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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meno and the Slave

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Abstract

This paper argues that the slave demonstration in Plato's *Meno* contains a carefully-wrought analogy of Meno's dialectic which can guide our understanding of the dialogue. This analogy exposes and diagnoses Meno's failings as a student who is unwilling to engage in the learning process but simply wants to be spoon-fed information. This, in turn, reveals the way Plato wants us to interact with his text: insofar as the author makes his point implicitly and allusively, we are aptly required to puzzle our way through the text to unravel the meaning. We must actively engage with the text. The *Meno*, thus, exemplifies its own didactic message. In this way, I hope to offer a meaningful interpretation of a significant passage in Plato as well as provide a case study of how he can marshal the literary resources at his disposal towards his philosophical ends.

Keywords: slave demonstration; learning; literary techniques; analogy; Meno

> Εὖ ἂν ἔχοι, φάναι, ὦ ᾽Αγάθων, εἰ τοιοῦτον εἴη ἡ σοφία ὥστ᾽ ἐκ τοῦ πληρεστέρου εἰς τὸ κενώτερον ῥεῖν ἡμῶν, ἐὰν ἁπτώμεθα ἀλλήλων, ὥσπερ τὸ ἐν ταῖς κύλιξιν ὕδωρ τὸ διὰ τοῦ ἐρίου ῥέον ἐκ τῆς πληρεστέρας εἰς τὴν κενωτέραν. (*Symp.* 175d3–7)[1]

In this paper I argue that the slave demonstration[2] in Plato's *Meno* functions as an allegory of the dialectic with Meno. I claim that the demonstration is designed to convey an account about how one ought to learn and, moreover, that this particular pedagogic technique is employed in the explanation even while it is being explained. That is, the text encourages and requires

[1] 'Wouldn't it be great, Agathon, [Socrates] said, if wisdom were the sort of thing that would flow from the full into the empty whenever we came in contact with one another, like water flowing down a length of yarn from a full cup into an empty one.' Translations are my own. References are to the Oxford Classical Text.

[2] I refer to the 'slave demonstration' rather than the 'slave *boy* demonstration' after Benitez (2016). He demonstrates that we have no reason to suppose that the slave was a young boy and urges us to refrain from the condescending label 'boy.'

us to employ the very learning technique it advocates. In a word, the analogy between the slave and Meno illustrates the importance of active engagement for learning and ultimately for being virtuous. However, insofar as it is does so implicitly and allusively, we are aptly required to engage in the process of unravelling this lesson in learning. In this way I hope to offer an interpretation of an important passage in the *Meno* as well as provide a striking and indicative example of Plato's approach to writing. Many have noticed that the *Meno* is concerned with learning, but few have tried to apply these ideas to the text itself – which is, of course, a didactic text.

I

We begin by looking at the dynamic between Socrates and Meno leading up to the slave demonstration and, in particular, what this reveals about Meno's character. As we shall see he is indolent, spoilt, and vain. He thinks of learning as little more than amassing 'learned' soundbites that he can use to show off. As such he shows no real interest in engaging in the learning processes, not least because of a reluctance to admit his ignorance. This, as often in Plato, highlights the connection between arrogance and unwitting ignorance.

Plato's Meno is happy enough to answer Socrates' questions at the beginning of the dialectic, but his goodwill soon evaporates and he starts trying to avoid Socrates' questions. For example, after Socrates has exerted himself in explaining the concept of a 'one over many' via the paradigms of shape and colour, he entreats Meno to define *shape* as practice for *aretē* (virtue). Meno refuses and instead asks Socrates to simply tell him (75b1). This is revealing. Socrates, for his part, obliges Meno, but his subsequent definition – shape is that which always follows colour (75b9–11) – is then rebuffed on the grounds that he has failed to define *colour* (75c5). There is, of course, a time and a place to demand so exacting a definition and we may well have reservations about Socrates' 'definition' here, but Meno's objection is an eristic quibble, as Socrates indicates (75c8–d7, cf. *Euthyd*. 286d11–e6). This proves to be the first of many attempts to weasel out of giving his own answers.[3] Thus once Socrates has given Meno a technical-sounding definition more to his liking, Meno then ask Socrates to define *colour* (76a8). Socrates remarks how Meno is both demanding and reluctant to answer questions, he even calls him spoilt, but he obliges him all the same (76a9–c2). Socrates in fact applies himself to giving Meno the kind of answer that he likes by referring to Empedocles and his theory of 'effluences.' Note Meno's enthusiasm in the following exchange (76c3–8):

[3] The objection may be raised that Socrates refers back to this point approvingly later in the dialectic at 79d, but this later passage is surely an *ad hominem* attempt to get Meno onside by referring back to something he himself had claimed; for the two cases are not really analogous. In the present case Socrates uses an item, colour, in a definition of shape even though 'colour' has not yet been defined. In the second passage Meno uses an acknowledged part of virtue, justice, to define virtue. It is not the case that the first definition defines shape in terms of a part of shape, for example roundness. See further Klein (1989) 82–5 and Ebert (2007) 185–7.

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> Soc.: Would you then like me to answer in the manner of Gorgias which you could follow most easily?
> Meno: Of course I would [Βούλομαι· πῶς γὰρ οὔ;].
> Soc.: Well don't you two mention certain effluences of things in the manner of Empedocles?
> Meno: Absolutely [Σφόδρα γε].

Meno is no less enthused with the ensuing Empedoclean definition. He says that it is the best (76d6) and is anxious for more of the same (77a1–2). Significantly, Socrates remarks that definition is inferior despite Meno's preference for it (see 76d6–e7).

In general, then, we can note Meno's growing reluctance to answer Socrates' incessant questions and his preference to simply being told things, especially clever-sounding, 'learned' things. This proves to be central to Plato's message about learning: namely, simply being told something is not good enough, one must actively engage to learn properly. It is significant then that Meno, who sees himself as part of the intelligentsia, is only too happy to repeat or to hear familiar ideas from poetry or philosophy. For instance, he quotes a poet to account for *aretē* at 77b and shows a fondness for the poet-philosopher Empedocles. As will become increasingly clear, this lack of self-reliance or tendency to defer is conspicuously presented as a decisive shortcoming of Meno.[4] Indeed, it seems to be something of a preoccupation of Plato to draw attention to the erroneous assumption that learning is the simple transfer of information. In the *Protagoras* (314b1–4) Socrates warns that buying knowledge is not like buying food because you can't carry it off in a separate vessel, but must take it straight away into your soul; in the *Republic* (518b6–c2) he says that education is not simply implanting knowledge in the student, like putting sight into blind eyes; and this theme is registered in the *Symposium* in the passage quoted at the head of this paper. It is worth emphasising that while *we* may be unsurprised at Plato's insistence that the student think for themselves, the same may not have been true for his contemporaries. Athenian education seems to have done little to encourage or develop a student's intellectual independence: young pupils would learn their letters, imbibe some poetry (especially for its moral exemplars), learn an instrument and of course practise gymnastics.[5] In this context Plato's pedagogy must have seemed much more novel.

[4] This dependence on others can be linked to sophistic teaching. Klein (1989: 72 n. 2) cites *Phdr.* 228b4 and Aristotle's *Soph. el.* 183b38–184a1, which notes how sophists would set their students speeches and arguments to learn by heart (ἐκμανθάνειν). See also Devereux (1978) 120.

[5] *Prt.* 325c5–326c3 has some useful evidence for traditional Athenian education in Plato's time, as does Ar. *Nub.* 961–1023. Marrou (1956: 40–3) emphasises gymnastics, music and literacy skills, in that order. He glosses this education as 'artistic rather than literary, athletic rather than intellectual,' and notes that the guiding ideal was ethical and aesthetic in that it aimed at physical beauty (43). Beck (1964: 80–1) echoes this and adds, 'the state took a keen interest in the moral development of its children, more so, indeed than in their intellectual progress' (103). The trilogy of *gynastikē*, *mousikē* and *grammata* is evident in the *Protagoras* passage and implicit in *Chrm.* 159c, while *Resp.* 376e2–7 singles out the first two as traditional (as with the *Clouds* passage). In the

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Returning to the dialectic, we reach a breaking point first with Meno's torpedo-fish metaphor and then again with Meno's paradox, both being attempts to shirk Socrates' penetrating questions. In the first instance Meno explains that he had already heard how Socrates is always confused and does nothing but confuse others; and now Socrates has drugged and enchanted him so as to fill *him* with *aporia*. He then compares Socrates to the torpedo fish that numbs whomever it comes in contact with, just as he is now numb in mind and body (79e7–80b1).

> καίτοι μυριάκις γε περὶ ἀρετῆς παμπόλλους λόγους εἴρηκα καὶ πρὸς πολλούς, καὶ πάνυ εὖ, ὥς γε ἐμαυτῷ ἐδόκουν· νῦν δὲ οὐδ᾽ ὅτι ἐστὶν τὸ παράπαν ἔχω εἰπεῖν.
>
> *Meno* 80b2–4

> Indeed, on countless occasions I have given great speeches on *aretē* to a great many people with much success, as it appeared to me. But now I can't even say what on earth it is.

In terms of the dynamic between Socrates and Meno the latter is here attempting to shift the blame for his newfound inability onto Socrates' shoulders. Meno thinks he has been beguiled and swindled by Socrates: γοητεύεις με καὶ φαρμάττεις καὶ ἀτεχνῶς κατεπᾴδεις (80a2–3); Socrates is warned not to try this sort of thing abroad (80b6). While it is a good sign that Meno is lost for words and willing to admit it, this is all for nothing if Meno will not take responsibility for his inability. Thus he proves unwilling to continue the inquiry and he thinks this newfound inability is a bad thing. This is entirely symptomatic of Meno's false understanding of teaching, especially when we bear in mind that he is a student of Gorgias, who accustoms people to answer questions boldly as if they knew the answer (ὥσπερ εἰκὸς τοὺς εἰδότας, 70b and cf. 96d). Socrates of course is not so easily deterred by the torpedo-fish comparison, and he concedes that *he* is certainly at a loss since he does not know what *aretē* is, but surely neither does Meno:

> καί νῦν περὶ ἀρετῆς ὅ ἔστιν ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ οἶδα, σὺ μέντοι ἴσως πρότερον μὲν ἤδησθα πρὶν ἐμοῦ ἅψασθαι, νῦν μέντοι ὅμοιος εἶ οὐκ εἰδότι.
>
> *Meno* 80d1–3

> In truth, regarding *aretē*, though *I* don't know what it is, perhaps you really did know before you came into contact with me, now however you're like someone who doesn't.

Meno Socrates will mention a number of great statesmen who saw to their children's education – but only horsemanship, gymnastics, and wrestling are mentioned (93a–94c). No doubt exceptions can be found to this curriculum, especially as the fourth century progresses, but this is a typical picture.

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Meno can't quite put his finger on it. He could always give fabulous orations on virtue, but now nothing. Socrates then pushes him to at least tacitly acknowledge his ignorance (and not just his temporary and mystical paralysis) and to join Socrates in the quest to discover what it is. To this Meno famously responds with his paradox by which the possibility of knowing what one does not know is ruled out: for if you don't know it, you can't seek it out, and even if you did manage to find it, you wouldn't be able to recognise it (80d5–8). This has received plenty of attention in the scholarship.[6] We need not veer off down this path except to notice that Socrates is somewhat dismissive of the paradox, identifying it as an eristic trick (80e1–81a3). Clearly it is a set move on Meno's part, presumably not unlike the many and great speeches he has given on virtue. He certainly seems proud of it: Οὐκοῦν καλῶς σοι δοκεῖ λέγεσθαι ὁ λόγος οὗτος, ὦ Σώκρατες; ('Doesn't this argument seem well put to you, Socrates?', 81a1–2). It also provides the context for Socrates to launch into the slave demonstration.

First he gets Meno back on side with the mention of poets and mystic priests who know about the immortality of the soul and its ability to recollect the truth; and he caps this off with a quote from Pindar that seems tailor-made to appeal to Meno with its reference to mighty kings and heroes (81a5–e2). There are interesting questions here regarding whether 'recollection' should be taken literally as a proper theory or merely as a metaphor.[7] Personally I find it hard to take the theory of recollection totally at face value, not least

[6] Meno's paradox is frequently linked to Socratic (ignorant) inquiry. Nehamas (1994: 226) thinks that Meno is perfectly justified in bringing his complaint forward. Weiss (2001: 57–63) thinks the paradox (at least) betrays a serious issue for Socrates, as does Scott (2006: 71–4 and 87–91), but for different reasons. See also Bluck (1961) 8–9. Many, however, find a solution to the paradox in some sort of awareness which lies between knowledge and ignorance, that is by denying that we are completely ignorant in an inquiry. See e.g.: Ionescu (2007) 44–6; Bluck ('latent knowledge' that we must recollect); Fine (2003) 51–4 (belief); Tarrant (2005) 36; and Ebert (2007: 187) who thinks that the paradox is not so much a philosophical problem as it is a hindrance to the dialectic. Franklin (2001: e.g. 420 and 426–30) argues that 'linguistic competence' or 'familiarity' without knowledge facilitates learning. I would add that it is of course entirely possible to identify an unknown entity as such (thus '*explanandum*' or Socrates' special brand of *aporia*). Moreover, it seems of a piece with Meno's limited conception of learning as the passive reception of information that he cannot accommodate the gradual process of knowledge acquisition.

[7] Some scholars think that the theory of recollection is a farce geared to Meno's predilections that does not address the paradox, e.g.: Eckstein (1968) 31–2; Scott (2006) 81–3; Ebert (2007) 187–90 and 197–8; and especially Weiss (2001) 63–76. Others think that Socrates genuinely believes in recollection, often because of a perceived commitment to the immortality of the soul, e.g.: Vlastos (1994) 103–5; Moravcsik (1994) e.g. 127; and Bluck (1961) 8–12, though he does not think Plato offers a proof of this (until *Phd.*), see also 44–7. The easiest position, I think, is that the theory has a serious message but that it is not intended to deductively disprove the paradox (cf. Arist. *An. post.* 71a1–12), e.g.: Klein (1989) calls it a 'myth' (e.g. 178, see further 189–90); Devereux (1978: 119–21) thinks Socrates uses the theory to elucidate the difference between Socratic and sophistic teaching; and Sharples (1985: 8–9) thinks it illustrates (not demonstrates) grasping *a priori* truth. See also Fine (2003) 64–5; Tarrant (2005) 35–43; Ionescu (2007: 48–64) who distinguishes a 'literal' from a 'philosophical' meaning; and Ebert (1973: 166–9) who argues that recollection is a metaphor for learning that registers the necessity of recognising that you don't know something (i.e., that you have 'forgotten' something).

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because of how flimsy the argumentation at 85d–86b is. However that may be, I do not believe that these issues have a major bearing on my argument. I will maintain that the slave demonstration is a lesson in 'true learning' and that it is designed (at least in part) to teach Meno the prime importance of accepting one's *aporia*. The text is quite clear that this is a key feature of the demonstration and this need not be inconsistent with more doctrinal readings of Plato's mythologizing here. Thus, Socrates rounds off the mythical preamble with the following words:

> So it isn't necessary to be persuaded by that eristic argument [i.e. the paradox]. That might make us lazy and is music to the ears of indolent men; but this account [i.e. recollection] makes us energetic and encourages us to inquire. (81d6–e1)

Here Meno is implicitly characterised as indolent and we are given an advance warning of what Socrates hopes Meno can take away from the theory of recollection.

II

In this and the following section I would like to examine Socrates' interaction with the slave. First I will go over the passage bringing out the relevant details as we go; and in the next section, I will attempt to show how Plato uses the slave to guide our understanding of Meno's dialectic. Finally, in the last section, I will bring my reflections to bear on the role of Plato's reader.

The slave demonstration begins at 82b6. Socrates makes sure the slave knows what a square is and gets him to calculate the area of a square with a base of two (82b9–d4). While Socrates provides the slave with plenty of hints and suggestions it is nevertheless apparent that the slave is genuinely required to think things over, to understand them and to answer based on his own reflection. He must calculate the area of the base-two square on his own: λογισάμενος εἰπέ ('Calculate and tell me'), instructs Socrates (82d4), and the slave does. And again he calculates the area of a square double this size. In fact, we too need to get out a pen and paper to sketch out what Socrates says (and for just this reason most modern editions of the *Meno* will include explanatory diagrams). It is important to notice that the problem is presented in terms of *numbers*. The slave has grasped the fact that a base-*two* square has an area of *four* and now, given a square of area *eight*, he needs to work back to *its* base.[8] Socrates then puts his question to the slave regarding the double-size square:

[8] Ionescu (2007: 69) remarks that Socrates indicates he does not want an arithmetical solution because he asks 'How large [πηλίκη τις] is the base of the double square?' (82d8–e1). But from the slave's point of view this in no way corrects for the consistently arithmetical language that proceeds and, as she notes (70), the slave does not get the hint. Klein (1989: 99–101), making a similar point to Ionescu, is explicit that Socrates' hints would be well beyond the slave's ken and that he pushes the slave towards false answers.

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> Φέρε δή, πεῖρω μοι εἰπεῖν πηλίκη τις ἔσται ἐκείνου ἡ γραμμὴ ἑκάστη. ἡ μὲν γὰρ τοῦδε δυοῖν ποδοῖν· τί δὲ ἡ ἐκείνου τοῦ διπλασίου;
>
> *Meno* 82d8–e3

> Come then, try to tell me how big each of the sides of this figure will be. The first was two feet, but what about those of the double square?

The key point I would like to make here is that the slave should not be faulted for the incorrect answer he gives. Socrates' question in fact invites the answer that it receives: Δῆλον δή, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὅτι διπλασία ('But it is obvious, Socrates, that it's double', 82e2–3). The slave not only reuses Socrates' word, 'double,' but he is quite confident about it. Socrates has suggested such a response and, moreover, made the question seem relatively easy. Meno of course knows better. When asked if the slave is correct in thinking he knows the base of the double square he says, 'Certainly not' (Οὐ δῆτα, 82e9). The reason for this would have been glaringly obvious to Plato's readership. Socrates has just glibly asked a simple slave to identify an item that scarcely even exists, namely an irrational *arithmos*.[9] It was well known that the side of a square was incommensurable with its diagonal and, similarly, that one could not simply double a square or a cube and hope to find the base of the double. Thus Aristotle can constantly refer to this problem without explanation, plainly assuming that everyone would be familiar with it.[10] Certainly it must mean something that Socrates tricks the slave using a piece of geometry that Plato's readership would be so readily acquainted with. At least one function is clear to see: Socrates interrupts the demonstration to point out that the slave thinks he knows what he actually does not (82e4–13).

Socrates has been making ample use of diagrams hitherto and now he uses a diagram to show the slave his error (82e14–83c4).[11] This involves starting from one corner of the original square and extending each of the two adjacent sides to double their length. These are then connected up to form a large square,

[9] A square with a base of two has an area of four. The double square has an area of eight so to find its base we need the square root of eight. This is not a rational number. Greek numbers, which are more like 'numbered groups,' cannot accommodate this. See Pritchard (1995) 17–18: 'the notion of *arithmos* is quite different from our notion of *number*, not only because we count negative integers, rationals, reals and complex numbers as equally *numbers*, but because even the basic notion of number is not to be identified with the notion of *arithmos*.'

[10] E.g., *An. pr.* 41a24–31, 46b, 50a36–9; *An. post.* 71b27, 89a32–3; *Soph. el.* 170a26–7; *Metaph.* 1012a33–4, 1047b6–13. See also, e.g., Plato's *Plt.* 266b.

[11] There is debate about how the first square is drawn. The 'traditional' interpretation has the square with transversals that bisect the sides of the square (i.e. one big square containing four smaller squares), see e.g., Sharples (1989) 220–6 and Fowler (1990); while others contend that it is bisected with diagonals, e.g., Boter (1988) 208–15, Weiss (2001) 84–94 and Ebert (2007) 190–1 n. 11. Correlated with the 'non-traditional' interpretation is the claim that Socrates does not draw a new diagram in the second phase (post *aporia*) of the demonstration because the all-important diagonal has been there from the start. My argument works on either model. Note, however, if it were the case that some special point hung in the balance it would be strange that Plato was not more explicit about it, *contra* e.g. Weiss. That is to say, I doubt the difference between these two interpretations of the diagram is significant.

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effectively leaving us with one big square divided into four smaller squares whereby each small square is the size of the original square, like four pieces of toast arranged into one big square. With this diagram Socrates shows the slave that doubling the base will not make a double square but a quadruple square. Once again while Socrates' instruction is instrumental in the slave's lesson and while Socrates shows him the error, the slave is still left to grasp the point on his own (see especially 83b6 and cf. 83d1–2).

Following this, Socrates again encourages the slave into another false answer and again looks to the problem in numerical terms. He notes that the last answer (a base-four square) led to a square with the area of sixteen, but that this is double the desired area of eight. On the other hand, the original base-two square has an area of four, so 'obviously' they need a square halfway between the base-two and the base-four squares. The slave responds accordingly that the answer must be three (83c5–e1). The slave is then given the opportunity to do the maths, 3 x 3, and thus to see that this does not lead to the double square with an area of eight, but to nine (83e5–8). Socrates then puts the question to him a third time, but with a revealing addition: if the slave cannot name a number, perhaps he can point out the answer (84a1). The slave however has seen the light: 'By Zeus, Socrates, I just don't know' (84a1–2). Socrates stops here and turns to Meno to comment on the demonstration (84a3–c9). The main point he brings out is that previously the slave thought he knew the base of the double square but was actually ignorant about it, but now he knows that he doesn't know it. What's more, the slave is better for this revelation. Socrates then generalises these remarks by saying that to bring someone to *aporia* improves them and in fact creates a desire to know in the subject. Indeed, such *aporia* is a prerequisite for inquiry. This is all clearly geared to Meno and the reluctance he put up both in word and deed with his paradox. Being at a loss, properly understood, actually stimulates and enables the quest for knowledge, not precludes it.[12]

The connection with Meno is then made even more explicit. The slave was said to answer boldly as if he knew (θαρραλέως ἀπεκρίνετο ὡς εἰδώς, 84a6–7) much as Gorgias was said to accustom the Thessalians to answer fearlessly and boldly as if they knew (ἀφόβως τε καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶς ἀποκρίνεσθαι … ὥσπερ εἰκὸς τοὺς εἰδότας, 70b6–7). Now the *slave* is said to have been numbed as by a torpedo fish (87b5–6, cf. 84c8) and rather unmistakably Socrates says that previously the slave would gladly have given many speeches to many people on doubling the square:

> τότε δὲ ῥᾳδίως ἂν καὶ πρὸς πολλοὺς καὶ πολλάκις ᾤετ᾽ ἂν εὖ λέγειν περὶ τοῦ διπλασίου χωρίου, ὡς δεῖ διπλασίαν τὴν γραμμὴν ἔχειν μήκει.
>
> *Meno* 84b11–c2

> But he would have easily considered himself to have spoken well to many people on many occasions about the double square, that its side must be double the length.

[12] For a comparable view of the elenchus and its aims see Szaif (2018) 43–7.

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Clearly the slave would have claimed no such thing. This charming little line is an allusion to Meno's claim at 80b quoted above.

The next phase of the demonstration begins with Socrates encouraging Meno to watch what the slave can discover by inquiring with Socrates. He is warned to watch and see that Socrates only asks questions and does not teach anything. He emphasises that the slave must rely on his own opinion (84c10–d2). Socrates then returns to his diagrams. First we get the large square made up of four squares, like four pieces of toast. Then he divides the smaller squares along their diagonals, just as one might half each piece of toast into triangles so that the diagonals make up one offset square in the middle of the larger square. As usual Socrates is careful to ascertain the slave's understanding at each step of the way. He helps the slave see that while the original square (a single piece of toast) contains *two* triangles, the offset square is made up of *four* triangles. Thus it is double the original square (84d3–85b1). From here it is easy enough for the slave to point out the base of the double square: it is the diagonal. Socrates knew the answer all along and of course it was not a number as the slave was initially led to believe.

Socrates again turns to Meno to discuss and interpret the demonstration. The first point he makes is that these true opinions were already in the slave, and that he was not taught but merely questioned so as to recollect the latent knowledge (85b8–d7). The obvious response would be to deny this. Socrates clearly does teach the slave and it is preposterous to suppose that he would have reached the solution without Socrates. And yet, even if Socrates does teach him, it does not seem unreasonable for him to claim that the opinions came from 'within' the slave himself if this is understood to mean that he relied on his own opinions. I propose to take this as a minimal view of what Socrates means by 'recollection.' Many who take a sympathetic view of Socrates' claim that he did not teach note that Socrates misled the slave and thus forced him to rely on his own wits.[13] In my view the most decisive reason for accepting Socrates' claim (in some sense) stems from, on the one hand, his obvious and genuine concern for self-reflection and taking responsibility for one's opinion and, on the other, Meno's inability to do just that. If we understand 'teaching' as Meno does, which is little more than rote learning, then Socrates certainly does not do this; nor does he accustom

[13] Regarding the question of whether Socrates teaches the slave some reject Socrates' claim that he does not teach: e.g., Eckstein (1968: 36–45) thinks it is an absurd farce that 'Socrates contemptuously dangles … before Meno's face' (44). Ebert (2007: 193) is more moderate. For the most part it is agreed that the slave in some sense 'recollects' and that the opinions he voices are from 'within' himself and not simply 'put there' by Socrates: Klein (1989: 103–7) has a thorough discussion and he distinguishes between answering questions in light of external factors like pride from genuinely attending to the issue at hand; Bluck (1961: 12–14) says that the slave expresses his own opinion in contradistinction to simply being told through sophistic teaching; Devereux (1978: 119–20) fleshes out this latter concept as teaching that comes from without as opposed to within; Vlastos (1994) stresses the *a priori* nature of the problem (e.g. 97) and that the slave is led to make mistakes and thus must think for himself (98); as does Moravcsik (1994) 123–6; Scott (2006: 100–5) thinks the contrast is between forming a belief from hearsay and thinking for oneself, rather than the *a priori*; see also Tarrant (2005) 48–9; and Fine (2003) 58–9 who stresses independent reflection.

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his students to speak boldly on any topic regardless of their knowledge of that topic. It is precisely that concept of learning as passively absorbing information which he wants to combat in Meno, and which ultimately prevents Meno from accepting the responsibility for his *aporia*.

From here Socrates purports to show how these observations demonstrate that the soul is immortal with knowledge eternally inside it. This need not detain us except for the final conclusion or moral he draws from it:

> So isn't it the case that if we have in our soul the truth of what really is, the soul would be immortal and thus you [Meno] ought to apply yourself valiantly to seeking out and recollecting what you don't actually know, what you haven't remembered?
>
> *Meno* 86b1–4

Socrates then drives home this all-important conclusion in terms clearly pointed at Meno's paradox, in spirit if not in terms of its logic:

> καὶ τὰ μέν γε ἄλλα οὐκ ἂν πάνυ ὑπὲρ τοῦ λόγου διισχυρισαίμην· ὅτι δ' οἰόμενοι δεῖν ζητεῖν ἃ μή τις οἶδεν βελτίους ἂν εἶμεν καὶ ἀνδρικώτεροι καὶ ἧττον ἀργοὶ ἢ εἰ οἰοίμεθα ἃ μὴ ἐπιστάμεθα μηδὲ δυνατὸν εἶναι εὑρεῖν μηδὲ δεῖν ζητεῖν, περὶ τούτου πάνυ ἂν διαμαχοίμην, εἰ οἷός τε εἴην, καὶ λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ.
>
> *Meno* 86b6–c2

> And I would not put too much store in those other claims, but rather, that in thinking it necessary to seek out what one doesn't know we become better, more manly and less idle than we would if we thought it were neither possible to articulate nor necessary to seek out what we don't know – for *this* I would fight, as far as I were able, in both word and deed.

Socrates here gives impassioned emphasis to the salient points of the demonstration and what he hopes Meno will take away from it. In a word, willingness and enthusiasm to make good the gaps in our knowledge. This resonates with the emphasis Socrates placed on relying on one's own opinions, doing the intellectual legwork and the importance of *aporia*. Conversely, it obliquely characterises Meno as lazy and – rather strikingly – lacking in virtue; those unwilling to inquire are, by implication, less manly and less *agathos*, that is less virtuous.

In what follows Meno pays lip service to Socrates' impassioned conclusion but, typically, fails to internalise the lesson (86c3–d2). He still refuses to inquire into what *aretē* is and wants his initial question answered. Perhaps he has made some marginal improvement since he wants to 'inquire and hear' the answer, rather than just hear it, but this is negligible (86c8–9). Accordingly, Socrates leads him on something of goose-chase, first arguing the virtue is knowledge and hence teachable, then arguing that virtue is unteachable in reference to the 'virtue' of Pericles *et alii,* and rounding it all

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off by claiming that in fact virtue comes from true opinion and must be a gift from the gods.[14]

III

Now I would like to take a closer look at the slave demonstration in terms of the correspondence between the slave and Meno. That the slave is in some sense a mirror of Meno has long been recognised in the scholarship.[15] As we have seen, Socrates clearly alludes to Meno when he refers to the many and wonderful speeches the slave might have given on the double square. In this way the demonstration purports to illustrate the benefits of *aporia* and thus the disadvantages of refusing to inquire, which in turn ought to provide a positive model for Meno to emulate. Beyond this, however, I argue that the slave demonstration is also designed to guide *our* understanding of the dialogue over and above what it does for Meno. The demonstration is a paradigmatic miniature of Meno's dialectic that highlights and explains Meno's failings.

To begin with there are some points of comparison between the *initial questions* in Meno's dialectic and the slave's demonstration. The slave is asked to find the base of the double square. This vexed question simply does not permit of an arithmetical answer. Socrates in no way prepares the slave for such a question, instead giving the impression that a number might be sought. The slave clearly has no idea what he's getting himself into and replies with confidence, Δῆλον δή, ὦ Σώκρατες... ('Surely it's obvious', 82e2). Socrates' little question is deceptively complex as would have been glaringly conspicuous to Plato's contemporary readership. Accordingly, they could have been expected to notice that something similar is at play with Meno's initial question. *He*, who had given a great many speeches on *aretē*, confidently steps up to his question: Ἀλλ᾽ οὐ χαλεπόν, ὦ Σώκρατες, εἰπεῖν ('But it is not hard to say, Socrates', 71e1). In point of fact Socrates repeatedly asks for the sort of answer that Gorgias would give (71c9–d1–2, 73c6–8, 76b1, 79c5–6), and for his first answer Meno dutifully complies, giving a reasonably standard answer, namely that virtue for a man is to be politically able and so on and virtue for woman is be a good homemaker and so on and so forth – an account which Aristotle could attribute (approvingly) to Gorgias (*Pol.* 1260a27–30). Which is to say, in this case too Socrates cunningly conceals the difficulty of the question and

[14] Cf. Wilkes (1994) 214–18. She argues that Socrates provides Meno with the *true belief* that virtue is teachable, so Socrates tries to 'shake Meno's belief.' Wilkes thinks that the arguments that follow are so transparent that Meno really should have seen through them. But he does not and this reveals his ignorance. Wilkes claims that Meno is better served by being left with an unsatisfactory belief about virtue because he would be more inclined to inquire into it.

[15] See, e.g.: Bluck (1961) 16–17; Moravcsik (1994) 121–2; Benson (1990) 137–9; Ebert (2007) 191–2; Ionescu (2007) 71–2; and Benitez (2016) 112–3. See also Scott (2006) 99–100. My analysis is most indebted to Klein (1989) see e.g. 99–100, 174–5, 181, 184–5 and 188. Brown (1967) has an interesting take. He thinks the demonstration models the entire dialogue not least in that the discussion shifts from an 'arithmetical' question ('what is virtue?') to a 'geometrical' question ('is virtue teachable?'), which he thinks is a crucial compromise. The view I will develop bears a resemblance to this, but Brown's claim that Socrates disapproves of the 'geometric' section is unfounded.

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encourages the other into false answer. Note, then, how the comparison between the slave and Meno isolates and foregrounds these common elements: namely, the deceptively difficult question and the false conceit of knowledge. Meno with his many-splendid speeches is like a slave pontificating on an insoluble problem in geometry. By seeing these as analogous cases we are led to understand them in a generic aspect. I will eventually argue that this is a kind of 'recollection.'

And we can add to this: Socrates exploits an ambivalence in the term *aretē* to confound Meno. On the one hand *aretē* can refer to one's personal preeminence, on the other hand *aretē* can be understood as a basic moral duty (as opposed to getting ahead at the expense of other people). This is ubiquitous and essentially 'co-operative' (cf. *Prt.* 322c5–d5).[16] Thus where Meno says, quite understandably, that virtue is ruling over people, Socrates appeals to the more inclusive sense of the term and asks if a *slave* who rules his master is virtuous (73d6–8). Or if virtue is the power to acquire fine things, Socrates asks if these acquisitions should not be made *justly* (78c–d), which again appeals to the moral sense of the term. Moreover, it is worth emphasising how very demanding Socrates' question proves to be. He asks Meno for the essence (οὐσία) of virtue, that thing we look to to explain virtue and that thing because of which the many virtuous things are virtuous (72c6–d1). We might wonder if Plato ever laid claim to such a profound knowledge of virtue (cf. *Resp.* 533a) and, even if he did, whether such a thing could be articulated in words and simply 'handed over' from one person to another.[17] Thus Socrates' *aretē* question continues to resemble the slave's question in being deceptively difficult, if not downright impossible.

These deceptively difficult questions are designed to bring their subjects into *aporia*. They are like levers by which Socrates can all-the-more-forcibly bring the unwitting ignorance of the student to the surface, and (hopefully) turn it into a witting ignorance. So much is plain to see from the slave demonstration where the role of *aporia* is emphasised. However, once Socrates has secured the slave's *aporia*, he then uses the geometric diagram with the diagonal to draw the slave out of his newfound ignorance. In this way we can identify the following structure in the slave demonstration: first a *negative phase* is employed to reduce the subject to *aporia*; this is followed by a *positive phase* which draws the pupil out of their ignorance. This is, of course, another substantive point of contact between the slave demonstration and Meno's dialectic; in Meno's dialectic too we have a 'negative phase' (which culminates in the torpedo fish accusation), followed by a series of positive lessons.

[16] Tarrant (2005) has a useful discussion of *aretē* that stresses the competitive nature of the Greeks (11–12) and the changing face of this concept in the fifth and fourth centuries (20–21). He also emphasises the pertinence of this issue for Plato and his contemporaries (17–20). See also Bluck (1961) 201–2 and Nehamas (1994) 222–3. Adkins famously distinguished between 'competitive' and 'co-operative' virtue; he discusses the ambiguities of *aretē* in Protagoras' Great Speech in Adkins (1973) 3–12. Similar issues are discussed by Maguire (1977) 105 and especially Nathan (2017) e.g. 380–2, 384–5 and 395–7.

[17] Gonzalez (1998: 254–6 and following) argues that there is in fact no definition that might meet Socrates' question because Plato does not have a propositional view of knowledge.

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I have just discussed how the slave's negative phase illuminates the elenctic part of Meno's dialectic. But things are not so simple when we turn to the respective positive phase. There are, in fact, three different episodes in Meno's dialectic that are illuminated by the analogy with the slave's positive phase.

Everything after the breakdown of the dialectic (where Meno deploys his paradox) is in some sense 'positive' for Meno in that Socrates gives over the direct attempt to refute him. The analogy with the slave however directs our attention to two of the episodes that follow: the slave demonstration itself and the hypothetical method. First we will deal with the slave demonstration. Note that in referring to the 'slave demonstration' here I refer to it insofar as it is a part of Meno's dialectic. Just as the slave is given a diagram to facilitate his positive lesson, Meno is given the slave demonstration for his positive lesson (which naturally creates a jarring effect since the analogue is contained within the thing it is an analogy of).

The positive phase of the slave's geometry lesson resembles the slave demonstration (*qua* positive lesson for Meno) in terms of method or form. In both of these episodes Socrates is offering positive lessons, not refuting. This, however, isolates an important point of disanalogy between the two: the content is different. The slave was refuted regarding the base of the double square and is given a positive lesson on the same problem. Meno, conversely, is refuted in reference to the 'what is virtue?' question only to be give a positive lesson on recollection and the beneficial effects of *aporia*. While the slave 'graduated' from his elenctic phase, Meno does not successfully pass his initial phase. The reason that Plato contrasts Meno and the slave like this is not far to find. The slave functions as a foil to cast Meno's failure into relief. In other words, the slave demonstration sets up a simplified model of a successful dialectic where the elenctic phase leads to *aporia* and the positive phase delivers us from *aporia*; but Meno, who fails his elenctic phase and refuses his medicine, must then be given a positive lesson on the importance of *aporia* for learning.

The paradigmatic schema laid out in the slave demonstration points to a hypothetical situation whereby Meno did in fact reach *aporia* and graduate phase one. Curiously, however, in this case Socrates would still not have given a definitive answer to his initial question (what is virtue?), for that is not what happens with the slave. Socrates initially asked the slave what the base of the double square was. This is a famous and insoluble problem. Nor does Socrates attempt it. But he does give *an* answer and it is quite striking that he did in fact possess this answer right from the start: namely, the double square can be constructed on the diagonal. While this is not the final answer to Socrates' question, it certainly sheds light on the issue. I suggest that this can be carried over to Meno's dialectic. If Meno *had* accepted his refutation, Socrates would *not* have directly answered the 'what is virtue?' question, but rather shed light on it to some extent. And this, as it turns out, is just what happens in the hypothetical method passage – the second passage that is illuminated by the analogy with the slave. With the hypothetical method Socrates explicitly abandons the 'what is virtue?' question but still tells us something about virtue, namely that it is knowledge. This answer, being a quintessential Socratic tenet, is something he possessed all along. Thus, by analogy, we have the following comparisons:

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(1) What is the base of the square? = What is virtue?
(2) The base can be found on the diagonal = Virtue is knowledge

Some might object to this on the grounds that Socrates uses the hypothetical method as a covert tactic to bring the 'what is virtue?' question back into focus.[18] This would imply that *virtue is knowledge* is, after all, a definitive answer to Socrates' question. Against these scholars I argue that Socrates does not in fact deliver on the question he initially set for Meno.[19] To begin with, 'virtue is knowledge' is not a definition of virtue, never mind its *ousia*, or essence. Note that at 87c3–4 it is said that one can learn nothing but *epistēmē* and this implies that the whole class of teachable things fall under 'knowledge.' Clearly then this would include things like shoemaking or playing an instrument which are not a part of virtue and thus *epistēmē* (here understood as a mass noun like 'scientific knowledge') is not coterminous with virtue.[20] Accordingly Socrates can also say that virtue is ἐπιστήμη τις ('a science') at 87d6 and d7, for example. It is also worth remembering that 'virtue is knowledge' would be a prescriptive account of virtue, whereas Meno is strongly encouraged to identify a descriptive account of virtue that brings together all the recognised 'virtues', from a slave's virtue to Pericles' virtue (see 72c6–73c4 and 74a–75a5). This is surely a chimera to match the irrational *arithmos*.

While I appreciate that my interpretation does ask a lot of the reader, it surely cannot be mere coincidence that Socrates asks for (a) the essence of virtue and (b) the base of the double square, only to end up with (a) virtue is knowledge and (b) the diagonal – neither of which answers the initial question and both of which he knew all along.[21] As I have said, if Meno *had* reached *aporia*, no doubt Socrates would have led him towards the partial conclusion that virtue is knowledge. Instead he offers this up with one hand only to snatch it away with the other by going on to argue that virtue is in fact not teachable. We, by contrast, should know better. By viewing this episode as analogous to the slave's positive lesson we, at least, are encouraged to take it seriously as something that sheds light on what virtue is and whether it can be taught.

Lastly, there is one more passage that is illuminated by comparison with the slave's positive lesson. It is another curiosity. Earlier in the dialogue at 75a8–c1 Socrates asks Meno to define shape as practice for *aretē*. Meno refuses and asks Socrates to simply tell him. So he does. Shape is that which always follows colour. This, of course, is a far cry from an essence nor does it seem like much of a definition. Yet Socrates not only seems to acknowledge some inadequacy in his answer, he brushes it aside and confirms that this is the type of account of *aretē* he wants: ἱκανῶς σοι, ἢ ἄλλως πως ζητεῖς; ἐγὼ γὰρ κἂν οὕτως

[18] See, e.g., Bedu-Addo (1984) 2–10, Benson (1990) 154–6 and Ionescu (2007) 108.

[19] Cf. Gonzalez (1998) 254–71.

[20] Socrates acknowledges that other things are taught at 89d6–8: 'If anything is teachable – not just virtue – surely there must be teachers and students of it?' (εἰ ἔστιν διδακτὸν ὁτιοῦν πρᾶγμα, μὴ μόνον ἀρετή, οὐκ ἀναγκαῖον αὐτοῦ καὶ διδασκάλους καὶ μαθητὰς εἶναι;).

[21] Although there is a sense in which Socrates can and does solve the geometric problem, he does not – nor could he – solve it in arithmetical terms; and it is this deeper answer which is conspicuously absent.

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ἀγαπῴην εἴ μοι ἀρετὴν εἴποις ('Does this suffice for you or were you seeking something else? Because I at least would be satisfied if you gave me such an account of *aretē*', 75b11–c1). He also seems to refer back to this model answer at 77a9–b1 and 79a10–11. But this, by analogy, would not answer the 'what is *aretē*?' question in the way that we expect. The reason for this is that *that* question is designed only to lead Meno into *aporia*. But the (more limited) account of *aretē* that Socrates has in mind might be something like 'that which always follows wisdom' (cf. φρονήσεως ἡγουμένης at 88c2).[22] This, then, is yet another passage that is illuminated by comparison with the positive phase of the slave demonstration. It is yet another hint of what Socrates is up to. Perhaps the easiest way to understand how the slave's positive phase is paradigmatic is to note that although the diagonal does not give us the base of the double square, it shows us where to find it; just as 'virtue is knowledge' was not the essence of virtue, but provided the genus of virtue and showed us where to look for it; and just as 'shape always follows colour' does not define shape but shows us where to find it.[23]

[22] Thus Klein (1989) 59–60. At 76e Socrates refers back approvingly to one of the definitions of *shape* he has given. Some would identify this with the second definition of shape, 'the limit of a solid', e.g.: Bluck (1961) 254; Eckstein (1968) 23; Vlastos (1988) 379 with 376; and Scott (2006) 44. Others identify it with the first definition, 'that which always follows colour,' e.g., Klein (1989) 70 and Franklin (2001) 426–8. I side with the latter and believe that my findings can lay this dispute to rest. The reason that commentators are unimpressed with the first definition is that is not a proper definition. On my view that is as it should be. Socrates ultimately intends to end up with something less than a rigorous definition of the essence of virtue. Thus he only gives the second definition to pacify Meno's quibble. On any interpretation one must account for the exemplary status Socrates bestows on the first definition.

[23] I am effectively arguing that Socrates employs a 'what is *x*?' question to confound his interlocutor, only to switch to a question about *what kind of thing* it is in the 'positive phase' of the dialectic. Such a claim, however, leads to a rather thorny area of scholarship – Wolfsdorf (2008) 121–31 is a good place to start. Rather than wading into this debate I have prioritised giving a clear picture of what is happening here in the *Meno* at the expense of more generic issues in the refutational dialogues. To address just one local issue, Socrates seems to reject my view when he says that you cannot know what *something is like* before you know *what it is* (71b). It seems to me that the uncompromising demand for a definition is a dialectic pose; a possibility raised by Gonzalez (1998) 254. Although demonstrative knowledge may well proceed from *what something is* down to *what kind of thing* it is, this is not true of inquiry. The heuristic path goes in the opposite direction. This corresponds to Aristotle's oft-mentioned idea that we start with things 'closer to us' until we come to the first principles (e.g. *Metaph.* 982a21–4, *An. post.* 71b33–72a5); this is also comparable to the ancient Greek geometric method of analysis, that is, the method from hypothesis; see Mueller (1992: 175) for an accessible account. There are plenty of significant examples of this in the dialogues. In the *Statesman*, for instance, the Eleatic stranger proposes to inquire about the art of statesmanship by means of a likeness, namely weaving (279a7–c3) and he explicitly registers that some things can be readily examined in reference to perceptible likeness (285d9–e4). In the *Phaedrus* (246a) Socrates says that only a god could say what the soul is so they will have to do with what it is like (ᾧ δὲ ἔοικεν). Here in the *Meno* we have a good example, curiously enough, precisely when Socrates registers the claim that one cannot know *what kind of thing* virtue is before one knows *what it is*. He articulates this point via an analogy: the difference between knowing *what it is* and *what kind* is illustrated via the (apparently analogous) example of *knowing who Meno is* and knowing *what kind of person* he is, whether handsome or rich (71b): you can't know what kind of person he is if you don't know who he is first. Here again Socrates does not give us a

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In sum, the slave demonstration provides something like a commentary on the Meno dialectic – though it does so via implicit analogies. Meno's ignorance is foregrounded and made to look ridiculous: in thinking he knows what virtue is, he is like a slave who claims to know how to solve one of the foremost geometric problems of the day. Further, the analogy encourages us see how and why Socrates attempts to lead Meno into *aporia* with a deceptively hard question. This takes us to a central theme of the *Meno*, the connection between virtue and learning. True learning is the necessary path to virtue – virtue is knowledge, after all – and embracing *aporia* is itself the beginnings of a virtuous soul.

IV

The most important feature of this interpretation, however, is not how it reflects on Meno, but how it reflects on the text itself. To bring this into view let me draw attention to a 'Russian doll' pattern that has all the hallmarks of a deliberate Platonic contrivance. At the innermost level of the imagery we have the slave, a learner, looking at a diagram with Socrates as the teacher. The slave looks to the image and 'recollects' from it. We might set this out like this, S:D, to indicate *student looks at diagram*. In an analogous way Meno is a learner looking at the slave (who looks at the diagram). Or in our notation, S2:D2 (where D2=S:D). Thus the paradigm set out by the slave demonstration is reproduced at the level of Meno (S2:D2::S:D) and Meno's demonstration contains its own microcosm (D2=S:D). This is like a line divided into unequal sections, whereby the smaller section is again divided by the same ratio. But we can keep going. For we, the readers, are also learners looking at a 'diagram.' Namely, Meno looking at the slave looking at the diagram. Thus: S3:D3 (where D3=S2:D2 (where D2 = S:D)). In all three cases the 'ratio' is the same. Thus we may take our divided line and divide the smallest segment again by the same ratio. Significantly then this pattern points to our own all-important recollection. Do we, like the slave, get it? Or are we like Meno and unwilling to actively engage and figure it out for ourselves? Just as Meno was supposed to recollect the importance of *aporia* from the slave demonstration, we need to see Meno's failed attempt to meet the example set by the slave and 'recollect' what this means. The comparison of Meno and the slave yields the crucial lesson about learning. In this way our 'recollection' appears to be analogous to recognising a geometric proof or perceiving the moral of a paradigmatic parable. In either case we must grasp a general, abstract point from a particular illustration. The particular somehow contains or points the way to a general notion.

Let us call this 'recollection.' For instance, we gain access to the square itself (if you will) by looking at a diagram of a square. Note that these diagrams can operate even when drawn inaccurately, which is to say, we do not consult the particular diagram *per se* but only insofar as it captures general features of a square. Similarly with the slave demonstration, it is quite clear that we are

definition of the what is/what kind distinction, he gives us a paradigmatic example that isolates a generic feature. Such epagogic arguments are Socrates' bread and butter.

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expected to draw general conclusions from this otherwise contingent demonstration.[24] This sort of thing is laid out in an instructive passage in the *Statesman*. The passage stretches from 277d1 to 278e10 and begins with the remark that we seem to know all things in a kind of dream state only to be ignorant of them in waking life (277d1–4). This metaphor has an affinity with the *Meno's* theory of recollection (cf. *Meno* 85c9–10).[25] More importantly the Eleatic Stranger immediately registers the need to explain himself by means of a *paradeigma*.[26] In brief he proffers an analogy of children learning to read who come across syllables (*sullabai*) they cannot recognise. Focusing on the letters (*stoicheia*) they are then led to more familiar syllables that have the same letters and in this way they can conquer the problematic syllables. In a word, the familiar can be used to explain the more complex and this self-same technique is employed in the explanation. The technique involves seizing on the 'elements' of the familiar and seeing how the same elements are operative in the complex case. Thus the letters in simple syllables can be re-identified in problematic syllables and – similarly – the way a student can use such a technique is itself a familiar example of how we can use familiar things to explain more sophisticated things; it is an analogy that helps us recollect recollection as it were.

In this way I would like to suggest that we 'recollect' when we perceive the general in the particular: much as the slave saw the square itself in a diagram of a square, so too Meno might have grasped a general point about *aporia* or learning from the slave demonstration, and we might perceive a general lesson in Meno's failure. One noteworthy feature of 'seeing the general in the particular' is that we seem to *already know* the thing we are looking for. The pupils mentioned by the Eleatic Stranger exploit familiar knowledge to gain ostensibly new knowledge; when we follow the example of children learning their letters and we say to ourselves 'Ah yes, I see the general point being made' it is as though the knowledge were already lying latent inside us; as if we knew these things in a dream state. Whether or not it is intended literally, *recollection* is a very apposite label here.

At the heart of our recollection, then, is the way that the character of Meno is employed throughout this text. He is furnished as a case study of someone with a very limited understanding of learning which impedes his ability to inquire and so on. We are, I take it, expected to grasp these points and to understand them in their generic significance. We need to divine that Meno has been effectively harmed by Gorgias (who teaches his students to answer in a bold way) or that Meno's arrogance precludes a meaningful intellectual engagement on his part. But none of this is ever really made explicit – indeed we are explicitly told that virtue is a gift from the gods. We are, I submit, expected to 'recollect' the true message from the text.

[24] Bedu-Addo (1983: 240) emphasised the didactic role of sensible diagrams in the *Meno's* recollection; moreover, he argues that this anticipates the way sensible particulars function as images of the forms in the *Phaedo*.

[25] Cf. Lane (1998) 64–5.

[26] The account of *paradeigmata* is discussed by, e.g., Miller (2004) 58–9 and Pender (2003) 63–72.

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This leads us to a final consideration which can be presented as a pre-emptive counter-argument. Perhaps the more sceptical reader will find my interpretation too ingenious by half, especially in the laboured analogy between Meno and the Slave. My response is that the message is supposed to be difficult, hidden, elusive and ultimately allusive rather than explicit. Consider a hypothetical question: To what end would Socrates have simply told Meno his theory of philosophical virtue and left it at that? So that the latter could add this to his repertoire of great and many speeches on the topic? Of course not. This would only further entrench Meno in his vice. I suggest that Plato would sooner not simply hand over his teachings to the unthinking Menos. On the contrary, the *Meno* is at pains to show how counter-productive this is. Thus the apparent over-ingenuity of my interpretation becomes not only tolerable but fitting. Aptly then, Plato presents his account of learning in such a way as to accord with that very account; he exemplifies his theory in practice even while he explains it. The substance of the theory is that a student must actively grasp the teachings on offer and Plato puts this lesson below the surface so we have to strive and actively engage to reach it. True understanding must come from one's own ratiocination. It is fine to learn from others, but one should not simply imbibe the words of sophists or poets – or even a philosophical text. With this in mind I wish to offer this interpretation of the *Meno's* slave demonstration as a case study of how Plato can marshal the literary resources at his disposal towards his philosophical ends. The *Meno* illustrates that true learning requires active engagement and does so in a way that requires and encourages active engagement. It is a lesson in learning.

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