The Method of Hypothesis in the *Meno*

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The *Meno* has long been considered a transitional Platonic dialogue. Indeed, Gregory Vlastos once maintained that he could identify the precise point in the dialogues where the historical Socrates (interpreted by Plato) gave off and Plato (on his own) began - *Meno* 80d-e. I am less sanguine than I once was about this historical and developmental claim. But that the *Meno* marks a break with the so-called elenctic dialogues appears secure. At *Meno* 80d-e, Plato has first Meno and then Socrates pose a challenge which the readers of the elenctic dialogues have been wanting to pose for some time. For Socrates’ immediate goal in those dialogues is eliminating the interlocutor’s false conceit of knowledge. And yet, it is clear that Socrates’ purpose in eliminating the interlocutor’s false conceit is to encourage the interlocutor to seek the knowledge he has been shown to lack. But how is such a search to take place given Socrates’ repeated claims to be ignorant as well? Socrates’ only explicit recommendation is that one should seek out someone who knows and learn from him. But if no one with the requisite knowledge is to be found, how is one to proceed? Indeed, is progress even possible? This is the problem Meno raises in response to Socrates’ encouragement to join him in the search for knowledge of the nature of virtue which both he and Meno have professed to lack. The problem has come to be known as Meno’s paradox.

(T1) MENO: In what way, Socrates, will you search for that thing which you do not know at all what it is? What sort of thing, of those things you do not know will you set up as the object of your search? Or even if you should happen upon it, how will you know that this is what you didn’t know? (Kai; tivna trovpon zhthvseì~, w\ Swvkrate~, tou'to o} mh; oi\sq\a to; paravpan o{ti ejstivn; poi'on ga;r wln oujk oi\sq\a proqevmeno~ zhthvseì~; h] eij kai; o{ti mavlista ejntuvcoi~ auijtwæ'; pw'~ ei[shæ o{ti tou'tov ejstìn o} su; oujk hæ{dhsq\a;} (Meno 80d5-8), followed by Socrates’ version
(T2) SOC: I know what you mean, Meno. Do you know how contentious an argument you are introducing, that it is possible for a person to search for neither what he knows nor what he does not know? For, he could not search for what he knows - for he knows it and there is no need to search for it - nor could he search for what he does not know - for he does not know what to search for. (Manqavnw oilon bouvlei levgein, w\ Mevwnwn. oJra/~ tou'ton wJ~ ejristiko;n lovgon katavgei~, wJ~ oujk a[ra e[stin zhtei'n ajnqrwvpwæ ou{e o} oì'de ou{e o} mh; oì'de; ou{e ga;r a}n o{ ge oì'den zhtoi' oì'den gavr, kai; oujde;n dei' twæ' ge toiouvtwæ zhthvse w~ ou{e o} mh; oì'den oujde; ga;r oì'den o{ti zhthvsei.)(Meno 80e1-5)

In the pages that follow the paradox two fundamental features of what has come to be thought of as classical Platonism are broached: the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis. vi The first - the theory of recollection - has rightly been regarded as Plato’s direct response to Meno’s paradox. The conversation with the slave boy, which immediately follows upon the statement of the theory of recollection, is offered to ‘teach’ or illustrate (ejpideivxwmai) this theory. vii It is not until the conversation with the slave boy has come to an end, followed by an argument for the immortality of the soul and a Socratic disclaimer viii, that the second feature of classical Platonism - the method of hypothesis - is introduced. Even so, it is introduced only after Meno refuses to consider the question Socrates thinks is in some sense primary, and then as a concession won by Socrates as a consequence of Meno’s refusal. This manner of introduction has led some scholars to wonder whether the method of hypothesis is of any philosophical importance whatsoever - let alone being one of the foundational features of classical Platonism. Indeed, some have argued that for Plato the method of hypothesis is at best a second best approach to be employed only when Plato’s preferred method of search - dialectic as practiced in the elenctic dialogues, for example - cannot be employed. ix Others have suggested that it is a mere ruse to get Meno to search for the nature of virtue in spite of himself. x Even Robinson, who is perhaps primarily responsible for the view that the method of hypothesis is a foundational feature of classical Platonism, thought that the method as it appears in the Meno
was inferior. By contrast I maintain that the method of hypothesis - far from being a second best method, a ruse, or inferior in some other way to Plato’s preferred method - is part of Plato’s answer to Meno’s paradox. It explains how one is to proceed once the Socratic/elenctic goal of eliminating the false conceit of knowledge and the recognition of one’s own ignorance has been achieved.

The idea is this. In the elenctic dialogues Plato depicts Socrates practicing a method which in virtue of its own constraints can do no more than test the knowledge claims of his interlocutors. Socrates hopes thereby to learn from these individuals if they know what they claim to know and persuade them of their ignorance if they do not. The overriding goal of this method, however, is the acquisition of knowledge of the most important matters - knowledge of good and evil. While Socrates may hope that he will acquire this knowledge from those who have it, he is concerned more plausibly to display to his interlocutors their ignorance, so like he, they will search for the knowledge they lack. For a variety of reasons, however, Plato came to believe that such a method could have only limited success. It appeared fairly successful at uncovering an interlocutor’s false conceit of knowledge, much less successful at persuading the interlocutor of this false conceit, and a dismal failure at acquiring the knowledge which one lacked - the method’s overriding goal. Socrates (at least as depicted in the elenctic dialogues) had devoted his entire life to the practice of this method - indeed at the risk of his own life, and yet professes at his life’s end to complete and utter ignorance (at least of the most important matters).

The reasons for this failure were various. On the one hand, Socrates - again as depicted in the elenctic dialogues - was a remarkable failure at uncovering anyone who had the knowledge he, Socrates, lacked and from whom he might acquire it. Even if such wise individuals existed, Plato began to wonder whether successfully identifying them was possible (Charmides 167b-172c) or attempting to learn from them was safe (Protagoras 313c-314a). Finally, Plato worried whether it was possible to successfully search for and acquire the knowledge one lacked in any other way - a worry that gets expressed in Meno’s paradox. The
theory of recollection and the conversation with the slave boy relieve this worry; the theory of recollection provides the psychological/epistemological explanation for the possibility; the conversation with the slave boy provides an instance of it.\textsuperscript{xv} But a problem remains - what method is to be used in seeking out the knowledge one lacks, if learning from one who knows has been abandoned? The \textit{elenchos} is expressly predicated on the possibility of learning from one who knows.\textsuperscript{xvi} Socrates, who recognizes his own ignorance, approaches and tests those who claim to know, hoping to learn from them if they do. And when they do not, the best advice he can offer is to join him in the search for someone who does. But how is one to proceed when the project of learning from one who knows has been abandoned? It is this question that motivates Plato’s introduction of the method of hypothesis - or so I will argue. The method of hypothesis provides one who is ignorant of what one is searching for with a place to start, a hypothesis to examine, when no one who claims to know is any longer to be found.\textsuperscript{xvii}

This is an interesting story, one might suppose, but it is a story nonetheless. What reason should any of this be believed? That this is a reasonable interpretation of the elenctic dialogues I have argued for elsewhere.\textsuperscript{xviii} But that this is a reasonable interpretation of the role of the method of hypothesis in the \textit{Meno} is the thesis of this essay. My defense of this thesis rests on three claims. First, the method of hypothesis is distinct from the \textit{elenchos}. Second, the way in which the method of hypothesis is distinct from the \textit{elenchos} addresses at least in part the difficulty that Meno’s paradox raises for inquiry from ignorance. And finally, the method of hypothesis is actually endorsed by Plato. Most of what will follow is directed at maintaining this last claim, that Plato endorses the method of hypothesis. In the course of this discussion, the other two claims will become apparent. In the end, however, it must be admitted that the difference between the method of hypothesis and \textit{elenchos} may appear rather slight and the way in which this difference resolves the paradox may appear rather feeble. Nevertheless, Plato’s endorsement of the method in the \textit{Meno} indicates that he takes the difference to be sufficient - at least for now.\textsuperscript{xix}
In the first two sections of the paper I will rebut the suggestion that Plato’s introduction of the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* indicates that he does not endorse it. It is not introduced as a ruse, a second best method, nor in some other way inferior to Plato’s preferred method. Next, I will maintain that from *Meno* 87d2 through 100b4 Socrates and Meno employ the method of hypothesis, consisting of first, an argument *to* the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge (87d2-89c4), second an argument *from* this hypothesis (89c5-96d4), and finally, a reconsideration of the argument *to* the hypothesis (96d5-100b4). I will conclude by recapitulating the account of the method of hypothesis that has emerged over the course of this examination and by speculating on the moral to be drawn from Socrates’ disclaimer at the end of the dialogue at 100b4-6.

I. Introduction of the Method of Hypothesis (86c4-87b2)

At 86c4-5, after disclaiming the details of the methodological digression but expressing his willingness to fight for the idea that “one ought to inquire concerning those things one fails to know”, Socrates once again encourages Meno to join him in the search for the nature of virtue, knowledge of which they both lack. Meno, however, would prefer to return to the question with which the dialogue began - whether virtue is taught, or whether it comes to humans by nature or in some other way. Socrates responds as follows:

(T3) Well, if I were directing you, Meno, and not only myself, we would not have investigated whether virtue is teachable or not before we had investigated what virtue itself is; but because you do not even attempt to rule yourself, in order that you may be free, but you try to rule me and do so, I will agree with you - for what can I do? So we must, it appears, inquire into the qualities of something the nature of which we do not yet know (skeptevon ei'nai poi'ovn tiv ejstin o) mhvpw i[smen o{ti ejstivn). However, please relax your rule a little bit for me and agree to investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis (ejx uIpoqevsew~ auijto; skopei'sqai). (*Meno* 86d3-e4; Grube trans.)

With this passage Plato introduces his method of hypothesis - hardly a ringing endorsement, it has been supposed.
Many commentators maintain that Plato is here introducing the method as a second best method - second to inquiring into the nature of virtue. Meno, it is suggested, refuses to inquire according to Plato’s preferred method according to which one first investigates the nature of the thing - what the thing is (ti ejstivn) - followed by an investigation of the thing’s qualities or properties - what sort the thing is (poi’ovn tiv ejstin). Meno insists that they investigate the qualities of virtue - whether it is teachable - before they have completed an investigation of virtue’s nature. Plato depicts Socrates as proposing an alternative method - an investigation from a hypothesis - as a result of Meno’s recalcitrance. Plato’s preferred method, the suggestion goes, is an investigation from the nature of the thing, but Meno’s refusal to allow Socrates to employ that method forces Socrates to a second best method of an investigation from a hypothesis. But I am not convinced.

First, we must be careful about placing too much weight on Meno’s recalcitrance as an explanation for Plato’s introduction of the method of hypothesis. This is Plato’s dialogue after all, and if he had wanted to depict an ignorant Socrates and Meno investigating from the nature of virtue - his preferred method - he could have. Plato chose not to depict such an investigation and to appeal to Meno’s stubborness for an explanation is to get carried away by the drama of the dialogue. Of course, Plato’s reason may have been to depict how Socrates proceeded or how one is to proceed when faced with an interlocutor unwilling to follow the preferred method. But, he also may have chosen to depict Meno’s stubborness as an excuse to introduce a new method. Meno’s recalcitrance explains nothing.

Second, understanding Plato’s introduction of the method of hypothesis as a second best method assumes that Plato is taking the question under investigation to be the teachability of virtue or, more generally, how virtue is acquired. The idea is that Plato is proposing two methods of arriving at an answer to this question - first, the preferred method of an investigation from the nature of the thing, and second, the second-best method of an investigation from a hypothesis. But this is not what Socrates actually says. Socrates says he does not want to investigate the question how virtue is acquired until they first have investigated the question.
what virtue is. He does not claim to want to investigate the question how virtue is acquired by investigating what virtue is. It is true, of course, that the reason (or at least one of the reasons) Socrates would prefer to investigate what virtue is (sometimes referred to as the *ti* question) prior to investigating how virtue is acquired (sometimes referred to as the *poion* question) is that he believes that one cannot know the answer to that latter question without knowing the answer to the former; that is, knowledge of the nature of virtue is epistemically prior to the knowledge of how it is acquired. But an epistemological priority need not imply a methodological priority. It is one thing to claim that I cannot know how something is acquired until I know the nature of that thing - as Socrates suggests at the end of the dialogue; it is quite another to claim that the best method for acquiring knowledge of how something is acquired is by first investigating its nature. So, we need not think that here at (T3) Socrates is objecting to Meno on the grounds that he is failing to follow a preferred method of investigating how virtue is acquired. Socrates may simply be objecting to Meno for failing to address a more important question - because it is epistemologically prior to Meno’s question and any other question concerning virtue for that matter.

Finally, even if Plato does understand epistemological priority to entail methodological priority, we need not understand the present passage as indicating that the method of hypothesis is a second best method. Socrates asks Meno to let him at least use the method he wants - the method of hypothesis - since he will not let him investigate the question he wants - the ‘What is virtue?’ question. This does not entail that he would have failed to ask to use the method of hypothesis if Meno had permitted him to investigate the ‘What is virtue?’ question. Our current passage provides us no evidence whatsoever for how Socrates would have proceeded if Meno had permitted him to investigate what virtue is. For all we know he would have asked Meno to permit him to proceed ‘from a hypothesis’. Certainly, the method employed prior to Meno’s paradox - the *elenchos* - is unavailable. As an investigation of the nature of virtue, the discussion prior to Meno’s paradox depended on Meno’s claim to know what virtue is. It was, in part, a method of learning from one who knows. No one claiming such knowledge is any
longer available at this point in *Meno*. Indeed, if what I have suggested about the elenctic dialogues and Meno’s paradox is correct, the last third of the *Meno* is one of the few passages (outside the middle and late dialogues) we have to begin to answer the question how Socrates would have proceeded to answer the ‘What is virtue?’ question had Meno permitted him to pursue it. For it is one of the few passages we have outside the middle and late dialogues in which Socrates is depicted as investigating anything which neither he nor his interlocutor professes to know.xxxi

In sum, (T3) clearly and unambiguously testifies to three things: [1] a distinction between two questions, perhaps even two types of questions: ‘What is virtue?’ (a *tí* question) and ‘Is virtue teachable?’ (a *poion* question); [2] a Socratic preference for investigating the former question before investigating the latter question when all the participants to the discussion are ignorant of both; and [3] Meno’s agreement to use the method of hypothesis as a concession for not permitting Socrates to investigate the question he would prefer to investigate. The passage does not testify to a distinction between two methods of investigating the same question, and *a fortiori* it does not testify to a preference of one method over another. Consequently, I see no good reason to take this passage as indicating that Plato introduces the method of hypothesis as a second best method to be employed only when the interlocutor is unwilling to consider first things first. If Plato understands this method as in some way inferior to a preferred method, the evidence for this must come from elsewhere.xxxii

Let us now turn to the passage which immediately follows and in which Socrates is made to explain what he means by ‘examining from a hypothesis’. Socrates explains that he has in mind the method that geometers often use when a question is to put to them the answer to which they do not know. The geometrical example that follows has been the subject of much dispute, but some of its features seem clear.xxxiii First, as I just noted, geometers appeal to this method when they fail to know the answer to the question which is posed. As Socrates puts it, when geometers are asked whether a given area can be inscribed as a triangle within a given circle, they respond “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 (Ou[pw o\'da eij e[stin tou'to toiou'ton, ajl\· w{sper mevn tina uJpovqesin prou[rgou o\'mai e[cein pro;~ to; pra'gma)” »87a1-3; Grube trans.].

There is no suggestion here that the geometers would prefer another method. They would, no doubt, prefer to answer the question from knowledge, but in lieu of that, their preference is to answer it from a hypothesis. That is, given that to answer the question requires a genuine search for the answer, i.e., an examination from ignorance, searching from a hypothesis may prove helpful. In addition, like the case of Meno and Socrates, the question to which the geometers do not know the answer but nevertheless seek to know by means of a hypothesis is a poion question - whether a specific area has a particular property. Thus, the situation of the geometers would appear to be like that of Meno and Socrates. They are being asked to answer a poion question the answer to which they do not know. The geometers respond by attempting to answer from a hypothesis without suggesting that there is anything inadequate or undesirable about proceeding in this way - just as I have suggested Socrates recommends in the case of the teachability of virtue.

How then do the geometers proceed? Again the details are controversial, but the idea seems to be that they 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, they turn their attention to inquiring whether or not the hypothesis is true. Thus, the geometers propose to reduce the original (poion) question - can the given area be inscribed as a triangle in a given circle - to another question - whether “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 to which it is applied.” This indicates that there are two aspects of the method. First, one must determine the property such that if the given area has it the area can be so inscribed and if it does not the area cannot, i.e., one must determine what might be called the limiting conditions; and second, one must determine whether the area has that property or not, i.e., whether the limiting conditions hold.
corresponds to the two hypotheses which some have identified in this passage.\textsuperscript{xli} On the one hand, there is the hypothesis that the given area is inscribable just in case the given area is such that when one has applied it in a particular way the area has property $P$ (87a3-6); on the other hand, there is the hypothesis that the given area is such that when one applies it in a particular way the area has property $P$ (87a6-b2).\textsuperscript{xli} Having provided us with this somewhat obscure geometrical example, Plato next turns to the examination of the teachability of virtue.

II. Introduction of the Hypothesis that Virtue is Knowledge (87b2-d1)

At 87b2-4, Socrates encourages Meno to investigate the teachability of virtue in a way similar to the method of the geometers saying: “since we do not know either what it is or what qualities it possesses, let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis (ejpeidh; oujk i]smen ou]q· o{ti ejsti;n ou]q· oJpoi'ovn ti, uJpoqevmenoi aujto; skopw'men ei[te didakto;n ei[te ouj didaktovn ejstin)” »87b3-4; Grube trans.}. Notice that Socrates focuses on their mutual ignorance for justifying the appeal to the method of hypothesis rather than on Meno’s refusal to consider the ‘What is virtue?’ question. He does not suggest that since Meno is unwilling to pursue the ‘What is virtue?’ question it is appropriate to examine from a hypothesis. Rather he suggests that it is appropriate because of their complete ignorance of virtue established before Meno’s paradox. It is because they are completely ignorant of virtue - knowing neither what it is nor what qualities it possesses - that appeal to a hypothesis is appropriate. If they had known something about virtue, they might have used that as a starting point. To be sure their complete ignorance of virtue is a consequence of their ignorance of the answer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question (which Meno refuses to pursue) as a result of Socrates’ commitment to the epistemological priority of this question. But had Meno not refused to pursue this question, their situation would have been just the same - knowing neither what virtue is nor what qualities it possesses, and an appeal to a hypothesis might be just as appropriate.\textsuperscript{xlii}

As it is, Socrates begins the investigation concerning the teachability of virtue by means of a hypothesis with the following exchange:
(T5) Among the things existing in the soul, of what sort is virtue, that it should be teachable or not (Eij poi’ovn tiv ejstin tw’n peri; th;n yuch:n o[ntwn ajrethv, didakto;n a]n ei[h h] ouj didaktovn)o First, if it is another sort than knowledge (e[stin ajlloi’on h] oilon ejpisthvmh), is it teachable or not, or, as we were just saying, recollectable? Let it make no difference to us which term we use: is it teachable? Or is it plain to anyone that men cannot be taught anything but knowledge? - I think so. - But, if virtue is a kind of knowledge (ejsti;n ejpisthvmh ti~ hJ ajrethv), it is clear that it could be taught - Of course. (Meno 87b5-c7; Grube trans.)

It is sometimes claimed that Socrates here manages to turn the discussion - at least temporarily - back to the ‘What is virtue?’ question. Indeed, Bedu-Addo maintains that Socrates’ appeal to a hypothesis is simply a ruse to get Meno to consider the ti question - ‘What is virtue?’ - which he had refused to consider just a few lines earlier. Socrates is not proposing an alternative method for answering the ‘Is virtue teachable?’ question - an investigation from a hypothesis. He is instead surreptitiously returning to the method Meno has refused to pursue - the method of investigating from the nature of the thing. But, notice that the question that Socrates asks here is explicitly a poion question, not a ti question. He asks what sort of a thing is virtue such that it would be teachable or not. What quality or property of virtue is the limiting condition of its teachability? Socrates does not reduce the poion question - ‘Is virtue teachable?’ - to the ti question - ‘What is virtue?’ or ‘Is virtue knowledge?’; rather he reduces one poion question - ‘Is virtue teachable?’ - to another - ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ or ‘Is virtue a kind of knowledge?’.

Of course, one might object that whatever the words Socrates uses to phrase the questions, there is a considerable difference in kind between the claim that virtue is teachable and the claim that virtue is a kind of knowledge. The one tells us something like a property or quality of virtue; the other tells us the kind of thing virtue is. It is inappropriate to lump both these claims together as answers to poion questions. The claim that virtue is a kind of knowledge is at least more like an answer to a ti question - a ‘What is F-ness?’ question - than it is to an answer to a question about the properties or qualities of the thing. Consequently, the
exchange in (T5) does manage to move Meno closer to the question he refused to pursue back at 86c8-d2. The question, of course, is whether this feature of the passage, viz. that the question ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ is more like a ti question than the question ‘Is virtue teachable?’ has any methodological salience. I maintain that it does not.

The reason for suspecting that this feature is methodologically salient is the Socratic commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge. What Socrates is trying to do in (T5), it is supposed, is move Meno away from an epistemologically posterior question toward an epistemologically prior question. But the evidence for Socrates’ commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge indicates only that Socrates thinks that an answer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question is epistemologically prior to the ‘Is virtue teachable?’ question, not that an answer to the ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ question is epistemologically prior to the question ‘Is virtue teachable?’ Indeed, insofar as one takes Socrates as committed to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge, it is clear that he would maintain that the question ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ is epistemologically posterior to the question ‘What is virtue?’ The point is that as far as the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge is concerned, there is no reason to prefer the question ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ to the question ‘Is virtue teachable?’ Neither can be known prior to knowing the answer to ‘What is virtue?’ If it is Socrates’ commitment to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge that motivates the move away from the teachability of virtue question, Socrates should be leading Meno to ask ‘What is virtue?’, not ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ Thus, just as in the geometrical example, Plato depicts Socrates as introducing the investigation of the teachability of virtue by means of a hypothesis by attempting to reduce the teachability question to another question - the knowledge question, both of which are epistemologically posterior to the question Meno has refused to pursue back at 86c8-d2.

Next, Plato depicts Socrates as carrying out this reduction by maintaining that virtue’s being a kind of knowledge is both a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue’s teachability, just as the geometers apparently proposed a property of the area which was necessary and
sufficient for the inscription of the area. At 87c2 Socrates maintains that it is clear to all that no one can be taught anything other than knowledge; that is, Socrates maintains that knowledge is a necessary condition of teachability. At 87c5-6 he maintains that it is clear to all that if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable, i.e., knowledge is a sufficient condition of teachability. So, just as in the geometrical example, Plato depicts Socrates as establishing the reducibility of the question under investigation to another question by identifying a property - being a kind of knowledge - the possession of which is a necessary and sufficient condition of virtue’s being teachable.

Finally, we should note that again just as in the case of the geometrical example, the present passage presents us with two aspects of the method. Immediately following (T5), Plato writes:

(T6) We have dealt with that question quickly, that if it is of one kind it can be taught, if it is of a different kind it cannot. (Touvtou me;n ar[a tacu; ajphllavgmeqa, o{ti toiou'de me;n o[nto~didaktovn, toiou'de d· ou[.) ... The next point to consider seems to be whether virtue is knowledge or something else. (To; dh; meta; tou'to, wJ~ e[oike, dei’ skevyasqai povterovn ejstin ejpisthvmh hJ ajreth; h] ajlloi'on ejpisthvmh~.) (Meno 87c8-d1; Grube trans.) Here Plato distinguishes between the process of identifying the question to which the question of virtue’s teachability is to be reduced from the process of investigating the answer to this question. That is, Plato distinguishes between the process of determining the limiting conditions and the process of determining whether the limiting conditions hold, just as in the geometrical example. Indeed, these two aspects of the method have found their way into the literature as a dispute over whether the hypothesis under consideration is ‘Virtue is teachable just in case it is knowledge’ or ‘Virtue is knowledge.’ Robinson in the first edition, supported much later by Zyskind, Sternfeld, and Stokes, argued for the former. In the second edition, Robinson reversed his position as a consequence of the arguments of Cherniss and Friedlaender, followed by a host of others, and defended the position that the latter - ‘Virtue is knowledge’ is the hypothesis under consideration. But the debate is a red-herring. Plato clearly allows more than one proposition to be labelled a hypothesis. In just a few lines Plato will have Socrates
explicitly call yet a third proposition - that virtue is good - a hypothesis; (87d3). Consequently, it is much less important to determine which of the propositions - that virtue is teachable just in case it is knowledge, or that virtue is knowledge - Plato takes to be the hypothesis to be employed in this particular application of the method, than it is to recognize that both aspects of the method illustrated in the geometrical example are illustrated here as well. The method of hypothesis apparently consists of first establishing the limiting conditions and then considering whether the limiting conditions are met.

Thus far, then there is nothing in the dialogue that indicates that Plato is in any way dissatisfied with the method of hypothesis as it is introduced here in the Meno. Plato introduces it as a method to be followed when all parties are ignorant of the matter under investigation and as the method endorsed in similar circumstances by the geometers. Moreover, the application of the method - as an attempt to investigate whether virtue is teachable - precisely parallels the geometrical example he cited to illustrate the method. It begins by [1] reducing the question under investigation to another question, both of which are unknowable prior to knowing the answer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question which Meno has refused to pursue (given Socrates’ commitment to the epistemological priority of definitional knowledge). It carries out the reduction by [2] identifying a property whose possession is necessary and sufficient for the possession of the property under consideration in the original question. It seeks to identify a property whose possession is necessary and sufficient for something to possess the property of teachability. Finally, [3] it distinguishes between the process of identifying such a property, what we have called the limiting conditions, from the process of determining whether the thing possesses that property, i.e., determining whether the limiting conditions hold. That Plato should endorse the method of hypothesis as a method to be followed when all parties to the investigation are ignorant of the matter under investigation is precisely what we should expect at this point in the dialogue if the story I told at the beginning of this essay is true. After proposing an affirmative answer to the question whether it is possible to acquire the Socratic goal of knowledge in circumstances of mutual ignorance, by presenting the theory of recollection and
the conversation with the slave boy, Plato now proposes a method for acquiring it - the method of hypothesis. Of course, if Plato goes on in the remainder of the dialogue to abandon the method in favor of some other method - for example, if Plato reverts to the *elenchos* as some have thought⁴⁴ - then the story will have been refuted, or at least seriously damaged. It is one thing to fail to disparage the method as in some way inferior to his preferred method. It is another thing to actually endorse it by employing it. We have seen that Plato fails to disparage it. We are about to see that he goes on to employ it.

### III. Examining Hypotheses: *Phaedo* 101d1-102a1

In what follows I want to briefly sketch an interpretation of the remainder of the *Meno* according to which it is read as the continued application of the method of hypothesis begun in the passages we have already examined. The argument will be necessarily brief, but its aim is to dispel the notion that Plato has Socrates abandon the method of hypothesis as a way of proceeding from mutual ignorance. I will argue that the remainder of the *Meno* consists in an application of the second of the two processes of the method of hypothesis described in the geometrical example. It consists, that is, in an attempt to determine whether the limiting condition - that virtue is knowledge - holds. At (T5) Plato depicts Socrates as establishing the limiting condition of the question whether virtue is teachable: It is teachable just in case it is knowledge. (T6) makes clear that this part of the method has come to an end. The next step - Socrates explains - is to determine whether the limiting condition holds. It is to this task that the remainder of the *Meno* is devoted. Unfortunately, the geometrical example provides very little information on how this second process is to be carried out. Consequently, before turning to what follows in the *Meno*, it will be useful to turn to a passage in the *Phaedo*.

A second passage that has dominated the discussion of the method of hypothesis is *Phaedo* 99c-102a. This passage is just as obscure as the passages in the *Meno* and now is not the time to begin a careful study of the *Phaedo*.⁴⁵ But a central passage in Plato’s discussion of hypothesis in the *Phaedo* is the following:
(T7) But you, ..., would cling (ejcovmeno~) to the safety of your own hypothesis (tou' ajsfalou'~ th'~ uJpoqevsew~) and give that answer. If someone then attacked (e[coito) your hypothesis itself (aujth'~ th'~ uJpoqevsew~), 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 (ta; ajp· ejkeivnh~ oJrmhqevnta skevyaiio ei[ soi ajllhvloi~ sumfwnei' h] diafwnei'). And when you must give an account (didovnai lovgon) of your hypothesis itself you will proceed in the same way: you will assume another hypothesis (a[llhn au\ uJpovqesin uJpoqevmeno~), the one which seems to you best of the higher ones (h{ti~ tw'n a[nwqen beltivsth faivnoito) until you come to something acceptable (ijkano;n), but you will not jumble the two as the debaters do by discussing the hypothesis and its consequences at the same time (periv te th'~ ajrch'~ dialogovmeno~ kai; tw'n ejx ejkeivnh~ wJrmhmevnwn), if you wish to discover the truth (tw'n o[ntwn). (Phd. 101d1- e3; Grube trans.)

There are a number of difficult questions surrounding this passage. One thing, however, seems reasonably clear. Plato is envisioning two different procedures one should employ in examining or investigating the truth of a proposed hypothesis: First, one should examine whether the consequences of the hypothesis agree with one another - whatever precisely that means. And second, one should attempt to derive the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis, and that hypothesis from a yet ‘higher’ hypothesis, and so on until one reaches something ‘adequate’ - again whatever precisely that means. If we assume that the hypothesis here refers to what we have been describing as the limiting conditions in the Meno, then Plato has provided an account - however vague and obscure - of how one should go about determining whether the limiting conditions hold: [1] examine whether the consequences of the limiting conditions agree with one another, and [2] derive the limiting conditions from other - ‘higher’ - limiting conditions until one reaches something ‘adequate’. The difficulty, of course, concerns what precisely these two procedures consist in. I propose that Meno 89d2-96d4 can help with
this difficulty. \textit{Meno 87d2-89c4} provides an example of the second procedure (an argument \textit{to} the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ one), while 89c5-96d4 provides an example of the first (an argument \textit{from} the hypothesis) - or at least so I will argue.\textsuperscript{lix}

\textbf{IV. An Argument \textit{to} the Hypothesis (87d2-89c4)}

Immediately following Socrates’ encouragement to inquire whether virtue is a kind of knowledge, Plato writes the following:

\begin{quote}
(T8) \textit{Well now, do we say that virtue is itself something good, and will this hypothesis stand firm for us, that it is something good? (}\textit{a\ll\lo t\i\ hi\ a\i\g\a\q\o\n f\a\m\e\n e\i\nai t\i\n a\i\r\e\t\h\v\n, k\a\i; a\u\{t\i\ n\j\p\o\v\q\e\s\i\ m\e\v\n\i\i\n, a\i\g\a\q\o\n a\u\j\t\o; e\i\n\a\i\t\i\n\i\n) ... If then there is anything else good that is different and separate from knowledge, virtue might well not be a kind of knowledge; but if there is nothing good that knowledge does not encompass, we would be right to suspect that it is a kind of knowledge. (}\textit{O\u\j\k\o\'n e\i\n t\i\v t\i\n e\j\s\t\i\t a\i\g\a\q\o\n k\a\i; a\l\l\l\o c\w\r\i\z\o\v\m\e\n\o\n e\j\p\i\s\t\h\v\m\h~, t\a\c\v\c\; a\n e\i\h \j\h \a\j\r\e\t; o\u\j\k e\j\p\i\s\t\h\v\m\h t\i\h d\i; m\h\d\e\v\n e\j\s\t\i\t a\i\g\a\q\o\n o\}\ o\u\j\k e\j\p\i\s\t\h\v\m\h p\e\r\i\e\v\c\e\i, e\j\p\i\s\t\h\v\m\h n a\n t\i\n a\u\j\t\o; u\j\p\o\t\e\u\v\c\o\n t\i~ e\i\n\a\i o\j\r\w\'~ u\j\p\o\t\e\u\v\c\o\n\i\n.) (}\textit{Meno 87d2-88\E Grube trans.})
\end{quote}

Here Plato appears to be recommending the second of the two procedures he describes in the \textit{Phaedo} for examining the hypothesis (or determining whether the limiting conditions hold).

First, he hypothesizes a ‘higher’ proposition - that virtue is good - which he explicitly refers to as a hypothesis. He indicates its ‘adequacy’ by explaining that it is a hypothesis that will ‘stand firm for us’. It is not completely clear what the force of ‘standing firm for us’ is supposed to be, but one is reminded of the image of the statues of Daedalus which Plato employs near the end of the dialogue. Socrates is made to explain that knowledge is more valuable than true belief because true belief, like the unchained statues of Daedalus and unlike knowledge, runs away and does not remain for long (\textit{p\o\l\u\n; n d\e; c\r\o\v\n o\u\j\k e\j\q\e\v\l\o\s\i p\a\r\a\m\e\v\n\e\i\n, a\j\l\l\a; d\r\a\p\e\t\e\u\v\c\o\u\s\i e\j\k t\h~ y\u\c\h~ t\o\u\ a\j\n\q\r\w\v\p\o\u\E 98a1-2}). The idea seems to be that a proposition that stands firm, remains, or does not run away from us is one that in some sense is
better confirmed, more evident, or more stable than one that does not. Perhaps, it is not likely to be abandoned in the face of contrary beliefs or recalcitrant evidence.\textsuperscript{lx}

Second, Plato has Socrates attempt to derive the ‘lower’ hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge from the ‘higher’ stable hypothesis. He does this by attempting to reduce the ‘Is virtue knowledge?’ question to the ‘Is virtue good?’ question. Plato provides an argument that states of the soul are good just in case they are led by or in some other way associated with knowledge. Plato attempts to establish an equivalency between the property of being good, at least when it is possessed by ‘things in the soul’, and the property of being in some way associated with knowledge. Socrates repeatedly claims both that when ‘something in the soul’ is associated with knowledge it is good, and that when it is not associated with knowledge it is not good.\textsuperscript{lxi} He does this despite the fact that all Plato needs for the purposes of the argument is that being associated with knowledge is a necessary condition for being good.

Having established to his satisfaction (at least for now) this equivalency between the property of being good and the property of being in some way associated with knowledge, Socrates concludes

\begin{itemize}
  \item (T9) So, virtue is knowledge, either in whole or in part. (Fronhsin a[ra fame;n ajreth;n ei\nai, h[toi suvmpasan h] mevro~ tiÊ) \textit{(Meno 89a3-4)}\textsuperscript{lxii}
\end{itemize}

And, so virtue is teachable.

\begin{itemize}
  \item (T10) Necessarily, as I now think, Socrates, and clearly, on our first hypothesis, if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught. (Dokei' moi h[dh ajnagkai'on ei\naiò kai; dh'lon, w\ Swvkrate~, kata; th;n uJpovqesin, ei\elper ejpisthvmh ejsti;n ajrethv, o{ti didaktovn ejstin. ) \textit{(Meno 89c2-4; Grube trans.)}
\end{itemize}

Whatever we think of the argument here - and certainly neither Plato’s commitment to it nor its logical structure are unambiguous, Socrates appears to be practicing the second of the two procedures he describes in the \textit{Phaedo}. He postulates a proposition that is in some way ‘adequate’ and derives the original proposition from it. Indeed, this is just the method of hypothesis employed on the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge. One first aims to reduce the
original question, now whether virtue is a kind of knowledge, to another question. That is, one
determines the limiting conditions on virtue’s being a kind of knowledge. Then, one seeks to
determine whether those limiting conditions hold. The difference lies in that the truth of the
question to which the original question has been reduced - i.e., whether virtue is good - is in
some way given, confirmed, or stable, i.e ‘adequate’. Consequently, determining that the new
limiting conditions hold is (at least provisionally) unnecessary.

V. An Argument from the Hypothesis (89c5-96d4)

Of course, that the argument from 87d2 to 89c4 represents the second of the two
procedures described in the Phaedo - an argument to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ one - has
been maintained before. But, it is sometimes thought that the method of hypothesis here in
the Meno comes to a conclusion with this procedure. At 89c5, it is suggested, Plato has
Socrates return to the question whether virtue can be taught, and examines it not from a
hypothesis, but by means of an elenchos or in some other way. However, the question whether
virtue is knowledge, i.e. whether the limiting condition of virtue’s teachability holds, has not
been abandoned. This is clear from the following passage with which Plato introduces the next
portion of the dialogue. He writes:

(T11) I am not saying that it is wrong to say that virtue is teachable if it is knowledge
(to; me;n ga;r didakto;n aui[to; ei\nai, ei[per ejpisthvmh ejstivn, oujk ajnativqemai
mh; ouj kalw’~ levgesqai), but look whether it is reasonable of me to doubt
whether it is knowledge (o{ti de; oujk e{stin ejpisthvmh, skevyai ejavn soi dokw’
eijkovtw~ ajpistei’n). 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.)

Socrates here maintains that what he is doubting is not that virtue is teachable, but the hypothesis
that virtue is a kind of knowledge. Virtue’s being a kind of knowledge remains the topic of
investigation. Socrates has not abandoned the method of hypothesis and begun a different
procedure for addressing the question whether virtue is teachable. He is still examining whether
the limiting conditions hold. But, then, why does Socrates express doubt concerning virtue’s being a kind of knowledge? Hasn’t that issue already been resolved? Apparently not, since Socrates is about to show that the hypothesis or limiting condition that virtue is a kind of knowledge has consequences that in some way fail to harmonize with one another. That is to say, the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge runs afoul of the first procedure for examining a hypothesis described in the *Phaedo*.

To see this we must quickly look at the structure of the argument from 89c5 to 96d4. At (T11) Plato makes clear that an immediate consequence of the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge is that virtue is teachable. This is of course not surprising. The hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge was originally introduced precisely because it had that consequence. The hypothesis was introduced because Plato had argued that being a kind of knowledge was necessary and sufficient for something to be teachable, and here Plato employs the sufficiency claim. But Plato also indicates at (T11) that a consequence of this consequence is that there should be teachers and pupils of virtue. Thereupon, Socrates embarks on a long argument (89d-96d) - first with Anytus (90a-95a) and then with Meno (95a-96d) - to the effect that there are no teachers or pupils of virtue, and consequently that virtue is not teachable, and so not a kind of knowledge. This argument has been roundly criticised and now is not the time to enter into this debate. But the structure of the argument is reasonably clear.

The discussion with Anytus first establishes that Anytus does not believe that the Sophists are teachers of virtue, and then argues against Anytus’ view that the kaloi; kajgaqoi; are. The argument relies roughly on three claims:

1. If any of the kaloi; kajgaqoi; were teachers of virtue, Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles, and Thucydides would have been.
2. If Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles, and Thucydides had been teachers of virtue, they would have taught their sons to be good.
3. The sons of Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles, and Thucydides were not good.
The discussion with Meno appears to consist of two arguments, one directed at the failure of both the Sophists and the kaloi; kajgaqoi; as teachers of virtue and the second directed solely at the Sophists. The first depends on the claim that [4] the teachers of every other subject matter never disagree over whether their subject matter can be taught (96b3-4), and yet [5] both the Sophists and the kaloi; kajgaqoi; disagree over the teachability of virtue (95b4-5 & 95b9-c8). The second depends on the claim that [6] the teachers of every other subject matter are recognized as teachers of that subject matter and skilled in that subject matter (96a6-b1), and yet as the discussion with Anytus has made clear [7] the Sophists are not so recognized. Socrates concludes this portion of the dialogue by securing Meno’s agreement to the proposition that [8] only sophists and kaloi; kajgaqoi; are potential teachers of virtue (Oujkou’n eij mhvte oij sofistai; mhvte oij aujtoi; kaloi; kajgaqoi; o[nте- didavskaloiv eijsi tou’ pravgmato-, dh’lon o{ti oujk a]n a[lloi geÉ 96b6-8). Consequently, there are no teachers or pupils of virtue (96c6-8).

And so, given the consequence of virtue’s teachability mentioned in (T11) that there should be teachers and pupils of virtue, it follows that virtue cannot be taught (ÆAreth; a[ra oujk a]n ei[h didaktovnÉ 96c10), and that virtue is not a kind of knowledge.

If I am right in suggesting that this portion of the Meno corresponds to the first of the two procedures for examining a hypothesis described in the Phaedo, we can begin to see what it is for the consequences of a hypothesis to ‘agree with another or contradict one another’. A consequence of the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge, viz. that there are teachers and pupils of virtue, conflicts with a variety of other propositions concerning virtue and its teachability - in short, that only the sophists and kaloi; kajgaqoi; are potential teachers of virtue, and yet neither actually are teachers of virtue. But why should we think that these last propositions (more accurately, propositions [1] through [8]) and the proposition that there are teachers and pupils of virtue are all ‘consequences of the hypothesis’ (ta; aip · ejkeivnh- oJrmhqvnta) that virtue is a kind of knowledge? The idea must be that the ‘consequences of the hypothesis’ are all those beliefs, assumptions, or common opinions (endoxa) appropriately associated with virtue and knowledge, the two component concepts of the hypothesis. As
such, this procedure for examining the hypothesis is at best provisional. For Plato has given us no reason to think that we should take the premises of the argument in this portion of the dialogue - [1] through [8] - as in any way more secure or stable than the hypothesis itself. But its provisional nature should be no obstacle to understanding the procedure as a component of the method of hypothesis. The provisional nature of the method of hypothesis is recognized in the Phaedo both in describing the procedure to the higher hypothesis as proceeding to something ‘adequate’ (iJkano;n) and at the conclusion of the argument for the immortality of the soul at 107b4-9. Moreover, its provisional nature is quite appropriate given a distinction between methodological priority and epistemological priority. Until one acquires the knowledge of the epistemically prior item, any results one reaches by any means will be provisional. If I am right that Plato is illustrating the method of hypothesis in the last third of the Meno, Plato underscores its provisional nature at the end of the dialogue (100b4-6).

In addition, it is easy to see why this portion of the Meno might be confused with the method of elenchos. The elenchos too proceeds by investigating whether a given proposition is consistent with a variety of propositions appropriately related to it. But there are at least two differences. First, in an elenchos the initial proposition - what I have labeled elsewhere as the apparent refutand - is always put forward as a knowledge claim. But this is not the case here in the Meno. No one here claims to know that virtue is a kind of knowledge. Certainly neither Meno nor Socrates do. Thus, while the elenchos is a test of knowledge, the method of hypothesis is not. Second, a necessary and sufficient condition for a premise to be accepted into an elenchos is that the premises are believed by the interlocutor. But again, no such requirement is in force here in the Meno. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons Plato has Anytus take part in this discussion. It underscores the fact that one can engage in this procedure with more than one interlocutor at a time - something that cannot be done given the requirements of premise acceptability in the elenchos. If, however, these differences between the elenchos and the argument in this portion of the Meno appear problematic or too insignificant, we still have no reason to suppose that Plato has abandoned the method of hypothesis. The argument of this
portion of the dialogue precisely mirrors the first of the two procedures outlined in the *Phaedo*. If Socrates is made to return to the *elenchos* in this portion of the dialogue as some have supposed, he has not thereby abandoned the method of hypothesis. Rather, the *elenchos* has become a component of the method of hypothesis.  

VI. **A Reconsideration of the Argument to the Hypothesis (96d5-100b4)**

Further evidence that we are still within the confines of the method of hypothesis is immediately available in the next portion of the dialogue. For, having provided an argument to the effect that the limiting condition holds, i.e., that virtue is a kind of knowledge, immediately followed by an argument that it does not, i.e., that virtue is not a kind of knowledge, Plato depicts Socrates as returning to the argument that it holds, i.e., the argument to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis. Socrates doubts the soundness of this argument. He says that he does not doubt that virtuous men are beneficial (96e7-97a1), or that right guidance is necessary for something to be beneficial (97a3-4), but he doubts that they were right to agree earlier that knowledge is necessary for right use (97a6-7). He proposes that true belief is sufficient for right use. The idea seems to be that when the outcomes of the two procedures for examining a proposed hypothesis described in the *Phaedo* conflict, - when, that is, one procedure confirms the hypothesis and the other falsifies it - one should re-examine those arguments. Upon re-examination, Socrates professes to have found a flaw in the first argument. It incorrectly assumed that knowledge was necessary for right use. The argument that confirmed the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge was flawed.

Following a digression in which Socrates explains to Meno why knowledge nevertheless is more valuable than true belief, Plato presents the final argument of the dialogue to the effect that virtue is acquired by divine dispensation. It is not clear how we are to understand this argument. But, two features of it should not escape our notice. First, the argument that virtue is not acquired by nature from 98b7-98d5 ([1]-[5]) is a shortened and revised (in light of the rejection of the assumption that knowledge is necessary for right use) version of the argument to the hypothesis found at 87d2-89c4. Second, the argument that virtue is not a kind of knowledge
from 98d10-98e8 ([6]-[10]) is a shortened version of the argument from the hypothesis found at 89c5-96d4. Socrates concludes by synthesizing the results of these two shortened and (in the first case) modified arguments on behalf of the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge.

Good people, according to Socrates, in fact have true belief, and so virtue is acquired by divine dispensation (99b5-100a2). Consequently, even here at the virtual conclusion of the dialogue one is hard-pressed to maintain that the method of hypothesis has been entirely abandoned. Of course, it must be admitted that Plato goes considerably beyond anything we can find in other dialogues by appearing to endorse the idea that when the results of the two examinations conflict one should identify the flaw in the examinations and - as it were - synthesize the results. And so, taking this final argument to fall within the confines of the method of hypothesis is quite speculative. But whether or not we do seems to me to depend on considerations unrelated to Plato’s understanding of the method of hypothesis. It depends on whether one takes Plato to be endorsing the view that virtue is acquired by divine dispensation. Let me try to explain.

The *Phaedo* presents us with two procedures for investigating the truth of a hypothesis or limiting conditions, what I have been calling an argument to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis and an argument from the hypothesis. The suggestion is that when both these procedures confirm the hypothesis, the hypothesis should be accepted (at least provisionally). But there is no indication of what should be done if the two procedures have conflicting results, as is the case in the *Meno*. If we take the last third of the *Meno* to be an application of the method of hypothesis, as I have argued we should, then we have an indication of how to proceed. Plato appears to recommend that when the results of the two procedures conflict one should re-examine the soundness of the two arguments. But whether Plato is endorsing the identification of the flaw in the argument to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ one at 87d2-89c4, and so endorsing the synthesis of the two arguments modified in light of this flaw is a question that has vexed numerous commentators.

Many readers of the *Meno* have recognized that the conclusion of this final argument appears to conflict with the view apparently endorsed in other (generally elenctic) dialogues that
knowledge is necessary for virtue. This has led some commentators, who take Plato to be endorsing the identification of the flaw in the first argument and the synthesis of the two appropriately modified arguments, to maintain that here in the *Meno* Plato is changing his view. He no longer maintains that knowledge is necessary for virtue, but allows that true belief may be sufficient. On this interpretation, synthesizing the results of the two appropriately modified arguments may be plausibly seen as a further application of the method of hypothesis. On the other hand, other commentators have maintained that Plato does not endorse this final argument. They argue that the flaw in the two arguments is not the one Plato explicitly and disingenuously targets, i.e., that knowledge is necessary for right use, but one Plato only hints at, i.e., that ‘teaching’ is being used equivocally. In this case, it is the second argument that Plato genuinely thinks is flawed, and once the flaw is exposed, the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge escapes unscathed. Since I am inclined on other grounds to accept this latter interpretation of the Plato’s final argument, I am not yet ready to commit Plato to endorsing a synthetic procedure like the one he portrays at the end of the *Meno* as a component of the method of hypothesis. Whether Plato is so committed must await a resolution of this more general issue. In either case, however, we have no reason to doubt Plato’s general endorsement of the method of hypothesis as a way of proceeding to the goal of acquiring knowledge in the face of mutual ignorance. Either Plato takes the argument *from* the hypothesis to be flawed in which case the method of hypothesis has established (at least provisionally) that virtue is teachable, or Plato takes the argument *to* the hypothesis to be flawed and so endorses a synthetic procedure as a component of the method of hypothesis.

VII. Conclusion

In this essay, then, I hope to have advanced the case that the method of hypothesis is put forward by Plato in the *Meno* as part of his answer to Meno’s paradox. It is put forward and endorsed as a method to employ in order to acquire the knowledge of an answer to a specific question when no one who already possesses that knowledge is to be found. Plato proposes that one first reduce the target question to another question (by identifying a property necessary and
sufficient for the original property to be possessed by the relevant subject), and then proceed to examine whether the subject has this reduced property. Plato recommends in the *Phaedo* two procedures to be employed for carrying out this latter examination - what I have called an argument *to* the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis and an argument *from* the hypothesis - both of which Plato employs in the last third of the *Meno*. And, in the *Meno* Plato suggests that when the results of these two arguments conflict one should re-examine the soundness of those arguments. In the course of this discussion, it has emerged that the method of hypothesis differs from the *elenchos* in at least two ways. The *elenchos* has no obvious counter-parts to the process of identifying the limiting conditions nor to the process of determining whether the limiting conditions hold by arguing *to* the hypothesis from a ‘higher’, more stable hypothesis. These differences, however, may obscure a more fundamental difference. The *elenchos* has no way of considering unprofessed answers. Put differently, it cannot examine a question. It can only examine an answer. This is as it should be given its aim of examining knowledge claims. But what is needed in response to Meno’s paradox is a strategy for examining questions and the method of hypothesis looks to be explicitly motivated by addressing that need. In the end, however, the method of hypothesis appears to depend for its success on the beliefs of the interlocutors involved - in spite of its talk of hypotheses that are ‘higher’ or more stable. To this extent it, then, it seems to be only a marginal advance upon the *elenchos*. What is needed is a way of recognizing the truth of these beliefs. Consequently, it is not clear how successful Plato thinks the application of the method in the *Meno* has been. The method of hypothesis may provide Plato with a method for proceeding in the quest for knowledge in the face of genuine, complete, and mutual ignorance, but it appears to leave untouched the difficulty of recognizing when it has been successful. This appears to be the role of the theory of recollection and, perhaps, the unhypothetical first principle of the *Republic*. Perhaps this is what Plato means to be suggesting at the end of the dialogue when he writes:

(T12) We will know clearly concerning this [that virtue comes to us by divine dispensation] when before we attempt to seek how virtue comes about in men, we attempt to seek what virtue
While the method of hypothesis provides a way of proceeding in the face of ignorance, its results can be no more than provisional as long as knowledge of what is epistemically prior has yet to be acquired. Nevertheless, in the *Meno* Plato appears to be recommending the method of hypothesis as a reasonable strategy for seeking such knowledge.\footnote{Meno 100b4-6}

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Notes

The historical and developmental claims have been the subject of substantial debate, especially since Vlastos’ bold and extreme expressions of them in Vlastos 1991. According to Vlastos, the philosophical views found in the elenctic dialogues and those found in the middle dialogues could not have simultaneously inhabited the brain of anyone other than a schizophrenic. Indeed, bold and extreme expressions, for which Vlastos is justly famous, while perhaps less likely to be true are productive of lively, healthy, and productive debates. I confess here to a more moderate version of these claims of the sort expressed by the likes of Brickhouse and Smith 1994, Irwin 1995, and Nehamas 1999, to name a few. (Cf. Benson 2000, 7-10.) For the purposes of this essay, however, it makes no difference whether Plato’s introduction of Meno’s paradox, the theory of recollection, and the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is a consequence of his philosophical development, his desire to distance himself from the philosophical views of the historical Socrates, or his piecemeal display of a fully worked-out philosophical theory. What is important is that these three features occur in the *Meno* together, and one wants to know how - if at all - they are related. - By the elenctic dialogues I mean those dialogues which have also been described as ‘early’ or ‘aporetic’: Apology, Charmides, Crito, euthydemus, euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, and Protagoras.

\footnote{For a defense of this way of reading the elenctic dialogues see, for example, Benson 2000.}

\footnote{See *Meno* 84a-c.}
ivThe sincerity of Meno’s profession of ignorance is, I believe, indicated by his claim to be numbed not simply in his tongue, but also in his mind. See Benson 1990, 138 n. 28 and Benson 1989.

vFor the claim that Socrates’ version of the paradox is not significantly different than Meno’s see Nehamas 1985 and White 1976. All translation are my own unless otherwise noted.

viiNeither of these features can be easily discerned in the elenctic dialogues. There may be a hint of the method of hypothesis at Charmides 169a-175d (see Kahn 1996, 184 and Weiss 2001, 131), and perhaps Euthyphro’s reference to the statues of Daedalus at 11b6-e2 foreshadows the theory of recollection as described at Meno 97d6-98a5, but otherwise I can find no hint of these two features in the elenctic dialogues. By contrast, they play important roles in the Phaedo, Republic, and Phaedrus, dialogues which are associated with classical Platonism.

viiiEven Jenks 1992, 328-329 who thinks that Plato does not take the theory of recollection seriously would agree that the substance of Socrates’ solution to Meno’s paradox is contained in the conversation with the slave boy which is proffered as an illustration of the theory. Pace Weiss 2001.

ix“I would not confidently assert the other things said in defense of this account, but that we would be better and braver and less idle if we believe that one ought to inquire concerning those things he fails to know than if one believes it is not possible to discover nor necessary to inquire concerning those things one fails to know (οἵτινες ψευδείς δείχνει είναι γέλαται και άναιρετοί και ἡττον αἰρετοί; ἡ δέ εἰσιν εἰσνομέτρηται mhde; dunato;n ei'rei'n mhde; dei'n zhte'i'n), I would fight for in both word and deed as far as I am able.” (Meno 86b6-c2)

ixSee, for example, Gonzalez 1998, 10: “In this study I challenge both of these general assumptions by arguing that the dialectic practiced in the ‘aporetic’ dialogues is positive and constructive despite the lack of propositional results, that this dialectic is itself in some sense the ‘solution,’ rather than a mere tool for arriving at a solution, and that the method of hypothesis, which is so admired by modern interpreters for its modest ability to deduce propositions, is in the dialogues consistently considered inferior to this dialectic or ‘second-best’. Thus this study at different points challenges all sides of the current disputes within the ‘developmentalist’ interpretation.” See also Seeskin 1993.
See, for example, Bedu-Addo 1984, 3: “The introduction of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’ is really a subterfuge on the part of Socrates to ensure the continuity of Meno’s recollection of the nature of virtue; ...”

See Robinson 1953, 121: “On the theory of this chapter, hypothetical method as Plato conceived it in his *Meno* is not very like Platonic hypothetical method in general ... It contains, indeed, something which the speakers call ‘hypothesizing’, and it contains deduction; but the deduction is almost wholly to the hypothesis instead of from it, and the elements of provisionality and approximation seem to be absent, or present only in the sense that the same question is answered first in the affirmative and then in negative. ... [Nevertheless] with the introduction of this method he is passing from destructive to constructive thinking, from elenchus and the refutation of other men’s views to the elaboration of positive views of his own.”

For the argument that the acquisition of knowledge of good and evil is the overriding goal of the elenctic method see Benson 2000, 23, 25-26, 29, and 180-185. In brief, I take Socrates seriously when he maintains at *Apology* 22b5 that he examines others claims to wisdom hoping to learn from them if they have the wisdom they claim to have and hoping to persuade them of their ignorance if they do not. Socrates is sincere when he claims to examine others’ professed wisdom. He does not begin with the assumption that they do not have the wisdom they profess. Rather he discovers by means of the *elenchos* that they do not.

But I do not think that Socrates or Plato thought that knowledge of the most important matters was impossible for humans to obtain, *pace* Weiss 2001, 9-10 most recently. Now, however is not the time to argue the point. See Benson 2000, 181-185.

See Benson forthcoming.

*Pace* Weiss 2001 who denies that the theory of recollection represents Socrates’ (or Plato’s) own beliefs and sees the conversation with the slave boy as a farce.

See Benson 2000 17-31 and more recently Benson 2002.

I should note in passing that no part of this story requires a commitment to developmentalism. While I have used phrases like ‘Plato began to worry’, for all this story requires these worries may have plagued Plato from childhood or he may have been able to resolve them from day one. I find it more likely, however, that Plato fell under the spell of the Socratic method which he depicts in the elenctic dialogues, began to notice difficulties with that method,
and developed solutions to those difficulties which are contained in the so-called middle dialogues. Whether Plato had these worries or their solutions in mind at the time of writing the elenctic dialogues is an issue that cannot be addressed without addressing Plato’s motivations for writing the dialogues in toto. I have little to offer on behalf of this issue (in part because I am skeptical that we have much evidence one way or the other) other than to assume that at least part of Plato’s motivation was to express his views. For two different accounts of Plato’s motivations see Vlastos 1991 and Kahn 1996.

Some of these issues appear to get addressed in the middle books of the Republic. I do not believe that Plato had the views of the Republic in mind at the time he wrote the Meno, but I will not argue that point here since it does not effect the present argument.

It has been common to see the Meno as falling into three parts: (1) an attempt to answer the ‘What is virtue?’ question (70a-79e), (2) a methodological digression, containing Meno’s paradox, the theory of recollection, the conversation with the slave boy, and an argument for the immortality of the soul (80a-86c), and (3) the discussion concerning the teachability of virtue (86c-100a). In addition some commentators have taken the first and third portions of the Meno to be paralleled by the first and second halves of the conversation with the slave boy (82a-84a & 84d-85d). See, for example, Brown 1967. I too recognize this parallel, although I am not persuaded that Plato employs the method of hypothesis in the second half of the conversation with the slave boy. As I will indicate below, the method of hypothesis is only one of the methods Plato endorses for searches from ignorance; see n. 34.

In describing the middle portion of the dialogue (80a-86c) as a methodological digression I do not here mean to suggest that it is irrelevant to the dialogue’s main questions, i.e. ‘What is virtue?’ and ‘How is virtue obtained?’ For those who think the passage contains the answer to at least this last question see, for example, Bluck 1964, 320-321, and perhaps Devereux 1978. At the surface level, however, it is presented as a digression.

See 80d1-4.

See Bedu-Addo 1984, 1: “On the strength of this passage scholars have sometimes all too readily assumed that the following argument ‘from a hypothesis’ marks the abandonment of the enquiry into the nature of virtue, and that it has nothing whatever to do with recollection and the search for the definition of virtue in the dialogue.” He cites

In describing Plato’s alleged preferred method of investigation as an investigation from the nature of a thing I have in mind the fact that the overriding investigation in the *Meno* is an investigation whether virtue is teachable. Plato’s alleged preferred method is to first investigate the nature of virtue and then use the results of this investigation to investigate whether it is teachable. Consequently, the investigation concerning virtue’s teachability is from the nature of virtue, as opposed to an investigation from a hypothesis concerning what sort of thing virtue is.

As I understand it, this is Weiss’ explanation; Weiss 2001.

This is often taken to be a hypothesis concerning the nature of x, but as we will see this is not the method that Plato depicts Socrates as employing in the *Meno*.

See Benson 1990.

One might here think of Aristotle’s distinction between things more knowable in nature and things more knowable to us. (See, for example, Physics I.1 184a.)

Indeed, at the beginning of the dialogue when the priority of the *ti* question is first introduced, it is not introduced as a methodological priority. When Meno asks Socrates to say how virtue is acquired, Socrates responds that he is so far from knowing the answer to that question that he doesn’t even know what virtue is. Meno is surprised to learn that Socrates professes ignorance of this, thinking that the nature of virtue is not difficult to know, and Socrates encourages Meno to tell him what virtue is at 71d6-8. Socrates does not here ask Meno to tell him what virtue is so that they can answer the question how it is acquired. The question how virtue is acquired has been shelved, while Socrates tests Meno’s knowledge of the nature of virtue - a test which as we all know Meno fails.

Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 55-60 argue that the many of the passages in the elenctic dialogues which have been cited on behalf of epistemological priority are really better understood as evidence for procedural priority. But I am not persuaded by their argument. For example: they cite *Euthyphro* 6d9-11, *Laches* 191e10-11, *Laches* 192b5-8, and three passages from the *Meno* (73c6-8, 75a4-5, 77a5-9) as evidence for their procedural principle. But all of
these passages come from portions of the dialogues in which the relevant interlocutor claims to know the answer to the *ti* question. So, they may provide evidence on how to proceed to answer a question the answer to which one claims to know, but they fail to provide evidence for how to proceed to answer a question the answer to which none of the present interlocutors claim to know, as is the case at this point in the *Meno*.

It also, of course, was a method of testing whether Meno did in fact know.

A passage which is sometimes cited in this regard is the *Euthyphro* following the so-called aporetic interlude at 11b1-8. But as I have argued elsewhere (see, for example, Benson 2000, 90 n. 135) I do not think that Socrates has yet completed his task of testing Euthyphro’s purported wisdom, intending to learn from him if he has it and to persuade him of his ignorance if he does not. Unlike Meno, Euthyphro has not yet recognized his ignorance.

Of course, another one of the main passages in which Plato discusses the method of hypothesis is *Phaedo* 99c9-102a2 where Plato explicitly introduces it as a second sailing which has been taken to indicate a second-best approach. See, for example, Kanayama 2000, 87-95 and Gentzler 1991, 266 n. 4. The *Phaedo* passage, however, should not encourage us to understand the introduction of the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* as the introduction of a second-best method for reasons to which I briefly allude in n. 56 below.

Meyers 1988, 173-174 appropriately objects to those who claim that a proper interpretation of the geometrical example is unimportant for understanding the method of hypothesis described here in the *Meno*. She writes: “But would a writer as skillful as Plato toss in a random geometrical problem? Wouldn’t he be careful to fashion one that is relevant to the rest of the dialogue? As the second geometrical problem discussed in the *Meno*, it should be related to the first. And, as the geometrical hypothesis is supposed to parallel the philosophical hypothesis, both should share some assumptions, patterns of argument, and types of conclusions.” While I am quite sympathetic to the sentiment expressed here, I have not been persuaded by Meyers interpretation of the problem for the reasons mentioned below. See n. 36 below.

Note also that the geometers here apparently do not maintain that searching for an answer to such questions by means of a hypothesis is the only way to proceed; they claim here simply that searching from a hypothesis may prove helpful (prou[rgou]).
Of course it may be that in drawing these parallels between Meno and Socrates’ procedure and the procedure of the geometers Plato is thereby deriding the procedure. In the *Republic*, at least, Plato appears to be no fan of the method of the mathematicians - or so it is maintained. See, for example Gonzalez 1998, 377 n. 97, and Seeskin 1993, 44-47. For a more positive view of Plato’s attitude of mathematics, at least at the time of writing the *Meno*, see Vlastos 1991, 107-131. In any case, I can see no evidence of such derision here in the *Meno*.

Meyers 1988, 175 objects that “there is no hint whatever in the text” of a bi-conditional. All that is required by the geometrical example, on her interpretation, is that the hypothesis is a sufficient condition for answering the original question. While I do not dispute the correctness of her interpretation of the geometrical example, that Plato takes the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge to be necessary and sufficient for the claim that virtue is teachable is confirmed by 87b2-c3 and especially 98d9-11. As I will maintain below, the necessity of this hypothesis both fails to be necessary for the argument that follows and conflicts with Plato’s account of the theory of recollection, but it nevertheless appears to be a feature of the method of hypothesis as Plato portrays it.

To follow Heath’s 1921, 298 ff interpretation. It may be worth noting in light of my response below to the suggestion that the method of hypothesis is a ruse to turn Meno back to the ‘What is virtue?’ that the question to which the geometers reduce the original question looks no less like a *poion* question than the original question.

See Bluck 1964, 76 ff and Bedu-Addo 1984, 6-7, esp. n 26. I here want to beg off the question whether the question to which the original question is reduced is prior in some way (other than methodologically), as the phrase ‘limiting conditions’ would suggest and Bluck and Bedu-Addo would appear to maintain. In the case of all three reductions exemplified here in the *Meno* - the geometrical reduction, the reduction of the teachability of virtue to virtue’s being a kind of knowledge, and the reduction of virtue’s being a kind of knowledge to virtue’s being good, Plato explicitly identifies a property whose possession is necessary and sufficient for the possession of the original property. (See below.) While there may be some indications of additional constraints on the question to which the original question was reduced, e.g. what I later describe as the stability of virtue’s being good and the proximity of virtue’s being a kind of knowledge to the nature of virtue, I believe that the text of *Meno* generally underdetermines this issue. Consequently, I here leave it open.

See Bluck 1964, 76.
See Bedu-Addo 1984, 6: “We thus have two types of hypothesis in the geometer’s statement of his procedure: (i) the hypothetical statement which is described as a ‘a sort of hypothesis’, and which is, in effect, the statement of the determinative criterion for the solubility of the problem; and (ii) the statement that ‘this area is such and such’, which must be the hypothesis the geometer says he wishes to make, and from which he will be able to state the conclusion.” See also Rose 1970 who argues for a plurality of hypotheses.

See Bluck 1964, 324-325 who writes concerning 87a6-b2 that “this sentence has rightly been taken to suggest that the geometer considers himself in a position to decide whether the conditions laid down in his uJpovqesi~ are satisfied or not, and also that if the conditions are not fulfilled, his answer will be that the cwrvon cannot be inscribed in the desired manner.”

It is true that the process of discovering the appropriate hypothesis to test may be more difficult, since there is no property/proposition against which to search for the limiting conditions. But, perhaps we should follow Plato’s lead here as well. Recall that the question with which the dialogue begins is not so much ‘Is virtue teachable?’, as it is ‘How is virtue acquired?’ (74a1-4). If Plato is applying and endorsing the method of hypothesis in the last third of the Meno as I maintain, then he appears to be recommending that one chose a potential answer to the question ‘How is virtue acquired?’, viz. by teaching, and examine it by means of a hypothesis. A similar recommendation might be made in the case of ‘What is virtue?’ If so, the distinction between the method of hypothesis and the elenchos is subtle, but still important. For, the elenchos too proceeds by examining a potential answer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question. The difference lies in the fact that when one is examining by a hypothesis no one of the interlocutors is committed to that answer. Indeed, the potential answer is kept in the form of a question - ‘Is virtue the knowledge of good and evil?’ for example - and one attempts to reduce this question to another one. See pp 00-00 below.

See, for example, Sharples 1985, 162-163: “The method of hypothesis was ostensibly introduced as a way of enabling Socrates and Meno to discuss the teachability of excellence without first establishing its nature (86de). In fact, though, it has simply served to establish that whether excellence is teachable or not depends on whether it is knowledge or not; so we are now back at the question of the nature of excellence itself, which is what Socrates wanted to discuss anyway;” and Brown 1967, 65: “Socrates says that if Meno will not inquire in a disciplined way, at all events (alla) he must relax his tyranny and permit some reasoning of a tentative kind, the characteristic of
which is simply to assume an answer to the *ti esti* question and then to proceed (in the manner of geometers) to a *poion* question.” For someone who does not make this mistake but draws a conclusion with which I cannot agree see Gonzalez 1998, 174: “this example immediately brings out the general character of the hypothetical method: it assumes a relation between different properties of a thing so that, if the thing is agreed to have one, it can be concluded to have the other. The method can thus reach conclusions about a thing while restricting itself to the level of how the thing is qualified (*poion ti*): the What-is-x? question (*ti esti*) is not even raised.”

**Bedu-Addo 1984, 3:** “The introduction of the argument ‘from a hypothesis’ is really a subterfuge on the part of Socrates to ensure the continuity of Meno’s recollection of the nature of virtue; ...”

That this is not unintentional is indicated both at 87b6 where the protasis of the conditional is ‘if virtue is any other sort than knowledge (ἐστὶν ἄλλων οἶνον ἐπίσημον)’, rather ‘if virtue is anything other than knowledge (ἐστὶν ἄλλοι ἐπίσημοι)’, and again at 87c5 where the protasis is ‘if virtue is some kind of knowledge (ἐστὶν ἐπίσημον τὶν ἀγρέθην)’, not ‘if virtue is knowledge (ἐστὶν ἐπίσημόν ἂν ἀγρέθην).”

**It is true that in providing an answer to this last question, Socrates sometimes suggests that virtue is knowledge, not simply a kind of knowledge. See esp. 89c3-4, although in truth this is Meno, not Socrates, and 89d3-5. But we ought to let the language by which the question is introduced guide our understanding. Moreover, in other passages Socrates is more careful. See 88c4-d3 and 89a3-4.**

In the *Categories*, Aristotle might have put the distinction as teachable is present-in virtue, while knowledge is said-of it, although Aristotle might not have been happy with something being present-in anything other than substances. Indeed, Aristotle tends to think of claims concerning what kind of thing a thing is as answers to *ti* questions. See *Topics* I.9 103b20-25.

Consequently, those who are skeptical of such a Socratic or Platonic commitment cannot maintain the salience of this feature.

The evidence of the elenctic dialogues indicates that an adequate answer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question must at least specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for being virtue, but clearly an adequate answer to ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ need not. For a more complete discussion of the adequacy conditions of a Socratic ‘What is F-ness?’ question, which in this essay I am calling a *ti* question, see Benson 2000, 99-111.
A further reason for doubting that Socrates takes the questions ‘What is virtue?’ and ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ to be identical derives from those who take Socrates to be endorsing the answer to the latter question that virtue is knowledge. In the elenctic dialogues, Socrates has repeatedly objected to the various definitions that the individual virtues were knowledge on the grounds that knowledge may be a necessary condition of the virtue, but it is not sufficient. The objection amounts to the view that the individual virtues are a kind of knowledge, but they are not knowledge. See, for example, *Laches* 194e-199e and *Charmides* 166e-176a.

A second reason for doubting the methodological salience of the proximity of the ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ question to the ‘What is virtue?’ question is that the question Socrates reduces the ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ question to at 87d2-8, i.e., ‘Is virtue good?’, is not in any obvious way at least closer to the ‘What is virtue?’ question than was the question ‘What kind of thing is virtue?’ A further difficulty is that the *tilpoion* is far less clear than I have been making it out to be. For example, some commentators understand it as parallel to the essential/accidental property distinction; see, for example Fine 1992, 225-226 n 42, Dimas 1996, 5-7, and Sharples 1985, 125. Other commentators understand it as parallel to the distinction between essence and essential properties; see Nehamas 1986, 283-285. I do not see how either of these interpretations fit the current passage. What is clear, however, is that Plato depicts Socrates as maintaining that knowledge of the nature of virtue is epistemologically prior to knowing anything else about it - whether it is it a kind of knowledge or whether it is teachable - or at least so I have argued; see Benson 1990.

That Socrates maintains that knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for teachability is puzzling for at least two reasons. First, the only side of this biconditional that Socrates employs in the argument that follows is the sufficiency condition. I will maintain below that, at 87d2-89c4, Plato provides an argument for the truth of the claim that virtue is a kind of knowledge, from which it follows that virtue is teachable, given the sufficiency condition. Again, at 89c5-96d4, Plato provides an argument that virtue is not teachable, from which it follows that virtue is not a kind of knowledge, given the sufficiency condition. The necessity condition appears otiose for the purposes of the arguments that follow. But, second, in light of Plato’s care to remind us of the theory of recollection in this passage - noting that teachability and recollectability are being used interchangeably, we should note that the necessary condition appears false. Plato has just a few pages earlier given us an example of the slave
boy recollecting/being taught true belief. Apparently, knowledge is not alone in being teachable/recollectable. True belief can be taught/recollected as well. So, being knowledge would appear not to be a necessary condition for teachability despite what Socrates maintains at 87c2. The fact that Plato depicts Socrates as maintaining the necessity of knowledge for teachability in light of these puzzles may indicate that he took identifying a property that was necessary and sufficient for the possession of the property under investigation as a fundamental characteristic of the method of hypothesis.

Robinson 1941, 120-123, Zyskind and Sternfeld 1976, and Stokes 1963, 197-198. Accuracy requires pointing out the proposition Robinson defined in his first edition was not the bi-conditional, but the conditional claim that if virtue is knowledge, then it is teachable. See also Weiss 2001, 131 n 10.


See, for example Weiss 2001, 130-134.

Indeed, Plato has Socrates introduce the discussion of the method of hypothesis in Phaedo by describing it as his ‘second voyage’ which has widely been understood as suggesting that the method is in some way second best to a preferred method. See, for example, Gonzalez 1998, 192 and 351 n 3, Rowe 1993, 238-239 and 68-69, Tait 1985, 457, and Gentzler 1991, 299 n 4. While I cannot adequately address the issue here two considerations lead me to doubt that the ‘second voyage’ comment should influence our understanding of the Meno. First, it is far from clear that the alternative method at issue in the Phaedo is available in the Meno, and second, Kanayama 2000, 87-95 has supplied a plausible rebuttal to the interpretation that ‘second voyage’ must be understood as second best.

See, for example, Robinson 1953, 136-141, and Bostock 1986, 170. Kanayama 2000, 76-77, however, would not agree. He argues that the problems associated with this passage - in particular the translation of e[coito as ‘attacked’ and the obscurity of the process of examining whether the consequences of the hypothesis are in accord with another or not - cannot be solved “as long as we suppose that [this passage] focus[es] on the truth of the hypothesis.” He writes “suppose Socrates ... is not talking about how to check the truth of the hypothesis but about how to ascertain the truth of the target proposition” (Kanayama 2000, 79).

As I shall be doing henceforth. Thus, I am siding with those who take the hypothesis in the Meno to be that virtue is a kind of knowledge. I do so, however, not because I think anything important hangs on this issue. As I
mentioned earlier, Plato appears quite willing to allow that various propositions may be called hypotheses in a single application of the method of hypothesis. Rather, I do so simply for ease of explication.

A more detailed study of the relationship between the description of the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* and the description in the *Phaedo* would, I believe, indicate that the general description of the method 100a3-100a9 parallels what I have been calling the process of determining what the limiting conditions are - i.e., the first procedure described in the geometrical example. It is this aspect of the method that is exemplified at *Phaedo* 100b1-c9. One of the reasons this parallel is difficult to detect is that the question under investigation by means of a hypothesis in the *Phaedo* - 'What is the cause of generation and destruction?' (95e9-96a1) - is more open-ended than the question in the *Meno* - ‘Is virtue teachable?’ In the case of such open-ended questions it is more difficult to see how this first procedure is to be carried out, but I think that *Phaedo* 100b1-c9 provides us with an example. See n 42.

Some who are inclined to see the claim that virtue is good as analytically true may want to read Plato’s suggestion that the claim will ‘stand firm for us’ even more strongly.

*See 88b4-6, b7-8, c1-3, c7-d1, d4-e2, and 88e3-4.

Sharples 1985, 165 renders this ‘excellence is wisdom, either the whole of wisdom or some part of it’ explaining “It has been shown both that knowledge or wisdom is necessary for excellence, and that everything else has good or bad consequences depending on whether or not knowledge directs it; but this does not in itself rule out there being some part of knowledge that is not required for excellence. ... The Greek could equally well, as far as the grammar goes, be rendered ‘wisdom is excellence, either the whole of excellence or a part of it’ (so Thompson 1901; but this would wreck Socrates’ argument; if wisdom is only a part of excellence, it does not follow that excellence will be teachable, for the other parts of excellence might be something which one cannot be taught.” It seems to me that the whole force of the argument in this portion of the *Meno* is that virtue is some kind of knowledge. It does not establish what kind of knowledge and hence can at best be seen as arguing what sort of a thing virtue is, not what virtue is. Thus, we should understand this passage as suggesting that virtue is a part of knowledge in the sense that it is one of the kinds of knowledge and that all kinds of knowledge are teachable.

See, for example, Bostock 1986, 166, Sharples 1985, 10, and Bluck 1964, 89.
See, for example, Robinson 1953, 116-117 and Bedu-Addo 1984, 2. Gonzalez 1998, 180 apparently thinks that the method of hypothesis continues following 89c, but he takes the fact that Socrates uses the method first to show that virtue is teachable and then to show that virtue is not teachable as evidence for the view that method of hypothesis is inadequate and only leads to half-truths based on the ambiguity of words.

For example, Cornford n.d., 245 thinks there is a flaw in the argument from no teachers to not teachable; Devereux 1978, 122-123 thinks the argument from no teachers to not teachable only applies to teachable in the sophistic sense (not in the Socratic sense); and Bedu-Addo 1984, 10-14 thinks the argument from no teachers to not teachable is tongue-in-cheek; the arguments on behalf of ‘virtue is not knowledge’ are deliberately fallacious Bedu-Addo 1984, 12 n 49. Bluck 1964, 19-30, for one, apparently takes the argument against the teachability of virtue to be taken seriously and hence takes seriously the aporetic conclusion of the dialogue.

The argument to this conclusion also relies on the the proposition that [9] if there are no teachers of virtue then there are no pupils of virtue at 96c8.

In describing these propositions as ‘appropriately associated with virtue and knowledge, the two component concepts of the hypothesis’ I recognize the obscurity and contentiousness of such a description. I have tried to clarify (if not make less contentious) this notion in a variety of places. See, for example, Benson 1992 and Benson 200, 99-163 and 250-255. For others who appear to understand the first procedure in the Phaedo similarly see Bostock 1986, 171 who writes: “what Plato’s first test in fact comes down to [is] just this: examine whether your hypothesis is consistent with all the other beliefs that you already have” and Gonzalez 1998, 197 who describes the first procedure as follows: “You should first resist having the hypothesis considered in isolation by situating it within the context of the account (of causes or of anything else) to which it has given rise. ... What must therefore be examined is whether or not there is any inconsistency within the resulting account as a whole, that is, either between those claims that have been individually postulated as consistent with the hypothesis or between the conclusions that have been inferred from the hypothesis in conjunction with the postulated claims and certain assumed beliefs. Thus the phrase “ta; ejp’ ejkeivnh~ oJrmhqevnta” covers a variety of propositions related to the hypothesis in different ways: ...”
The provisional nature of the method of hypothesis may also be indicated at *Cratylus* 435d-439c. The *Republic* may be attempting to rectify (if that is the right word) the provisionality by requiring the process of arguing to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis to continue until one reaches an unhypothetical first principle (to; ejp· ajrch:n ajnupvqeton) at 510b2-10. In the *Republic*, however, the process of arguing from the hypothesis - what is sometimes referred to as the downward path - no longer serves as a test of the hypothesis. Such a test is no longer required. The hypothesis has been derived from an unhypothetical first principle. Instead, the downward path simply amounts to drawing out the consequences of the hypothesis. Perhaps, we should think of this as an *investigation from knowledge*.

See, for example, Bluck 1964, 54-55.

The case is only marginally less certain in the case of Anytus.

Benson 2000, 37-53. For a recent argument against such a constraint on premise acceptability in the *elenchos* see Beversluis 2000, ch. 2.

Bluck 1964, 90-91 may be taken as suggesting that the Platonic method of hypothesis is a combination of the method of hypothesis used by the geometers (which represents the procedure I have described as the argument to the hypothesis from a ‘higher’ hypothesis) and the Socratic *elenchos* (which represents the procedure I have described as the argument from the hypothesis). I have no objection to such a description of the method as long as the phrase ‘the Socratic *elenchos*’ is being used rather loosely. Something like this may also be the view of Sharples 1985, 10.

In the earlier argument this was a relatively immediate consequence of the ‘adequate’ hypothesis that virtue is good; see 87d8-e3.

See, for example, 88a3-5 in the earlier argument.

See, for example, 88e3-4 in the previous argument.

[1] If something is beneficial, then it is accompanied either by knowledge or true belief (98b7-c3)
[2] The good are beneficial (98c5-6)
[3] So, the good either have knowledge or true belief (98c7-10)
[4] Neither knowledge nor true belief are possessed by nature (98c10-d2)
[5] So, virtue is not acquired by nature (98d4-5)

[6] Something is teachable just in case it is knowledge (98d10-12)

[7] Something is teachable just in case there are teachers of it (98e1-2)

[8] There are no teachers of virtue (98e4-5)

[9] So, virtue is not teachable (98e7)

[10] And, so virtue is not knowledge (98e7-8)

[11] So, the good have true belief (99b5-c5)

[12] True belief is sometimes acquired by divine dispensation

[13] So, virtue is acquired by divine dispensation (99e3-100a2)

lxxviii See, perhaps, Bluck 1964, 19-30.


lxxx See, for example, Protagoras 331c-d. Beversluis 2000, 270 thinks that the requirement expressed at 331c-d is violated only a couple of pages later at 333c4-d1, but this is I think to misread the latter passage. (See, for example, Benson 2000, 54-55.)

lxxxi See Scott 1995, 30-31 for the distinction between the paradox of inquiry (the paradox of the attempt to inquire) and the paradox of discovery (the paradox of successful inquiry). Scott thinks that the first paradox, which I see the method of hypothesis as a response to, is trivial and depends on an ovisoulsy false conception of the knowledge, while the second paradox is interesting and difficult for Plato to resolve. See also Weiss 2001, 54-58.

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