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George Grote

Excerpt

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## P L A T O .

## CHAPTER XX.

## MENON.

THIS dialogue is carried on between Sokrates and Menon, a man of noble family, wealth, and political influence, in the Thessalian city of Larissa. He is supposed to have previously frequented, in his native city, the lectures and society of the rhetor Gorgias.\* The name and general features of Menon are probably borrowed from the Thessalian military officer, who commanded a division of the Ten Thousand Greeks, and whose character Xenophon depicts in the *Anabasis*: but there is nothing in the Platonic dialogue to mark that meanness and perfidy which the Xenophontic picture indicates. The conversation between Sokrates and Menon is interrupted by two episodes: in the first of these, Sokrates questions an unlettered youth, the slave of Menon: in the second, he is brought into conflict with Anytus, the historical accuser of the historical Sokrates.

The dialogue is begun by Menon, in a manner quite as abrupt as the Hipparchus and Minos:

*Menon.*—Can you tell me, Sokrates, whether virtue is teachable—or acquirable by exercise—or whether it comes by nature—or in what other manner it comes?—*Sokr.* I cannot answer your question. I am ashamed to say that I do not even know what virtue is: and when I do not know what a thing is, how can I know any thing about its attributes or accessories? A man who does not know Menon, cannot tell

Persons of  
the Dialogue.

Question put  
by Menon—  
Is virtue  
teachable?  
Sokrates con-  
fesses that  
he does not  
know what  
virtue is.  
Surprise of  
Menon.

\* Cicero notices Isokrates as having heard Gorgias in Thessaly (*Orator*, 53, 176).

whether he is handsome, rich, &c., or the contrary. *Menon.*—Certainly not. But is it really true, Sokrates, that you do not know what virtue is? Am I to proclaim this respecting you, when I go home?<sup>b</sup> *Sokr.*—Yes—undoubtedly: and proclaim besides that I have never yet met with any one who *did* know. *Menon.*—What! have you not seen Gorgias at Athens, and did not he appear to you to know? *Sokr.*—I have met him, but I do not quite recollect what he said.<sup>c</sup> We need not consider what he said, since he is not here to answer for himself. But you doubtless recollect, and can tell me, both from yourself, and from him, what virtue is? *Menon.*—There is *no difficulty* in telling you.<sup>d</sup>

Many commentators here speak as if such disclaimer on the part of Sokrates had reference merely to certain impudent pretensions to universal knowledge on the part of the Sophists. But this (as I have before remarked) is a misconception of the Sokratic or Platonic point of view. The matter which Sokrates proclaims that *he* does not know, is, what, not Sophists alone, but every one else also, professes to know well. Sokrates stands alone in avowing that he does not know it, and that he can find no one else who knows. Menon treats the question as one of no difficulty—one on which confessed ignorance was discredit-able. “What!” says Menon, “am I really to state respecting you, that you do not know what virtue is?” The man who makes such a confession will be looked upon by his neighbours with surprise and displeasure—not to speak of probable consequences yet worse. He is one whom the multifarious agencies employed by King Nomos (which we shall find described more at length in the Protagoras) have failed to mould into perfect and uninquiring conformity, and he is still in process of examination to form a judgment for himself.

<sup>b</sup> Plato, Menon, p. 71 B-C. Ἄλλὰ σὺ, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐδ' ἴδ, τι ἀρετὴ ἐστὶν οἴσθα, ἀλλὰ ταῦτα περὶ σοῦ καὶ οἰκαδε ἀπαγγέλλωμεν;

<sup>c</sup> Plato, Menon, p. 71 D. ἐκεῖνον μέντοι νῦν ἐῶμεν, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἄπεισται. Sokrates sets little value upon opinions unless where the person giving them

is present to explain and defend; compare what he says about the uselessness of citation from poets, from whom you can ask no questions, Plato, Protagor. p. 347 E.

<sup>d</sup> Plato, Menon, p. 71 E. Ἄλλ' οὐ χαλεπὸν, ὦ Σώκρατες, εἰπεῖν, &c.

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Menon proceeds to answer, that there are many virtues : the virtue of a man—competence to transact the business of the city, and in such business to benefit his friends and injure his enemies : the virtue of a woman—to administer the house well, preserving every thing within it, and obeying her husband : the virtue of a child, of an old man, a slave, &c. There is in short a virtue—and its contrary, a vice—belonging to each of us, in every work, profession, and age.<sup>e</sup>

Answer of Menon—plurality of virtues, one belonging to each different class and condition. Sokrates enquires for the property common to all of them.

But (replies Sokrates) are they not all the same, *quatenus* virtue? Health, *quatenus* Health, is the same in a man or a woman : is not the case similar with virtue? *Menon*.—Not exactly similar. *Sokr*.—How so? Though there are many diverse virtues, have not all of them one and the same form in common, through the communion of which they *are* virtues? In answer to my question, you ought to declare what this common form is. Thus, both the man who administers the city, and the woman who administers the house, must act both of them with justice and moderation. Through the same qualities, both the one and the other are good. There is thus some common constituent : tell me what it is, according to you and Gorgias? *Menon*.—It is to be competent to exercise command over men.<sup>f</sup> *Sokr*.—But that will not suit for the virtue of a child or a slave. Moreover, must we not superadd the condition, to command justly, and not unjustly? *Menon*.—I think so : justice is virtue. *Sokr*.—Is it virtue—or is it one particular variety of virtue?<sup>g</sup> *Menon*.—How do you mean? *Sokr*.—Just as if I were to say about roundness, that it is not figure, but a particular variety of figure : because there are other figures besides roundness. *Menon*.—Very true : I say too, that there are other virtues besides justice—namely, courage, moderation, wisdom, magnanimity,

<sup>e</sup> Plato, *Menon*, c. 3, p. 72 A. καθ' ἐκάστην γὰρ τῶν πράξεων καὶ τῶν ἠλικίων πρὸς ἕκαστον ἔργον ἐκάστῳ ἡμῶν ἡ ἀρετὴ ἐστίν. ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ ἡ κακία.

Though Sokrates disapproves this method of answering—τὸ ἐξαριθμεῖν τὰς ἀρετάς (to use the expression of Aristotle)—yet Aristotle seems to think

it better than searching for one general definition. See *Politica*, i. 13, p. 1260, a. 15-30, where he has the Platonic *Menon* in his mind.

<sup>f</sup> Plato, *Menon*, p. 73 D.

<sup>g</sup> Plato, *Menon*, c. 5, p. 73 E. Πότερον ἀρετὴ, ἢ Μένων. ἢ ἀρετὴ τις ;

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and several others also. *Sokr.*—We are thus still in the same predicament. In looking for one virtue, we have found many; but we cannot find that one form which runs through them all. *Menon.*—I cannot at present tell what that one is.<sup>h</sup>

Sokrates proceeds to illustrate his meaning by the analogies of figure and colour. You call *round* a figure, and *square* a figure: you call *white* and *black* both colour, the one as much as the other, though they are unlike and even opposite.<sup>i</sup> Tell me, What is this same common property in both, which makes you call both of them figure—both of them colour? Take this as a preliminary exercise, in order to help you in answering my enquiry about virtue.<sup>k</sup> Menon cannot answer, and Sokrates answers his own question. He gives a general definition, first of figure, next of colour. He first defines figure in a way which implies colour to be known. This is pointed out; and he then admits that in a good definition, suitable to genuine dialectical investigation, nothing should be implied as known, except what the respondent admits himself to know. Figure and colour are both defined suitably to this condition.<sup>l</sup>

All this preliminary matter seems to be intended for the purpose of getting the question clearly conceived as a general question—of exhibiting and eliminating the narrow and partial conceptions which often unconsciously substitute themselves in the mind, in place of that which ought to be conceived as a generic whole—and of clearing up what is required in a good definition. A generic whole, including various specific portions distinguishable from each other, was at that time little understood by any one. There existed no grammar, nor any rules of logic founded on analysis of the intellectual processes. To predicate of the genus what was true only of the species—to predicate as distinctively charac-

<sup>h</sup> Plato, *Menon*, c. 6. p. 74 A. οὐ γὰρ δύναμαι πῶ, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὡς σὺ ζητεῖς, μίαν ἀρετὴν λαβεῖν κατὰ πάντων.

<sup>i</sup> Plato, *Menon*, p. 74 D.

<sup>k</sup> Plato, *Menon*, c. 7, pp. 74-75. Πειρῶ μοι εἰπεῖν, ἵνα καὶ γένηταί σοι

μελέτη πρὸς τὴν περὶ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἀπόκρισιν.

The purpose of practising the respondent is here distinctly announced.

<sup>l</sup> Plato, *Menon*, p. 75 C-E.

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terizing the species, what is true of the whole genus in which it is contained—to lose the integrity of the genus in its separate parcels or fragments<sup>m</sup>—these were errors which men had never yet been expressly taught to avoid. To assign the one common meaning, constituent of or connoted by a generic term, had never yet been put before them as a problem. Such preliminary clearing of the ground is instructive even now, when formal and systematic logic has become more or less familiar: but in the time of Plato, it must have been indispensably required, to arrive at a full conception of any general question.<sup>n</sup>

Menon having been thus made to understand the formal requisites for a definition, gives as his definition of virtue the phrase of some lyric poet—“To delight in, or desire, things beautiful, fine, honourable—and to have the power of getting them.” But Sokrates remarks that honourable things are good things, and that every one without exception desires good. No one desires evil except when he mistakes it for good. On this point all men are alike; the distinctive feature of virtue must then consist in the second half of the definition—in the power of acquiring good things, such as health, wealth, money, power, dignities, &c.<sup>o</sup> But the acquisition of these things is not

Definition of virtue given by Menon; Sokrates pulls it to pieces.

<sup>m</sup> Plato, Menon, p. 79 A. ἐμοῦ δεηθέντος σου μὴ καταγνῶναι μηδὲ κερματίζειν τὴν ἀρετὴν, &c. ἐμοῦ δεηθέντος ὄλην εἰπεῖν τὴν ἀρετὴν, &c.

<sup>n</sup> These examples of trial, error, and exposure, have great value and reflect high credit on Plato, when we regard them as an intellectual or propædæutic discipline, forcing upon hearers an attention to useful logical distinctions at a time when there existed no systematic grammar or logic. But surely they must appear degraded, as they are presented in the Prolegomena of Stallbaum, and by some other critics. We are there told that Plato's main purpose in this dialogue was to mock and jeer the Sophists and their pupil, and that for this purpose Sokrates is made to employ not his own arguments but arguments borrowed from the Sophists themselves—“ut callidè suam ipsius rationem occultare existimandus

sit, quo magis illudat Sophistarum alunnum” (p. 15). “Quæ quidem argumentatio” (that of Sokrates) “admodum cavendum est ne pro Socraticâ vel Platonicâ accipiatur. Est enim prorsus ad mentem Sophistarum aliorumque id genus hominum comparatâ,” &c. (p. 16). Compare pp. 12-13 seq.

The Sophists undoubtedly had no distinct consciousness, any more than other persons, of these logical distinctions, which were then for the first time pressed forcibly upon attention.

<sup>o</sup> Plato, Menon, p. 77 B. δοκῶ τοῖνυν μοι, ἀρετὴ εἶναι καθάπερ ὁ ποιητὴς λέγει, χαίρειν τε καλοῖσι καὶ δύνασθαι. καὶ ἐγὼ τοῦτο λέγω ἀρετὴν, ἐπιθυμοῦντα τῶν καλῶν δυνατὸν εἶναι πορίζεσθαι.

Whoever this lyric poet was, his real meaning is somewhat twisted by Sokrates in order to furnish a basis for ethical criticism, as the song of Simonides is in the Protagoras. A per-

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virtuous, unless it be made consistently with justice and moderation: moreover the man who acts justly is virtuous, even though he does not acquire them. It appears then that every agent who acts with justice and moderation is virtuous. But this is nugatory as a definition of virtue: for justice and moderation are only known as parts of virtue, and require to be themselves defined. No man can know what a part of virtue is, unless he knows what virtue itself is.<sup>p</sup> Menon must look for a better definition, including nothing but what is already known or admitted.

*Menon.*—Your conversation, Sokrates, produces the effect of the shock of the torpedo: you stun and confound me: you throw me into inextricable perplexity, so that I can make no answer. I have often discoursed copiously—and, as I thought, effectively—upon virtue; but now you have shown that I do not even know what virtue is. *Sokr.*—If I throw you into perplexity, it is only because I am myself in the like perplexity and ignorance. I do not know what virtue is, any more than you: and I shall be glad to continue the search for finding it, if you will assist me.

Menon complains that the conversation of Sokrates confounds him like an electric shock—Sokrates replies that he is himself in the same state of confusion and ignorance. He urges continuance of search by both.

*Menon.*—But how are you to search for that of which you are altogether ignorant? Even if you do find it, how can you ever know that you have found it?

*Sokr.*—You are now introducing a troublesome doctrine, laid down by those who are averse to the labour of thought. They tell us that a man cannot search either for what he knows, or for what he does not know. For the former, research is superfluous: for the latter it is unprofitable and purposeless, since the searcher does not know what he is

But how is the process of search available to any purpose? No man searches for what he already knows: and for what he does not know, it is useless to search, for he cannot tell when he has found it.

looking for.

son having power, and taking delight in honourable or beautiful things—is a very intelligible Hellenic idéal, as an object of envy and admiration. Compare Protagoras, p. 351 C. *εἴπερ τοῖς καλοῖς ζῶν ἡδόμενος*. A poor man may be φιλόκαλος as well as a rich man: φιλοκαλούμεν μετ' εὐτελείας, is the boast of Periklēs in the name of the

Athenians, Thucyd. ii. 40.

Plato, Menon, c. 11, p. 78. Ἄγαθὰ δὲ καλεῖς οὐχὶ οἶον ἐγγίειν τε καὶ πλοῦτον; καὶ χρύσιον λέγω καὶ ἀργύριον κτῆσθαι καὶ τιμὰς ἐν πόλει καὶ ἀρχάς; μὴ ἄλλ' ἅττα λέγεις ἀγαθὰ ἢ τὰ τοιαῦτα;

*Menon.* Οὐκ· ἀλλὰ πάντα λέγω τὰ τοιαῦτα.

<sup>p</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 12, p. 79.

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I do not believe this doctrine (continues Sokrates). Priests, priestesses, and poets (Pindar among them) tell us, that the mind of man is immortal and has existed throughout all past time, in conjunction with successive bodies; alternately abandoning one body, or dying and taking up new life or reviving in another body. In this perpetual succession of existences, it has seen every thing,—both here and in Hades and everywhere else—and has learnt every thing. But though thus omniscient, it has forgotten the larger portion of its knowledge. Yet what has been thus forgotten may again be revived. What we call learning, is such revival. It is reminiscence of something which the mind had seen in a former state of existence, and knew, but had forgotten. Since then all the parts of nature are analogous, or cognate—and since the mind has gone through and learnt them all—we cannot wonder that the revival of any one part should put it upon the track of recovering for itself all the rest, both about virtue and about every thing else, if a man will only persevere in intent meditation. All research and all learning is thus nothing but reminiscence. In our researches, we are not looking for what we do not know: we are looking for what we do know, but have forgotten. There is therefore ample motive, and ample remuneration, for prosecuting enquiries: and your doctrine which pronounces them to be unprofitable, is incorrect.<sup>4</sup>

Theory of reminiscence propounded by Sokrates — anterior immortality of the soul— what is called teaching is the revival and recognition of knowledge acquired in a former life, but forgotten.

Sokrates proceeds to illustrate the position, just laid down, by cross-examining Menon's youthful slave: who, though wholly untaught and having never heard any mention of geometry, is brought by a proper series of questions to give answers out of his own mind, furnishing the solution of a geometrical pro-

Illustration of this theory —knowledge may be revived by skillful questions in the mind of a man thoroughly

<sup>4</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 14-15, p. 81.

“Ατε οὖν ἡ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατός τε οὖσα καὶ πολλὰκις γεγονυῖα, καὶ ἑωρακυῖα καὶ τὰ ἐνθάδε καὶ τὰ ἐν Ἄδου καὶ πάντα χρήματα, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅ, τι οὐ μεμάθηκεν ὥστε οὐδὲν θαναστὸν καὶ περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ ἄλλων οἶδόν τε εἶναι αὐτὴν ἀναμνησθῆναι ἢ γὰρ καὶ πρότερον ἠπίστατο.

“Ατε γὰρ τῆς φύσεως ἀπάσης συγγένους οὐσης καὶ μεμαθηκυῖας τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπαντα, οὐδὲν κωλύει ἐν μόνον ἀναμνησθέντα, ὃ δὴ μάθησιν καλοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι, τὰλλα πάντα αὐτὸν ἀνευρεῖν, εἴαν τις ἀνδρείος ᾗ καὶ μὴ ἀποκάμνη ζητῶν. Τὸ γὰρ ζητεῖν ἔρα καὶ τὸ μαρθάνειν ἀνάμνησις ὄλον ἔστιν.



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untaught.  
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blem. The first part of the examination brings him to a perception of the difficulty, and makes him feel a painful perplexity, from which he desires to obtain relief:<sup>r</sup> the second part guides his mind in the efforts necessary for fishing up a solution out of its own pre-existing, but forgotten, stores. True opinions, which he had long had within him without knowing it, are awakened by interrogation, and become cognitions. From the fact that the mind thus possesses the truth of things which it has not acquired in this life, Sokrates infers that it must have gone through a pre-existence of indefinite duration, or must be immortal.<sup>s</sup>

The former topic of enquiry is now resumed: but at the instance of Menon, the question taken up is, not—“What is virtue?” but—“Is virtue teachable or not?” Sokrates, after renewing his objection against the inversion of philosophical order by discussing the second question without having determined the first, enters upon the discussion hypothetically, assuming as a postulate, that nothing can be taught except knowledge. The question then stands thus—“Is virtue knowledge?” If it be, it can be taught: if not, it cannot be taught.<sup>t</sup>

Sokrates proceeds to prove that virtue is knowledge, or a mode of knowledge. Virtue is good: all good things are profitable. But none of the things accounted good are profitable, unless they be rightly employed; that is, employed with knowledge or intelligence. This is true not only of health, wealth, beauty, strength, power, &c., but also of the mental attributes justice, moderation, courage, quick apprehension, &c. All of these are profitable, and therefore good, if brought into action under knowledge or right intelligence; none of them are profitable or good, without this condition—which is therefore the distinctive constituent of virtue.<sup>u</sup>

<sup>r</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 18, p. 84 C. Οτι οὐδὲν ἂν αὐτὸν πρότερον ἐπιχειρήσαι ζητεῖν ἢ μανθάνειν τοῦτο ὃ φέρετο εἶδέναι οὐκ εἰδώς, πρὶν εἰς ἀπορίαν κατέπεσεν ἡγησάμενος μὴ εἶδέναι, καὶ ἐπόθησε τὸ εἶδέναι; Οὐ μοι δοκεῖ. Ὡνητο ἄρα ναρκήσας.

<sup>s</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 21, p. 86. Οὐ κοῦν εἰ ἀεὶ ἡ ἀληθεια ἡμῖν πάντων ὄντων ἔσται ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, ἀθάνατος ἂν ἡ ψυχὴ εἴη.

<sup>t</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 23, p. 87.

<sup>u</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 25, p. 89.



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Virtue therefore, being knowledge or a mode of knowledge, cannot come by nature, but must be teachable.

Yet again there are other contrary reasons (he proceeds) which prove that it cannot be teachable. For if it were so, there would be distinct and assignable teachers and learners of it, and the times and places could be pointed out where it is taught and learnt. We see that this is the case with all arts and professions. But in regard to virtue, there are neither recognised teachers, nor learners, nor years of learning. The Sophists pretend to be teachers of it, but are not : \* the leading and esteemed citizens of the community do not pretend to be teachers of it, and are indeed incompetent to teach it even to their own sons—as the character of those sons sufficiently proves.<sup>7</sup>

Virtue, as being knowledge, must be teachable. Yet there are opposing reasons, showing that it cannot be teachable. No teachers of it can be found.

Here, a new speaker is introduced into the dialogue—Anytus, one of the accusers of Sokrates before the Dikastery. The conversation is carried on for some time between Sokrates and him. Anytus denies altogether that the Sophists are teachers of virtue, and even denounces them with bitter contempt and wrath. But he maintains that the leading and esteemed citizens of the state do really teach it. Anytus however presently breaks off in a tone of displeasure and menace towards Sokrates himself.<sup>2</sup> The conversation is then renewed with Menon, and it is shown that the leading politicians cannot be considered as teachers of virtue, any more than the Sophists. There exist no teachers of it; and therefore we must conclude that it is not teachable.

Conversation of Sokrates with Anytus, who detests the Sophists, and affirms that any one of the leading politicians can teach virtue.

The state of the discussion as it stands now, is represented by two hypothetical syllogisms, as follows :—

\* Plato, Menon, c. 30, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 36, p. 97. Sokrates (adv. Sophistas, s. 25, p. 401) expressly declares that he does not believe *ὡς ἔστι δικαιοσύνη διδασκόν.* There is no *τέχνη* which can teach it, if a man be *κακῶς πεφυκῶς*. But if a man be well-disposed, then education in *λόγοι*

*πολιτικοί* will serve *συμπαρακελεύσασθαι γέ καὶ συνασκήσαι.*

For a man to announce himself as a teacher of justice or virtue, was an unpopular and invidious pretension. Sokrates is anxious to guard himself against such unpopularity.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 34, p. 94 E.

Confused state of the discussion. No way of acquiring virtue is shown.

1. If virtue is knowledge, it is teachable :  
But virtue is knowledge :  
Therefore virtue is teachable.
2. If virtue is knowledge, it is teachable :  
But virtue is not teachable :  
Therefore virtue is not knowledge.

The premisses of each of these two syllogisms contradict the conclusion of the other. Both cannot be true. If virtue is not acquired by teaching, and does not come by nature, how are there any virtuous men ?

Sokrates continues his argument: The second premiss of the first syllogism—that virtue is knowledge—is true, but not the whole truth. In proving it we assumed that there was nothing except knowledge which guided us to useful and profitable consequences. But this assumption will not hold. There is something else besides knowledge, which also guides us to the same useful results. That something is *right opinion*, which is quite different from knowledge. The man who holds right opinions is just as profitable to us, and guides us quite as well to right actions, as if he knew. Right opinions, so long as they stay in the mind, are as good as knowledge, for the purpose of guidance in practice. But the difference is, that they are evanescent and will not stay in the mind: while knowledge is permanent and ineffaceable. They are exalted into knowledge, when bound in the mind by a chain of causal reasoning:<sup>a</sup> that is, by the process of reminiscence, before described.

Virtue then (continues Sokrates)—that which constitutes the virtuous character and the permanent, trustworthy, useful guide—consists in knowledge. But there is also right opinion, a sort of *quasi-knowledge*, which produces in practice effects as good as knowledge, only that it is not deeply or permanently

Right opinion cannot be relied on for staying in the mind, and can never give rational explanations, nor teach

<sup>a</sup> Plato, Menon, c. 39, p. 98. καὶ γὰρ αἱ δόξαι αἱ ἀληθεῖς, ὅσον μὲν ἂν χρόνον παραμένωσιν, καλὸν τὸ χρέμα καὶ πάντα τὰγαθὰ ἐργάζονται· πολὺν δὲ χρόνον οὐκ ἐθέλουσι παραμένειν, ἀλλὰ δραπετεύουσιν ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. ὥστε οὐ πολλοὺ ἄξιαί εἰσιν, ἕως ἂν τις αὐτὰς δέσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῶ· τούτο δ' ἐστὶν ἀνάμνησις, ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρόσθετ' ἡμῖν ὁμολόγηται.