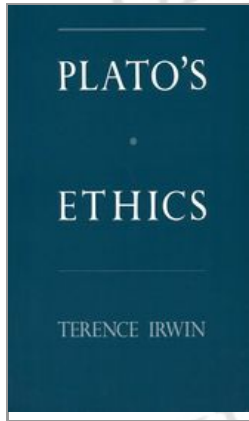


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Terence Irwin

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Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno

Terence Irwin (Contributor Webpage)

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[+] Abstract and Keywords

The core argument of chapter 9 is the thesis that the epistemological distinction between knowledge and beliefs introduced in the *Meno* plays a crucial role in the consideration of virtues. Thanks to this distinction, Plato can indeed dismiss the theory according to which virtues are only instrumental. Therefore, it is demonstrated that the theory of virtue of the early dialogues is the result of having knowledge of the importance of virtues but not a proper and true knowledge of them.

Keywords: Belief, Plato, Instrumentalism, Knowledge, Meno, Virtue

88. Questions About Socratic Method

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 88. Questions About Socratic Method

In the early dialogues Socrates relies on the elenchos, but does not normally explain why he believes he is entitled to rely on it. In the *Gorgias* Plato is more self-conscious; he tries

to defend some of the guiding principles of Socratic inquiry. In the *Meno* he is still more self-conscious; he examines some of the basic assumptions that underlie both Socrates' method and his conception of virtue.

The dialogue focusses on knowledge, and especially on two claims about knowledge that Socrates makes in the early dialogues: (1) It is important to look for a definition of a virtue, and since he cannot give such a definition, he lacks knowledge about the virtue. (2) Knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for virtue. The first part of the *Meno* examines Socrates' first claim, and the second part examines his second claim.

In the first part Plato tries to explain what a Socratic definition is and why it is relevant to knowledge. In the early dialogues Socrates readily assumes that certain things are virtues and relies on quite controversial assumptions about what a virtue must be like; but he never tries to justify these assumptions by raising the general question that is raised in the *Meno*.¹ In the second part of the dialogue, Plato considers some arguments for identifying virtue with knowledge and apparently rejects them.

We might reasonably wonder whether the same sort of knowledge is relevant to each of these Socratic claims. The first claim seems to refer to the theoretical knowledge that concerns someone who wants to understand virtue; the second seems to refer to the practical knowledge that concerns someone who wants to be virtuous. Socrates, however, seems to assume that the same kind of knowledge is relevant in both claims, for he seems to regard failure in Socratic inquiry as a sign of lack of virtue (*Ap.* 29e3–30a2).² The *Meno* might be expected to clarify this issue; either Plato ought to reject Socrates' apparent assumption, or he ought to explain why the assumption is justified.

(p.128) 89. Inquiry and Knowledge

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 89. Inquiry and Knowledge

When Meno asks Socrates whether virtue is teachable, Socrates suggests that an Athenian will give a modest answer:

Stranger, it looks as though I seem to you to be some blessed sort of person; for I seem to you to know whether virtue is something teachable or how it is produced. But in fact I am so far from knowing whether it is something teachable or not teachable that in fact I don't even know at all what on earth it is. (71a3–7)

This Athenian modesty is supposed to come as a surprise to a Thessalian such as Meno, since the Thessalians are used to hearing people like Gorgias, who answered questions like Meno's 'fearlessly and magnificently,³ as one would expect in people who know' (70b7–8). Gorgias is confident in his ability to answer any question that people ask him; in the *Gorgias* Plato contrasts this self-confidence with Socrates' disavowal of knowledge (*G.* 447c–d). The *Meno* marks the same contrast; Socrates cannot give the sort of confident answer that would reflect a claim to knowledge. Socrates is too generous, however, in suggesting that such modesty is characteristic of Athenians; Anytus' behaviour in this dialogue shows that, as Socrates claims in the *Apology*, he is the only one who recognizes his lack of knowledge.

When Socrates disavows any knowledge about virtue, Meno is surprised (71b9–c2), and Socrates surprises him further by saying that he has never met anyone else who knows what virtue is (71c3–4). Meno asks whether Socrates did not think Gorgias knew what virtue is (71c5–7), clearly assuming that Gorgias did know. The demand for knowledge is not forced on Meno; he assumes that the demand is legitimate and easily met. Plato suggests that Socrates and Meno must have in mind some distinction between knowledge and mere belief; the gradual articulation of the distinction is a task for the dialogue.

Socrates professes inability to answer Meno's question because he is so far from knowing whether virtue is teachable that he does not even know what virtue is; he assumes that if he did know anything about virtue he would have to know what virtue is. Socrates supports this assumption by suggesting that if he did not know who Meno is, he could not know whether Meno is handsome or rich or well-born (71b1–8). Meno does not challenge Socrates' suggestion. He assures Socrates that 'it is not difficult to say' what virtue is (71e1), and that 'there is no puzzle⁴ to say about virtue what it is' (72a2).

So far, then, Meno is not surprised that Socrates is looking for knowledge, or that he takes knowledge of whether virtue can be taught to require knowledge of what it is. He is surprised only by Socrates' profession of failure in these apparently rather easy cognitive tasks.

(p.129) 90. Accounts and Definitions

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 90. Accounts and Definitions

In the early dialogues the interlocutors readily agree to answer the 'What is it?' question (*La.* 190c6, 190e4; cf. *HMa.* 286c8); they agree that it is reasonable to look for some account of a virtue. It takes them longer to see that the right sort of account is a Socratic definition, giving a single description of the F by which all F things are F.⁵ In the *Meno* Plato tries to justify the demand for a Socratic definition.

Sometimes Socrates objects that the interlocutors' initial accounts are not comprehensive enough; he tells Laches and Charmides that many other types of actions and people besides the ones they mentioned are brave and temperate. Similarly, Socrates criticizes Euthyphro for telling him about only 'one or two of the many piouses' (*Eu.* 6d9–10). Meno's first answer, however, shows that the demand for comprehensiveness does not justify the demand for a Socratic definition. He suggests that a complete list of the many different types of virtuous action gives a suitably comprehensive account of virtue, and so he mentions the various qualities, abilities, and accomplishments that equip different classes of people (men, women, children, slaves, etc.) for different social statuses and roles (71e–72a, 91a).

Meno treats virtue as essentially heterogeneous. He thinks first of all of what an aristocrat is expected to do and expects that virtue will equip him to do it in the ways that bring honour and success. He is not necessarily indifferent, however, to other-regarding morality; when he speaks of conducting the city's affairs finely, he may be alluding to the demands of justice. Someone who recognizes these distinct, uncoordinated, and

potentially conflicting elements in the common-sense view of virtue might well conclude that the sort of account that Meno offers must be right. The potential conflict between the two aspects of virtue is not recognized in the shorter Socratic dialogues; it is easier to see in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*.⁶ It is expressed in Meno's list of the types of virtue.

In contrast to Meno, Socrates looks for one and the same non-disjunctive characteristic of being F that is present in all instances of F. He compares the parallel question about what a bee is. Once Meno agrees that 'one bee does not differ at all from another in so far as they are bees' (72a8–9), Socrates makes the parallel claim about health, largeness, and strength, and invites Meno to agree that it holds for virtue as well:

Even if they are many and of all sorts, still they have some one identical form because of which (*di'ho*) they are virtues, focussing on which the respondent can presumably show well to the questioner what in fact virtue is. (72c6–d1)

Meno is not sure that the parallel claim is true in this case (72d4–73a5), but Socrates persuades him that such an account of virtue must be possible. Meno has assumed that virtuous people all perform their function well (73a6–7), and he now agrees that good performance of one's function involves justice and temperance, so that the same conditions must be satisfied in each case (73a6–c5).

(p.130) 91. Definition, Explanation, and Knowledge

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 91. Definition, Explanation, and Knowledge

The agreement between Socrates and Meno relies on assumptions that certainly need further discussion.⁷ For the moment, however, we ought to notice why this discussion of definition is relevant to the initial questions about knowledge. In suggesting that different types of virtue have 'some one identical form because of which (*di'ho*) they are virtues' (72c7–8), Socrates suggests that we can recognize some one thing that explains why we count all the items on Meno's list as genuine varieties of virtue. Once Meno concedes this, he concedes that a Socratic definition is relevant to the previous demand for knowledge. For the sort of confidence that he displayed, following *Gorgias*, in listing the types of virtue would be challenged if he could not say why a particular item really belongs on the list; and so the ability to answer that question is necessary for the warranted confidence that Meno connects with knowledge.

This discussion, then, looks forward to Socrates' later claim that knowledge differs from mere belief because it includes 'reasoning about an explanation'. A definition of virtue tells us the explanation of why different characteristics are virtues, and this explanation, Socrates suggests, is necessary for the sort of knowledge that Meno seeks. Meno has a reason for taking Socratic definition to be important for knowledge about virtue, and so Socrates is justified in trying to clarify the further features of an adequate definition (73c6–79e6).

Meno agrees that an adequate definition has all these further features; but once they are made clear to him, he still finds himself unable to produce a definition of virtue. It is not

only Meno who fails; the interlocutors in the early dialogues also find it difficult to answer Socrates' demand, and Socrates insists that he cannot answer it himself. Why are definitions so difficult to find? We might reconsider some of the features that Socrates attributes to an adequate definition and argue that an acceptable definition may lack these features; if Socrates made less strict demands on definitions, they might be easier to find.

This criticism of Socrates certainly deserves to be explored, but Meno does not consider it.⁸ He believes he has found a more basic objection to Socrates' search for a definition. If he is right about this, then it is pointless to modify Socrates' particular demands on definitions, since the search for a definition will turn out to be misguided in the first place. Meno's objection, therefore, needs to be answered.

92. The Paradox of Inquiry

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 92. The Paradox of Inquiry

In Meno's view, it is Socrates' disavowal of knowledge that makes the whole inquiry into virtue futile:

And in what way, Socrates, will you look for that thing which you don't know at all what it is? For what sort of thing among the things you don't know will you put forward and look for? And on the other hand, however true it might be that you happen on it, how will you know that this is the thing that you didn't know? (80d5–8)

(p.131) Meno suggests that if Socrates really does not know what F is, then he fails the minimum necessary conditions for inquiry into F.⁹

The difficulty raised by Meno would not seem so compelling if Socrates had not affirmed that knowledge about F requires knowledge of what F is. If we could know some facts about F without knowing what F is, then perhaps we could know enough about F to pick it out as an object for inquiry. Socrates rules out this answer. Since he also insists that knowledge of what F is requires a definition of F, Meno's difficulty seems to arise. For Socrates believes we discover the definition of F through inquiry into F; but if we cannot begin inquiry into F without already knowing what F is, we must know the definition of F before we can begin the inquiry that is supposed to lead us to the definition of F.

Meno's argument, suitably expanded, seems to be this:

1. If we do not know what F is, we do not know anything about F.
2. If we do not know anything about F, we cannot distinguish F from other things we do not know.
3. If we cannot distinguish F from other things we do not know, we cannot inquire about F.
4. Hence, if we do not know what F is, we cannot inquire about F.
5. If we cannot define F, we do not know what F is.
6. Socrates and Meno cannot define virtue.
7. Therefore, they do not know what virtue is.
8. Therefore, they cannot inquire about virtue.

This expansion shows how Meno's assumptions about knowledge and inquiry—in (2) through (4)—together with Socrates' assumptions about knowledge and definition—in (1) and (5)—result in the paradox; if either set of assumptions were rejected, the paradox would be dissolved. One conception of knowledge makes Meno's assumptions plausible; another conception makes Socrates' assumptions plausible.

Socrates has given some reason for preferring his assumptions about knowledge over Meno's present assumptions. Indeed, he has made it clear that at the beginning of the dialogue Meno agreed with Socrates' assumptions about knowledge rather than with the assumptions that generate Meno's Paradox. Socrates suggested that Gorgias' authoritative confidence in his answers to everyone's questions would be justified if he really knew what he was talking about; Meno asserted that Gorgias had the appropriate knowledge. Next Socrates showed that Meno's list gave insufficient basis for justified confidence. He invited Meno to consider why his list of virtues included only these specific items and no others; if Gorgias (and Meno on his behalf) could not answer this question, then he would have no appropriate basis for confidence in his list. Gorgias' and Meno's own implicit conception of knowledge as the basis for justified confidence shows why Socrates is right to reject Meno's minimal conditions for knowledge.¹⁰

If Meno's assumptions about knowledge are rejected, then his conditions for inquiry should be rejected too. The assumptions about knowledge shared by Socrates and Meno at the beginning of the dialogue suggest that we do not need knowledge to begin inquiry; if we are to distinguish one object of inquiry (**p.132**) from others, we do not seem to need the sort of cognitive state that Meno ascribed to Gorgias. However conjectural and tentative our belief about F might be, it might still serve to identify F as an object of inquiry. To resolve Meno's Paradox, Socrates needs to say that inquiry requires initial belief, not initial knowledge, about the object of inquiry.¹¹

93. A Successful Inquiry

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 93. A Successful Inquiry

Socrates, however, does not draw an explicit distinction between knowledge and belief. Instead, he tells a story about the immortal soul and the knowledge it possessed before its incarnation. Although he expresses some reservations about the story as a whole (86b6–7), he defends the belief in prenatal knowledge by engaging in a discussion with a slave¹² about geometry.

This discussion with the slave is meant to recall the discussion with Meno.¹³ The slave begins, as Meno did, by being confident that he knows the answer to Socrates' question (82e5–6); he shares this confidence with many interlocutors (cf. 71e1; *La.* 190e4; *Eu.* 4b9–5e2), who do not see that there is anything difficult about Socrates' questions. Socrates insists, as he regularly does, that his role is simply to ask questions and not to oppose one conviction with another (82e4–6). The questions cause the slave to see a contradiction between his general claim (that if one figure has sides double the length of the sides of a second figure, the area of the first figure is also twice that of the second figure) and what he thinks most reasonable in the particular case presented to him. At this point the slave is puzzled and 'numb', as Meno was when he despaired of making

progress (84a3–c6; cf. 79e7–80b4; *La.* 193d11–e6; *Eu.* 11b6–8; *R.* 334b7–9).

Socrates urges that this state of puzzlement is a precondition for making progress (84c4–9; cf. *Sph.* 230c3–d4). He does not suggest that puzzlement and awareness of one's own ignorance is simply a stimulus to modesty in the assertion of one's views, or that it should make us reluctant to assert any positive claims. At this point the discussion with the slave continues where the discussion with Meno left off; further questioning causes the slave to find the right answer. When the right answer has been found, Socrates says that questioning has aroused true beliefs without knowledge in the slave, and that further questioning of the right sort will lead to accurate knowledge about the same things (85c6–d1).¹⁴ His present state of belief without knowledge is like a dream (85c9–10), and knowledge is what corresponds to being awake (86a6–8).

From this discussion with the slave Socrates draws three conclusions:

1. The slave brings or 'gathers up' (*analambanein*, 85d4) the answer from within himself, since Socrates does not tell him the answer but he has to discover it in answer to Socrates' questions. When he has pursued inquiry further, to the point where he has achieved knowledge, he will have gathered up knowledge from within himself (85d3–4).
 2. This process of gathering the right answer from within oneself is actually recollection, the gradual recovery of knowledge that we possessed in a previous existence but have forgotten in the meantime (85d6–7).¹⁵
- (p. 133)**
3. We ought to be confident and optimistic in inquiry (86b6–c2). In particular, we ought to regard the interlocutor's puzzlement not as a reason for despondency, but simply as a necessary preliminary to progress.

Socrates declares that he is confident about his third conclusion, but 'would not be altogether insistent in defence of the argument, as far as the other points are concerned' (86b6–7). If Socrates means to endorse only the third conclusion while hesitating about the other two, his position is strange; for why should we accept the third conclusion if the discussion with the slave has given us no grounds for it? His position is more reasonable if he means that we should commit ourselves definitely only to the parts of the argument that are needed to support the third conclusion. If this is what he means, then he probably means to endorse the first conclusion and to express hesitation about the second; for if we agree that the slave has gathered up true beliefs from within himself, we have some reason for confidence about the prospects of inquiry, even if we are not convinced that this process of gathering up is also a process of literal recollection of what he once knew.

94. A Defence of Socratic Inquiry

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 94. A Defence of Socratic Inquiry

The discussion with the slave is meant to give us grounds for confidence in Socrates' inquiries. To see how it does this, we ought to consider (1) how it gives grounds for confidence in some Socratic inquiry and (2) whether the same grounds for confidence

apply to the sort of moral inquiry that goes on in the *Meno* and in the Socratic dialogues. The two questions need to be distinguished, since the discussion with the slave is an inquiry into a mathematical question, not a moral question, and we should satisfy ourselves that the two cases do not differ in some relevant respect.¹⁶

The discussion with the slave answers Meno's Paradox, if we are convinced that the slave has inquired successfully despite having had no initial knowledge of the things he was inquiring into. The slave begins with the sort of confidence that Meno expressed in saying there was no difficulty in answering Socrates' questions; but it turns out, as it turned out with Meno, that he has no reasonable basis for such confidence, and so he has no knowledge. Socrates makes it clear, however, that the slave has enough true beliefs to make progress; and so Meno's lack of knowledge should not lead us to conclude that he lacks the true beliefs needed for successful inquiry. The slave has not yet acquired knowledge; but his inquiry has been successful, since he has increased his stock of true beliefs.

The slave has been inquiring, and has not simply recited the correct answers, since Socrates has not taught him, but he has gathered up the correct answers from within himself. In saying that he is not teaching the slave, Socrates does not mean that he suggests nothing to him, but that the slave never gives a particular answer simply because he has been told that it is the right one. In every case he answers only when it seems to him, on the basis of his previous beliefs, that this is the most reasonable answer; this is what Socrates means in saying that the slave gathers up the answers 'from within himself'. He does just what **(p.134)** the interlocutors in the early dialogues are told to do; they are required to answer sincerely, not saying what they think Socrates believes or what he wants to hear, but saying what seems reasonable to them in the light of their previous convictions.¹⁷ The discussion should give us confidence in the slave's ability to find the right answer for himself from his own resources.

We have reason to believe, then, that the inquiry makes progress, because we have reason to believe it meets these conditions:

1. The slave's initial beliefs were not too far astray. Most of his judgments about particular lengths and areas were correct.
2. He was able to make his beliefs more consistent by revising them when he detected an inconsistency.
3. He was able to revise them in a reasonable direction. He did not adjust all his other geometrical views to make them fit the principle that a figure with sides double the length of the sides of a second figure also has double the area of the second figure.
4. This revision eliminated false beliefs and replaced them with true beliefs.

Since Plato has given us reason to believe that the discussion with the slave meets these conditions, he has given us reason for confidence in some Socratic inquiry.

These reasons for confidence seem to apply to the moral inquiry in the *Meno*. Meno

satisfies the second condition. He also, in Socrates' view, satisfies the first, since Socrates agrees that Meno's answers to most of his questions are reasonable; these are the answers that Socrates uses to convince Meno to reject his general claims about virtue.¹⁸ Here as in the other dialogues, Socrates assumes that in getting the interlocutor to reject one of his initial claims by appeal to the interlocutor's other beliefs, and especially by appeal to the guiding principles of the elenchos, he helps the interlocutor to make his beliefs more reasonable; therefore, Socrates must assume that the interlocutor begins with a fairly large stock of reasonable beliefs.¹⁹

In Socrates' view, Meno also satisfies the third condition. He could have stubbornly denied that justice and temperance are needed for all the cases of virtue that he originally listed, and hence he could have denied that there was anything inadequate about his list. In fact, he does not do this. Socrates believes that Meno's beliefs have become both more consistent and more reasonable, insofar as he has thrown out the ones that are inconsistent with the more reasonable ones, not those that are inconsistent with the unreasonable ones. In the *Meno* as in the early dialogues, Socrates assumes that if we rely on the guiding principles of the elenchos as guides for resolving conflicts of belief, we revise our beliefs in the right direction. The fact that Socrates secures Meno's agreement by asking leading questions does not matter, any more than it mattered in the discussion with the slave, as long as Meno assents for reasons that seem good to him, not simply because Socrates tells him to.

But this defence of Meno's beliefs seems to fall short of what is needed to show that they really satisfy the first and third conditions fully enough for the purposes of the argument. For we might doubt whether Socrates' judgment that some of Meno's beliefs are reasonable and that Meno revises his beliefs in a (p.135) reasonable direction is reliable enough to warrant confidence in the direction of the inquiry. In the discussion of the slave there was no doubt about the right answer, and there was no room for objection to the judgments that Socrates relied on in focussing the slave's attention on one question rather than another. But we might argue that in the moral cases there is room for objection.

Socrates himself acknowledges in the *Euthyphro* that questions about the good, the just, and the fine are those that raise disputes of the sort that do not arise in questions where we can appeal to measurement. In the discussion with the slave, Plato picks a mathematical example, since it is an uncontroversial example of progress, but the feature that makes it such a good example of progress also seems to raise a difficulty for an attempt to extend the conclusion, as Plato wants to, to the case of moral inquiry.

In the *Gorgias* Plato suggests a possible answer to these objections. Socrates professes to argue from a starting point that Calicles himself accepts, outside the mere conventions (as Calicles conceives them) of ordinary moral beliefs; he tries to show that Calicles must revise his beliefs to agree with Socrates. The *Meno* does not show that it is logically impossible for the slave to hold on to his initial conviction about the areas of different figures, but we can easily see that the revisions that would be needed would make the subsequent geometrical beliefs rationally intolerable. Socrates suggests that if Calicles

resists the revisions suggested by Socrates' questions, Callicles' subsequent beliefs will also lead to rationally intolerable results.

The *Meno* does not pursue this suggestion further. Plato's initial reflexions might reasonably have convinced him that a proper development of the suggestion sketched in the *Gorgias* would have to be quite elaborate. He would need to show why Socrates' starting point is rationally acceptable and why a particular direction of revision in beliefs is rationally inescapable. The *Meno* turns instead to the more basic question about whether Socratic inquiry rests on self-defeating claims about knowledge and definition. Once this more basic question has been answered, Plato can return to the questions left open by the *Gorgias*. He takes them up in the *Republic*.

95. Aspects of Recollection

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 95. Aspects of Recollection

We have considered Plato's answer to Meno's Paradox without reference to Plato's claim (however hesitant) that the progress we make in Socratic inquiry is literally recollection.²⁰ Does that claim make the issues easier to resolve?

An appeal to recollection cannot reasonably convince us that we discover truths through Socratic inquiry. For if we were not antecedently convinced that the slave had found the true answer by a process of rational inquiry distinct from what Socrates calls teaching, we would have no reason to say he has recollected anything; there would be nothing needing to be explained by an appeal to recollection. And so the introduction of literal recollection does not answer the doubts that might be raised about the reasonableness of Socratic moral inquiry and the truth of its conclusions.

(p.136) Still, an appeal to literal recollection is not idle. It answers one reasonable question about Socratic inquiry. If we are convinced that Socratic inquiry makes progress towards the truth, an appeal to literal recollection helps to explain how this progress is possible. For if we actually knew moral truths before we were born, it is reasonable to expect that we will have true moral beliefs when we begin inquiry and that we will be able to elicit more in the course of inquiry. If we do not accept the appeal to recollection, how are we to explain our apparent success in Socratic inquiry? Must we simply say it is a lucky accident that we begin with many true beliefs and have the capacity to eliminate false ones through inquiry?

If Plato wanted to answer this question without appealing to literal recollection, he would have to say more about how we acquire the common-sense beliefs that Socrates begins from. If he agrees with something like Protagoras' account of how we acquire our beliefs, he certainly does not believe that the mechanisms for forming moral beliefs guarantee the truth of the beliefs that are formed. But perhaps he can show why these mechanisms are likely to produce the sorts of beliefs that are presupposed by Socratic inquiry. If (1) the virtues aim at the good of the virtuous agent and at the common good of the community, and (2) the good of individuals and the community has been advanced in the past when people have relied on their judgments about the fine and the good to correct their views about virtue, then Socrates has some reason to claim that the sort of revision that he

advocates has in the past tended to bring common moral beliefs closer to the truth. Insofar as these processes tend to form the common beliefs that we begin from, we begin from a sufficient stock of true beliefs (mixed with some false ones).

Both the Socratic dialogues and the *Meno* accept the first of these claims, but they do not argue explicitly for the crucial second claim. An argument for this claim would involve some complex historical claims of the sort that are merely suggested in Protagoras' Great Speech. But Plato could make a reasonable case for this claim; he could, therefore, have offered a reasonable alternative to the belief in literal recollection.

96. Virtue as Knowledge: For and Against

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 96. Virtue as Knowledge: For and Against

After the discussion with the slave, Socrates agrees to consider whether virtue is teachable, even though they have not yet found out what virtue is (86c4–e1). Perhaps Plato means to suggest that we can profitably inquire into questions about virtue without having answered Socrates' demand for definition. He certainly suggests this in the *Gorgias*; although the main arguments against Polus and Callicles do not rest on any definition of justice or happiness, Socrates thinks he establishes his conclusion by arguments of iron and adamant (G. 508e6–509a4).

Still, Socrates is reluctant to begin this inquiry before inquiring into what virtue is (86d3–6). As he says at the end of the dialogue, we will know something perspicuous (*saphes*) only if we examine what virtue is before considering (p.137) how it can be acquired (100b4–6). The inquiry into whether virtue is teachable may be intended to support this verdict by warning us that inquiries into questions about virtue are deficient unless they rest on knowledge of what virtue is. The *Gorgias* offers a similar warning; after drawing his conclusions, Socrates insists that he does not know they are true (G. 509a4–6).

After giving this warning, Socrates presents three arguments about virtue: First, he argues that virtue is knowledge and therefore must be teachable. Second, he argues that virtue is not teachable and therefore cannot be knowledge. Third, he draws a distinction between knowledge and right belief and argues that virtue is right belief rather than knowledge. Since Plato sees that the conclusions of these arguments are inconsistent, he must believe that at least one argument is unsound. The third argument challenges the first argument by suggesting that knowledge is not the only thing that leads to success in action; and Socrates emphatically endorses the distinction between knowledge and belief that underlies the third argument.

We ought not to infer, however, that Plato means to challenge only the first argument. We are advised not to rely uncritically on our initial impression that a given argument is sound (89c5–10); moreover, all three arguments precede the final warning that a satisfactory conclusion about whether virtue is teachable requires knowledge of what virtue is. In this warning Plato invites us to reconsider points at which any of the arguments might have gone astray through a mistaken conception of what virtue is. If we follow Plato's own suggestion, can we find any reasonable objections to the arguments?

97. Virtue and Benefit

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 97. Virtue and Benefit

First, Socrates argues that since virtue is knowledge, it is teachable.²¹ He argues that is knowledge by arguing that virtue is good (87d2–3) and only knowledge is good. Socrates claims that other conditions of the soul—confidence, self-control, and so on—are beneficial if and only if they are combined with knowledge (88c6–d1). He concludes that ‘according to this argument, virtue, since it is beneficial, must be some sort of wisdom’ (88d2–3).²²

How is this conclusion to be understood? Two options need to be considered: (1) It is meant to say that virtue is simply some type of knowledge, so that it requires no non-cognitive components. (2) It is meant to say that virtue is ‘some sort of wisdom’ in the sense that it is wisdom combined with something else. Just as bravery may be called ‘some sort of endurance’ if it is endurance combined with wisdom, virtue may be called ‘some sort of wisdom’ if it is wisdom combined with the non-cognitive aspects of bravery, temperance, and so on.²³

The first option is a more natural interpretation of the passage, and it states the conclusion that Socrates needs in order to establish that virtue is teachable. We have some reason to hesitate, however, since only the second option fits the argument Socrates has given. When Socrates argues that confidence and so on are beneficial only if they are combined with wisdom, ought he not to conclude that virtue is confidence (etc.) plus wisdom? The argument seems to show **(p.138)** that knowledge is a necessary part of virtue, but not that it is the whole of virtue.²⁴

The claim about the beneficial character of virtue fits one of the guiding principles of the elenchos and the considerations that Socrates appeals to support the inseparability of at least some of the virtues, and so it tends to support the Reciprocity Thesis.²⁵ But this claim does not imply that knowledge is sufficient for virtue, and so it does not imply that all the virtues are identical to knowledge (the Unity Thesis). In the *Protagoras* Plato suggests, although he does not clearly state, the difference between the arguments for the Reciprocity Thesis and the arguments for the Unity Thesis;²⁶ his main argument for the Unity Thesis depends on a proof that knowledge is sufficient for virtue.

It is important to decide which thesis Plato means to express in this argument in the *Meno*. If the conclusion of this argument really states that virtue is simply knowledge, then the argument is invalid, and we must ask whether Plato recognizes the invalidity. If the conclusion expresses only one aspect of the Reciprocity Thesis, by claiming that knowledge is necessary for virtue, then Socrates is not entitled to infer that virtue is teachable because it is simply knowledge. We must ask whether Plato recognizes that such an inference is illegitimate.

98. Psychological Eudaemonism in The Meno

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 98. Psychological Eudaemonism in The Meno

To answer this question about the argument, we ought to go back to an argument in the first part of the dialogue. Socrates has a reason to identify virtue with knowledge as long

as he maintains psychological eudaemonism, and so he rules out the possibility of incontinence; we might suppose that he tacitly relies on psychological eudaemonism to justify the identification of virtue with knowledge. In the *Gorgias* we saw some reasons for wondering whether Plato still accepted psychological eudaemonism. In *Meno* 77–78 he discusses an issue connected with psychological eudaemonism, but it is difficult to be sure about his conclusion.

Socrates argues that it is superfluous to include the clause ‘desiring good things’ in a definition of virtue, because no one desires bad things (77b6–78b2).²⁷ This sounds like the doctrine of the *Protagoras*, that we always and only desire what we believe to be better and therefore cannot desire what we believe to be worse.

It is not clear, however, that Socrates defends the strong psychological eudaemonism of the *Protagoras*. He might be taken to argue for either of two conclusions: (1) We never desire bad things as such; that is to say, the fact that they are bad is never a feature that makes us desire them. (2) We never desire, under any description, things that we believe to be bad; that is to say, the belief that they are bad always prevents us from desiring them. Only the second conclusion affirms psychological eudaemonism, but only the first conclusion is warranted by the argument. The argument leaves open the possibility that we might want x, knowing x to be bad but still believing that it has something else to be said for it (that, for instance, it is pleasant).

(p.139) Does Plato see the difference between the two conclusions, and does he see that his argument supports only the first? In summing up the argument, Socrates says that the proposed definition of virtue, ‘wishing (*boulesthai*) the good things and being able <to get them>’ (78b3–4), should have the first conjunct deleted, since ‘wishing belongs to everyone and in this respect one person is no better than another’ (78b5–6). Socrates need not mean to be asserting psychological eudaemonism (the second conclusion); he may mean simply that the good is one object of everyone's desire, not that it is the object of all desire.²⁸

A further difficulty must be faced. Although *Meno* agrees that the proposed definition was ‘wishing (*boulesthai*) the good things . . .’ (78b4), Socrates actually set out to discuss an account that said ‘desiring (*epithumein*) the good things’ (77b3–7). Does Plato intend any distinction between wishing and (merely) desiring? Socrates introduces ‘wish’ in saying that no one wishes to be miserable (78b4), and he infers that no one wishes bad things, since being miserable is simply ‘desiring (*epithumein*) bad things and getting them’ (78b6–8). This argument does not show that Plato treats ‘wish’ and ‘desire’ as synonyms. He may mean that since no one has a rational wish to be miserable, no one has a rational wish for things believed to be bad; this would still allow us to say that some people have a non-rational desire for things they believe to be bad.²⁹

The Socratic dialogues mention a distinction between ‘wish’ and ‘desire’ that Plato might reasonably exploit in this context (*Ch.* 167e1–5; *Lys.* 221a3; *Pr.* 340a7–b2).³⁰ He does not exploit it in the Socratic dialogues, where it would raise a serious doubt about psychological eudaemonism. In the *Gorgias* Plato perhaps implicitly distinguishes wish,

which is directed towards the good (G. 468e5–7), from ‘desire’ or ‘appetite’ (*epithumia*), which seems to be directed towards the pleasant (G. 493b1, 503c4–6), but he does not explore the implications of this division for his claim that we do whatever we do for the sake of the good.³¹ In the *Meno*, however, we ought not to assume that he means to leave psychological eudaemonism unquestioned.

This earlier discussion of desire and the good is relevant to the later argument about virtue and knowledge (87d–89a). If the earlier discussion was not meant to support psychological eudaemonism, then we are not clearly justified in taking psychological eudaemonism to be tacitly presupposed in the later argument; hence it is not clear that Plato takes the later argument to be a valid argument for the identification of virtue with knowledge. He may recognize that he has given no sufficient reason to identify bravery with knowledge rather than with confidence regulated by knowledge; in that case he may recognize that he has given no reason for accepting the Unity Thesis rather than the claim that virtue is inseparable from knowledge.

We cannot be sure that Plato sees the flaw in his argument for the identification of virtue with knowledge, but the case for believing that he sees it is strengthened by the fact that his earlier argument fails to support the psychological eudaemonism that would in turn support the Unity Thesis. In presenting these two arguments Plato may mean to suggest that we ought to reopen the question about what virtue is, and especially about how far it can be identified with knowledge.

(p.140) 99. Knowledge and Teaching

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 99. Knowledge and Teaching

The first argument has concluded that virtue must be teachable. The second argument (89c5–96d4) argues directly against this conclusion, as follows:

1. Virtue is knowledge if and only if it is teachable.
2. Virtue is teachable if and only if there are teachers of it (89d3–e3).
3. There are no teachers of virtue (96c4–10).
4. Hence it is not teachable.
5. Hence it is not knowledge.

The first step of the argument is taken over from the previous argument and is unchallenged. The second step, however, is neither defended nor adequately explained.

The claim that virtue is knowledge if and only if it is teachable is true, if it means that virtue is knowledge if and only if it is the sort of thing that people can teach if they find out enough about it. But if this is how we understand ‘teachable’ in step 1, we have no reason to accept (2), if we attach the same sense to ‘teachable’. If (2) is true only if a different sense is attached to ‘teachable’, the argument contains a fatal equivocation.

Some of Plato's remarks suggest that he sees this flaw in the argument. He draws our attention especially to issues about teachability, when we are instructed to include recollection under ‘teaching’ (87b5–c3). This instruction is quite surprising; for the

account of recollection denied that Socrates was teaching the slave, and since recollection results in knowledge, recollected knowledge seems to falsify the claim that all knowledge is teachable. To avoid this objection, the scope of 'teaching' is extended to include recollection.

Once Plato does this, he makes it easy to see the falsity of the claim that if virtue is teachable, there must be people who can teach it. For if we can be taught virtue only through recollection, there will be teachers of virtue only if there are people who can guide recollection until it reaches knowledge. Plato shows that if the knowledge relevant to virtue is recollected, then probably no one can teach it at present; for Socrates has not shown that he knows how to guide recollection all the way to knowledge, and no one else even believes that the relevant knowledge is recollection at all.³² If, then, we consider the very type of knowledge that Plato himself has urged on our attention, we will see that steps (1) and (2) of the argument cannot both be true if the same sense of 'teachable' is assumed.³³

We have a good reason, therefore, for supposing that Plato does not accept all the steps of this argument. Ostensibly the failure of different people to teach virtue is offered as a reason for denying that virtue is teachable (95a4–96b4). The earlier parts of the *Meno* itself, however, give us good reasons for doubting whether the failure of these people to teach virtue shows that it is not teachable.³⁴ Their views are clearly affected by their conception of what virtue is and of what teaching is; Socrates has made it clear that their views on both these **(p.141)** questions are likely to be mistaken. He has shown that it is difficult to say what virtue is and therefore difficult to form a correct conception of what is to be taught; and he has shown that the appropriate way to learn about virtue is recollection. If people who try to teach virtue have the wrong conception of what they are trying to teach and of what would count as teaching it, their efforts are likely to be wrongly directed; their failures therefore do not show that virtue cannot be taught.³⁵

100. Knowledge, Belief, and Socratic Inquiry

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 100. Knowledge, Belief, and Socratic Inquiry

In the third argument (96d5–100b6) Socrates assumes the soundness of the second argument and resolves the conflict between the first and second arguments by challenging the truth of a premiss of the first argument. The first argument asserted that only knowledge is beneficial, but in the third argument Socrates suggests that correct belief is also beneficial; hence we can resolve the conflict between the conclusions of the first two arguments by identifying virtue with correct belief.

Socrates claims—uncharacteristically—that one of Prodicus' distinctions is illuminating (96d5–7).³⁶ Indeed, he is unusually emphatic in endorsing the distinction between knowledge and correct belief (98b1–5). His emphasis is quite justified; for the whole dialogue has shown that we need to draw this distinction and that Socrates' inquiries will seem pointless and unintelligible unless we keep the distinction in mind. Knowledge differs from correct belief because correct belief by itself is unstable, whereas knowledge makes it stable by 'reasoning about the explanation' (97e5–98a8). Meno himself remarks

on the tendency of his beliefs to wander away under Socrates' questioning (79e7–80b7, 95c7–8), and the same thing happens to the slave (84a3–b1). The comparison with Daedalus' wandering statues is used in the *Meno* in the same way as in the *Euthyphro*, where it is applied to Euthyphro's reaction to Socratic inquiry (*Eu.* 11b6–e1). The condition of Socrates' interlocutors illustrates the condition of someone who has correct belief without knowledge.

The instability of correct belief need not, however, result in the confusion that affects Socrates' interlocutors. For Socrates himself disavows knowledge about virtue, and yet he seems to have quite steady convictions about what virtue requires. In explaining why he lacks knowledge, Socrates does not say that his own beliefs waver; he suggests that since he cannot give an account of virtue, he lacks knowledge of what virtue is, and so lacks knowledge of other properties of virtue. Since the explicit distinction between knowledge and belief makes explanation necessary for knowledge, we can infer that knowledge of the definition of virtue provides knowledge of truths about virtue by providing an explanation to stabilize one's belief in these truths.

This connexion between giving an explanation and giving an account is assumed in the *Gorgias*. Socrates argues that a craft, in contrast to a mere knack, can give the explanation, which is manifested by the ability to give an account (**p.142**) (*logos*) 'by which <a craft> applies the things it applies, <saying> what sorts of things they are in their nature' (*G.* 465a3–5). Giving the explanation implies ability to give the account answering a 'What is it?' question.

How, then, does a Socratic definition provide an explanation? The first part of the *Meno* does not actually use 'explanation' in connexion with a Socratic definition, but it comes very close. To give the explanation of what one does (cf. *G.* 501a2) is to say why (*dia ti*) one does it, and to give the explanation of x's being F is to give the reason why (*di'ho*) x is F.³⁷ When Socrates asks Meno for a single answer to the question 'What is virtue?' he says that all virtues 'have some one identical form because of which (*di'ho*) they are virtues, focussing on which the respondent can presumably show well to the questioner what in fact virtue is' (72c6–d1).

In speaking of Socratic definition Socrates clearly affirms that it answers the relevant why-question; he implies that in doing so it gives the appropriate sort of explanation. Socrates makes the same point in the *Euthyphro*, claiming that a definition of a virtue identifies the property that we can focus on in deciding whether an action is virtuous (*Eu.* 6e3–6), because the property is that 'by which' all virtuous actions are virtuous (*Eu.* 6d11–e1). A definition gives our beliefs the sort of justification and explanatory account that both Plato and Aristotle count as a distinctive feature of knowledge.

This connexion of knowledge, explanation, and Socratic definition justifies the implicit assumption of the early dialogues that the elenchos exposes people's lack of knowledge by showing that they cannot give a correct definition. The elenchos shows that people lack knowledge because it shows that they lack the particular sort of justification that a definition would supply. Although they may be right to claim *that* bravery requires

standing firm against danger on some occasions and not on others, they cannot say *why* this is so. They would have the 'why' as well as the 'that', as Aristotle puts it (*EN* 1095a31–b8), if they could produce a Socratic definition. And so, when Socrates claims that he and other people are ignorant about the virtues, he claims that they lack the 'why', the explanation that would transform their beliefs into knowledge.

Plato's remarks about knowledge and recollection confirm the suggestion that a Socratic definition meets the demand for explanation. For having introduced this demand, Socrates says: 'and this . . . is recollection, as stands agreed by us in the earlier discussion' (98a4–5). 'This' refers to reasoning about the explanation; Socrates refers back to his remark that the slave had belief that could be converted into knowledge by the appropriate further inquiries (85b8–d2). This remark about the slave, however, says nothing about finding an explanation. We see the relevance of an explanation only if we connect recollection with the Socratic inquiry conducted in the first part of the dialogue, for that aims at finding the one thing because of which all virtues are virtues. We can see why Plato thinks finding the explanation has been shown to be recollection, if, and only if, we take his allusion to recollection to be an allusion to the search for a definition.

If this is correct, then Plato's explicit distinction between knowledge and belief explains what is said and done in earlier dialogues. According to the *Meno*, (p.143) Socrates is right to disavow knowledge about virtue because he lacks the appropriate sort of explanation, and he is right to seek a definition because that will provide the sort of explanation that contributes to knowledge. Since the *Meno* presents an explicit account of knowledge that is absent from the early dialogues, it gives a clear formulation and defence of claims that are implicit and undefended in the early dialogues; it does not introduce a new epistemological demand that was absent from earlier dialogues.³⁸

101. Knowledge, Belief, and Stability

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 101. Knowledge, Belief, and Stability
Plato clearly accepts the part of the third argument that affirms the difference between knowledge and correct belief, but does he accept the further premisses that lead to the identification of virtue with correct belief? That depends on what he thinks about the combination of two claims: (1) Correct belief is as beneficial as knowledge. (2) Whatever state is always beneficial is virtue. If Plato accepts both these claims, and if they both use 'beneficial' in the same sense, they constitute an argument to show that knowledge cannot be necessary for virtue.

In defending (1) Socrates explains what he means by it. Meno suggests that correct belief might sometimes go wrong, whereas knowledge never goes wrong, (97c6–8). Socrates seems to say that this suggestion rests on a misunderstanding: 'Will not the person who has correct belief on a given occasion succeed on that occasion, as long as he believes the correct things?' (97c6–8).³⁹ He agrees that correct belief is all right 'as long as it believes correctly' (97c10), but it is liable to wander away, and the function of knowledge is to tie it down. In claiming that mere correct belief is all right as long as it is correct, Socrates is not merely stating a tautology. He presumably means that in some circumstances the fact that my belief is not knowledge makes no difference to its reliability.

How might this happen? True beliefs are liable to wander away in two different ways: (1) I lose the relevant sort of belief in conditions where I am puzzled and do not know what to believe; this is what happens to Euthyphro (*Eu.* 11b–e). (2) I still have the same sort of belief, but it ceases to be correct, in conditions where my tenacious belief turns out to be false. Knowledge therefore binds belief both (1) by preventing it from wandering away in unfamiliar conditions and (2) by preventing it from wandering away from the truth. In the first case, the agent's belief itself is unstable; in the second case, the truth of the belief is unstable. Since Plato is concerned with the stable correctness of beliefs, not simply with tenacity of belief, he must take both kinds of wandering away into account, and knowledge must protect us against them both.

Plato also needs to consider the different circumstances that might cause true beliefs to wander away in one of these two ways, so that he can say how many circumstances are relevant to deciding whether our beliefs have the right kind of stability. Different demands for stability might rest on different standards of reliability. If, for instance, I believe that these animals are sheep, and they are sheep, then my belief is reliable for these animals, and it does not matter (p.144) if I do not know what makes them sheep. If, however, I cannot tell the difference between sheep and goats and do not know why these animals are sheep rather than goats, my ignorance would make a difference if I were confronted with goats. If we are concerned about 'empirical reliability' (the tendency to be right in empirically likely conditions), my belief that animals with a certain appearance are sheep may be perfectly reliable (if I can be expected not to meet any goats). If we are concerned about 'counterfactual reliability' (the tendency to be right in counterfactual, and not necessarily empirically likely, conditions), my inability to distinguish sheep from goats makes my belief unreliable that animals with a certain appearance are sheep. In saying that my belief about sheep is counterfactually unreliable, we point out that my reason for believing that these things are sheep is mistaken, even though the mistake makes no difference to my judgments in actual circumstances.

When Plato speaks of a given belief 'wandering', he describes a fault that we might more easily recognize if it were described differently. If I identify sheep by features that do not distinguish them from goats, then I rely on false principles to reach the true belief 'this is a sheep' in an environment without goats. If I rely on the same principles to identify sheep in an environment that includes goats, I will often reach the false belief 'this is a sheep' when I meet a goat. We may want to describe these facts by speaking of three things: (1) the true token belief 'this is a sheep' (applied to a sheep in the first environment), (2) the false token belief 'this is a sheep' (applied to a goat in the second environment), and (3) the false general principle that I use to identify sheep in both environments. Plato, however, tends to speak as though the false general principle causes one and the same belief ('this is a sheep') to change from truth to falsity in different environments.⁴⁰ Once we keep this in mind, it is easier to understand what he means by speaking of beliefs 'wandering'.

If we take account of the different ways in which beliefs may be stable or unstable, we can defend Socrates' claim that mere correct belief is less stable than knowledge. If we

consider mere empirical reliability, the case for saying that correct belief must be less stable is weak. For in particular empirical circumstances, I may never face the situations that will cause either my belief or the truth of my belief to wander away; and so, if these are not alternative circumstances that need to be considered, my belief may be perfectly stable, contrary to Socrates' claim. If, however, we consider counterfactual reliability, taking an appropriate range of counterfactual circumstances to be relevant, Socrates is right to claim that without knowledge correct belief must be unstable. Even if correct belief is as good as knowledge in a given range of situations, it will not remain correct if it is exposed to certain kinds of challenges that someone with knowledge can overcome.⁴¹

Plato gives a clear reason, then, for preferring the rational understanding and explanation that we gain from knowledge. If we know why it is right to keep promises in all the situations we have faced, we will be better equipped to discover that it would be wrong to keep them in some situation that we have not considered (cf. *Rep.* 331c), and we will be better equipped to resist specious **(p.145)** arguments suggesting that the rule does not apply in some situation that we had not previously confronted.

If Plato takes this counterfactual reliability to be necessary for the stability that distinguishes knowledge from true belief, then the two features that appeared to distinguish knowledge from true belief become harder to separate. We might at first suppose that knowledge differs from mere correct belief both in being stable and in including 'reasoning about the explanation'; in that case we might suppose that some correct beliefs could have one of these features without the other. If, however, the relevant sort of stability requires the counterfactual reliability that focusses on the right reason for believing that p, then we cannot have the relevant sort of stability without grasping the right reason for believing that p. If this is true, then we cannot achieve stability without meeting the demand for rational understanding.

102. Knowledge, Belief, and Virtue

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 102. Knowledge, Belief, and Virtue

If this is Plato's view about the difference between knowledge and correct belief, what does it imply about the claim that correct belief is as beneficial as knowledge?

Consideration of the different types of reliability suggests that the question may be difficult to answer. If we are concerned with actual results, we may conclude that only empirical reliability matters and that therefore correct belief is as beneficial as knowledge; perhaps this is what Socrates has in mind when he says that true belief achieves the result of each action no less well than knowledge does (98a7–9) and that it is no less beneficial 'for actions' (98c1–3). If, however, the relevant sort of benefit includes counterfactual reliability, knowledge is more beneficial than correct belief.

Our view about the sort of benefit being considered will also affect our judgment on the claim that whatever state is always beneficial is to be identified with virtue. If the only relevant benefit is the 'pragmatic' benefit displayed in actual results, then the identification of virtue with the beneficial state implies that only actual results matter for virtue; in that case, correct belief will do as well as knowledge. Socrates assumes this pragmatic conception of benefit in using the distinction between knowledge and belief

against the earlier argument (87d–89a) for the identification of virtue with knowledge. The pragmatic conception of benefit supports the ostensible conclusion of the third argument, that virtue comes by some divine fate, and not by nature or teaching, to those who have it.

Socrates qualifies this conclusion, however, by adding that we will know something perspicuous about this only if we ask what virtue is before asking how it is acquired (100b4–6). Each of the three main arguments (from 87d onwards) is open to some doubt that raises questions about the nature of virtue. If we have correctly understood the arguments in their context, then Plato amply justifies his suggestion that they rely on disputable assumptions that need to be clarified by an inquiry into what virtue is. In this case we need to know **(p.146)** enough about virtue to decide whether the purely pragmatic conception of benefit is the only one that is relevant to virtue.

Socrates claims that knowledge is more valuable (*timiōteron*, 98a7) than correct belief. He implies that the greater value of knowledge does not consist in its greater empirical reliability, since it may not in fact be empirically more reliable than correct belief. Knowledge may confer some benefit that is not purely pragmatic, but is nonetheless morally relevant. If A's knowledge and B's correct belief would give different answers only in counterfactual conditions, this might still be relevant to virtue; for perhaps the actual behavioural difference between A and B is not all that matters, but we should also be concerned about their motives and attitudes. If these matter to us, then the benefit relevant to virtue is not exhausted by the pragmatic benefit.

103. The Meno and Socratic Ethics

Socratic Method and Socratic Ethics: The Meno 103. The Meno and Socratic Ethics

This question about the value of knowledge introduces one of the features that, in Aristotle's view, distinguish virtues from crafts. He argues that whereas we assess people's possession of a craft by considering how efficiently they produce the right products, we assess someone's character by considering further features that are independent of results:

The actions that come about in accordance with the virtues are done justly or temperately, not if they themselves are in some specific condition, but if in addition the agent is in some condition in doing them—first, if he does them knowingly, second, if he does them by deciding on them, and deciding on them for their own sakes, and third, if he also does them from a firm and immovable state. (*EN* 1105a28–33)

If Plato in the *Meno* is concerned to identify the features of virtue that Aristotle mentions here, he has good reason to insist that knowledge, not just correct belief, is necessary for virtue. Since he insists that knowledge is more valuable than virtue, while recognizing that it is no more useful in action, he raises the possibility that the further valuable element in knowledge is also an element of virtue.

If Plato takes this view of virtue, he goes beyond the attitude of the early dialogues. For

in the early dialogues Socrates is silent about the differences that Aristotle sees between virtues and crafts; indeed, he appears to assimilate the virtues to crafts.⁴² He never suggests that understanding the right reason for virtuous action is itself an element in virtue, apart from its consequences for action.

However, a reader of these dialogues might fairly argue that Socrates' emphasis on the importance of articulate understanding seems to go beyond anything he could justify instrumentally. Nicias warns Lysimachus that anyone who engages in discussion with Socrates finds himself having to 'give an account about himself, how he is conducting himself and how he has conducted his whole previous life' (*La.* 187e10–188a2). Socrates confirms Nicias' impression of him; **(p.147)** he maintains that the unexamined life is not worth living, and that it is the greatest good for human beings to argue daily about virtue (*Ap.* 38a1–6).⁴³ Although some instrumental defence of Socrates' activities can be given, one may well doubt whether it would really explain the importance that Socrates attaches to them.

This question about Socratic ethics and its connexion with Socratic method cannot be raised properly without the distinctions drawn in the *Meno*; that is why it is not raised in the earlier dialogues. Once Plato distinguishes knowledge from correct belief, he can consider the character of knowledge, as distinct from the practical results that it may share with correct belief, and he can ask whether the rational and articulate understanding that is characteristic of knowledge is to be valued in its own right as an aspect of virtue. In suggesting that it has some value in its own right, Plato suggests that a purely pragmatic conception of the benefit of virtue cannot explain Socrates' own conviction that knowledge is necessary for virtue. Although a grasp of the distinction between knowledge and belief tends to support the practice of Socratic inquiry, it tends to challenge Socrates' attempts to explain the character of virtue. The Socrates of the early dialogues turns out to have correct belief, but not knowledge, about the character of virtue.

In the *Meno* and especially in the discussion of recollection, knowledge, and belief, Plato introduces epistemological questions that are not examined in the early dialogues. But his introduction of these questions shows that they matter for Socratic method and Socratic ethics. Plato suggests that the historical Socrates made it unnecessarily difficult to defend his moral convictions because he confined himself to ethical discussion. Some defence of Socratic method is needed if we are to take these ethical discussions as seriously as Socrates took them, and a defence of Socratic method soon leads us into epistemology. Moreover, Socrates' emphasis on the ethical importance of rational understanding and self-examination requires a fuller understanding of knowledge and belief than Socrates himself achieved.

Many readers of the *Meno* have recognized that it expresses Plato's critical reflexions on Socrates. Some have argued that Plato's criticisms are primarily external; according to this view, he finds Socrates wanting when he measures him against epistemological and metaphysical standards that Socrates did not accept.⁴⁴ We have discovered that, on the contrary, Plato's criticisms are internal; he insists that if we want to understand and

defend Socrates in the light of questions that Socrates himself must recognize as legitimate, we cannot confine ourselves to Socrates' purely ethical inquiries. To this extent the impulse behind the epistemological and metaphysical inquiries of the middle dialogues is strictly Socratic.

Notes:

(1.) On virtue in general, see §23.

(2.) On Socratic inquiry and virtue, see §10.

(3.) 'Magnificently' in 70b6 perhaps refers to the impressive character of Gorgias' answers; he did not simply answer the question, but made a fine speech too. See Bluck [1961], ad loc.; *Symp.* 199c6–7; *St.* 277b1–6.

(4.) 'No puzzle' in 72a2 is picked up in 80c8.

(5.) On Socratic definition, see §13.

(6.) On different aspects of virtue, see §§55, 68.

(7.) On assumptions about definition, see §105.

(8.) On Socrates' conditions for a definition, see §107.

(9.) Meno's conception of knowledge is discussed by Ebert [1973], 173–75; Fine [1992], 220, and note 24.

(10.) The fact that Socrates and Meno share these implicit assumptions about knowledge counts against the view that their disagreement about inquiry turns on different senses of 'know'. Plato is careful to avoid suggesting that Socrates relies on any such eristic move.

(11.) A different answer to the paradox is suggested by White [1974]; [1976], 47–50.

(12.) '*Pais*' (like the English 'boy' in some periods) can be used for a slave of any age, and so does not imply that the slave is young.

(13.) The relation between the conversation with the slave and the Socratic elenchos is discussed by Irwin [1977a], 315f; Nehamas [1985], 305–10; Benson [1990c]; Brown [1991]; Vlastos [1991], 118–20.

(14.) Plato does not imply that at the end of this conversation the slave has knowledge. In 85d9 *nun* probably refers to the time mentioned in 85d1, when the slave will have completed his recollection. In *Phd.* 73a9–10 Cebes says people could not give the right answers to questions about diagrams unless knowledge and the correct account 'were in them'; but he may refer simply to the prenatal presence of knowledge. Contrast Brown [1991], 608–14.

(15.) In 85d4 *analabōn* need not actually mean 'recollect' or 'recover' (implying that we previously had it); it may just mean 'take up' (cf. *Ap.* 22b2; *Symp.* 185e1; *R.* 606e4; *Tht.* 203a1; *Sph.* 255e9; *St.* 261c5). The crucial claim about recollection is not the claim that the slave *analambanei*, but the further claim that this *analambanein* must be recollection, 85d6–7 (i.e., what the slave does can be explained only on the assumption that he recollects). The extent of recollection is discussed by Scott [1987]; Fine [1993], 137f.

(16.) On the discussion with the slave and the reliability of the elenchos, see Fine [1992], 207–13.

(17.) On sincerity, see §11.

(18.) Not all of Meno's beliefs are endorsed as reasonable. On his belief in parts of virtue, see chap. 3, note 29.

(19.) On the guiding principles, see §32.

(20.) Since Plato identifies knowledge with recollection, we can say that our recollection about *F* is complete, or that we have recollected *F*, only when we have reached the appropriate true beliefs about *F* and bound them with the appropriate *logos*. But this does not imply that recollection, understood as the process of recollecting rather than the result that consists in having recollected, goes on only when we acquire knowledge. Although Laches, say, cannot be said to have recollected bravery, he may still have recollected some truths about bravery in the course of incompletely recollecting bravery. On the relation between inquiry and recollection, see chap. 9, note 15; Nehamas [1985], 309f.

(21.) This identification of virtue with knowledge does not count as a satisfactory definition; for it does not say what sort of knowledge virtue is, and, as the *Euthd.* shows, that is not an easy question to answer.

(22.) On the *Euthd.*, see §§38 through 40. The arguments in the *M.* and the *Euthd.* are compared by Devereux [1977], 130–32; Ferejohn [1984].

(23.) On 'some sort of' (*tis*), cf. chap. 3, note 15.

(24.) This feature of the argument might support Thompson's translation of 89a4 as (1) 'wisdom is either virtue or a part of virtue', rather than Bluck's and Sharples' (2) 'virtue is either wisdom or a part of wisdom'. While (2) is needed to show that virtue is knowledge, only (1) has been defended. This point might also support the reading *ti autou* ('some part of virtue') in 87d7 (favoured by Bluck and by O'Brien [1967], 95).

(25.) For a qualification of this claim about the Reciprocity Thesis, see chap. 4, note 26.

(26.) On the Reciprocity Thesis in the *Pr.*, see §56.

(27.) The move from *kala* to *agatha*, 77b6, is also open to question.

(28.) Santas [1979], 194, seems to attribute the rejection of incontinence to our passage (see also Nakhnikian [1973]). His account of the argument (185–89), however, does not defend this attribution.

(29.) On *boulesthai* and *epithumein*, see Bluck [1961] ad 78a5, who rightly rejects Croiset and Bodin's [1923] suggestion that *boulesthai* and *dokein* in *G.* 466b–468a (also cited by O'Brien [1967], 87) mark the distinction that may be marked by *boulesthai* and *epithumein* in the *M.* Cf. §145. The distinction is reminiscent of Prodicus, who is treated differently in the *M.* from the way he is treated in the early dialogues. See chap. 5, note 14; chap. 6, note 43; chap. 8, note 2. Contrast §100.

(30.) Kahn [1987], 91f., takes the passage in the *Ch.* to show that when he wrote it Plato did not believe that all desire is for the good. The passage shows this, however, only if we are justified in assuming that Plato does not take desire for the fine and the pleasant to be reducible to desire for the good. This assumption about Plato's view in the early dialogues is unjustified.

(31.) On desire in the *G.*, see §80.

(32.) The relevance of the claim about recollection to the claim about teachability is noticed by Wilkes [1979]. The importance of recollection is also urged by Cornford [1952], 60 and note; and Devereux [1978], who draw different conclusions from mine.

(33.) The argument on teachability is discussed by Bluck [1961], 21–24; Sharples [1985], 162, 168; Kraut [1984], 288–304 (the best defence of the argument); Barnes [1991]; Brunschwig [1991].

(34.) On Plato's attitude to Athenian politicians, see Penner [1987a], 316–20; [1992b], 165. Contrast Vlastos [1991], 125; Snider [1992].

(35.) This point weakens the force of the analogy offered by Kraut [1984], 289f., and the similar suggestion offered by Brunschwig [1991], 595f.

(36.) On Prodicus, see chap. 9, note 29.

(37.) On explanations, see §109.

(38.) On knowledge in the early dialogues, see §16. Socrates' conditions for knowledge are discussed by Kraut [1984], 280–85; Penner [1992b], 140–43.

(39.) The repeated *aiei* in 97c6–8 emphasizes Socrates' point.

(40.) Aristotle recognizes beliefs with changing truth-values at *Catg.* 4a21–b13. For Plato's views on beliefs, cf. §§183, 184.

(41.) The bearing of counterfactual variations and relevant alternatives on questions about reliability and justification is discussed by Dretske [1970]; [1981], 129–34;

Goldman [1976], 44–50; [1986], 103–13.

(42.) On virtue and craft, see §§49, 50.

(43.) On the relevance of Socrates' claims about the examined life, see Vlastos [1991], 125.

(44.) An 'external' account of Plato's criticisms of Socrates is presented by Vlastos [1991], chap. 4. He claims that Plato's interest in mathematics swept him 'away from his Socratic moorings' towards 'the "Socrates" of his middle period, pursuing unSocratic projects to antiSocratic conclusions' (131). A similar view about the relevance of mathematics is expressed by Cornford [1952], chap. 4, esp. pp. 48, 55. Vlastos' view is criticized well by Gentzler [1991a], chap. 4.



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