

## ARTICLE

# MENO'S PARADOX IN CONTEXT

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I argue that Meno's Paradox targets the type of knowledge that Socrates has been looking for earlier in the dialogue: knowledge grounded in explanatory definitions. Socrates places strict requirements on definitions and thinks we need these definitions to acquire knowledge. Meno's challenge uses Socrates' constraints to argue that we can neither propose definitions nor recognize them. To understand Socrates' response to the challenge, we need to view Meno's challenge and Socrates' response as part of a larger disagreement about the value of inquiry.

**KEYWORDS:** Meno's Paradox; recollection; knowledge; definition; inquiry

## INTRODUCTION

A third of the way through the *Meno*, Meno's frustration erupts. First he accuses Socrates of being like a torpedo fish and then, after Socrates responds, he puts forward three questions challenging whether we can search for virtue:

(1) And how are you going to search, Socrates, for this thing [virtue<sup>1</sup>], when you don't know at all what it is? (2) For what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you propose when you are searching? (3) And even if you should completely hit upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know?

(80d)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>While it is possible that the 'τοῦτο' is merely pointing forward to the relative 'ὅ', Socrates has just said that they should seek knowledge of what virtue is. Meno is directly responding to Socrates' suggestion and so it is most natural to take the 'τοῦτο' to refer to 'ἀρετή' above. I do not mean to deny that Meno's worries can be extended well beyond virtue. For this reading of the 'τοῦτο' see Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 271.

<sup>2</sup>All translations are my own, drawn from Sharples, *Plato Meno* and Sedley and Long, *Plato Meno and Phaedo*.

Socrates quickly reformulates Meno's challenge, constructing a dilemma:

Do you see what a contentious argument you're conjuring up, that it isn't possible for a man to search either for what he knows or what he doesn't know? For he wouldn't search for what he knows – for he knows it, and there is no need to search for something like that – nor for what he doesn't know – for he doesn't even know what he will be searching for.

(80e)

Socrates first responds to this challenge with the idea that all learning is recollection; he claims to demonstrate this using a conversation with a slave boy; and then he argues that, since learning is recollection, the soul is immortal.

In this paper, I shed new light on Meno's challenge and Socrates' response by drawing on their context within the dialogue. On the reading I provide, Meno's challenge raises problems specifically about acquiring the sort of knowledge that Socrates asked for earlier: knowledge grounded in explanatory definitions. The challenge points to the fact that, given Socrates' stringent requirements on definitions and on knowledge, we seem to have no way to formulate or identify correct definitions. After laying out the challenge, I turn to Socrates' response to it. Here the context helps us understand the structure and ultimate goals of Socrates' response. The discussion immediately before Meno's challenge reveals that Meno raises his challenge to convince Socrates to abandon their inquiry. The main goal of Socrates' multi-stage response is to convince Meno that, to the contrary, inquiry is valuable. Recollection has a subordinate role in this response.

## NOT KNOWING AT ALL

The first question of Meno's challenge, (1), asks how Socrates will inquire, given that he does not know at all (τὸ παράπαν). What is this state of not knowing at all and why would Meno raise a problem about being in it? Fine and Irwin have made a very influential suggestion: that Meno's challenge relies on being in something like a mental blank about the object of inquiry and so without anything that would allow us to fix the object of our inquiry.<sup>3</sup> To inquire, we need a description that fixes what we are inquiring into, yet we cannot have such a description, since we are in a mental

<sup>3</sup>Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', 206, treats it as clear that the problem arises from 'total ignorance (being in a blank)'. She takes it as clear that having true beliefs would allow us to escape from the problem. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, 131, puts the inability to fix the target of inquiry in terms of an inability to distinguish our object of inquiry from other things.

blank. On its own, the phrase 'not knowing at all' might well refer to such a mental blank. But this is not how it has been used earlier in the dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

In the first sentence of the *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates whether he can tell him whether virtue can be taught (70a). Socrates says that he cannot answer when questioned in this way since he does not know at all what virtue is and so cannot say what it is like (71a–b).<sup>5</sup> Socrates says that his inability to know what virtue is like follows from a general principle that is often discussed along with Meno's challenge: that you cannot know what something is like (ποῖόν ἐστι) if you do not know what it is (τί ἐστι) (71a–b; see also 86e).<sup>6</sup> Meno accepts this principle but is surprised that Socrates claims not to know at all what virtue is. Socrates uses the principle to lead Meno from his original question – is virtue teachable? – to the main topic of the first third of the dialogue – what is virtue?<sup>7</sup> Whether virtue is teachable or not is a question about what virtue is like, so we must know what virtue is before we can answer this. Following standard practice, I refer to these answers to 'what is it?' questions as 'definitions'; thus, Socrates is saying that you cannot know what something is like if you do not know its definition.

While it is not clear that Meno ever thinks of 'not knowing at all' as a mental blank, for all we can tell he might be doing so here at the beginning of the dialogue. However, even if Meno initially thinks this, Socrates makes very clear that 'not knowing at all' is not restricted to a mental blank. Instead, one counts as 'not knowing at all' what virtue is so long as one is unable to provide a definition of virtue. Socrates has never met anyone who could do so (71a–c). Over the next third of the dialogue, Socrates shows Meno that his grasp of virtue is no better than Socrates', so Meno also does not know at all what virtue is. Meno's challenge comes shortly after he abandons his attempt to tell Socrates what virtue is. Meno claims that Socrates is like a torpedo fish<sup>8</sup> since he has left Meno unable to provide an account of virtue (80c).

<sup>4</sup>See Nehamas, 'Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher', 5–8, for another account (in many ways complementary) of Socrates' earlier use of 'τὸ παράπαν' and its role in Meno's challenge.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of Socrates' claim not to be able to answer because he does not have knowledge, see Ebrey, 'A New Philosophical Tool in the *Meno*'.

<sup>6</sup>The most prominent discussion of this principle is in Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*'. It might seem that 'what a thing is' picks out its essential features and 'what it is like' picks out its accidental features. However, whether virtue is teachable or not seems to be a direct result of what virtue is, not an accidental feature of virtue.

<sup>7</sup>It is difficult to see why this principle is supposed to be true. The example Socrates gives – we cannot know whether Meno is handsome or wellborn unless we know who he is – does not obviously transfer over to the more theoretical case of virtue. Should we take the example as a merely analogous case (as most commentators do) or as a case that is a literal application (for example, as White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* and Burnyeat, 'Socrates and the Jury' do)? For the purposes of this paper, we need not settle this question.

<sup>8</sup>This fish, 'νόρκη', is sometimes mistranslated 'stingray' (e.g. chapter 6 of Scott, *Plato's Meno* is titled 'The stingray'). 'τρογγών' is the Greek word for stingray. Torpedo fish use an

Since Meno claims to be at least temporarily unable to say what virtue is, Socrates suggests that they inquire together (συζητήσαι, 80d). This is, in fact, a new activity that Socrates is suggesting. Earlier in the dialogue they never both claim to inquire (which explains why ‘συζητήσαι’ is used here for the first time). Instead, one person always claimed to inquire while the other claimed to have answers. Typically, Socrates claims to inquire (ζητεῖν), in contrast to Meno, who claims to have answers (72a, 73d, 74a). The one exception is where they switch positions and Meno says that he is inquiring into what colour is (75b), while Socrates provides answers. Meno presents his challenge in response to Socrates’ new suggestion that they inquire together, without either of them supposing that he already has the answer and can simply provide it to the other.

This background poses a serious problem for the Fine–Irwin interpretation of Meno’s challenge. Given that earlier in the dialogue Socrates considered someone as ‘not knowing at all’ if this person could not provide a definition, (1) is naturally read as challenging a person’s ability to inquire without a definition. Not only is there no precedent for understanding ‘not knowing at all’ as a mental blank, there is no reason for Meno to raise a puzzle about inquiring in a mental blank, since neither he nor Socrates take themselves to be in such a state. Meno is confused about virtue, but this does not mean that he does not have any thoughts or beliefs about it. Meno is saying: let us suppose that you are right and neither of us currently has an account of what virtue is; in this case, there are serious difficulties with inquiring.

To see what these difficulties are, we first need to understand the requirements Socrates places on knowledge and definitions. He says that a definition must provide a single thing (which he calls a ‘form’ (εἶδος)) because of which, for example, all the many and different virtues are virtues (72c). We can distinguish between two (interconnected) requirements here: (a) the ‘unity requirement’ is the need for the account to pick out a single thing and (b) the ‘explanatory requirement’ is the need for it to be *because of* (διὰ) this thing that the many virtues are virtues.<sup>9</sup> Socrates does not say much about this explanatory requirement in the *Meno*, although arguably one of Meno’s proposals fails because of it.<sup>10</sup> We know from the *Euthyphro* that Socrates thinks that it is a difficult requirement to meet

electrical discharge to stun (both as a way of hunting and in self-defense); stingrays sting using a poisonous venom (only in self-defense).

<sup>9</sup>I take it that behind the unity requirement is the thought that something can only be explanatory if it is properly unified. However, nothing in the paper turns on this.

<sup>10</sup>These requirements are related to the conception of knowledge articulated near the end of the dialogue (98a), according to which knowledge involves an account of the cause. Since definitions are explanatory, they can serve as this cause, which is why grasping definitions provides us with knowledge. I think Meno’s second definition (‘being able to rule over people’, 73c) runs into problems with the explanatory requirement, although this is not necessary for my argument.

(10a ff.): proposed accounts that pick out the correct extension might still fail by not identifying the relevant *because of what*. This explanatory relation plays a crucial role across Plato's dialogues and raises difficult interpretive questions; fortunately, for the purposes of this paper, we do not need a detailed account of it.

I have already discussed one requirement that Socrates lays down at the beginning of the dialogue: (c) you cannot know what something is like if you do not know what it is. In Socrates' response to Meno's final proposed definition we discover another way that knowledge of definitions is prior to other types of knowledge. Socrates provides a general argument against any account of virtue that makes reference to a type of virtue, such as justice and piety (79b–c). The different types of virtue are parts of virtue and yet: (d) we cannot know the part of a thing until we know that thing.<sup>11</sup>

(a) and (b) place strict requirements on an account of what something is and (c) and (d) restrict the order in which we can acquire knowledge: we must inquire into what a thing is in order to inquire into its parts or what it is like.<sup>12</sup> Together, these principles tell us that knowledge needs to be grounded in knowledge of unified, explanatory definitions. A natural thought, though not one explicit in the *Meno*, is that (c) and (d) ultimately rest on (a): one cannot know what something is like or what its parts are without knowing what it is, because these things are explained, at least in part, by what it is.<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, it does not matter why Socrates has these requirements. Given that he does, it is difficult to see how we could acquire knowledge through inquiry. I will argue that this is not merely difficult to see, but that, given these constraints, Meno's challenge points to serious problems for inquiry.

### MENO'S CHALLENGE

We are now ready to provide an account of Meno's challenge. As a reminder, the challenge is this:

(1) And how are you going to search, Socrates, for this thing [virtue], when you don't know at all what it is? (2) For what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you propose when you are searching? (3) And even if you should completely hit upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know?

(80d)

<sup>11</sup>Perhaps we should understand 'what something is like' broadly enough to include facts about a thing's parts. If so, then (c) would not be a separate requirement from (d).

<sup>12</sup>For a fuller discussion of how (c) restricts the order of inquiry see Ebrej, 'A New Philosophical Tool in the *Meno*'.

<sup>13</sup>For a similar idea, see Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', 203.

We have seen that (1) points to a problem with inquiring when you do not have a definition. As we will see, Meno's complaint is that the game is rigged: (2) there is no good way to provide the type of definitions that Socrates is looking for and (3) even if you managed to do so, you could never tell that you had done so. We face these problems because we are trying to acquire something difficult to identify, a unified and explanatory definition, and we lack the tools that could have helped us identify it, namely knowledge of what it is like or of its parts.<sup>14</sup>

Questions (2) and (3) present challenges to two different stages of inquiry: (2) challenges part of the process of inquiry and (3) challenges our ability to succeed at inquiry, which is generally called 'discovery' in the secondary literature. I will examine the two questions separately before turning to how they relate to one another.

Question (2) does not simply raise a general problem about inquiring when one does not know; it raises a problem about proposing (προτίθημι) things in this state. What are we trying to propose and why is it difficult to do so when we lack knowledge of what a thing is? On the Fine–Irwin interpretation (followed by Scott), we are trying to propose a definite description that will fix our target of inquiry. Given what we saw earlier, it is much more likely that Meno is referring to proposing definitions. That is what Meno has been trying to do up to this point and, given Socrates' requirements (c) and (d), that is precisely what they should be doing, even if they are ultimately interested in knowledge of what it is like or of its parts.

Why think there is any difficulty proposing a definition in this state? Meno has made three proposals and surely he could continue indefinitely: perhaps virtue is putting on a hat, perhaps virtue is clapping your hands, perhaps ... There is no problem finding syntactically appropriate words to put after 'virtue is ...' The problem is that we seem not to have any way to put forward a correct definition, aside from blind luck. We have no good way to provide an account of what something is. It is not that we need a way to automatically formulate a correct definition. But Meno wants some reason to think that if they continued the process for long enough, there is some reasonably good chance that they will succeed. Proposing definitions should not be effectively hopeless.

Why would proposing a definition be effectively hopeless if we do not know at all what something is? Contrast the case of inquiring into Socratic definitions with the case of a parent searching for something to calm a crying baby. The parent has no way to be sure what will help, but

<sup>14</sup>White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 42, also argues that Meno's challenge targets inquiring into definitions. Nehamas, 'Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher' and Gentzler, 'Recollection and the "Problem of the Elenchus"' each argue that Meno's challenge targets the sort of *elenchus* that has occurred in the first third of the dialogue. None of them argue that the challenge draws on the specific constraints Socrates has placed earlier on knowledge and definitions.

there are a number of likely candidates. We know what it is to calm a baby and what it is like to calm babies; we often can use this knowledge on a particular occasion to figure out what will calm this baby now. When searching for an answer to the 'what is it?' question, we cannot have the three things that could point us in the right direction: the very knowledge we are looking for, knowledge of what it is like or of its parts.<sup>15</sup> If we knew any of these, we might be able to use this as a sign of what we are looking for. Moreover, we have no good way to tell whether something has the specific requirements that Socrates is looking for, (a) and (b). It is not transparent whether a proposal meets these requirements. It might seem that someone has put forward something explanatory or properly unified, when in fact she has not.<sup>16</sup>

Question (2) does not question the (metaphysical) possibility of proposing something appropriate, since Meno has no reason to doubt the possibility of accidentally putting forward a correct account. Thus, we should interpret (2) as follows: we have no way (other than dumb luck) to propose something that meets the unity and explanatory requirements, (a) and (b); we cannot have the only tools that would have helped because we cannot know what it is, what it is like, or what its parts are.

In the following four sections of the paper we will consider how Socrates responds to this challenge. For now, let us turn to how Socrates' restrictions on definitions and knowledge help us understand (3). As mentioned earlier, (3) raises a problem for successfully completing the search for knowledge, that is, for discovery. Why does (3) suppose that we need to know what we are looking for? One might think that discovery simply involves acquiring unified and explanatory accounts, that recognizing such accounts is not, strictly speaking, necessary. However, Meno seems to be relying on the basic idea that discovery involves finding something and in order to find something (whether knowledge, keys, or anything else) one must be able to recognize what one is searching for.<sup>17</sup> In the case of searching for one's keys, this does not pose a problem: when I lose my keys, I can know what

<sup>15</sup>It might seem that we could know individual examples of virtue and use these to guide us to a correct account. This takes us to the classic debate about whether Socrates is committed to the priority of the knowledge of forms over knowledge of their instances (Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 51, Geach, 'Plato's *Euthyphro*', 369–80). I think Scott, *Plato's Meno*, 86–87, deals with this concern in exactly the right way. The sort of knowledge Socrates is discussing includes an account of the cause (98a). In order to have knowledge of instances, we need an account of their cause; but, the relevant cause is the definition, since this is what meets the explanatory requirement. Thus, in the *Meno* I cannot know instances of x if I do not know what x is.

<sup>16</sup>Note that the problem would get off the ground with either the unity or the explanatory requirement. The problem is made worse if there are two non-transparent requirements, but it is sufficient if we cannot tell whether a proposal is properly unified. For discussion of whether Meno can rely on these requirements, see the section 'Meno and Socrates' below.

<sup>17</sup>For the idea that the problem turns on recognition, see, for example, White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 43. It is not crucial to my reading that Meno thinks about discovery in terms

I am searching for without already knowing how to find them and so, once I run into them, I can recognize them. Similarly, when I am searching for a geometric proof, I know the result to be proved and I know how to prove results geometrically. This means that once I stumble upon a proof, I can recognize it.

Why is it difficult to recognize unified, explanatory definitions? Again, contrast this with searching for my keys. If I only knew that I was searching for ‘my nephew’s favourite thing to play with’, I would not recognize it even if I came upon it. Of course, certain descriptions might help: the shiniest object in the room, the only thing in the room that has a metal ring as a part. But, this is where searching for an answer to the Socratic ‘what is it?’ question is different from a normal search. When searching for such a definition we cannot have such knowledge (that it is the shiniest object, that it has a metal ring as a part) because we cannot know what it is like or its parts. Moreover, I can know what keys are and use this to help me determine if I have succeeded in finding my keys. But when we search for an answer to the ‘what is it?’ question we are searching for the very thing needed to determine whether we have found what we are searching for. We have no way to determine whether something has the appropriate unity and explanatory power.

In light of these clarifications, we can understand (3) as follows. In order to find anything we need some way to recognize it as what we are looking for. We are looking for a unified and explanatory account. But we cannot have any of the tools that might help us recognize it. In order to know what it is like or what parts it has, we would need to know what it is, which is precisely what we are looking for. It is not that discovering what something is would be extremely difficult; it is simply impossible because we cannot recognize it. Since this recognition is required for inquiry to be successful, recognition is a requirement on the success of a rational activity (namely, inquiry). Thus, (3) is saying that it is rationally impossible *and so* (simply) impossible to discover.

In some ways this account of (3) is similar to what Scott calls the ‘deeper reading’ of (3) (Scott, *Plato’s Meno*, 83–87). On both readings, the problem is that one needs to have knowledge before one can acquire it. But we disagree about what one needs to have knowledge of and why this prior knowledge is required. On his reading, we cannot know whether anything is the object of our inquiry because anything we find is guided by our initial specification of this object and if we do not know this initial specification is correct, we will not know where it leads us. Hence, on his reading one needs to have knowledge of the initial specification of the object, whereas on my reading one needs knowledge of the very definition one is looking for. There are at least two problems with Scott’s reading. First, it is rather

of finding; the important thing is that he thinks that successful inquiry requires recognizing what one is looking for.



distant from the text. Question (3) asks how we can know whether something is the thing we are looking for. It does not bring up our initial specification of the object of inquiry, making it unlikely that the problem hinges on our not knowing this. Moreover, as Scott himself explains, this problem relies on the principle that in order to acquire knowledge you must already have knowledge (which Scott calls the foreknowledge principle). This is an extremely strong principle and it is not clear that Meno can simply rely on it without a thorough defence – the principle seems almost as problematic as the challenge it gives rise to. The account I have offered does not rely on any such strong claim. On my account, (3) relies on the much more reasonable idea that to find something you need to be able to recognize what you are looking for and then argues that, in the case of finding an answer to the ‘what is it?’ question, this is impossible.

I have focused on Meno’s (2) and (3), since, in some important respects, they are more detailed than Socrates’ reformulation. Socrates reformulates the challenge as a dilemma. The first horn gives Meno’s challenge universal scope, by bringing in the case where we already have knowledge and pointing out that we cannot search in this situation any more than we can when we do not have knowledge. There was no reason for Meno to bring up this horn, because he was focusing on the situation that Socrates says they are in: both ignorant of what virtue is. The second horn of the dilemma tells us that a person cannot search for what he does not know because ‘he doesn’t even know what he’s going to search for’. The most natural reading would understand this as encompassing both of Meno’s questions – otherwise Socrates would have left out an important part of Meno’s challenge. The idea is that ‘not even knowing what he’s going to search for’ is what prevents him from proposing a candidate (2) and what prevents him from recognizing one when he runs into it (3). But this presupposes a controversial relationship between (2) and (3) and so, before we can accept this reading of Socrates’ reformulation, we need to consider the relationship between these questions. Understanding how they are related will also help us better understand how they fit into their immediate context.

Fine and Scott think, and I agree, that (2) and (3) pose problems for different things, which Scott calls inquiry and discovery.<sup>18</sup> However, they think that because Socrates’ reformulation poses a problem for inquiry, he is only capturing Meno’s (2), not (3) (Fine, ‘Inquiry in the *Meno*’, n. 21; Scott, *Plato’s Meno*, 76–83). They treat the challenges in (2) and (3) as strongly independent of one another. I think that (3) poses a problem for inquiry by posing a problem for discovery and so both of Meno’s questions

<sup>18</sup>Dimas, ‘True Belief in the *Meno*’, on the other hand, thinks there is fundamentally one thing challenged here, discovery, and that we are supposed to understand the first question in light of the second and the second in light of the third (19–20). Dancy, *Plato’s Introduction of Forms* thinks there is one thing challenged, ‘successfully looking’ and that the third question tells us what would go wrong if we did not do what the second question suggests (218–220).

ultimately challenge inquiry. On this reading Socrates' reformulated puzzle captures both of Meno's concerns.

There are serious problems with interpreting Meno as challenging two independent targets here, rather than having two challenges to the same thing: inquiry. The context strongly suggests that Meno is only challenging inquiry. Immediately before Meno's challenge, Socrates exhorts Meno to inquire with him into what virtue is. Meno presents a challenge to inquiring without knowledge. Objecting to something else (discovery) would be beside the point if doing so did not end up undermining inquiry. And Socrates reformulates Meno's challenge as a challenge to inquiry. If we treat Meno as challenging two independent things, then Socrates does not capture one of Meno's challenges. As Fine reads the passage, Socrates simply does not attempt to capture Meno's question (3). As Scott reads it, Socrates' reformulation as a dilemma captures (1) and (2) and then he uses recollection not to respond to his reformulation, but to the deeper (3), which (on Scott's reading) is a problem that Meno does not himself recognize.

Is there a way to see Meno and Socrates as responsive to each other's concerns? Inquiry's aim is discovery: we search for knowledge to discover it. If discovery is impossible, then inquiry can never be successful. Thus, a challenge to discovery is a challenge to inquiry – if not to its possibility, at least to its goal. Once we view Meno's challenge to discovery in this way, Meno's three questions fit naturally together, they make sense as a response to Socrates' exhortation to inquiry, and Socrates' reformulation can be seen as trying to capture the entirety of Meno's concern.

## MENO AND SOCRATES

Before we consider Socrates' overall response to Meno's challenge, let us consider two concerns one might have at this point. The first has to do with Meno: is this challenge too sophisticated for him to pose? The second has to do with Socrates: does he take the challenge as seriously as he should, if I am correct? Answering this second question will provide our first step towards understanding Socrates' response to the challenge.

Does Meno really understand which restrictions have been placed on knowledge and exactly what is required from an answer to the 'what is it?' question? To answer this, we need to distinguish between what Meno is vaguely aware of and what he realizes. Meno realizes that he has repeatedly broken up virtue; Socrates repeatedly tells Meno that he is making this mistake (72a, 74a, 77a–b, 79a–c). Meno might not know precisely what is involved in this breaking up – he may not be able to state the unity requirement, the explanatory requirement, or the priority of whole to parts – but he is aware that something along these lines has been causing him problems, so all his proposals fail. Moreover,

Meno sees that he is not supposed to start with the question he is really interested in, whether virtue is teachable, but instead with what virtue is. Thus, he realizes that there are restrictions on how to look for knowledge and that there are very demanding standards for having knowledge. Perhaps all Meno is thinking is, 'these restrictions make it impossible to put something forward and impossible to identify it even if I come across it'.<sup>19</sup> But Socrates, who has a strong grasp of the requirements, can see precisely what problem they cause.

While it is open to debate whether Meno understands more than this minimal amount, this is all that is needed for my account to work.<sup>20</sup> If he understands at least this much, I can make the fundamental move of drawing on Socrates' requirements.

The other concern is that Socrates does not take Meno's challenge as seriously as one would expect, given this interpretation. It is sometimes thought that Socrates does not take the challenge seriously since, immediately after Meno puts forward his challenge, Socrates says, 'Do you see what an *eristic* argument you're conjuring up ...' (80e1–2).<sup>21</sup> His use of 'eristic' here seems here to suggest that it is not deep or difficult.

This turns on a misunderstanding of what Socrates means by calling an argument 'eristic'.<sup>22</sup> Understanding this will help us piece together his overall response to the challenge. An *eristic* argument is not the same as a fallacious or superficial one. Calling an argument 'eristic' brings out two features of it: that it is brought up in a contentious and argumentative way and that it is similar to arguments that the sophists use. We see evidence for this first feature of *eristic* earlier in the *Meno*. After Socrates gives Meno an account of shape in terms of colour, Meno asks how he would answer if someone said that they did not understand colour. Socrates says:

The truth. And if the person who asked was one of the clever and *eristic* and contentious sorts, I would say to him, 'I've had my say; if what I say is not correct, it's your job to exact an account and refute me.' But if, like you and I now, they were friends willing to converse with one another, then the

<sup>19</sup>It fits with Meno's character for him to ask whether anyone can come up with a definition that he or she does not already know how to articulate. Socrates says at the beginning of the dialogue that Meno has grown accustomed to Gorgias' bold pronouncements on any question (70b–c). Moreover, Meno seems to want to have answers handed to him (e.g. 76b–c). Gorgias has not provided Meno with a model for how to inquire without someone already having the answer.

<sup>20</sup>There is a debate about how sophisticated Meno is and a related debate about whether he makes progress over the course of the dialogue. See Nehamas, 'Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher', (esp. 1–2, 6) for the claim that Meno is more sophisticated than people have thought; Scott, *Plato's Meno* thinks Meno makes progress across the dialogue (Chapters 5 and 16); Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, by contrast, presents an unflattering portrait of Meno throughout (esp. 17–21).

<sup>21</sup>For example, Mathews, *Socratic Perplexity and the Nature of Philosophy*, 54.

<sup>22</sup>For a view similar to mine see White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 41.

answer must be somehow gentler and more suited to conversation. And perhaps what is more suited to conversation is to reply not just with the truth, but also in terms that the questioner has additionally agreed he knows.  
(75c–d)

Socrates contrasts how an *eristic* person acts with how a friend acts. The very same claim could be made in an *eristic* fashion or in a friendly one. When Socrates describes an argument as *eristic*, he is not describing its content, but how it is used. An argument is *eristic* when it is not being used to gain understanding but instead to win or to block or derail the discussion. Socrates accuses Meno of doing this because Meno is setting up a roadblock to their search for virtue. Socrates sees Meno's challenge as brought up to avoid searching for knowledge (as I discuss below in the section 'The Structure of Socrates' Response').

In calling the argument 'eristic', Socrates is likely alluding to the fact that arguments of this sort (against the possibility of inquiry) have been popular in the Greek intellectual world, especially among the sophists. We find an early ancestor to Meno's question (3) in Xenophanes' fragments (DK fr. 34). And in the *Euthydemus* sophists argue (i) that both the wise and the ignorant learn and (ii) that one who learns both has knowledge and is ignorant (275d–277c). One could turn these into arguments that it is impossible to inquire. Socrates, in identifying it as an argument of the sort discussed by sophists, need not be saying that it is inherently superficial or that we cannot learn much from it. Socrates thinks it is a bad argument, as he goes on to say (81a), but this can easily mean that it reaches a false conclusion; it need not mean that it fails to present a serious challenge.

## TRUE BELIEFS

Before we turn to my account of Socrates' response, it will be useful to consider the role of true beliefs in Socrates' response to the challenge. Socrates, near the end of the dialogue, says that knowledge comes about when a true belief is tied down (98a), so he seems to think that true belief plays a role in inquiry. The important question is whether the existence of certain sorts of true beliefs is sufficient to address Meno's concerns. Fine has argued that certain sorts of true beliefs address Meno's challenge. Fine's interpretation is designed to work with her reading of the challenge and her solution works if we accept this reading (setting aside whether it is found in the text). On the Fine–Irwin reading, Meno's challenge has a rather obvious weakness: it assumes that the only two options are knowledge or a mental blank. In a mental blank, we cannot identify what we are looking for and so the solution is clear: we need an identifying description before we inquire. Since Socrates distinguishes between knowledge and true belief later in the dialogue, it is natural to think that the identifying description

could be a true belief. Once you see the need for such a description and that we can have such a description without full knowledge, you have dealt with the main difficulty. By contrast, on the account I presented earlier, inquiry requires some way to formulate and recognize correct definitions. This is a serious problem: it is not at all clear that we have a way to do this. One can see why Plato thinks that something like recollection is needed.

Given how Fine understands the challenge, you can see why she does not think that recollection solves Meno's challenge. However, Socrates explicitly says that recollection shows us why Meno's challenge is not a good argument (81a). He never says that true belief solves the problem. It is true that he later says that the slave boy has true beliefs, not knowledge. Fine takes this to indicate that Meno's challenge merely requires true beliefs to be solved (Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', 209). But Socrates says that recollection solves Meno's challenge and that the discussion with the slave boy is simply supposed to show us *that* learning is recollection (82a). There is no reason to expect the slave boy example to shed light on *how* recollection solves Meno's challenge; that is not what Socrates says it is supposed to do. Moreover, there is a better and simpler explanation available for why Socrates stops the slave boy questioning at true beliefs: he does not think he can provide an example of someone beginning without any relevant expert knowledge, such as the slave boy, and going on to acquire substantive knowledge in a single sitting; it takes weeks, months, or years to acquire such knowledge. What is surprising and needs to be established is that we have any such information in us at all; if we accept that we have such true beliefs in us, there is no reason not to extend the account to knowledge, since we can acquire knowledge without ever having been taught, if we are given enough time (85d).

Despite Socrates never saying that we can respond to the challenge by specifying the right sort of true belief, there is something attractive about this idea. Part of the appeal is that Socrates and Meno seem to leave out important mental states when they formulate the challenge. Meno asks how we can know when we do not know at all what virtue is. Socrates' reformulation tells us that there are two options, either having knowledge or not. This might suggest that we either are completely ignorant or have full knowledge. But recall that there is good reason to think that 'not knowing at all' encompasses not just ignorance, but also intermediate states: Socrates claims not to know at all what virtue is and yet he clearly has intermediate mental states that are about virtue.

Unfortunately, Socrates does not explain why other mental states (such as belief) cannot be used to address the challenge. But given that he thinks that something like recollection is needed and given that he considers true beliefs elsewhere in the *Meno*, we should try to reconstruct why such mental states, on their own, would not help.<sup>23</sup> Why would simply specifying some sort of

<sup>23</sup>My main claims in this article do not rely on this claim that true beliefs, on their own, do not solve to the challenge. I think the idea that they solve it distorts our understanding of Meno's

true belief not be sufficient to explain how we can propose a unified and explanatory definition (addressing (2)), or recognize one if we come across it (addressing (3))?

Let us start with (2). We are looking for something with a reasonable chance of bringing us to our target. If Meno's challenge simply asked whether it was metaphysically possible to put forward a correct account, then a true belief would be enough. But, as argued earlier, the challenge asks whether we have any good way to propose definitions. Why should Meno be satisfied if once every 50 years, unbeknownst to us, we happen to propose something correct because we happened to start with a true belief? Our ability to do this is cold comfort to someone who has just been urged to inquire. Using true beliefs is not a useful way to inquire if we have no reliable way to generate or identify such true beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Any solution needs to at least point us towards some reliable means for inquiry, perhaps by providing us with a reliable way to generate true beliefs that will reliably become knowledge.

Could some sort of true belief, on its own, allow us to respond to (3), providing us with the ability to recognize a definition as unified and explanatory? The question is a particularly difficult one, since it is not clear what would allow us to identify something as unified and explanatory. Perhaps a true belief could, but we can see why Socrates thinks that something like recollection is necessary. The problem is that any true belief that helped us would seem to be a case of knowledge, and hence mere true beliefs would not be sufficient. As I just noted, Socrates says near the end of the dialogue that we acquire knowledge when a true belief is tied down by an account of the cause (98a). The question, then, is whether we can have a true belief that is not tied down by an account of the cause and yet identifies an account as properly unified and explanatory. It is not at all clear how there could be such beliefs. To see the problem, suppose we are trying to learn what virtue is without having any knowledge about virtue and suppose that I truly believe that Jeff has virtue. Let us also suppose that, in fact, virtue is knowledge. My true belief that Jeff has virtue, on its own, does not allow me to recognize that virtue is knowledge; it will not help me identify the correct account of virtue. Similarly, if I truly believe that Jeff has virtue and truly believe that he has knowledge, this is still not enough, since they might simply be coinciding in the same person. So suppose that I truly believe that Jeff has virtue and that he has it because he has knowledge. But now I have a true belief tied down by an account

challenge and Socrates' response. But even if I am wrong about this, my account of Meno's challenge could still be correct and so could my account of the structure of Socrates' response (see the section 'Recollection' below).

<sup>24</sup>Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', 213–215, thinks that recollection is supposed to explain why we tend to favour true beliefs; however, she does not think that this is strictly needed to respond to Meno's challenge.

of the cause, and hence seem to have knowledge. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to formulate a true belief that identifies something as properly unified and explanatory without providing a unified explanation that would qualify it as knowledge.

### THE STRUCTURE OF SOCRATES' RESPONSE

Now that we have an account of Meno's challenge and have explored why Socrates does not use true beliefs to solve it, let us turn to Socrates' response. As we will see, the primary goal of Socrates' response is not to address the details of Meno's challenge, but rather to argue for the value of inquiry. Socrates does this because he sees Meno's challenge as subordinate to his concerns about the value of Socrates' investigation. Here are Meno's nested concerns and Socrates' nested replies:

- A. Meno's concern that Socrates' investigation is harmful.
- B. Meno's concern that there is no way to inquire.
- C. Meno's specific challenge to inquiry.
- D. Socrates' account of how we inquire: recollection.
- E. Socrates' questioning of slave boy.
- F. Socrates' affirmation that inquiry is valuable.

Meno raises three concerns, each subordinate to the last. Socrates responds individually to these three threats and each of his responses is importantly independent from his previous one. Thus, independently of whether it confirms recollection, the slave boy questioning shows that there must be some way to inquire and that Socrates' investigation is valuable. And Socrates' final affirmation addresses Meno's concern that this investigation is harmful independently of whether Socrates has taken the correct lesson from the discussion with the slave boy and independently of his claims about recollection.

Why does Socrates think that Meno's primary concern is that Socrates' investigation is harmful? Because this is the primary issue in Meno's torpedo fish accusation (79e–80b) and Meno's challenge is brought in to support this accusation. Meno says that Socrates is like a torpedo fish that numbs anyone who draws near to him; he has made Meno unable to talk about a topic, virtue, that he says he could once speak well about. Meno's accusation targets an activity that Socrates thinks is of paramount importance: trying to determine what virtue is (and what the individual virtues are). Meno contends that this sort of Socratic investigation is in fact bad for him, so he is worse off than when they started.

Socrates tries to deflect this accusation by asking Meno to inquire with him into virtue (80d) (as discussed above in the section 'Not Knowing At All'). If Meno were to succeed at inquiry, then Socrates would not have

seriously harmed him, regardless of whether Meno originally had knowledge or not, because Meno would gain (or regain) this knowledge. This is where Meno's challenge comes in. Meno questions whether inquiry is possible. If Meno is right, we are left with his original torpedo fish accusation. Meno's challenge is subordinate to the accusation: it tries to cut off Socrates' avenue of escape, leaving them with the claim that Socrates has made Meno worse off.

With this in mind, let us turn to Socrates' response to the challenge. He says that Meno's argument is a bad one. When asked why, he provides his account of recollection. Before we consider how recollection responds to the challenge (in the next section), let us see how it fits into Socrates' larger response. Immediately after describing recollection, he says:

So one should not be persuaded by that *eristic* argument, for it would make us lazy and is pleasant to hear for those people who are soft, whereas this one makes people active and ready to search. Because I trust that it is true, I wish to search with you for what virtue is.

(81d–e)

As discussed above in the section 'Meno and Socrates', Socrates sees Meno's challenge as *eristic*: raised not in order to determine the truth, but to avoid engaging in inquiry with Socrates. Meno's challenge was initially subordinate to the question of whether Socrates' investigation is valuable and Socrates continues to view it this way. His main goal is to convince Meno to search for knowledge.

The discussion with the slave boy is brought in to demonstrate recollection to Meno. One important and overlooked feature of this encounter is that Socrates makes a number of crucial points *before* he explains how the discussion demonstrates recollection. Socrates points out that the slave boy is going through the same process as Meno: first believing that he has knowledge and so putting forward a number of false proposals, and then coming to recognize his own ignorance. Socrates explains that, because this has happened, the slave boy can go on to acquire true opinions and eventually knowledge.<sup>25</sup> He refers to the torpedo fish accusation twice and says that he is showing that it is beneficial, not harmful, to go through this questioning (84b–c). Socrates is at pains to show that it is better to be numbed by him than not to be, which he takes to be contrary to Meno's initial accusation.

Socrates also directly shows that there must be a way to inquire by showing the slave boy inquiring, which makes clear that Meno's concerns about inquiry must ultimately be misguided. It is only after this that Socrates argues that the slave boy is recollecting. The passage is carefully set up so that even if you do not believe that the slave boy is recollecting, you can

<sup>25</sup>See Gentzler, 'Recollection and the "Problem of the Elenchus"' for the idea that the slave-boy discussion shows that *elenchus* is possible.



still be convinced of what, for Socrates, is the more important point: that inquiry is valuable and there is a way to engage in it.

Socrates makes his commitment clearest in his final response. After arguing that the slave boy is recollecting, Socrates argues that the soul is immortal, knowledge is in it, and so we should confidently search. This leads to Socrates' final assessment of what is most important:

As far as the other points are concerned, I would not altogether take a stand on the argument; but that we will be better and more manly and less idle if we think one should search for what one does not know than if we thought that it is not possible to discover what we do not know and that we do not need to search for it – this is something that I would certainly fight for to the end, if I were able, in both word and deed.

(86b–c)

For our purposes, the important point is that Socrates says that he would fight most strongly for the value of inquiry.<sup>26</sup> He contrasts this with his earlier claims, which he says he would not take a stand on. His confidence does not rely on the previous claims, just as the slave boy episode established the possibility and value of inquiry without relying on recollection.

## RECOLLECTION

We have seen that recollection plays a subordinate role within the argument; Socrates thinks it is more important that Meno accept that inquiry is possible and valuable. One would, nonetheless, like to know how recollection helps us with Meno's challenge. Unfortunately, Socrates simply does not tell us how recollection helps; any interpretation requires some speculation. He says that the account seems (*δοκεῖ*) true and fine to him (81a), which suggests that he believes it but does not think he has a complete account of it. Socrates may also think that recollection appeals to Meno's love of the esoteric (a feature of Meno brought out earlier in their discussion of colour) and so Socrates might bring up recollection, in part, to make Meno more sympathetic to inquiry.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Does Socrates mean that we should search even if success is impossible? That would give him a sort of radically pragmatic position and lead to serious questions about what he thinks the value of inquiry is, if not to acquire knowledge. It would also directly contradict his immediately earlier claim that the slave boy would achieve knowledge given enough time. Another possibility is that Socrates strongly believes that we *can* succeed in searching, he just is not saying so here.

<sup>27</sup>Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave* and Ionescu, 'The Mythical Introduction of Recollection in the *Meno* (81a5–E2)' each think that recollection is supposed to appeal to Meno. Unlike me, however, they each deny that Socrates accepts literal recollection, in the sense of literally recovering knowledge that one once (consciously) had. By contrast, I am not denying that Socrates himself believes in literal recollection. For a similar view, see Scott, *Plato's Meno*, 94.

Although Socrates does not tell us how recollection addresses Meno's challenge, he does tell us a few basic things about it. He says that the slave boy is recollecting while he is questioned (82e, 84a). Thus, it seems that the entire process of recognizing one's ignorance and then searching for knowledge can be referred to as part of 'recollecting', not just the end of the process. Socrates also says that one must recollect in order (82e), although it is not clear whether there are different possible orderings or what the stages are in these orderings. He says that recollecting is finding knowledge in oneself (85d). Thus, while one is recollecting from the beginning of inquiry, the process is not complete until one acquires knowledge. Socrates infers that the slave is recollecting because he could find knowledge within himself given enough time, but Socrates does not provide us with an account of the psychological mechanisms involved in recollection.

For purposes of this paper, we do not need a complete account of recollection; what we need is to see how recollection could respond to Meno's challenge as interpreted in the section 'Meno's Challenge' above. Here is a relatively simple interpretation of how it could do so. If we once had knowledge but forgot it in such a way that it left no trace in us, our past knowledge would do us no good. To be useful, recollection must provide some sort of unconscious remains of our prior knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Socrates seems to provide a clue to how this would be useful for inquiry when he reformulates the challenge as a dilemma: we avoid one horn of the dilemma by in some way having knowledge (unconsciously) and avoid the other horn by in another way not having it (consciously). Unconscious knowledge would give the inquirer enough to reliably propose definitions and to recognize a correct definition if encountered (thus avoiding one horn of the dilemma), but not so much as to remove the need for searching (thus avoiding the other horn).

Notice that this account only responds to the problem schematically: it does not tell us *how* unconscious knowledge helps us propose a definition or *how* it helps us recognize a correct definition once we find it.<sup>29</sup> Socrates says that we will see that Meno's argument is not good when we consider recollection; it is not clear how detailed of a response he thinks recollection provides.

Most interpreters think that recollection is supposed to address the details of Meno's challenge.<sup>30</sup> Since Socrates does not tell us how recollection would do this, these interpretations involve some speculation. To provide a detailed response to the challenge as presented in the section 'Meno's

<sup>28</sup>See White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, 42, for the idea that recollection solves the problem by allowing us to have knowledge, albeit unconsciously.

<sup>29</sup>Note that Socrates says that the answer to the 'what is virtue?' question is the form of virtue (72c) and hence, in recollecting a definition, one is recollecting a form. But we need not import Socrates' claims about forms from the so-called middle period dialogues, such as the *Phaedo* and *Republic*.

<sup>30</sup>E.g. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', 208–215, Dimas, 'True Belief in the *Meno*', 22–30, and Scott, *Plato's Meno*, 79–87.

Challenge', the unconscious remains of our knowledge would need to direct us towards the correct definition (addressing (2)) and help us identify things as the correct definitions (addressing (3)). Recollection could answer (2) by being a dependable guide to unified and explanatory accounts. When we inquire into virtue, unconscious remains of knowledge guide us towards the correct definition – just as I might be led down the right road in a city that I travelled in long ago. Our inchoate sense of what virtue is would be a reliable guide because it would be based on genuine knowledge we once consciously possessed.

But how could these unconscious remains address (3), providing a way to recognize the account we are looking for? This question leads Dimas to claim that recollection is meant to be a phenomenologically identifiable process (a sort of 'aha!' moment) described in the slave boy episode, which we can use to identify something as what we are looking for (Dimas, 'True Belief in the *Meno*', 26). However, this is unlikely since Socrates does not draw our attention to the phenomenology of recollection and he is clear that we can tell that the slave is recollecting simply because he could find knowledge within himself, given enough time (85d). Happily, we do not need phenomenology to explain how recollection can help us recognize something. Recognition is precisely what recollection involves: typically, it involves suddenly recognizing something one had forgotten. Recollection, for Socrates, could directly allow us to recognize a definition as properly unified and explanatory. In this way, it would be akin to direct perception, as this is normally understood. One does not need additional reasons for accepting something that one directly perceives; the fact that one is directly perceiving it is sufficient reason to accept it. Similarly, it is rational to accept what one recollects; one does not need additional reason for accepting it. In recollecting what virtue is, you would directly see that what you have proposed is, in fact, what virtue is. This is analogous to how, when I see a picture of someone I have forgotten about, I can directly remember the person. Thus, on this account, recollection does not provide a specific phenomenology or other sort of reason for thinking that something is the correct account; rather, it is the mechanism that makes recognition possible.<sup>31</sup>

This reading has advantages compared with some prominent alternatives. I have already mentioned textual problems with Fine and Dimas' readings: Fine claims that true belief, not recollection, directly addresses the challenge and Dimas claims that recollection is meant to provide the phenomenology of discovery. Scott's reading fails to address the challenge as he interprets it. He thinks that the problem in (3) is that our inquiry is guided by an initial specification and if we do not know that this initial specification is correct, we will not know that it has led us correctly. This is what leads Scott to

<sup>31</sup>For this sort of idea, see Gentzler, 'Recollection and the "Problem of the Elenchus"' (she uses the term 'mechanism' on 295).

the foreknowledge principle (that knowledge requires previous knowledge). Scott claims that recollection provides this foreknowledge; the problem with mere beliefs is that we do not know whether the beliefs that guide our inquiry are correct. But this same problem arises for the person who has not yet recollected: how can she tell whether she is being guided by unconscious knowledge? If she were confident that unconscious knowledge was leading her, she would trust where she was led – similarly if she were confident that true belief was guiding her. But she has no reason to be confident that she is being guided by unconscious knowledge and so it does not help us avoid the challenge, as Scott interprets it. By contrast, on my account of (3) it does not pose a problem about trusting one’s initial description; instead, the problem is that we have no means with which to recognize something as the knowledge we are looking for. On the detailed account of recollection I have offered, recollection simply is a means for directly recognizing an account as unified and explanatory.

I have laid out two ways to understand recollection: as a schematic response to Meno’s challenge or as a detailed one. I do not see any basis for choosing between these interpretations. Socrates may well be unclear about this because he is more concerned with convincing Meno that inquiry is valuable.

## CONCLUSION

It is not unusual, at the end of a definitional dialogue like the *Euthyphro* or *Charmides*, to feel some frustration. Many readers wonder whether anything worthwhile has been accomplished. Plato writes the first third of the *Meno* like one of these definitional dialogues and then gives voice to this typical frustration, in the form of Meno’s torpedo fish accusation: Socrates’ questioning has harmed, rather than helped him. This leads to Meno’s challenge, where Meno raises serious questions about whether we can inquire into and find these Socratic definitions. It is unclear how exactly recollection responds to the challenge, although there are a few viable possibilities. Instead of focusing narrowly on Meno’s challenge, Socrates’ response is meant to convince Meno that they should continue to inquire together.<sup>32</sup>

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