

KNOWLEDGE OF THE GOOD:  
VIRTUE IN THE *MENO* AND *PROTAGORAS*

by

B.W.D. Heystee

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καὶ τότε ἔπειθ' ὑμῖν μελέτω κάρτος τε βίη τε,  
αὐθι δ' ἔχειν μεμαῶτα καὶ ἐσσύμενόν περ ἀλύξαι.  
πάντα δὲ γιγνόμενος πειρήσεται, ὅσσ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν  
ἔρπετὰ γίγνονται, καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ θεσπιδαῆς πῦρ.

*Odyssey* 4.415-418

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## ABSTRACT

In both the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*, Plato investigates the unity, acquisition and nature of virtue (ἀρετή). Although these dialogues appear to reach opposing conclusions—the *Protagoras* that virtue is knowledge and the *Meno* that virtue is divinely dispensed true opinion—in fact they both articulate the same moral principle. Both dialogues argue that virtue is knowledge of the good. I investigate these two dialogues independently and on their own respective terms, dedicating Chapter 2 to the *Protagoras* and Chapter 3 to the *Meno*. Although both dialogues argue that virtue is knowledge of the good, neither offers an account of the good. This is because each dialogue is but a single part of a larger argument which culminates in the *Republic*, wherein we find a more complete explanation of knowledge of the good in the description of the philosopher-king.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From Plato's extensive corpus, I have selected for examination the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*. This requires some explanation and justification. In particular, I must answer why it is that the study of these two dialogues comprises a single work and not, say, two projects that are merely associated, even if that association is close. These dialogues have little to no dramatic continuity with one another as we find in other pairs or sets of dialogues. The *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman* make an obvious trilogy. The *Republic* and the *Timaeus* are bound to one another by the *Timaeus*' introductory summary, which recounts a conversation conspicuously similar to that of the *Republic* (*Timaeus*, 17c-19a). The *Protagoras* itself is closely related to the *Symposium* on account of the notable overlap in characters.<sup>1</sup> The *Meno* and the *Protagoras*, however, have no such dramatic connections yet are nevertheless intimately connected.<sup>2</sup>

What connects them and compels concurrent study is that these two dialogues address the same questions and face the same issues. In the first place, these dialogues both ask, "What is virtue? And how do you get it?" This is explicit in the *Meno* from the outset. Meno's opening question inquires after the acquisition of virtue, whether it comes from teaching, practice, nature or some other source (70a).<sup>3</sup> Socrates immediately transforms this question into one of virtue's nature, because it is impossible to know how it is acquired until you first know what it is (71a-b). In the *Protagoras*, Socrates' friend

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<sup>1</sup> All the major characters of the *Symposium* save Aristophanes appear in the *Protagoras*: Phaedrus, Eryximachus, Pausanias, Agathon and Alcibiades. See Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*, 37.

<sup>2</sup> This is widely recognized. As a point of example, there are no fewer than four editions of the *Meno* and *Protagoras* published as a pair in a single volume (Beresford and Brown; Bartlett; Guthrie; and Jowett).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all English language references to either the *Meno* or the *Protagoras* are from Plato, "*Protagoras*" and "*Meno*," trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). For the Greek text of these dialogues I have consulted Plato, *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1990).

Hippocrates wants to acquire some kind of excellence from Protagoras though he is unsure what it is or whether Protagoras really teaches it or not. When Socrates meets the sophist, he expresses doubt that virtue is acquired through teaching and subsequently launches into an investigation of the unity of the virtues, which is effectively a provisional investigation of virtue's nature. This is made explicit at the conclusion of the dialogue when Socrates insists that in order to complete their inquiry, they will have to find out "what virtue is and investigate once again whether it is something teachable."<sup>4</sup> Although it is less explicit, the *Protagoras* too investigates the nature of virtue and its acquisition. In that sense, the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* are asking the same questions (361c).<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, both dialogues ask these questions in the face of the possibility that there is no such thing as virtue itself. In the *Protagoras*, the eponymous sophist against whom Socrates squares off is a moral relativist. As I argue at some length in Chapter 2, Protagoras does not believe that virtue is anything in itself. It is only a matter of social convention. Virtue is not 'moral' but practical. It is simply a question of maintaining the right appearances; accordingly, it has no essential properties. It is a practical necessity by which we must abide while pursuing our own private ends. When Socrates argues against Protagoras and tries to show that virtue has real and determinate properties, he is in effect arguing that there really is such a thing as virtue in itself. *Meno* too harbours opposition to virtue, though in a different way. As I show in Chapter 3, *Meno* has no genuine ethical

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<sup>4</sup> "The question of an explicit definition...does not arise until the very end of [the *Protagoras*]; but the substance of this question is present throughout" (Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 212).

<sup>5</sup> Guthrie too notes this: "*Protagoras* and *Meno* attack the same question: 'Can virtue be taught?', and in both Socrates concludes that they have been premature in asking it before settling what virtue *is*" (Guthrie, vol. IV, 213). Cf. *Protagoras*, trans. C.C.W. Taylor, xi; and Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 149.

interest in virtue as a moral standard. For Meno, virtue is the ability to dominate others in order to get one's way; in other words, for Meno 'might is right'. Meno's conception of virtue is a radical departure from the virtues of Athenian conservatism and is opposed to the virtue for which Socrates argues. Although their social obligations and shame prevent them from admitting it outright, both Protagoras and Meno believe that our sole imperative is to achieve our desires by any means necessary. In arguing against each of them in their respective dialogues, Socrates thus confronts the notion that there are neither genuine moral imperatives nor a definite nature to virtue.

This notion arises within the context of a conflict between Athenian conservatism and sophistry as a result of which we are presented with three moral alternatives: conservatism,<sup>6</sup> sophistry and philosophy. Conservatism appears in the *Protagoras* through Hippocrates and in the *Meno* through Anytus. Hippocrates is a young Athenian man for whom the conservative tradition is failing and who is considering sophistry as an alternative source of education. Anytus himself is a representative of the conservative point of view which thought that "sophistic training might seem to make people too clever by half."<sup>7</sup> He is incensed by the kind of education men like Gorgias offer. The *Protagoras* and the *Meno* articulate different aspects of the moral dynamic these three moral stances produce. On the one hand, in the *Protagoras* philosophy lays claim to greater moral authority than sophistry in the face of conservatism's failure. On the other, the *Meno* shows that in a certain sense conservatism and sophistry are the same: they

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<sup>6</sup> Conservative education operated through a kind of 'education by association'. A young Athenian would receive a proper education simply by spending time with his father or any other eminent Athenian. In other words, virtue was acquired by doing what your elders did and abiding by the established social ἔθος. This is the practice Socrates describes at *Protagoras* 319e-320b and which Anytus advocates at *Meno* 92e ff. (cf. Guthrie, vol. III, 39, 251). This education claimed to produce καλοκᾶγαθοι and was practiced for the sake of social esteem and gain (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 40; Friedländer, vol. II, 287).

<sup>7</sup> Irwin, "Intellectual Background," 64.



both try to ‘pour’ knowledge and virtue into the souls of young men, when really it needs to be found within. Therefore both the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* situate philosophy with respect to conservatism and sophistry and the conflict between them. By thus inquiring into the nature of virtue in the context of conservatism and sophistry and against the contention that there is no such thing, the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* are fundamentally addressing the same questions and issues.

What is more conspicuous, however, and more compels concurrent examination is not the similarities of the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*, but rather the differences in spite of these similarities. Although they address the same subject matter, the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* have very different styles. On the one hand, the *Protagoras* is richly dramatic. It vividly describes the scene in Callias’ home and the personalities of those who appear there.<sup>8</sup> Grote goes so far as to claim that

It contains... a great deal in which we hardly recognize, or at least cannot verify, any distinct purpose, either of search or exposition. Much of it seems to be composed with a literary or poetical view, to enhance the charm or interest of the composition.<sup>9</sup>

Although Grote’s reading of the *Protagoras* is uninspired in robbing the dialogue of its philosophical substance,<sup>10</sup> we note that his remarks are only possible in the first place on

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<sup>8</sup> Grote, *Plato*, 259. It is no coincidence that ancient and contemporary commentators on Plato have found the historical Socrates and Protagoras in this dialogue. Guthrie apparently bases much of his work on the historical Protagoras in his *History of Greek Philosophy* on this dialogue. In Aristotle’s account of the Socratic view of *akrasia*, he quotes the *Protagoras*, suggesting that he takes the dialogue to be an accurate representation of the historical Socrates (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.2 1145b23; *Protagoras* 352b5-c2; Kahn *Socratic Dialogue* 86).

<sup>9</sup> Such sentiment has not grown entirely out of style: “If we look to the *Protagoras* for philosophical lessons, it may seem an irritating patchwork of niggling argument, irrelevant digressions, false starts, and downright fallacy. Read as a play in which the most outstanding and individual minds of a brilliant period meet and engage in a battle of wits, it will give a different impression” (Guthrie, vol. IV, 235).

<sup>10</sup> As Kraut remarks, “Plato’s dialogues cannot have been intended merely to dramatize conflict between opposing characters and to give expression to competing philosophical ideas... The dialogue form of his works should not keep us from saying that they are vehicles for the articulation and defense of certain

account of the great literary merits of the dialogue. By contrast the *Meno* is veritably Spartan in detail. Plato gives little to no hint about the setting of the dialogue;<sup>11</sup> the slave enters and exits the conversation without ceremony; Anytus enters the scene abruptly with no explanation and leaves in the same manner. Although the *Meno* is dramatically sound,<sup>12</sup> it does not have the manifold detail of the *Protagoras*.

Besides their differing literary styles, we may also note that these two dialogues use similar arguments, though to apparently different effect and with apparently different conclusions. Most notably, at 319a-320b in the *Protagoras* and at 92e-94e in the *Meno* Socrates cites the failure of Athenian noblemen to teach their sons virtue as proof that virtue cannot be taught. In the *Protagoras* the eponymous sophist apparently overcomes this objection with his Great Speech,<sup>13</sup> but in the *Meno* this seems to be a fatal problem that refutes their earlier arguments, leaving Socrates and Meno to conclude that virtue must come by some kind of divinely dispensed true opinion (100a). The respective conclusions of these two dialogues also differ from one another, principally on account of these differing treatments of conservative education. For while the *Protagoras* tentatively concludes that virtue is knowledge and therefore is a result of learning, the *Meno* seems to suggest that virtue is acquired through divine dispensation, in spite of its extended

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theses and the defeat of certain others” (26). It is not sufficient to treat them solely as representations of historical personages.

<sup>11</sup> Bluck suggests that it takes place in a *gymnasium* (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 120). Guthrie suggests that it takes place in Anytus' home (Guthrie, vol. IV, 237). Both arguments depend upon extremely subtle readings of details. The tenuousness of their arguments is a testimony to the lack of textual evidence. In fact, it seems far more likely that there is no definite setting at all.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Guthrie remarks that despite criticism, “Meno's opening question is dramatically perfect, conveying at once the youthful impetuosity of his character which is further revealed in inimitable touches as the dialogue proceeds” (Guthrie, vol. IV, 42). Gonzalez argues that the lack of context reflects Meno's Gorgian training since “it suggests that Meno's question is not inspired by any practical dilemma but is ‘academic’, that is, ‘sophistic’” (Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 154).

<sup>13</sup> He claims that no one appears to be able to teach virtue because *everyone* is teaching it simultaneously (327a-328a).

treatment of virtue as a kind of knowledge. That such similar dialogues should reach apparently opposing conclusions is conspicuous to say the least and demands our attention. These difficulties will be resolved through close readings of the dialogues, but for now it is enough to say that the simultaneous commonalities and differences between the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* demand that we read them together.

In reading them together, however, we must have an at least provisional sense of how to situate them in relation to one another and within the broader Platonic corpus. To this end, I generally follow Kahn's interpretation of the dialogues. Kahn argues that the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo*, and what he calls the 'threshold dialogues'<sup>14</sup> are all best understood from the perspective of the *Republic*.<sup>15</sup> That is to say, with a handful of exceptions like the *Crito* and the *Ion*, the so-called 'Early Dialogues' are each individual parts of a single, larger project which culminates in the *Republic*.

This interpretation of the overarching project of the Early and Middle dialogues depends upon a few claims which we should here note. In the first place, this framework depends upon the stylometric analysis which has divided the dialogues into three groups which have come to be known as the Early, Middle and Late dialogues. On account of this painstaking analysis, scholars generally agree on this division, the differences between which are usually attributed to some significant event in Plato's life, such as his trip to Sicily.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, this interpretation does not include the Late dialogues. These dialogues form a very distinct group with its own set of difficulties for the reader. Of

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<sup>14</sup> The 'threshold dialogues' are the *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Lysis*, and *Euthydemus*.

<sup>15</sup> Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 50. In the past few decades there has been some criticism of stylometric analysis. For a brief summary of the controversy and the scholar involved, see Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 275 note 2.

course, it would be unwieldy to attempt an adequate justification of this claim here. For now it will have to suffice to say that a variety of stylistic and methodological features unifies these dialogues as a single group that is of its own kind distinct from the Early and Middle works.<sup>17</sup> A thorough analysis of those dialogues presents a separate project.

Thirdly and perhaps most contentiously, this schema suggests that Plato was essentially of one mind throughout his Early and Middle periods.<sup>18</sup> Those who wish to distinguish the two and claim that they contradict one another typically refer to ‘Socratic’ dialogues in contradistinction to later ‘Platonic’ dialogues which represent the “full luxuriance of [Plato’s] mature opinions.”<sup>19</sup> Scholars often distinguish the two by contrasting ‘Socratic’ and ‘Platonic’ conceptions of virtue. In the former, “virtuous activity will result when and only when the agent is possessed of intellectual understanding”, whereas in the latter “the training of the emotional and irrational more or less independently of the intellectual is a necessary precondition to virtue.”<sup>20</sup> The implication is that in the Early dialogues Plato was in full agreement with his teacher Socrates and only later developed his own thought.

Yet as Friedländer and Guthrie explain, there are no ‘Socratic dialogues’ to be distinguished from the ‘purely Platonic’. While the Platonic Socrates grows out the historic Socrates, Plato could not avoid putting something of himself in the character represented in his writing; and if ‘purely Platonic’ means completely purged of Socratic influence, these dialogues simply do not exist, for Plato was never beyond the influence

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<sup>17</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 2 and Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 43-4.

<sup>18</sup> That is not to say that there was no development or change whatsoever. It would be presumptuous to think that Plato’s thoughts did not change at all over the course of many years. But Plato makes no radical break with his early years. By and large he agrees with himself throughout the Early and Middle periods.

<sup>19</sup> Findlay, *Plato*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Penner, “Socrates,” 127.

of his teacher.<sup>21</sup> The ‘developmental’ framework demands we consider where ‘Socrates’ ends and ‘Plato’ begins. The result of this is that whatever we attribute to Socrates we also take away from Plato,<sup>22</sup> again problematically suggesting that these are separate and distinguishable things. Granted, these criticisms do not prove that there is no development in the Early and Middle dialogues; we could still use ‘Socratic’ as a useful shorthand for those dialogues which purportedly express little to no metaphysical insights and which argue that virtue is exclusively an intellectual expertise.

The force of this position then remains that the philosophical investigations in the Early dialogues are fundamentally incompatible with those of the Middle dialogues. This position depends upon two assumptions: (a) that Plato put the whole of his thought into each dialogue at any given time and (b) that what Socrates says is what Plato thinks.<sup>23</sup> Neither of these is necessarily true. Rather, it seems eminently reasonable that each dialogue is only a single moment in Platonic philosophy, dealing with a particular problem, functioning in a particular context, or fulfilling a specific pedagogical function. Accordingly, if we find that we can read the dialogues in such a way that they fit within a single, coherent framework and do not contradict one another, we have no reason to suppose an intellectual break between them; this would be enough to show that they belong to a single project.

As noted above, I largely follow Kahn in this reading of the Early and Middle dialogues as a single project. To that end, I agree with him that there are two major pieces of evidence to support this theory. He writes,

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<sup>21</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 68 and Friedländer, vol. I, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Findlay, *Plato*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, xiv.

On the one hand we find passages in the threshold dialogues [cf. note 14 above] that are enigmatic, puzzling, or somehow problematic, for which the solution or clarification will be provided by a text or doctrine in the middle dialogues. And on the other hand, we find texts in the middle dialogues that deliberately emphasize their continuity with ideas and formulations familiar from the earlier works. An example of the first sort of is the gradual emergence of the terminology for dialectic. An example of the second sort will be the formula for the Forms, presented in the *Phaedo* and repeated in the *Republic*, which unmistakably echoes the *what-is-X?* question of the dialogues of definition.<sup>24</sup>

In the space of this introduction it would be difficult to prove either of these claims in general. With respect to the *Meno* and *Protagoras*, although I have shown that they are closely related, I have not shown that they belong to a single project. Rather, vindicating Kahn's claims with respect to these dialogues in particular amounts to reading them and proving that in fact the conception of virtue which Socrates advocates therein is one and the same. If we can explain the differences and apparent contradictions between these two dialogues while locating them within the same project, then there is no need to resort to a 'developmental' hypothesis. One way of showing that they belong to a single project is to show that they have the same goal and find their completion in the same thing.

Accordingly, in this paper I will argue that the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* do in fact have the same conception of virtue. I have already argued above that despite their differences, these two dialogues have the same task at hand; that is, they are essentially preoccupied with the same question, namely, what is virtue. As we shall see, they provide the same answer in suggesting that virtue is knowledge of the good. We find, however, that both dialogues postpone an account of the good. A fuller treatment of the good is only found later in the *Republic*.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates confronts the eponymous sophist and argues against his moral relativism, asserting instead that virtue is something objective with its own determinate properties apart from its appearance. Socrates contends that virtue is something in itself and that being virtuous fundamentally depends on the state of the soul. For Socrates, the virtuous person is the knowledgeable person and knowledge is primarily of what *is*. In his famous argument of the measuring *technē*, Socrates argues that virtue must be knowledge of the good.<sup>25</sup> Since it is an object of knowledge, this good must be something that *is*. But beyond this, the *Protagoras* offers no substantial explanation of the nature of the good.

In the *Meno*, Socrates discusses the acquisition of virtue with a young Thessalian nobleman, Meno. Socrates' aim in this discussion is to prove that the pursuit of knowledge makes us more virtuous. The dialogue is divided into two parts. In the first part, Socrates does two things: (a) he outlines what the pursuit of knowledge might look like and (b) he shows that Meno is unwilling to pursue knowledge and is as a result vicious. The second part of the *Meno* explicitly connects virtue to knowledge and distinguishes knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) from true opinion (*ὀρθὴ δόξα*). It suggests that virtue is a unique but total form of knowledge, namely, knowledge of the good. The effort to acquire this knowledge is therefore paramount and the pursuit of it makes us more virtuous. Like the *Protagoras*, there is little explanation of the nature of the good.

Since these two dialogues conclude that virtue is knowledge, they also conclude that virtue is acquired through learning and is teachable (*διδακτόν*). This learning,

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<sup>25</sup> As I show in Chapter 2, Socrates does not use this argument in order to identify pleasure and the good. His goal instead is to show the strength of knowledge and to argue that the knowledge which is virtue must be knowledge of some objective good.

however, is radically different from the learning which conservatives and sophists offer. While they want to ‘pour in’ knowledge by means of speeches and forced memorization, Socrates argues that learning is not a passive reception, but a laborious search.<sup>26</sup> Socrates argues for this new conception of learning in the *Meno*’s recollection passage (81a-86c) and in the *Protagoras* by convincing Hippocrates and his other listeners of the need for dialogical inquiry.

As I have noted, the content of this learning remains unknown in the *Meno* and *Protagoras*. An account of the good, however brief, is postponed until the *Republic*. There we find that the Good is the source of all being and knowledge and is that which makes the virtues themselves good at all. It is through knowledge of the Good that philosopher-kings are virtuous. An adequate treatment of the *Republic*, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, I will limit myself to examinations of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. These will be Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. In Chapter 4, my conclusion, I will touch briefly on the Good as it appears in the *Republic* and the way in which knowledge of it is true virtue, but these remarks are intended only to be provisional. They will not present account of the Good adequate to the *Republic*.

The very nature of this thesis therefore necessitates that it be incomplete. For without an adequate account of virtue in the *Republic*, the accounts of the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* themselves remain incomplete. Rather, this paper calls for further work if Plato’s conception of virtue is to be fully understood. If the nature of the good remains unknown, the knowledge that constitutes virtue too remains unknown. Just as the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* are incomplete and in and of themselves demand culmination in the

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<sup>26</sup> Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 169.



*Republic*, this paper requires an additional investigation. Nevertheless, our examinations of the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* do successfully sketch out for us an outline of virtue: they show that whatever the good might be, knowledge of it constitutes virtue.

## CHAPTER 2: MEASURING THE GOOD: VIRTUE IN THE *PROTAGORAS*

The narrative of the *Protagoras* is neatly divided into two sections: Socrates' conversation with Hippocrates and his conversation with Protagoras. In the former, Hippocrates, a young Athenian nobleman, asks Socrates for an introduction to Protagoras so that he can study under him; Socrates tempers this request and warns Hippocrates of the dangers of studying under a sophist. In the latter, Socrates meets with Protagoras on behalf of Hippocrates and tries to determine the nature of his practice. After Protagoras gives a display (ἐπίδειξις) in the form of his so-called 'Great Speech',<sup>27</sup> Socrates proceeds to investigate with the sophist the unity of the virtues. Although there is scarcely mention of Hippocrates in this second part,<sup>28</sup> the whole conversation with Protagoras is in the context of Hippocrates' desire to find a teacher. As Socrates reminds Hippocrates at 313a, at stake is the welfare of his soul. Yet Hippocrates is an everyman representative of the waning influence of Greek conservatism. Therefore although the dialogue is superficially concerned with the welfare of a single man, in fact it addresses the moral crisis that faces Athens as a whole. The import of this contest is therefore universal in scope. Socrates and Protagoras are each trying to lay claim to moral authority in general. In light of this, in this paper I shall argue that in his conversation with Protagoras, Socrates is trying to reveal that the sophists' position is fundamentally problematic and actually demands recourse to Socrates' own moral outlook, that virtue (ἀρετή) is knowledge of what is essentially good.

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<sup>27</sup> The name comes courtesy of Gregory Vlastos, 1956.

<sup>28</sup> Protagoras makes a brief remark to Hippocrates at 318a. After that, he goes unmentioned and unaddressed until 362a when Socrates says that he and Hippocrates leave together (ἀπῆμεν; 362a; Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*, 38).

For the purposes of this examination, the *Protagoras* should be divided into five parts: (1) the early morning conversation with Hippocrates and the opening scene in Callias' home (310b-320b), (2) the Great Speech (320c-328d), (3) an initial inquiry into the unity of the virtues (328d-335c), (4) the interpretation of Simonides' poem (338e-347a), and (5) the final inquiry into the unity of the virtues (348c-362a). Part 1 helps set the terms of the debate and reveals the pedagogical crisis that Athens faces. In the conversation with Hippocrates in particular, Socrates outlines the requirements that any legitimate teacher must meet and hints at certain aspects of his moral system, namely (i) that being is prior to becoming, (ii) that the soul's welfare is paramount, (iii) that the soul is nourished on 'learning' (μαθήματα),<sup>29</sup> and (iv) that as a result constant inquiry is obligatory. In Part 2, Protagoras states his position and tries to justify his claim to teaching virtue. Protagoras does not speak plainly; the implications and underlying premises of his position must be teased out by a careful reading. In Part 3, Socrates simultaneously tries to reveal Protagoras' moral relativism and argue against it by advocating the unity of the virtues. In Part 4, Socrates has the opportunity to lay out monologically a more complete metaphysical and ethical framework that (a) is fundamentally opposed to that of Protagoras and (b) provisionally grounds and elaborates upon what was suggested in Part 1 (i, ii, iii, and iv), which is hitherto only asserted without explicit justification. In Part 5, Socrates proves more conclusively the insufficiency of the Protagorean stance. Socrates is able to show not only that Protagoras' position is untenable, but that it actually demands recourse to the Socratic position if drawn to its full conclusion. Although neither Part 4 nor Part 5 offers a complete account

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<sup>29</sup> I follow Bartlett's lead in thus translating μαθήματα. In order to distinguish it from μάθησις, I will use quotation marks ('learning') to refer to μαθήματα and omit quotation marks (learning) to refer to μάθησις.

of virtue, when we read them together, recognizing that each articulates aspects Socrates' moral system, we find that Socrates is suggesting that virtue is knowledge of what is essentially good.

## PART 1: SETTING THE STAGE

There are two things we ought to note in reading Part 1: (a) the pedagogical and moral crisis that Athens faces and (b) certain suggestions of what Socrates' moral position might be. On the one hand, if we examine who Hippocrates is and the circumstances he faces as well as the state of Callias' house, it becomes clear that Athens is currently uncertain what virtue is or how one might get it. Conservatism is no longer sufficient and sophistry is becoming more popular. On the other hand, in Socrates' cautionary conversation with Hippocrates we find suggestions of a moral system (i, ii, iii, and iv above) of which there will be confirmation later on in the dialogue. The suggestions temper Hippocrates' desire to see Protagoras for the time being and are only later proved.

Let us first consider who Hippocrates is and the circumstances in which we find him. We know very little about Hippocrates. We are told that he is the son of Apollodorus and the brother of Phason, but we have no record of any Phason and Apollodorus is a rather common name,<sup>30</sup> so these do not help identify him.<sup>31</sup> Rather, we

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<sup>30</sup> Nails, *People*, 169. Nails further notes that this Apollodorus is neither the one featured in the *Symposium* (on account of the respective dramatic dates) nor the one mentioned in the *Ion* (because that Apollodorus was not yet a citizen of Athens at the dramatic date of the *Protagoras*) (*Ibid.*, 170).

<sup>31</sup> Nails suggests that Apollodorus is a nephew of Pericles, but this seems dubious: Pericles is an intimate of Protagoras and his two sons Xanthippus and Paralus already study under the sophist (315a); it would be very odd indeed to seek an introduction through Socrates instead of family members who know Protagoras well and are on good terms with him (Nails 169-170).

know only that Hippocrates is an Athenian and that he comes from “a great and prosperous house” (316b). He apparently belongs to the social elite of Athens, for he knows of Protagoras’ arrival,<sup>32</sup> though obviously he is not such a major figure that he is already present in Callias’ house with the others. In sum, he is a young, wealthy Athenian of no discernible historical significance or distinguishing qualities who is in search of an education. For these reasons, I submit that Hippocrates stands as an everyman at a pivotal moment in his life where he is deciding on his final, formative education.

Hippocrates’ status as an everyman is further confirmed by his role later on in the dialogue, or rather, his lack of role. As I mentioned above, Hippocrates effectively leaves the stage after 318a when Protagoras makes a brief remark to him. In effect, he becomes a spectator of the conversation to follow. He witnesses the battle between Socrates and Protagoras in the same way that we do as readers: as (more or less) passive observers. Given that we the readers and Hippocrates are put in the same position it is very easy to identify with him. We should feel that the battle fought is not simply to convince Hippocrates to abandon sophistry, but to convince us as well. Each reader is himself Hippocrates observing this struggle. Hippocrates stands in for all people for whom sophistry is a consideration. He stands for a whole class of people as an everyman.

This everyman finds himself in the midst of a pedagogical crisis. In Athens, conservatism is beginning to lose its authority and is being replaced by sophistry. We recognize this both in the way Hippocrates himself treats the issue and in the state of Callias’ home when we first arrive on scene. When Hippocrates shows up in Socrates’ home, we learn that he has come over “immediately” (εὐθὺς) after learning of the

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<sup>32</sup> Nails, *People*, 169.

sophist's arrival in Athens with pausing for consultation (310c). Socrates notes this explicitly:

You've *communicated neither with your father nor brother* nor any one of us who are your comrades as to whether or not you should turn your soul over to this newly arrived foreigner. Instead, you heard about him last evening, as you say, and have come at dawn, but you make no argument *nor take any advice* as to whether you should turn yourself over to him. (313a; emphasis added)

It would be typical for Hippocrates to talk with family and intimates about other important issues in his life (e.g. medical welfare), but for some reason he does not consult his family on the matter of his education. Whether or not he is aware of it, Hippocrates feels that the decision to pursue sophistic education does not belong to the advice a family can offer. Whereas normally familial counsel would be all-embracing and include all matters within its purview, somehow sophistry escapes this. The family cannot advise someone whether or not to study under the sophists because sophistry is an *alternative* to familial education.<sup>33</sup> With the prospect of sophistry at hand, Hippocrates is forced to make a decision about the future of his education. He has to make a choice between the conservative familial institution and sophistry. As we see from his reluctance and shame at the idea of accepting sophistry outright (312a), this is not a simple or easy choice.

This pedagogical crisis is also evident from the moment Socrates and Hippocrates arrive at Callias' house. We find that the house is divided into three groups, each surrounding a sophist, Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus, each of whom has his own

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<sup>33</sup> Despite certain claims that suggest the contrary (328b), Protagoras himself admits that in a certain sense sophistry and the familial institution are opposed to one another. He notes that sophists are frequently the object of resentment because they often persuade "the best of the young to forsake the company of others—both kin and others, older and younger" (316c). Apparently eminent young Athenians abandon the family as a source of education and self-improvement and instead heed the counsel of sophists.

method of educating his students, each of which qualifies them as ‘wise’.<sup>34</sup> The sophists do not agree on the most effective method for making their students best, a fact readily acknowledged by Protagoras.<sup>35</sup> Neither do their Athenian students, for they have separated into factions. The divisions and evident disagreements within Callias’ house show that Athens as a whole is in the midst of a pedagogical disagreement.<sup>36</sup> Just as Hippocrates is unsure of the best way to pursue self-improvement, Athens itself is at a loss. The young elite feels that it can no longer rely on the familial tradition, but it has not yet settled on a new source for its education.<sup>37</sup>

In his conversations with Hippocrates, it is Socrates’ task to temper the young man’s desire to study under Protagoras. He knows the sophist and the attendant dangers of his teaching<sup>38</sup> and as a result wants to dissuade Hippocrates from adopting him as a teacher. Through a close examination of this conversation we shall see that in dissuading his friend Socrates actually suggests certain aspects of his own moral system, (i) the priority of being over becoming, (ii) the importance of the soul’s welfare, (iii) the nourishment of the soul on ‘learning’, and (iv) and the consequent obligation to inquire.

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<sup>34</sup> Protagoras walks around the portico surrounded by a flock of followers, bewitching them with his voice as if he were Orpheus (315a). He demonstrates his rhetorical power. Hippias the technical authority sits on his throne expatiating on various *technai* and heavenly phenomena (315c). Prodicus teaches his students lexical precision (316a).

<sup>35</sup> 318d and Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Evidently, with the arrival of Socrates a fourth contender enters the arena. Socrates too has a pedagogical program that he wants to advance. And just like each of the sophists, Socrates has his own supporters: Alcibiades sits in Socrates’ corner.

<sup>38</sup> Socrates knows that it is no problem to wait a little while because Protagoras spends his time indoors (311a). He is already familiar with the habits and behaviours of the sophist so that he can predict where he will be. This coupled with Socrates’ apparent indifference to the sophist in spite of his high reputation (he has known of Protagoras’ presence in Athens for a couple of days but has made no effort to go see him and shows little interest; Goldberg, *Commentary*, 74) suggest that Socrates already knows a great deal about Protagoras.

Since we see these elaborated later on in the *Protagoras* in Parts 4 and 5, we note that even at this early stage Socrates is advocating his own moral outlook.

Socrates suggests that being is prior to becoming when he inquires of Hippocrates what he will become through sophistic instruction. In trying to make Hippocrates realize what he is doing by pursuing Protagoras, Socrates asks, “You intend to pay a fee... on the grounds that he *is* what?... And so that you’ll *become* what?” (ὥς τίτι ὄντι;...ὥς τίς γενησόμενος; 311c; emphasis added). Socrates uses this formula nearly verbatim for the technical examples of the physician Hippocrates and the sculptors Polycleitus and Pheidias as well as for Protagoras himself. Each time he emphasizes that what Hippocrates will become thoroughly depends on what his teacher already *is*. In each case the being of the teacher determines what the student will become. The possibility of change depends upon the prior existence of some being. Becoming happens within the limits and framework established by being. Understanding becoming therefore requires that we first understand being. Only when we know what *is* will what *becomes* be intelligible.

Having established with Hippocrates that he seeks to learn from a sophist, Socrates now asks what a sophist is. This amounts to distinguishing the sophistic *technē*. Hippocrates ventures that a sophist is “a knower of wise things” (τὸν τῶν σοφῶν ἐπιστήμονα; 312c). Hippocrates implicitly acknowledges that all craftsmen (δημιουργοί) have knowledge and are distinguished by the object of their knowledge. So for each craftsman there is a unique object of knowledge and for each object of knowledge there is



a distinct craftsman.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, in order to distinguish a *technē* we must identify the *ergon* of which it has knowledge. Since understanding becoming requires understanding being and knowledge is first and foremost of what *is*, the object of the craftsman's knowledge must be something that *is*. Therefore this *ergon* must be something stable and determinate that does not *become*, but *is*. Socrates subtly suggests to Hippocrates that in order for him to understand what a sophist is, he will have to find out what stable *ergon* the sophist knows.

Hippocrates cannot say what this *ergon* is so Socrates chides him for his carelessness. By recklessly seeking out a sophist without knowing what a sophist is, Hippocrates is neglecting what is most important, the welfare of his soul. In admonishing him, Socrates tells Hippocrates that the soul is “that which you believe to be worth more than the body... [and that] on whose usefulness or worthlessness depends whether all your own affairs fare well or badly” (313a). Socrates does not here argue for the supreme worth of the soul so much as he asserts it as a fact and claims that Hippocrates too must believe it. Nowhere previous in this conversation has either Hippocrates or Socrates said anything about the soul, its worth or the dependency of all affairs on its welfare. Neither does Socrates describe what the soul's well-being might be. He only asserts that it is most important. Proper justification of this claim should require an elaborate framework in which to situate it, but we do not find this here. This appears only in Parts 4 and 5.

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<sup>39</sup> We find this same principle articulated explicitly in the *Ion*. There Socrates and Ion agree that “one art [is] different from another when one is a knowledge of one kind of thing, and another a knowledge of another kind” (*Ion* 537d). Socrates further specifies that “by the same art we must know the same thing and by different art things that are not the same” (*Ion*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb, 538a). Kahn claims that this principle is so clearly and definitely established in the *Ion* that it is simply taken for granted in other dialogues like the *Gorgias* or the *Charmides* (Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 108). He points to *Gorgias* 462b-465a and *Charmides* 171a specifically. As we can see this principle is clearly reflected here in the *Protagoras*.

Rather, all we learn is that soul is nourished on ‘learning’ and that for this reason we must be wary of sophists (313c).

The nourishment of souls on ‘learning’ and the suspect teaching of sophists mean that we are obligated to be in a state of constant inquiry. Most vendors are indifferent to or ignorant of the quality of their products and praise them all indiscriminately; their word cannot be trusted. Similarly, it seems that a sophist might not speak honestly about the ‘learning’ that he sells. Unlike other products, however, ‘learning’ cannot be taken away for examination; one cannot help but take it in immediately and thereby be benefitted or ruined.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the only safe way to purchase ‘learning’ from Protagoras or any other sophist is “if you happen to be a knower of what among these things [pertaining to the soul] is useful and worthless” (313e). One must be a ‘soul-doctor’ so to speak. That is to say, unless you are able to critically evaluate the learning as it is given to you, so that you may either accept or reject it as it comes, learning presents the greatest of dangers. While learning, the student must be in a constant state of critical evaluation of both the teacher’s soul and his own. He must recognize what will benefit his own soul and see if this is what inhabits and characterizes the teacher’s soul i.e. whether or not the teacher has true and good μαθήματα to offer.<sup>41</sup> Because there is no distinction between the acquisition and consumption of ‘learning’, all consumption must be evaluative. Thus Socrates impresses upon Hippocrates the need for constant scrutiny.

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<sup>40</sup> Learning for Socrates is obviously not simply an act of memorization of a few stock lines or principles. Rather it is a process of coming to understand. Consequently, the student must be personally and actively involved in the learning process; it is not enough to be a passive recipient of some parcel of information. For that reason, the student cannot keep ‘learning’ at a distance while he evaluates it. When a student learns, the mind must actively reckon with what is being taught. Anything genuinely learned is ‘digested’ and made a part of the student’s soul.

<sup>41</sup> The knowledge the teacher possesses determines the state of his soul. For this reason, we can ask what *technē* he possesses when we want to know what he *is* (cf. 311c ff.). For the practical purposes of this issue, the teacher’s soul and his μαθήματα are functionally indistinguishable.

Whenever we face the prospect of learning anything, we must be inquiring and evaluating to determine if it is sound.<sup>42</sup>

In light of what we have found out about Socrates' moral position (i, ii, iii, and iv), Socrates' initial objections to Protagoras in Callias' house may seem counter-intuitive. They seem to be at odds with what Socrates previously said to Hippocrates. In fact, they are. This is because they do not represent Socrates' own views but rather a conservative outlook against which Socrates wishes to test Protagoras. When Protagoras claims to teach good counsel (εὐβουλία), what Socrates glosses as “the political art” (πολιτικὴν τέχνην; 319a) and is later called “virtue”, Socrates objects that he had long thought that this is not teachable. Yet at a certain level his conversation with Hippocrates implied that virtue *is* teachable. The virtue Protagoras claims to teach allows one to manage profitably one's affairs (318e). Socrates earlier claimed that the success of one's affairs depends upon the well-being of the soul (313a) and that a soul-doctor would know what benefits or harms a soul (313e). Therefore if someone can learn what benefits a soul, they are also indirectly learning how to cultivate the success of their worldly affairs. On the grounds that Socrates himself has suggested, there is good reason to suspect that virtue is teachable.

The contradiction is resolved when we recognize that Socrates' objections are not really his own. Socrates' objections fall into two parts. First he argues that Athenian political practice suggests virtue is not teachable because Athenians discriminate between craftsmen and laypeople in teachable matters but do not do so for matters “pertaining to

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<sup>42</sup> The need for constant scrutiny and evaluation is reflected in the conversation Socrates and Hippocrates have on the way to Callias' house. They arrive before their discussion is complete, so they continue to talk until it is finished (314c). The discussion must be internally determined and reach its own resolution. Only once it is complete can Hippocrates and Socrates pause.

the city's management" (περὶ τῆς πόλεως διοικησέως; 319d). Second, he notes that the most eminent Athenians, while having their sons educated in all the usual *technai*, prove unable to teach them this particular, all important skill (320b). Socrates' personal distance from these objections is reflected in the almost casual way in which he presents his evidence; it is gathered from discrete examples that Socrates observed on occasion,<sup>43</sup> which lend it at most a good plausibility but by no means a necessary conclusion. More than that, however, these objections are a traditional formulation of the problem. Hubbard and Karnofsky cite the *Dissoi Logoi* which calls such objections quite typical and rather tired.<sup>44</sup> Jaeger notes that these objections are essentially a philosophical restatement of aristocratic beliefs represented by Pindar. These beliefs had been ignored rather than contradicted by sophistic teaching.<sup>45</sup> In raising these objections, Socrates is testing Protagoras and seeing how he treats the Athenian conservative institution. Rather than raising his own personal objections, Socrates is asking Protagoras to situate himself in relation to the moral crisis that Athens faces. Socrates is not actually contradicting himself so much as he is trying to frame the problem.

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<sup>43</sup> Bodin, *Lire*, 12. Bodin remarks: "La thèse générale, négative, une fois établie puis confirmée par des exemples, n'est donnée que comme une somme de constatations, faites uniquement à Athènes. 'Je constate, j'observe' (ὁρῶ 319b4) trouve son écho naturel à la conclusion : 'quand je jette les yeux sur ces faits' (εἰς ταῦτα ἀποβλέπων 320b3)" (Bodin 13-14).

<sup>44</sup> Hubbard and Karnofsky, *Plato's Protagoras*, 86. They quote the *Dissoi Logoi*: "There is a certain proposition, which is neither true nor original, to the effect that wisdom and excellence can neither be taught nor learned. Those who advance this proposition adduce the following arguments: that if you pass a thing on to somebody else, you could not retain it yourself, since it is a single thing; secondly, that if it could be taught there would be recognized teachers of it, as is the case with poetry; thirdly, that the wise men in Greece would have taught their own craft to their own families, fourthly, that some have already attended sophists to no avail; fifthly, that many have distinguished themselves without attending sophists" (Diels, *Older Sophists*, 90.6.1-6). Although the *Dissoi Logoi* is dated only as post-Peloponnesian War (Diels, *Older Sophists*, 279), the assertion that these criticisms are unoriginal and the resemblance of some to those found in Platonic dialogues are enough to suggest that Socrates' objections here are not entirely his own.

<sup>45</sup> Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 113.

Thus we see in Part 1 the pedagogical and moral crisis that Athens faces and the way in which Socrates anticipates a moral position upon which we shall see he elaborates only later in Parts 4 and 5. Because Hippocrates is an everyman, we see in him the decision that Athens as a whole must make by choosing a kind of education to foster virtue. Athens is no longer certain about what virtue is or the best way to acquire it. When he meets Protagoras, Socrates frames the question of Protagoras' profession in terms of the moral crisis that Athens faces by listing some conservative objections to Protagoras' claims. Because these objections are not genuinely his own, Socrates does not contradict his earlier suggestions (i) that being is prior to becoming, (ii) that the welfare of one's affairs depends upon the state of the soul, (iii) that the soul is nourished on 'learning', and (iv) that as a result of this one must be in a state of constant inquiry. Rather, the framing allows Socrates to better examine Protagoras and make a rebuttal in which he proves his own moral outlook.

## PART 2: THE GREAT SPEECH

In response to Socrates' challenge to prove that virtue is indeed teachable, Protagoras presents to his illustrious audience the Great Speech. Protagoras divides his speech into two major parts. He first tells a myth with a brief explanation (320c-324d) and then he gives a *logos* (324e-328c). Protagoras' ostensible purpose is to show that virtue, or the political *technē*, is common to all (thus legitimating democratic practices) and yet is still taught; in other words, that it is neither by nature nor like other *technai*.<sup>46</sup> In my examination of the Great Speech in this section, it is my intention to outline

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<sup>46</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 65.

Protagoras' position as it appears in his speech and to draw out some of its implications. We shall see that although the speech is quite magnificent, it displays a remarkable indifference to the actual content of virtue. In fact, Protagoras does not believe that virtue is good in itself, but is rather a means to an end, namely survival. It consists in socially appropriate behaviour; the psychological state of the agent is inconsequential. That is to say, virtue consists in actions and is defined not by someone's inner state, but their external appearance. The result of this is that citizens are required not *to be* virtuous, but *to appear* virtuous. This reflects Protagoras' ontological and moral relativism typified by his famous dictum, "Man is the measure of all things."<sup>47</sup> Once Protagoras has outlined his position, Socrates' task will be to prove more conclusively that the implications drawn from the speech are undesirable and are grounds for rejecting Protagoras. That will be the project of Parts 3, 4, and 5.

Let us begin by recalling Protagoras' anthropogenic myth: when all the mortal creatures were being created, Prometheus and Epimetheus were responsible for equipping them. Epimetheus distributed among the various animals their powers (*δυνάμεις*) like strength, speed, or claws to ensure their survival against the elements and each other. He forgot, however, to equip mankind. The nature of mankind thus fixed, Prometheus had to steal *technē* and fire and give them to humans so that they would not perish. Yet this was not sufficient to fight successfully against animals, so they tried to form cities but were unable because they lacked the political *technē*. Zeus sent this down calling it "shame and

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<sup>47</sup> "As Protagoras meant when he said that of all things the measure is man, that as things appear to me, then, so they actually are for me, and as they appear for you, so they actually are for you" (Plato, "Cratylus," 385e ff. in Diels, *Older Sophists*, 10). Guthrie remarks, "All the direct sources agree on the general meaning of Protagoras' saying, namely that what appears to each individual is the only reality and therefore the real worlds differ for each" (Guthrie, vol. III, 171). As we shall see, this also extends to the political level: what appears to the city to be just *is* just. The city is morally determinative.

justice” (αἰδῶ τε καὶ δίκην; 322c). He instructed Hermes to distribute them not as the other *technai* (i.e. to only a few each), but to everyone. Those who do not practice them are to be killed.<sup>48</sup>

As it is presented, the emergence of the virtues suggests that they are resolutely practical in nature. When Prometheus provides the *technai*, he does so to make up for our natural deficiency, to replace the powers that Epimetheus forgot to give us. Yet the *technai* alone are inadequate for our survival so Zeus also provides for us the political *technē*, for which animals in their self-sufficiency have no need. In other words, the various *technai* and the political *technē* in combination are functionally equal to the natural powers provided to animals. This means that we have the political *technē*, i.e. virtue, for the sake of survival. When Protagoras speaks of the impetus for this gift, he speaks of it only in terms of survival and perishing. Zeus fears not that we might live poorly or viciously, but “that our race might perish altogether” (322c). Virtue is presented as a system by which we can manage to live together without killing each other. There is no suggestion whatsoever in the myth that virtues are intrinsically good or even anything more than pragmatic. If virtues are good in their own right, this is obviously not Protagoras’ concern. By his description, we do not have a moral, but a practical obligation to possess justice.

In fact, the very way in which Protagoras tries to show that virtue is universal betrays his essentially pragmatic understanding of virtue. Protagoras argues that in order

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<sup>48</sup> Needless to say this is all allegorical and in no sense need we believe that Protagoras believes in the gods (Friedländer, vol. I, 176; Guthrie, vol. IV, 64; Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*, 13). Recall the famous opening line of Protagoras’ treatise *On the Gods*: “Concerning the gods, I cannot know that they exist or that they do not exist; for there is much to prevent one’s knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man’s life” (Diogenes Laertius, in Diels, *Older Sophists*, 4).

to survive we must all live in cities (322b) and that in order to live in cities we need virtue (322c). In other words, virtue is a *social* phenomenon. We are not obligated to practice virtue insofar as we are individual human beings but rather insofar as we are members of a community. A sufficiently self-reliant person would theoretically have no need of virtue. Virtue is fundamentally a matter of how we behave with one another when we are living in community. Since virtue is behavioural, it consists in actions. The state of the soul underlying these actions is immaterial as long as it produces the right actions. We need not concern ourselves with what psychological conditions produce someone's virtuous actions provided that they achieve the desired end, that is, socially acceptable behaviour. What matters is not someone's internal state, but what is externally manifested. Therefore we are concerned not with what the soul *is*, but how it makes its outward appearance through action. Since each person is not personally, but *socially* obligated to be virtuous, as long as one appears virtuous to the community that will be enough. If the community judges that you are virtuous—that is, that you are acting virtuously—you will be able to survive in the city and therefore have no need of actual, psychological virtue.<sup>49</sup> Therefore we see that in Protagoras' myth he is very subtly suggesting that a disingenuous appearance of virtue is acceptable or even preferable because it still 'seems right' to the community.

This is made particularly clear in Protagoras' explanation of his myth. Protagoras tries to explain the necessary universality of virtue by contrasting justice with flute-playing. While with flute-playing those who claim to possess the *technē* but do not are ridiculed and admonished, people are universally chastised if they admit injustice, *even if*

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<sup>49</sup> "This leaves open the possibility that, provided one is sufficiently adept at manipulating appearances, one need not at all be concerned with justice itself" (Goldberg, *Commentary*, 46).



*they are known to be unjust.* Everyone agrees “that all must say they are just, whether they are or not, and that anyone who doesn’t pretend to possess justice is mad” (323b). While Protagoras claims this is evidence of the universal obligation to possess justice, we recognize that in practice this only obligates one to make a pretense of justice. Protagoras’ explanation of the universal possession of justice actually argues not that everyone must possess justice but that everyone must *appear* just. The city, after all, is not concerned with people’s souls but their actions. As long as citizens behave virtuously—or in such a way that they appear virtuous and the city believes them to be virtuous—the psychological apparatus which produces these actions and appearances is of no consequence.

Ironically, the sole demand to appear just undercuts itself by amounting to a demand to conceal one’s vice. This is acknowledged by the behaviour of one’s friends and associates. When someone reveals their injustice to their intimates, the outrage and surprise is not at the possession of injustice itself, but at the admission of it (323b). Goldberg comments that by noting this, “Protagoras is coolly contending that, when men are unjust, unless they are mad, both they and their friendly associates will conceal their injustice.”<sup>50</sup> Because the friends do not try and dissuade the unjust person from being unjust but rather from revealing their injustice and *appearing unjust*, the implication is that injustice is not seen as itself harmful or bad to its possessor. Injustice is undesirable because of the punishments the city will exact upon the criminal. The trick is not to avoid committing injustice, but to avoid getting caught. Since the demand to behave justly amounts to a demand to appear just, the city is actually demanding not that one avoid

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<sup>50</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 46.

injustice, but that one conceal it. Therefore, while pretending to claim that all are obligated to possess justice and virtue, Protagoras is actually suggesting to his more attentive listeners that those who are clever enough to go undetected by the city have license to act with impunity. Exceptionally clever men can get away with murder.

In the second half of Protagoras' speech, his *logos*, we find the same emphasis on actions and appearances and indifference to the state of the soul. Protagoras tries to explain the apparent failure of fathers to impart virtue to their sons by outlining the Athenian educational regime. He claims that no one appears to teach virtue because *everyone* is a craftsman of virtue and all teach virtue constantly. By claiming that everyone is a craftsman and that virtue is a *technē*, Protagoras is suggesting that virtue is a property of the soul. Yet this is counter to Protagoras' own account of this education. He claims that Athenian education consists in beatings, exhortation to particular behaviour, and forced memorization and imitation (325d-326b). It is highly dubious that such an education would produce an expert on the level of a craftsman. More probably this program would produce ignorant imitation and good habits. It seems quite unlikely that students of this program would have the explanatory ability that distinguishes *technē*; they would not be able to explain the virtue they supposedly possess and therefore would not qualify as genuine craftsmen.<sup>51</sup> It is not immediately clear how it is that beatings and

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<sup>51</sup> Protagoras himself acknowledges that *technē* is productive of speech. In his myth, the pre-political people "formulated speech and names, by means of art" (322a). Further, we may recall that Socrates and Hippocrates agreed that anyone with *technē* is a clever speaker about what he knows (312d-e). It is precisely the fact that *technē* is productive of speech that justifies Athenians allowing anyone at all to speak in the assembly.

imitation alone would make citizens capable of giving a *logos* of the virtue of which they are purportedly masters.<sup>52</sup>

Instead of producing knowledge in the soul, this education tries to ensure that people perform the right actions. An education that consists in beatings and orders does not tell its students *why* something is obligatory, but only *that* it is obligatory. Parents and teachers tell young children that particular things are just or unjust and pious or impious. From this students acquire lists of virtuous and unvirtuous actions. This education amounts to the commands “Do these things! Don’t do those!” (325d), that is, orders to follow discrete actions. For parents and teachers do not look to the soul but to these actions—they are only concerned whether or not the student obeys (πειθεται; 325d). Whether the students agree because they see the merit in these actions or they acquiesce out of fear of further beatings is a moot point. As long as the parents see correct behaviour in their child, they be will satisfied and pay no mind to the state of his soul.

Yet in addition to that, we are not even sure in what actions virtue consists because the content of the education (and thus the content of virtue) remains unspecified. Neither in his myth nor in his description of Athenian education does Protagoras make clear what virtue itself actually is. Although the myth makes mention of *technē* and wisdom in vague ways, not once does it use the word ‘virtue’ (ἀρετή). Nor does it discuss the virtues it does mention; we are never clear on the specific functions of shame<sup>53</sup> and

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<sup>52</sup> It is also confusing that the Athenian population, supposedly all δημιουργοί, should disagree about whether or not what they do is a *technē* at all (cf. *Meno*, 96a). Surely someone in possession of a *technē* would be aware of his own expertise. We might also wonder why it is that Protagoras’ teaching style differs so much from that of the other ‘experts’. While they beat their ‘students’, he lectures to them. Despite Protagoras’ protestations to the contrary, the two styles of education seem to have nothing in common.

<sup>53</sup> It is a minor point, but one still worth noting: ‘shame’ (αἰδώς) and ‘moderation’ (σωφροσύνη) are used without apparent difference in meaning (*Protagoras*, 323a; Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 188; Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle* 9).

justice.<sup>54</sup> In what little clues he does give in the myth, Protagoras implicitly speaks of the virtues as a unity; shame and justice go undifferentiated.<sup>55</sup> All we know of them is that they are constituent elements of virtue. Protagoras is no clearer in his *logos*. Although he tries to justify the teachability of virtue, “what virtue is, Protagoras neither defines nor analyzes, nor submits to debate. He manifests no consciousness of the necessity of analysis: he accepts the ground already prepared for him by King Nomos.”<sup>56</sup> He leaves the listener to supply his own content to virtue based on his prejudices or the educational regime in which he grew up.<sup>57</sup> Although Protagoras is decidedly vivid and detailed in depicting the continuous course of education in Athens, he never actually addresses the substance of that education.<sup>58</sup> We know that parents and nurses tell their children, “Do these things! Don’t do those!” but we don’t know what those things are.

It would seem that Protagoras is more or less indifferent to the content of virtue. The only thing that really matters is that virtue must allow for the continued existence of the city and thereby ensure the survival of the species. It is not important what the specific features of justice or moderation are, so long as they meet this broad goal of sustained survival. So long as a city is in agreement about which actions are just and which are unjust, that will suffice. The content of this agreement is largely inconsequential. Accordingly, at the political level—the only level at which morality is

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<sup>54</sup> Bodin, *Lire*, 30. “Pas une fois Protagoras n’y emploie le mot ἀρετή. Il ne parle que de σοφία et de τέχνη, opposant, par exemple, τὴν περὶ τοῦ βίου σοφίαν et τὴν πολιτικὴν (321d), ἢ δημιουργικὴ τέχνη et πολιτικὴν τέχνην (322b) Ce que sont Αἰδώς et Δίκη, nous ne le savons pas” (*Ibid.*, 30).

<sup>55</sup> Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Grote, *Plato*, 300.

<sup>57</sup> This would make Protagoras’ teaching more amenable to conservative Athenians and young men like Hippocrates. At first glance, it would appear that Protagoras agrees with them entirely about what justice, piety and the rest of the virtues are. As we know, however, it is not that Protagoras agrees with Athenians, but that he agrees with *everyone*, for they are all right in their own respective cities.

<sup>58</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 27.

relevant for Protagoras—the collective opinion of the city determines what is just in that particular city. In an important way, as Socrates on another occasion makes the sophist say, “whatever seems right and honourable to a state is really right and honourable to it, so long as it believes it to be so.”<sup>59</sup> By evading the question of what each virtue is or does, Protagoras tacitly suggests that this question is unimportant; rather, he puts forward as an option moral relativism. Just as ‘man is the measure of all things’, because virtue is essentially a social phenomenon and depends exclusively on the city’s collective agreement, the city is the measure of all things moral. Practicing “good counsel concerning one’s own affairs” (318e) therefore becomes a matter not of some psychological state but of correct behaviour or the semblance of correct behaviour. Protagoras’ indifference to the content of virtue should make us wary.

Yet in addition to this troublesome indifference, we should note that Protagoras’ exoteric political theory is itself problematic. In his explanation of the Athenian educational program, Protagoras claims that because everyone is constantly teaching virtue, variations in ability depend much more on one’s natural capacity than on the skill of a parent (327c).<sup>60</sup> Such an admission—that some have a better nature for virtue than others—is an open declaration that some are more skilled at politics than others.<sup>61</sup> If, like

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<sup>59</sup> *Theaetetus*, trans. H.N. Fowler, 167c.

<sup>60</sup> Our natures, our given, natural capacities, do not change once established, either by *technē* (political or otherwise) or by anything else. They are and remain fixed always. By the time Prometheus arrives to inspect his brother’s work, “the allotted day was already at hand” (321c) and he can do nothing but add *technai* that change the way we use our pre-established natures (Segvic, *From Protagoras to Aristotle*, 8). Likewise is Zeus unable to correct this titanic oversight: “Quand [Zeus] intervient, l’homme a déjà vu le jour, il s’est déjà essayé à vivre. A sa nature définitivement fixée, Zeus lui-même ne saurait rien changer : elle est ce qu’elle est, et, telle qu’elle est, elle doit rester” (Bodin, *Lire*, 27-8). Protagoras has suggested in his myth that we only employ both the usual *technai* and the political *technē* within the limits of our natural capacities.

<sup>61</sup> This produces another problem: if the single greatest determining factor is one’s natural capacity, the unjust should be pitied, not admonished as they are (Goldberg, *Commentary*, 44). Although education

flute-playing, “this single capacity [for political virtue] produces in reality such a wide range of endowment, it is hard to see why all men should be allowed to speak in the assembly.”<sup>62</sup> The assembly prefers shipwrights with more skill to those with less, so by the same logic they should not admit just anyone to speak on the administration of the city, but only those with the most skill. By Protagoras’ logic, it should not be the city at large that rules, but the few who are particularly skilled at politics. Instead of advocating a system that justifies democracy, Protagoras is subtly arguing for the rule of a small elite.

We have seen that Protagoras is indifferent to the content of virtue and has suggested that we have practical and not personal obligations to be virtuous; this should make us wary. For this means that those in power will be able to rule capriciously, reshaping ‘virtue’ to fit their needs and desires. There is no standard to which they must conform. It seems altogether likely that when Protagoras claims he is someone “who differs just a little in bringing about an advance toward virtue” (328b), he really means that he can help catapult his clientele into this upper echelon of power. This is permissible on account of his moral relativism, for virtue is not anything in itself but only a matter of collective agreement. As long as someone is able to maintain the right appearances, they may act as they please. Of course Protagoras cannot declare any of this outright, for such a declaration would be anathema to the city. Superficially, he still claims that the traditional virtues are essentially obligatory. Accordingly, in rebutting Protagoras it will be Socrates’ task to draw out more fully the implications of the Great

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(including some punishment) would still be necessary, the outrage and resentment they suffer would be wildly excessive.

<sup>62</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 44.

Speech. In particular, Socrates will try to make explicit Protagoras' moral relativism and then subsequently show that this is untenable. Against this relativism he will prove that virtue is knowledge of what is objectively and essentially good.

### PART 3: AN INITIAL INQUIRY INTO THE Unity OF THE VIRTUES

Socrates' initial examination of Protagoras consists of three distinct arguments in which Protagoras tries to defend the multiplicity of the virtues and Socrates argues for their unity. Socrates' aim in this section is to bring out more clearly the radical stance Protagoras holds, in particular the total disunity of the good. Protagoras' claim for the multiplicity of the goods is crucially determined by his relativism, which we have seen is the crucial feature of his moral outlook. Because the just consists of nothing but what *appears* just, there need be no essential connection between justice and any of the other virtues; there are no essences to connect them. Consequently, for Protagoras the just things are many. Therefore, in trying to argue that there *must* be a connection between the particular virtues, Socrates is arguing for real, definite properties of the virtues distinct from the opinions held of them. By forcing Protagoras to declare the multiplicity of the good, Socrates also suggests that Protagoras' claims to teaching virtue are disingenuous and just a smokescreen. Thus Socrates prepares the way to assert and then subsequently prove his own claims about virtue.

Socrates begins by telling Protagoras that although his speech has been very good,<sup>63</sup> there is one small issue he would like to resolve (328e). Socrates wants

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<sup>63</sup> Let us remind ourselves that this is ironic; Socrates is not convinced as he outwardly claims to be. Despite his initial praise for the speech, he reminds us that such a speech is really just typical fare for any competent orator : “[One] would perhaps hear speeches of just this sort from Pericles or anyone else among

Protagoras to explain the relationship the particular virtues have to one another and to virtue as a whole. In so inquiring, Socrates asks several increasingly specific questions in order to clarify precisely Protagoras' position. The precision and specificity that Socrates demands highlights the importance of this issue despite Socrates' insistence that the matter is small.<sup>64</sup>

Socrates asks Protagoras about the relationship that the various virtues have to one another. He wants to know if they are different names for the same thing or if they really are different things; if the latter, what is their relationship to one another and to the whole of virtue? After a series of questions, Protagoras claims that the virtues are all different things, each with its own power (*δύναμις*), none of which necessarily entails possession of the others—for “many are courageous but unjust, and there are those who are just, in turn, but not wise” (329e).<sup>65</sup> Socrates summarizes Protagoras' position: “None of the other parts of virtue, then, is such as (*οἷον*) knowledge; nor such as justice; nor such as courage; nor such as moderation; nor such as piety” (330b). Protagoras agrees to this summary; this is how he understands the virtues and their relations to one another.

Socrates first tries to demonstrate the similarity of justice and piety. His argument in brief is this: justice is to be such as (*οἷον*) the just and piety is to be such as the pious; if all the virtues are totally unlike each other, then justice cannot be such as the pious and piety cannot be such as the just; therefore the just is impious and the pious unjust.

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those competent (*ικανῶν*) at speaking” (329a). In itself it is neither wholly convincing nor reflective of knowledge. What would be more conclusive, Socrates suggests, is if Protagoras would be able to answer questions and not merely go off like struck bronze.

<sup>64</sup> “Recalling Socrates' insistence upon the littleness of the impediment, we might have expected one or maybe two questions; instead we get a series. It seems, however, that one question lies behind this series: what is virtue? For, although Protagoras has argued at length that virtue is teachable, he has failed to say exactly what virtue is” (Goldberg, *Commentary*, 97).

<sup>65</sup> For Protagoras this means only that they *appear* just/unjust, wise/unwise etc.



Although it may seem problematic, Socrates has good grounds to equate the not-just with the unjust. Stokes comments,

Protagoras would have those killed who are unable to partake of justice and moderation (322d). Simply because they lack, and are unable to acquire, these good qualities, he describes them as a ‘disease of the city’. It is hard to think of these exceptional people as other than actually unjust [as opposed to merely not-just].<sup>66</sup>

At least by Protagoras’ own description in his myth, ‘not-just’ is functionally equivalent to ‘unjust’. If the pious lacks justice, we can reasonably say that it is ‘unjust’.

Protagoras tries to weasel his way out of this difficulty by denying that “it is not so simple as for [him] to concede that justice is pious and piety just” (331d). Although he could plausibly refine his earlier position to distinguish moral difference from moral opposition, he declines to go into detail; he is willing to let justice be pious and vice versa. Socrates demands clarity and will not allow such soft and vague arguments. Protagoras then concedes that “justice does resemble (προσέοικέ) piety in some way” (331d), but in doing so he strips resemblance of all significance: he says that all things are similar to one another in a sense, even complete opposites. If all things resemble all other things, ‘resemblance’ is no longer a distinguishing quality and cannot meaningfully describe the relationship between two things. The ‘resemblance’ between justice and piety means nothing more than that between justice and injustice or impiety. Socrates tries to argue for the unity of justice and piety by showing the absurdity of saying that justice is impious, but Protagoras obscures the relationship between these virtues and vices by reducing it to a homogenizing ‘resemblance’.

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<sup>66</sup> Stokes, *Socratic Conversation*, 283.

In order to overcome Protagoras' objection, Socrates has to distinguish more clearly the kind of relationship between the virtues and their opposites. When he objects to Socrates' argument, Protagoras criticizes Socrates' semantic obscurity while willfully adopting it in allowing justice and piety to be identified. He uses this tactic to adopt a conceptual fog that makes the distinction between justice and piety hazy at best. He prevents real examination of the virtues and thereby is able to maintain their separability and his credibility. In response to this, Socrates' task is to clarify how the virtues and vices relate to one another. He has to distinguish difference and opposition and make use of this distinction.

Socrates takes up this task trying to tease out the relationship between moderation (σωφροσύνη) and wisdom. To succeed, however, he will need to use a more complex argumentative style; lest he run aground on some sophistic verbal evasion, he takes a more indirect approach.<sup>67</sup> He sets up all his pieces and only afterwards assembles them. He argues: wisdom is the opposite of foolishness; acting correctly is done with moderation; acting foolishly is not done with moderation, but with foolishness; and for each thing there is only one opposite (332a-c). Only once he has gotten agreement to all this does he put it all together to show that wisdom and moderation are both opposite to foolishness when each thing should only have one opposite (332d-333b). At each stage of the argument Protagoras agrees to the precisely defined relationships between concepts. No longer can he blur the distinction between opposition and identity.

What is more, this argument has begun to invade Protagoras' territory by examining virtuous actions. In Protagoras' moral outlook, virtue only consists in correct

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<sup>67</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 117.

behaviour. Therein lies the multiplicity of the virtues; each particular instantiation of virtue is a single, isolated action which bears no essential relation to any others. Socrates, however, has argued that virtuous actions are performed through the virtues. Any moderate action is done through moderation (332b). What is important is not simply that Protagoras acknowledges that there are such things as wisdom and moderation and that they are conceptually distinct from actions—but that actions are fundamentally related to underlying concepts. It is this relationship that points toward the unity of the virtues. Recognition that all moderate appearances are only moderate through their relation to moderation itself unifies these appearances and implies a way in which all the virtues may be unified, that is, that each of the particular virtues is an appearance of virtue itself. Insofar as moderation or any of the other virtues is a virtue at all, it is so because it is a particular appearance of virtue itself.<sup>68</sup> So insofar as moderation, for example, has this determinate and necessary property of being a virtue, it is so only on account of virtue itself. Just as the moderate actions are all one while retaining their multiplicity, it seems that the virtues too are all in a sense one while remaining in another sense many. In effect, if we admit that essences underlie particular actions, at some level we admit the unity of the virtues.

Before Protagoras can object to the trap in which he is caught, Socrates moves on to the third movement of his overall argument. He now wants to bring together justice and moderation. He asks Protagoras, “Is it your opinion that some unjust person is moderate, because he commits injustice” (333c)? Protagoras tells Socrates that he would be ashamed to admit this, but many people assert it. This is tantamount to an evasion; his

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<sup>68</sup> We shall find later on in the *Protagoras* that virtue is knowledge, the implication being that the particular virtues are particular cases of knowledge e.g. courage is knowledge of what is to be feared.

potential shame is not an affirmation or denial of the issue at hand. ‘Moderation’, we learn, here means ‘faring well’ (333d). If we recall that in Protagoras’ speech the sufficiently prudent man will only conceal his injustice but not curb it, we suspect that Protagoras would in fact agree that one ‘fares well’ through injustice. Yet since each is obligated to appear just, Protagoras cannot admit outright that injustice is profitable.<sup>69</sup> By allowing him to answer on behalf of the hoi polloi instead of for himself, Socrates gives Protagoras a space in which he can maintain the separability of the virtues while superficially distancing himself from its moral implications. Socrates is able to engage Protagoras’ actual opinions by provisionally attributing them to the many.<sup>70</sup>

Up to the point where it is interrupted, the argument is this: being moderate is being sensible and deliberating well; if someone deliberates well in being unjust, then they fare well. Socrates then tries to identify the good and the advantageous, but Protagoras is “riled up for a fight” (333e) and will not let Socrates proceed. It is unclear exactly how Socrates would proceed to complete the argument.<sup>71</sup> In any case, Protagoras proceeds to give a sophistical stump speech on the multiplicity and diversity of the good, effectively preventing any further discussion (334a-c). More clearly than ever, Protagoras argues in favour of difference and multiplicity, while Socrates has been arguing for sameness and unity.<sup>72</sup>

This is precisely what Socrates was aiming for. The diversity of the virtues implicit in his Great Speech is now given explicit justification: the virtues are many

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<sup>69</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 125.

<sup>70</sup> It would be unclear why Protagoras later becomes so agitated while merely arguing on behalf of the hoi polloi if he indeed does not share their opinions. His vigorous reply to Socrates is evidence that he is personally invested in the position he now defends (Stokes, *Socratic Conversations*, 307).

<sup>71</sup> Perhaps he would argue that justice is good and therefore beneficial. Consequently all just actions would be beneficial. If they are all beneficial, then faring well means doing just things etc.

<sup>72</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 130.

because the good is many. There is no such thing as a single, essential good; rather, the good is circumstantial and multifarious. There is no essential connection between particular instances of the good. Each is an isolated and individual event. The good is so complicated and varied that it does not even exist as a single thing for a single person (334c). Given the radical multiplicity of the good, it is hard to see how virtue could retain any unity unto itself whatsoever. No particular good has anything to do with any other good, so no good act has anything to do with any other good act. That is, no instance of a particular virtue has anything to do with any other instance of that same virtue. Because of the radical gulf between instances of the good, no moderate act has anything to do with any other moderate act, so moderation itself becomes multifarious. Accordingly, the virtues are no longer five, but infinite. The good becomes infinite because it is never ‘good in itself’ but always ‘good for something’; it is circumstantial. In determining what is good and what is bad, no longer does one look to essences or definitions. Instead, what I take to be good for me in my particular circumstances *is* good. The immediate and subjective appearance of goodness is the only criterion of goodness. What appears good to any particular thing is good.

This should catch our attention because it suggests that Protagoras does not actually teach virtue. In this initial inquiry Socrates is ostensibly trying to clarify Protagoras’ understanding of virtue so that he may better understand the sophistic *ergon* and find out what it is Protagoras really does. What we find, however, is what was hinted at in the Great Speech: there is no single *ergon* of which the sophist has knowledge. Protagoras claims to teach virtue, but virtue lacks any kind of unity. Each *technē* is distinguished and defined by the particular object which it grasps and for each distinct

object there is a distinct *technē*. Therefore if there is an infinite number of goods, ‘virtue’ must require an infinite number of *technai*. Either Protagoras is infinitely wise or he is up to something else entirely. It seems that Protagoras is not a craftsman of virtue at all, for this would be impossible. Rather, since the only connection between goods is that they are all individual appearances, we have reason to suspect that Protagoras’ wisdom consists in making an appearance of the good.<sup>73</sup> If there really is such a thing as virtue or the good, Protagoras does not have knowledge of it.

This initial inquiry thus confirms that Protagoras’ ‘knowledge’ is not of virtue itself but of change and outward appearances. That is, he understands becoming, not being. In contrast to this Socrates has been arguing on behalf of what persists beneath particular instances. Socrates wants to claim that a single virtue underlies all appearances of that virtue and that the five particular virtues are in some sense one. All virtuous actions must be related to virtue itself. What remains unchanged throughout allows change to happen. In other words, being is prior to becoming. The particular and mutable is only possible on account of the universal and unchanging. Thus this initial inquiry makes explicit Protagoras’ relativism and confirms what was suggested of Socrates’ moral position in his early morning conversation with Hippocrates.

#### PART 4: INTERPRETING SIMONIDES

After some brief methodological wrangling with Protagoras,<sup>74</sup> Socrates has the opportunity to lay out his own moral position in the form of a poetic ‘interpretation’. This

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. *Theaetetus*, trans. H.N. Fowler, 166d.

<sup>74</sup> Socrates insists that Protagoras speak more briefly and submit to question and answer. Protagoras resists, for he likes long speeches. Socrates will not proceed the way Protagoras prefers because, as we know,

begins when Socrates and Protagoras agree to switch roles so that Protagoras will ask the questions and Socrates will answer. Protagoras decides that together they ought to investigate one of Simonides' poems which addresses virtue. Protagoras criticizes the poem and then Socrates defends and interprets it. In this defense and interpretation Socrates is able to justify monologically the moral system which we have seen is hinted at earlier in the dialogue.<sup>75</sup> Among other things, he shows (i) that being is prior to becoming, (ii) that all success depends upon the welfare of the soul, (iii) that the soul's welfare depends on 'learning', and (iv) that this means constant inquiry is obligatory. Socrates does not strictly speaking prove these claims because he only asserts them monologically, but he is able to lay out a framework which anticipates and frames the subsequent dialogical refutation of Protagoras in Part 5.

Once Socrates agrees to stay and answer Protagoras' questions, Protagoras begins his examination of one of Simonides' poems.<sup>76</sup> Protagoras criticizes Simonides for first saying that it is difficult to become good and later criticizing Pittacus for saying that it is difficult to be noble (339d). Socrates refutes Protagoras and defends Simonides by drawing out the distinction between being and becoming (340c). Rather, Socrates suggests, Simonides claims that it is difficult to *become* good in contradistinction to *being*

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constant inquiry is obligatory. Long speeches do not lend themselves to examination the way that questions and answers do and for that reason are anathema to Socrates.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 215: "Only in the prologue [310b-314c], then, together with these obscure allusions in the interpretation of Simonides, can we recognize the conception of virtue as genuinely Socratic."

<sup>76</sup> We may note that although Protagoras claims they are still investigating virtue by examining this poem the topic of which is virtue, this is not true. For the question at hand is no longer the nature of virtue but whether or not the poem is composed well. Goldberg remarks, "No longer is the concern virtue itself but the poetic discourse about virtue. The question whether or not Simonides is consistent with or contradicts himself does not determine the truth or falsity of what he says in any instance" (Goldberg, *Commentary*, 158). Protagoras is not interested in real discussion. He is avoiding the issue.

good. Only by ignoring this distinction was Protagoras able to criticize Simonides.<sup>77</sup> This oversight is not unrelated to Protagoras' ethical stance. I noted above that for Protagoras virtue is circumstantial; justice is what appears just. Virtue is in a constant state of flux and has no internal determination. Protagoras conflates being good with becoming good because for him all cases of virtue are always the latter. 'Being good' does not have distinct meaning unto itself. For Protagoras, if someone 'is good', they are 'becoming good', that is, adapting themselves to present circumstances which are themselves bound to be changing. Protagoras' neglect of the actual possession of virtue and emphasis on the appearance of virtue and actions which are considered virtuous therefore goes hand in hand with his interpretive oversight of the distinction between being and becoming.

Following this interpretation and another humorous exchange over the meaning of *chalepon*,<sup>78</sup> Socrates offers to give his interpretation of the poem as a whole. This reading avoids the most natural understanding of Simonides' poem; instead, Socrates gives a wildly fantastic interpretation that forces Socratic principles into a poem where they have no business being.<sup>79</sup> In this parody of the sophistic *epideixis*, by twisting the poem to his own ends, Socrates is able to present his own tenets under the guise of 'interpretation'; he

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<sup>77</sup> Heystee, "A Titanic Debate," 48.

<sup>78</sup> Socrates claims that *χαλεπόν* does not mean 'difficult' but 'bad' so that it is 'bad' to possess virtue. Protagoras of course objects to this, saying that *χαλεπόν* does indeed mean 'difficult'. Unwittingly, Protagoras argues that *χαλεπόν* has a determinate meaning and is not simply what it appears to the interpreter to mean. Socrates tricks Protagoras into arguing against his own relativism; a thing's properties are not determined by the way it appears to someone, but by its own nature, prior to and distinct from perception.

<sup>79</sup> Kahn calls Socrates' reading "an elaborate misinterpretation" (Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 210); Guthrie says the reading "thoroughly distorts the poem's meaning" (Guthrie, vol. IV, 219); Grote puts it even more strongly: "That interpretation is so strange and forced—so violent in distorting the meaning of the poet—so evidently predetermined by the resolution to find Platonic metaphysics in a lyric effusion addressed to a Thessalian prince—that if such an exposition had been found under the name of Protagoras, critics would have dwelt upon it as an additional proof of dishonest pervasion by the Sophists" (Grote, *Plato*, 284). Hubbard and Karnofsky, (*Plato's Protagoras*, 132), as well as Goldberg, (*Commentary*, 176 ff.), agree, but in softer terms. For reference, estimations of the complete text of this poem can be found in either Hubbard and Karnofsky (*Plato's Protagoras*, 125) or Goldberg (*Commentary*, 179).



finds a way to outline his moral and ontological stance in the face of a hostile interlocutor. This ‘interpretation’ is presented in clear opposition to Protagoras’ claims and should be seen as Socrates presenting his alternative to sophistic teaching.

In Socrates’ interpretation of Simonides there are two major points that I would like to consider. First, I will examine the ethical import of the being-becoming distinction which Socrates tells us justifies the poem. Simonides wrote the poem out of a sense of ambition (343c) and this ambition takes shape by saying that it is hard to *become* good but impossible to *be* so. By Socrates’ reading, this refutation, and thus the distinction upon which it is predicated, is the whole premise of the poem (344b). Second, I will examine Socrates’ emphasis on the connection between knowledge and virtue. In his interpretation, Socrates cites multiple examples of good people whose excellence is defined by knowledge. The implication is that knowledge constitutes virtue.

Socrates argues that becoming necessarily demands being as prior. Having already established with Prodicus that being and becoming are indeed different things, he goes on to note that it is impossible for man to *be* good; he is only able to *become* good. The question then remains, what are the conditions of becoming? This is brought out most clearly in the discussion of the doctor (345a ff.). Socrates explains that the only person who can become a bad doctor is someone is (a) a doctor and (b) a good doctor. For becoming to happen there must be both essential (being a doctor) and accidental (being good) qualities and the latter is secondary to the former. First, the doctor must remain a doctor throughout the whole process of becoming. Then, the doctor must first be good before he can become bad. Being a good doctor requires first being a doctor. The essential quality must persist throughout the entire process of becoming both to make the

accidental quality in the first place possible, and to allow the accidental quality to change into a contrary. Being is thus prior to and requisite for becoming.<sup>80</sup>

The import of this metaphysical argument is that the mutable appearances that Protagoras emphasizes must themselves demand recourse to some real and existent thing that grounds them. Despite the variety of ethical appearances the sufficiently savvy person would manifest, underneath them all there must be a single person who persists throughout. The ethical agent is not simply what he appears to be at any given moment; he is a real entity who performs many acts but retains an identity distinct from the changes he undergoes. All changes depend upon the existence of this agent so questions of morality must first be questions of this agent, i.e. the soul. It is no wonder then that the welfare of all one's affairs depends upon the well-being of the soul. Good appearances are the manifestation of the healthy state of the soul. Good actions issue from a good soul. It is not enough, therefore, to simply 'do good'; one must first *be* good. The soul, therefore, must be the primary locus of ethical issues. Although Protagoras would maintain indifference to the actual disposition of the soul at any given moment, this is simply untenable. For any mutability demands that the soul be actually disposed in a particular way; the soul must have an accidental quality (e.g. justice) before it can change. Concern for the soul and the qualities it possesses, however mutable they may be, must be our priority. We now see why "whether all [our] own affairs fare well or badly" depends on the "usefulness or worthlessness" of the soul (313a).

Simultaneously Socrates suggests that the well-being of the soul is grounded in knowledge. In each of his examples of good and bad men, Socrates contrasts those with

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<sup>80</sup> Heystee, "A Titanic Debate," 50.

knowledgeable skill with unskilled layman (ιδιώται). ‘Unmanageable misfortune’ brings down only those with knowledge; it could not possibly do so to those who are already down, namely the ignorant.<sup>81</sup> This serves to identify good men with men of learning.<sup>82</sup> Socrates then points out that good action (ἀγαθὴ πράξις) in any given field both *is* and depends upon learning that field (μάθησις; 345a).<sup>83</sup> It is no surprise then that the one true evil (μόνη...κακὴ πράξις) is the deprivation of knowledge (ἐπιστήμης στέρηθῆναι; 345b). On this passage Stokes remarks, “The implications of this are clear... The good man is the ‘wise’ one; ‘wisdom’ is equivalent, without addition and by itself, to ‘goodness’ [ἀρετή].”<sup>84</sup> In contrast to this, Goldberg argues that “Socrates does not refer, in his discussion of the physician, to a completed process of learning but rather to learning (μάθησις) as an activity (ἐμπραγία). Strictly speaking, then, the good man is the learner and not the learned.”<sup>85</sup> In a sense they are both right. As Socrates is at pains to show, as a human being one cannot *be* good without change; complete and unchanging possession of virtue is impossible. In that way Goldberg would be right in saying that human virtue consists in learning, in the constant pursuit of knowledge. Yet although static possession of virtue is a practical impossibility, in a theoretical sense the truly and completely virtuous person would be someone in a complete possession of wisdom; this is the ideal toward which we must always be moving. In that sense Stokes is right.

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<sup>81</sup> E.g.: “So whom does unmanageable misfortune bring down when it comes to the rule of a ship? Clearly not the unskilled layman, for the unskilled layman has always been down”; rather, it brings down the pilot, the man of knowledge (344c- d).

<sup>82</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 206.

<sup>83</sup> “What then *is good action* when it comes to letters, and what *makes a man good* at letters? It’s clear that it is the learning of these things” (345a; emphasis added).

<sup>84</sup> Stokes, *Socratic Conversations*, 320.

<sup>85</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 206.

If perfect virtue consists in complete knowledge and practical virtue consists in the process of learning (μάθησις), it is no longer any surprise that the soul would be nourished on ‘learning’ (μαθήματα). What was previously only asserted without clear justification (313c) is now the logical conclusion of a complex metaphysical and ethical system. If Hippocrates wants to rear his soul well and make it as healthy and good as it can be, he must pursue all the ‘learning’ he can. The crucial role of ‘learning’ in the soul’s well-being—and by extension in all one’s affairs—further means that one must constantly search out new knowledge, that is, constantly scrutinize everything for the truth and falsity it may contain, accepting one and rejecting the other. One’s life therefore becomes the unending mission of inquiry to which Socrates earlier converted Hippocrates (cf. 314c). In this way we see that although he has not properly *proved* anything, Socrates has justified the claims he previously only asserted without substantial explanation (i, ii, iii, and iv).

#### PART 5A: IDENTIFYING KNOWLEDGE AND COURAGE

It is now Socrates’ task to prove his claims in dialogue with Protagoras. The monological ‘proof’ Socrates has offered is insufficient because it does not allow for the testing requisite to the Socratic outlook. In examining Socrates’ interpretation of Simonides we see that the Socratic stance is opposed to that of Protagoras and begin to see the merit in Socrates’ objections. We still recognize, however, that this ‘proof’ is provisional at best. For Socrates, an adequate proof is only possible in the give and take of conversation. It is not through flat assertion, but only through dialogue that one can

adequately demonstrate knowledge and thereby justify his or her claims.<sup>86</sup> Accordingly, Socrates now resumes his conversation with Protagoras; he will ask the questions and Protagoras will answer.

In this leg of the conversation Socrates will crown his examination of Protagoras by showing conclusively that virtue is knowledge of the good. In his examination of Simonides' poem Socrates argued that the excellent person is knowledgeable and that the only true evil is the deprivation of knowledge. It should come as no surprise then that in completing the investigation into the unity of the virtues Socrates will seek to identify virtue itself with knowledge. Socrates will do this by considering courage and wisdom. In explaining the nature of courage, Socrates will show that it is a particular application of knowledge of what is good. Thereby he suggests that all correct action and virtue is essentially knowledge of the good. In light of his prior claims about the priority of being over becoming, we recognize that this must be knowledge of what is essentially and unchangingly good.

After publicly chastising the sophist for his reluctance to talk, Socrates eventually prevails upon him. Socrates begins by outlining their investigation. The question they are investigating, Socrates reminds everyone, is whether the five parts of virtue actually refer to only one thing or if each has some particular and unique thing underlying it so that each has its own power and none is like any other. Protagoras maintained the latter, believing that none of the parts is like the others or like the whole. Socrates cleverly gives

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<sup>86</sup> "In the *Protagoras*, knowing how to give and receive a *logos* [ἐπίστασθαι λόγον τε δοῦναι καὶ δεξιᾶσθαι] is identified with the ability to engage in dialectic [οἷός τ' εἶναι διαλέγεσθαι, 336b9-c1]. Dialectic is here contrasted with Protagoras' practice of giving long speeches with no concern for whether or not his listeners are following what he says" (Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 224). An adequate proof must ensure that the audience or interlocutor understands and thinks through each stage of the argument. While a monological speech talks *at* someone, a conversation talks *with* them and leads them through the argument.

Protagoras an opportunity to save face and revise his former statement. The sophist now concedes that four of the parts—justice, piety, moderation and wisdom—are “reasonably comparable” (ἐπιεικῶς παραπλήσια; 349d) but that courage is altogether different.<sup>87</sup> The evidence for this is that there are some who are courageous but manifestly lack the other virtues.

Having gained Protagoras’ agreement on the similarity of four virtues, now Socrates proceeds to consider courage and wisdom. The apparent purpose of this is to continue their previous discussion and to include courage among the loose unity of the virtues that Socrates worked out in Part 3. At least superficially Socrates is proceeding in the same way as before. Yet as I have noted, the real purpose of this is to explain virtue in terms of its psychological apparatus, namely knowledge. In doing so, Socrates suggests that each of the other virtues is also knowledge and therein lies their unity. Using the example of courage, Socrates proceeds to demonstrate the unity of the virtues at a level distinct from that of his initial inquiry and is able to make a more substantial claim about the nature of virtue.

Socrates’ initial argument is brief. He argues that those who have courage, a noble quality, are bold (349e). Those who have knowledge are also bold and those with more knowledge are bolder (350a). There are some, however, who are ignorantly bold; this boldness is shameful, so these men are not courageous (350b-c). Therefore, Socrates

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<sup>87</sup> No doubt this revision is at least partly a response to the results of the initial inquiry (328d-335c). Although they were left incomplete, the three movements of that inquiry respectively argued for the identities of (i) justice and piety, (ii) wisdom and moderation and (iii) justice and moderation. The result is that all four of these virtues are loosely connected (cf. Hubbard and Karnofsky, *Plato’s Protagoras*, 117). Recall that if  $a = b$ ,  $c = d$ , and  $b = c$ , then  $a = b = c = d$ . By trying to identify justice and piety, then wisdom and moderation and finally justice and moderation, Socrates has made a tentative unity of all four. The only virtue outside this arrangement is courage. Courage remains the last vestige of the radical multiplicity of the virtues Protagoras wants to maintain.

claims, courage is knowledge. The force of the argument is that there are two kinds of boldness, one good and one bad, and that the distinction between the two is that the former is characterized by knowledge and the latter by ignorance. Good, knowledgeable boldness Socrates calls courage. In other words, a particular action and/or disposition becomes virtuous *because the agent is knowledgeable*. Diving into a well or being eager to dive is made virtuous if the well-diver possesses knowledge. This psychological state, knowledge, is here presented as the single, determining factor of whether or not a person is virtuous.

Protagoras objects to this reasoning by reminding Socrates that although he agreed that the courageous are bold, he did not say that the bold are courageous, so the identification of knowledge and courage is faulty. What Socrates assumed in his argument is that if boldness is good it is therefore courage; since knowledge makes boldness good, knowledge is courage. Protagoras contends that there are two kinds of good boldness, one of which is courage. Protagoras explains this by discussing ‘power’. If one were to agree that both the strong and the knowledgeable are powerful (*δυνατοί*) and that the acquisition of knowledge makes one more powerful, by Socrates’ logic one could assert that strength is knowledge (350d-e). Protagoras argues that one ought to distinguish ‘power’ and ‘strength’, the one coming from “knowledge as well as from craziness (*μανίας*) and spirited anger (*θυμοῦ*)” and the other from “the nature and proper nurturing (*εὐτροφία*) of bodies” (351a). He wants to distinguish ‘boldness’ and ‘courage’ in a parallel way: “boldness [comes] from art (*τέχνης*) as well as from spirited anger and craziness, just as in the case of power, but courage comes into being from the nature and proper nurturing of souls” (351a-b). So boldness is to courage as power is to

strength. Recall that strength makes one more powerful. Therefore Protagoras at least acknowledges that courage makes one bolder. So while Protagoras wants to distinguish boldness and courage and claims that they have different sources, by his own logic he still allows that courage is a species of boldness. His important claim is that not all good boldness is courage. He asserts that good boldness may come either from *technē* or from nature and proper nurturing and the latter alone is courage.

Socrates' arguments have compelled Protagoras to move to a consideration of the soul. Protagoras distinguishes courage from knowledgeable boldness by their respective causes, but in so doing he implicitly agrees that outwardly they appear to be the same thing. Both the strong and the knowledgeable are powerful wrestlers; with respect to wrestling, the actions in which strength and knowledge issue are the same. Similarly, it would seem, knowledgeably bold and courageous people perform the same actions or at least actions that appear identical; the difference between them is the psychological states which cause them. This is the only difference Protagoras notes. If there is a difference in the actions they perform, Protagoras neither mentions it nor gives us reason to suppose it exists. Therefore judging exclusively by the actions they perform, it would be very hard to distinguish the knowledgeable person from the courageous one. Protagoras can now maintain the multiplicity of the virtues only by defining them in terms of psychological causation. No longer are the virtues merely discrete actions or appearances. In order to understand virtue, we must examine the soul. In order to understand courage, we must consider the single, underlying state of the soul which issues in courageous actions. This argument shows that one cannot give an account of virtue strictly in terms of actions and appearances; the locus of virtue must be the soul.



Socrates must now argue that knowledge is the exclusive source of good boldness. Protagoras has asserted that courage is caused by a psychological state which is not knowledge and that therefore courage and knowledge cannot be identified. Protagoras claims that while knowledge does issue in good bold actions, there are good bold actions not caused by knowledge and that these are courageous actions. If Socrates can show that all good bold actions are caused by knowledge, this would mean that the actions courage produces are in fact caused by knowledge. In so arguing, Socrates would bring courage under the purview of knowledge. Therefore, in order to show that courage—and by extension each other virtue—is knowledge, Socrates has to show that all correct action depends on knowledge.

#### PART 5B: THE MEASURING *TECHNĒ*

Socrates now begins the final movement of his argument in which he argues for a strong identification of courage with knowledge. The argument may be divided into two parts, the first lasting from 351b to 357e and the second from 358a to 360e. In the first part, Socrates argues in favour of the measuring *technē* and gives an account of the good, which is identified with pleasure. In the second part, he applies these to an account of courage in order to show that it is knowledge.<sup>88</sup> As we shall see in our consideration of these two arguments, the latter does not depend on the specific declaration of hedonism found in the former. Rather, the purpose of the first part is to outline the relationship of knowledge to the good.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 296.

<sup>89</sup> “This conception of wisdom as an instrument of measurement, conjured up in the final argument of the *Protagoras*, corresponds only too well to the power of reason as defined by Hobbes and by Hume: the slave

Socrates begins by asking if the pleasant is good. As we shall see, his aim in trying to identify the two is not to argue in favour of hedonism, but to establish an objective criterion by which actions and behaviour can be evaluated. Once he has established a single, exclusive criterion, Socrates will be able to show that all correct action depends upon knowledge. Pleasure and its contrary pain are particularly useful for this dialectical strategy because they are immediate and subjective experiences of the world. Insofar as I experience something as pleasurable, it *is* pleasurable. In this circumstance my experience of the world is what is true. What appears pleasurable is pleasurable. In choosing something that is true on account of its appearance, Socrates tacitly meets Protagoras and his ‘man is the measure’ dictum on their own terms and aims to show the inevitable necessity of recourse to objective knowledge about the world.

Although Protagoras allows that someone has lived well if he has lived pleasantly, he is reluctant to admit that pleasure is good without qualification. Protagoras objects that someone lives well only if he takes pleasure in noble things (τοῖς καλοῖς; 351c). It is not immediately clear what exactly ‘noble’ means here. In order to clarify the objection, Socrates reiterates his question. He asks if pleasures are good insofar as they are pleasant and if pains are bad insofar as they are painful, but Protagoras is hesitant “to answer so simply, as the question [Socrates] pose[s] suggests, that *all* pleasant things are good and the painful things bad” (351d).<sup>90</sup> Protagoras explains the reason for this hesitancy:

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of the passions, and by no means their master. It is not the least paradox of the *Protagoras*, and not the least tribute to the genius of its author, that the dialogue provides this first classical statement of hedonism by way of a dialectical *tour de force*, as a merely plausible basis for arguing to a conception of moral virtue that is in the last analysis incompatible both with the hedonism and with the instrumental role of reason that serve as premisses in the argument” (Kahn, “Unity of the Virtues,” 37).

<sup>90</sup> Here and throughout I have substituted ‘pain’ and ‘painful’ in place of Bartlett’s ‘distress’ and ‘distressing’ to translate ἀνίαρόν and related terms.

“Rather, in my opinion it’s safer for me to reply not only with a view to the present answer but also with a view to the rest of my life as a whole” (351d).<sup>91</sup>

In order to make sense of this exchange, we must first understand the word *kalon*. *Kalon* makes its first appearance in the *Protagoras* early on at 309a in Socrates’ conversation with his unnamed friend. Socrates’ friend ribs him for his supposed pursuit of Alcibiades, who is famous for being *kalos*, which Bartlett here renders as ‘beautiful’ (309a). As *kalos* as Alcibiades is, however, Socrates assures his friends that that which is wisest (τὸ σοφώτατον) is always *kallion*, more beautiful (309c). It is natural enough to think of Alcibiades as beautiful, for he is notorious for his good looks. But as Kosman points out, it is awkward to translate *kalon* as ‘beautiful’ if we are describing wisdom; for although wisdom is indeed *kalon*, it is not beautiful in the sense of ‘good looking’; after all it does not ‘look’ like anything.<sup>92</sup> While Alcibiades is described in virtue of his physical, visible appearance,<sup>93</sup> wisdom cannot be. In light of this semantic tension, we must investigate in what sense good looks and wisdom are both *kalon*.

We should note that in describing Protagoras and his wisdom Socrates uses the language of appearance. He asks rhetorically, “How...won’t that which is wisest appear (φαίνεσθαι) more beautiful” (309c)? If wisdom manifests itself, its possessor is indubitably *kalon*. The internal quality, wise, produces the external appearance, *kalon*. In relating to wisdom or its possessor in virtue of appearance, Socrates recognizes the wise person as *kalon*. In that sense we begin to see the commonality between wisdom and

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<sup>91</sup> ἀλλά μοι δοκεῖ οὐ μόνον πρὸς τὴν νῦν ἀπόκρισιν ἐμοὶ ἀσφαλέστερον εἶναι ἀποκρίνασθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς πάντα τὸν ἄλλον βίον τὸν ἐμόν.

<sup>92</sup> Kosman, “Kalon,” 350. “Wisdom is something we value, something precious, something worthy of our admiration and striving, something estimable. It is decidedly good; but it’s not beautiful, nor for that matter ugly. Wisdom simply doesn’t look like anything” (*Ibid.*, 350).

<sup>93</sup> In particular the growth of his beard (309a-b). Alcibiades of course has the reputation of being physically attractive.

good looks: we describe them both as *kalon* on account of the way they appear to others. This is also implied in the Homer quotation we find at 309b. It comes from both *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 10 and refers to Hermes in disguise.<sup>94</sup> The essence of the god himself is not revealed as the essence but as something else that is *according to* this essence. In the same way, *kalon* is not an articulation of the essence but rather the appearance of the essence, namely of what is *agathon*, good. This agrees with Kosman's understanding of *kalon*, which he says is "the mode of the good that shows forth; it is the splendor of the appearance of the good."<sup>95</sup> In this sense, *kalon* is our assessment of what is *agathon* as it appears.<sup>96</sup>

This extremely close relationship between *kalon* and *agathon* is all too clear in the passage at issue. For here at 351c, Socrates makes little discernible distinction between the two. When Protagoras objects that one must take pleasure in "noble things" (τοῖς καλοῖς), Socrates asks a clarifying question: "Surely you too don't call some pleasant things bad and some painful things good, as do the many?" (351c). Nowhere in Socrates' restatement is there any mention of *kalon*. The implication is that *kalon* and *agathon* are themselves identified or at least so closely related that one necessarily implies the other. This makes sense if we understand *kalon* as the appearance of the good.

Given that *kalon* is fundamentally an appearance, it is no coincidence that Protagoras uses it as a moral yard-stick. Twice in this dialogue Protagoras explicitly acknowledges the moral status of *kalon*. In his Great Speech Protagoras describes the

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<sup>94</sup> For an interesting reading of the Homeric reference, see Segvic 28 ff.

<sup>95</sup> Kosman, "Kalon," 355.

<sup>96</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves of Kosman's careful note: "Understood properly, the relationship of the beauty represented by the *kalon* to the good thus reveals the relationship of appearance to being. A thing's being *kalon* is not a cosmetic supplement, a surface that is painted on; it is the shining forth of the thing's nature" (*Ibid.*, 355).

moral instructions that parents give to their children. There he places *kalon* alongside ‘just’ and ‘pious’ (325d).<sup>97</sup> Later on Protagoras claims that he teaches virtue on the grounds that it is *kalon*; to say otherwise would be mad (349e). The force of this latter claim even goes so far as to imply that the single best descriptor of virtue is *kalon*. We may remind ourselves that virtue and other moral qualities are for Protagoras nothing but a matter of appearance. There is no underlying essence of moral qualities; they are only as they appear. That is abundantly clear from the Great Speech. It is entirely fitting, then, that *kalon*, a word that is necessarily tied up with appearance, should be the word to describe something morally sound. While *agathon* might be used to describe something that is *essentially* good, Protagoras instead uses the term *kalon* because for him there are only appearances. Since *kalon* is the appearance of the good, for Protagoras it may stand in as a catch-all adjective for anything and everything that is or appears to be in accordance with virtue.

The question then remains, why is it “safer” for Protagoras not to identify the *kalon* and the pleasant and instead answer “with a view to the rest of [his] life as whole” (351d)? Let us first consider what ‘safety’ means for Protagoras. This is most clear if we consider Protagoras’ initial explanation of his practice at 316c-317c. There we see that Protagoras has a constant preoccupation with his own physical well-being. When Socrates asks only whether they ought to talk privately or publicly, “Protagoras takes it for granted that Socrates is being solicitous on his behalf.”<sup>98</sup> Protagoras proceeds to outline at some length the measures he has developed to ensure his safety and assures his

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<sup>97</sup> Parents and teachers teach young Athenians “that one thing is just, another unjust; and this this is noble, that shameful; and that this is pious, that impious” (325d).

<sup>98</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 32.

listeners that he has many more which go unspecified (317b).<sup>99</sup> Protagoras clearly spends much time thinking about his personal safety and making sure he comes to no physical harm. Given this preoccupation, it seems altogether likely that when Protagoras offers to give a “safer” answer, he means an answer that will not incur bodily violence.

When Protagoras tells Socrates that he ought rather to answer “with a view to the rest of [his] life as a whole,” there are two senses that we ought to understand. On the one hand, the identification of pleasure and the good would contradict the way Protagoras has ostensibly lived his life and the way he would be proud to continue living. On the other hand, Protagoras cannot answer Socrates’ question thinking only about present circumstances, but must look to the rest of his life and see how such an answer would affect him—namely, whether or not such an answer would ruin his business.

Let us consider the first sense. Understanding Protagoras’ response in this way means that he is concerned that his behaviour would be at odds with what he says. Presumably, he would be ashamed to be contradicting himself or to say or do things that he knows are not true. Yet it is not clear that this is a genuine concern for Protagoras. As we saw in our examination of the Great Speech, Protagoras is all too ready to say one thing and do another. He claims to advocate the necessary, universal possession of all the virtues, but we found that he is actually advocating clever dissemblance and indifference to actual virtue. Prior to the Great Speech, Protagoras claims that he is frank and honest about his work as a sophist and that this keeps him safe (317b). But Protagoras is hardly frank about what he is doing; he only feigns frankness to avoid cultivating resentment. He constantly avoids telling us what exactly a sophist really does. He has his own

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<sup>99</sup> “And I’ve considered other measures in addition to this [frankness], such that—to speak with god—I suffer nothing terrible on account of my granting that I am a sophist” (317b).

personal motives that he does not readily share with just anyone. From what little we know of these motives, it is not clear that they would be at odds with hedonism. Rather, if he is concerned with anything at all, it is that the identification of pleasure and the good would be at odds with the public persona that he has cultivated.

Let us now consider the second sense. For the purposes of the present conversation, Protagoras would be willing to identify pleasure and the good, but with a view to the consequences such an answer would have on the rest of his life and his livelihood in particular, such an answer is untenable. If Protagoras openly declared himself a complete hedonist, he would be liable to incur the ire of various cities. Such hedonism seems to be at odds with the traditional virtues which are essential to political life and obligatory to those living in community.<sup>100</sup> After all, everyone must practice virtue lest they “be killed as an illness in the city” (322d). Since hedonism might seem to the city to be at odds with the traditional virtues, in making such an admission Protagoras would lose much of his business if not be run out of town entirely. Protagoras is unwilling to identify the pleasant and the good because this would adversely affect the remainder of his life.

These two senses of “with a view to the rest of [his] life as a whole” thus end up being one and the same: Protagoras cannot admit hedonism because it would be at odds with the public persona necessary to his itinerant profession. He is not concerned about contradicting his actual motives and inclinations—for these remain a well-guarded secret;

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<sup>100</sup> That it seems to be at odds is confirmed by Socrates’ conversation with the *hoi polloi*. The premise of ‘being overcome by pleasure’ is that what is pleasant is not necessarily what is good. In other words, there is some other criterion of goodness that is not pleasure. This criterion, we imagine, is grounded in traditional morality. Although Socrates shows that beneath it all the *hoi polloi* are actually hedonists, popular and unreflective belief would reject hedonism as immoral.

he is concerned that he needs to maintain a certain façade to carry on his business without suffering violence. When Protagoras wants to give a ‘safer’ answer, he is not speaking of intellectual prudence, but preserving his body from harm. Protagoras is still preoccupied with physical safety just as he was when he first met Socrates and Hippocrates.

We see therefore that Protagoras wants to differentiate the *kalon* and the pleasant in order to preserve his profession. For Protagoras, what matters in the city is the appearance of virtue. This appearance will be determined by the collective opinion of the city since for Protagoras the city is morally determinative.<sup>101</sup> Because it is a matter of appearance, Protagoras describes what is morally sound not as *agathon* but as *kalon*. Therefore, Protagoras must abide by what the city decides is *kalon*. In order to practice sophistry safely, at some level he needs to accept *kalon* as a moral metric. And so long as the city distinguishes the *kalon* and the pleasant, Protagoras cannot identify the two. This understanding of *kalon* explains why Protagoras and the other sophists are willing to accept the identity of pleasure and the good as “true to an extraordinary degree” once Socrates completes his conversation with the *hoi polloi* (358a). For while Protagoras initially could not accept this identity because the city itself did not, once the city believes that pleasure is the only good, it is both profitable (357e) and safe to accept openly that pleasure and goodness are one and the same. At this point, however, Socrates has not revealed these opinions of the *hoi polloi*, so Protagoras is unwilling to give clear answers and defers the investigation to Socrates.

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<sup>101</sup> Cf. *Theaetetus*, trans. H.N. Fowler, 167c.



The question, we learn, is whether knowledge is powerful and leads the soul and human action.<sup>102</sup> Protagoras agrees with Socrates that knowledge is strong and that if someone knows what is best he will not be overpowered by various affections like pain, fear or pleasure. He says that it would be shameful (αἰσχρόν) for him to admit the contrary (352d).<sup>103</sup> The hoi polloi disagree, so Socrates suggests that they investigate what it means to be “overcome by pleasure”. Protagoras objects to this because he sees no reason to investigate what the many have to say. Socrates assures Protagoras, however, that this question is actually for the sake of discovering the relationship of courage to the other virtues (353b).

When Socrates reminds us that this line of questioning is actually directed toward the investigation of courage, we should recall the impasse that temporarily halted the questioning just moments prior. Protagoras asserted that good boldness comes either from knowledge or from nature and proper nurture and that the latter is called courage (351b). By claiming that courage comes from nature and proper nurture of the soul, Protagoras asserts that things other than knowledge are determinative in the soul. The converse of his claim is that if the soul has a bad nature and has not been nurtured properly, it will be cowardly regardless of how much knowledge it might have. Now Protagoras claims that knowledge is sufficiently strong to direct all actions. No affection is strong enough to overpower the directives of knowledge. So on the one hand Protagoras claims that knowledge is not the exclusive determining quality of the soul, but on the other hand he

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<sup>102</sup> Socrates summarizes the ruling-thesis thus: “That knowledge is both noble and capable of ruling a human being, and that if in fact someone knows the good things and the bad, he won’t be overpowered by anything so as to do anything other than what knowledge bids him to do, but rather prudence (φρόνησις) is competent to come to the person’s aid” (352c).

<sup>103</sup> That is to say, such an admission would be contrary to the public persona he has cultivated which is necessary for his profession.

now claims that it is supreme. The tension between these two claims ought to make us suspicious and especially so because the only reason Protagoras claims that knowledge is strong is because it would be “shameful” as a sophist to claim otherwise (352d). Despite Socrates’ request that he bare his soul, we suspect that Protagoras harbours reservations about this but cannot admit them outright. So not only will the investigation into pleasure address the sophistic subjectivism, but it will also address the tacit objections to the strength of knowledge we imagine Protagoras to have. As we shall see, in proving that that knowledge is strong, Socrates will also prove that knowledge rules in the soul exclusively.

The proof that knowledge is strong is as follows. In investigating with the many what it means to be ‘overcome by pleasure’, Socrates finds that the many believe that good actions issue in more eventual pleasures than pains and base (πονηρά) actions issue in more eventual pains than pleasures (353d). The many are unable to suggest criteria other than pleasure and pain by which to evaluate actions, so Socrates is left to say that pleasure is good and pain is bad. This means that correct action depends upon taking greater pleasures and fewer pains in all that we do. Yet certain actions have misleading appearances (e.g. attendant pains are in the distant future and thus appear small), so correct action further depends on knowing how to measure what will produce more pleasure and less pain. This knowledge could be called the ‘measuring art’ (μετρητικὴ τέχνη; 356d). This knowledge would ensure correct action in all that we do; only through ignorance of it would we ever err.

We should note immediately that in this argument Socrates nowhere agrees that pleasure is the only good and pain the only evil.<sup>104</sup> He only suggests as a possibility that pleasure insofar as it is pleasure is good and notes the inability of the many to suggest criteria beside pleasure and pain. Socrates even gives the many repeated and emphatic opportunities to retract the identification of pleasure and the good.<sup>105</sup> Yet neither the many nor Protagoras, their *de facto* spokesman in this passage, is able to suggest anything else. Protagoras is unable to suggest any other criterion because for him nothing else exists by which one can evaluate an action. All properties—and in particular moral properties—are as they appear to a person or a community. Nothing is in itself just or noble; objective measures do not exist. So insofar as the community has no other criterion besides pleasure by which to evaluate actions, neither does Protagoras. As I suggested above, pleasure alone is applicable here because it is unique in that it is constituted wholly by the way it is perceived immediately and subjectively.

Socrates' claims in Parts 1 and 4 of the *Protagoras* confirm that we should not consider him a hedonist. I have already discussed at some length the claims made in those sections. In particular we should recall that in his conversation with Hippocrates, Socrates says that the soul is nourished on 'learning' and tries to distinguish what is useful and what is bad (ὅ τι χρηστὸν ἢ πονηρὸν) in this respect; nowhere in this discussion is there any reference to pleasure (313c-313e).<sup>106</sup> Neither does Socrates mention pleasure anywhere in his interpretation of Simonides, where he declares good action (ἀγαθὴ)

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<sup>104</sup> This is noted by a swath of scholars, e.g. Kahn, "Unity of the Virtues," 25; Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 240. Jaeger puts it quite bluntly: "Socrates himself never agrees to the identification of the good with the pleasant in *propria persona*."

<sup>105</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 260; 354b9, 354e10.

<sup>106</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 262.

πρᾶξις) to be learning (μάθησις) and the only evil action (μόνη...κακὴ πρᾶξις) to be the deprivation of knowledge (345b). If pain were bad without qualification, then the deprivation of knowledge would only be indirectly bad.<sup>107</sup> In light of this, we see why Socrates would distance himself from the opinions of the hoi polloi and their identification of pleasure and the good.

Accordingly, this discussion of pleasure and the good should in no way be considered exhaustive. If anything, it begs for completion. The identification of the good with pleasure is predicated on the inability of the many to suggest another criterion. Protagoras cannot suggest anything on their behalf because for him nothing is real save immediate and subjective perception, which is evaluative in terms of pleasure and pain. This failure to suggest anything else is highlighted by Socrates so that we are impelled to consider what another criterion of goodness might be. He repeatedly notes that their investigation would be very different if they could evaluate pleasure and pain “in some other respect and with a view to some other end” (354d). What this ‘respect’ and ‘end’ might be is left unspecified. The argument proceeds as is only because the many are unable to say that the good or the bad is anything other than what issues in pleasure or pain (355a). It should come as no surprise, then, that following this argument proving that knowledge is strong Socrates all but ignores the identity of the pleasant and the good. When he does mention pleasure, it seems to be little more than a placeholder for ‘good’. This particular identity is of no consequence. Socrates even says that the nature of the

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<sup>107</sup> Thus Plato is not contradicting himself in the *Phaedo* when Socrates unambiguously condemns hedonism as simple-minded moderation and slavish virtue (*Phaedo*, 69a-d; Kahn, “Unity of the Virtues,” 26). That the *Phaedo* condemns the hedonism articulated here in the *Protagoras* is also noted in Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 250-1; Guthrie, vol. IV, 234; and Grote, *Plato*, 313.

measuring *technē* is still unknown and is to be investigated later (357b), strongly suggesting that the identification of pleasure and the good is not final.

To understand this lacuna and make some sense of what is here omitted, we should consider Socrates' ethical stance as it has appeared earlier in the *Protagoras*. In doing so we will get a fuller picture of Socratic virtue. In the early morning conversation with Hippocrates Socrates claims that the soul is nourished on 'learning'. Later on in his interpretation of Simonides Socrates suggests that virtue consists in knowledge. The result of this is that good action both is and depends upon learning (μάθησις; 345a). This learning must be of what *is*. Socrates explains that being is prior to becoming in all ways so that what becomes is unintelligible without prior knowing what *is*. What *is* is prior to change and is itself unchanging. It is what underlies change but itself does not. Consequently knowledge must be first and foremost of what *is*. Thus we must say that virtue is knowledge of what *is*.

Here in the argument of the measuring *technē* we find a slightly different account of virtue, though one obviously still closely related. In this argument virtue appears as a kind of knowledge that measures pleasure. Though because we ought to bracket pleasure for the reasons outlined above, it is better to say that virtue consists in knowledge of some good that we try to maximize in all our actions. This knowledge of what is good is the supreme determining factor in our behaviour. With this knowledge we would never err and would lead blessed lives.

Given that these are two distinct yet clearly related accounts of virtue, we should read them in light of one another. The one account says that virtue is knowledge and that knowledge is of what *is*, and the other says that virtue is knowledge of what is good. It

follows from this that virtue is knowledge of what is unchangingly good. The soul must be fundamentally oriented to what *is* and in particular the object of its attention must be what is good. Obviously with this understanding of virtue, pleasure—paradigmatically mutable and subjective—is no longer an adequate measure of the good life. The good that is the object of this knowledge must be of a different species from pleasure. By subtly questioning the identification of pleasure and the good and thus distancing himself from it, Socrates allows his listeners to fill in the gaps and supply this altogether different understanding of virtue. It is only through knowledge of an eternal and objective good that we will ensure our soul's welfare and possess virtue.<sup>108</sup>

The aim of the argument of the measuring *technē* is therefore not to identify pleasure and the good but to meet Protagoras on his own terms and show that if brought to its logical conclusion, his position must eventually move beyond itself to a knowledge of the objectively good. At the end of Part 3 Protagoras claims that the good is multifarious and that the good for one thing is different from the good for something else; in effect he suggests that there is no such thing as the good. For Protagoras what is good is what appears good to a particular thing or person. In this argument Socrates makes use of pleasure because of its nature as a discrete and subjective event that typifies Protagorean relativism. Yet subjective as pleasure may be, Socrates is able to make Protagoras discuss it as a determinate good.<sup>109</sup> Socrates treats pleasure as the single criterion of one's life and as universal in its applicability; it is identical in all cases,

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Grote, *Plato*, 313: "In the *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Phaedon*, etc., we shall find [Socrates] discountenancing the calculation (recommended in the *Protagoras*) of pleasures and pains against each other, as greater, more certain, durable, etc., and insisting that all shall be estimated according as they bear on the general condition or health of the mind."

<sup>109</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 275.

differing only in terms of quantity. Socrates is thereby able to make Protagoras acknowledge the commonality between all subjective experiences and bring objectivity out of subjectivity. This determination of a good compels the application of the measuring *technē*. Our relationship to what is good becomes a matter of knowledge because we recognize that the good is something objective. Even a stance of radical relativism, if brought to its full conclusion, demands recourse to knowledge of what is objectively and unchangingly good. Socrates thus proves from the premises of a contrary position that virtue is knowledge of the good.

Socrates declines to say what exactly this knowledge is, for that is not the point he is trying to make right now. It is enough for him to say that it is knowledge. He tells Protagoras that “whatever this art and knowledge is, [they’ll] investigate that later” (357b). Recall that in Part 1 we found that a *technē* is determined by its *ergon*. Figuring out what *technē* Protagoras practices is a matter of figuring out what *ergon* he knows (312c-e). So when Socrates postpones the investigation of what this *technē* is, he is postponing an investigation of its *ergon*. That is to say, Socrates has suggested to us that virtue is knowledge of what is objectively and unchangingly good, yet he has not said and, for now, does not intend to say what the good is. Learning what the good is presumably requires a much larger and more extended investigation for which the present circumstances are not accommodating. In the meantime we do not know what the good is; we know only that knowledge of it constitutes virtue.

The consequence of this provisional conclusion is that Socrates is now able to meet the objection Protagoras made at 351b, that courage is not knowledge but a result of nature and proper nurture. Socrates is equipped to say that all error is a result of

ignorance and all right action is a result of knowledge. He shows this by applying the conclusions of the argument of the measuring *technē* to the particular case of courage and implies that it follows for the other virtues as well. Thereby he shows more conclusively that the virtues are unified in knowledge of the good. Only through this knowledge will someone lead a good life and possess all the virtues.

In order to clear up what courage is, Socrates implores everyone to consider fear. In spite of Prodicus' hairsplitting, all parties agree that fear is the expectation of something bad (358d). Since no one advances to what they suppose is bad (358c), by definition no one goes toward what they fear when it is possible to do otherwise. Everyone agrees to this also (358e). Having established these things, Socrates now turns back to Protagoras so that they can re-examine his earlier claims.

In order to determine what courage is, Socrates begins by distinguishing the courageous from the cowardly. They ought to be distinguished by "what they are eager for", for these surely could not be the same things. While common opinion is that the cowardly pursue emboldening things (*τὰ θαρραλέα*) and the courageous pursue terrible things (*τὰ δεινά*), this cannot be the case; no one pursues what they expect to be bad and what one expects to be bad is terrible. Rather, all people pursue emboldening things; in this respect "the cowards and the courageous advance toward the same things" (359e). Nevertheless, as agreed, they do not pursue the same things, for while the courageous go to war, cowards avoid it.

The difference between the courageous and the cowardly is that the one knows what truly ought to be feared while the other does not. Socrates explains this by considering how courage and cowardice function with respect to war. He notes (a) that



going to war is noble and (b) that all noble things are good. This second claim should catch our attention. Prior to the discussion of the measuring *technē*, Protagoras objected that to live well one must take pleasure in noble things (351c). In discussing this objection, I suggested that Protagoras resorts to *kalon* because it is a kind of appearance and moral evaluation for Protagoras is exclusively a matter of appearance. In other words, Protagoras claims that one's actions must be determined by the subjective appearance of goodness. Yet the force of the argument of the measuring *technē* is that there must be a determinate and objective criterion for our behaviour.<sup>110</sup> Since there is an objective good, *kalon* can no longer be the mutable and subjective appearance of the good; rather, it must be the *authentic* appearance of what is objectively good. The *kalon* is not any appearance of goodness, but only those appearances that correspond to objective goodness. If war is indeed *kalon*, then it must be good.

Correct behaviour therefore depends on recognizing the real and objective properties of things. Given that going to war is good, the only reason that the cowardly avoid war is because they do not know that it is good. The courageous, on the other hand, go toward war because they recognize it for what it is. Goldberg catches this well. Socrates finds that the difference between the cowardly and courageous

cannot be found by an appeal to the state of mind of the agent but rather in the relation between that state of mind and the truth of things. And so Socrates asks about the war not, do the agents *suppose* that it is a noble or shameful war, but rather, *is* it a noble or shameful war.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> As I have noted above, the argument of the measuring *technē* does not aim to prove that pleasure is the good. Socrates only uses the case of pleasure and pain a useful dialectical expedient. Yet in the present argument Socrates says that since war is noble it is good and pleasant (360a). This should not derail our earlier conclusions. Socrates calls war pleasant in order to maintain continuity with the prior argument, but in fact the identity of the good and the pleasant is entirely dispensable to the discussion of war.

<sup>111</sup> Goldberg, *Commentary*, 289.

The courageous are distinguished because they recognize the objective nature of what they are doing. They are courageous because they know that going to war is good. They recognize that war is good because they first know what is essentially and unchangingly good. It is through this knowledge that they are able to evaluate different actions and choose accordingly. Through the example of war, Socrates shows that the courageous behave courageously because their actions correspond to what things actually are.

Therefore both the courageous and the cowardly have fears, but these fears are entirely different from one another. The courageous fear what is actually terrible and thus have noble fears; the cowardly mistakenly fear what they take to be terrible but is not and thus have shameful fears. The cowardly instead are eager for certain things out of ignorance; Socrates calls this “shameful boldness” (360b) and in so doing clearly connects this argument with the initial inquiry into courage and knowledge (349e-351b). In that inquiry, Protagoras argued that there are several sources of good boldness and implied the converse that there are several sources of bad boldness. Socrates has now shown that all good boldness is knowledge and all bad boldness ignorance. Therefore cowardice is “ignorance of what’s terrible and what isn’t terrible” and courage, its contrary, is “wisdom pertaining to what’s terrible and what isn’t terrible” (360d). Since the only criterion for one’s actions is the good, determining whether or not something is terrible means determining whether or not it is good. Correct action with respect to boldness is a question of whether or not one knows what is good. Socrates is thereby able to meet Protagoras’ objections and show that since all good boldness is knowledge and courage is good boldness, courage must be knowledge. We recognize that this knowledge must be knowledge of what is objectively and unchangingly good.

The crucial feature of this argument is that with correct knowledge of what is truly good, one will always act correctly. Socrates and Protagoras examine this by considering ‘going towards’ or ‘fleeing from’ something, but we may extend the logic to all choice and action. When deciding whether or not to approach or flee something, one must consider (a) what the good is and (b) what action will most realize this. Although Socrates does not tell us what the good is, we still recognize that all correct behaviour depends upon knowledge of it. Accordingly, whatever it actually is, we must pursue knowledge of what is objectively good. Only in this way will we ensure noble behaviour.

This gives us a clearer sense of how we ought to understand the unity of the virtues. In my discussion of Part 3, I suggested tentatively that we could understand the unity of the virtues by treating each of them as a particular appearance of virtue itself. In this final argument of the *Protagoras* we now see the way in which this is true. For example, just as courage consists in determining one’s fears through knowledge of the good, we can say moderation consists in determining one’s desires in the same way. The moderate person evaluates his desires (e.g. for food, drink or sex) with respect to his knowledge of the good and thereby decides whether or not to fulfill these desires. Or better yet, what he desires in the first place will be determined by what he recognizes as good. Just as courage is ‘wisdom pertaining what’s terrible and what isn’t terrible’, we might say that moderation is ‘wisdom pertaining to what’s desirable and what isn’t desirable’. Presumably, we could form parallel definitions for justice and piety. In this sense we see that each of the virtues is a particular instance of knowledge of the good and that this knowledge is therefore virtue itself.

Protagoras is displeased with the turn the argument has taken and with good reason. In the first place, he has been clearly refuted in front of a large crowd. Whereas he claimed to possess a *technē*, Socrates has shown that Protagoras is unable to give an account of his *ergon*. If Protagoras clearly lacks this knowledge, it seems highly unlikely that many students will want to study under him. Considering the wealthy clientele in the room, this amounts to a serious financial loss. More importantly, however, in demonstrating their unity Socrates has shown that the virtues have definite properties; they are not simply a matter of convention. Protagoras was earlier able to claim that the virtues were distinct and unrelated things because they were only a matter of appearance. There were no underlying essences to the virtues which would unify them. In demonstrating their necessary unity by showing that they are all knowledge of some objective, determinate good, Socrates shows that the virtues can no longer be only appearances. Consequently the obligation to be virtuous is no longer practical, but *personal*. Regardless of the community in which we live or how we appear to others, we must be virtuous. Thus Protagoras' ethical theory is thoroughly dismantled.

Socrates reminds Protagoras that his only purpose in this conversation is to investigate virtue and summarizes what has just transpired in their conversation. He remarks how funny it seems that he and Protagoras have apparently switched positions: he was initially arguing that virtue was not teachable and now argues that it is and Protagoras the contrary (361a-c). Yet we know of course that Socrates never really believed that virtue could not be taught; the arguments he rehearsed against the teachability of virtue were really the conservative Athenian outlook against which Socrates wished to test Protagoras. Socrates has not switched positions at all; he has

revealed the internal contradictions of Protagoras' position, showing that it is fundamentally untenable, and proved instead that virtue must be knowledge of the objectively and unchangingly good. Whatever the 'virtue' that Protagoras claims to teach is, it is neither virtue nor teachable.

Instead of giving up the argument, however, Socrates and Protagoras must renew their efforts and go through "the matter of what virtue is and investigate once again whether it is teachable or isn't teachable" (361c). Socrates has shown that virtue is likely knowledge of the good and but postponed an investigation of the exact nature of this knowledge. Determining the nature of this knowledge means figuring out what its *ergon* is. Insofar as the *ergon* remains unknown, it is to a certain extent still tentative that virtue is in fact knowledge. Therefore we must investigate the nature of what is unchangingly good in order to learn fully whether or not virtue is knowledge and thus whether or not it is teachable. Only once we have found this out will we be able to practice and teach virtue at a Promethean level, as a *technē*.

In our reading of Protagoras' Great Speech we found that Protagoras advocates that his students adopt a semblance of virtue because there is no need for the real thing. Since virtue is only a means to an end, the obligation to practice virtue is not personal but practical. Because virtue is social and is determined by community norms, it has no determinate content of its own and is only a matter of appearance. Socrates' task in refuting Protagoras is therefore a matter of showing that virtue is in fact something in itself. In Part 1 we found hints of Socrates' moral outlook in his suggestions (i) that being is prior to becoming, (ii) that the soul's welfare is paramount, (iii) that the soul is nourished on 'learning', and (iv) that as a result constant inquiry is obligatory. The full

opposition between these claims and the Protagorean stance is made clear in Part 4 when Socrates more fully outlines his metaphysical and moral system. There he justifies the suggestions made in Part 1 (i, ii, iii, and iv) ultimately contending that virtue consists in knowledge of what is. Socrates proves these claims more conclusively in Part 5 when he reengages Protagoras in dialogue and argues for the identity of courage and knowledge. In so doing, Socrates shows that all correct action fundamentally depends upon knowledge of what is good though he does not say what the good is. In light of Part 4, however, we recognize that this good too must be something that *is*; in other words it must be essential and unchanging. Socrates proves this on Protagoras' terms by using the hedonic argument and in so doing shows that the Protagorean stance is internally problematic and demands recourse to the Socratic position. By thus refuting Protagoras, Socrates shows that virtue is neither a matter of appearance nor simply a practical necessity, but a knowledge of the objectively and unchangingly good which we are all personally obligated to pursue.

### CHAPTER 3: IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE: VIRTUE IN THE *MENO*

Despite the substantial attention that the doctrine of recollection has received from scholars, we may remind ourselves that Plato's *Meno* is above all concerned with the nature of virtue. This is the question that opens the dialogue, that provides the impetus for the whole discussion, and that prompts every major and minor digression. Although Meno's opening question is explicitly about the *acquisition* of virtue, we should remind ourselves that, as Socrates is at pains to prove throughout the conversation, this must first be a question about virtue's essence, ὁ τί ἐστίν. Since every feature of the dialogue will address virtue in varying degrees of directness, it is unnecessary at this point to fully justify the claim that virtue is always the central concern. Giving it due justification here would be unwieldy and impractical. Suffice it to say here, however, that insofar as this claim is true, the entire subsequent investigation of the *Meno* will prove it. This is generally uncontroversial, but it is important that we bear it in mind throughout our considerations.

Likewise important are the two claims Socrates makes at the midpoint and end of the dialogue respectively: that the pursuit of knowledge will make us better people (86b-c) and that knowledge is indeed something different from true opinion (98b). These claims are distinguished for the certainty and force with which Socrates declares them. For that reason, they ought to be taken as given interpretive starting points by which the rest of the dialogue is read.

The distinction between knowledge and true opinion (the Distinction Claim) is made only as the conversation is wrapping up, but doubtless it is present throughout. It is obviously anticipated by the recollection passage and, at some level, the subsequent

discussion of knowledge. It is in direct response to the examination of the sophists' and statesmen's failure to teach virtue. The import and certainty of the Distinction Claim, however, is clear not just from the way it is anticipated, but from the very way that Socrates himself describes it:

That correct opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα) is something different from knowledge, I'm really *not* of the opinion that I'm just conjecturing (εἰκόζειν). Rather, if in fact I would assert that I know (εἰδέναι) anything—and I would assert it about few things—this, at least, is one thing that I would place among those that I know (οἶδα). (98b)

It would be difficult for Socrates to be more explicit in a dialogue than in this passage. Despite his frequent use of metaphor, analogy and imagery, this claim is *not* made equivocally; it is true without qualification.<sup>112</sup> Although Socrates often argues in such a way as to accommodate the dialectical abilities of his interlocutor, he declares this on his own terms. He makes an exception to his characteristic profession of ignorance in order to assert what is certainly true.

When Socrates makes the claim that the pursuit of knowledge makes us better people (the Virtue Thesis), he speaks in equally certain terms. He makes this bold declaration at the end of the recollection passage. It is worth quoting in full:

As for the other points, at least, I wouldn't insist very much on behalf of the argument; but that by supposing one ought to inquire (δεῖν ζητεῖν) into things he doesn't know, we would be better (βελτίους) and more manly (ἀνδρικώτεροι) and less lazy than if we should suppose either that it's impossible to discover those things that we don't know or that we ought not inquire into them—about *this* I certainly would do battle, if I could, both in speech and in deed. (86b-c)

Socrates claims here that although what he showed in the myth of recollection and the subsequent demonstration may be true only in a particular sense, it is *certain* that our

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. Klein, *Commentary*, 249.



pursuit of knowledge will make us better. He asserts this forcefully and unambiguously; the certainty is matched only by the subsequent Distinction Claim.<sup>113</sup> Further, the readiness with which Socrates discards the rest of the recollection passage serves to highlight both this claim's importance and its surety.<sup>114</sup> Again, we can justifiably accept it is as true without qualification. We should also note that βελτίους (better) should be read with moral implications. Since ἀγαθόν (good) is the adjectival form of ἀρετή (virtue) this claim effectively amounts to 'the search for truth will make you more virtuous.'<sup>115</sup> This moral reading of βελτίους explains the otherwise conspicuous appearance of courage (ἀνδρεία). The assumption of the Virtue Thesis does not simply make us correctly bold (θάραχος) in our inquiries, but bold in a morally appropriate way. The assumption of the Virtue Thesis is productive of moral excellence. Importantly, the Virtue Thesis depends upon the equally explicit Distinction Claim since, as Klein notes, "the effort of learning is meaningful only if there be possible a state of knowledge *different* from the state of right opinion."<sup>116</sup> For this reason, we ought to take the latter claim as necessarily implied in the former. Given the explicitness of both, we can justifiably locate them at the thematic centre of the dialogue. In fact, it is my contention that the dialogue as a whole serves to justify and prove this: that the pursuit of knowledge will make us more virtuous.<sup>117</sup>

In brief, I would note that we ought to divide the bulk of the dialogue into two broad sections. The first section extends from 71b to 86b and the second section from 86c

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<sup>113</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 249.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>115</sup> Friedländer, vol. II, 284.

<sup>116</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 250.

<sup>117</sup> For a similar but distinct claim see Weiss' treatment of the *Meno* in *Virtue in the Cave*. Weiss argues that the good life consists in unending moral inquiry (Weiss, *Virtue*, 4).

to the end at 100c. Placed almost at the midpoint of the dialogue, the Virtue Thesis acts as a hinge between these two halves. The first section of the dialogue is the definitional section in which Meno tries to define virtue (ἀρετή). This passage serves to demonstrate two things: (a) what the pursuit of knowledge might look like, i.e. what are the conditions and limits of knowledge and consequently how we should go about our investigations, and (b) that Meno fails to genuinely pursue knowledge and thus does not become virtuous, but remains vicious (this reflects the Virtue Thesis negatively: neglecting knowledge makes us worse). The second section of the dialogue explicitly connects virtue to knowledge and distinguishes knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) from correct opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα). It points towards a unique but total form of knowledge that would constitute virtue, knowledge of the Good. The effort to acquire this knowledge, regardless of whether complete acquisition is or is not possible, is thus paramount and the pursuit of it makes us more virtuous. In this way, both sections in their respective ways serve to justify the claim that unites them, the Virtue Thesis.

### FIRST ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING VIRTUE

Since the *Meno* is a dialogue, that is, a conversation between characters, we should at the outset remind ourselves of who Meno was. The best source we have for Meno is Xenophon, who travelled with him during the Campaign of Cyrus and features him prominently in his *Anabasis*. There Xenophon depicts him as a degenerate scoundrel:

Menon the Thessalian was manifestly eager for enormous wealth – eager for command in order to get more wealth and eager for honour in order to increase his gains; and he desired to be a friend to the men who possessed greatest power in order that he might commit unjust deeds without suffering the penalty. Again, for the accomplishment of the objects upon

which his heart was set, he imagined that the shortest route was by way of perjury and falsehood and deception, while he counted straightforwardness and truth as folly. Affection he clearly felt for nobody, and if he said that he was a friend to anyone, it would become plain that this man was the one he was plotting against.<sup>118</sup>

Xenophon goes on at some length in his description of Meno, of which this passage is but a short selection. Bluck summarizes well the account as a whole:

Xenophon's portrait of Meno makes him quite unscrupulous: a man with no loyalty, completely immoral, and entirely self-interested – one whose fundamental motive was greed. Xenophon no doubt exaggerates, but his assessment may be basically correct.<sup>119</sup>

Despite Xenophon's obvious bias, there seems to be consensus among ancient sources about Meno's character.<sup>120</sup> As Klein goes on to suggest, although Plato does not depict Meno as the meritless villain that Xenophon does, this general image certainly underlies the dialogue.<sup>121</sup> The dramatic date of the *Meno* falls at the end of the fifth century, so the Campaign of Cyrus is imminent.<sup>122</sup> The reader would be well aware of Meno's unsavoury exploits in Persia and at the mention of the name could not but think of his questionable deeds. Plato recognizes that because everyone is aware of it, there is no need to enlarge on Meno's worst side; besides being unnecessary, doing so would only make Socrates' gentle irony impossible (cf. note 120 above). Rather, Plato can depict Meno not as a

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<sup>118</sup> Xenophon, *Anabasis*, II, 6, 21 ff.

<sup>119</sup> Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 124.

<sup>120</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 36. Klein notes that "through Plutarch and Photius some of Ctesias' testimony reaches us. Ctesias... was an eyewitness... A third source is Diodorus Siculus... These sources agree on Meno's character and disagree, or seem to disagree, only on the question of Meno's death" (*Ibid.*, 36).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Bluck explains why Plato would not make Meno's depravity more explicit: "There was no need to enlarge here on the worst side of Meno's character, about which most of Plato's readers would know; and to have done so would have made impossible the gentle irony in which the Platonic Socrates excels" (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 125).

<sup>122</sup> Bluck sets the dialogue in 402 BC, after the restoration of the democracy and prior to the expedition (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 120-2). Friedländer is less certain about the date, but still estimates that it was set around 405-2 BC. He comments, "Plato probably does not set a definitive year. But the names Menon and Anytos must make everyone think of the campaign of Cyrus and the trial of Socrates: both are imminent" (Friedländer, vol. II, 358 note 3). Whatever the case, the expedition looms and informs our view of Meno.

complete degenerate, but as someone without virtue whose corruption is inevitable and imminent. Xenophon's account is true in sense if not in detail and should preface our reading of the *Meno*.

Yet not only is Meno a vicious character, he neither has knowledge of virtue, nor a real desire to learn about it. Meno has pretenses to the contrary, but these are thin at best. When Socrates first asks Meno to define virtue, Meno remarks four times that this would be an easy task (71e-72a).<sup>123</sup> Yet Socrates promptly refutes these definitions. After several refutations, Meno himself wonders at his ἀπορία because previously he had been able to make “a great many speeches about virtue before many—and very well too” (80b). Meno clearly would presume in some sense to know what virtue is, even though he evidently does not.<sup>124</sup>

If Meno claims to know virtue, however, his initial question concerning its acquisition could be problematic. Someone who knows what virtue is should also know as a consequence how it is acquired, thus obviating the need for this question. These problems disappear if we recognize the source of this question: it does not come from a genuine desire to know, a philosophical urge, but rather from his sophistic ἔθος; he wants Socrates to demonstrate his rhetorical prowess. While some commentators like A.E. Taylor claim that the lack of context for Meno's initial inquiry reflect poor dramatic technique,<sup>125</sup> Gonzalez in contrast suggests that it is both appropriate and informative: “the very lack of context is revealing, since it suggests that Meno's question is not

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. Klein, *Commentary*, 46.

<sup>124</sup> Thus Meno's incredulity at Socrates' professed ignorance of virtue: it is an easy subject that everyone should know without serious reflection. Although Meno would claim to know virtue, it is obvious that he has never put much effort into it (Weiss, *Virtue*, 18) nor thinks that anyone else should have to. As the slave demonstration makes clear, Socrates' task with Meno is to make him realize his own ignorance so that inquiry can begin.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Guthrie, vol. IV, 42.

inspired by any practical dilemma but is ‘academic’, that is, ‘sophistic.’”<sup>126</sup> This question that Meno asks is not his own, but is little more than the standard formulation of a long-debated issue that extends back to Hesiod, Theognis, Simonides and Pindar.<sup>127</sup> The use of this standard format shows both that the question does not come from an inner struggle and that Meno was up to date with current debates on the subject (Klein 39).<sup>128</sup> Meno’s exercises with Gorgias have cultivated a desire to hear verbal flourish. Meno can ask this question while assuming his own certain knowledge of the matter because he has no genuine desire to learn.

Meno’s indifference to the content of this question results from his Gorgian education in two ways. In the first place, as a student of Gorgias, Meno already has a sufficient answer: virtue cannot be taught. Gorgias holds that virtue cannot be taught and that one’s efforts instead ought to be directed toward becoming clever at speaking (95c). Meno admires (ἄγαμαί) Gorgias on this point and readily parrots what his teacher has to say, so he very likely holds the same opinion. Meno has no genuine interest in answering the question because he already ‘knows’ the answer. Secondly, since Meno latches on to everything Gorgias has to say, in all likelihood he has adopted the declarations from *On the Nonexistent*: “first and foremost, that nothing exists; second, that even if it exists it is inapprehensible to man; third, that even if it is apprehensible, still it is without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man.”<sup>129</sup> The consequence of this is that no answer Socrates can give could ever communicate anything meaningful. Meno

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<sup>126</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 154. To illustrate this point, Gonzalez points us to the *Protagoras*. There, “the question concerning the teachability of virtue arises from a concrete situation, that is, Hippocrates’ desire to learn virtue from Protagoras” (*Ibid.*). The question arises from a crisis and the answer will have real consequences.

<sup>127</sup> Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 161.

<sup>128</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Sextus, “Against the Schoolmasters,” in Diels, *The Older Sophists*, 42.

cares only about the rhetorical flourish and not the content of what is being said because he does not believe that this content can ever mean anything or correspond to an underlying reality. Therefore on two counts does Meno's Gorgian education rob him of any real interest in an answer to his imperious question: (1) he already has an opinion with which he is satisfied, and (2) no answer could articulate the truth if it exists. It is this kind of indifference that Socrates answers when he responds to Meno's question about the acquisition of virtue.

Socrates' answer is filled with apparently great praise for Meno and his countrymen, but there is both irony and foreshadowing throughout. Socrates first lauds the way that Gorgias "has made it a customary habit (ἔθος) for [Thessalians] to answer [questions] in a fearless (ἀφόβως) and magnificent manner (μεγαλοπρεπῶς) if someone asks something, as is fitting for those who know (εἰδότες)" (70b). As I have noted above, Meno's question is hardly grounded in genuine philosophical inquiry. He is not at all invested in whatever answer Socrates might give. Socrates surely detects this and notes the shallowness. Meno does not possess the courage necessary to ask and answer serious questions and thus necessary for philosophy. If Meno is fearless in any way, this question does not reflect it. At the same time, however, Socrates' remark also points us forward to the theory of recollection. There Socrates encourages us to provisionally assume that we possess all knowledge within us as if we were (latent) knowers; such an assumption should make us more courageous (86b). Socrates is subtly telling Meno that if he is to acquire actual knowledge that in some way, he will have to be braver; he will have to ask questions honestly and genuinely.

Socrates is again ironic when he praises Thessaly. He tells Meno that in some strange way all the wisdom that was in Athens has left to go to Thessaly. This seems like a particularly odd remark to make for two reasons. First, despite what Socrates claims, it is unlikely that Athenians as a whole would deny knowledge of virtue; we need only consider Anytus' incredulity to see this. Anytus would claim that both he and every other καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ know both what virtue is and how to teach it.<sup>130</sup> Second, it is dubious that Thessaly has somehow come into wisdom. As Socrates himself claims in the *Crito*, Thessaly is so unbearably savage and uncultured that Socrates would not be able to carry on any conversations about justice or virtue; in fact, Thessaly is so uncivilized, Socrates uses it as the example of lawlessness and lack of education *par excellence*.<sup>131</sup> As far as Plato and Socrates are concerned, Thessaly is the locus of disorder and intemperance.<sup>132</sup> All this, whether or not Meno is aware of it, serves to deflate his implicit claim to wisdom. Socrates indirectly reproves Meno for treating this question, how does one acquire virtue, so lightly. In a playful but clever way, Socrates is trying to prepare his interlocutor for serious philosophical inquiry.

Having thus chided his interlocutor, Socrates now begins the investigation of virtue. He asks Meno to recall his Gorgian education and to define virtue. Answering this request, three times Meno offers a definition of virtue and three times he is refuted by Socrates (71e-79e). Following each proposed definition, in addition to a refutation

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<sup>130</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 41. What Socrates means to say is that not a single person with whom he has spoken, after finishing their conversation, has not found themselves in ἀπορία. Nevertheless, just about every citizen would claim to know something and would certainly weigh in on the matter if they were given the chance.

<sup>131</sup> Socrates uses Thessaly as a contrast to “well-governed cities and the most civilized men” such as Thebes or Megara and their citizens. Socrates says that in Thessaly “great disorder and lawlessness prevail” (53b-e).

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Friedländer, vol. II, 275; Klein, *Commentary*, 40.

Socrates gives a methodological lesson. Socrates tries to train Meno how to pursue knowledge, to familiarize him with the limits and conditions of knowledge. As we shall see, however, these methods require personal effort and, in anticipation of the theory of recollection, a turn inward. Meno reveals himself as fundamentally unwilling to do these things and as a result remains vicious.

In his initial and unreflective confidence, Meno first tells Socrates that virtue is an easy thing to define. In fact, it is so easy that he is able to define it many times over, offering definitions of a man and a woman's respective virtues and suggesting that he could do the same for old men, children and slaves (71e).<sup>133</sup> Socrates quickly objects to this casual formulation: while he has asked for only one thing, Meno instead provides many, a 'swarm' of virtues as it were (72a).

Socrates illustrates his objection with the example of 'bee'. He reminds Meno that although bees are quite varied in their size and beauty, they all still remain 'bee' in the same way; insofar as each is a bee, they are the same. Meno readily acknowledges this, agreeing that bees "don't differ at all in being bees" (72b). Meno maintains that were he asked to define 'bee', he would be able to see past the many differences amongst the particulars and identify the form that is the same in all cases. The same problem, Socrates suggests, applies to the case of virtue: Meno must search out "some one form (εἶδος)<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> This is a usual, if often unarticulated, Greek understanding of ἀρετή. Klein remarks, "The view expressed here agrees with commonly accepted... standards, and the terms in which it is expressed agree, in their ambiguity, with those used in common speech" (Klein, *Commentary*, 47). Bluck agrees with this sentiment: "This conception of ἀρετή as differing according to age and sex was probably a popular one which sophists and rhetors encouraged, rather than the invention of any sophist or rhetor" (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 218).

<sup>134</sup> This use of 'εἶδος', although perhaps a bit technical, does not have the metaphysical implications present in the *Phaedo* and *Republic* (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 224; cf. Klein, *Commentary*, 50). The term does not here imply separate existence from sensible particulars.



that is the same, on account of which [the particular cases of virtue] are virtues” and by which one could identify virtue (72c).<sup>135</sup>

Meno claims he understands the issue, but he clearly does not appreciate all its difficulties. As Klein notes, “to ‘define’ what ‘bee’ is, is not an easy task.”<sup>136</sup> Socrates does not ask Meno to say what ‘bee’ is, nor does Meno venture a definition, but we can well imagine that if he were pressed, his definition would likely fall short. Nevertheless, Meno is certainly familiar with bees and at some level knows what ‘bee’ is, whether or not he can give a definition. At the very least he would be able to enumerate its properties: bees are black and yellow; they have wings; they are small. In spite of this, at no point does Meno ask himself whether he would be able to assemble his familiarity with bees into a definition. The underlying assumption, in any case, is that Meno must have some awareness of virtue and by reflecting upon that will be able will be able to articulate a definition. Only by reflecting upon pre-existent familiarity will Meno be able to take his many examples of virtue and find what is universal among them. The bee example shows, however, that such reflection is extremely unlikely in Meno’s case, except perhaps with some serious goading.

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<sup>135</sup> As the image of a ‘swarm’ suggests, there is a certain kind of unity to the definitions of virtue that Meno has given. In the same way that many individual bees together make a single swarm, each definition articulates a particular social role that in combination with other roles forms a single ordered whole that is the *polis*. Nevertheless, each role in its particularity is only an instance of virtue. The man is not virtuous simply because he acts like a man, nor is the woman virtuous because she acts like a woman; rather, each is virtuous insofar as he or she performs a role in the context of a community. In other words, each must recognize what is the same in all cases—e.g. membership in a co-dependent community—and apply it in particular circumstances. Although there are many different kinds of bees (drones, workers, queens), they differ neither insofar as they are bees nor insofar as they are members of a swarm.

<sup>136</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 48.

Meno objects that virtue is unique because unlike other things, the various instantiations of virtue have nothing in common.<sup>137</sup> As we soon learn, Meno is an eristic fellow and resists honest, good-spirited discussion. Although at some level Meno likely believes his own objection, it is not hard to imagine that he is dragging his heels at this point. Socrates politely reminds him that in fact all instantiations of virtue do resemble each other; people are only ever virtuous when they are just and moderate (73b). Socrates remarks that “they would not be good in the same way if their virtue were not the same” (73c). That is, if their virtues were different from one another, then they would not necessarily be virtuous in the same way; but given that virtuous people *are* necessarily virtuous in the same way, virtue must be a single thing. Meno is reminded of what he surely knew to be true but conveniently forgot. He is forced to recognize that virtue is indeed like every other case: he must find and articulate the one thing that is common in all cases.<sup>138</sup>

After this brief explanation, Meno tries to define virtue for the second time: he says that virtue is “to be able to rule human beings” (73c).<sup>139</sup> Socrates immediately objects that surely this definition does not apply to slaves or children.<sup>140</sup> This issue is

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<sup>137</sup> “Will virtue differ at all in its being virtue, whether it be in a child or in an elder, whether in a woman or in a man?” “In my opinion Socrates, [virtue] is somehow no longer similar to those [other examples like health, size and strength]” (73a).

<sup>138</sup> “In insisting that we can only use the single name virtue on the assumption that it stands for a single, definable essence or form, the same in all its instances, Socrates was not only giving a lesson in logic but upholding the existence of an absolute moral standard against the hand-to-mouth ethics of the Sophists” (Guthrie, vol. IV, 242). Strictly speaking this is not essential to the methodological exercise; nevertheless it is hardly coincidence.

<sup>139</sup> It is no accident that Meno the Thessalian nobleman should define virtue this way: “In Thessaly, ‘ruling’ has more conspicuous aspects than in the democratic Athens. This becomes evident when Menon appears with a large retinue” Friedländer, vol. II, 274). This ‘retinue’ is evidenced when Socrates asks Meno to “call over... one of [his] many attendants” for the slave demonstration (82b).

<sup>140</sup> Sharples claims that this objection could be refuted if Meno would maintain that slaves and children do not possess true ἀρετή (*Meno*, ed. R.W. Sharples, 129). This likely explains why Socrates moves on from

quickly dropped and instead Socrates amends Meno's definition to say "to be able to rule... justly, but not unjustly" (73d). Meno describes only the 'virtue' of a very particular demographic and forgets to include justice. Friedländer describes this failing well: in Meno's second effort, "the unitary concept is bought at the price of validity and at the risk of converting virtue into its opposite."<sup>141</sup> Meno forgets what virtue must be and that in defining it he must not pick one out of many, but see the unity in the multiplicity.<sup>142</sup>

Reminded that virtue should somehow be related to justice, Meno identifies the two. Socrates points out yet another definitional subtlety that Meno has overlooked: whether justice is virtue or a *certain* virtue.<sup>143</sup> This distinction confuses Meno, so Socrates reminds Meno that roundness is not shape pure and simple, but a *certain* shape, since there are other shapes, e.g. straightness. Meno realizes his oversight and says, "I too say that justice is not the only virtue but that there are others as well" (73e). The distinction Socrates wants to make should be reformulated into a conditional: *if* there are other virtues, *then* justice is a certain virtue.<sup>144</sup> At Socrates' gentle encouragement, Meno

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this criticism so quickly. Overcoming this defense would likely require a long and involved discussion, so it is easier for Socrates at this point to mention it only in brief.

<sup>141</sup> Friedländer, vol. II, 278.

<sup>142</sup> The 'ruling' Meno suggests is not the intelligent and beneficent ordering of things under its power, but the domination of the *hoi polloi* to the ruler's own gratification. For Meno virtue is not simply ruling, but ruling *over human beings* (*ἀνθρώπων*) – *ἄνθρωπος* being a term of disparagement akin to 'the many' and to be contrasted with *ἀνὴρ*, a real man, and *καλοκῆρατος*, a gentleman ("*Protagoras*" and "*Meno*," trans. Robert C. Bartlett, 91 note 2). It is to lord one's might over the plebs. This understanding of ruling is brought out later in the dialogue when Meno tries to dominate Socrates (86d). Meno's notion of ruling is to be contrasted with 'technical' ruling (*Republic*, 342c) and rule of the self (cf. note 192 below). In these latter senses, 'ruling' constitutes a kind of virtue, but this is not what Meno means and Socrates knows it.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Klein, *Commentary*, 55: "Meno has *not* grasped, although he had seemed to, the difference between the various *aretai* and *aretê* in its sameness and oneness that Socrates is asking about."

<sup>144</sup> By thus framing the issue, Socrates tacitly raises for consideration the unity and multiplicity of the virtues. Only if, for example, justice is other than temperance et al. can we say that justice is *a certain* virtue and not virtue itself. Although Meno is able to list virtues other than justice, we should consider in what way these virtues are different from one another. When Socrates uses the examples of 'shape' and

recognizes the important distinction between a member of a class and the class itself: when there are other equally valid but distinct cases, each case must belong to some other, comprehensive class. This is the distinction between a particular instance and a universal category.

With this realization, Meno begins again to enumerate the virtues: “courage is a virtue... and moderation, and wisdom and magnificence” (74a). In doing so, Meno shows a brief glimmer of improvement, though unfortunately this is short-lived. It appears that Meno has fallen into earlier trappings, but Socrates rightly discerns a difference. Although virtue has become manifold, it is “in a manner different than just now” (74a). In contrast to his first definition, which fragmented the virtues into discrete particulars without a clear notion of the identity that persists through all of them, Meno is here able to manage the universality and coherence that a definition must have. Nevertheless, he is not yet capable of coupling this with unity in multiplicity.

### SHAPES AND COLOURS: HOW TO DEFINE

This begins a passage of wide, though not especially fierce, disagreement. Meno, in his difficulties, petitions Socrates for help. He does not understand how “to get hold of one virtue pertaining to all” (74b), so Socrates decides to offer him an example definition. In examining this definition, Meno will see how to grasp the many in a single, comprehensive idea: how he ought to describe virtue. In this episode Socrates gives three

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‘colour’ to explain the difference between ‘X’ and ‘a certain X’, he specifically emphasizes that these terms include within themselves contraries, e.g. straight and round, black and white. By contrast, it would be hard to say that justice and piety are contrary to one another (cf. *Protagoras*, 329e-333b). We are thus compelled to ask in what way the virtues may be one or many. As we shall see, because the virtues find unity in knowledge, they are one *and* many; none of them is other than knowledge, but neither is justice the same as piety, courage or temperance or vice versa.

definitions: the first two are of ‘shape’ (σχῆμα) and the third is of colour. The third definition is laughably and identifiably poor, but there is much debate whether the first or second definition of ‘shape’ is preferred by Socrates. It is my contention that Socrates privileges neither, but that each has its own merits and shortcomings; the two definitions exhibit two distinct ways of grasping virtue (or any other *definiendum*), each with its own limitations. In these definitions, Socrates makes every reasonable effort to accommodate Meno, but the young Thessalian is revealed lazy and indolent.

In response to the new ‘swarm’ that has appeared, Meno expresses doubt that he will be able to resolve the issue in the way Socrates wishes. In an effort to help his interlocutor, Socrates explains the difficulty once more. He points to the examples of ‘shape’ and ‘colour’. Because ‘roundness’ is only one among many shapes, it is not ‘shape’ but ‘a certain shape’. Because there are many colours, none of which is privileged, each colour is only ‘a certain colour’. Meno readily acknowledges this difference and his familiarity with both particular colours and shapes (74b-e).

Having gained this assent, Socrates asks Meno to practice making this distinction. Because they are agreed on what particular shapes are (at least implicitly), Socrates tells Meno to try using this example to make a general definition: “Try to say [what shape is], so that you may become practiced with a view to answering about virtue” (75a). If Meno is to later succeed in his more difficult task, finding the nature of virtue, he will first have to learn *through his own activity* how to define something. This practice will prepare him for the greater task that lies ahead. Unsurprisingly though, Meno resists: “No, but *you* say, Socrates” (75b). He has no interest in making a real effort. As a student of Gorgias, it is his ἔθος to passively receive instruction. He would rather be told a definition than

search and reflect upon what he already knows in order to gather one out of himself. Thus we can see his aforementioned laziness.

Before considering the definitions themselves, let us note that Socrates' stated preference at 76e is grammatically ambiguous. After Socrates has given all three definitions, he says that of the three definitions the third definition is not the best, "but that other one is" (ἀλλ' ἐκείνη βελτίων; 76e). The grammar of this sentence does not denote to which of the first two definitions Socrates refers with ἐκείνη. As Sharples says, "That one' could in principle be either the first definition of shape... or the second."<sup>145</sup> The grammar and syntax do not indicate the antecedent of ἐκείνη, so we must examine the content of the definitions themselves.<sup>146</sup>

After Meno's flat refusal to make an effort, Socrates decides to gratify his interlocutor and to define shape. He describes shape as "that which alone of beings happens always to accompany color" (75b). This is the model definition with which Meno can fashion one of virtue, since Socrates "would be content if [Meno] should speak to [him] about virtue in this way" (75b). Meno balks at this, saying that someone might deny knowing colour and thus invalidate such a definition. There are several points to address here. Kahn claims that Socrates' definition fails because it offers only an attribute instead of the essence and consequently does not tell us what shape is.<sup>147</sup> This is true, but this does not invalidate the definition. Socrates' definition of shape does not articulate or explain the essence of shape, but it does not aim to. Socrates' definition presupposes that

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<sup>145</sup> *Meno*, ed. R.W. Sharples, 136.

<sup>146</sup> Bluck's comments likewise exhibit this ambiguity: "Ἐκείνη refers, *presumably*, to Socrates' second definition of σχῆμα" (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 254; emphasis removed and added). In fact, the scholarly debate depends upon this ambiguity. If ἐκείνη clearly denoted either the first or the second definition, the interpretive issues of the passage would be largely resolved.

<sup>147</sup> Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 177.

in some sense ‘shape’ and ‘colour’ are already known. Instead, this definition comprehensively groups together every instance of ‘shape’ in terms that are simple and immediate. Contrary to Kahn’s claims, this definition does not simply give any old attribute of ‘shape’; rather, it identifies something not essential, but *unique* by which ‘shape’ may be recognized. It does not clarify what ‘shape’ is, but it does not have to because it assumes that we already know what shape and colour are. Meno himself implicitly agreed that he knows what ‘shape’ and ‘colour’ are when he acknowledged that ‘roundness’ and ‘white’ are ‘a certain shape’ and ‘a certain colour’ respectively.<sup>148</sup> If someone has no idea what shape is and were “as perplexed about [colour] as he is about shape” (75c), this definition would fail, but that is not the case. This definition aims to identify what is already immediately known through simple, non-technical language. For this reason, Socrates is totally genuine when he says that “[he] would be content” with this sort of definition whether or not it articulates the essence of shape (75b).<sup>149</sup>

Despite this, Socrates recognizes Meno’s criticism as valid, insofar as it may come from a genuine ignorance of a term and not merely eristics (75c). If the term ‘colour’ is genuinely unknown to Meno, then the definition is not meaningful and the objection is valid. In specific response to Meno’s objection, Socrates accepts as a procedural rule that both interlocutors should meet on even terms and only use words that they both agree they understand.

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<sup>148</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 248; Weiss, *Virtue*, 28.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 7; Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 164. “We may take it that this *sort* of definition, explaining one thing by reference to others, would satisfy Socrates... We may suppose, then, that the Socrates of the *Meno* would have been satisfied with a *λόγος* similar to his own at 75b: one which, without itself stating the *οὐσία* of virtue, might help both Socrates and Meno to recognize (or recollect) what the *οὐσία* was. The terms of the definition, we may suppose, need not all be defined, so long as they are *understood*” (Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 7).

Socrates then gives a second definition of ‘shape’. He begins by securing Meno’s agreement on a handful of terms (‘end/limit’, ‘plane’, ‘solid’) and then gathers them together: “shape is the limit of a solid” (στερεοῦ πέρας σχῆμα εἶναι; 76a). This revision meets Kahn’s objection to the first definition: it articulates what the essence of shape is. It does this by locating shape within a larger scientific framework; because of this, the definition itself is scientific.<sup>150</sup> It is not clear, however, that Meno’s objection has really been overcome. In a formal sense the issue is resolved, but one doubts that Meno knows what στερεόν or πέρας mean any more than he did colour.<sup>151</sup> If anything, because these words are technical,<sup>152</sup> it is *more* likely that someone would not understand them and ask for them to be defined. Yet defining these terms and those which in turn define *them* would amount to an infinite regress.<sup>153</sup> So whenever we attempt to define something, at some point we must resort to undefined terms taken as immediately known. The scientific framework is just such a set of defining terms within which one may articulate the essence of shape. Only when a scientific framework is taken as given and known can one even begin to define scientifically. So while Meno and Socrates tried to overcome the problem of unknown or undefined terms, they have actually shown that this problem is insurmountable. The difference between the first and second definition in this respect is

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<sup>150</sup> Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 177. In so remarking, Kahn cites Sharples: “If the reason for [a definition’s] being better than the definition of colour is that it goes some way to indicate the place in the scheme of things of the thing being defined, it must be the second definition that Socrates had in mind... Indeed, it was suggested that Socrates would be content with a mere distinguishing mark; but one definition may still be better than another, even if both are adequate” (*Meno*, ed. R.W. Sharples, 137).

<sup>151</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 65.

<sup>152</sup> “It is clear that Socrates... has abandoned the colloquial meaning of *schêma* altogether. In the definition he has just given, the word does not mean ‘closed surface of a visible thing’ but a geometrical entity, ‘figure,’ as defined, for example, in Euclid: ‘Figure is that which is contained by any boundary or boundaries,’ where ‘boundary,’ in turn, is defined as the limit (*peras*) of something. *Schêma*, in Socrates’ second definition, is a ‘technical’ word signifying a ‘bounded surface area’ akin to *epipedon* and to *epiphaneia*. Socrates’ second statement is indeed strictly a geometrical definition” (Klein, *Commentary*, 65).

<sup>153</sup> Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 6; Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 163.



that a 'scientific framework' greatly increases the number of undefined terms, both explicit and implicit,<sup>154</sup> and reduces the immediacy with which these terms are known. Therefore with respect to Meno's objection, this second definition is only superficially better; in fact, by using technical terms that are not immediately understood instead of simple ones, it actually exacerbates the problem. So while the second definition successfully articulates the essence of shape, it does so at the expense of removing this articulation from what is immediately known.

Therefore, both the first and the second definition of 'shape' have their merits and their shortcomings. The first definition is problematic because it neglects to articulate the essence of 'shape'. It is good because it groups together every instance of 'shape' using simple and immediately understood terms in recognition of the fact that using only prior defined terms is impossible. The second definition is problematic because the terms it uses are not known immediately the way that colour is; it purports to overcome the problem of unknown terms but actually makes it worse. It is good because it manages to articulate the essence of shape scientifically. Therefore Socrates would rightly be satisfied if Meno defined virtue in either way. For while neither is perfect, both are adequate in their own way; an unproblematic definition is impossible.

Although by all accounts Meno should be satisfied by this second definition because Socrates has met his specific objections, instead he reveals his *hubris* (76a). In

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<sup>154</sup> Socrates asks if Meno understands 'plane' and 'solid' but 'plane' does not make it into the definition. Socrates does not explain why he asks about 'plane'. 'Plane' is somehow necessary for this definition which uses only the terms 'solid' and 'limit'. The implication is that at some level 'solid' cannot be understood unless we also understand 'plane'. By the same logic, 'plane' cannot be understood unless we also understand 'line' and 'line cannot be understood unless we also understand 'point'. All these terms are necessary if we are to understand anything geometrically. So when Socrates says that he will speak in terms of geometry (76a) and mentions only 'plane' and 'solid', a host of other terms are also implied. These implied are understood but are left undefined.

immediate response to Socrates' second definition, Meno flatly asks "What do you say color is, Socrates?" (76a). Clearly Meno is being difficult and trying to delay the fulfillment of his promise to define virtue (75b). Socrates' second definition has nothing to do with colour; this question has no relevance in terms of learning how to give a definition. Rather, it confirms what Socrates ironically hinted at earlier: when Meno objected that he does not know colour and thus that the first definition is invalid, his objection was not genuine but came from his eristic and contentious nature (cf. 75c). Meno has no wish to define virtue. He does not resist just because he does not understand the proper method of investigation, but because he has no interest in answering the question. He would rather hold on to his unexamined prejudice.

Socrates recognizes this and defines colour ironically. After briefly commenting on the way Meno always orders others around (cf. 86d), Socrates says that he will proceed "in the manner of Gorgias—the way in which [Meno] would follow most of all" (76c). Instead of trying to give an accurate or explanatory definition, he will give one that accommodates Meno's ἔθος, a 'tragic' definition (τραγικῆ; 76e).<sup>155</sup> In the same manner as the second definition, Socrates first seeks and gains assent over the terms 'effluence', 'pores', and 'sight'. With these he declares that "color is an effluence of shapes (σχημάτων) commensurate with sight and hence subject to perception" (76d).<sup>156</sup> After Meno expresses his delight, Socrates immediately undercuts his own definition—and thus also Meno—with two criticisms.

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<sup>155</sup> Alternatively translated as "high-flown" (Bartlett ad loc.), "high-poetic" (Lamb ad loc.), or "impressive at stage play" (Friedländer, vol. II, 279).

<sup>156</sup> I have substituted 'effluence' for Bartlett's 'emanation'.

First, he says, this definition likely pleases Meno because “it was spoken in accord with [his] customary way (συνήθειαν)” (76d), that is, it uses terms and a style with which Meno is familiar. Meno, of course, is a student of Gorgias, who in turn was a student of Empedocles.<sup>157</sup> In other words, Meno does not understand the terms of this definition ‘immediately’—they are borrowed from an Empedoclean theory which he is all too happy to parrot. He has heard the sophisticated theory of effluences before, but it seems highly unlikely he knows what an effluence is.<sup>158</sup> Second, he tells Meno that “[he] might also say, on the basis of it, what sound is as well as smell and many other such things” (76d). This definition does not say anything about what colour is. It does not try to articulate its essence. Rather, it asserts some obscure event which corresponds to colour. The result of these two criticisms is that this third definition suffers from both problems and enjoys none of the benefits of the first two definitions. It neither articulates the essence of colour nor uses simple and immediate terms. Socrates’ criticism of his definition of colour therefore subtly suggests the merits and demerits of his definitions of shape.

Ironically, these two problems are precisely the reason that Meno likes this third definition. When Meno declares his preference for this third definition, Socrates says that this is only because it is Empedoclean (and thus familiar) and because with it he could define any number of sensations (76d). The implication is that this definition makes a minimum of work for the young Thessalian. Meno prefers it because he is lazy. Meno

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<sup>157</sup> “*Protagoras*” and “*Meno*,” trans. Robert C. Barlett, 100 note 33.

<sup>158</sup> These terms only have meaning within an elaborate theory of sensation. So when Meno agrees that he know what ‘effluences’ and ‘pores’ are, he is implicitly agreeing to much more. It seems dubious that Meno really understands this Empedoclean theory. Thus his agreement to accept these terms as understood is further problematized.

tries to defer his labour in defining virtue and in recompense is given a “tragic” definition, his preference for which reveals his indolence.

So these three definitions both reveal Meno’s laziness and indicate that there are multiple ways to investigate something and to form a definition. As I have noted, Socrates says he would be satisfied with the first definition, even if it fails to articulate the essence of shape. His satisfaction at someone answering *in this particular way* suggests that this is only one method among many.<sup>159</sup> Yet Meno’s objection compels a second definition and Socrates happily obliges. Socrates exhibits a second satisfactory way of forming a definition. It seems from this that *either* the first *or* the second definition would suffice. Each of the two methods functions in its own way and has its own limitations: the first gives an immediate and simple definition that points toward the *definiendum* but does not articulate the essence; the second articulates the essence but only by using technical terms that must be located within an assumed body of knowledge. In light of this, it is my contention that Socrates is deliberately ambiguous when he says ἐκείνη—‘that one’. This ambiguity demands a critical evaluation of each method that reveals their respective limits. Socrates thereby educates the reader (for Meno is hardly paying close attention) in definitional inquiry.

### A SECOND ATTEMPT AT DEFINING VIRTUE

On the increasingly unlikely chance that Meno will make a real effort, Socrates asks him to define virtue once more. This time, Meno puts it thus: “for one who desires noble things (ἐπιθυμοῦντα τῶν καλῶν) to be capable of providing them for himself”

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<sup>159</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 59.

(77b). Socrates immediately translates this into ‘desiring goods and being able to procure them’. This definition has some formal merit insofar as it is both unified and universal; it does not “make many out of the one, as the wits say” (77a).

Nevertheless, Meno is confused about its meaning; this confusion should make us doubt that Meno understands his own definition. We first witness this when Socrates substitutes τὰ ἀγαθὰ for τὰ καλὰ. Whether or not he is consciously aware of it, by καλόν Meno probably intends to say ‘what is *truly good*’; he means that virtue in part consists in recognizing what is truly good and not mistaking what is actually bad for something good as the *hoi polloi* are wont to do. The obscurity of this intention is a result of Meno’s imprecise and unclear use of ‘desire’ (ἐπιθυμεῖν).<sup>160</sup> Socrates aptly demonstrates that no one desires the bad (77b-78b), but conspicuously overlooks Meno’s plausible (if unconscious) intention. He shows Meno that some people desire bad things, thinking them to be good. In effect, they agree, these people actually desire good things, but they do not know what is truly good. A reasonable definition might be rendered thus: to know what is truly good and to be able to get it.<sup>161</sup> These agreements therefore serve to articulate the latent hunch in Meno that came out in his use of καλόν. Nevertheless, there is no mention here of knowledge or recognition of the good. Socrates uses the obscurity of Meno’s thought to obliquely point toward the importance of virtue’s relationship to knowledge.

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<sup>160</sup> Let us note Kahn’s remarks: “Whereas in the *Gorgias* and *Charmides* Plato draws a terminological distinction between *boulēsis* and *epithumia* that prefigures Aristotle’s contrast between rational desire and appetite, in the *Meno* Plato alternates between *epithumein* and *boulesthai* without any noticeable difference in meaning. So in the *Protagoras* this verbal distinction is treated as typical of the pedantry of Prodicus (340a8)” (Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 249 note 30). This assessment is generally correct and I follow it.

<sup>161</sup> Of course, being able to get something entails knowing what it is you seek. So in a sense, being able to acquire good things includes knowing what the good things are. Knowing the good bleeds into both desiring and being able to get the good. Despite this overlap, it is nonetheless important to articulate knowing as a distinct activity.

This silent mention of knowledge explains what would otherwise be a confusing explanation of wretchedness (ἄθλιον). After noting that no one desires bad things, Socrates defines wretchedness as “to desire (ἐπιθυμεῖν) and to possess the bad things” (78a). Given that *no one* truly desires bad things, it would follow from a literal reading that the former condition could never be met and that no one is ever wretched. This seems intuitively absurd. Rather, we should read this definition as implying ignorance of what is good. Wretchedness would then be “to desire bad things *because one mistakes them for good things*, and to possess them”. Since wretchedness is posed as in some way contrary to virtue,<sup>162</sup> this also highlights the importance of virtue’s relationship to knowledge.

Because everyone desires the same thing but not everyone is virtuous, Socrates claims, Meno’s third definition of virtue can be simplified to “the capacity to provide good things for oneself” (78c). Socrates expresses some optimism for this definition: “Let’s see if this too that you are saying is true, for perhaps (ἴσως) what you say might be good” (78c). Socrates means to say that the truth of this claim will depend on what sort of things Meno considers noble or good.<sup>163</sup> When queried, Meno reveals the good things to be health, honours, high office and, above all, wealth.<sup>164</sup> Money-grubbing Meno once again has forgotten that virtue must have some relation to justice and the like. Socrates reminds him that acquiring wealth unjustly is vice; the consequent “lack of provision (ἀπορία)” (78e) would then be virtue. Socrates sums up this argument: “So the provision

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<sup>162</sup> The parallel structure of the respective definitions of virtue and wretchedness indicates this.

<sup>163</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 78.

<sup>164</sup> Socrates later substitutes gold and silver for ‘the good things’ and omits mention of the other goods, e.g. high office (78e). Presumably he understands Meno to mean that everything else is merely a means to an end, namely the acquisition of wealth (Klein, *Commentary*, 78). This certainly reflects Meno’s own personal convictions and displays his greed.

(πόρος) of such goods would no more be virtue than the lack (ἀπορία) of them, but it seems that whatever comes with justice will be virtue, and whatever without that sort of thing will be vice” (78e).<sup>165</sup> What Meno has identified as τὰ ἀγαθὰ, gold and silver, are not true goods; they are only circumstantially good, made good by the presence of some other thing that is *essentially* good (cf. 87e ff.).

These essential goods are here identified with the individual virtues. Socrates reminds Meno that they agreed to reject terms not yet agreed upon (79d). This was Meno’s objection, not Socrates,<sup>166</sup> but given that they agreed to proceed in this way, it is no longer admissible that they should define virtue in terms of justice, piety or any other particular virtue.<sup>167</sup> Socrates demands Meno make another effort to define virtue.

In his efforts thus far, Meno has been revealed as a lazy, forgetful and greedy man who would gladly overlook justice and the other virtues were he not explicitly reminded. Now having failed for a third time and being asked once again to define virtue, Meno grows frustrated and resorts to petty insults and threats, making us question his moral standing and foreshadowing his corruption during the Campaign of Cyrus. He says that he has grown completely perplexed, in accordance with the rumours circulating about Socrates. Meno uses this as an excuse to poke fun: “In my opinion too you are in every way—if I may be permitted a little joke—in form and other respects, most like that well-known stingray of the sea” (80a). He also accuses Socrates of being a sorcerer (γότης) as well as bewitching and drugging him (γοητεύεις με καὶ φαρμάττεις; 80a-b). This is not,

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<sup>165</sup> My translation. Ἀπορία obviously reminds us of intellectual ἀπορία. Πόρος also fits well the analogy of the road to Larissa (97a) since it means both ‘provision’ and ‘path’ or ‘way’.

<sup>166</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 82.

<sup>167</sup> If Meno had agreed to use undefined but ‘understood’ terms, perhaps this definition would be acceptable. Cf. note 147, above.

however, childish but harmless fun; it is accompanied by thinly veiled threats. Meno unobtrusively warns him that if he should travel outside of Athens and “as a stranger (ξένος) in another city... do things of this sort, [he] would perhaps be carted off to jail as a sorcerer (γόης)” (80b). Meno hints that if Socrates should ever leave the protective custody of Athenian law, he would use his Thessalian influence to have Socrates arrested or worse. Such remarks are unbecoming of a well-to-do young nobleman who would certainly claim to be a good citizen. But Meno prides himself on his reputation and for the past while Socrates has been revealing Meno to be a lazy and ignorant fool, unable to answer questions he considers embarrassingly basic.<sup>168</sup> Meno becomes willing to make violent threats because not only is he confused and disoriented, but he is losing more and more of his reputation with each passing minute. With no public image left so save, Meno openly threatens Socrates.<sup>169</sup>

Socrates defends himself against these accusations by explaining that he is not a stingray. The important distinction, he reminds Meno, is that while the stingray only numbs others, Socrates only brings others to the same perplexities as himself;<sup>170</sup> he is as much in ἀπορία as Meno (80c). He exhorts Meno once more to seek out what virtue is.

Meno responds with what has come to be known as ‘Meno’s Paradox’:

And in what way, Socrates, will you seek out that about which you don’t know at all (μὴ οἶσθα τὸ παράπαν) *what* it is? By setting out for yourself what sort of a thing, from among those that you don’t know, will you make your inquiry? Or even if you happen right upon it, how will you know that this is that thing which you don’t know? (80d)

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<sup>168</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 89.

<sup>169</sup> It is no wonder, then, that Socrates can get away with openly calling Meno a πανοῦργος.

<sup>170</sup> Of course, Meno too made this distinction at 80a1-2: σὺ οὐδὲν ἄλλο ἢ αὐτός τε ἀπορεῖς καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ποιεῖς ἀπορεῖν. Meno must have known that his stingray analogy did not quite work, but it was a convenient segue to his insult.



Meno raises this objection not out of any personal, epistemological crisis, but a convenient sophistic trick to forestall the conversation.<sup>171</sup> Socrates calls out Meno for making an eristic argument (ἐριστικὸν λόγον; 80d). Ironically enough, this argument, which is purposed specifically to perplex an interlocutor, is much more befitting of a numbing ‘stingray’; if successful, it would paralyze whoever hears it.<sup>172</sup> Regardless, this problem has real philosophical import for Plato and must be addressed in some capacity.<sup>173</sup>

### THE RECOLLECTION PASSAGE

With this begins the recollection passage. For our purposes, we may divide it into three sections: the myth (81a-e), the slave demonstration (82a-85b) and the explanation (85c-86c). The purpose of the recollection passage is twofold. First, Socrates is trying to explain to Meno the very thing that they have been doing, that is, their discussion. Second, Socrates is trying to justify in a provisional way the Virtue Thesis in which the recollection passage culminates.

When Socrates turns to myth, it is because in the present circumstances a *logos* would not suffice. Whether it is because time does not permit a more extended treatment,

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<sup>171</sup> Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 8, 277; *Meno*, ed. R.W. Sharples, 142. Both Bluck and Sharples note that this argument closely resembles those found in the *Euthydemus*: πότεροί εἰσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ μανθάνοντες, οἱ σοφοὶ ἢ οἱ ἀμαθεῖς; No doubt Meno learned this sort of trick from Gorgias. Just as *On the Nonexistent* showed “the absurdity of arguing from ‘it is’ and ‘it is not’ as such” (Guthrie, vol. III, 194), this argument shows the impossibility of learning by dividing things into ‘known’ and ‘unknown’.

<sup>172</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 91.

<sup>173</sup> Weiss notes that Meno words his eristic paradox in the second person, while in rephrasing it Socrates uses the third person. Socrates replies to Meno thus: “Do you see how eristic is this argument you’re spinning, that it isn’t possible for a *human being* to seek out either what *he* knows or what *he* doesn’t know? For that which *he* knows *he* wouldn’t seek out—*he* knows it, and *such a person* has no need of a search—nor what *he* doesn’t know, for *he* doesn’t know what *he* will seek out” (80e; emphasis added). What was an *ad hominem* tirade is impersonalized and made into a universal, epistemological problem (Weiss, *Virtue*, 58). This universal problem is what Socrates will try to resolve.

because the discussion lacks sufficient theoretical framework, or simply because the interlocutor is unwilling or hostile, the myth occupies a space that a *logos* in the current context cannot.<sup>174</sup> This is in contrast to, for example, Protagoras, for whom the difference between myth and *logos* is strictly formal; it is inconsequential which format he uses.<sup>175</sup> This myth of recollection here should be able to make sense of the discussion that just preceded it, especially because it was left incomplete. It should extend the *logos* beyond its own limits.<sup>176</sup> Meno frustrates the inquiry into the limits and conditions of knowledge with his paradox such that Socrates is unable to continue without recourse to a more elaborate framework which he cannot rationally justify at the moment. Now supported by a myth, Socrates and Meno will be able to investigate that which previously escaped the efforts of their *logos*. This myth will help to explain what rational inquiry is.

The myth claims that the soul itself does not perish, but is immortal. This means that it is particularly important to live piously and that the soul in its longevity has ‘learned’ all things. It follows that the soul should be able to recall everything it once knew (ἠπίστατο) if it pursues the truth courageously and tirelessly.<sup>177</sup> For this reason, they should believe it and continue their inquiry. Let us note a few things about this myth.

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<sup>174</sup> That is to say, myth has the same aim as *logos*, namely, it “look[s] to a beyond for the principles of explanations of the sensible world” (Brisson, *Saved Myths*, 6). As Brisson goes on to note, Plato privileges philosophical discourse over mythological discourse, which prior to Plato held an explanatory monopoly in Greece (*Ibid.*, 16). At stake in the matter of myth and *logos* is the relationship between reason and what is somehow beyond reason, the latter of which belongs to myth. This issue is of course not limited to Plato. For a brief examination of differing historical accounts of the relationship between reason and myth, see Brisson’s *How Philosophers Saved Myths*, in which the author offers several accounts spanning from Plato to renaissance thinkers. For a fuller treatment of Plato in particular, see Brisson’s *Plato the Myth Maker*.

<sup>175</sup> *Protagoras*, 320c; Friedländer, vol. I, 176

<sup>176</sup> Cf. Friedländer, vol. I, 189. He also remarks, “And here we see a reason why the Socratic myths are found in the middle or at the end of the dialogue, but not at a place where the dialectical method has not yet begun” (Friedländer, vol. I, 176).

<sup>177</sup> As I mention below, 81c marks the first appearance of ἐπιστήμη in the *Meno*. It reappears again at 85d ff. when Socrates distinguishes it from δόξα and then throughout the rest of the dialogue.

First, when the soul ‘learns’ all things, this must be taken in an equivocal sense. Kahn explains:

Unless the prenatal cognitive experience of the disembodied psyche was radically different from learning in this life, the hypothesis of learning in a previous existence would simply produce a regress, in which the paradox would immediately recur.<sup>178</sup>

Second, Socrates maintains that “nothing prevents someone, once he has recollected just one thing... to discover all else” (81d). This means that the whole of nature is tied together so that no particular truth is isolated or atomic; understanding individual parts to some extent implies understanding of both the whole and other parts. Further, this also means that once the process of learning has begun, it may continue until all knowledge has been made conscious.<sup>179</sup> It is not simply that all of nature and truth is connected, but that these connections lead to one another so that knowledge of one thing provokes knowledge of another and moves the ‘learner’ to discover the whole.

Meno finds all this incredible and wants an explanation from Socrates. This begins the slave demonstration passage. In it, Socrates questions one of Meno’s slaves about the side of the double square. Twice in the midst of the inquiry Socrates pauses to explain to Meno what is happening (82e, 84b-c). Socrates shows that the slave is undergoing the same process as Meno did when he was trying define virtue. Socrates calls this demonstration an ἐπίδειξις, a sophistic display (82b).<sup>180</sup> By implicitly connecting this demonstration with sophistry, Socrates actually puts himself in opposition

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<sup>178</sup> Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 64.

<sup>179</sup> If it weren’t already clear from the image of ‘recollection’, the implication of this is that ‘knowledge’ has a limited scope. Recollection can proceed of its own accord, free from sense experience. Therefore the objects of recollection and knowledge cannot be sensible particulars. ‘Knowledge’ in this sense must be limited to the intelligible.

<sup>180</sup> An ἐπίδειξις, typically translated as ‘exhibition’, is a short speech or demonstration in which a sophist displays his talents in order to attract students. Cf. *Protagoras*, 328d.

to the sophists and their typical method of ‘pouring in’ knowledge, the method for which Meno has developed an ἔθοϛ.<sup>181</sup>

For the most part, we need not concern ourselves with the particular details of the geometrical proof. Rather it is the method and movement of the discussion that we should pay attention to, since that is what Socrates is trying to show to Meno. In this demonstration, there are three active levels of meaning. They are (1) the conversation between Socrates and the slave, (2) Meno watching and himself being urged to learn (i.e. recollect) that all ‘learning is recollection’, and (3) the reader witnessing the first two and ‘learning’ from them.<sup>182</sup> The same movement happens on all three levels.

Socrates begins by calling over one of Meno’s many attendants, a slave. He then draws a square of side length two and questions him about it, eventually asking him about the length of the side of the double-square, which the slave declares to be four. Socrates pauses to confirm with Meno that he is teaching him nothing and to note the contradictory opinions. He resumes the questioning and helps the slave realize that the side length is neither four nor three. We know, along with Meno and Socrates, that the slave could say numbers endlessly to no avail; it is not clear, but perhaps the slave realizes this too. It is at this point that Socrates suggests pointing to the line instead of stating its length, which we know to be the only real solution.<sup>183</sup> The slave does not notice the import of this suggestion and, unable to state the length, declares his perplexity (84a).

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<sup>181</sup> Cf. Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 169-170: “As Plato in *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* explains the ethical outlines of his new paideia by putting it in contrast to the sophists’ ideal of education, so here in *Meno* he unfolds the profound conception of knowledge latent in Socrates’ thought by contrasting it with the sophists’ mechanical conception of the learning process. True learning is not passive reception, but a laborious search, which is possible only if the learner spontaneously takes part in it.”

<sup>182</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 99.

<sup>183</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 168.

For the second time, Socrates pauses and explains what is happening. The explanation is more extended and more clearly articulates what previously occurred with Meno in his definitional efforts. Whereas previously the slave mistakenly thought he knew all about the double-square but did not, now he still does not know but he is aware of his ignorance. This ἀπορία is what Meno had previously called being numbed (ναρκᾶν); clearly it does not do harm, as Meno thought, but *benefits* the slave. Socrates drives home that this is what happened to Meno: “Now he might even gladly inquire because he doesn’t know, but then he easily supposed that he would speak well (εὖ λέγειν), before many (πρὸς πολλοὺς) and many times (πολλάκις), about the double figure” (84b). Substituting ‘virtue’ for ‘the double figure’, this was Meno’s own position just moments earlier (80b); Socrates mocks him through near verbatim quotation.<sup>184</sup> Socrates shows Meno that inquiry of any kind is impossible unless one feels a lack, ἀπορία; it is this lack that Socrates was trying to reveal to Meno. In terms of the parallel between the definitional section and the slave demonstration, this is the point to which Meno has been brought.<sup>185</sup> The difference between these two cases, however, is that while Meno became eristic and unresponsive, the slave became ready and eager to pursue the truth. Earlier Meno had lashed out and insulted Socrates because he had lost face; now he (presumably) understands that he has been benefitted and will hopefully be more willing to discuss virtue.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> It seems incredible that the slave would eagerly speak well before large crowds on a topic which previously had clearly given him little pause, but this only adds to the humour.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 16.

<sup>186</sup> If Meno does indeed understand, it is only because he can witness this phenomenon as something external to himself. Only in observing it happen to someone else can Meno follow along. One imagines that had Socrates explained without demonstrating on the slave, Meno would have been unable to understand.

Having thus explained ἀπορία to Meno, Socrates resumes his discussion with the slave. He draws more lines and together they find that the side of the double-square is the diagonal. One of the most conspicuous aspects of this part is how leading many of Socrates' questions are. Meno sees no problem, but he is dull-witted and makes a poor judge. In what sense is the slave really 'recollecting' his understanding of the double square? Socrates draws all the diagrams and points the slave in the right direction. When the slave is confused, Socrates clarifies the matter. Socrates leads the slave by the hand so that he could not but find that the answer is 'the diagonal', but in a sense, this is precisely the point. What is important is that at each stage, the slave himself *recognizes the necessity* in each proposition to which he agrees and in every answer that he gives. Although Socrates may make leading suggestions, these cannot produce the inner conviction that the slave must feel in giving his answers and that we must feel in reading along.<sup>187</sup> Any diagram is necessarily imperfect and for that reason could not account for the slave's understanding or produce certainty.<sup>188</sup> Whatever the precise nature of 'recollection', this much is certain: the source of epistemological certainty in general and knowledge in particular must be somehow 'within us'. Only through reflection and an inward turn can we come to know anything.

Socrates turns back to Meno and explains, through question and answer, what has just happened. For this, Socrates distinguishes between opinion (δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). This is the first appearance of δόξα in the dialogue and only the second of

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<sup>187</sup> Jaeger, *Greek Culture*, 167. This is, in fact, one of the constituent features of the dialogue form in general: "The written dialogue transmits its dialogical and dialectical dynamics to the reader. To him is addressed every question raised by Socrates; every aye of Glaucon or Lysis is his aye – or nay – and this dialogical dynamics continues to echo within him beyond the conclusion" (Friedländer, vol. I, 166).

<sup>188</sup> Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 12.

ἐπιστήμη, the first being at 81c in the myth of recollection. They note that although the slave did not *know* anything, there were somehow true opinions within him which allowed him to make true geometrical claims. Socrates explains that these opinions can be converted into knowledge: “If someone will ask him these same things many times (πολλάκις) and in many ways (πολλαχῆ), you know that he will end up having knowledge (ἐπιστήσεται) about them no less precisely than anyone” (85c-d). This conversion depends upon sustained and repeated practice, what is later called ‘tying down’ (98a). The slave (or anyone else) must practice looking into himself and submitting to the necessity inherent in his thinking.<sup>189</sup> In the definitional section, Socrates was trying to get Meno to practice in precisely this way. He was trying to make Meno reflect on the vague but true intuitions (or opinions) that he had about virtue. He deliberately drew out the problems in Meno’s received opinions and tried to provoke an inward turn. This movement from opinion to knowledge, brought on through repeated practice, is unique to neither geometry nor moral inquiry, but applies to “all the other subjects of learning (μαθημάτων ἀπάντων)” (85e).<sup>190</sup>

Although this method applies to all μαθήματα, it is no accident that Socrates chose this particular proof to work through with the slave. As scholars are quick to point out, the object that they are seeking, the diagonal of the square, is irrational or ineffable (ἄρρητον).<sup>191</sup> As mentioned above, Socrates suggested either stating the length or pointing to the line, only the latter of which is possible. The only possible answer does

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<sup>189</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 177.

<sup>190</sup> Cf. Fine, “Inquiry,” 209.

<sup>191</sup> Cf. Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 10; Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 168-170; Friedländer vol. II, 283; Klein, *Commentary*, 99. If a length or any other number is ‘irrational’ this means that it cannot be expressed as a fraction (X/Y) where X and Y are integers. Put otherwise, this means that the diagonal and the side of the square are ‘incommensurable’; there is no common unit of length into which they can both be divided; the length of the diagonal and the side cannot be expressed in common terms.

not describe the length itself, but the *relationship* between two lines. In this we see perhaps why Socrates would have accepted something like his first definition of shape, which did not describe shape itself but pointed toward it.<sup>192</sup>

Having explained the process of recollection to Meno, Socrates strangely and perhaps prophetically declares the Virtue Thesis: that the pursuit of knowledge makes us more virtuous. He qualifies his prior explanation as tenuous but emphasizes the certainty of this claim. The primary aim of this is not to discard the theory of recollection wholesale, but to emphasize the certainty of the Virtue Thesis.<sup>193</sup> As I claimed above, this is the hinge of the *Meno*; the rest of the dialogue serves to justify this claim. Thus far the Virtue Thesis remains unproven, for the definitional and recollection passages have been primarily methodological; they show what the pursuit of knowledge might look like. They also show Meno's unwillingness to pursue knowledge and his non-coincidental lack of virtue. With this preparation in place and this prophecy made, the second half of the dialogue can now examine the relationship between virtue and knowledge and show more conclusively that the pursuit of knowledge will make us more virtuous.

#### A CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE: ΦΡΟΝΗΣΙΣ AND ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΗ

Socrates exhorts Meno once more to renew their investigation of virtue. Disappointingly, however, Meno seems to forget or ignore all that he has learned: instead of asking about virtue's nature, he returns to his first question, "whether virtue is

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<sup>192</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 169.

<sup>193</sup> Nevertheless it does imply that 'recollection' may be taken equivocally. Despite this, I have no wish to spill more ink on what is already a voluminous debate. Because this debate for the most part does not affect this paper, I will take 'recollection' as *at least* equivocal, completely leaving open the possibility of a more literal meaning (cf. Guthrie, vol. IV, 258).



something teachable, or whether virtue comes to be present in human beings by nature, on in whatever other way it does so” (86d).<sup>194</sup> Socrates’ latest effort to show Meno what he has been doing has been to little effect. Socrates tried to correct Meno’s vicious tendencies by explaining what had happened in their prior investigation of virtue, but to no avail.

Socrates chides him for this failing. He reminds Meno that the question of virtue’s acquisition must follow the question of its nature. Meno, however, has a tyrannical soul: he attempts to rule others, but not himself (86d). Meno supposes that freedom (ἐλευθερία) and (by implication) virtue lie in dominating others and asserting one’s free license. This is precisely the delusion from which the tyrants in the *Republic* suffer.<sup>195</sup> There we learn that the tyrant is not free, but is in fact a slave. This turn in the *Meno* is all the more remarkable for the role slaves play in the dialogue. Meno’s own slave followed the *elenchus* more capably than his master and thus revealed his virtue. Further, recall that Socrates refuted Meno’s second definition of virtue—ruling other people—by pointing to the example of a slave. He thus suggested that virtue has nothing to do with our station in life, but belongs to our inner selves. Meno does not know what ‘ruling’ really is; he is a slave in the true sense. If Meno learned to rule himself, he would surely overcome this slavery (cf. 73d).<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> In contrast to the opening question of the dialogue, ‘practice’ is conspicuously omitted here. As we have seen, Meno is a lazy fellow and shies away from hard work. Accordingly, he does not legitimately consider practice to be a possible source of virtue. Because the acquisition of virtue is now (to a limited extent) a serious question for Meno and is no longer simply ‘academic’, he cannot speak contrary to his own beliefs and suggest ‘practice’ as one of the potential sources of virtue. At least in this small way Meno has made some progress.

<sup>195</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 205; Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 321; *Gorgias* 491d.

<sup>196</sup> This suggests a sense in which Meno’s second definition is right: the virtuous person will rule i.e. carefully direct the actions – not of others, but of himself.

Socrates appears to accommodate Meno and the question of virtue's essence is officially dropped. Yet Socrates extracts an important compromise from Meno. Instead of immediately addressing the acquisition of virtue, they will now ask, 'What sort of thing is virtue?' (86e). Thereby they will be able to say how virtue is acquired. Despite Meno's efforts to return to his question of choice, the shallow sophistic question, Socrates has again directed their inquiry to what virtue is.<sup>197</sup> Once more Socrates compels Meno to consider the nature of virtue before its acquisition.

Socrates suggests they proceed by making hypotheses. He cites a geometrical problem as an example.<sup>198</sup> The force of this example is that they can suppose a hypothesis about which they are unsure and then try to verify afterwards whether or not it is true. The issue at hand is whether or not virtue is teachable. They proceed by examining the implications of this claim, namely, if virtue is teachable, then it must be knowledge. Their question now is "whether virtue is knowledge or other than knowledge" (87c).

There are two curious features of this brief discussion that we should bring to our attention. First, immediately following the recollection passage, Socrates is once again using the term 'teachable' (διδασκτόν). He notes this, saying that it makes no difference whether we use this word or 'recollectible' (ἀναμνηστόν; 87b). This seems like a surprising claim given the emphasis that Socrates earlier placed on using the term 'recollection' to describe what is mistaken for teaching and learning.<sup>199</sup> In any case, Socrates is saying that these two words are functionally equivalent. This means that in the

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<sup>197</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 211.

<sup>198</sup> The details of this are obscure at best. I follow Bartlett's recommendation in heeding Bluck's cautious warning: "It has been reasonably claimed... that the identity of the theorem is strictly speaking unimportant" (Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 441; "*Protagoras*" and "*Meno*," trans. Robert C. Barlett, 116).

<sup>199</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 175. Cf. "I just said, Meno, that you are a rascal, and now you're asking if I can teach you—I who assert that there is no learning but only recollection—so that I might immediately come to sight as contradicting myself!" (82a).

subsequent discussion, wherever ‘teaching’ or ‘learning appears, we should be thinking of ‘recollection’. For example, the discussions of the teachers of virtue and true opinion should be considered in terms of the theory of recollection. The initial surprise we may have felt at Socrates’ indifference as to which term we use serves as a general reminder that we must always reflect on the subsequent discussion in terms of ‘recollection’.

Second, Socrates here blurs the distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘a certain knowledge’. In his preliminary considerations, Socrates wonders whether or not virtue is ἄλλοιον ἢ ὅσον ἐπιστήμη, dissimilar or similar to knowledge (87b). He concludes that “if virtue is a *kind of knowledge* (ἐπιστήμη τις), it’s clear that it would be something teachable” (87c; emphasis added). But just a few lines later he says that their investigation will ask “whether virtue is knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) or other than knowledge” (87c). The τις that qualified ἐπιστήμη just a moment ago is nowhere to be found.<sup>200</sup> While in general one could argue that this distinction is trifling and insignificant, such an objection does not pass in the *Meno*. Earlier on Socrates made much hay about the distinction between ἀρετή and ἀρετή τις (73e). It is implausible that Socrates would forget this distinction so easily. It follows that throughout the *Meno*, each use or omission of τις, ‘a certain’, is careful and deliberate. Thus there is a tension between ἐπιστήμη and ἐπιστήμη τις that will have to be worked out.

Overlooking this tension, Meno and Socrates continue with their next question, whether there is something that is good (since virtue must be good) that is separate from knowledge. If there is nothing, they agree, then virtue must be a kind of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη τις). Since virtue is good, it must also be beneficial (ὠφέλιμον); since it is

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<sup>200</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 211.

beneficial, we should examine the source of all benefits (ὠφέλιμα) and whether or not it is knowledge (87d).

Such an examination necessitates asking what things are truly good or beneficial. Socrates first brings up health, strength, beauty, wealth and everything of this sort (87e).<sup>201</sup> None of these is beneficial or harmful in itself but each becomes so depending on whether or not it is used correctly. It is implied that correct usage depends upon knowledge.<sup>202</sup> Next, Socrates raises for consideration the “things pertaining to the soul”, such as moderation (σωφροσύνην), justice (δικαιοσύνην) or courage (ἀνδρεία). Again, each of these that is not knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) can be either beneficial or harmful, “for example, courage—if courage is not prudence (φρόνησις) but a certain sort of boldness” (88b). So given that neither wealth, nor beauty, nor justice, nor anything else is beneficial without the guidance of prudence, and that virtue is necessarily beneficial, virtue must be prudence “either in whole or in part” (89a).<sup>203</sup>

This passage is not without its difficulties. Socrates and Meno correctly agree that wealth may be either beneficial or harmful depending on how it is used, for “to have these so-called goods and use them badly would actually be worse for us than if we didn’t have them;”<sup>204</sup> yet what exactly constitutes ‘beneficial’ is never actually articulated. Not once do Socrates and Meno specify the benefit which correct use of money or health might provide. Obviously ‘the beneficial’ cannot be anything of the things previously listed; none of these things is necessarily and essentially good.

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<sup>201</sup> Special emphasis (δή) is placed on wealth. No doubt this is for Meno’s benefit. Cf. note 162 above.

<sup>202</sup> This is made more explicit at 88e: “the soul with good sense (ἔμφορον) guides correctly”.

<sup>203</sup> As I explain below, knowledge and prudence are used more or less interchangeably here in the *Meno*. There are subtle differences between the two, which I will discuss shortly. Aside from that particular discussion, we may treat them as meaning one and the same thing. Except where stated otherwise, I shall refer to them both as knowledge.

<sup>204</sup> Penner, “Socrates,” 135.

Neither can we conclude from this that knowledge is “the only thing good in itself”<sup>205</sup> or that it is “*the foremost benefit*.”<sup>206</sup> This would be problematic for two reasons. In the first place, this would amount to circularity and explain nothing. It would mean that knowledge is good because it is capable of providing more knowledge. Rather, knowledge must look towards something outside of itself; there must be some other benefit which knowledge confers, an object of knowledge that is essentially good.<sup>207</sup> Secondly, we cannot say that knowledge is the only thing good in itself because there are kinds of knowledge that do not necessarily confer true benefits, namely, the various *technai*. The doctor has knowledge of medicine and through this knowledge is able to produce health. The trainer has knowledge of gymnastics and is able to produce strength. But neither health nor strength is essentially beneficial. So these forms of knowledge do not guarantee benefits. Not every form of knowledge will produce benefits for its user. Rather, there must be some knowledge whose object is what is essentially and necessarily good and beneficial. Only through knowledge of what is necessarily good will all other particular forms of knowledge become beneficial. We see, then, that in the same way that particular things must be subordinated to knowledge in order to be beneficial, particular knowledges must in turn be subordinated to knowledge of what is essentially good.

We should note that the ‘virtues’ of which Socrates speaks at 88a-b are not real virtues, but psychological dispositions at most. As Guthrie remarks, at first it indeed seems strange to say that “virtues [like courage and moderation] could be abused and go

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<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>206</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 216.

<sup>207</sup> “In the opinion of the many the good is pleasure, while in that of the more refined it is prudence... and, my friend, those who believe this can’t point out what kind of prudence it is, but are finally compelled to say ‘about the good’” (*Republic* 505b). All English quotations from the *Republic* are from Bloom’s translation. Cf. Friedländer vol. II, 286.

wrong if used without *phronesis*”; but, as he claims, the issue is resolved if we understand Socrates to be speaking of the virtues in the popular sense.<sup>208</sup> These are the virtues described in the *Phaedo* at 68d ff.: courage through fear and moderation through licentiousness. This much is clearer if we note how courage without prudence is but “a certain boldness” (θάραχος τι; 88b); precisely the same designation at *Protagoras* 349e ff. distinguished true courage from some paltry substitute. If these psychological states are not themselves beneficial, they become so through knowledge. We have seen, however, that this is not simply knowledge in general, but specifically knowledge of what is essentially good.

In this sense it would seem that we could say that virtue is *a certain* knowledge, but such a simple reading is problematic. As I noted above, the distinction between ‘a certain x’ and ‘x itself’ depends upon whether or not there are other equally valid but different cases of ‘x’. If there are, something is only ‘a certain x’; if not, then it is ‘x itself’. This means that if we are to say that virtue is ‘a certain knowledge’, there must be other knowledges separate and distinct from virtue. I have already noted how Socrates blurs the distinction between ἐπιστήμη and ἐπιστήμη τις. This difficulty is only heightened with the introduction of the term φρόνησις. In asking whether or not virtue is knowledge and thus teachable, Socrates and Meno consistently used the word ἐπιστήμη. From 88b to 89c, however, φρόνησις apparently substitutes for ἐπιστήμη without mention.<sup>209</sup> If we are going to clarify the relationship between knowledge/prudence and

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<sup>208</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 260 note 1.

<sup>209</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 221.

virtue and determine if virtue is a certain knowledge or not, we must first consider what is going on between these terms and what this substitution signifies.<sup>210</sup>

To some extent, φρόνησις and ἐπιστήμη seem to have no difference in meaning in the *Meno*. Klein argues that while φρόνησις always appears linked with ἐπιστήμη, the two are not identical. He suggests that “*phronêsis* may be said to be ‘knowledge of some kind’ (*epistêmê tis*).”<sup>211</sup> If we conclude that virtue is *a certain* ἐπιστήμη, it would be φρόνησις. Such a reading, however, is problematic. In the *Meno* there is no difference in the way the two terms are used, neither here nor later at 97a.<sup>212</sup> For example, in the initial transition at 88b, Socrates uses ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις in the same breath and with no difference in meaning.<sup>213</sup> This substitution is seamless and natural; it persists until 89c when Socrates resumes his use of ἐπιστήμη with an equally smooth transition. Further, during this particular passage, we find the same confusion of ‘a certain X’ and ‘X itself’ in the case of φρόνησις as we earlier found with ἐπιστήμη at 87b-c. At 88b true courage is identified with φρόνησις itself, and at 88c so is virtue; but just a few lines later, in the same paragraph, Socrates remarks that “virtue... must be a certain prudence”. Later, in summarizing the discussion, Socrates puts his finger on this tension exactly by wondering whether virtue is φρόνησις “either in whole or in part” (89a).<sup>214</sup> Although proving something’s absence is inherently problematic, it is difficult to discern a difference in the respective uses of φρόνησις and ἐπιστήμη.

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<sup>210</sup> For the purposes of this issue, I shall use the Greek so as to avoid terminological confusion.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>212</sup> *Meno*, ed. R.W. Sharples, 164.

<sup>213</sup> “So examine whether, in your opinion, some of these [psychological faculties] are not knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) but are other than knowledge... For example, courage—if courage is not prudence (φρόνησις) but a certain boldness.”

<sup>214</sup> Along with Sharples and others, I follow Bluck who says that σύμπασαν ἢ μέρος τι qualifies φρόνησις (though grammatically it might also qualify ἀρετή). The contrary would prevent Socrates and Meno from having discovered the essence of virtue itself by itself (Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 336).

That should not, however, obliterate all differences between these two words. Although φρόνησις and ἐπιστήμη may be nearly functionally identical, or even synonymous,<sup>215</sup> each has its own flavour and implications. One difference of particular importance to this discussion is whether or not each can be partitioned. Obviously ἐπιστήμη can be; there are many ἐπιστήμαι that are separate and distinct from each other. For example, as a *technē* medicine would qualify as an ἐπιστήμη; it is distinct from, say, astronomy or housebuilding. It makes sense to speak of multiple ἐπιστήμαι. By contrast, with φρόνησις this is intuitively jarring. If we think of φρόνησις as “the exercise of wise judgment”, it is difficult to imagine how exactly it could be separated into parts.<sup>216</sup> It would be very odd to speak of many φρονήσεις. A survey of the Platonic corpus confirms this. Of the more than 150 uses of the word, only five are in the plural. Those five all appear in the ‘late’ dialogues.<sup>217</sup> By point of contrast, ἐπιστήμη appears in the plural three times in the *Meno* alone.<sup>218</sup> Typical use of φρόνησις would dictate that it remain a singular whole. In light of this, I would like to suggest that when Socrates mentions “a certain φρόνησις” at 88d and suggests that there could be parts distinct from the whole at 89a, the Greek reader would find this conspicuous and take pause. Since ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις are tacitly identified, the question of the whole versus the parts is again brought to our attention.

This tension is created to suggest that virtue as knowledge is somehow *both* a certain knowledge *and* knowledge itself. As I said, ἐπιστήμη is easily divided into many

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<sup>215</sup> Cf. Aubenque, *La Prudence*, 13. He suggests that Plato makes ἐπιστήμη, φρόνησις and σοφία synonyms. Guthrie makes the same claim in citing *Euthydemus* 281b (Guthrie, vol. IV, 265).

<sup>216</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 216.

<sup>217</sup> *Epinomis* 974b; *Laws* 1.645e, 2.672c, *Philebus* 63a; *Timaeus* 90b.

<sup>218</sup> 85d, 86a, 98a. Plural forms of ἐπιστήμη are also found elsewhere throughout the Platonic corpus, e.g. *Protagoras* 312e, 313e; *Republic* 350a, 428e; *Charmides* 165e, 166a.



while φρόνησις is not; ἐπιστήμη is on the side of divisibility and φρόνησις on the side of indivisibility. In uniting the two here and highlighting the problem of whole and part, Socrates is hinting at a ‘knowledge’ that is both a one among many and the undivided totality, one that is both a particular instance and the universal.

We see therefore that there are two particular attributes of the knowledge that constitutes virtue: (1) it is a knowledge of what is essentially good and beneficial, and (2) it is in some sense both a certain knowledge and knowledge itself. With respect to the former, it is a matter of recognizing and realizing the universal good in each particular while retaining and making use of the particularity of each thing. Nothing is good without being fundamentally related to the essential good. This reflects the challenge that Socrates was earlier trying to bring out in the methodological portion of his discussion with Meno: to see the inclusive universality in all the particulars while retaining their particularity. Virtue requires seeing the one in the many. Yet seeing the one in the many is characteristic of knowledge in general. This knowledge seems to be distinguished only by its object, the good. As I noted above, it should follow from this that knowledge of the good is simply *a certain knowledge* and not knowledge itself. So in what sense is (2) true?

Knowledge of the good is knowledge itself insofar as it fully exemplifies what it means to be knowledge: each kind of knowledge is of a particular kind of good. Let us consider this with respect to medicine. Medicine is knowledge of the body and the good particular to the body, namely, health.<sup>219</sup> Because of the limits of his knowledge the

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<sup>219</sup> Lest I be charged with self-contradiction for calling health a good, let me qualify this. With respect to the body, health is good and sickness is bad. *In general* health is good, though occasionally it can be bad. Recall Socrates’ remarks: “Health, we assert, and strength and beauty and of course wealth: we say that

doctor is not equipped to say why health is ultimately good, but within these limits he can say that health is good and sickness is bad. It is through this knowledge of the good (health) that he comes to knowledge of its less complete forms all the way down to the bad (sickness). The doctor, therefore, has knowledge of a good though only within the sphere of the body. Likewise does carpentry know how to build good houses; and the more knowledgeable the carpenter, the better the houses. What distinguishes these examples is the way in which they are limited. They only know the good within the limits of their particular *technē*. That is why their respective particular goods sometimes do harm. Yet in any case, they are knowledge because they know some good. In that sense, knowledge of the good is what it means to be knowledge. For that reason we can say that knowledge of the good is knowledge itself and not simply ‘a certain knowledge’.

We see therefore how knowledge of the good resembles the tension Socrates brought out with the terms ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις. In a certain sense knowledge of the good is a certain knowledge and in another sense it is knowledge itself. By completely exemplifying what it means to be knowledge but having as its object something distinct, the good, this knowledge is both universal and particular simultaneously. It is this knowledge of what is truly beneficial that is the knowledge that constitutes virtue. These conclusions anticipate what we find in the *Republic* where Socrates offers a more explicit and more extended treatment of the Good as the only true benefit and the highest object of knowledge, the μέγιστον μάθημα.

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these things, and those like them, are advantageous... but we assert that these same things *sometimes* (ἐνίοτε) also do harm” (87e; emphasis added). For the most part health is good; there are occasions upon which health is bad, but they are the minority. Despite these extenuating circumstances, *with respect to the body alone*, health is good.

Recall that Socrates is unwilling to say that even the ‘virtues’ are good in themselves. Only with knowledge of what is good and beneficial are they true virtues. In the *Republic*, Socrates speaks of the virtues and their relationship to the good in the same way. He tells his interlocutors that it is through their relationship to the Good that “just things... become useful and beneficial” (*Republic* 505a). Without the Good, justice is not necessarily beneficial and thus by definition not a virtue (cf. 87d). Just actions find their relation to the Good in the knowledge of the philosopher, for it is through his knowledge that he orders both his own soul and the activities of all citizens in the good city. So for the virtues to be real virtues, they must be grounded in this special philosophical knowledge of the Good.

The *Republic* also shows that knowledge of the Good characterizes the coincidence of universal and particular. The knowledge of the Good, while remaining itself and distinct from other knowledges, is also the complete grasp of all knowledge. In the *Republic* Socrates tells us that the Good is the μέγιστον μάθημα and distinguishes it from other μαθήματα (505a). He speaks about it as a particular object of knowledge distinct from, say, ‘equality’ or ‘courage’. Yet he also says that “no one will adequately know [other μαθήματα] before [the Good] is known.” (506a). So without being knowledge itself (508e), it makes other things known. I do not mean this in the sense of it being the cause of knowability as the sun is the cause of visibility, although this is also true (507a-509a). Rather I mean that *knowing the Good constitutes knowing everything else*. Without knowing the Good, no one can know anything else. All other knowledge is only potential knowledge for the knower until he achieves knowledge of the Good. In that sense, knowing the Good is *essential* to knowing anything else. Socrates explains

that “when [the soul] has grasped this [the Good], argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end... using forms themselves, going through forms to forms it ends in forms too” (511b). Knowing the Good entails knowing everything else as a necessary consequence. Coming to know the Good, then, is also coming to know all things. So at once the Good is both a single, distinct object of knowledge and the complete totality. The universal and particular find complete coincidence in the knowledge of the Good. The tension that the combination of the terms ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις produced is resolved in knowing the Good and this is virtue.

#### ANYTUS AND THE SOPHISTS

In concluding that virtue is knowledge, Socrates and Meno find that it must therefore be teachable. Socrates immediately expresses reservation at this. He maintains the principle that if something is knowledge it is teachable, but suggests another for consideration: if something is teachable, then there must be teachers of it (89e). Accordingly, they will now consider whether or not there are teachers of virtue and thereby whether or not virtue is teachable. Given that Socrates has overturned conventional notions of teaching and learning by showing that in fact all learning is ‘recollection’, we should immediately have doubts about this procedure. Rather, instead of undermining the thesis ‘knowledge is virtue’, which bears a certain logical necessity, this discussion serves to prove that the ‘virtue’ that the sophists and noblemen (καλοκᾶγαθοι) teach is not knowledge and thus not real virtue.

Anytus suddenly appears on the scene and sits down with Socrates and Meno. Socrates invites him into the conversation and, after explaining that he embodies the popular conception of a successful man, a man filled with virtue,<sup>220</sup> he asks him who the teachers of virtue are. Socrates immediately suggests the *technē* analogy and that the teachers are “those who lay claim to the art (rather than those who do not) and take pay for this very thing” (90d). Anytus at first heartily agrees to this, but balks when Socrates says these men would be the sophists. Anytus flies into such moral indignation that he is practically frothing at the mouth. His distrust of them is nothing short of hyperbolic.<sup>221</sup> He tells Socrates that he has had nothing to do with the sophists, nor has anyone he knows.<sup>222</sup> Socrates finds Anytus’s criticisms of the sophists highly suspect and “pointedly dissociates himself from [this] indiscriminate hostility,”<sup>223</sup> for Anytus’ enmity is founded on no facts of experience.<sup>224</sup>

Anytus suggests instead that the teachers of virtue are Athenian noblemen. No nobleman would have any trouble teaching virtue to his son or close associate. In making

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<sup>220</sup> Anytus is a wealthy man born of a good father, who earned his wealth through “wisdom and diligence”. Popular opinion holds that he is not arrogant, but is well-behaved. The *hoi polloi* have elected him to high office. Clearly Anytus is the very epitome of the popular conception of a *καλοκᾶγαθος*.

<sup>221</sup> We may note that in Anytus’ accusations against the sophists, he says that they corrupt the youth, the same accusation that he and Meletus lay against Socrates before the Dikastery just a few years later (Grote, *Plato*, 257). Anytus blurs the distinction between Socrates and the sophists, implicitly treating the former as a member of the latter. In addition to foreshadowing Socrates’ imminent execution, this reference also serves to *contrast* Socrates with the sophists. Just as Socrates opposed himself to the sophists by calling his slave demonstration an *ἐπίδειξις*, by grouping Socrates along with the sophists Anytus unintentionally brings the differences between the two into relief.

<sup>222</sup> This is, of course, quite humorous in its irony. Sitting right next to Anytus is his *ξένος* and *πατρικὸς ἐπαῖρος*, Meno, who is all too proud of his Gorgian education.

<sup>223</sup> Irwin, “Intellectual Background,” 65.

<sup>224</sup> Grote, *Plato*, 256. When Socrates calls Anytus a prophet, the remark is sarcastic and biting: “Socrates likens [Anytus’ knowledge of the sophists] to the clairvoyance of a diviner, a playfully polite but far from flattering comparison. For the power of divination is a divine gift to human thoughtlessness” (Klein, *Commentary*, 236). Although Socrates wants nothing to do with Anytus’ position, this does not mean that he thinks the sophists teach virtue. When he says that he supposed the sophists to be teachers (92d), this is ironic and only means that Anytus has not refuted this claim. Socrates and Meno will give a more legitimate (albeit brief) treatment later at 95a ff.

such a claim, Anytus makes himself the representative of “a system according to which practical statesmanship, political virtue, or kalokagathia is acquired by means of a firm tradition passed on from one generation to another.”<sup>225</sup> This accords well with Klein’s remark that Anytus represents the Athenian political institution.<sup>226</sup> Throughout this episode with Anytus, then, Socrates is to some extent confronting traditional Athenian morality as a whole. If Anytus’ claims are true, Socrates argues, then the great Athenian statesmen will surely demonstrate this. The successes and failures of men like Themistocles and Thucydides should vindicate or refute Anytus. Of course in each case, the excellent father always proves unable to teach to his son the virtue that brought him so much success. Sparing no expense to benefit their sons, these fathers all fail to impart that most important of qualities. Anytus naturally takes affront at this, for he understands it to be nothing less than a personal attack.<sup>227</sup>

After receiving a second threat on his life (94e; cf. 80b), Socrates turns to Meno and resumes his conversation with him. He confirms with Meno that there is considerable disagreement among Thessalian noblemen about whether or not virtue is teachable. The same disagreement, it seems, is found among the sophists, for Gorgias claims that virtue

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<sup>225</sup> Friedländer, vol. II, 287.

<sup>226</sup> “With the appearance of Anytus, the city of Athens, spoken about by Socrates in the earliest exchange of the dialogue, the city of Athens in all its glory and splendor and wealth, in all its pettiness and depravity and corruption, makes its entry too” (Klein, *Commentary*, 225).

<sup>227</sup> Cf. Guthrie, vol. IV, 240. Socrates, at any rate, should not be surprised at this conclusion. Despite the assumption to the contrary upon which this line of questioning is predicated, Socrates does not believe these statesmen to possess virtue, at least not the virtue he and Meno have been investigating thus far. The virtue that Socrates seeks is not some knowledge of generalship (Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 20). Neither is it the ability to become powerful in the city so that one may acquire honours and practice self-indulgence unrestrained (Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 40; cf. *Phaedo* 68 ff.). When Socrates later suggests (ironically) that the good statesmen have virtue on account of true opinion, he puns that their virtue comes to be through εὐδοξία – not true opinion, but *good repute* (Klein, *Commentary*, 253). The implication is that these statesmen are not actually virtuous, but only considered so. They are called virtuous not on account of the state of their souls or the true quality of their actions, but only because the city at large declares them virtuous.

cannot be taught (95c). If virtue were in fact teachable, it would be a very odd thing if the so-called teachers disagreed on this matter, so this suggests that it is not.<sup>228</sup> Knowledge implies a certain uniformity and the sophists are multifarious.

The respective criticisms of the sophists and the noblemen serve to undermine the conservative understanding of virtue. Although Anytus had wanted to group Socrates with the sophists, it would be more appropriate to group the sophists together with the noblemen and distinguish Socrates from them both. This is reflected in both the method and the content of their instruction. Both sophists and noblemen educate the same things in essentially the same way: they teach their students correct behaviour by ‘pouring’ teachings into their students. Sophists in general and Gorgias in particular force their students to memorize manuscripts and parrot lectures;<sup>229</sup> this would supposedly ensure success in the city and make the student politically influential.<sup>230</sup> Noblemen exhort their sons to particular actions they deem praiseworthy;<sup>231</sup> to bolster this, they make their sons witness and mimic the excellence they so proudly possess. This form of education practiced by sophists and conservatives alike issues in discrete actions, not understanding. Socrates by contrast would have his students turn inward and reflect on what they already know so that they may ‘recollect’ the truth and really know it. The difference between Socrates on the one hand and the sophists and noblemen on the other is reflected in their respective understandings of the content of virtue: Socrates’ is

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<sup>228</sup> Just as the general argument here “does not prove that teachers of virtue are non-existent, must less impossible” (Kahn, *Socratic Dialogue*, 312), strictly speaking this point does not prove that no sophist teaches virtues. Rather, it proves that sophistry as a whole (as much as it can be called a single thing) cannot lay claim to teaching virtue. There may be exceptional individuals, but right now that is not the issue at hand.

<sup>229</sup> Guthrie, vol. III, 269.

<sup>230</sup> Cf. *Protagoras*, 319a.

<sup>231</sup> Cf. *Protagoras*, 325d: “Do these things! Don’t do those!”

essentially moral and that of Anytus, his cohort and the sophists is socio-political.<sup>232</sup> Socrates wants to care for the soul and produce virtue therein, while sophists and noblemen want to produce correct behaviour and action in the context of the city. So we see that while Socrates appeared to be making two separate and distinct refutations – one of sophistic education and another of its conservative counterpart – he is actually refuting the same position twice. Both refutations serve to prove the same thing: virtue as it is understood *in the sophistic-conservative outlook* is not teachable.

This portion of the discussion began with the introduction of a new principle: if there are teachers of virtue, it is teachable; if not, then not. Now since knowledge is teachable, it would follow that if there are no teachers of virtue, then it is not knowledge. What the argument has shown, however, is that virtue as it is understood *by conservatives and sophists*, i.e. as a set of discrete actions and not as a state of the soul, is not teachable and therefore is not knowledge. This disjoint between the Socratic and the sophistic-conservative concepts of virtue – that the one is teachable and the other not – should come as no surprise given Socrates' radical reformulation of learning into 'recollection'. Since this discussion dealt exclusively with the latter form of 'virtue', it should not impugn the prior understanding of virtue as knowledge that we previously reached. Rather, we should say that since true virtue is knowledge, and the sophistic-conservative conception of virtue is not teachable and thus not knowledge, it follows that sophistic-conservative 'virtue' is not real virtue.

## ATHENIAN NOBLEMEN AND TRUE OPINION

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<sup>232</sup> Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 126.



Socrates and Meno continue their discussion under the false assumption that the eminent Athenian statesmen are virtuous. Socrates is aware of this but unwitting Meno is not (though Meno briefly hits on the truth when he wonders aloud whether good people exist at all; 96d). If there are any, they are not the statesmen. This is confirmed in the subsequent discussion. In attributing their ‘virtue’ to some kind of ‘divine dispensation’ by way of true opinion, Socrates is seriously undermining the authority of these statesmen. For when he says they are like “soothsayers and divine prophets” and “say many true things while in an inspired state” (99c), he is claiming that they are out of their minds and have no idea what they are doing.<sup>233</sup> At 99e4-6 Socrates nearly quotes *Apology* 22c2-3, where Socrates claims to be better than the poets; if politicians are in the same state as these poets, he does not think much of them either.<sup>234</sup> Socrates ‘confirms’ the statesmen’s divinity by citing the authority of women and Spartans, but this is extremely sarcastic.<sup>235</sup> Although Meno does not notice this, the politicians would; they would be deeply offended if someone told them that they lack ἐπιστήμη, just as Anytus was but a moment ago.<sup>236</sup> These statesmen are no pillars of virtue, for nearly everything positive about them is said with deep irony.

Although Socrates wants to distance himself from any real praise of these statesmen, they still raise a question for consideration: how is it that someone can act beneficially without true and complete knowledge? This is particularly relevant to the

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<sup>233</sup> Cf. 92c and my remarks above at note 222 above.

<sup>234</sup> Guthrie, vol. IV, 262.

<sup>235</sup> Klein, *Commentary*, 255.

<sup>236</sup> Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*, 8. Additionally, cf. *Ibid.*, 117: “So far as the treatment of Athenian statesmen is concerned, the irony would seem to be such that even Anytus is aware of it, for if he were not, he would hardly remark that Socrates is speaking ill of them.”

Virtue Thesis. If making oneself more virtuous is considered ‘acting correctly’, and this is done through the pursuit of knowledge *of which one does not already have conscious possession*, it is necessary that correct action be possible without knowledge. Socrates suggests that true opinion (δόξα ἀληθής)<sup>237</sup> would allow someone to act correctly. In order to explain this, he cites the analogy of the road to Larissa. The mention of true opinion immediately calls to mind the recollection passage. Accordingly, we should read this analogy in the light of ‘recollection’. In the recollection passage, three distinct stages were described: (1) bringing to ἀπορία, (2) stirring up true opinions, and (3) converting opinions into knowledge.<sup>238</sup> The first two stages were demonstrated with the slave, though the third was only asserted. The road to Larissa helps explain this third, hitherto hazy stage and clarifies to some extent the difference between opinion and knowledge.

In this analogy, Socrates suggests that there are two men, one who has knowledge of the road to Larissa, and one who has only a true opinion. Both would be able to travel the road and lead others correctly, although the latter has never travelled previously and does not know the road at all (97b). This implies that the chief distinction between the knower and the opiner is that the knower has travelled the road and thereby has acquired knowledge. Successfully travelling, step by step, from starting point to destination is akin to converting opinion to knowledge. The opiner has a vague notion of how to get to Larissa (i.e. latent true opinions), and if he proceeds carefully, he can articulate them and make them more precise. One might imagine the opiner as someone who once travelled to Larissa long ago as a youth and so has some idea of the road, but does not know it. At

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<sup>237</sup> True opinion and correct opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα) are used interchangeably with no apparent difference in meaning.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

each stage along the way, travelling the path would remind him of what he once knew. If he took a misstep, he would lose his way (πόρος) and find himself at an impasse (ἀπορία), recognizing immediately that some error has been made. He would then retrace his steps until he found the known path again and would continue on his way. Thus by proceeding carefully and recognizing ἀπορία for what they are, opinion can be converted to knowledge. Learning the road to Larissa is identical with travelling to Larissa.

There is also curious emphasis placed on the guiding of others. Both the knower and the opiner are equally capable of guiding others along the road to Larissa. This can be read in two ways. First, the ‘knower’ and the ‘opiner’ *are* ‘knowledge’ and ‘true opinion’ respectively and thus guide correct action. Those who follow true opinion will end up acting correctly as much as those who follow knowledge.<sup>239</sup> Alternatively, if we consider the ‘knower’ and ‘opiner’ as individuals possessing knowledge and opinion (as I did in the previous paragraph), we have an image of philosophical inquiry. In the first case, a knower would help others in their inquiry by travelling with them the whole way along the path so that they too would know it themselves; leading others along the road to Larissa would make them knowers. In the second case, by working together and carefully examining the road, a group of opiners can together come to certain knowledge of how to get to Larissa.<sup>240</sup> Both of these readings are right in their own way and we should read this analogy as suggesting both.

Meno is appropriately confused about the way in which knowledge would be better than true opinion if they both guide action correctly. Socrates explains that true

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<sup>239</sup> This reading is suggested by Socrates’ conclusion to the analogy: “True opinion, is no worse a guide with a view to correctness of action than is prudence” (97b).

<sup>240</sup> All members of the party are opiners, for true opinions are in everyone as the slave demonstration shows. If even the lowest, most uneducated slave has true opinions, surely so does everyone else.

opinions are like the statues of Daedalus. These marvelous, moving statues have a tendency to wander off and so, if they are not tied down, they are easily lost and thus not worth much. Likewise, true opinions are indeed noble things for as long as they stay put, but unless one ties them down with a calculation of cause (αἰτίας λογισμῶ; 97e-98a), they are liable to sneak off and leave their former possessor in perplexity. Socrates explains that this ‘tying down’ of opinions is the recollection which he previously demonstrated with the slave.

One wonders, however, in what sense true opinions ‘wander off’ if they are latent within us. If these true opinions reflect the knowledge possessed by our immortal soul as the recollection passage asserts, it is not clear how they would leave us. Gonzalez explains this aptly: “Because true belief conveys only a vague impression of the truth, it allows the truth to appear now one way and now another: there is thus as little stability in such belief as there is in a dream.”<sup>241</sup> Latent knowledge (the unconscious true opinions within us) manifests itself in a variety of hazy forms which constitute the true opinions. While these opinions reflect the truth, they do so in a constantly changing way. This change is what Socrates means by ‘wandering off’. By tying down opinions with a calculation of cause, the latent knowledge is made actual and conscious and is given a definite form, thus preventing further flux and affording clarity and precision. Although a true opinion will be practical and useful, the longevity and clarity of knowledge make it much more valuable.

In the slave demonstration, the slave recognized that the side of the double square is the diagonal of the first square; Socrates called this recognition ‘true opinion’ but not

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<sup>241</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 181.

yet knowledge. Socrates tells Meno that through repeated practice this opinion will become knowledge. Wherein lies the difference between knowledge and opinion for the slave? He and Socrates have gone through an explanation that clearly demonstrates the side length of the double square. If this demonstration does not constitute a ‘calculation of cause’, it is not clear what would. So what benefit do repeated practice and its product, knowledge, confer on the slave? The difference between knowledge and opinion is that with knowledge one will recognize the answer and in this recognition will simultaneously grasp the whole chain of reasoning that led to this conclusion. When Socrates helps the slave recollect, the slave recognizes the necessity of each claim and follows Socrates’ demonstration step-by-step. Yet we get the impression that at no point does the slave ever understand the demonstration *as a whole*. When the last portion of the demonstration begins (84d), he does not realize where it is going. By the time he and Socrates find that the answer is the diagonal (85b), he is not thinking about his initial agreements, but only the most recent conclusions. The result is that the slave recognizes that the side length of the double square *must* be the diagonal, but that this recognition and the demonstration that led to it are distinct moments. With sufficient practice, however, when he recognizes that the side length must be the diagonal, this will be *identical* with his full understanding of the reasoning that led to this conclusion. If the slave is forgetful of the reasoning that leads to his presently certain conclusion, he may be persuaded otherwise or forget on his own the correct answer; the opinion may ‘wander off’. Yet if he grasps the conclusion and the reasoning behind it simultaneously, and these two are the same thing, no one will convince him of another answer nor will he forget the truth; the opinion will be ‘tied

down' and will be knowledge. 'Tying down' one's opinions gives them the fixed and definite form that affords the longevity and clarity of knowledge.

Now for the second time in the dialogue Socrates makes a bold and unqualified statement. He maintains with certainty that knowledge really is something different from true opinion (98b). As with the recollection passage, the explanatory analogies and metaphors may be true in a sense, but they all point towards and try to justify something that is literally true. As I said above, this distinction is necessary if the Virtue Thesis is to hold true. As we approach the end of the dialogue, Socrates posits this second interpretative principle so that we may refocus our reading and better direct our efforts.

Socrates proceeds to outline the course of their discussion thus far. It runs thus: only knowledge and true opinion are beneficial; virtue is necessarily beneficial; there are no teachers of virtue, so virtue would not be knowledge; therefore it is true opinion. They further agree that true opinion does not come by nature or by chance, but that somehow good men must be so by a divine dispensation (θεία μοίρα; 99e). As I suggested above, this seriously undermines the already dubious virtue of Athenian statesmen.<sup>242</sup> Meno himself recognizes this and warns Socrates that Anytus may be getting annoyed (99e).

We should not, however, defer to miraculous endowment in explaining virtue's acquisition. For while each of Meno's suggested sources of virtues—teaching, practice and nature—on its own is problematic, together all three provide a cogent explanation. While Meno had presented each as an exclusive alternative, the discussion has shown the opposite: "[Virtue] is possessed by nature insofar as it already exists 'in' us. It is learned

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<sup>242</sup> Cf. *Gorgias*, 515c ff.; Klein, *Commentary*, 236.

insofar as it needs to be recollected. It is acquired through practice insofar as it depends on repeated questioning.”<sup>243</sup>

About to leave and having thus summarized their argument, Socrates asks Meno a favour: “Persuade Anytus here, your guest-friend, of the same things that you yourself have been persuaded of, so that he may be gentler. If you do persuade him, there is a certain benefit you’ll render (ἔστιν ὃ τι... ὀνήσεις) to the Athenians as well” (100b). In its close relation to ὠφελέω, ὀνήσεις reminds us of the earlier discussion of the beneficial. It again demands that we ask, “What is truly beneficial? What is essentially good?” These are the questions that shape and direct the knowledge that characterizes virtue.

Yet we must still ask, of what has Socrates persuaded Meno? If Socrates has succeeded, he has persuaded Meno both that knowledge and true opinion are different things, and that the pursuit of knowledge will make us more virtuous. Given Meno’s failings here and in the future as well as Socrates’ future conviction, we may assume that Meno is unpersuaded. Nevertheless, convincing Anytus of these things would amount to nothing less than lighting a philosophical fire which would compel an inward turn that would make someone more just and more temperate.

As we have seen, while the subject matter of the *Meno* is most essentially the nature of virtue, in many respects this dialogue is preoccupied with the problem of the one and the many. In trying to find a definition of virtue, Meno had to try and find a unified, general and inclusive articulation of what virtue is. Although it is never explicit, the *Meno* hints that virtue is a knowledge of the Good. It is this knowledge that overcomes the problem of the universal and the particular by being both wholly unique

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<sup>243</sup> Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 173.

and wholly comprehensive at the same time. If learning is articulating the one in the many, it is therefore most essentially coming to know the Good, for knowledge of the Good is particular *and* universal. Pursuing knowledge, therefore, would also be pursuing knowledge of the Good and pursuing virtue. It is no wonder, then, that believing such knowledge is possible and acting on this belief would make us better and more courageous.



## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

In Chapter 1 I asserted that the Early dialogues were all parts of a larger overall argument which culminates in the *Republic*. This was in opposition to the developmental understanding of the dialogues which asserts that the apparent contradictions between dialogues are to be explained by radical differences in what Plato thought at different points throughout his life; the result is that the Early and Middle dialogues are essentially irreconcilable. In contrast to this, I contended that there are differences and apparent contradictions in the dialogues because each dialogue deals with a particular problem in a particular context and fulfils a specific pedagogical function within a single overarching project. The Early dialogues each are incomplete on their own. They only make sense from the perspective of the *Republic*.

In order to vindicate this claim, I have investigated the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*. I have tried to show that each dialogue argues that virtue is knowledge of the good, but that neither actually says what the good is; for that reason their respective arguments are only completed by the *Republic* wherein we find a fuller account of knowledge of the good in Books VI-VII. Thus both dialogues are located within the same project and find their completion in the same thing. Granted, it would be easy to interpret these dialogues just as Socrates interpreted Simonides' poem: twisting them to accommodate particular opinions or ends and fitting the round peg in the proverbial square hole. For that reason I have interpreted each dialogue independently and on its own terms. In that way we find that each dialogue itself points toward this conclusion. The *Meno* and the *Protagoras* each individually suggest that virtue is knowledge of the good without saying what the good is.

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates confronts the eponymous sophist and argues against his moral relativism. Protagoras argues that there are no objective moral standards. Virtue exists only on account of practical necessity and only by convention. Nothing is just or unjust in and of itself, but only on account of community norms. What appears just to the community *is* just for that community. Accordingly, there is no personal obligation to practice virtue. We are only obligated to maintain the right appearances so that we do not suffer adverse social consequences. Protagoras holds this moral outlook because he believes that there is no objective good; for Protagoras, the good is circumstantial and diverse.

Against this, Socrates argues that virtue has an objective nature by which we must abide. He does this by referring it to what is objectively and unchangingly good. Socrates' argument against Protagoras falls into three parts: the initial inquiry into the unity of the virtues, the interpretation of Simonides, and the identification of courage and knowledge (identified in Chapter 2 as Parts 3, 4, and 5 of the *Protagoras*). In Part 3 Socrates does two things: he more fully reveals Protagoras' moral relativism and he suggests against this that particular instances of virtue must be essentially related to one another, thereby advocating the unity of the virtues and their objective nature. In Part 4 Socrates outlines a broader metaphysical framework in which he argues both that being is prior to becoming and that virtue must consist in some kind of knowledge. It follows from this that virtue must be knowledge of something that *is*. Socrates crowns his overall argument in Part 5 when he proves dialogically that virtue must be knowledge of some objective good. Goodness becomes the measure of all our conduct, though we never learn what exactly this goodness is. The dialogue ends with Socrates calling for a renewed

inquiry into virtue on account of this lacuna, but that investigation is postponed for another occasion.

In the *Meno*, Socrates discusses with the young Thessalian the nature and acquisition of virtue. He proves that the pursuit of knowledge will make us more virtuous and that this knowledge is ultimately knowledge of the good. In the first half of the dialogue, Socrates asks Meno to define virtue, which he fails to do. This passage does two things: first, it outlines the limits and conditions of knowledge, i.e. it tells us what the pursuit of knowledge might look like; and second, it shows that Meno is both vicious and unwilling to pursue to knowledge, highlighting the relation between this pursuit and virtue.

The second half of the *Meno* explicitly connects virtue and knowledge. It suggests that virtue is both knowledge itself (ἐπιστήμη) and a certain knowledge (ἐπιστήμη τις). This is knowledge of the good. For while the good is a particular object of knowledge, knowing it is paradigmatic of all knowledge. In that sense, knowing the good is what it means to know anything at all. We will become more virtuous if we pursue this peculiar knowledge which is paradoxically both a particular instance and the general case. Since pursuing knowledge at all is implicitly pursuing knowledge of the good, whenever we make genuine inquiry we are approaching knowledge of what is truly good and beneficial and thus become more virtuous. In arguing thus, Socrates points us toward virtue and indicates what it might be, but still does not explain what the good itself is.

It is my contention that the lacunae of the *Meno* and *Protagoras* suggest that each by itself is incomplete; they demand that we turn our attention to the *Republic*. In its discussion of the Good in Books VI-VII, the *Republic* supplies what the *Meno* and

*Protagoras* implicitly require. For that reason it now behooves us to discuss briefly the account of knowledge of the Good as it appears in the *Republic*. We shall find that in the good city the philosopher-kings possess virtue in the highest degree. Their virtue is essentially knowledge of the Good. Although in a certain sense the philosophers will be virtuous through their knowledge of particular virtues, in another sense they will be virtuous through knowledge of the Good itself.

In the good city of the *Republic*, the citizens are divided into three classes, the technicians, the auxiliaries, and the philosopher-kings, each of which is virtuous in its own way. The technicians are moderate and just; the auxiliaries are moderate, just and courageous; and the philosophers are moderate, just, courageous and wise. Even though the philosophers have certain virtues in common with the other two classes, their virtue is of a radically different nature. The technicians and auxiliaries possess virtue because they have the correct opinions,<sup>244</sup> while the philosophers are virtuous specifically on account of their knowledge. The difference between virtue through correct opinion and virtue through knowledge is the difference between political and psychological virtue. Socrates qualifies the courage of the auxiliaries as “political courage” (πολιτικὴν γὰρ [ἀνδρείαν]; 430c).<sup>245</sup> The auxiliaries are virtuous not because their souls are perfectly ordered in and

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<sup>244</sup> The virtue most characteristic of the auxiliaries is courage, which for them is “a power that through everything will preserve the opinion about which things are terrible (δεινῶν)” (429c). That is to say, their courage is a result of correct opinion. The virtue of the auxiliaries is produced through the musical and gymnastic education discussed in Books II-IV. This education does not produce knowledge, but a certain receptivity to the correct opinions (387c; 396e; 401d-e; 522a). Although it is not explicitly mentioned, this education extends to the technician class and produces their moderation. Guthrie remarks, “Plato could not have viewed with indifference the prospect of the children of artisans and businessmen being stuffed with false and harmful notions about gods and heroes” (Guthrie, vol. IV, 456).

<sup>245</sup> Bloom comments, “That is, the courage of a citizen, the courage necessary to a city. Socrates leaves open the possibility that there is a higher form of courage which is radically different from that expressed in the willingness to die at the law’s command” (Bloom ad loc.). Baccou’s remarks are likewise instructive: “Platon appelle *politique* le courage des gardiens pour le distinguer du courage individuel (défini en 442 b), et parce qu’aussi bien c’est par lui que la cité est courageuse. Cette forme du courage diffère de celle dont il

of themselves, but because their souls are ordered in such a way that they fulfill their proper function within the city.<sup>246</sup> In other words, the technicians and auxiliaries are only virtuous within the context of the whole city. If a fully educated auxiliary were removed from the good city, he or she would not qualify as virtuous.

In contrast to this, the philosophers are not virtuous on account of their actions, but on account of the state of their souls. While the philosophers will no doubt behave virtuously, this is not *why* we call them virtuous. They are not virtuous because of the benefit that they provide to the city; if they were removed from the good city, they would still remain virtuous.<sup>247</sup> Rather, they are virtuous because the parts of their souls are each in good condition and are properly ordered as whole. They possess the whole of virtue as a single thing within their own souls. It is not subject to context in the way that the auxiliaries' virtue is. They are and remain virtuous regardless of changing surrounding circumstances.

The philosopher's virtue is essentially knowledge of the Good. It is through this knowledge that the philosopher knows the forms of the particular virtues and is thus able to order his soul and behave virtuously. Not only does the Good make knowledge possible insofar as it "provides truth to the things known and gives power to the one who

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est question aux livres VI et VII en ce qu'elle se fonde sur la droite opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα) qu'une bonne éducation fait naître, tandis que la vertu proprement dite du courage (ou courage philosophique) repose sur la science" (Baccou ad loc.). While the city as a whole may exhibit true courage, identical to that of the philosopher (cf. Kahn, "Unity of the Virtues," 32), the courage possessed by the auxiliary himself is quite limited.

<sup>246</sup> The technicians and auxiliaries are virtuous on account of the actions they perform, not on account of the psychological conditions which issue in these actions. The *Meno* finds value in true opinion insofar as it issues in the same actions as knowledge (*Meno* 97b). But lest the merit of true opinion be overestimated, in the *Republic* Socrates says that all opinions are ugly and blind. They are like "blind men who travel the right road" (506c). True opinion is not good in itself, but only because of the actions it produces, which are themselves only contextually good.

<sup>247</sup> Cf. 592a. The fully virtuous man, i.e. the man who knows the Good, will not participate in politics in bad cities but he will still remain virtuous. His actions differ but his virtue remains the same.

knows” (509a), knowing the Good makes what was previously hypothetical into real and genuine knowledge. Socrates call the Good the μέγιστον μάθημα and says that “no one will adequately know [other μαθήματα] before [the Good] is known” (506a). In other words, without knowing the Good, true knowledge of anything else is impossible.<sup>248</sup> Socrates explains that in the process of dialectic, the soul treats hypotheses as hypotheses and uses them to ‘springboard’ up to “what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole” (510d). Once the soul has grasped this, it returns back down and is able to make arguments based on this unhypothetical first principle. In this way it is able to come to know the forms. In other words, only once the soul has knowledge of the Good is all other knowledge free from hypothesis and truly knowledge in the strict sense of the term. Only once it knows the Good does the soul *know* the forms of justice and moderation and the like.

Since coming to know the forms is fundamentally coming to know the Good, it should be no surprise that the Good should exemplify what a form is. As Findlay explains, the forms are specifications of goodness, that is, particular ways of being good. Each form mentioned in the dialogues is always the form of something good and useful. This extends from lofty forms like justice to even mundane artefacts such as beds and shuttles.<sup>249</sup> The forms are what particular instantiations are ‘supposed to be’ but are not.<sup>250</sup> Therefore an essential part of what it means to be a form is to be good. The form

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<sup>248</sup> In the analogy of the Line (509d-511e), Socrates says that the entire top half of the Line corresponds to ἐπιστήμη and only the top section to νόησις. After presenting the analogy of the Cave and outlining the educational program of the philosophers, Socrates revises this, saying that νόησις belongs to the whole top half and ἐπιστήμη to the top section (533d-534a). The sense of this revision seems to be that once they have more clearly outlined the structure of the intellectual ascent of philosophers, they see that only an unhypothetical grasp of the forms can be properly called ἐπιστήμη.

<sup>249</sup> Findlay, *Plato*, 41.

<sup>250</sup> Cf. Gonzalez, *Dialectic*, 214-5

of the Good is thus in a certain sense the form of forms, i.e. what it is to be a form. Accordingly, knowing the Good means knowing what it is to know a form at all. Because the forms are instances of goodness, coming to know the forms fully is essentially coming to know the Good. If the Good is unknown, the forms are grasped only as hypotheses and not as objects of knowledge.

It is through knowing the forms and the Good that the philosopher is virtuous. In contemplating the Good and the forms, the philosopher “imitates them and, as much as possible, makes himself like them” (500c). Knowing their essences and that they are good, he cannot help but desire to make himself like them. By the very fact of “keeping company with the divine and the orderly”, he “becomes divine and orderly” (500d). The philosopher is able to be just because he knows the form of justice and forms himself to it as best he can. Yet since knowledge of justice is only possible through knowledge of the Good, it is knowledge of the Good that ultimately allows the philosopher to be just. Thus it is knowledge of the Good that allows and even obligates the philosopher to order his soul to become as good as possible.

The implication of this is that knowledge of the Good is not virtue itself but a precondition for virtue. Although this is in one sense true, in another sense knowledge of the Good is not simply a precondition but really *is* virtue. I have suggested in the above paragraph that virtue is the divine and orderly state of the soul. When the philosopher knows the Good, he reflects on this knowledge and then orders his soul appropriately. In that sense knowing the Good is only a precondition but is not virtue itself. But knowing the Good and ordering the soul are not distinct psychological moments. For it is not simply *while* but *in* ‘keeping company with the divine’ that he comes to be divine, i.e. it

is the very act of knowing the Good that puts the philosopher's soul in Good condition. The Good is not merely that to which he refers when ordering his soul. Rather, 'knowing the Good' is the state of the soul when the philosopher is being virtuous. If we say that virtue is the good state of the soul, it is clear that virtue is not other than knowing the Good. Knowledge of the Good is therefore in a sense the precondition for virtue and in another sense virtue itself.

This account of the Good and the philosopher's knowledge of it which I have just offered is only provisional. This is in part because it is not my aim here to provide a detailed and complete account. In addition to this, however, this is because the *Republic* itself does not offer a full account of the Good. Socrates offers the three analogies of the Sun, Line and Cave which, among other things, give us a sense of what the Good is. But we must remember that these are only images (εἰκόν; 509a, 514a) and are not to be confused with an articulation of the truth itself. Socrates himself admits the limits of these analogies, remarking that they will necessarily leave much out (509c). These images offer us but a shadow of the truth. Yet even in recognition of the fact that they are only images and of the explanations which Socrates offers, the account of the Good provided is brief. As Kraut puts it,

Although [Plato] insists on the pre-eminence of this Form [the Good], he does not say precisely what he takes goodness to be; he simply says that it is not pleasure or knowledge (505b-6e). There is a marked contrast here between the fullness of his account of what justice is and the thinness of his discussion of goodness.<sup>251</sup>

The official excuse which Socrates for this 'thinness' is that his interlocutors do not have the requisite philosophical training to follow along with a further explanation. To say

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<sup>251</sup> Kraut, "Defence of Justice," 207.



nothing of the fact that the Good is beyond being and hence beyond words,<sup>252</sup> explanation beyond these analogies is available only to the power of dialectic alone, in which Glaucon has not yet been trained (533a). This is directed at the reader as much as it is at Glaucon. No reader without the requisite preparation and training will be able to understand the truth of the Good.

In Chapter 3 in particular, I argued that coming to know something cannot merely be a matter of a teacher ‘pouring’ knowledge into a passive student. No doubt even if an adequate explanation of the Good could be put down in words, the student would learn nothing if they did not do the requisite intellectual labour. As Socrates’ proposed educational program for the philosophers suggests, a great part of this intellectual labour consists in preparation and training. Only once the mind has been turned toward what *is* will it be able to behold the truth.

In my introduction to this thesis, I suggested that one explanation of the differences between Plato’s dialogues is that each dialogue is but a single part of a larger pedagogical program. I claimed that the Early dialogues only make sense from the perspective of the *Republic*. One cannot expect to find a full account of Platonism in the *Charmides* or any other single dialogue. This does not except the *Republic*. Although I have suggested that the Early dialogues culminate in the *Republic*, this does not mean we can read the *Republic* alone. Just like Glaucon, we have to undergo the requisite philosophical training before we can see the truth. The pedagogical program of the Early dialogues comprises just such a training. Understanding the *Republic* requires reading the dialogues which anticipate it and reckoning with the arguments found therein. Just as the

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<sup>252</sup> Friedländer, vol. III, 115.

Early Dialogues look forward to the *Republic* insofar as they are only complete from its perspective, the *Republic* looks back insofar as it requires having read the preceding works.

My project in this thesis has been to show that the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* argue for the same understanding of virtue—that it is knowledge of the good—and that they look forward to the *Republic* for a fuller explanation of this. Without the treatment of Books VI-VII, these two dialogues remain incomplete. Yet as my brief consideration of the *Republic* suggests, neither is the *Republic* complete without them or the other Early dialogues. This thesis therefore only marks a small part of a much larger project. This project would be ‘complete’—inasmuch as completion is at all possible—only with a thorough reading of all the Early and Middle dialogues, labouring through them and reckoning with what they offer.

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