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## RECOLLECTION AND THE ARGUMENT ‘FROM A HYPOTHESIS’ IN PLATO’S *MENO*

### INTRODUCTION

THE dialogue begins with Meno’s peremptory request: ‘Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue can be taught, or is it acquired by practice, not teaching . . .?’ (70a). Socrates protests that he does not know what virtue is, and hence cannot know whether it is teachable or not, explaining that in general if one does not know what a thing is, *τί ἐστι*, one cannot know what it is like, *ὅποῖον* (71b). He insists that the prior question of what virtue is must be settled before consideration of the subsequent question of whether it is teachable or not.

In accordance with this principle, Socrates gets Meno to make attempts to offer a general definition of virtue. As in earlier dialogues, Socrates quickly reduces his interlocutor to *aporia*, and Meno refuses to make further attempts at defining virtue on the ground that no criterion of truth exists. Socrates sums up his argument thus: ‘It is impossible for a man to enquire into what he knows or into what he does not know. For he cannot enquire into what he knows, because he knows it, and there is no need for enquiry; nor again can he enquire into what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to enquire into’ (80e). Socrates describes this paradox as a piece of eristic, but he does not dismiss it. To resolve it, he introduces the theory of recollection, *ἀνάμνησις* (81a–e).

To demonstrate the truth of this theory, Socrates proceeds to teach, or rather help one of Meno’s illiterate slaves who speaks Greek to recollect, how to construct a square twice the size of a given square. This he does with the aid of diagrams drawn in the sand and skilful questioning. The upshot is that the slave gets to understand that the square of the diagonal is twice the size of the given square. Socrates claims that the slave has always possessed this piece of knowledge—he has not really taught him anything; he has only helped him to recollect what he already knew. Socrates, however, does not say that at this stage the slave has knowledge properly so called; what he has is true opinion, *ἀληθὴς δόξα*. He does claim, however, that this true opinion, namely that the square of the diagonal is twice the size of the given square, *can* be converted into knowledge by further questioning (85c). This process is later described as tying down the true opinion ‘by reasoning out the cause’, *αἰτίας λογισμῷ*, and this is said to be recollection (98a).

Having thus justified enquiry, Socrates invites Meno once more to proceed with their joint enquiry into the nature of virtue. Meno, however, is not at all enthusiastic; he rather wants to find out first how virtue is acquired. Then follows this crucial passage:

I will yield to you—what else am I to do? It seems then that we are to consider of what sort a thing is when we do not know what it is. But perhaps you would relax your authority just slightly, and allow the question whether virtue comes by teaching or some other means to be examined ‘from a hypothesis’ (*ἐξ ὑποθέσεως*) (86d–e).

On the strength of this passage scholars have sometimes all too readily assumed that the following argument ‘from a hypothesis’ marks the abandonment of the enquiry into the nature of virtue, and that it has nothing whatever to do with recollection and the search for the definition of virtue in the dialogue. As Bluck<sup>1</sup> puts it: ‘The real *οὐσία* of virtue could only be discovered by recollection, and the attempt to define it has been abandoned. The result is that throughout this discussion, since the introduction of the hypothetical method, virtue has strictly speaking been an unknown quantity. . . .’ That is to say, having taken the trouble to demonstrate to the satisfaction of Meno in that long ‘Slave passage’ (82b–85c) that *all* learning is recollection, and having carefully pointed out a correspondence between the stages in the slave’s

<sup>1</sup> R. S. Bluck, *Plato’s Meno* (Cambridge 1964) 23.

progress at recollection and the stages in that of Meno (84a–c), Socrates is here telling us quite unambiguously that he actually intends to humour Meno, and abandon this promising enquiry into the nature of virtue, against his better judgement.

This view is the fundamental presupposition of the current interpretations of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’;<sup>2</sup> and I think that it is a mistaken presupposition: it reckons completely without Platonic artistry. In this paper, I propose to show that despite Meno’s unwillingness to continue with the enquiry into the nature of virtue, Socrates artfully introduces the hypothetical method to ensure the continuity of Meno’s recollection of the nature of virtue. I shall argue (i) that Meno does attain true opinion about the nature of virtue, namely that it is knowledge, at the end of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’ (89c), and that this is a stage in Meno’s recollection corresponding with that attained by his slave at the end of the slave-boy experiment;<sup>3</sup> and (ii) that the subsequent argument tending to prove that virtue is not knowledge is not meant to be taken at its face value, but that it is a piece of Platonic artistry illustrating the unstable and transitory nature of Meno’s true opinion and all other true opinions unfettered ‘by reasoning out the cause’, *αἰτίας λογισμῶ* (97c–98a).

## I

A careful examination of the passage 86d–e, quoted above, reveals that Socrates does not have the slightest intention of yielding to Meno’s request to leave the prior question unanswered so that the subsequent question may be taken up, when he says: ‘But perhaps, you would relax your authority just slightly, and allow the question whether virtue comes by teaching or some other means to be examined “from a hypothesis” (*ἐξ ὑποθέσεως*)’ (86e). Two features in the Greek preclude the interpretation which assumes that Socrates is yielding to Meno and that, as Malcolm Brown puts it, ‘he reconciles himself to the fact that it is Meno who, unable to control himself, is nevertheless controlling the course of the discussion, so that Socrates will be forcibly led away from the fundamental *ti esti* question in the direction of the *poion ti*’.<sup>4</sup>

First, as Brown himself notes,<sup>5</sup> when *ἀλλά* is used to introduce the apodosis of a conditional sentence in which a command is expressed, and when the protasis is negative, it implies a break in thought between protasis and apodosis: it means ‘the apodosis contains a more or less inadequate substitute for what is left unrealized in the protasis: “at all events”, with a notion of *pis aller*’.<sup>6</sup> Thus as Bluck rightly points out, ‘even if Meno will not allow an inquiry into the nature of *ἀρετή*, he is asked to allow a hypothesis to be made, in very general terms, about its nature, if any sort of answer is to be reached to the question whether or not it is *διδακτόν*’.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, this is precisely how Plato thinks the mind should proceed in forming a true opinion about the nature of a thing. Bluck, however, does not seem to suspect that making a hypothesis, in very general terms, about the nature of virtue is at once an attempt to define virtue and an aid at recollecting the nature of virtue.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, in the phrase *ἐξ ὑποθέσεως αὐτὸ σκοπεῖσθαι*, the object of *σκοπεῖσθαι* is *αὐτό* (it, i.e. virtue). Thus Socrates is saying in effect, ‘let us examine virtue “from a hypothesis” to see

<sup>2</sup> See esp. R. Robinson, *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford 1953) 114–22; I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato’s Doctrines* (London 1963) ii 529–48; Bluck (n. 1) 8–17; M. S. Brown, ‘Plato disapproves of the slave-boy’s answer’, *RMetaphys* xxi (1967) 63–5; Lynn E. Rose, ‘Plato’s Meno 86–89’, *JHistPhilos* viii (1970) 1–8; R. E. Allen, *Plato’s Euthyphro and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London 1970) 96; Harold Zyskind and R. Sternfeld, ‘Plato’s Meno 89c: “Virtue is Knowledge” a hypothesis?’, *Phronesis* xxi (1976) 130–4.

<sup>3</sup> Brown (n. 2) 57–93 rightly points out the precise parallelism between Socrates’ dialogue with the slave

and his dialogue with Meno, and says that the slave-boy experiment ‘is a model of the dialogue as a whole’ (65). However, as I shall argue, the slave-boy experiment is a model of Socrates’ dialogue with Meno, but only up to the end of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’, i.e. 89c.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>6</sup> J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1954) 12.

<sup>7</sup> Bluck (n. 1) 322.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.* 92.

whether it comes by teaching or some other means'.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, he means to examine the prior question of what virtue is before considering the subsequent question of whether it is teachable or not. Similarly, having given the geometrical illustration of the argument 'from a hypothesis' Socrates says:

In the same way concerning virtue, since we know neither what it is nor what sort of thing it is, let us make a hypothesis and consider whether it is teachable or not (*ὑποθέμενοι αὐτὸ σκοπῶμεν εἴτε διδασκτὸν εἴτε οὐ διδασκτὸν ἔστιν*) (87b).

Bluck criticizes Friedländer's translation, namely, 'hypothesizing it let us inquire . . .', and suggests that *ὑποθέμενοι* is used absolutely, as in *ὑποθέμενος οὖν ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν σοι . . .* (87a).<sup>10</sup> This criticism, however, is not as decisive as Zyskind and Sternfeld suggest,<sup>11</sup> for Bluck also suggests that *αὐτό* is likely to be the object of *σκοπῶμεν*.<sup>12</sup> Thus in either case (i.e. whether *αὐτό* is the object of *ὑποθέμενοι* or *σκοπῶμεν*) the question of whether virtue is teachable or not is still made to depend on an examination of virtue; and, as we shall see in section II, Socrates does precisely that in the argument 'from a hypothesis'.

Now, it is generally recognized that in this dialogue, Plato, by pointing out a correspondence between the stages in the slave's progress at recollection and the stages in that of Meno, makes it clear that the theory of recollection is introduced as a foundation for the Socratic search for definitions. What does not seem to be clearly recognized is that until complete recollection of the essential nature (*οὐσία*, 72b) or 'form' (*εἶδος*, 72c) is achieved, *general* definitions are in fact opinions (however true they may be) which should be treated as hypotheses or *assumptions* involving notions of the 'forms' involved in the enquiry. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> in the *Phaedo* we are meant to understand that the *λόγοι* referred to in Socrates' description of the hypothetical method are opinions in the form of *general* explanations or definitions and that they become *ὑποθέσεις* when they are *provisionally* assumed to be true.

It is significant that in the *Meno* the hypothetical method is introduced immediately after the demonstration of the truth of the theory of recollection, and though Socrates does not explicitly say so, and Meno himself is quite unaware of it, it would seem that we are meant to see that the general definitions of virtue offered by Meno, and tested by means of the Socratic elenchus, are treated by Socrates as hypotheses or *assumptions* about the nature of virtue. The introduction of the argument 'from a hypothesis' is really a subterfuge on the part of Socrates to ensure the continuity of Meno's recollection of the nature of virtue; and at the end of the argument 'from a hypothesis' (89c), Meno attains true opinion about the nature of virtue, namely 'virtue is knowledge' which, in effect, is a satisfactory definition of virtue. Indeed, as Cornford<sup>14</sup> rightly observes: 'The Socratic definition of virtue as knowledge is actually reached about half-way through (89a), and yet the conversation ends with the remark that we shall never be sure how

<sup>9</sup> On the case of *αὐτό*, Bluck (n. 1) 322 rightly points out that by the regular Greek idiom the subject (virtue) of the indirect question (*εἴτε διδασκτὸν ἔστι κτλ.*) is brought forward and associated with the introductory verb *σκοπεῖσθαι*. Bluck, however, does not seem to suspect that this fact may have influenced Plato's thinking in the argument 'from a hypothesis'.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 325.

<sup>11</sup> Zyskind-Sternfeld (n. 2) 131–2.

<sup>12</sup> Bluck (n. 1) 325.

<sup>13</sup> 'The role of the hypothetical method in the *Phaedo*', *Phronesis* xxiv (1979) 113–14.

<sup>14</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Plato and Parmenides* (London 1939) 245. Admittedly, it is not definition *per genus et differentiam* (see Allen [n. 2] 94). However, since Socrates, having defined figure as 'that which alone always follows upon colour', says he would be satisfied if Meno would define virtue for him 'even like

this'—*καὶν οὕτως* (75b), it seems that he would accept 'virtue is knowledge' as a satisfactory definition of virtue; though, clearly, in the context of the discussion, 'virtue is knowledge of what is good' would be a more satisfactory definition. Indeed, if, as I shall argue, we are meant to see the deduction of the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' from the proposition 'virtue is good' as an exemplification of the 'upward path' of the hypothetical method as described in the *Phaedo*, then it seems likely that Plato is hinting at 'virtue is knowledge of the Good' as the definition of virtue required here. Significantly, the hypothesis 'virtue is good' is said to stand (*μένει*, 89d), which presumably means it cannot be refuted. Thus, since virtue and knowledge are not really Forms, but rather psychical endowments (87d), it would seem that Plato has in mind even here in the *Meno* the view implicit in the *Republic*, namely that virtue is the effect of knowledge of the Good on the soul. See n. 54.

virtue is acquired until we have found out what virtue is. The concealment is so cunningly effected that many readers of the *Meno* do not realize that we have found out what virtue is. . . .’

It would seem that many readers of the *Meno* are misled by the contrast which Socrates draws between knowing what a thing is (τί ἐστι) and knowing what it is like (ποῖόν τι) at the beginning of the dialogue into thinking that in the argument ‘from a hypothesis’ Socrates ‘is operating in flat contradiction to the rule which he himself had enunciated in 71b’, as Brown puts it,<sup>15</sup> and that Plato means us to see that the entire enquiry right from the introduction of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’ to the end of the dialogue is improperly conducted. I shall now show that this view derives from a fundamental misunderstanding of the basis of that contrast.

Socrates explains that in general if one does not know what a thing is, one cannot know what it is like: ὁ δὲ μὴ οἶδα τί ἐστιν, πῶς ἂν ὁποῖόν γέ τι εἰδείην; (71b). Thus, if, for example, one does not know Meno at all, one cannot know what sort of person Meno is: ἡ δοκεῖ σοι οἶόν τε εἶναι, ὅστις Μένωνα μὴ γινώσκει τὸ παράπαν ὅστις ἐστίν, τοῦτον εἰδέναι εἴτε καλὸς εἴτε πλούσιος εἴτε καὶ γενναῖός ἐστιν, εἴτε καὶ τὰναντία τούτων; (71b). Admittedly, the statement that if one does not know what a thing is, one cannot know anything about it sounds rather paradoxical. Clearly, however, the use of the verb to know—γινώσκειν, εἰδέναι—and the fact that throughout the dialogue Plato is operating with a conception of knowledge which distinguishes it sharply from true opinion<sup>16</sup> would seem to indicate that Plato does not really mean to suggest that if one does not know what a thing is, one *cannot say*, or entertain a true opinion about, what sort of thing it is. However, it is not uncommonly supposed that Socrates is in fact saying something of this sort. Thus commenting on this contrast between knowing what a thing is and knowing what it is like, Crombie says: ‘It is defended in this place by an unfortunate, not to say sophistical, analogy—namely that *I cannot* say what sort of person Meno is if I do not know who he is.’<sup>17</sup>

It is, of course, quite possible for one who does not know (γινώσκει) Meno in the sense of being acquainted with him, to say, quite truly what sort of person Meno is from hearsay; but this to Plato is something quite different from knowing (εἰδέναι) what sort of person Meno is—it is only an opinion which, however true it may be, does not constitute knowledge. One may be said to *know* what sort of person Meno is only when one gets to *know* him personally. Thus the boy who at the end of the geometry lesson is said not to know the answer to the problem of doubling the square whose side is two feet, can say, or entertain a true opinion about, *what sort of line* is the required length (85b).<sup>18</sup> Significantly Socrates explains here that one can have true opinions about matters of which one has no knowledge, when at the end of the geometry lesson, he observes: ‘Do you see then that he who does not have knowledge has true opinions about the things of which he has no knowledge?’ (85c).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Brown (n. 2) 64.

<sup>16</sup> See *Meno* 98b ff.

<sup>17</sup> Crombie (n. 2) 532. Cf. also Robinson (n. 2) 51–2.

<sup>18</sup> Socrates describes this as a true opinion and not knowledge (85b); for as he has already explained, if one does not know what a thing is, one cannot know anything about it. We are meant to understand that the boy does not *know* that the square of the diagonal is twice the size of the given square, precisely because he does not know *what the square is*, i.e. the Form). Once we recognize this, we shall be much less inclined to suppose that when Plato makes use of acquaintance with objects to illustrate what he means by knowledge properly so called he is ignoring ‘knowledge that . . .’ or propositional knowledge. He means that propositional knowledge presupposes knowledge by acquaintance of objects designated by the terms of the proposition. Note that γινώσκειν is used of ‘knowing Meno’ whereas εἰδέναι is used of knowing facts about him (71b). But

see Bluck (n. 1) 213.

<sup>19</sup> This should mean that when Socrates says that if one does not know X, one cannot know what sort of thing X is, he is conscious of the fact that he is enunciating a paradox which requires for its solution a clear distinction between knowledge and true opinion. It is, however, not to be supposed that at the time of writing the *Meno*, Plato considered ‘knowing Meno’ and ‘knowledge of the road to Larisa’ as instances of knowledge properly so called. Plato is only making use of acquaintance with sensible particulars to illustrate what he means by knowledge that is the result of recollection. I have argued in a forthcoming article, ‘Sense-experience and recollection in Plato’s *Meno*’, that at the time of writing the *Meno* Plato had already formulated his metaphysical theory of Forms, and that he was consciously aware of the importance of sense-experience in the slave-boy experiment.



Any reader who after the demonstration of the theory of recollection and the discussion of the immortality of the soul does not recognize that Plato means us to see that in spite of the fact that one cannot know *what virtue is like* (ποιόν τι) who does not know *what virtue is* (τί ἐστι), the actual process of acquiring knowledge (i.e. recollection) of what virtue is begins with the 'stirring up' of innate true opinions about *what virtue is like*, is bound to be deceived when Socrates pretends to yield to Meno's request to settle the subsequent question of whether virtue is teachable or not, leaving unsettled the prior question of what virtue is, and thus suppose that it is Meno who is controlling the course of the discussion. Surely, Socrates is more resourceful than that. Meno is being difficult; but in relaxing his 'authority' just slightly, and allowing Socrates to consider his question 'from a hypothesis', Meno unwittingly allows him to have his own way. It would seem that we are meant to see (even if Meno does not see it) that the hypothesis 'virtue is knowledge' is a true opinion and a satisfactory definition of virtue reached by the consideration of what sort of thing virtue is. We do not know what virtue is, nor do we know what sort of thing it is, but we do have opinions about what sort of thing it is, by the consideration of which opinions we may attain true opinion about what virtue is; and this will enable us to answer the subsequent question of whether virtue is teachable or not. However, until we are able to convert this true opinion into knowledge our answer to the subsequent question will be a true opinion (a very unstable thing) and not knowledge.

This, indeed, is precisely the role assigned to τὸ ποῖόν τι (περὶ ἕκαστον) or 'what the nature of each thing is like' in the process of acquiring knowledge of 'the real nature of each thing'—τὸ ὄν ἐκάστου or τὸ τί at *Epistle 7* 342e and 343b. This means that the process of acquiring knowledge of Forms must be indirect. I submit, then, that Plato's conspicuous use of sensible diagrams in the *Meno*, and his recommendation of the use of sensible particulars as images of Forms in the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, and of the hypothetical method in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* derive from this view of the nature of knowledge and the manner whereby we may acquire it expressed in *Epistle 7*, but never explicitly stated in any of his dialogues.<sup>20</sup>

I shall now show, by a detailed examination of the argument 'from a hypothesis', that Socrates and Meno are indeed still engaged in a joint enquiry into the nature of virtue.

## II

Socrates begins the argument 'from a hypothesis' with an explanation of the procedure:

By 'from a hypothesis', I mean thus, as the geometers often enquire, when someone asks them for example about an area, whether it is possible for this area to be inscribed as a triangle in this circle, they might reply: 'I do not know yet if this is so; but I think I have a sort of hypothesis that will be of help in the matter, and it is as follows: if the area is (such and such)<sup>21</sup> one thing seems to me to follow,

<sup>20</sup> The genuineness of this letter is disputed by some scholars; however, whoever wrote it must have considered that, according to Plato, situated as we are, we can only approach τὸ ὄν ἐκάστου or τὸ τί through the consideration of τὸ ποῖόν τι (περὶ ἕκαστον). The nearest Plato comes to stating explicitly that the approach to knowledge of Forms must be indirect, starting with sensible images through verbal images, is Socrates' account of his 'second voyage' (δεύτερος πλοῦς) in the *Phaedo*. See Bedu-Addo, 'On the alleged abandonment of the Good in the *Phaedo*', *Apeiron* xiii (1979) 104–11; *art. cit.* (n. 13) 112 ff.; 'Mathematics, dialectic and the Good in the *Republic* VI–VII', *Platon* xxx (1978) 112 ff., and 'Διάνοια and the images of Forms in Plato's *Republic* VI–VII', *Platon* xxxi (1979) 93–103.

<sup>21</sup> Plato's point in using this geometrical example seems clear enough, but the example itself as well as the statement of the determinative criterion are matters of scholarly dispute. Many different interpretations of these have been offered; of these the most important are discussed by Bluck, (n. 1) 441–61. See also Robert Sternfeld and H. Zyskind, 'Plato's *Meno* 86e–87a: The geometrical illustration of the argument by hypothesis', *Phronesis* xxii (1977) 206–11. They use W. H. D. Rouse's translation (*Great Dialogues of Plato* [Mentor 1965] 52) of the statement of the determinative criterion: '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 follows, and if this is impossible, another' (87a3–6).

and another thing if it is not such. Accordingly, I should like to make a hypothesis and tell you the result regarding the possibility of inscribing it in the circle' (86e–87b).

The first thing to note here is that what the geometer says he has is 'a sort of hypothesis'—*ὥσπερ τινα ὑπόθεσιν*. The geometer says: if the area is such and such, one thing follows, and another thing if it is not such. Clearly, he is prescribing the conditions which any given area should satisfy if it is to be inscribable triangularly in a given circle; and in doing so, he is not really *assuming* anything about the given area; he is making use of geometrical theorems which he knows, and for which he is not required to offer any proofs. Secondly, it is important to recognize that unlike the geometrical problem in the slave-boy experiment, this geometrical problem *cannot* be solved without taking the necessary measurements. Whereas in the slave-boy experiment the length of the side of the given square is explicitly stated, in the geometrical illustration of the argument 'from a hypothesis' we are given no clues whatever for the determination of the sizes of the given circle and the given space (*χωρίον*). Thus we are to imagine the questioner simply drawing a circle and a rectangle (or, indeed, any other rectilinear figure) in the sand, and in the manner of Meno at the beginning of the dialogue, asking the geometer: 'Can *this* space be inscribed as a triangle in *this* circle?' To determine whether the given space satisfies his conditions or not, the geometer will have to take the necessary measurements. Having done that, he will be in a position to say with certainty whether the space is inscribable triangularly in the circle or not. In fact, he does not even have to tackle the problem of construction.<sup>22</sup>

What then does the geometer mean by the statement: 'accordingly, I should like to make a hypothesis and tell you the result . . .' (*ὑποθέμενος οὖν ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν σοι τὸ συμβαῖνον*) (87a)? Presumably he cannot really mean to suggest that he wants to make the hypothetical statement, namely that 'if the area is such and such, one thing follows, and another thing if it is not such', and then state the conclusion, for he has just made precisely that statement. What he is likely to mean is that, making use of his theorems he will take the necessary measurements, and make the hypothesis that 'this area is such and such' or that it is not such, from which he will be able to state the conclusion.<sup>23</sup> We thus have two types of hypothesis in the geometer's statement of his procedure: (i) the hypothetical statement which is described as 'a sort of hypothesis', and which is, in effect, the statement of the determinative criterion for the solubility of the problem; and (ii) the statement that 'this area is such and such', which must be the hypothesis the geometer says he wishes to make, and from which he will be able to state the conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> On the 'operationalism' of our geometer, see Sternfeld–Zyskind (n. 21) 210. What is described here as 'a sort of hypothesis' or 'a hypothesis, as it were' (*ὥσπερ τινα ὑπόθεσιν*) is the hypothetical statement, i.e. the statement of the determinative criterion which is not an assumption, but rather something that the geometer knows for certain. See n. 21 above. It is sometimes suggested that Plato is using this example to introduce the reader to the notion of *ὑπόθεσις*, and that he is apologizing for the use, in a semi-technical sense, of an unfamiliar word. Cf. Bluck (n. 1) 92–3. This would be a rather misleading way of introducing an unfamiliar notion, precisely because when the geometer, having made this hypothetical statement, proceeds to say *ὑποθέμενος οὖν ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν σοι τὸ συμβαῖνον*, it seems clear that his hypothesis is going to be the minor premise (i.e. 'this area is such and such') of the hypothetical syllogism, from which, if proved, the conclusion may be drawn. Similarly, when at the beginning of the Line passage in the *Republic* Socrates says *ὥσπερ . . . γραμμὴν . . . λαβὼν . . .* (509d), he is

not really introducing the reader to the notion of *γραμμή*; he means that the intelligible and the visible do not really form a straight line. See Bedu-Addo, *Platon* xxxi (n. 20) esp. 90–2 and 106–8. I submit that Plato was not really writing for people unfamiliar with elementary geometry. Presumably the word *ὑπόθεσις* was currently used indifferently to refer to both types of proposition, and Plato means that a hypothesis in the strict sense of the word is a proposition that is not known for certain.

<sup>23</sup> The geometrical example given is of a *διορισμός*—limiting condition or conditions for the solubility of a geometrical problem. Cf. Euclid i 22, vi 28. These *διορισμοί*, it is important to note, always depended on some theorem already known. For good discussions of Greek geometrical analysis to which Plato seems to be indebted for his own practice and development of a 'hypothetical method', see N. Gulley, 'Greek geometrical analysis', *Phronesis* iii (1958) 1–14; and Bluck (n. 1) 76–85.

Let us now consider how Socrates and Meno proceed. Socrates says:

In the same way, concerning virtue, since we know neither what it is nor what sort of thing it is, let us make a hypothesis and examine it (virtue) to see whether it is teachable or not, saying as follows: 'If virtue were what sort of thing concerning the soul would it be teachable or not teachable? In the first place, if it is other than knowledge, is it teachable or not—or recollectable . . . ? Is it not plain to everyone that the only thing a man is taught is knowledge? (87b–c).

Socrates and Meno proceed, like the geometer, to prescribe what they think is the condition that anything should satisfy if it is to be teachable. They decide that in fact it is plain to everyone that the one and only thing taught to men is knowledge, and hence that if virtue is a kind of knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη τις*) it clearly must be teachable. That is to say, virtue is teachable *if and only if* it is knowledge. To arrive at this decision Socrates and Meno make use of the fact, described as obvious to anyone, that the one and only thing taught to men is knowledge: *ἢ τοῦτό γε παντὶ δῆλον, ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄλλο διδάσκεται ἄνθρωπος ἢ ἐπιστήμην;* (87c). Thus this proposition, namely that 'the one and only thing taught to men is knowledge', functions as a *self-evident truth* corresponding to the theorem or theorems on the basis of which the geometer decides that the area is such and such or that it is not such.<sup>24</sup>

Socrates now says: 'The next thing, it would seem, is to consider whether virtue is knowledge or other than knowledge' (87c). Socrates and Meno then proceed to prove *dialectically* that virtue is knowledge (87c–89a), and Meno draws the conclusion that virtue is teachable (89c). Thus Socrates is treating the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' as an *assumption* which has to be established or refuted. However, as in the geometrical example, we have here two types of hypothesis: (i) the hypothetical statement 'if virtue is knowledge it is teachable'; and (ii) the assumption that virtue is knowledge.

Now since the propositions 'virtue is knowledge' and 'virtue is teachable' are mutually deducible, it is sometimes maintained that the important thing to note here is the equivalence relation between 'virtue is knowledge' and 'virtue is teachable'.<sup>25</sup> However, from the manner in which Socrates and Meno proceed to obtain the proposition 'virtue is teachable if and only if it is knowledge', and subsequently to deduce the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' from the proposition 'virtue is good', which is significantly described as a hypothesis (87d), it would seem that Bluck is quite right in considering that Socrates is looking at each stage for *limiting conditions* rather than for an equivalence relation in one case and for a limiting condition in the other.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Zyskind and Sternfeld (n. 2) say that the basic hypothesis is 'knowledge alone is teachable' (87c), and that 'textually it is this statement or the statement validly derivable from it which functions as the major premiss of the hypothetical syllogism: "if virtue is knowledge, clearly it could be taught" ' (p. 132). Similarly at Sternfeld–Zyskind (n. 21) 206, they argue as follows: 'The objective is to state an hypothesis which will determine whether or not a given property is ascribable to a given object; that is whether the property inscribable triangularly, is ascribable to the joint object, a given area and a given circle, or whether the property teachable, is ascribable to the object virtue.' It seems to me that they are mistaking the geometer's *theorem* or *theorems*, and Socrates' *self-evident truth* (knowledge alone is teachable), on the basis of which they make their respective hypotheses, for the hypotheses themselves.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Robinson (n. 2) 116; H. P. Stahl, 'Beginnings of propositional logic in Plato', trans. by G. Weiler from *Hermes*, in M. Brown, *Plato's Meno* (Indianapolis 1971) 180–97; and Zyskind–Sternfeld (n. 2) 132.

<sup>26</sup> Bluck (n. 1) 87–8. See also nn. 23 and 40. It would seem that in Plato's 'method of hypothesis', even when we have an equivalence relation between two proposi-

tions, Plato is primarily interested not in the mutual deducibility or convertibility of the two propositions, but rather in the *causal priority* of the 'limiting condition'. Thus we are here dealing with a causal relation—a relation that is asymmetrical: it is not because a given space is inscribable triangularly in a given circle that it has a certain characteristic; it is because it has that characteristic that it is inscribable triangularly in the circle. Similarly, it is not because virtue is teachable that it is knowledge; it is because it is knowledge that it is teachable. This, as we shall see, has an important bearing on the propriety of the arguments purporting to prove, on the ground that there are no successful teachers of virtue, that virtue is not knowledge. Again, since the 'method of hypothesis' is a means of establishing necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of a hypothesis—in the present example, 'virtue is knowledge'—we should expect the dialectician, at the end of the enquiry, to be able to formulate an 'adequate proposition' that will include the necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of the hypothesis. As in the case of his description of the method in the *Phaedo*, Plato does not do this for his readers. But see n. 14 for my view that (i) the deduction of the proposition



Thus Socrates and Meno make the hypothesis 'virtue is knowledge', which is the limiting condition that will allow virtue to be teachable, on the basis of the self-evident truth that knowledge alone is teachable, just as the geometer, making use of the relevant theorems, makes the hypothesis that this area is such and such or that it is not such. However, apart from their use of the same types of hypothesis noted above, it would seem that the procedure of Socrates and Meno is, *toto mundo*, different from that of the geometer; for unlike Socrates and Meno, the geometer does not try to deduce his hypothesis from a 'higher' hypothesis.<sup>27</sup> Socrates and Meno proceed dialectically to demonstrate the truth or falsehood of their hypothesis, and this involves gradual recollection of the nature of virtue. In the case of the geometer's example, the question of recollecting the nature of the area does not arise, since he is not really *assuming* anything, nor is he learning any new *a priori* truth.

It is sometimes suggested that by proceeding as they do to prove the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge instead of pursuing the consequences to see whether they are consistently tenable, Socrates and Meno are contravening the instruction at *Phaedo* 101d–e according to which we should not mix things up if we want to discover any of the realities:<sup>28</sup> ἄμα δὲ οὐκ ἂν φύροιο ὥσπερ οἱ ἀντιλογικοὶ . . . εἴπερ βούλοιο τι τῶν ὄντων εὑρεῖν (101e). However, as we have seen, before proceeding to find arguments in support of the hypothesis, Socrates says significantly: 'The next thing, it would seem, is to consider whether virtue is knowledge or other than knowledge.' (τὸ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτο, ὡς ἔοικε, δεῖ σκέψασθαι πότερόν ἐστιν ἐπιστήμη ἢ ἀρετὴ ἢ ἄλλοιον ἐπιστήμης) (87c). And this would seem to suggest that Plato has in mind some body of teaching on this technique of employing *logoi* upon which he is consciously drawing.<sup>29</sup> I suspect that the strict procedure outlined in the *Phaedo* is meant to be the proper procedure for philosophical enquiries undertaken by two or more 'philosophers', but that in its pedagogical or maieutic use, as in this dialogue, this departure may be justified on other grounds.<sup>30</sup>

In this particular instance, if, as I have argued, the introduction of the hypothetical method is not intended to disrupt the enquiry into the essential nature of virtue, Socrates has a very good reason for making this departure; for, indeed, the proper consequences of the hypothesis—which must include the application of the hypothesis 'virtue is knowledge' to particular instances of virtue, i.e. acts of justice, courage, temperance, etc., to ensure that every virtuous act involves knowledge, specifically, knowledge of what is good and what is bad—have already emerged in the course of Socrates' examination of Meno's definitions.<sup>31</sup> Besides, Socrates makes use of this

'virtue is knowledge' from the proposition 'virtue is good' is to be seen as an instance of 'reasoning out the cause' (αἰτίας λογισμός), and that (ii) what Plato has in mind here as the 'adequate proposition' is 'virtue is the effect of knowledge of goodness on the soul'. See also Bedu-Addo (n. 13) 122–4, and 130 n. 23.

<sup>27</sup> In effect, the difference is precisely that which exists between the dianoietic mathematician's treatment of his hypothesis and the dialectician's treatment of his hypothesis described at *Repub.* 510b ff. For the view that the hypothetical treatment of the propositions of dianoietic mathematics belongs to philosophical dialectic, see Bedu-Addo, *Platon* xxx (n. 20), esp. 120 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. K. M. Sayre, *Plato's Analytic Method* (Chicago/London 1969) 29–30 n. 40, and 57–8 n. 1.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Crombie (n. 2) 528 where, commenting on hypotheses in *Meno*, *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, he says: 'It seems that there is some technical doctrine connected with this word that Plato is anxious to communicate to us . . . and that he failed to notice that he had not given us enough clues to enable us to follow him with confidence. . . .' However, on Plato's conception of the

nature of philosophical writing, see *Phdr.* 276c–d, and *Epist.* 7 343 ff.

<sup>30</sup> See Bedu-Addo (n. 13) 117–18, where I have argued that far from being a digression, *Phaedo* 100c–101c is an illustration of this part of the hypothetical method. Here in the *Meno* Socrates obviously has in mind the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge in his examination of Meno's definitions, since he makes him admit at each stage that all acts or cases of virtue involve knowledge of what is good and what is bad.

<sup>31</sup> See n. 30. It is not to be supposed that in the first part of the dialogue with Meno, Socrates and Meno dispense with what each of them supposes to be instances or cases of what virtue is like, for if as I believe (see n. 3) the slave-boy experiment is a model of Socrates' dialogue with Meno, then we are meant to understand that Meno, in his attempts at defining virtue, and Socrates, in his examination of Meno's definitions, are drawing upon their *previous experience* of what each of them supposes to be instances or cases of what virtue is like.

fact, namely that every virtuous act involves knowledge, in his demonstration of the truth of the hypothesis, which may be outlined as follows:

1. Virtue is good (87d)
2. All good is beneficial (87e–88a)
3. Thus, virtue is beneficial (87e)
4. If something pertaining to the soul is beneficial, it is knowledge (88a–89a)
5. Thus, virtue is knowledge (89a)

Now, it seems clear that in all this Socrates is not really settling the subsequent question of whether virtue is teachable or not; he is rather settling the prior question of what virtue is. That is to say, Socrates is not in fact yielding to Meno. This fact constitutes a real difficulty for the interpretations which assume that the introduction of the hypothetical method marks the abandonment of the enquiry into the nature of virtue. Crombie's criticism of his own reconstruction of the argument 'from a hypothesis' on the assumption (which he does not accept) that the hypothesis is 'virtue is knowledge' rather than 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable' is particularly noteworthy. He observes:

The trouble with this reconstruction is that it overlooks the fact that Socrates agrees to consider Meno's question, whether virtue is teachable from a hypothesis, whereas on this reconstruction he is all the time interested in his own question, what is virtue. The question whether it is teachable is not considered 'from a hypothesis'; it is simply considered by asking whether in fact people do succeed in teaching it.<sup>32</sup>

It seems clear, however, that Socrates and Meno actually prove the proposition that virtue is knowledge, from which Meno draws the conclusion that virtue is teachable: 'And it is plain, Socrates, according to the hypothesis, since virtue is knowledge, that it is teachable'<sup>33</sup> (καὶ δῆλον, ὦ Σώκρατες, κατὰ τὴν ὑπόθεσιν, εἴπερ ἐπιστήμη ἐστὶν ἀρετή, ὅτι διδακτὸν ἐστίν) (89c). Crombie seems to ignore this conclusion when he says that Meno's question is not considered 'from a hypothesis', and that 'this fact constitutes an obstacle to any reasonable interpretation of this part of the dialogue'.<sup>34</sup>

The fundamental presupposition of the view that it is the proposition 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable', rather than the proposition 'virtue is knowledge', which functions as the most important or decisive hypothesis in the argument 'from a hypothesis' is that the hypothetical method is essentially a method of proof, rather than a method of invention, employed 'whenever one wants to discover any of the realities'—εἴπερ βούλοιό τι τῶν ὄντων εὐρεῖν (*Phd.* 101e).<sup>35</sup> Failure to appreciate that the Platonic hypothetical method involves recollection leads to Aristotelian interpretations of it. It is true that Aristotle regarded the major premiss of the 'syllogism from a hypothesis' as *the* hypothesis in the argument,<sup>36</sup> presumably because it is hypothetical. Thus the proposition 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable' is hypothetical, and like Aristotle, Plato, as we have seen, regarded it as 'a sort of hypothesis'. Indeed at 89d Socrates says that he does not 'take back' (ἀνατίθεμαι) the proposition 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable'; and this would seem to mean that he is letting it stand as a hypothesis. But the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' which is the minor premiss of the hypothetical syllogism also functions as a hypothesis in the argument,<sup>37</sup> and is, in fact, more important in the argument 'from a hypothesis' than the hypothetical statement itself, in as much as it is *the assumption* about the nature of virtue which has to be proved or refuted to justify any *modus ponens* inference.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Crombie (n. 2) 536.

<sup>33</sup> I think Zyskind and Sternfeld (n. 2) 131–2 are right in maintaining that Lamb's translation, 'and plainly, Socrates, on our hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, it must be taught', is mistaken, and that the hypothesis referred to here is 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable'.

<sup>34</sup> Crombie (n. 2) 536.

<sup>35</sup> See Bedu-Addo (n. 13) 117 ff.

<sup>36</sup> See *Analytica Priora* 50a16–28.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Crombie (n. 2) 544–5.

<sup>38</sup> Zyskind and Sternfeld (n. 2) do not explain why, in spite of the fact that the minor premiss of the hypothetical syllogism 'has been proved', thus justify-

Indeed, as Cherniss<sup>39</sup> has pointed out, in calling the proposition ‘virtue is good’ a hypothesis, Socrates is exemplifying the ‘upward path’ of the hypothetical method as described in the *Phaedo*: ‘And when you should have to give account of *the hypothesis itself*, you would do so in the same manner hypothesizing another hypothesis which seemed best of those above, until you came to something adequate (τι ἱκανόν)’ (*Phd.* 101d). Thus the proposition ‘virtue is good’ functions as the ‘something adequate’ in the argument ‘from a hypothesis’; and the entire proof which gives the ‘account’ of the hypothesis ‘virtue is knowledge’ as recommended at *Phaedo* 101d is to be seen as an instance of ‘reasoning out the cause’, αἰτίας λογισμός, which we are told has to be done if a true opinion is to be converted into knowledge, and which is said to be recollection (98a).<sup>40</sup> It is, however, not to be supposed that Meno attains knowledge in respect of the propositions ‘virtue is good’ and ‘virtue is knowledge’; for neither Meno nor his slave has attained the state of mind or level of thought of the ‘true philosopher’ at which alone the mind can completely recollect the Forms necessary to guarantee the truth of propositions.<sup>41</sup>

Now, to appreciate what Socrates proceeds to do from 89c to the end of the dialogue, it is absolutely necessary to see that Socrates and Meno have indeed answered Meno’s question ‘from a hypothesis’. I shall now show that in the subsequent argument tending to prove that virtue is not teachable, and hence that it is not knowledge, Socrates is all along speaking tongue in cheek. For the sake of brevity, I shall confine myself to the main arguments which have been offered in support of the view that the arguments are meant to be taken at their face value.

### III

Bluck brings forward a number of arguments in support of the view that the aporetic conclusion of the dialogue is to be taken at its face value.<sup>42</sup> He disagrees with scholars who see a deliberate flaw in the argument when Socrates suggests that if there are no teachers or learners of a thing it will not be teachable (89e).<sup>43</sup> Bluck agrees that the absence of teachers of a thing does not entail that it is not teachable. However, he thinks that Socrates does not say that it does: ‘and it is perfectly legitimate to use the absence of teachers of virtue both now and in the past as a *reasonable ground for assuming* that it is not teachable, and this is what Socrates is doing . . . and if it is only meant that virtue cannot be taught *now*, this seems reasonable enough’.<sup>44</sup> Plato, however, clearly indicates right at the beginning of the enquiry that he does not really think that the argument is sound when he makes Socrates point out to Meno, who has expressed surprise that the proposition ‘virtue is teachable’ seemed correct a moment ago, that ‘it must seem correct not only a moment ago, *but now also and hereafter* if it is to be at all sound’: ἀλλὰ μὴ οὐκ ἐν τῷ ἄρτι μόνον δέη αὐτὸ δοκεῖν καλῶς λέγεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα, εἰ μέλλει τι αὐτοῦ ὑγιὲς εἶναι (89c). This statement would seem to rule out Bluck’s contention that Socrates

ing the conclusion ‘virtue is teachable’ ‘in a simple *modus ponens* inference’ (132–3), Socrates finds it necessary to proceed to argue that since there are no teachers of virtue, it is not teachable, and hence that it is not knowledge. Nor indeed do they explain why, if ‘virtue is knowledge’ is not a hypothesis in the argument, the proposition ‘virtue is good’ which is *not* hypothetical is described as a hypothesis at 87d.

<sup>39</sup> H. Cherniss, ‘Some war-time publications concerning Plato’, *AJP* lxxviii (1947) 140.

<sup>40</sup> As N. Gulley, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (London 1962) 14, rightly says: ‘We may give greater precision to Plato’s phrase “a chain of causal reasoning” by associating it with a particular method of analysis the aim of which is to find the antecedent conditions for the solution of a problem or for the truth of a proposition’,

i.e. Greek geometrical analysis. See n. 23 above.

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, at the end of the ‘upward path’ of the hypothetical method in the *Phaedo*, Cebes and Simmias only attain true opinion, whereas Socrates attains knowledge of the cause of generation, existence and destruction. See Bedu-Addo (n. 13) 126–7. Cf. also my ‘A theory of mental development: Plato’s *Republic* V–VII’, pt 1, *Platon* xxviii (1976) 296 ff., and pt 2, *Platon* xxix (1977) 222–4.

<sup>42</sup> Bluck (n. 1) 19–30.

<sup>43</sup> See Cornford (n. 14) 245, and his *Principium Sapientiae* (Cambridge 1952) 60 n. 1; A. Koyré, *Discovering Plato*, trans. L. C. Rosenfield (New York 1945) 17; V. Goldschmidt, *Les dialogues de Platon* (Paris 1947) 117 ff.

<sup>44</sup> Bluck (n. 1) 22.

is only arguing that virtue cannot be taught *now*. And this applies also to the view that 'if Socrates had been deliberately making a false inference, he would hardly have spoilt the trick by "watering down" his conclusion that virtue is not teachable, and allowing, at 99e–100a, that one day virtue *may* prove to be teachable'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it would rather seem that by thus 'watering down' his conclusion, Socrates is deliberately reminding Plato's readers of what he has just said at 89c, namely that "'virtue is teachable" must seem correct not only a moment ago, *but now also and hereafter* if it is to be at all sound', thus hinting that the conclusion is not really sound.

Again, in his discussion of the arguments for the absence of teachers of virtue, Bluck recognizes that Socrates is engaged in *argumenta ad homines*, and that this is confirmed by his treatment of the lines from Theognis (95d–96a). However, though he agrees that it is not in fact the case that Theognis contradicts himself on the question whether virtue is teachable, and that 'Plato can hardly have been unaware of this', Bluck does not seem to suspect that the argument is not meant to be taken at its face value even if Meno accepts it. As he says: 'The Socrates of our present dialogue is copying the manner of the sophists in his discussion of Theognis. Meno, the disciple of Gorgias, would not object to the method, and he accepts Socrates' conclusion—all the more readily, perhaps, as Gorgias himself had not claimed to teach virtue (95c).'<sup>46</sup> Surely Socrates' humorous treatment of a poem of Simonides in the *Protagoras* (342a–347a) in imitation of the sophists ought to put us on our guard against taking his arguments here at their face value.

Nor, indeed, is it the case that, since in his discussion with Anytus Socrates consistently uses teaching in the sophistic sense, he does not really intend to argue that 'virtue is not teachable *simpliciter*', as Daniel Devereux<sup>47</sup> suggests. For having explained to Anytus (who was not present during the discussion of the theory of recollection) that what he wants to know is whether good men know how to transmit (*παράδοῦναι*) their virtue to another or whether virtue is something which cannot be transmitted or taken over from one person to another, Socrates says significantly: 'That is the question Meno and I have been discussing all the time' (93b). Surely readers of the *Meno* are meant to see that, on the contrary, the introduction of the theory of recollection was meant, among other things, to disabuse Meno's mind of this sophistic conception of teaching.

Devereux further suggests that taking the view that the argument was not seriously meant lands us in a serious difficulty, namely that Socrates is trying to convince Meno of something which he himself believes to be false; for 'given Socrates' belief that false opinion about an important question—which this surely is—is an evil to be avoided at all costs, this difficulty becomes a rather serious matter'.<sup>48</sup> However, we can think of at least two good reasons why Meno is not very likely to suffer any spiritual damage: (i) he has had 'stirred up in him like a dream' a number of true opinions about virtue including a particularly important one, namely that virtue is good—a hypothesis which is significantly said to be unassailable, *μένει* (87d); (ii) when later on Meno comes to reflect on the theory of recollection and the nature of teaching, he is very likely to regain his lost true opinion, namely that virtue is knowledge, and hence that it is teachable.

The fact is that it is a misunderstanding to suppose that Socrates is only arguing that virtue is not teachable in the sophistic sense, but that it is, or may be, teachable in the maieutic sense; for the arguments clearly purport to establish that virtue is not knowledge, but rather true opinion, imparted by divine dispensation (*θεία μοίρα*) without intelligence—*ἄνευ νοῦ* (99e). Socrates argues, for instance, that we were wrong in considering that knowledge was *the only guide* to right action, for there is also true opinion (97c); thus true opinion *is just as useful as knowledge*, 'at least as long as one opines rightly' (97c). Nevertheless, instead of concluding *merely* that some sort of virtue *can* also be based on true opinion, Socrates rather concludes that since we have agreed that virtue is not teachable, we no longer take it to be knowledge, hence 'knowledge

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 22–3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 29.

<sup>47</sup> D. T. Devereux, 'Nature and teaching in Plato's

*Meno*', *Phronesis* xxiii (1978) 122–3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 122.



cannot be our guide in political conduct' (99a–b). Now, observe how Socrates and Meno arrive at this conclusion (98e–99b):

- Soc. At the same time we agreed that it (virtue) is something good, and that to be useful and good consists in giving right guidance.
- Meno Yes.
- Soc. And that these two, true opinion and knowledge, *are the only things* which direct us aright . . . and we say that where a man is a guide to what is right we find these two things, true opinion and knowledge.
- Meno Yes, I agree.
- Soc. Well now, since virtue is not teachable, we no longer take it to be knowledge?
- Meno Apparently not.
- Soc. So of two good and useful things one has been rejected and knowledge cannot be our guide in political conduct.

So we are now to believe that the only thing that is good and useful in directing one's life is that unstable and transient thing called true opinion (97e ff.), and that this is what virtue is? Plainly, sophistry can go no further.<sup>49</sup>

I do not think we need to suppose that between writing the *Meno* and the *Republic* Plato had changed his mind, nor that it was not until the writing of the *Republic* that Plato realized that the absence of teachers of a thing (e.g. solid geometry) does not entail that it is not teachable. Indeed, when at the beginning of the argument 'from a hypothesis' Socrates says (87b):

If virtue were what sort of thing concerning the soul would it be teachable or not teachable? In the first place, if it is other than knowledge, is it teachable or not—or recollectable (*ἀναμνηστόν*)? Let us not quarrel about the choice of words—is it teachable?

he seems to be making it quite clear that 'teachable' (*διδασκτόν*) in the argument that follows means 'recollectable'. Thus it would seem that Plato wants his readers to see that Socrates, in the argument against the proposition that virtue is knowledge, is now talking as if the theory of recollection has not been mentioned in the dialogue at all. At 81c, however, we are explicitly told that the soul can recollect all that it knew before *about virtue* and other things (*καὶ περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ ἄλλων*). And since Socrates has shown in the slave-boy experiment that true opinion *is only a stage* in the process of recollection (85c), it would seem that Plato means his readers to see that the view that virtue is true opinion and not knowledge does not really make sense in the context of this dialogue.<sup>50</sup>

It would seem then that Plato expects his readers to recognize that the arguments tending to prove that virtue is not knowledge (i.e. the soul cannot recollect the nature of virtue) are not really meant to be taken at their face value. However, it is sometimes suggested that the explanation of the aporetic conclusion of the *Meno* lies in the distinction, implied by Plato, but

<sup>49</sup> It may be suggested that this argument is valid and that the conclusion does not really contradict the premiss that *the only guides to right conduct* are true opinion and knowledge. On this view, Socrates is saying that knowledge is not a useful guide in political conduct (i.e. in social and moral life), but that it may well be a good and useful guide in other areas, e.g. in the application of technical skills. This view, however, is so patently opposed to the political views both of the historical Socrates and Plato that it is difficult to imagine that the irony in the conclusion of this argument was lost on contemporary readers of the *Meno*. I suggest that Plato expects his readers to see that the fault in this argument can be traced to the premiss 'virtue is not knowledge', the arguments in favour of which, I have argued, are deliberately fallacious. For Plato's deliberate use of sophistical arguments as an indirect recommenda-

tion of his own position, see Rosamond K. Sprague, *Plato's Use of Fallacy* (London 1962) esp. 1–33.

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the view that virtue is true opinion imparted by divine dispensation (*θεία μοίρα*) without understanding or intelligence (*ἄνευ νοῦ*) is particularly absurd in the context of this dialogue, since we are explicitly told (i) that the nature of virtue can be recollected (81c), and (ii) that true opinion is only a stage in this process of recollection (85c). Bluck recognizes that Plato is here 'being very ironical' (n. 1) 434. However, he maintains that 'we need not suppose . . . that the whole of what is said about virtue based on true belief is not seriously meant' (435). The argument, however, purports to establish, not that virtue or some sort of virtue *can* be based on true opinion, but rather that true opinion *is just what virtue is*. See n. 53.

not explicitly stated in the dialogue, between virtue as *popularly* conceived and virtue as *properly* conceived, the former being 'at best' true opinion and hence unteachable, the latter knowledge and hence teachable. This view is almost certainly a misunderstanding if only because it assumes (i) that there are a number of popular opinions about *what virtue is* that are true, but are, nevertheless, different from virtue as properly conceived, and that these true opinions cannot be taught;<sup>51</sup> (ii) that the arguments against the conclusion that virtue is teachable are not really directed against virtue as *properly* conceived, but rather against virtue as *popularly* conceived;<sup>52</sup> and (iii) that there is no irony in Socrates' references to Themistocles, Pericles and Thucydides as virtuous Athenian citizens whose inability to pass on their good qualities to their children indicates that virtue is not teachable.<sup>53</sup>

I submit that the explanation of the aporetic conclusion of the dialogue is to be sought in Socrates' use of eristic arguments against the conclusion that virtue is knowledge and hence that it is teachable at this stage in the dialogue. Though some scholars have recognized that these arguments are not meant to be taken at their face value, they do not seem to see clearly that Plato has a serious purpose here, and that he is not just being playful for its own sake. Now, in the course of the arguments purporting to prove that virtue is not knowledge but true opinion, Socrates avails himself of the opportunity to contrast knowledge with true opinion. He explains that true opinions, like the statues of Daedalus, are indeed unstable and transitory, unless they are fastened up, and that this is how true opinions are converted into pieces of knowledge (97e–98a):

For these, so long as they stay with us, are fine possessions, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one tethers them by reasoning out the cause. And this process, my dear Meno, is recollection, as we agreed earlier on.<sup>54</sup>

Thus if, as I have argued, Meno attains true opinion about the nature of virtue at the end of the argument 'from a hypothesis', we can see that the entire argument which completely changes Meno's opinion about the nature of virtue is a piece of Platonic artistry—an admirable illustration of the unstable and transitory nature of all true opinions unfettered 'by reasoning out the cause', αἰτίας λογισμῶ. The conclusion of the dialogue, then, that 'the result of our present reasoning (ἐκ τούτου τοῦ λογισμοῦ) is that virtue comes by divine dispensation, but we shall

<sup>51</sup> It seems clear from what Plato says in this dialogue about knowing *what a thing is* (τί ἐστι) and knowing *what it is like* (ποῖόν τι), that there can be only one true opinion about *what virtue is*, namely that it is knowledge (of what is good and what is bad), whereas there may be many true opinions about *what virtue is like*, i.e. about particular instances of virtue. Again, the view that true opinion is not teachable reckons without the demonstration of recollection in this dialogue. Perhaps this misunderstanding is due to the fact that at *Tim.* 51e2–3 Plato suggests that true opinion is not teachable; but it is important to note that there Plato is adverting not to true opinions about *what things are*, but rather true opinions about *what things are like*, i.e. particulars. On levels or grades of opinion, see my article cited in n. 41, pt 2, 223–4.

<sup>52</sup> As I have suggested, in this argument Socrates is talking as if the theory of recollection has not been mentioned at all in the dialogue, and he deliberately talks as if knowledge can be handed over from one person to another. Thus it is clear that he has in mind not only virtue as *popularly* conceived, but also teaching as *popularly* conceived. Nevertheless, he concludes that virtue (as *properly* conceived) is not knowledge, but

rather true opinion! See n. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Immediately after rejecting knowledge as a good and useful guide in political conduct, Socrates says (99b): 'So it is not by the possession of any wisdom that such men as Themistocles, and others *whom Anytus mentioned just now*, became leaders in their cities. This fact . . . will explain why they are unable to make others like themselves.' Note that it is not really Anytus who mentions the names of these highly respected and renowned statesmen; it is Socrates himself! Indeed, as far as Anytus himself is concerned, it is quite unnecessary to mention the name of any individual—any Athenian gentleman (καλὸς καγαθός) is quite capable of making Meno a good man (92c). The whole of this section (i.e. 99b ff.) up to the end of the dialogue is shot through and through with subtle sarcasm. See also n. 50.

<sup>54</sup> As Bluck (n. 1) 31 rightly says, 'in view of the suggestion that αἰτίας λογισμός is recollection "as we agreed before"', we may assume that although the expression αἰτίας λογισμός was not used earlier on, we may gloss with these words what was said at 85c about the possibility of converting true opinions into knowledge by further questioning'.

never know the certainty of this until, before asking how virtue comes to mankind, we set about enquiring what virtue is, in and by itself' (100b), need not be construed to mean that Socrates and Meno have not really made the enquiry into the nature of virtue, which, as I have argued, is precisely what the argument 'from a hypothesis' is designed to accomplish. Socrates is still pretending that he has indeed yielded to Meno.<sup>55</sup>

### CONCLUSION

It would seem, then, that the *Meno* is primarily an enquiry into the nature of knowledge and the manner whereby it may be acquired, and that the nature of virtue and how we acquire it are discussed only for the sake of example. I have also tried to show (i) that despite Meno's unwillingness to continue with the enquiry into the nature of virtue, Socrates artfully introduces the hypothetical method to facilitate his recollection of the nature of virtue; (ii) that the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' rather than 'if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable' functions as the important hypothesis in the argument 'from a hypothesis'; (iii) that Plato wants his readers to see this hypothesis as a satisfactory definition of virtue—a 'true opinion' attained by Meno at the end of the argument 'from a hypothesis' (89c), and a stage in Meno's recollection corresponding with that of his slave at the end of the slave-boy experiment (85b); and finally (iv) that the subsequent argument tending to prove that virtue is not teachable, and hence that it is not knowledge, is a piece of Platonic artistry illustrating the unstable and transitory nature of 'true opinions' unfettered 'by reasoning out the cause', *αἰτίας λογισμῶ* (97c–98a).

These results suggest that the aporetic conclusion of the dialogue is not genuine, and that in it, Plato is making use of the maieutic art of Socrates to prepare his readers' minds for the major themes in his metaphysics, epistemology and methodology which he later develops in the *Phaedo* and in the *Republic*.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> It would seem then, that *ἐκ τούτου τοῦ λογισμοῦ* (100b) refers to 'our present' discussion of the question whether there are successful teachers of virtue, rather than to the entire discussion right from the introduction of the argument 'from a hypothesis'.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. H. Erbse, 'Über Platons Methode in den sogenannten Jugenddialogen', *Hermes* xcvi (1968)

21–40, where he argues convincingly that Plato was not merely experimenting in the aporetic dialogues, but was rather producing artistically framed teaching works designed to prepare his readers step by step towards his main philosophical doctrines which he had already developed to a considerable degree.