

## Characters

SOCRATES, a philosopher (here aged about sixty-seven)

MENO, a young aristocrat from Thessaly

SLAVE, one of Meno's slaves

ANYTUS, an Athenian politician; Meno's host in Athens

*The dialogue is set in Athens, in about 402 BC, a few years after the city's final defeat in the Peloponnesian War, and just after the restoration of the democracy following the dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants. Two years later, Meno was killed while fighting as a mercenary in Persia; shortly after that, in 399 BC, Socrates was put on trial on suspicion of promoting anti-religious views and corrupting the young, and was executed. Anytus was one of the prosecutors.*

MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates – is *being good* something you can be taught?<sup>1</sup> Or does it come with practice rather than being teachable? Or is it something that doesn't come with practice *or* learning; does it just come to people naturally? Or some other way? 70 a

SOCRATES: In the old days, Meno, you Thessalians were known and admired all over Greece for horsemanship and wealth. But times have changed: it seems these days you're also known for being intellectuals – especially if you're from Larissa, like your mate Aristippus.<sup>2</sup> And the man you can thank for that is Gorgias:<sup>3</sup> he's come to town and won over the top men in Larissa's ruling family as his intellectual fans – they're crazy about him (including Aristippus, who's crazy about *you*), and so are the rest of Thessaly's elite. For one thing, he's got you into this habit of giving answers – confidently and generously – to any question anyone ever asks you, just as you'd expect from people with knowledge. Because that's his thing: he likes to challenge all comers, all over Greece, to ask him any question they want, and he never, ever fails to have an answer. But here in Athens, Meno, the situation is exactly the reverse. There's been a kind of intellectual drought. It looks to me like knowledge has left this part of the world and moved to Thessaly. At any rate if you try asking anyone round here a question like that, they'll just laugh in your face. 'Stranger!' they'll say, 'you seem to take me for a very fortunate man! At any rate, you seem to think I might know whether being good is something you can be taught, or how exactly people become good, when the fact 71 a

b is, so far from knowing whether or not it's teachable, I haven't even got the faintest idea what being good *is*! Well, that's just how it is with me too, Meno. This is one area where I'm just as hard up as my fellow Athenians, and I'm the first to admit that I haven't got the faintest idea what *being good* is. And if I don't know *what* it is, how on earth am I supposed to know *what kind* of thing it is? Or do you think that's possible? Do you think that if someone has no idea who Meno is, they can know if Meno's beautiful, or if he's rich, or if he's from a good family, or the opposite of all those things? Does that seem possible to you?

MENO: No, I suppose not. But come on, Socrates; do you really not even know what being good *is*? Is that what you want us to say about you to people back home?

SOCRATES: That's not all. You can also tell them that I've never met anyone else who knows, either – or I don't think I have.

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

SOCRATES: Yes, I did.

MENO: So, didn't you think he knew?

SOCRATES: My memory isn't all that good, Meno. So I couldn't tell you right now exactly what I thought at the time . . . But, yes, maybe he does know . . . and you probably know what he said. So why don't you just remind me? Or, if it's all right with you, tell me what you think yourself – presumably you think the same as he does?

MENO: That's right, I do.

SOCRATES: Well, in that case forget Gorgias. He isn't here, is he? Let's hear what you have to say, Meno: what do you think being good is, for heaven's sake? Don't be stingy. Let's hear it. Show me that what I've just said isn't true – I'll never have felt so lucky I was wrong, if it turns out you and Gorgias know the answer, when I've just said I've never met a single man who knew.

e MENO: Well, it's not very difficult, Socrates. First, if you want to know what being good is *for a man* – well, that's easy. Here's what being a good man is: having what it takes to handle your city's affairs, and, in doing so, to help out your

friends and hurt your enemies<sup>4</sup> (while making sure they don't do the same to you). Or, if you want me to explain what being a good *woman* is, no problem: she's got to be good at looking after the home, be thrifty with household goods and always obey her man. And then there's being a good child (a boy or a girl) or being a good old man (free, if you want, or, if you like, a slave) – and there are all sorts of other cases of being good. So there's no need to feel baffled about what being good *is*! The thing about 'being good' is that it's different for each of us; it varies according to what we're doing, according to how old we are and according to our role in life. And I imagine, Socrates, the same goes for being *bad*. 72 a

SOCRATES: Well, what an amazing stroke of luck! There I was, looking for just one sort of 'being good,' and it turns out you've brought along a whole swarm of the things! . . . But listen, Meno – my swarm analogy gives me an idea – suppose my question had been about bees, and exactly what it is to be a bee, and you'd started saying that there were 'lots of different kinds of bees'; what would you have said if I'd asked you this: 'Are you saying there are lots of different kinds of bees all differing from one another in their way of being bees? Or is the idea that, in that respect, there's no difference whatsoever from bee to bee, and that it's only in some other respect that they're different from one another, like, say, in how beautiful they are, or their size, or something else like that?' How would you have answered if you'd been asked that question? b

MENO: That's just what I'd have said: no bee, in so far as it's a bee, is any different from any other bee.

SOCRATES: So, suppose that after that I said: 'In that case, Meno, just tell me about *that* – what's the respect in which there's no difference from bee to bee? What is it that makes all of them the same thing? What do you think that is?' Presumably you'd have been able to come up with something? c

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, do the same with cases of being good. Even if there are a lot of them, and lots of different sorts, they must at

least all have some single form,<sup>5</sup> something that makes them all cases of being good – and surely that's what it makes sense to focus on if you're explaining to someone what being good actually is. Surely that's how you should answer the question.  
Or don't you understand what I'm saying?

MENO: I think so . . . only, I don't see what you're asking me quite as fully as I'd like.

SOCRATES: Do you think this only applies to being good, Meno – that it's one thing for a man, and something else for a woman, and so on? Or do you think the same goes for being healthy, and being tall, and being strong? Do you think a man's health and a woman's health are two different things? Or is health the same form in every case – as long as it really is health – whether it's in a man or in anyone else?

MENO: In the case of health, yes, I think it's the same thing for a man as for a woman.

SOCRATES: And will that be true for height and strength as well? If a woman is physically strong, will it be the same form – strength in exactly the same sense – that makes her strong? And what I mean when I say 'strength in exactly the same sense' is this: that strength doesn't have different ways of being strength, depending on whether it's in a man or a woman. Or do you think it does?

MENO: No, I don't.

73 a SOCRATES: And what about being good? Whether it's in a child or an old man, a man or a woman, why should there be any difference in what makes it a case of being good?

MENO: Somehow I don't feel it works in quite the same way as those other things, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Oh? But weren't you saying that, for a man, being good means doing a good job of running a city, and for a woman it means doing a good job of running a household?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So is it possible to do a good job of running a city, or a home, or anything, if you don't do it sensibly and according to what's right?

MENO: Of course not.

b SOCRATES: And if they do it sensibly and according to what's

right, then they'll be acting with good sense and with respect for what's right?

MENO: Obviously.

SOCRATES: So that means both of them – men and women – need the same things if they're going to be good people: respect for what's right and good sense.

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: What about children and old men? Surely there's no way they could be good if they were out of control and always doing wrong?

MENO: Of course not.

SOCRATES: No. They have to be sensible, and do what's right.

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So it's the same for everyone, then: people are all good in the same way, in the sense that it's by getting the same qualities that they become good.

MENO: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: And obviously they wouldn't be 'good in the same way' if it weren't the case that being good was the same thing for all of them?

MENO: I suppose not.

SOCRATES: Well, in that case, since being good is the same thing for everyone, try to remember Gorgias' definition – the one you agree with.

MENO: Well, obviously being good is a matter of being able to rule other people,<sup>6</sup> if what you're looking for is a single, overall definition.

SOCRATES: That's exactly what I'm looking for. But wait – will being a good child be the same, Meno? Or being a good slave? – being able to rule\* *your master*? Do you think you'd still be a slave if you were the one doing the ruling?<sup>7</sup>

MENO: No, Socrates, obviously not.

SOCRATES: It does seem rather unlikely. And think about this, too: 'being able to rule,' you say. Aren't we going to have to add to that, '*according to what's right*, but *not if it means doing wrong*'?

MENO: Yes, I suppose we are. After all, Socrates, doing what's right is the same as being good, isn't it?<sup>8</sup>

e SOCRATES: *The same as* being good, Meno? Or *one sort of* being good?<sup>9</sup>

MENO: How do you mean?

SOCRATES: Just what I'd mean with anything else. Take roundness, for example – I'd say that roundness was *one sort of* shape; I wouldn't simply say that roundness is *the same as shape*. And the reason I'd put it like that is because there are other shapes besides roundness.

MENO: Yes, good point . . . that's what I meant, as well; I'm saying there are other ways of being good besides doing what's right.

74 a SOCRATES: What are they? Let's hear them. Just like the way I could name you some other shapes if you told me to – do the same for me, and tell me some other cases of being good.

MENO: All right, then: there's being brave. I think that's a form of being good; and being sensible, and having knowledge,<sup>10</sup> and being generous – and a whole lot of others.

SOCRATES: The same thing's happened to us again, Meno! We were looking for just *one* idea of being good, and we've found a whole load of them – though in a different sense from the way we did a moment ago. But we don't seem to be able to hit upon our single idea of being good that can cover all of them.

b MENO: No, that's right, Socrates; I still can't do it the way you want me to. I can't get just one, overall take on what it is to be good, the way I could with those other things.

SOCRATES: Well, never mind; that's only to be expected. I tell you what – I'll do my best and see if I can move us forward myself. You realize it's the same way with everything? Say someone asked you about the thing I mentioned a moment ago – 'What is *shape*, Meno?' – and you told him, 'roundness,' and then he'd said the same as I did: 'You mean, roundness is the same thing as shape, or one sort of shape?' You'd probably have said it was one sort of shape.

MENO: Absolutely.

c SOCRATES: And that's because there are other shapes as well?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if he'd gone on to ask what other shapes there are, you could have told him?

MENO: Yes, I could.

SOCRATES: And suppose he'd asked you in the same way about colour – 'What is colour?' – and you'd said, 'white,' and then he'd said, 'You mean, white is the same thing as colour, or just one sort of colour?' You'd have said it was one sort of colour, because there are other colours as well – right?

MENO: Right.

SOCRATES: And if he told you to name other colours, you could have named other colours – colours that are just as much d colours as white is?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So suppose his approach to the question was the same as mine, and he said, 'Look, we keep arriving at *lots* of these things. That's not what I want. Try to do it like this: since you're referring to these lots of things by one and the same name, and saying that every one of them is a shape (even when they're completely different from one another), tell me what *that* is – the thing that includes both "round" and "straight", the thing you're calling "shape" when you say that "round is no more a shape than straight is." You do e say that, don't you?'

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So when you put it like that, are you saying that round is no more round than it is straight, and straight is no more straight than it is round?

MENO: Obviously not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: No. But what you are saying is that round is no more *a shape* than straight is, and vice versa?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: 'Well, what's that – the thing that "shape" is the name for? Try and tell me.' Now if that's what he was asking, 75 a either about shape or about colour, and you said, 'I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you want. I don't know what you mean!', he'd probably have been amazed. 'You don't understand? You don't understand that I'm just trying to find out what it is that all of them have in common?' Or even with these examples, Meno, would you have no idea what to say? – if someone asked, 'What is it in round, and straight,

and all the other things you call “shapes”, that’s the same in all of them?’ Go on, try and tell me. That way you’ll also get a bit of practice for your answer about being good.

b MENO: I’ve got a better idea. Why don’t you tell *me*, Socrates?

SOCRATES: You want me to pamper you, do you?

MENO: Of course.

SOCRATES: And then you’ll tell me what being good is? Will you?

MENO: I will, I promise.

SOCRATES: Well, I better give it a try, then – that’s quite a bargain.

MENO: It certainly is.

SOCRATES: All right, let’s see then; let me try and tell you what shape is. See if you accept this as a definition: let’s say that shape is . . . the only thing that colour always comes with.<sup>11</sup>

c There. Is that good enough for you, or are you looking for something different? I’d be very happy if you gave me a definition of being good along those lines.

MENO: But that’s a *silly* definition, Socrates!

SOCRATES: What do you mean?

MENO: Well, a shape – according to your idea – is ‘the thing colour always comes with’. Fine. But what if someone says they don’t know what colour is? What if they’re as baffled about that as they are about shape? What kind of an answer do you think you’d give them?

SOCRATES: Well, one that’s true, at least. And if the man who’d asked the question was one of those expert quibblers,<sup>12</sup> who just want to ‘win’ arguments, then what I’d say to him is this:

d ‘Look, I’ve made my claim. If what I’m saying isn’t right, that’s your problem: it’s up to you to question me and prove me wrong.’ But if the two of us were friends and wanted to talk things through with one another – the way you and I are doing now – then I’d have to go a bit easier on him and answer in a more *talk-it-through* kind of way.<sup>13</sup> And I suppose ‘a more talk-it-through kind of way’ means not just giving an answer that’s true but also only answering by way of things the other person admits he knows, when you ask him.\*

So I’ll try to tell you what a shape is that way. Tell me – do you know what an edge is? I mean, in the sense of a border, or an outline? I’m treating all those as meaning the same thing – Prodicus<sup>14</sup> might disagree with us; but I assume you talk about things having a border or coming to an edge? That’s the kind of thing I mean. Nothing fancy.

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

SOCRATES: And you talk about surfaces, and also solids? As in, those things you find in geometry? 76 a

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, you’re already there, then: you can use those to understand what I mean by shape. Because here’s what I’m saying holds true for every shape: I’m saying that a shape is the thing that borders a solid. So I could say, in short, that a shape is a border of a solid.

MENO: And what’s your definition of colour, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Show a little respect, Meno! Look at you, pestering a poor old man with all these questions; meanwhile you refuse to remember, and tell me, what Gorgias says being good is! b

MENO: But I will, Socrates – just as soon as you’ve told me what colour is.

SOCRATES: Even with a blindfold on, Meno, anyone could tell just from talking to you that you’re beautiful, and men still fall for you.

MENO: Why’s that?

SOCRATES: Because you’re always so bossy in conversation! And that’s what people do when they’re spoiled – spoiled from being treated like royalty while they’re young and sexy. Plus you’ve probably noticed I can’t resist beautiful people. All right, I’ll pamper you and answer the question. c

MENO: Yes, good idea. Pamper me.

SOCRATES: So do you want me to answer the way Gorgias would? That’ll make it easiest for you to follow.

MENO: Well, of course.

SOCRATES: All right. So do you two talk about ‘out-flowings’ from things, the way Empedocles does?<sup>15</sup>

MENO: Now you're talking!

SOCRATES: And 'channels', into which, and out through which, the 'out-flowings' pass?

MENO: Absolutely.

d SOCRATES: And of these out-flowings, some of them fit some of the channels, while some are too big or too small?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: And you know what I mean by 'sight'?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, from all of that you can 'throw together what I mean', as Pindar says. Because here's what colour is: *a sight-fitting, perceptible out-flowing from shapes*.

MENO: I think that's a fantastic answer, Socrates!

e SOCRATES: Maybe that's because it's in the sort of language you're more used to; plus, I suspect you realize you could also use it to say what sound is, and smell, and lots of other things like that.

MENO: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: It's a theatrical answer,<sup>16</sup> Meno. That's why you like it more than the one about shape.

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: But what it isn't, son of Alexidemus, is a better answer. I'm convinced the other one was better. And I believe you'd come to think so too, if you didn't have to leave town (as you were telling me yesterday) before the *Mysteries*<sup>17</sup> – if only you could stay and be initiated.

77 a MENO: I would stay, Socrates, if you told me lots more things like that last one!

SOCRATES: Well, I'll certainly try to. I'll do my very best, for your sake and my own. But I may not be able to come up with many more ideas like that one. Anyway, come on, it's your turn now: you've got to try to keep your promise and tell me what being good is, as a whole. Stop 'making lots of things from one', as the jokers say to someone who's smashed a plate. Just leave it whole, and in one piece, and tell me what b it is. You've got your examples from me now.

MENO: All right, Socrates. I think that being good, as that poet says, is a matter of

Rejoicing in all that is fair and fine, and being able.<sup>18</sup>

That's what I say 'being good' is, as well – wanting fine things and being able to acquire them.

SOCRATES: By 'someone who wants *fine* things' you mean someone who wants things that are good?

MENO: Yes, exactly.

SOCRATES: You mean, as if some people want bad things, and only some of us want good things? Don't you think that *everyone* wants what's good?

MENO: No, I don't think so.

SOCRATES: What – people sometimes want things that are bad?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Because they reckon the bad things are good, you mean? Or do they realize they're bad and want them anyway?

MENO: [*Thinks it over for a moment.*] Both, I think.

SOCRATES: What? You really think, Meno, that a person can realize bad things are bad and want them anyway?

MENO: Definitely.

SOCRATES: When you say someone can 'want' bad things, you mean, want to get them?

MENO: Yes, to get them. What else?

SOCRATES: Why? Because they reckon these bad things *benefit* d whoever gets them? Or do they realize that bad things always harm whoever's got them?

MENO: Well, in some of these cases, people think the bad things are doing them good, but in other cases, they know they're doing them harm.

SOCRATES: And, in your view, do the people who think bad things are doing them good realize the bad things are bad?

MENO: No, I certainly wouldn't say that.

SOCRATES: Well, clearly those people don't *want* bad things (the people who don't realize that they're bad). They want e things that they thought were good – it's just that those things are, in fact, bad. That's to say, if they don't realize these things are bad, and think they're good, then it's clear that what they actually want is what's good. Don't you see?

MENO: Yes, that's probably right – in their case.

SOCRATES: And what about the ones who do want bad things – you say – and at the same time believe that bad things harm whoever gets them? Presumably they're aware that they're going to be harmed by the things they want?

78 a MENO: Yes, they must be.

SOCRATES: And don't these people think that being harmed makes you, to the extent that you're harmed, a loser?<sup>19</sup>

MENO: Yes, they must think that, as well.

SOCRATES: And don't they think that losers are sad and pathetic?

MENO: Yes, I suppose so.

SOCRATES: So does anyone actually *want to be* a sad, pathetic loser?

MENO: No, I suppose not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, nobody wants bad things, then, if we're sure that nobody wants to be someone like that. I mean, isn't that just what being a loser is – wanting bad things and then getting them?<sup>20</sup>

b MENO: You're probably right, Socrates; I guess no one wants bad things.

SOCRATES: Right. So were you saying just a moment ago that being good means 'wanting good things, and being able . . . '?

MENO: Yes, that's what I said.

SOCRATES: So out of that definition, the 'wanting' part already applies to everyone from the start<sup>21</sup> – so in that respect no one's a better person than anyone else?

MENO: Apparently not.

SOCRATES: So if anyone's a better person than someone else, it's obviously because of the 'being able' part?

MENO: Exactly.

c SOCRATES: So that means that the quality of being good, on your definition, is just *the ability to acquire good things*?

MENO: Yes! I like the way you're thinking, Socrates: that's my view exactly!<sup>22</sup>

SOCRATES: All right then, let's look at what you're saying and see if you're right. You may very well be on to something. You're saying that being good means being able to acquire good things?

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: And by 'good things' you mean things like health and money? Right?

MENO: Yes – gold and silver; that's what I'm talking about; and obtaining positions of power and honour in your city.<sup>23</sup>

SOCRATES: I see. So there's nothing else you're thinking of as good, besides those kinds of things?

MENO: No. All the things I'm talking about are like that. d

SOCRATES: Right. So being a good man means acquiring loads of gold and silver, according to Meno, special family friend of the Great King!<sup>24</sup> And are you including with this idea of 'acquiring things', Meno, that you have to do it according to what's right, and with respect for religion? Or doesn't that matter? Are you just as happy to call it 'being good' even if you acquire things *wrongfully*?

MENO: No, of course not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You'd call that *being bad*?

MENO: Well, obviously.

SOCRATES: So it looks like this 'acquiring' business also has to involve respect for what's right, or moderation, or religiousness, or some other part of being a good person. e Otherwise, it won't count as being good, even if it *does* supply you with lots of good things.

MENO: Of course. How could it possibly count as being good without those?

SOCRATES: And what about *not acquiring* any gold or silver, either for yourself or for someone else, when it isn't right to do so? Won't that count as being good – that particular case of *not acquiring anything*?

MENO: Yes, it seems so.

SOCRATES: So in other words, being good isn't a matter of acquiring those sorts of good things any more than *not* acquiring them. It looks like acquiring things will only count as being good when it's done with respect for what's right; but when it's done without anything like that, it'll be a case of being *bad*. f

MENO: Yes, I suppose that must be right.

SOCRATES: So, weren't we saying just a little while ago that



each of those things – respect for what's right, and moderation, and so on – is part of being a good person?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: I see, Meno – you're playing games with me, are you?

MENO: Why do you say that, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Well, look; just a moment ago I asked you not to split up the idea of being good – not to break it into little pieces; I even gave you examples of how you were supposed to answer. And without paying any attention to that, you're now telling me that being good means 'being able to acquire  
b good things *with respect for what's right*' – which you say is part of being good.

MENO: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: So it turns out, from all the things that you're agreeing to, that being good just means doing – with some 'part of being good' – whatever it is you're doing. Because that's what you're calling respect for what's right (and each of those qualities): 'part of being good'.

MENO: So what's your point?\*

SOCRATES: My point is, I asked you to tell me what being good is, as a whole; and without even coming close to telling me what it is itself, you're now saying that any action counts as being good as long as it's done with one of the parts of being  
c good – as if you'd already told me what being good is as a whole and I'm going to have any idea what you're talking about when you go and chop it up into parts! So it looks to me like you'll have to go back and answer the same question, Meno. What *is* being good – granted that 'any action that's done with a part of being good counts as being good'? Because that's all we're saying when we say that 'doing anything with respect for what's right counts as being good.' Or am I wrong? Don't you think we need to ask the same question? Do you think anyone's going to know what a *part* of being good is if they don't know what being good is, itself?<sup>25</sup>

MENO: No, I suppose not.

d SOCRATES: No. And in fact, if you remember, when I gave you

that answer about shape, a little while back,<sup>26</sup> we rejected that way of answering – I mean, where you try to answer a question by using things that are still being figured out and haven't yet been agreed on.

MENO: And we were right to reject that way of answering, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, stop doing it yourself, then! If we're still trying to find out what *being good* is, as a whole, don't go thinking that you'll be showing anyone what it is if you talk about *parts* of it in your answer (or that you'll ever explain anything if you make your claims that way). We'll just need  
e to go back and ask the same question: you're talking about 'parts of being good', but what's that? What *is* being good? Or do you think I'm talking nonsense?

MENO: No. I suppose you're right.

SOCRATES: In that case, you'd better answer the question again, from the top: What do you think being good is – you and your mate Gorgias?

MENO: You know, people kept telling me, Socrates, even before I met you, that all you do is go around being baffled by things  
80 a and baffling everyone else. And now that I've met you, sure enough, I feel as though you're bewitching me, and jinxing me, and casting some strange spell over me, to the point where I'm about as baffled as can be. You know what I think? Just to tease you a little – I think that you're exactly like that flat-faced numbfish.<sup>27</sup> You certainly look like a numbfish, and you're just the same in other ways as well: because you know what a numbfish does? It makes anyone that gets too close and touches it, go numb; and that's pretty much what I think you've done to me. My mind and my tongue have  
b literally gone numb. I've got no idea how to answer the question. And yet, damn it, I've talked about 'being a good man' *thousands* of times. I've made countless claims about it, time and again, in front of loads of people, and perfectly good claims, too – or so I thought at the time. But now I can't even say what it is. I haven't got the faintest idea! If you ask me, you're making a smart decision in not going on

any trips away from Athens, or living abroad; because if you did this sort of thing in some other city, as a foreigner, you'd probably be locked up for being a wizard.

SOCRATES: Oh, that's very crafty, Meno. I almost fell for it.

MENO: Fell for what, Socrates?

c SOCRATES: I know exactly why you compared me to a numbfish.

MENO: Why?

SOCRATES: To get me to compare you to something in return.

d That's one thing I've learned about all beautiful people: oh, they just love it when you tell them what they look like. It's all right for them; because of course beautiful people are always told they resemble beautiful things. Well, sorry: I'm not going to compare you to anything. And as for me – unless a numbfish feels numb itself when it makes other people feel numb, then I'm not like a numbfish. Because it's not as if I've got all the answers myself when I baffle other people. I only make other people feel baffled by being more baffled than anyone myself. Take our question about what exactly being  
e good is: I certainly don't know the answer, and that's why you . . . well, maybe you knew before you 'touched' me, but right now you're very like a man who doesn't know. Of course, I'm still willing to look into it with you; I still want the two of us to try to find out what it is.

MENO: But how can you try to find out about something, Socrates, if you 'haven't got the faintest idea' what it is? I mean, how can you put before your mind a thing *that you have no knowledge of*, in order to try to find out about it? And even supposing you did come across it, how would you know that *that was it*, if you didn't know what it was to begin with?

e SOCRATES: Ah, I see what you're getting at, Meno. See what you're doing? You're bringing in that famous quibbler's argument, the one that says that it's impossible to try to find out about anything – either what you know or what you don't know. 'You can't try to find out about something you know about, because you know about it, in which case there's no point trying to find out about it; and you can't try to find out

about something you don't know about, either, because then you don't even know what it is you're trying to find out about.<sup>28</sup>

MENO: And you don't think that's a good argument, Socrates? 81 a

SOCRATES: Nope.

MENO: Can you tell me why not?

SOCRATES: Yes, I can. It's because I've listened to certain men and women, people who know all about the world of the gods . . .

MENO: Saying what? What claim did they make?

SOCRATES: A claim, in my view, that was as beautiful as it was true.

MENO: What claim? What people?

SOCRATES: Well, the people who make the claim are all those priests and priestesses who've taken the trouble to be able to explain the basis of their religious practices. And Pindar<sup>29</sup> says the same thing, and so do lots of other poets – all the  
b ones inspired by the gods. And what they say is this (you decide if you think that what they say is true): they say that a person's soul can never die; that sometimes it comes to an end – most people call it 'dying' – and sometimes it comes back into being, but that it's never destroyed. And that's why we've got to live the whole of our lives as religiously as we possibly can. Because only those

who've paid Persephone the price,  
for the pain, for the grief, of long ago<sup>30</sup> –  
theirs are the souls that she sends,  
when the ninth year comes,  
back to the sun-lit world above.

And from those souls, proud-hearted kings will rise, c  
and the swift and strong, and the wisest of the wise.  
And people, for the rest of time,  
will hail them as heroes, to be held in awe.

So, since the soul can never die, and has been born over and over again, and has already seen what there is in this world, and what there is in the world beyond – i.e. absolutely

d everything – there's nothing it hasn't already learned about. So it wouldn't be at all surprising if it managed to remember things, the things it used to know, either about being good or about anything else. Because if the whole of nature is akin, and your soul has already learned and understood everything, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able, after remembering just *one* thing – most people call it 'learning' – to go on and figure out everything else, as long as you're adventurous and don't get tired of trying to find out about things; in fact, 'finding out about things' and 'learning' are entirely a matter of remembering. So you shouldn't pay attention to that quibbler's argument. That claim is just an excuse for being lazy, and music to the ears of slackers; whereas mine gives us reason to be energetic and eager to find out as much as we can. And it's the one I trust and believe is true, and that's why I'm willing to try and find out what being good is – with your help.

e MENO: Yes, all right, Socrates . . . but what do you mean by this idea that we don't *learn* anything, and that what we call learning is just remembering? I'd like to learn a bit more about that. Is that really how it is?

82 a SOCRATES: Didn't I just say you were crafty, Meno? There you go again – asking me if you can '*learn* more', when I've just said there's no such thing as learning, only remembering! You're trying to trick me into contradicting myself straight away!

MENO: No, Socrates, that wasn't what I was thinking, I swear! I just used that expression out of habit. All I meant was, if you've got some way of *showing* me that what you say is true, then I'd like to hear it.

b SOCRATES: Well, it's certainly not easy. But all right, I'm willing to give it a try, just for you . . . [*He looks over at the large group of slaves that Meno has with him*] – Do me a favour and call over one of these attendants of yours, whichever one you like. I'll use him for a demonstration.

MENO: No problem. [*He beckons to one of his slaves.*] Come over here!

[*The slave joins them.*]

SOCRATES: Is he Greek, at least? Does he speak Greek?

MENO: Absolutely. He's a home-bred.<sup>31</sup>

SOCRATES: All right. Now watch carefully, and see if he gives the impression of remembering things or learning them from me.

MENO: I will.

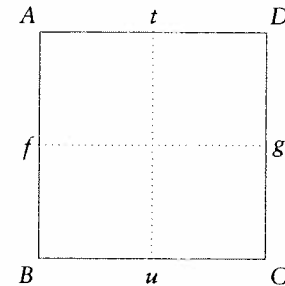
SOCRATES: Tell me then, boy<sup>32</sup> – do you know what a square is? You know that a square . . . [*He draws a square in the sand with his stick.*] . . . looks like this?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So a square is a figure with four sides – these lines here – all the same length?

SLAVE: Of course.

SOCRATES: And these lines that go through the middle [*fg and tu*] – they're the same length as well, aren't they?



SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: Right. Now a figure like this could be various different sizes, couldn't it?

SLAVE: Of course.

SOCRATES: So suppose this side here [*BC*] was two feet long, and that side there [*AB*] was two feet long, how many square feet would the whole thing be? [*The slave looks unsure.*] Here, look at it like this: suppose it was two feet long on this side [*BC*] but only one foot long on this side [*fB*], wouldn't that make the area one-times-two square feet?

SLAVE: Yes.

d SOCRATES: But since it's two feet long on this side as well [*AB*], doesn't that make it *two-times-two*?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So that gives us two-times-two square feet?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So how much is two-times-two? Figure it out, and tell me.

SLAVE: Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES: All right. Now can you imagine there being another square, also with four equal sides, just like this one, but twice the area?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So how many square feet would that one be?

SLAVE: Eight square feet.

SOCRATES: All right, now listen: try and tell me how long each side of that one would have to be. Look – each side of this one here is two feet long. What about each side of a square that's twice the area?

SLAVE: That's obvious, Socrates: twice as long.

SOCRATES: You see, Meno? I'm not teaching him anything. All I'm doing is asking questions. And now he thinks he knows which line will get us an area of eight square feet. Doesn't he?

MENO: Yes, he does.

SOCRATES: So does he know?

MENO: He certainly doesn't.

SOCRATES: But he *thinks* he knows we'll need a line that's twice as long?

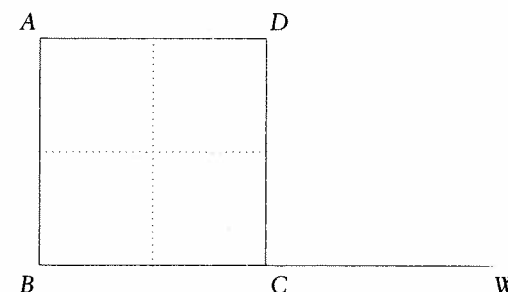
MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Just watch him then, as he remembers, step by step – the way remembering should be done. [*He turns back to the slave.*] Now, you, tell me: you're saying that from a line that's twice the length we'll get twice the area? Here's what I mean: it can't be longer on one side and shorter on the other; it's got to be the same length on all four sides, just like this one here [ABCD] but twice the area – *eight square feet*. Now take your time: you still think it'll be from a line that's twice as long as this one?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: All right. And don't we get a line twice as long as

this one if we just add on another line of the same length, here [CW]?

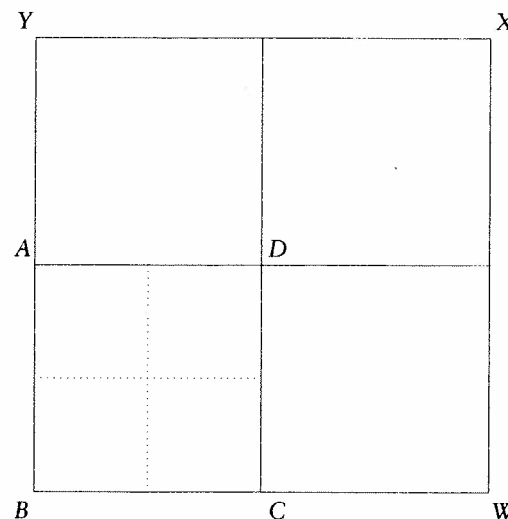


SLAVE: Yes, of course.

SOCRATES: So you're saying that from this line here [BW] we'll get our area of eight square feet – i.e. if we have four of these lines, all the same length as this one [BW]?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: Let's mark up four equal lines, then, starting off from this one [BW] . . . [*He begins to draw the larger square, BWXY.*] . . . So that would make this square here [BWXY] the one you're saying has an area of eight square feet – yes?



SLAVE: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: All right. Now isn't it made up of four squares – here, here, here and here – each with the same area as this one  $[ABCD]$ , the one that was four square feet?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So what does that make its area? Doesn't that make it four times as big as this one?

SLAVE: Yes, it'd have to be.

SOCRATES: So, is it twice the area, if it's four times as big?

SLAVE: No, of course not.

SOCRATES: How many times the area is it?

SLAVE: Four times the area.

SOCRATES: Ah. So it turns out we don't get twice the area from a line twice as long. We get four times the area. Right, boy?

SLAVE: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: Because four times four is sixteen square feet. Isn't it?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: In that case, which line will give us our square of eight square feet? [*The slave looks unsure.*] From this line here  $[BW]$  we got four times the original area, didn't we?

SLAVE: Right.

SOCRATES: And from this line here  $[BC]$ , which is half as long, we get our original square here  $[ABCD]$  of four square feet. Right?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now isn't a square of eight square feet twice the area of this one here  $[ABCD]$ , and half the area of that one  $[BWXY]$ ?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So that means we'll get it from a line that's bigger than this one  $[BC]$  but smaller than that one  $[BW]$ . Won't we?

d SLAVE: Yes, I think so.

SOCRATES: Perfect! That's just what I want to hear: what *you* think.<sup>33</sup> Now tell me; didn't we say this line  $[BC]$  was two feet long, and that one  $[BW]$  was four feet long?

SLAVE: Yes.

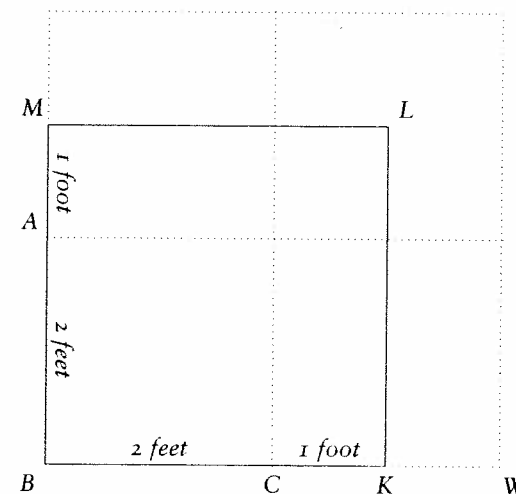
SOCRATES: So that means the line we're trying to find has got to be bigger than this line here – i.e. more than two feet long – and smaller than that one – i.e. less than four feet long?

SLAVE: Yes, it does.

SOCRATES: So, try and tell me how long you think it is.

SLAVE: [*Tentatively*] Three feet long?

SOCRATES: All right. So let's say it's three feet long . . . why don't we just take half of this line here and add it on, and that'll make three feet. [*He means, add half of  $CW$  – i.e.  $CK$  – to  $BC$ .*] Look: two feet here  $[BC]$  plus one foot here  $[CK]$ . And we'll do the same on this side – two feet here  $[AB]$  plus one  $[AM]$ . [*He now draws the square  $KLMB$ .*] That gives us the square you mean.



SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: Right. Now, if it's three feet long on this side, and three feet long on this side, doesn't that give the whole thing an area of three-times-three square feet?

SLAVE: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: And how much is three-times-three square feet?

SLAVE: Nine.

SOCRATES: And how many square feet was our twice-as-big square supposed to be?

SLAVE: Eight.

SOCRATES: Ah. So we still haven't got our square of eight square feet; we don't get it from the three-foot line either.

SLAVE: No, we don't.

84 a SOCRATES: Well, what line do we get it from? Try and tell us exactly. And if you don't want to use numbers, you can just show us. [*He hands the slave his stick.*] What line?

SLAVE: [*He stares at the drawing.*] Honest to god, Socrates, I don't know!

b SOCRATES: There, see that, Meno? You realize where he is now on the road towards remembering? At first, he didn't know which line gave us an area of eight square feet . . . and he still doesn't know now; but the point is, back then he *thought* he knew, and he answered as if he knew, without the slightest hesitation – he didn't feel baffled. But now he *does* feel baffled; and as well as not knowing, he also doesn't think he knows.

MENO: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: So isn't he better off now – as regards the thing he didn't know?

MENO: Yes, I think he is.

SOCRATES: So by making him feel baffled – by making him numb, the way the numbfish does – we haven't done him any harm, have we?

MENO: No, I don't think we have.

c SOCRATES: At any rate, this should have helped him towards discovering the truth. Because now he'll be happy to try and find out what he doesn't know, whereas before, he thought he could easily make perfectly good claims, time and again, in front of loads of people, all about how you need a line of twice the length to get twice the area.<sup>34</sup>

MENO: Yes, probably!

SOCRATES: So do you think he would ever have tried to find out, or learn, what he wrongly thought he knew, before he tumbled into bafflement – before he sensed he didn't know and felt the need to know?

MENO: No, I don't think he would, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So in fact, being numbed was good for him?

MENO: I think it was.

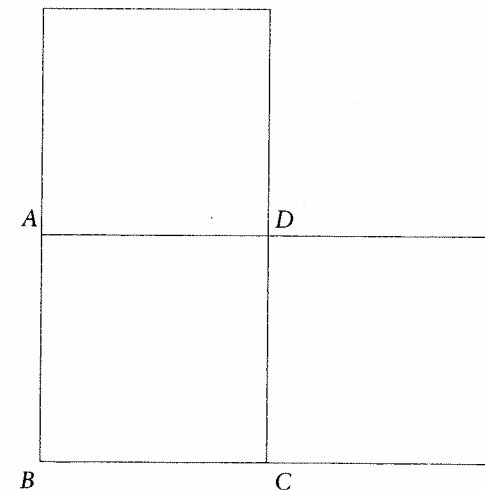
SOCRATES: Then look at what comes next: out of being baffled, see what he'll also discover by searching with my help – and all I'll be doing is asking questions; I won't be teaching him. Watch very closely. See if you catch me teaching him or explaining things at any stage, and not simply bringing out his own opinions. [*He turns back to the slave.*] You: tell me . . . [*He draws a new square, the same size as the first one.*] . . . we've got our square of four square feet, here. Right? Understand?

SLAVE: I understand.

SOCRATES: And we could add another one next to it, here, the same size?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: And a third one, here, the same size as each of these two? [*The drawing now looks like this:*]



SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: All right. And we could fill in the other one here in the corner?

SLAVE: Of course.

SOCRATES: So wouldn't that give us four squares, all with the same area?

e SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So how many times the area of this one [ABCD] does that make the whole thing?

SLAVE: Four times the area.

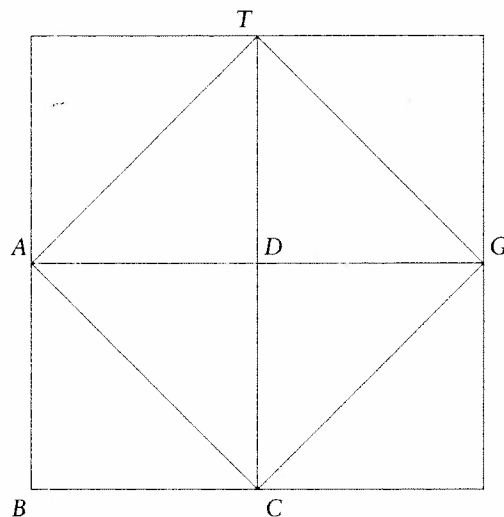
SOCRATES: And what we needed was a square that was *twice* the area. Remember?

SLAVE: Absolutely.

85 a SOCRATES: All right. Now can we also have a line like this, cutting each one of these squares in two, from corner to corner? \* [He draws the line AC, then the three other similar lines, CG, GT and TA.]

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: Right, so that gives us these four equal lines, with this new square, here, inside them? [He means the lines AC, CG, GT and TA, enclosing the square ACGT.]



SLAVE: Yes, it does.

SOCRATES: Now think what's that square's area [ACGT]?

SLAVE: [Hesitates] I don't follow.

SOCRATES: Look, isn't one half of each of these four smaller squares now on the inside, sliced off by each one of these lines?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: So how many of those chunks [i.e. of the triangles] are in this square here [ACGT]?

SLAVE: Four.

SOCRATES: And how many are there in this one here [ABCD]?

SLAVE: Two.

SOCRATES: And four is how many times bigger than two?

SLAVE: Twice as big.

SOCRATES: So what's this square's area [ACGT]?

SLAVE: [Thinks for a moment]: Eight square feet! b

SOCRATES: And what line do we get it from?

SLAVE: That one there [AC]!

SOCRATES: The one that stretches from corner to corner in the square of four square feet?

SLAVE: Yes.

SOCRATES: They call that line a 'diagonal' – sophists, I mean.

So if we're calling that line a 'diagonal', then it's from the diagonal of a square, *according to you*, Meno's boy, that we get a square that's twice the area?

SLAVE: Yes, Socrates. Absolutely.

SOCRATES: What do you think, Meno? Did he say anything in his answers that wasn't his own opinion?

MENO: No; they were all his own opinions.<sup>35</sup> c

SOCRATES: And we're quite sure he didn't have knowledge – we were saying so a moment ago.

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: But these opinions were certainly there, inside him? Weren't they?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So in other words, inside someone with no knowledge (of whatever it might be) there are correct opinions about the things he doesn't know?

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: And although right now he'll find these opinions

are hazy and dreamlike (because they've only just been stirred up), if you ask him the same questions over and over again, and in lots of different ways, you can be sure that he'd end up knowing about these things as precisely as anyone.

MENO: Yes, he probably would.

SOCRATES: So that means he'll have knowledge without anyone having taught him, just through being asked questions – by retrieving the knowledge from within himself?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And isn't retrieving knowledge from inside yourself the same thing as remembering?

MENO: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: So this knowledge that he has within him – presumably he either acquired it at some point, or he's had it forever?<sup>36</sup>

MENO: That's right.

SOCRATES: So if he's had it forever, then he's also been, forever, a being with knowledge; and if he acquired it at some point, it certainly can't have been during the life he's living now.<sup>37</sup>

Or has someone taught him geometry? Because he'll do exactly the same thing with any question in geometry, and with every single other subject as well. So is there someone who's taught him – taught him everything? You should know, especially if he was born and raised in your own home.

MENO: I know for a fact that no one's ever taught him.

SOCRATES: But he does have these opinions, doesn't he?

MENO: It seems he must, Socrates.

86 a SOCRATES: And if he didn't acquire them in his present life, doesn't that prove that he had them – had already learned them – in some other period of time?

MENO: Apparently.

SOCRATES: And that other time must be the time when he wasn't human?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So if he's had these correct opinions somewhere inside him, for all the time that he's been a human being and for all the time that he hasn't – opinions that become bits of knowledge when they're roused by questioning – won't that

mean there's never been a time when his soul hadn't already learned them? Because, obviously, it's for the whole of time that he either has or hasn't been in human form.

MENO: Yes, that seems to follow.

SOCRATES: So if the truth about how things really are has been in our soul forever, then the soul must be ever-living – and that means that if there's something you happen not to know right now, or rather, happen not to have remembered yet, you mustn't be afraid to try and find out about it – that is, to remember it.

MENO: Socrates ... in a funny kind of way ... I like what you're saying.

SOCRATES: I like what I'm saying, too, Meno. And I wouldn't absolutely insist on all the other details if I was defending my claim; but the idea that we'd be better people – more energetic, less lazy – if we felt that it was our duty to try to find out whatever we don't know, instead of thinking that discovering what we don't know isn't even possible, and that there's no point in even trying – that's a claim I will keep fighting for, as best I can, in everything I say and do.

MENO: And I certainly think you're right about that, too, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, since we're agreeing that you've always got to try and find out what you don't know, why don't the two of us have another go at trying to find out what being good is?

MENO: Sure ... although, mind you, Socrates, what I'd really like to look into, and hear more about, is the question I asked back at the start – whether what we're dealing with is something that can be taught, or if being good just comes to people naturally ... or how exactly?

SOCRATES: If only I could control *you*, Meno, instead of only controlling myself! If I could, we wouldn't look into whether being good is or isn't teachable until we'd first tried to find out what it is. As it is, although you don't even try to control yourself – because you prefer to be 'free'<sup>38</sup> – you certainly try to control *me*, and you're very good at it. So I'll grant you



e your wish. Do I have any choice? So it seems we have to consider what sort of thing it is, even though we don't yet know *what* it is. But at least relax your power over me just a little and grant me this: let's ask the question – the question of whether it's teachable – *on a hypothesis*.<sup>39</sup> And when I say 'on a hypothesis', I mean the way mathematicians often look at problems, when someone asks them a question . . . about an area, for example . . . like 'Can this area here be inscribed, as a triangle, in this circle?' A mathematician might say, 'Well, I don't know yet; maybe it can, maybe it can't, but I think I have a *hypothesis* that will help with the problem, and it goes like this:

87 a

*IF the area is such that, when you stretch it out along its given line, it falls short by an area matching the area stretched along the line, then I take that to give us one outcome . . . and we get another outcome, if that can't be done to it.*<sup>40</sup>

b So, on that hypothesis, I'm prepared to tell you the outcome – whether or not it's possible for the area to be inscribed in the circle.' We can do the same thing with our question about being good: since we don't know what it is, or what sort of thing it is, let's first find a hypothesis and then use that to look at whether or not it's teachable. Here's what we say:

*Being good (which is a feature of the soul) will turn out to be teachable, or unteachable, IF – what? What sort of feature of the soul would it have to be?*

c Here's a place to start, then: will it or won't it be teachable . . . (or *remember-able*, as we were saying just now; but let's say it doesn't matter which word we use) . . . will it be teachable if it's something different from knowledge? Presumably not. Isn't it obvious to anyone that the only thing you can be taught is knowledge?

MENO: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: But if being good *is* a kind of knowledge, obviously that would mean it *is* teachable?

MENO: Of course.

SOCRATES: So, that's quickly dealt with, then. We're sure that

*IF it's a kind of knowledge, then it can be taught; and if it isn't, then it can't?*

MENO: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: So it looks like the next thing we need to think about is whether being good is a kind of knowledge or something different from knowledge. Right?

MENO: Right. There's our next question.

SOCRATES: Well, how about this – are we saying that being a good person is something that's good? Can we treat that as a stable 'hypothesis': that it's a good thing?<sup>41</sup>

MENO: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: Right; so if there's anything that's good in life that has nothing whatsoever to do with knowledge, then being good could well turn out not to be any kind of knowledge. But if there's *nothing* good in life that isn't in the general sphere of knowledge,<sup>42</sup> then a hunch that it's some kind of knowledge would be a pretty good hunch?

MENO: Yes, that's right.

SOCRATES: Now obviously, being good is what makes us good people.

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if we are good, we do good.<sup>43</sup> Because all good things do us good, don't they?<sup>44</sup>

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Which means that being good people must also do us good.

MENO: It must . . . from what we've agreed.

SOCRATES: Then here's our next question: What kinds of things do us good in life? Let's run through them, one by one. There's being healthy, being strong, being beautiful and – of course – being rich. We say that things like that do us good in life, don't we?

MENO: Yes, we do.

PLATO  
Protagoras *and* Meno

*Translated by* ADAM BERESFORD  
*with an Introduction by* LESLEY BROWN

PENGUIN BOOKS