Plato’s Method of Dialectic

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Richard Robinson in his classic work Plato’s Earlier Dialectic (1953) describes the following difference between dialogues which he takes to represent Plato’s ‘early period’ - and dialogues which he takes to represent Plato’s ‘middle period’:

the early gives prominence to method but not to methodology, while the middle gives prominence to methodology but not to method. In other words, theories of method are more obvious in the middle, but examples of it are more obvious in the early. Actual cases of the elenchus follow one another in quick succession in the early works; but when we looked for discussions of the elenchus, we found them few and not very abstract. The middle dialogues, on the other hand, abound in abstract words and proposals concerning method, but it is by no means obvious whether these proposals are being actually followed, or whether any method is being actually followed. (Robinson 1953:61–62)

Robinson goes on in what follows to soften this distinction between the two sets of dialogues, but scholarly discussion of Platonic method in the latter set of dialogues has continued to focus more upon Plato’s explicit proposals than on Plato’s actual practice in those dialogues. No doubt part of the explanation for this tendency is Robinson’s suggestion that in the latter dialogues Plato appears not to practice what he preaches. The philosophical method that Plato has Socrates recommend in dialogues like the Meno, Phaedo, and Republic is apparently not the method that Plato has Socrates practice in those dialogues. In this chapter I resist such a conception of Platonic dialectic.

I will begin by looking briefly at Plato’s explict recommendations of philosophical method in three key middle dialogues - the Meno, the Phaedo, and the Republic. We will see that while differences in the methods recommended in these three dialogues are apparent, certain
core features remain invariant. These core features can be reduced to two processes: a process of identifying and drawing out the consequences of propositions, known as hypotheses, in order to answer the question at hand, and a process of confirming or justifying those hypotheses. I will then maintain that in three pivotal and extended stretches in these three dialogues Plato has Socrates practice one or the other of these processes of the method he has had Socrates recommend. Such a view of Platonic dialectic has two immediate consequences. First, there is more continuity and commonality to Plato’s discussion of method, his ‘methodology’ to use Robinson’s word, than has often been supposed. The methods of hypothesis introduced in the *Meno* and again in the *Phaedo* and the method of dialectic explicitly introduced in the *Republic* are versions of a single core method. Second, in order to understand Plato’s recommended philosophical method in the so-called middle dialogues we should not restrict ourselves to Plato’s explicit discussions of that method. Just as in the so-called early dialogues we look at both Socrates’ explicit discussions of method and his actual practice in order to understand the *elenchos* (SEE YOUNG), so in the so-called middle dialogues we should look at both Socrates’ explicit discussions of method and his actual practice in order to understand dialectic. We should, that is, look at both his ‘methodology’ and his ‘method’ to use Robinson’s words. Nevertheless, we will see that the philosophical method that emerges from both of these sources remains by Plato’s own lights in some way inadequate. I will conclude by offering an explanation of this apparent inadequacy - an explanation that points in the direction of further study.

**Dialectic with a Small ‘d’**

Let us begin with the word ‘dialectic’. Robinson, again, famously maintained that ... the word ‘dialectic’ had a strong tendency in Plato to mean ‘the ideal method, whatever that may be’. In so far as it was thus merely an honorific title, Plato applied it at every stage of his life to whatever seemed to him at the moment the most hopeful procedure. ... This usage, combined with the fact that Plato did at one time considerably change his conception of the best method, has the result that the meaning of the word
‘dialectic’ undergoes a substantial alteration in the course of the dialogues. (Robinson 1953:70)

One might be surprised to learn, however, that the Greek substantive *he dialectike* and its cognates occur only 22 times in the Platonic corpus and only once in dialogues that Robinson considers early (*Euthydemus* 290c5). Moreover, more than a third of those occurrences are concentrated within six Stephanus pages in the *Republic* (531d9, 532b4, 533c7, 534b3, 534e, 536d6, 537c6, 537c7). The substantival infinitive *to dialegesthai* occurs much more frequently and can sometimes carry a technical sense as opposed to its more ordinary meaning of ‘to converse’ or ‘to discuss’. But it is often difficult to determine when the technical sense is being employed. Nevertheless, when the technical sense is plausibly employed, Robinson correctly calls attention to its instability. For example, twice in the *Gorgias* Socrates appears to be drawing a quasi-technical contrast between *to dialegesthai* and rhetoric where the contrast appears little more than a preference for a shorter question and answer style of philosophical discussion over longer displays of philosophical prowess (*Gorgias* 447b9-c4 and 448d1-449c8; (Kahn 1996:303)). In the *Republic*, however, Socrates contrasts the power of *to dialegesthai* with a method apparently sometimes employed by mathematicians where the constrast appears highly technical making use of specialized notions like hypotheses, conclusions, first principles, and so on (510b2-511d5). Nevertheless, throughout this instability one feature remains invariant - Socrates’ preference for the method he picks out by *to dialegesthai, dialectike* or their cognates (Gill 2002:150).

In discussing Plato’s dialectical method, then, I take myself to be discussing Plato’s preferred or recommended philosophical method whatever that may be. The method he recommends and practices in the so-called early dialogues has already been discussed in the previous chapter - the method of *elenchos* (See YOUNG). The method Plato introduces and apparently recommends in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* has come to be known as the method of hypothesis. In the middle books of the *Republic* (VI-VII), Plato recommends as the culmination of the educational process of the philosopher-rulers an apparently distinct method often
understood as dialectic strictly so-called (see Republic 531d-537c mentioned above; ‘Dialectic’ with a cap ‘D’). The method of collection and division is introduced and recommended in the Phaedrus and apparently practiced in the Sophist, Politicus, and Philebus. While Plato’s dialectical method (at least ‘dialectic’ with a small ‘d’) includes all these methods, my focus will be on the method or methods discussed and, I maintain, practiced in the Meno, Phaedo, and Republic. Connections with Plato’s elenchos and his method of collection and division are abundant and important, but cannot be pursued here.

Plato on dialectic in the Meno, Phaedo, and Republic

The questions of this essay, then, are what is the method that Plato recommends in the central dialogues of the Meno, the Phaedo, and the Republic, and does he practice it in those dialogues. Consider, first, Socrates’ response to Meno’s desire to return to the question of the teachability of virtue prior to answering the question of the nature of virtue approximately two thirds of the way through the Meno. Socrates has just responded to Meno’s paradox that it is either impossible or unnecessary to methodically attempt to acquire knowledge of something. Either one fails to know what one is attempting to know in which case the attempt cannot be successfully begun nor concluded; or one knows what one is attempting to know in which case the attempt is unnecessary. Socrates’ response consists first in appealing to the theory of priests and priestesses - which has come to be known in the literature as the theory of recollection (see KAHN) - and then illustrating that theory by means of a conversation with a slave concerning doubling the area of an original two square foot square. Socrates concludes that while he would not vouchsafe the details of his response, he would vouchsafe that we ought to methodically seek the knowledge that we lack rather than accept that such an inquiry is impossible. Apparently having been persuaded, Meno expresses his desire to return to the question with which the dialogue began - the teachability of virtue. Surprisingly and despite some misgivings, Socrates accedes to this desire on the condition that Meno permit him to pursue the question according to the method of the geometers which he immediately explains with the following example:
... if they are asked whether a specific area can be inscribed in the form of a triangle within a given circle, one of them might say: ‘I do not yet know whether that area has that property, but I think I have, as it were, a hypothesis that is of use for the problem, namely this: If that area is such that when one has applied it as a rectangle to the given straight line in the circle it is deficient by a figure similar to the very figure which is applied, then I think one alternative results, whereas another results if it is impossible for this to happen. So, by using this hypothesis, I am willing to tell you what results with regard to inscribing it in the circle— that is, whether it is impossible or not.’ [Grube trans.; 86e6-87b2]

While the details of this example are notoriously obscure and controversial, the idea seems to be that the method of the geometers is to first propose a hypothesis which attributes to the given area a property such that if the area has that property such an inscription can be made, and if it does not, then such an inscription cannot be made. So if the hypothesis is true, the inscription can be made; and if the hypothesis is false, it cannot be made. Then, the geometers turn their attention to inquiring whether or not the hypothesis is true. Here, then, we have Socrates proposing a method that consists of two processes. First, it consists of the process of identifying a hypothesis such that its truth is necessary and sufficient for a determinate answer to the question under consideration. In the case of the geometrical example, the hypothesis appears to be that the area is ‘such that when one has applied it as a rectangle to the given straight line in the circle it is deficient by a figure similar to the very figure which is applied’, while in the case of the teachability of virtue the hypothesis is that virtue is a kind of knowledge (cf. 87b5-c7). The second process is to determine whether the hypothesis in question is true. One seeks to determine whether the given area is ‘such that when one has applied it as a rectangle to the given straight line in the circle it is deficient by a figure similar to the very figure which is applied’ or whether virtue is a kind of knowledge. This two part method that Plato has Socrates propose here in the Meno has come to be called the method of hypothesis. (For further discussions of the
method proposed here in the *Meno* see (Robinson 1953:ch. 8), (Bluck 1961), (Bedu-Addo 1984), and (Benson 2003).)

This so-called method of hypothesis makes its appearance at a similar stage in the *Phaedo*. Socrates has been offering a series of three arguments designed to establish the immortality of the soul - each of which has met with formidable objections. In response to the last objection to the third argument Socrates explains that an adequate response will require “a thorough investigation of the cause of generation and destruction” (95e9-96a1) and Socrates offers to recount his own investigation. He began in his youth, he tells us, by following the method of the natural scientists, but he quickly came to learn that rather than acquire the knowledge he lacked he actually lost some of the knowledge he formerly thought he had (96c-97b). Next, he turned to the method of Anaxagoras (see 97b3-7) which consisted of attempting to determine what is best (97c-98b). Unfortunately, Socrates was unable to acquire the knowledge he lacked by this method either - for he was able to neither discover what is best on his own nor learn it from the writings of Anaxagoras. Consequently he explains that he set out to acquire the knowledge of the cause of generation and destruction - which he lacked - by means of the following ‘second-best’ method.

I thought I must take refuge in discussions (*tous logous*) and investigate the truth of things by means of words. ... I started in this manner: taking as my hypothesis in each case the theory that seemed to me the most compelling, I would consider as true, about cause and everything else, whatever agreed with this, and as untrue whatever did not so agree.  [99e4-100a7; Grube trans.]

Socrates next explains that the hypothesis he has in mind in the present case is what has come to be called in the literature his theory of Forms - “the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest” (100b5-7; Grube trans.; See PENNER). Socrates indicates that it follows from this theory that the cause of a thing’s having a given property is that thing’s participation in the relevant Form. For example, “it is through Beauty that beautiful things are made beautiful” (100e2-3; Grube trans.). Socrates concludes his discussion of this method by
explaining how one should react when one’s hypothesis is ‘questioned’ (*echoito* see (Kahn 1996:318 n. 35))

you would ignore him and would not answer until you had examined whether the consequences that follow from it agree with one another or contradict one another. And when you must give an account of your hypothesis itself you will proceed in the same way: you will assume another hypothesis, the one which seems to you best of the higher ones until you come to something acceptable, but you will not jumble the two as the debaters do by discussing the hypothesis and its consequences at the same time, if you wish to discover any truth. (101d3-e3; Grube trans.)

Once again at a crucial stage in the argument of a dialogue, Plato has Socrates propose a method employing hypotheses in order to continue the inquiry. Again, he distinguishes two processes of the method. In describing the first process Socrates stresses the process of drawing out the consequences of the proposed hypothesis rather than the process of identifying the hypothesis (100a3-7) and in describing the second process Socrates explains in more detail precisely how one is to carry it out. First, one should determine whether the consequences of the hypothesis are consistent with other background beliefs or information concerning the topic under discussion. Second, one should employ the method of hypothesis on the hypothesis itself - identifying a further hypothesis whose truth is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the original hypothesis and testing the consistency of the consequences of this new hypothesis with one’s background beliefs or information - until one reaches a hypothesis that is ‘acceptable’ (*hikanon*). (For further discussions of the method proposed here in the *Phaedo* see (Robinson 1953:ch. 9), (Gallop 1975), (Bostock 1986), (Rowe 1993) (van Eck 1994), and (Kanayama 2000).)

Finally, in the central books of the *Republic* Plato provides an extended discussion of the appropriate philosophical method. Two passages are especially salient. In the first passage Plato has Socrates distinguish the method practiced by mathematicians that can at best lead one to acquire thought (*dianoia*) from the method he recommends that leads one to acquire knowledge
(episteme or noesis). In the second Plato has Socrates explicitly describe the discipline of dialectic as the culmination of a life-time of philosophical education.

At 509c-511d Socrates asks the interlocutors of the Republic to imagine a line cut into two unequal portions. The smaller portion, he says, represents the things that participate in Forms, for example, the beautiful things, and the larger portion the Forms themselves, for example, the Beautiful itself. Each of these two portions of the line is similarly divided into two unequal sub-sections. The portion representing the things that participate in Forms consists of a smaller sub-section representing images of the things that participate in Forms - shadows, reflections in pools of water, etc., while the larger sub-section represents the originals of the things imaged in the smaller sub-section. The portion representing the Forms, however, is not divided according to objects like the two lower sub-sections, but according to the methods employed in each sub-section. According to Socrates, in the smaller sub-section of the portion representing the Forms [A1] the soul uses as images the originals of the previous sub-section, [A2] is forced to investigate from hypotheses, and [A3] proceeds to conclusions, not to a first principle (510b4-6), while in the larger sub-section the soul makes “[B1] its way to a first principle that is not a hypothesis, [B2] proceeding from a hypothesis [B3] but without images used in the previous subsection, using forms themselves and making its investigation through them” (Republic 510b6-9; Grube/Reeve trans.). Corresponding to these four sub-sections of the Line are four conditions of the soul: imaging (eikasia), belief (pistis), thought (dianoia), and understanding or knowledge (noesis).

Notice that Plato’s description of the two methods distinguished in the top two sub-sections appeals to three features which appear to correspond as follows: [A1]/[B3], [A2]/[B2], and [A3]/[B1]. That is, both the method that leads to diianoia - the dianoetic method, and the method that leads to knowledge - the dialectical method make use of hypotheses - [A2] and [B2]. The two methods are distinguished not by the fact that they employ hypotheses but by the way they employ hypotheses. The dianoetic method uses the originals from the preceding sub-section in proceeding from its hypotheses [A1], while dialectic does not [B3], and dianoetic proceeds
from hypotheses to conclusions and not first principles [A3], while dialectic proceeds from hypotheses to first principles [B1]. Socrates’ subsequent elaboration of these features suggests that the former difference amounts to a difference between the use of sense experience (by the dianoetic method - 510d5-511a2 & 511a6-8) as opposed to the a priori method of dialectic (511b7-c2), while the latter difference amounts to a distinction between treating hypotheses as though they were confirmed and not in need of justification or an account (by the dianoetic method - 510c1-d4 & 511a3-6) and treating hypotheses as unconfirmed stepping stones requiring justification or an account until one reaches ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’ (511b3-7) which is plausibly identified with the Form of the Good. What is important to notice for our present concerns is the continuity between the methods proposed in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* and the method of dialectic in the *Republic* - all three consist of two fundamental processes of, on the one hand, identifying and drawing out the consequences of hypotheses and, on the other hand, verifying or confirming the truth of the hypotheses. The failure of the dianoetic method - in large part - lies in its failure to focus attention on the latter process.

The three features of dialectic specified here in the *Republic* - the use of hypotheses, the unsuitability of sense experience, and the necessity of confirming the hypotheses employed until one reaches the ‘unhypothetical first principle of everything’ are repeated in the last of the passages we will be looking at, although the last feature is the focus of attention. At *Republic* 531d7-535a2 (which contains five of the 22 occurrences of *he dialectike* in the Platonic corpus) Socrates describes dialectic as the completion of a lifetime of philosophical education (531d, 534e-535a). He says “dialectic (*he dialectike*) is the only inquiry that travels this road, doing away with hypotheses (*tas hupotheseis anairousa*) and proceeding to the first principle itself, so as to be secure” (533c7-d1). While the claim that dialectic does away with hypotheses might be understood as indicating that Plato is here recommending against the use of hypotheses, it is more plausible to suppose (especially in light of the passages we have just been examining) that Plato is recommending the manner in which they should be used (see, for example (Robinson 1953:161–162) and (Gonzalez 1998:238–240)). They need to be confirmed, explained, and
justified ultimately ‘proceeding to the first principle itself, so as to be secure.’ It is this aspect of
the use of hypotheses that is emphasized throughout the discussion of dialectic in this passage.
Socrates explains that dialectic can give an account (*ho logos*) of what it knows (531d6-e6, 534b,
and 534c), doesn’t give up until one grasps the first principle or the Form of the Good (532a-b,
534b-c), and can survive against all refutations (*elenchon*) (534c). But Socrates also refers to the
other feature of the use of hypotheses mentioned in the divided line passage - the unsuitability of
sense experience. He explains that the dialectician “tries through argument (*tou logou*) and apart
from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing” (532a6-7).

In these three key dialogues, then, we find Plato having Socrates describe a methodology
he appears to be endorsing. All three passages feature the use of hypotheses, but each provides a
different perspective. The *Meno* introduces the method in general terms - describing it as a
method employed by geometers and identifying its two fundamental processes - identifying
hypotheses necessary and sufficient for resolving the question at hand and determining the truth
of the hypotheses. The *Phaedo* recognizes two processes as well but stresses drawing out the
consequences of the hypotheses rather than identifying the hypotheses and provides additional
details for how one should go about determining the truth of the hypotheses - testing their
consistency with other background beliefs and information and attempting to confirm them by
employing the method on the hypotheses themselves. Finally, the *Republic* adds that the process
of determining the truth of hypotheses should be independent of sense-experience and carried on
until one hits upon the ‘unhypothetical first principle of everything.’ Having discovered the
rough outlines of the method Plato has Socrates discuss and propose in the *Meno, Phaedo,* and
*Republic,* we can now consider whether Plato has Socrates practice what he preaches.

**Plato’s Practice of dialectic in the *Meno, Phaedo,* and *Republic***

Let us begin with perhaps the easiest case. Immediately following Socrates’ introduction
of the method at *Meno* 86e6-87b2, Socrates proposes to “investigate whether it is teachable or
not by means of a hypothesis” (87b3-5). He immediately identifies a hypothesis such that its
truth is necessary and sufficient for the teachability of virtue, viz. that virtue is a kind of
knowledge, and then sets out to determine the truth of this hypothesis. He does this by employing the second of the two procedures mentioned in the *Phaedo* - employing the method of hypothesis on the hypothesis itself. First, he identifies further hypotheses whose truth is necessary and sufficient for the truth of the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge, viz. that virtue is good (87d2-3) and that nothing else is good other than knowledge (87d4-8). The former he justifies only by claiming that it ‘remains’ or ‘stands firm for us’ (*menei hemin*; 87d3). The latter he defends by means of a brief argument (87e5-89a1) after which he concludes that since wisdom is beneficial and virtue is beneficial “Virtue then, as a whole or in part, is wisdom” (89a3-4). (If we are not to find Socrates guilty of an irrelevant conclusion here, we must assume that he is using ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*) and ‘knowledge’ (*episteme*) interchangeably.)

That this portion of the *Meno* is an instance of the method of hypothesis has been generally recognized. But the portion is short - little over two Stephanus pages long - and it is often thought that the method is dropped for the rest of the dialogue. Thus, Robinson assumes that the method ends here at 89c (Robinson 1953:117), confirming his view that Plato seldom depicts Socrates practicing the method he discusses in the so-called middle dialogues. But the method of hypothesis is not abandoned at this point in the *Meno*. Rather Socrates takes up the first of the two procedures the *Phaedo* mentions for confirming a hypothesis - testing its consistency with other background beliefs and information. (For a longer defense see (Benson 2003); see also (Kahn 1996:313).)

After concluding at 89c2-4 that the answer to Meno’s question is that virtue can be taught, on the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, Socrates expresses doubt saying

I am not saying that it is wrong to say that virtue is teachable if it is knowledge, but look whether it is reasonable of me to doubt whether it is knowledge. Tell me this: if not only virtue but anything whatever can be taught, should there not be of necessity people who teach it and people who learn it? (Meno 89d3-8; Grube trans.)

Notice that Socrates here expresses doubt about the hypothesis - that virtue is a kind of knowledge - from which the positive answer to Meno’s question has been inferred, revealing that
he is still operating within the confines of the method of hypothesis. He is expressing doubt about the truth of the hypothesis. Its truth has been supported by the second of the two procedures mentioned in the *Phaedo*, but the results of the first procedure - testing its consistency with other background beliefs and information - which Socrates is about to perform go in the other direction. An immediate consequence of the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge is that virtue is teachable (the positive answer to Meno’s question), but a consequence of this (at least given the background belief expressed above that for everything that can be taught there are people who teach and people who learn it) is that there are teachers and learners of virtue. But the subsequent discussion with Meno and Anytus from 89e6-96d4 reveals background beliefs and information concerning the educational practice of sophists and the gentlemen of Athens that entail that there are no teachers nor learners of virtue. While the second procedure from the *Phaedo* tended to confirm the truth of the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge, the argument from 89d3-96d4 has revealed that the first procedure from the *Phaedo* has disconfirmed it.

Thus, contrary to the suggestion that Plato tends not to depict Socrates practicing the method he proposes in the middle dialogues, here in the *Meno* we have Socrates depicted as practicing the method he has just proposed at length (for nearly a third of the dialogue as a whole and for more than three quarters of the dialogue following the introduction of the method). What is unique about this portion of the *Meno* - as we will see in a moment - is not that we are presented with an extended instantiation of the method Socrates proposes, but that we are presented with the portion of the method aimed at determining the truth of the hypothesis. Indeed, we are presented with this portion of the method having conflicting results - the first procedure of the *Phaedo* disconfirming the hypothesis, the second procedure confirming it. Socrates provides no guidance in either the *Phaedo* or the *Republic* for how one is to proceed when this two part process has conflicting results. *Meno* 96d5-100b4 suggests that one should review the arguments presented in each part to determine whether they contain any flaws. Socrates claims that the flaw is to be found in the argument for the claim that nothing else is
good other than knowledge. True belief, Socrates professes, is no less beneficial than knowledge (97a9-d3 and 98b7-c3). Whether we take this profession seriously or not, we should not conclude that Socrates fails to practice the method he proposes.

As I mentioned above, however, the *Meno* may be the easiest case to make out. Nearly everyone would grant that Plato depicts Socrates practicing the method he proposes at least briefly in the *Meno*. But what about the *Phaedo*? Does Plato depict Socrates practicing the method he proposes in the *Phaedo*? Obviously I believe that the answer to this question is yes, but the way in which Socrates practices the method he proposes in the *Phaedo* is different than the way in which he practices it in the *Meno*. Recall that all three dialogues - the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* - propose and discuss a method that consists of two distinct processes - the process of identifying hypotheses and drawing out their consequences and the process of verifying, confirming, or otherwise determining the truth of the hypotheses. We saw that in the *Meno* Plato depicted Socrates concentrating on the latter process - verifying or confirming the hypotheses, depicting only briefly Socrates’ attention to the former (87b5-c7). The converse is the case in the *Phaedo*. Despite providing more detail about the process of verifying hypotheses at 101d3-e3, Plato depicts Socrates concentrating on the process of identifying hypotheses and drawing out their consequences.

Following the general description of the method at 99e4-100a7, Socrates provides content by turning to the case at hand. He identifies the hypothesis that the Forms exist (100b5-9) and infers from it together with various subsidiary premises concerning the nature of cause (perhaps the three laws or requirements of ‘cause’; see (Gallop 1975:186), (Bostock 1986:137), and (Kanayama 2000:54)) that each thing comes to be what it is by sharing in the Form in which it shares. For example, something becomes beautiful because it shares in the Form of Beauty (100d4-8), something becomes two because it shares in the Form of Twoness (101c1-6), and something becomes big because it shares in the Form of Bigness (100e5-101a5). From this ‘safe’ causal principle (again presumably together with various subsidiary premises) Socrates infers a ‘more subtle’ causal principle according to which a thing comes to be what it is, say F,
by possessing something that entails F-ness. For example, three comes to be odd by possessing Oneness which entails Oddness, or the body comes to be hot by possessing fire which entails Heat (105b-c). At this point Socrates begins his final argument for the immortality of the soul which can be summarized as follows. The ‘more subtle’ causal principle entails that if the presence of a thing makes x F, then that thing cannot be not-F. For example, if the presence of fire in water makes water hot, then fire cannot be not hot. Since the presence of the soul makes a body alive, it follows that the soul cannot be not alive. It cannot die. It is immortal. After acknowledging the appropriateness of Simmias’ continued ‘private misgivings’, Socrates concludes the argument as follows:

... our first hypotheses require clearer examination, even though we find them convincing. And if you analyze then adequately, you will, I think, follow the argument as far as a man can and if the conclusion is clear, you will look no further. (107b5-9; Grube trans.)

This last passage makes it explicit that Socrates supposes that he has been practicing all along the method he proposed. He has - to be sure - been focused on the first of the two processes which characterize the method - the process of identifying and drawing out the consequences of the hypotheses for the question at hand - in this case the immortality of the soul. But he here maintains that the method will not be complete until one turns to the second process of verifying or confirming the hypotheses employed. Thus, here in the Phaedo for the crucial final argument for the immortality of the soul Plato appears to be depicting Socrates practicing the method he proposes, just as in the Meno.

Of course, this having been said, my sketch of this final argument for the immortality of the soul runs roughshod over a variety of difficulties surrounding the argument and the interpretation of the method proposed. For example, it might be objected that one cannot derive interesting or substantive consequences from a single hypothesis (as the general description at 99e4-100a7 would suggest), and indeed, it will be noticed that in describing the argument that follows as an instance of deriving such consequences I frequently had recourse to additional
hypotheses and/or auxiliary premises. Moreover, I have simply assumed without argument that
the notion of ‘agreement’ (sumphonein) employed in the general description is roughly the
notion of logical entailment despite all of the difficulties that surround such an assumption (see,
for example, (Robinson 1953:126–128), (Gentzler 1991), and (Kanayama 2000:62–64)). And, of
course, finally, I have hardly offered anything like a definitive and problem-free interpretation of
the structure of Plato’s final argument in the Phaedo (see, for example (Kanayama 2000),
MILLER?). Nevertheless, as we seek to address these difficulties surrounding the method
Socrates proposes in Phaedo, we need not, and indeed, should not restrict ourselves to Socrates
explicit statements concerning it. We should look to the final argument for the immortality of
the soul that follows Socrates’ explicit statements. In coming to understand Socrates’ method of
elenchos (see YOUNG) one would not - and indeed does not - restrict oneself to Socrates’
explicit statements concerning it, but one looks to Socrates’ actual practice in dialogues like the
Euthyphro, Laches, Charmides, and Protagoras. Similarly, while the last third of the Meno
should be seen as evidence of what Socrates has in mind by verifying or confirming hypotheses,
so the final argument for the immortality of the soul in the Phaedo should be seen as evidence
for what Socrates has in mind by identifying and drawing out their consequences.

A similar point applies to the method practiced in the Republic although our discussion
will necessarily be more sketchy. The Republic can be read as an extended argument aimed at
showing that justice is a good welcomed for its own sake as well as it consequences (357a1-
358a8). (See, for example, (Annas 1981), (White 1979); KEYT). To show this Socrates
proposes first to determine the nature of justice and immediately points out that the investigation
they are about to begin is not easy, but requires ‘keen eyesight’.

Therefore, since we aren’t clever people, we should adopt the method of investigation that
we’d use if, lacking keen eyesight, we were told to read small letters from a distance and
then noticed that the same letters existed elsewhere in a larger size and on a larger
surface. We’d consider it a godsend, I think, to be allowed to read the larger ones first and
then to examine the smaller ones, to see whether they really are the same. (368d1-7)
Like the geometer in the *Meno* Socrates here proposes to reduce the question he is concerned with - the nature of individual justice - to a question that is supposed to be easier to answer - the nature of civic justice. That is, he proposes to identify a hypothesis from which he can infer an answer to his original question. Such a hypothesis, however, is not ready to hand and so he turns to two other hypotheses from which he infers such a hypothesis. Socrates proposes to construct the ideal city or Kallipolis based on two hypotheses - that “none of us is self-sufficient, but we all need many things” (369b6-7; Grube/Reeve trans.) and that “each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one task, another to another” (370a8-b2; Grube/Reeve trans.) (See, for example, (Pappas 1995:61), (White 1979:84–85), and (Annas 1981:73)). From these two hypotheses and numerous auxiliary premises and arguments Socrates infers that civic justice is each class of Kallipolis - the craftsmen class, the soldier class, and the ruler class - performing the task for which it is best suited (433e-434c, esp. 434c7-10). Next on the basis of the hypothesis that “the same thing will not be willing to do or to undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” (436b8-9; Grube/Reeve trans.; see also 436e8-437a2), together with various psychological premises, Socrates infers that the soul too consists of three parts arranged like the parts of Kallipolis, and so based on the presumed reduction with which the argument begins, individual justice is each part of the soul - appetite, spirit, and reason - performing the task for which it is best suited. From this account of the nature of justice Socrates goes on in books VIII through X to show that justice is a good welcomed for its own sake and for its consequences. Given this admittedly hurried and imperfect reconstruction of the main argument of the *Republic*, Plato may be seen as depicting Socrates practicing the method he has been proposing. Socrates proceeds by attempting to identify and draw out the consequences of hypotheses in order to answer the question at hand.

Even if we grant this reconstruction of the argument, it must be admitted that the evidence that Plato depicts Socrates as practicing the dialectical method as proposed in the *Meno, Phaedo*, and *Republic* in the central argument of the *Republic* is at best circumstantial. Indeed, it might be wondered whether any argument could be seen as an instantiation of this
aspect of the dialectical method - at least to the extent that the main argument of the *Republic* can. But the evidence becomes more compelling when we turn to two passages in which Socrates describes the argument he has provided.

The first is a short passage following the account of civic justice, as Socrates turns to the question of individual justice. He says

But you should know, Glaucon, that, in my opinion, we will never get a precise answer using our present methods of argument - although there is another longer and fuller road that does lead to such an answer. But perhaps we can get an answer that’s up to the standard of our previous statements and inquiries. (435c9-d5; Grube/Reeve trans.)

Plato here has Socrates express misgivings about the force of the argument to this point. The answer it has arrived at appears in some way uncertain. Knowing what we know about the dialectical method Plato has been proposing in the *Meno, Phaedo,* and *Republic* and its difference from the dianoetic method, we might speculate that the difficulty with the argument is that it has only employed one of the processes that constitute the dialectical method. It has only identified and drawn out the consequences of hypotheses necessary and sufficient to answer the question at hand. It has not attempted to verify or confirm the truth of those hypotheses. The longer road would be to employ this process as well - all the way to ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’. A longer road, indeed! What Plato appears to be indicating here, however, is that Socrates is not practicing the dianoetic method, but the dialectical method though incompletely. Socrates is aware that his hypotheses are in need of confirmation. Unlike the dianoetic mathematician, he does not take his conclusions as secure when they are based on unconfirmed hypotheses.

This speculation is confirmed when Plato has Socrates return to his distinction between the shorter and longer road when discussing the education of the future rulers. Socrates says, referring back to the passage we have just been discussing,

Do you remember when we distinguished three parts in the soul, in order to help bring out what justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom each is?
... We said, I believe, that, in order to get the finest possible view of these matters, we would need to take a longer road that would make them plain to anyone who took it but that it was possible to give demonstrations of what they are that would be up to the standard of the previous argument. And you said that that would be satisfactory. So it seems to me that our discussion at that time fell short of exactness, but whether or not it satisfied you is for you to say. (504a4-b7; Grube/Reeve trans.)

After Glaucon expresses his satisfaction, Socrates explains that the future rulers, however, must take the longer road and put as much effort into learning as into physical training, for otherwise, as we were just saying, he will never reach the goal of the most important subject and the most appropriate one for him to learn. (504c9-d3; Grube/Reeve trans.)

Here we are told that the longer road is the road to that leads to the most important subject. We go on to learn that this subject is the knowledge of the Form of the Good. Given the identity of the Form of the Good and ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’ our speculation is confirmed. The shorter road being pursued in the main argument of Republic is defective because it has failed to employ the process of verifying the hypotheses employed upto ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’. The method Socrates employs in the main argument of the Republic is one half of the dialectical method he describes in the Meno, the Phaedo, and the Republic.

The Second Best Method

Thus far I have maintained that is it a mistake to view Socrates as failing to practice the method Plato has him propose in the central dialogues of the Meno, the Phaedo, and the Republic. In these dialogues Socrates is made to propose a method that consists of two processes: a process of identifying and drawing out the consequences of hypotheses necessary and sufficient for resolving the question at hand, and a process of verifying or confirming such hypotheses. The method undergoes development and/or elaboration throughout the course of these three dialogues, but these two fundamental processes remain invariant. In the Meno
Socrates is depicted as employing the process of verifying or confirming hypotheses to an apparently unsatisfactory result. In the *Phaedo* and *Republic*, Socrates is depicted as employing the process of identifying and drawing out the consequences of the hypotheses necessary and sufficient for determining, on the one hand, the immortality of the soul and, on the other hand, whether justice is a good welcomed for its own sake as well as its consequences. Nevertheless, throughout these passages there remains something unsatisfactory about the method Socrates is depicted as proposing and employing. We have just seen that in the *Republic*, Socrates reproaches the method he has employed in Books II through IV as taking the shorter rather than the longer, superior road. In the *Phaedo* he describes the method he proposes and then employs as in some way ‘second best’ (*deuteros plous*; see, for example, (Gonzalez 1998:192 & 351 n. 3), (Rowe 1993:238-239 & 68-69), and (Gentzler 1991, 266 n. 4), *pace* (Kanayama 2000:87-95)). And, in the *Meno* many have taken Socrates to propose and employ the method he does only because of Meno’s refusal to pursue the nature of virtue rather than its teachability. ((Kahn 1996:318–319), (Brown 1967:63–65), and (Seeskin 1993:45–47)) How are we to explain this apparent reluctance to endorse the method Plato has had Socrates propose and employ?

It might be thought that this reluctance indicates that for Plato genuine philosophical method or genuine dialectic cannot be depicted in the dialogues. It is in some way ineffable or non-discursive. It must be practiced, not described or depicted. What Plato describes and depicts is the second-best method of hypothesis. In fact, something like this may be supported by Plato’s apparent disparagement of writing as a way of practicing philosophy in the *Phaedrus* (275c5-277a4). Nevertheless, this same dialogue offers yet another account of the nature dialectic - this time characterized as the method of collection and division (265d3-266c1) which many think Plato goes on to depict in some detail in dialogues like the *Sophist*, *Politicus*, and *Philebus*. (see, for example, (Kahn 1996:300) and (Stenzel 1973:xliii)). It is difficult then to take Plato to be committed to the impossibility of depicting genuine dialectic as such in the dialogues.
Others have suggested that Plato’s reluctance to endorse the method employed and proposed in our three dialogues is precisely to distinguish that method from the method of dialectic endorsed in the middle books of the *Republic* (and employed in the so-called early dialogues) (see (Gonzalez 1998)). The method that Plato employs and proposes prior to the middle books of the *Republic* is the method of hypothesis and that method is to be identified with the dianoetic method. But, the dianoetic method’s second-best status in Plato’s eyes is straightforward. Of course, I have maintained that such a view of the method of hypothesis needs re-examination. Both the dialectical and dianoetic methods of the *Republic* employ hypotheses. What distinguishes these two methods is the way they employ hypotheses. Dianoetic uses sense experience in dealing with hypotheses and treats them as though they were confirmed, while dialectic does not use sense experience and treats its hypotheses as unconfirmed until it reaches ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’ or the Form of the Good. We have not focused on the use of sense experience in the methods proposed in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* and practiced in all three dialogues. But we have seen that Socrates does not describe the method he proposes in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* as verifying or confirming its hypotheses until one reaches ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’, nor does the method he practices in any of the three dialogues confirm its hypotheses to this point. Indeed, Socrates’ description of his practice in the *Republic* as the shorter road reveals that he does not takes his hypotheses as so confirmed.

Perhaps this indicates how we should understand Plato’s apparent reluctance to endorse the method he has had Socrates propose and employ prior to the middle books of the *Republic*. Plato’s failure to depict Socrates practicing a method that confirms its hypotheses to the point of ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’ explains the second-best status of Socrates’ practice in these dialogues. The method resides some place between dianoetic and dialectic. It fails to confirms its hypotheses to the point of ‘the unhypothetical first principle of everything’. But it recognizes its need to do so.
Why Plato chooses not to depict Socrates confirming his hypotheses up to such a principle given his recognition that he needs to calls for an answer. To begin such an answer requires detailed study of Plato’s account of the Form of the Good including why he chooses to discuss it by means of an analogy in the middle books of the Republic (see N WHITE). It also requires distinguishing between practicing philosophy as method of philosophical discovery and practicing philosophy as a method of philosophical instruction and considering how writing philosophy (whether in dialogue form or not) is related to both (See McCABE). Finally, it requires making sense of a ‘unhypothetical first principle of everything’ - something which on its face simply seems beyond the pale. For now, however, we can conclude that a thorough examination of Plato’s method of dialectic should not confine itself to Socrates’ explicit statements concerning method in Plato’s central dialogues. It should also look to Socrates’ practice in those dialogues. To return to the quote from Robinson with which we began this chapter, in the Meno, Phaedo, and Republic Plato gives prominence to method as well as methodology.

References


