

## Meno's Paradox

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(Draft)

### Introduction

Two features of classical Platonism are introduced in Plato's *Meno*: the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> These two features - especially the first - may seem philosophically embarrassing. Consequently, charity encourages a reading of the *Meno* that denies their philosophical efficacy. Insofar as these features can be seen as philosophically otiose, they can be dismissed as flights of fancy. Nevertheless, such an understanding of the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis - however well intentioned - is misguided. I contend that these two features of classical Platonism are introduced as the initial stages of a resolution of a genuine philosophical problem that has been lying just beneath the surface in Plato's elenctic dialogues.<sup>2</sup> The problem concerns acquiring knowledge or learning. The defense of this contention requires a long and detailed argument - an argument I will not and cannot supply here.<sup>3</sup> In this essay I propose instead to provide a part of it.

The theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis appear to be motivated by the puzzle that Meno puts forward and Socrates repeats at *Meno* 80d-e, often referred to as Meno's

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<sup>1</sup>In claiming that these two features are 'introduced' I do not mean to presuppose a developmentalist interpretation of the dialogues. Instead I simply mean to underscore that Plato has Socrates introduce these two features in such a way that neither Meno nor the reader of the dialogue is presumed to be familiar with them. Contrast, for example, the way in which the theory of recollection is introduced at *Phaedo* 71e3-6. In the *Meno*, however, there is no suggestion that Meno is familiar with either the theory of recollection or the method of hypothesis (at least as a method of philosophical or moral inquiry). Rather Socrates is made to explain both features to Meno.

<sup>2</sup>Again, I am not presupposing a developmentalist interpretation. Plato may have had the resolution of the problem in mind when he composed the elenctic dialogues or he may have come to recognize the need for this resolution after composing those dialogues. The point I am concerned to make is that there is a problem of knowledge acquisition just below the surface in the elenctic dialogues and the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis are offered as a first approximation for resolving this problem. This point does not depend in any way on determining the order of composition of the dialogues. By the elenctic dialogues I mean: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthydemus*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Major*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, and *Protagoras*.

paradox. This paradox evidently raises a problem for the acquisition of knowledge or learning. But problems concerning the acquisition of knowledge have been lying just beneath the surface of the elenctic dialogues for some time. Plato's Socrates is depicted as lacking knowledge of anything fine and good (*Apology* 21d) and yet devoting his entire life to the pursuit of coming to know such things (*Apology* 29d-30b). Along the way, he comes to realize that no one else he has met appears to know these things either, even though they always think they do, and so he encourages them to join him in his pursuit. The method Socrates encourages them to employ and which he himself employs throughout the elenctic dialogues is one of seeking out someone who has this knowledge and learning from him or her.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, such a method of knowledge acquisition or learning appears to face a variety of difficulties - not the least of which is Socrates' growing recognition that no one appears to know these things and so there is no one from whom he can learn them. This suggests that if Socrates (or anyone else) is to ever acquire knowledge of something fine and good, he will need to search for it himself (or in concert with others equally ignorant). He will not be able to learn it from another who knows. He will need to discover it for himself.<sup>5</sup> But it is at precisely this point that Meno's paradox comes to the fore. For the paradox suggests that discovering knowledge for oneself, as a directed method of knowledge acquisition or learning, cannot succeed either. In the *Meno*, however, Plato has Socrates introduce the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis in order to show that such a method of knowledge acquisition can indeed succeed. Consequently, I maintain that these

<sup>3</sup>I have begun to lay out portions of this argument in the following (Benson 2000): (Benson 2003b), (Benson 2002a), and (Benson 2003a).

<sup>4</sup>See (Benson 2002b) and n. 14 below.

<sup>5</sup>See (Dimas 1996:12). For the recognition in the dialogues of these two modes of knowledge acquisition see *Laches* 185e7-187d5. Contrast (Gentzler 1996) who appears to take the method of searching together from ignorance as the same as the method of knowledge acquisition practiced and endorsed in the elenctic dialogues and to take Meno's puzzle as applying equally to the method Socrates is about begin with Meno as to the method he has been employing previously in the *Meno* and the elenctic dialogues.

two features of classical Platonism are introduced in order to resolve a genuine problem of knowledge acquisition or learning that has been lying beneath the surface of the elenctic dialogues.

Nevertheless, a variety of commentators would disagree. According to these commentators the problem presented by Meno's paradox is a not a serious philosophical problem requiring the resources of anything as elaborate as the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis to resolve. The problem on their view can be resolved more simply.<sup>6</sup> It can be resolved simply by noticing an elementary equivocation or some other obvious logical fallacy.<sup>7</sup> Meno's paradox presents no genuine philosophical problem of knowledge acquisition at all. Consequently, no new substantive philosophical theory - certainly not the theory of recollection or the method of hypothesis - is required to resolve it. Let us call this the *Euthydemus* interpretation of Meno's paradox, since a paradox of a similar form appears in the *Euthydemus* and Socrates diagnoses it as being the result of an elementary equivocation. In the present essay, I will argue for the philosophical inadequacy of the *Euthydemus* interpretation of Meno's paradox. The Meno paradox is in my view a substantial philosophical problem, whose solution requires substantive philosophical thinking.<sup>8</sup>

My argument will proceed as follows. I will begin by briefly reviewing the context of the paradox as it arises in *Meno*'s text. We will see that the context of the paradox is precisely what

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<sup>6</sup>(Eckstein 1968:31–33) describes the theory of recollection as a 'dodge'. (Weiss 2001:75) denies that Plato believes the 'myth' of recollection. (Fine 1992:213) claims that the theory of recollection is introduced not to resolve Meno's puzzle, but to explain certain aspects of the resolution found in the elenctic dialogues; see also (Irwin 1995:135–136).

<sup>7</sup>See, for example (Taylor 1956:135–136), (Bluck 1964), (Shorey 1965:157), (Eckstein 1968:29–30), (Grube 1980:12), and most recently (Weiss 2001:49–76).

<sup>8</sup> Other commentators, who deny the philosophical efficacy of the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis, at least vis-a-vis Meno's paradox, allow that the paradox is genuine philosophical puzzle but maintain it can be resolved by resources already available in the elenctic dialogues, viz. the distinction between knowledge and true belief. Again, no new new substantive philosophical theory - certainly not the theory of recollection or the

we should expect if I am correct in supposing that the paradox is motivated by a problem that has been lying just beneath the surface of the elenctic dialogues. Next, I will quickly lay out the paradox as it is propounded at *Meno* 80d-e. I will present the paradox as a conjunction of Meno's version at 80d5-8 and Socrates' version at 80e1-5. Henceforth, I will refer to the paradox as *Meno's* paradox (as distinct from Meno's paradox or Socrates' paradox).

Then, I will turn to the main argument that the paradox so understood cannot in fact be resolved by noticing an elementary equivocation. First, I will maintain that Socrates' resolution of a similar difficulty in the *Euthydemus* does not resolve *Meno's* paradox, and it would be uncharitable to suppose that Plato thought that it did. Second, I will turn to a more recent attempt to defend a *Euthydemus* style interpretation offered by Roslyn Weiss in her provocative book *Virtue in the Cave*. Weiss does not maintain that the paradox in the *Meno* can be resolved by noticing an equivocation like the one Socrates appeals to in the *Euthydemus*, but she does argue that it can be resolved by noticing a different elementary equivocation. I argue that again it cannot be so resolved, at least given other Platonic philosophical commitments, and that there is no reason to suppose that Plato thought it could. Finally, I conclude by distinguishing between *Euthydemus* style interpretations and those interpretations which see the theory of recollection as resolving *Meno's* paradox by distinguishing between two senses of some key term. In rejecting *Euthydemus* style interpretations I leave open the possibility that *Meno's* paradox can be resolved, for example, by distinguishing between tacit and occurrent knowledge. In doing so, Plato can be making genuine substantive philosophical claims, not merely uncovering elementary equivocations.

method of hypothesis - is called for. See, especially (Fine 1992:212–213) and (Irwin 1995:131–132). I reserve for

## The Text

Let us begin, then, by considering the context of the paradox as it arises in the *Meno*. After Socrates professes his inability to answer Meno's question concerning how virtue is acquired on the grounds that he fails to know at all what virtue is, the *Meno* begins its examination of the nature of virtue. The explicit motivation of this examination is Socrates' desire to be proven mistaken that he has never met anyone else who knows what virtue is. Meno claims that both he and Socrates have met Gorgias and Gorgias surely knows what virtue is. Consequently, after asking Meno to put Gorgias aside, Socrates encourages Meno:

[T1] What do you say virtue is? Speak and do not begrudge us, so that I may have spoken a most unfortunate falsehood, in claiming never to have met anyone who knows [what virtue is], when you and Gorgias are shown to know. [*Meno* 71d5-8e; adapted from Grube trans.]<sup>9</sup>

In testing, to see whether Meno does in fact have this knowledge, Socrates also attempts to learn from Meno what virtue is should Meno turn out to know it.<sup>10</sup> But by 79e-80d Socrates' attempt to learn from Meno what he knows has come to an end. Meno's failure to know what virtue is has been exposed to both Socrates and Meno himself (79e7-80b4).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, Socrates does not abandon his attempt to acquire knowledge of what virtue is. Rather than attempting to learn it from Meno, Socrates, after repeating his profession of ignorance (80c6-d3), now encourages Meno to join him in the attempt to discover it:

another occasion a full scale examination of such an understanding of the paradox and the theories which follow it.

<sup>9</sup>All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>10</sup>While this is not explicit in the *Meno*, it is explicit in other elenctic dialogues. See esp. *Apology* 22b5, and also *Euthyphro* 5a-c, and *Laches* 191c-e, for example.

<sup>11</sup>See (Weiss 2001:50 n. 3) for an argument against taking this as a genuine profession of ignorance. See also (Welbourne 1986). For a brief defense of the sincerity of Meno's profession see (Benson 1990a:138 n. 28).

[T2] Nevertheless I wish to examine with you and seek in common what [virtue] is.  
[80d3-4]

One method of learning - being taught by one who knows - has come to an end.<sup>12</sup> Another method of learning has begun - discovering the knowledge oneself.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this point that Meno demurs. He wonders how such a method of learning is to proceed. How, he wonders, are they to search for what virtue is when neither of them knows what virtue is?<sup>14</sup>

[T3] [a] In what way, Socrates, will you search for that thing which you do not know at all what it is? [b] What sort of thing, of those things you do not know will you set up as the object of your search? [c] Or even if you should happen upon it, how will you know that this is what you didn't know? [80d5-8]

This is immediately followed by Socrates' apparent explication of Meno's puzzle:

[T4] I know what you mean, Meno. Do you know how contentious an argument you are introducing, [a] that it is possible for a person to search for neither what he knows nor what he does not know? For, [b] he could not search for what he knows - for [c] he knows it and there is no need to search for it - nor [d] could he search for what he does not know - for [e] he does not know what to search for.  
[80e1-5]

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<sup>12</sup>This method of learning - what we might call 'being taught' - appears to presuppose another who has the knowledge one seeks to learn. Hence, if A learns<sub>t</sub> x, then there is a B (distinct from A) who knows x and B teaches x to A. See n. 14 below.

<sup>13</sup>This method of learning - what we might call searching or inquiry - does not presuppose another who has the knowledge one seeks. Indeed, I do not see any evidence that Plato is committed even to presupposing the presence of another - whether a knower or non-knower. He may, however, believe that joint, as opposed to individual, search is helpful.

<sup>14</sup>See (Weiss 2001:51) who correctly observes: "Let us be clear that Meno's resistance to Socrates' ongoing investigation has nothing to do with any aversion on Meno's part to learning. On the contrary, Meno is glad to learn as long as he learns from someone who teaches."

Socrates here suggests that Meno's puzzle is part of a contentious or eristic argument (eristikon logon), the dilemmatic structure of which appears clear. Each of the following is claimed to hold for any person A and any thing x:

- [1] Either A knows what x is or A does not know what x is<sup>15</sup> (supplied)
- [2] If A knows what x is, then A does not need to search for what x is ([T4c])
- [3] So, if A knows what x is, then A cannot search for what x is ([T4b])
- [4] If A does not know what x is, then A does not know what to search for ([T4e])
- [5] So, if A does not know what x is, then A cannot search for what x is ([T4d])
- [6] So, A cannot search for what x is, i.e. search or inquiry is impossible ([T4a])

Meno's puzzle develops the second horn of the dilemma. Supplementing [4] as a reason for [5], however, Meno includes this:

- [4a] If A does not know what x is at all, then A does not know what to search for ([T3b])
- [4b] If A does not know what x is at all, then even if A happened upon x, A cannot know that this is x ([T3c])
- [5m] So, if A does not know what x is at all, then A cannot search for what x is ([T3a])<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>I here restrict the paradox to search or inquiry concerning what x is. I do not thereby restrict the paradox to search or inquiry concerning the nature of specific universals or properties. As is clear from the example of knowing Meno by which Socrates illustrates the priority of definitional knowledge at 71b4-8 Socrates does not find the difference between Meno and virtue to be epistemically important. Nor do I mean to be ruling out the possibility that the paradox may even be understood as applying to search more generally. It is clear, however, from the language of [T3] and [T4] together with the what motivates Meno to present the paradox, that it at least applies to search concerning what x is. Consequently, I will be offering an account of the paradox with such a search in mind. Whether or not it should be understood more generally will in part depend on whether the account of the paradox can be so extended. I believe that Plato would allow any of the following to be substituted for 'x' and so serve as objects of knowledge and/or search: a proposition, an object, a definition, a *techne*, or a *mathema*; (for this latter, see (Dimas 1996)). But I need not argue the point here. Nothing in the argument that follows will depend on it.

<sup>16</sup>To get [5m] we need to supply the following:

- [-a] If A does not know what to search for, then A cannot search for x, and
- [-b] If A cannot know that this is x, even if A happened upon x, then A cannot know what to search for x.

Here [4a] and [4b] appear to be independent reasons for [5].<sup>17</sup> [4a] appears to present a problem for beginning the inquiry; [4b] appears to present a problem for ending it. I will refer to these two problems as ‘the beginning problem’<sup>18</sup> and ‘the ending problem’<sup>19</sup>, respectively.

Putting both these pieces together we get *Meno*’s paradox:

- [1] Either A knows what x is or A does not know what x is (supplied)
- [2] If A knows what x is, then A does not need to search for what x is ([T4c])
- [3] So, if A knows what x is, then A cannot search for what x is ([T4b])
- [4a] If A does not know what x is at all, then A does not know what to search for ([T3b] and [T4e])
- [4b] If A does not know what x is at all, then even if A happened upon x, A cannot know that this is x ([T3c]), and so
- [5m] So, if A does not know what x is at all, then A cannot search for what x is ([T3a]).
- [5] So, if A does not know what x is, then A cannot search for what x is ([T4d])
- [6] So, A cannot search for what x is, i.e. search or inquiry is impossible ([T4a])

### **The *Euthydemus* Interpretation**

Irwin’s and Fine’s interpretation (see n. 8 above) can be understood as denying [-a], at least when the what clause in [4a] and [-a] are understood interrogatively. (See pp. 000 below.)

<sup>17</sup>The move from *Meno*’s version of [5], i.e. [5m] to Socrates’, i.e. [5], can be explained by Plato’s commitment to the priority of definition principle, viz. If A does not know what x is, then A does not know anything at all about x, i.e., does not know what x is at all; see, e.g., *Meno* 71b3-4 and pp. 000 below. Plato’s commitment to this principle also explains why the missing ‘at all’ (parapan) in Socrates’ version of the paradox is not philosophically significant. For those who think this difference between the two versions is philosophically significant see (Moravcsik 1970:57) and (Weiss 2001:ch. 2).

<sup>18</sup>Dubbed by (Scott 1995:30) ‘the paradox of inquiry’ (see also (Weiss 2001:53)), by (Matthews 1999:58) ‘the Targeting Objection’, and by (Dimas 1996:18) ‘the Conceptual Impossibility account’.

<sup>19</sup>Dubbed by (Scott 1995:31) ‘the problem of discovery’, by (Weiss 2001:53) ‘the paradox of knowing’, by (Matthews 1999:58) ‘the Recognition Objection’, and by (Dimas 1996:19) ‘the Rational Impossibility account’.

There might appear to be at least two very good reasons for not taking *Meno's* paradox seriously - understood as accurately captured by Socrates' dilemma. First, Socrates twice explicitly calls the dilemma an eristic or contentious argument.<sup>20</sup> Second, a similar argument in the *Euthydemus* - a dialogue evidently aimed at distinguishing eristic arguments from more properly Socratic arguments - is explicitly described as play.

[T5] These things are the frivolous part of study (which is why I also tell you that the men are jesting) and I call these things "frivolity" (paidia) because even if a man were to learn many or even all such things, he would be none the wiser as to how matters stand but would only be able to make fun of people, tripping them up and overturning them by means of the distinctions in words, just like the people who pull the chair out from under a man who is going to sit down and then laugh gleefully when they see him sprawling on his back. So you must think of their performance as having been mere play. [*Euthydemus* 278b2-c2; Sprague trans.]

In what follows I will argue that *Meno's* paradox cannot be resolved by recognizing the equivocation that resolves the puzzles of the *Euthydemus* nor any similar elementary, philosophically insubstantial equivocations. Consequently it would be uncharitable to suggest that Plato thought it could. I will then explain why Socrates might be made to describe the paradox as an eristic argument, if it was not to suggest that the paradox commits an obvious logical fallacy. Let us begin, then, with the puzzles in the *Euthydemus* and the equivocation by which Socrates is made to resolve them.

At *Euthydemus* 276a-277c two arguments are put forward whose conclusions might plausibly be thought to be that learning (manthanein) is impossible. So understood the structures of the two arguments are as follows:

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<sup>20</sup>See 80e2 and 81d6.

First Argument (276a1-c7):

- [EI1] Learners are either wise or ignorant
- [EI2] Learners are not wise
- [EI3] Learners are not ignorant
- [EI4] So, there are no learners

Second Argument (276d7-277c7):

- [EII1] Learners either learn what they know or what they do not know
- [EII2] Learners do not learn what they do not know
- [EII3] Learners do not learn what they know
- [EII4] So, there are no learners

We can see the similarity between these two arguments in the *Euthydemus* and the dilemma of the *Meno* if we reformulate *Meno*'s paradox as follows:

- [M1] Searchers either search for what they know or what they do not know (from [1])
- [M2] Searchers do not search for what they know (from [2] and [3])
- [M3] Searchers do not search for what they do not know (from [4a] through [5m])
- [M4] So, there are no searchers

To return to the *Euthydemus*, Socrates explains that its arguments are 'frivolous' because they depend on an equivocation.<sup>21</sup> He says to Cleinias

- [T6] you must learn about the correct use of words - and our two visitors are pointing out this very thing, that you did not realize that people use the word 'learn' not only in the situation in which a person who has no knowledge of a thing in the beginning acquires it later, but also when he who has this knowledge already uses

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<sup>21</sup>See 'tripping them up and overturning them by means of the distinctions in words' at *Euthydemus* 278b6-7. See also *Theaetetus* 167e5-6.

it to inspect the same thing, whether this is something spoken or something done. (As a matter of fact, people call the latter ‘understand’ rather than ‘learn,’ but they do sometimes call it ‘learn’ as well.) Now this, as they are pointing out, had escaped your notice - that the same word is applied to opposite sorts of men, to both the man who knows and the man who does not. There was something similar to this in the second question, when they asked you whether people learn what they know or what they do not know. [*Euthydemus* 277e4-278b2; Sprague trans.]

The idea here seems clear enough. Socrates explains to Cleinias that the first *Euthydemus* argument depends on an equivocation of ‘learn’ (manthanein). Apparently one can be said to ‘learn’ in two senses. First, one can be said to learn when one “who has no knowledge of a thing in the beginning acquires it later”. We will call this learn<sub>1</sub>. Second, one can be said to learn when one “who has this knowledge already uses it to inspect the same thing.” We will call this learn<sub>2</sub> or understand.<sup>22</sup>

Once these two senses of ‘learn’ are disambiguated, however, the first *Euthydemus* argument no longer goes through. Both premises fail to be true when ‘learn’ is used in the same sense in both premises. On the one hand, [EI2] is true for learn<sub>1</sub>, but [EI3] is not. On the other hand, [EI3] is true for learn<sub>2</sub> or understand, but [EI2] is not. The only way to understand both [EI2] and [EI3] as true would then be to equivocate on the use of ‘learn’. Socrates indicates that a similar point applies to the second argument. The idea here seems to be that [EII2] is true for

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<sup>22</sup>See (McCabe 1993:80) for an alternative account of Socrates’ diagnosis based not on different senses of manthanein, but different tenses or aspects of manthanein. There are other diagnoses available as well. See, e.g. (Hawtrey 1981:58–61). Here I focus on what I take to be the most obvious interpretation of Socrates’ diagnosis. The same sorts of points that I make below concerning this diagnosis can be made concerning the alternative diagnoses.

learn<sub>2</sub> or understand, but not [EII3], while [EII3] is true for learn<sub>1</sub>, but [EII2] is not. The question, then, is can the dilemma in the the *Meno* be resolved similarly.

Obviously, *Meno*'s paradox cannot be resolved exactly in the same way, since the equivocal word - learn (manthanein) - does not occur in the *Meno* puzzle.<sup>23</sup> But perhaps it can be solved in a way that has an analogous structure. For perhaps 'search' (zetein) is subject to a similar equivocation.

Perhaps, that is, one can be said to search<sub>1</sub> when one has no knowledge of the object of the search<sub>1</sub> at the beginning but acquires it later, and one can be said to search<sub>2</sub> when one has the knowledge of the object of the search<sub>2</sub> at the beginning and uses that knowledge to inspect the thing one knows. One might even propose that zetein in the sense of search<sub>2</sub> would be better translated as 'examine' or 'investigate', much as manthanein in the sense of learn<sub>2</sub> would be better translated as 'understand'. If so, then we might suppose that [M2] is true for search<sub>1</sub>, but [M3] is not. That is, it is true that one does not search<sub>1</sub> - in the sense in which one fails to know the object at the beginning but acquires that knowledge at the end - for what one knows, but one does indeed search<sub>1</sub> - in that same sense - for what one does not know. On the other hand, [M3] is true for search<sub>2</sub>, but [M2] is not. That is, one does not search<sub>2</sub> - in the sense of examine or investigate - for what one does not know; rather, one examines or investigates what one knows.

But there are at least two difficulties with such a resolution of *Meno*'s paradox. First, the *Euthydemus* puzzles are resolved by recognizing that the second and third premises of each argument are both true only if manthanein is used equivocally in the two premises. As I have

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<sup>23</sup>At 81d4-5 Socrates appears to identify manthanein with zetein but this is, I think, misleading. It is difficult to see the force of the beginning and ending problems for learning that takes place with a teacher who knows what the student is attempting to learn. The teacher can provide the student with a place to begin his or her search and let the student know when he or she has arrived at the correct answer. Moreover, *Meno* does not propose the paradox until the method of learning that takes place with one who knows has been abandoned and yet Socrates proposes that he and *Meno* should continue the search. Consequently, what is claimed to be recollection at 81d4-5 must be zetein,

said, if manthanein is used in the same sense in both premises - whichever sense one wants - then one of the premises is false.<sup>24</sup> If it is used as learn<sub>1</sub>, then [EI3] and [EII2] are false; if it is used as learn<sub>2</sub> or understand, then [EI2] and [EII3] are false.

But this is not true of *Meno*'s paradox, at least when zetein means search<sub>1</sub>, i.e., seeking to acquire the knowledge that one does not have. When zetein means search<sub>1</sub>, it is true that searchers<sub>1</sub> do not search<sub>1</sub> for what they know, i.e., [M2]. But [M3] so understood is not obviously false. That is, it may remain true that searchers<sub>1</sub> do not search<sub>1</sub> for what they do not know, i.e. [M3].

In fact, the considerations offered on behalf of [M3] in the *Meno* do not appear to rest on understanding zetein as examine or investigate, but remain in force when zetein is understood as search<sub>1</sub>. Consider first the beginning problem. The idea here is that it looks impossible to search (zetein) for what one does not know, because one does not know what to search for (zetein). But recognizing that zetein here means search<sub>1</sub>, rather than investigate or examine, does not resolve this problem. Even if zetein is understood as search<sub>1</sub>, it remains problematic how one is to begin searching<sub>1</sub> for what one does not know at all. The beginning problem does not arise simply for search<sub>2</sub>. The beginning problem is a more obvious problem for search<sub>2</sub> - since one cannot begin the kind of search that requires knowledge in order to perform if one fails to have that knowledge. But the beginning problem is also a problem for search<sub>1</sub> - the kind of search that does not explicitly require knowledge in order to perform.

Similarly, the ending problem fails to be resolved by disambiguating 'search'. Even recognizing that zetein here means search<sub>1</sub>, not investigate or examine, it remains problematic

i.e., the kind of manthanein that amounts to discovering on one's own. (See nn. 4, 12, and 14 above). The paradoxes in the *Euthydemus* apply to the kind of manthanein that requires a teacher.

<sup>24</sup>The same point applies to the premises of the arguments on behalf of [EI2], [EI3], [EII2], and [EII3].

how one is to recognize that one has hit upon what it is one is searching<sub>1</sub> for when one does not know at all what one is searching<sub>1</sub> for. Thus, even if zetein is ambiguous much like manthanein, the puzzle in the *Meno* cannot as a matter of fact be resolved simply by pointing to this ambiguity. *Meno*'s paradox remains even when zetein is used unambiguously throughout - at least when it used in the sense of search<sub>1</sub>.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps this suggests an alternative way in which *Meno*'s paradox depends upon an equivocation. Perhaps Plato wants us to see that search will appear impossible as long as we fail to recognize that 'search' is ambiguous. Search is indeed impossible when search is understood as search<sub>1</sub>. So understood, search<sub>1</sub> is impossible both when the searcher knows what one is searching for (since that would be search<sub>2</sub>, not search<sub>1</sub>) and when one does not know what one is searching for (since one can neither begin nor successfully end a search<sub>1</sub>). But, there is another sense of search - search<sub>2</sub>, examine, or investigate - which is possible. While search<sub>2</sub> remains impossible when the searcher fails to know what he or she is searching for, search<sub>2</sub> is possible when the searcher knows what he or she is searching for. So, the puzzle in the *Meno* is to be resolved by recognizing the ambiguity in zetein - realizing, in one of the senses of zetein, search<sub>1</sub> is indeed impossible, but, in the other sense of zetein, search<sub>2</sub> is possible when one knows what one is searching<sub>2</sub> for or examining.

If this is how the puzzle is to be resolved, the second difficulty with the *Euthydemus* interpretation presents itself. For if this is how the puzzle is resolved, then *Meno*'s puzzle at [T3] goes unresolved. Remember that *Meno*'s puzzle concerns how the search that Socrates has encouraged *Meno* to begin at [T2] is to take place. For neither Socrates nor *Meno* know what virtue is at all - or at least so they both claim, and *Meno* wonders how in such a state of ignorance they can begin their search or recognize when they have ended it. Pointing out that

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<sup>25</sup>A similar objection to the *Euthydemus* interpretation is offered by (Matthews 1999:57–59).

search<sub>2</sub> is possible in the sense that examining or investigating what one already knows when one knows what one is searching for will go nowhere in addressing the problem that Meno raises. Meno's problem concerns search<sub>1</sub>. Moreover, it will leave unexplained Socrates' encouragement to search<sub>1</sub> for what neither he nor Meno know at all. If Plato intends to resolve *Meno's* paradox by appealing to search<sub>2</sub>, he will need to account for the possession of knowledge by Meno and Socrates despite their professions. He will need something like the theory of recollection.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, turning to the eristic arguments of the *Euthydemus* will prove fruitless in resolving the puzzle in the *Meno*. Meno's puzzle and Socrates' version of it cannot as a matter of fact be resolved simply by recognizing an ambiguity in zetein, and lacking explicit textual evidence to the contrary we should not suppose that Plato thought it could.

Nevertheless, one might think that while the *Euthydemus* arguments do not supply the precise resolution to *Meno's* paradox, they suggest the general line of attack that Plato is inclined to employ to respond to these kinds of puzzles. They suggest, that is, that Plato will resolve this *Meno* puzzle by uncovering an elementary equivocation or some other logical fallacy. And Plato has Socrates describe the paradox as an 'eristic argument' precisely to remind the reader of this general line of response.<sup>27</sup>

Something like this is what Roslyn Weiss has in mind, I think, when she writes that the paradox

has no philosophical bite. It exemplifies the sort of argument that Socrates easily dispenses with in the *Euthydemus* (Weiss 2001:54).

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<sup>26</sup>Consequently, (White 1976:42)'s view that Socrates resolves the paradox by denying the first horn of the dilemma, i.e., that one cannot search for what one knows, requires elaboration. If Socrates resolves the paradox in this way without explaining how Meno and Socrates have knowledge despite appearances, he leaves quite unresolved Meno's puzzle. Meno's puzzle concerns how search can take place in the face of apparent complete ignorance. Simply, to say that one can search for what one knows leaves that puzzle unexplained.

<sup>27</sup>See (Chance 1992:229 n. 8) who takes *Theaetetus* 197a-b and 199a to indicate that "controversialists at the time were delighting in dragging about the concepts of learning and knowing."

Weiss does not take *Meno*'s paradox to be resolved by noticing an equivocation on zetein. Rather, following up on a suggestion by Ryle,<sup>28</sup> she takes the paradox to be resolved by noticing an elementary equivocation on the phrase 'what to search for'. One might be said to fail to know what to search for either in the 'adjectival' sense or in the 'interrogative' sense.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps, the clearest way to explain this distinction is as follows. If A fails to know what she is searching for in the interrogative sense, it follows that if what A is searching for is virtue (or what virtue is), then A fails to know virtue (or what virtue is). But if A fails to know what she is searching for in the adjectival sense, it follows that if what A is searching for is virtue (or what virtue is), then A fails to know that she is searching for virtue (or what virtue is). Consequently, if A fails to know virtue (or what virtue is), then A does not know what to search for in the interrogative sense, but may know what to search for in the adjectival sense. That is, to return to *Meno*'s paradox,

[4a] If A does not know what x is at all, then A does not know what to search for is true in the interrogative sense, but not the adjectival sense. Of course, to see this as a resolution of the puzzle, one also needs to maintain that in order to search for what x is, one does not need to know what to search for in the interrogative sense. One only needs to know what to search for in the adjectival sense.<sup>30</sup> Thus, it might be supposed that while *Meno*'s paradox is not to be resolved by pointing to the same sort of equivocation that resolves the puzzles of the *Euthydemus*, it nevertheless is to be resolved by pointing to an elementary equivocation.

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<sup>28</sup>(Ryle 1976:7–9).

<sup>29</sup>See (White 1976:58 n. 31).

<sup>30</sup>To see the equivocation explicitly consider this portion of the paradox as follows:

- [4a] If A does not know what x is at all, then A does not know what to search for ([T3b] & [T4e])  
 [--] If A does not know what to search for, then A cannot search for what x is (supplied)  
 [5m] So, if A does not know what x is at all, then A cannot search for what x is ([T3a])

[4a] is true in the interrogative sense, but [--] is not, while [--] is true in the adjectival sense, but [4a] is not.

It is of course one thing to claim that a Platonic puzzle can be resolved by noticing an ambiguity in a key phrase or term, and quite another to claim that Plato was aware of such a resolution. Like Ryle, whom Weiss credits with calling our attention to ambiguity of the phrase ‘what to search for’, I am skeptical that Plato was aware of this distinction.<sup>31</sup> But even if one could reasonably establish that Plato was aware of this distinction, two reasons remain for doubting that Plato employed this distinction to resolve *Meno*’s paradox.

According to Weiss’s reading of the paradox, [4a] is true on the interrogative reading, but false on the adjectival reading. It does not follow, according to Weiss, that if one fails to know at all what virtue is, that one fails to know that one is searching for virtue.

Now, this may indeed be true, but seeing it requires more than simply recognizing the distinction between the interrogative and adjectival senses of what-clauses. It requires recognizing that knowing that one is searching for virtue does not amount to knowing something about virtue. It requires recognizing that the proposition that one is searching for virtue is not a proposition about virtue. It requires this because of Plato’s commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge testified to at *Meno* 71b3-4 (among other places), according to which failure to know what virtue is entails failure to know anything else about virtue.<sup>32</sup> Given such a

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<sup>31</sup>As far as I can tell Weiss’ primary reason for attributing the awareness of this distinction to Plato is that immediately following the paradox Socrates cites two geometry examples that “are models of how one can inquire into something when the solution is not already known” (Weiss 2001:55). I do not deny that the two geometrical inquiries that follow the paradox serve as Moorean counter-examples to the paradox. (See (Moore 1959:144–145) and also (Thomas 1980:123 and 130–131) who describes the character of Plato’s response to the paradox as Samuel Johnson-like, referring to Johnson’s famous stone kicking as a refutation of Berkeleian idealism.) But a Moorean counter-example only serves to show that the argument on behalf of the paradox is in some way unsound. It leaves completely open the diagnosis of the problem. It is as though Moore faced with the Zenonian paradoxes for the impossibility of motion were to raise his hand, waive it back and forth, and declare ‘I refute you thusly’. We might allow that such a display indicates that the Zenonian arguments are unsound. But such a display provides us no evidence that the Zenonian paradoxes result from an elementary equivocation, let alone a specific elementary equivocation. Consequently, even if Ryle’s distinction between adjectival and interrogative senses of ‘what one is searching for’ does resolve *Meno*’s paradox, I see nothing in the text that indicates that Plato would endorse this diagnosis.

<sup>32</sup>For an extended argument that Plato in the elenctic dialogues is committed to the priority of definitional knowledge see (Benson 1990b) and (Benson 2000:ch. 6). See also (Kahn 1996:160–161) and (Irwin 1995:25–26).

commitment, why should one concede that Meno's and Socrates' ignorance of what virtue is is compatible with their knowledge that virtue is what they are searching for? Seeing that this latter knowledge does not amount to knowing something about virtue (if it does not) clearly requires more than simply recognizing an elementary equivocation.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, merely recognizing the equivocation on the phrase 'what one is searching for' does not suffice to resolve the paradox.

Secondly, as Weiss would readily admit, resolving the paradox by appealing to the equivocation on the phrase 'what one is searching for' leaves completely unresolved the second consideration Meno offers on behalf of the impossibility of inquiry - [4b] - the ending problem. Remember that in addition to wondering how one can begin a search when one is completely ignorant, Meno wonders how one can successfully finish such a search. As Meno puts it: "Or even if you should happen upon it, how will you know that this is what you didn't know?" There is no equivocating on the what-clause here. It must be read in the interrogative sense. Meno is wondering how one will know that one has hit upon virtue. The problem here concerns recognizing that one has completed a search, and the awareness of the distinction between adjectival and interrogative senses of what-clauses will not resolve this problem.

Of course, Weiss would not disagree. She maintains that the absence of Meno's second consideration in Socrates' version of the paradox is not an accident. According to Weiss, Plato fails to believe that this second consideration can be resolved at least in the case of searches for things like the nature of virtue.

(Vlastos 1990), who denies Plato's commitment in the elenctic dialogues, concedes that he is committed to it in the *Meno* and other post-elenctic dialogues.

<sup>33</sup>For some reason to think that Plato would maintain that knowing that virtue is what we are searching for does amount to knowing something about (or involving) virtue see my discussion of Plato's puzzle concerning false belief in the *Theaetetus* (Benson 1992:esp. 177 n. 15).

But, such an understanding of the paradox is difficult to sustain in light of the way Socrates is made to conclude this entire methodological digression ushered in by the paradox.<sup>34</sup>

Socrates is made to say following his conversation with the slave-boy

[T7] 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, I would fight for in both word and deed as far as I am able. [86b6-c2; emphasis added]

Plato clearly presents Socrates here as taking his solution to the paradox to address the ending problem. He explicitly maintains that, whatever else he may or may not have shown, he has shown that one ought to think that one can discover - i.e. hit upon and recognize - what one has been searching for.<sup>35</sup> The fact that Socrates' version of the paradox only mentions the beginning problem cannot, then, be understood as philosophically significant. Plato takes Socrates to have provided a solution to the ending problem whether it is mentioned in Socrates' version of the paradox or not. But understanding Plato's resolution of the paradox as recognizing an equivocation between the interrogative and adjectival senses of what-clauses cannot explain how Plato has resolved the ending problem.

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<sup>34</sup>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 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.

<sup>35</sup>See (Dimas 1996:22) and (Scott 1995:31).

Consequently, we should not suppose that Plato takes *Meno's* paradox to be resolved by recognizing an equivocation on the adjectival and interrogative senses of what-clauses.

But if we are not to suppose that Plato takes *Meno's* paradox to be resolvable by the recognition of some elementary equivocation or logical fallacy, how are we to explain his repeated comment that Meno is raising an eristic or contentious argument? Considerable attention has been devoted in recent years to Plato's understanding of eristic, particularly as distinguished from the Socratic *elenchos*.<sup>36</sup> No one to my knowledge has suggested, let alone shown, that according to Plato every eristic argument must consist in a deliberate use of fallacious argumentation.<sup>37</sup> The consensus, rather, seems to be that what distinguishes eristic argumentation from the sort of argumentation Plato approves of - Socratic *elenchos* and dialectic - is the purpose to which the argumentation is put. Roughly, the purpose of eristic argumentation according to Plato appears to be victory in argument, while the purpose of Platonic argumentation appears to be truth.<sup>38</sup> It is this purpose of eristic that allows it to employ elementary equivocations and other logical fallacies, but it is not required to do so. Sometimes sound arguments will lead to victory as well. Indeed, sometimes genuine (as well as clearly fallacious) paradoxes will deflect the course of what looks to be a losing battle, and turn a lost cause into a victory. One suspects that those who practice eristic argumentation have a store of such paradoxes available to employ when the discussion appears to be going poorly. It is likely that it is this aspect of eristic argumentation that Plato has in mind when he has Socrates describe

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<sup>36</sup>See, for example (Kerferd 1981:59–67) (Benson 1989), and (Nehamas 1990).

<sup>37</sup>See (Nehamas 1990:7) who maintains that Plato does not portray Protagoras as likely to use fallacious arguments despite having authored *Techne Eristikon*. Moreover, as Nehamas points out, there is no indication of fallacy at *Meno* 75c-d, where Socrates considers how he would respond to an eristic questioner who doubted his definition of shape. Nehamas goes on to argue that to appeal to the deliberate use of fallacy “as a neutral, methodological distinction, we need a general theory of fallacious arguments” which he doubts is available at this point (Nehamas 1990:8).

Meno's puzzle as the second horn of an eristic argument. This is just the sort of obstructionist argument<sup>39</sup> that those who practice eristic argumentation would be likely to employ at this stage of the discussion - whether or not Socrates is ascribing such an obstructionist motive to Meno.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

I have argued that Plato presents *Meno's* paradox as a serious philosophical puzzle that motivates serious philosophical reflection and theorizing. Plato does not take the paradox to be the result of some elementary equivocation. Plato clearly does not think that the paradox is sound. He is earnestly committed to the possibility of searching for and coming to know what one does not at present know. But we should not think that Plato takes the recognition of this possibility to be easily explained by discerning an elementary equivocation of some key term or clause in the paradox. Something more is required, although precisely what is required to account for this possibility and so resolve *Meno's* paradox I have not attempted to address in this essay.

Nor have I attempted to maintain that the correct resolution of *Meno's* paradox cannot be the recognition of different senses of some key term or clause in the puzzle. And so, to that extent the puzzle may yet be accurately described as depending on an equivocation. For example, those commentators who take the paradox to be resolved by recognizing a distinction between tacit or latent knowledge and occurrent or manifest knowledge may be accurately

<sup>38</sup>See (Kerferd 1981:62). Even Nehamas, who is generally critical of Kerferd's account, allows that eristic's purpose might be characterized as victory as such, while Socrates' purpose could be characterized as "victory for the correct argument, not for himself" (Nehamas 1990:10).

<sup>39</sup>See (White 1974:289 n. 1) who maintains that the correct translation of *eristikon logon* is 'contentious' or 'obstructionist argument'.

<sup>40</sup>Commentators differ considerably over the sincerity and philosophical ability of Meno in the dialogue.

described as taking the paradox to depend on an equivocation.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, [M2] is false, while [M3] is true when ‘know’ is used in the sense of tacit or latent knowledge, while [M2] is true and [M3] is false when ‘know’ is used in the sense of occurrent or manifest knowledge. My aim has not been to argue that *Meno*’s paradox does not depend upon an equivocation or logical fallacy, but that it does not depend upon an elementary equivocation or obvious logical fallacy. It is for Plato a serious philosophical puzzle which requires careful consideration to be resolved. It is not to be dismissed as mere play as are the puzzles concerning learning in the *Euthydemus*. Perhaps it can be resolved by recognizing that it depends on an equivocation or logical fallacy, but such a recognition makes serious philosophical progress.<sup>42</sup>

Consider, for example, the paradoxes with which Quine begins his “Reference and Modality’.<sup>43</sup> Are these paradoxes the result of some kind of fallacy of ambiguity? Certainly, one

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<sup>41</sup>See, for example (Bluck 1964:9 and 272), and (Matthews 1999:60–65).

<sup>42</sup>(Matthews 1999:61–62) makes a similar point, but he maintains that seeing the paradox as resolved by the distinction between latent and manifest knowledge is not seeing the paradox as resolved by recognizing an equivocation. It seems to me, however, that such a resolution is formally equivalent to the solution Socrates advocates in the *Euthydemus*.

<sup>43</sup>Roughly:

- [A] Given a true statement of identity, one of its two terms may be substituted for the other in any true statement and the result will be true.
- [1B] Giorgione = Barbarelli
- [1C] Giorgione was so-called because of his size
- [1D] So, Barbarelli was so called because of his size.
- [1E] But, Barbarelli was not so called because of his size.
  
- [A] Given a true statement of identity, one of its two terms may be substituted for the other in any true statement and the result will be true.
- [2B] Cicero = Tully.
- [2C] ‘Cicero’ contains six letters.
- [2D] So, ‘Tully’ contains six letters.
- [2E] But, ‘Tully’ does not contain six letters.
  
- [A] Given a true statement of identity, one of its two terms may be substituted for the other in any true statement and the result will be true.
- [3B] Cicero = Tully.
- [3C] Philip is unaware that Tully denounced Catiline.
- [3D] So, Philip is unaware that Cicero denounced Catiline.
- [3E] But, Philip is aware that Cicero denounced Catiline.

way to resolve them is to carefully disambiguate referential from non-referential occurrences of singular terms. But whether these paradoxes are the result of some sort of formal fallacy does not really seem to matter. What does matter is that the paradoxes are offered to motivate serious philosophical issues.

It is clear that Quine thinks some kind of fallacy has been committed in the inferences in these paradoxes, just as Plato clearly thinks some fallacy has been committed in the inferences that generate *Meno's* paradox. Plato no more thinks that search is impossible than Quine thinks that Philip is both aware and unaware that Cicero denounced Catiline. But it is equally clear that Quine does not introduce these paradoxes as mere play, as a kind of quiz of the linguistic acuity of the reader. Rather, they are employed to introduce serious philosophical issues concerning referential and non-referential contexts. In Quine's case, the subsequent discussion is not aimed at the resolution of these paradoxes. He has larger fish to fry. Whether Plato's subsequent discussion of the theory of recollection and the method of hypothesis is introduced to resolve *Meno's* paradox (as I believe) or whether he too has larger fish to fry (as, for example, Fine and Irwin would maintain)<sup>44</sup> I leave for another time. For now we can safely conclude that *Meno's* paradox when properly understood is no dodge. Plato takes it to require serious philosophical reflection.<sup>45</sup>

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For Quine use of 'paradox' to describe at least the second argument see (Quine 1961:139).

<sup>44</sup>See n. 8 above.

<sup>45</sup>I would like to thank Monte Cook, Ray Elugardo, Wayne Riggs, Roslyn Weiss, Nick White, and Linda Zagzebski for helpful comments on various versions of this essay.

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