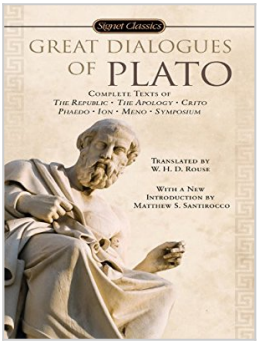

Great Dialogues of Plato

By Plato, W. H. D. Rouse, Matthew S. Santirocco

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Great Dialogues of Plato By Plato, W. H. D. Rouse, Matthew S. Santirocco Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #450084 in eBooks
- Published on: 2008-03-04
- Released on: 2008-03-04
- Format: Kindle eBook

Editorial Review

About the Author

Plato (c. 427–347 b.c.) founded the Academy in Athens, the prototype of all Western universities, and wrote more than twenty philosophical dialogues.

W.H.D. Rouse was one of the great 20th century experts on Ancient Greece, and headmaster of the Perse School, Cambridge, England, for 26 years. Under his leadership the school became widely known for the successful teaching of Greek and Latin as spoken languages. He derived his knowledge of the Greeks not only from his wide studies of classical literature, but also by travelling extensively in Greece. He died in 1950.

Introduction:
Discovering Plato

Shortly before his death, Plato had a dream that he was a swan flitting from tree to tree and eluding the bird-catchers. When Simmias the Socratic heard this, he interpreted it to mean that all men would try to grasp Plato's meaning but that none would succeed, and each would interpret him according to his own views.

—From an ancient commentator on Plato*

I. PLATO AND PHILOSOPHY

The Greek word philosophia means "love of wisdom"—"love" because what is at stake is not just intellectual interest but passionate engagement, and "wisdom" because the goal is not just to acquire expertise but to gain a deeper understanding of the world, of ourselves, and of our place in the world. There are, of course, other claimants to such wisdom—religion, mythology, the arts, and science, to name just a few. But philosophy makes a special claim, that it privileges neither revelation nor inspiration nor experimentation but, rather, rigorous logic and rational argument. And among philosophers, Plato has always held pride of place.

It may not be strictly accurate to say, as Alfred North Whitehead did, that "…the European philosophical tradition…consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."† But Plato is arguably not only the first real philosopher of the West but also one of the greatest, since he set so much of the agenda for future thinkers. His writings range over most of the subfields in which philosophy is now practiced—from epistemology to metaphysics, and from ethics to aesthetics; and he ventured also into other disciplines such as political theory, psychology, linguistics, and education. True, it is not always clear how (or even if) the parts of his philosophy are meant to fit together systematically; his arguments are more than occasionally tendentious; and his own views (when they can be discerned) are sometimes unrealistic and even, some have said, dangerous. Nonetheless, Plato manages to identify so many of the important and perennial questions, and the artistic skill with which he explores them—the way in which his dialogues enact the thrilling play of ideas—sets him up as a standard of literature as well as of thought.

To appreciate the significance and beauty of Plato's works, one needs to know something about their historical context (section II below), the intellectual milieu out of which they arose (section III), the importance of Socrates and Plato's own philosophical project (section IV), and the literary style and form of the dialogues (section V).*

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Plato was born in Athens around 429 BCE and died in 347 BCE.† His family was aristocratic and politically prominent. Indeed, his relatives, Critias and Charmides (who appear in the dialogues), were leading members of the antidemocratic or oligarchic faction. Perhaps destined for a public career like theirs, Plato received a fine education, in the course of which he fell under the influence of Socrates. But this was a difficult time for Athens. When Plato was just a child, the Peloponnesian War broke out and pitted agains teach other Athens and Sparta (and their respective allies). When the war finally ended after more than two decades (431–404 BCE), Athens had been defeated. Although Plato and his contemporaries might not have realized it, the once-great city of Pericles had begun a slow and irreversible decline.

Things were so different just fifty years before Plato's birth. In 490 BCE the Greek city-states were not fighting among themselves but had banded together against fierce odds to defeat two invasions launched by the powerful Persian empire. When the Persian Wars ended in 479 BCE, Athens, which had taken a leadership role, had itself become an empire. With the prestige, confidence, and riches it had thereby acquired, the Athenian democracy fostered a burst of intellectual and cultural activity with few parallels in history. This is the moment in which the great Greek tragedies were performed, when historiography was invented by Herodotus (who wrote about the Persian Wars), when the Parthenon was built, and when the Greek Enlightenment really took hold, freeing human minds to question old assumptions and to examine the world with fresh eyes.

We can get a sense of this creativity and excitement from Plato's dialogues, which were written in the fourth century BCE but are mostly set in the second half of the fifth, before Athens' defeat. They portray intellectual, cultural, and political leaders discussing such heady topics as the nature of justice, love, courage, beauty, and piety; the ideal form of the state; the best way to educate the young; the place of the arts in society; the objects of knowledge and ways of knowing; and the existence of the soul. The historian of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, reports that the great statesman Pericles characterized Athens at this time as rich, confident, open, and free—a city that nurtured creativity and whose citizens tempered self-interest with a concern for the common good. Athens, he said, was "an education to Greece" and a city with which all should "fall in love."*

It is ironic that Pericles' exposition of the ideology of the democracy was delivered as a funeral oration for those who had recently died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War. A year later Pericles himself was dead, a victim of a plague that descended on Athens as a result of wartime conditions. From then on, as Thucydides analyzes the situation, the war led to Athens' moral and political deterioration.

Plato grew up in this time of insecurity and upheaval. Like other conservatives, he disapproved of the radical democracy whose demagoguery and adventurism had led to Athens' defeat. But he also disapproved of the ruthless oligarchy, the Thirty Tyrants, who overthrew the democracy after the war, even though several of their leaders were his relatives. His disillusionment was complete when the democracy was restored in 401 BCE, and one of its first acts was to put his teacher Socrates on trial. The death of Socrates in 399 BCE was a watershed event for philosophy. Deciding not to pursue a political career, Plato left Athens to travel and reflect. When he returned over a decade later, he founded a school, the Academy (so named from its location by a grove sacred to the hero Academus). Here, in what was arguably the first university of Europe (it lasted until the Roman emperor Justinian closed the pagan schools in 529 CE), he spent the rest of his days studying, teaching (one of his pupils was Aristotle), and writing philosophical dialogues, all of which—remarkably—survive.†

III. INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

When Plato began to write he was reacting not only to political disappointments but also to intellectual provocation by prior or "pre-Socratic" thinkers—specifically, the natural philosophers and the sophists.

The Natural Philosophers

During the sixth century BCE, the prosperous cities of Greek Asia Minor saw the rise of a group of intellectuals (the physiologoi) who inquired into the nature (physis) of the physical universe (the cosmos)—how it came to be, what it is composed of, and how it is organized. These "natural philosophers" (as they are sometimes called) rejected the traditional stories (mythoi) that the poets had told about the creation of the world and about arbitrary and willful gods who intervened in it. Instead, they used rational arguments (logoi) to demonstrate the underlying substance or reality of the world and then to explain its

apparent diversity and changeability as the result of basic principles like chance or necessity.

For Thales this basic substance was water, for Anaximenes air, and for Anaximander something he called "the boundless."* Parmenides pursued the implications of such thinking by asserting that if reality is one substance, change is not possible. Heraclitus, on the other hand, argued that there is much more change than even the senses reveal and that everything is in flux. Attempting to solve this contradiction, Empedocles argued for the existence of four permanent elements (fire, air, water, earth) and two principles of motion (love/attraction and hate/repulsion) that would account for change. Anaxagoras, on the other hand, seems to have affirmed that Mind is the origin of motion and change. Finally, the Pythagoreans took an entirely different approach, arguing that reality is to be found not in material substances at all but rather in the mathematical proportions of their mixtures, i.e., in numbers. It is not surprising that, by the time of Socrates and Plato, a thinker like the atomist Democritus could take a skeptical position and claim that an objective world exists but that we cannot fully know it.

Obviously there was great disagreement among the natural philosophers. There was also very little basis on which to choose among their conflicting theories; in a sense, incapable of being tested, they were speculations not unlike the myths they were designed to disenthrone. Finally, these theories attempted to explain only the how and not the why of things. Thus they had little connection to our lived experience or to the deeper questions human beings have about the purpose and meaning of the universe and of our place in it.

The Sophists

An alternative approach arose in the fifth and early fourth centuries among another group of thinkers, the sophists (from the Greek sophos, "wise" or "skilled," but later acquiring the pejorative sense of "[too] clever"). Traveling from city to city and teaching for a fee, they focused less on the physical world and more on individuals and on society. Like the natural philosophers, sophists such as Protagoras, Hippias, Gorgias, and Prodicus are known to us largely from fragmentary texts and accounts by other writers, especially Plato, who had an ax to grind. It is, therefore, difficult to reconstruct a consistent body of teachings, if any existed. But it is clear that their main claim was that they could teach aret. Often translated as "virtue," the word actually means "excellence," and the excellence that the sophists promised to impart was not primarily ethical but, rather, a set of competencies that would promote success in public life, from a knowledge of general culture to the techniques of public speaking and debate.

Redirecting attention from the physical to the human world, the sophists were often critical of traditional ideas and practices, questioning whether things were as they were because of nature (physis) or simply because of convention (nomos). Thus, the famous statement attributed to the sophist Protagoras, that "man is the measure of all things," affirms the central importance of human beings; but it also expresses a strong relativistic perspective: what appears true to one person is in fact true for that person. Such views laid the sophists open to the charge made by Plato and others that they were not really interested in searching for the truth. Their project was teaching people how to succeed in the world, and that necessitated working within existing belief structures rather than challenging them. Thus, the techniques of persuasion and debate the sophists taught were often aimed at scoring points rather than arriving at the truth, and some even bragged that they could teach their pupils how to make the weaker argument the stronger.

IV. FROM SOCRATES TO PLATO

So far, we have seen that Athens' political experiences at the end of the fifth century resulted in defeat and disillusionment. Similarly, intellectual developments had also reached an impasse. The theories of the natural philosophers were abstract and of little relevance; and the sophists, who focused on practical matters

affecting human beings, failed to advance knowledge and sometimes even distorted the truth.

It is at this point that Socrates appears on the scene and suggests a way out of these quandaries.* Born in Athens in 469 BCE, he did not participate actively in politics, though he was once chosen by lot to serve on the Council and he fought in several battles of the Peloponnesian War. We don't know how he supported himself, but he seems to have spent most of his time conversing with people whose opinions he exposed as unfounded. He attracted a following, especially among the city's youth, who delighted to see pretension punctured. But in doing this, Socrates also irritated many other people, a fact to which Plato refers when he compares Socrates to a gadfly (Apology 30D–31A) or a stingray (Meno 79E–80B).

The earliest representation of Socrates is in Aristophanes' comedy The Clouds. He is depicted there as the master of a school, the "Think Shop" (Phrontisterion), where he hangs from a basket looking upward at the skies, and where he teaches young men to be disputatious for a fee. This portrayal caricatures Socrates as both a natural philosopher and a sophist. Interestingly, the charges that were brought against Socrates almost a quarter of a century later—that he was impious and corrupted the young—have much in common with this earlier, albeit parodic, portrayal. The Apology, which is Plato's version of the speeches Socrates gave in his own defense, even refers to Aristophanes' play. But here in the Apology (19A–19D), Socrates denies that he was ever a natural philosopher; and while he elsewhere (Phaedo 96A–99D) admits to a youthful infatuation with the subject, he says that he abandoned it because its exponents explained the world as the product of chance or necessity rather than as the work of a purposeful and intelligent designer. Similarly, while Socrates resembled the sophists in that youths gathered around him to hear his conversations, they did so voluntarily and never paid a fee (Apology 19B–20C). More important, the lessons they learned from him were very different from those the sophists taught—not how to speak but how to think.

How, then, did Socrates get in trouble? In the Apology Plato has the philosopher tell how his old friend Chaerophon had once asked the Delphic oracle if anyone was wiser than Socrates. When the answer came back that no such person existed, Socrates was perplexed and set out to refute the oracle by interrogating politicians, poets, and craftsmen, all of whom claimed to be wise. That examination, however, only exposed their ignorance and earned Socrates their displeasure.* He was forced to conclude that the oracle was right: he was wise in at least this one respect, namely, that he did not think he knew what he did not really know.

Many of Plato's dialogues depict Socrates conducting just this sort of examination. In them, Socrates' primary interest is ethical, not how to be successful on the world's terms (as the sophists taught), but how to live a good life. Since he equated virtue with knowledge—he believed that no one would knowingly do wrong—it was of paramount importance to him that individuals should act on the basis not of opinion (correct or otherwise) but of true knowledge. Socrates' method for arriving at this was dialectic, a type of conversation in which he would subject someone to a cross-examination (eristic) designed with a specific end in mind, the "testing" or "refutation" (elenchus) of a proposition that that person had advanced. Asking for a precise definition of the moral virtues under discussion—what is justice, or piety, or courage?—he would engage his companion in a series of questions intended to uncover logical impossibilities or inconsistencies with the original thesis. Not surprisingly, this would often have the effect of reducing his interlocutor to a state of perplexity (aporia). This was essentially a negative result, showing what justice or piety or courage was not. But to be at a loss—to know what one does not know—is not an end in itself, but a precondition for discovery. As Socrates famously put it, "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology 38A).

We cannot know for certain how much of this characterization in the dialogues reflects the historical Socrates and how much is Plato's creation; similarly, we cannot know precisely where Socrates' ideas leave off and Plato's begin. But, in a sense, it is not really necessary to disentangle the two, unless one is trying to divine the original Socrates or to reconstruct the development of Plato's thought. Of course, scholars have

over the years tried to do just this, and have even grouped the dialogues into early, middle, and late works. There has always been disagreement, however, about where to place certain dialogues within this scheme, and recently some scholars are even questioning the stylometric evidence upon which the traditional classification has been based and the chronological conclusions that have been drawn from it.

For our purposes, the dialogues fall into three broad categories that are based on certain topical and formal characteristics and that do not necessarily equate to early, middle, and late periods. The largest and most varied group includes works of varying lengths that focus on ethical questions and feature Socrates as their leading character; in some of these, he uses the aggressive elenctic method of examination described above, and that subset consists of the dialogues that end in aporia rather than in any positive discovery. Then there is a group of longer dialogues; the conversation within them is often set within a narrative frame, and while Socrates is still the main figure, elenctic questioning is replaced by more sustained argumentation, which produces positive results. Many scholars have assumed (not unreasonably) that these dialogues introduce Plato's own fully developed ideas, most notably the theory of the Forms.* Finally, there are a few longer works that are very different from those in the other two groups: here Socrates is not the main character, the style is less dramatic and more expository, the subject matter is more technical (e.g., cosmology, epistemology, metaphysics), and the treatment seems addressed to a more "professional" audience, since Plato overtly engages with the ideas of others.*

The present volume contains major dialogues that are representative of the first group (Ion, Apology, Crito) and the second group (Meno, Phaedo, Symposium, and Republic). Among Plato's most famous works, these are also the most accessible ones and provide the best introduction to the Socratic method, to Plato's artistry, and to some of his most important ideas. The short introductions and footnotes for each translation in this volume provide further summary and helpful commentary. But the dialogues should also be allowed to speak for themselves and the reader should feel free to follow where they lead (like the bird-catchers in the anecdote about Plato's dream that appears at the top of this Introduction).

V. PLATO'S LITERARY STYLE AND FORM

So far we have been discussing ideas. But Plato was as great a literary artist as he was a philosopher. An elegant and nuanced prose stylist, he has also reminded readers (ancient as well as modern) of the great poets. His techniques of characterization rival those of Homer and the playwrights, his imagery is as pointed and poignant as that employed by the lyric poets, he is a master of humor and wit, and his works abound with powerful metaphors and memorable myths that are brilliantly deployed to strategic ends.

This may seem surprising, given Plato's complicated and sometimes negative attitude toward literature in some of his works. The Ion, for instance, represents poetry as the product of divine inspiration rather than rational thought. And the Republic goes so far as to banish poetry from the ideal state. There are two reasons for this, both of which turn on the notion of imitation (mimesis). The first is the familiar claim of censors throughout the ages, viz., that literature depicting immoral actions may influence people to imitate those actions. The second reason, unique to Plato, is more subtle and metaphysical, that art is itself an imitation and, to that extent, is at several removes from reality and can have no claim to truth.

Plato's strictures on literature, however, are not absolute. First, they must be understood in their local context. Thus, the metaphysical objection to literature as being at several removes from reality is directly related to the theory of the Forms as it is presented here in the Republic and elsewhere. Similarly, the behavioral objection, that people may be tempted to imitate immoral actions if they see them onstage or read them in books, relates to the overall project of the Republic, which is to construct a blueprint for the ideal (and imaginary) state and for the education of its citizens. In addition, his critique here is not directed at all literature but primarily at imitative literature—i.e., not at narrative poetry or prose works, but rather at

tragedy, comedy, and those sections of Homer's epics (e.g., the speeches his characters give) that engage in impersonatation. Indeed, Plato happily admits into his ideal state other types of poetry, such as hymns to the gods and praises of worthy men (607A). And even in the case of imitative poetry, he confesses to having an affection for it and at least allows for the possibility that someone might be able to make the case for it: "But let it be said plainly that if imitation and poetry made to please can give some good reason why she ought to be in a well-ordered city, we should be glad indeed to receive her back home, since we are quite conscious of her enchantment for us" (607B–C). Obviously, Plato believes that his own works—which are written in prose but depend on dramatic impersonation—meet this test. Thus, he will not forgo the power of art to illustrate his arguments or even, at times, to take us where philosophical argument alone cannot quite reach.

Perhaps Plato's greatest achievement as an artist is the use to which he put the dialogue form.* Whereas the prose treatise seems to us ideally suited for philosophical reflection, ancient thinkers composed in a variety of literary forms or genres, including epic poetry, lyric, speeches, and letters. Thus, Plato was unconstrained by precedent when he decided to write philosophical dialogues that purport to reproduce conversations on specific topics by particular individuals. Of course, the "dialogic" component varies greatly from work to work: in some the reader is plunged directly into the conversation, whereas in others the discussion is set up by means of more or less elaborate narrative frames. Or again, some dialogues are cast as real give-and-take among the interlocutors, while others resemble monologues in which Socrates holds forth for long stretches punctuated only occasionally by his (often hapless) interlocutor's brief statements of acquiescence or perplexity.

While literary models for dialogue were available to him—in the speeches of Greek tragedy, for instance, the historical writings of Herodotus and Thucydides, or the prose mimes of Sophron—Plato seems to have invented, or at least developed to its full potential, the philosophical dialogue as a genre. Why?

At a very basic level, the dialogue form was an ideal way for Plato to memorialize his teacher by showing him in action, since Socrates occurs in most of the dialogues and is often the leading character in the work. More important, the dialogue form also reproduces (to the extent that the fixity of any written text can) Socrates' own practice, which was, after all, conversational. In this there is a certain irony, since Socrates pointedly rejected the written word, precisely because a book is inert, it cannot adapt to its audience, and one cannot argue with it (Phaedrus 274B–278B). But insofar as the dialogue form preserves a residual orality, it at least has the advantage of enacting philosophical conversation or dialectic. Both Socrates' practice and the dialogue form based on it emphasize the paramount importance of method—the process of inquiry at least as much as any final product.

In addition, the dialogue form discourages us from concluding too readily that the text represents the final views either of Plato (who, after all, never appears as a character in his dialogues) or even of Socrates. Even when dialectic goes beyond aporia to produce positive results—the doctrine of the Forms, for instance, or prescriptions for the ideal state—these results are, by virtue of the very form in which they are expressed, provisional; they are subject (as are all claims to knowledge) to further examination, modification, or rejection. Indeed, even Plato's own theory of the Forms is challenged in the Parmenides, where it is subjected to a powerful critique that Plato allows to go unrebutted. And in a dialogue with an elaborate narrative frame—the Symposium, for instance, which purports to be the account of a drinking party that took place earlier, told by someone who was not there but who heard about it from someone who was—that device calls into question the reliability of the text and is itself a further deterrent against attributing any finality to the propositions advanced by the characters in the work.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the very multiplicity of views and voices contained in the dialogues, the way in which the dialogues enact the lively play of ideas, challenges each of us, as readers, to conduct a similar dialectic within ourselves. Plato uses many images to describe Socrates' effect on people, comparing

him (as noted above) to a gadfly or a stingray. But perhaps his most appropriate—and certainly most poetic—image occurs in the Theaetetus, where the philosopher's role is compared to that of a midwife—helping to bring to birth truths that are hidden within ourselves and that are just waiting to see the light (Theaetetus 150B–151B).*

—Matthew S. Santirocco

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Simon Blackburn observes, "Anyone who stays very long in the vast mausoleums lined with works about Plato and his influence runs the risk of suffocating" (Plato's Republic: A Biography [New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006] 8). Still, that could be said for the scholarly literature on most major authors; and there is a number of books in English that the new reader of Plato will find helpful and upon which I have drawn in the preparation of this essay. They include not only Blackburn's own somewhat irreverent volume, but also R. B. Rutherford, The Art of Plato (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) on the literary aspects of the dialogues, and Richard Kraut (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), a collection of essays by various experts (particularly useful are Kraut's introduction, pp. 1–50, and T. H. Irwin's essay on the intellectual background, pp. 51–89). Good general introductions include G. M. A. Grube, Plato's Thought (cited above in the note on front matter), and David Melling, Understanding Plato (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). For additional information on the intellectual background of Plato, see Edward Hussey, The Presocraties (New York: Scribners, 1972); G. B. Kerferd, The Sophistic Movement (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and James Warren, Presocratics: Natural Philosophers Before Socrates (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and studies of the image and influence of Socrates in antiquity include Paul A. Vander Waerdt (ed.), The Socratic Movement (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), a collection of essays by various hands, and Paul Zanker (trans. Alan Shapiro), The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Each of these works also includes a useful bibliography. Finally, for a magisterial scholary survey, see W. K. C. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy, vols. 1–5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–78).

Editors' Note

This translation was one of Dr. Rouse's many labours, and he was unfortunately prevented, by the volume of other work which he undertook, from giving it a final revision in detail before his death in February 1950.

In carrying out this revision, the Editors have tried to clear up the few inaccuracies and obscurities they found, and at the same time to interrupt as little as possible the distinctive character of Dr. Rouse's translation.

By far the greater part of his work remains unaltered, but in fairness to him it should be stated that the Divided Line diagram, the Banquet and Cave diagrams, and some of the footnotes have been subsequently added, so any faults in these should be imputed not to Dr. Rouse but to the Editors. The Summary of the Republic, which is also an addition, was written by J. C. G. Rouse, who also assisted in the work of editing.

Except for one or two well-known names (such as Plato) Dr. Rouse retained consistently the ancient Greek spelling of names; e.g. Phaidon, instead of Phaedo, the familiar Anglicised form; but for readers'

convenience it has been decided to adopt the more generally accepted form for the titles of the dialogues.

—Eric H. Warmington
—Philip G. Rouse

For the 2008 edition, Signet Classics took the liberty of correcting some errors in the original Greek.

Great Dialogues of PLATO

ION

Socrates, Ion

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This is a dialogue between Socrates and the “rhapsode” or reciter, Ion of Ephesus, who declares himself unequalled as a reciter and exponent of Homer. The rhapsodes (“song-stitchers”) were men who made a living by giving public recitations from the great epic poets, chiefly Homer. The most successful held large audiences spellbound and moved them to amazement, laughter or tears. They also lectured or taught.

Socrates suggests to Ion that his skill as a reciter and his hold on his audiences are due to divine inspiration passed down to him through the poet, and shows up as absurd the claims of the reciters to teach practical rules of conduct from Homer.

The dialogue foreshadows the views on art as a whole which are explained in the Republic (see pp. 481–482).

SOCRATES: Good morning, Ion. Where have you now come from in your travels? From home, from Ephesus?

ION: Oh no, Socrates, from Epidauros; I have been at the feast of Asclepios.

SOCRATES: Do the Epidaurians hold a contest of reciters* of poetry in honour of the god?

ION: Yes, of course, and in other fine arts also.

SOCRATES: Well! and did you compete, please? And how did your contest go?

ION: First prize is what I won, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well done! Now then, we must win the Panathenaia* too!

ION: So we will, please God.

SOCRATES: I have often envied you reciters that art of yours, Ion. You have to dress in all sorts of finery, and make yourselves as grand as you can, to live up to your art! And you are, at the same time, bound to

spend your time on no end of good poets, especially Homer, the best and most divine of all poets; you have to learn his meaning thoroughly, not only his verses, another enviable thing. For no one could be a good reciter unless he understood what the poet says. Yes, the reciter must be the interpreter of the poet's mind to the audience; and to do this, if he does not understand what the poet says, is impossible. So all that very properly makes one envy.

ION: Very true, Socrates. At least I found this myself the most troublesome part of the art; and I believe I can speak on Homer better than any other man alive. Not Metrodoros of Lampsacos, not Stesimbrotos the Thasian, not Glaucon, nor anyone else who ever was born could utter so many fine thoughts on Homer as I can.

SOCRATES: I'm glad to hear it, Ion, for it is clear you won't mind giving me a show.

ION: I will most certainly. You'll find it a treat to hear, Socrates, how finely I have decked out Homer! I believe I've earned a golden crown from the Homer Association.†

SOCRATES: Many thanks. I'll make leisure to hear it some time, but just answer me one question now: Are you as good at Hesiod and Archilochos, or only Homer?

ION: Only Homer, no one else; I think Homer's quite enough.

SOCRATES: But is there anything which both Homer and Hesiod speak about, and say the same?

ION: Yes, I think so, a good many things.

SOCRATES: Well then, in such matters could you explain what Homer says better than what Hesiod says?

ION: Oh, just the same, Socrates, when they say the same.

SOCRATES: What about when they don't say the same? For example, they both say something about divination?

ION: Yes, certainly.

SOCRATES: Well then, could a good diviner explain better what these two poets say about divination, both when they say the same and when they don't, or could you?

ION: A diviner could.

SOCRATES: But if you were a diviner, and if you were able to explain what was said the same, you would know how to explain what was said otherwise?

ION: That's obvious.

SOCRATES: Then how comes it that you are good at Homer but not at Hesiod and the other poets? Does not Homer speak about those very things which all other poets speak of? War, now—has not he said nearly everything about war, and the intercourse of men together, good men and bad men, craftsmen and laymen, about the gods' dealings with men and with each other, how they do it, about what happens in heaven and in the house of Hades, and the origins of gods and heroes? Are not these the things about which Homer made his poetry?

ION: That is quite true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And the other poets, did not they speak of these same things?

ION: Yes, they did, Socrates, but not as Homer did.

SOCRATES: What then—worse than Homer?

ION: Much worse.

SOCRATES: And Homer did it better?

ION: Better indeed, I should think so, by Zeus!

SOCRATES: Now listen, dear heart alive! Suppose there are several people talking about number, and one speaks much better than the rest; I suppose somebody will be able to pick out the good speaker?

ION: I should say so.

SOCRATES: Will it be the same person who can also pick out the bad speakers, or somebody else?

ION: The same, I suppose.

SOCRATES: Well, this will be the person who has arithmetic, the art of numbers?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Very well. Suppose a number of people discussing which foods are healthy, and one speaking much the best; will the same person recognise that the best speaker speaks best and the worse worse, or will one person recognise the best and another the worse?

ION: The same, that's clear, I suppose.

SOCRATES: Who is he? What's his name?

ION: Doctor.

SOCRATES: So we should say that in general the same person will always know who speaks well and who speaks badly, when a number of people are speaking about the same things; or else, if he does not know the bad speaker, it is clear he will not know the good speaker either about one and the same thing.

ION: Just so.

SOCRATES: Then the same person is good at both?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Very well. You say, then, that both Homer and the other poets, two of them being Hesiod and Archilochos, speak about the same things, but not in the same way: that Homer speaks well, and the others not so well?

ION: Yes, I do say so, and it is true.

SOCRATES: Then if you recognise the one who speaks well, you would recognise the ones who speak worse, and know that they do speak worse?

ION: Yes, so it seems.

SOCRATES: Then, my dear fellow, if we say Ion is good at Homer and good at the other poets alike, we shan't be wrong, since you admit yourself that the same person is a sufficient judge of all that speak about the same things, and the poets pretty well all poetise the same things.

ION: Very well, Socrates, kindly explain the reason for something I am about to tell you. When someone speaks about any other poet, I can't attend. I can't put in one single remark to the point, I'm just in a doze—but only mention Homer and I'm wide awake in a jiffy, and I attend, and I have plenty to say!

SOCRATES: Oh, that's not hard to guess, old fellow. Anyone can see that not by art and science are you able to speak about Homer; for if art made you able, you would be able to speak about all the other poets too; for there is, I suppose, an art of poetry as a whole; isn't there?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well now, if one gets a grasp of any other art whatever, the whole of it, the same way of looking at your problem holds good for all the arts, doesn't it? Would you like me to say what I mean, my dear Ion?

ION: I should indeed, my dear Socrates; I love to listen to a clever man like you.

SOCRATES: I only wish that were true, my dear Ion. But clever! You are the clever ones, you reciters and actors, and the poets whose verses you chant;* all I can do is to tell the truth, as any plain man can do. Just look at my question; how plain and simple it is; everyone recognises, as I said, that if one takes any art as a whole, it is the same problem for all arts. Suppose for our discussion we take, say, painting; there is a general art of painting, isn't there?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: And there have been also many painters, good and bad?

ION: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Well, have you ever seen anyone who was good at Polygnotos, son of Aglaophon, and could show which of his paintings are good and which are not, but with the other painters was incapable? When someone shows him works of other painters, does he just doze, and has nothing to say, and can't put in a remark: but when he has to give an opinion about Polygnotos, or any other one painter that you may choose, does he wake up and take notice, and does he find plenty to say?

ION: Oh dear me, no, not at all.

SOCRATES: Well then, take sculpture: Did you ever see anyone who was good at Daidalos, Metion's son, or Epeios, Panopeus' son, or Theodoros the Samian, or any other one sculptor, and could explain all his good work, but before the work of the other sculptors is dumb-founded, starts dozing, and has nothing to say?

ION: Oh dear me, no, I have not seen him either.

SOCRATES: Go on, then, to piping and harping and singing to the harp and reciting poetry; you saw never a man, as I think, who was good at discoursing on Olympos or Thamyras or Orpheus, or Phemios,† the Ithacan reciter, but is struck dumb before Ion the Ephesian, and has no remark to make when he recites well or ill!

ION: I can't contradict you there, Socrates. But one thing I do know about myself: I speak about Homer better than any other man alive, I have plenty to say and all declare that I speak well; but yet about the others, no. Do just see what that means.

SOCRATES: I do see, my dear Ion, and I'm going to show you what I think that means. Really, as I said just now, this is no art in you to speak well about Homer; no, some divine power is moving you, such as there is in that stone which Euripides called the Magnesian, but most people call it the Heracleian stone.* This magnet attracts iron rings, and not only that, but puts the same power into the iron rings, so that they can do the same as the stone does; they attract other rings, so that sometimes there is a whole long string of these rings hanging together, and all depend for their power on that one stone. So the Muse not only inspires people herself, but through these inspired ones others are inspired and dangle in a string. In fact, all the good poets who make epic poems use no art at all, but they are inspired and possessed when they utter all these beautiful poems, and so are the good lyric poets; these are not in their right mind when they make their beautiful songs, but they are like Corybants out of their wits dancing about. As soon as they mount on their harmony and rhythm, they become frantic and possessed; just as the Bacchant women, possessed and out of their senses, draw milk and honey out of the rivers, so the soul of these honey-singers does just the same, as they say themselves. The poets, as you know, tell us that they get their honey-songs from honey-founts of the Muses, and pluck from what they call Muses' gardens, and Muses' dells, and bring them to us, like honeybees,† on the wing themselves like the bees; and what they say is true. For the poet is an airy thing, a winged and a holy thing; and he cannot make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his senses and no mind is left in him; so long as he keeps possession of this, no man is able to make poetry and chant oracles. Not by art, then, they make their poetry with all those fine things about all sorts of matters—like your speeches about Homer—not by art, but by divine dispensation; therefore, the only poetry that each one can make is what the Muse has pushed him to make, one ecstatic odes, one hymns of praise, one songs for dance or pantomime, one epic, one satiric iambic; in every other kind each one of them is a failure. For not by art do they speak these things, but by divine power, since if an art taught them how to speak well in one kind, they could do it also in all the other kinds. Therefore God takes the mind out of the poets, and uses them as his servants, and so also those who chant oracles, and divine seers; because he wishes us to know that not those we hear, who have no mind in them, are those who say such precious things, but God himself is the speaker, and through them he shows his meaning to us. A very strong piece of evidence for the argument is Tynnichos of Chalcis, who never made one poem which a man would think worth mentioning except only the hymn of praise which all the world sings,* well-nigh most beautiful of all lyrics, really and truly "a godsend from the Muses" as he calls it himself. Here most of all I think God has shown us, beyond all dispute, that these beautiful poems are not human, not made by man, but divine and made by God; and the poets are nothing but the gods' interpreters, possessed each by whatever god it may be. Just to prove this, God purposely sang the most beautiful of songs through the meanest of poets. Don't you think I speak the truth, my dear Ion?

ION: Upon my word I do! You touch my soul in some way by your words, my dear Socrates! I feel sure that a divine dispensation from heaven for us makes good poets the interpreters in these things.

SOCRATES: And don't you reciters interpret the poet's works?

ION: That is quite true also.

SOCRATES: So you are interpreters of interpreters?

ION: We are indeed.

SOCRATES: Then go on and tell me something more, my dear Ion; don't hide it, just answer my question.

When you speak your verses well, and astound the audience most—you know, when you sing how Odysseus leaps onto the threshold, and reveals himself to the wooers, and spreads out the arrows before his feet,* or how Achilles rushes on Hector,† or one of those touching scenes about Andromache‡ or Hecuba or Priam¶—are you in your right mind then, or do you get beside yourself, does your soul feel itself inspired and present in the action which you describe, somewhere in Ithaca or at Troy or wherever the epic scene is?

ION: Clear as daylight I see your proof, my dear Socrates! I will not hide it, I will tell you frankly. Why, whenever I speak of sad and touching scenes, my eyes are full of tears; when it is something terrible or awful, my hair stands up straight with fear and my heart leaps!

SOCRATES: Well then, my dear Ion, could we say such a man is for the time being in his right senses who, decked out in gorgeous raiment and golden crown, bursts out crying at a sacrifice or a festival, when he has lost none of these fine things? Or who is terrified, with more than twenty thousand friendly faces about him, when no one robs him or wrongs him?

ION: No, upon my word, not at all, my dear Socrates, to tell the honest truth.

SOCRATES: And do you know that you reciters make most of the audience do the very same?

ION: Oh yes, indeed I do! I always look down from my platform, and there they are crying and glaring and amazed, according to what I say. Indeed, I'm bound to pay careful attention to them. If I leave them crying in their seats, I shall laugh at my pockets full of money; if I leave them laughing, I myself shall cry over the money lost.

SOCRATES: Then do you know that the member of the audience is the last of those rings which I described as getting power from each other through the magnet? You the reciter and the actor, are the middle ring, and the first is the poet himself; but God through all these draws the soul of men whithersoever he will, by running the power through them one after another. It's just like that magnet! And there is a great string of choristers and producers and under-producers all stuck to the sides of these hanging rings of the Muse. And one poet hangs from one Muse and another from another—we call it "possessed," and it is very like that, for he is held fast; and from these first rings, the poets, different people again, hang on each to his own poet, some to Orpheus, and some to Musaios, but most hang on to Homer, and they are possessed and held fast through the poet. And you are one of them, Ion; you are possessed through Homer; and whenever someone recites who belongs to another poet, you go to sleep and have nothing to say, but whenever someone chants a melody of this poet, you are awake in a jiffy and your soul dances and you have plenty to say; for it is not by any art or science of Homer that you say what you say, but by divine dispensation and possession. Just so with the wild Corybants; the only melody which they quickly perceive is that which belongs to the god of whom they are possessed, whoever he is, and for that melody they have plenty of dances and songs, but they care nothing about the rest. The same with you, my dear Ion. Let anyone mention Homer, you are ready; for anyone else you are dumb. And this is the reason why, this answers your question why you have plenty to say about Homer and nothing about the others; because no art, but divine dispensation, makes you Homer's great encomiast.

ION: That is excellently said, Socrates. But I should be surprised if you could be eloquent enough to persuade me that I am always possessed and mad when I praise Homer. If you heard me speaking about Homer, I believe you would not think so yourself.

SOCRATES: Well, that's just what I want to hear—but not until you answer one more question: What in Homer do you speak well about? Not everything, I suppose.

ION: Every mortal thing, my dear Socrates, I assure you.

SOCRATES: Surely not when he speaks about something which you do not know?

ION: And what is there that Homer speaks about which I don't know?

SOCRATES: Why, does not Homer speak often enough about arts and crafts? For example, driving a chariot—if I can remember the verses, I will repeat them.

ION: Oh, I'll say them, I remember.

SOCRATES: Then tell me what Nestor says to his son Antilochos, in the horse race at the funeral of Patroclos, when he advises him to be careful in turning the post.*

ION: This is what he says:

Lean yourself over in your polished car

A little to the left of both your steeds;

Call to the right-hand horse and goad him on,

And slacken with your hand his reins. Then let

The left horse swerve close round the turning post,

So that the nave of well-made wheel may seem

To reach the stone's edge: but avoid to graze it!

SOCRATES: That will do. Now then, Ion, which would know better whether that is good or bad advice, a doctor or a charioteer?

ION: A charioteer, I suppose.

SOCRATES: Because that's his own art, or why?

ION: Because it is his art.

SOCRATES: Well, has God granted to each of the arts to be able to know some particular work? For example, what we know by the art of the pilot we shall not know by the art of physic.

ION: Of course not.

SOCRATES: And what we know by the art of physic, we shall not know by the art of carpentry.

ION: Of course not.

SOCRATES: And is that true of all arts—what we know by one we shall not know by another? But before that, answer me this: Do you agree that there are different arts?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Do you distinguish as I do—would you call them different arts when they are the knowledge of different things?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: For I suppose that if one were only a knowledge of the same things as another, there would be no reason to call the arts different, when you would know the same things from both. For example, I know that here are five fingers, and you know the same about them as I do; then if I asked you if we both knew it by the same art, arithmetic, or a different one, you would say, “by the same,” I suppose?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Very well, now tell me what I was going to ask you just now, is this what you think about all arts in general: by the same art we must know the same things, but by another art not the same things—if it is another art, we must know different things by that?

ION: Yes, that is what I think, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then if anyone has not a certain art, he will not be able to know what is said or done well in that art?

ION: Quite true.

SOCRATES: Then take those verses which you repeated: Will you or a charioteer know better whether Homer speaks well or ill?

ION: A charioteer.

SOCRATES: Because you are a reciter, not a charioteer.

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the reciter’s art is different from the charioteer’s art?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: If it is different, then, it is also a knowledge of different things?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well then, when Homer says how Nestor’s woman Hecamede gives wounded Machaon a posset to drink, it goes something like this—*

With Pramnian wine, and over it she grates

With a bronze grater goat’s-milk cheese, and adds

An onion as a relish for the drink.

Whether this is good or bad in Homer, what will decide properly, the art of physic or the art of reciting?

ION: Physic.

SOCRATES: Again when Homer says—†

Into the deep she plunged, like a lead weight

Set in an ox horn, which goes hurtling down

With death for greedy fishes.

Do we say this is rather for the fisherman's art to judge than the reciter's, whether it is good or bad?

ION: The fisherman's art, Socrates, that is clear.

SOCRATES: Look here then. If you were asking the questions, and if you should say, "Ah well, Socrates, so much for these arts; you find the places in Homer where each of these ought to decide, but kindly find something about a seer and his divination, which are the bits which he ought to be able to decide and say whether they are done well or badly." If you were to say that, see how easily and truly I shall answer. He speaks of these in many passages in the Odyssey, for example what that seer of Melampus' family says* to the wooers, Theoclymenos, I mean—

Poor souls, what mischief's on you? Night is wrapt

About your heads and faces, down to your feet—

There is a blaze of wailing, cheeks bedabbled—

The porch is full, the hall is full of spectres,

Hurrying to hell and darkness; and the sun

Put out in heaven, a foul mist covers all.

There are many places in the Iliad, too, as in the battle at the wall, where he says—†

A bird came over as they tried to cross,

An eagle flying high, skirting their left,

With a great serpent bleeding in his talons,

Alive and struggling still, not yet forgetful

Of battle's joy. Bent back it struck the bird

That held it on the breast, hard by the neck.

The eagle hurled it from him to the ground

In agony, and down among the crowd

It fell; he shrieked, and flew on puffs of wind.

These and other such things I should say it is proper for the seer to examine and to decide.

ION: Yes, you are right in what you say, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So are you, Ion. Well now, come, I have picked out from both Odyssey and Iliad pieces which belong to the seer, and to the doctor, and to the fisherman; will you kindly pick out for me, since you are better up in Homer than I am, pieces which belong to the reciter, my dear Ion, and the reciter's art, which are proper for the reciter to examine and judge beyond the rest of mankind.

ION: My reply, my dear Socrates, is all Homer.

SOCRATES: Oh dear me, Ion, surely not all? Have you such a bad memory? Surely a reciter ought not to have a bad memory.

ION: Why, what have I forgotten?

SOCRATES: Don't you remember that you said the reciter's art was different from the charioteer's?

ION: Yes, I remember.

SOCRATES: Did you not agree that, being different, it would know different things?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the reciter and his art will not know all Homer, according to your argument.

ION: All except, perhaps, a few things like that.

SOCRATES: By things like that, you mean all the business of the other arts, pretty well. But what will he know then, since he will not know everything?

ION: What is proper for a man to say—so at least I take it, or what for a woman, what for a slave or what for a free man, what for a subject or what for a ruler.

SOCRATES: Do you mean, what is proper to say for the ruler of a ship in a storm at sea? Will the reciter know that better than the pilot?

ION: Oh no, the pilot will know that better.

SOCRATES: And what the ruler of a sick man ought to say: Will the reciter know that better than the doctor?

ION: No, he won't know that either.

SOCRATES: But you say he knows what a slave ought to say?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: If, for example, the slave is an oxherd, and his cattle are wild and he wants to calm them, you say the reciter will know what he ought to say, and not the oxherd?

ION: Oh dear, no.

SOCRATES: Then, what a woman ought to say about working wool, a woman whose business is to spin?

ION: No.

SOCRATES: Then he will know what a man ought to say if he is a general encouraging his troops?

ION: Yes, that is the sort of thing a reciter will know.

SOCRATES: Oh, the reciter's art is the general's art?

ION: I should know, at any rate, what the general ought to say.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you are something of a general, Ion. In fact, if you were something of a horseman as well as a harpist, you might know when horses were well or badly managed; but then I might ask you, "Which of the two arts, Ion, makes you know the well-managed horses? The art by which you are a horseman, or the art by which you are a harpist?" What would you answer me then?

ION: That which makes me a horseman.

SOCRATES: Well, if you could distinguish good performances on the harp, would you agree that you did it as being a harpist and not as a horseman?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, since you understand military matters, do you do so as being a bit of a general, or as being a good reciter?

ION: I think there's no difference.

SOCRATES: How's that—no difference? Do you say that reciting and generalship are one art, or two?

ION: One, I think.

SOCRATES: Then whoever is a good reciter is also really a good general?

ION: Certainly, my dear Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then whoever is really a good general is also a good reciter?

ION: No, I don't think that.

SOCRATES: But you do think that whoever is a good reciter is also a good general?

ION: By all means.

SOCRATES: Well, you are the best reciter in Hellas?

ION: Much the best, my dear Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then are you also the best general in Hellas?

ION: Yes, I assure you, Socrates; and I learnt it all from Homer.

SOCRATES: Good heavens, my dear Ion! You are the best man of the nation, both reciter and general! Then why do you career all round Hellas reciting, and don't general at all? Do you think there is a great need for a reciter in our nation, with a golden crown on his head, and no need at all for a general?

ION: The reason is, my dear Socrates, that my own city of Ephesus is under your state's rule and generalship, and needs no general of its own; and your state and Lacedaimon* would not choose me as general, for you think you are enough by yourselves.

SOCRATES: Dear old fellow, don't you know Apollodoros of Cyzicos?

ION: Who is he?

SOCRATES: One whom the Athenians have often chosen as general over themselves, although he is a foreigner. And Phanosthenes of Andros, and Heracleides of Clazomenai, they are both foreigners, but they proved themselves men of merit, and so this our city invites them in for generalships and other high offices. But not Ion of Ephesus, it seems! Will she not choose him as general, and honour him, if he is considered a man of merit? Why, aren't you Ephesians really Athenians in origin, and is not Ephesus no mean city?

But really, my dear Ion, if you are telling the truth when you say that by art and knowledge you are able to praise Homer, you are cheating me. You declared to me that you know any number of fine things about Homer, and you promised to make an exhibition; but you only deceive me, and there is no exhibition—far from it! You will not even tell me what these things are in which you are so clever, although I have been imploring you all this time. You are really nothing but a new Proteus, changing into all sorts of shapes, and twisting up and down, and at last you escaped me and turned into a general, all to avoid showing me how clever you are in the lore of Homer. Well, if you are an artist, and if you just promised to exhibit your art, and then deceived me, as I said just now, you are cheating; if you are not an artist, but are possessed by divine dispensation through Homer, and say all those fine things about the poet without knowing anything, as I described you, then you are not cheating. Choose, then, which you prefer us to believe you, a cheat or one divine.

ION: A great difference there, Socrates! It is much finer to be considered divine!

SOCRATES: Then that finer thing is yours, Ion, in our belief; you are divine, and not an artist, when you eulogize Homer.

MENO (Menon)

Menon, Socrates, A slave of Menon, Anytos

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This dialogue is a discussion of the nature of virtue and particularly the question whether virtue can be taught.

Menon was a wealthy young Thessalian nobleman. He took part, probably not long afterwards, as a Thessalian general in the famous expedition of the Ten Thousand under Cyrus in 401 B.C. against the King of Persia; he was captured, and was put to death by the King. Xenophon considered him a treacherous, self-seeking character (The March Up Country, ii. 5.28, translated by W. H. D. Rouse).

Anytos appears later as one of the three accusers at Socrates' trial.

MENON: Can you tell me, Socrates—can virtue be taught? Or if not, does it come by practice? Or does it come neither by practice nor by teaching, but do people get it by nature, or in some other way?

SOCRATES: My dear Menon, the Thessalians have always had a good name in our nation—they were always admired as good horsemen and men with full purses. Now, it seems to me, we must add brains to the list. Your friend Aristippos is a very good example, and his townsmen from Larissa. Gorgias* is the man who set it all going. As soon as he got there, all the Aleuadai* were at his feet—your own bosom friend Aristippos was one—not to mention the rest of Thessaly. Here's a custom he taught you, at least—to answer generously and without fear if anyone asked you a question; quite natural, of course, when one knows the answer. Just what he did himself; he was a willing victim of the civilised world of Hellas†—any Hellene might ask him anything he liked, and every mortal soul got his answer!

But here, my dear Menon, it is just the opposite. There is a regular famine of brains here, and your part of the world seems to hold a monopoly in that article. At least, if you do ask anyone here a question like that, all you will get is a laugh and—"My good man, you must think I am inspired! Virtue? Can it be taught? Or how does it come? Do I know that? So far from knowing whether it can be taught or can't be taught, I don't know even the least little thing about virtue, I don't even know what virtue is!"

I'm in the same fix myself, Menon. I am as poor of the article as the rest of us, and I have to blame myself that I don't know the least little thing about virtue, and when I don't know what a thing is, how can I know its quality? Take Menon, for example: If someone doesn't know in the least who Menon is, how can he know whether Menon is handsome or rich or even a gentleman, or perhaps just the opposite? Do you think he can?

MENON: Not I. But look here, Socrates, don't you really know what virtue is? Are we to give that report of you in Larissa?

SOCRATES: Just so, my friend, and more—I never met anyone who did, so far as I know.

MENON: What! Did not you meet Gorgias when he was here?

SOCRATES: Oh, yes.

MENON: Didn't you think he knew?

SOCRATES: I have rather a poor memory, Menon, so I can't say at the moment whether I did think so. But perhaps he did know, or perhaps you know what he said; kindly remind me, then, what he did say. You say it yourself, if you like; for I suppose you think as he thought.

MENON: Oh, yes.

SOCRATES: Then let us leave him out of it, since he is not here; tell me yourself, in heaven's name, Menon, what do you say virtue is? Tell me, and don't grudge it; it will be the luckiest lie I ever told if it turns out that you know and Gorgias knew, and I went and said I never met anyone who did know.

MENON: That is nothing difficult, my dear Socrates. First, if you like, a man's virtue, that is easy; this is a

man’s virtue: to be able to manage public business, and in doing it to help friends and hurt enemies, and to take care to keep clear of such mischief himself. Or, if you like, a woman’s virtue, there’s no difficulty there: she must manage the house well, and keep the stores all safe, and obey her husband. And a child’s virtue is different for boy and girl, and an older man’s, a freeman’s, if you like, or a slave’s, if you like. There are a very large number of other virtues, so there is no difficulty in saying what virtue is; for according to each of our activities and ages each of us has his virtue for doing each sort of work, and in the same way, Socrates, I think, his vice.

SOCRATES: I seem to have been lucky indeed, my dear Menon, if I have been looking for one virtue and found a whole swarm of virtues in your store. However, let us take up this image, Menon, the swarm. If I asked you what a bee really is, and you answered that there are many different kinds of bees, what would you answer me if I asked you then: “Do you say there are many different kinds of bees, differing from each other in being bees more or less? Or do they differ in some other respect, for example in size, or beauty, and so forth?” Tell me, how would you answer that question?

MENON: I should say that they are not different at all one from another in beehood.

SOCRATES: Suppose I went on to ask: “Tell me this, then—what do you say exactly is that in which they all are the same, and not different?” Could you answer anything to that?

MENON: Oh, yes.

SOCRATES: Very well, now then for virtues. Even if there are many different kinds of them, they all have one something, the same in all, which makes them virtues. So if one is asked, “What is virtue?” one must have this clear in his view before he can answer the question. Do you understand what I mean?

MENON: I think I understand; but I do not yet grasp your question as I could wish.

SOCRATES: Do you think that virtue alone is like that, Menon—I mean one thing in a man and another in a woman, and so forth, or do you also say the same of health and size and strength? Do you think health is one thing in a man, and another in a woman? Or is the essence the same everywhere if it be health, whether it be in a man or in anything else whatever?

MENON: I think health is the same thing in both man and woman.

SOCRATES: And what of size and strength? If a woman is strong, is it the same essence and the same strength which will make her strong? By the same strength I mean this: the strength is not different in itself whether it be in a man or a woman. Do you think there is any difference?

MENON: Why, no.

SOCRATES: Yet virtue will differ in itself in a boy and in an old man, in a woman and in a man?

MENON: I can’t help thinking, Socrates, that this is not quite like those other things.

SOCRATES: Very well: Did you not say that man’s virtue is to manage public affairs well, and woman’s to manage a home?

MENON: Yes, I did.

SOCRATES: Then is it possible to manage a state or a house or anything well, without managing temperately* and justly?

MENON: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: If, then, they manage temperately and justly, they will manage with temperance and justice?

MENON: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: Then both need the same things, if they are to be good, both woman and man—justice and temperance.

MENON: So it seems.

SOCRATES: What of the boy and the old man? If they are reckless and unjust, could they ever be good?

MENON: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: But they must be temperate and just?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then all men are good in the same way? For when they have the same things, they are good.

MENON: So It seems.

SOCRATES: Then I suppose if they had not the same virtue, they would not be good in the same way.

MENON: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Since therefore the same virtue is in all, try to tell me, and try to remember, what Gorgias says it is, and what you say too.

MENON: What can it be but to be able to rule men? If you want something which is the same in all.

SOCRATES: That is just what I do want. But is it the same virtue in a boy, Menon, and a slave, for each of them to be able to rule his master? And do you think he that ruled would still be a slave?

MENON: No, Socrates, I certainly don't think that.

SOCRATES: For it isn't reasonable, my good fellow. But here is another thing to consider. You say, "able to rule": shall we not add to it justly, not unjustly?

MENON: I think so, yes; for justice is virtue, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Virtue, Menon, or a virtue?

MENON: What do you mean by that?

SOCRATES: The same as in anything else. For example, if you please, take roundness: this I would say is a figure, not simply thus—figure. I would say so because there are other figures.

MENON: What you said was quite right, since I agree that there are other virtues besides justice.

SOCRATES: What are they, tell me, just as I would tell you other figures if you ask; then you tell me some other virtues.

MENON: Very well. Courage, I think, is a virtue and temperance and wisdom and high-mindedness and plenty more.

SOCRATES: Here we are again, Menon: We looked for one virtue and found many, although that was in another way; but the one that is in all these things we cannot find!

MENON: I can't see my way yet, Socrates, to find the one virtue you seek in them all, as we did with the other things.

SOCRATES: That is quite likely; but I will do my best to bring us a step forward, if I can. You understand, no doubt, that it is the same with everything: if someone should ask you what I mentioned just now: "What is figure, Menon?" and you said to him: "Roundness"; and if he asked you, as I would: "Is roundness figure or a figure?" I suppose you would say: "A figure."

MENON: Yes, to be sure.

SOCRATES: Because there are other figures, isn't that the reason?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if he asked further: "What other figures?", you would tell him?

MENON: So I would.

SOCRATES: And again, if he asked you in the same way what colour is, and you said, "White," the man would ask next, "Is white colour, or a colour?" And you would say, "A colour," because there are others.

MENON: I should.

SOCRATES: And if he requested you to tell him other colours, you would tell him others that are no less colours than white?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: If then he followed up the argument, like me, and said, "We always arrive at a multitude. I don't want that; but since you call these many by one name, and say they are all figures without exception, and that too even if they are opposite to each other, what is this which contains the round no less than the straight? You name it indeed figure, and say the round is no less figure than the straight." Is not that what you say?

MENON: It is.

SOCRATES: Well, when you say that, do you then mean that the round is no more round than the straight, or the straight no straighter than the round?

MENON: Not at all, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Yet you do say that the round is no more figure than the straight, or the straight than the round.

MENON: Quite true.

SOCRATES: Then what is this name, figure? Try to tell me. If someone asked you like that about colour or

figure, and you said, “My good man, I don’t understand what you want, and I don’t know what you mean,” perhaps he would have been surprised, and would have said, “Don’t you understand that I am looking for the common element in these?” Or would you have nothing to say, if someone should ask, “What is there in the round and straight and so forth, all that you call figures, the same in all?” Try to say, that you may have a little practice for your reply about virtue.

MENON: No, no, Socrates, you say.

SOCRATES: Shall I grant you that favour?

MENON: Please do!

SOCRATES: And then will you do me the favour of telling me about virtue?

MENON: Yes, yes.

SOCRATES: Then I must do my best; it is worth while.

MENON: That it is.

SOCRATES: Come along, then, let me try to tell you what figure is. Just think a moment: Will you accept this for it—let us suppose that figure is the only thing in the world which is always found along with colour. Good enough, eh? Or do you want something else? If you give me an answer like that about virtue, I shall be quite content, I assure you.

MENON: But that’s silly, my dear Socrates.

SOCRATES: How do you mean?

MENON: That figure, according to your statement, is what always goes with colour. Very well; but if someone said he didn’t know what colour is, and if he were in the same difficulty as about figure, what do you think you should have answered them?

SOCRATES: Only the truth! And if my questioner were one of these clever fellows, who just chop logic and argue to win, I should answer him, “I have said my say; if I am wrong, it is your business to take up the argument and to refute it.” But if we were friends, like you and me now, who wished to have a talk together, you see I must answer more gently and more like friends talking together; and perhaps it is more like friends talking together, not only to answer with truth, but to use only what the one who is questioned admits that he knows.

Then that is how I will try to talk with you. Tell me, if you please: Do you speak of an end of anything? I mean something like this, a boundary or a verge—these are all the same thing. Perhaps Prodicos* might not agree with us, but you at any rate say that a thing is bounded and ended; that’s the sort of thing I mean, nothing elaborate.

MENON: Oh yes, I use those words, and I think I understand you.

SOCRATES: Very well; you speak of a surface, or a solid as it may be, like those things in geometry.

MENON: Yes, I use those words.

SOCRATES: There’s enough then already for me to explain what I call figure. With every figure, I say that

to which the solid extends is the figure; to put it shortly, I would say that figure is the boundary of a solid.

MENON: And what is colour, Socrates?

SOCRATES: You're a bully, Menon; you worry an old man to answer questions, and you won't trouble to remember what Gorgias says virtue is.

MENON: Oh, I'll tell you that as soon as you tell me this, my dear Socrates!

SOCRATES: Anyone could tell you're a handsome man and have lovers, by only hearing you talk, even if he were blindfolded!

MENON: Why, pray?

SOCRATES: Because in your talk you do nothing but lay commands on people, like young society beauties who are regular tyrants as long as they are young and good-looking. And perhaps you have found me out already; I can't resist the handsome! So I will do you the favour of answering.

MENON: Yes, do me that favour.

SOCRATES: Then do you wish me to answer in the style of Gorgias, so that you could most easily follow?

MENON: Of course I do.

SOCRATES(imitating Gorgias): Well, you people say that emanations, or films, are given off from things—that is the science of Empedocles.

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And there are pores, or passages, and the emanations go pouring into them and through them?

MENON: Quite so.

SOCRATES: And some of the films fit some of the pores, but some are too small or too large?

MENON: That is true.

SOCRATES: You speak of sight also?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then from these things "Comprehend what I tell thee," as Pindar said: Colour is an emanation from figures, and is symmetrical with sight and perceptible by sense.

MENON(laughing): That is an excellent answer of yours, my dear Socrates.

SOCRATES: Perhaps because you are used to the way it is put. And at the same time, I think, you notice that you could define in this way what sound is, and smell, and many other such things?

MENON: Certainly, yes.

SOCRATES: Because the answer is in high poetic style, so you like it better than the one about figure.

MENON: I do, certainly.

SOCRATES: But it is not so good, my dear son of Alexidemos; I am convinced the other is better. And I think you would agree with me, if you were not obliged to go off before the Mysteries, as you said yesterday; you have only to stay and be initiated.

MENON: Oh, I would stay, my dear Socrates, if you would only go on talking like this!

SOCRATES: Indeed, my will shall not be wanting; I would go on talking like this for both our sakes, but I fear I shall not be able to go on talking like this for long. But now please try yourself to keep your promise to give me a general description of virtue—what it is; no more turning the singular into the plural, as witty people say whenever you smash something; just leave virtue sound and whole, and tell me what it is—I have shown you how to do it by my examples.

MENON: Then, my dear Socrates, virtue seems to me to be, as the poet says, “to rejoice in what is handsome and to be able”; I agree with the poet, and I say virtue is to desire handsome things and to be able to provide them.

SOCRATES: Do you say that the man who desires handsome things is desirous of good things?

MENON: By all means.

SOCRATES: Do you imply that there are some that desire bad things, and others good? Don’t you think, my dear fellow, that all desire good things?

MENON: No, I don’t.

SOCRATES: But some desire bad things?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Thinking the bad things to be good, you mean, or even recognising that they are bad, still they desire them?

MENON: Both, I think.

SOCRATES: Do you really think, my dear Menon, that anyone, knowing the bad things to be bad, still desires them?

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: What does he desire, do you say—to have them?

MENON: To have them; what else?

SOCRATES: Thinking that the bad things benefit him that has them, or knowing that they injure whoever gets them?

MENON: Some thinking that the bad things benefit, some also knowing that they injure.

SOCRATES: Do those who think that the bad things benefit know that the bad things are bad?

MENON: I don’t think that at all.

SOCRATES: Then it is plain that those who desire bad things are those who don’t know what they are, but they desire what they thought were good whereas they really are bad; so those who do not know what they are, but think they are good, clearly desire the good. Is not that so?

MENON: It really seems like it.

SOCRATES: Very well. Those who desire the bad things, as you say, but yet think that bad things injure whoever gets them, know, I suppose, that they themselves will be injured by them?

MENON: They must.

SOCRATES: But do not these believe that those who are injured are miserable in so far as they are injured?

MENON: They must believe that too.

SOCRATES: Miserable means wretched?

MENON: So I think.

SOCRATES: Well, is there anyone who wishes to be miserable and wretched?

MENON: I think not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then nobody desires bad things, my dear Menon, nobody, unless he wishes to be like that. For what is the depth of misery other than to desire bad things and to get them?

MENON: It really seems that is the truth, Socrates, and no one desires what is bad.

SOCRATES: You said just now, didn’t you, that virtue is to desire good things and to be able to provide them.

MENON: Yes, I did.

SOCRATES: Well, one part of what you said, the desiring, is in all, and in this respect one man is no better than another.

MENON: It seems so.

SOCRATES: It is clear, then, that if one is better than another, he must be better in the ability.

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Then according to your argument virtue is the power to get good things.

MENON: My dear Socrates, the whole thing, I must admit, seems to be exactly as you take it.

SOCRATES: Now let us see whether your last is true—perhaps you might be right. You say virtue is to be able to provide the good?

MENON: Quite so.

SOCRATES: Don’t you call good such things as health and wealth?

MENON: Yes, and to possess gold and silver and public honour and appointments.

SOCRATES: Don’t you say some other things are good besides these?

MENON: No, at least, I mean all such things as those.

SOCRATES: Very well; to provide gold and silver is virtue, according to Menon, the family friend of the Great King.* Do you add to your providing, my dear Menon, the qualification “fairly and justly”? Or does that make no difference to you, and if a man provides them unjustly, you call it virtue all the same?

MENON: Oh dear me no, Socrates.

SOCRATES: It is vice then.

MENON: Dear me, yes, of course.

SOCRATES: It is necessary then, as it seems, to add to this getting, justice or temperance or piety or some other bit of virtue; or else it will not be virtue, although it provides good things.

MENON: Why, how could it be virtue without these?

SOCRATES: And not to get gold and silver when that is not just, neither for yourself nor anyone, is not this not-getting also virtue?

MENON: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: Then the getting of such good things would not be virtue any more than the not-getting; but as it seems, getting with justice would be virtue, and getting without such qualifications, vice.

MENON: I think it must be as you put it.

SOCRATES: Now we said a little while ago that each of them is a bit of virtue, justice and temperance and all things like that.

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then are you making fun of me, Menon?

MENON: How so, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Because I begged you just now not to break virtue into bits, or give me virtue as a handful of small change, and I gave you specimens to show how you ought to answer; and you simply paid no attention—now you tell me virtue is to be able to get good things with justice, and justice, you say, is a bit of virtue!

MENON: Yes, that is what I say.

SOCRATES: It follows, then, from what you agree, that to do whatever we do along with a bit of virtue is virtue; for you say justice is a bit of virtue, and so with each of those bits. Well, why do I say this? Because when I begged you to tell me what whole virtue is, instead of telling me that (far from it!) you say that every

action is virtue if it be done with a bit of virtue, just as if you had explained what virtue is as a whole and I should know it at once even if you chopped your coin up into farthings. Then I must put the very same question from the beginning, as it seems: My dear friend Menon, what is virtue, if a little bit of virtue would make any action virtue? For that is as much as saying, whenever anyone says it, that all action with justice is virtue. Don't you think yourself that I must put the same question again, or do you believe that we can know what a bit of virtue is, when we do not know virtue itself?

MENON: I don't believe that.

SOCRATES: Perhaps you remember that when I answered you about figure a while ago, we excluded such an answer as might try to explain things by using what was not yet agreed between us but what we were seeking still.

MENON: We did right to exclude that.

SOCRATES: Then don't you do it now, my dear fellow! We are still trying to find out what virtue is as a whole, and pray do not believe you will make that clear to anyone by using bits of virtue in your answer. You will never explain anything to anyone by this same manner of speaking, but you will again come up against the same question, what this virtue is which you bring into your explanation. Do you think there's something in what I say?

MENON: I think you are quite right.

SOCRATES: Then begin again and answer: What is virtue, according to you and your friend?

MENON: Well now, my dear Socrates, you are just like what I always heard before I met you: always puzzled yourself and puzzling everybody else. And now you seem to me to be a regular wizard; you dose me with drugs and bewitch me with charms and spells, and drown me in puzzledom. I'll tell you just what you are like, if you will forgive a little jest: your looks and the rest of you are exactly like a flatfish and you sting like this stingray—only go near and touch one of those fish and you go numb, and that is the sort of thing you seem to have done to me. Really and truly, my soul is numb and my mouth is numb, and what to answer you I do not know. Yet I have a thousand times made long speeches about virtue, before many a large audience, and good speeches, too, as I was convinced; but now I have not a word to say at all as to what it is. I must say you are wise not to sail away or travel abroad; for if you did this as a foreigner in a foreign city, you would probably be run in for a wizard.

SOCRATES: You are a young rogue, Menon, and you almost took me in.

MENON: How, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I know why you made that comparison of me.

MENON: Why, do you think?

SOCRATES: That I might make another of you.* I know this—that all the famous beauties love being put into comparisons; it pays them, you see, for comparisons of the beautiful are beautiful, I think; but I will not do it with you in return. Well, if this stingray is numb itself as well as making others numb, I am like it; if not, I am not. For I am not clear-headed myself when I make others puzzled, but I am as puzzled as puzzled can be, and thus I make others puzzled too. So now, what virtue is I do not know; but you knew, perhaps, before you touched me, although now you resemble one who does not know. All the same, I wish to investigate, with your help, that we may both try to find out what it is.

MENON: And how will you try to find out something, Socrates, when you have no notion at all what it is? Will you lay out before us a thing you don't know, and then try to find it? Or, if at best you meet it by chance, how will you know this is that which you did not know?

SOCRATES: I understand what you wish to say, Menon. You look on this as a piece of chop-logic, don't you see, as if a man cannot try to find either what he knows or what he does not know. Of course he would never try to find what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case he needs no trying to find; or what he does not know, because he does not know what he will try to find.

MENON: Then you don't think that is a good argument, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Not I.

MENON: Can you tell me why?

SOCRATES: Oh yes. I have heard wise men and women on the subject of things divine—

MENON: And what did they say?

SOCRATES: True things and fine things, to my thinking.

MENON: What things, and who were the speakers?

SOCRATES: The speakers were some priests and priestesses who have paid careful attention to the things of their ministry, so as to be able to give a reasoned explanation of them; also inspired poets have something to say, Pindar and many others. What they say I will tell you; pray consider, if they seem to you to be speaking truth. They say that the soul of man is immortal, and sometimes it comes to an end—which they call death—and sometimes it is born again, but it is never destroyed; therefore we must live our lives as much as we can in holiness: for from whomsoever

Persephone shall accept payment for ancient wrong, She gives up again their souls to the upper sun in the ninth year;

From these grow lordly kings, and men of power and might,

And those who are chief in wisdom; these for time to come

Are known among men for holy heroes.*

Then, since the soul is immortal and often born, having seen what is on earth and what is in the house of Hades, and everything, there is nothing it has not learnt; so there is no wonder it can remember about virtue and other things, because it knew about these before. For since all nature is akin, and the soul has learnt everything, there is nothing to hinder a man, remembering one thing only—which men call learning†—from himself finding out all else, if he is brave and does not weary in seeking; for seeking and learning is all remembrance. Then we must not be guided by this chop-logic argument; for this would make us idle, and it is pleasant for soft people to hear, but our way makes them active and enquiring. I have faith that this is true, and I wish with your help to try to find out what virtue is.

MENON: Yes, Socrates. But what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, but what we call learning is remembering? Can you teach me how this is?

SOCRATES: You are a young rogue, as I said a moment ago, Menon, and now you ask me if I can teach

you, when I tell you there is no such thing as teaching, only remembering. I see you want to show me up at once as contradicting myself.

MENON: Is wear that isn't true, my dear Socrates; I never thought of that, it was just habit. But if you know any way to show me how this can be as you say, show away!

SOCRATES: That is not easy, but still I want to do my best for your sake. Here, just call up one of your own men from all this crowd of servants, any one you like, and I'll prove my case in him.

MENON: All right. (To a boy) Come here.

SOCRATES: Is he Greek, can he speak our language?

MENON: Rather! Born in my house.

SOCRATES: Now, kindly attend and see whether he seems to be learning from me, or remembering.

MENON: All right, I will attend.

SOCRATES: Now my boy, tell me: Do you know that a four-cornered space is like this? [Diagram 1]*

BOY: I do.

SOCRATES: Is this a four-cornered space having all these lines† equal, all four?

BOY: Surely.

SOCRATES: And these across the middle, are they not equal too?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Such a space might be larger or smaller?

BOY: Oh yes.

SOCRATES: Then if this side is two feet long and this two, how many feet would the whole be? Or look at it this way: if it were two feet this way, and only one the other, would not the space* be once two feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But as it is two feet this way also, isn't it twice two feet?

BOY: Yes, so it is.

SOCRATES: So the space is twice two feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then how many are twice two feet? Count and tell me.

BOY: Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Well, could there be another such space, twice as big, but of the same shape, with all the lines

equal like this one?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: How many feet will there be in that, then?

BOY: Eight.

SOCRATES: Very well, now try to tell me how long will be each line of that one. The line of this one is two feet; how long would the line of the double one be?

BOY: The line would be double, Socrates, that is clear.

SOCRATES(aside toMENON): You see, Menon, that I am not teaching this boy anything: I ask him everything; and now he thinks he knows what the line is from which the eight-[square] foot space is to be made. Don't you agree?

MENON: Yes, I agree.

SOCRATES: Does he know then?

MENON: Not at all.

SOCRATES: He thinks he knows, from the double size which is wanted?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, observe him while he remembers bit by bit, as he ought to remember.

Now, boy, answer me. You say the double space is made from the double line. You know what I mean; not long this way and short this way, it must be equal every way like this, but double this—eight [square] feet. Just look and see if you think it will be made from the double line.

BOY: Yes, I do.

SOCRATES: Then this line [ac]* is double this [ab], if we add as much [bc] to it on this side.

BOY: Of course!

SOCRATES: Then if we put four like this [ac], you say we shall get the eight-foot space.

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then let us draw these four equal lines [ac, cd, de, ea].†† Is that the space which you say will be eight feet?

BOY: Of course.

SOCRATES: Can't you see in it these four spaces here [A, B, C, D] each of them equal to the one we began with, the four-foot space?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Well, how big is the new one? Is it not four times the old one?

BOY: Surely it is!

SOCRATES: Is four times the old one, double?

BOY: Why no, upon my word!

SOCRATES: How big, then?

BOY: Four times as big!

SOCRATES: Then, my boy, from a double line we get a space four times as big, not double.

BOY: That's true.

SOCRATES: Four times four is sixteen, isn't it?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But what line will make an eight-foot space? This line makes one four times as big, sixteen, doesn't it?

BOY: That's what I say.

SOCRATES: And this four-foot space [A] comes from this line [ab], half the length of the long one?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Good. The eight-foot space will be double this [double A] and half this [half A, B, C, D].

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then its line must be longer than this [ab], and shorter than this [ac]. What do you think?

BOY: That's what I think.

SOCRATES: That's right, just answer what you think. Tell me also: Was not this line [ab] two feet, and this [ac] four?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the line of the eight-foot space must be longer than this line of two feet, and shorter than the line of four feet.

BOY: Yes, it must.

SOCRATES: Try to tell me, then, how long you say it must be.

BOY: Three feet.

SOCRATES: Three feet, very well: If we take half this bit [half of bc] and add it on, that makes three feet [af], doesn't it? For here we have two [ab], and here one [bf], the added bit; and, on the other side, in the

same way, here are two [ag], here one [gh]; and that makes the space you say [afkh].

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then if the space is three feet this way and three feet that way, the whole space will be three times three feet?

BOY: It looks like it.

SOCRATES: How much is three times three feet?

BOY: Nine.

SOCRATES: How many feet was the double to be?

BOY: Eight.

SOCRATES: So we have not got the eight-foot space from the three-feet line after all.

BOY: No, we haven't.

SOCRATES: Then how long ought the line to be? Try to tell us exactly, or if you don't want to give it in numbers, show it if you can.

BOY: Indeed, Socrates, on my word I don't know.

SOCRATES: Now, Menon, do you notice how this boy is getting on in his remembering? At first he did not know what line made the eight-foot space, and he does not know yet; but he thought he knew then, and boldly answered as if he did know, and did not think there was any doubt; now he thinks there is a doubt, and as he does not know, so he does not think he does know.

MENON: Quite true.

SOCRATES: Then he is better off as regards the matter he did not know?

MENON: Yes, I think so too.

SOCRATES: So now we have put him into a difficulty, and like the stingray we have made him numb, have we done him any harm?

MENON: I don't think so.

SOCRATES: At least we have brought him a step onwards, as it seems, to find out how he stands. For now he would go on contentedly seeking, since he does not know; but then he could easily have thought he would be talking well about the double space, even before any number of people again and again, saying how it must have a line of double length.

MENON: It seems so.

SOCRATES: Then do you think he would have tried to find out or to learn what he thought he knew, not knowing, until he tumbled into a difficulty by thinking he did not know, and longed to know?

MENON: I do not think he would, Socrates.

SOCRATES: So he gained by being numbed?

MENON: I think so.

SOCRATES: Just notice now that after this difficulty he will find out by seeking along with me, while I do nothing but ask questions and give no instruction. Look out if you find me teaching and explaining to him, instead of asking for his opinions.

Now, boy, answer me. Is not this our four-foot space [A]?* Do you understand?

BOY: I do.

SOCRATES: Shall we add another equal to it, thus [B]?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And a third equal to either of them, thus [C]?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Now shall we not also fill in this space in the corner [D]?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Won't these be four equal spaces?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Very well. How many times the small one is this whole space?

BOY: Four times.

SOCRATES: But we wanted a double space; don't you remember?

BOY: Oh yes, I remember.

SOCRATES: Then here is a line running from corner to corner, cutting each of these spaces in two parts [draws lines bm, mi, ig, gb].

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Are not these four lines equal, and don't they contain this space within them [bmig]?

BOY: Yes, that is right.

SOCRATES: Just consider: How big is the space?

BOY: I don't understand.

SOCRATES: Does not each of these lines cut each of the spaces, four spaces, in half? Is that right?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: How many spaces as big as that [blg] are in this middle space?

BOY: Four.

SOCRATES: How many in this one [A]?

BOY: Two.

SOCRATES: How many times two is four?

BOY: Twice.

SOCRATES: Then how many [square] feet big is this middle space?

BOY: Eight [square] feet.

SOCRATES: Made from what line?

BOY: This one [gb].

SOCRATES: From the line drawn from corner to corner of the four-foot space?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: The professors* call this a diameter [diagonal]: so if this is a diagonal, the double space would be made from the diagonal, as you say, Menon's boy!

BOY: Certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Now then, Menon, what do you think? Was there one single opinion which the boy did not give as his own?

MENON: No, they were all his own opinions.

SOCRATES: Yet he did not know, as we agreed shortly before.

MENON: Quite true, indeed.

SOCRATES: Were these opinions in him, or not?

MENON: They were.

SOCRATES: Then in one who does not know, about things he does not know, there are true opinions about the things which he does not know?

MENON: So it appears.

SOCRATES: And now these opinions have been stirred up in him as in a dream; and if someone will keep asking him these same questions often and in various forms, you can be sure that in the end he will know about them as accurately as anybody.

MENON: It seems so.

SOCRATES: And no one having taught him, only asked questions, yet he will know, having got the knowledge out of himself?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: But to get knowledge out of yourself is to remember, isn't it?

MENON: Certainly it is.

SOCRATES: Well then: This knowledge which he now has—he either got it sometime, or he had it always?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then if he had it always, he was also always one who knew; but if he got it sometime, he could not have got it in this present life. Or has someone taught him geometry? For he will do just these same things in all matters of geometry, and so with all other sciences. Then is there anyone who has taught him everything? You are sure to know that, I suppose, especially since he was born and brought up in your house.

MENON: Well, I indeed know that no one has ever taught him.

SOCRATES: Has he all these opinions, or not?

MENON: He has, Socrates. It must be so.

SOCRATES: Then if he did not get them in this life, is it not clear now that he had them and had learnt at some other time?

MENON: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Is not that the time when he was not a man?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then if both in the time when he is a man and when he isn't there are to be true opinions in him, which are awakened by questioning and become knowledge, will not his soul have understood them for all time? For it is clear that through all time he either is or is not a man.

MENON: That's clear.

SOCRATES: Then if the truth of things is always in our soul, the soul must be immortal; so that what you do not know now by any chance—that is, what you do not remember—you must boldly try and find out and remember?

MENON: You seem to me to argue well, Socrates. I don't know how you do it.

SOCRATES: Yes, I think that I argue well, Menon. I would not be confident in everything I say about the argument; but one thing I would fight for to the end, both in word and deed if I were able—that if we believed that we must try to find out what is not known, we should be better and braver and less idle than if we believed that what we do not know it is impossible to find out and that we need not even try.

MENON: I think you argue well there too, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Very well. Since we agree that we must try to find out about what we do not know, shall we do our best to find out together what is virtue?

MENON: By all means. However, my dear friend, I should very much like to consider and to hear what I began by asking, whether we ought to tackle what virtue is as being something which can be taught, or as if men get it by nature or in some other way.

SOCRATES: But if I were your master, Menon, as well as master of myself, we should not consider beforehand whether virtue can be taught or not until we had tried to find out first what virtue really is. But since you make no attempt to master yourself—I suppose you want to be a free man—but you do attempt to master me, and you do master me! I will give way to you—for what else am I to do?—and it seems we must consider what qualities a thing has when we don't know yet what it is. Please relax at least one little tittle of your mastery, and give way so far that we may use a hypothesis to work from, in considering whether it can come by teaching or in some other way. I mean by hypothesis what the geometricians often envisage, a standing ground to start from; when they are asked, for instance, about a space, "Is it possible to inscribe this triangular space in this circle?" They will say, "I don't know yet whether it can be done, but I think I have, one may say, a useful hypothesis to start from, such as this: If the space is such that when you apply it to the given line* of the circle, it is deficient by a space of the same size as that which has been applied, one thing appears to follow, and if this be impossible, another.* I wish, then, to make a hypothesis before telling you what will happen about the inscribing of it in the circle, whether that be possible or not."

There now, let us take virtue in that way. Since we don't know what it is or what it is like, let us make our hypothesis or ground to stand on, and then consider whether it can be taught or not. We proceed as follows: If virtue is a quality among the things which are about the soul, would virtue be teachable, or not? First, if it is like or unlike knowledge, can it be taught or not, or as we said just now, can it be remembered—we need not worry which name we use—but can it be taught? Or is it plain to everyone that only one thing is taught to men, and that is knowledge?

MENON: So it seems to me at least.

SOCRATES: Then if virtue is a knowledge, it is plain that it could be taught.

MENON: Of course.

SOCRATES: We have soon done with that—if it is such, it can be taught, if not such, not.

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Now we have to consider, as it seems, whether virtue is a knowledge or something distinct from knowledge.

MENON: Agreed, that must be considered next.

SOCRATES: Very well. Don't we say that virtue is a good thing? This hypothesis holds for us, that it is good?

MENON: We do say so.

SOCRATES: Then if there is something good, and yet separate from knowledge, possibly virtue would not be a knowledge, but if there is no good which knowledge does not contain, it would be a right notion to suspect that it is a knowledge.

MENON: That is true.

SOCRATES: Further, by virtue we are good?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if good, helpful; for all good things are helpful. Are they not?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And virtue, therefore, is helpful?

MENON: That must follow from what we have agreed.

SOCRATES: Let us consider then, taking up one by one, what sorts of things are helpful to us. Health, we say, and strength, and good looks, and wealth, of course; these and things like these we say are helpful, eh?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: And these same things we say do harm sometimes also; do you agree with that?

MENON: I do.

SOCRATES: Consider then what leads each of these when it is helpful to us, and what leads each when it does harm. Are they not helpful when led by right use, and harmful when they are not?

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Let us pass on then, and consider the things that concern the soul. You speak of temperance and justice and courage and cleverness at learning and memory and high-mindedness, and all such things?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Look now; such of these as seem to you to be not knowledge but different from knowledge, are they not sometimes harmful and sometimes helpful? For example courage, if courage is not intelligence but something like boldness; is it not true that when a man is bold without sense, he is harmed, but when with sense, he is helped?

MENON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Is it not the same with temperance and cleverness at learning? When things learnt are accompanied by sense and are fitted in their proper places they are helpful; without sense, harmful?

MENON: Very much so.

SOCRATES: Then, in short, all the stirrings and endurings of the soul, when wisdom leads, come to happiness in the end, but when senselessness leads, to the opposite?

MENON: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Then if virtue is one of the things in the soul, and if it must necessarily be helpful, it must be wisdom: since quite by themselves all the things about the soul are neither helpful nor harmful, but they become helpful or harmful by the addition of wisdom or senselessness.

According to this argument, virtue, since it is helpful, must be some kind of wisdom.

MENON: I think so.

SOCRATES: Very well then, come now to the other things we mentioned a while since, wealth and so forth, and said they were sometimes good and sometimes harmful. When wisdom led any soul it made the things of the soul helpful, didn't it, and senselessness made them harmful: so also with these, the soul makes them helpful when it uses them rightly and leads them rightly, but harmful when not rightly?

MENON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: The sensible soul leads them rightly, the senseless wrongly?

MENON: That is true.

SOCRATES: Then cannot we say this as a general rule: In man everything else depends on the soul; but the things of the soul itself depend on wisdom, if it is to be good; and so by this argument the helpful would be wisdom—and we say virtue is helpful.

MENON: We do.

SOCRATES: Then we say virtue is wisdom, either in whole or in part?

MENON: I think what we say is well said, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then if this is right, nature would not make men good.

MENON: I think not.

SOCRATES: Here is another thing, surely: If good men were good by nature, we should have persons who could distinguish those young ones who were good in their nature, and we might take them over as they were indicated and keep them safe in the acropolis, and hallmark them more carefully than fine gold, that no one might corrupt them, but that when they grew up they should be useful to their cities.

MENON: Quite likely that, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then since the good are not good by nature, is it by learning?

MENON: I really think that must be so; and it is plain, my dear Socrates, according to the hypothesis, that if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught.

SOCRATES: Yes, by Zeus, perhaps, but what if we were wrong in admitting that?

MENON: Well, it did seem just then to be a right conclusion.

SOCRATES: But what if we ought not to have agreed that it was right enough for then only, but for now also and all future time, if it is to be sound?

MENON: Why, what now? What makes you dissatisfied and distrustful? Do you think virtue is not knowledge?

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