Hypotheses in Plato's *Meno*

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I investigate the epistemic status of the hypotheses and other premises used in Socrates' 'arguments from a hypothesis' in the *Meno*, and of the conclusions drawn from them, and argue that, while they are taken by Socrates to fall short of knowledge, he takes them all to have a positive epistemic status, and is not committed to advancing them only tentatively.

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It is a great pleasure to present this paper in honour of my friend Vassilis Karasmanis. I hope he will not think it impertinent that I have chosen to write on a subject which he made his own when we were graduate students together.[1]

The question I wish to pursue concerns the 'arguments from a hypothesis' in the *Meno*,[2] and in particular the epistemic status of the hypotheses and other premises Socrates uses in them and of the conclusions he draws. As it stands this question is somewhat ill-formed. Among other things, we must distinguish the question of what status Socrates *is presented in the*

[1] See Karasmanis 1987, chs 2-4, and 2011.

[2] It is controversial whether the investigation 'from a hypothesis' ends at 89c3, or includes the subsequent argument that virtue is true belief (for discussion of this issue see Robinson 1953, pp. 116-17; Rose 1970, pp. 5-6; Karasmanis 1987, p. 85; Kahn 1996, pp. 311-13; Benson 2003, pp. 118ff.; Scott 2006, p. 139). For reasons which I shall give later, it does not matter to my argument what view we take of this.

dialogue as giving to the hypotheses and other premises, and to the results based on them, and the question of what *Plato invites the reader* to think about their status. I shall focus principally on the first of these questions, but will say something about the second at the end. The question about how Socrates is presented in this section of the *Meno* also calls for a distinction. As I shall argue, there is good reason to think that the reader is supposed to take Socrates as being *disingenuous*–as not meaning all of his premises and arguments seriously. If this is right, we have to be careful to distinguish the view which Socrates is presented as taking of the particular premises he deploys and the particular results he arrives at (perhaps he is presented as not really endorsing all of these) from the view which he is presented as taking about the general kind of epistemic assessment appropriate for successful arguments based on hypotheses: his disingenuousness about the former does not mean that he is not serious about the latter.[3]

The context in which Socrates introduces the idea of arguing from a hypothesis is very familiar. Following the apparent resolution of the paradox of enquiry, Socrates says that Meno and he should enquire once more as to what virtue is:

> Socrates: Then since we agree that it is what one does not know that one should inquire into, would you like us to set about inquiring together into whatever virtue is?
> Meno: Very much so. But no, Socrates, what I would investigate and hear about with most pleasure is what I asked first of all: should we set about virtue as being a thing

[3] Bedo-Addo thinks that Socrates' talk about a new method is itself disingenuous, since (he claims) Socrates in fact reverts to examining the nature of virtue, and it thus a matter of Socratic business as usual; in this sense Socrates' talk of hypotheses and relaxing (Meno's) authority are simply a 'ruse' (1984; cf. Sharples 1985, p. 163). But none of Socrates' premises purports to offer a (full) definition of virtue, nor are they examined as attempted definitions; indeed, Socrates does not examine any of his premises in his standard elenctic way, so that the argument is very much not Socratic business as usual (see p. 4 and n. 7 below).

> that can be taught, or as coming to people by nature or in some other way?
> Socrates: Well, Meno, if I had authority not only over myself but over you as well, we would not investigate whether or not virtue can be taught before first inquiring what it is itself. But since it is you who, while not even trying to have authority over yourself–to be free, no doubt–try to have authority over me instead, and have it too, I shall give way to you–for what else must I do? So it seems that we have to investigate what something is like when we do not yet know what it is. Then please relax your authority just a little, at least, and consent to investigate whether virtue can be taught or comes in whatever way, *from a hypothesis*.[4]

Socrates wishes to return to the enquiry into the nature of virtue because Meno wants to know whether it is teachable, and as he hints here, Socrates thinks that they cannot know that–or anything else at all about virtue–until they first know what it is. This is a reference back to 71b1-8.[5] My view is that this position makes much more sense if (with Burnyeat and Schwab) we take Socrates to be presented as construing knowledge as *understanding*; but nothing in this paper hinges on this (see pp. 12-14 below). So Socrates' view, clearly, must

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[4] 86c4-e4: ΣΩ. Βούλει οὖν, ἐπειδὴ ὁμονοοῦμεν ὅτι ζητητέον περὶ οὗ μή τις οἶδεν, ἐπιχειρήσωμεν κοινῇ ζητεῖν τί ποτ' ἐστὶν ἀρετή;
ΜΕΝ. Πάνυ μὲν οὖν. οὐ μέντοι, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἀλλ' ἔγωγε ἐκεῖνο ἂν ἥδιστα, ὅπερ ἠρόμην τὸ πρῶτον, καὶ σκεψαίμην καὶ ἀκούσαιμι, πότερον ὡς διδακτῷ ὄντι αὐτῷ δεῖ ἐπιχειρεῖν, ἢ ὡς φύσει ἢ ὡς τίνι ποτὲ τρόπῳ παραγιγνομένης τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τῆς ἀρετῆς.
ΣΩ. Ἀλλ' εἰ μὲν ἐγὼ ἦρχον, ὦ Μένων, μὴ μόνον ἐμαυτοῦ ἀλλὰ καὶ σοῦ, οὐκ ἂν ἐσκεψάμεθα πρότερον εἴτε διδακτὸν εἴτε οὐ διδακτὸν ἡ ἀρετή, πρὶν ὅτι ἐστὶν πρῶτον ἐζητήσαμεν αὐτό· ἐπειδὴ δὲ σὺ σαυτοῦ μὲν οὐδ' ἐπιχειρεῖς ἄρχειν, ἵνα δὴ ἐλεύθερος ᾖς, ἐμοῦ δὲ ἐπιχειρεῖς τε ἄρχειν καὶ ἄρχεις, συγχωρήσομαί σοι—τί γὰρ χρὴ ποιεῖν;—ἔοικεν οὖν σκεπτέον εἶναι ποιόν τί ἐστιν ὃ μήπω ἴσμεν ὅτι ἐστίν. εἰ μή τι οὖν ἀλλὰ σμικρόν γέ μοι τῆς ἀρχῆς χάλασον, καὶ συγχώρησον ἐξ ὑποθέσεως αὐτὸ σκοπεῖσθαι, εἴτε διδακτόν ἐστιν εἴτε ὁπωσοῦν.

[5] For discussion see, e .g., Geach 1966, 370-2, Burnyeat 1977 and 1980, Fine 1992, 2002, and 2014, pp. 31-42, and Schwab 2015.

be that the enquiry which follows–the enquiry 'from a hypothesis'–cannot lead to knowledge. If he thought it could, he would not describe what they are about to do as involving a relaxing of 'Meno's authority'.[6] So it is natural to expect that, in Socrates' view, the investigation from a hypothesis will not–because it cannot–lead to knowledge. At the same time there is, apparently, *some* point to engaging in enquiry from a hypothesis. So we can predict that in Socrates' view, the method of using hypotheses to arrive at answers about virtue is a second best, compared to Socratic enquiry into the nature of virtue, and that the results of the method using hypotheses have some positive epistemic status–they are plausible, say–but that they fall short of knowledge.[7] What consequences does this have for the epistemic status of the arguments' premises–whether they are hypotheses or not? (Nothing hinges, for these purposes, on which propositions we identify as the hypotheses.[8]) Clearly they must all have some positive epistemic status–they must all be to some degree plausible. If some premises

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[6] Of course, it is really *Socrates'* authority which is being relaxed, as it was he who insisted that they defer the investigation of whether virtue comes from teaching until they had arrived at knowledge of what virtue is.

[7] Hugh Benson claims that Socrates is not presented as regarding arguments from a hypothesis as a second best. This not because they are a 'business as usual' ruse (see n. 3 above), but because they are appropriate in a different investigative context from that in which (according to Benson) Socrates deploys his elenchus, namely a context in which none of the investigators knows the answer (2003, pp. 97-8). But whatever Plato's position (see pp.16-17 below), Socrates clearly maintains his view that the present enquiry into what virtue is like cannot yield knowledge because it will not first arrive at knowledge of what virtue is (and note that Benson concedes that, on his interpretation, 'it must be admitted that the difference between the method of hypothesis and *elenchos* may appear rather slight' [p. 100]).

[8] For discussion of this somewhat vexed issue see Robinson 1953, pp. 116-20; Bluck 1961, pp. 85-91; Crombie 1963, pp. 533-5; Stokes 1963, pp. 297-8; Rose 1970, pp. 1-5; Zyskind and Sternfeld 1976; Wilkes 1979, p. 143-4; Bedu-Addo 1984, p. 9; Sharples 1985, p. 167; Karasmanis 1987, pp. 74-81; Weiss, 2001, pp. 131-2; Menn 2002, pp. 211-12; Benson 2003, pp. 112-13; Scott 2006, pp. 138-9 and 221-4; Wolfsdorf 2008, pp. 42-6.

are chosen at random, or only for the sake of argument, then the conclusion they yield will not be in any better state.[9] That the conclusions fall short of knowledge does not, of course, mean that any or even all of the premises must also fall short of knowledge. But given Socrates' commitment to the epistemological priority of knowing what *X* is, it would be surprising if he did claim to know any of these premises, and indeed he does not; on the contrary, in passage we shall come back to, he goes out of his way to say how little he knows:

> Well of course I myself am not speaking from knowledge, but from supposition. However, that true belief and knowledge are different things –I do not at all seem to me to suppose this. Rather if there is anything else I would say I know–and I would say that these are few–this is one thing I would include among those I know.[10]

That Socrates thinks that the premises of the arguments 'from a hypothesis' have to be plausible, even if they and the conclusions of the arguments fall short of knowledge, seems to be exactly what we should expect. For what it is worth, it also how Aristotle understands the procedure (with a clear reference to the *Meno*'s argument that virtue is knowledge and hence teachable) at *Prior Analytics* II.25 69a20-37. Nonetheless it is denied by many commentators. Robinson offers a striking instance of this denial. In relation to what he takes to be the general pattern of Plato's conception of arguments from a hypothesis he says something close to what I have said about the position in the *Meno*.[11] On his account, Plato

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[9] So, at least as far as the use Socrates puts the 'hypothetical method' to goes, it will not do to say, as Wilkes does, that 'even a falsehood would serve quite as well [in the hypothetical method] as a genuine 'hypothesis' (1979, p. 143, n. 2).

[10] 98b1-5: Καὶ μὴν καὶ ἐγὼ ὡς οὐκ εἰδὼς λέγω, ἀλλὰ εἰκάζων· ὅτι δέ ἐστίν τι ἀλλοῖον ὀρθὴ δόξα καὶ ἐπιστήμη, οὐ πάνυ μοι δοκῶ τοῦτο εἰκάζειν, ἀλλ' εἴπερ τι ἄλλο φαίην ἂν εἰδέναι—ὀλίγα δ' ἂν φαίην—ἓν δ' οὖν καὶ τοῦτο ἐκείνων θείην ἂν ὧν οἶδα.

[11] 1953, pp. 107-22.

thinks that 'the hypothetical method consists in holding one's opinions *provisionally* and not dogmatically' (p. 107), but '[b]y this provisionality, however, Plato does not understand a timidity or weakness in maintaining one's opinions' (p. 108). So far, so good; but for no clear reason Robinson thinks that the *Meno*'s hypothetical section does not conform to this general pattern and its conclusions are 'tentative' (p. 122). The term 'tentative' is also adopted in Rose 1970 and Scott 2006.[12] Ebrey thinks that Socrates can have *no* confidence in the results of these arguments–he cannot endorse them even provisionally– because '[a]ccording to strong PKW [i.e. the epistemological primacy of definition], we cannot be confident about whether something is true until we know the appropriate definition.'[13] Bluck apparently allows that hypotheses might have some epistemological support, and takes over Robinson's term 'provisional' without taking over his 'tentative'; but he generally speaks of their being '*only* provisional', and describes hypotheses as 'conjectures', as does Scott.[14] Sharples and Scott both characterise the hypotheses as 'assumptions'.[15]

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[12] Rose 1970, p. 2; Scott 2006, pp. 138 and 224.

[13] 2103, p. 81 (cf. pp. 77-8). The *Meno* give us no reason, however, to suppose that in the absence of knowledge of what *X* is we can have no grounds for *any* degree of confidence *at all* in a belief about what *X* is like: all that Socrates denies is that we can *know* what it is like without knowing what it is. Ebrey also argues that the 'hypothetical technique' is not aimed any providing any sort of answer to the question (e.g.) 'is virtue teachable?', but only to show the equivalence of this question to another ('is virtue knowledge?'). This is at best a terminological move: both the geometer and Socrates appeal to equivalences of this sort as a means to making progress with answering the original question. Allen claims that arguments from hypotheses (including geometrical ones) can get nowhere, as they are at best circular (1984, pp. 144-7). Whatever the difficulties posed by the geometrical example, however, there is no reason to see the geometer as mired in circularity (see Karasmanis 1987, chs 2-4, and 2011; Menn 2002); nor, for that matter, for seeing Socrates' method as circular. Of course, something seems to go amiss in the arguments which Socrates actually advances (see pp. 10-12 below), but this does not mean that the method is *bound* to get nowhere.

[14] Bluck 1961, pp. 88-92; Scott 2006, p. 133.

[15] Sharples 1985, p 163; Scott ('provisional assumption') 2006, p. 142.

How could we resolve this issue? The natural place to look is the epistemic status which Plato presents Socrates as ascribing to the *results* of the arguments from hypotheses. In fact Socrates uses two very striking terms to describe his acceptance of the conclusions of his various arguments in this part of the diaologue: ὑποπτεύειν in the second argument from a hypothesis, at 87d6-8, and εἰκάζειν in connection with his later arguments that virtue is not knowledge but true belief. In ordinary usage ὑποπτεύειν has the same two senses as 'to suspect', i.e. 'to be suspicious of' and 'to have *some* reason to believe.' Socrates clearly uses it in the latter sense:

Then if there is also something else that is good, separate from knowledge, virtue might perhaps not be a form of knowledge. If, on the other hand, there is nothing good which is not included within knowledge, then if we suspected that it was a form of knowledge we would be right to suspect that.[16]

Socrates is indicating that the conclusion they will reach falls short of knowledge in some way–though it does not follow from this that it is not reasonable or that it is just guess-work. The same point holds for εἰκάζειν. It can mean 'portray, or represent by means of a likeness', and hence to see a resemblance between things, to compare them.[17] It has this sort of

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[16] 87d4-8: Οὐκοῦν εἰ μέν τί ἐστιν ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἄλλο χωριζόμενον ἐπιστήμης, τάχ' ἂν εἴη ἡ ἀρετὴ οὐκ ἐπιστήμη τις· εἰ δὲ μηδέν ἐστιν ἀγαθὸν ὃ οὐκ ἐπιστήμη περιέχει, ἐπιστήμην ἄν τιν' αὐτὸ ὑποπτεύοντες εἶναι ὀρθῶς ὑποπτεύοιμεν.

[17] See, for example, Herodotus II.69 on crocodiles: '[In the Egyptian language] they are not called 'crocodiles' but '*khampsai*'; they were called *crocodiles* [which means a type of lizard] by the Ionians, seeing a resemblance in their form to the lizards commonly found on stone walls in their own country (καλέονται δὲ οὐ κροκόδειλοι ἀλλὰ χάμψαι· κροκοδείλους δὲ Ἴωνες ὠνόμασαν, εἰκάζοντες αὐτῶν τὰ εἴδεα τοῖσι παρὰ σφίσι γινομένοισι κροκοδείλοισι τοῖσι ἐν τῇσι αἱμασιῇσι).

meaning earlier in the *Meno*, at 80c1-6: Meno compares Socrates to the sting-ray, and Socrates says 'I know why you drew a resemblance between me and something–so that I would draw a resemblance between you and something in return.'[18] But εἰκάζειν can also mean something like 'to infer what something is like on the basis of an image or portrayal',[19] and then more generally to infer something. In this usage it is often translated as 'conjecture', or 'guess';[20] but the idea is not that one has *no* basis for the inference–it is not a guess–but that the basis is *indirect*, a basis which is not as good as (for instance) seeing the thing for oneself, or talking to the person concerned. εἰκάζειν in this sense indicates a *reservation* about the thing inferred–it does not amount to knowledge, though it can still be plausible or likely. Examples from Herodotus, again, include plausible inferences about such things as: whether there will be good harbours for Xerxes' huge fleet along the as-yet unexplored coast; what an enemy's reasons are for doing something; when the enemy army will arrive.[21] I shall translate εἰκάζειν in this sense as 'suppose', as 'guess', 'conjecture' and

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[18] ΣΩ. Γιγνώσκω οὗ ἕνεκά με ἤκασας.
MEN. Τίνος δὴ οἴει;
ΣΩ. Ἵνα σε ἀντεικάσω. ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦτο οἶδα περὶ πάντων τῶν καλῶν, ὅτι χαίρουσιν εἰκαζόμενοι—λυσιτελεῖ γὰρ αὐτοῖς· καλαὶ γὰρ οἶμαι τῶν καλῶν καὶ αἱ εἰκόνες—ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀντεικάσομαί σε.

[19] This usage is found in Herodotus: for decoding (successfully and unsuccessfully) what the oracle about the bones of Orestes signifies, on the basis of what resembles what (I.68; cf. the Persians trying to decode the meaning of the Skythians' gift of a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows at IV.132); the Skythians think that falling snow is falling feathers (or they call snow 'feathers') because of the resemblance between them (IV.31); the tyrant Gelon compares Greece without his support to a year bereft of its spring (VII.162).

[20] In translations of the *Meno:* 'conjecture': Jowett 1953 *ad* 98b2-5, Allen 1984, Sharples 1985 *ad* 98b2-5; 'guess': Guthrie 1956 *ad* 98b2-5, Grube 1981 *ad* 98b2-5, Day 1994b *ad* 89e1-3, Weiss 2001, p. 140 and n. 26; 'assume': Grube 1981 *ad* 89e1-3.

[21] VII.49, VII.239, VIII.144, IX.17, IX.45.

so on seem too close to the idea of mere guesswork. Socrates uses εἰκάζειν in this second sense at 89e1-3 and 98b2-5: at 89e1-3 he says:

> Conversely, therefore, in the case of something of which there were neither teachers nor learners, would we not suppose well [καλῶς εἰκάζοντες] if we were to suppose [εἰκάζοιμεν] that it cannot be taught?[22]

At 98b1-5 (quoted above) Socrates explicitly contrasts εἰκάζειν with *to know* (εἰδέναι):

> Well of course I myself am not speaking from knowledge [οὐκ εἰδὼς], but from supposition [εἰκάζων]. However, that true belief and knowledge are different things–I do not at all seem to me to suppose this [εἰκάζειν]. Rather if there is anything else I would say I know [εἰδέναι]–and I would say that these are few–this is one thing I would include among those I know [οἶδα].

Finally, Socrates also uses terms which indicate falling short of knowledge when he expresses his doubts about his initial conclusion that virtue is knowledge at 89d3-6:

> For that [virtue] can be taught, if it is knowledge, that I do not retract as not well said; but as to whether it *is* knowledge, consider whether I seem to you to be reasonable in disbelieving it.[23]

As I have said, it is controversial whether these later arguments are part of the enquiry 'from

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[22] Οὐκοῦν τοὐναντίον αὖ, οὗ μήτε διδάσκαλοι μήτε μαθηταὶ εἶεν, καλῶς ἂν αὐτὸ εἰκάζοντες εἰκάζοιμεν μὴ διδακτὸν εἶναι;

[23] τὸ μὲν γὰρ διδακτὸν αὐτὸ εἶναι, εἴπερ ἐπιστήμη ἐστίν, οὐκ ἀνατίθεμαι μὴ οὐ καλῶς λέγεσθαι· ὅτι δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐπιστήμη, σκέψαι ἐάν σοι δοκῶ εἰκότως ἀπιστεῖν.

a hypothesis':[24] but this does not matter for my purposes. The issue of disingenuousness aside, Socrates is presented as giving his conclusions here at least as strong an epistemic status as his earlier conclusions from hypotheses: if he claims to take the earlier conclusions to be plausible (while falling short of knowledge), he must claim to take these later conclusions as even more plausible–while still falling short of knowledge, as 98b1-5 makes explicit. Socrates is plainly committed to the possibility of a belief's being plausible or reasonable while not amounting to knowledge, and if this is for Socrates a possibility for the later conclusions, there is no reason to deny (what he in any case made clear) that it could be true for the conclusion of the earlier arguments 'from a hypothesis'.

The same point holds if we take Socrates (as I myself think we should) to be presented as being disingenuous in all or some of the arguments in question. I cannot discuss this at length here,[25] but it is worth noting how many things seem to go wrong in the enquiry. (i) The claim that true belief cannot be taught or learnt simply contradicts what Socrates claims to happen in the episode with the slave–namely that the slave has arrived at true beliefs, which, Socrates claims at the time, could be converted into knowledge by further questioning and testing of the same general sort (85c10-d1). (ii) In the course of the argument that good people do not always bring up good children, Socrates brushes aside the objection that success in teaching depends on the ability of the teacher *and* on the aptitude of the learner, when he ought to take the objection very seriously (not least because we have already encountered it as a serious objection in the *Protagoras* (323-8)).[26] (iii) The equation of

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[24] See n. 2 above.

[25] For further discussion see Stokes 1963, pp. 295-6, Wilkes 1979, Day 1994a, pp. 27-33.

[26] At 93d9-10 Socrates appears to try to forestall this objection–'so no one would have blamed [Themistokles'] son's nature, at any rate, as being bad'–on the lamentable grounds that the son in question, Kleophantos, was good at horsemanship.

learning with recollection at 87b-c means that 'learning' in this argument is a matter of *recollection*, and not just being taught in the ordinary, everyday sense. This puts real pressure on the plausibility of the list of candidates for teachers of virtue,[27] as does the point that it seems unlikely that Socrates really thinks that the 'fine and good men' *are* virtuous (or that if they are, no one else is). (iv) What Socrates says at the end of the dialogue entirely undercuts his conclusion that virtue is cannot be taught:

> If in this whole discussion we have done well in our inquiry and in what we have said, then virtue could not come either by nature or from teaching, but would come to people to whom it does come by divine dispensation and without thought–unless there were to be a statesman of a kind that could make someone else a statesman too. If there were, he could almost be described as being, among the living, as Homer says Teiresias is among the dead when he says of him, 'He alone'–of those in Hades–'had life and mind; the rest were shadows.' That is just what such a man would be like in this world–in relation to virtue something real among shadows.[28]

In raising the possibility that someone might appear in future who could after all teach virtue, Socrates ought to remember the point he made earlier that a conclusion 'needs to be finely

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[27] See also Wilkes 1979, p. 152, who links the possibility that Socrates himself is a candidate teacher of virtue with the passage at 99e4-100a7 quoted below.

[28] 99e4-100a7: Οὐδὲν μέλει ἔμοιγε. τούτῳ μέν, ὦ Μένων, καὶ αὖθις διαλεξόμεθα· εἰ δὲ νῦν ἡμεῖς ἐν παντὶ τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ καλῶς ἐζητήσαμέν τε καὶ ἐλέγομεν, ἀρετὴ ἂν εἴη οὔτε φύσει οὔτε διδακτόν, ἀλλὰ θείᾳ μοίρᾳ παραγιγνομένη ἄνευ νοῦ οἷς ἂν παραγίγνηται, εἰ μή τις εἴη τοιοῦτος τῶν πολιτικῶν ἀνδρῶν οἷος καὶ ἄλλον ποιῆσαι πολιτικόν. εἰ δὲ εἴη, σχεδὸν ἄν τι οὗτος λέγοιτο τοιοῦτος ἐν τοῖς ζῶσιν οἷον ἔφη Ὅμηρος ἐν τοῖς τεθνεῶσιν τὸν Τειρεσίαν εἶναι, λέγων περὶ αὐτοῦ, ὅτι οἷος πέπνυται τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου, τοὶ δὲ σκιαὶ ἀίσσουσι. ταὐτὸν ἂν καὶ ἐνθάδε ὁ τοιοῦτος ὥσπερ παρὰ σκιὰς ἀληθὲς ἂν πρᾶγμα εἴη πρὸς ἀρετήν. Note that at *Protagoras* 315b9 and c8 Socrates represents himself meeting Hippias, Prodicus, and so on, as Odysseus in Hades–alive, but meeting the dead. See Taylor 2006, p. 167.

said not just a short while ago but also in the present and in the future if there is to be anything sound about it'[29]–and of course he ought to remember that, according to his earlier claims, the teachability of virtue depends on its *nature*, so that if a teacher of virtue is even possible, virtue must (by his premises) be knowledge after all.

If Socrates is being disingenuous he is of course not really committed to the *success* of his argument(s). As I have said, however, this is no reason to suppose he doubts that arguments of these general types could be successful; nor is it a reason to doubt his commitment to the possibility of beliefs which are plausible while falling short of knowledge.

As Plato presents it, then, Socrates' official position is very clear: the conclusions of arguments 'from a hypothesis'–and indeed the premises of these arguments–do not amount to knowledge. But he is represented as taking them as nonetheless reasonable or plausible, and even if he is being disingenuous, he is committed to the coherence of the claim that beliefs which fall short of knowledge can at least be plausible. What does this difference amount to? To some extent this depends on what conception of knowledge we take Socrates to be presented as having, but some–largely negative–claims can be made in any case. (i) The hypothesis and other premises need not be held *tentatively* or *provisionally*. The point is very clear if we take Socrates to conceive of knowledge as understanding: there need be nothing tentative or provisional about one's endorsement of *p* even if one does not suppose that one understands it in the way required for knowledge (I have no hesitation in affirming the existence of the Large Hadron Collider at CERN even though I have little clear idea what it is; likewise with a geometrical theorem which I believe on excellent authority but cannot myself prove). If we take Socrates' conception of knowledge to be the everyday one of (something like) justified true belief, the situation is not, essentially, different. There need be

[29] 89c8-10: Ἀλλὰ μὴ οὐκ ἐν τῷ ἄρτι μόνον δέῃ αὐτὸ δοκεῖν καλῶς λέγεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα, εἰ μέλλει τι αὐτοῦ ὑγιὲς εἶναι.

nothing tentative about a belief which one takes to lack the degree or kind of justification which would make it knowledge –indeed, one might be very confident about it (I am very confident indeed that the *Laches* was among the earliest of Plato's dialogues, but I do not think I know it). As for being provisional, things are, in a way, reversed. Unless we ratchet up the notion of justification required for knowledge so as to eliminate the possibility of error (so abandoning the everyday conception for something philosophically rarefied), all claims to knowledge will themselves be provisional in the sense that we must acknowledge that anything we claim to know might turn out to be false; so being provisional is not a distinguishing mark of beliefs which are taken to be plausible while falling short of knowledge. Of course, one might say that the beliefs which seem to fall short of knowledge (construed in the everyday way) are more likely to turn out to be false–but this is just to say that we take them to fall short of knowledge. (ii) Socrates characterises one premise ('that a person is not taught anything but knowledge') as 'clear to everyone' (παντὶ δῆλον);[30] and he says of another (the hypothesis that virtue is good) that 'it endures for us'.[31] These expressions of conviction should also rid us of the idea that hypotheses must be tentative. Equally, their strength should not trouble us: as I have said, one can think that something is very clear, or even hard to doubt seriously, without supposing that one has knowledge. For this reason, that a proposition is qualified in this way is not a reason to suppose that it is not a hypothesis.[32] The worries of some commentators[33] that 'virtue is good', which Socrates

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[30] 87b6-c7. Note, however, that in the light of the slave's acquiring true beliefs through teaching (see p. 10 above), Socrates' next remark, 'so we have quickly dealt with the first point, how, if it is of one kind, virtue would come from teaching, but if it is of another kind, it would not' (87c8-9), may be highly disingenuous: their dealing with the point is all too quick.

[31] 87d2-3: ἄλλο τι ἢ ἀγαθὸν αὐτό φαμεν εἶναι τὴν ἀρετήν, καὶ αὕτη ἡ ὑπόθεσις μένει ἡμῖν, ἀγαθὸν αὐτὸ εἶναι; It is a little unclear what this means: it might mean 'it stands firm', i.e. 'is very solid', or it might mean 'it has never been refuted.'

[32] So, e.g., Karasmanis 1987, p.77; Scott 2006, pp. 222-3. Of course, there may be other grounds for thinking that this proposition is not a hypothesis.

unquestionably calls a hypothesis, is too obviously true to be a hypothesis, are likewise misplaced–recall that, for Socrates, one cannot *know* that virtue is good unless one first knows what virtue is. (iii) We are told nothing further about the epistemic situation, as Socrates is presented as seeing it, and should not, I think, attempt to flesh it out in any more specific way. An example of going beyond the evidence in this way is Wolfsdorf's account. He claims that hypotheses are intended as 'cognitively secure propositions' which, 'at least those at *Meno* 86e1-87d8, are treated as self-evident.'[34] They 'differ from merely truly believed propositions in that merely truly believed propositions are unstable,' while they 'differ from known propositions in that known propositions imply a "reasoning of the cause"'. Part of Wolfsdorf's argument appeals to the geometrical example; as I shall suggest below, the uncertainties surrounding this example mean that we should be reluctant to argue from its supposed specifics to the specifics of Socrates's position.[35] In any case, there is a lot of epistemic room between 'unstable' and 'known'–room which covers all the degrees of plausibility compatible with not knowing, and there is no good reason to exclude the lesser degrees. Wolfsdorf also appeals to Socrates' remarks discussed in (ii) above, but for the reasons I gave there I do not think that calling the propositions in question 'self-evident' marks out the relevant kind–nor do I think it has any explanatory pay-off.[36]

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[33] See, e.g. Bluck 1961, p. 88; Wilkes 1979, p, 143, n. 2; Sharples 1985, p 163.

[34] 2008, p. 41.

[35] Though it is worth noting that even if Wolfsdorf is correct is associating the term 'hypothesis' with the idea of an ἀρχή (pp. 39-41), it does not follow that it must be associated with an unassailable or first ἀρχή rather than with either a first ἀρχή or what Menn calls a 'relative' ἀρχή (Menn 2002, pp. 219-20).

[36] In an earlier discussion Wolfsdorf floats 'the possibility that Socrates may accept ['virtue is good'] on the grounds that it is logically self-evident–although of course his commitment would be pre-theoretical and not conceived as such. If this is correct, it would explain why Socrates regards ['virtue is good'] as secure, and so it would provide at least the beginnings

So far I have paid no attention to the geometrical parallel with which Socrates introduces his arguments from a hypothesis. This is because its indeterminacies are sufficient to prevent our learning anything relevant to my present purposes from it. Broadly speaking, Socrates might be deploying one of two strategies: on the first, the only point of analogy between how the geometer in question proceeds and how Socrates does is the method of reducing one question to another; on the second, the *epistemic position* of the geometer in question is also meant to be analogous to that of Socrates and Meno. In the latter case, when the geometer says 'I do not yet know', he means–in the context of geometry–that he cannot prove it from acceptable starting points.[37] If his epistemic position is to be analogous to that of Socrates and Meno, his argument using the hypothesis must also fall short of being a proof: since it appears to be valid, at least one of its premises–the biconditional and the assertion that the relevant condition is (or: is not) satisified–must be plausible, but must lack proof from acceptable starting points (and must fail itself or themselves to be acceptable starting point(s)). If, on the other hand, Socrates' strategy is the former one, the geometer's argument he envisages might or might not constitute a proof. In the case of the most widely accepted interpretation of the geometrical problem–the Cook Wilson / Heath interpretation–we simply do not know whether the general solution, using conics, had been discovered by the time Plato wrote the

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of an explanation of Socrates' conception of stable or secure propositions' (2003, p. 140). Menn thinks that reaching the proposition 'virtue is good' successfully terminates the procedure of reduction, because it is a proposition 'which presumably we can immediately grasp to be true' (2002, p. 211): but we cannot, by Socrates' lights, *know it* to be true.

[37] I use 'proof' here to cover both the demonstration of a given theorem and the demonstration of how to construct a given figure. Note that we do not have to take–or even ascribe to the geometer–any precise view as to what the criteria of acceptability are, beyond the modest condition that these criteria must allow some starting points which fail to satisfy them to be nonetheless more plausible than others: see below.

Meno:[38] so for Plato the geometer's argument might, or might not, have constituted a proof by the lights of contemporary geometry. There are of course other plausible interpretations according to which the argument would certainly have constituted a proof by the lights of contemporary geometry.[39] We are simply not in a position to argue either from Socrates's strategy to what the geometrical problem must have been, or from what the geometrical problem must have been to Socrates' strategy. For this reason I do not think that we can use the geometry example to throw any light on the epistemic status of Socrates' own premises and conclusions.

Finally, what does *Plato* intend us to take to be the status of any results arrived at by the new procedure involving hypotheses?[40] This too is to some extent indeterminate, since we do not know how much of the now-famous philosophical afterlife of argument from hypotheses[41] Plato already has in mind–let alone how much of that he might expect even his immediate audience to know about. I shall just make one point. As we have seen, things go very badly wrong in the final section of the dialogue: what is Plato trying to get us to see by presenting the arguments in this way? What Socrates and Meno plainly fail to do is *examine* their

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[38] See Sternfeld and Zyskind 1977; Karasmanis 1987, ch. 4; Lloyd 1992, pp. 166-75 and n. 13; Menn 2002, pp. 209-14; Scott 2006, pp. 133-7.

[39] See Sternfeld and Zyskind, Karasmanis, and Lloyd cited in the previous note.

[40] For discussion, see, e.g., Vlastos 1991, p. 123 ('to adopt this procedure ... is to *scuttle the* elenchus': but note that Plato has just presented Socrates as helping the slave make progress towards knowledge by using what we are clearly meant to understand as elenctic methods, given the parallels drawn between Meno's earlier 'progress' and the slave's (compare 80a4-7 with 84b6-7 and 80b1-2 with 84b9-c1)); Menn 2002, pp. 215-23; Benson 2003, pp. 97-100 (but see n. 7 above).

[41] For hypotheses in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* see, e.g., Robinson 1953, chs 9 and 10; Karasmanis 1987, chs 5 and 6; Benson 2015, chs 7 and 8.

premises and their arguments: they do not subject them to the sort of rigorous probing and criticism which we are used to in Socratic enquiry. Clearly, enquiring by using hypotheses requires just as much rigour and just as steadfast a refusal to take things for granted as a standard Socratic enquiry into what *X* is. And this is exactly what we should expect, since in both cases the enquirers do not–yet–know what the right answer is. Although Socrates is very much 'the guilty party' in this section, in the wider context of the *Meno* as a whole we can see that the essential problem is Meno: he does not want to engage in rigorous enquiry, and does not want Socrates to engage in it either. So Plato might well think that the *method* is a good one, but that it requires the same scrupulous and relentless care.[42] In the *Republic* Plato writes about how to gain–and how to fail to gain– knowledge of the form of the good. Although the context is thus a very special one, the general attitude towards philosophical enquiry which it expresses is one which Plato held throughout his life, and what he says could stand as a commentary on the end of the *Meno*:

> The same thing, then, holds for the form of the good. Only if someone can distinguish the form of the good in an account and separate it from everything else, can survive as if in a battle all examinations, striving to examine things not in accordance with belief but in accordance with reality, and can make his way through all these without his account falling, will you say that he knows the good itself, or any other good. And if he gets hold of some image, will you not say that he gets hold of it through belief, not through knowledge, and that he is dreaming and sleeping in his present life, and before he wakes up here, he will arrive in Hades and fall asleep completely?[43]

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[42] Cf. (in a slightly different connection) Lloyd 1992, p. 181: 'But it is one thing to understand the method, another to use it to get the right results. Even if the procedures are clear enough from the philosophical example, that does not entitle anyone (Meno, or us) to feel confident that we can apply them correctly.'

[43] VII 534b8-d1: Οὐκοῦν καὶ περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ὡσαύτως· ὃς ἂν μὴ ἔχῃ διορίσασθαι τῷ λόγῳ

ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων πάντων ἀφελὼν τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν, καὶ ὥσπερ ἐν μάχῃ διὰ πάντων ἐλέγχων διεξιών, μὴ κατὰ δόξαν ἀλλὰ κατ' οὐσίαν προθυμούμενος ἐλέγχειν, ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις ἀπτῶτι τῷ λόγῳ διαπορεύηται, οὔτε αὐτὸ τὸ ἀγαθὸν φήσεις εἰδέναι τὸν οὕτως ἔχοντα οὔτε ἄλλο ἀγαθὸν οὐδέν, ἀλλ' εἴ πῃ εἰδώλου τινὸς ἐφάπτεται, δόξῃ, οὐκ ἐπιστήμῃ ἐφάπτεσθαι, καὶ τὸν νῦν βίον ὀνειροπολοῦντα καὶ ὑπνώττοντα, πρὶν ἐνθάδ' ἐξεγρέσθαι, εἰς ῞Αιδου πρότερον ἀφικόμενον τελέως ἐπικαταδαρθάνειν;

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