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Volume 43, numéro 2, juin 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400301ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400301ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Gooch, P. W. (1987). Irony and Insight in Plato's *Meno*. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 43(2), 189–204. <https://doi.org/10.7202/400301ar>

## IRONY AND INSIGHT IN PLATO'S *MENO*

Paul W. GOOCH

*RÉSUMÉ.* — Quoique, à la fin du *Ménon*, la vertu provienne d'une dispensation divine distincte de la compréhension, on trouve néanmoins dans les toutes dernières pages des indications que Platon n'entend pas sérieusement proposer cette conclusion. De plus, des relations dramatiques et des arguments logiques à l'intérieur du dialogue renforcent l'ironie du dénouement. Je soutiens que Platon a recours à l'ironie dramatique pour suggérer que *Ménon* se trompe en croyant que seule la science peut être enseignée et que la vertu, n'étant pas un *didakton*, par conséquent ne s'enseigne pas. En donnant à son lecteur un aperçu plus complet qu'à *Ménon*, Platon lui permet de saisir que *Ménon* ignore encore l'origine et la nature de la vertu.

*SUMMARY.* — At the *Meno's* end, virtue comes through divine dispensation apart from understanding, but there are indications in the closing pages that Plato does not seriously intend this conclusion. Moreover, dramatic relationships and logical arguments in the dialogue reinforce the irony of the ending. I argue that Plato employs dramatic irony to show that *Meno* goes wrong in believing that only knowledge can be taught and in thinking that virtue's not being *didakton* entails that it cannot in principle be taught. By giving his reader more insight than *Meno*, Plato positions us to appreciate that *Meno* still lacks the truth about virtue's origin as well as its nature.

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UNLIKE most of Plato's dialogues, the *Meno* begins abruptly and concludes with a resolution of its opening perplexity. The answer to the fourfold question about how virtue comes — whether by teaching or practice or nature or in some other way — turns out to be a version of the last possibility: where people are virtuous they are so by divine dispensation apart from understanding (*theia moira, aneu nou* 99e6). Virtue is a matter neither of constitution nor of education, but is the result of a divine implanting of true beliefs to guide right conduct.

Or so it seems. The reader who has watched Socrates practise his negative method on others cannot however be certain that Plato here intends a positive conclusion about the relation between religion and morality. The charge at his trial notwithstanding, Socrates did not divorce the ethical from the divine: so perhaps Plato is serious.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps not: as will soon be apparent, there are good reasons to feel uncomfortable about such a straightforward reading of the text.<sup>2</sup>

This paper first sets out those reasons in discussing the last stages of the conversation between Meno and Socrates. Although it finds ironical language there, the paper's main contention is that irony in the *Meno* is complex, for it is also to be located in the dramatic and logical structures of Plato's dialogue. It thus extends the support usually offered on behalf of an ironical interpretation of virtue's professed origin. If successful, the study will also strengthen the principle (more often counselled than followed) that Plato should be read both as philosophy and as literature.

#### I. A SUSPICIOUS END

We begin by recalling how Plato brings the dialogue to a close. Socrates has concluded at 99a that the only right guides in human affairs are knowledge and true opinion. Reminding Meno that virtue cannot be knowledge since it is not taught, he is left with true opinion as the sole good guide. How, though, can the right beliefs get into the minds of men? Not through teaching: so it must be by divine dispensation.

But this conclusion, put so baldly, is not obvious. And when we reflect on the moves Plato makes to get us there, it is difficult to allay suspicions about his intentions. There are two main steps. First, Socrates returns Meno to the question of political leadership, not to raise doubts about the success of politicians but rather to

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1. For a recent discussion of the close connection of the religious and the moral in Socrates, see James BECKMAN, *The Religious Dimension of Socrates' Thought*. SR Supplements 7 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1979), especially Chapter Two. Beckman sees the *Meno*'s ending as a positive statement (pp. 86–88). Jerome Ekstein, though he is interested in drama and irony, believes the conclusion to be taken more or less as is. His only qualification concerns a modern tendency to read too much into the term "divine". Socrates emphasizes in this term that the "source of virtue is a mystery", but the term is "liberal enough to cover the excellence of human production" (*The Platonic Method: And Interpretation of the Dramatic-Philosophic Aspects of the Meno*. New York: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1968, p. 72). R. STERNFELD and H. ZYSKIND (*Plato's Meno: A Philosophy of Man as Acquisitive*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978) are not suspicious of the conclusion (though they note the strangeness of the appeal to Spartans and women, p. 100), believing it a serious attempt to point up the limits of knowledge. In listing older commentators who see no irony R.S. BLUCK included WILAMOWITZ, H. RAEDER and P. CAUER (*Plato's Meno*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 39 n. 1; cf. the reference to B.J.H. Ovink as well, p. 25 n. 1.).
  2. As I argue in this study, the competing claim that the dialogue's conclusion is "ironic" is itself open to different interpretations. But among those who have made such claims may be included R.S. BLUCK in *Plato's Meno*; and Jacob KLEIN, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), although Klein suggests that the "divine allotment" of 100b2 may not be intended sarcastically (p. 256). F. SCHLEIERMACHER in his *Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato* (trans. W. Dobson. London: John Williams Parker, 1836) speaks of "a sufficient quantity of irony which at the end rings out clearly enough" (p. 211).

ask about the origins of whatever virtues they possess.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with the previous argument, knowledge (*epistêmê* 99b3) cannot guide public affairs: political leaders must rule not through wisdom (*sophia* b5) as wise men (*sophoi* b5), but through good opinion (*eudoxia* b11). If the appropriate stringencies on the concepts of knowledge and wisdom are understood, the language is acceptable and the conclusion so far inoffensive. But it has no hint of the divine. That comes in the second step.

Plato moves to divine dispensation by way of analogy at 99c, introducing a comparison between political leaders and the religious classes of soothsayers and oracles. These when inspired speak truths without knowing what they say (*isasi de ouden hôn legousin* c4-5). More generally, where people succeed in correct words and deeds without intelligence (*noun mê echontes* c8) they are called "divine" (*theious* c7). This word is thus applicable to poets as well as soothsayers and prophets. Further, there is a link between "divine" and being good (as distinct from being inspired): women and Spartans call good men *theious* (d8-9). In these cases, then, saying and doing the right thing seems a function of divine possession rather than knowledge.

The comparison between the possessed and political leaders is emphasized again at 99d. These leaders speak correctly and accomplish much through divine possession, not knowing what they say (*mêden eidotes hôn legousin* d5).

It follows then that virtue must come by divine dispensation (*theia moira* 99e6, 100b2-3) apart from intelligence (*aneu nou* 99e6).

Now suppose we think of this passage not as the conclusion to an entire dialogue but as a statement in itself about the origin of virtue. It is possible, perhaps, to read it as a straightforward account. In support one could argue that Plato takes inspiration and divine possession seriously, and that the divine and the virtuous are indeed appropriately linked in his mind. Not only is there the case of Socrates and his *daimonion*. All lovers are divinely mad (*Phaedrus* 244ff), and both state and individual can benefit from divine dispensation (see for some instances *Apology* 33c, *Phaedo* 58e, *Republic* 366d, 443c, 499b, *Laws* 875c). Moreover, the evidence of *Apology* 22c (where lines 1-3 parallel closely *Meno* 99c2-5) and the *Ion* will not allow us to think that Plato always mocks poetic inspiration: in fact, earlier in the *Meno* he has used *theioi* of poets in a commendatory way (81b2). Therefore the message of the *Meno* is that virtue is the result of divine intervention.

This reading is not however convincing. It is true that Plato often contrasts knowledge and inspiration, and that he occasionally praises divine possession. But it does not follow that, because he does this first thing in the *Meno*, he is also doing the second. (a) The link between being "divine" and being good is strangely fastened, with the linguistic choice of women and Spartans the sole reason for joining the two.

3. The issue here is political virtue, a change from Socrates' earlier attempts to deal with virtue *toute simple* in the first part of the dialogue, and from his interest in the paternal teaching functions (not the civic contributions) of Athenian leaders in the discussion with Anytus. One is reminded of shifts between virtue and political virtue in the first part of the *Protagoras* (see C.C.W. Taylor's note on *Prot.* 319a3-7 in his *Plato: Protagoras*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). Since the success of political leaders is not openly questioned in the *Meno*, this has led to comparisons with the political critique of the *Gorgias* in 515 ff. (see Bluck's note on *Meno* 93a5).

There is at least playfulness here (especially if we take Socrates to be imitating the Spartan accent<sup>4</sup>), even if some commentators would wish to be more cautious than Jacob Klein, who speaks of “the extreme sarcasm which flavors Socrates’ words”.<sup>5</sup> (b) As we have seen, the conclusion that political virtue must derive from divine dispensation cannot go through without the comparison of leaders with oracles and soothsayers. Both groups appear, along with the craftsmen, in *Apology* 22c–22e. What unites all three, however, is lack of knowledge, *not* the fact that whatever they get right they owe to inspiration. So the *Apology* offers no support for the claim that Plato is serious about right opinion’s having to be derived from divine dispensation in the case of political leaders. Indeed, from what Plato says elsewhere about Athenian politics, we are perfectly justified in beginning to suspect that the comparison is ironic: leaders do not in fact get it right, and the state might just as well be run by oracles.<sup>6</sup> (c) There is an interesting use of “prophet” (*mantis*) earlier in the dialogue which confirms this suspicion. At 92c6 Socrates calls Anytus a prophet because he claims evaluative knowledge of the sophists without any experience of them. The epithet is hardly commendatory, for Socrates’ surprise (*thaumadzoim’ an* 92c7) is intended to reflect upon this way of acquiring such beliefs in Anytus’ case.<sup>7</sup> (d) Plato’s language about political leaders is heightened beyond necessity if his real aim is to attribute virtue to divine activity. It is one thing to argue that true beliefs are implanted by god, but quite another to remark that leaders do not even know what they are saying (99d5). The distinction has passed from that between knowledge and true belief almost to the difference between conscious and unconscious beliefs. As R.S. Bluck remarks, “it is highly probably that the emphasis here on lack of *nous* (*noun mē echontes* c6, *aneu nou* 100a1) is deliberately mischievous... and that the present comparison is, in fact, ironical”.<sup>8</sup>

I hold then that the *Meno*’s closing pages provide good reasons for the reader’s unwillingness to see the ostensible conclusion of the dialogue as seriously intended by Plato. Bluck states this point twice, first commenting that Plato is “being *very* ironical” (his emphasis), and then repeating that “Socrates is being exceedingly ironical” in suggesting that politicians are blessed by the gods.<sup>9</sup> But although I agree, the interesting work on the *Meno*’s conclusion is far from complete. So far we have examined Plato’s statements and language within a small bit of text, largely in the light of beliefs he expresses elsewhere. Is there any other evidence from the dialogue as

4. Bluck so takes him: see the comment on 99d9.

5. KLEIN, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*, p. 255.

6. Cf. A.E. TAYLOR’s observation: “The effect of his classification is much that which might be produced to-day by speaking together of ‘ventriloquists, medium, and cabinet ministers’” (*Plato: the Man and his Work*, fourth edition. University paperbacks. London: Methuen, 1960, p. 144 n. 1). SCHLEIERMACHER less strikingly reports the politicians as “most gently merged into the same class with soothsayers and poets” (*Introduction*, p. 212).

7. A similar point is made by B.T. McDONOUGH, “A Study of the Conclusion of Plato’s *Meno*”, *Dialogos* 13 (1978), 169–177.

8. On 99c2-3. Bluck thinks the comparison by itself is not sufficient to establish irony, but my points (b) and (c) above suggest reasons why it is not wrong so to think.

9. On 100a1.

a whole which bears upon our concern? I think there is. Both the dramatic features of the work, and the structure of its argument, may be seen to support the view that its ostensible conclusion is ironic.

## II. IRONY IN THREE KINDS

Before we consider those issues, however, it will be useful to look briefly at the role in Platonic interpretation of the concept of irony. For some commentators the concept plays only bit parts; and unless it is controlled very tightly it can dominate the entire stage. It is easy enough to say that this or that statement in Plato is ironic and should be read with a glance here, an emphasis there. Irony so treated may become effective ammunition for shotgun hermeneutics, especially when the interpreter wants the text to release his own favourite theory. At the same time, it is hard to discuss Plato without referring sooner or later to "Socratic irony". So some attempt at clarification seems called for.

I begin with the fact that Bluck has identified the irony in our passage as belonging both to Plato and to Socrates. Presumably that is a stylistic point with him, based on a belief that "Socrates" here speaks for Plato. The matter is not that simple, though. For the irony we believe we have discovered is quite plausibly seen as *internal* to the dialogue. It is conveyed in language which should signal something of Socrates' intention to Meno; that is, it works on the level of the characters within the text. This is irony in a common understanding of the term, so close to something like sarcasm that (as we have seen) Jacob Klein finds it natural to use that term. Sarcasm, as a species of irony signifying disapproval or contempt,<sup>10</sup> requires for its success that the listener understand its ironical nature; and Meno's caution to Socrates about Anytus at 99e suggests that he has caught at least something of Socrates' attitude.<sup>11</sup> Plato, however, is as we shall see capable of more irony than this sort. But first we must comment on Socratic irony, which is yet another kind. It too has its natural place at the level of conversation between interlocutors, but unlike sarcasm it is a specialized or technical sort, entirely related to Socrates' profession of ignorance. Socratic *eironeia* I take to refer to the belief of an observer that Socrates conceals, holds back, or misrepresents in speech his true mind, with emphasis upon "true". The most forceful characterization of this Socratic irony is given by Thrasymachus, who accuses Socrates of deceit and dissimulation (*Rep.* 337a). It is thus a feature, not so much of Socrates' ignorance, as of an attitude towards his profession that he does not know. We might draw out a distinction by saying that wherever the person Socrates uses irony as normally understood, in either sarcastic or other mode, we have an instance of Socrates' irony; but where he is suspected of insincere claims about his ignorance, there is exhibited "Socratic irony".<sup>12</sup>

10. Sarcasm of course is only one species: there can be gentle, even affectionate irony (as I learned early from my father).

11. See Bluck on 99e3 and on 100a1.

12. Whether Socrates' professions of "Socratic irony" are themselves sarcastic is a matter of the interpreter's judgment. Jerome Ekstein uses that label for Socrates' claims to be ignorant in the *Meno* (*The Platonic Method*, p. 19).

I said, though, that Plato may have more irony in store. This is because his Socrates is not merely a speaker, but a speaker in dialogues which are like plays. And that opens the reader to the possibility of *dramatic irony*. This kind of irony has its life not simply within the play, but between audience and stage, so that the author is capable of generating in the spectator an understanding of words spoken on stage but not appreciated by at least some of the play's characters. The ironic intent is situated not in the speaker (as in the cases of sarcasm etc. and Socratic irony), but in the real source of the words, that is, the author of the play. There is thus an interesting difference between dramatic irony and irony in normal discourse: where the latter requires its speaker to intend recognition of its nature in order to be effective, the former must depend upon a lack of recognition for its effect.<sup>13</sup>

That there is dramatic irony in Plato's dialogues, as well as irony in its other senses, should be obvious; but for an example in the *Meno* itself, consider a couple of Socrates' remarks about Anytus. Although Anytus thinks Socrates is slandering statesmen, he does not know — as he might one day — what it is to slander someone (95a); and if Meno can persuade him to be gentler, the Athenians will be benefited (100e). The reader knows, as Meno cannot, that these words foreshadow Socrates' trial; and further that they are ironic because not even Socrates himself could in the end persuade Anytus that he was slandering him in the charges which led to Socrates' death. Since the *persona* Socrates cannot be in a position to comprehend this within the dialogue itself, Plato heightens his Socrates with such touches, and creates a wider community of understanding between Socrates and the reader, a community which excludes the other characters in the drama.

With these distinctions between ironies belonging to Socrates and what we might call Platonic irony, I wish to return to the irony of the dialogue's conclusion. For, while to this point the argument has raised reasons to feel uncomfortable about Socrates' claims concerning divine dispensation, we may now proceed to several features of the dialogue which point to a dramatic irony about the conclusion, an irony which Meno is incapable of understanding.

### III. DRAMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

Our first task is to sketch the relationships which exist between the characters in the dialogue as they have developed by 86c when Meno reverts to his opening question about the origin of virtue. The full significance of this moment will become clear, but for now we can observe its dramatic importance: in taking us back to the beginning Meno creates a good deal of tension. We are uncertain about his understanding of the first half of the discussion, and unsure both about what Socrates' reaction will be and

13. It is this dramatic irony which is best expressed by Fowler's statement: "Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension" (Fowler and Gowers, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, s.v. "irony", p. 305). As a description of (say) sarcastic irony this will not work: such words have no bite unless the victim hears and understands that the opposite is indeed intended.

how the discussion can achieve a satisfactory conclusion. Thinking about four relationships in the dialogue to this point will help us understand this tension more fully.

(1) Although he never has a place on stage, Meno's teacher Gorgias has such a strong background presence that we should begin with this relationship. It provides the important clues to Meno's character and intellectual capacities, for Plato portrays him as almost entirely dependent upon Gorgias for his opinions. Worse, he is not even very clear about those opinions. Instead of learning insights from Gorgias, Meno has picked up habits — and this word aptly describes his behaviour. At the outset Socrates notes that Gorgias has given Meno “the regular habit of answering any chance question in a fearless, magnificent manner, as befits those who know” (70b, Loeb): style, in other words, rather than genuine understanding. This enables him to make fine speeches about virtue (80b), but since he seems to have no opinions other than those he has picked up from Gorgias, Socrates constantly links him with his teacher (73c, 76c, 79c). Even then he apparently has trouble remembering Gorgias' views (76b). And when Socrates tries to introduce a new distinction into the discussion, Meno immediately slips back to familiar ways of speaking through habit (82a). Small wonder, then, that one commentary describes him as paying “only lip-service to virtue”.<sup>14</sup> In language familiar from the *Gorgias*, rhetoric has produced in Meno not knowledge but persuasion.

(2) In sharp contrast to this background relationship is the exchange in the “play within the play” between Socrates and the slave boy. In fact, Plato is so concerned to differentiate between mere persuasion and real education that he has Socrates draw an exaggerated distinction between teaching and learning on the one hand, and questioning and recollecting on the other. (Socrates says the slave is recollecting, *not* learning, at 82a1,2 and 82b7; and he makes a point of distinguishing the asking of questions from teaching at 82c4,5, 84c11-d2 and 85d3.) Since this sharp division will later disappear, we must assume that Plato wishes to emphasize through exaggeration the features of Socrates' pedagogic relation with the slave boy. That relation results in a series of steps through which the slave passes in order to “recollect” the right answers to Socrates' questions about the way in which to double the square.<sup>15</sup> (a) The boy begins with *confidence*: at 82e he says it is obvious (*dêlon dê, ô Sôkrates e2*) that he should double the side of the original square, and Socrates observes to Meno that the boy thinks that he knows. (b) But it is not long until he is reduced to *perplexity*. By 84a he has given a sufficient number of wrong answers that he ends up confessing that he does not know (*egôge ouk oida a2*). This stage is of course essential to his coming to know the truth; as Socrates remarks to Meno, he had to be perplexed and numbed

14. STERNFELD and ZYSKIND, *Plato's Meno*, p. 9.

15. Bluck distinguishes three stages in the process of recollection: refutation, the stirring up of latent opinions, and their conversion into knowledge (*Plato's Meno*, p. 15). My account adds the initial stage of mistaken confidence; but more importantly, I claim that it will turn out to be significant to the later argument that the last stage of knowledge is *not* reached by the slave boy. I therefore stress this point here, as Bluck does not. (cf. John E. THOMAS, *Musings on the Meno*. The Hague: Martinus NIJHOFF, 1980, pp. 153–156 “Stages of Recollection”).



(84b6) before he would gladly seek for what he does not know (*dzêtêseien an hêdeôs ouk eidôs* 84b10-11). (c) However, now that he has indeed the desire to know (*epothêsen to eidenai* 84c6), the slave is able to arrive at his own opinions on the question. Exactly how this comes about (is sense experience necessary?), and how we are to interpret the doctrine of *anamnêsis* (is it restricted to a grasp of analytic truths? should we resist tearing it from its mythological setting?), are matters of great interest in themselves,<sup>16</sup> but they do not need consideration here. It is enough to note that Socrates insists that all the boy's opinions are not mere repetitions of what he has heard, but instead arise as answers from within himself (85b,c). Further it is to be stressed that this third stage is a dream-like stage of *true opinions*, not knowledge. Socrates says that if repeated questions were put to the boy he would end up with certain knowledge, but he is not yet at that place (85c). (d) It follows that the final stage in the recollection process will be the conversion of true beliefs into *knowledge*. While the relationship between the slave and Socrates does not take this last step, Plato does return to it at 98a, where true beliefs are made fast by working out their reasons (*aitias logismô* a3-4).

(3) The third dramatic relationship of importance is the one between Meno and Socrates. In fact, since it is Meno who comes to accept the dialogue's conclusion about the origin of virtue, we must pay careful attention to the way in which Meno relates to Socrates. Does he treat him as another Gorgias, a teacher from whom he can pick up ideas and who will inculcate in him acceptable verbal habits? Or will he gain genuine insights into the nature of virtue?

Plato suggests that Meno will come to have knowledge only if he is able to go through the steps to recollection we have just outlined.<sup>17</sup> By the time we get to the slave boy episode in the dialogue, Meno is in the second stage. He began with the great confidence he learned from Gorgias: he could easily tell Socrates what virtue is (*all'ou chalepon, ô Sôcrates, eipein*, 71e1). And even after his inability to define virtue has been exposed, he still produces a confident attempt at 77b. Only after more investigation by Socrates does he finally admit defeat. Nevertheless, it may be of interest that his admission at 80a is couched more in the language of numbing and bewitching than in the confession of ignorance. He has nothing to reply or to say; but he does not acknowledge outright that he does not know. Socrates has cast a spell on Meno, so that for the first time in his life he is at a loss for words.

16. See BLUCK, Introduction pp. 8-17: Socrates' teaching does enable the slave to express his own opinions (p. 12; cf. on 82e4-5); sense perception is an aid to recollection (p. 14; and on 82b8-9). There is also Gregory Vlastos' oft-referred-to article, "Anamnesis in the *Meno*" (*Dialogue 4* (1965) pp. 143-167; reprinted as "The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*", BOBBS-MERRILL reprint Phil 215); empirical evidence is utterly unnecessary (p. 157); the religious doctrine is important to Plato's discovery of inference and insight (p. 166). For more bibliography see STERNFIELD and ZYSKIND, p. 160 n. 3; and for a discussion of many of these views, John E. THOMAS, *Musings on the Meno*, pp. 127-162.

17. I do not mean by this that Meno must "recollect" what virtue is in just the same way that the slave boy "recollected" his geometric solution. That this does not happen is a source of puzzlement for all readers of the dialogue, and may be explained in different ways. Rather, I claim only that Plato expects Meno to go through the formal steps to arrive at knowledge—an expectation clearly set out in Socrates' explicit parallels between Meno and his slave (see my next paragraph).

(4) Since Meno is at the second stage, it is natural to compare him with his slave. This relationship provides a dramatic foil for Meno's relation with Socrates, and Socrates is not reluctant to point out the similarities between the two of them at 84a-c. The numbing sting was useful for the boy, and Meno should learn from that. Socrates invites Meno to watch how the boy progresses from perplexity to discovery (84c), and once the boy has come to true opinion Meno is urged to take courage and search out what he does not at present know (86b-c). Thus the slave boy is deliberately held up as a model for Meno's inspection and emulation.

#### IV. THE ARGUMENT TO THE DIALOGUE'S CONCLUSION

In setting out these four relationships I have (so to speak) frozen the dramatic action at the end of the slave boy episode. It is time to return to the drama: and immediately we see that Meno is not prepared to follow the lead of his slave. Although he professes himself ready to take on with Socrates the question "what is virtue?", he would much rather revert to his opening question about the origin of virtue. He overcomes perplexity about an issue not by desiring to learn, but by replacing that issue with a different one.

Socrates capitulates, but suggests a hypothetical approach. Since we have not yet defined virtue, we cannot tell whether it comes by teaching or nature or some other way (practice as a possible origin is dropped from Meno's 86c list). We could surmise, however, that if it is taught it might have something to do with knowledge; so the hypothetical method will investigate relations between virtue, knowledge and teaching. Meno agrees to approach the matter in this way. And the way appears fruitful, for by the dialogue's end Meno has his answer: virtue must come not by teaching or by nature but by divine dispensation. His perplexity is put to rest.

The reader, for his part, may be less easily satisfied, remembering the suspicions advanced in section I above. I therefore propose to trace in this present section the steps whereby we move from the hypothetical investigation to the dialogue's end. The tracing is not detailed: only crucial premises and moves are noted, in three stages. In part A we consider assumptions which relate virtue, knowledge and teaching; part B deals with conditions under which teaching takes place; and in part C the last few steps to the conclusion are recounted.

##### A.

Socrates begins by securing Meno's agreement with the view that nothing other than knowledge is taught (*ouden allo didasketai anthrōpos ê epistēmên* 87c2-3). In order to be quite clear about this view, we should look ahead to 98d where Socrates and Meno summarize their conclusions: there we find an agreement that if something were to be taught then it would be wisdom (*ei ge didakton eiê, phronêsis an einai* d12). Accordingly we can enter as our first premise.

- (1) If x is knowledge then x is taught (87c); and if x is taught then x is knowledge (98d).

This has the effect of making the sphere of knowledge or wisdom (the difference may be ignored here) and the sphere of what is taught entirely co-extensive, which I think is faithful to Socrates' hypothesis: knowledge is taught and only knowledge is taught.

The next premise for investigation is whether virtue is a kind of knowledge: for if it is, well be taught (87c). By a series of steps which need not delay us here,<sup>18</sup> it is concluded at 89a that virtue is, either in whole or in part, wisdom. By ignoring again any distinction between *epistêmê* and *phronêsis*, we can set out this result as

(2) Virtue is knowledge.

But then, we have our conclusion. By (1) and (2) we reach

(3) Virtue is taught

which even Meno can see clearly enough to state (89c3-4).

### B.

Unfortunately, no sooner affirmed than questioned. Socrates does not deny the validity of the argument, but he does have a doubt about its second premise, and therefore about the soundness of the conclusion (89d). The problem has to do with the conditions under which teaching takes place, and may be set out in a premise:

(4) If there are neither teachers nor students of x, x cannot be taught (89e1-3).

Apply this next to virtue: are there any teachers of virtue around? Socrates' answer is the next premise:

(5) There are neither teachers nor students of virtue. The evidence for this is presented in the interlude with Anytus, from 90a to 95a. Although this interlude (which is a little longer than the slave boy episode and perhaps in dramatic balance to it) has not always received detailed consideration from commentators,<sup>19</sup> for our purposes it is sufficient to note that neither sophists nor (as Anytus finally agrees) well-intentioned fathers have been able to better the youth of Athens through teaching. At 95a Meno acknowledges that citizens of his own state and even the sophists he knows do not necessarily teach virtue. He has been in two minds about it, but by 96c he is willing to agree that there are no teachers of virtue, and therefore no students either. With the truth of (4) and (5) established, the conclusion is clear:

(6) Virtue cannot be taught (96c10).

Of course, this conclusion is in direct contradiction to the first argument's conclusion (3) that virtue *is* taught. Here we have reached a genuine logical impasse, so obvious that Meno must confess uncertainty again: he wonders whether there are any good people after all, or if there are (but here he fixes once more on his question) how possibly they might come to be good (96d). In the process of their discussion, he and Socrates had rejected the alternative that virtue might come by nature, for two reasons: first, if it is knowledge it is learned, not natural (89a; cf. 98d); and second, if

18. See THOMAS, *Musings on the Meno*, section III.2 for a discussion of the argument. He reads 87c1-3 as I have done in (1) except that he uses "teachable" where I have "taught".

19. As STERNFELD and ZYSKIND point out: *Plato's Meno*, p. 64.

virtue were merely a matter of natural gift, those so gifted could simply be kept locked away from corrupting influences until maturity.<sup>20</sup> There seem no avenues left for virtue.

C.

But Socrates has another idea altogether, and in a few moves the matter is settled.

(i) Though he does not state this categorically, Socrates seems to accept the belief that virtue is not knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This would follow from the first premise of the first argument, that the spheres of knowledge and of what is taught are co-extensive, and the conclusion of the second discussion, that virtue cannot be taught. The reasoning can be made quite plain. From "If virtue is knowledge then virtue is taught" (cf. (1) and (2) above), and "Virtue is not taught" (cf. (6) above), we reach by *modus tollens*: "Virtue is not knowledge".

(ii) That conclusion would not bother Socrates, however. For he next introduces the claim that true belief is as good a guide for action as is knowledge (97b), giving in support the example of the road to Larisa. Meno takes some persuasion, but he comes round to see the point when Socrates has explained the superiority of knowledge to true belief in terms of its stability rather than its practicality on any particular occasion.

(iii) But how do people come to have true opinions? They cannot be given them by nature, since both knowledge (as we have seen) and true opinions are things acquired. But true beliefs unlike knowledge may not come through teaching: Meno and Socrates have already agreed in premise (1) to restrict what is taught to knowledge, and they reaffirm that now — there are no teachers of virtue, and only knowledge can be taught. However virtue comes, it cannot be taught or be knowledge (98e). So if virtue comes by true belief, then those true beliefs must come in some way other than by nature or by education.

(iv) We have already considered in section I above the final steps. When statesmen succeed in doing right things they must have been guided by true beliefs. In this they are like prophets and soothsayers: so all together are inspired, not knowing what they speak. When true beliefs come to guide action aright, those beliefs originate in the divine. Hence the dialogue's conclusion:

(7) Virtue comes by divine dispensation (99e6, 100b2-3). Meno is charmed with the result: «I think you put it excellently, Socrates» (100b).

20. The suggestion has the air of a *reductio ad absurdum*; KLEIN terms it "playfully presented" (*A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, p. 219). Nevertheless, as Klein goes on to show, there are interesting issues about innate abilities and education associated with the suggestion, and his references to the *Republic* are apt. If anyone has drawn attention to the adumbration of the *Republic* (at 415a) in the comparison of the innately virtuous young to gold (89b5), I have missed it.

21. The closest Socrates comes to stating this is 98e6, though he has not previously asserted it (as Bluck notes *ad loc.*).

## V. THE ARGUMENT REVISITED

Meno may be charmed, but the reader who suspects the conclusion will want to keep his wits about him. While the printed word cannot answer in new speech his questions, the stability of written argument does allow him to retrace the path to the conclusion. When he walks the argument's course again, he may see that its end is not inevitable.

Return first to what I have called argument B, about the teachers and students of virtue. Proposition (4), « If there are neither teachers nor students of  $x$ ,  $x$  cannot be taught », is essential to the conclusion (6) that virtue cannot be taught. But the full meaning of (4) has not been brought out in my exposition to this point. I have translated the *mête didaskaloi mête mathêtai eien... mê didakton einai* of 89e1–3 as, “if there are neither teachers nor students [of something] then it cannot be taught”, for that is how Meno understands it, and this is what the success of the argument demands. However, *didakton* masks an ambiguity which needs to be exposed. The phrase *hê aretê ouk esti didakton* may mean either “virtue is not taught” or “virtue is not teachable”,<sup>22</sup> and the difference is important. To say that something is not actually taught in certain circumstances is not to say it cannot in principle be taught under any circumstances whatever, any more than to say that what is the case is the same as what could be the case. Virtue may not be *didakton* because there are no appropriate teachers right now, or because it is (like digestion) something which no one could teach anywhere. Hence, we must ask what Socrates intends by his claim in (4). If he means, “Since there are at present neither teachers nor students of  $x$ ,  $x$  is not at present taught”, then that seems at least plausible. If however we are expected to read (4) as, “If there are at present neither teachers nor students of  $x$ , then  $x$  can never be taught” (or even more strongly, “then  $x$  is unteachable in principle”), then we cannot accept this claim. One day there may be some teacher of  $x$  if circumstances change, a possibility we could imagine as long as  $x$  is something of a sort to be taught.

That Plato himself understood virtue to be the sort of thing which under very different conditions might be taught is evident from 100a: there might yet come a Teiresias-like statesman who could make another like himself. Accordingly, Plato can accept (4) only in a limited sense, which will yield a similarly limited conclusion, that virtue is not at present taught. Proposition (6) must accordingly be modified in this way. That, however, will not be enough to contradict (3) “Virtue is taught” if *didakton* there is read as “capable of being taught”. For the two propositions can be reconciled into the claim that although virtue is not taught right now, it is nonetheless the sort of thing that might yet be taught. This of course leaves open the possibility that the virtue capable of being taught is indeed knowledge — and if it is knowledge then step (i) of part C above fails. We do not need to adopt the stated conclusion of the dialogue, that virtue is true opinion given by divine inspiration.

But this is not the only false step. There is another problem about what is or can be taught which arises at the very beginning of argument A, and Meno's failure to

22. For a useful discussion of this point see BLUCK on 80a1, *didakton*. E. THOMAS translates *didakton* as “teachable” or “can be taught”, not simply as “taught”, thereby missing the ambiguity in the term.

appreciate this places him on the wrong road at the start. Think again of proposition (1), which makes the spheres of knowledge and the teachable co-extensive, so that anything taught is knowledge and knowledge alone. Since this premise is crucial to the entire course of the dialogue, we must reflect carefully upon Socrates' language. In Guthrie's translation the passage at 87b3–c9 reads :

... let us use a hypothesis in investigating whether it is teachable or not. We shall say, "what attributes of the soul must virtue be, if it is to be teachable or otherwise?" Well, in the first place, if it is anything else but knowledge, is there a possibility of anyone teaching it — or, in the language we used just now, reminding someone of it? We needn't worry about which name we are to give to the process, but simply ask, will it be teachable? Isn't it plain to everyone that a man is not taught anything except knowledge? — That would be my view. — If on the other hand virtue is some sort of knowledge, clearly it could be taught. — Certainly. — So that question is easily settled — I mean on what condition virtue would be teachable.

In securing Meno's agreement to proposition (1) Socrates harks back explicitly to the discussion with the slave boy, concluded only a moment ago. And this is the clue: for if Meno were to remember how that discussion ended, he would not so readily agree with Socrates now. To the claim that "a man is not taught anything except knowledge" he might reply (reflecting on point 2c of section III above), "Your yourself have just taught the slave boy true opinions, not knowledge". That someone should teach something other than knowledge is indeed possible, since Socrates has himself completed that kind of teaching within the last few minutes.

Did Plato intend his reader to make the move Meno fails to make? If the move is legitimate perhaps Plato's permission is unnecessary; nevertheless there are features of the text which may be invoked in support of my point. (a) It is not insignificant that our proposition (1) has the status of an hypothesis rather than a categorical assertion. (b) Twice Plato uses the term *dêlon*, translated by Guthrie at c2 as "plain" and at c5 as "clearly". In appealing to the obvious character of his claims Socrates may invite us to further reflection, especially where he is dealing with an easily-numbed Meno who should be learning from his slave how to proceed with Socrates (cf. the boy's confident "That's plain" at 82e2, point 2a in section III above; and point 4 of the same section). (c) A like warning may lurk in Socrates' easy ending to this passage: "we've made quick work of that". On what other question in this dialogue has agreement been so effortlessly achieved?

In light of such considerations, then,<sup>23</sup> I propose that the premise fundamental to the rest of the dialogue requires major revision. The slave boy episode makes it

23. Two objections may be raised against my assertion that Plato intends by the considerations advanced above to suggest that true beliefs can be taught.

(i) Someone may object that the slave boy episode establishes, not that true opinions are taught, but that they are instead *recollected*. Socrates is quite explicit about this difference in several places (see Section III.2 above). And of course, if recollection is not teaching then my argument collapses. But so does Socrates' argument. Fortunately, the distinction between teaching and recollection is drawn for a limited time and purpose. Even within the episode Socrates has spoken of the slave boy's "learning" (84c4-5 and 86a4), and in the passage quoted above the difference in abandoned ("we needn't worry about which name we are to give the process", 87b8). The language of

possible for us to relax the exclusive grip of knowledge on the teachable, and to add a new premise:

(la) True beliefs are taught.

It is not hard to see the large difference which (la) makes to the dialogue. For we now have an answer, previously unavailable, to our question at step (iii) in part C above: how do people come to have true opinions? There is no need for "another way", no necessity to invoke the divine. Conclusion (7) that virtue comes by divine dispensation may be replaced by an ending which allows for the usefulness of true beliefs in virtuous action and grants at the same time that those beliefs may be taught.

## VI. INSIGHT AND IRONY

It remains to draw together the ironies we have discovered in the conclusion to Plato's *Meno*. Our suspicions were initially aroused by Socrates' language in the dialogue's closing exchanges: we discovered an irony akin to sarcasm in his reference to the linguistic choices of Spartans and women, his comparison of political leaders to soothsayers and oracles, and his gibe that they have no understanding of what they say. In such ways the author of this dialogue writes the lines of his chief character Socrates in an ironic mode, allowing his interlocutor Meno a glimpse of their intention.<sup>24</sup> The reader too therefore suspects that Socrates may be ironic in concluding that virtue must come by divine dispensation.

The burden of this paper has however been greater than that. I have argued that Plato incorporates into the dramatic and logical structure of his dialogue an irony which depends upon insights available to his audience but not shared by all his characters. This irony does not live in the language between Meno and Socrates, for their arguments work on one level without it. Nevertheless, when the reader considers what kind of character Meno is, and how Plato has arranged the dramatic tension by the end of the episode with Meno's slave, then reflection on what Meno does not know

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recollection may be introduced partly to make a point about different *ways* of learning; but that done, Plato can agree that true opinions are taught.

- (ii) More generally against this claim it may be objected that Plato holds as doctrine that only knowledge is taught: beliefs are the result of persuasion, not teaching. While I cannot consider general doctrine here, I can raise doubts about the way doctrine is generated. Consider the *Gorgias*, where Socrates distinguishes knowledge from belief (454d) and associates learning (*noimathekôtes* 45e1) with the former, not the latter. This looks like the received doctrine. However, in the next lines he is perfectly willing to speak of *two* forms of persuasion (*peithous* e3), one of which issues in belief and the other in knowledge. This is because (as Socrates has already noted) when someone teaches he persuades his pupil about that which he teaches (453d9-10). My point is this: general doctrine ought not to rest upon Plato's language as though it were fixed with technical precision. He is capable of distinctions for the sake of their effect, and (as we have seen in the last paragraph) just as capable of altering those distinctions for other purposes. So just as teaching which produces knowledge is (in one sense) persuasion, so it can be argued that pupils learn (in one sense) beliefs which are not, or not yet, knowledge. There seems then no impediment to accepting the *Meno's* implicit claim that true beliefs can be taught. It seems equally clear that this claim ought not to be exported without inspection to other dialogues where Plato might speak differently for different reasons.

24. As noted above in section II (cf. n. 11 for references to Bluck's discussion).

or does not do reveals important alternatives to the dialogue's ending. We recall from section III above that Meno has been urged to emulate his slave's progress from perplexity to true belief capable of becoming knowledge; and we have wondered whether Meno will learn from Socrates genuine insights into the nature of virtue, or instead treat him as another Gorgias. Now we see that he has failed. Not only does he exhibit no desire to learn with Socrates the nature of virtue. Meno also endorses without hesitation what Socrates says, in spite of his slave's lesson that an uncritical confidence in one's answers may lead only to perplexity.<sup>25</sup> He falls into his old habit of trusting the teacher instead of following out the argument to the truth. Moreover, he remains blind to the ambiguity in *didakton*, not pressing Socrates on the implications of his evidence that virtue at present is not taught. In these ways he sets himself up for the harsher ironies of the last few steps, his uncritical adoption of Socrates' earlier proposals leading him inexorably to the absurdities of his final position. His last words, "I think you put it excellently, Socrates", epitomize the dramatic irony of Meno's misunderstanding.

Such irony, dependent upon insights created for the audience but kept from Meno, properly belong to Plato rather than to Socrates.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless it is the famed and familiar Socratic irony which brings down the curtain on the *Meno* and concludes the argument of this paper. Socrates ends with the observation that he and Meno still do not know what virtue is, so that they cannot yet be certain about its origin. Meno has been persuaded: but the status of the dialogue's conclusion about divine dispensation remains belief, not tethered knowledge. And since our other ironies give us no confidence that this belief is true, Meno is worse off than his slave.

Note, however, where Plato has situated his reader. Though not as advanced in virtue as is the slave in geometry, the reflective reader leaves the dialogue wiser than Meno in this sense at least, that he knows that Meno does not know how virtue comes, let alone what virtue is. So the silence at the drama's end is the silence of Socratic ignorance. But that is not all. There may be other insights to be won after the curtain falls. Though we do not yet perceive this clearly, we strongly suspect that if virtue comes through true beliefs, those beliefs could be turned into knowledge should the right person set us the right questions. We also suspect that, under better conditions

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25. There is this difference between Meno and his slave in their relations to Socrates: Socrates allows the boy to make wrong proposals himself, without immediately correcting him, whereas (on my view) Socrates and not Meno is the one who proposes the problematic premise (I). This difference would be significant only if Socrates could be accused of a positive attempt to deceive Meno. However, such an accusation would have to ignore the facts that Socrates has just demonstrated where uncritical thinking leads, and that he formulates his proposal as a question inviting reflection, as well as the other points I noted near the end of section V above.

26. I have argued that Meno does not appreciate the logic of the arguments in this dialogue. There may be situations of dramatic irony where none of the characters on stage fully grasp the levels of meaning in their language - and this leads me to ask whether the character Socrates in this drama is aware of the slips in Meno's reasoning. I do not see how he could fail to be aware, given that all of the evidence I have adduced in section V as clues to Plato's intentions is found in Socrates' words. This complicity in irony might bother some readers, if they regard this as insincere deception. Such worries might be alleviated by considerations like those in n. 25. In any case, the fact that the irony is dramatic requires Meno to be left in the dark, and his being there is due to Plato's art, not to a failure on Socrates' part.



with better companions, the right teacher would be Socrates. For just as Plato allows his Socrates foreknowledge of his trial and death, so he grants him such control over the argument that we are tempted to believe that he knows more than he reveals about virtue. In this way the closing profession of Socrates' ignorance about the origin and nature of virtue becomes ironic. It is perhaps one more irony of the *Meno* that this Socratic irony should arise, not from the accusations of Socrates' sceptical listeners, but from Plato's own admirable art.