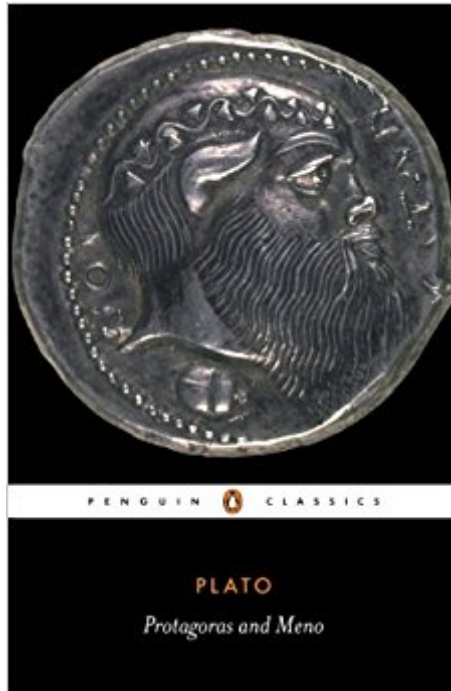




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# Protagoras And Meno (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Plato's finest dramatic work, an entertaining tale of goodness and knowledgeExploring the question of what exactly makes good people good, Protagoras and Meno are two of the most enjoyable and accessible of all of Plato's dialogues. Widely regarded as his finest dramatic work, the Protagoras, set during the golden age of Pericles, pits a youthful Socrates against the revered sophist Protagoras, whose brilliance and humanity make him one the most interesting and likeable of Socrates' philosophical opponents, and turns their encounter into a genuine and lively battle of minds. The Meno sees an older but ever ironic Socrates humbling a proud young aristocrat as they search for a clear understanding of what it is to be a good man, and setting out the startling idea that all human learning may be the recovery of knowledge already possessed by our immortal souls. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.) founded the Academy in Athens, the prototype of all Western

universities, and wrote more than twenty philosophical dialogues. Lesley Brown is Centenary Fellow in Philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford, and the author of numerous articles and book chapters on Plato and Aristotle.

The protagonist of all of Plato's dialogues is, of course, Socrates – a fact that makes the dialogues as frustrating as they are delightful. The delights are many and considerable – we'll get to in a moment. The frustrations come from what philosophers and scholars refer to as the "Socrates problem" – the fact that (a) Socrates, as far as we know, never wrote anything himself, and (b) Plato never openly states his own opinions and convictions, but rather always speaks through Socrates. When is a particular dialogue expressing what Socrates really said, and when is it presenting what Plato finds it convenient for Socrates to say? An impossible question to answer definitively, especially when one considers that the Socrates of one dialogue may (and sometimes does) contradict the Socrates of another dialogue. Those frustrations acknowledged, let us get on to the delights of Plato. The dialogues are splendid in their variety, working as literature just as well as they do as philosophy. The characterization is rich; the dramatic tension is considerable; the social criticism of the Athens of Plato's time is incisive; the themes leave any reader, not just the philosopher, with much to think about. The dialogues brought together for this Penguin Books edition, "Protagoras and Meno," seem to have been written at different times in Plato's literary career; but they are united by their interest in the question of what it means to be a good person, or how to live a good life. More specifically, both dialogues address the question of whether moral goodness can be a matter of pedagogy; as Meno puts it at the beginning of his dialogue, "[I]s being good something you can be taught? Or does it come with practice rather than being teachable? Or is it something that doesn't come with practice or learning; does it just come to people naturally? Or some other way?" (p. 85) Interesting possibilities all – and Plato explores them all quite thoroughly in these two short dialogues. The "Protagoras" (a dialogue also known as "The Sophist") is distinctive in part for its presentation of a young Socrates. We are so used to Socrates as a wise elder statesman correcting some young

man, that it is something of a surprise to see a youthful Socrates, of age 35 or so, cutting his philosophical teeth in a contest of wits with a noted itinerant sophist whose name, unsurprisingly, is Protagoras. Unlike some of Socrates' interlocutors in other dialogues, Protagoras of Abdera doesn't

seem like a bad sort; he truly believes that “when it comes to helping someone become a good and decent man, I can offer something out of the ordinary” (p. 29), and he even offers unsatisfied customers the chance to donate his fee to the local temple instead! The setting is Athens in approximately the year 435 B.C., a few years before the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. The scene is a gathering of a sort of All-Star Team of sophists – Protagoras, Prodicus of Ceos, Hippias of Elis – at the home of Callias, the wealthiest man in all of Athens. Also in attendance is Critias, a rich Athenian who enjoys philosophy and is himself the subject of another Platonic dialogue, along with the 18-year-old Alcibiades. Greek readers of Plato’s time would have known only too well that Alcibiades, a man whose good looks and charm were complemented by his lack of scruples, would later rise to leadership of Athens during the Peloponnesian War, and would at various times offer his services to (a) his Athenian homeland, (b) the Spartan enemy, and (c) Persian agents from the empire next door. Whatever Socrates may have tried to teach Alcibiades regarding ethical consistency, clearly it didn’t take. What has brought Socrates to this gathering of sophists and philosophers is the eagerness of his youthful friend Hippocrates to become a student of Protagoras. With characteristic modesty, Socrates at first expresses reluctance to engage with Protagoras in a battle of ideas; but the others there present emphasize that they are all there together in Athens, the world headquarters of philosophy, and that it would be a disgrace if we failed to produce anything worthy of this prestigious occasion (p. 43). Thus subjected to this bit of philosophical peer pressure, Socrates and Protagoras begin their conversation. For modern readers, the extended exercise in literary criticism, imagining how the poet Simonides and the general Pittacus of Mitylene (one of the Seven Sages of Greece) might have disagreed regarding the possibilities of being or becoming good, may be a case of something being lost in translation. Perhaps it reads better in the original classical Greek, or perhaps it is a matter of our not being immersed in these cultural referents the way Plato and the readers of his time were. To try to draw a comparable scenario for American readers, we might find it fun and interesting to imagine, for example, Union General Ulysses S. Grant disagreeing with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow regarding a line or two in “Evangeline” or, in a Southern vein, Confederate General Robert E. Lee taking Edgar Allan Poe to task for a wayward stanza from “The Raven.” But how much would that do for future readers from some yet unknown culture in, say, the year 4417? But nothing is lost from the methodical manner in which Socrates exposes Protagoras’ preconceptions and assumptions regarding the supposed teachability of goodness. Protagoras has no real answer for Socrates’ suggestion that “when people make mistakes in

choosing pleasures and pains— they make those mistakes through a lack of knowledge—, or that the cause of that mistake is ignorance— (p. 73). Indeed, as the dialogue goes on, Protagoras gets more and more sulky and unresponsive, saying things like “You can finish it off yourself—” or “You don’t let up, do you, Socrates?” or “Well, all right, I’ll say it, if it makes you happy—” (pp. 78-79). Yet to his credit, Protagoras is gracious about being shown up by Socrates in this manner, saying that “you’re by far the most impressive man I’ve met—”, and adding that “I wouldn’t be surprised if you ended up as a pretty famous name in philosophy—” (p. 80). How Protagoras was as a sophist, we don’t know; but if he said this, as Plato shows him saying it, he knew a good philosopher when he met one, and was damned near oracular when it came to predicting future developments in classical Greek philosophy. “Meno,” which also has the decidedly Ciceronian-sounding title “On Being Good,” is set much later in time— around 402 B.C., after Athens has been defeated by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, and has been placed under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants. It may also be the richest in dramatic irony of all Plato’s dialogues, because of two of Socrates’ three interlocutors for this dialogue— the young nobleman Meno of Thessaly, and the Athenian leader Anytus. A Greek reader of Plato’s time would know that within a year after participating in this dialogue, Meno would take service with a mercenary army seeking to overthrow the Persian emperor, and would be captured and killed by the Persians (put to death in a prolonged and painful way, if Xenophon’s testimony from the “Anabasis” is accurate). And within two years after that, Anytus would be among the Athenian politicians accusing Socrates of impiety and corrupting the young, and securing Socrates’ conviction and execution. Imagine an American dialogue where two characters are speaking in a coffee shop inside the World Trade Center on September 10, 2001, and one character says to the other, “I’ll meet you back here day after tomorrow—” and I think you’ll get the idea. As is so often the case in Socratic dialogues, Socrates must get at the hidden assumptions that his partner in conversation holds but is not aware of; and as always, when he is dealing with someone who is a bit of an “*exyprn̄kias*, or know-it-all), his partner is not always happy with being led into logical contradictions. The *Meno* must be the only work of Plato where Socrates gets compared to a numbfish or electric ray from the family *Narcinidae*: as Meno puts it, “You certainly look like a numbfish, and you’re just the same in other ways as well: because you know what a numbfish does? It makes anyone that gets too close and touches it, go numb; and that’s pretty much what I think you’ve done to me. My mind and my

tongue have literally gone numb. I've got no idea how to answer the question (p. 99). Yet Socrates is not put off by Meno's deployment of the numbfish metaphor, stating that "unless a numbfish feels numb itself when it makes other people feel numb, then I'm not like a numbfish. Because it's not as if I've got all the answers myself when I baffle other people. I only make other people feel baffled by being more baffled than anyone myself" (p. 100). In the same way, Socrates tries to put the quietus to what philosophers now describe as Meno's paradox: "that famous quibbler's argument, the one that says that it's impossible to try to find out about anything 'either what you know or what you don't know' (p. 100). Many readers will no doubt respond positively, as I did, to Socrates' ultimate refutation of Meno's paradox: "[T]he idea that we'd be better people 'more energetic, less lazy' if we felt that it was our duty to find out whatever we don't know, instead of thinking that discovering what we don't know isn't even possible, and that there's no point in even trying" that's a claim I will keep fighting for, as best I can, in everything I say and do" (p. 113). Like the "Protagoras," the "Meno" features at its center an elaborate philosophical conceit that may not work for modern readers as well as it may have worked for Athenians of Plato's time. Speaking with one of Meno's slaves, Socrates offers the enslaved man (who has had no formal schooling) a geometry lesson, to support his claim that all knowledge is buried somewhere within us and has to be re-remembered "or, to put it another way, that there's no such thing as learning, only remembering" (p. 102). For my part, I found the math lesson more enjoyable than Socrates' attempts to establish that the math lesson supports his claim about human memory and knowledge. Perhaps you'll respond differently. Socrates' development of the idea "that being good is a kind of wisdom" (p. 117) is interrupted by the arrival of Anytus, who mouths with tiresome regularity clichés about how it's easy to be a good person, if only you follow the laws and honour the gods. When Socrates points out, quite logically, that there are plenty of eminently good Athenians whose sons turned out as

kalō-gia-tō-pota, good-for-nothings), Anytus does not take it well: "Socrates, it seems to me you're rather casual about badmouthing people. Personally, I'd advise you to watch your back, if you know what's good for you" (p. 125). Plato's look ahead to Anytus' prosecution of Socrates in 399 B.C. is unmistakable. I was troubled by Socrates' claim that "true opinion is just as good a guide to right action as knowledge" (p. 129); have there

not been many people who have committed atrocious acts in the belief that true opinion was leading them to carry out right action? Yet his suggestion that *being good* is not something that comes to us naturally, or something that can be taught; instead, it seems it arises by gift of god, and without understanding, in the people who have it (p. 133) is certainly thought-provoking exactly as Plato would have wanted it. With a helpful introduction and footnotes by Lesley Brown of Somerville College, Oxford, this edition of "Protagoras and Meno" can serve as a valuable companion text for anyone who is on his or her own personal quest toward trying to be a good person and live a good life.

One of the best classical novels out there, although this one may take some time to get into. I had to reread each section over and over until I understood what was going on. It was frustrating at first, but I am glad I kept at it. A good read with plenty of food for thought. Every adolescent should read this novel.

This copy does have standard pagination and Stephanus numbers. Needed this for a class. Anyone else looking for these markings will find it in this copy for Meno and Protagoras. Shame on for not giving at least one sample page of the actual translation so customers would know this!

I've read the translations of Plato's Meno by Guthrie and Waterfield, and I like Beresford's the most. The passage in the Meno (82b-85b) on doubling a square is hugely important in the history of Greek mathematics, since only fragments - not a single full work - survive from geometry before Plato. Because this passage is so important in the history of mathematics, it deserves some mathematical attention in the commentary, which it is not given. It is puzzling that Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, is not in the bibliography: this is a line by line reading of the Meno by one of the few classicists who feel at home with mathematics. (Most of the commentary is not about mathematics, but when mathematics appears, Klein has perceptive things to say.)

The penguin edition was the first edition of Meno I've read, the other is the Hackett edition. Between the two the Penguin does seem easier to understand and has better sentence structure, but I don't know which is more accurate. One of the big differences between the two is the Penguin edition uses "Good" where as the Hackett uses "Virtue". This edition also contains way better footnotes. Protagoras was my first introduction to Plato, but sadly I read it a while ago and I don't really remember much. The impression I got at the time was that Socrates sure likes to hear himself

speaking. The part I remember best is where Protagoras gives a half page reply to one of Socrates questions which causes Socrates to rant for 5 pages about how he's leaving if Protagoras can't answer his questions more direct with less words, oddly later on when Protagoras asks Socrates questions, most of his answers are far longer than Protagoras's. In any case I definitely need to read this again. I've recently read Meno again and it was pretty good, not the best Socrates dialogue but I did like it more on second readings. I think reading a few more of Plato's dialogues did cause me to like Socrates far more. It was somewhat interesting, Socrates meets with Meno to discuss what virtue is and how can it be acquired. Meno seems to have some ideas but he comes in contact with a broad torpedo fish (Socrates) and this leaves him numb and in a state of perplexity, in the end we're not really sure what virtue is but we know a few things it's not. The thing this seems to be best remembered for a part where Socrates questions a slave to prove that souls already learned everything before inhabiting a human. To prove this Socrates asks a series of leading questions which the slave gets wrong but then upon further leading questions he figures out the answer. This seems to prove the pre-knowledge to everyone, although I don't see how anyone getting some questions right when they're lead to the conclusion to prove anything.

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