

## BOOK REVIEWS

1 Hugh Benson, *Clitophon's Challenge: Dialectic in Plato's Meno, Phaedo, and Republic*.  
 2 New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. x + 318 pp.

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 4 While anyone's highest priority must be to live well as a human being, Socratic  
 5 examination aims to make us aware that we lack such expertise, so that our most  
 6 pressing question becomes how to acquire the knowledge that Socrates has  
 7 made us desire. Hugh Benson's book proposes to understand the method of  
 8 hypothesis as Plato's strategy for that acquisition (3). Chapter 1 argues that Plato  
 9 "owes" us "an account of how such an acquisition is to be accomplished," and  
 10 that "Platonic dialectic, as Plato's philosophical method has come to be called,"  
 11 is that account (4). Chapter 2 argues that the "elenctic" dialogues fail to pay the  
 12 debt owed us, because the only strategy there—whether we look at Socrates's  
 13 explicit recommendations or study his performance of elenchus—is to find an  
 14 expert who will transmit expertise to us, and this strategy "appears doomed to  
 15 failure. Socrates is unable to discover any such individuals" (44). On the other  
 16 hand, the method of hypothesis—as shared by the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*—  
 17 is a "well-considered response to Clitophon's challenge" (7). Chapter 3 argues  
 18 that "*De novo* discovery"—the alternative to learning from another—is possible,  
 19 thanks to the hypothesis of recollection in the *Meno*. Chapter 4 argues that Plato  
 20 does not, contrary to appearances, disparage this method as a mere second best.  
 21 Chapter 5 draws on the three descriptions of the method, at *Meno* 86e6–87b2  
 22 and *Phaedo* 100a3–8 and 101d1–e3, to characterize this method as consisting of  
 23 a two-part "proof stage" and a two-part "confirmation stage" (115). The next  
 24 three chapters use this characterization to identify and interpret three applica-  
 25 tions of this method, in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*. The ninth and final  
 26 chapter connects the interpretation of the method to the image of the Divided  
 27 Line in the *Republic*. The book deserves discussion in future studies of Plato's  
 28 method of hypothesis for its sound exposition, careful argument, and insightful  
 29 conclusions about an issue central to understanding Platonic philosophy. I aim  
 30 to contribute to that discussion in what follows.

31 The book's scholarship is limited. Benson considers only Anglophone  
 32 scholarship. But Germany in particular has contributed much, both compre-  
 33 hensive standard works on Plato's dialectic, such as Stemmer 1992, as well as  
 34 recent specific studies, such as Jörg Hardy's (2011, 179–212) solution to the  
 35 paradox of inquiry. The resources of current philosophy of discovery would also  
 36 have improved the book. Benson formulates the method as a two-part proof  
 37 stage and a two-part confirmation stage. "In the first, or proof, stage [Pa] one  
 38 seeks to identify a hypothesis from which an answer to the question one seeks to  
 39 know can be obtained, and then [Pb] one shows how the hypothesis provides

40 Thanks to Naomi Reshotko and Evan Rodriguez.

1 the answer to the question. In the second, or confirmation, stage, one seeks to  
 2 confirm the truth of the hypothesis [Ca] by testing the things that start out from  
 3 the hypothesis to see whether they agree with one another, and [Cb] by identi-  
 4 fying a further hypothesis from which the original hypothesis can be obtained,  
 5 showing how the original hypothesis is obtained, and continuing this process  
 6 until one reaches something adequate” (5–6). Notice that step *Pa*, finding the  
 7 appropriate hypothesis, is not a matter of proof but discovery proper. Step *Pb* is  
 8 proof proper—demonstrating how an answer to the hypothesis will provide  
 9 an answer to the original question—which might well be understood as a kind  
 10 of “generative” justification, while step *Ca*—testing the consequences of the  
 11 hypothesis—maps well onto “consequential” justification, in terms of current dis-  
 12 cussion reviewed in Schickore 2014. It would be better to describe the method as  
 13 three steps—Discovery, Generation, and Consequences—and replace the awk-  
 14 ward *Cb* with an instruction to let the three steps repeat until they reach suffi-  
 15 cient justification.

16 The two main theses framing the book are dubious. The first is that the  
 17 Socrates of the elenctic dialogues fails to pay a debt to those whom he converts to  
 18 a life that “reasons every day about human excellence,” a life that cares and  
 19 thinks about “wisdom and truth and how a soul will be best” (*Apology* 38a3, 29e1–  
 20 2)—on the ground that Socrates fails to give them a “method” for making “*de*  
 21 *novo* discovery” about what virtue is. But this is not good ground. By “method” in  
 22 this context Benson would be satisfied by any “pursuit” directed at acquiring  
 23 “the virtue-knowledge one lacks” that is “not simply . . . random” (4). According  
 24 to this criterion even the Feyerabendian pluralism of “epistemological anarchy”  
 25 would count as a method (Preston 1997, 136–41). The Socrates of the elenctic  
 26 *Protagoras* states an opposite strategy. While Paul Feyerabend would disregard  
 27 the constraints of others so that his private perception might be one of a thou-  
 28 sand blossoms blooming, Socrates would weed the garden of his private percep-  
 29 tions by trying to elicit them from others—only with the assent of another “may  
 30 they find support” (“*bebaiōsetai*,” *Protagoras* 348d3–5). Benson’s interpretation  
 31 of this passage as a case of Socrates “professing to learn from Protagoras” rather  
 32 than investigation *de novo* (52n16) is unfaithful to the text. Socrates’s stated  
 33 motive is “nothing other than to investigate thoroughly” (“*diaskepsasthai*,” *Pro-*  
 34 *tagoras* 348c5–7). The verb *diaskepsasthai* prefixes *dia-* (“thoroughly”) to a form  
 35 of the same verb of investigation *skopeō* that Benson himself takes to distinguish  
 36 *de novo* inquiry from learning from another in the *Meno* (52, 95, 116, 154, and  
 37 166) and *Phaedo* (108, 140, and 190). Benson argues that the elenctic Socrates  
 38 fails to pay his debt on the additional ground that the convert must practice *de*  
 39 *novo* discovery. Now, I may share Socrates’s faith in the truth of the Delphic  
 40 oracle (“no one is wiser” than he) yet still seek to learn from others what virtue is,  
 whether I test their claims to know from interpretive charity, from civic duty, or  
 as a mission from God. What makes such a life of philosophy choice worthy is not  
 its unlikely chance of finding “virtue-knowledge” (2) but its superiority to the

1 life of nonphilosophers in being free from the guilt of negligence (Rudebusch  
2 2009, 17–29).

3 The second dubious thesis is that the method of hypothesis is “a plausible  
4 Platonic response to Clitophon’s challenge” (116), that is, a plausible way to  
5 acquire virtue-knowledge. But the method of hypothesis by itself cannot suffice  
6 for such an acquisition. Since it only provides answers to questions, the most we  
7 might ever gain from the method is confirmation of a theory. But virtue-knowledge  
8 is the craft of living well as a human being. For intellectualists, who believe  
9 that the whole of virtue is nothing but wisdom (as, for example, Socrates argues  
10 in *Republic* 1), virtue-knowledge requires practical expertise, not merely a confirmed  
11 theory. And for the Socrates who argues (as in *Republic* 4) that virtue is a  
12 harmony of intellect and other parts of the soul, even more is needed. The soul’s  
13 nonintellectual parts must also be made virtuous “by habits and by exercises”  
14 (*Republic* 7.518e1–2). The method of hypothesis is then but a fragment of the  
15 necessary selection, nurture, and education (summarized at *Republic* 7.535a–  
16 540b). Intellectualism aside, the *Republic*’s response to Clitophon’s challenge is  
17 this whole decades-long course of training, not the method of hypothesis by  
18 itself. And, giving that response, Socrates thinks it safe to assume that there will  
19 always be “a few” philosophers who possess the expertise needed for ruling a city,  
20 so that only “chance” is needed for them to come to power (*Republic* 6.499b3–5).  
21 The empowerment of existing philosophers is the issue, not de novo discovery.

22 Benson’s subordination of the method of hypothesis to the goal of de  
23 novo inquiry weakens his interpretations of the *Meno* (chap. 6) and *Phaedo*  
24 (chap. 7). If the method in the *Meno* is an instance of de novo inquiry, it must  
25 have a “defect” in its “application” (180), rendering it “incomplete” (182). Better  
26 to see Socrates there using the method in subordination to his mission to act  
27 as a gadfly trying to awaken Meno from the slumbering dream that he possesses  
28 virtue-knowledge (Rudebusch 2011, 183n22). And if Socrates’s use of the  
29 method is restricted to de novo “philosophical inquiry” (as Benson argues, 187),  
30 the *Phaedo* must be flawed in making no “application of the confirmation stage”  
31 of the method even while emphasizing the necessity of such a stage in a successful  
32 investigation (207). Better to abandon the restriction. Vasilis Karasmanis  
33 (1987), for example, finds the method used throughout the *Phaedo* as a justification  
34 of the philosopher’s life in the face of death, a justification that takes place by  
35 the ascending hypotheses, roughly speaking, of Reincarnation, the Principle of  
36 Opposites, Recollection, the Exclusion of Opposites, and finally the “sufficient”  
37 hypothesis of Safe Causes as elaborated by the theory of Forms. By expanding  
38 the scope of application of the method, it is possible for Karasmanis (1987, 183)  
39 to find what Benson could not: repeated applications of the “confirmation stage.”

40 Benson after all expands the scope in his account of the *Republic*: “Plato  
permits, perhaps even advocates, the use of the method of hypothesis in contexts  
of defense or justification, in addition to contexts of discovery or inquiry”

1 (235, pace 187). Such expansion is essential to his project, since it is only in a  
 2 justificatory passage that Benson can find a satisfactory application of the meth-  
 3 od (chap. 8). Even so, Benson (chap. 9) can give no account of how the method  
 4 of hypothesis might recognize the celebrated “unhypothetical principle” of  
 5 *Republic* 6.510b7. No such principle can be proved from a higher hypothesis.  
 6 Since Platonic “dialectic is the method of hypothesis” for Benson (238), dialectic  
 7 has no resources for such recognition. This is an unsatisfactory interpretation.  
 8 The remedy is to reject Benson’s identification (246–55) of the method  
 9 of hypothesis with dialectic. Dialectic has more resources. In particular, the  
 10 method Evan Rodriguez (2016) calls “exploring both sides” is able to recognize  
 11 first principles (likewise, Karasmanis 2012).

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39 In recent years the renewed interest in pre-Kantian German Enlightenment has  
 40 transformed our picture of that period, shedding light on previously neglected