

Selections from Plato's *Meno* and *Theaetetus* on the definition of 'knowledge'

Plato, *Meno* (Benjamin Jowett, tr.) 96d-98b

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*Soc.* I am afraid, Meno, that you and I are not good for much, and that Gorgias has been as poor an educator of you as Prodicus has been of me. Certainly we shall have to look to ourselves, and try to find some one who will help in some way or other to improve us. This I say, because I observe that in the previous discussion none of us remarked that right and good action is possible to man under other guidance than that of knowledge;—and indeed if this be denied, there is no seeing how there can be any good men at all.

*Men.* How do you mean, Socrates?

*Soc.* I mean that good men are necessarily useful or profitable. Were we not right in admitting this? It must be so.

*Men.* Yes.

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

*Men.* Yes.

*Soc.* But when we said that a man cannot be a good guide unless he have knowledge, this we were wrong.

*Men.* What do you mean by the word "right"?

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

*Men.* Certainly.

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

*Men.* Certainly.

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

*Men.* Exactly.

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

*Men.* True.

*Soc.* Then right opinion is not less useful than knowledge?

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

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

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

*Soc.* And shall I explain this wonder to you?

*Men.* Do tell me.

*Soc.* You would not wonder if you had ever observed the images of Daedalus; but perhaps you have not got them in your country?

*Men.* What have they to do with the question?

*Soc.* Because they require to be fastened in order to keep them, and if they are not fastened they will play truant and run away.

*Men.* Well. what of that?

*Soc.* I mean to say that they are not very valuable possessions if they are at liberty, for they will walk off like runaway slaves; but when fastened, they are of great value, for they are really beautiful works of art. Now this is an illustration of the nature of true opinions: while they abide with us they are beautiful and fruitful, but they run away out of the human soul, and do not remain long, and therefore they are not of much value until they are fastened by the tie of the cause; and this fastening of them, friend Meno, is recollection, as you and I have agreed to call it. But when they are bound, in the first place, they have the nature of knowledge; and, in the second place, they are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more honourable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain.

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

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

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

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Plato, *Theaetetus* (Benjamin Jowett, tr.) 200d-202d

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*Soc.* Then, once more, what shall we say that knowledge is?—for we are not going to lose heart as yet.

*Theaet.* Certainly, I shall not lose heart, if you do not.

*Soc.* What definition will be most consistent with our former views?

*Theaet.* I cannot think of any but our old one, Socrates.

*Soc.* What was it?

*Theaet.* Knowledge was said by us to be true opinion; and true opinion is surely unerring, and the results which follow from it are all noble and good.

*Soc.* He who led the way into the river, Theaetetus, said “The experiment will show”; and perhaps if we go forward in the search, we may stumble upon the thing which we are looking for; but if we stay where we are, nothing will come to light.

*Theaet.* Very true; let us go forward and try.

*Soc.* The trail soon comes to an end, for a whole profession is against us.

*Theaet.* How is that, and what profession do you mean?

*Soc.* The profession of the great wise ones who are called orators and lawyers; for these persuade men by their art and make them think whatever they like, but they do not teach them. Do you imagine that there are any teachers in the world so clever as to be able to convince others of the truth about acts of robbery or violence, of which they were not eyewitnesses, while a little water is flowing in the clepsydra?

*Theaet.* Certainly not, they can only persuade them.

*Soc.* And would you not say that persuading them is making them have an opinion?

*Theaet.* To be sure.

*Soc.* When, therefore, judges are justly persuaded about matters which you can know only by seeing them, and not in any other way, and when thus judging of them from report they attain a true opinion about them, they judge without knowledge and yet are rightly persuaded, if they have judged well.

*Theaet.* Certainly.

*Soc.* And yet, O my friend, if true opinion in law courts and knowledge are the same, the perfect judge could not have judged rightly without knowledge; and therefore I must infer that they are not the same.

*Theaet.* That is a distinction, Socrates, which I have heard made by some one else, but I had forgotten it. He said that true opinion, combined with reason, was knowledge, but that the opinion which had no reason was out of the sphere of knowledge; and that things of which there is no rational account are not knowable—such was the singular expression which he used—and that things which have a reason or explanation are knowable.

*Soc.* Excellent; but then, how did he distinguish between things which are and are not “knowable”? I wish that you would repeat to me what he said, and then I shall know whether you and I have heard the same tale.

*Theaet.* I do not know whether I can recall it; but if another person would tell me, I think that I could follow him.

*Soc.* Let me give you, then, a dream in return for a dream:—Methought that I too had a dream, and I heard in my dream that the primeval letters or elements out of which you and I and all other things are compounded, have no reason or explanation; you can only name them, but no predicate can be either affirmed or denied of them, for in the one case existence, in the other non-existence is already implied, neither of which must be added, if you mean to speak of this or that thing by itself alone. It should not be called itself, or that, or each, or alone, or this, or the like; for these go about everywhere and are applied to all things, but are distinct from them; whereas, if the first elements could be described, and had a definition of their own, they would be spoken of apart from all else. But none of these primeval elements can be defined; they can only be named, for they have nothing but a name, and the things which are compounded of them, as they are complex, are expressed by a combination of names, for the combination of names is the essence of a definition. Thus, then, the elements or letters are only objects of perception, and cannot be defined or known; but the syllables or combinations of them are known and expressed, and are apprehended by true opinion. When, therefore, any one forms the true opinion of anything without rational explanation, you may say that his mind is truly exercised, but has no knowledge; for he who cannot give and receive a reason for a thing, has no knowledge of that thing; but when he adds rational explanation, then, he is perfected in knowledge and may be all that I have been denying of him. Was that the form in which the dream appeared to you?

*Theaet.* Precisely.

*Soc.* And you allow and maintain that true opinion, combined with definition or rational explanation, is knowledge?

*Theaet.* Exactly.

*Soc.* Then may we assume, Theaetetus, that to-day, and in this casual manner, we have found a truth which in former times many wise men have grown old and have not found?

*Theaet.* At any rate, Socrates, I am satisfied with the present statement.

*Soc.* Which is probably correct—for how can there be knowledge apart from definition and true opinion? And yet there is one point in what has been said which does not quite satisfy me.

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