Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?

O Meno, . . . I confess with shame that I know literally nothing about virtue; and when I do not know the “quid” of anything, how can I know the “quale”? How, if I knew nothing at all of Meno, could I tell if he was fair or the opposite of fair; rich and noble, or the reverse of rich and noble? Do you think that I could?

No, indeed. But are you in earnest, Socrates, in saying that you do not know what virtue is? . . .

Not only that, my dear boy, but you may say further that I have never known of any one else who did, in my judgment.
Meno
Then you have never met Gorgias when he was at Athens?

Socrates
Yes, I have.

Meno
And did you not think that he knew?

Socrates
I have not a good memory, Meno, and therefore I cannot now tell what I thought of him at the time. And I dare say that he did know, and that you know what he said: please, therefore, do remind me of what he said; or, if you would rather, tell me your own view; for I suspect that you and he think much alike. . . .

Meno
There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us take first the virtue of a man—he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman’s virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.

Socrates
How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping. Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as, for example, beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?

Meno
I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.
Socrates
And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike—would you be able to answer?

Meno
I should.

Socrates
And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues. . . . When you say, Meno, that there is one virtue of a man, another of a woman, another of a child, and so on, does this apply only to virtue, or would you say the same of health, and size, and strength? Or is the nature of health always the same, whether in man or woman?

Meno
I should say that health is the same, both in man and woman.

Socrates
And is not this true of size and strength? . . . And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man?

Meno
I cannot help feeling, Socrates, that this case is different from the others.

Socrates
But why? Were you not saying that the virtue of a man was to order a state, and the virtue of a woman was to order a house?

Meno
I did say so.

Socrates
And can either house or state or anything be well ordered without temperance and without justice?

Meno
Certainly not.
Socrates
Then they who order a state or a house temperately or justly order them with temperance and justice?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
Then both men and women, if they are to be good men and women, must have the same virtues of temperance and justice?

Meno
True. . . .

Socrates
Then now that the sameness of all virtue has been proven, try and remember what you and Gorgias say that virtue is.

Meno
Will you have one definition of them all?

Socrates
That is what I am seeking.

Meno
If you want to have one definition of them all, I know not what to say but that virtue is the power of governing mankind.

Socrates
And does this definition of virtue include all virtue? Is virtue the same in a child and in a slave, Meno? Can the child govern his father, or the slave his master; and would he who governed be any longer a slave?

Meno
I think not, Socrates.

Socrates
No, indeed; there would be small reason in that. Yet once more, fair friend; according to you, virtue is “the power of governing”; but do you not add “justly and not unjustly”?
Meno
Yes, Socrates; I agree there; for justice is virtue.

Socrates
Would you say “virtue,” Meno, or “a virtue”? . . .

Meno
[T]here are other virtues as well as justice.

Socrates
What are they? Tell me the names of them, as I would tell you the names of the other figures if you asked me.

Meno
Courage and temperance and wisdom and magnanimity are virtues; and there are many others.

Socrates
Yes, Meno; and again we are in the same case: in searching after one virtue we have found many, though not in the same way as before; but we have been unable to find the common virtue which runs through them all.

. . . .

Meno
Well then, Socrates, virtue, as I take it, is when he, who desires the honorable, is able to provide it for himself. . . .

Socrates
And does he who desires the honorable also desire the good?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
Then are there some who desire the evil and others who desire the good? Do not all men, my dear sir, desire good?

Meno
I think not.
Socrates
There are some who desire evil?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
Do you mean that they think the evils which they desire to be good; or do they know that they are evil and yet desire them?

Meno
Both, I think.

Socrates
And do you really imagine, Meno, that a man knows evils to be evils and desires them notwithstanding?

Meno
Certainly I do.

Socrates
And desire is of possession?

Meno
Yes, of possession.

Socrates
And does he think that the evils will do good to him who possesses them, or does he know that they will do him harm?

Meno
There are some who think that the evils will do them good, and others who know that they will do them harm.

Socrates
And, in your opinion, do those who think that they will do them good know that they are evils?

Meno
Certainly not.
Socrates
Is it not obvious that those who are ignorant of their nature do not desire them; but they desire what they suppose to be goods although they are really evils; and if they are mistaken and suppose the evils to be goods, they really desire goods?

Meno
Yes, in that case.

Socrates
Well, and do those who, as you say, desire evils, and think that evils are hurtful to the possessor of them, know that they will be hurt by them?

Meno
They must know it.

Socrates
And must they not suppose that those who are hurt are miserable in proportion to the hurt which is inflicted upon them? . . . . But if there is no one who desires to be miserable, there is no one, Meno, who desires evil; for what is misery but the desire and possession of evil?

Meno
That appears to be the truth, Socrates, and I admit that nobody desires evil.

Socrates
And yet, were you not saying just now that virtue is the desire and power of attaining good?

Meno
Yes, I did say so.

Socrates
But if this be affirmed, then the desire of good is common to all, and one man is no better than another in that respect?

Meno
True.
Socrates
And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power of attaining it?

Meno
Exactly.

Socrates
Then, according to your definition, virtue would appear to be the power of attaining good?

Meno
I entirely approve, Socrates, of the manner in which you now view this matter.

Socrates
Then let us see whether what you say is true from another point of view; for very likely you may be right—you affirm virtue to be the power of attaining goods?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And the goods which you mean are such as health and wealth and the possession of gold and silver, and having office and honor in the state—those are what you would call goods?

Meno
Yes, I should include all those.

Socrates
Then, according to Meno, who is the hereditary friend of the great king, virtue is the power of getting silver and gold; and would you add that they must be gained piously, justly, or do you deem this to be of no consequence? And is any mode of acquisition, even if unjust and dishonest, equally to be deemed virtue?

Meno
Not virtue, Socrates, but vice.
Socrates
Then justice or temperance or holiness, or some other part of virtue, as would appear, must accompany the acquisition, and without them the mere acquisition of good will not be virtue.

Meno
Why, how can there be virtue without these? . . .

Socrates
Then the acquisition of such goods is no more virtue than the non-acquisition and want of them, but whatever is accompanied by justice or honesty is virtue, and whatever is devoid of justice is vice.

Meno
It cannot be otherwise, in my judgment.

Socrates
And were we not saying just now that justice, temperance, and the like, were each of them a part of virtue?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And so, Meno, this is the way in which you mock me.

Meno
Why do you say that, Socrates?

Socrates
Why, because I asked you to deliver virtue into my hands whole and unbroken, and I gave you a pattern according to which you were to frame your answer; and you have forgotten already and tell me that virtue is the power of attaining good justly, or with justice; and justice you acknowledge to be a part of virtue.

Meno
Yes.
Socrates
Then it follows from your own admissions that virtue is doing what you do with a part of virtue; for justice and the like are said by you to be parts of virtue.

Am I not right?

Meno
I believe that you are.

Socrates
Then begin again, and answer me. What, according to you and your friend Gorgias, is the definition of virtue?

Meno
O Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits’ end. And if I may venture to make a jest upon you, you seem to me both in your appearance and in your power over others to be very like the flat torpedo fish, who torpifies those who come near him and touch him, as you have now torpified me, I think. For my soul and my tongue are really torpid, and I do not know how to answer you; and though I have been delivered of an infinite variety of speeches about virtue before now, and to many persons—and very good ones they were, as I thought—at this moment I cannot even say what virtue is. . . .

Socrates
As to my being a torpedo, if the torpedo is torpid as well as the cause of torpidity in others, then indeed I am a torpedo, but not otherwise; for I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself. And now I know not what virtue is, and you seem to be in the same case, although you did once perhaps know, before you touched me. However, I have no objection to join with you in the inquiry.

Meno
And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?
Socrates
I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are
introducing. You argue that a man cannot inquire either about that which he
knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need
to inquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about
which he is to inquire.

Meno
Well, Socrates, and is not the argument sound?

Socrates
I think not.

Meno
Why not?

Socrates
I will tell you why: I have heard from certain wise men and women who
spoke of things divine that.

... The soul, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and
having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below,
has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call
to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue and about everything; for
as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty
in her eliciting, or as men say “learning,” out of a single recollection, all the
rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint; for all inquiry and all learning
is but recollection. And therefore we ought not to listen to this sophistical
argument about the impossibility of inquiry; for it will make us idle, and is
sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and
inquisitive. In that confiding, I will gladly inquire with you into the nature of
virtue.

Meno
Yes, Socrates; but what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, and that
what we call learning is only a process of recollection? Can you teach me
how this is? ...
Socrates
It will be no easy matter, but I will try to please you to the utmost of my power. Suppose that you call one of your numerous attendants, that I may demonstrate on him.

Meno
Certainly. Come hither, boy.

Socrates
He is Greek, and speaks Greek, does he not?

Meno
Yes, indeed; he was born in the house.

Socrates
Attend now to the questions which I ask him, and observe whether he learns of me or only remembers.

Meno
I will.

Socrates
Tell me, boy, do you know that a figure like this is a square?

Boy
I do.

Socrates
And you know that a square figure has these four lines equal?

Boy
Certainly.

Socrates
And these lines which I have drawn through the middle of the square are also equal?

Boy
Yes.
Socrates
A square may be of any size?

Boy
Certainly.

Socrates
And if one side of the figure be of two feet, and the other side be of two feet, how much will the whole be? Let me explain: if in one direction the space was of two feet, and in the other direction of one foot, the whole would be of two feet taken once?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
But since this side is also of two feet, there are twice two feet?

Boy
There are.

Socrates
Then the square is of twice two feet?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And how many are twice two feet? Count and tell me.

Boy
Four, Socrates.

Socrates
And might there not be another square twice as large as this, and having like this the lines equal?

Boy
Yes.
Socrates
And of how many feet will that be?

Boy
Of eight feet.

Socrates
And now try and tell the length of the line which forms the side of that double square: this is two feet—what will that be?

Boy
Clearly, Socrates, it will be double.

Socrates
Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions; and now he fancies that he knows how long a line is necessary in order to produce a figure of eight square feet; does he not?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And does he really know?

Meno
Certainly not.

Socrates
He only guesses that because the square is double, the line is double.

Meno
True.

Socrates
Observe him while he recalls the steps in regular order. (To the Boy.) Tell me, boy, do you assert that a double space comes from a double line? Remember that I am not speaking of an oblong, but of a figure equal every way, and twice the size of this—that is to say of eight feet; and I want to know whether you will still say that a double square comes from a double line?
Boy
Yes.

Socrates
But does not this line become doubled if we add another such line here?

Boy
Certainly.

Socrates
And four such lines will make a space containing eight feet?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
Let us describe such a figure: Would you not say that this is the figure of eight feet?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And are there not these four divisions in the figure, each of which is equal to the figure of four feet?

Boy
True.

Socrates
And is not that four times four?

Boy
Certainly.

Socrates
And four times is not double?

Boy
No, indeed.
Socrates
But how much?

Boy
Four times as much.

Socrates
Therefore the double line, boy, has given a space, not twice, but four times as much.

Boy
True.

Socrates
Four times four are sixteen—are they not?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
What line would give you a space of eight feet, as this gives one of sixteen feet—do you see?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And the space of four feet is made from this half line?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
Good; and is not a space of eight feet twice the size of this, and half the size of the other?

Boy
Certainly.
Socrates
Such a space, then, will be made out of a line greater than this one, and less than that one?

Boy
Yes, I think so.

Socrates
Very good; I like to hear you say what you think. And now tell me, is not this a line of two feet and that of four?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
Then the line which forms the side of eight feet ought to be more than this line of two feet, and less than the other of four feet?

Boy
It ought.

Socrates
Try and see if you can tell me how much it will be.

Boy
Three feet.

Socrates
Then if we add a half to this line of two, that will be the line of three. Here are two and there is one; and on the other side, here are two also and there is one: and that makes the figure of which you speak?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
But if there are three feet this way and three feet that way, the whole space will be three times three feet?
Boy
That is evident.

Socrates
And how much are three times three feet?

Boy
Nine.

Socrates
And how much is the double of four?

Boy
Eight.

Socrates
Then the figure of eight is not made out of a line of three?

Boy
No.

Socrates
But from what line?—tell me exactly; and if you would rather not reckon, try and show me the line.

Boy
Indeed, Socrates, I do not know.

Socrates
Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, what is the side of a figure of eight feet; but then he thought that he knew, and answered confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty, and neither knows nor fancies that he knows.

Meno
True.

Socrates
Is he not better off in knowing his ignorance?
Meno
I think that he is.

Socrates
If we have made him doubt, and given him the “torpedo’s shock,” have we done him any harm?

Meno
I think not.

Socrates
We have certainly, as would seem, assisted him in some degree to the discovery of the truth; and now he will wish to remedy his ignorance, but then he would have been ready to tell all the world again and again that the double space should have a double side.

Meno
True.

Socrates
But do you suppose that he would ever have inquired into or learned what he fancied that he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desired to know?

Meno
I think not, Socrates.

Socrates
Then he was the better for the torpedo’s touch?

Meno
I think so.

Socrates
Mark now the further development. I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the inquiry with me; and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion. Tell me, boy, is not this a square of four feet which I have drawn?
Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And now I add another square equal to the former one?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And a third, which is equal to either of them?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
Suppose that we fill up the vacant corner?

Boy
Very good.

Socrates
Here, then, there are four equal spaces?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And how many times larger is this space than this other?

Boy
Four times.

Socrates
But it ought to have been twice only, as you will remember.

Boy
True.
Socrates
And does not this line, reaching from corner to corner, bisect each of these spaces?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And are there not here four equal lines which contain this space?

Boy
There are.

Socrates
Look and see how much this space is.

Boy
I do not understand.

Socrates
Has not each interior line cut off half of the four spaces?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And how many spaces are there in this section?

Boy
Four.

Socrates
And how many in this?

Boy
Two.

Socrates
And four is how many times two?
Boy
Twice.

Socrates
And this space is of how many feet?

Boy
Of eight feet.

Socrates
And from what line do you get this figure?

Boy
From this.

Socrates
That is, from the line which extends from corner to corner of the figure of four feet?

Boy
Yes.

Socrates
And this is the line which the learned call the diagonal. And if this is the proper name, then you, Meno’s slave, are prepared to affirm that the double space is the square of the diagonal?

Boy
Certainly, Socrates.

Socrates
What do you say of him, Meno? Were not all these answers given out of his own head?

Meno
Yes, they were all his own.

Socrates
And yet, as we were just now saying, he did not know?
Meno
True.

Socrates
But still he had in him those notions of his—had he not?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
Then he who does not know may still have true notions of that which he does not know?

Meno
He has.

Socrates
And at present these notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as anyone at last?

Meno
I dare say.

Socrates
Without anyone teaching him he will recover his knowledge for himself, if he is only asked questions?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And this spontaneous recovery of knowledge in him is recollection?

Meno
True.
Socrates
And this knowledge which he now has must he not either have acquired or always possessed?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
But if he always possessed this knowledge he would always have known; or if he has acquired the knowledge he could not have acquired it in this life unless he has been taught geometry; for he may be made to do the same with all geometry and every other branch of knowledge. Now, has any one ever taught him all this? You must know about him if, as you say, he was born and bred in your house.

Meno
And I am certain that no one ever did teach him.

Socrates
And yet he has the knowledge?

Meno
The fact, Socrates, is undeniable.

Socrates
But if he did not acquire the knowledge in this life, then he must have had and learned it at some other time?

Meno
Clearly he must.

Socrates
Which must have been the time when he was not a man?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by
putting questions to him, his soul must have always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?

Meno
Obviously.

Socrates
And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember. . . .

Meno
By all means, Socrates. And yet I would much rather return to my original question, Whether in seeking to acquire virtue we should regard it as a thing to be taught, or as a gift of nature, or as coming to men in some other way? . . .

Socrates
I have now to inquire into the qualities of a thing of which I do not as yet know the nature. At any rate, will you condescend a little and allow the question “Whether virtue is given by instruction, or in any other way,” to be argued upon hypothesis? As the geometrician, when he is asked whether a certain triangle is capable of being inscribed in a certain circle, will reply: “I cannot tell you as yet, but I will offer a hypothesis which may assist us in forming a conclusion: as thus, if virtue is of such a class of mental goods, will it be taught or not? Let the first hypothesis be that virtue is or is not knowledge—in that case will it be taught or not, or, as we were just now saying, “remembered”? For there is no use in disputing about the name. But is virtue taught or not, or rather, does not everyone see that knowledge alone is taught?

Meno
I agree.

Socrates
Then if virtue is knowledge, virtue will be taught?

Meno
Certainly. . . .
Socrates
The next question is whether virtue is knowledge or of another species?

Meno
Yes, that appears to be the question which comes next in order.

Socrates
Do we not say that virtue is a good?—This is a hypothesis which is not set aside.

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
Now, if there be any sort of good which is distinct from knowledge, virtue may be that good; but if knowledge embraces all good, then we shall be right in thinking that virtue is knowledge?

Meno
True.

Socrates
And virtue makes us good?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And if we are good, then we are profitable; for all good things are profitable?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
Then virtue is profitable?

Meno
That is the only inference.
Socrates
Then now let us see what are the things which severally profit us. Health and strength, and beauty and wealth—these, and the like of these, we call profitable?

Meno
True.

Socrates
And yet these things may also sometimes do us harm, would you not think so?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And what is the guiding principle which makes them profitable or the reverse? Are they not profitable when they are rightly used, and harmful when they are not rightly used?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
Next, let us consider the goods of the soul: they are temperance, justice, courage, quickness of apprehension, memory, magnanimity, and the like?

Meno
Surely.

Socrates
And such of these as are not knowledge, but of another sort, are sometimes profitable and sometimes hurtful; as, for example, courage wanting prudence, which is only a sort of confidence? When a man has no sense he is harmed by courage, but when he has sense he is profited?

Meno
True.
Socrates
And the same may be said of temperance and quickness of apprehension; whatever things are learned or done with sense are profitable, but when done without sense they are hurtful?

Meno
Very true.

Socrates
And in general, all that the soul attempts or endures, when under the guidance of wisdom, ends in happiness; but when she is under the guidance of folly, in the opposite?

Meno
That appears to be true.

Socrates
If then virtue is a quality of the soul, and is admitted to be profitable, it must be wisdom or prudence, since none of the things of the soul are either profitable or hurtful in themselves, but they are all made profitable or hurtful by the addition of wisdom or of folly; and therefore, if virtue is profitable, virtue must be a sort of wisdom or prudence?

Meno
I quite agree.

Socrates
And the other goods, such as wealth and the like, of which we were just now saying that they are sometimes good and sometimes evil, do not they also become profitable or hurtful, accordingly as the soul guides and uses them rightly or wrongly; just as the things of the soul herself are benefited when under the guidance of wisdom, and harmed by folly?

Meno
True. . . .

Socrates
And thus we arrive at the conclusion that virtue is either wholly or partly wisdom?
Meno
I think that what you are saying, Socrates, is very true.

Socrates
But if this is true, then the good are not by nature good?

Meno
I think not. . . .

Socrates
But if the good are not by nature good, are they made good by instruction?

Meno
There appears to be no other alternative, Socrates. On the supposition that virtue is knowledge, there can be no doubt that virtue is taught.

Socrates
Yes, indeed; but what if the supposition is erroneous?

Meno
I certainly thought just now that we were right.

Socrates
Yes, Meno; but a principle which has any soundness should stand firm not only just now, but always.

Meno
Well; and why are you so slow of heart to believe that knowledge is virtue?

Socrates
I will try and tell you why, Meno. I do not retract the assertion that if virtue is knowledge it may be taught; but I fear that I have some reason in doubting whether virtue is knowledge; for consider now and say whether virtue, and not only virtue but anything that is taught, must not have teachers and disciples?

Meno
Surely.
Socrates
And conversely, may not the art of which neither teachers nor disciples exist be assumed to be incapable of being taught?

Meno
True; but do you think that there are no teachers of virtue?

Socrates
I have certainly often inquired whether there were any, and taken great pains to find them, and have never succeeded; and many have assisted me in the search, and they were the persons whom I thought the most likely to know. Here at the moment when he is wanted we fortunately have sitting by us Anytus, the very person of whom we should make inquiry; to him then let us repair. . . . Please, Anytus, to help me and your friend Meno in answering our question, Who are the teachers? Consider the matter thus: If we wanted Meno to be a good physician, to whom should we send him? Should we not send him to the physicians?

Anytus
Certainly.

Socrates
Or if we wanted him to be a good cobbler, should we not send him to the cobblers?

Anytus
Yes.

Socrates
And so forth?

Anytus
Yes. . . .

Socrates
Very good. And now you are in a position to advise with me about my friend Meno. He has been telling me, Anytus, that he desires to attain that kind of wisdom and virtue by which men order the state or the house, and honor their parents, and know when to receive and when to send away citizens and
strangers, as a good man should. Now, to whom should he go in order that he may learn this virtue? Does not the previous argument imply clearly that we should send him to those who profess and avouch that they are the common teachers of all Hellas, and are ready to impart instruction to anyone who likes, at a fixed price?

Anytus
Whom do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates
You surely know, do you not, Anytus, that these are the people whom mankind call Sophists?

Anytus
By Heracles, Socrates, forebear! I only hope that no friend or kinsman or acquaintance of mine, whether citizen or stranger, will ever be so mad as to allow himself to be corrupted by them; for they are a manifest pest and corrupting influence to those who have to do with them.

Socrates
But I am not inquiring of you who are the teachers who will corrupt Meno (let them be, if you please, the Sophists); I only ask you to tell him who there is in this great city who will teach him how to become eminent in the virtues which I was just now describing. He is the friend of your family, and you will oblige him.

Anytus
Why single out individuals? Any Athenian gentleman, taken at random, if he will mind him, will do far more good to him than the Sophists.

Socrates
And did those gentlemen grow of themselves; and without having been taught by anyone, were they nevertheless able to teach others that which they had never learned themselves?

Anytus
I imagine that they learned of the previous generation of gentlemen. Have there not been many good men in this city?
Socrates
Yes, certainly, Anytus; and many good statesmen also there always have been, and there are still, in the city of Athens. But the question is whether they were also good teachers of their own virtue. . . . Would you not admit that Themistocles was a good man?

Anytus
Certainly; no man better.

Socrates
And must not he then have been a good teacher, if any man ever was a good teacher, of his own virtue?

Anytus
Yes, certainly.

Socrates
But did anyone, old or young, ever say in your hearing that Cleophantus, son of Themistocles, was a wise or good man, as his father was?

Anytus
I have certainly never heard anyone say so.

Socrates
And if virtue could have been taught, would his father Themistocles have sought to train him in . . . minor accomplishments, and allowed him who, as you must remember, was his own son, to be no better than his neighbors in those qualities in which he himself excelled?

Anytus
Indeed, indeed, I think not.

Socrates
I will return to you, Meno; for I suppose that there are gentlemen in your region, too?

Meno
Certainly there are.
Socrates
And are they willing to teach the young, and do they profess to be teachers, and do they agree that virtue is taught?

Meno
No, indeed, Socrates, they are anything but agreed; you may hear them saying at one time that virtue can be taught, and then again the reverse.

Socrates
Can we call those “teachers” who do not acknowledge the possibility of their own vocation?

Meno
I think not, Socrates.

Socrates
And what do you think of these Sophists, who are the only professors? Do they seem to you to be teachers of virtue?

Meno
I often wonder, Socrates, that Gorgias is never heard promising to teach virtue; and when he hears others promising he only laughs at them, but he thinks that men should be taught to speak.

Socrates
Then do you not think that the Sophists are teachers?

Meno
I cannot tell you, Socrates; like the rest of the world, I am in doubt, and sometimes I think that they are teachers, and sometimes not. . . .

Socrates
And is there anything else of which the professors are affirmed not only not to be teachers of others, but to be ignorant themselves, and bad at the knowledge of that which they are professing to teach; or is there anything about which even the acknowledged “gentlemen” are sometimes saying that “this thing can be taught,” and sometimes the opposite? Can you say that they are teachers in any true sense whose ideas are in such confusion?
Meno
I should say, certainly not.

Socrates
But if neither the Sophists nor the gentlemen are teachers, clearly there can be no other teachers?

Meno
No. . .

Socrates
Then virtue cannot be taught?

Meno
Not if we are right in our view. But I cannot believe, Socrates, that there are no good men; and if there are, how did they come into existence? . . .

Socrates
I observe that in the previous discussion none of us remarked that right and good action is possible to man under other guidance than that of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)—and indeed if this be denied, there is no seeing how there can be any good men at all.

Meno
How do you mean, Socrates? . . .

Socrates
I will explain. If a man knew the way to Larisa, or anywhere else, and went to the place and led others thither, would he not be a right and good guide?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
And a person who had a right opinion about the way, but had never been and did not know, might be a good guide also, might he not?

Meno
Certainly.
Socrates
And while he has true opinion about that which the other knows, he will be just as good a guide if he thinks the truth, as he who knows the truth?

Meno
Exactly.

Socrates
Then true opinion is as good a guide to correct action as knowledge; and that was the point which we omitted in our speculation about the nature of virtue, when we said that knowledge only is the guide of right action; whereas there is also right opinion.

Meno
True.

Socrates
Then right opinion is not less useful than knowledge?

Meno
The difference, Socrates, is only that he who has knowledge will always be right; but he who has right opinion will sometimes be right, and sometimes not.

Socrates
What do you mean? Can he be wrong who has right opinion, so long as he has right opinion?

Meno
I admit the cogency of your argument, and therefore, Socrates, I wonder that knowledge should be preferred to right opinion—or why they should ever differ.

Socrates
And shall I explain this wonder to you?

Meno
Do tell me.
Socrates
You would not wonder if you had ever observed the images of Daedalus; but perhaps you have not got them in your country?

Meno
What have they to do with the question?

Socrates
Because they require to be fastened in order to keep them, and if they are not fastened, they will play truant and run away. . . . Now this is an illustration of the nature of true opinions: while they abide with us they are beautiful and fruitful, but they run away out of the human soul, and do not remain long, and therefore they are not of much value until they are fastened by the tie of the cause; and this fastening of them, friend Meno, is recollection, as you and I have agreed to call it. But when they are bound, in the first place, they have the nature of knowledge; and, in the second place, they are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more honorable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain.

Meno
What you are saying, Socrates, seems to be very like the truth.

Socrates
I, too, speak rather in ignorance; I only conjecture. And yet that knowledge differs from true opinion is no matter of conjecture with me. There are not many things which I profess to know, but this is most certainly one of them.

Meno
Yes, Socrates; and you are quite right in saying so.

Socrates
And am I not also right in saying that true opinion leading the way perfects action quite as well as knowledge?

Meno
There again, Socrates, I think you are right.

Socrates
Then right opinion is not a whit inferior to knowledge, or less useful in action; nor is the man who has right opinion inferior to him who has knowledge?
Socrates
And surely the good man has been acknowledged by us to be useful?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
Seeing then that men become good and useful to states, not only because they have knowledge, but because they have right opinion, and that neither knowledge nor right opinion is given to man by nature or acquired by him—(do you imagine either of them to be given by nature?)

Meno
Not I.)

Socrates
Then if they are not given by nature, neither are the good by nature good?

Meno
Certainly not.

Socrates
And nature being excluded, then came the question whether virtue is acquired by teaching?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
If virtue was wisdom [or knowledge], then, as we thought, it was taught?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And if it was taught, it was wisdom?
Meno
Certainly. . .

Socrates
Then we acknowledged that it was not taught, and was not wisdom.

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
And yet we admitted that it was a good?

Meno
Yes.

Socrates
And the right guide is useful and good?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
And the only right guides are knowledge and true opinion—these are the
guides of man; for things which happen by chance are not under the guidance
of man; but the guides of man are true opinion and knowledge.

Meno
I think so, too.

Socrates
But if virtue is not taught, neither is virtue knowledge.

Meno
Clearly not.

Socrates
Then of two good and useful things, one, which is knowledge, has been set
aside and cannot be supposed to be our guide in political life.
Meno
I think not.

Socrates
And therefore not by any wisdom, and not because they were wise, did Themistocles and those others of whom Anytus spoke govern states. This was the reason why they were unable to make others like themselves—because their virtue was not grounded on knowledge.

Meno
That is probably true, Socrates.

Socrates
But if not by knowledge, the only alternative which remains is that statesmen must have guided states by right opinion, which is in politics what divination is in religion; for diviners and also prophets say many things truly, but they know not what they say.

Meno
So I believe.

Socrates
And may we not, Meno, truly call those men “divine” who, having no understanding, yet succeed in many a grand deed and word?

Meno
Certainly.

Socrates
Then we shall also be right in calling divine those whom we were just now speaking of as diviners and prophets, including the whole tribe of poets. Yes, and statesmen above all may be said to be divine and illumined, being inspired and possessed of the god, in which condition they say many grand things, not knowing what they say.

Meno
Yes. . .
Socrates
To sum up our inquiry—the result seems to be, if we are at all right in our view, that virtue is neither natural nor acquired, but an instinct given by God to the virtuous. Nor is the instinct accompanied by reason, unless there may be supposed to be among statesmen someone who is capable of educating statesmen. . . .

Meno
That is excellent, Socrates.

Socrates
Then, Meno, the conclusion is that virtue comes to the virtuous by divine dispensation. But we shall never know the certain truth until, before asking how virtue is given, we inquire into the actual nature of virtue. I fear that I must go away. . . .