MENO

Meno's is one of the leading aristocratic families of Thessaly, traditionally friendly to Athens and Athenian interests. Here he is a young man, about to embark on an unscrupulous military and political career, leading to an early death at the hands of the Persian king. To his aristocratic 'virtue' (Plato's ancient readers would know what that ultimately came to) he adds an admiration for ideas on the subject he has learned from the rhetorician Gorgias (about whom we learn more in the dialogue named after him). What brings him to Athens we are not told. His family's local sponsor is the democratic politician Anytus, one of Socrates' accusers at his trial, and apparently Anytus is his host. The dialogue begins abruptly, without stage-setting preliminaries of the sort we find in the 'Socratic' dialogues, and with no context of any kind being provided for the conversation. Meno wants to know Socrates' position on the then much-debated question whether virtue can be taught, or whether it comes rather by practice, or else is acquired by one's birth and nature, or in some other way? Socrates and Meno pursue that question, and the preliminary one of what virtue indeed is, *straight through to the inconclusive conclusion characteristic of 'Socratic' dialogues. (Anytus joins the conversation briefly. He bristles when, to support his doubts that virtue can be taught, Socrates points to the failure of famous Athenian leaders to pass their own virtue on to their sons, and he issues a veiled threat of the likely consequences to Socrates of such 'slanderous' attacks.)*

The dialogue is best remembered, however, for the interlude in which Socrates questions Meno's slave about a problem in geometry—how to find a square double in area to any given square. Having determined that Meno does not know what virtue is, and recognizing that he himself does not know either, Socrates has proposed to Meno that they inquire into this together. Meno protests that that is impossible, challenging Socrates with the 'paradox' that one logically cannot inquire productively into what one does not already know—nor of course into what one already does. Guided by Socrates' questions, the slave (who has never studied geometry before) comes to see for himself, to recognize, what the right answer to the geometrical problem must be. Socrates argues that this confirms something he has heard from certain wise priests and priestesses—that the soul is immortal and that at our birth we already possess all theoretical knowledge (he includes here not just mathematical theory but moral knowledge as well). Prodded by Socrates' questions, the slave was 'recollecting' this prior knowledge, not drawing new conclusions from data being presented to him for the first time. So in moral inquiry, as well, there is hope that, if we

question ourselves rightly, 'recollection' can progressively improve our understanding of moral truth and eventually lead us to full knowledge of it.

The examination of the slave assuages Meno's doubt about the possibility of such inquiry. He and Socrates proceed to inquire together what virtue is—but now they follow a new method of 'hypothesis', introduced by Socrates again by analogy with procedures in geometry. Socrates no longer asks Meno for his views and criticizes those. Among other 'hypotheses' that he now works with, he advances and argues for an hypothesis of his own, that virtue is knowledge (in which case it must be teachable). But he also considers weaknesses in his own argument, leading to the alternative possible hypothesis, that virtue is god-granted right opinion (and so, not teachable). In the second half of the dialogue we thus see a new Socrates, with new methods of argument and inquiry, not envisioned in such 'Socratic' dialogues as Euthyphro, Laches, *and* Charmides. Meno *points forward to* Phaedo, *where the thesis that theoretical knowledge comes by recollection is discussed again, with a clear reference back to the* Meno, *but now expanded by the addition of Platonic Forms as objects of recollection and knowledge.*

J.M.C.

MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not 70
teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?

SOCRATES: Before now, Meno, Thessalians had a high reputation among the Greeks and were admired for their horsemanship and their wealth, but now, it seems to me, they are also admired for their wisdom, not least b
the fellow citizens of your friend Aristippus of Larissa. The responsibility for this reputation of yours lies with Gorgias, for when he came to your city he found that the leading Aleuadae, your lover Aristippus among them, loved him for his wisdom, and so did the other leading Thessalians. In particular, he accustomed you to give a bold and grand answer to any question you may be asked, as experts are likely to do. Indeed, he himself c
was ready to answer any Greek who wished to question him, and every question was answered. But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite is the case, as if there were a dearth of wisdom, and wisdom seems to have departed hence to go to you. If then you want to ask one of us that 71
sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: "Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."

I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I b
blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know

Translated by G.M.A. Grube.

SOCRATES: This then is virtue according to your argument, the power of
c securing good things.

MENO: I think, Socrates, that the case is altogether as you now understand it.

SOCRATES: Let us see then whether what you say is true, for you may well be right. You say that the capacity to acquire good things is virtue?—I do.

SOCRATES: And by good things you mean, for example, health and wealth?

MENO: Yes, and also to acquire gold and silver, also honors and offices in the city.

SOCRATES: By good things you do not mean other goods than these?

MENO: No, but I mean all things of this kind.

d SOCRATES: Very well. According to Meno, the hereditary guest friend of the Great King, virtue is the acquisition of gold and silver. Do you add to this acquiring, Meno, the words justly and piously, or does it make no difference to you but even if one secures these things unjustly, you call it virtue none the less?

MENO: Certainly not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You would then call it wickedness?—Indeed I would.

SOCRATES: It seems then that the acquisition must be accompanied by
e justice or moderation or piety or some other part of virtue; if it is not, it will not be virtue, even though it provides good things.

MENO: How could there be virtue without these?

SOCRATES: Then failing to secure gold and silver, whenever it would not be just to do so, either for oneself or another, is not this failure to secure them also virtue?

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Then to provide these goods would not be virtue any more
79 than not to provide them, but apparently whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and what is done without anything of the kind is wickedness.

MENO: I think it must necessarily be as you say.

SOCRATES: We said a little while ago that each of these things was a part of virtue, namely, justice and moderation and all such things?—Yes.

SOCRATES: Then you are playing with me, Meno.—How so, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Because I begged you just now not to break up or fragment virtue, and I gave examples of how you should answer. You paid no
b attention, but you tell me that virtue is to be able to secure good things with justice, and justice, you say, is a part of virtue.

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: It follows then from what you agree to, that to act in whatever you do with a part of virtue is virtue, for you say that justice is a part of virtue, as are all such qualities. Why do I say this? Because when I begged you to tell me about virtue as a whole, you are far from telling me what it is. Rather, you say that every action is virtue if it is performed with a
c part of virtue, as if you had said what virtue is as a whole, so I would already know that, even if you fragment it into parts. I think you must

face the same question from the beginning, my dear Meno, namely, what is virtue, if every action performed with a part of virtue is virtue? For that is what one is saying when he says that every action performed with justice is virtue. Do you not think you should face the same question again, or do you think one knows what a part of virtue is if one does not know virtue itself?—I do not think so.

SOCRATES: If you remember, when I was answering you about shape, d
we rejected the kind of answer that tried to answer in terms still being the subject of inquiry and not yet agreed upon.—And we were right to reject them.

SOCRATES: Then surely, my good sir, you must not think, while the nature of virtue as a whole is still under inquiry, that by answering in terms of the parts of virtue you can make its nature clear to anyone or make anything else clear by speaking in this way, but only that the same question must be put to you again—what do you take the nature of virtue to be when e
you say what you say? Or do you think there is no point in what I am saying?—I think what you say is right.

SOCRATES: Answer me again then from the beginning: What do you and your friend say that virtue is?

MENO: Socrates, before I even met you I used to hear that you are always 80
in a state of perplexity and that you bring others to the same state, and now I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed. Indeed, if a joke is in order, you seem, in appearance and in every other way, to be like the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you now seem to have had that kind of effect on me, for both b
my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. Yet I have made many speeches about virtue before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is. I think you are wise not to sail away from Athens to go and stay elsewhere, for if you were to behave like this as a stranger in another city, you would be driven away for practising sorcery.

SOCRATES: You are a rascal, Meno, and you nearly deceived me.

MENO: Why so particularly, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I know why you drew this image of me. c

MENO: Why do you think I did?

SOCRATES: So that I should draw an image of you in return. I know that all handsome men rejoice in images of themselves; it is to their advantage, for I think that the images of beautiful people are also beautiful, but I will draw no image of you in turn. Now if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others. So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you d
are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be.

MENO: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

e SOCRATES: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

81 MENO: Does that argument not seem sound to you, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Not to me.

MENO: Can you tell me why?

SOCRATES: I can. I have heard wise men and women talk about divine matters . . .

MENO: What did they say?

SOCRATES: What was, I thought, both true and beautiful.

MENO: What was it, and who were they?

SOCRATES: The speakers were among the priests and priestesses whose
b care it is to be able to give an account of their practices. Pindar too says it, and many others of the divine among our poets. What they say is this; see whether you think they speak the truth: They say that the human soul is immortal; at times it comes to an end, which they call dying, at times it is reborn, but it is never destroyed, and one must therefore live one's life as piously as possible:

> *Persephone will return to the sun above in the ninth year*
> *the souls of those from whom*
> *she will exact punishment for old miseries,*
> c *and from these come noble kings,*
> *mighty in strength and greatest in wisdom,*
> *and for the rest of time men will call them sacred heroes.*[4]

As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both
d about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. We must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it,
e whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. I

4. Frg. 133 (Snell).

trust that this is true, and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of virtue.

MENO: Yes, Socrates, but how do you mean that we do not learn, but that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me that this is so?

SOCRATES: As I said just now, Meno, you are a rascal. You now ask me if I can teach you, when I say there is no teaching but recollection, in order 82
to show me up at once as contradicting myself.

MENO: No, by Zeus, Socrates, that was not my intention when I spoke, but just a habit. If you can somehow show me that things are as you say, please do so.

SOCRATES: It is not easy, but I am nevertheless willing to do my best for your sake. Call one of these many attendants of yours, whichever you like, b
that I may prove it to you in his case.

MENO: Certainly. You there come forward.

SOCRATES: Is he a Greek? Does he speak Greek?

MENO: Very much so. He was born in my household.

SOCRATES: Pay attention then whether you think he is recollecting or learning from me.

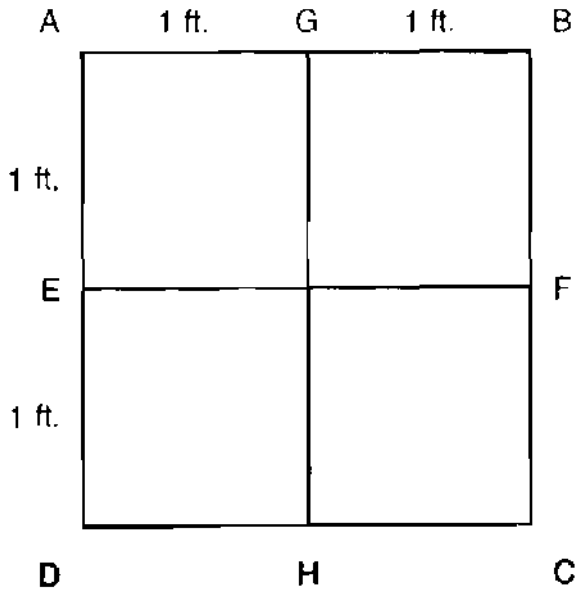
MENO: I will pay attention.

SOCRATES: Tell me now, boy, you know that a square figure is like this?—I do.

SOCRATES: A square then is a figure in which all these four sides are c
equal?—Yes indeed.

SOCRATES: And it also has these lines through the middle equal?[5]—Yes.

5. Socrates draws a square ABCD. The "lines through the middle" are the lines joining the middle of these sides, which also go through the center of the square, namely EF and GH.



SOCRATES: And such a figure could be larger or smaller?—Certainly.

SOCRATES: If then this side were two feet, and this other side two feet, how many feet would the whole be? Consider it this way: if it were two feet this way, and only one foot that way, the figure would be once two feet?—Yes.

d SOCRATES: But if it is two feet also that way, it would surely be twice two feet?—Yes.

SOCRATES: How many feet is twice two feet? Work it out and tell me.—Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Now we could have another figure twice the size of this one, with the four sides equal like this one.—Yes.

SOCRATES: How many feet will that be?—Eight.

SOCRATES: Come now, try to tell me how long each side of this will be.
e The side of this is two feet. What about each side of the one which is its double?—Obviously, Socrates, it will be twice the length.

SOCRATES: You see, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him. And now he thinks he knows the length of the line on which an eight-foot figure is based. Do you agree?

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: And does he know?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: He thinks it is a line twice the length?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Watch him now recollecting things in order, as one must recollect. Tell me, boy, do you say that a figure double the size is based
83 on a line double the length? Now I mean such a figure as this, not long on one side and short on the other, but equal in every direction like this one, and double the size, that is, eight feet. See whether you still believe that it will be based on a line double the length.—I do.

SOCRATES: Now the line becomes double its length if we add another of the same length here?—Yes indeed.

SOCRATES: And the eight-foot square will be based on it, if there are four lines of that length?—Yes.

b SOCRATES: Well, let us draw from it four equal lines, and surely that is what you say is the eight-foot square?—Certainly.

SOCRATES: And within this figure are four squares, each of which is equal to the four-foot square?—Yes.

SOCRATES: How big is it then? Is it not four times as big?—Of course.

SOCRATES: Is this square then, which is four times as big, its double?—No, by Zeus.

SOCRATES: How many times bigger is it?—Four times.

c SOCRATES: Then, my boy, the figure based on a line twice the length is not double but four times as big?—You are right.

SOCRATES: And four times four is sixteen, is it not?—Yes.

SOCRATES: On how long a line should the eight-foot square be based? On *this* line we have a square that is four times bigger, do we not?—Yes.

SOCRATES: Now this four-foot square is based on this line here, half the length?—Yes.

SOCRATES: Very well. Is the eight-foot square not double this one and half that one?[6]—Yes.

SOCRATES: Will it not be based on a line longer than this one and shorter than that one? Is that not so?—I think so. d

SOCRATES: Good, you answer what you think. And tell me, was this one not two-feet long, and that one four feet?—Yes.

SOCRATES: The line on which the eight-foot square is based must then be longer than this one of two feet, and shorter than that one of four feet?—It must be.

SOCRATES: Try to tell me then how long a line you say it is.—Three e feet.

SOCRATES: Then if it is three feet, let us add the half of this one, and it will be three feet? For these are two feet, and the other is one. And here, similarly, these are two feet and that one is one foot, and so the figure you mention comes to be?—Yes.

SOCRATES: Now if it is three feet this way and three feet that way, will the whole figure be three times three feet?—So it seems.

SOCRATES: How much is three times three feet?—Nine feet.

SOCRATES: And the double square was to be how many feet?—Eight.

SOCRATES: So the eight-foot figure cannot be based on the three-foot line?—Clearly not.

SOCRATES: But on how long a line? Try to tell us exactly, and if you do 84 not want to work it out, show me from what line.—By Zeus, Socrates, I do not know.

SOCRATES: You realize, Meno, what point he has reached in his recollection. At first he did not know what the basic line of the eight-foot square was; even now he does not yet know, but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not know, b neither does he think he knows.

MENO: That is true.

SOCRATES: So he is now in a better position with regard to the matter he does not know?

MENO: I agree with that too.

SOCRATES: Have we done him any harm by making him perplexed and numb as the torpedo fish does?

MENO: I do not think so.

SOCRATES: Indeed, we have probably achieved something relevant to finding out how matters stand, for now, as he does not know, he would be glad to find out, whereas before he thought he could easily make many

6. I.e., the eight-foot square is double the four-foot square and half the sixteen-foot square—double the square based on a line two feet long, and half the square based on a four-foot side.

c fine speeches to large audiences about the square of double size and said that it must have a base twice as long.

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Do you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?

MENO: I do not think so, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Has he then benefitted from being numbed?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Look then how he will come out of his perplexity while searching along with me. I shall do nothing more than ask questions and not
d teach him. Watch whether you find me teaching and explaining things to him instead of asking for his opinion.

SOCRATES: You tell me, is this not a four-foot figure? You understand?—I do.

SOCRATES: We add to it this figure which is equal to it?—Yes.

SOCRATES: And we add this third figure equal to each of them?—Yes.

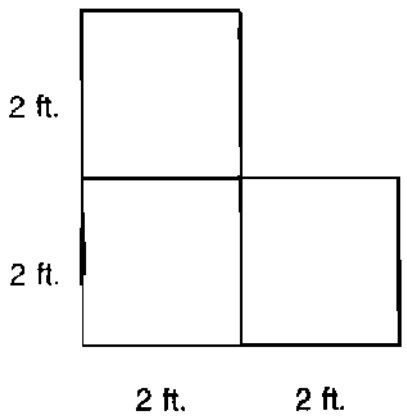
SOCRATES: Could we then fill in the space in the corner?—Certainly.[7]

SOCRATES: So we have these four equal figures?—Yes.

e SOCRATES: Well then, how many times is the whole figure larger than this one?[8]—Four times.

SOCRATES: But we should have had one that was twice as large, or do you not remember?—I certainly do.

7. Socrates now builds up his sixteen-foot square by joining two four-foot squares, then a third, like this:



Filling "the space in the corner" will give another four-foot square, which completes the sixteen-foot square containing four four-foot squares.

8. "This one" is any one of the inside squares of four feet.

SOCRATES: Does not this line from one corner to the other cut each of these figures in two?[9]—Yes. 85

SOCRATES: So these are four equal lines which enclose this figure?[10]—They are.

SOCRATES: Consider now: how large is the figure?—I do not understand.

SOCRATES: Within these four figures, each line cuts off half of each, does it not?—Yes.

SOCRATES: How many of this size are there in this figure?[11]—Four.

SOCRATES: How many in this?[12]—Two.

SOCRATES: What is the relation of four to two?—Double. b

SOCRATES: How many feet in this?[13]—Eight.

SOCRATES: Based on what line?—This one.

SOCRATES: That is, on the line that stretches from corner to corner of the four-foot figure?—Yes.—Clever men call this the diagonal, so that if diagonal is its name, you say that the double figure would be that based on the diagonal?—Most certainly, Socrates.

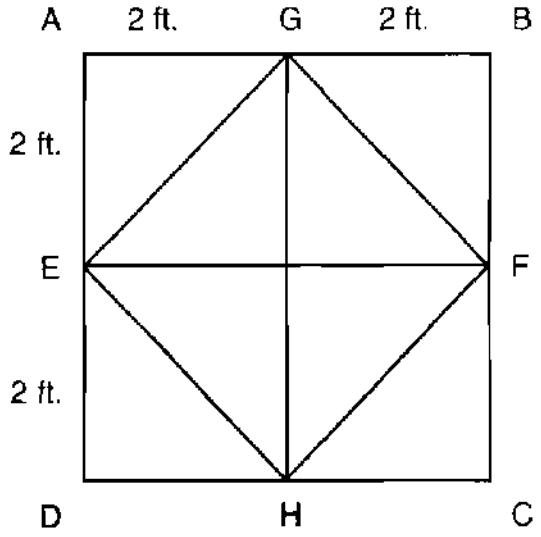
SOCRATES: What do you think, Meno? Has he, in his answers, expressed any opinion that was not his own? c

MENO: No, they were all his own.

SOCRATES: And yet, as we said a short time ago, he did not know?—That is true.

SOCRATES: So these opinions were in him, were they not?—Yes.

9. Socrates now draws the diagonals of the four inside squares, namely, FH, HE, EG, and GF, which together form the square GFHE.



10. I.e., GFHE.

11. Again, GFHE: Socrates is asking how many of the triangles "cut off from inside" there are inside GFHE.

12. I.e., any of the interior squares.

13. GFHE again.

SOCRATES: So the man who does not know has within himself true opinions about the things that he does not know?—So it appears.

SOCRATES: These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways,
d you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's.—It is likely.

SOCRATES: And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself?—Yes.

SOCRATES: And is not finding knowledge within oneself recollection?—Certainly.

SOCRATES: Must he not either have at some time acquired the knowledge he now possesses, or else have always possessed it?—Yes.

SOCRATES: If he always had it, he would always have known. If he
e acquired it, he cannot have done so in his present life. Or has someone taught him geometry? For he will perform in the same way about all geometry, and all other knowledge. Has someone taught him everything? You should know, especially as he has been born and brought up in your house.

MENO: But I know that no one has taught him.

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

MENO: That seems indisputable, Socrates.

86 SOCRATES: If he has not acquired them in his present life, is it not clear that he had them and had learned them at some other time?—It seems so.

SOCRATES: Then that was the time when he was not a human being?—Yes.

SOCRATES: If then, during the time he exists and is not a human being he will have true opinions which, when stirred by questioning, become knowledge, will not his soul have learned during all time? For it is clear that during all time he exists, either as a man or not.—So it seems.

b SOCRATES: Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present—that is, what you do not recollect?

MENO: Somehow, Socrates, I think that what you say is right.

SOCRATES: I think so too, Meno. I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather
c than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.

MENO: In this too I think you are right, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Since we are of one mind that one should seek to find out what one does not know, shall we try to find out together what virtue is?

MENO: Certainly. But Socrates, I should be most pleased to investigate and hear your answer to my original question, whether we should try on
d the assumption that virtue is something teachable, or is a natural gift, or in whatever way it comes to men.