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

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

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the answer to the question. In the second, or confirmation, stage, one seeks to confirm the truth of the hypothesis \([C_a]\) by testing the things that start out from the hypothesis to see whether they agree with one another, and \([C_b]\) by identifying a further hypothesis from which the original hypothesis can be obtained, showing how the original hypothesis is obtained, and continuing this process until one reaches something adequate” (5–6). Notice that step \(P_a\), finding the appropriate hypothesis, is not a matter of proof but discovery proper. Step \(P_b\) is proof proper—demonstrating how an answer to the hypothesis will provide an answer to the original question—which might well be understood as a kind of “generative” justification, while step \(C_a\)—testing the consequences of the hypothesis—maps well onto “consequential” justification, in terms of current discussion reviewed in Schickore 2014. It would be better to describe the method as three steps—Discovery, Generation, and Consequences—and replace the awkward \(C_b\) with an instruction to let the three steps repeat until they reach sufficient justification.

The two main theses framing the book are dubious. The first is that the Socrates of the elenctic dialogues fails to pay a debt to those whom he converts to a life that “reasons every day about human excellence,” a life that cares and thinks about “wisdom and truth and how a soul will be best” (Apology 38a3, 29e1–2) —on the ground that Socrates fails to give them a “method” for making “de novo discovery” about what virtue is. But this is not good ground. By “method” in this context Benson would be satisfied by any “pursuit” directed at acquiring “the virtue-knowledge one lacks” that is “not simply... random” (4). According to this criterion even the Feyerabendian pluralism of “epistemological anarchy” would count as a method (Preston 1997, 136–41). The Socrates of the elenctic Protagoras states an opposite strategy. While Paul Feyerabend would disregard the constraints of others so that his private perception might be one of a thousand blossoms blooming, Socrates would weed the garden of his private perceptions by trying to elicit them from others—only with the assent of another “may they find support” (“bebaiostai,” Protagoras 348d3–5). Benson’s interpretation of this passage as a case of Socrates “professing to learn from Protagoras” rather than investigation de novo (52n16) is unfaithful to the text. Socrates’s stated motive is “nothing other than to investigate thoroughly” (“diaskepsasthai,” Protagoras 348c5–7). The verb diaskepsasthai prefixes dia- (“thoroughly”) to a form of the same verb of investigation skopeō that Benson himself takes to distinguish de novo inquiry from learning from another in the Meno (52, 95, 116, 154, and 166) and Phaedo (108, 140, and 190). Benson argues that the elenctic Socrates fails to pay his debt on the additional ground that the convert must practice de novo discovery. Now, I may share Socrates’s faith in the truth of the Delphic 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
life of nonphilosophers in being free from the guilt of negligence (Rudebusch 2009, 17–29).

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

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

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

References


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