

Plato's Hypothetical Inquiry in the *Meno*

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At *Meno* 86e2–4 Socrates proposes to Meno that they should consider the question whether virtue is teachable on a hypothesis. Partly because its concrete procedure is illustrated by a baffling geometrical example, there has still been wide disagreement among scholars as to how he actually carries out this hypothetical inquiry into virtue. The basic structure of the argument at 87b2–89a5 appears very simple: Socrates converts the original question whether virtue is teachable to the question whether it is knowledge, and then examines the latter on the basis of his agreement with Meno that virtue is good. Apart however from that agreement being, as it is explicitly called, a ‘hypothesis’, opinion is divided on what other hypothesis Socrates posited. Some think of it as the conditional ‘if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable’ or as ‘knowledge is teachable’ (Bedu-Addo 1984, 7–9; Wolfsdorf 2008, 44–6 and 58–60),¹ and others as the bi-conditional ‘if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable, but if not, not’ or as ‘knowledge alone is teachable’ (Grgić 1999, 34–6; Weiss 2001, 131; Zyskind and Sternfeld 1976, 132).² But most scholars, in contrast, identify it with the simple proposition ‘virtue is knowledge’ (Bedu-Addo 1984, 7–9; Benson 2003, 107–25; Bluck 1961, 17–19 and 85–91; Bostock 1986, 165–6; Canto-Sperber 1991, 98–102; Cherniss 1947, 140; Hackforth 1955, 140–1; Kahn 1996, 310; Robinson 1953, 116–18; Rose 1970, 3–7; Sayre 1969, 29 n. 40; Scott 2006, 137–40 and 221–4; Sharples 1985, 167).³ It is also suggested that Socrates’ new philosophical tool does not involve any process of positing a hypothesis but only aims to establish the equivalence between teachability and knowledge (Ebrey 2013, 76 and 83–4). Accordingly, it has remained regrettably unclear what role the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* plays in examining virtue.

Against those preceding studies, I argue in this paper that in the whole hypothetical argument (87b2–89a5) the hypothesis Socrates posited is, in fact, the proposition ‘virtue is good’ *alone*, and that assuming the presence of another hypothesis is seriously misleading in assessing the nature of hypothesis in the *Meno*. For the hypothesis in question, as a result, is often said to be a higher and sufficient hypothesis in line with

¹ But Bedu-Addo (1984) also acknowledges the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge.

² Grgić (1999) considers some other statements as well to be hypotheses.

³ Rose (1970) also mentions some other hypotheses.

the method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. In the light of the earlier discussion of Meno's third definition of virtue (77b2–79a2), in contrast, the paper shows that the content of the hypothesis, although deeply rooted in Socrates' beliefs, is not treated as self-evidently true but as posing the serious problem of whether virtue is profitable without any other goods, which Plato has him tackle squarely in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*. The method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is then, I submit, intended to avoid discussing such a controversial claim, not to answer either what virtue is or whether it is teachable. Plato's real aim here is rather to turn focus to the relationship between goodness and knowledge and to persuade Meno, who earlier claimed that bodily and external goods are the only good things, that they are in fact not good or bad in themselves but become beneficial only under the guidance of knowledge. In this sense, I conclude, his hypothetical argument in the *Meno* is essentially protreptic.

Here I do not discuss the geometrical problem at 86e4–87b2, after which Socrates' current inquiry is said to be modelled. But this should not be taken to be a problem with the argument I shall advance below. For the geometrical hypothesis in question is so obscure that any interpretation of it cannot escape some speculation. Although I argued elsewhere that it essentially has the same features as I shall point out with regard to the hypothesis that virtue is good (Iwata 2015), I therefore do not presuppose any outcome of the discussion there but attempt to interpret our philosophical passage independently, as a result of which, I hope, my interpretations of the two passages are shown to be complementary to each other.

I start by discussing the first part of the argument (87b2–c10) with the aim of critically examining the previous studies which endorsed the presence of a different hypothesis from the proposition that virtue is good (Section I). Then I go on to discuss the second part (87c11–89a5) in order to bridge the gap between the passage about Meno's third definition of virtue and our present hypothetical passage, and to argue for the unstable nature of the hypothesis in question (Section II). Finally, I end with the concluding remark that the hypothesis in the *Meno* is posited for exhortative purposes (Section III).

I. The Argument at 87b2–c10

Just after giving the geometrical example, Socrates says to Meno that since they do not know what virtue is or what sort of thing it is, they should likewise consider whether virtue is teachable or not, by making a hypothesis (87b3–4). Unfortunately, he does not specify the content of a hypothesis here; all he suggests is that they posit a hypothesis regarding virtue in order to consider whether it is teachable or not. There is therefore no hint so far which settles on what hypothesis he posits.

Socrates continues:

(1) Among the things connected with the soul, of what sort is virtue, for it to be teachable or not teachable? (2) First of all, if it is of a different kind from the sort of thing knowledge is, is it or isn't it teachable (or rather, as we were just saying, recollectable: let it make no difference to us which of the two names we use). Or is this much obvious to everyone, that a person is taught nothing other than knowledge?

I for one think so.

(3) And if virtue is a sort of knowledge, clearly it would be teachable.

Of course.

(4) Then we've quickly dealt with this point, that virtue is teachable if it's this kind of thing, but not if it's of the other kind.

Quite so. (87b5–c10, tr. Sedley and Long, modified)

As many commentators point out, Socrates here seems to be carrying out problem reduction by the method of analysis (Canto-Sperber 1991, 101 and 285 n. 193; Menn 2002, 211–12; Wolfsdorf 2008, 58–9).⁴ The method of analysis is, roughly speaking, a way of discovering a proper starting point of a demonstration. It first assumes the conclusion in question to be true, and then deduces from that conclusion another proposition, from that proposition another and so on until reaching a premise which can be judged to be true independently of the assumed conclusion and intermediate propositions. This premise in turn becomes a starting point from which the proof of the conclusion is deductively constructed approximately in the reverse order. On the other hand, if an inference from the conclusion ends with the point where a reached premise needs proving, then the reverse deduction from it results in the problem reduction;

⁴ Wolfsdorf (2008) takes step (1) as showing the first step of 'analysis', namely assuming virtue to be teachable; he translates the passage as 'What sort of being pertaining to the soul would excellence be, if it were to be teachable or not teachable?' But this translation is not faithful to the Greek, in which 'would virtue be teachable or not?' is the apodosis, not the protasis. Even if we adopt his translation, moreover, the presence of 'or not teachable' does not support his view that Socrates is applying only teachability to virtue.

namely the task of demonstrating the conclusion in question is reduced to that of demonstrating the reached premise. In our present case too, since it is still an object of examination whether virtue is knowledge (87c11–12), Socrates seems to be attempting to reduce the original problem, not to solve it: if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable, but if it is of another psychological character, it is not. Step (1) is therefore to be taken as a general question which introduces Socrates' philosophical application of the geometrical method to problem reduction.

One thing to notice about (1) is that Socrates asks the question with *poion ti*, which clearly indicates that this hypothetical inquiry still remains within the domain of *poion* questions (cf. Benson 2003, 108–11). Since the hypothesis at 87d2–3, that virtue is good, is also only a statement about a quality of virtue, there will be few grounds for believing, as some scholars do, that the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* aims to tackle the *ti* question (*pace* Bedu-Addo 1984, 9; Grgić 1999, 21 and 37–9; Guthrie 1962, vol. 4 259–60; Menn 2002, 211 and 216; Sharples 1985, 10 and 162–3). Socrates makes it explicit that the new approach is to be introduced in order to *bypass* the *ti* question (86d8–e1). That Socrates did not intend the hypothetical discussion to contribute to answering the *ti* question is further grounded by the later passage, 97b10–c1, where Socrates looks back to the whole argument here simply as the consideration of a *poion* question.

Following the introductory question in (1), Socrates moves on to the first reduction process, which is composed of the two conditionals. Since by the time of step (4) Socrates has finished the problem reduction, the next two steps, (2) and (3), are supposed to complete the process. As far as their logical structure is concerned, step (2) establishes the conditional, if virtue is teachable, it is knowledge; on the other hand, step (3) confirms the other, if virtue is (a kind of) knowledge, it is teachable. This procedure is certainly akin to problem reduction by the method of analysis: Socrates (tacitly here) assumes virtue to be teachable and then deduces from it that virtue is knowledge, and, in turn, conversely deduces from the latter that virtue is teachable.⁵ Accordingly, this pair

⁵ An anonymous referee has put to me the question why we have to suppose that Socrates is here employing the method of analysis rather than simply maintaining the equivalence between teachability and knowledge. One simple reason for adopting the former reading is that the order of the inferences (2 and 3) exactly corresponds to the procedure of the method. To answer the question fully, however, I have to discuss the geometrical problem at 86e4–87b2 in detail, which I cannot here because space is limited. But the interpretation which I think is most widely accepted by scholars, the one Cook Wilson (1903) first presented, strongly suggests that a

of conditionals establishes the equivalence between teachability and knowledge, and enables the problem of whether virtue is teachable to be reduced to that of whether virtue is knowledge.⁶

What, then, is this problem reduction related to the process of positing a hypothesis? Most scholars believe, as I said at the beginning, that by this stage Socrates has already posited a hypothesis, a belief which has led to long-standing debate about whether it is the simple proposition ‘virtue is knowledge’, the conditional ‘if virtue is knowledge it is teachable’ (‘knowledge is teachable’) or the full bi-conditional ‘if virtue is knowledge it is teachable, and if not, not’ (‘knowledge alone is teachable’). I strongly doubt, however, that any of these options is correct, for there is no explicit evidence that a hypothesis is formulated here. One might immediately object that since at 87b3–4 he says, ‘By making a hypothesis let us consider whether or not virtue is teachable, saying as follows (*hōde legontes*)’, and goes on to ask what kind of psychological state virtue must be in order to be teachable, this question is supposed to introduce a hypothesis. But it could be only a preliminary to putting forward the hypothesis at 87d2–3 that virtue is good, which is used in the end for considering the original problem as well as the reduced one. And I think this is the better reading of the passage. For it should be incontestable that Socrates hypothesizes the proposition that virtue is good; when explaining the procedure of the method of hypothesis with the geometrical problem, on the other hand, he says that a geometer uses *a* hypothesis (*tina hypothesisin*, 87a2), which indicates that the method involves positing only one hypothesis for the inquiry in question. I therefore suggest that what Socrates did in the first part of the argument should be the immediate

geometer is supposed to infer the reduced problem mentioned at 87c3–6 by employing the method of analysis. For a more detailed discussion, see Iwata (2015, 2–8). That aside, whether he is actually applying the method of analysis here or not, the main point of the paper is that he employs it to make an inference to the hypothesis that virtue is good, and considers it to be a tentative starting point of the argument. This, as I shall argue below, is what Socrates has in mind when introducing the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*.

⁶ It is sometimes claimed that this series of steps is the process of finding a limiting condition, analogous to a condition known in Greek mathematics as ‘diorism’ (Bedu-Addo 1984, 6 n. 23 and 7–8; Benson 2003, 107–25; Knorr 1986, 73–4). For example, Bluck (1961, 326) says, ‘Socrates’ aim in obtaining consent to them both is to establish a *limiting condition* for the teachability of virtue. *If and only if* virtue is a kind of knowledge, will it be teachable’ (his italics; cf. 17–18, 76, 79–81 and 86–8). Actual mathematical examples indicate, however, that a diorism is just a necessary condition for a problem being solved (cf. *Elements* I. 22 and VI. 28). What Socrates establishes here, in contrast, is not only a necessary but also sufficient condition for virtue being teachable. We should therefore not confuse problem reduction with specifying a diorism.

conversion of problems, and nothing more; he reduced the original problem in accordance with the method of analysis, but did not posit any hypothesis involving knowledge. Throughout the dialogue he does not call any other statement on virtue a hypothesis, and the only hypothesis posited in the *Meno*, I submit, is the proposition that virtue is good.

There is a passage, however, which apparently supports the opponents' views. After agreeing at the end of the hypothetical argument that there are no good things other than knowledge, Meno responds to Socrates as follows.

And according to your hypothesis, Socrates, if indeed (*eiper*) virtue is knowledge, it is clear that virtue is teachable. (89c2–4, tr. Sedley and Long)

Scholars have been in wide disagreement as to whether by 'your hypothesis' Meno means the simple proposition, the conditional or the bi-conditional hypothesis involving knowledge; and this passage is a principal battlefield on which the justification of their interpretations largely depends. The point of contention is which of the options 'your hypothesis' is in apposition to (cf. Scott 2006, 223–4). I think, however, that neither option is correct, and that it is still the proposition 'virtue is good'. Remember the context down to this statement of Meno's: as a result of convincing Meno that knowledge is the only good, Socrates has just established the conditional, if virtue is good, then it is knowledge; during that process he particularly emphasized that the conclusion that virtue is knowledge depends on the premise that virtue is beneficial (88c4–5, d2–3, 89a2–5), which I shall argue below is the content of the hypothesis at 87d2–3. Meno's response here to Socrates, then, should be that if one starts with the hypothesis that virtue is good, it is successfully inferred that virtue is knowledge, which, in turn, shows, based on the equivalence between knowledge and teachability, that virtue is teachable. The use of *eiper* connotes the consequence of the argument that the hypothesis that virtue is good entails the proposition that it is knowledge, rather than indicates that the latter is a mere supposition.

What should be noticed is that whether virtue is knowledge was, as Socrates himself says, an object of examination, not of hypothesizing, in order to answer the question

whether virtue is teachable.⁷ It might be objected, to be sure, that a proposition's being to be examined does not necessarily ensure that it is not a hypothesis, in the light of the method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates mentions the method of positing another *higher* hypothesis (101d6–8).⁸ However, this connection is highly doubtful, because in the *Phaedo* a higher hypothesis is introduced, I suppose, to *ground* the lower one only after recognizing some reliability in it by checking its *hormēthenta* (101d3–6), even if it might be eventually discarded. Exactly for this reason, an attempt to formulate a higher hypothesis which successfully grounds the lower functions as a heuristic procedure (101e3), which presumably forms the background of the upward path to the Form of the Good in the *Republic*. Here in the *Meno*, in contrast, the proposition that virtue is knowledge is not treated as an object whose reliability the discussants are sufficiently confident in, but merely as an object of inquiry. In fact they even agree that virtue is *not* knowledge later in the dialogue. There is no substantial reason, therefore, why we should read the process of positing a higher hypothesis into the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*. Rather, doing so is highly misleading: many scholars have accordingly been led to the idea that the hypothesis that virtue is good is sufficiently secure (cf. *ti hikanon*, *Phaedo* 101d8), or self-evidently true, implicitly or explicitly, in view of the unhypothetical principle of the Form of the Good in the *Republic*. This dominant view is critically examined in the following section.

II. The Argument at 87c11–89a5

⁷ It is true that some of the Socratic doctrines, such as the unity of virtue and the impossibility of *akrasia*, make us believe that he was generally committed to the intellectualistic view of virtue; one might therefore think that the proposition that virtue is knowledge is likely to be treated as a hypothesis here. However, his commitment to the idea is not so unwavering that we can find any plausible reason for his positing it as a hypothesis from which he is proposing to consider or infer the conclusion that virtue is teachable. Even in the *Protagoras*, where he most explicitly defends the above two doctrines, the dialogue ends up with the aporetic conclusion that his view of the relationship between virtue and knowledge as well as Protagoras' is confused (361a5–d2). As far as I can see, on the other hand, there is no indication in the dialogues that Socrates doubts that virtue is good. There is therefore ample reason why this proposition, more basic in his relevant set of beliefs, should be thought to be the sole hypothesis from which he proposes to consider whether or not virtue is knowledge, or teachable.

⁸ Since Cherniss (1947, 140) suggested this possibility, it has been accepted by almost all the scholars who regard the proposition that virtue is knowledge as a hypothesis.

If my discussion thus far is correct, it is not until the second part of the argument (87c11–89a5) that Socrates takes the actual step of positing a hypothesis—the only hypothesis in the *Meno*, that virtue is good; its analysis is therefore more important for understanding the nature of hypothesis in the *Meno*. Paying more attention, however, to the first part than to the second, many scholars have simply believed that the hypothesis here is treated as a sufficient or self-evidently true starting point of argument (Bostock 1986, 174–5; Canto-Sperber 1991, 286–7 n. 200; Gonzalez 1998, 174–5; Grgić 1999, 36–7; Guthrie 1962, vol. 4 259; Menn 2002, 211; Sharples 1985, 163; Wolfsdorf 2008, 42–4).⁹ By considering, in contrast, its exact meaning and procedure of discovery, I shall show in this section that, despite his belief in its truth, Socrates thinks of it as a thesis which essentially requires considerable justification, and therefore that although his hypothetical method here plays, on the surface, the role of considering the *poion* question without answering the *ti* question, it also plays, on a deeper level, the role of avoiding the task of arguing for the truth of the hypothesis.

After reducing the original problem, Socrates tells Meno that they must next examine whether virtue is knowledge or not, and starts an argument as follows.

Well then, surely we say that virtue is per se good (*agathon auto ... tēn aretēn*)? And does this hypothesis remain for us, that it is good?

Certainly.

Now if there is something else, distinct from knowledge, which also is good, then perhaps virtue might not be a sort of knowledge. But if there is nothing good that isn't included in knowledge, then we'd be right to suspect that virtue is a sort of knowledge.

True.

And is it because of virtue that we are good?

Yes.

But if good, then beneficial (*ōphelimoī*). For all good things are beneficial, aren't they?

Yes.

Then is virtue also something beneficial?

Necessarily, given what we have agreed. (87d2–e4, tr. Sedley and Long, modified)

⁹ Benson (2003, 116) reads the epistemic status of the hypothesis in question a little weakly by considering that the claim that virtue is good is only more secure rather than self-evidently true. I agree that Socrates would have firmly believed in its truth probably because it had survived his elenctic examination of it, but shall argue below that the point of positing that claim as a hypothesis is still the omission of a necessary demonstration.

Here Plato makes it explicit that the hypothesis posited for the ensuing discussion is the proposition that virtue is good. To assess its epistemic nature, we need first to clarify its exact meaning. Some say that since *aretē* is the abstract noun corresponding to the adjective *agathon*, the proposition that virtue is good is a self-predication and therefore a trivially true starting point of the argument (Guthrie 1962, vol. 4 259). But I do not think that Socrates makes such a near-tautological statement as that goodness is good. It is true that at *Republic* 352d–354a *aretē* functions simply to mean goodness of something, and that Socrates does sometimes mention self-predicative propositions like ‘justice is just’, apparently regarding them as self-evident (*Protagoras* 330c3–e2; cf. *Phaedo* 100c3–101d3). In the *Meno*, however, *aretē* basically serves as a generic term for such moral qualities as justice, temperance and so on (cf. 73a7–c5¹⁰, 73d6–74b1, 79a3–6); on the other hand, Socrates specifies the meaning of ‘good’ as ‘beneficial (*ōphelimon*)’. Since by their conjunction, therefore, Socrates means that moral qualities are profitable, the hypothesis cannot be tautological (cf. Bluck 1961, 88).

One might object, to be sure, that since Socrates *infers* ‘beneficial’ from ‘good’ in the second half of the above passage, the hypothesis itself is not supposed to carry the specific meaning that virtue is beneficial. In the successive argument, however, Socrates occasionally uses ‘good’ again instead of ‘beneficial’ as if they are interchangeable (88d5, 89a1; cf. 98e12); this would be logically incoherent if he did not assume the identity of ‘beneficial’ with ‘good’. Socrates speaks, in fact, as if the hypothesis is that virtue is ‘beneficial’ at 88c4–5, d2, 89a2. Earlier in the dialogue, moreover, ‘good’ is replaced with ‘beneficial’ many times without notice (77b6–78b2). At least from that passage onwards, the neuter *agathon* is intended to have the same connotation as *ōphelimon*, and by inferring briefly from the former to the latter (87d8–e4) Socrates only clarified the meaning of the hypothesis itself.

What, then, does ‘beneficial’ mean in our present passage? In order to show that nothing other than knowledge is beneficial, Socrates takes up and rejects various bodily and external goods and psychological characters one by one as examples of beneficial things. His discussion at 89b1–7 seems to suggest that ‘beneficial’ means ‘beneficial to cities (*chrēsimoī ... tais poleōsi*)’ or to public interest (cf. 91a1–6, 96e7–97a5, 98c5–9).

¹⁰ In this passage, *aretē* is identified with *agathon*, but both are used in connection with moral qualities.

Such instances as health, beauty and wealth, however, are thought to be beneficial primarily to those who possess them (Sharples 1985, 163–4); when saying, in addition, that if one is bold with understanding, one is benefited (*ōpheleitai*, 88b5–6), he is obviously speaking of the benefit of the courageous man himself. Although his attitude here towards the relationship between common good and individual good is vague, it is at least clear that he does not use ‘beneficial’ in a purely altruistic sense in the *Meno* (cf. 77b6–78b2); therefore, the hypothesis itself implies that virtue is beneficial to its possessors.

Moreover, we need to look at the reason why Socrates judges items customarily taken to be good not to be beneficial. The gist of the argument is that such seemingly beneficial things are in need of what guides (88a3–4, c2–3, d6–7) or correctly uses them (88a4–5, e1–2), and therefore that they are neither beneficial nor harmful in themselves (88c6–d1, 4–5). His argument presupposes, then, that what can be counted as beneficial must be something beneficial *per se*, in the sense of making other things good, and therefore that the hypothesis also entails the idea that virtue is such an inherently good thing. This is hardly an obvious truth about virtue.

Again, it might be objected that I am unreasonably adding many qualifications to the hypothesis and then attempting to argue that it is not self-evident. However, if Socrates had not intended those qualifications to be included in the hypothesis, his ensuing hypothetical argument would be logically fallacious. For the items which Socrates rejects because they are not a source of goodness could still count as good without those qualifications, as a result of which he could not have deduced virtue’s being knowledge from its being good. The hypothesis therefore has to mean, to put it concretely, that virtue is something because of which other things or actions become beneficial primarily for its possessors.¹¹

The question to ask here is: how could Socrates find that starting point suitable for examining whether virtue is knowledge? Although scholars are generally silent on this, I argue that Socrates formulated the hypothesis by tacitly bringing in the idea that if something is knowledge, it is good, which is logically analogous to the earlier inference

¹¹ It would not be an accident that Socrates adds *auto* at 87d2, which qualifies *agathon* as ‘per se good’. Therefore, *auto* in the hypothesis (87d3) might well have the same connotation, although *auto* is used in other places in the *Meno* (87d7, 88c5, 89d4, 98e7, 10) simply for referring to *aretē*.

from something's being teachable to its being knowledge. For the idea that knowledge is good seems to be an assumption made before discussing what is good or beneficial in the ensuing argument at 87e5–89a5. This is because when explaining the point of the argument just after positing the hypothesis (87d4–8), Socrates says, 'if there is something else, distinct from knowledge, which *also* is good (*ei men ti estin agathon kai allo chōrizomenon epistēmēs*)'. The addition of 'also (*kai*)' would be inexplicable if at this point he had not presupposed that at least knowledge is good. One might think that this statement of Socrates' is what is going to be argued for rather than a presupposition of the argument that follows. And it is true that he repeatedly claims there that when something is associated with knowledge, it is good (88b5–6, b7–8, c1–3, c6–d1, d6–e2, e3–4).¹² What should be noticed is, however, that all that the argument has to establish in order to draw from the hypothesis the conclusion that virtue is knowledge is the point that nothing except knowledge is good. And it appears that the idea that knowledge is good is *used* there to establish that necessary point rather than is itself established in the argument, for the necessity of knowledge is mentioned only when arguing that the other seemingly good things are not sufficient for benefit. This may well support the view that by conceiving of knowledge as being good Socrates reached the desirable starting point of the argument, which could be seen as involving the method of analysis.¹³

However, the inferential move to the hypothesis here might be doubted for the reason that Socrates could not establish the equivalence between knowledge and goodness, because not all kinds of knowledge are inherently good: just as, for example, the product of a flute-maker becomes good only under the guidance of a flute-player, subordinate crafts are not inherently good and need to be directed ultimately by the kingly art which knows how to lead our lives best (Ebrey 2013, 88–9). However, it is misleading to introduce the hierarchy of crafts here,¹⁴ for Socrates seems to *intend* not

¹² Benson (2003, 117) comments that in the argument Socrates unnecessarily establishes the equivalence between something's being good and its being associated with knowledge. But if we take the sufficiency of the latter for the former to be just a presupposition of the argument, we do not need to think that he is attempting to establish an unnecessary conditional as well in the argument.

¹³ Wolfsdorf (2008, 60–2) also argues that Socrates employs the method of analysis here, but his grounds for it are rather different from what I shall argue below.

¹⁴ Compare the two distinct protreptic arguments in the *Euthydemus*. In the first (278e3–282d3) Socrates confines himself to the point that knowledge in general benefits us, without

to apply the hierarchical relationship of knowledge to this hypothetical argument. Earlier in the dialogue (73e1–74a6) Socrates explicitly distinguished between virtue as a whole (*aretē*) and a sort of virtue (*aretē tis*), and is well aware of the same distinction in the passage under examination (cf. 87c5, d6, 7, 89a4). When therefore Socrates says in the hypothetical passage that knowledge is a source of goodness, by using the words *epistēmē*, *nous* and *phronēsis* without the qualification of *tis*, he is likely to mean that ‘knowledge in general’ is good. His idea would then be that it is always some kind of knowledge which correctly guides our action and benefits us in a particular situation, just as the knowledge of medicine tells people what to eat or drink and always produces the best outcome in its field. It is true that products of specific knowledge are subject to or used further by higher knowledge, such as the knowledge of politics and legislation. However, the aim of Socrates’ present argument is only to show that virtue is a sort of knowledge, not to go so far as to specify what that knowledge is. This supposition is grounded in Socrates’ following remark at the end of the hypothetical passage: ‘Then do we say that virtue is wisdom (*phronēsin*), either the whole of wisdom (*sympasan*) or some part of it (*meros ti*)? (89a3–4)’¹⁵ If Socrates had limited the range of knowledge under discussion only to the highest or really beneficial kind from the beginning, he could not have ended up leaving it an open question whether virtue is the whole or a part of knowledge—*phronēsis* is being used in the argument at 88a6–89a5 without distinction from *epistēmē* and *nous*.

The next important question for our purposes is how Socrates then prepared himself for appealing to the idea that knowledge is good. To answer this question we need to notice some difference between geometry and philosophy so far as regards the nature of argument. In the former, a geometer deductively infers consequences from a premise simply by clarifying its entailment of them. In the latter, in contrast, Socrates *dialectically* establishes propositions by obtaining consent from his interlocutor, Meno in this case. When examining whether virtue is knowledge from the hypothesis, for example, he infers the proposition that knowledge is the only good thing, by making Meno agree that other seemingly good things are in fact not good. It would therefore not

distinctions between kinds of knowledge. In the second (288d5–292e7), on the other hand, he introduces the hierarchy of knowledge for the first time in the dialogue. And it is the first argument, I suppose, that corresponds with the content of the hypothetical passage in the *Meno*.

¹⁵ The alternative reading ‘virtue is knowledge, either the whole of virtue or some part of it’ makes no sense of the whole argument. See, for example, Benson (2003, 117 n. 62).

be unreasonable to suspect that there might be some dialectical background for using the proposition that knowledge is good in preparation for proposing the hypothesis in question. I suggest that the passage to look at is where Socrates discusses Meno's third definition of virtue (77b2–79a2).

The discussion starts at 77b2–5 with Meno's definition of virtue as 'to desire beautiful things (good things) and have the ability to secure them'. In the first half of the argument about it (77b6–78c2) Socrates examines the former part of the definition, 'to desire good things'. First, since by that Meno implies that there are some people who desire bad things, Socrates tries to refute it by separating the following two cases: where people think that bad things are beneficial to them, and where people know that bad things are harmful to them.¹⁶ In the former Socrates argues that they simply mistake bad things for good ones, and that they in fact desire good things. In the latter, on the other hand, he argues that while being harmed entails becoming pitiful and unhappy, they do not desire to be pitiful and unhappy, and therefore that they, in fact, do not desire bad things, either. Although the point of the latter argument is ambiguous, I take it that if they *really* know what effect bad things have on them, they do not desire them; for example, someone sick who purports to know that drinking alcohol exacerbates the illness but still desires to drink does not really know, Socrates thinks, how bad the consequence could be (cf. *Protagoras* 352a1–359a1). It is concluded, accordingly, that everyone desires good things.

Since the clause 'to desire good things' has turned out to be pleonastic, the definition is amended to or focused on only its latter part, 'the ability (*dynamis*) to secure good things' (78b9–c2). Following this amendment, in the second half (78c3–79a2), Socrates asks Meno what good things are. Meno enumerates bodily and external goods like health, wealth (gold and silver), and political honours and offices, and insists that they are all good things (78c3–d3). Despite this belief, on the other hand, Meno is shown to have a contradictory view as well: that it is not until a part of virtue like justice, temperance and piety is added to the acts of providing bodily and external goods that they become virtuous; and even *not* providing (*aporia*) them is virtuous when doing so is not just. Finally Socrates concludes that, according to Meno's definition, providing

¹⁶ Scott (2006, 47–9) subdivides the latter into two categories but assimilates one of them to the former. It does not make much difference, I suppose, to the gist of Socrates' argument to assume that he distinguishes only the above two cases.

such bodily and external goods itself would not be virtuous any more than not doing so, and that whatever is done with justice will be virtuous, but whatever is done without any part of virtue will be vicious, which Meno reluctantly accepts (78d3–79a2).

When it comes to the first half, two points should be noticed. First, Socrates emphasizes a guiding role of knowledge in making decisions. Even if people seem to desire bad things, some of them just do not know what bad things are; the others can at least identify them correctly but do not really know what consequences they lead to for them. It should be clear that in both cases their apparent desire for bad things is expected to be explained by reference to a lack of knowledge. This argument then conveys Socrates' conviction that knowledge always directs one's action in a good direction, and is therefore beneficial in its own right. But what sense of 'benefit' is in play? This question leads us to the second point. With Socrates' denial here of *akrasia* (the second case) in mind, one might suppose that good things must be things which lead to the final good or overall happiness. However, we should not forget Socrates' addition of 'to the extent of being harmed (*kath' hoson blaptontai*, 78a2)', which suggests that benefit and harm are referred to in a more specific sense; when you are ill, for example, the knowledge of medicine instructs you to avoid drinking alcohol instead of enjoying brief pleasure from it; only in the sense of recovering from the illness do you become happy. It is not the object of discussion here whether or not restoring health is truly beneficial to you from a holistic point of view (cf. *Republic* 342b4–e11, 346d2–6).¹⁷ The idea is that it is always a certain kind of knowledge which can guide our specific choice and action and benefit us in that particular context.

We can see that this part of the dialogue certainly offers Socrates some dialectical grounds for assuming in the later hypothetical passage that knowledge is good or beneficial in itself. And the close connection between the two passages is made more distinct by paying attention to Meno's remaining criterion of virtue, namely the ability (*dynamis*) to secure good things. In the light of the preceding conclusion that what makes people miss good outcomes is ignorance, it is perfectly natural to suppose that Socrates is here expecting that if virtue is construed as such a source of goodness, it will

¹⁷ When Socrates mentions the benefit of knowledge, it is necessary to think from which aspect he discusses it, specific or holistic; he does not always consider the latter. In *Republic* I, for example, Socrates focuses on the proper benefit of each kind of knowledge (craft); his discussion of crafts in the *Gorgias*, on the other hand, considers their roles in human happiness as a whole (cf. 511c4–512d6, 517c7–518a7).

be knowledge, whatever the knowledge may be of.¹⁸ This should be the reason why he makes a favourable comment on the renewed definition at 78c3–4, although it undoubtedly anticipates with some irony the fact that Meno himself does not have in mind the same kind of ability but something such as political power. What is important here for our purposes is that, whatever Meno ends up taking the ability in question to be, they have turned out to share at least the basic idea that virtue is a source of goodness, which I argued is the core meaning of the hypothesis Socrates posits. And it cannot be an accident that this agreement later forms the basis for examining whether virtue is knowledge. In this way, Meno's renewed third definition can be seen to pave the way for Socrates to propose the hypothesis that virtue is good for their common starting point of argument.

If the observation so far is right, the final outcome of Meno's third definition is expected to add a significant insight into the nature of the hypothesis in the *Meno*. I suggest that the rest of their discussion hints that the hypothesis may be called into doubt. Against Socrates' expectation that the ability in question will be knowledge, as we saw above, Meno actually takes it in a materialistic manner by claiming that it is the power to have bodily and external goods. The second half of the argument is then devoted to Socrates' rebuttal of this claim of Meno's. Its crux is that despite his materialistic view of virtue Meno also has the inner belief that morally correct actions are not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for being virtuous. What his agreement amounts to is therefore the identification of virtue with the moral qualities that issue in actions that are just, temperate and so on.

What, then, does this identification mean for Meno? Given that he recognized only bodily and external goods, the conclusion that one sometimes has to give up them for morally correct actions must have made him doubt the core of his third definition, namely virtue's being a source of goodness. Although Meno finally accepted Socrates' reasoning without any particular objection, it is fairly clear from his reluctant responses that he was not fully convinced of the conclusion of the discussion (*Phainetai*, 78e6, and *Dokei moi anagkaion einai hōs legeis*, 79a1–2). Instead of accepting it, he could have raised the question whether virtue can be beneficial even when it does not bring any bodily and external goods, which, I suggest, Plato would have deliberately avoided

¹⁸ Cf. *R.* 477c–478d on knowledge as a *dynamis*.

bringing forward there.¹⁹ The essential connection between virtue and benefit, which had been assumed by Meno's third definition, was exposed to some uncertainty at the end due to Socrates' cross-examination of Meno's contradictory beliefs about virtue. Despite clear indications of potential objections, Socrates impetuously diverted the topic by attacking the circularity of his definition (79a3–e6). This will be best explained by reference to Plato's authorial strategy of avoiding the serious question whether moral qualities such as justice alone are sufficient for the agent's well-being, to which he devotes much of the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*.²⁰

No doubt Socrates himself would have firmly believed that virtue is a source of goodness (cf. *Apology* 30b2–4²¹), and therefore had no qualms about positing that proposition as a shared starting point. My contention is, however, that the hypothesis in question is not considered to be a truism but is still of a suppositional nature. Despite Socrates' strong commitment to virtue's inherent value, it must have been a thesis which Plato fully recognized the need to justify with a substantial argument. The underlying aim of the method would therefore have been, I submit, to avoid dealing with objections which might have been provoked by explicitly endorsing the truth of the hypothesis.

If we briefly look at what Plato's defence of virtue's inherent value amounts to in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, we will have more reason to believe that the hypothesis in the *Meno* cannot be self-explanatory. For the task is not completely accomplished even in those two dialogues. At *Gorgias* 506c–507c, Socrates, exploiting his previous agreements with Callicles, argues for the thesis that a virtuous or good man does whatever he does well and is therefore blessed and happy. Before defending this sufficiency of virtue for benefit, however, he denies that his claims are based on any knowledge (506a3–5; cf. 508e6–509a7), presumably because of the absence of the definition of the virtues (cf. *Republic* 354b9–c3). In the *Republic*, on the other hand, Socrates formulates the definition of each virtue in book IV, which forms the basis for

¹⁹ Cf. *Euthd.* 279b4–c1, where Socrates states that it is debatable whether or not temperance, justice and courage are good things.

²⁰ It is notable that Meno's first (73a7–c5) and second definitions (73d7–10) are also vulnerable to circularity. Socrates' objection to it is therefore not a specific outcome of his discussion of Meno's third definition.

²¹ I follow Burnet (1924, ad locum), although his interpretation has some problems. See also Slings 1994, 138–40. Cf. *Lg.* 660d11–663a8.

concluding in books VIII and IX that justice is beneficial whether or not accompanied by goods such as wealth and honour. In the central books, however, he hints that the conclusion ultimately depends on the knowledge of the Form of the Good, which he does not possess, by saying, ‘you’ve often heard that the Form of the Good is the most important subject, because of which just things and others become useful and beneficial. (...) as you know I’ll go on to say that we don’t have sufficient knowledge of it; even if without this we should have the fullest possible knowledge of other things, you are aware that it is of no benefit to us (505a2–7)’. I do not mean to suggest that in the *Meno* Plato conceived of this specific doctrine of the Form of the Good, but it is not unlikely that he was well aware that the truth of the hypothesis is to be demonstrated by a long and difficult argument.

My suggestion would be reinforced by looking at the fact that in introducing the hypothesis at 87d3 Socrates asks Meno whether the hypothesis ‘*menei hēmin*’. It has been suggested that this phrase should be translated as ‘stands firm for us’, meaning that the hypothesis stays as cognitively secure as knowledge which, as the analogy of Daedalus’ statues suggests at the end of the dialogue, is tied down by causal reasoning (Benson 2003, 116; Hackforth 1955, 142). However, the Greek there is *paramenō* (97d10, e4, 98a1–2), which is used in contrast with the situation where a true opinion drops out of one’s mind. The word *menō*, on the other hand, is used in other dialogues not so much to indicate that an opinion one keeps is well grounded as to remind an interlocutor that a proposal or thesis which was brought up for discussion earlier still remains in force.²² This usage perfectly matches my point that Meno’s renewed third definition offers dialectical grounds for Socrates’ presenting the hypothesis. The implication would be that Meno is asked whether he keeps the previous commitment to virtue’s being a source of goodness despite his puzzlement about the conclusion at the end, which might have led to the opposite view. We should therefore translate the phrase, more literally, as ‘remain for us’. At least for Meno (presumably Socrates too) the content of the hypothesis is clearly not a true belief which has fully been backed up by

²² See *Euthphr.* 11b6–e4, *Cri.* 48b2–9, *Grg.* 480b2–3, *Phd.* 92a7–9, *Sph.* 248a1–3; cf. *Cri.* 49e3 (*emmeneis*), 53a6 (*emmeneis*), *Prt.* 353b3 (*emmenein*). The *Euthyphro* passage also uses the analogy of Daedalus’ statues but focuses it on the point that what Euthyphro (and Socrates) proposed about piety (*prothōmetha* or *hypothōmetha*, 11b7) does not remain valid, because of Socrates’ cross-examination. It is also notable that Plato uses the word *hypotheseis* (11c5) for Euthyphro’s proposed definitions or views of piety.

knowing the cause of its being the case. This could be evidence that the hypothesis is not treated as a self-evident truth, but is proposed as a temporary starting-point of the argument in the light of some previous discussion.

All in all, the main point of the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is to start discussion with a plausible but still suppositional starting-point, which enables Socrates to consider the original problem and, more importantly, to avoid difficult questions and possible objections which he might face if he declares the hypothesis to be true. This is also, as I argued elsewhere, the essentials of the geometrical hypothesis he introduced to explain the hypothetical inquiry into virtue here.²³

III. Conclusion

Earlier in this paper I argued that the hypothetical argument in the *Meno* is not aimed at inducing Meno tacitly to return to the question what virtue is, because the territory for investigation is still regarded as *poion* questions. Even the most foundational proposition that virtue is good, the hypothesis in the dialogue, is a description of what sort of thing virtue is rather than of what it is. At the end of the dialogue, in fact, Socrates returns to the point that since they have not established the definition of virtue, they cannot know how people can become virtuous (100b4–6). Bearing in mind the fact that the method of hypothesis was introduced, as it were, as a last-resort measure which enabled discussion at least to keep going without defining virtue, we may say that the examination of the nature of virtue itself did not make any progress beyond the earlier aporetic endings in the first half of the dialogue.

It is true that the method of hypothesis plays an important role in approaching a fundamental principle in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, and that the geometrical analysis introduced in the *Meno* certainly has the same feature in the sense that it functions to discover a starting point of demonstration or argument. Methodologically speaking, however, the connection seems to me not to lie in more than the superficial shared feature of proceeding from a more particular problem to a more basic one. For it is rather hard to believe that the problem reduction as exhibited in the *Meno* constitutes the ascending process of finding a more fundamental principle envisaged in the *Phaedo*

²³ For discussion on the nature of the geometrical hypothesis, see Iwata (2015, 10–16).

and the *Republic*. We should therefore not bring the procedural element of positing a higher hypothesis into discussion of the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*.

The other point I emphasized in the paper is that the hypothesis that virtue is good is not a self-explanatory starting point of argument, analogous to ‘something sufficient’ in the *Phaedo* and the unhypothetical principle of the Form of the Good in the *Republic*, but is only a relatively secure proposition which Socrates believes to be true but realizes the need to justify.²⁴ It is therefore wrong to think that the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is a genuine alternative to establishing the definition of virtue, for the purpose of considering whether it is teachable. One might immediately object that even if it is granted that the hypothesis is not a truism but needs justifying, this does not prevent us from thinking that Socrates is still attempting to give an answer to the original question, if at least he firmly believes in the truth of the hypothesis; and that this is, at any rate, the basic point of the method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates demonstrates the immortality of soul by starting with the theory of Forms, which he only believes to be true.

Although the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is certainly introduced to accommodate Meno’s demand to bypass the *ti* question, however, the surrounding context hampers us from readily accepting the view that, just as in the *Phaedo*, Socrates seriously intends the method to contribute to answering whether virtue is teachable (*pace* Scott 2006, 140–2). First of all, the dialogical scene of the *Phaedo* is set on the verge of the execution of Socrates. No wonder that he is depicted as showing to his intimate friends as sufficient a proof of immortality as he could. In the *Meno*, on the other hand, he is being forced to consider whether virtue is teachable, against his will (86d3–e1). As long as the hypothesis is not regarded as a self-evidently true starting point, there is therefore little reason to think that he sees any merit in drawing some conclusion from the hypothesis in violation of his cardinal principle of the priority of definition, to which, importantly, the Form-hypothesis in the *Phaedo* is not subject. Second, after the hypothetical argument, the conclusion that virtue is knowledge and teachable is reversed for the reason that Socrates and Meno could not find any teachers and students of virtue (89c–96d). This discussion then leads them to realize that there

²⁴ So the epistemic status of the hypothesis in the *Meno* is rather analogous to that of the hypotheses mathematicians are said to posit (*R.* 510b9–d3). And this gives a good account of why the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is introduced as a geometrical method.

was a flaw in the previous hypothetical argument—knowledge is not the only source of goodness but true belief is also so (96d–98a). And they go on to conclude that virtue is *not* knowledge or teachable (98b–99a). But their definitive conclusion here is strange because even if true belief is also a source of goodness, with the logic of the hypothetical argument, virtue may still be a sort of knowledge and teachable (cf. ‘perhaps’ at 87d5). It indicates that at this stage the hypothetical argument has already been superseded by their observational approach to the question whether virtue is teachable. With hindsight, therefore, we cannot say that the method of hypothesis played any decisive role in solving the original problem in the dialogue.

What, then, is Plato’s real intention in introducing the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*? A promising explanation can be found if we look at the hypothetical argument from a viewpoint other than the dialogue’s main question. In the first half of the dialogue, as we saw, Meno acknowledged nothing good but bodily and external goods (78c5–d3). Although he was then forced to agree, after a brief exchange, that they are neither necessary nor sufficient for being virtuous, it is clear that he was not entirely satisfied with that conclusion. In contrast, the greater part of the hypothetical argument is devoted to persuading Meno that conventional goods are neither good nor bad by themselves but that their value depends fundamentally on knowledge. Importantly, this point can be made independently of answering the main question whether virtue is knowledge or teachable and also what it is. By employing the method of hypothesis Socrates was thus able to draw Meno’s attention to the relationship between goodness and knowledge, more specifically, to the question whether the items he considered to be good are really good. Whatever virtue might turn out to be, one significant result of the hypothetical argument is therefore to have shown Meno that it is not until knowledge guides one’s life correctly that those customary goods become beneficial. We can say, accordingly, that the method of hypothesis in the *Meno* is essentially protreptic, to lead Meno to seek for knowledge (cf. *Euthydemus* 282a–d).

My proposal nicely matches the educational spirit underlying various epistemological topics pursued by Socrates throughout the dialogue. The definitional task carried out in the first half is, as a whole, aimed at disclosing Meno’s ignorance about virtue, which he did not realize before undergoing Socrates’ cross-examination (80b). And this process of growing self-awareness, it is implied, corresponds to the

initial stage of searching for or recollecting the truth (84a–c). When it comes to the recollection theory, Socrates' discussion is intended not so much to pursue it with theoretical rigour as to convince Meno of the general point that it is worth trying to know what one does not know, by warding off his paradox of inquiry (86b–c). The theme of true belief is, to be sure, a little tricky, because it appears to imply that there is no need, after all, to acquire knowledge in order to produce good outcomes. But this is not what Socrates actually means. Meno is depicted as a politically-minded young man eager to learn skills necessary for such a career (cf. 91a). The conclusion of their discussion of true belief, on the other hand, is that great politicians such as Themistocles did not guide their cities by knowledge but by only true belief, and that it is because true belief comes by divine allocation that they are on the same plane as oracles, prophets and poets. It is hardly possible to overlook Socrates' ironical criticism here of his contemporary politics, which is Meno's sole concern.²⁵ By stripping it of the status of knowledge, therefore, Socrates is implicitly pointing Meno towards the true type of politics, namely his own philosophy-based one (cf. *Gorgias* 521d). Although it is not made clear how Meno understood such an indirect consequence, the *Meno* is thus full of Socrates' exhortative devices. This common element of the dialogue is surely shared by the method of hypothesis.²⁶

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²⁵ The same kind of discussion is made, I suppose, to criticize rhapsodists and poets for their lack of knowledge in the *Ion*.

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