MENO
by Plato
translated by Benjamin Jowett

Characters: Socrates and Meno

Soc. By the gods, Meno, be generous, and tell me what you say that virtue is; for I shall be truly delighted to find that I have been mistaken, and that you and Gorgias do really have this knowledge; although I have been just saying that I have never found anybody who had.

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

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

Meno I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.

Soc. And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike; would you be able to answer?

Meno I should.

Soc. And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed: Do you understand?

Meno I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish.

Soc. When you say, Meno, that there is one virtue of a man, another of a woman, another of a child, and so on, does this apply only to virtue, or would you say the same of health, and size, and strength? Or is the nature of health always the same, whether in man or woman?

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

Soc. And is not this true of size and strength? If a woman is strong, she will be strong by reason of the same form and of the same strength subsisting in her which there is in the man. I mean to say that strength, as strength, whether of man or woman, is the same. Is there any difference?

Meno I think not.

Soc. And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man?

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

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

**Meno** I did say so.

**Soc.** And can either house or state or anything be well ordered without temperance and without justice?

**Meno** Certainly not.

**Soc.** Then they who order a state or a house temperately or justly order them with temperance and justice?

**Meno** Certainly.

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

**Meno** True.

**Soc.** And can either a young man or an elder one be good, if they are intemperate and unjust?

**Meno** They cannot.

**Soc.** They must be temperate and just?

**Meno** Yes.

**Soc.** Then all men are good in the same way, and by participation in the same virtues?

**Meno** Such is the inference.

**Soc.** And they surely would not have been good in the same way, unless their virtue had been the same?

**Meno** They would not.

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

**Meno** Will you have one definition of them all?

**Soc.** That is what I am seeking.

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

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

**Meno** I think not, Socrates.

**Soc.** No, indeed; there would be small reason in that. Yet once more, fair friend; according to you, virtue is "the power of governing"; but do you not add "justly and not unjustly"?

**Meno** Yes, we must