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EDITED BY
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Preface

The translations and the ‘Further Reading’ were drafted by Alex Long, the introduction by David Sedley. The subsequent revision of the whole, and the footnotes to the translation, were shared between the two.

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Introduction

Plato's progress

Socrates (469–399 BC) was the first great Athenian philosopher. His pupil Plato (427/424–347 BC) was the second. Socrates, who left nothing in writing, was a charismatic but also provocative public figure on the streets of Athens, raising deep ethical questions with all and sundry, and thereby spawning both adulators and sworn enemies. The final victory of his enemies, who secured his conviction and execution at the age of 70, also marked his canonization as a philosophical guru and martyr. Over the following hundred years and more, numerous philosophers set out to resume and complete the project which Socrates was seen as having initiated. Among these, it was Plato who stood out, both as an incomparably great prose writer and as arguably the most seminal of all ancient thinkers, even if his own pupil Aristotle could compete for this latter title. Plato's philosophical writings were mainly in the form of dialogues and, unusually for an ancient Greek author, they have survived in their entirety.

Although we know Plato's dates with some precision, have good evidence that the *Lams* was his last work, and can group a few other dialogues near the end of his life because of their stylistic similarity to the *Lams*, we have no reliable indicators of date for the great majority of his works, including the *Meno* and *Phaedo*. Nevertheless, a global chronological reconstruction has, at least in outline, enjoyed an impressive degree of consensus for many decades, and this chronology will be assumed in what follows. The *Meno* and the *Phaedo* (almost certainly written in that order) are seen as straddling a period in which Plato's philosophical style was

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undergoing important changes, namely the transition from his 'early' to his 'middle' period. A reasonable guess would place this phase in the 380s–370s BC.

Plato's preceding dialogues (including *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Protagoras*, *Charmides*, *Lysis*) had represented above all his attempt to capture and explore the philosophical persona and significance of Socrates. The ideas which Socrates had been shown exploring there had centred on the nature of human goodness or virtue (*aretē*) as a supremely beneficial state of soul, quite possibly identifiable as a special kind of knowledge, and on a related question, how the specific virtues can be successfully defined. These dialogues typically involved Socrates quizzing an interlocutor, and most ended negatively, with the (ideally at least) cathartic realization of ignorance which Plato at this date saw as the principal pay-off of a Socratic conversation. But there is little doubt that the agenda pursued in these texts, whatever it may have owed to the historical Socrates, was also becoming an integral part of Plato's own philosophy.

The next phase of Plato's work, often called his 'middle' period, is one in which constructive metaphysical speculation and argument take centre stage. Socrates is by now presented as wedded to a hypothesis about the nature of true being: the objects of intellectual inquiries like those pursued in previous dialogues are in fact Forms, the pure essences of beauty, goodness and the like, and these, because their purity means their existing apart from the sensible world, must be found by intellectual activity independent of the senses. This is Plato's celebrated theory of Forms, the capital letter being conventionally used to mark a transcendent as opposed to an immanent property or entity. From another perspective, it has sometimes been called the 'two-world theory', since it turns on a radical division between the sensible and intelligible worlds. It is found in outline in the *Cratylus* and *Symposium*, plays a vital role in the arguments of the *Phaedo*, appears in its most elaborate form in books 5–7 and 10 of the *Republic*, recurs in mythical dress in the *Phaedrus*, and is subjected to searching (though not necessarily fatal) criticism from Plato's own pen in the opening part of the *Parmenides*. All these dialogues, perhaps even written in the order just cited, can be counted as belonging to Plato's middle period, although the *Parmenides* is seen as marking the transition to his final phase. In his late work the theory puts in just one unambiguous further appearance, in the *Timaeus*. The *Meno* does not overtly anticipate

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the theory even in passages where it might have done (although it says nothing incompatible with it), and this is a ground for regarding it as prior, albeit transitional, to the middle period.

In addition to the theory of Forms, Plato's middle period is marked by an enhanced interest in the immortality of the soul. This thesis becomes the central contention of the *Phaedo*. It also plays an important supporting role in the *Meno*, where, in partial anticipation of the *Phaedo*, it is invoked to underpin Plato's most startling new theory, that all learning is in reality recollection of truths which our souls learnt before their present incarnation. This theory of Recollection constitutes the most direct link between our two dialogues. Indeed, the *Phaedo*'s recapitulation (73a–b) of the *Meno*'s argument for Recollection is one of the few unambiguous intertextual references in the Platonic corpus.

The 'soul' (Greek *psychē*) is a major player in both dialogues. Greek usage makes it natural for Plato to use the term *psychē* both of the mind, where reasoning and virtues can be assumed to reside, and of that element or aspect of us that survives death, if indeed any does. That we do in fact have a *psychē* is uncontroversial to a Greek ear, in a way that does not correspond to modern assumptions about a 'soul'. The latter translation should therefore be recognized as only an approximation to the meaning of this key Greek term.

As the *Meno* opens it is recognizably Plato's early Socrates, more an open-minded inquirer than a constructive theorist, who features as protagonist. Asked whether virtue is the sort of thing that can be taught, he professes total ignorance even of what virtue is and, with a touch of his characteristic irony (deferral to the supposed superior wisdom of others), invites his interlocutor Meno to enlighten him. The result is a cross-examination in which Meno is repeatedly forced to admit confusion, and to withdraw his proffered definitions one after another. However, in the central section of the dialogue a radically new style of Platonic discourse intrudes. It is here that Socrates unveils the theory of Recollection, and even purports to prove its truth by questioning a slave in such a way as to reveal his innate understanding of geometry. This is the precise point in the Platonic corpus at which, according to a common perception, middle-period thought first enters.

However, another prominent feature of the *Meno*, and one that this time unifies its opening and middle sections, is the use of mathematics as a paradigm of knowledge. This is thought not to be part of Plato's Socratic

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heritage, and may rather reflect the incipient influence of Pythagoreanism. The ambition of making ethics as pure and exact a science as geometry is plainly visible in the *Meno*. The introduction of Forms as the true objects of ethical inquiry is, when it occurs in other dialogues, symptomatic of that same project.

The above should suffice to indicate the transitional character of the *Meno*. It is now time to turn to the dialogue itself.

The Meno

Opening conversation

The conversation takes place in Athens in 402 BC, just three years before Socrates' death as portrayed in the *Phaedo*, and the subtly menacing participation in it of Anytus, destined to be one of Socrates' accusers at his trial, reminds us of this proximity. The main interlocutor, Meno, is a wealthy young Thessalian, currently staying with Anytus, and undoubtedly known to Plato's contemporary readers to have ahead of him a morally disreputable military career soon ending in a not-undeservedly grisly death.

The main topic, whether or not virtue is the sort of thing to be acquired by teaching,¹ locates this dialogue in familiar Socratic territory. In fact, it marks the *Meno* as in effect a continuation of the *Protagoras*, where a debate on the same topic between Socrates and the sophist Protagoras ended inconclusively.² The main interlocutor this time is not a sophist, but he is a committed disciple of the sophist Gorgias.

Arete, here rendered 'virtue' (though some prefer 'excellence'), often functions as the Greek abstract noun corresponding to *agathos*, 'good'. It also serves as the generic name for a set of specific virtues especially prized by ancient Greek civic culture, notably wisdom, justice, courage, temperance and piety, these five (or at least the first four) being later known as the 'cardinal virtues'. Athens was a magnet for sophists like Protagoras, professional intellectuals who hired themselves out to teach

¹ The question, as we translate it, is whether virtue is 'teachable'. The Greek *didakton* can also be translated 'something taught', the question not, however, being whether it is in fact taught, but whether it is the sort of thing whose transmission is via teaching.

² Another area of common ground is that both *Protagoras* (352a–357e) and *Meno* (77b–78b) defend the Socratic paradox that it is impossible to act against knowledge of what is best.

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all the skills of citizenship, and it was above all they who professed to be teachers of virtue. Those sophistic pretensions will come under scrutiny in the later part of the dialogue (88c–92e).

Socrates himself, as famously portrayed in Plato's *Apology*, sees his interrogative practice as a divinely assigned mission, that of making his fellow-Athenians better or more virtuous by provoking them to reflect on their moral presuppositions. But he does not claim to 'teach' virtue, and in fact the *Meno* will provide a theoretical rationale for that avoidance (81c–82a): all a 'teacher' can do in reality is ask questions which bring to the surface knowledge already latent in the soul.

But even that diagnosis of teaching will rely on virtue's being the sort of thing – perhaps knowledge, perhaps just true opinion – that could in principle be recalled. And the opening part of the dialogue (70a–79e) is indeed concerned with this primary question, what virtue itself is. For, as Socrates remarks, the definitional question would have to be settled first, before they could meaningfully proceed to the further question whether or not virtue is acquired by teaching.

This opening move appeals to a highly Socratic principle, the Priority of Definition. It is disputed how far the principle is simply one of good method, how far Plato's Socrates thinks that without a definition a term cannot be understood; and, if the latter, whether he means that an undefined term is not yet *philosophically or scientifically* understood, or that it defies even ordinary lexical understanding. The clues in the *Meno* direct us to both ends of this spectrum. On the one hand, Socrates' claim of ignorance is a strong one. He does not even 'know at all' what virtue is; and, he adds (71b), 'how could I know what sort of thing something is, when I don't know what it is? Or do you think that, if someone doesn't know at all who Meno is, it is possible for him to know whether Meno is beautiful or rich?' Both the wording and the analogy suggest that, in the absence of a definition, Socrates doubts if he has even identified virtue correctly yet. On the other hand, he will later praise Meno with the words 'Even if someone had his head covered, Meno, he could tell from your conversation that you're beautiful' (76b), thus pointedly casting doubt on the very analogy – you cannot know whether Meno is beautiful when you do not even know who he is – which earlier supported his appeal to the Priority of Definition. This is one of many subtle ways in which Plato can in the *Meno* be seen critically re-evaluating his own Socratic legacy. He is

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informally opening the door to a methodology (to be further developed at 86d–87c as a method of ‘hypothesis’) which will permit the definitional stage of an inquiry to be bypassed.

Nevertheless, the definitional inquiry is initially allowed to run its course (71c–79e), and it is pursued with greater subtlety than in any dialogue likely to predate the *Meno*. Two particular themes are worth noting in this section.

First, when he first offers his own definition of virtue, Meno’s mistake (71e–72a) is to reply with a list: the virtue of a man is this, the virtue of a woman is that, and so on. Socrates’ reply amounts to a defence of the Unity of Definition: however heterogeneous the items that fall under a universal term, there must be *some* unifying property that entitles them all to the same name. Although Meno resists so far as regards the diversity of virtue, he concedes the point for ‘bee’, ‘health’, ‘largeness’ and ‘strength’: men and women are healthy, large or strong in the same way, but not *good* in the same way. This contrast implicitly introduces a key point of Platonic method. Beekeeping, medicine, measurement and athletic training are already successful disciplines, which therefore draw on secure data. Goodness belongs to the as yet undeveloped science of ethics. Many philosophers have explained the difference in terms of the different kind of subject matter ethics deals with: values, not facts, for example, or alternatively, in a distinction popular in Plato’s own day, ‘conventional, not natural’. But for Plato, goodness and other values *are* matters of natural fact, just extraordinarily difficult fact, whose science is still in its infancy.

The other aspect to notice is Plato’s new awareness of the dangers of regress and circularity in the definitional process. First, regress. Socrates favours a purely mathematical definition of his specimen definiendum, shape: ‘the limit of a solid’ (76a, e).³ If shape, a mathematical concept, is instead defined as ‘that which always accompanies colour’ (75b), colour too may have to be defined, and unsatisfactorily so if its definition relies on an unconfirmed scientific theory that falls outside the original domain

³ In the *Meno*, ‘shape’ (*schēma*) appears to be used exclusively for the shape of a ‘solid’ (see 76a), and not for the outline of a two-dimensional figure or (e.g. 82b) ‘area’ (*chōrion*). If it were assumed to cover the latter as well, we might have to follow Dominic Scott, *Plato’s Meno* (Cambridge, 2006), 35–41 in translating ‘surface’ instead. But ‘straight’ and ‘round’, both called *schēma* (at 75a), are species of shape, not surface, and we have preferred to retain the traditional translation.

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of inquiry (75c, 76a–e). One danger of such reliance is subtly put on display. Socrates experimentally adopts a definition of colour which he knows Meno will approve, because it rests on the authority of the physicist Empedocles, endorsed by Empedocles' follower Gorgias and therefore also in turn by Gorgias' follower Meno: 'colour is effluence of shapes, commensurate with sight and thus perceptible' (76d). But if colour is effluence of shapes, in other words if shapes flow from external bodies to the eye, we may wonder how shape could still be 'the limit of a solid'.⁴

Chains of definitions are here threatening to form a regress which, if not infinite, risks at any rate being as weak as its weakest member, and in which systematic consistency is at risk. Socrates' preferred mathematical definition of shape, in accordance with the best principles of dialectic (the method of constructive question-and-answer inquiry), contains no regress-threatening disputed term on which the participants are not already agreed (75c–76a), and stays within the bounds of its own well-established discipline, in this case solid geometry. Plato's confidence that ethical method can learn from mathematics is still in full evidence here.

The above issue crops up in the course of discussing Meno's second definition (73c). The parallel danger of circularity, for its part, looms in the critique of Meno's third definition (77b–79e). His new definition is agreed to amount to 'Virtue is proficiency at securing good things', but he concedes that for completeness 'justly', 'piously' and 'temperately' would have to be added (it could hardly be virtue to secure good things in an unjust or impious way). But thereupon the definition is vitiated, because justice, piety, etc. are agreed to be parts of virtue, parts which we therefore could not be expected to understand unless we *already* knew what virtue itself is. A little reflection may reveal that Meno's previous definitions already looked vulnerable to this circularity objection (73a–b, d), and Plato may be inviting us to wonder how *any* definition of virtue could escape it. His own provisional suggestion will be that virtue is a kind of knowledge (87c–89a), and in other dialogues (*Euthydemus* 291e–293a;

⁴ An alternative translation of 76d makes colour 'an effluence *from* [not 'of'] shapes'. That would simply substitute a new inconsistency: shape could no longer be 'that which always accompanies colour' (75b).

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Republic 6.505b–c) versions even of that thesis are treated as vulnerable to the circularity objection.

Stalemate

At all events, it is at precisely this point that the search for a definition is dropped. Meno expresses his despair as to how the mind-numbingly negative outcome of a Socratic cross-examination could ever be avoided (79e–81a). Socrates replies that he is himself merely communicating his own puzzlement, and proposes that the two of them should seek an answer together. But Meno has been ironically seduced by Socrates into thinking that he himself really knows the answer, and that Socrates has merely made him look as if he does not (80d); so when (at 80d) he proceeds to propound his paradox, famous today as ‘Meno’s paradox’, it is presented as a problem merely about Socrates’ predicament:⁵ how can Socrates either determine what he is going to look for, or recognize it if he should happen to find it, given that he does not know at all what it is? It is Socrates himself who then converts this into a universal dilemma about inquiry (80e):

A person turns out not to be able to search either for what he knows or for what he doesn’t know? For he wouldn’t be searching for what he knows, since he knows it, and someone like that, at least, has no need to search; nor would he be searching for what he doesn’t know, since in that case he doesn’t even know what to search for.

This reformulation omits what in the end proves to be the most important part of Meno’s original paradox, his question how Socrates will know when he has found the right answer.⁶ Curiously Meno, in his self-satisfied conviction that he himself already knows what virtue is and merely needs to remove his superficial confusion, is close to Plato’s own solution to this problem. For that solution, to which we must now turn, is that thanks to the soul’s pre-existence we were born already possessing the knowledge we seek, and that by proper interrogation we can bring it back to the surface.

⁵ It usually goes unnoticed that in ‘And how will you search for something, Socrates, if you don’t know at all what it is?’ etc. (80d) ‘you’ almost certainly does not have the generalizing sense that English ‘you’ can have, but refers to Socrates alone.

⁶ See Scott, *Plato’s Meno*, ch. 7.

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Recollection

The theory of Recollection, which Socrates proceeds to outline, is developed with the following components:

- (a) A religious doctrine (81a–c), attributed to the authority of priests, priestesses and poets. The soul is immortal, and transmigrates between incarnate and discarnate existences. This has enabled it to learn everything.
- (b) An epistemological doctrine (81c–e), put forward in Socrates' own voice. Thanks to its pre-existence, a soul can recollect knowledge which it once actively had; and because 'all nature is akin', one such recollection can lead on eventually to global recall. The process we call seeking and learning is in reality just this recollection.
- (c) A practical demonstration of (b) (81e–85b). One of Meno's slaves, who it is confirmed has never studied geometry, is taken by Socrates through the problem of constructing a square with twice the area of a given square, helped by diagrams (see pp. 16–22). After a series of wrong answers, whose error becomes clear to him, the slave arrives at the right answer. Yet Socrates claims to have done nothing more than ask him questions throughout.
- (d) Reflections on what has been achieved and its implications (85b–86c). True opinions (along with a number of false ones) were already present in the slave. These have now been stirred up. And 'if someone questions him about these things on many occasions and in many ways', he will end up having full knowledge of them. That knowledge will be being retrieved from inside him, i.e. recollected. Moreover, he could extend the same retrieval to the whole of mathematics. Additionally, a byproduct of the demonstration is confirmation that the soul is immortal; but the only conclusion Socrates will absolutely insist on is that confidence in the possibility of seeking and finding knowledge is justified, and is preferable to the lazy alternative of capitulating to Meno's paradox. Socrates and Meno can therefore if they wish resume their search for what virtue is.

It is natural to question the legitimacy of Socrates' cross-questioning procedure: are his questions too leading, for example, and does the slave derive some of his answers from the visual evidence of the diagram rather than from reasoning, or from prior mathematical learning? No doubt

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corners are cut, if only in the literary interests of reasonable brevity. But one might nevertheless conclude that at the heart of the demonstration stands a key insight: at least in the paradigmatic case of mathematics, knowledge really is attained by searching in one's own inner resources. It is easier to disagree with Socrates' further assumption that those inner resources take the form of latent, prenatally acquired knowledge, and not, for example, just an innate rational capacity. But the underlying insight that mathematical knowledge is (roughly speaking) *a priori*, is itself a significant step towards a quintessentially Platonic thesis, to be fully articulated in the *Republic*: that real knowledge is independent of the senses, and instead has as its objects the occupants of a distinct intelligible world.

Even leaving aside such moves toward Platonism, the theory and its exposition play an important part in Plato's habitual Socratic agenda. First of all, it justifies dialectic, the method of inquiry through question and answer that Socrates had bequeathed. The regular failure of the definitional inquiries in earlier dialogues naturally enough suggested doubts as to how such inquiries could *ever* succeed, given that neither party to the dialectic was already in possession of the answer. Meno's paradox, even though Socrates calls it 'eristic' (80e) (that is, argumentatively confrontational), is in fact a serious encapsulation of this very problem. And Socrates' geometrical demonstration is an equally serious reply: even those with no awareness of the answer to a question may legitimately seek it by raising and answering questions, and can expect to recognize it when they eventually hit upon it.

Admittedly there is a further question, not addressed here by Socrates, as to whether the *a priori* character which makes mathematical knowledge suitable for this treatment extends to moral values as well. On no credible interpretation can Socrates mean that literally *all* learning is achieved in this way, including for example the acquisition of geographical or historical information. The method is clearly tailored to the discovery of *a priori* truths – truths which, on reflection, we realize could not have been otherwise. And there is every reason to think that Plato sees grounds for extending it beyond mathematics to all the theoretical disciplines covered by philosophical dialectic, ethics included.

Not only does the theory of Recollection suggest that the Socratic philosophical method could, given time, arrive at ethical truths, it also gives a specific role to the refutative part of dialectic in which Socrates

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specialized. The slave passes through the following stages: (1) confidently giving wrong answers, (2) seeing his error, (3) being reduced to numbed puzzlement, (4) making a new start, and (5) finally seeing the right answer. Here the quintessentially Socratic stages (1) to (3) pointedly mirror the stages through which Meno has already passed, and in particular the slave's reduction from confident false belief to a state of numbed puzzlement (82b–84c) is designed to mimic in detail Meno's deflation in the first part of the dialogue (71e–80d). Yet when the slave has been thus humbled, Socrates asks 'So when we made him puzzled and numb, . . . we didn't do him any harm, did we?' (84b). The point is that the slave *had* to go through this stage, by being disabused of his previous confident misconceptions, before he would be ready to find out the truth. By analogy, Meno too has not been harmed, but benefited, by his reduction to puzzlement, and for precisely the same reason.

Note too that the numbing effect suffered by Meno is said to be the same one that Socrates has on people quite generally (80a–d). At a second level of subtext, then, what applies singly to Socrates' treatment of Meno applies equally to Socrates' lifetime mission at Athens. His project, devoted to the systematic refutation of false beliefs, was a necessary phase in the history of philosophy. By means of it he has removed enough prevailing misconceptions to make people's minds for the first time ready for the recognition of the truth, and more specifically, we may suppose, for the arrival of Platonism.

The inquiry into virtue renewed

At 86c–d Socrates proposes that they should resume their search for the definition of virtue, but this time he agrees to Meno's request to take a short cut and proceed directly to the secondary question, is virtue the sort of thing to be acquired by teaching? We have already seen (pp. xiii–xiv) Socrates' informal hint, via an analogy, that this reversal of the usual procedure might be justified. He now adds a formal analogy in favour of the same conclusion (86e–87b). Significantly, it once again involves treating geometry, an already successful science, as the model for the future science of ethics. Geometers, Socrates points out, sometimes use a method of 'hypothesis' to solve a problem, and in doing so they are drawing the consequences of some proposition that they do not know in advance to be true. He proposes to use an analogous hypothesis in order

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to find out whether virtue is teachable despite not already knowing what virtue is.

This time, by contrast with the interrogation of the slave, the chosen mathematical example is both condensed and obscure. Plato may want to convey that, whereas just now the slave was having his first elementary lesson in geometry, at the upper end of the same scale professional geometry is a highly demanding intellectual discipline suitable for an elite, and one such as might provide a transition to the even more demanding science of ethics. Geometry, as a bridge discipline, is being sketched at both its entry and its exit level. We need not, then, press the mathematical details in the expectation that clarity will emerge.⁷

The unclarity of the geometrical ‘hypothesis’ also infects the ensuing ethical argument which is said to imitate it. What is a ‘hypothesis’? It seems that by this term Socrates means any thesis adopted provisionally in order to explore its consequences, and that a typical, although not the only, form that this may take is as the ‘If . . .’ clause of a conditional. The two hypotheses he proceeds to invoke are (i) ‘Virtue is good’ (87d) and (ii) ‘Virtue is knowledge’ (87b). Although, by Socrates’ principles, in the absence of a definition of virtue both propositions must necessarily remain hypothetical, (i) defies disbelief, and the main burden of the argument is to show that (ii) follows from it (87d–89a). Given that (ii) does follow, it itself in turn then functions as a hypothesis: it has after all been inferred from a hypothetical premise, and from it in turn is inferred the provisional conclusion that virtue is teachable. For, as Socrates remarks, if and only if virtue is knowledge is it subject to teaching (87b–c, 89c).

The showpiece of this section is the inference from (i) to (ii), which along with *Euthydemus* 278e–282d is a classic defence of the Socratic thesis that virtue is knowledge, a trail-blazer for the *Phaedo*’s ethics (68c–69d), and a seminal antecedent of Stoic ethics. Virtue is hypothesized to be good. Everything conventionally counted as good – wealth, health, and even it seems cardinal ‘virtues’ like justice and courage – is in reality not good in its own right, but derivatively, in so far as its use is guided by wisdom, for if it were instead guided by folly it would be positively harmful. It follows that the only underderivatively good thing is wisdom itself, that is, knowledge (its functional equivalent in Plato’s usage). This

⁷ For geometry as a necessary basis for ethics, cf. *Gorgias* 507c–508a and *Republic* 7.526c–527c. For the idea that the illustration is deliberately obscure, cf. G. E. R. Lloyd, ‘The *Meno* and the mysteries of mathematics’, *Phronesis* 37 (1992), 166–83.

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conclusion is not definitively proved, but if the argument so far is sound it could be denied only by someone willing also to deny the hypothesis that virtue is good. It is a step towards a definition of virtue, but is limited not only by its hypothetical status but also by a question left unsettled at 89a: whether virtue is the whole of wisdom, or just some part of it.

Teaching, knowledge and true opinion

The final phase of the argument (89a–100b), in which Socrates and Meno are joined by the sinister figure of Anytus, takes an unexpectedly empirical turn. The interim conclusion that virtue is teachable, being the sort of thing, namely knowledge, that is subject to teaching, has left unaddressed the question whether it is in fact ever taught. But Socrates now turns to this latter question, in a way that again echoes his strategy in the earlier *Protagoras*. There, having initially argued that virtue is not teachable on the ground that virtuous men have consistently failed to teach their sons to be virtuous (319d–320b), Socrates moved to the opposed viewpoint by arguing that virtue is knowledge, and therefore is after all teachable (361a–b). Here now in the *Meno* he makes the same switch, but in the reverse direction. Thus, the next major portion of the text (89a–96d) is devoted to an argument which turns out to be anecdotally based. If virtue is teachable, who are its teachers? Certainly not sophists, Anytus insists, and Socrates, despite his ironic pretence of surprise, clearly agrees. Rather, teaching virtue is the proper task of a citizen, Anytus continues. But, he has to admit when quizzed by Socrates, in practice virtuous Athenians do not succeed in teaching virtue to their sons. The ostensible conclusion is that virtue is not transmitted by teaching. But readers will have no difficulty in extracting a Platonic subtext according to which Socrates himself, whether or not he realizes it, is the authentic teacher of virtue. And if he has moved away from his initial conclusion that virtue is knowledge and therefore teachable, that may, at least from an authorial viewpoint, reflect not the falsity of the conclusion but its present status as mere true opinion, which we are about to learn is inherently volatile (cf. 89c–d).

At 96d–98c Socrates introduces a vital new perspective. They have been assuming all along that things are good if and only if they are guided by wisdom, that is, by knowledge. But on reflection it seems that true opinion must produce just the same results. Someone who had merely

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true opinion about the road to Larisa would be as good a guide to those going there as someone who had travelled it before and therefore knew it. Plato thus opens up the central epistemological question how, if at all, knowledge differs from true opinion, a question destined to play a key role in the *Republic* (476d–480a) and *Theaetetus* (200e–210b).

His answer here in the *Meno* is that true opinion is, so long as one has it, as valuable as knowledge, but tends to slip one's grasp and run away. Knowledge differs from it in being 'tied down', and what ties it down is, in his famous phrase, 'reasoning out the cause' (*aitias logismos*, 98a). 'And this, Meno, my friend,' Socrates adds, 'is recollection, as we have earlier agreed.' The back-reference is to 85c–d, where (see p. xvii) it was multiple and varied repetition of the questioning that was said to turn true opinion into knowledge. Why this latter procedure should be thought equivalent to 'working out the cause' is no easy question. But at any rate the implicit definition, 'Knowledge is true belief bound down by reasoning out the cause', has been judged by many to be Plato's most successful account of knowledge. It is one that deeply influenced Aristotle.

In the final stages of the dialogue (98c–100c) Socrates sifts through the options previously considered. Virtue is not acquired by nature, since it has been shown to be either knowledge or true belief, neither of which is naturally possessed. Nor is it attainable by teaching, since there are no teachers of it. Nor is it in fact knowledge, since if it were it *would* be subject to teaching. The only option left is that virtue, as manifested by those great political figures who failed to teach it to their sons, comes from true opinion, which in its turn, since it is not transmitted by teaching, must be a matter of inspiration. Socrates assumes such inspiration to be divine, but we may take what he has in mind to be, roughly speaking, political instincts. Good politicians, treated here as the paradigm of virtue, have no science or other expertise: they just have a nose for the right decisions.

The final page throws us two thoughts to ponder. First, an authentically virtuous politician, capable of transmitting virtue to others, is still a possibility (100a). Here we inevitably think of Socrates, who in the *Gorgias* (521d) describes himself as the only true politician in Athens, since only he seeks to improve his fellow-citizens. Secondly, the implied slight to existing politicians is likely to anger Anytus, Socrates foresees (100b–c), thus foreshadowing the judicial proceedings against him. With these veiled allusions to Plato's broader *oeuvre*, the conversation ends.

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The *Phaedo*

The scene

Socrates, now tried and convicted, sits in his death cell, his execution just hours away. According to the account narrated by Phaedo (himself a Socratic philosopher of some note), Socrates whiles away those final hours explaining to a group of intimate friends why he is facing his own death with such startling equanimity. Uniquely for the Platonic corpus, Plato's absence is expressly noted (59b), perhaps to emphasize that he is not offering us a historical transcript of Socrates' last conversation. Correspondingly, despite its contextualization at a key point in Socrates' biography, the *Phaedo* is widely agreed to belong to Plato's middle period, and to place in Socrates' mouth a two-world metaphysics with no precedent in the early group of dialogues.

The leading interlocutors, Thebans named Simmias and Cebes, are philosophical hybrids: members of the Socratic circle, but also much influenced by the Pythagorean Philolaus. That the soul is immortal, and transmigrates, was the most famous of all Pythagorean doctrines. Yet in the *Phaedo* we encounter two philosophers whose exposure to Pythagoreanism has left them unconvinced of the soul's immortality, so that they have to be persuaded of it instead by Socrates. And in the frame dialogue, in which Phaedo narrates the main conversation to a Pythagorean named Echecrates, the latter confesses to sharing the doubts expressed by Simmias and Cebes (88c–d). This can be interpreted as amounting to an ownership claim on Plato's part: the doctrine of the soul's immortality is more Platonic property than Pythagorean, for it can be proved only with the help of two Platonic discoveries, voiced here by Socrates: the theory of Forms, and the doctrine that all learning is recollection.

The main stages of the narrated conversation are as follows.

Stage 1 (57a–69e): Socrates' defence

The conversation focuses increasingly on the subject of death. Asked by his friends to justify his declaration that a true philosopher is content to die, Socrates offers a 'defence' (63b, 69d–e) of his attitude which he hopes will be more successful than his defence speech at his trial (as recreated by Plato in his *Apology*). The underlying theme is that death

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is the complete separation of soul from body, and that philosophy, as the process of making the soul function with increasing independence of the body, is properly seen as a step towards this final state. When, first, soul and body are in partnership as they are during a human lifetime, the soul's agenda can easily be infected by that of the body. Desires for bodily satisfaction, and the pursuit of money, war and the like, which serve the same ultimate bodily aims, belong fundamentally to the body. Philosophy teaches the soul to minimize the body's goals and to seek instead its own intrinsic good, wisdom. Thus the first plank of Socrates' defence is asceticism. The second is a newly emphatic anti-empiricism. Philosophy promotes this soul-body severance by enabling the intellect to attain direct access to reality (equated with the Forms, first introduced at 65d–e), not mediated by those seriously misleading instruments of the body, the sense organs.

Plato had always been interested in the parallel treatment of soul and body, but what we are now seeing is a much more radical dualism than that, one in which soul and body become antithetical to each other, and the ideal for the soul is to leave the body behind.

Stage 2 (69e–107b): the proofs of immortality

Socrates' foregoing 'defence' has rested on the assumption that the soul can in fact survive the body – that instead of sharing the body's end it is 'indestructible' and 'immortal'. Socrates is now challenged to prove the truth of this. Simmias and Cebes, although sympathetic to Socrates' view, cannot overcome their irrational fear that upon the demise of the body the soul simply dissipates like smoke. This attempted set of proofs occupies the great bulk of the dialogue. Its landmarks are a series of formal arguments: the Cyclical Argument, the Recollection Argument, the Affinity Argument, and the Final Argument, to all of which we will return below.

Since antiquity these arguments have attracted, often deservedly, a wide range of criticisms. There is a consequent tendency to infer that Plato himself must have regarded them as weak, even fallacious. This would be surprising. The *Phaedo* is Plato's attempted answer to the puzzle why Socrates, to the consternation of his friends, embraced his own death with complete calm. The arguments placed in Socrates' mouth contain Plato's explanation: Socrates had come to understand that death is

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not annihilation, but the soul's blessed release from bodily confinement and its continued existence in a new state of purity and fulfilment. If Plato had set out to show his master founding this conclusion on faulty arguments, he would have been entirely undermining his long-sustained portrayal of Socrates as a paradigm of the philosophical life.

The important objections raised by Simmias and Cebes (85e–88b) may show that in Plato's eyes the first three arguments are not yet enough to establish the immortality of the soul, but far from suggesting that these arguments are fallacious the two interlocutors treat them as successful in proving the soul's capacity for disembodied existence (e.g. 87a, 92d–e). And neither detects any flaw in the Last Argument, Socrates' proof of absolute immortality, which Cebes indeed regards as conclusive (107a–b).

The ensuing survey of the arguments will therefore try to focus as much on their strengths as on their vulnerabilities. There is no reason to doubt that Plato both believed in the immortality of the soul and regarded these arguments as cumulatively corroborating it.

Stage 3 (107c–115a): the myth

Given the now completed proofs that the soul survives death, Socrates offers to sketch what he thinks death must be like, largely in the form of a myth which draws heavily on existing religious traditions but also innovates daringly. It is founded on a purported revelation about the earth's real shape. It is spherical, and so structured as to have three different atmospheres (as we might call them): water in the lowest regions, air above that, and aether (purer than air) in the upper reaches. The souls of the dead undergo judgement and, where appropriate, punishment in a network of underground rivers and lakes, and are then reincarnated in an atmosphere appropriate to their level of impurity or purity: the least pure in water, some like us in air, and the purest in Olympus-like dwellings up in the aether. The life of the aether-dwellers is described in some detail: they are very long-lived and happy, have direct contact with the gods, etc. Yet other souls, the myth briefly adds, go to even finer abodes, where they are granted permanent disembodiment.

The function of the myths in Plato's dialogues has long been a matter of debate, and the *Phaedo* myth is no exception. Readers will want to make their own judgements on the question. But two hints are in order. First, the pure life of the aether-dwellers can be read as a close approximation

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to disembodiment, and to that extent as a way of graphically conveying to the reader why total disembodiment is the supremely desirable goal.

Secondly, the myth seems to take up an earlier passage (97b–99c) in which Socrates, describing his youthful flirtation with natural science, reports his subsequent disappointment with the physicist Anaxagoras. The latter had said, promisingly in Socrates' eyes, that everything in the world is caused by intelligence, yet had then failed to show precisely that which one would expect of an intelligently structured world, namely that it is the *best* way for things to be. For example, instead of explaining the earth's shape and position in terms of why that was the best arrangement, Anaxagoras had contented himself with 'assigning the causality to air, aether, water and the like, as well as many other oddities' (98c), items which in reality cannot be causes but just necessary conditions of the cause's successful operation (99a–b). A subtext of the myth is to restore air, water and aether to this latter role, and to sketch how the shape and position of the earth really could, as Socrates had hoped, be explained in terms of why it is best for things to be so – namely, to enable the just progression or demotion of souls between one incarnation and the next.

Stage 4 (115a–118a): the death scene

Socrates' last minutes as he drinks the hemlock, utters his enigmatic last words, and takes his departure, are among the most celebrated in all literature. The contrast between Socrates' calm and the anguish of his companions leaves us with the sense that his levels of understanding and self-mastery are, in the last analysis, of an altogether different order from theirs.

Evaluation of arguments

It is now time to return to some of the dialogue's individual arguments in favour of the soul's immortality. Here one feature in particular deserves stressing at the outset, in further support of the above contention that we should not be too quick to dismiss the arguments as consciously weak. Some of the arguments are less defences of the soul's immortality *ab initio* than attempts to provide formal corroboration of an existing religious tradition. As Socrates has already observed in the *Meno* (81a–c), alluding particularly to the religious movement known as Orphism, one

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can learn from priests, priestess and poets that the soul survives death and is eventually reincarnated. And that the souls of the dead exist in Hades was a well-entrenched popular belief too, with its roots in Homer (*Odyssey* 11). Socrates' aim in the *Phaedo* is to establish both the scientific respectability and the real meaning of these traditions. The soul's survival in Hades and its eventual reincarnation start out with the credibility that ancient tradition is assumed to confer on a belief, and Socrates' central strategy is to establish scientific laws (as we might call them) to which these particular beliefs conform. Arguments which fail as complete proofs of a thesis may nevertheless have considerable corroborative force when used in this way.

Cyclical Argument (70c–72d)

Socrates' foundation for the Cyclical Argument is a universal theory concerning change, arguably the first in the Western philosophical canon. In any domain (physical, mathematical, moral, etc.), whenever some subject acquires or loses a property which has an opposite, the change is between that pair of opposites: for example, cooling is a transition from hot to cold, or from hotter to colder; falling asleep is a transition from awake to asleep; and separation is a transition from together to apart. Moreover, change between opposites is reciprocal, and proceeds in a cycle. The hot comes from the cold, and vice versa. Likewise the waking come from the sleeping, and vice versa, and the combined comes from the separated, and vice versa.

Another such pair of opposites, Socrates continues, is living and dead. That the dead come from the living is uncontroversially true. We should therefore infer that the living likewise come from the dead. This is taken to mean that at the time of birth a soul is being reincarnated in a body, that at the time of its death it will again leave that body, and so on in an endless cycle.

Critics have exposed a number of weaknesses in this argument. In particular, the correct opposite of alive is probably not 'dead', as assumed here, but something like 'lifeless', a term which avoids the implication that new life must come from individuals who first had, then lost, a previous life. But note at least that much here depends on one's definition of 'dead'. For Socrates and his interlocutors (64c, 67d), life is the conjunction of soul and body, death their separation. The first two examples of reciprocal

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processes quoted above (the cyclical interchange of heating/cooling, and waking/falling asleep) already provided a beguiling analogue for a cyclical interchange between coming to life and dying, but in the light of Socrates' definition of death we can see that the third pair, combination/separation, is even more artfully chosen. From the body's point of view, the life-death interchange corresponds to a heating-cooling cycle; from the soul's point of view, it closely mimics the waking-sleeping cycle; and from their common point of view, it is a special case of the combination-separation cycle.

Recollection Argument (72e–77a)

This is among Plato's most celebrated, and controversial, arguments. Building on the defence of Recollection in the *Meno* (see pp. xvii–xix), it purports to provide additional proof that the soul must have pre-existed the body, since the soul brings to this life concealed knowledge which it can only have acquired beforehand. This conclusion, when combined with that of the Cyclical Argument, will be taken to show (77c–d) that the soul must also continue to exist after leaving the body.

An additional consequence is that during its discarnate phases the soul must possess wisdom (76c). This answers Cebes' earlier request that the disembodied soul should be shown not only to survive but also to have some 'power and wisdom' (70b). It thereby implicitly wards off the threat posed by Homer's description of departed souls, 'the dead who have no understanding' (*Odyssey* II.475–6), and vindicates Socrates' reinterpretation of the tradition so as to make death a positive advance.

The bare bones of the argument are as follows.

- (A) If certain conditions are fulfilled, a cognitive act counts as a case of 'recollection' or 'being reminded' (the Greek verb *anamimnēskesthai*, along with its cognate noun *anamnēsis*, combines both senses) (73c–74a).
- (B) There is a familiar cognitive act by which, as a result of seeing sensible equal things, one comes to think of the Form of Equal (74a–c).
- (C) This cognitive act, since it exactly matches the conditions for recollection in (A), is a case of recollection (74c–d).

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- (D) Therefore, since you can recollect only what you previously knew (73c), the Form of Equal was known to us prior to that cognitive act (74d–75a).
- (E) The knowledge of it was not acquired at any time between birth and the cognitive act (75a–76c).
- (F) Nor can it have been acquired at the moment of birth (76c–d).
- (G) Therefore it was acquired before birth (76c).
- (H) Therefore our souls existed before our birth, and possessed wisdom (76c).

Much of the controversy focuses on (A) and (B). (A) offers various examples of being reminded. The relationship of *x* to *y* in virtue of which perceiving *x* reminds you of *y* may be, for instance, that of being owned by *y*, being a friend of *y*, or resembling *y*. But the special case on which Socrates then focuses, the resemblance relation, is picked out because of its detailed correspondence to the cognitive act described in (B). When you see a portrait of Simmias, (i) it may prompt you to recall Simmias himself, whom you previously knew, and (ii) you cannot help thinking about how accurate a likeness it is. Correspondingly, when you see a pair of sticks equal in length, (i) it may prompt you to think of the Equal itself, and (ii) you cannot help being aware of their deficient likeness to that Form. As Simmias himself is to his portrait, so implicitly is the Form of Equal to sensible instances of equality: a paradigm towards which they are striving, but achieving only a deficient resemblance.

In what, then, does this deficiency consist? The question is of great importance to our reading of the Recollection Argument. Some have thought in addition that its answer holds the key to Plato's thesis (e.g. *Republic* 479a–b) of the 'compresence of opposites', according to which no sensible particular manifests one of a pair of opposites without also manifesting the other. However, not only is no such universal thesis yet visible in the *Phaedo*, but the Last Argument (see below) explicitly draws attention to sensible particulars that contravene it (e.g. fire is only hot and in no way cold, and snow the converse). The present argument cannot safely be assumed to apply to all predicates, or even to all opposites.

'Equal' functions for Plato as a size relation (rather than, e.g., a numerical one), intermediate between large and small. All three terms are ones he regards as easily grasped and defined, and that may be why Simmias readily agrees the Form of Equal to be already known to 'us' (74b),

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whether that be everybody or, at any rate, all those present. Those like Simmias who know the Equal itself can testify that it is not subject to a conflict of appearances such that it might appear to be unequal (or, perhaps, Unequal). Yet the equivalent confusion can and does occur with regard to the equality of sticks or stones: they *can* also appear unequal. Just how they can do so is a matter of huge textual debate at 74b: ‘Don’t equal stones and sticks sometimes, despite being the same ones, appear at one time equal, at another not?’ Most English editors and translators have preferred the variant reading ‘appear equal to one but not to another’, and have been divided as to whether to construe it as ‘appear . . . to’ or ‘equal to’. The latter is the less likely, since the sticks’ and stones’ equality seemed to be equality *to each other* when they were first introduced as ones that simply ‘were equal’ (74b). Moreover, in this same description the sticks and stones are assumed to be actually equal, and not also unequal. The deficiency to which Socrates draws attention lies not in their possessing inequality as well, but in their ability to *appear* to do so. It is that capacity for misleading appearance that distinguishes them from the corresponding Form, an object of pure thought which is grasped either just as it is or not at all.

What, finally, is the cognitive act by which a Form is recollected? This again has generated much controversy. It has often been supposed that Plato is explaining what rational thought itself is, or at any rate how we are able to use *a priori* concepts: you cannot, for example, entertain the thought ‘These sticks are equal’ without drawing to some extent on your innate grasp of what Equality (the Form of Equal) is. On this view, everybody is in the process of recollecting most of the time, although only those who go on to investigate and define the Forms in question *fully* recollect them. At the other extreme, it has been proposed that recollection is done only by a privileged few, namely philosophers, to whom alone the ‘we’ at 74a–b refers.

Arguably the former interpretation, for all its philosophical attractions, pays too little attention to the specification, repeated from the *Meno*, that it is ‘those who learn’ (75e, 76a) who recollect. And the latter, more restrictive interpretation, has its own disadvantage too: it risks undermining the argument’s aim (amply borne out by the myth) of showing that *all* souls, not just those of philosophers, have a discarnate existence. An intermediate position not without merits is to suppose that very much the same constituency is envisaged as in the *Meno*. Anybody, even a slave,