Meno

MENO:[1] Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is teachable?[2] Or is 70a
it not teachable, but attainable by practice? Or is it attainable neither by practice nor by learning, and do people instead acquire it by nature, or in some other way?

SOCRATES:[3] In the past, Meno, the Thessalians were renowned among the Greeks and admired for both horsemanship and wealth, but now, I 70b
think, they are admired for wisdom as well, and particularly the fellow-citizens of your friend Aristippus, the men of Larisa. You have Gorgias[4] to thank for this, for since he came to that city he has made the leading Aleuadae,[5] of whom your lover Aristippus is one, court him for his wisdom, as well as the leading people among the other Thessalians. And besides he has given you this very habit of fearlessly and magnificently answering any question anyone asks, as is only reasonable for people who have knowledge, since he himself makes himself available for any Greek 70c
who wishes to pose him any question he likes, and answers absolutely everyone.

But the situation here, my dear Meno, is quite the opposite: there has been a drought of wisdom, as it were, and in all likelihood wisdom has 71a
vanished from these parts and migrated to your people. At any rate, if you want to put a question like that to one of the people here, any one of

Footnotes marked with an asterisk indicate departures from the Oxford Classical Text and do not discuss the translation or interpretation of the dialogues.

[1] On Meno, see p. xii. [2] On the word translated 'teachable', see p. xii n. 1.

[3] On Socrates, see p. ix.

[4] Gorgias of Leontini (*c.* 485–*c.* 380 BC), a leading sophist and rhetorician, featured extensively in the first part of Plato's *Gorgias*.

[5] The ruling family of Larisa, in Thessaly.

them will laugh and say: 'Stranger, you must think I am richly blessed, at least if you expect me to know whether virtue is teachable or how people come to have it. I am so far from knowing whether or not it's teachable that even the very question *what on earth virtue is* is one regarding which I don't in fact have any knowledge at all.'

71b Now that is true of me as well, Meno. I share my fellow-citizens' poverty in this matter, and reproach myself for knowing nothing at all about virtue. But how could I know what *sort* of thing something is, when I don't know *what* it is? Or do you think that, if someone doesn't know at all who Meno is, it is possible for him to know whether Meno is beautiful or rich or even of good birth, or, as it may be, the opposites of these? Do you think that possible?

71c MENO: No. But do you really not know even what virtue is, Socrates, and is that the news about you we are to take back home as well?

SOCRATES: Yes, and not only that, my friend, but also that I don't think I've yet even met anyone else who knows.

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

SOCRATES: I did.

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

SOCRATES: My memory isn't great, Meno, so I can't say now how he struck me back then. Perhaps, however, he does know, and perhaps you

71d know what he said. So remind me what he said. Or, if you want, tell me yourself. For I presume you agree with him.

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Then let's forget about him, since he isn't here anyway. But as for you, by the gods, Meno, what do you say virtue is? Tell me and don't keep it to yourself, so that, if you and Gorgias prove to know, my mistake when I claimed never yet to have met someone who knew may turn out to be a most fortunate one.

71e MENO: Well, it isn't difficult to say, Socrates. First, if you want to take the virtue of a man, it is easy to state that the virtue of a man is to be competent at managing the affairs of his city, and in so doing to benefit friends and harm enemies, and to take care that nothing of the latter kind befalls him himself. Then if you want the virtue of a woman, it isn't hard to explain that she must run her household well, conserving its property and being obedient to her husband. And there is a different virtue for a child – one for a female child, one for a male – and one for an older man,

who may be a freeman if you like, or a slave if you like. There are also very many other virtues. And so there is no puzzle in saying what virtue is. For each of us, you see, and for each pursuit, there is the relevant virtue to match each activity and age. And I think the same is true of the relevant vice, Socrates. 72a

SOCRATES: I seem to have met with a great piece of good fortune, Meno, if in seeking one virtue I have discovered that you have a whole swarm of virtues at your disposal. But, Meno, with regard to this image of 'swarms', suppose I asked you about just what it is to be a bee,[6] and you said that there were many kinds of bees. What answer would you give me if I asked you: 'Do you say that it is their being bees that makes them of many different kinds? Or do they not differ at all because of this, but because of something else, such as beauty or largeness or something else of that kind?' Tell me, how would you answer if you were asked this question? 72b

MENO: Like this: in so far as they are bees, one bee doesn't differ at all from another.

SOCRATES: Now suppose I said to you next: 'Then tell me about precisely that, Meno: what do you say it is that makes them all no different, but the same?' You would have an answer for me, I take it? 72c

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: Likewise then when it comes to the virtues too – even if they are of many kinds, they still all have one and the same form[7] because of which they are virtues. And when responding to questions it is right, presumably, to look to this form before explaining what virtue really is to the person who asked the question. Or do you not get my point? 72d

MENO: Well, I *think* I do. But I don't yet grasp what you're asking, at least as I would like to.

SOCRATES: Do you think that it is true only of virtue, Meno, that there is a different one for a man, a different one for a woman, and so on? Or do you regard health and largeness and strength in the same way? Do you believe that there is a different health for a man, a different one for

[6] 'what it is to be . . . ': the Greek word is *ousia*, 'being', the abstract noun from the verb 'be'. It can also be translated 'essence', and it comes to be associated especially with the transcendent Forms, cf. *Phaedo* 65d, 76d, etc.

[7] The Greek word *eidos* here comes to be one of Plato's favourites for his theory of transcendent 'Forms'.

a woman? Or is the form the same everywhere, provided that it is health,
72e whether in a man or in anyone else?

MENO: Health, at least, is I think the same both for a man and for a woman.

SOCRATES: Largeness and strength as well? If a woman is strong, will she be strong because of the same form and the same strength? What I mean by 'the same' is that strength does not differ at all with regard to its being strength depending on whether it is in a man or in a woman. Or do you believe that it does?

MENO: No, I don't.

73a SOCRATES: Whereas virtue *will* differ with regard to its being virtue depending on whether it is in a child or in an elderly person, in a woman or in a man?

MENO: Somehow I think, Socrates, that this case isn't like those other ones.

SOCRATES: Well, weren't you claiming that a man's virtue is to manage a city well, a woman's virtue to manage a house well?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now is it possible to manage a city, a house or anything else in a good way, if one doesn't do so in a temperate and just way?

MENO: No, surely not.

73b SOCRATES: If, then, they manage justly and temperately, they will do so because of justice and temperance?

MENO: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: Therefore both the woman and the man need the same things if they are to be good: justice and temperance.

MENO: Yes, they seem to.

SOCRATES: How about a child and an elderly person? Could they ever become good if they were intemperate and unjust?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: But they could do so if they were temperate and just?

73c MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then all humans are good in the same way. For they become good by attaining the same things.

MENO: It looks that way.

SOCRATES: And they wouldn't be good in the same way, I presume, if their virtue were not the same.

MENO: Definitely not.

SOCRATES: So since they all have the same virtue, try to say and recall what Gorgias says it is – and you with him.

MENO: The ability to rule over people – what else? Assuming, that is, 73d
that you're seeking one thing covering all cases.

SOCRATES: I certainly am. But does a child also have the same virtue, Meno, and does a slave, namely the ability to rule their master? Do you think that one would still be a slave with such authority?

MENO: Not at all, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Right – it's implausible, my friend. Besides, consider this further point. You say that virtue is 'to be able to rule'. Won't we add to that 'justly, and not unjustly'?

MENO: I think so, because justice is virtue, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Virtue, Meno, or *a* virtue? 73e

MENO: What do you mean by that?

SOCRATES: Just what I would say about anything else. For example, if you like, I would say that roundness is a shape, not simply that it is shape.[8] And my reason for describing it like this would be that there are other shapes as well.

MENO: Yes, you'd be right to say that, since I myself say that justice isn't the only virtue, but that there are other virtues as well.

SOCRATES: What are they? Tell me. I would tell you other shapes too, 74a
if you asked – so you tell me other virtues.

MENO: Well then, courage seems to me to be a virtue,[9] as do temperance, wisdom, magnificence, and a great many others.

SOCRATES: The very same thing has happened to us again, Meno. Once more we have found many virtues when seeking one, though in a different way from just now. But we can't discover the one virtue which extends through all these.

MENO: That is because I can't yet find one virtue covering all cases in 74b
the way you're seeking, Socrates, as I can in the other examples.

SOCRATES: Yes, understandably. But I'll strive to bring us closer,*[10] if I can. You appreciate, I presume, that the following is true in every case. Suppose that someone were to ask you what I just asked, 'What is shape, Meno?', and you replied 'Roundness'. Then suppose that he said

[8] For the translation of *schēma* as 'shape', see p. xiv n. 3.
[9] Meno's reply could be translated 'virtue' or 'a virtue'.
*[10] Reading προσβιβάσαι at 74b3.

to you what I said: 'Is roundness shape, or *a* shape?'. Presumably you would reply that it's a shape.

MENO: Certainly.

74c SOCRATES: Your reason being that there are other shapes as well?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Right, and if he proceeded to ask you what other sorts of shape there are, you would tell him?

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: Again, suppose that, along the same lines, he asked you what colour is, you replied 'White', and your questioner then retorted: 'Is white colour, or a colour?'. You would say that it's a colour, because there are others too?

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: Yes, and if he asked you to mention other colours, you
74d would tell him others which are no less colours than white is?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now imagine that, like me, he pursued the argument and said: 'We keep ending up with a multitude. Don't give me that sort of reply, but since you call this multitude by a certain single name, and say that none of them isn't a shape, despite the fact that they're actually opposite to one another, tell me what this thing is which encompasses the
74e round no less than the straight, the thing you name shape, saying that the round is no more a shape than the straight is?' Or don't you claim that?

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Then when you make such a claim, do you mean to say that the round is no more round than straight, and the straight no more straight than round?

MENO: Certainly not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And yet you do say that the round is no more shape, at least, than the straight is, nor vice versa.

MENO: True.

75a SOCRATES: So what on earth is this thing named 'shape'? Try to tell me. Now imagine that you said to the person who was questioning you in this way, either about shape or about colour: 'Look here – I don't even understand what you want, and I don't know what you mean either.' Perhaps he would be taken aback and say: 'Don't you understand that I'm seeking what is the same in all these cases?' Or would you have no

answer even in the case of these things, Meno, if someone were to ask you: 'What is the same in the case of all these things, the round and the straight and the other things you call shapes?' Try to say, so that you may then get some practice for your answer about virtue.

MENO: No – you say, Socrates. 75b

SOCRATES: You want me to indulge you?

MENO: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: So will you likewise be willing to tell me about virtue?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then I must do my best – because it's worth my while.

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Right then, let's try to tell you what shape is. Now consider whether you accept this account of what it is: let us take shape to be that which, alone of all things, always accompanies colour. Do you find that sufficient, or do you ask for a different kind of answer? For my part, you see, I would be satisfied even if the account of virtue you gave me were 75c of this kind.

MENO: But that's simple-minded, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What do you mean?

MENO: I mean that on your account, as I understand it, shape is what always accompanies colour. Maybe so, but if someone were to say that he didn't know colour, and was puzzled about it in the same way as about shape, what do you think your answer would be?

SOCRATES: The truth. And if the questioner were one of the experts in eristic and competitive debate I would tell him: 'That's what I have to 75d say. But if what I'm saying is incorrect, it's your job to hold me to account and refute it.' If, however, like you and me now, they were friends and wished to have a genuine dialogue with one another, they should find a gentler and more dialectical way to answer. And I suggest that the more dialectical manner is to reply not only with the truth, but in addition through things which the person questioned[11] also admits he knows. So I too will endeavour to speak to you in that way. Tell me: do you use the 75e term 'end' of something? In the sense of limit and extremity, that is – I mean the same thing by all of these. Perhaps Prodicus would disagree with

[11] This is often emended so as to read 'the questioner'. But as the present passage illustrates, in dialectic the respective roles of questioner and answerer can switch at any time. What matters is that either party, if asked, will admit to knowing the thing in question.

us, but I would guess that you, at any rate, describe something as being limited *and* ended.[12] That is what I mean to say, nothing complicated.

MENO: But of course I use those descriptions, and I think I understand your point.

76a SOCRATES: Very well. Do you describe something as 'surface', and something else as 'solid', such as the ones in geometrical studies?

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Now already with these you might understand what I say shape is. For all shape, I say that shape is that at which the solid is limited. Drawing that together I would say that shape is the limit of a solid.

MENO: But what do you say colour is, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Outrageous behaviour, Meno! You set problems for an
76b old man to answer, but you're not willing yourself to recollect and tell me what on earth Gorgias says virtue is.

MENO: Well, when you answer that question of mine, Socrates, I'll answer you.

SOCRATES: Even if someone had his head covered, Meno, he could tell from your conversation that you're beautiful and still have lovers.

MENO: How?

SOCRATES: Because you do nothing but give orders in the discussion, precisely what fêted boys do, for they play the tyrant as long as they have
76c the attractions of youth. And at the same time you've probably realised that I'm at the mercy of beauties. So I'll indulge you and answer.

MENO: Yes, indulge me you must.

SOCRATES: Now do you want me to answer you in the style of Gorgias, in the way you would follow best?

MENO: I do, naturally.

SOCRATES: Then do you and he say that things have certain effluences, as Empedocles[13] claims?

MENO: Quite so.

SOCRATES: And that there are channels into which and through which the effluences are conveyed?

MENO: Absolutely.

[12] In Plato's dialogues the sophist Prodicus' trademark is to deny that any two words are exact synonyms.

[13] Mid-fifth-century Sicilian philosopher-poet, for whose physical analyses of perception cf. Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 7–11.

SOCRATES: And that some of the effluences fit some of the channels, 76d
but others are too small or large?

MENO: That's true.

SOCRATES: Is there also something you describe as 'sight'?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then from this 'mark what I tell thee', as Pindar put it: colour is effluence of shapes, commensurate with sight and thus perceptible.

MENO: I think that is a superb answer, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Quite, for perhaps such an answer is familiar to you. And at the same time you realize, I think, that from it you could also say what sound is, and smell and many other such things. 76e

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Yes, the answer belongs in a tragedy, Meno. That is why it pleases you more than the one about shape.

MENO: It does.

SOCRATES: But the better answer isn't this one, son of Alexidemus, or so I have convinced myself, but the other one. And I imagine that you wouldn't think so either, if you didn't need, as you said yesterday, to leave before the mysteries, but were to stay and be initiated.

MENO: But I would stay, Socrates, if you were to tell me many things 77a
of that kind.

SOCRATES: Well, if I do I won't be at all lacking in eagerness, both for your sake and for mine, although I suspect that I won't be able to tell you many things like that. But come on, *you* try to keep your promise to *me*: say what virtue is as a whole and stop making many from one, as jokers are always saying when people smash something. But leave virtue whole and intact, and say what it is. I've given you the models, after all. 77b

MENO: Very well, Socrates, I think virtue is, as the poet says, 'to rejoice in the noble and be proficient'. And I say that this is virtue: to desire noble things and be proficient at securing them.

SOCRATES: Would you say that the person who desires noble things desires good things?

MENO: Very much so.

SOCRATES: On the assumption that there are some people who desire bad things, others who desire good things? Do you not think, my friend, 77c
that everyone desires good things?

MENO: No, I don't.

SOCRATES: But that some people desire bad things?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Thinking that the bad things are good, do you mean? Or do they actually know that the things are bad, but nonetheless desire them?

MENO: Both happen, I think.

SOCRATES: Do you really think, Meno, that there is anyone who knows that the bad things are bad but nonetheless desires them?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: What do you mean that he desires? To acquire them?

MENO: Yes, what else?

77d SOCRATES: In the belief that bad things benefit whoever acquires them, or in the knowledge that bad things harm whoever possesses them?

MENO: There are some who do so in the belief that bad things benefit, but others as well who do so in the knowledge that they harm.

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

MENO: That I *don't* believe.

SOCRATES: Then it is clear that these people, at least, don't desire bad
77e things, ignorant as they are about them, but desire things they thought were good, but in fact are bad. And so the people who are ignorant about these things and think they are good clearly desire good things. Or don't they?

MENO: These people, at any rate, probably do.

SOCRATES: Very well. The people who desire bad things, according to you, but think that bad things harm whoever acquires them, presumably know that they will be harmed by them?

78a MENO: They must.

SOCRATES: But don't these people believe that those who are harmed are pitiful to the extent that they are harmed?

MENO: Again, they must.

SOCRATES: And that the pitiful are unhappy?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: So is there anyone who wants to be pitiful and unhappy?

MENO: No, I don't believe so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Therefore nobody wants bad things, Meno, assuming he doesn't want to be like that. For what else is being pitiful, if not desiring bad things and acquiring them?