

On the Teaching of Virtue in Plato's *Meno* and the Nature of Philosophical Authority

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Abstract

Socrates and Meno reach two different conclusions: in the first part of the dialogue, that virtue is knowledge and can therefore be taught; in the second, that it is reliable true opinion and can therefore be acquired only by divine inspiration. Taking into account Socrates' role as a teacher (of his interlocutors and of Plato) and Plato's role as a teacher (of us), I show that neither of these conclusions is consistent with the existence of philosophy as a human institution, and argue that, for this reason, Plato refuses ultimately to endorse either of them.

Meno's question — “Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is something teachable?” (70^a1–2)¹ — is important for the obvious reason that it concerns *what we must do*: if there is some way of acquiring virtue, then we are obliged to acquire it. But it has further implications, as well, both for political philosophy and for philosophical politics: that is, the political structure of philosophy itself. It is therefore worth understanding how Plato answers it, or fails to, in the course of the dialogue.

Much discussion of the *Meno* has focused on epistemological issues, and on the passages in which Socrates explains his theory of learning as recollection. Given the confusing nature of those passages, it is no surprise that many competing interpretations have emerged.² I do have ideas about how (and to what

¹Parentetical references to Plato's works are to *Platonis Opera*, 5 vols., Oxford Classical Texts (1902–1913), and unless otherwise indicated to the *Meno* (in vol. 3, ed. John Burnet). Translations are my own.

²There is a vast literature (of the kind we call “secondary”) on Plato in general, on this dialogue in particular. I unfortunately do not have space here for a proper discussion of it, though I will sometimes mention other authors below for one reason or another. Some recent interpretations usefully compared to mine are: Rosemary Desjardins, “Knowledge and Virtue: Paradox in Plato's *Meno*,” *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1985): 261–81; Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern

extent) these ambiguities can be resolved, and I could have chosen to mount a detailed exposition and defense of them. I have deliberately avoided doing so, however, because it seems to me that excessive focus on these issues has obscured what are in reality the major themes of the dialogue. Thus, while I will say what is necessary on this topic in the appropriate places below, whatever I say will have the status of a proposal, rather than a demonstrated conclusion. As such it ought to be evaluated, at least in part, according to the strength and interest of the overall reading to which it contributes.

There are various possible ways to divide the *Meno* into parts, but it is best, I think, to divide it in two, with the dividing line at 89^c4. Here, again, a full argument for the appropriateness of this division can only come from its fruitfulness when put to use. Its main advantage for my purposes, however, can be stated right away: namely, the symmetrical structure which it reveals.³ At the beginning of each of the proposed parts, Socrates claims to be in doubt about what virtue is, whereas Meno is confident (71^e1; 89^c7). In both parts Socrates reduces Meno to perplexity (80^b4; 96^d1–4). In both instances Socrates steps in with his own proposal (87^c11–12; 96^b9–^c2) and, by the end, makes Meno confident once again (89^a4–5; 100^b1). This structure, moreover, is paralleled in Socrates' conversation with the slave — as, we will see, the text implies it should be.

But the dialogue not only *represents* an interaction between Socrates and his (temporary) student, Meno; it also *is* an interaction between Plato and his (perhaps temporary) students, us. Here the parallel will fail. The first part presents us, I will argue, with an answer to Meno's question, which the second part then undermines, but without providing an obvious alternative. The effect will thus be first to make us confident, only later to reduce us to perplexity. This failed parallel is also significant. It appears to show that Plato disagrees with his teacher, Socrates, about the proper method of teaching. We may guess that

University Press, 1998), ch. 6, 153–87; Paul W. Gooch, "Irony and Insight in Plato's *Meno*," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 43 (1987): 189–204; Jeffrey S. Turner, "The Images of Enslavement and Incommensurability in Plato's *Meno*," *Interpretation* 20 (1992–3): 117–34; Roslyn Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave: Moral Inquiry in Plato's Meno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also very relevant is Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965; reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³An advantage for my purposes, however, may be a disadvantage for others. According to a now-venerable tradition, our dialogue is the place to investigate a (historical?) transition from dialogues which (mostly) end in perplexity to those which (mostly) do not. For that purpose other, more customary divisions are better. However, although that tradition is indeed venerable (i.e., although veneration is due to it), I cannot try to continue it here.

this (apparent) disagreement will imply some (apparent) disagreement about the nature of virtue and the relationship between virtue and knowledge.

1 Virtue as Knowledge

To proceed, then, with the first part: Meno's question is whether virtue can be taught. But Socrates soon diverts him to another, based on the principle that one must know what something is before one can know its qualities (71^b3–4). This implies that, to answer Meno, one must first know (1) what virtue is and (2) what teaching is. In the end Socrates and Meno agree (1) that virtue is “prudence” or “knowledge” (89^a3–5, ^c2–4) — it is no foregone conclusion that those are equivalent,⁴ but Socrates treats them interchangeably — and (2) that what human beings call “teaching” is actually “reminding” (87^b7–^c1).

Socrates demonstrates (2) by means of his conversation with Meno's slave.⁵ The demonstration is as follows. Socrates asks for the side of a square whose area is eight square feet, and the slave, who at first answers incorrectly, eventually learns the correct solution. Socrates thus teaches him a truth. Since the official point of the demonstration is to show that (what human beings call) teaching in general is actually reminding — rather, that is, than to establish the merits of any one teaching (or reminding) method — it is unsurprising that he does so in what is to this day the normal and only effective way of teaching mathematics, namely to ask leading questions.⁶ As anyone knows who has stud-

⁴Aristotle implies that our dialogue goes astray precisely by ignoring this distinction: Pericles and the others discussed in the second part are indeed to be praised for their prudence, but not necessarily for their knowledge (see *EN* 6.5.1140^b1–3, 7–10).

⁵The Greek *παῖς* means either “slave” or “boy” (or rather: even an adult slave can be called a “boy”). It does *not* mean “slave boy.” I would suggest that, if anything, the slave is around the same age as Meno. (Among others who have noted this is Deborah Levine Gera: see “Porters, *Paidagogoi*, Jailers, and Attendants: Some Slaves in Plato,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 15 [1996]: 98. But I cannot agree with her conclusions.)

⁶For example, by asking the student to prove theorems which, the instructor implies, are true. Even the detailed form of Socrates' exercise is entirely standard: he leads his student through a counterexample to a false but intuitively plausible principle. See, e.g., Tom M. Apostol, *Calculus*, 2d ed. (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell, 1967) 139, no. 27: the problem is to show that $\sin 1/x$, though continuous at $x \neq 0$, approaches no limit as $x \rightarrow 0$ from either side; after a step-by-step discussion (including an imperfect sensible representation) it ends: “*Hint*: Assume such an A exists and obtain a contradiction.” (Socrates' questions are easier and/or don't require showing as much work. But (a) his student is a complete beginner; (b) that student has to look him in the eyes while he answers; (c) those are *Socrates'* eyes.) Cf. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 95–100, and the authors she cites; also Turner, “Images,” 121–2. (Weiss herself considers the whole demonstration to be a “farce” [94], convincing only to the stupid and “gullible” [83]. Cf. Leibniz, *Discours de metaphysique*, §26.)

ied a new area of mathematical knowledge, one's knowledge is secure only once one has answered such leading questions many times in many ways. Until then it is, like a dream, easily forgotten (see 85^{c9}–^{d1}). On this official level, then, Socrates' demonstration works by reminding Meno what it is like to be taught mathematics: one is asked leading questions and discovers (with more or less difficulty) that one already knows the answers. And although, in the midst of the discussion, Socrates expresses this by getting Meno to admit that he is *not* teaching the slave, but *only* reminding him, the conclusion, I take it, is (2): it turns out that there is no such distinction (between teaching and reminding) to be drawn.

That is the official point. Socrates, however, clearly intends more. For his procedure is: (1) to elicit the slave's confident response (82^{e2}–3); (2) to show him that it is incorrect, and that he cannot produce a better one, thus reducing him to perplexity (84^{a1}–2, 7–^{b1}); (3) to introduce a new answer of his own (84^{e4}–85^{a1}); and finally (4) to return him to confidence, now in the correct answer (85^{b5}–7). This establishes the parallel mentioned above: Socrates' procedure with the slave is the same as (goes through the same steps as) his procedure with Meno. Lest Meno (or we) might miss this, moreover, Plato has Socrates drive it home. Meno has complained that whereas, previously, he not only knew what virtue was, but was even a kind of expert, Socrates has now “paralyzed” his mouth and soul, depriving him of his former knowledge (80^{a7}–^{b4}). Socrates therefore forces him to admit, at the relevant point, that the slave, who would previously have considered himself an expert on the double square, but has now been paralyzed (84^{b6}–7), is nevertheless better off now than before. Socrates wants to show, therefore, not just what teaching is (that it is nothing but reminding), but also that the particular method by which he is teaching (i.e., reminding) Meno is a correct (beneficial) one.

What is Socrates teaching Meno? What, that is, corresponds to the geometrical problem Socrates poses for the slave? Not Meno's original question, but rather Socrates' substitute: “What is virtue?” Socrates does make a show of finally agreeing to address Meno's question instead (86^{d6}–^{e1}). How exactly he proposes to do so is unclear.⁷ All that matters for our present purposes is that it involves introducing an answer to his own original question: virtue, Meno agrees, will be teachable if and only if it is knowledge (87^{c1}–7). So Socrates gets his way after all: they determine whether virtue can be taught only through a prior determination as to what it is.

⁷He says he will proceed “from a hypothesis” (86^{e3}). But what this means, and what Socrates means to call his “hypothesis” (or hypotheses), have been topics of controversy.

Now, if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught — that is, one can make others virtuous by imparting some knowledge to them, or in other words by reminding them of it. But what knowledge? Virtue is a good — beneficial, rather than harmful (87^e1–4). It is beneficial because it is that which guides us correctly (88^d4–^e2). That is, it is that by which we make correct (beneficial) choices. But no one chooses the evil (that is, the harmful) knowing it to be evil, since no one knowingly chooses to be harmed (77^e5–78^b2). Hence to know that something is virtue will be to choose to have that thing, rather than not to have it: to choose otherwise, under those circumstances, would be knowingly to choose the evil. But that thing, virtue, is good. Thus in choosing to have it one is already in a beneficial state of being correctly guided in one’s choices — that is, already virtuous. To teach virtue, therefore, it suffices to teach what virtue *is*. In particular: if virtue is knowledge, to teach virtue is to teach that virtue is knowledge. In having Socrates answer his own question, Plato himself is answering Meno’s. If Socrates can teach Meno what virtue is, he can teach him virtue. But Socrates teaches (i.e., reminds) Meno that virtue is knowledge; virtue, therefore, can be taught.

Meno does need to learn virtue. We should not assume this based on the (unflattering) reports about his later life,⁸ since to assume that his viciousness was innate would be to beg the very question which the dialogue raises: does vice come by nature, or from improper (or insufficient) education? There is, however, evidence internal to the dialogue that Meno lacks virtue initially, and the historical sources at least make us suspect that any improvement will be temporary. The question is whether there is any such temporary improvement. If we want to know, we had better give Meno the benefit of the doubt. And if we do, we will see that, in the first part of the dialogue, Meno’s learning that virtue is knowledge is indeed represented as an improvement in his character.⁹

Begin with the actual demonstration that virtue is knowledge. Meno agrees that virtue is beneficial (87^e3–4), meaning per se desirable (see 77^c3–^d1). Socrates therefore proposes to examine things which are said to be beneficial (87^e5–

⁸See Klein’s summary (*Commentary*, 36–7); but see also Truesdell S. Brown, “Menon of Thessaly,” *Historia* 35 (1986): 387–404, for an analysis of the (gossipy and unreliable) sources upon which all such reports rest.

⁹If instead we begin with the presupposition that Meno is irremediably stupid and wicked, and then go looking for support in the text, we will find it. There are always many things in a Platonic dialogue which depend on our stage directions. This method may involve some danger to our own souls, however. Meno doesn’t do too well in the face of Socrates. But which one of us would? To exaggerate Meno’s arrogance, laziness, smugness, snobbishness, rudeness, failure to pay attention, slavish tendency to follow teachers or common opinions, and so forth, might well be to underestimate our own.

6). He suggests two classes of such purported goods: bodily (health, strength, beauty and wealth) (87^e6–7) and psychic (temperance, justice, courage, teachability, memory, magnificence, and “all such things”) (88^a6–^b1). Meno has already proposed the members of these lists as answers to Socrates’ question: items from the second have come up as “parts of virtue” (74^a4–6; 78^d7–^e2), and it has also been suggested that virtue is the ability to acquire things on the first (77^b4–5; 78^c5–^d3). Meno himself, moreover, possesses members of both lists. He is wealthy (again, 78^c5–^d3; also 82^a8–^b1) and beautiful (76^b4–5; 80^c1–5), and answers questions “fearlessly and magnificently” (70^b6–7). If wealth, beauty, courage, magnificence, or the ability to acquire them, is (part of) virtue, therefore, then (1) Meno already knows (in part) what virtue is — or at least, has a true opinion about that — and (2) Meno is already (in part) virtuous. Of course, if one of these things is virtue, then (1) and (2) are logically unconnected: if virtue, for example, is wealth, one can be virtuous (i.e., wealthy) without knowing what virtue is. But if virtue is knowledge, then the negations of (1) and (2) are closely related. For in that case Meno is (in part) vicious precisely because he (in part) does not know what virtue is — or those, rather, are just two ways of describing the same defect in Meno’s character.

Socrates now demonstrates that the items on each list are beneficial if and only if accompanied by knowledge. “Courage,” for example, if it means simply “boldness” (not already a kind of “prudence”), benefits those who have it if and only if they also are intelligent (88^b3–6). If this is so, then Meno was wrong to think that courage per se is (part of) virtue. If virtue is knowledge, then, we expect a corresponding initial defect in Meno’s own courage or boldness. And just such a defect is evident. Meno answers Socrates boldly, but, because his boldness is unaccompanied by knowledge, it is harmful to him. Socrates has already demonstrated this in the parallel case of the slave. The slave’s “paralysis” is beneficial because, as long as he does not know the true answer, his boldness stifles his desire to learn, and is therefore harmful (84^a3–7). The same is presumably true of Meno’s gradual paralysis, in which he first admits that he does not grasp a question perfectly (72^d2–3), then is reluctant to answer (73^a4–5), then tries to get Socrates to answer for him (75^b1), and finally admits that he has no idea (80^b4).¹⁰

Similar points can be made about other virtues. For example, Meno’s behavior demonstrates that justice, too, is harmful without knowledge. Socrates, having offered, as a definition of “shape,” that it is “that which alone of all

¹⁰We *could* read all this so as to put Meno in a worse and worse light, rather than showing his improvement. (See, e.g., Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 165; Klein, *Commentary*, 58, 67, 88; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 50.) See the previous note.

things is always connected to color” (75^b10–11), asks Meno: “[have I answered] sufficiently for you, or are you seeking [to be answered] in some other way?” (75^b11). Meno rejects the definition, because it helps itself to the concept of “color,” which remains to be defined. How would Socrates respond if someone claimed not to know what color is? Socrates accepts the objection, but criticizes the spirit in which it is raised: if the questioner were a disputatious and competitive sophist, he says, he would tell him “I have said [what I have to say]; if I do not speak correctly, it is your business to take up the argument and refute [me]”; friends who want to converse with each other, however, must answer “more gently and dialectically” (75^c8–^d4).

Socrates has asked Meno whether the definition is sufficient *for him*, but Meno understood a different question: whether “someone” might rightly demand more. In this he is indeed acting like a disputatious sophist, as we can see from the *Euthydemus*. There Dionysodorus, asked by Socrates whether he is making a certain argument for the sake of argument, or whether it truly seems to him to be correct, responds as Socrates imagines himself responding here: “But you, rather, refute [me]” (286^e1). In a sense, he is within his rights. He is due a refutation before he can justly be accused of not believing his own conclusion. Similarly, he is within his rights, on the following page, to demand an answer to his own question, which is already on the table, before he responds to Socrates’ new one. Thus when Socrates asks, “And is that just?”, Dionysodorus rightly answers, “Just indeed” (287^c7–8). Yet this justice yields argument (or “speech”: *λόγος*) for its own sake, rather than truth. So, too, in our dialogue, Socrates points out that an argumentative justice in which one demands as much and yields as little as legitimately possible is harmful. A conversation is, as we would say, not a zero-sum game: the truth is found more easily if one discusses “gently,” with friends. Note, therefore, that when Socrates later recalls the episode, he says that “we” rejected the first definition — he represents this, that is, as a gain for both of them, rather than as a point for Meno. Meno agrees (79^d1–5).

As for teachability (*εὐμαθία*) and memory: whatever Meno’s status with respect to Socrates, we know that he is a student (*μαθητής*) of Gorgias. Moreover, he is a *good* student (*εὐμαθής*).¹¹ He remembers Gorgias’ teaching and can remind others of it, by saying it over or by restating it in his own words (71^c9–^e1;

¹¹These words, *μαθητής* and *εὐμαθής*, are not actually applied to Meno in our dialogue, but they are the correct words to describe his relationship with Gorgias. *μαθητής* means, not simply “learner,” but “student” (in the sense of “pupil”) or “disciple.” See 90^e5–6; *Euthydemus* 276^a4–7; *Theaetetus* 152^c8–11, 180^b4–^c3. Hence Socrates correctly says that, if there are no teachers, there can be no *μαθηταί* (89^e1–2, 96^e1, ^c8). Cf. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 151.

80^b2–3). Meno, that is, has these qualities of teachability and memory, as well. Is it obvious that they don't benefit him? Many interpreters, in fact, treat these qualities of Meno's with contempt. They think, apparently, that it is easy to remember the words of a thinker like Gorgias well enough to repeat them accurately and appropriately and explain them many times before a large audience of one's peers. If Meno takes pride in doing this well, therefore, they infer that he is an idiot, incapable of "independent thinking."¹² Some even infer, from the fact that Meno thinks or hopes his ability may help him learn the truth about virtue, that he is a moral idiot, as well, if not outright "wicked."¹³

That they think and infer these things is odd, given the nature of their own profession. What is it they themselves take pride in doing, if not in remembering Plato's words, citing them appropriately, and explaining them well to a large audience? Be that as it may: Socrates' own doctrines here in the first part of the dialogue (that virtue is knowledge and teaching is reminding) imply that teachability and memory, if properly used, are what will lead one most quickly and surely to virtue. Despite his self-deprecating comments (71^c8; 96^d5–7), Socrates certainly possesses them, and is capable of using them just as Meno does.¹⁴ Nor is it obvious that that is an improper use. If the slave wants to stabilize and extend his knowledge in the future, it will no doubt help to think back on Socrates' words and diagrams.

On the other hand, it is hard to deny that Meno's possession of these attributes has failed to make him virtuous. But that is not surprising: Meno himself admits that he has not known how to use them for that purpose. He has never been sure whether the sophists can teach virtue (95^c7–8), and (therefore) loves Gorgias for (ironically?) claiming only to teach clever speaking (95^c1–4). Not seeing how the memory of a teacher's words and arguments might lead one to virtue, Meno has supposed that his teachability and memory are good only for achieving and maintaining knowledge of how his teacher speaks, and thus

¹²See Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 159, 185; Gooch, "Irony and Insight," 195; Richard G. Hoerber, "Plato's *Meno*," *Phronesis* 5 (1960): 91–2; Klein, *Commentary*, 71–3, 97, 103–5, 189; John Sallis, *Being and Logos: Reading the Platonic Dialogues*, 3d ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 67–8, 73, 95; Robert Sternfeld and Harold Zyskind, *Plato's Meno: A Philosophy of Man as Acquisitive* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 27, 115–16; Turner, "Images," 131; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 19, 50 n. 3, 68–9; 136.

¹³Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 166.

¹⁴I take it 80^e1–2 shows that Socrates remembers the words of the sophists better than Meno: Meno has recited over one of their paradoxes without realizing it. See W.J. Verdenius, "Further Notes on Plato's *Meno*," *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., 17 (1964): 262 (ad 71^c8) and 267 (ad 80^e2, suggesting the reading *καταλέγεις* for *κατάγεις*). See also 81^a5–6, ^b1–2, 95^e4; Klein, *Commentary*, 44; Sallis, *Being and Logos*, 67 n. 4..

an ability to speak that way himself. This, according to the theory developed here, is a serious error, and also implicated in the other errors just discussed: Meno answers questions fearlessly (but without knowledge) because Gorgias answers that way, and he demands the wrong thing as his dialectical due because he thinks to learn, not what is true, but how Socrates would answer a certain question. What would help him out of this predicament would be, not a resolve never again to remember a teacher's words, but, rather, knowledge of how teaching can lead to knowledge, and of why that is per se to be desired — the very knowledge Socrates imparts to him.

As for the goods on Socrates' first list, Meno has already agreed that the power to acquire them is neither better nor worse than the corresponding lack of power, unless accompanied by justice, temperance, etc. (78^d7–79^a2). But, in case Meno was merely shamed into saying that, Socrates now gets him to admit something obvious and not explicitly moralizing: bodily goods are harmful to those unable to use them properly (88^a3–5). So far this does not tell us what their proper use is, but it cannot be simply to acquire *more* such things, since what is not per se beneficial is not per se good, hence not per se desirable. Thus if Meno believed, incorrectly, that the power to acquire bodily goods was virtue, he did not know their proper use. By his own admission possession of such things was harmful to him, rather than beneficial.

The action of the dialogue confirms this. For the result of Meno's possessing these things is his ability to order others around. Due to his wealth, Meno literally owns many people, and can tell them what to do. Here, he orders his slave to come forward and be taught, but we know that he has previously failed so to order. Socrates asks him whether anyone has ever taught the slave geometry, and then pointedly adds: “for you probably ought to know, especially since he was born and brought up in your household” (85^e3–5). Socrates emphasizes that beauty, too, confers a power to rule over others (76^b4–^c1). If the ability to rule were in itself virtuous, as Meno has already suggested (73^c9), wealth and beauty would therefore also be beneficial, hence virtuous. But in fact Meno's ability to rule is harmful, because not accompanied by knowledge. In particular, Meno does not know the proper order of investigation. If Socrates were not clever enough to restore that order, then Meno, ruling over Socrates, would have disturbed it (86^d3–8), and would thus have deprived himself of the answer he sought. Since Meno's beauty and wealth give him the ability to rule, it follows that they, too, when unaccompanied by knowledge, are harmful.

We have seen, therefore, that Meno not only incorrectly supposes that certain things are virtuous (beneficial), but also possesses those things, and that they are actually harmful to him. But how will learning that virtue is knowledge

remedy, not only his belief, but also his behavior? How will it teach him when to answer questions, what to yield and demand in argument, what to learn and remember, how to use his wealth, beauty and (consequent) power?

Socrates makes three claims which, if virtue is knowledge, have radical practical implications. First, knowledge is available to any human being: even the slave could learn geometry no less accurately than anyone (85^c11–^d1). Second, all knowledge forms one whole: having gained any one part, we have a basis for discovering the rest (81^c9–^d4). Finally, knowledge can be taught: if I have knowledge, I can cause you to have it, while still keeping it for myself. The three claims supposedly follow from Socrates' theory that learning is recollection (being reminded), but Socrates himself is not too sure about the details of this theory (86^b5–6). What he *is* sure about is the practical consequence of taking knowledge and teaching to have the claimed nature: “since we agree,” he says, “that one ought to seek [for knowledge] about that which no one knows, let us attempt to seek, in common, [to learn] what virtue is” (86^c4–6; cf. *Charmides* 166^d4–7; *Gorgias* 505^e3–6). And *if* knowledge is virtue (that is: per se desirable), then it indeed follows from these three claims that I can and ought to wish, and try to bring about, that everyone possess virtue (i.e., that which is beneficial) at least as much as I do. I can in principle teach everyone what I know, and in doing so I am making it possible for them to learn other things — things which they might, in turn, teach me. Thus Meno's argumentative tactics and his orders to the slave and to Socrates were mistaken.¹⁵

Looking back, we can see that Socrates has, from the start, already begun reminding Meno that virtue is knowledge. He highlights two characteristics of virtue which correspond to two of the above three claims. He insists (and Meno agrees) (1) that “all human beings are good in the same way” (73^c1–2) and (2) that virtue must be *one* thing, common to all so-called “virtues” (74^a7–10). Socrates argues that virtue must be like this because “everything” is — e.g. strength, health, shape and color (72^d4–^e9; 74^b2–75^a8). But Meno protests: “Somehow, Socrates, it seems to me that this [case] is no longer the same as those others” (73^a4–5). His feeling is correct. Meno can admit that it is the same for

¹⁵The theory Socrates develops here is therefore *not* one of “independent thinking”: on the contrary, all true thoughts, according to it, and all true thinkers, are mutually dependent. Not only the slave, but even Pythagoras, had teachers. Cf. Weiss, who finds the remark at 86^c4–6 a “jarring non sequitur” (*Virtue in the Cave*, 99), and see, on the other hand, St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 2-2.49.3 ad 3: *ipsos maiores [oportet] dociles quantum ad aliqua esse*. (Note that *docilitas* is the traditional translation of *εὐμαθία*: see e.g. Cicero, *De finibus* 5.13.36; Apuleius, *De Platone* 2.4.226; Macrobius, *In Somnium Scipionis* 1.8.7. The last source is cited by Thomas, loc. cit., 48.1 obj. 1.)

him and his wife or slave to be healthy without implying anything about the social order. But if it is the same for him and them to be virtuous, then that order is morally irrelevant. It cannot be virtuous for the slave to rule (73^d2–5) (that is inconsistent with the concept *slave*), hence it cannot be virtuous per se for the master to rule, either.¹⁶ Meno can safely admit, similarly, that straightness no more makes something a shape than does roundness (74^e8–10), but not that power to obtain bodily goods is no more virtuous than powerlessness to obtain them (78^e6–7). That virtue has these two characteristics already implies: (1) that virtue, like knowledge, is in principle available to all human beings, and (2) that whatever is good, i.e. is beneficial, i.e. confers the power to obtain the good, is of the same kind as the good which it confers the power to obtain: that the parts of virtue, like the parts of knowledge, are themselves the power to acquire the whole.¹⁷

These two characteristics already show that one cannot become virtuous by acquiring some advantage over others — e.g., by winning an argument, or ruling over a slave. To have such an advantage cannot, as such, be virtuous, since virtue is the same for all; and if having some advantage conferred the power to *become* virtuous, then the advantage would already itself be virtue. To show, however, that one ought actually to benefit others, we need more: something corresponding to the third claim about knowledge, that it can be taught. Socrates does not argue explicitly here for this third characteristic of virtue, though he does allude to it later (92^a2–6). But elsewhere he maintains that my virtue benefits those around me, and vice versa, so that I can and ought always to make them better (e.g., *Apology* 25^c–26^a). If virtue is like this then it is transferable in the way that knowledge is.

There is one more complication, which will turn out to be important. It concerns a puzzling feature of Socrates’ demonstration. He goes out of his way to show that the slave is better off even in the intermediate state of paralysis, in which he has discovered the error of his first answers, but has no idea how to replace them. Why emphasize this? If Socrates wants to convince Meno to press on past his present perplexity, then it should be enough — indeed, it might seem better — just to show that the whole process leaves the slave better off.

¹⁶Thus Aristotle, in defending the commonplace that virtuous women obey their husbands and virtuous slaves their masters, must defend “Gorgias” (i.e., Gorgias’ teaching as related here by Meno) against Socrates’ attack (*Pol.* 1.13.1260^a14–31).

¹⁷In this way the parts of knowledge (and of virtue) are unlike either the parts of a face or the parts of gold. Cf. *Protagoras* 329^d4–8 and Paul Woodruff, “Socrates on the Parts of Virtue,” in Roger A. Shiner and John King-Farlow, eds., *New Essays on Plato and the Pre-Socratics*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supplementary Volume 2, 107–10.

Consider, however, that the slave's education is not yet complete. Socrates says that the slave's new knowledge is unstable, and doesn't even say clearly that the slave has achieved knowledge yet at all.¹⁸ Only "if someone were to ask him many times and in many ways about these same things," would he come to know them no less accurately than anyone (85^c9–^d1). In the slave's case, there will probably be no time for this, and Meno, too, is leaving soon (76^e7–9). Even, moreover, if Meno were to stay, Socrates might be unable to complete his education: in the end, it is Socrates who says "but now it is time for me to go somewhere" (100^b7). This is a subtle version of a point which Plato makes more starkly in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates there asserts that the philosophical life is superior to the political one, in that the political person, brought up "in the law courts," is always bound by time (*Theaetetus* 172^d4–^e1). At the end of that dialogue, however, Socrates says, "Now I must go appear [in court] at the Royal Stoa, against Meletus' indictment" (210^d2–3). Meletus drew up that indictment, on the basis of which Socrates was eventually executed, together with Anytus, who is about to appear in our own dialogue. In both places, in other words, Plato is reminding us that, as they say, Socrates is human, and all humans are mortal: because his lifetime is finite, some or all of his projects of teaching will ultimately go unfinished.

This problem — that mortals must conduct philosophy in finite time — raises, in turn, a problem about Socrates' method. Before the discussion, Meno and the slave do have some true opinions: some of their confident responses are correct. Once the process begins, even these true opinions are thrown into doubt: both Meno and the slave are reduced to a state in which they simply do not know

¹⁸This formulation goes against nearly all recent interpreters, according to whom Socrates clearly says that the slave does *not* yet know. Some treat this as important (e.g., J.T. Bedu-Addo, "Sense-Experience and Recollection in Plato's *Meno*," *American Journal of Philology* 140 [1983]: 235–6; Desjardins, "Knowledge and Virtue," 266–7; Panagiotis Dimas, "True Belief in the *Meno*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 14 [1996]: 1–2; Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 170–71; Michael-Thomas Liske, "Was bedeutet 'Lehrbarkeit der Tugend' in Platons *Menon*?" *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 32 [1989]: 81–3), others treat it as a more or less minor embarrassment (e.g., Benson, "Meno, the Slave Boy and the Elenchos," *Phronesis* 35 [1990]: 134–7; "Method of Hypothesis in the *Meno*," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 18 [2003]: 111 n. 52; Gail Fine, "Inquiry in the *Meno*," in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2003], 56; Alexander Nehamas, "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 [1983]: 21–3), and at least one concludes that Socrates is being disingenuous (Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 110–11). But everything Socrates says admits just as easily of the interpretation that the slave's true opinions, having been awakened in the correct order, are now already knowledge, though not yet stable. See 82^e12, 85^c9–^d1, ^d9, 98^a4–6. I agree, however, that Socrates is not clear about this, and will suggest some reasons for that below.

what to say. Granted that they will be better off when the process is complete — what if that time never comes? Isn't "paralysis" in itself detrimental? In this first part of the dialogue, the answer is "no." With respect to *knowledge*, one is better off knowing that one does not know, rather than thinking one knows when one does not. To have knowledge is not simply to be able to obtain true opinions, nor to possess them, no matter how stably. Such opinions are like bodily goods: it is no better, per se, to have them than to lack them, or indeed even to be reduced to perplexity — i.e., be unable to provide any opinion at all. What matters is whether one is, as we say, *justified*.¹⁹ If virtue is knowledge, then, it will always be beneficial to lose confidence in unjustified opinions, whether true or false.

The first part of the dialogue thus presents a coherent answer to Meno's question. Virtue can be taught: one can make others better by transmitting knowledge. And the knowledge to be transmitted is just: that virtue is knowledge. This fact about virtue by itself implies everything which forms the basis of morality: that, in respect to what is truly good and beneficial, all human beings are potentially equal; that one cannot reasonably seek it by seeking an advantage over others; that, on the contrary, one can and should benefit them, and in doing so benefit oneself. This last point implies that virtue not only *can* be taught, but that one *ought* always to teach it — given, that is, that, as we have argued, even incomplete teaching is better than none. All of this is not merely explained, but shown: just as Socrates demonstrates to Meno what teaching is, and what virtue is, by showing him how to teach his slave, Plato demonstrates to us what the teaching of virtue is by showing us how Socrates teaches Meno.

It may feel as if there is some sleight of hand here, as if we have got something for nothing. We could give expression to that feeling by noting an ambiguity in the doctrine that virtue is knowledge — an issue raised in the dialogue (89^a4), but never addressed. Is virtue all knowledge in general, or some specific part of it? According to our argument above, virtue is indeed a specific part of knowledge: the knowledge that virtue is knowledge. But recall the argument by which we identified this "part." To teach that virtue is knowledge, we argued, is to teach the nature of virtue, and hence to teach virtue. If it then follows that virtue is not knowledge in general, but the knowledge that virtue is knowledge, then to teach virtue must mean to teach, not the general principle that virtue is knowledge, but the more specific one that virtue is *the knowledge that virtue is knowledge*. If virtue is only part of knowledge, the attempt to specify *which*

¹⁹Cf. 78^e3–5, and note that the word *απορία*, used there for the failure to obtain or provide gold and silver, is the same which is used for "perplexity" elsewhere in the dialogue.

part leads to infinite regress. Or, to put it more suggestively, to an infinite series of approximations: the terms of the infinite series specify smaller and smaller parts of knowledge within which virtue must lie.

Perhaps the problem was in our identification of the part of knowledge that is virtue. Should we instead say that virtue is the knowledge of good and evil, or that it is knowledge of the good?²⁰ This is not wrong, but neither will it help with our problem. For if the good in question — the good we know when we are virtuous — is *our* good (beneficial for human beings), then it is itself virtue.²¹ Knowledge of the good will thus be knowledge *of the knowledge of the good*, and so forth. We are led straight back into the same infinite regress, or series of approximations.

Now notice three odd features of Socrates' discussion with the slave. (1) The slave's final answer differs in kind from the (numerical) answers which he first attempted: he is only able to point out a line of the desired length. Plato calls attention to this (84^a1). (2) Though the slave does not know it, this failure to find a numeric answer is not accidental, nor due to the limitations of slaves. The length of the diagonal simply cannot be stated in terms of the units used to measure the side. Neither slaves, women, free men, nor, indeed, the gods, in other words, can settle the question of its length by measuring — though one can, as Plato knew, approximate its length to any desired accuracy.²² That the solution is irrational does not mean, however, that there isn't one, or that the slave has not learned it. It is simply that the (intelligible) answer to the question, "What is the side of the double square?" cannot be said; it can only be shown (demonstrated), by pointing to the correct *kind* of (sensible) line.²³

²⁰By Socrates' principle that there is one science of contraries, these two answers are the same (see *Republic* 3.409^d6–^e1). Authors who explicitly give one or both of them include Benson, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153–4, 157, 239, and those he cites; also Bedu-Addo, "Recollection," 3 n. 14, 8; Konrad Gaiser, "Platons *Menon* und die Akademie," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 46 (1964): 283; Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 55–9; W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 4:261; Liske, "'Lehrbarkeit der Tugend'" 80; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 46 n. 64; Woodruff, "Parts of Virtue," 104.

²¹This is the kind of good which figures in Socrates' argument here. If, however, we substituted the knowledge of good in general, then the conclusion reached below (that this knowledge is empty of specific content) would follow even more readily. (See *Republic* 6.509^b6–10.)

²²See Malcolm Brown, "Plato Disapproves of the Slave-Boy's Answer," in *Plato's Meno*, tr. W. K. C. Guthrie, with essays edited by Malcolm Brown (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 227–8, and Gaiser, "Platons *Menon*," 258–9.

²³"Sophists" have a word, "diagonal," for this kind of line — but, as Socrates implies, just inventing a fancy word doesn't fundamentally change the situation (85^b4–6). Note that

(3) This difficulty is characteristic of geometry: the line has parts which cannot be measured in units of its length. Thus the slave is learning geometry “no less accurately than anyone” (85^c11); to demand more is to demand an accuracy not germane to the subject matter.

Turning back to the discussion with Meno, and assuming for now that virtue is “part” of knowledge, we can say the following. (1) Meno does not reach the kind of answer initially requested: he can only say what *kind* of thing virtue is, not *what* it is (87^b5, ^c12). (2) This is not a failure, because it is impossible to *say* how the “line” of knowledge is to be divided between virtue and everything else, though it is possible to show what virtue is by pointing to the correct kind of knowledgeable behavior, and also to say the answer approximately to, so to speak, any desired accuracy. This is not a limitation of human beings.²⁴ Meno, true, is unaware of this problem about his answer.²⁵ But he has nevertheless learned that answer no less accurately than anyone. (3) We might expect that the problem is characteristic of a certain domain of subject matter. But which? Perhaps “ethics” — not a bad answer, since it seems to be Aristotle’s.²⁶ Some things we have already noted about knowledge, however, suggest a different one: “philosophy,” or the knowledge of knowledge (“the knowledge that knows itself”²⁷). If knowledge is as Socrates claims, then every part of it is potentially the whole. It is because virtue is “like” knowledge, then, that it is impossible to express their identification more accurately. To identify virtue with a part

although Gaiser (loc. cit., n. 31) implies that Plato would not have applied the terms *ἄλογος* or *ἄρρητος* to “potentially commensurable” lengths, the passages he cites do not support this: at *Hippias Major* 303^b7–^c1 Socrates explicitly says that *ἄρρητοι* can have either a rational or an irrational product.

²⁴Neither we nor the gods, therefore, can settle questions of good and evil by authority of the gods. See *Euthyphro* 7^c3–5, ^c10–8^a2. This helps to explain why Socrates is enthusiastic about geometry in the *Meno*, and why he introduces geometrical terminology (scalene, isosceles) in the *Euthyphro* in a context where it appears superfluous (12^d7–10). Cf. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 118ff., 273; Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 135; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 80, 112. It also helps to answer Weiss’s questions, why anyone would think geometry is like virtue (79, 133) and how being reminded of a geometrical truth could help remind us of a moral one (76 n. 63). Socrates reminds the slave of a truth (which both Euthyphro and Weiss have forgotten) about measurement, and thus also, ultimately, of a truth about virtue: that, if virtue is indeed knowledge, it must be knowledge to which we ourselves can be made to bear witness (cf. *Virtue in the Cave*, 120–21 n. 92, 173–4, 207 n. 2). (Thus the command or divine mission of the oracle is simply: know thyself.)

²⁵Socrates is aware of it: see *Euthydemus* 292^{a–e}, and also *Charmides* 173^d–175^d (note the use of *ἄλογος* at 175^c7–8), and cf. *Theaetetus* 147^b11–148^b9.

²⁶See *EN* 1.7.1098^a26–9.

²⁷See *Charmides* 166^e5–6, 169^e4.

of knowledge is to identify it with the whole, but the attempt to describe that whole leads back to an infinite search for some abstract “part” different from all parts.

Now, however, we come to the heart of the objection which I mentioned above. In the geometrical case, the successive approximations lead closer and closer to some definite but inexpressible length. In ours, however, they lead into an abstraction which is inexpressible because empty, or, as we might say, merely formal. But although I would not claim that there is nothing to such an objection,²⁸ we should be cautious in making it. The idea that true virtue is to know the *form* of good — that the good is something empty of (specific) content, but which nevertheless determines all content, and that to be good is to acknowledge this formality of the good, its independence from everything particular and a posteriori and its identity with the universal, with what everyone already knows and has always known — none of this was proposed for the last time by Plato. One thinks, for example, of Plotinus, Maimonides, or Kant. Philosophers of this caliber can be mistaken, but it is not really open for us to say that they are stupidly or viciously so. Hence if the doubts raised in the second part of the dialogue are serious, they are serious doubts about a serious position — doubts, that is, of the most important kind.

2 The Exchange Value of Virtue

With respect to our interaction with Plato, the two parts of the dialogue are very different: the first leaves us with a clear answer, whereas the second leads into perplexity. But Socrates leaves Meno confident in the second part as in the first. Virtue, it turns out, is not knowledge, but true opinion (99^a1–^c1). Let us first take this new theory at face value, and see how it differs from the old one.

We might expect matters to turn on the intrinsic difference between knowledge and true opinion. But Socrates himself speaks, here, as one who does not know that intrinsic difference (98^b1). Instead he brings up a way in which the two might be differently beneficial. Meno has already suggested something like this: that knowledge is *always* beneficial, whereas true opinion sometimes is not. According to the theory of the first part, he is correct: true opinion, like gold and silver, is beneficial only when we possess it justly. But Socrates now claims that true opinion, too, is always beneficial, as long as it remains (97^c6–11), and introduces a different distinction by means of a parable. The moving statues made by Daedalus are not valuable when loose, just as it is not valuable to

²⁸Aristotle, after all, objects in exactly this way: see *EN* 1.6.1096^b19–20.

have obtained a loose runaway slave. A tied one is valuable, however, since, as Socrates says, they are very beautiful (97^e2–5).

This last point may at first appear to be a non sequitur. A loose statue, surely, is just as beautiful as a tied one: as long as it remains, it is in that sense just as beneficial. But Socrates is right, nevertheless, to say that only a tied statue is very *valuable* (πολλοῦ ἄξιον) — i.e., that only a tied one will bring a high price (τιμή: 97^e3). It is valuable, indeed, even to a blind man, who cannot see its beauty. And knowledge is supposed to differ from true opinion in just this way. It is not that, when we know, our hold on true opinions is *just*, but merely that we are then, so to speak, able to enforce it better: true opinions which have been “tied down” by reasoning (in the process of recollection), become — if not at first then eventually — more stable, and thus more valuable (97^e5–98^a8).²⁹ It seems, then, that Socrates no longer proposes to look at virtue as something intrinsically good to possess, but rather as beneficial in the way a tied-up slave can be, or in the way a beautiful statue can be valuable even to a blind man. It will emerge that this attitude towards the benefits of virtue, rather than any conclusion about its nature, is what is fundamentally new in the second part of the dialogue.

Hence the main argument by which Socrates now shows that virtue is *not* knowledge is that, if virtue could be taught, there would be professionals who claim to teach it and take money for doing so (90^d2–4; 91^b2–5).³⁰ In the first part, when Socrates taught Meno and his slave, there was no mention of payment. The Platonic Socrates never takes money for teaching, and the equation of knowledge and virtue would justify that: if one can gain more knowledge by imparting it to one’s associates, and if knowledge is the intrinsic human good, then to benefit others is to benefit oneself. If, on the other hand, virtue is a matter of possessing something which may be useful to someone else, rather than to oneself, then one might expect it to be purchasable. It is reasonable, therefore, for Socrates to assume that, if anyone is able to teach virtue, there will be those who ask and receive payment for doing so. Since it is at best unclear whether the alleged professional teachers of virtue actually teach it (95^c7–8), it then becomes doubtful that virtue can be taught, and hence that it is knowledge.

Doesn’t the conduct of Socrates’ life show that he is not serious about this argument? Perhaps it does (though we should keep in mind that Plato’s own way of life was different). But let us, for now, continue with our plan of taking the argument of the second part at face value, and draw some further consequences.

²⁹Not that they ever get so securely tied that they cannot possibly escape. Otherwise how did we forget in the first place? Cf. the runaway slave, who managed to escape once before.

³⁰See also 91^d1–5; 95^e4–8; *Republic* 1.346^c9–^e2.

It is no coincidence, for one thing, that opinions are compared to slaves. According to the first part of the dialogue, possession of a slave could only be beneficial if it were just. It is questionable, at least, whether that condition is ever fulfilled. In any case, the first part certainly showed, in general and with respect to Meno, that neither the master nor the slave is virtuous as such. But now that a distinction between what is beneficial for oneself and for others is taken for granted, it follows that the rule of one human being over another can indeed be beneficial, whether for the ruler or for the ruled (that dangerous old ambiguity about what it means to rule “well”). Socrates’ new approach thus opens the way to a theory of virtue which is political and economic: he introduces their topic of discussion to Anytus as the virtue “by which human beings properly direct households and cities, and serve their parents, and know how to receive citizens and aliens . . . as befits a good man” (91^a2–6).

The shift from “human beings” to “man” here highlights something else. On the old theory, virtue is proper to human beings in general. To know what is good for Meno, it is enough to know *what* he is; it should be irrelevant *who* he is. Hence all a posteriori facts must be irrelevant for the definition of virtue: “someone who does not know at all who Meno is” could not know “whether he is beautiful or rich or well-born, or whether the opposites of these” (71^b4–7). On the new theory, however, what is beneficial for one human being need not be for another. The virtue by which “human beings” direct cities, etc., is in fact only useful for a “good man” — i.e., a respectable or noble man, a gentleman. Such virtue would be useless for Meno’s slave, largely useless for his wife, and at least somewhat useless for his elderly parents.

Similarly, the new theory no longer entails that one should treat all human beings in the same way: one properly receives aliens differently than citizens. Later Anytus forces a more explicit admission of this. Socrates has argued that Themistocles, a virtuous man, must have been a teacher of virtue if anyone is (93^c3–4). On the new theory, however, Anytus’ response is very much in order: “I think so, indeed — if, that is, he wanted to” (93^c5). Hence Socrates is forced to retreat. Themistocles, he must admit, could reasonably have wanted to withhold his virtue from slaves, women, foreigners, etc. But from his own son? Just in case one is not so sure, we find that this particular father, at least, spared no effort in his son’s education (93^c6–^d7). The new admission that it makes sense to teach for money and to exercise coercive power helps back this argument up. Thucydides, for example, was so wealthy and powerful that, even if he himself was too busy, he could surely have obtained lessons for his sons, either by payment or coercion (94^d5–^e1).

These examples bring us to another point. One might think that the new

theory would be more appealing to privileged men like Meno and Anytus — particularly given that it begins by granting what one might expect Socrates to deny: that Themistocles, Thucydides, and the like are virtuous and benefit the city. But in fact the new theory has its own radical implications. Power tends, even in a democracy (90^b1–3), to be handed down from father to son. Meno and his slave have both inherited their positions (92^d3; 78^d2–3; 82^b5), and, as for Anytus, his main recommendation is that he is the son of the rich and wise Anthemion, “who became rich not due to chance or to some gift . . . but . . . through his own wisdom and diligence” (90^a1–5). There could hardly be a more emphatic way of pointing out the derivative nature of Anytus’ wealth and power: one characteristic which a father cannot pass on to his son is that of being a self-made man. If Meno and Anytus have any claim to virtue, it must be because their privileged background has provided them with special training (90^b1). No wonder Anytus becomes furious when Socrates gets him to admit that that is not feasible! “For,” Socrates explains, “he thinks, first, that I slander these [sons of famous fathers], and then further believes that he too is one of them” (95^a2–4).

Should we consider instead the kind of system which Socrates proposes in the *Republic*, in which the “golden” youths are sorted out regardless of their lineage? Something similar is indeed suggested here (89^b1–7). But it is suggested only as a consequence of the theory that human beings are virtuous “by nature” (i.e., reliably throughout their lives), and Meno agrees that true opinions, which tend to flee if not tied down, cannot in that sense be natural (98^c10–^d3). The new theory thus provides no more basis for any hierarchical social order (hereditary or meritocratic) than does the old one. Some may have a virtue appropriate to ruling, others to being ruled, but we cannot predict which will be which, and hence cannot assign the proper social positions.

These conclusions rest, however, on the premise that virtue cannot be taught. Socrates continues to admit that it could be if it were knowledge (89^d3–5). Nor does he argue that it is not teachable because it is not knowledge — rather, on the contrary, that it cannot be knowledge because it is not teachable (99^a7–9). The latter remains to be proved. Anytus is forced to agree to it, but, because he is personally unfamiliar with the sophists, his beliefs about them appear to be mere prejudice (92^b5–^c3). Meno, who has a more solid basis for judgment, is unsure (95^c7), and Socrates claims, just on the basis of such uncertainty, that neither the sophists nor great or respectable men can be true teachers. Even accepting that, however, the conclusion is on shaky ground. The most suspect step is this: “if neither the sophists nor the gentlemen themselves are teachers of this thing, it is surely clear that no one else is” (96^b6–8). Might there not be

a third kind of person who succeeds where sophists and statesmen fail?

Socrates himself hints at such a possibility towards the end of the dialogue (100^a1–7); we will look at it carefully in the next section. But for now: if virtue is neither taught nor possessed by nature, how *is* it acquired? Meno at first offered four possibilities: human beings might come to have virtue by (1) teaching; (2) practice; (3) nature; or (4) acquiring it in some other way (70^a1–4). If (1) and (3) are ruled out, should we consider (2)? Maybe sometimes true opinions get awakened otherwise than by argument (perhaps simply by following the example of one’s parents). This is not enough to explain Themistocles, Pericles, and the rest, since they — again, on the assumption that they really were virtuous — must have had true opinions many times about many things. Still, if the same true opinions or related ones got awakened over and over (perhaps in a deliberate plan of training), then the soul, although unable to tie them down with arguments, might become disposed to hold them. If virtue is such a disposition to hold true opinions, Socrates’ teaching could well be harmful, since, while the *result* of teaching would indeed be beneficial, the intermediate stage of “paralysis” would not. On the contrary: the paralyzed state might be much worse than the initial one.³¹ Since, moreover, the complete teaching process may require more time than will ever be available, the effects of teaching might be truly ruinous. Why *does* Anytus believe that the sophists are harmful? He might be quite certain if he held a theory of this kind. If any process which calls established opinions about virtue into question is inherently dangerous, the details of their teachings and methods would be irrelevant: that they teach virtue by argument would be enough to condemn them. If, moreover, that is really Anytus’ reason, it is sufficient reason to condemn Socrates as well, whatever the difference between him and the sophists. This is part of the meaning of Anytus’ final words, which are a threat, certainly, but also an accusation and even a sincerely meant warning: “I would advise you . . . to be careful. For probably also in other cities, but certainly in this one, it is easier to do evil to human beings than good. But I think that you yourself also know that” (94^e4–95^a1).

A close look at Socrates’ argument reveals that this theory, which never comes up explicitly, is present in the background. The examples Socrates uses in the second part — medicine, shoemaking, and flute playing (90^b7–^c1, ^c4–5, ^d7); horsemanship, music, and athletics, and in particular wrestling (93^d1–3; 94^b4–5, ^c2–3) — are not at all like geometry. The slave would need a kind of practice to attain full knowledge of geometry, but that “practice” would really just be more teaching of the kind he has already had (85^c10–11). No amount of discussion

³¹Cf. (on the similar consequences of a related theory) *Republic* 7.537^e–9^a.

with Socrates, in contrast, could yield full knowledge of horsemanship: practice, in a stricter sense, is absolutely necessary. Yet Socrates is nevertheless able to show (1) that there are professional trainers of the arts in question and (2) that the powerful, wealthy Athenian statesmen were able to impart them to their sons. If neither (1) nor (2) is true of virtue, then virtue must not be any more like these than it is like geometry. Hence even if Anytus is correct to think that the sophists (and Socrates) are harmful, his reason is invalid, so that this is mere true opinion, not knowledge, on his part. And it is still unclear how he or anyone else comes to hold such true opinions reliably. It seems like a fantastic string of luck — so fantastic that it demands a supernatural explanation. Socrates therefore suggests divine inspiration (92^c6–7; 99^c1–10).³²

It is difficult to tell how seriously this is meant. Although Meno accepts the proposal readily enough, it does have a definite sound of *reductio* to it, even of sarcasm. One imagines that is how Anytus takes it, and further that (as Meno points out, 99^c2) he would not appreciate being compared to a poet, let alone a raving priestess. We should be cautious here, however. Plato typically, in inviting us to laugh at some apparently silly proposal, also invites us to ask what it would mean to make that proposal seriously. And there are other places where Socrates and others suggest similar ideas (including that Socrates himself is divinely charged or inspired) with apparent seriousness; even here in the *Meno* Socrates claims divine authority for his theory of recollection (81^a5–^b2). Granted that, if Socrates is right (I mean: if his way of life is the right one), then “divine inspiration” may turn out to mean something rather different than it does here. But just this, the nature and correctness of Socrates’ way of life and of his way (if any) of teaching, is most at issue here and everywhere in Plato. The question of how to take this talk of divine inspiration is thus connected with the evaluation of Socrates as a teacher.

3 Socrates as a Teacher of Virtue

This question, of Socrates’ value as a teacher, is implicitly raised throughout the dialogue, but the second part is more complicated than the first. If virtue really *cannot* be taught, then, clearly, whatever Socrates teaches, if indeed he teaches anything at all, it cannot be virtue. Hence if the second part is as consistent as the first, it will show that Socrates does not improve his students. But the new

³²Note that divine inspiration, according to this theory, causes the stability of true beliefs. It is not *identified* with true belief. Nor, therefore, is successful guidance by true belief identified with successful guidance by chance. (See 99^a3–4, and cf. Gonzalez, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, 176, 181; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 167.)

theory, as we have noted, rests on a flawed refutation of the old one, and the flaw is quite relevant. Socrates is not a sophist, a statesman, or even much of a gentleman. Couldn't he be a teacher of virtue? If so then the argument that virtue, if it were really knowledge, ought to have teachers, is ineffective: Socrates is such a teacher (i.e., reminder), and the first part of the dialogue shows him engaged in teaching (i.e., reminding).

The proposal of sophists, statesmen, and gentlemen as teachers of virtue was based, moreover, on the new idea that virtue is beneficial because of its extrinsic value, so that (1) there ought to be professional teachers of virtue, and (2) the virtuous might use their virtue to rule over others. But if something is valued for its use in obtaining other goods, then there must, ultimately, be goods which are valued per se (see *Lysis* 219^c2–^d2). On the old theory, the good which virtue (knowledge) is useful for obtaining is just more virtue (knowledge), and all knowledge is ultimately a single whole, so that the usefulness of virtue is no different from its intrinsic value. In abandoning this solution, the new theory takes on the responsibility of saying what the intrinsic goods really are.³³ But the second part of the dialogue, far from doing this, falls back on the examples already discussed and rejected in the first part: wealth, power, and so forth. Socrates is thus right to complain, in the end, that they have after all tried to determine how virtue is acquired without first asking what virtue is (100^b4–6): their final answer to the latter question, namely that virtue is true opinion, is based on an implicit return to Meno's failed definition of virtue as the ability to obtain such things as wealth and power, and as such cannot be taken seriously. Knowledge, meanwhile, remains the only candidate for an intrinsic good. And if the intrinsically good has the characteristics of knowledge, then the *old* attitude is still appropriate, and Socrates, who never took money for teaching and who always avoided political office, might well be a teacher of virtue.

There is, as I have said, a strong hint, towards the end of the dialogue, that we should think in this direction. Socrates mentions a possible superior kind of statesman who is capable of teaching virtue (100^a1–2). If such a statesman is possible, then virtue is teachable, and therefore is knowledge; the statesmen of the second part (Themistocles, etc.) are then not virtuous after all, i.e. not truly statesmen. The true statesman would be someone who improves the city by other means — someone who teaches the citizens, rather than ruling over them. Someone, perhaps, like Socrates. What Plato has Socrates hint at

³³It must not be thought that one could usefully answer here that the intrinsic good is happiness. If there are any intrinsic goods, then those who possess them are happy, but this conceptual point gets us no closer to saying what the intrinsic goods might be. (Cf. Aristotle, *EN* 1.4.1095^a17–22.)

here, moreover, he elsewhere has him claim explicitly: that he alone, of living Athenians, practices true politics (*Gorgias* 521^{d7-8}).³⁴

There is a serious problem, however, involving the considerations with which I opened this section. The theory of the second part implies that Socrates' teaching that theory to Meno will not improve him, since, according to it, virtue cannot be taught. But if Socrates really *is* capable of teaching virtue, then there are two alternatives: (1) he is still teaching virtue there, or (2) he has stopped doing so. (2), however, is impossible. To know that virtue is knowledge is to know that teaching is always beneficial. If Socrates does not teach, then he must not know what virtue is — i.e., must be unable to. Thus if we want to maintain that Socrates is the missing teacher, we should expect to find that the action of the second part contradicts its explicit conclusion: Socrates' teaching there should improve his interlocutors.

Now, Socrates' activity in the second part does not improve people in any normal sense. Plato presumably introduces Anytus to dramatize this point. We can safely assume, for the sake of argument, that having Socrates killed was not a good thing (for if that *was* a good thing, then the conclusion we're headed for, that Socrates was not a teacher of virtue, follows much more directly). Whatever caused Anytus to do so, then, seemingly failed to improve him. And yet Socrates deliberately engages him in a conversation which is calculated to make him both personally furious and suspicious that Socrates is a danger to the city. Recall that, when Anytus first appears, Socrates exclaims that he is the perfect person to hold their discussion with, precisely because he is the son of a famous father (89^{e9-90}a2) — i.e., the type of man Socrates is about to slander. Understandably, then, Socrates says, after Anytus' final angry words, that he is “not at all surprised” (95^{a3}). That is: he begins his conversation with Anytus fully expecting to cause the very dispositions which lead, eventually, to his own execution. But then how can Socrates be a teacher of virtue? Hasn't Socrates' interaction with Anytus made Anytus worse, i.e., harmed him? That is the third,

³⁴Socrates also claims there “to undertake the true political art” (ἐπιχειρεῖν τῆ ὡς ἀληθῶς πολιτικῆ τέχνη). Probably the two phrases mean the same: see *Phaedrus* 279^{a6}. Irwin (*Plato's Gorgias* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], 240–241), apparently thinking of a different parallel (*Cratylus* 424^{c1}), wants instead to understand that Socrates is merely “attempting” this art, in the sense of “searching for its principles.” He does not explain how he understands πράττειν τὰ πολιτικά. In any case, I feel constrained to interpret Socrates in line with what he will go on to say. A so-called physician who lacked all knowledge of the medical art, but nevertheless burned, cut, and starved children as part of a search for its principles, would likely be convicted even in a court of adults. (See also, in agreement with this, Vlastos, *Socrates*, 240 n. 21. But cf. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 8 n. 11; Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, 247.)

hidden meaning of Anytus' warning that Socrates should be careful because it is easier to cause harm than benefit — a meaning not visible to Anytus himself.

Notice that Socrates does not harm Anytus in the way suggested by the theory of virtue as disposition. Anytus becomes worse, not because his old opinions are disturbed, but because he is exposed to certain (purported) truths which make him angry. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates explains that this occurs precisely because he is a true statesman: his situation is like that of a physician accused in an assembly of children by a cook (521^e3–4). Just as the physician seems worse to the children, the true statesman seems worse to the citizens than the flatterers who go by that name. But there is a problem in this analogy. In an immediately preceding passage, in fact, Socrates argues that the two cases are quite different. Those who claim to improve others in respect, not to their health, but to their virtue, are in no position to claim that their clients have subsequently treated them unjustly, “lest they . . . also accuse themselves of having in no way benefited those whom they claim to benefit” (520^b4–8).³⁵ That two blatantly contradictory statements occur so close to each other in the *Gorgias* shows that something complicated is going on there. For our purposes, however, we need only note that what is blatant there is implicit here. If Socrates' method makes Anytus angry and disposes him to do wrong (to Socrates or anyone else), then the alleged method of teaching virtue is anything but.

One might claim, in Socrates' defense, that his bad effect on Anytus is temporary. If this means that Socrates will later complete his teaching, then we know that that never actually happened. We argued above, moreover, that such uncompleted teaching projects are inevitable: even if Anytus had not so effectively ruled out the possibility of further education by having his teacher put to death, still Socrates was already old and would have died soon enough. In the end, however, when Socrates has to “go somewhere,” he instructs Meno to persuade Anytus of the truth of their conclusions “so that he may be gentler” — which will also “profit” all the Athenians (100^b7–^c2). Socrates, in other words, might have students who continue his work even in his absence. Meno never became such a student, but one might think that there was at least one: namely, Plato. Socrates' trial and execution, moreover, may have given Plato the material to do Socrates' work in a way that Socrates himself could not. At one point Socrates cryptically remarks that if Anytus ever learns what slander is, he will stop being angry (95^a5–6). One way to interpret this is that Anytus will find out what it's really like to have people speak ill of him only after he has had Socrates killed. In the *Apology*, at any rate, Socrates predicts that his execu-

³⁵See also 516^a5–8, and cf. *Apology* 30^e1–31^a6.

tioners will suffer a far worse punishment than he will: many new accusers, “as much harsher as they are younger” (*Apology* 39^c4–^d3), will now rise up against them. Presumably Plato is such an accuser, and his words in the *Apology* and the *Meno* are a part of Socrates’ vengeance. And whatever is true of Anytus personally, it is plausible that, on the whole and in the long run, the words of the “new accusers” made people somewhat gentler, at least toward philosophers.

This defense assumes that Socrates has special students, or rather *disciples*: people he teaches in a sense stronger than that in which he teaches everyone he meets. It therefore raises the issue of philosophical tradition, which will return at the end of the paper. For now, though, we need to ask whether we have taken the right thing to be virtue. The whole discussion began when we asked whether the argument of the first part might not after all be correct. It was refuted by the observation that virtue has no teachers, but, we asked, isn’t Socrates such a teacher? According to this line of reasoning, however, Socrates (and/or his students) ought to improve people in a particular way: by teaching them. And yet, if the first part is correct, the activity of the second part can hardly be called “teaching,” since it consists in persuading Meno to reject a theory which by hypothesis is true in favor of a falsehood. If Socrates persuades Meno to say of the false that it is true, then he is leading him *away* from knowledge. Even if this makes him gentler, how is gentleness beneficial if unaccompanied by knowledge?

Socrates’ method does sometimes involve eliciting false statements which might never have been produced otherwise. That is understandable: if true opinion is not as such valuable, then, just as one may benefit people by replacing their true opinion with perplexity, so one might at times benefit them by replacing it with a false one. The search for knowledge is held back not by believing what is false, but by believing that one knows when one does not. But if virtue is knowledge, and if Socrates’ argument to that effect, in the first part, is really valid, then Meno already knows (albeit unstably), or is on the way to knowing, the truth about these matters. Why would Socrates persuade him to abandon that truth in favor of a falsehood, and even ask him to go persuade others of the same? Perhaps some strange pedagogical theory could be invoked to explain this — and we know that Socrates is strange. More on that below. But it must be admitted that Socrates has called attention to no such theory. On the contrary, the one feature of our dialogue which has no parallel in his conversation with the slave is the transition between its two parts, where (at 89^c5–6), Socrates turns against the answer (the *true* answer, we are assuming) to his own leading question. If that is a beneficial procedure, Socrates has yet to demonstrate its benefits.

There is an even deeper problem here, moreover, and one which touches on the central paradoxicality of Plato's Socrates. The argument of the second part was flawed, we supposed, because Socrates neglected to mention that he himself might be a teacher of virtue. In this, at least, he is consistent. Not only does he deny being a teacher in general (84^c11–^d1), but he also claims, in particular, not to know what virtue is (71^b1–3; 80^d1). If virtue is knowledge, it would follow that he is neither virtuous nor a teacher of virtue. Could it be that he consistently misrepresents himself? Given his reputation as an ironist, we cannot dismiss that possibility. But how could such irony be justified? If Socrates knows that virtue is knowledge, he knows that it is beneficial to remind every human being of the truth — including especially of the truth that there are teachers of virtue. If he is the *only* such teacher (as he claims in the *Gorgias*), then, though he might conceivably have reasons not to mention this truth at a certain time, or even to prompt Meno to deny it, it is, once again, hard to see how it could be anything but harmful for him to promulgate a false opinion in its stead (see 71^b9–^c4). Thus though there may be theories of virtue which can justify such irony, the theory developed in the first part of the dialogue appears not to be one of them. And if Socrates acts in a way which is not virtuous, then, according to that theory, he must not know what virtue is, after all.

Thus Socrates turns out, by his own standards insofar as he has revealed them, not to be a teacher of virtue: his dealings with his interlocutors are not such as to improve them. The second part of the dialogue, in other words, is unrefuted in its assertion that virtue has no teachers, and therefore cannot be taught.³⁶ But the argument of the first part also stands unrefuted: virtue, the intrinsic human good, must be knowledge, and thus must be teachable. It is impossible for us to accept both conclusions. Is there, then, no way to reach a consistent understanding of the dialogue? We will not be able to do so by adding up all of Socrates' statements, taken at face value: they add up to a contradiction. We will have to assume, rather, that he has omitted something important, or said something *not* to be taken at face value, or both. We will indeed have to assume, in other words, that he is being (in some sense) ironic.

Here is one way we could proceed.³⁷ Suppose we say that Meno was wrong to agree, not that virtue is knowledge, but that all and only knowledge (that is,

³⁶But isn't it possible that, although virtue is knowledge and therefore teachable, there are no teachers of it because nobody actually possesses this knowledge? If so then Socrates and Meno, too, must lack such knowledge, i.e. must not know what virtue is, so that, at a minimum, there must be some unnoticed flaw in the argument of the first part: see 96^d5–7.

³⁷The approach I am about to sketch is similar in to those of Gonzalez, Hoerber, Klein, Sallis, Turner, and Weiss, though with importance differences from each of them.

something with the characteristics which Socrates there attributed to knowledge) can be taught (that is, transmitted by what Socrates there called “teaching”).³⁸ If virtue were a kind of inspired true opinion — we could even, as Socrates perhaps does in the *Republic*, call it “knowledge” — which lacked those characteristics, then there is no reason to think it could, even in principle, be transmitted by just any human being to any other. Still, transmission — we could even call it “teaching” — might be possible in some cases. If virtue is knowledge or wisdom which depends on inspiration, then a (directly) inspired master might transmit it to an (at least indirectly) inspired disciple.³⁹ And if that were the correct theory, we could read the whole dialogue as consistent, but ironically so. The irony here would be of a kind which has been called “complex”:⁴⁰ virtue *is* knowledge (but not knowable by Meno); it *is* teachable (but not to Meno); it also comes by nature (but not to Meno) and by inspiration (but not to Meno, nor, presumably, to Anytus or Themistocles or Pericles). And virtue is indeed per se beneficial — only, like a beautiful statue or a trip to Larisa, its per se benefit is unavailable to those who lack the requisite faculty of “sense” (intellect).⁴¹ Others (no matter whose sons they may be) are best trained, as we train animals,⁴² to be gentle: that is, to shut up and do as the virtuous say.

So there is a consistent way to read the dialogue — a reading according to which the theory of the second part is essentially correct. Neither part, on this reading, shows a successful teaching of Meno, though both may make him a bit gentler. But Socrates *is* a teacher of virtue (to those capable of learning it), so there may be successful teaching of someone here: the slave, we know, is also present, and in general both Meno and Socrates have many followers, albeit of different sorts (82^a8–^b1; *Apology* 23^c2–4). It is for the benefit of these others, perhaps, that Socrates drops his ironic hint about a true teacher who would be among the living as Tiresias among the dead (100^a2–8). When Tiresias was among the living, his literal eyes were sightless. In another sense, however, he had a faculty of sight entirely lacking in the supposedly keen-sighted Oedipus, whom he was therefore unable to benefit (i.e., to teach).

But that reading, though consistent, is not the only one possible.⁴³ Suppose

³⁸See above, n. 7.

³⁹See *Ion* 533^d1–^e5, 536^a1–3.

⁴⁰Vlastos, “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 30; *Socrates*, 31. Vlastos most likely does not see such irony at the end of *Meno*, however, since he considers it to be “firmly non-elenchic” after 80^e: see *Socrates*, 115 n. 41.

⁴¹See 88^b7, and cf. *Republic* 6.484^b3–7, 506^c6–10, 508^b12–^c2.

⁴²See *Apology* 25^a13–^c4; *Protagoras* 334^a3–6; *Republic* 5.451^d4–2^a1 (where a class of human beings is compared to an animal species).

⁴³I am not aware of an approach quite like the following in the secondary literature (unless

we start instead by asking how the theory of recollection solves the famous paradox of 82^a7–^b2. Without defending this answer against or classifying it among the many subtle alternatives to be found in the literature, I will assert: the solution is that we are all already familiar with (need only be reminded of) a way of seeking and finding knowledge in a situation in which we both do not yet know and already do. We call it “being reminded” (85^d6–7). This is not to say, however, that, in such a situation, we already know in one sense but do not yet know in another. Rather, human knowledge is always, in *every* sense, a matter of recollecting, more or less easily, what we have forgotten. Even if and when the slave comes to know all geometry no less accurately than anyone, he will still have to recall his true opinions to mind every time he needs them. Human knowledge, like human virtue, is a matter of *having* learned (86^a8).⁴⁴ It is, as such, latent: never present wholly, but only, at best, in the series of true opinions which get awakened in the proper order (82^e12).⁴⁵

Still, the theory of recollection involves more than that. The claim is not just that our knowledge is (to begin with and for the most part) forgotten, but also that our ignorance is always only forgetting — i.e., is always already knowledge. Where we would normally say, for example, that the slave simply did not know the solution before he was taught, Socrates instead wants to claim that he was merely reminded of it. That does sound strange. But it would sound less strange to say: Socrates reminds him that there are other ways of specifying lengths based on the figure, besides using the existing lines as measures. Surely the slave already knew that. And this is not only the hint he really needs to find the solution (before doomsday), but also and more importantly is what he must remember if he is to acquire the rest of geometry — as Socrates, however unrealistically, is clearly preparing him to do.

But doesn’t that sound less strange precisely because *that* reminding is just reminding in the ordinary sense? Isn’t the slave, in other words, just being reminded of something he learned in *this* life? Maybe; maybe not. It doesn’t matter much, in any case, if all knowledge is one whole, and if virtue is knowledge. If our struggles with incontinence are (and are they not?) struggles to recall — to recall what we wanted before a temptation appeared on the scene, or in the wake of a previous incontinent act — then the struggle for virtue as

you count Kierkegaard or as secondary literature).

⁴⁴Cf. Descartes, *Med.* 2 (AT 7:25): *imo certe ego eram, si quid mihi persuasi.*

⁴⁵The way (method) of recollection is thus unlike the road to Larisa: if one is truly on it then one is already at the destination. (Cf. Fine, “Nozick’s Socrates,” *Phronesis* 41 [1996]: 242.) For related, but not identical, views see Benson, *Socratic Wisdom*, especially 208 n. 74, and Plotinus, *Enn.* 1.2.1.46–50 (alluding to our dialogue: see ll. 23–7), 3.19–24, 4.20–29.

a whole, and therefore for knowledge as a whole, is a struggle to recall what we wanted before *any* temptation appeared, or in the wake of *all* acts. It is a struggle to recall what we knew before and after we were human beings.

And now we come to the irony, which is again “complex” (if not “infinite”). Socrates, like all human beings, does and does not know virtue — not because he knows it in one sense and does not know it in another, but because that is what human knowledge, and human virtue, are like. Thus Socrates, like Gorgias, Protagoras, and Pericles, like all upstanding Athenian gentlemen, like all physicians, sea captains, cobblers, and midwives’ sons, like all Thessalians, Persians, women, slaves, and tyrants of Syracuse, like all writers of secondary and of primary literature, and like the lord whose oracle is at Delphi, both is and is not a teacher of virtue.⁴⁶ What makes him wisest, or most virtuous, is that he knows (reminds himself) that human wisdom is, in this sense, worth little or nothing, so that his knowledge does not make him intemperate (shameless) nor his ignorance, cowardly.⁴⁷ It is of this above all that he must remind his students (whether or not it makes them gentler⁴⁸). To do so, however, he must be ironic. No matter how true the conclusion he and his interlocutors have found, he must remind them that clear, stable, accurate knowledge will require a seeking which has yet properly to begin (100^b4–6).⁴⁹ And no matter how perplexed he makes them, he must remind them, ironically, that it is not too late to seek together for a teacher (96^d7–^e1) — ironically because, whenever we seek together, our teachers are already present, and the teaching has already begun.

This second reading is also consistent. According to it, the theory of the *first* part is essentially correct; thus, the first part really demonstrates successful teaching (i.e., reminding). But so, too, does the second part, in which Socrates successfully reminds Meno (and Anytus, and the slave) that the truth, like a slave, is never a secure possession for us human beings.⁵⁰ The introduction of

⁴⁶Socrates disagrees with Anytus, then, about where to send our sons for training, because Anytus is too *restrictive*. See *Apology* 41^e1–4; also, Julius Stenzel, *Platon der Erzieher* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1928), 160–61.

⁴⁷If he does forget what he wants to say or do, he simply stops acting and talking (see *Symposium* 220^c1–^d5; *Apology* 40^b4–5). At such times, following the command of the god, he looks into himself (*Phaedo* 95^e8–9, *Symposium* 174^d5). That is: he tries to recall his knowledge (retrieve it from within), and so reminds himself of his ignorance. (The first ironic reading, however, will do something else with these passages: see Klein, *Commentary*, 92–3.)

⁴⁸See again *Apology* 30^e1–31^a2, and see Xenophon, *Symposium* 2.10.

⁴⁹See also *Republic* 6.484^a4–^b1, 8.543^d1–544^a1. As for Tiresias, perhaps he *did* manage to teach Oedipus to see, but only (in a kind of elenchus) by first bringing him blindness.

⁵⁰He may also, on either reading, be reminding the slave that he could run away. (In a sense, he is already untied: see *Republic* 7.515^c6–8, 528^e6–9^c3.) Recall that Socrates’ ancestor

Socratic irony thus does not relieve our difficulty, but only moves it to a new level. The straight reading contradicts itself; the ironic readings, one another. How can we choose one of them? The second, clearly, is nicer — but niceness without knowledge, or without prudence, might be harmful. Not knowing what virtue is, or what philosophy is, we have no way of deciding between the two. We are left perplexed.

4 Plato, Socrates, and the Question of Philosophical Authority

Obviously, this perplexity is far from logically airtight. We could easily start thinking of ways out. Aristotle and Kant, for example, present us with such alternatives, and so does Plato himself in other dialogues. It is *not* obvious, however, that any alternatives will ultimately be successful. Contradictories cannot, in this simple (unmediated) fashion, both be true; but there are other fashions beside the simple, and there are other philosophers who have worked as hard to deepen our problem, rather than to solve it. Such considerations are anyway beyond the scope of this paper.

Whether or not there is some way out of our perplexity, Plato does not provide us with one here. He himself may or may not know a solution — i.e., may or may not be (simply or complexly) ironic. But either way, we would need to ask why he leaves *us* with a problem. Why does he believe that our perplexity about the teachability of virtue is beneficial, to us or to himself?

The importance and difficulty of these questions stem from two facts: that Plato was (in *some* sense) Socrates' student, and that we, insofar as we read Plato as philosophers, are his. Now, Socrates could claim divine authority for his status as wise, and, at his trial, even produces a witness to that effect. But Plato has no such divine sanction. If he knows what virtue is and/or how to teach it, he must have learned it from his teacher, Socrates. Plato's claim to be able to teach *us* virtue thus stands or falls with the claim that Socrates was a "true statesman," able to make others like himself. If Plato presented us (clearly or ironically) with a consistent model of such teaching, we would know how he intends to teach us. The question is: why, at least in this dialogue, does he fail to do so, thus leaving us perplexed as to who, in his opinion, can expect to take instruction from his works, and how?

The arguments of both parts have one conclusion in common: both serve to undermine the legitimacy of all (human) authority. This applies not only to the *political* authority which free men (especially if wealthy, beautiful and well-born) exercise over others, but also to *intellectual* authority. According to

Daedalus was also a runaway slave (and see Xenophon, *Mem.* 4.2.33).

the second part, reliably true opinion belongs only to the divinely inspired. If such people successfully transmit some true opinion to others, such that they, too, come to hold it reliably, then it can only be because they, too, are inspired. Hence one's (reliable) true opinions are never thanks to any human teacher. The teachers allowed by the first part, on the other hand, would have students, but no disciples: no people whom they have selected in particular to teach, who then teach on their teachers' authority, and make it their business to interpret their teachers' words.⁵¹ On that understanding of teaching, on the contrary, one ought to teach anyone, and no one is in principle more fit to do so than anyone else: that is why teaching increases the chances that one will in turn be taught. Just as the true statesman, then, makes other statesmen, the true teacher does not make disciples, but teachers. The true teacher, in other words, is not a master. And the true student, by the same token, can be no disciple. The true student learns equally from everyone, and is as well-qualified to interpret one person's words (and judge their truth) as any other's.⁵²

As we have seen, neither way of rejecting human authority implies that there is *never* any benefit to be had from the wise or from their students. If virtue is knowledge, and if Socrates was virtuous and a teacher of virtue, then Plato will have, to some extent, learned those things from Socrates, and we (all of us, all human beings) can expect to learn them from Plato. If, on the other hand, virtue is true opinion (or "knowledge") sustained by divine inspiration, then some of us (the philosophers) may still benefit from Socrates by way of Plato. If Socrates is inspired, and Plato his inspired interpreter, then at least some of us may in turn be inspired through him. Still, we are faced with a choice between two incompatible kinds of benefit. One might say that the dialogue does not so much reject human authority as split it in two. A human authority (even if "divinely inspired" — whatever we might mean by that, serious or otherwise) is both a master and a teacher. One reads and interprets the works of such an author with special care, and one feels sure that they contain nothing (or not much) unnecessary, contradictory, absurd, stupid or vicious. But one also expects such works to be rationally convincing: one expects their contents to be justifiable in human eyes — in principle, in *all* human eyes. Each of the two arguments of the dialogue allows one of these pieces, but not both: we can have human teachers who are not masters (are not authoritative), or human masters who are not teachers (cannot be justified in the eyes of universal reason). We can have Plato as a set of arguments, which might have been made by anyone,

⁵¹See *Apology* 33^b6–8.

⁵²See *Ion* 532^c5–10.

and should be judged and interpreted by impartial standards, or we can have Plato as an inspired text, of use only to those who are (inexplicably) called to it, and insofar as they read it by way of its proper interpreters.

Why is Plato himself not a character in any dialogue? This question has often been asked, and it is a good one. If Plato was Socrates' best and closest student, would we not have the most to learn from their private conversations? Is there, then, some secret which Plato has learned from Socrates but which he wants to hide from us? The secret, I would suggest, is not the content of the teaching, but its manner. If Plato were to show us his own conversation with Socrates, he would have to choose which to show us: either Socrates treating him the same as all other interlocutors, or differently, as a disciple.⁵³ And this choice is connected with the one that is forced in our dialogue. Plato could not refuse one without the other. For, on the one hand, the decision as to whether virtue is knowledge implies, as I have just argued, a decision as to the relationship between students and teachers. And, on the other hand, information about Plato's relationship to Socrates would enable us to draw a definite conclusion from our dialogue about the teachability of virtue.

To see the latter point, recall what I noted at the beginning of the paper: that, since Socrates leaves his interlocutor confident, whereas Plato leaves us in perplexity, they apparently disagree about the proper method of teaching. On either of our two models of virtue, this disagreement would have to be *merely* apparent. One can disagree with one's teachers about many things, but cannot, if one claims them as teachers, condemn their teaching method as ineffective. And if, on the other hand, one claims authority as the interpreter of a divinely inspired master, one can hardly accuse the master of having imparted his or her wisdom improperly. Sure enough, our two ironic readings each explain away the apparent disagreement. They each imply that the true point of the dialogue is not at all apparent: that the dialogue has what is called an "esoteric" message. But that term conceals the very ambiguity which we now need to bring out. Why

⁵³One might usefully compare Plato to the other nearly-absent character in the dialogues, Xanthippe. Phaedo reports that Xanthippe left before Socrates' final conversation, apparently because she was unable to control her grief — characteristically for a woman, according to him (*Phaedo* 60^a1–7; cf., in our dialogue, 81^a5, 10, and see also *Apology* 41^c2–3). About Plato, on the other hand, he says, "I think he was ill" (59^b10), and perhaps he is actually taken in by that rather transparent excuse. We certainly should not be. But if Plato and Xanthippe are the only two for whom Socrates is irreplaceable, and for whom Socrates' death is therefore an unbearable calamity, it remains unclear why that is so. I might be unable to bear Socrates' death because he alone treats me differently from anyone else, or, on the other hand, because he alone treats me just like any other human being. I submit that both explanations are open in both cases.

is the message hidden, and from whom, and to what effect? On the second (nice) ironic reading, it is, like all human knowledge, hidden (for the most part) from everyone and (in principle) from no one. Socrates and Plato, on this reading, are simply carrying out different phases of the one proper method, which awakens true opinions in the proper order. On the first (nasty) reading, on the other hand, the true message is, like all human wisdom, permanently hidden from all but the disciples: by definition, only they are capable of receiving it. In the first case, the appearance of disagreement would be due to Socrates and Plato's representing different stages: having gone through Socrates' argument with Meno, *we* are ready to go beyond it. In the second case, it would be due to a difference in audience: Meno may well be among Gorgias' true disciples, but he is not among Socrates', whereas those of us who understand Plato are among his. We could tell between the two alternatives if we could observe Socrates teaching Plato — just what Plato refuses to let us see.

Plato's refusal is a sign of his prudence, or of the way in which we members of the philosophical tradition still depend upon him and (through him) upon Socrates, our teacher and master. Whether or not there is technically some way around the particular arguments of this dialogue (and hence some space in which to develop philosophical disciplines of theoretical and applied ethics), the problem underlying the perplexity is, for philosophy, real and unavoidable. We can fantasize a philosophy which would have no masters or disciples, in which a philosopher would be just a human being who knows the nature of human knowledge and ignorance — that is, in which everyone and no one would be a philosopher — and a (nice, healthy) truthful city in which such philosophers would be the statesmen.⁵⁴ We can fantasize, too, a philosophy in which masters with special insight into the truth carefully select, as their disciples, the golden youths who alone are able to receive their inspired teaching (the young of their race, so to speak), while those without the proper nature are made gentle with a noble or a beautiful lie, and a (nasty, inflamed) city which is ruled, and (in some sense) ruled “well,” by such lying philosophers. These are the two alternatives which would give a consistent reading to philosophy and to its political role. In either of these fantastic cities, philosophy would answer only, as per the command of the oracle, to itself. In the real city, however, it becomes subject also to the oracle's other command: “nothing in excess.” Philosophers in such a city rule directly, at best, only over themselves and their students (86^d3–4; see also *Republic* 8.557^d1–9). Philosophy thus becomes a human institution, dependent on human tradition and human authority — authority to which veneration is

⁵⁴See *Republic* 2.372^e2–8, and see again 6.484^a4–^b1, 8.543^d1–544^a1.

due, but which can always be forced to account for itself before philosophers and non-philosophers alike.

This is why I said to begin with that Meno's question raises an issue of "philosophical politics." Can philosophical virtue be taught? That is: can we learn from past philosophers what we, qua philosophers, ought now to do? As a human institution, philosophy cannot afford to answer either "yes" or "no." Only by *refusing* the choice could Plato make Socrates, of all people, into a human authority (make a philosopher into a king, or a king into a philosopher). It is for this, above all, that we owe him thanks.⁵⁵

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