Meno

PLATO

c. 428–348 BC

Meno

Μένων

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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Meno · Plato (c. 428–348 BC)

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INTRODUCTION

"Can you tell me, Socrates: can excellence be taught?" With that question the young aristocrat Meno launches one of Plato's most famous short dialogues.

Socrates says he doesn't even know what excellence is, and within pages Meno is stuck, numbed, he says, as if by a stingray. That leads to "Meno's paradox": how can you look for something when you don't know what it is? Socrates answers with a demonstration. He questions an enslaved boy with no schooling until the boy works out a geometry problem himself, which suggests that learning is really recollection.

The dialogue ends with the difference between knowledge and true opinion, and a warning from Anytus, who would later help prosecute Socrates.

Meno

Athens, around 402 BC.
Socrates and Meno ask what excellence is and whether it can be taught.

MENO 70a Can you tell me, Socrates: is excellence something that can be taught? Or is it not teachable but acquired by practice? Or is it neither acquired by practice nor learned, but comes to people by nature, or in some other way?[1]

SOCRATES Meno, the Thessalians used to be famous among the Greeks, and admired for their horsemanship and their wealth. 70b But now, it seems to me, they're admired for wisdom as well—not least the people of Larisa, your friend Aristippus' fellow citizens. You have Gorgias to thank for this. When he came to your city, he won over the leading men of the Aleuadae as lovers of his wisdom—your lover Aristippus among them—and the other Thessalians too. And in particular he has got you into this habit: answering any question anyone asks, fearlessly and grandly, as befits people 70c who know—since he himself offers to be questioned by any Greek who wants, on any subject he likes, and there's no one he doesn't answer.[2]

But here, my dear Meno, the opposite has come about. There's been a kind of drought of wisdom, and it looks as if wisdom may have left 71a these parts for yours. At any rate, if you care to ask anyone here a question like that, every one of them will laugh

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1 *Aretē*, traditionally translated "virtue," covers any kind of excellence, including human goodness.

2 Gorgias of Leontini was a celebrated teacher of rhetoric; the Aleuadae were the ruling family of Larisa in Thessaly.

and say: "Stranger, you must think I'm someone blessed—to know whether excellence is teachable, or in what way it comes to people. But I'm so far from knowing whether it's teachable or not that I don't even happen to know what excellence itself is at all." 71b

And that's how it is with me too, Meno. I share my fellow citizens' poverty in this matter, and I reproach myself for knowing nothing at all about excellence. And if I don't know what something is, how could I know what sort of thing it is? Or do you think it's possible for someone who has no idea at all who Meno is to know whether he's handsome or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that's possible?

MENO No, I don't. But is it true, Socrates, that you 71c don't even know what excellence is? Is this the report we're to take home about you?

SOCRATES Not only that, my friend, but also that I've never yet met anyone else who knew, as far as I can tell.

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

SOCRATES I did.

MENO And didn't you think he knew?

SOCRATES I don't have much of a memory, Meno, so I can't tell you right now what I thought of him then. But perhaps he does know, and you know what he used to say. So remind 71d me how he put it. Or if you like, tell me yourself—I take it you think the same as he does.

MENO I do.

WHAT IS EXCELLENCE?

Meno offers several definitions of excellence, and Socrates shows why each falls short.

SOCRATES Then let's leave him aside, since he isn't here anyway. But you yourself, Meno—in the gods' name—what do you say excellence is? Tell me, and don't hold back, so that I turn out

to have told the happiest of lies, if it's revealed that you and Gorgias know, when I've said I've never met anyone who did.

MENO [71e] But it isn't hard to say, Socrates. First, if you want a man's excellence, that's easy: a man's excellence is to be capable of managing the city's affairs, and in managing them to do good to his friends and harm to his enemies, and to take care that he suffers nothing of the kind himself. If you want a woman's excellence, that's not hard to describe either: she must manage the household well, looking after its contents and obeying her husband. And there's another excellence for a child, girl or boy, and another for an older man—a free man, if you like, or, if you like, [72a] a slave.

And there are a great many other excellences, so there's no difficulty in saying what excellence is. For each of us has an excellence corresponding to each activity and each time of life, for each task—and the same goes for badness too, Socrates, I think.

SOCRATES I seem to have had a great stroke of luck, Meno: I was looking for one excellence and I've found a whole swarm of them settled on you. But, Meno, to follow up this image [72b] of swarms: suppose I asked you about the being of a bee, what it is, and you said there are many bees of all sorts. What would you answer if I then asked you: "Do you say they are many and of all sorts and different from one another in being bees? Or do they not differ at all in that respect, but in something else—in beauty, say, or size, or something of that kind?" Tell me, what would you answer if you were asked that?

MENO This: that insofar as they're bees, they don't differ at all, one from another.

SOCRATES [72c] Suppose I then said: "Well then, Meno, tell me just this: that in which they don't differ at all but are all the same—what do you say that is?" You could surely give me some answer?

MENO I could.

SOCRATES It's the same with the excellences, then. Even if they're many and of all sorts, they all have some one form, the

same in all, which makes them excellences. Someone answering the question would do well to keep his eyes on that in order to show the questioner just what excellence 72d is. Or don't you understand what I mean?

MENO I think I understand. But I don't yet grasp the question as well as I'd like.

SOCRATES Is it only about excellence that you think this way, Meno—that there's one for a man, another for a woman, and so on for the rest? Or do you think the same about health and size and strength? Do you think a man's health is one thing and a woman's another? Or is it the same form everywhere, if it really is 72e health, whether it's in a man or in anyone else?

MENO Health, at least, seems to me the same for a man and a woman.

SOCRATES And size and strength too? If a woman is strong, will she be strong by the same form and the same strength? By "the same" I mean this: strength doesn't differ at all in its being strength, whether it's in a man or in a woman. Or do you think it differs at all?

MENO I don't.

SOCRATES 73a And will excellence differ at all in its being excellence, whether it's in a child or an old man, in a woman or a man?

MENO Somehow I feel, Socrates, that this is no longer like those other cases.

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

MENO I did.

SOCRATES Well, is it possible to manage a city or a household or anything else well without managing it moderately and justly?

MENO Certainly not.

SOCRATES [73b] And if people manage justly and moderately, won't they manage with justice and moderation?

MENO Necessarily.

SOCRATES Then both of them need the same things if they're going to be good, the woman and the man: justice and moderation.

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES What about a child and an old man? Could they ever be good if they were undisciplined and unjust?

MENO Certainly not.

SOCRATES Only if they're moderate and [73c] just?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES So all human beings are good in the same way, since they become good by acquiring the same things.

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES And surely they wouldn't be good in the same way if their excellence weren't the same.

MENO Certainly not.

SOCRATES Then since everyone's excellence is the same, try to tell me—try to recollect—what Gorgias says it is, and you along with him.

MENO What else but being able to rule over people? [73d] If you're looking for one thing that covers them all.

SOCRATES That's just what I'm looking for. But is this also a child's excellence, Meno, and a slave's—to be able to rule over his master? And do you think someone who rules would still be a slave?

MENO I don't think so at all, Socrates.

SOCRATES No, it wouldn't be likely, my excellent friend. And consider this further point. You say "being able to rule." Shouldn't we add to that "justly, and not unjustly"?

MENO I think so, since justice, Socrates, is excellence.

SOCRATES [73e] Is it excellence, Meno, or an excellence?

MENO What do you mean by that?

SOCRATES The same as with anything else. For example, take roundness, if you like: I'd say it's a shape, not simply that it's shape. And I'd put it that way because there are other shapes as well.

MENO And you'd be right, since I too say that there are other excellences besides justice.

SOCRATES [74a] What are they? Tell me. Just as I could name other shapes for you, if you told me to, so you name other excellences for me.

MENO Well, courage seems to me to be an excellence, and moderation, and wisdom, and magnificence, and a great many others.

SOCRATES Once again, Meno, the same thing has happened to us. We were looking for one excellence and we've found many—in a different way from before. But the one that runs through all of them we can't find.

MENO No, Socrates, I can't yet grasp one excellence covering them all, the way you're looking for it, [74b] as in those other cases.

SOCRATES No wonder. But I'll do my best, if I can, to move us forward. You understand, I suppose, that it's like this with everything. If someone asked you what I asked just now—"What is shape, Meno?"—and you told him "roundness," and he then said to you what I did—"Is roundness shape, or a shape?"—you'd surely say it was a shape.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES [74c] Because there are other shapes as well?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And if he went on to ask you what they were, you'd tell him?

MENO I would.

SOCRATES And again, if he asked you in the same way what color is, and when you said "white," the questioner then took you up: "Is white color, or a color?"—you'd say it was a color, because there happen to be others as well?

MENO I would.

SOCRATES And if he told you to name other colors, you'd name 74d others, which are colors every bit as much as white is?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES Now if he pursued the argument as I did, and said: "We keep arriving at many things—but don't give me that. Since you call these many things by one name, and say that every one of them is a shape, even though they're opposed to each other, what is this thing that includes the round no less than the straight—the thing you call shape, 74e when you say the round is no more a shape than the straight is?" Isn't that what you say?

MENO It is.

SOCRATES Well, when you say that, are you saying that the round is no more round than straight, and the straight no more straight than round?

MENO Surely not, Socrates.

SOCRATES But you do say that the round is no more a shape than the straight is, nor the one more than the other.

MENO That's true.

SOCRATES Then what on earth is this thing whose name is "shape"? 75a Try to say. Suppose that when someone asked you this about shape or color, you said, "But I don't understand what you want, sir, or know what you mean." He'd probably be surprised and say, "Don't you understand that I'm looking for what's the same in all these cases?" Or would you be unable to answer even in these cases, Meno, if someone asked you, "What is it that's the same in the round and the straight and the other

things you call shapes—the same in all of them?" Try to say, so that you get some practice for your answer about excellence.

MENO [75b] No—you tell me, Socrates.

SOCRATES You want me to do you the favor?

MENO Very much.

SOCRATES And will you then be willing to tell me about excellence?

MENO I will.

SOCRATES Then I must do my best. It's worth it.

MENO It certainly is.

SOCRATES Come on, then, let's try to tell you what shape is. See whether you accept this. Let's say that shape is the one thing among all things that always happens to accompany color. Is that enough for you, or are you looking for something different? For my part, I'd be [75c] content if you told me what excellence is in this way.

MENO But that's simple-minded, Socrates.

SOCRATES How do you mean?

MENO That according to your account shape is what always accompanies color. Fine. But if someone said he didn't know what color is, and was just as much at a loss about it as about shape, what do you think your answer would amount to?

SOCRATES A true one, I'd say. And if the questioner were one of those clever people who love disputes and contests, I'd tell [75d] him: "I've given my answer. If I'm wrong, it's your job to take up the argument and refute it." But if people are friends, as you and I are now, and want to have a discussion with each other, then one has to answer more gently and in a way more suited to discussion. And perhaps what's more suited to discussion is not only to answer truly, but also to answer in terms that the person being questioned agrees he knows. So I'll try to answer you that way too. [75e] Tell me: is there something you call an end? I mean something like a limit or a boundary—I'm saying all these are

the same thing. Prodicus might disagree with us, perhaps, but you, at least, speak of something as being limited or ended—that's the sort of thing I mean, nothing fancy.[3]

MENO Yes, I do, and I think I understand what you mean.

SOCRATES [76a] And do you call something a surface, and something else again a solid, as in geometry?

MENO I do.

SOCRATES Then from these you can already understand what I mean by shape. For I say this of every shape: shape is that in which a solid ends. To sum it up, I'd say shape is the limit of a solid.

MENO And what do you say color is, Socrates?

SOCRATES You're outrageous, Meno. You pester an old man to answer questions, while you yourself won't [76b] recollect and tell me what Gorgias says excellence is.

MENO Once you've told me this, Socrates, I'll tell you.

SOCRATES Even someone blindfolded, Meno, could tell from the way you talk that you're handsome and still have lovers.

MENO Why?

SOCRATES Because you do nothing but give orders in discussion, the way spoiled beauties do—they play the tyrant as long as they're [76c] in their bloom. And perhaps you've also spotted that I have a weakness for handsome people. So I'll do you the favor and answer.

MENO By all means do me the favor.

SOCRATES Would you like me to answer in the manner of Gorgias, the way you'd find easiest to follow?

MENO I would—of course.

3 Prodicus of Ceos was a sophist famous for drawing fine distinctions between near-synonyms.

SOCRATES Don't you people say, following Empedocles, that there are certain effluences given off by things?[4]

MENO Very much so.

SOCRATES And pores into which and through which the effluences travel?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES And that some of the effluences fit some of the 76d
pores, while others are too small or too large?

MENO That's right.

SOCRATES And is there something you call sight?

MENO There is.

SOCRATES From these, then, "grasp what I tell you," as Pindar said. Color is an effluence from shapes, commensurate with sight and perceptible.[5]

MENO I think that's an excellent answer you've given, Socrates.

SOCRATES Probably because it's been given in terms you're used to. And I expect you also notice that you could use it to say what sound is too, 76e and smell, and many other things of that kind.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES It's a grand, theatrical answer, Meno, so you like it better than the one about shape.

MENO I do.

SOCRATES But it isn't better, son of Alexidemus—I'm convinced of that. The other one is better. And I don't think you'd think so either, if you didn't have to leave before the Mysteries, as you were saying yesterday, but could stay and be initiated.[6]

4 Empedocles of Acragas, a fifth-century BC philosopher-poet, explained perception by particles flowing from objects into pores in the sense organs.
5 Pindar was a lyric poet of the fifth century BC.
6 The Eleusinian Mysteries, a secret religious rite near Athens into which participants were initiated in stages.

MENO 77a But I would stay, Socrates, if you gave me many answers like that.

SOCRATES Well, I certainly won't fall short in effort, for your sake and my own, in giving answers like that. But I'm afraid I won't be able to give many of them. Now come on, you try to keep your promise to me: tell me what excellence is as a whole, and stop making many out of one, as the joke goes about people who break things; leave it whole and in one piece, and tell me what excellence is. You've got 77b the examples from me.

MENO Well then, Socrates, it seems to me that excellence is, as the poet says, "to delight in fine things and have power." And that's what I call excellence: to desire fine things and be able to get them.

SOCRATES Do you mean that someone who desires fine things desires good things?

MENO Very much so.

SOCRATES Implying that there are some people who desire bad things and others who desire 77c good things? Don't you think, my excellent friend, that everyone desires good things?

MENO No, I don't.

SOCRATES Some desire bad things?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES Thinking the bad things are good, you mean, or knowing that they're bad and desiring them all the same?

MENO Both, I think.

SOCRATES Really, Meno? You think someone knows that bad things are bad and still desires them?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES What do you mean by "desires"? That they should come to be his?

MENO That they should come to be his—what 77d else?

SOCRATES Thinking that bad things benefit the person who gets them, or knowing that bad things harm whoever has them?

MENO There are some who think bad things benefit them, and some who know they do harm.

SOCRATES And do you think that those who believe bad things benefit them know that the bad things are bad?

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

SOCRATES Then clearly these people, who don't recognize bad things for what they are, don't desire bad things, [77e] but things they thought were good, though in fact they're bad. So people who don't recognize them and think they're good clearly desire good things. Isn't that so?

MENO In their case, it looks like it.

SOCRATES Well then, those who desire bad things, as you say, but believe that bad things harm whoever gets them—surely they know they'll be harmed by them?

MENO [78a] Necessarily.

SOCRATES But don't they think that people who are harmed are miserable, to the extent that they're harmed?

MENO That's necessary too.

SOCRATES And that the miserable are unhappy?

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES Well, is there anyone who wants to be miserable and unhappy?

MENO I don't think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then no one wants bad things, Meno, if no one wants to be like that. For what else is being miserable but desiring bad things and getting them?

MENO It looks as if you're [78b] right, Socrates. No one wants bad things.

SOCRATES Weren't you saying just now that excellence is to want good things and have the power to get them?

MENO Yes, I said that.

SOCRATES And of what was said, the wanting is common to everyone, and in that respect no one is any better than anyone else?

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES So clearly, if one person is better than another, it would be in the power to get them.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES Then this, it seems, is excellence on your account: 78c the power to get good things.

MENO I think it's exactly as you now take it, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then let's see whether this is true as well; you may well be right. You say excellence is being able to get good things?

MENO I do.

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

MENO And I mean acquiring gold and silver, and honors and offices in the city.

SOCRATES You don't mean any good things other than things of that kind?

MENO No, 78d I mean all things of that kind.

SOCRATES Very well. Getting gold and silver is excellence—so says Meno, hereditary guest-friend of the Great King. Do you add "justly and piously" to this getting, Meno, or does it make no difference to you, and even if someone gets them unjustly you still call it excellence all the same?[7]

MENO Surely not, Socrates.

SOCRATES You'd call it badness.

MENO Certainly.

7 The Great King was the king of Persia; a hereditary guest-friendship was a formal bond of hospitality passed down in families.

SOCRATES So it seems that justice or moderation or [78e] piety, or some other part of excellence, has to accompany this getting. Otherwise it won't be excellence, even though it gets good things.

MENO Yes—how could it be excellence without those?

SOCRATES And not getting gold and silver, when it wouldn't be just, either for oneself or for someone else—isn't this not-getting excellence too?

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES So getting good things of this kind would be no more excellence than not getting them. Rather, it seems, whatever is done with justice will be excellence, and whatever is done [79a] without anything of that kind will be badness.

MENO I think it must be as you say.

SOCRATES And a little while ago didn't we say that each of these —justice and moderation and all the rest—was a part of excellence?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES So, Meno, are you making fun of me?

MENO Why do you say that, Socrates?

SOCRATES Because just now I asked you not to break excellence up or chop it into small change, and I gave you examples of how you should answer. You ignored that, and now you tell me that excellence [79b] is being able to get good things with justice. And justice, you say, is a part of excellence?

MENO I do.

SOCRATES Then it follows from what you agree that doing whatever one does with a part of excellence—that is excellence. For you say justice is a part of excellence, and so is each of the others. So why do I say this? Because when I asked you to tell me about excellence as a whole, you're far from saying what it is. Instead you say every action is excellence as long as it's done with a part [79c] of excellence—as if you'd already said what excel-

lence is as a whole, and I'd recognize it right away, even if you chop it up into parts. So it seems to me you need to face the same question again from the beginning, my dear Meno: what is excellence, if every action done with a part of excellence would be excellence? For that's what someone is saying when he says that every action done with justice is excellence. Or don't you think you need to face the same question again? Do you think someone knows what a part of excellence is when he doesn't know excellence itself?

MENO No, I don't think so.

SOCRATES [79d] And if you remember, when I answered you about shape just now, we rejected that kind of answer, the kind that tries to answer in terms of things still being looked for and not yet agreed on.

MENO And we were right to reject it, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then, my excellent friend, don't you think either, while we're still looking for what excellence as a whole is, that you'll make it clear to anyone by answering in terms of its parts, or by saying anything else in this same [79e] way. No, you'll need to face the same question again: what is this excellence you keep talking about? Or do you think I'm talking nonsense?

MENO I think you're right.

SOCRATES Then answer again from the beginning: what do you and your friend say excellence is?

MENO'S PARADOX

Meno compares Socrates to a stingray and asks how one can search for what one does not know.

MENO Socrates, even before I met [80a] you I used to hear that you do nothing but get into difficulties yourself and make others get into difficulties too. And now, it seems to me, you're bewitching me, drugging me, casting a real spell on me, so that I've become full of perplexity. And if I may make a bit of a joke, I think you're very like the flat stingray of the sea, both in looks and in other

ways. It numbs whoever comes near it and touches it, and I think you've now done something like that to me—numbed me. I really am numb, in 80b soul and mouth alike, and I don't know how to answer you.[8] And yet I've given countless speeches about excellence, and at length, to many people—and very good ones too, or so I thought. But now I can't even say what it is at all. I think you're wise not to sail away from here or travel abroad. If you did this sort of thing as a stranger in another city, you might well be arrested as a sorcerer.

SOCRATES You're a rascal, Meno. You nearly tricked me.

MENO How so, Socrates?

SOCRATES 80c I know why you made that comparison with me.

MENO Why do you think?

SOCRATES So that I'd make one of you in return. I know this about all good-looking people: they enjoy being compared to things. It works in their favor, since the likenesses of beautiful people are beautiful too, I suppose. But I won't make a comparison of you in return. As for me, if the stingray is numb itself and that's how it makes others numb, then I'm like it; if not, I'm not. It isn't that I have the answers myself and make others perplexed. I'm more perplexed than anyone, and that's how I make others 80d perplexed too. So now, as for what excellence is, I don't know; you perhaps knew before you came into contact with me, though now you're like someone who doesn't know. Still, I'm willing to examine it with you and search together for what it is.

MENO And how will you search, Socrates, for something when you don't know at all what it is? Which of the things you don't know will you set up as the object of your search? And even if you bump right into it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know?

SOCRATES 80e I understand what you mean, Meno. Do you see what a contentious argument you're bringing in? That a person

8 The Greek *narkē* is the electric ray, or torpedo fish, which numbs whatever touches it.

can't search either for what he knows or for what he doesn't know? He wouldn't search for what he knows, since he knows it, and someone like that has no need to search; nor for what he doesn't know, since then he doesn't even know what he's going to search for.

MENO [81a] Well, don't you think it's a good argument, Socrates?

SOCRATES No, I don't.

MENO Can you say why not?

RECOLLECTION

Socrates answers with the view that the soul is immortal and all learning is recollection.

SOCRATES I can. I've heard men and women who are wise about divine matters—

MENO Saying what?

SOCRATES Something true, it seems to me, and beautiful.

MENO What is it, and who are the people saying it?

SOCRATES The people saying it are those priests and priestesses who have made it their concern to be able to [81b] give an account of the rites they perform. Pindar says it too, and many other poets, the ones who are divinely inspired. What they say is this—but see whether you think they're telling the truth. They say that the human soul is immortal: at one time it comes to an end, which is what people call dying, and at another it is born again, but it is never destroyed. For this reason, they say, one must live one's life as piously as possible. For those from whom "Persephone accepts atonement for ancient grief, their souls in the ninth year she sends back again to the sun above; [81c] from them grow noble kings, and men swift in strength and greatest in wisdom, and for the rest of time they are called pure heroes by humankind."[9] So, since the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen both what is here and what is in

9 These lines come from a lost poem of Pindar.

Hades—everything, in fact—there is nothing it hasn't learned. So it's no wonder that it can recollect about excellence and about other things, since it knew them before. And since nature 81d as a whole is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents someone who has recollected just one thing—which is what people call learning—from discovering all the rest for himself, if he is brave and doesn't tire of searching. Searching and learning, then, are recollection, all of it. So we mustn't be persuaded by that contentious argument. It would make us lazy, and it's pleasant for the soft among us to hear, whereas this one 81e makes us hardworking and eager to search. Trusting that it's true, I'm willing to search with you for what excellence is.

MENO Yes, Socrates. But what do you mean by saying that we don't learn, and that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me that this is so?

SOCRATES I said just now, Meno, that you're a rascal, and 82a now you ask whether I can teach you, when I say there's no teaching, only recollection—so that I'll be caught contradicting myself straightaway.

MENO No, by Zeus, Socrates, I didn't say it with that in view; it was just habit. But if you can somehow show me that it is as you say, please show me.

THE GEOMETRY LESSON

Socrates questions a slave boy about doubling a square to show recollection at work.

SOCRATES It isn't easy, but I'm still willing to make the effort for your sake. Call over one of these many 82b attendants of yours, whichever you like, so that I can demonstrate it to you with him.

MENO Certainly. Come here.

SOCRATES He's Greek, and speaks Greek?

MENO Absolutely—he was born in the household.[10]

10 That is, he was born a slave in Meno's household; the boy is never named.

SOCRATES Now pay attention and see which he seems to you to be doing: recollecting, or learning from me.

MENO I will.

SOCRATES Tell me, boy, do you know that a square looks like this?[11]

BOY I do.

SOCRATES So a 82c square has all these sides equal, all four of them?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES And these lines through the middle are equal too?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES And a square like this could be larger or smaller?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES Now if this side were two feet long and this one two feet, how many feet would the whole be? Look at it this way: if it were two feet this way and only one foot that way, wouldn't the figure be two feet taken once?

BOY 82d Yes.

SOCRATES But since it's two feet this way too, doesn't it become twice two?

BOY It does.

SOCRATES So it comes to twice two feet?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES Then how many feet are twice two? Work it out and tell me.

BOY Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES Now could there be another figure twice the size of this one, but of the same kind, with all its sides equal like this one?

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11 Socrates draws figures in the sand as he speaks; "this" and "here" point to the drawing. Areas are counted in "feet," meaning square feet.

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES How many feet will it be?

BOY Eight.

SOCRATES Come on, then, try to tell me how long each [82e] side of that one will be. This one's side is two feet; what about the side of the double one?

BOY Obviously, Socrates, double.

SOCRATES Do you see, Meno, that I'm not teaching him anything, only asking him everything? And now he thinks he knows what sort of line the eight-foot square will come from. Or don't you think so?

MENO I do.

SOCRATES Well, does he know?

MENO Certainly not.

SOCRATES But he thinks it comes from the double line?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES Now watch him recollecting, step by step, as one should recollect.

You tell me: do you say the [83a] double square comes from the double line? I mean a figure like this, not long this way and short that way, but equal every way, like this one, and twice the size of this one: eight feet. See whether you still think it will come from the double line.

BOY I do.

SOCRATES Now this line becomes double this one if we add another of the same length here?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES And from this one, you say, the eight-foot square will come, if four lines of this length [83b] are made?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES Then let's draw four equal sides from it. Wouldn't this be what you say is the eight-foot square?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES And inside it there are these four squares, each of them equal to this four-foot one?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES So how big does it come out? Isn't it four times as big?

BOY Of course.

SOCRATES So is four times as big the same as double?

BOY No, by Zeus.

SOCRATES Then how many times as big?

BOY Four times.

SOCRATES So from the double [83c] line, boy, you get a square not double but four times as big.

BOY That's true.

SOCRATES Yes, since four times four is sixteen, isn't it?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES And the eight-foot square comes from what sort of line? Doesn't this one give us a square four times as big?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES And this four-foot square here comes from this line here, half as long?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES Very well. Isn't the eight-foot square double this four-foot one, and half this sixteen-foot one?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES So won't it come from a line longer than this one, and shorter than [83d] this one? Or not?

BOY I think so.

SOCRATES Good—answer what you think. And tell me: wasn't this line two feet, and this one four?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES So the side of the eight-foot square must be longer than this two-foot line and shorter than the four-foot one.

BOY It must.

SOCRATES 83e Then try to tell me how long you say it is.

BOY Three feet.

SOCRATES Well, if it's three feet, we'll add half of this line to it, and it will be three feet? Here are two feet, and here one more; and on this side likewise, two here and one here. And this gives us the square you mean.

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES Now if it's three feet this way and three feet this way, doesn't the whole square come to three times three feet?

BOY Apparently.

SOCRATES And how many feet are three times three?

BOY Nine.

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

BOY Eight.

SOCRATES So the eight-foot square doesn't come from the three-foot line either.

BOY Certainly not.

SOCRATES Then from what line? Try to tell us exactly; and 84a if you'd rather not count it out, just point to the line it comes from.

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

SOCRATES Do you notice, Meno, how far along the road of recollecting he's come now? At first he didn't know what the side of the eight-foot square is—just as he still doesn't know now—but back then he at least thought he knew it, and answered confid-

ently as if he knew, and didn't think he was perplexed. Now he does recognize that he's [84b] perplexed, and just as he doesn't know, he doesn't think he knows either.

MENO That's true.

SOCRATES So isn't he better off now with regard to the thing he didn't know?

MENO I think so too.

SOCRATES So by making him perplexed and numb, the way the stingray does, have we done him any harm?

MENO I don't think so.

SOCRATES We've certainly done something useful, it seems, toward finding out how things stand. Now, since he doesn't know, he'd be glad to search, whereas before he'd readily have thought, in front of many people and many times, [84c] that he was speaking well about the double square, saying that it must have a side double in length.

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES Do you think he would have tried to search for or learn what he thought he knew but didn't, before he fell into perplexity, recognizing that he didn't know, and longed to know?

MENO I don't think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES So being numbed did him good?

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES Now see what he will actually discover, starting from this perplexity, by searching with me, while I do nothing but ask questions and don't teach. [84d] Watch out in case you catch me teaching him and explaining things, rather than asking for his opinions.

Tell me, you: isn't this our four-foot square? Do you follow?

BOY I do.

SOCRATES And could we add this other square to it, equal to it?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES And this third one, equal to each of them?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES And could we fill in this one here in the corner?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES So wouldn't these be four equal [84e] squares?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES Well then, how many times as big as this one does this whole one come out?

BOY Four times.

SOCRATES But we needed one that was double; don't you remember?

BOY Certainly.

SOCRATES Now doesn't this line, from corner to corner, [85a] cut each of these squares in two?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES So these are four equal lines, enclosing this figure?

BOY They are.

SOCRATES Now consider: how big is this figure?

BOY I don't understand.

SOCRATES There are four squares here: hasn't each line cut off the inner half of each one? Or not?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES So how many halves of that size are there in this figure?

BOY Four.

SOCRATES And how many in this four-foot square?

BOY Two.

SOCRATES And what is four compared to two?

BOY Double.

SOCRATES So this one [85b] is how many feet?

BOY Eight feet.

SOCRATES From what line?

BOY From this one.

SOCRATES From the line stretching from corner to corner of the four-foot square?

BOY Yes.

SOCRATES The experts call this the diagonal. So if its name is the diagonal, then it's from the diagonal, as you say, Meno's boy, that the double square would come.

BOY Yes, certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES What do you think, Meno? Did he give any opinion in his answers that wasn't his own?

MENO [85c] No, they were his own.

SOCRATES And yet he didn't know, as we said a little earlier.

MENO That's true.

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

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES So someone who doesn't know has true opinions within him about the things he doesn't know?

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES And now these opinions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream. But if someone asks him these same questions many times and in many ways, you can be sure he'll end up knowing about them no less precisely [85d] than anyone.

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES So he'll know without anyone having taught him, only asked him questions, recovering the knowledge himself from within himself?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And isn't recovering knowledge oneself within oneself recollecting?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES Now the knowledge he has now—didn't he either acquire it at some time, or always have it?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES If he always had it, he was always knowledgeable; and if he acquired it at some time, he can't have acquired it in his present life. Or [85e] has someone taught him geometry? He'll do exactly the same with all of geometry and every other branch of learning. So is there anyone who has taught him all this? You ought to know, I suppose, especially since he was born and raised in your house.

MENO But I know that nobody has ever taught him.

SOCRATES Yet he has these opinions, doesn't he?

MENO It seems he must, Socrates.

SOCRATES And if he didn't acquire them in his present life, isn't it [86a] clear by now that he had them and had learned them at some other time?

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES And isn't that the time when he wasn't a human being?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES So if, both during the time he is a human being and the time he isn't, there are to be true opinions in him which become knowledge when awakened by questioning, won't his soul have had this learning for all time? For clearly, through all time he either is or isn't a human being.

MENO Apparently.

SOCRATES [86b] So if the truth about the things that are is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal. So shouldn't you con-

fidently try to search for and recollect what you happen not to know now—that is, what you don't remember?

MENO I think you're right, Socrates, though I don't know how.

SOCRATES So do I, Meno. Most of the argument I wouldn't insist on very firmly. But that we'd be better, braver and less lazy if we believed we should search for what we don't know than if we believed that it is neither 86c possible to discover what we don't know nor necessary to search for it—on that point I'd fight hard, if I could, in word and in deed.

MENO That too I think you're right about, Socrates.

CAN EXCELLENCE BE TAUGHT?

Socrates reasons on a hypothesis that excellence is knowledge, then doubts it because it has no teachers.

SOCRATES Since we agree, then, that one should search for what one doesn't know, shall we try together to search for what excellence is?

MENO Certainly. And yet, Socrates, what I'd like best is to examine and hear about the question I asked at first: whether we should approach it as something that can be taught, 86d or as something that comes to people by nature, or in some other way.

SOCRATES Well, Meno, if I were in charge not only of myself but of you too, we wouldn't have examined whether excellence can be taught or not before first inquiring what it is. But since you don't even try to govern yourself—so as to be free, no doubt—but you do try to govern me, and succeed, I'll give in to you. What else can I do? So it seems we must examine 86e what sort of thing something is when we don't yet know what it is. Well, if nothing else, at least relax your rule over me a little, and agree to let us examine it on a hypothesis—whether it can be taught, or whatever else.

By "on a hypothesis" I mean the way geometers often examine things. When someone asks them, say, about a figure,

whether this figure can be inscribed in this circle [87a] as a triangle, one of them might say: "I don't yet know whether it is of that kind. But I think I have, as it were, a hypothesis that will help with the problem, as follows. If this figure is such that, when you apply it along the given line of the circle, it falls short by a figure like the one that has been applied, then one result seems to me to follow; and another, again, if it's impossible for it to do this.[12] "So, having laid down this hypothesis, I'm willing [87b] to tell you what follows about inscribing it in the circle: whether it's impossible or not." In the same way with excellence, since we know neither what it is nor what sort of thing it is, let's lay down a hypothesis and examine whether it can be taught or not, putting it like this: if excellence is a certain sort of thing among the things that concern the soul, would it be teachable or not? First, if it's a different sort of thing from knowledge, can it be taught or not—or, as we were saying just now, recollected? Let it make no difference to us [87c] which word we use—but can it be taught? Or isn't this clear to everyone, that a person is taught nothing but knowledge?

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES But if excellence is some kind of knowledge, clearly it would be teachable.

MENO Of course.

SOCRATES So we've quickly disposed of that: if it's of one kind it's teachable, if of another, not.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES Next, it seems, we must examine whether excellence is knowledge or something different from knowledge.

MENO [87d] Yes, I think that's what we must examine next.

SOCRATES Well then: don't we say that excellence is good, and doesn't this hypothesis stand firm for us, that it is good?

12 The geometrical example is notoriously obscure, and its exact meaning is disputed.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES So if there's something good that is also separate from knowledge, perhaps excellence wouldn't be a kind of knowledge. But if there's nothing good that knowledge doesn't encompass, we'd be right to suspect that it is some kind of knowledge.

MENO That's so.

SOCRATES And surely [87e] it's by excellence that we're good?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And if we're good, we're beneficial; for all good things are beneficial. Aren't they?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES So excellence is beneficial too?

MENO That must follow from what we've agreed.

SOCRATES Then let's take them one by one and examine what sorts of things benefit us. Health, we say, and strength, and beauty, and of course wealth: these and things like them we call beneficial. Don't we?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES [88a] But we say these same things sometimes do harm as well. Or do you say otherwise?

MENO No, I say so.

SOCRATES Then consider: what guides each of these when it benefits us, and what when it harms us? Isn't it that it benefits us when there's right use, and harms us when there isn't?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES Next, let's also consider the things that belong to the soul. Is there something you call moderation, and justice, and courage, and quickness at learning, and memory, and magnificence, and all things [88b] of that kind?

MENO I do.

SOCRATES Then consider: those of these that you think are not knowledge but something other than knowledge—don't they sometimes harm and sometimes benefit? Courage, for example, if courage isn't understanding but a kind of boldness: when a person is bold without sense, isn't he harmed, and when he's bold with sense, benefited?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And the same with moderation and quickness at learning: things learned and trained with sense are beneficial, but without sense harmful?

MENO Very [88c] much so.

SOCRATES So, in short, everything the soul attempts or endures ends in happiness when understanding leads, and in the opposite when folly leads?

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES So if excellence is one of the things in the soul and must be beneficial, it must be understanding, since everything that belongs to the soul is, taken by itself, neither beneficial nor harmful, but becomes harmful or beneficial with the addition of understanding [88d] or folly. By this argument, then, excellence, since it is beneficial, must be some kind of understanding.

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES And what's more, the other things we were just talking about, wealth and the like, which are sometimes good and sometimes harmful: isn't it that, just as understanding, when it guides the rest of the soul, makes the soul's qualities beneficial, and folly makes them harmful, so in turn [88e] the soul makes these things beneficial when it uses and guides them rightly, and harmful when it doesn't?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES And a wise soul guides rightly, a foolish one wrongly?

MENO That's so.

SOCRATES So we can say this about everything: for a human being, all other things depend on the soul, and the soul's own qualities depend on understanding, if [89a] they are to be good. And by this argument understanding would be what is beneficial. And we say that excellence is beneficial?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES So we say that excellence is understanding, either the whole of it or some part?

MENO I think what's been said is well said, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then if this is so, good people wouldn't be good by nature.

MENO I don't think so.

SOCRATES [89b] Yes, and there's this too, I suppose: if good people became good by nature, we'd surely have people who could recognize which of the young were good by nature, and when they had pointed them out we would take them over and guard them on the Acropolis, sealed up far more carefully than gold, so that no one could corrupt them, and so that when they came of age they would be useful to their cities.

MENO That's likely enough, Socrates.

SOCRATES So since good people don't become good by nature, [89c] is it by learning?

MENO I think it must be now. And it's clear, Socrates, on our hypothesis, that if excellence is knowledge, it can be taught.

SOCRATES Perhaps, by Zeus. But what if we were wrong to agree to that?

MENO Well, it certainly seemed right just now.

SOCRATES But perhaps it has to seem right not only just now, but now and in the future too, if there's to be anything sound in it.

MENO [89d] What is it, then? What makes you uneasy about it and doubt that excellence is knowledge?

SOCRATES I'll tell you, Meno. That it's teachable if it's knowledge—I don't take that back; I don't say it was wrong. But as for my doubt that it is knowledge, see whether you think it's reasonable. Tell me this: if anything whatever can be taught, not just excellence, mustn't there be teachers and students of it?

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES 89e And conversely, if something has neither teachers nor students, would we be right to guess that it can't be taught?

MENO That's so. But don't you think there are teachers of excellence?

ANYTUS

Anytus scorns the sophists, and Socrates notes that great Athenians failed to pass excellence to their sons.

SOCRATES Well, I've often looked to see whether there are any teachers of it, and for all my efforts I can't find any. And yet I search along with many others, especially those I think most experienced in the matter. And look, Meno, right now Anytus here has sat down beside us at just the right moment; let's give him a share in our search.[13] 90a And we'd have good reason to. First, Anytus here is the son of a wealthy and wise father, Anthemion, who became wealthy not by chance or through someone's gift—like Ismenias the Theban, who has just recently come into Polycrates' money—but acquired it by his own wisdom and hard work. Then, in other respects too, he has the reputation of a citizen who isn't arrogant, pompous or offensive, but an orderly, well-mannered 90b man. Then too he brought up and educated this son of his well, as the Athenian people think: at any rate they elect him to the highest offices. So it's right to search with men like this for teachers of excellence—whether there are any or not, and who they are. So, Anytus, join us, me and your guest-friend Meno here, in searching into this question: who might the

13 Anytus was a prominent Athenian politician who later became one of Socrates' accusers at his trial in 399 BC.

teachers be?[14] Look at it this way. If we wanted Meno here to become a good doctor, 90c what teachers would we send him to? Wouldn't it be the doctors?

ANYTUS Certainly.

SOCRATES And what if we wanted him to become a good shoemaker? Wouldn't it be the shoemakers?

ANYTUS Yes.

SOCRATES And the same with everything else?

ANYTUS Certainly.

SOCRATES Now tell me something more about the same point. We say we'd be doing well to send him to the doctors if we wanted him to become a doctor. When we say that, do we mean 90d that we'd be sensible to send him to those who lay claim to the art rather than to those who don't, and who charge a fee for this very service, having declared themselves teachers of anyone who wants to come and learn? Isn't it with this in view that we'd do well to send him?

ANYTUS Yes.

SOCRATES And isn't it just the same 90e with flute-playing and everything else? If we wanted to make someone a flute player, it would be sheer folly to refuse to send him to those who promise to teach the art and charge a fee for it, and instead to go bothering other people, having him try to learn from those who neither claim to be teachers nor have a single pupil in the subject we expect the person we send to learn from them. Don't you think that would be quite unreasonable?

ANYTUS By Zeus, I do—and ignorant besides.

SOCRATES Well said. Now, then, you can join me 91a in deliberating about our guest here, Meno. For some time now, Anytus, he's been telling me that he longs for the wisdom and excellence by which people manage their households and their cities well,

14 Ismenias was a leading politician in Thebes; who this Polycrates was, and how Ismenias came by his money, is uncertain.

look after their own parents, and know how to receive and send off citizens and foreigners in a way worthy of a good man. So consider: for this 91b excellence, whom should we send him to if we're to send him rightly? Or is it clear, by the argument we just made, that it's to those who promise to be teachers of excellence and have declared themselves open to any Greek who wants to learn, setting a fee for it and charging it?

ANYTUS And who do you mean by that, Socrates?

SOCRATES Surely you know as well as I do: they're the people everyone calls sophists.

ANYTUS 91c Heracles! Don't say such a thing, Socrates. May no one of mine—no relative or friend, citizen or foreigner—be seized by such madness as to go to those people and be ruined. They are plainly the ruin and corruption of anyone who spends time with them.

SOCRATES What do you mean, Anytus? Of all those who claim to know how to do people some good, are these the only ones so different from the rest that, where the others improve whatever is entrusted to them, these not only fail to improve it but do the opposite and corrupt it? 91d And they openly expect to be paid for it? For my part, I can't see how to believe you. I know that one man, Protagoras, made more money from this wisdom than Phidias—who produced such conspicuously beautiful works—and ten other sculptors besides.[15] And yet it's a monstrous thing you're describing. People who repair old shoes and mend cloaks couldn't go thirty 91e days without being found out if they returned the cloaks and shoes in worse shape than they got them; if they did that, they'd soon starve to death. Yet Protagoras, it seems, went unnoticed by all of Greece, corrupting those who studied with him and sending them away worse than he received them, for more than forty years—I believe he died at nearly seventy, having spent forty of them practicing his art—

15 Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490–420 BC) was the most famous of the sophists; Phidias was the sculptor of the great statues of Athena in the Parthenon and of Zeus at Olympia.

and in all that time, right up to this day, his reputation has never stopped standing high. And not only Protagoras, but [92a] a great many others too, some born before him and some still living now. So are we to say, on your account, that they deceive and ruin the young knowingly, or that they don't realize it themselves either? And are we to consider them as mad as that—men whom some call the wisest of human beings?

ANYTUS Far from being mad, Socrates. It's much more the young men who pay them money who are mad, and even more [92b] those who hand the young over to them, their relatives; and most of all the cities, which let them come in and don't drive them out, whether it's a foreigner who tries anything of the kind or a citizen.

SOCRATES Has one of the sophists done you some wrong, Anytus? Or why are you so hard on them?

ANYTUS By Zeus, no. I've never had anything to do with any of them myself, and I wouldn't let anyone of mine do so either.

SOCRATES So you have no experience of these men at all?

ANYTUS And may I never have any.

SOCRATES [92c] Then how, my remarkable friend, could you know whether there's anything good in this business or anything bad, if you have no experience of it at all?

ANYTUS Easily. I know what sort of people they are, at any rate, whether I've had experience of them or not.

SOCRATES Perhaps you're a prophet, Anytus. Because how else you could know about them, going by what you yourself say, would amaze me. But anyway, it isn't these people we're looking for, the ones Meno would go to [92d] and turn out bad—let those be the sophists, if you like. No, tell us about the others, and do a kindness to your family's friend here by telling him whom he should go to, in a city this great, to become worth talking about in the excellence I described just now.

ANYTUS Why didn't you tell him yourself?

SOCRATES Well, I did name those I thought were teachers of these things, but it turns out I'm talking nonsense, as you say—and maybe there's something 92e in what you say. But now it's your turn: tell him which Athenians to go to. Name anyone you like.

ANYTUS Why does he need to hear one man's name? Any fine, upstanding Athenian he happens to meet—every one of them—will make him better than the sophists would, provided he's willing to do as he's told.

SOCRATES And did these fine, upstanding men become that way spontaneously, having learned from no one, yet able all the same to teach others what they themselves never 93a learned?

ANYTUS I'd say they, in turn, learned from those before them, who were fine and upstanding. Or don't you think there have been many good men in this city?

SOCRATES I do, Anytus. I think there are men here who are good at politics, and that there have been no fewer in the past than there are now. But have they also been good teachers of their own excellence? That's what our discussion is actually about: not whether or not there are good men here, nor whether there have been in the 93b past, but we've been examining all this while whether excellence can be taught. And in examining that, we're examining this: whether the good men of the present and of the past knew how to pass on to someone else the excellence in which they themselves were good, or whether this is something a person can't pass on or receive from another. That's what Meno and I have been looking into all along. So look at it this way, starting from what you yourself said. Wouldn't you 93c say Themistocles was a good man?

ANYTUS I would—the best of all.

SOCRATES Then also a good teacher, if anyone was ever a teacher of his own excellence?

ANYTUS I think so—if he wanted to be.

SOCRATES But don't you think he'd have wanted others to become fine and upstanding—and above all, surely, his own son? Or do you think he begrudged him that, and deliberately didn't pass on [93d] the excellence in which he himself was good? Haven't you heard that Themistocles had his son Cleophantus taught to be a good horseman? He could keep his balance standing upright on horseback, and throw a javelin standing upright on horseback, and do many other amazing things his father had him trained in, making him skilled in everything that depended on good teachers. Or haven't you heard this from older people?[16]

ANYTUS I have.

SOCRATES Then no one could have blamed his son's nature for being poor.

ANYTUS [93e] Perhaps not.

SOCRATES But what about this? Have you ever heard anyone, young or old, say that Cleophantus son of Themistocles became a good and wise man in the things his father was good and wise in?

ANYTUS Certainly not.

SOCRATES So are we to believe that he wanted to educate his own son in those other things, but not to make him any better than the neighbors in the wisdom he himself had—if excellence really could be taught?

ANYTUS Probably not, by Zeus.

SOCRATES There you are, then: that's the sort of teacher of excellence he was, a man you yourself agree was among the best of those who came before. Let's look at [94a] another: Aristides son of Lysimachus. Or don't you agree he was a good man?[17]

ANYTUS Of course I do, absolutely.

16 Themistocles was the Athenian statesman and general who led the Greek fleet to victory over the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC.
17 Aristides, called "the Just," was an Athenian statesman and general of the Persian Wars.

SOCRATES Didn't he, too, give his son Lysimachus the finest education in Athens in everything that depended on teachers? But do you think he made him a better man than anyone at all? You've spent time with him, I believe, and you can see what he's like. Or, if you like, take 94b Pericles, a man of such magnificent wisdom. You know he raised two sons, Paralus and Xanthippus? [18]

ANYTUS I do.

SOCRATES Well, as you know yourself, he taught them to be horsemen second to none in Athens, and trained them in music and athletics and everything else that falls under an art, second to none. Didn't he want to make them good men, then? I think he did want to—but it may be that it can't be taught. And so you won't think that only a few, and the most worthless of the Athenians, have proved incapable in this 94c matter, remember that Thucydides also raised two sons, Melesias and Stephanus. He educated them well in everything, and in particular they were the best wrestlers in Athens—he put one with Xanthias and the other with Eudorus, who were thought to be the finest wrestlers of their day. Or don't you remember?[19]

ANYTUS I do, by hearsay.

SOCRATES Isn't it clear, then, that he would never have taught his own boys the things that required 94d spending money to teach, and yet failed to teach them what would have cost nothing—to make them good men—if that could be taught? Or perhaps Thucydides was a nobody, without a great many friends among the Athenians and the allies? He came of a great family and had great power in the city and among the other Greeks, so if this could be taught, he'd have found someone to make his sons good—either one of his fellow citizens or 94e a foreigner—if he himself had no time because of his public duties. No, my friend Anytus: it may be that excellence can't be taught.

18 Pericles was the leading statesman of Athens from about 461 BC until his death in 429 BC.

19 Not the historian, but Thucydides son of Melesias, Pericles' chief political rival.

ANYTUS Socrates, you seem to me very ready to speak ill of people. If you're willing to take my advice, I'd advise you to be careful. It may be that in other cities, too, it's easier to do people harm than good, but in this one [95a] very much so. I think you know that yourself.

SOCRATES Meno, I think Anytus is angry, and it's no wonder. For one thing, he thinks I'm slandering these men; for another, he believes he himself is one of them. But if he ever comes to know what speaking ill really is, he'll stop being angry; for now he doesn't know. But tell me: aren't there fine, upstanding men where you come from, too?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES [95b] Well then, are they willing to offer themselves as teachers to the young, and to agree that they are teachers and that excellence can be taught?

MENO By Zeus, no, Socrates. Sometimes you'd hear them say it can be taught, and sometimes that it can't.

SOCRATES Then should we say they're teachers of this subject, when they can't even agree on this very point?

MENO I don't think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES Well, what about these sophists, the only ones who profess it? Do you think they're teachers of excellence?

MENO [95c] What I especially admire about Gorgias, Socrates, is that you'd never hear him promise that. He even laughs at the others when he hears them promising it. He thinks the job is to make people clever speakers.

SOCRATES So you don't think the sophists are teachers either?

MENO I can't say, Socrates. I'm in the same state as most people: sometimes I think they are, and sometimes not.

SOCRATES And do you know that it's not only you and the other politicians who sometimes think this can be taught and some-

times not, [95d] but that the poet Theognis, too, says the very same thing?[20]

MENO In which verses?

SOCRATES In his elegiacs, where he says: "Drink and eat with these, and sit with them, and please those whose power is great. For from the good you'll learn good things; but if you mingle [95e] with the bad, you'll lose even the sense you have." Do you see that here he speaks as though excellence can be taught?

MENO Clearly.

SOCRATES But in other lines, shifting ground a little, he says, "If sense could be made and put into a man," and then something like "those who could do this would carry off many large fees," and "Never would a bad son come from a good father, [96a] if he heeded wise words. But by teaching you'll never make the bad man good." Do you notice that he contradicts himself on the same subject?

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES Can you name any other subject in which those who claim to be teachers are not only not acknowledged as teachers of others, but aren't even acknowledged to know it themselves, and are considered bad [96b] at the very thing they claim to teach; while those acknowledged to be fine and upstanding themselves say at one time that it can be taught and at another that it can't? Would you say that people so confused about anything whatever are teachers in any real sense?

MENO By Zeus, I wouldn't.

SOCRATES Then if neither the sophists nor those who are fine and upstanding themselves are teachers of the subject, clearly no one else could be?

MENO I don't think so.

20 Theognis of Megara was a sixth-century BC poet whose elegiac verses of advice to a young man were widely quoted.

SOCRATES [96c] And if there are no teachers, there are no students either?

MENO I think it's as you say.

SOCRATES And we've agreed that a subject with neither teachers nor students can't be taught?

MENO We have.

SOCRATES Now, nowhere do there appear to be teachers of excellence?

MENO That's so.

SOCRATES And if no teachers, no students either?

MENO So it appears.

SOCRATES Then excellence can't be taught?

KNOWLEDGE AND TRUE OPINION

Socrates distinguishes true opinion from knowledge and concludes that excellence comes by divine dispensation.

MENO [96d] It seems not, if we've examined it correctly. So I really do wonder, Socrates, whether there are no good men at all, or else how it is that good men come to be.

SOCRATES I'm afraid, Meno, that you and I are rather poor specimens, and that Gorgias hasn't educated you adequately, nor Prodicus me. So above all we must pay attention to ourselves, and look for someone who will, in one way or another, make us [96e] better. I say this with our recent inquiry in view: how ridiculously we failed to notice that it isn't only when knowledge guides them that people conduct their affairs rightly and well. That, perhaps, is why understanding how good men come to be escapes us.

MENO What do you mean by that, Socrates?

SOCRATES This. That good men must be beneficial— [97a] we were right to agree that it couldn't be otherwise. Weren't we?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And that they'll be beneficial if they guide our affairs rightly—we were right to agree to that too, I suppose?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES But that it isn't possible to guide rightly without understanding—it looks as if we were wrong to agree to that.

MENO How do you mean, "rightly"?

SOCRATES I'll tell you. If someone who knew the road to Larisa, or anywhere else you like, walked there and guided others, wouldn't he guide them rightly and well?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES [97b] And what if someone had a true opinion about which road it was, but had never been there and didn't know it? Wouldn't he guide rightly too?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES And as long as he has true opinion about the things the other has knowledge of, he'll be no worse a guide—believing what's true without understanding it—than the one who does understand it.

MENO No worse at all.

SOCRATES So true opinion is no worse a guide to right action than understanding. And this is what we left out just now in our inquiry into what sort of thing excellence is, when we said [97c] that understanding alone guides right action. There was also, it turns out, true opinion.

MENO It seems so.

SOCRATES Then true opinion is no less beneficial than knowledge.

MENO Only in this respect, Socrates: the one who has knowledge would always hit the mark, whereas the one with true opinion would sometimes hit it and sometimes not.

SOCRATES What do you mean? Wouldn't someone who always has true opinion always hit the mark, as long as his opinion was true?

MENO It seems to me it must be so. Which makes me wonder, Socrates, [97d] if that's how it is, why on earth knowledge is valued so much more highly than true opinion, and what makes them two different things.

SOCRATES Do you know why you wonder, or shall I tell you?

MENO Please do tell me.

SOCRATES It's because you haven't paid attention to the statues of Daedalus. But perhaps you don't have any where you come from.[21]

MENO What makes you say that?

SOCRATES Because they, too, if they aren't tied down, run off and escape; but if they're tied down, they stay put.

MENO [97e] What of it?

SOCRATES To own one of his works untied isn't worth much—it's like owning a runaway slave, since it won't stay put—but tied down, it's worth a great deal, for they are very fine works. So what's my point? True opinions. True opinions, too, are a fine thing as long as they stay put, and all they accomplish is [98a] good. But they aren't willing to stay long; they run away from a person's soul, so they aren't worth much until someone ties them down by working out the reason why. And that, Meno my friend, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. Once they're tied down, they first become knowledge, and then they're stable. That's why knowledge is valued more highly than true opinion: knowledge differs from true opinion by being tied down.

MENO By Zeus, Socrates, it does seem to be something like that.

SOCRATES [98b] Mind you, I too am speaking not as one who knows, but by conjecture. But that true opinion and knowledge

21 Daedalus, the legendary craftsman, was said to have made statues so lifelike that they moved and would run away unless tied down.

are different things—that, I think, is not mere conjecture on my part. If there's anything else I'd claim to know—and there are few things I would—this, at any rate, is one I'd count among the things I know.

MENO And you're right, Socrates.

SOCRATES Well then, isn't this right too: that true opinion, when it guides, accomplishes the work of each action no worse than knowledge?

MENO I think what you say is true there as well.

SOCRATES 98c So true opinion will be no worse than knowledge, and no less beneficial, when it comes to action; nor will the man who has true opinion be any worse than the one who has knowledge.

MENO That's so.

SOCRATES And we've agreed that the good man is beneficial.

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES Since, then, it's not only through knowledge that men would be good and beneficial to their cities, if they are, but also through true opinion; and since neither of these belongs to human beings by nature, 98d neither knowledge nor true opinion, nor are they acquired—or do you think either of them is there by nature?

MENO No, I don't.

SOCRATES Then since they're not by nature, good men wouldn't be good by nature either.

MENO Certainly not.

SOCRATES And since it's not by nature, what we examined next was whether it can be taught.

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And didn't we think it could be taught if excellence was understanding?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And that if it could be taught, it would be understanding?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES [98e] And that if there were teachers of it, it could be taught, and if there weren't, it couldn't?

MENO Just so.

SOCRATES But we've agreed that there are no teachers of it?

MENO That's so.

SOCRATES So we've agreed that it's neither teachable nor understanding?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES But we do agree that it's good?

MENO Yes.

SOCRATES And that what guides rightly is beneficial and good?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES [99a] And that only these two things guide rightly, true opinion and knowledge, and a person who has them guides rightly—for what turns out right by some chance doesn't come about through human guidance—but where a person is a guide to what's right, these are the two: true opinion and knowledge.

MENO I think so.

SOCRATES Now since it can't be taught, excellence is no longer knowledge either?

MENO It appears not.

SOCRATES [99b] So of the two things that are good and beneficial, one has been ruled out, and knowledge wouldn't be what guides us in political action.

MENO I don't think so.

SOCRATES So it wasn't by some wisdom, or because they were wise, that men like these led their cities—Themistocles and the others Anytus here was talking about just now. And that's why

they can't make others like themselves: it isn't through knowledge that they are what they are.

MENO It seems to be as you say, Socrates.

SOCRATES Then if it isn't by knowledge, the only thing left is that it comes [99c] by good opinion. Statesmen use this to keep their cities on the right course, and as far as understanding goes they're no different from oracle-chanters and inspired prophets. For these, too, when inspired, say many true things, but know nothing of what they're saying.

MENO It may well be so.

SOCRATES So, Meno, isn't it right to call these men divine, who without having intelligence get many great things right in what they do and say?

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES Then we'd be right to call divine the ones we mentioned just now, [99d] oracle-chanters and seers, and all poets too. And statesmen, not least of all, we'd say are divine and inspired, breathed into and possessed by the god, when they succeed in saying many great things while knowing nothing of what they say.

MENO Certainly.

SOCRATES And women, surely, Meno, call good men divine; and the Spartans, when they praise a good man, say, "He's a divine man."

MENO [99e] And they seem to be right, Socrates. Though perhaps Anytus here is annoyed with you for saying so.

SOCRATES I don't care. We'll talk with him another time, Meno. But if in this whole discussion our inquiry and our arguments were sound, excellence would be neither by nature nor teachable, but would come by divine dispensation, without intelligence, to those it [100a] comes to—unless there were some statesman capable of making another man a statesman too. If there were, he could almost be said to be among the living what Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, when he says of him,

"He alone has his wits of those in Hades; the others flit about as shadows." In the same way, here among us such a man would be, as regards excellence, like a real thing among shadows.[22]

MENO [100b] I think that's very well said, Socrates.

SOCRATES From this reasoning, then, Meno, it appears that excellence comes by divine dispensation to those it comes to. But we'll know the clear truth about it only when, before asking in what way excellence comes to people, we first try to inquire what excellence is, itself by itself. But now it's time for me to be going. You, persuade your guest-friend Anytus here of the very things you've been persuaded of yourself, so that [100c] he'll be calmer. If you persuade him, you may do the Athenians some good as well.

22 Tiresias was the blind Theban prophet whom Odysseus consults among the dead in Homer's *Odyssey*.