investigate what virtue is, following your lead.

Study Questions:

1. What is virtue? Why, according to Socrates, must they answer this question first (71a)? Do you think Socrates is correct? Is it *always* the case that we must answer the *What is ...* question first?
2. Notice Socrates' initial move at 70b, establishing the pursuit of wisdom as the context for their discussion. Why do you think he does this?
3. What does Meno say virtue is? Consider each of Meno's attempts to define virtue as well as the replies offered by Socrates. By the end of this passage, have the interlocutors made progress in defining virtue?
4. While they are seeking a good definition of virtue, the conversation of Meno and Socrates sheds light upon the virtues of a good definition. What can we learn about definition as such from this passage?