

## Plato's *Meno*

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MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, is virtue the sort of thing you can teach someone? Or is it the sort of thing no one can teach you, but you pick it up by practicing it? Or maybe it's neither: virtue is something people are born with, or something they get some other way?

SOCRATES: ...if you want to put this sort of question to one of us, everyone will have a good laugh and say to you: 'Good stranger, you must think I am a lucky man, to know whether virtue can be taught or not, or where it comes from. Me, I'm so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I don't even know what it is.' I'm just as badly off as all my fellow citizens in this regard, Meno, and I blame no one but myself for my utter ignorance about virtue...

M...Socrates, you really don't know what virtue is? Should I say this about you to everyone back home?

S: Not only that, my friend. Tell everyone back home that I think I have never yet met anyone who *did* know.

...Meno, by the gods, what do you yourself say virtue is? Speak up and don't be a wisdom miser. For it would be a very lucky thing if I turned out not to have told the truth when I said I never met a man who knew, if I find out you and Gorgias know.

M: It's really not that hard to say, Socrates. First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists in being able to manage public affairs and thereby help his friends and harm his enemies – all the while being careful to come to no harm himself. If you want the virtue of a woman, it's not difficult to describe: she must manage the home well, keep the household together, and be submissive to her husband; the virtue of a child, whether boy or girl, is another thing altogether, and so is that of an elderly man – if you want that – or if you want that of a free man or a slave. There are lots of different virtues, as a result of which it is not at all hard to say what virtue is. There is virtue for every action and every stage in life, for every person and every capacity, Socrates. And the same goes for wickedness.

S: It must be my lucky day, Meno! Here I was, looking for just one virtue, and you happen by with a whole swarm! But, Meno, following up on this figurative swarm of mine, if I were to ask you what sort of being a bee is, and you said, 'there are all sorts of different sorts of bees,' what would you say if I went on to ask: 'Do you mean that there are all sorts of different sorts of bees insofar as they are bees? Or are they no different, insofar as they are bees, but they differ in other respects – in how beautiful they are, for example, or how big, and so on and so forth?' Tell me, what would you answer if I asked you this?

M: I would say that they do not differ from one another insofar as they are all bees.

S: What if I went on to say: 'Tell me Meno, what is this thing that they all share, with respect to which they are all the same?' Would you be able to tell me?

M: I would.

S: The same goes for all the virtues. Even if they come in all sorts of different varieties, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtues, and the thing to do is look to this form when someone asks you to make clear what virtue is. Do you follow me?

M: I think I understand, but – then again – not as clearly as I would like.

S: I am asking whether you think it is only in the case of virtue that there is one for a man, another for a woman and so on. Does the same go for health and size and strength? Do you think that there is one health for a man and another for a woman? Or, if it is health, does it have the same form everywhere, whether in man or in anything else whatever?

M: The health of a man seems to me the same as that of a woman.

S: And the same goes for size and strength? If a woman is strong, her strength will be the same and have the same form; for by 'the same' I mean to indicate that strength is strength, whoever has it – man or woman. But maybe you think it makes a difference.

M: I don't think it does...