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Interpreting Plato's Meno and Euthyphro:
A Defense of the Literary Approach

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1985

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INTERPRETING PLATO'S MENO AND EUTHYPHRO

A Defense of the Literary Approach

Perhaps one reason modern readers of Plato are unable to agree on what he said is that they tend to agree wrongly on how he said it. By basing their interpretations on inaccurate assumptions about the author's intentions and methods, they insulate themselves from the guides to interpretation which he built into the text. I have written this essay to help undermine scholarly confidence in the traditional approach to the Platonic texts, an approach which emphasizes linguistic details at the expense of literary structure. The first section of my essay argues for a literary approach. The second two sections exemplify what happens when that approach is used to interpret two well-known dialogues.

The German philosopher Schleiermacher showed exceptional early sensitivity to this problem and observed that,

of all philosophers who have ever lived, none have had so good a right as Plato, in many respects, to set up the only too general complaint of being misunderstood, or even not understood at all Whoever observes how superficially, or with a feeling of uncertainty which they try in vain to conceal, even the best interpreters speak of the objects of particular works of Plato, or how slightly and loosely they treat the connexion of the subject with the form in detail, as well as in general, will find traces enough to shew him that the authors of these views, however superior, have not yet generally gone upon a perfect understanding of the matter in hand, and that this is not yet brought to the point to which we might ourselves

bring it even with the insufficient means we possess. And thus that feeling of satisfaction seems to be somewhat premature, which maintains that we might now be able to understand Plato better than he understood himself; and it may excite a smile to observe how unPlatonically one who entertains such a feeling comes to the investigation of Plato, who puts so high a value upon the consciousness of ignorance.¹

My argument will be that the twentieth century sympathizers of Schleiermacher have far more to contribute to our understanding of Plato than most scholars seem to realize.

I. The dialogues as dramas.

Most commentators have not sufficiently considered the form of Plato's writings, treating them rather as straightforward treatises, which they are not. It has often been puzzling to Plato's successors that he chose to write only in dramatic form, never resorting to the direct treatise that was current in his own time, and that certainly became the standard thereafter. What has often been overlooked is Plato's unique attitude toward philosophical writing. Understanding this attitude is the key to appreciating the form Plato employed, which in turn provides the key to deciphering his meaning.

We must remember that in Plato's Athens the greatest teachers were poets. In fact, one noted critic of ancient drama points out that "up to the fifth century they had had no teachers who were not artists; the fact was too obvious to need pointing out."² Professor Kitto has also asserted that "it is roughly true to say that up to the time of Socrates and the Sophists, the poets had been among the profoundest and most active of the Greek thinkers."³ But by the time of Plato, the Greeks had become more interested in philosophical discourse. Plato rejected this

direct approach in his philosophical writing, preferring the advantages of poetry. Because of Plato's repeated criticism of the poets, many of his readers fail to notice that he considered himself one of them. He believed that he had distinguished himself from the herd of poets in that his own work was based on knowledge, not on speculation or imitation. The plots of his dramatic pieces were not designed merely to entertain, but also to require the reader to philosophize in order to appreciate the subtle tensions and movements of the conversations. A superficial story line is usually provided in Plato's dialogues, but the philosophical plot which it masks is always more important.

Plato's decision to use heuristic drama (in the tradition of Aeschylus and Sophocles) as a vehicle for his philosophical teachings forces the serious reader to make a careful examination of the literary elements of the dialogues. Plato's basic reason for using this literary form is to provide guidance for the interpretation of the content. As Kitto has observed, "In a great work of art, whether a play, a picture, or a piece of music, the connexion between the form and the content is so vital that the two may be said to be ultimately identical."⁴ It is therefore counterproductive to analyze the content without considering the form or control mechanisms provided by the author. As we attempt to interpret these dramatic dialogues, we must advance an interpretation which gives full credit for the dramatist's abilities. If we see imperfections of design, it may be because we have not yet seen the form the artist created.⁵ In other words,

If you will trust the dramatist, if you will consider the form of his play, patiently and with some imagination, as being probably the best possible expression of what he meant, then you will be giving yourself the best chance of appreciating what impact he was hoping to make on the audience for which he was writing.⁶

The best justification for using this approach in reading Plato's dialogues is that it works. New interpretations do emerge, and once glimpsed, they cannot be denied. The complete integration of form and content cannot occur by accident, dialogue after dialogue. Plato emerges from such an analysis as one of our great dramatists, and possibly the only one who has successfully integrated the analysis of complex philosophical themes into his literary work.

II. Plato's views on philosophical writing.

In the Phaedrus, Plato treats the relationship between philosophy and both written and oral discourse.⁷ Certain clues in this conversation show us that Plato believes that a true philosopher is severely limited in what he can write. Spoken discourse is of "unquestioned legitimacy," but written speech is only its image (276a). He specifies that a knower of truth is only playful in his writings, that he writes primarily for the purpose of entertaining and of refreshing the memories of himself and his friends, who also know the truth based on earlier and private philosophical investigations (276d). From this we might expect that Plato's writings will not directly explain his philosophical doctrines or his assumptions. Rather we should expect them to be particularly entertaining to those who can understand the drama in light of these doctrines and assumptions. Interpreting the dialogues will necessarily entail the making of hypotheses about what the implicit doctrines might be. And presumably, the better the hypothesis, the better the overall interpretation will explain the relationship of form to content in the dialogues. Thus, the understanding of the philosophy cannot safely be separated from an interpretation of the drama.

Plato gives two reasons why he views writing in this unusual way. First, written discourse cannot defend itself or answer the questions of one who seeks to be instructed further

about what it says; therefore writing cannot really teach. It cannot "present the truth adequately." Second, once something is put into writing, it may get into the hands of those who do not understand it, and who will abuse it. It cannot defend itself when this happens, nor can it avoid this by knowing how to address only the right people (276a,c). Living dialectic, on the other hand, when founded on knowledge, can defend both itself and the author. Because it can grow in the souls of the right kind, it is vouchsafed a form of immortality, "and its possessor the fullest measure of blessedness that man can attain unto" (276e-277a).

Plato's attitude toward philosophical writing is stated more directly in the Seventh Letter:

So much at least I can affirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these questions, pretending to a knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned, whether they claim to have learned from me or from others or to have made their discoveries for themselves: it is impossible, in my opinion, that they can have learned anything at all about the subject. There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself. And this too I know: if these matters are to be expounded at all in books or lectures, they would best come from me. Certainly I am harmed not least of all if they are misrepresented. If I thought they could be put into written words adequate for the multitude, what nobler work could I do in my life than to compose something of such great benefit to mankind

and bring to light the nature of things for all to see? But I do not think that the "examination," as it is called, of these few questions would be of any benefit to men, except to a few, i.e., to those who could with a little guidance discover the truth by themselves. Of the rest, some would be filled with an ill-founded and quite unbecoming disdain, and some with an exaggerated and foolish elation, as if they had learned something grand.

For this reason anyone who is seriously studying high matters will be the last to write about them and thus expose his thought to the envy and criticism of men. What I have said comes, in short, to this: whenever we see a book, whether the laws of a legislator or a composition on any other subject, we can be sure that if the author is really serious, this book does not contain his best thoughts; they are stored away with the fairest of his possessions. And if he has committed these serious thoughts to writing, it is because men, not the gods, "have taken his wits away."⁸

Plato repeats here his feeling that expounding ideas in a straightforward way, either in books or lectures, would expose them to envy and criticism, leaving them defenseless against such abuse; he also warns that reading an "examination" of these questions would cause ill effects in most men.

Certainly Plato had good reason for his fears. He had seen how his mentor Socrates had fared at the hands of his fellow Athenians. Plato reports that his earlier ambitions for a political career turned to revulsion and apprehension as he witnessed the unjust deeds of the city leaders, which culminated in the condemnation and execution of Socrates, "the wisest and justest man of

that time." Plato refrained from acting because he felt it was practically impossible to cure the ills of the city, and perhaps because he feared the consequences of introducing his own radical ideas of justice, both for himself and for the city. His perceptions of these life-shaping events and conditions are recorded in the Seventh Letter:

When I saw all this and other like things of no little consequence, I was appalled and drew back from that reign of injustice. Not long afterwards . . . certain powerful persons brought into court this same friend Socrates, preferring against him a most shameless accusation, and one which he, of all men, least deserved. For the prosecutors charged him with impiety, and the jury condemned and put to death the very man who, at the time when his accusers were themselves in misfortune and exile, had refused to have a part in the unjust arrest of one of their friends.

The more I reflected upon what was happening, upon what kind of men were active in politics, and upon the state of our laws and customs, and the older I grew, the more I realized how difficult it is to manage a city's affairs rightly. For I saw it was impossible to do anything without friends and loyal followers; and to find such men ready to hand would be a piece of sheer good luck, since our city was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers, while to train up new ones was anything but easy. And the corruption of our written laws and our customs was proceeding at such amazing speed that whereas at first I had been full of zeal for

public life, when I noted these changes and saw how unstable everything was, I became in the end quite dizzy; and though I did not cease to reflect how an improvement could be brought about in our laws and in the whole constitution, yet I refrained from action, waiting for the proper time. At last I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; and I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.⁹

Because of these feelings, Plato was wary of exposing his ideas to those who might misunderstand them. Yet he did write. Unless we are to dismiss Plato's writings as mere frivolous pieces written only for amusement, or unless we are to accuse Plato of not heeding his own warnings, we must try to discover how his writings avoid violating his own prohibitions while approaching his ideal of the long-continued interchange between teacher and pupil which results in knowledge being born in the soul.

An examination of the dialogue form Plato used reveals a suitable medium for doing just that. This form allowed him to hide his true feelings and ideas from the unphilosophical, while

disclosing them to those capable of philosophy. He hints that this was his intention in the section of the Phaedrus already mentioned. He specifies that the philosophical writer must understand his audience and write so that he says different things to each of the different natures in that audience (277c). This means that the dialogue will be saying several things at the same time, and that what is said to the many--or the tyrannical--will sound good and be uplifting to them, but will be ironic and even tragic from the point of view of those who have been trained in philosophy. Likewise, that which is written to those trained in philosophy will be unnoteworthy to others.

Plato requires the reader to engage himself philosophically in the dialogue if he expects to discover its deeper meaning. As Schleiermacher notes,

[I]t must have been the Philosopher's chief object to conduct every investigation in such a manner from the beginning onwards, as that he might reckon upon the reader's either being driven to an inward and self-originated creation of the thought in view, or submitting to surrender himself most decisively to the feeling of not having discovered or understood anything.¹⁰

Because of his approach, Plato's dialogues are best understood as dramatic works of art that pose philosophical questions. They are deliberately structured fictions featuring characters whose names and general characteristics are drawn from contemporary Athenian society, but whose dramatic relationships with one another may have no basis in historical fact. The true chronology of history governs neither the ages of these characters nor the historical events they mention. Rather, the characters and their relationships serve as ideal types in a Platonic creation that brings certain themes of Athenian culture and certain well-known characteristics of Athenian

personalities into confrontation with one another in searching philosophical examination. Thus, even the Socrates of the dialogues is a Platonic creation, and not necessarily a faithful portrayal of the historical figure. Nor are the dialogues to be taken as accurate portrayals of historical conversations.

We must also remember that the dialogues are philosophical literature. The real plot and purpose of each conversation will make sense only as we follow the philosophical questions being treated. In many dialogues, we find that Plato's primary philosophical concern is not the question that the characters are discussing. Instead, he may be pointing us to more fundamental issues on which the question being discussed rests. This puts a responsibility on the reader to be philosophically alert and inquisitive in order to understand the dialogues at every level.

We should not conclude from this that Plato's wisdom is confined to secret doctrines, unavailable to any but those who have been personally initiated into the truth. On the contrary, his thoughts and ideas are there for the taking, but they must be approached in a roundabout way. They are carefully shielded from those unwilling to participate philosophically in the dialogues in order that "truth . . . [be] born in the soul." The reader of Plato must not become discouraged when, on first reading, much of the dialogue does not make sense. The dialogues are not meant to be understood on first reading--one must know the end to understand the beginning. The reader needs to have the dialogue as a whole in mind in order to understand the parts.

To this point we have considered the philosophical nature of Plato's dramatic writings. The remaining sections of this chapter will describe the literary elements and characteristics of the dialogues which can aid us in ferreting out his philosophical teachings.

III. Plato's use of myth.

On first reading Plato one cannot help being struck by his frequent use of myth. This is characteristic of Greek drama, much of which relied on traditional myths, revised as necessary to support an author's themes. In Plato's writings the mythical elements serve a similar function, even though Plato was much freer than most with his inventions and adaptations of these myths.

The first question most readers will ask is whether or not Plato himself subscribed to the stories related in the myths. Plato's first readers knew that through the drama of Euripides and the dramatic works of Plato's own uncle Critias, the Athenian stage had displayed "the traditional world of the gods" as the purposeful invention of a clever human being.¹¹ But the time had long since passed that a sophisticated audience could be entertained with a simple debunking of traditional mythologies. Thus we find Plato drawing mythological elements not only from his own Greek heritage, but also from the distant cultures of Egypt and even India. All these elements are fashioned in delightful ways to meet the literary requirements of his dialogues.

By the time of Plato, the word "myth" suggested the idea of a false story or fable; so it should not surprise us that as we compare the myths in his dialogues, we find no real attempt to make them consistent with one another. Instead, we find Plato continually changing the details and even the general structure of the myths he uses. He sprinkles the dialogues with admonitions and warnings that we should not take the stories of the myths seriously. From his discussion of "noble lies" in the Republic, we learn that myths can be used to instruct and to help the unphilosophical commit themselves to a kind of virtuous living, even when they are incapable of achieving philosophical virtue.

Plato does intend that we take the myths seriously to the extent that they teach true relationships, even though the myths accomplish this with false stories. We must avoid the twin

errors of taking the content of the myths seriously and rejecting their philosophical implications. As we attempt to understand the ways in which Plato is using each myth, we must take careful account of the ways in which the myth fits into the logos, or logical thread of the dialogue; the ways in which it provides setting and guidance for the discussion; and the ways in which it will be understood by the different characters in the dialogue as they relate to Socrates. By taking account of these uses of mythical materials, we will more easily find Plato's meaning. And we will also better appreciate the marvelous sensitivity with which Plato uses these elements of classical poetry to enrich philosophical drama.

The result is the creation of one of the greatest and most effective of all Greek myths, the life and conversations of Plato's Socrates.¹² This myth might be called the Socratic Journey. Plato portrays Socrates as being engaged in a life-long quest for true knowledge, a quest imposed by the god at Delphi (or perhaps by reason). The quest leads him to expose systematically the characteristic ignorance of sophists, generals, politicians, rhetoricians, poets, prophets, rhapsodes, and others who claim special knowledge or abilities that would qualify them to rule the city. As he exposes their ignorance and vice, Socrates, the mythic philosopher, emerges as the obvious alternative, the model of the good man living the good life.

IV. Character development in the dialogues.

Plato's careful development and comparison of his characters further augments the effectiveness of these dramatic dialogues. The way in which the moral and intellectual character of each interlocutor is portrayed gives us important clues about how we should interpret the conversation between that person and Socrates. For instance, we may take more seriously Socrates' arguments to a philosophically sensitive interlocutor than the statements made to

characters who are unworthy or incapable of philosophical thought.

V. Aporia.

Closely related to this careful development of character is Plato's technique of ending dialogues at a point where the discussion seems to have reached a state of confusion, perplexity, or aporia. In the group of dialogues that end this way, this is an indication that the other interlocutor is incapable of knowledge and that the featured question is probably not the question Plato is trying to answer, though the two will usually be related. Plato's artistry is powerfully displayed in the aporetic dialogues as he creates surface confusion and perplexity in the conversation to mask (and thereby emphasize) his own answers to the questions. Usually, in these dialogues, Plato's portrayal of the life and character of Socrates shines forth like a beacon, illustrating rather than mentioning the conceptual solution Plato would recommend. Only the subtle ironies, hints and other indirect devices in the conversation provide us with the outline of Plato's philosophical doctrine on the analytical level.

VI. Irony.

Understanding Plato's pervasive irony is important because he uses irony to control all the other literary techniques, and because it serves both to reveal and conceal his meaning. Plato's desire to obscure his true meaning led him to rely heavily on irony. Because his irony is multi-layered, it often develops both tragic and comic themes simultaneously. Indeed, Plato is one of the greatest ironists in the western literary tradition.

Wayne Booth has noted that "there is no agreement among critics about what irony is."¹³ Perhaps because of this, surprisingly few people have recognized the pervasive and well controlled irony in Plato's dialogues. Plato relies primarily on what Booth calls stable irony, the kind that provides sensitive readers with distinct guidelines for limiting the effects of the irony. Booth explains that stable ironies are intended by their authors. They are always covert because they contain deeper meanings that the reader must reconstruct from surface meanings. They are "stable or fixed in the sense that once a construction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions."¹⁴ Finally, such ironies are marked by their finitude; they are local or limited. Such irony is not designed solely to create confusion and ambiguity. Instead, to the perceptive reader the intended meanings are communicated even more clearly than in direct discourse. The foregoing description of Plato's Socrates provides one example. For once we discover that the supposedly bumbling, unknowing, and confused philosopher is actually guided by philosophical truth, we will quickly recognize that Platonic wisdom guiding the most erratic and disappointing of the Socratic conversations.

As a successful ironist, Plato exploits many of the advantages of this literary device. First irony enables him to deal with politically sensitive questions without explicitly stating his own

views. Having witnessed the fate of the outspoken Socrates, Plato may have seen this kind of veiled discourse as a political necessity. But perhaps just as important as this political caution was his concern to keep his philosophical beliefs safe from intellectuals who might prostitute his precious teachings. As academicians undertake to interpret Plato's writings, they will forever be hampered by the absence of a consistent set of straightforward textual statements on any subject.

Another advantage of irony is its intrinsic elitist appeal. As Booth has also pointed out, a reader who discovers a subtle irony and its interpretation automatically joins that small community of kindred spirits. Among Plato's contemporaries this may have been a very small circle, and the appeal of intellectual elitism may have been very strong indeed. This kind of appeal enables Plato to use ironic discourse to attract people to his views and to reinforce their adherence to his philosophy once they receive it.

The elitist stance is especially effective in buttressing one's critiques of opponents. As victims of the irony they are doubly refuted when they fail to detect the criticism against them. Socrates often maintains long discussions with people who feel that he is flattering or supporting them, when in fact he is criticizing them mercilessly.

Irony also presents the reader with a choice between various structures of belief--indeed, between whole ways of life. The ironist is aggressive in forcing the reader to make these choices. This, of course, is the central purpose of Plato's philosophical writing. Interestingly, these kinds of choices, or contrapositions of belief structures, are almost impossible to paraphrase fully in non-ironic statement. Therefore, like all great ironists, Plato invites us "to join the wise and the just in looking down on repudiated worlds." When he provokes us to laughter with his ironic characterizations, he "forces us into hierarchical participation" and makes it natural for us to

adopt his values.¹⁵

Perhaps one reason our understanding of Plato has progressed slowly is that his heavy reliance on irony prevents those who believe the views he is attacking from understanding his position. As Booth points out, "every reader will have greatest difficulty detecting irony that mocks his own beliefs or characteristics."¹⁶ Since Plato is a radical critic of human weakness and vice, almost all men will be subject to his searing criticisms at some point. Consequently, his ironies are very difficult for any of us to fathom completely.

An author can warn us of impending ironies in many ways. Straightforward statements in the author's own voice are the most simple. An example in Plato is the warning cited above that a wise man will never plainly write his most precious thoughts. Irony is also heralded when obvious errors or falsehoods are proclaimed as truths. We see this in Plato's presentation of the young Meno (in the dialogue by that name) as a man who exemplifies and understands aristocratic virtue. Yet Plato's audience already knew Meno as a man who had eventually proved to be one of the most despicable Greeks of his time. Similarly, conflicts of fact within the work are indicators of irony and make it necessary to determine whether any statement gives the author's view.

A soliloquy or an aside to the audience may also pave the way for ironic conversations. Plato uses this kind of warning often. Socrates may suddenly go off on some tangent and then just as suddenly return to the conversation without any further reference to the ideas in the soliloquy or aside. These isolated speeches can be regarded as soliloquies or asides when they are stated so that the interlocutors would not have understood their import. And Plato does use them to set up alternative philosophical possibilities in competition with the theses actually being

discussed.

Additional indicators of irony appear in shifts or clashes of style and in conflicts of beliefs. For example, "a deliberate illogicality can, of course, be either a clue to a character's fallacious thoughts or an invitation to join the author in denouncing the absurdity of things."¹⁷ Again, Plato often uses this device; he allows Socrates to use fallacious logic--not to undermine his own position, but to expose the unjustified claims to knowledge made by those who are persuaded by his fallacious arguments. The Protagoras provides notable examples of this. Plato most frequently presents inconsistencies between speech and deed to reveal the true character and intellect of interlocutors and to help us see Socrates' true position in an argument. Socrates' adversaries make noble claims, but behave shabbily. Socrates denies that he knows the truth about virtue, but his every act shows that he does.

In his superb treatise on irony, Wayne Booth provides us with four helpful steps for reconstructing the author's meaning in stable ironies. The first of these steps, of course, is to recognize that the literal meaning of a statement is not the intended meaning. The reader takes this step when he detects incongruities, contradictions, or other clues indicating that all is not as it seems. Plato is exceptionally clever at providing the reader with the kind of clues which, once noticed, cannot be ignored. The second step proceeds on the assumption that the clue was not accidental, and consists in hypothesizing alternative interpretations for the ironic statements. All such alternative interpretations must be contradictory in some way to the literal statement.

Before settling on a single interpretation, the reader must take the third step and decide what the beliefs of the author must have been that would make the ironic statements significant and coherent. This decision is the most subjective aspect of interpreting ironies; but it is

necessary. And it is often not as difficult as it may seem. With Plato, however, this is the most difficult step; for the beliefs he invites us to discern are a complex set of philosophical principles. Plato is a unique dramatist in that he actually requires his true readers to enter into philosophical inquiry with the characters of the drama. Otherwise, they can never glimpse the beliefs that he wants to hide from ordinary readers in the same way he hides them from Socrates' fellow interlocutors. The final step is to choose the new meanings that seem most consistent with the unstated beliefs the reader attributes to the author. The determined quest for an interpretation of the ironies that pervade Plato's dialogues requires that we theorize about the fundamental philosophical beliefs of the author. By using so much irony Plato has ensured that we cannot simply read his philosophy and then forget or reject it. We can only come to it through a process of philosophical discovery provoked by his tantalizingly ironic dialogues.

Finally, the irremediably tentative aspect of this approach to interpreting Plato must be noted. We can never be completely certain that we have correctly unravelled Plato's ironies and arrived at his actual beliefs. There are too many elements that we, being from another time and culture, cannot be sure that we have interpreted correctly. But I believe that with even a little skill in handling these diverse elements we can come closer to the truth than if we merely read Plato. As our skill and sensitivity to Plato's dramatic form of philosophical literature increases, we can gain confidence that we are understanding what Plato intended his readers to learn. The best test of our interpretations will be whether other readers agree after considering all the same evidence. The next two chapters present the reader with detailed examples of this kind of interpretation.

VII. Socrates as a Platonic character.

I have already described briefly what I take the character of Plato's Socrates to be. In this final section I will explain in greater detail this complex relationship between the historical Socrates and the literary figure that dominates the majority of Plato's dialogues. There is nothing in the tradition of classical Greek politicians, orators, sophists, or poets to discourage the use of the personal pronoun "I" in Plato's written discourse.¹⁸ But in all his writings, Plato uses the first person only in those epistles written to intimate friends. And in all his dialogues he barely refers to himself three times. Socrates mentions Plato's presence at the trial twice in the Apology, and in the Phaedo it is recognized that Plato could not be present because of illness. Yet Plato's dialogues were written for the use of students who did not know Socrates, but considered Plato the great teacher and intellectual leader of their time.

It does not seem likely that Plato refrained from writing in the first person to enhance the acceptability of his ideas. He obviously enjoyed tremendous personal esteem and intellectual respect among his own students and colleagues. As his letters reveal, he was thought by some to be capable of working miracles in the affairs of men, if he would only apply himself to the task. But in his writings Plato studiously avoids explicit statements of his own views. Consequently, we are forced to analyze carefully the participation of all the interlocutors as they interact with Socrates in Plato's dialogues, paying particular attention to Socrates himself.

Given the method Plato chose for expressing his views, we should not be surprised that his dialogues feature another person--particularly one he so admired. Of course, Plato would be the last to claim that his representation of Socrates is historically accurate. It was even reported anciently that Socrates lived to read some of Plato's early work, and that upon listening to a recital of the Lysis he exclaimed, "By Heracles, how much this young man has invented about

me." Apparently many others had done this kind of thing. We have numerous Socratic conversations reported by Xenophon, claiming some accuracy as reconstructions of Socratic pronouncements. But in these we note considerable differences from Plato's dialogues in tone, style, and intellect.

Plato was not writing history. He was striving to resolve the great philosophical problems posed by Socrates and others. We can easily see why Plato sets forth his own characterization of Socrates, the ideal philosopher, as the solution to these great problems. Socrates' reputation for wisdom and virtue combined with his martyrdom at the hands of his own countrymen made him the prime candidate for the ideal philosopher, the key character in Plato's dialogues. No other figure could have served as well.

Even so, as with Plato's other interlocutors, much of the historical personality shines through in the fictional representation. The intimate details and consistent personality ascribed to Socrates show us how Plato perceived his mentor. The dialogues are infused with a persistent acknowledgement of Socrates' great power over young seekers after truth. Socrates repeatedly appears as a figure who can bring sincere seekers under the glow of an inexplicable and unique personal love. Plato labels this power eros, and it becomes a persistent theme in his philosophy. This love binds teacher and pupil together until truth is born in the soul of the pupil.

Other Socratic characteristics enter into Plato's works. Socrates is forced to be ironic with those companions who do not fully understand or share in the humble pursuit of truth. He consistently plays the role of a gadfly, trying to force those who should know what is good and who should be leading the people in paths of virtue to examine their own ignorance that they might profit from opportunities to obtain knowledge.

Apparently the historical Socrates did make it his practice to spend his time trying to convince young and old "to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls" (30b). He engaged them in gaining knowledge about justice, goodness, truth, and piety. Many of the youth enjoyed seeing their elders' credibility elders questioned. They followed Socrates around as his pupils, though he never charged for what he did. It is not difficult to see how Socrates incited the anger of the prominent men of Athens who were not eager to have their ignorance exposed.

Socrates is often ranked high on the list of early Greek rationalists. There is some justification for this. Socrates believed in the importance of knowledge; he believed that if someone truly knew something, he would act on that knowledge. He believed in analyzing issues by careful thought and discussion. But he was not a Cartesian. As one scholar expresses it, "Socrates no doubt believed in following the argument wherever it led; but he found that too often it led only to fresh questions, and where it failed him he was prepared to follow other guides."¹⁹

The "other guides" were, in Socrates' words, "God's commands given in oracles and dreams and in every other way that any other divine dispensation has ever impressed a duty upon man." One of the most mysterious of Socrates' divine guides was what is usually called the "divine sign."²⁰ This divine sign frequently came to Socrates whenever he was about to do something that would not be beneficial or right. Interestingly enough it seems to have been only a negative sign--it never enjoined him to do anything. Much speculation has arisen as to exactly what sort of phenomenon the divine sign was. Based on our current knowledge, the only honest answer is that we simply do not know. But its presence certainly makes Socrates a more

intriguing fellow, one who in reality was probably not the ideal rational philosopher suggested by Plato's literary figure.

The historical Socrates remains, then, something of an enigma. A rationalist, a mystic, a moral and religious person, yet a nonbeliever in the traditional Athenian deities, he spent his time helping people understand and overcome their ignorance. In so doing, he offended many people. Finally, Socrates, whom Plato called "the justest man of his time," was convicted of impiety and executed. These events made indelible impressions on the mind of young Plato, impressions which in turn left their mark on Plato's philosophical dramas.

VIII. Summary.

As we undertake to read Plato, we are freed from the tyranny of any traditional interpretation by our observations that (1) the mostly highly respected scholars differ in their interpretations, and (2) even many of the greatest scholars have ignored some important guidelines when interpreting his works: Plato's dialogues are dramas, not treatises; they are written seriously as entertainment for those who have been philosophically enlightened; and they are constructed on layers of irony.

Successful interpretation of ironic writing like Plato's will be based on a set of hypotheses concerning the content of the philosophical doctrines that lie behind them. In the interpretive literature based on Plato's dialogues, there appears to be no one who has accomplished this in full. Many have made valuable observations. But even though these works have been available for almost four hundred years, there is still a great need for creative interpretation of Plato's works. The following interpretive essays are offered as a gesture in this direction.

NOTES

¹ Friedrich Ernst Daniel Schleiermacher, Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato, trans. William Dobson (New York: Arno, 1973), pp. 4-5.

² H. D. F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama (London: Methuen, 1956), p. vi.

³ Kitto, p. 239.

⁴ Kitto, p. v.

⁵ Kitto, p. v.

⁶ Kitto, p. vii.

⁷ Plato's Phaedrus, trans. R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

All references to the Phaedrus are noted in the text and are taken from this translation and edition.

⁸ Glenn R. Morrow, Plato's Epistles (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 241.

⁹ Morrow, pp. 216-217.

¹⁰ Schleiermacher, p. 17.

¹¹ Paul Friedlander, Plato, trans. Hans Meyerhoff, 2nd ed (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), I, 171.

¹² Friedlander, p. 172.

¹³ Wayne C. Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. ix. I rely here almost exclusively on Booth's analysis of irony because of both its excellence and its ready applicability to Plato.

¹⁴ Booth, p. 6.

¹⁵ Booth, pp. 39-43.

¹⁶ Booth, p. 81.

¹⁷ Booth, p. 75.

¹⁸ See discussion in Friedlander, I, 127.

¹⁹ E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 184.

²⁰ This is the usual translation of the Greek to daimonion. The word is a diminutive form of daimon, which signifies frequently an inferior divinity or intermediary, as in Plato, Symposium, 202 d-e.

EUTHYPHRO

Most human societies have religious seers who claim special knowledge about the future and the ultimate realities--the supernatural world and its denizens. This special knowledge, by implication, supports their further claim that they are best qualified to rule the city and to teach the citizens virtue. But philosophers recognize a special challenge in such knowledge claims. They cannot help wondering whether the divines are merely self-appointed.

Because the Socratic journey portrayed in Plato's dialogues propels Socrates into confrontation with representatives of every group that makes such claims, it was necessary that Socrates eventually face one of these divines. This confrontation occurs near the end of the journey, just before Socrates faces the city itself in the form of the Athenian jury.

I. Background.

Socrates has come to the king's porch to respond to a charge of impiety. Impiety was a serious and indictable offense in Athens. In the fifth century such notable figures as the playwright Aeschylus, the natural philosopher Anaxagoras, the sophist Protagoras and the famous general (and Socratic pupil) Alcibiades were tried for impiety.¹ Piety (eusebeia) for the Greeks was not just a state or attitude of the mind or soul. It consisted of various outward acts of worship which were performed to propitiate the gods and assure their good will.²

Over numerous generations these acts were formalized and passed on as sacred traditions consisting chiefly of various sacrifices and rites of worship and purification. Taken collectively, this body of unwritten rules and practices was known as the ancestral law, and obedience to it was of the utmost importance, equal to, if not exceeding, that of the written civil law. Although

these traditions had been passed down from "men of old time," they were considered to have come originally from the gods.³ A holy or pious person was one who followed these divine prescriptions. The very word hosios, meaning that which is sanctioned by divine law or the duty men owe to the gods, was also used to refer to a pious or holy person--one who performed those duties.

Piety did not, however, refer only to man's relationship with the gods. Rather, and originally preeminently, it included man's relationship with his family.⁴ Each family had its own household gods, and those gods were worshipped as directed by the head of the family--the father. Originally, the gods of the family were the family's ancestors. They were revered because they had given life to the family, bringing it into existence. Also, the ancestors were believed to have power to bless or curse the family, much as they did in life by means of their parental authority.

To assure the good will of the ancestral gods toward the family, the living had to perform various rites and duties on behalf of the dead. Anciently these services to the dead were thought necessary because the ancestors lived on, albeit in a very shadowy existence, and needed to be provided for even in death. Thus the family had a responsibility to bury the corpse, carry out the proper burial rites, and offer sacrifices and drink offerings continually to sustain the dead. If these duties were not carried out, the dead, who were thought to have great power to do harm, might justly punish their impious descendants. But if such duties were properly observed, the dead would bless and protect their pious offspring.⁵

This domestic religion centered on the household hearth. Every Greek house had a hearth or altar on which the family kept some lighted coals. It was a sacred duty of the father to make

certain the fire was lit both day and night--it must never go out. Even the hearth itself was a god, capable of granting gifts needed by the family. In all activities of domestic worship, the father presided as the priest and king. He directed the family worship and decided who would be able to worship around the hearth. He had the right to give his children in marriage, to exclude them from the worship circle, to adopt others into the family (which would give them full family status), and even to act as a judge to his children. It was he who gave them life, and it was he who had the power to control it. And as we have seen, his power did not end even at death. Therefore, in the most ancient times, respect for parents was viewed as "the most sacred of all our obligations."⁶

As time went on and the power of the state increased, the religious group widened to include the community and eventually the city; but it continued to model the religious structure of the family. Indeed, religion in Greece never lost its connection with the family and community.⁷ Just as the family worshipped those divine ancestors who brought the family into existence, each city was thought to have been brought into existence by a particular god or gods; these became the tutelary gods of the city, who watched over and protected it as the gods of the divine hearth did the family. In fact, the city had its own hearth, located in the council chamber.⁸ Sacrifices and prayers were always preceded by an invocation to the hearth.⁹ Thus piety became a matter of rendering ones duty to the gods of the city. It consisted of various rites and ceremonies that had been handed down from generation to generation and were collectively known as the sacred ancestral law. To carry out the rites commanded by that law was the essence of piety to the Greek mind.

In place of the father, the early leader of the city was the king. Like the father, he had all

power over the city, especially in his jurisdiction over religious worship. Over time the power of the Greek kings was limited and distributed among many officials. However, in Athens, even in the days of the democracy, the king never lost his title. Although most of his power was taken away, he retained supervision of the city's religion. This is why the Euthyphro takes place at the porch or office of the king in Athens. Socrates has been charged with impiety, and the king has jurisdiction over such cases.¹⁰

The confrontation Plato arranges between the philosopher and the seer presents the ideal opportunity for a discussion of piety, the essential virtue Socrates is accused of lacking. Following his usual pattern, Plato involves us in a character study in which we must judge between the interlocutors--in this case Socrates and the mantis Euthyphro (and indirectly, Meletus, who does not appear in the dialogue, but who is referred to throughout). This character study also provides a vehicle for Plato's defense of Socrates against the charge of impiety--a philosophical defense which could not have been given to the Athenian jury. For as we glimpse Plato's secular notion of piety we must recognize his Socrates as the personification of it and Socrates' life as the life of true piety.

As Euthyphro is not a well-known Athenian personality, Plato must develop his character somewhat more fully than he does those of the chief interlocutors in other dialogues. Euthyphro is not known to us except through the dialogues of Plato, and is almost certainly a fictitious character. The name Plato invented for him means "straight thinker," an irony which intensifies throughout the dialogue as his confusion grows. Plato portrays Euthyphro as a self-appointed seer or mantis, one who claims to receive oracles.¹¹ The chance encounter of Socrates and Euthyphro at the king's porch naturally leads them to compare their reasons for being there.

Socrates is just arriving to answer his indictment from Meletus; Euthyphro is leaving, having just lodged a suit against his own father. Their exchange of stories makes an unusually long dramatic introduction for the conversation that ensues, but it is necessary to provide primary evidence for the characters of the men and to introduce other dramatic themes.

The character comparison is presented on several levels. The first level emerges immediately as Euthyphro simply assumes that Socrates is above indicting anyone, presumably because of his moral character. Euthyphro says that he would never suspect Socrates of indicting another person, yet he sees no problem in indicting his own father. Nor is Socrates surprised to see Euthyphro as a plaintiff. This implicit comparison of Socrates' character with Euthyphro's is further developed in indirect references throughout the dialogue.

Plato next turns our attention to a comparison between Euthyphro and Meletus, Socrates' accuser. Meletus is first introduced to us when Euthyphro invites Socrates to explain who has indicted him and why. With irony that Euthyphro fails to detect, Socrates describes in seeming innocence Meletus' hooked nose and majestic physical features, and praises him for the "correct way" in which he has begun his political career and for the "natural result" that must follow from "so fine a beginning" (2d-3a). The praise is sincere in that Socrates' abstract description of Meletus' program is one which Plato would recommend, i.e., teaching virtue to the youth first, making them as good as possible as a means of improving the city. But it is insincere in that Socrates' naivete about Meletus' intentions and prospects is entirely feigned.

Even Euthyphro is not so naive as to believe that Meletus has the noble intentions Socrates seems to attribute to him. Speaking on deeper levels than he realizes, Euthyphro observes that the indictment of Socrates is tantamount to an attack on the hearth, or on the true

father of the city. In so doing, Meletus not only wrongs Socrates, but will also make the city less just, if we may take our cue from the verb Plato selects (adikein, to wrong, formed from the negative of dike, justice). The combination of these last two statements by Socrates and Euthyphro gives us the picture of Socrates as a true or even divine father to the city, one who could give it wise direction and leadership in the important matters of life. But rather than going to this wise man for instruction, Meletus and the democratic politicians who employ him are offended by Socrates' attempts to teach virtue to the citizens. Rather than going to the father, they choose to run complaining "to the city as to a mother to accuse [Socrates]" (2c). The image is that of a child trying to play mother off against father, perhaps even knowing that the father is right, but unwilling to accept his instruction. And, as is the case in many families where the ancient religious laws are forgotten, the mother here will take the part of the child and overrule the father.

The picture of Socrates as the father being prosecuted by Meletus also completes the comparison of Meletus and Euthyphro: just as Meletus, a character hardly viewed favorably by Plato, indicts the city's "father," Euthyphro prosecutes his actual father. Socrates and Euthyphro's father are falsely accused of impiety by Meletus and Euthyphro, who are themselves guilty of impiety, for they are attacking the sacred hearth without justification.

As identified by Euthyphro, the motive behind Socrates' indictment is jealousy (3c). Because of the close parallel between himself and Meletus, we may expect that Euthyphro's motivation will be the same. Finally, because of this parallel, Socrates' exposure of Euthyphro's ignorance will also serve symbolically as a refutation of Meletus. If the confrontation between Socrates and Euthyphro is to be most effective, Plato must allow it to focus on what are

supposedly Euthyphro's strengths and Socrates' weaknesses. Euthyphro claims to have knowledge of what is holy and unholy (he must prosecute his father for impiety). Furthermore, as a holy man (mantis) he should be a model of piety. Socrates, on the other hand, is under indictment for impiety. Therefore, piety is the natural point for comparison, with respect to both their knowledge and their characters. Socrates must prove superior to Euthyphro not only in his knowledge of what is holy and unholy, but also in the way he exemplifies true piety in his conduct.

Plato continues to lay the background for this confrontation by introducing the charge against Socrates--that he makes new gods and does not worship the old ones. Events in Socrates' life that led to this charge are left in a shadowy background by Plato. But Euthyphro immediately assumes that the charge refers to Socrates' divine sign, the voice which began to come to him in his early childhood, dissuading him from some actions, but never urging him to do anything (Apology, 31d, 40a-d).

There is, however, one sense in which Plato's Socrates is clearly guilty of introducing or "making" new gods. In his endless quests to identify certain abstract entities, such as the virtues and the good, we find Socratic statements treating these abstractions as deities.¹² Clearly, Plato portrays his Socrates as recommending these new deities to the Athenians as higher guides to right conduct than the Homeric gods. But this way of putting things is never part of the charge against Socrates.

At this point Plato develops a superficial similarity between Euthyphro and Socrates. Euthyphro believes that because the assembly laughs at him when he speaks about religious matters, he is like Socrates in being superior to and misunderstood by the multitude. But

Socrates points out that it is "a thing of little moment" to be laughed at (3c). What worries him is making the many angry. But this is no problem for Euthyphro. As a mantic prophet, he is not taken seriously. In spite of his confidence in his ability to prophesy and in his knowledge of religious and moral matters, his name will provoke only ridicule and derision. Socrates, on the other hand, is suspected of "teaching his cleverness to others" (3c), and thus his radical moral views pose a threat to the corrupt political establishment. For as a radical attuned to the real needs of the city, Socrates has a plausible and persuasive revolutionary message for the young.

Thus, this superficial similarity between Socrates and Euthyphro actually reveals a more fundamental difference. That Plato intends this similarity ironically is confirmed by Socrates' exposure of Euthyphro as a false prophet. He invites Euthyphro to prophesy concerning the outcome of his trial, and as we might expect, Euthyphro prophesies falsely that all will go well for Socrates. Plato not only rejects the Olympian divinities, he also decries this type of mantic prophet who claims to know the future and to be authoritative in the ancient religion. Neither is fit to rule the city. Neither understands human virtue or the good life.

Euthyphro's character is further exposed by the initial suggestion of another favorable comparison between Socrates and Euthyphro. Euthyphro, like Socrates, is acting in brave defiance of the opinion of the many. As Socrates points out, "the many must be ignorant of what is right" if what Euthyphro is doing is correct, for "not just anyone would undertake a thing like that." Indeed it must require "someone quite far gone in wisdom" (4a). However, a deeper difference again lies beneath this surface similarity, for these statements do correctly describe Socrates, but not Euthyphro. Euthyphro is simply mistaken in what he is doing, and in this case the many would probably be more correct than he. Like Socrates (and Plato), he seems to appeal

to a moral law higher than the law of the city. But Euthyphro undermines his own claim that it is a higher law by going to the city with his appeal. His views are not grounded in knowledge of truth. He does not even rely on the tried and proven laws and customs of the city. Rather, he proclaims himself a standard against which the rest of the world should be measured. If Plato is suggesting three levels of understanding of virtue, Socrates and Euthyphro are at the extremes, and the many are between them.

II. Legal background.

Inasmuch as Euthyphro has chosen to go to the king, who handles suits involving the state religion, he would be well advised to pay more attention to the law to which he will be appealing. First, he does not appear to have any legal right to bring such a suit--only a relative of the dead man could do so. Second, as he describes the "murder" and other actions by his father, we see a picture emerging of a traditionally pious man who acted according to the law in every way. Under Athenian law, if the day-laborer had been caught in the act of killing his slave--as seems to be the case--Euthyphro's father would have been justified in killing him on the spot. If he had not caught the laborer in the act, the proper action would have been to consult the authoritative exegete in Athens--the course which he has actually taken.¹³ Thus, whatever the circumstances, he fulfilled the legal and religious requirements and showed himself to be a scrupulous man. So although Euthyphro insists that his motive for prosecuting his father is to clear them both of pollution, we have reason to be dubious. It is not at all evident that there really was any pollution. And even if there were, Euthyphro should have consulted the exegete himself to determine the proper religious rites necessary to cleanse himself and his household. One of the specific duties of the exegete was to advise concerning such rites.¹⁵ But because

Euthyphro esteems himself to be the expert on religious tradition, he acts boldly, without direction--and contrary to the law. He seemed to think he was above the law.

We might also ask ourselves, what message a proud young man claiming to be an authority on religious questions would receive when his father acknowledges an urgent need of religious advice, but ignores him and sends a servant all the way to Athens to consult the exegete instead. Euthyphro was justifiably insulted, for his pious and practical father shares the opinion of the many toward such prophets. Euthyphro, like Meletus, has been offended by a father who thinks his son knows nothing about the most important questions. Like Meletus and the democratic politicians, he too will go to his mother, the city, to seek vengeance against his father, even if the charge is insubstantial and the procedure illegal.¹⁶

III. The logos.

Once the initial character comparisons have been developed in the dramatic introduction, Plato is ready to lead Euthyphro into a dialectical discussion. He will develop two forms of social pressure that force Euthyphro into this examination of his beliefs. The first and most important is Euthyphro's claim to superior knowledge of "how things stand in religious matters regarding the holy and the unholy" (4e). Characteristically, Plato uses the claims to knowledge made by representatives of the various elements of Athenian society as the bait with which Socrates can draw these representatives into a search for virtue. Claiming that he knows "all such things with strict accuracy" (5a), Euthyphro cannot reasonably deny Socrates' seemingly innocent request to become his pupil.

In addition to exploiting Euthyphro's boasting, Socrates also establishes a rhetorical friendship, repeatedly calling Euthyphro his "gifted friend." This rhetorical friendship and

student-teacher relationship combined give Socrates the necessary leverage to force Euthyphro to submit to what would otherwise be an intolerable embarrassment--the exposure of his ignorance. Socrates even goes to the length of (quite insincerely) associating his future chances against Meletus with the outcome of the forthcoming conversation. It does make Socrates a true prophet. But Socrates already knows, as Euthyphro must secretly realize, that the claim to have been taught by Euthyphro will only incite laughter from the Athenian court and will not in any way alleviate Socrates' responsibility for the positions he has taken. Nor will it intimidate Meletus or cause him to drop the charges. This becomes even more obvious as Euthyphro reveals that he has no wisdom to give.

A. The first definition.

Socrates initiates the logos by encouraging Euthyphro to produce an essential definition of the holy. He coaches Euthyphro by pointing out that the holy and the unholy are opposites and that there is a single characteristic by which each may be identified. As is standard in Socratic dialectic, Socrates pushes his interlocutor to provide a statement of the essence, or nature, of the virtue being discussed, in this case piety or holiness.¹⁷

Euthyphro's initial response misses the point of Socrates' question completely by advancing an example, rather than a definition. His answer is inadequate because the only holy acts it allows are acts of prosecution for impieties. All other actions would be irrelevant to the question of holiness. He then goes on to "prove" his answer by comparing himself to the gods who are commonly assumed to be righteous, and who behave in the same way as he. Thus he accuses the many of contradicting themselves because "they say one thing about the gods and another about [Euthyphro]" (5e-6a).

During all this, Euthyphro unwittingly provides us with the common sense equation of piety and justice that Socrates will try in vain to develop later in the dialogue. Because the standard method Plato has Socrates employ depends on an examination of the correct meaning of words in the search for essences, it is a delightful touch of irony that Euthyphro himself introduces the more ordinary meaning of piety while trying to prove his own very odd definition. Euthyphro's proof assumes that unjust acts in general are impieties, suggesting that piety and justice are equivalent, so that just acts in general (however defined) would be pious acts. This conclusion stems from Euthyphro's view that Cronus and Uranus were guilty of certain impieties, that is, certain injustices; therefore, their respective sons were justified in punishing them for these acts. By analogy, of course, Euthyphro feels he is justified in seeking punishment for his own father. In another burst of immodesty, Euthyphro has implicitly compares himself to Zeus, "the best and most righteous of the gods" (5e).¹⁸

Euthyphro's ludicrous attempt to answer a philosophical question threatens to derail the discussion. But Socrates contains his mirth and shifts to the question of belief in the traditional myth. He gently reminds Euthyphro that his own indictment is a result of skepticism concerning these myths and asks if Euthyphro really believes the tales of war and enmity among the gods.¹⁹ Less obviously, we can see that appealing to the examples of the gods as authoritative does not work unless one already knows what is just or pious so as to be able to distinguish the righteous from the evil examples. But of course, this is the thrust of the original question.

Plato must elicit Euthyphro's defense of the traditional divinities for two reasons. First, he must establish that Euthyphro's attempt to prove the correctness of his definition appealed to an established right based on the traditional religious myths, not a natural right discoverable

through reason. Second, he must establish the fact of the gods' inability to agree, so that he can use it later to refute Euthyphro's next definition of piety. Socrates elicits from him a double affirmation of his belief in these religious myths and others "which the multitude does not know" and which if "you hear will amaze you" (6c). But of course, Socrates is not at all interested in these higher mysteries of the traditional religion. He has rejected this religion and is only eager to pursue the question he asked in initiating the logos. With Euthyphro's affirmation on record, he proceeds to politely examine Euthyphro's first definition.

Although Socrates has implicitly been the teacher from the beginning of the logos, he now emerges more openly in that role (6d) as he attempts to instruct Euthyphro in the proper mode of definition. He emphasizes that it is necessary to get a definition of that same characteristic "by which all holy things are holy" that we "may look to it and use it as a standard" (6e).

B. The second definition.

Euthyphro seems to have partially understood Socrates' injunction to provide an essential definition, for his second definition is a general statement that has at least the logical possibility of meeting Socrates' guidelines. "What is dear to the gods" could be the universal characteristic of the holy, if indeed the gods all loved the same things. But on this point, Euthyphro's cosmogony will trip him up. Based on what he has professed earlier about the gods, Euthyphro must now admit that they frequently disagree about what is just and what is unjust. Then, once he accepts Socrates' statement that the gods love the just and hate the unjust, he must conclude that they both love and hate the same things. Therefore the same things are both holy and unholy.

Euthyphro tries to salvage his definition by insisting that all the gods agree about the killing of a man unjustly--the killer must be punished. But Socrates forces him to admit that the gods disagree about the justice and injustice of particular actions, and this gives Socrates the chance to question Euthyphro about his own case. Socrates becomes more aggressive and demands Euthyphro's proof that all the gods believe his father's actions to be wrong and his actions to be right.

Throughout this interchange Plato is indirectly suggesting to the reader an equation of justice with piety. The gods love what is just, and what the gods love is holy. This implicit equation is repeatedly reinforced by the frequent use of words with the stem dike (justice)--no fewer than twenty-two from 7e to 9a.

We should also notice that the reason there is disagreement among the gods and among men is that there is no universally accepted measure of the just, the beautiful, or the good, as

there is for weight, area, and length. Such a standard seems to be the object of Socrates' persistent searching. The Platonic assumption reflected in the dialectic is that essential definitions will provide such a measure. And the implied conclusion of this interchange is that the traditional gods are inadequate because they have no knowledge of the essences.

C. The third definition.

Socrates' direct challenge to the justice of Euthyphro's particular action invites Euthyphro to provide a proof that spells out the nature of "the just," or in this case, "the pious." But Euthyphro begins to hedge, suggesting that such a proof would not be a small task; so Socrates begins to taunt him. But the logos is not yet over and ridicule would undo it. Socrates releases Euthyphro from this commitment he cannot keep and allows him to refine his position. Euthyphro gratefully embraces a third definition suggested to him by Socrates: "The holy is what all the gods love" (9e).

Euthyphro adopts this revised definition immediately and without reservation. But Socrates probes lightly, asking if they should simply accept this definition just because someone says it is so, or if they should examine it more closely to see if it is true. Socrates is subtly suggesting his philosophical principle that every authority should be questioned. Of course, Euthyphro misses the implication that Socrates might question even Homer and the myths about the gods which depend on Homer for their authority. Displaying his naive dogmatism, Euthyphro is perfectly confident that this new definition is true in spite of the fact that it was suggested to him only a few seconds before.

We should pause here to observe how Plato has Socrates use different kinds of reasoning to refute different kinds of interlocutors. When the discussion is with sophists who pride

themselves on their reasoning ability, Plato often provides Socrates with logically fallacious arguments which nevertheless convince the sophists. This not only persuades them they are wrong, but also demonstrates that they do not know as much about reasoning as they claim to know. However in this discussion with the "straight thinker," Plato allows his leading character to use straightforward and valid arguments to lead Euthyphro into contradictions. Euthyphro's second definition was reduced to a contradiction in a most straightforward manner, showing the boldness of his student. The third definition will now also be legitimately refuted, but in an entertaining way, as the "pupil" uses a complex, though valid, argument to befuddle his "teacher."

Some commentators have tried to derive some secret philosophical principle from Socrates' refutation of the third definition, but this is not necessary and is not the intention of the argument. In a direct manner, the linguistic discussion shows the difference between essence and accident (ousia and pathos, or reality and affection); the love of the gods as conceived by Euthyphro is shown to be relevant only in an accidental way to the "holy" not to be an essential part of its nature and reality. The mid-point of the dialogue is marked with a conversational interlude and Socrates' request that Euthyphro "start again from the beginning" (11b).

The interlude arises as Euthyphro observes that all of his definitions "go around in circles . . . and will not stand still" (11b). Just as the logos began at the point where Euthyphro joined the many in laughing at Socrates, Socrates now makes a second start by expanding this hapless comment into a new joke, which Euthyphro never realizes is at his expense. Rather, Euthyphro thinks the joke is on Socrates, who like his ancestor Daedalus²⁰ has made Euthyphro's creations (definitions) move around in circles. He insists that "if it had been up to me, they would have

stayed where they were" (11d). But from a philosophical point of view, this makes Euthyphro the real butt of the joke. It is due to Socrates' superior wisdom that he is able to undermine Euthyphro's faulty and dogmatic definitions and cause them to move, whereas they satisfied the unphilosophical Euthyphro in their original unexamined state. Capitalizing on this unexplained joke, Socrates comments in an aside for the readers' sake, that he truly wants arguments "to stand fixed and immovable" (11d), thus reminding us of the philosophical quest for immovable definitions--statements about reality that remain stable even when subjected to critical analysis.

D. Socrates' argument.

The second half of the discussion is characterized by Socrates taking the role of a helper rather than pupil to Euthyphro. The difference is immediately obvious. Socrates introduces a new connection between the holy and the just, trying to define their essential relationship by asking if all the just is holy or if all the holy is just. But "the straight thinker" confesses that he cannot follow this, and we see that the instruction he has received has not overcome his inherent incapacity to follow a straightforward inquiry into essences. Socrates first taunts him: "You seem to be lazy and soft" (11e). But then he converts this to flattery--"You are lazy and soft because of your wealth of wisdom" (12a)--and renews the appeal to their rhetorical friendship, thus preserving the conversation.

After considerable prodding, Euthyphro advances the view that "that part of the just which is pious and holy is concerned with ministering to the gods, and the remaining part of the just is concerned with ministering to men" (12e). This time Socrates leads Euthyphro to see the undesirable implications of his statement, rather than producing a contradiction in the original definition. The natural result of his statement would be to say that men could improve the gods in some way. But Euthyphro would never commit such an impiety. Therefore, doing something holy cannot mean making the gods better. So the notion of ministering to the gods is revised to become "service to the gods."

At this point Socrates once again relies on Euthyphro's proud claim to "know better than anyone else about religious matters" in order to solicit a statement concerning what service to the gods produces (13e). But Euthyphro can only refer vaguely to the many excellent things that are produced by service to the gods. Finally, under prodding from Socrates, it occurs to him to cite

serving the gods through prayer and sacrifice as holy things, the product of which is the preservation of both families and cities.

Now we encounter one of those intriguing statements in which the seemingly omniscient Socrates suggests to the reader that the correct answer was nearly achieved as Euthyphro "just came right up to the point and turned away," and that if he had answered correctly, Socrates "would already have learned holiness" from him (14c). Is Plato suggesting here that the line of reasoning at that point could have produced the correct answer? If so, to what would that line of reasoning have led? Our translator, A. E. Allen, denies that some Platonic doctrine is being suggested at this point. But many others, such as A. E. Taylor, have seized on this passage as evidence that we are to look beyond the dialogue to a doctrine Plato is suggesting.

Euthyphro's answer introduced the concept of knowledge: a pious man "knows how to say and do things acceptable to the gods" (14b). This answer actually comes quite close to the Platonic answer, though Euthyphro does not realize it, and Socrates acknowledges it only indirectly. If for "gods" we substitute the divinities with which Plato is concerned--the "fixed and immovable," i.e., justice and the other virtues--then Socrates may have been suggesting that holiness is knowing how to speak and act in accordance with justice and virtue.

We come even closer to understanding Plato's answer to the question of this dialogue if we consider this reformulation of Euthyphro's answer in light of the question which elicited it. That question was "What . . . would service to the gods produce?" (13d). Since service to the gods--holiness--is knowing how to speak and act in accordance with justice, the most likely answer is that such service produces just souls. Such is obviously the product in the case of Socrates, for one central purpose of the Platonic dialogues is to reveal the virtues produced in

Socrates' soul by his striving for and attaining knowledge of these "divinities." Producing just souls in his associates also seems to be what Socrates most ardently strives for in his dealings with the other interlocutors of the dialogues. At times he may mock, and he almost always subtly attacks, yet he never leaves them unimproved. This in turn would produce better families and cities--the very results promised by Euthyphro.

There are also certain dramatic elements which help confirm this interpretation. We are prepared for such a link between piety and justice by the carefully developed suggestion that piety is a part of justice. More important, there is a dramatic parallel between this section of the dialogue and an earlier section in which Socrates ironically praises Meletus for beginning his career correctly by trying to improve the young, thus benefiting the city greatly by producing good (and just) souls. The link between these sections is further established through agricultural analogies. In the earlier section, Meletus is compared to a farmer who looks after his young plants first. In the later parallel section Socrates invokes a very similar analogy about a farmer and his crops to try to spur Euthyphro to explain what service to the gods produces. This parallel leads us to expect that the product here will be just what Meletus was praised for producing--better young people, i.e., better souls.

E. The final argument and aporia.

But, of course, Euthyphro is incapable of following all this. Therefore, Socrates again draws out the implication that piety must be some kind of business transaction between gods and men. By this time Euthyphro sees Socrates' line of reasoning in time to avoid the accusation that his definition suggests that pious acts improve or benefit the gods. But, in trying to avoid that most recently experienced trap, he falls again neatly into the earlier one and claims that "the holy

is what is loved by the gods" (15b).

This brings the discussion full circle; Euthyphro has to admit that (like the statues of Daedalus) he has come all the way around to a definition that has already been disproved. And so, in spite of their new beginning, they have made almost no progress toward answering the question. Certainly Euthyphro would not be able to advance a definition that would be any better than his original point of view.

Socrates pretends not to be dismayed or discouraged, and assumes the conversation must continue. He says a second time, "Let us begin again from the beginning, and ask what the holy is" (15d). Once again, he refers to the confidence that Euthyphro has in prosecuting his own father as evidence that Euthyphro must certainly know what is holy. Otherwise, he would fear the opinion of both men and the gods. By implication, Socrates is suggesting to us that the philosopher can defy the opinions of both men and gods simply because he does know with certainty what virtue is. Reemphasizing his confidence in Euthyphro's knowledge, Socrates begs him to reveal the secret. But Euthyphro's embarrassment is now too acute. Their rhetorical friendship and his own pride are not sufficient to keep him in the conversation. He frantically ruptures the bonds that have held him by suddenly discovering that he is late and must hurry "somewhere," before, we might add, Socrates totally destroys him.

The dialogue ends with Socrates' futile appeal to Euthyphro, invoking again the rhetorical friendship and also Socrates' desire to live better the rest of his life. But neither of these is a concern to Euthyphro. Perhaps he has sensed his own inadequacy, though he is not willing to confess it. He is clearly unwilling to stay and have it pointed out again. In speech Socrates seeks to learn the virtuous life from Euthyphro. But by his deeds Euthyphro shows that he is clearly

the inferior person; we know with certainty that for the rest of his life Socrates will live more virtuously than Euthyphro. But because Socrates' challenge to Athens and its ideologies is both serious and persuasive to the bright young men of the city, he must be eliminated by those whose authority and knowledge he challenges. Euthyphro, on the other hand, is harmless and truly laughable. He is anything but a "straight thinker," whether he is judged by cultural or philosophical standards. Plato's condemnation of the mantis is that his ignorance and false claims are obvious not only to the philosopher, but to the many as well. His defense of Socrates is that if we understand what piety really is, we will see it best exemplified in the behavior of Socrates who, as an aging father, could teach true piety to the Athenians, if they would only stay to discuss it with him.

NOTES

¹ Glen R. Morrow, Plato's Cretan City (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 471. What the laws were at the time is uncertain, but we do know of a law brought forth by Diopieithes as late as 432 B.C. which specifically made not acknowledging the gods (ta theia nomizontas) an indictable offense. See Plutarch's Pericles, 32.1; Diodorus, 12.38ff. E. R. Dodds says of the law: "asebeia (impiety) in the sense of sacrilege had no doubt always been an offense; what was new was the prohibition of neglect of cult or antireligious teaching." The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 201, n. 63.

² N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, The Ancient City (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 167; G. Lowes Dickinson, The Greek View of Life (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), pp. 1, 21-28; M. P. Nilsson, Greek Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 7.

³ In the famous trial of Andocides for impiety, the unwritten ancestral laws were particularly mentioned by the prosecution: "For you are well aware, men of Athens, that it is not possible for you to live with our ancestral laws and with Andocides at the same time"; Lysias, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, 6.9-10.

⁴ Fustel de Coulanges, p. 99; Plato, Republic, 615c.

⁵ Fustel de Coulanges, pp. 15-25; W. K. C. Guthrie, The Greeks and their Gods (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 274-277; Nilsson, pp. 4-8.

⁶ "And now we come to honor to be shown to parents while they are yet in life. Here, religion demands the due discharge of this earliest and heaviest debt, the most sacred of all our obligations. It bids a man count all he has and owns at the service of those who gave him birth

and breeding, to minister to their needs to his utmost ability, first with his substance, then with his body, and then with his mind, in repayment of a loan of care and painful labor made so long ago in the security of his youth, and now to be made good to his elders in their age and sore necessity." Plato, Laws, 717bc.

⁷ Nilsson, pp. 6-7.

⁸ Nilsson, pp. 6-7.

⁹ Fustel de Coulanges, p. 30.

¹⁰ Aristotle, Constitution of Athens, 571.1, trans. Sir Frederick G. Kenyon.

¹¹ Euthyphro, 2c, 3e; Cratylus, 396 d-e, 428c. Anciently, a mantis was one who interpreted the will of the gods. He did this not only through prophecy, but also through studying collections of previous oracles which were circulated among the prophets. James Oliver, The Athenian Expounders of the Sacred and Ancestral Law (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1950), p. 6. Cf. Republic II, 364; Herodotus, VII, 6. But as time went on, the manteis began to lose face. This was primarily because they had "unlimited pretensions to expert knowledge," and because their "knowledge" often turned out to be false, as will Euthyphro's prophecy in this dialogue. Gradually, they came to be viewed by most Athenians as quacks (Oliver, p. 30). "In the course of time, however, so many false interpretations based on both revered and dubious chresmoi (oracles) accumulated and so many dubious chresmoi were collected for a less receptive public that the term chresmologos (this is the same as a mantis) began to signify a kind of fraud . . . The time came when the comic poets counted on an explosion of laughter from the audience at the mere mention of the word" (Oliver, p. 28). Aristophanes reflects this attitude toward the mantis/chresmologos in his play Peace, written in 421 B.C., in which he has Trygaeus

demand of the mantis Hierocles, "Will you never desist bamboozling the people of Athens?"

A few years after the production of the play, the disastrous Sicilian expedition further undermined remaining popular respect toward the mantis/chresmologos. Originally at least some of the prophets strongly encouraged the expedition of Athens, which then suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of the Syracusans, losing almost the entire fleet. Thucydides reports the resulting attitude: "At last they knew the truth; and then they were furious with the orators who had joined in promoting the expedition--as if they had not voted it themselves--and with the soothsayers (chresmologoi) and prophets (manteis), and all who by the influence of religion had at the time inspired them with the belief that they would conquer Sicily" (Thucydides, VIII, 1., trans. Benjamin Jowett).

¹² After hearing a vicious attack on the Olympian gods with all their weaknesses as represented by Homer, as well as an attack on the notion of justice, Socrates responds that he must speak out "for I fear lest it be actually impious to stand idly by when justice is reviled and be fainthearted and not defend her" (Republic 368b-c).

¹³ Because the reputation of the manteis had degenerated, some credible authority was needed in Athens to interpret the religious law. And so the position of exegete developed as an actual office in fourth century Athens and probably in the fifth century as well (Cf. Oliver, pp. 28-30 and Morrow, p. 420). On him devolved the responsibility to interpret the sacred religious ancestral law, especially in regard to "rules of purification to be followed in cases of homicide or any contact with it (Guthrie, p. 187). In the ancient world, homicide was primarily a religious rather than civil offense (See Pauly-Wissowa, "Nord," Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft).

¹⁴ Demosthenes, xlvii. 69-70.

¹⁵ We have an excellent example of just such a case told by Demosthenes. Some men had killed an old freedwoman who was serving as nurse to the plaintiff in the case. Since she was no longer a slave, no one had the legal right to begin proceedings against the murderers. So the plaintiff went to the exegetes to determine what he ought to do. They advised him not to make proclamation against the killers by name because that course was open only to relatives or masters. They further advised him to perform "the proper religious rites to cleanse yourself and your house" and "to bear your misfortune with such patience as you can, and, if you choose, avenge yourself in some other way (See Demosthenes, xlvii, 70)."

¹⁶ Euthyphro's action violates not only ancestral tradition but also the established legal procedure. In Athens it was illegal for anyone but a near relative of the victim to initiate homicide proceedings against a person (Demosthenes xlvii, 69-70; IG², 1, 115; Demosthenes, xlii, 47). For a good discussion of the laws, see Robert J. Bonner & Gertrude Smith, The Administration of Justice from Homer to Aristotle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930) II, 192-231. For a discussion of the inscription see I, 115. The victim in this case was not a near relative but only a hired hand. It would be expected that the king might refuse to bring the suit to trial. Had the suit was tried, it is most unlikely that Euthyphro would have been successful.

¹⁷ No attempt is made throughout the dialogue to distinguish between piety and holiness.

¹⁸ Euthyphro mentions the actions of Zeus, Cronus, and Uranus (6a). Uranus and his consort Gaia (the earth mother) were the first primeval deities. Uranus became jealous of their children and hid them all in the huge body of Gaia. When she could no longer bear the strain, she begged them to take vengeance on their father. The youngest son, Cronus, responded,

castrating, and dethroning his father. Enraged, Uranus foretold a similar fate for Cronus at the hands of his own children (E. M. Berens, A Hand-Book of Mythology (New York: Maynard, Merrell and Co., n.d.), pp. 13-14, and Hesiod, Theogonia, 154ff).

Fearing fulfillment of his father's prediction, Cronus swallowed each of his children as it was born. But the last child, Zeus, was saved by his mother. When he had grown to manhood, Zeus returned from hiding and defeated his father. With Cronus imprisoned, Zeus reigned supreme (H. J. Rose, A Hand-Book of Greek Mythology (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n.d.), p. 44).

¹⁹ One pointed confirmation of Plato's skepticism about these myths occurs in the Republic, where almost this same description of the elements of the myths is given in the process of outlawing all such stories from Glaucon's new city (Republic 378b-c).

²⁰ Other mythological characters mentioned in the dialogue had also committed violence against members of their families. Though these histories are not recounted in the dialogue, Plato's audience would certainly have been aware of them. The first character mentioned is Heracles, the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. Because Hera, Zeus' wife, was jealous of his exploits with other females, she persecuted them and their offspring, particularly Heracles. At one point she sent a fit of madness upon him; he imagined that his wife and children were enemies, so he killed them (Rose, p. 209). When Socrates comments (11c) that Euthyphro's statements are like Daedalus' works, many of his audience would recall that Daedalus' works included not only statues that moved, but also the murder of his nephew, of whom he was jealous because the nephew's growing skill began to match his own (Ovid, Metamorphosis, p. 236).

Socrates then mentions Tantalus because of his proverbial wealth (11e). But Tantalus

was also known for the punishment he received for murdering his son, Pelops. He had been permitted to join the banquets of the gods because Zeus enjoyed his conversation, but he abused this privilege (Berens, p. 134). He decided to test the omnipotence of the gods by serving them the flesh of Pelops to see if they could tell it from that of some beasts. The gods discovered his crime and banished him to Tartaros where he was plagued with perpetual hunger and thirst (Rose, p. 81. Cf. Pindar, *Is*, VIII, 10).

Thus, it is interesting to note that all of the mythical figures referred to in the Euthyphro (with the exception of Proteus, who changed shapes to avoid being caught and forced to answer questions) are well known in Greek mythology for having committed violence against members of their own families--in effect what Euthyphro, who compares himself to these divinities, himself is doing.

One more reference to Zeus should be noted, since it ties Euthyphro's action even more clearly to those of these mythical criminal gods. After Euthyphro has related the crimes of Zeus, Cronus, and Uranus, Socrates urges him to tell if he really believes those stories (6b3). In doing so, Socrates invokes Zeus by his title of Philius, which means "the Friendly One" or "the god of Friendship." The phrase containing this invocation would most reasonably be translated, "Tell me in the name of friendship," or "Tell me, as a friend." But it would not be unreasonable to translate this as "Tell me on behalf of the god of friendship," i.e., on behalf of Zeus. Such a meaning for this phrase was used by other ancient writers (Cf. Allen Rogers Benner, Selections from Homer's Iliad (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1903), p. 11 (line 239) and p. 227 [note to line 239]). Those of Plato's audience who recognized the possibility of this meaning would realize that Euthyphro, who was prosecuting his father, was being asked to speak on

behalf of Zeus, who had done essentially the same to his father, but with greater provocation.

The defender of Homer's gods has no case when confronted by the philosopher.

Meno

Traditional interpretations of the Meno generally adhere to the view that Plato's doctrine of anamnesis, as explained to Meno, must be regarded as a basic feature of his epistemology. This literalist approach ties Plato closely to a belief in individual preexistence and immortality, as well as to an epistemology which is not easily reconciled with his "later" emphasis on unaided reason in the Republic and the Theaetetus. An alternative interpretation in which anamnesis is nothing more than a metaphor, and in which Plato's only strong epistemological commitment is to reason, with no reliance on doctrines either of immortality or of divine inspiration in the ordinary senses of these terms, emerges when one considers the dramatic details more seriously. Such a consideration must begin with the characters of Meno and Anytus, Socrates' main interlocutors in the dialogue.

Plato's choice of Meno, a Thessalian aristocrat, as the major participant in this dialogue probably stems from the reputation the young man subsequently earned among the Athenians as a military leader. This reputation was recorded by Xenophon, and others. He despised Meno as an unscrupulous man, a man without loyalty or morals, who was entirely self-interested and motivated only by greed.¹ As Bluck points out, though these character traits may have been exaggerated by Xenophon, they were probably so widely known among the Athenians that Plato did not need to belabor them in the dialogue.² Rather, they provide an ironic background for a discussion of virtue and how it might be obtained. To provide a setting for a conversation between these paragons of vice and virtue, it is necessary that Socrates soft-pedal Meno's vices. Consequently, the dialogue mentions explicitly only such characteristics as his pride in his beauty (80c), his lack of self-discipline (86d), and his judgment that riches, honors, and high offices are

the most noble blessings a man can have (78c).

It is worth noting that in addition to having all the advantages of life, Meno has had an expensive education. He knows the poets; he understands enough geometry to follow Socrates' demonstration, and he has listened to Gorgias, the rhetorician whom he admires.³ There is an obvious contrast with Socrates--a man who has had none of the advantages of life--who is poor, ugly, of low birth, and by conventional standards, uneducated. He does not have the polished manners of an aristocrat, and he claims not to have virtue. But as the Platonic dialogues show, his virtue is real human excellence, the one thing Meno lacks.

Just as Meno is a type of the aristocratic politician exhibiting a traditional virtue (arete) "with which Plato must have been very familiar from his earliest childhood,"⁴ so Anytus, with his brief appearance in the dialogue, provides the type of the democratic politician and his conception of arete. Although the two men differ somewhat in their conceptions of arete, the views of both are primarily social-political and are blind to the role that true knowledge plays as the foundation of arete. Of course, Anytus' role as the prosecutor of Socrates and as one of the leaders in the overthrow of the thirty tyrants would be well known to Plato's audience. His angry reactions to Socrates' probing give us some inkling of the type of incidents that may have led to Socrates' fateful prosecution.

I. Stage One.

In contrast to Euthyphro, this dialogue launches immediately into a conversation with no preliminary character development. Again, this may be a function of the choice of such famous figures for characters. Meno arrests Socrates in public with a high-sounding question: "Is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice

that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?" (70a).

Meno's abrupt opening question introduces two assumptions which Socrates accepts for the purposes of the conversation. As readers we should never forget that these are Meno's assumptions. They include, first of all, the apparent belief that virtue is easily had among men. Meno does not question whether there are virtuous men, or what virtue is; for him there is only the problem of choosing between the alternative means by which it can be obtained. Meno's second assumption limits the ways by which men can obtain virtue. The reader must watch carefully throughout the dialogue to see what Plato does with each of these alternatives. The four possibilities suggested by Meno are teaching, practice, nature, or something else. Meno seems to assume that one of these possibilities must be sufficient to account for human virtue. He does not even recognize the possibility of a combination of two or more of the ways he has mentioned.

Meno's simplistic view contrasts sharply with accounts in other dialogues in which it is a combination of factors that produces excellence. For example, Socrates tells the young Phaedrus that to become a true rhetorician, he must have "an innate capacity" for rhetoric, and he must acquire both "knowledge and practice," for a lack of any of these will detract from his potential achievements.⁵ This passing advice is, of course, much less substantial than the long account in the Republic of the personality traits, the practice, and the knowledge necessary in the education of a philosopher.⁶ However, Hoerber and others seem to have focused so exclusively on the three named possibilities that they underestimate the importance of the fourth, i.e., "something else."

It is important at this point to notice the terminological confusion inherent in Meno's opening statement. He asks whether virtue is something that can be taught (didakton); or, if not,

does it come by practice (asketon); or if it comes neither by teaching (this time matheton) nor practice, then is it by nature (physis), or something else? This failure on Meno's part to distinguish between didakton (learning by heart, memorizing) and matheton (gaining an understanding through inquiry) will be a thematic feature of the dialogue and constitutes Plato's evidence that Meno is incapable of following important terminological distinctions, the first step toward discovery of philosophical insight. This inadequacy on Meno's part leads to a frustration of the logos and to Socrates' own lapse into deliberate terminological carelessness at the end of the dialogue.⁷

It should also be noted that the question Meno asks was popular among the Greeks of this period. There are even catalogues of the arguments in favor of different answers.⁸ By posing a stock question, Meno assumes the stance of a philosophical man. He has addressed a recognizably philosophical question to a famous philosopher, and he has laid out the alternative answers that he will consider reasonable, thereby assuming some authority in the matter.

Quite properly then, Socrates notes the philosophical import of what has been proposed and responds not to Meno's specific question but to his assumptions and to the situation. Recognizing the potential philosophical nature of the question, Socrates marvels that the Thessalians have now exceeded their great reputation as wealthy horsemen by the acquisition of philosophy. The irony is compounded as Socrates wryly attributes this philosophical flowering to Gorgias, a rhetorician that Socrates finds quite unencumbered by wisdom.

Having called Gorgias' techniques "philosophy," Socrates now describes them as "the habit of answering any question you might be asked with the confidence and dignity appropriate to those who know the answers" (70c). The philosophy of Meno and Gorgias is reduced to

rhetoric. Continuing the in the same tone, Socrates laments that "here at Athens . . . it is just the reverse. There is a dearth of wisdom and it looks as if it had migrated from our part of the country to yours" (70c). For in Athens men know that they don't know. Socrates will insist that he has "no idea what virtue itself is (71a);" and he has "never met anyone who did"--doubtless including present company.

This rapid exchange sets up the dramatic forces necessary for a conversation. Meno's opening statement assumes that he understands what virtue is. Socrates, by feigning ignorance of the nature of virtue, is able to steer the logos to the investigation of this more general idea rather than the particular question proposed by Meno. Meno's assumption that he already knows what virtue is requires him to participate in the inquiry and to answer the questions of the supposedly ignorant Socrates.

Meno's first move is to ask Socrates if he did not learn about virtue from Gorgias when he was in Athens. But again Socrates cleverly guides the conversation, this time by feigning forgetfulness of what it was that Gorgias might have said on the matter, thus forcing Meno to provide an answer.⁹

Meno approaches his assignment with remarkable confidence. He asserts first that "there is no difficulty about it," and concludes that "no one need be at loss to say what [virtue] is." Furthermore, Meno assures Socrates that "it is easy to see" what the virtue of a man is, and that also a woman's virtue "is easily described" (71e-72a). Yet, ironically, the very term that he uses (be at loss--aporia) is the term that will later be used to describe his own loss and difficulty in being unable to say what virtue is. However, it is also worth noting that Meno's intellectual abilities are not on the low level of a Euthyphro. He can state correctly the general Greek view

that the virtue of anything is generally associated with its function (72a).

Meno's first answer is that there are many kinds of virtue, and Socrates in his usual manner proceeds to redirect the discussion from this multiplicity of virtues to the essence of virtue. "What is the character in respect of which they don't differ at all, but are all the same?" (72c). Meno's unphilosophical nature is again revealed through his difficulty in understanding the meaning of Socrates' request. Consequently Socrates undertakes to teach him what he means by the "essence" or the "nature" of virtue.¹⁰

Having failed in this first attempt to limit the idea of virtue, Socrates invites Meno again to the answer the question, "what is virtue?" (72d). Having introduced the real question of the dialogue, he now attempts to raise the level of the discussion by mentioning such higher virtues as justice and temperance (73b). Meno picks this up very quickly and extends the list to include courage, "wisdom and dignity and many other things." This is clearly an improvement over the earlier response, but Socrates accuses him again of lapsing into multiplicity when he was asked for a single idea (74a). Even with further instruction, Meno "cannot yet grasp" what Socrates wants with his request for "a single virtue covering them all" (74a). Socrates is "not surprised" (74b).

One cannot overlook, in view of the doctrine of anamnesis (recollection) which will be introduced in this dialogue, the Socrates' pointed encouragement in the foregoing passage when he said, "try to remember and tell me what Gorgias and you say virtue is" (73c). Of course Meno will try to remember; but the point is that there is nothing to remember. Gorgias never told him what virtue itself was. He has already given the answer that Gorgias would have given.

What does this mean for the doctrine of anamnesis? Does it mean that there really is

nothing there to remember and that, as in this case, an answer can only be achieved by following the logos? For just as Meno does not remember that there is nothing to remember, but rather seems to remember that there is an answer to that question, so all Socrates' interlocutors seem to remember that there is an answer to the question being asked. Merely speaking a language requires them to assume that they must know the essences of things to which general terms refer. Therefore, the logos is a kind of remembering in that it seeks to ferret out the assumptions of linguistic meaning. But it is not literally remembering that which one has seen in a previous life. This Platonic formulation is only metaphorical. The reasons for this conclusion will emerge throughout this chapter.

As Socrates tries to educate Meno about the nature of a good answer, it is clear that Socrates' knowledge guides the discussion, and not Meno's. Socrates lays out the nature of the problem when he complains that "we always arrive at a plurality, but that is not the kind of answer I want" (74d). Socrates discusses the nature of shape to teach Meno what he means by "essence" or "nature." Socrates' definition says that shape is "the only thing which always accompanies color." Note that the definition states a unique and unchanging attribute of shape. Socrates then adds that he "should be content if Meno's definition of virtue were on similar lines" (75b). As virtue always accompanies knowledge, it would seem that Socrates has openly provided Meno with a pattern for approximating the correct answer.¹¹

But Meno finds Socrates' definition quite naive. And so Socrates advances the mathematical notion of shape. But Meno argumentatively delays the conversation, pressing Socrates further for a definition of color (75c).¹² To return him to the logos, Socrates flatters him in the rhetorical style of Gorgias, and then explicitly asks him if he would like an answer after the

manner of Gorgias. Socrates then proceeds to provide a nonsensical answer using the Empedoclean terminology of Meno's favorite rhetorician. Socrates recognizes that Meno accepts this as an excellent answer because it is the sort he is "used to" (76b) and because "it's a high sounding answer" (76e), all of which Meno freely acknowledges.¹³

Socrates then goes on to clarify his preference for his own type of answer, saying, "I am convinced that the other is better, and I believe you would agree with me if you had not, as you told me yesterday, to leave before the Mysteries, but could stay and be initiated" (76e). Socrates is of course suggesting that Meno be initiated in the daily exercise of the mysteries of philosophy, not the annual reenactment of the religious mysteries, as Meno undoubtedly assumes.¹⁴

But now Socrates presses him to keep his promise and state the definition of virtue. Meno no sooner opens his mouth than he reveals his failure to appreciate fully the Socratic instruction, for he defines virtue "as desiring fine things and being able to acquire them" (77b). In spite of Socrates' attempts to introduce the higher virtues and to instruct Meno in the art of defining, in spite of their agreement on this score, Meno reverts to a formulation which ignores the higher virtues and which Socrates will soon show to be based in multiplicity, despite its superficial unity.

At this point, we might expect Socrates, as before, to remind Meno of the importance of avoiding a multiplicity of virtues and to seek "the general nature of virtue." But instead, Socrates simply drops this request that has shaped the earlier discussion. This reveals his recognition that Meno is incapable of paying attention to wholes, to essences. We have, then, at this point, a clear shift in Socrates' strategy. Rather than attempting again to lead Meno to understanding (matheton), Socrates will now be satisfied to disabuse Meno of certain false beliefs and lead him

to some correct opinions.

Socrates quickly presses this last definition so as to suggest the Socratic maxim that virtue is knowledge. First he asks Meno if men knowingly desire evil. Meno's eventual denial of this possibility leaves, by implication, the conclusion that if men desire evil (or are lacking in virtue) they are ignorant. By logical implication this can be stated positively: if men have knowledge, then they are virtuous. But Meno misses all of this.

Socrates then gains the clarification that Meno is thinking of the "gaining of gold and silver and of high and honorable office in the state" as being fine things (78c). This restatement of manly virtue is quickly qualified by Socrates as he once more lifts the level of the discussion by introducing such virtues as justice, temperance, and piety, and forces Meno to admit that the fine things could not be virtuous without these others. Though Meno has again been led to a higher level of discussion, the logos falls into disarray as the definition again produces a multiplicity of virtues or a portion of virtue only, rather than the essence of virtue itself (79b).¹⁵

Socrates then presses a third time for a definition of virtue. Again he is asking Meno for his definition, which Meno claims to derive from Gorgias. At this point Meno cannot respond; he can only express his perplexity (aporia). He feels that Socrates has exercised "magic and witchcraft" (80a) and compares Socrates' physical appearance and intellectual effect to that of the flat stingray that one finds in the sea; he says, "My mind and lips are literally numb, and I have nothing to reply to you." He next contrasts this perplexity with the fact that he has "spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often upon the subject in front of large audiences and very well, too," or so he thought, reminding us of his own initial confidence in this conversation (80b).¹⁶ And he concludes that now he "can't even say what it is" (80b).

Having couched this admission in the context of an insult, Meno cannot be satisfied without adding an implicit threat, stating that Socrates is well advised to live in Athens because if he behaved in this way as a foreigner in another country, he would "most likely be arrested as a wizard" (80b). Of course Plato's judgment on a barbarian Athens rings in our ears, as this is the fate that befalls Socrates in his own country, where he is indeed a stranger.

Socrates has now brought Meno to the state of aporia or perplexity that usually marks the end of the aporetic dialogues. But the aporia has been achieved here too quickly; Plato has not drawn out the discussion in a way that allows him to develop the groundwork for his own answers to the questions raised. In the Meno, the aporetic state provides a starting point for launching a joint investigation and inquiry into the nature of virtue. The inquiry must start all over again, but this time with the understanding that neither inquirer knows what virtue is. The procedure also emphasizes that aporia is an essential beginning stage for dialectic.¹⁷

Of course Socrates is faced with the practical problem of getting Meno to continue, after having numbed him so successfully. He resorts again to flattery, and to an insistence on his own ignorance in the matter (80cd). With these appeals, Socrates then invites Meno to undertake "a joint investigation and inquiry into what virtue is" (80d).

Meno accepts the invitation and saves face by reentering the conversation with a stock objection that he has probably heard Gorgias use, i.e., how will they be able to recognize virtue when they find it if they do not already know what it is? To understand the answer to this paradox, Meno must understand the nature of knowledge, and so Socrates undertakes to instruct him on that subject. But because the simplistic Meno will be incapable of understanding a philosophical answer, Socrates first offers him a quick explanation that he can understand: a

myth.

The myth will be something that he "has heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion." They are "the priests and priestesses of the sort who make it their business to be able to account for the functions which they perform" (81a). The myth is taken from Pindar and other poets and expresses the religious doctrine of anamnesis, based on the doctrine of reincarnations of the soul. Though these doctrines are most commonly associated with the Pythagoreans, the connection is inconclusive. Plato may have had less well-preserved Orphic doctrines in mind.¹⁸ The myth answers Meno's objection by claiming that virtue can be recognized when it is encountered because all men have already achieved knowledge of it in previous lives. Socrates then gives the real reasons for dismissing Meno's objection and for accepting the doctrine of anamnesis. This is the practical kind of justification that is regularly advanced in the Republic to justify noble lies. It is that if Meno's paradox is accepted, "it would make us lazy." But if we accept the doctrine of anamnesis, it "produces energetic seekers after knowledge" (81e). This emphasis on a practical justification also seems to undermine the literal truth of the myth and the doctrine of anamnesis. But the doctrine needs to be discussed further to give Plato a means of developing his teachings on the nature of knowledge. Accordingly, Meno requests clarification of this doctrine of recollection, asking Socrates if he can teach (didakton) it to him. Socrates feigns annoyance by saying (82a) that if he could teach the doctrine, there would be no such thing as recollection. This dark saying will acquire meaning for us as the metaphorical nature of the doctrine of recollection is revealed later in the dialogue. In Plato's technical sense of recollection, or learning by inquiry, we will see that the doctrine cannot be taught (didakton). Teaching it (didakton) would demonstrate the falsity of the epistemological

theory. But in the literal sense of recollection as Meno understands it, the theory of recollection can indeed be taught (didakton), and will be, thus providing Plato with an easily overlooked device for showing us that the literal doctrine of anamnesis is not acceptable to the author of this dialogue as a serious account of knowledge.¹⁹ For, as Socrates tells Meno, if he can teach it, it cannot be true.

The paragraph at 81c-d is crucial in its presentation of the doctrine of anamnesis. Here Socrates says that because the soul is immortal and has been born so many times, it has seen all things and has learned everything that is. So, he says, we needn't be surprised if the soul can remember the knowledge of virtue or anything else it once possessed. He next says that when a man has recalled, or in plain language learned, a single thing, he can find out all the rest--for seeking (zetein) and learning (manthanein) are nothing more than recollection (anamnesis). We should notice that Meno's trick argument would seem to apply against learning in the other world just as well as it does here. But the authoritative appeal to religious myth satisfies him. Plato's real answer seems to be suggested in the Seventh Letter and the Republic in which he describes the process whereby diligent, intelligent seeking can lead to a flash of insight by which knowledge is kindled in a soul.²⁰

The intellectual style of Meno may provide the most systematic evidence that we are not to take the doctrine of recollection literally. Throughout the dialogue Meno is represented as one whose intellectual ability is directly related to his capacity to remember things he has heard wise men say, particularly Gorgias and other sophists. Also, at key points where Meno feels he is making his most important contributions, he is reciting themes that he has heard these same individuals announce, as for example, his argument for the futility of searching for knowledge of

that which one does not already know.

An interesting complication is that Socrates' doctrine of recollection, if taken literally, seems to recommend the intellectual style represented in the dialogue by Meno. That is, people's knowledge will be a function of what they can remember having seen in some earlier experience (seeing in this case being a perceptual analogy to hearing). Because a literal doctrine of recollection is so closely analogous to the demonstrably defective intellectual style of Meno, we should be hesitant to accept it as Plato's proposed answer to the problem of knowledge.

Only as we focus on comments introducing the doctrine of recollection and the metaphorical guidance of the doctrine can we develop a doctrine of knowledge consistent with the pattern represented by Socrates, rather than the one exemplified by Meno. The very idea of two interpretations of the doctrine is suggested by Socrates in the opening sentence when he says that there are two sources for the doctrine: (1) the priests and priestesses who make it their business to give reasoned accounts for their actions, and (2) divinely inspired poets. In response to Meno's question as to who specifically these people are, Socrates is deliberately vague in identifying the "priests and priestesses" but does cite Pindar as an inspired poet. Is it possible that the vague reference is really to philosophers, the only people who, in Plato's view, do give reasoned accounts for their actions. If so, the reference to inspired poets is as ironical here as it is in the Ion and in the appeal to divine inspiration at the end of the Meno itself. We should strongly suspect that Socrates is developing, side by side, two doctrines of recollection. The one, mythical and simple minded, portrays the gaining of knowledge as a simple process of remembering what one has seen before in a prior existence. The second represents knowledge as that learning which comes by seeking--starting from a single piece of knowledge and finding out

the rest by "keeping a stout heart" and "not growing weary of the search" (81d).

It is worth noting that this entire passage is introduced by a dramatic pause as Socrates begins to say that he has heard from men and women who "understand the truths of religion" but fails to complete the statement of what it is they understand. Such a pause of undetermined length is very significant in Platonic dialogue. As Klein points out, these pauses "occur when Socrates is about to say something of more crucial importance, when he comes near touching the truth."²¹

Before proceeding further, we should consider the teaching of the myth. Because it is a myth, we might assume that the doctrine that will be advanced is not a literal account of Plato's beliefs. In this myth, recollection seems to be a metaphor for reason; for, as with recollection, by reason a man is able to start from "a single piece of knowledge" and "find out all the rest." Philosophical reasoning is strangely analogous to recollection; it discovers in the conclusion what was hidden (forgotten) in the premises. We must watch the examination of the slave to discover whether anamnesis is intended to be any more than a stand-in for reason.

II. Stage Two.

The interlude with the slave serves two functions. In the story, it serves to show Meno a pattern of anamnesis and to convince Meno that this is in fact how knowledge is gained. It constitutes, for Meno, a proof. The other function of the interlude, however, is to provide Plato's readers with a pattern in microcosm of the dialogue as a whole. Several Socratic statements signal parallels and even paraphrase key earlier passages. This second function of the interlude provides the reader with strong interpretative footholds.

Stage Two begins with the random selection of one of Meno's slaves to indicate that he

has in no way had prior preparation for the conclusions to which Socrates will lead him. Socrates states, "It is not an easy thing," to preface his demonstration in exactly the opposite manner to Meno's preface to his own last, unsuccessful definition.²²

Socrates first leads the slave through a series of questions to the conclusion that he "just doesn't know" (84a). Socrates interrupts his own demonstration to point out to Meno that whereas the slave once thought he knew, and answered boldly, he is now perplexed and does not know and does not even think that he knows. Socrates specifically points out that he has perplexed the slave and numbed him like the stingray, and because of this the slave is better off and has not been harmed (84b).

We cannot miss the explicit comparison with Stage One of the dialogue, in which Socrates brought a bold and knowing Meno to an identical state of perplexity and numbness. Socrates now extracts the further admission from Meno that this process has been good for the slave, for up until now the slave was like a rhetorician (and like Meno), because "he thought he could speak well and fluently on many occasions and before large audiences on the subject of a square double the size of a given square." But the slave was previously unaware that he did not know, and is therefore, better off knowing that he does not know, i.e., being "aware of his ignorance" (84c).

Socrates now invites Meno to watch closely while the slave is led from this stage of aporia to a stage of knowledge without Socrates "giving him any instruction or explanation." Socrates then leads the slave to the point that he agrees when Socrates says, "the square on the diagonal of the original square is double its area" (85b).

Having followed this brief discussion, the reader is inevitably impressed with the fact that

the slave never offers anything except "yes" or a number as an answer to one of Socrates' leading questions, and that in each case the numerical responses only require that he count. One is overwhelmed with the impression that Socrates is giving the slave everything that he concludes, and one's breath is somewhat arrested by Socrates' bald assertion that all of these opinions were somehow in the man and were not given to him. In essence, Socrates has simply drawn out assent to a diagrammatic version of the Pythagorean theorem, by showing how it logically follows from some very uncomplicated beliefs that the slave did, in fact, already hold, such as $2 \times 2 = 4$, $2 \times 4 = 8$, $2 \times 8 = 16$, $4 \times 4 = 16$, and that the sides of squares are equal.²³ The reader should also note that Socrates' denial that this knowledge was produced by teaching in the didakton sense need not exclude learning in the matheton sense.

Stage Two provides us with a simplified pattern for the dialogue as a whole. Meno's aporia at the end of Stage One is echoed by the slave as Socrates leads him into a mathematical puzzle that his intuitions prove inadequate to solve. The demonstration with the slave is interrupted by a side conversation with Meno that is designed to focus Meno's attention on the importance of aporia as a precursor to knowledge--a function Stage Two serves for the dialogue as a whole. And just as the slave in the final section of Stage Two is led to a true opinion that he cannot himself justify or fully understand, so we will guess correctly if we expect Socrates to lead Meno finally to a correct opinion about the source of virtue. When at that late point in the dialogue we try to evaluate Meno's final understanding, we should apply for ourselves the reflective comments which Socrates now makes on the slave's achievement.

III. Stage Three.

Reflecting on his brief conversation with the slave, Socrates points out that the slave has

been raised to the level of true opinion, though he may not yet have knowledge (85c). Socrates goes on to suggest that "these opinions being newly aroused have a dream-like quality. But if the same questions are put to him on many occasions and in different ways, you can see that in the end he will have a knowledge on the subject as accurate as anyone's" (75c). This supposedly spontaneous recovery of knowledge is then taken to exemplify recollection, and Meno accepts this definition.

Next Meno is led to admit that inasmuch as the slave has never been taught these things yet now seems to know them, he must have learned them during a previous life (86a). Socrates first used a dubious myth to provide justification for the doctrine of recollection. Now he uses a highly questionable example of recollection to provide Meno with justification for accepting the basic claims of the myth. This in turn leads to the facile conclusion that "if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul must be immortal and one must take courage and try to discover--that is to recollect--what one doesn't happen to know, or more correctly, remember at the moment" (86b). And Meno concedes that "somehow or other" he believes Socrates is right. The fallacious proofs are adequate for a confused Meno. Just as the slave has now been raised from his aporia to a true opinion about the Pythagorean theorem, so Meno has been taken from his ignorance on the question of knowledge to the true or useful opinion that if one pursues the questioning method of Socrates, some good results or true opinions might be achieved.²⁴ Meno's true opinion is based on the belief garnered from the demonstration and from the myth that the soul is immortal and recollects through the process of questioning.

Once Meno assents to this doctrine, vague though his assent may be, Socrates quickly asserts that he thinks this is right, but that he shouldn't like to take his oath on the whole story

(86b). Socrates does not take the myth seriously, nor the doctrine of immortality and anamnesis;²⁵ but he again quickly provides a practical justification for pressing ahead. He says, "One thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can in word and act--that is, that we shall be braver, better (i.e., more virtuous)²⁶ and more active (not lazy) men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know, than if we believe there is no point in looking" (86b--emphasis added). In this moving defense of the way of virtue, Plato's Socrates stands illuminated as the complete exemplar of arete.²⁷ Again, the use of myths and noble lies is justified on the practical grounds of leading Meno along in the conversation.

Had Meno truly been learning what Socrates was showing him about the virtuous life, he would at this point in the dialogue have become more virtuous himself, eagerly following Socrates in pursuing knowledge of virtue. And indeed, he asserts that he is ready to join Socrates in the inquiry into the nature of virtue. But all our hopes for Meno suddenly evaporate when he reverts to his original confused question, openly revealing his total inability to follow Socrates' instructions in virtue. At this central point of the dialogue, following immediately after the transcendent vision of Socrates as the defender and exemplar of virtue, we see Meno exposed as Socrates' moral opposite. In the words of Klein: "Meno's unspeakable soul has been finally unveiled. We see Meno now as he is, in the nakedness of his own soul."²⁸ This shows that to this point the discussion has been largely wasted, and that Meno has not been brought to recollection or any other understanding in the search for the essence of virtue. And he still calls teaching didakton.

From this point on Socrates abandons his attempt to teach Meno in the matheton sense, but will proceed to teach him in the didakton sense teaching him lines (correct opinions) that he

can recite in public which, if he believes them, will protect him from the great evils that would otherwise flow from his vicious heart. Meno's subsequent life betrays the weakness of this kind of teaching.

As we compare Meno's new formulation of the question with the first line of the dialogue we note that he now omits "practice." As originally used by Meno the term asketon almost certainly referred to the training of the body. But we are not easily going to forget this possible path to virtue since, in all probability, the discussion has been proceeding in the gymnasium, in the presence of men who are practicing or exercising. Perhaps the real reason Plato lets practice drop out without further analysis is that, for him, it is the exercise or training of the mind that plays an important role in making a soul virtuous. This is also continually suggested to us by the example of the conversation we are reading. That Meno failed to appreciate the connection between the present practice in inquiry and his own development of virtue is reason enough to let it drop out of the discussion. But we must remember to the very end that practice is a likely component of the answer Plato is suggesting to us.

Meno demonstrates that he cannot be taught by Socrates because, unlike the slave, he "prizes his own freedom" and "makes no attempt to govern his actions," but rather tries "to govern Socrates' actions" (86d). Like the Athenian democracy, Meno is unwilling to learn from Socrates--the one man who knows what virtue is. Socrates again complains resignedly that Meno is inquiring "into a single property of something about whose essential nature we are still in the dark" (86d). Refusing to be led by knowledge, Meno cannot be brought to understanding. He is much more distant from Socrates than is the slave.

This warns us not to expect an answer in this conversation. Whatever answer it achieves

will be on Meno's level--the level of a willful and unseeing student. Socrates seems to allow Meno to derail the inquiry into the nature of virtue a second time, this time with the question of the teachableness of virtue. But Socrates is able to take Meno's detour without discontinuing the inquiry into the essence of virtue. We would have expected Socrates to be a little more insistent about his question if he really believed the two inquiries were independent or that his question was necessarily prior. Instead, he counters with an ingenious hypothesis that clearly suggests the Platonic connection between virtue and teaching: if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable; if not, it is not.

This suggests that the decisive question, then, will be whether virtue is a form of knowledge--that is, "whether it is knowledge or something different" (87c). And again Socrates' preferred inquiry comes to the fore. Socrates advances a brief argument leading again to the conclusion that virtue must be a "sort of wisdom (88d). This is accomplished by assuming that good things are advantageous and that advantage comes from right use, which in turn is governed by wisdom.

Though potentially sound, the argument is extremely loose and undeveloped. While our attention is therefore strongly and immediately focused on the obvious need for a rational defense of each assumption, Socrates glibly moves on to conclude: "In short, everything that the human spirit undertakes or suffers will lead to happiness when it is guided by wisdom, but to the opposite when guided by folly" (88c). Consequently, virtue is found to be "wise judgment" (88d). Meno seems to suspect no important difference between knowledge and wise judgment.²⁹ Although the principle has been only half proven, it seems to corroborate the original hypothesis. Meno accepts the proof wholeheartedly. He has been taught in the didakton sense, and he has

acquired a correct opinion.

At this point Meno, like the slave, has been raised from aporia to true opinion. For as the slave came to the point at which he could assent to Socrates' formulations of the Pythagorean theorem, Meno has now been lifted to an assent to the Socratic maxim that virtue is knowledge. But just as we suspected the slave might easily be robbed of his new opinion, which still had a "dream-like quality" and "needed to be rehearsed many times," so we might expect that Socrates will be able to rob Meno of this new-found truth, thus demonstrating that though Meno has the correct opinion, it is not knowledge for him. He will not be able to defend the conclusion.

Socrates begins the attack first by explicitly rejecting nature as the source of virtue. This is accomplished with a fallacious argument. In other dialogues Plato has Socrates use flawed arguments to refute the true opinions of those who claim to hold them as knowledge (e.g., Protagoras). The reason for this Platonic technique is two-edged. First, a fallacious argument does not really disprove these opinions, the truth of which Plato does acknowledge. Second, the conclusive proof that a man does not know what he claims to know is that he cannot provide an adequate reasoned defense when faced with a fallacious critique. The technique itself suggests true belief with a reasoned account as Plato's definition of knowledge.

Meno is willing to reject nature as a source of virtue simply on the basis of their conclusion "that virtue, either in whole or in part, is wisdom" (89a). But of course, the deliberate qualification there introduced by Socrates almost seems to suggest that wisdom may be accompanied by some additional cause of virtue, possibly nature. But one fallacy does not seem to suffice for Socrates, so he piles on another, pointing out that if virtue came by nature societies would develop experts who could identify the naturally virtuous infants and shut them away in a

protected place to save them from corruption so that the state might enjoy their full services as mature and virtuous men. Despite Socrates' poor arguments, both nature and practice are eliminated as plausible explanations for virtue in Meno's view. It only remains to demonstrate that teaching is unsuitable. Socrates then raises learning as the next possibility; Meno, out of habit, immediately converts learning (matheton) to teaching (didakton), and together they conclude that "if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable."

Socrates introduces his attack on this true opinion with a veiled warning that it needs a stable, reasoned account. He then threateningly asserts that to be sound the opinion must be right not only now, but also in the future (89c). Socrates' sudden turn against the conclusion catches Meno by surprise, and he asks Socrates: "What has occurred to you to make you turn against it and suspect that virtue may not be knowledge?" (89d).

Socrates now introduces another fallacious argument which places intentional emphasis on the unreasoned basis the interlocutor might have for holding the true opinion. The argument rests on the deliberately false assumption that if virtue is knowledge there must be teachers and students of it; and conversely, if there are no teachers and students of virtue, then virtue cannot be taught.³⁰ To those unfamiliar with Plato's mode of argument, it may seem strange that Meno is set up so for the kill. Socrates was portrayed as Meno's friend, leading him on toward knowledge, even to the very point that Meno agrees with Socrates. Why at this point is Meno openly treated with disrespect and refuted?

To answer this, we must recognize two things. The disrespect is apparent only in the irony of the Socratic statements which follow. Meno never perceives it. Plato is contrasting the virtue of Socrates with the viciousness of Meno. As we see this contrast in the drama, we must

also recognize it in the dialogue. Because Socrates' virtue is characterized by his knowledge, as Meno's viciousness is characterized by his ignorance, it is necessary that Socrates know and understand Meno's ignorance, and that Meno ignore and not recognize Socrates' knowledge. Thus, Socrates is deliberately setting Meno up for the kill, so to speak. But it is not a vicious move. It must be shown, both to Meno and to us, that Meno's life, like his views about virtue, is not based on knowledge. So Socrates now undertakes to demonstrate this.

He first suggests to Meno that there may possibly be no teachers of virtue, and Meno requests clarification (89e). Socrates hastens to point out that he did not mean to say no teachers exist, but only that he and his "fellow searchers" have looked diligently yet unsuccessfully for them. The fellow searchers are men who "have most experience in such matters." We might expect these to be other philosophers. But to Meno, whose notion of virtue has really not been altered at all, they must be men like Anytus. And so, Socrates observes ironically, "Here's a piece of luck" (89a) as Anytus, the future prosecutor of Socrates, suddenly sits down beside them.³¹

Socrates asserts that Anytus will be the ideal partner in this inquiry. Again the irony is emphasized. For from Plato's view, Anytus is a suitable companion only because he, like Meno, will help Socrates by exemplifying the absence of virtue. But Socrates explains his claim to Meno on the grounds that Anytus meets all Meno's criteria for virtue. He is a son of Anthemion--"a man of property and good sense--who earned his money by his own brains and hard work;" he is also a "decent, modest citizen with no arrogance or bombast or offensiveness about him," who has "brought up his son well, and had him properly educated as the Athenian people appreciate." And most important, Meno is asked to note how the Athenians "elect him

into the highest offices in the state" (90a-b).

Even though Socrates' extended praise is almost too pointedly directed at Anytus' father rather than at Anytus, it is sufficiently flattering to draw him into the conversation. Of course, it is flattering only on the assumption that fathers can somehow pass their virtue on to their sons. But this is the very assumption that Socrates will attack. Meno at this point makes no objection either that the kind of virtue Socrates is describing is one that has long since been refuted in the dialogue or that it omits any direct reference to knowledge and the notion of virtue they are testing. This is again an implicit proof that Meno's assent to the Platonic maxim is not based on knowledge.

Socrates and Anytus quickly agree that when you want children to learn something you send them to an expert in that subject, a professional who teaches for a fee. Socrates then asks Anytus who might be the experts in virtue. Again, Socrates uses the popular notion of virtue which "fits men to manage an estate or govern a city, to look after their parents, and to entertain and send off guests in proper style--both their own countrymen and foreigners" (91a).

Anytus is upset by Socrates' baiting suggestion that the sophists may be best suited to do this, inasmuch as they charge money for just such a service. Plato here is reminding us that Anytus' inability to distinguish philosophers from sophists eventually leads him to prosecute Socrates. Any illusions we may have had that Anytus is a temperate man like his virtuous father are suddenly shattered as he launches a bitter attack on the sophists (91c). Socrates responds in mock surprise, asking "Why is it that they make themselves rich, if people are not finding the education and virtue there that they are paying to receive?" Anytus weakly explains that it is due to the lack of judgment on the part of the youth who hand over their money, and lamely admits

that he has had no experience with sophists himself. One notes here Plato's clear sympathy for the sophists he elsewhere attacks; for, compared to Anytus, the sophists are superior men. They do not exhibit the suspicion and even hatred of reason that Anytus demonstrates in this tyrannical outburst.

Once the character of Anytus has been exposed, Socrates insists that he answer the question, "Who are the teachers of virtue?" Anytus responds that the advice of any decent Athenian gentleman whom he happens to meet (at random) will make him a better man than sophists would (92e). Socrates then gently forces him to the further statement that these gentlemen "in their turn learned it from their forebears" (93a). This gives Socrates the test he desires. He proceeds to list a number of Athenian gentlemen of renowned virtue who by all ordinary measures failed to pass this virtue on to their sons, in spite of great efforts to do so.

Having recited his list of prominent Athenians, Socrates concludes, "No, my dear Anytus, it looks as if it cannot be taught." Anytus, the enemy of reason, cannot counter with arguments or even questions. He abruptly abandons the logos with a threat (like Meno), warning Socrates "to be careful:" "In all cities it is easier to do a man harm than good" (943). As he departs, gathering the tattered rags of democratic virtue about him, we cannot resist the obvious, ironic conclusion that noble Anthemion has failed miserably in his fatherly duty to teach a son virtue.

By questioning the virtue of Anytus and other leading citizens and by promoting the heated attack on the sophists, Socrates provokes Anytus into revealing his own viciousness. Like Meno before him, Anytus is driven by fallacious arguments into an embarrassing corner. Like Meno, he has responded with a threat, behaving like a cornered beast that has nothing higher than his own worldly welfare and status to protect. Like Meno before him, Anytus was on trial for his

claims to be an authority on virtue, and beside him the virtue of democratic Athens stood as co-defendant.³²

As in many of the dialogues this confrontation is, in Plato's mind, a life and death struggle. We must not underestimate the gravity of the indictment that Plato brings here against his own city. For as Socrates and others like him are the only hope for saving Athens from self-destruction, the ignorance and viciousness of the city's people will blind them to this salvation and lead them to destroy this man, their only hope.³³ In this brief incident with Anytus, we clearly see a fulfillment of the prophecy implicit in the cave analogy--that the city will kill its philosopher savior (Rep. 517a).

The foreshadowing of the upcoming prosecution of Socrates cannot be missed. Socrates responds knowingly, saying that while Anytus believes Socrates to be slandering the Athenian statesman, "he does not know what slander really is; if he ever finds out he will forgive me" (95a). For if Anytus really understood slander--and his confusion of the sophists with the philosophers shows that he obviously does not--he would recognize that Socrates was offering to teach him the virtue that he could learn nowhere else. Anytus would forgive Socrates and refuse to prosecute him. But this is hopeless, and Socrates knows it. Without reply to Anytus' threat, Socrates returns to the previous line of questioning with Meno. Meno is fully prepared to acknowledge that in his country it is an unsettled question whether virtue can be taught. Gorgias in particular laughs at those sophists and others who claim they can teach virtue.

Meno's continued uncertainty in the matter is finally settled in the negative when Socrates cites the example of Theognis, a famous poet, who also seems to have contradicted himself on this issue.³⁴ Meno is now convinced (1) that the professed teachers of virtue are not themselves

notably virtuous and (2) that not all notably virtuous men agree that virtue can be taught. Then Socrates asks him, "When people are so confused about a subject, can you say that they are in a true sense teachers?" (96b). As Meno fails to see the way around this, Socrates joins him in concluding that "there are no teachers" and "there can be no students either" (96b).

Given the earlier fallacious assumptions, this implies that virtue is not knowledge and that it cannot come by teaching. For those of us who are keeping score, this leaves only one of Meno's original list of possibilities, i.e., "something else." For Meno this will prove to be well-aimed conjecture, or divine inspiration (99c). For Plato virtue comes through inquiry based on reason, in conjunction with nature and practice.

Building on the fallacy established at the beginning of this section, Socrates concludes that if there are neither teachers nor students, then virtue cannot be taught (96c). But now the fallacious argument will set the stage for a profitable conclusion again, for Socrates is not malicious and will not leave Meno unimproved. Having demonstrated that Meno does not know what virtue is, Socrates will now provide him with right opinion, and through its ingenious presentation will also show us its proper role.

IV. Stage Four.

The conclusion of the foregoing argument was that virtue does not come exclusively "under the guidance of knowledge" (996e). Now Socrates goes on to introduce the "other way," suggested by Meno's opening sentence (70a). Notice that the correct conclusion would not have been that virtue was not teachable, but there were no teachers of virtue among those considered by Meno and Socrates. This moves Meno to speculate correctly that there may be no good men at all (96d), at least among the candidates considered. Of course, through all of this Plato is showing Socrates to us as the man who is virtuous and who could help a man of suitable nature learn virtue.

The logical problem is now clear. First, it has been assumed throughout the dialogue that there are men of virtue in Athens. Second, it has been assumed that if there are no teachers of virtue, then virtue is not knowledge. And finally, it has been shown that there are no teachers of virtue. But a fourth element has been the proposition that virtue is knowledge. A resolution of this dilemma seems to be achievable only by modifying the one true claim, i.e., that virtue is knowledge.

Earlier, in stating this conclusion about virtue, Socrates had made the unnoticed qualification that the argument showed that virtue, "either in whole or in part, is wisdom" (89a--emphasis added). Some element besides knowledge must be introduced to explain virtue. Socrates glibly points to correct or right opinion as the way out of the contradiction. The famous example of right opinion is the guide to Larissa, who can lead someone there equally well whether he truly knows the way, or merely has a correct belief about what the way is. From this Socrates concludes, "True opinion is as good a guide as knowledge for the purpose of acting

rightly" (97b). And Meno agrees.

This brief discussion leads Meno to wonder why it is that "Knowledge should be so much more prized than right opinion," and "what the difference between them might be" (97d). This clear admission reaffirms the earlier point that he has no knowledge. Plato is here holding Meno up to us as an explanation for the disappointing developments in the conversation. It is Meno who is ignorant of the true nature of virtue and who does not really prize knowledge over right opinion. He cannot distinguish between knowledge and right opinion, nor between virtue and other things. This gives Socrates an opportunity to demonstrate what the difference is.

As in the Euthyphro, Socrates introduces the example of the legendary statues of Daedalus which when not tied down will run away and escape. Socrates explains as follows:

True opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place. But they will not stay long. They run away from a man's mind so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason. That process my dear Meno is recollection as we agreed earlier. Once they are tied down, they become knowledge and are stable. That is why knowledge is something more valuable than right opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether (97e-98a).

This revealing paragraph clarifies considerably the Platonic position on reason, recollection, and knowledge. Knowledge is represented as true opinion which has been tethered or tied down by reasons. Recollection is the term used to describe the process of working out these reasons.³⁵ Reasons, then, are the tether; and knowledge is a true belief that is justified or anchored with a reason.³⁶ Recollection is also clearly a rational process akin to deduction. It uses the logical

rules of deduction, but moves creatively from conclusions backwards to premises and to an examination of each. The reason, or tether, is all that distinguishes true opinion from knowledge (98a).

It is significant that Socrates adds quite seriously that among the "few things that I should claim to know" (98b) is the claim that "right opinion and knowledge are different" (98b). For a second time in this singular dialogue the veil of irony is briefly drawn, and Socrates speaks to his audience clearly of what he knows. All else seems rhetorical.

Socrates now elects to recapitulate the argument. He summarizes the observations thus: (1) for practical purposes right opinion is no less useful than knowledge; (2) there are good and useful men in the community who rely on knowledge or right opinion, as the case may be; and (3) both of these are acquired--they are not innate (98c-d). Meno does not even notice the double consequence of accepting Socrates' statement. He is again willing to make explicit his rejection of nature as the source of virtue. But he seems to miss completely that this statement also entails the rejection of recollection as a source of knowledge.³⁷ From Meno's unseeing point of view, this is a major problem. For if right opinion and knowledge are the only ways to direct right action, and if neither of these can be taught nor comes by nature, there must be some other account for the correct behavior of men.

As soon as this conclusion is recognized, Socrates parenthetically excludes chance (tyche) as a candidate for the explanation of virtuous action. "We may except chance because what turns out right by chance is not due to human direction" (99a). Given his reason for excluding chance, does it not seem odd that Socrates later advances divine inspiration as the explanation for right conduct?

Notice at this point that Socrates and Meno are pursuing two different questions. Socrates seems to be leading Meno to the conclusion that right opinion will have to be the explanation for right conduct. But how can we expect true opinion to be any less vulnerable to Socrates' tricky argument than knowledge? And so we find Socrates subtly suggesting that the true explanation for the successes of right opinion is chance.³⁸ Socrates avoids the direct connection between right opinion and chance by saying that it is by "well-aimed conjecture" (eudoxia, good or repeated judgment) that statesmen are able to uphold their country's welfare (99c). But Socrates has given the clue and has us thinking of chance as the explanation.³⁹

He now introduces inspiration as the answer that Meno will accept. Chance would not be a suitable opinion for Meno to hold; it would undermine his faith in right opinion. Therefore, Socrates gives him another right opinion which will justify his belief in virtue. He says, referring to these virtuous statesmen, "Their position in relation to knowledge is no different from that of prophets and tellers of oracles,⁴⁰ who under divine inspiration utter many truths, but have no knowledge of what they are saying" (99c). Socrates seems to be equating chance with the divine. He goes on to reemphasize the point by saying, "Ought we not to reckon those men divine who with no conscious thought are repeatedly and outstandingly successful in what they do or say." And so, "Statesmen, too, when by their speeches they get great things done, yet know nothing of what they are saying are to be considered as acting no less under divine influence, inspired and possessed by the divinity." The conclusion to this point is that statesmen can be virtuous because they hold right opinions that do not come to them through teaching, as knowledge would, but come through chance, or, as Meno will understand it, through inspiration or divine influence.

Therefore the answer given to Meno is that virtuous statesmen are divinely inspired, as

are prophets and poets. But to the careful reader of the dialogue, the real explanation for these occurrences is chance. Though it appears that chance is casually introduced as a noncandidate for "guide to virtue," it is accepted by Socrates precisely "because what turns out right by chance is not due to human direction." This describes perfectly the divine inspiration that Socrates attributes to these Athenian statesmen "that have held right opinions that get great things done, yet know nothing of what they are saying."⁴¹

This brings out the equivalence in Plato between the divine and chance. What the many attribute to divinity, Plato ascribes to chance. In contrast, the divine attributes of Socrates are products of reason. The divine for Plato is reason or rationality. Such rationality comes through a process which at a high level of abstraction works like recollection. Therefore, the apparent emphasis on recollection in this dialogue is, in reality, an emphasis on rational inquiry (matheton).

At this point the major objectives of the dialogue have been achieved. Meno has been robbed of his opinions, demonstrating graphically the inferiority of his opinion when compared with the knowledge of Socrates. However, he has been re-armed with a true opinion which will make more sense to him and which he will be able to defend more easily in public. He now believes that the virtuous actions of statesmen are the result of divine inspiration. This view allows Meno to retain his original unphilosophical notion of virtue and place it in a context with other beliefs that are less subject to public critique than his earlier unreasoned beliefs. Socrates at this point addresses some additional reflective comments to his audience, which doubtless have little meaning for Meno. Socrates concludes: "If all we have said in this discussion and the questions we have asked have been right, virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by

teaching [didakton]. Whoever has it, gets it by divine dispensation without taking thought, unless he be the kind of statesman who can create another like himself" (99e-100a--emphasis added). Recognizing that not all that has been said in this discussion is right, and that the questions asked have not all been correct, we can conclude that the acquisition of virtue may well include nature and teaching, at least in the Platonic sense of the terms.

The irony Socrates employed with the unsuitable Meno has been brought full circle in a conclusion that bears two contradictory meanings, one acceptable to Socrates, the other to his interlocutors. The irony continues in the suggestion that those who have virtue get it by divine dispensation which means by chance for the many and by reason for the philosopher--and that they do it without "taking thought unless they be the kind of statesmen who can create others like themselves." The suggestion is that a man who could teach it to another does get virtue by taking thought. An obvious candidate is suggested as we think of Socrates who taught Plato. For as he goes on to say, "should there be such a man, he would be among the living, practically what Homer said Tiresias was among the dead when he described him as the only one in the world who keeps his wits; the others are mere flitting shades.

Where truth is concerned such a man would be just like that, a solid reality among shadows" (100a). This statement shows epigrammatically Plato's consistent characterization of Socrates as the one solid reality among the shadowy earthly men.

The irony continues in Socrates' final farewell as he concludes, "on our present reasoning . . . whoever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation" (100b). This applies equally to Socrates and other Greeks (such as Meno, where "divine" means reason and chance respectively). This understanding will hold for all future reasonings, as Socrates pointed out earlier (89c) that the right answer should be right each time it is considered.

Should we be still wondering at this point whether the conclusion is ironic or not, Socrates clearly states that "we shall not understand the truth of the matter until we discover what virtue is in and by itself" (100b). Meno has not learned what virtue is. Though he was at one point raised to the true opinion that virtue is knowledge, this true opinion was quickly led away by Socrates because Meno could not tether it with reasons. Meno cannot understand the truth of this matter because he does not know what virtue is. We are clearly warned that Meno's understanding is not true. But the irony reminds us that Socrates knew well that virtue was knowledge and that this was the true conclusion.

The final irony comes just as we are subtly reminded that Meno does not know the truth of the matter. Socrates urges him to convince Anytus that what he now believes is true. The immediate connection between not being able to know the truth and arguing that what you believe is true must not be missed. Meno's final opinion is clearly a belief which, if successfully passed on to Anytus, would result in a blessing to the Athenians, a true opinion which, if believed by this key person, would save Socrates' life and the one chance the Athenians might have to learn virtue from one who knows.⁴² The good results of such a deed by Meno would

flow not from teaching, nature, or practice, but from chance. But to become good, to be virtuous himself, Meno would have to have a suitable nature; he would have to seek, learn and practice--tying down any true insights with reasons, thus basing his life on knowledge.

NOTES

¹ Anabasis, 129.

² One of the best discussions of the historical Meno occurs in R. S. Bluck, Plato's Meno (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 35-38. In addition to contemporary views on Meno's character, Plato could also rely on Athenian preconceptions about Thessalians in general to help his audience understand his dramatic figure. For most Athenians, Thessaly was a little known northern kingdom characterized by broad plains covered with grain fields and surrounded by protective mountains. The aristocratic families of Thessaly were reputed to have amassed immense wealth. They were also famous for their unexcelled prowess as horsemen and athletes. However, their enviable reputation ended there, as the Greek world generally regarded them as a backward and semi-barbaric people whose lack of self-discipline resulted from endless feasting and other indulgences that stunt intellectual development. In the Crito, Plato has Socrates refer to Thessaly as the "home of indiscipline and laxity" (53d).

³ For a discussion of the difference between sophists and rhetoricians see Bluck, pp. 205-6.

⁴ Bluck, p. 126.

⁵ Phaedrus, 269d. Also, see Gorgias, 509e.

⁶ Republic, 484-87a, 491e. See R. G. Hoerber, "Plato's Meno." Phronesis, 1960, pp. 78-102, especially 83-4, for documentation of further supporting statements from Aristotle and Xenophon.

⁷ See Hoerber, pp. 89-92, for discussion of these points.

⁸ Cf. Jacob Klein, A Commentary on Plato's Meno. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1965. p. 39, especially footnote 19, and Bluck, p. 1.

⁹ Klein (pp. 44-45) has brilliantly analyzed the pun that this passage contains in the Greek, showing among other things that it does provide a shadowy introduction of both the distinctions and the relationships between knowing, remembering, and opining. It also links the name Meno phonically to these terms.

¹⁰ This is another instance of the exercise of philosophical education that we see repeated in numerous dialogues (See, e.g., Euthyphro 6d, 11b; Laches 191e, 192b; and Theaetetus 148d). Socrates seems to advance the instruction in each case as a test of the natural philosophical ability of his interlocutor. Meno and Euthyphro fail the test, thus limiting the levels to which the dialectic can rise in quest of the logos. Theaetetus on the other hand, shows that he already understands and uses the method of definition by essences; and the achievements of the dialogue are correspondingly on a much higher level.

¹¹ This analogy is ingeniously revealed by Klein (pp. 57-60) in spite of the fact that he inexplicably reverses the roles of knowledge and virtue.

¹² Cf. Klein, p. 62.

¹³ "Plato emphasizes Meno's ignorance by having him praise a definition based on a theory which he accepted third-handed, but apparently did not comprehend" (Hoerber, p. 95).

¹⁴ Cf. Phaedo 69D "For the initiated are in my opinion none other than those who have been true philosophers" (translated by W. K. C. Guthrie in Orpheus and Greek Religion [London, 1952], p. 71).

¹⁵ Cf. Klein, pp. 80-81.

¹⁶ Cf. the discussion of 71e-72a supra.

¹⁷ Friedlander (Plato III: 277) does not group the Meno with the aporetic dialogues, though he recognizes certain structural affinities. For those who recognize that the essential question of the dialogue concerns the nature of virtue, it is clear that the Meno does end on a note of aporia. And just as the central questions of the other aporetic dialogues are answered through the example of Socrates, the character and deeds of Socrates provide the missing elements in Plato's treatise of virtue in this dialogue as well.

¹⁸ See Bluck, pp. 274-76.

¹⁹ It is quite usual for defenders of the doctrine of recollection in the Meno to point eventually to the doctrine of recollection in the Phaedo as clear evidence that it was meant seriously, indicating that it therefore should be seriously taken in the Meno. However, this puts the cart before the horse. Surely if we can find strong evidence in the Meno to interpret recollection simply as a conceptual device and not as a serious doctrine, we would have important new insight with which to read the Phaedo; and we may learn something new about that crucial dialogue.

Bluck seems totally insensitive to these Socratic reservations. He thinks that Plato's enthusiasm for recollection as a new solution to the problem of an absolute ethic is the reason the dialogue begins so abruptly. Such a psychological explanation might suffice for uneven portions of an undergraduate's essay. But for Plato?

²⁰ Seventh Letter, 341d. The divided line analogy seems to be treating the same process, but does not emphasize a moment when knowledge comes in a flash (Republic, 509e-511e).

²¹ Klein, p. 92.

²² Cf. discussion of 71e-72a, supra, p. 10.

²³ As obvious as this seems to me, I must recognize that many established authorities take Socrates seriously in this passage. See, e.g., Bluck, pp. 310-11.

²⁴ See Bluck, pp. 320-21, for an extended discussion of this point.

²⁵ Bluck recognizes the possibility of this interpretation, but of course necessarily resists it because of his view that Plato is serious about anamnesis (pp. 318-19).

²⁶ The Greek term beltion, here translated "better," can be an adjectival form of arete. This is Socrates' only example of arete, and seems to be intentionally oblique. It does show that virtue is the central question for Socrates.

²⁷ Klein seems to agree that the doctrine of anamnesis is not to be taken literally. But he goes on to ask why the doctrine should be made "the explicit theme of Socrates' endeavor to teach Meno and us." The answer of course ties back to Socrates' repeated injunctions to look into oneself, which is like recollecting to find knowledge. Vicious men like Meno have no depth of knowledge into which they can look--they have only a surface of somewhat randomly collected memories on which to draw. Klein's analysis forcibly reminds us that there can be no successful separation of inquiry from action. Men who do wicked things cannot gain knowledge of virtue (pp. 189-90, and 200-202).

²⁸ Klein, p. 185. See Klein, pp. 183-90, for an equally moving explanation of the role of Meno's deep-seated viciousness in the drama of the dialogue.

²⁹ See Klein, pp. 215-218, for a careful exploration of the implications of the terminological shift from knowledge (episteme) to wise judgment (phronesis).

³⁰ Bluck defends the assumptions ingeniously, but, I think, mistakenly (pp. 326, 342).

³¹ The abruptness of Anytus' appearance here reminds us of the way the conversation with Meno began. Its significance has been widely interpreted by scholars. For example, see the summary of this commentary and an elaborate explanation by Hoerber, pp. 92-94.

³² Klein (p. 225) points out, "And with the appearance of Anytus, the city of Athens . . . in all its glory and splendor and wealth, in all its pettiness and depravity and corruption, makes its entry, too."

³³ Cf. Klein, p. 239.

³⁴ The reference to Theognis may be more important for two other reasons. First, scholars agree that Theognis did not contradict himself inasmuch as he was talking about the essential role of natural aptitude of virtue for learning. Thus Socrates induces Meno to see fallacy where there is none, and to overlook it where it exists (Cf. discussion of 86c). Second, the quote reinforces the Platonic view that virtue is dependent on nature. But nature, one of the four original alternative sources of virtue, has been implicitly rejected by Meno (See Bluck, pp. 391 and 395-6).

³⁵ Bluck's translation gives the process a different rubric ("by calculation of cause") but also emphasizes its apparent identity with what we call deduction (pp. 412-13).

³⁶ This view of knowledge is echoed in other dialogues including Republic, Laws, Gorgias, and especially Theaetetus (see Bluck, p. 413).

³⁷ Those scholars who take recollection as a serious Platonic doctrine find themselves forced into some rather amusing rationales for this passage. Many are willing to go so far as to amend the texts to fit their interpretation. Bluck documents these attempts approvingly at pp. 416-17.

³⁸ Klein differs, taking seriously Socrates' first rejection of chance as a possible explanation.

³⁹ Cf. Theaetetus for a critique of sensory knowledge because it is based on chance (trial and error). The analysis is applied to virtue in the Laws (753a-b).

⁴⁰ Remember that Anytus was also called a soothsayer earlier (mantis, 92c 6). That passage is more literally translated by Klein, "Perhaps you are a diviner (mantis), Anytus. . . ." (p. 228). The present passage (99c) speaks of prophets and tellers of oracles (theomanteis and chresmologoi). Chresmologoi are diviners or oracle readers; a theomantis is one who has a spirit of prophecy.

⁴¹ Plato's disbelief in the kind of divine inspiration he suggests to Meno is cautiously recognized by Bluck, pp. 434-36. It seems identical to that mockingly attributed to the poets in the Ion. Shorey and others have clearly seen the equivalence between chance and divine grace (Paul Shorey, The Unity of Plato's Thought, p. 136, esp. n. 37). In the Seventh Letter we have another instance in which a single circumstance (the failure of Plato and Dion's project in Syracuse) is explained on one page by the interference of some deity or avenging spirit (336b), but on the following page by chance.

⁴² This interpretation is also advanced by Bluck, p. 440.