Reading

**Meno**

**PLATO**

Study Questions

1. In seeking to answer the question of whether virtue can be taught, what does Socrates propose they first consider?
2. The question about whether virtue can be taught then becomes what new question?
3. Why do they next discuss what kind of things are profitable to people?
4. When are the goods of the soul such as courage not profitable?
5. How do they come to the conclusion that virtue is wisdom or prudence and is thus not from nature?
6. Why do they next discuss whether there are any teachers of virtue—Anytus, for example?
7. Why do they next inquire about to whom one should be sent to learn to be a good physician or cobbler or flautist?
8. What does Anytus answer when Socrates asks whether virtue can be learned from the Sophists?
9. What differences of opinion are expressed in the verses of poetry Socrates quotes?
10. Why does this lead them to believe that virtue cannot be taught?
11. What makes a person a good guide? How does this apply to the issue of virtue?
12. Why is knowledge more honorable than true opinion, according to Socrates?
13. According to Socrates, why were people like Themistocles not able to teach others to govern well? What did they then possess that enabled them to do so themselves?
14. What does Socrates mean by saying that “virtue comes to the virtuous by the gift of God”?

*Meno.* 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? . . .

*Socrates.* . . . And we too as we know not the nature and qualities of virtue, must ask, whether virtue is or is not taught, under a hypothesis: 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 every one see that knowledge alone is taught?

*Meno.* I agree.

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

*Meno.* Certainly.

*Socrates.* Then now we have made a quick end of this question: if virtue is of such a nature, it will be taught; and if not, not?

*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 hurtful 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 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 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 her-

self are benefited when under the guidance of wisdom and harmed by folly?

Meno. True.
Socrates. And the wise soul guides them rightly, and the foolish soul wrongly.
Meno. Yes.
Socrates. And is not this universally true of human nature? All other things hang upon the soul, and the things of the soul herself hang upon wisdom, if they are to be good; and so wisdom is inferred to be that which profits—and virtue, as we say, is profitable?
Meno. Certainly.
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. If they had been, there would assuredly have been discerners of characters among us who would have known our future great men; and on their showing we should have adopted them, and when we had got them, we should have kept them in the citadel out of the way of harm, and set a stamp upon them far rather than upon a piece of gold, in order that no one might tamper with them; and when they grew up they would have been useful the right way.
Meno. Yes, Socrates, that would have been the right way.
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, Men; 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 enquired 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. In the first place, he is the son of a wealthy and wise father, Anthemion, who acquired his wealth, not by accident or gift, like Ismenias the Theban (who has recently made himself as rich as Polycrates), but by his own skill and industry, and who is a well-conditioned, modest man, not insolent, or over-bearing, or annoying; moreover, this son of his has received a good education, as the Athenian people certainly appear to think, for they choose him to fill the highest offices. And these are the sort of men from whom you are likely to learn whether there are any teachers of virtue, and who they are. 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. Let me trouble you with one more question. When we say that we should be right in sending him to the physicians if we wanted him to be a physician, do we mean that we should be right in sending him to those who profess the art, rather than to those who do not, and to those who demand payment for teaching the art, and profess to teach it to any one who will come and learn? And if these were our reasons, should we not be right in sending him?

Anytus. Yes.

Socrates. And might not the same be said of flute-playing, and of the other arts? Would a man who wanted to make another a flute-player refuse to send him to those who profess to teach the art for money, and be plaguing other persons to give him instruction, who are not not professors teachers and who never had a single disciple in that branch of knowledge which he wishes him to acquire—would not such conduct be the height of folly?

Anytus. Yes, by Zeus, and of ignorance too.

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 honour 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 any one 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 influences to those who have to do with them.

Socrates. Now, can there be a doubt that Thucydides, whose children were taught things for which he had to spend money, would have...
taught them to be good men, which would have
cost him nothing, if virtue could have been
taught? Will you reply that he was a mean
man, and had not many friends among the
Athenians and allies? Nay, but he was of a great
family, and a man of influence at Athens and in
all Hellas, and, if virtue could have been taught,
his he would have found out some Athenian or for-
eigner who would have made good men of his
sons, if he could not himself spare the time
from cares of state. Once more, I suspect,
friend Anytus, that virtue is not a thing which
can be taught?

Anytus. Socrates, I think that you are too ready to
speak evil of men: and, if you will take my ad-
vice, I would recommend you to be careful. Per-
haps there is no city in which it is no easier to do
men harm than to do them good, and this is cer-
tainly the case at Athens, as I believe that you
know.

Socrates. O Meno, I think that Anytus is in a rage.
And he may well be in a rage, for he thinks, in
the first place, that I am defaming these gentle-
men; and in the second place, he is of opinion
that he is one of them himself. But some day he
will know what is the meaning of defamation,
and if he ever does, he will forgive me. Mean-
while 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 ac-
knowledge the possibility for 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 are you aware that not you only and
other politicians have doubts whether virtue can
be taught or not, but that Theognis the poet says
the very same thing?

Meno. Where does he say so?

Socrates. In these elegiac verses:—

"Eat and drink and sit with the mighty, and
make yourself agreeable to them; for from the
good you will learn what is good, but if you mix
with the bad you will lose the intelligence which
you already have."

Do you observe that here he seems to imply that
virtue can be taught?

Meno. Clearly.

Socrates. But in some other verses he shifts about
and says:—

"If understanding could be created and put into
a man, then they [who were able to perform
this feat] "would have obtained great rewards."

And again:—

"Never would a bad son have sprung from a
good sire, for he would have heard the voice of
instruction; but not by teaching will you ever
make a bad man into a good one."

Socrates. And is there anything else of which the
professors are affirmed not only not to be teach-
ers of others, but to be ignorant themselves, and
bad at the knowledge of that which they are pro-
fessing 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 gen-
tlemen are teachers, clearly there can be no
other teachers?

Meno. No.

Socrates. And if there are no teachers, neither are
there disciples?

Meno. Agreed.
Socrates. And we have admitted that a thing cannot be taught of which there are neither teachers or disciples?

Meno. We have.

Socrates. And there are no teachers of virtue to be found anywhere?

Meno. There are not.

Socrates. And if there are no teachers, neither are there scholars?

Meno. That, I think, is true.

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 am afraid, Meno, that you and I are not good for much, and that Gorgias has been as poor an educator of you as Prodicus has been of me. Certainly we shall have to look to ourselves, and try to find some one who will help in some way or other to improve us. This I say, because 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 mean that good men are necessarily useful or profitable. Were we not right in admitting this? It must be so.

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. And in supposing that they will be useful only if they are true guides to us of action—there we were also right?

Meno. Yes.

Socrates. But when we said that a man cannot be a good guide unless he have knowledge (ἐπιστήμης), in this we were wrong.

Meno. What do you mean by the word “right”?

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 the 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.

Meno. Well, what of that?

Socrates. I mean to say that they are not very valuable possessions if they are at liberty, for they will walk off like runaway slaves; but when fastened, they are of great value, for they are really beautiful works of art. 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 ret
main 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 honourable 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?

Meno. True.

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. And if there were teachers, it might be taught; and if there were no teachers, not?

Meno. True.

Socrates. But surely we acknowledged that there were no teachers of virtue?

Meno. Yes.

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 God, in which condition they say many grand things, not knowing what they say.
Meno. Yes.
Socrates. And the women too, Meno, call good men divine—do they not? and the Spartans, when they praise a good man, say “that he is a divine man.”
Meno. And I think, Socrates, that they are right; although very likely our friend Anytus may take offence at the word.
Socrates. I do not care; as for Anytus, there will be another opportunity of talking with him. To sum up our enquiry—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 some one who is capable of educating statesmen Meno. And if there be such a one, he may be said to be among the living what Homer says that Tiresias was among the dead, “he alone has understanding; but the rest are flitting shades;” and he and his virtue in like manner will be a reality among shadows.
Meno. That is excellent, Socrates.
Socrates. Then, Meno, the conclusion is that virtue comes to the virtuous by the gift of God. But we shall never now the certain truth until, before asking how virtue is given, we enquire into the actual nature of virtue. I fear that I must go away, but do you, now that you are persuaded yourself, persuade our friend Anytus. And do not let him be so exasperated; if you can conciliate him, you will have done good service to the Athenian people.

REVIEW EXERCISES

1. Determine whether the following statements about the nature of ethics are true or false. Explain your answers.
   a. Ethics is the study of why people act in certain ways.
   b. To say that moral philosophy is foundational means that it asks questions about such things as the meaning of right and wrong and how we know what is good and bad.
   c. The statement “Most people believe that cheating is wrong” is an ethical evaluation of cheating.

2. What is meant by the “divine command theory”? How does Plato’s Euthyphro treat this problem?

3. Label the following statements as either normative (N) or descriptive (D). If normative, label each as ethics (E), aesthetics (A), law (L), religion (R), or custom (C).
   a. One ought to respect one’s elders because it is one of God’s commandments.
   b. Twice as many people today, as compared to ten years ago, believe that the death penalty is morally justified in some cases.

4. Discuss the relation between ethical theory and ethical reasoning; between ethical theory and ethical reasoning.

5. As they occur in the following statements, label the reasons for the conclusion as appeals to motive (M), the act (A), or the consequences (C).
   a. Although you intended well, what you did was bad because it caused more harm than good.
   b. We ought always to tell the truth to others because they have a right to know the truth.
   c. Although it did turn out badly, you did not want that, and thus you should not be judged harshly for what you caused.