

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

The Images of Enslavement and Incommensurability in Plato's *Meno*

JEFFREY S. TURNER

Bucknell University

You know also that they use visible forms and make their arguments about them, but they are not thinking about them but about those things which they resemble; they are making their arguments about the square itself, the diagonal itself, not about the one they draw, and similarly with the others. These very things which they fashion and draw, of which there are shadows and images in water, they now in turn use as images, in seeking to see those others themselves, which one cannot see except in thought.

Republic 510d5–511a1'

I. INTRODUCTION

The example of mathematical instruction in Plato's *Meno* (82b9–85b7) is one of the most dramatic passages in his entire corpus. Not only is it “our *first* direct, explicit, extended piece of evidence about Greek mathematics” (Fowler, 7) as well as “the most sustained stretch of geometrical reasoning” in the whole of Plato's work (Vlastos, 1991, 118), it also offers us the rare opportunity to hear Socrates comment explicitly on his own pedagogical efforts. Socrates interrupts the lesson with the slave twice (82e4–13, 84a3–d2) in order to discuss its progress with Meno, and at the conclusion of the lesson (85b8–86c3) Socrates and Meno once again discuss it. At the very heart of the *Meno*, then, we have an example of Socratic instruction together with something like “meta-instruction.” Both in word and deed, Socrates tries to show Meno something about what it is to learn.

But just what is he trying to show him? A straightforward answer immediately presents itself: Socrates wants to show Meno “that learning is recollection.” This, after all, is Socrates' claim at 81d4–5, and in fact the metainstructional “interruptions” of the discussion with the slave boy seem centrally focused on this claim. Of course, we might have our worries about whether Socrates *actually* shows this—we might hesitate to agree with Meno that the boy's opinions are all his own, that they were in him, and therefore that he has recollected and not been taught (85b8–e8)—but it seems hard to deny that this is what Socrates is trying to show.

While not denying that this is what Socrates is trying to show, in what follows I want to ask again what “learning is recollection” is supposed to mean here, and to consider *how* Socrates tries to show it. After considering in the remainder of this section two interpretations of this passage offered by Gregory Vlastos, I will then offer some comments about the structure of the *Meno* as a whole (section II) as a preface to placing the images of enslavement and incommensurability within that context (section III), and then, finally, return to issues more directly related to the thesis that “learning is recollection” (section IV).

My attempt to understand Socrates’ claim situates itself between two papers on this passage in the *Meno* written by Gregory Vlastos, and in a sense attempts to span a gap between them. At the beginning of his article “*Anamnesis in the Meno*,” Vlastos claims that

In the *Meno* we have a chance, rare in Greek philosophy, to compare a philosophical theory with the data which make up its ostensible evidence. Meno asks if there is any way Socrates can show him that “learning” is recollecting. Socrates offers to produce the proof on the spot. Meno will see the slave-boy learning, and this will show that he was recollecting. (1965, 143)

On this view, Socrates *has a theory* that learning is recollection, and he uses this episode with Meno’s slave to give “evidence” for this theory. Presumably, then, the “metainstructional” interruptions are meant to get Meno to take a stand on whether “the data” with the slave boy support “the theory” of recollection.

But on what grounds should we believe that the example of mathematical instruction with the slave is meant as “data” for a “theory”? Neither these terms nor anything like them are used by Socrates in describing his discussion with the slave boy. Are we so sure that the interruptions of this discussion have the character of comparing “theory” and “data”? The religious overtones with which Socrates introduces his claim that learning is recollection might seem to point in a somewhat different direction: Socrates attributes the doctrine to “priests and priestesses whose care it is to be able to give an account of their practices” (81a10–b1). I suggest that Vlastos in “*Anamnesis in the Meno*” has his own theory about this part of Plato’s text, which is that *it is best interpreted* in terms of the relation between “data” and “theory.” (Note, e.g., that his article is divided into two parts, “The Data of the Theory” [143–57] and “The Theory” [158–67].) By looking at the *Meno* this way, Vlastos no doubt hoped to make clear what kind of support Socrates and Plato have for this “theory” as well as how strong that support is: the use of the data/theory relation as an interpretive device is meant to make clear just what the epistemic status of the claim that “learning is recollection” really is.

It is therefore rather disturbing when one finds that in using this interpretive “metatheory” Vlastos seems to have fiddled with *his* data (the passage in the text) in order to get his *theory* (his interpretation of this passage) to come out

right. His central claim about the “theory of recollection” is: “Reduced to its simplest terms, then, what Plato means by ‘recollection’ in the *Meno* is *any enlargement of our knowledge which results from the perception of logical relationships.*” (1965, 156 f.) Vlastos goes on to try to uncover what “the middle term Plato is offering us between the data and the theory [of recollection]” was, and finds it in the notion that these logical relationships are “within” us (1965, 158 f.). This is what determines the epistemic status of “Plato’s theory.”

But just how does Vlastos reduce “the theory of recollection” to these simplest of terms? Essentially by changing the text: Vlastos constructs two examples, the first a simple problem in arithmetic and the second a simple logic problem, and then claims that these are equivalent, for all of Plato’s intents and purposes, to the problem in the text. With the arithmetical example Vlastos is particularly bold: he invites the reader to perform a “scissors-and-paste experiment on Plato’s text”:

. . . cut out the whole interrogation from 82B 9 to 85B 7, paste in the above dialogue in its place, and consider whether any material change will have to be made in what comes before and after. You will find that none will; that the same Platonic theses would be illustrated, and that they would be substantiated to the same degree, so that the meaning and truth-value of the conclusions Socrates draws from the dialogue at the end will be unaffected. (1965, 146)

Vlastos turns from Plato’s geometrical image to a pattern of logical inference. But this is fiddling with the textual “data,” and we ought to be wary of any interpretation to claim support from such fiddling. Note in particular that once we have agreed that the meaning of “recollection” in the *Meno* is “any enlargement of our knowledge which results from the perception of logical relationships,” it is a short step—indeed, all too short a step—to say that in this part of the text Socrates and Plato are offering us “data” for a “theory.” By interpreting the substantive concern of the text in terms of “the perception of logical relationships,” it seems as if we could not possibly have done violence to the text by construing it in terms of the data/theory relation: it seems as if we are just interpreting the text in its own terms.

But violence to the text is in fact what has gone on here: Vlastos’s “meta-theory” about *Meno* 82b9–85b7 more or less deliberately ignores the particular images of the text for the sake of his own theoretical construction.² What makes this all the more troubling is that the geometrical image in this section of the dialogue has great significance, both for the history of mathematics and of philosophy. Although it is not named as such in the *Meno* (it is, however, at *Theaetetus* 148a7–b2), we have here an example of the existence of “irrational” numbers: the square with double area is built on the diagonal of the original square, whose length is (expressed in modern terms) $2\sqrt{2}$. It is an important mathematical truth, of which Plato was no doubt aware, that this number is

inexpressible in terms of any integers m and n such that $m/n = 2\sqrt{2}$. This fact was of course damaging to the Pythagorean attempt to understand the whole *kosmos* in terms of integral numbers and their proportions (see von Fritz, 382–412, and, more generally, Burkert). Given the Pythagorean overtones of some parts of the *Meno*, this fact seems especially important; Plato surely uses the image of incommensurability in this dialogue deliberately.

In his attempt to uncover the meaning of “learning is recollection,” then, Vlastos changes the textual details purporting to show that learning is recollection. But to change the text in order to get one’s interpretation to come out right seems to violate the spirit of Vlastos’s own interpretive approach: if we want to follow the data/theory model we need a healthier respect for the independence of our textual “data.” A chapter from his recent book *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, “Elenchus and Mathematics,” looks again at *Meno* 82b9–85b7 and appears at first glance to remedy this problem, for in it Vlastos takes the image of incommensurability in the *Meno* much more seriously.

Let me begin by briefly summarizing the argument of this paper as a whole. Vlastos seeks to account for the “disenchantment with the elenchus” (1991, 118) he finds in the *Lysis*, *Hippias Major*, and *Euthydemus*, where “the yes-man of the middle dialogues has made his entry into Plato’s corpus” (1991, 117, n. 47). For him the solution lies in the fact that Plato himself, like the philosophers of Book VII of the *Republic*, is now deeply involved in mathematical studies, and “the effect is proving as transformative of his own outlook as he believed it would be of theirs” (1991, 118). Hence Socrates’ apparent turn from elenchus to a more dogmatic approach is to be explained by his creator’s new interest in the more positive approach of mathematics, which can overcome the “shortfall in epistemic certainty, inherent in the elenctic method” (1991, 114).

Given this, it is no surprise that the example of mathematical instruction in the *Meno* plays such a central role in Vlastos’s chapter (it is in fact the first passage he considers after introducing his hypothesis about Plato’s development). The use of a mathematical problem to which no straightforward arithmetical solution could be given, and whose solution therefore must simply be *shown*, might itself be taken as an image of the turn from elenchus to positive system. Vlastos seems to do this in the following passage:

The interrogation which follows has been thought a paradigm of Socratic elenchus. Is it? Yes and No. Yes, where the boy’s mistakes are being corrected. . . . Elenchus is good for this, and only this. It does not begin to bring him to the truth he seeks. He could have gone on till doomsday trying out different integers or ratios of integers to be shown their falsehood by the same process, and none of this would have brought him an inch closer to the true answer. In Greek mathematics, which recognizes only integral numbers, no integer or ratio of integers could yield the answer to Socrates’ question. The problem admits of no arithmetical solution. But it does admit of a geometrical one. This answer no elenctic badgering could

have elicited from the boy. To bring him to it Socrates *must shed the adversative role* to which persistence in elenctic argument would have kept him. Shed it he does. Extending the diagram, he plants into it the line that opens sesame, and *then* the boy “recollects” that the side of a square whose area is twice that of a given square is the diagonal of the given square. (1991, 118 f.)

There is nothing new in the claim that Socrates seems to be going beyond simply “asking questions” of the slave boy when he draws in the diagonal here: cf. e.g. G. M. A. Grube’s note to this passage in his translation of the *Meno*: “. . . Socrates here introduces a new element, which is not the result of a question but of his own knowledge, though the answer to the problem follows from questions” (1976, 18). What I want to call attention to now is a *tension* between the account of *Meno* 82b9–85b7 given here and the account Vlastos gave earlier, a tension Vlastos himself seems to overlook (see 1991, 118, n. 54). Here Vlastos takes the particular image in the text quite seriously: by focussing on the fact that the solution to the mathematical problem cannot be arithmetical because the diagonal of the square with sides whose length is 2 units is irrational, he wants to show how Socrates must go beyond the method of elenchus, and so “shed the adversative role” and plant “the line that opens sesame.” (Were Vlastos to consider another image here, namely that Socrates’ interlocutor is a slave, this point would seem even more compelling. Isn’t a slave the very image of a pliant interlocutor, one waiting to be “implanted”?) But in calling attention to this he also shows something else: precisely to the extent that Socrates *plants* the line that opens sesame, the sense in which he is showing Meno that the slave boy “recollects” the truth here starts to slip away. (Note how Vlastos himself puts it in quotation marks.) If Socrates plants the answer, then even in Vlastos’s own earlier view of Platonic recollection, Socrates is doing a pretty poor job of showing an example of recollection: how are we so sure the slave boy “perceived the logical relationships,” given Socrates’ planting job?

There is a tension in Vlastos’s two accounts, then, a tension between (i) trying to show the plausibility of Socrates’ demonstration that learning is recollection and (ii) paying close attention to the particular character of the images in the text of the *Meno* and Plato’s use of them. In “*Anamnesis in the Meno*” Vlastos pursues the former at the cost of the latter; in “*Elenchus and Mathematics*” he pursues the latter but at the cost of the former. It is hard for Vlastos *both* to emphasize the antielenctic character of Socrates’ mathematical instruction *and* to say that in order for the slave boy to be recollecting he must not depend epistemically on Socrates’ beliefs.

Upon reflection this tension might not be particularly surprising. The images at the heart of Plato’s dialogues often seem peculiarly self-defeating. Consider, for example, the image of the Sun in *Republic VI-VII*: Plato offers us the source of light as an image for the precondition of intellect. But to look at “the sun

itself in its own place" (516b4–6)—the ultimate intellectual moment of knowing, wholly outside the cave—would only lead one to blindness (cf. Bloom, 402 ff.). Or again consider the so-called ladder of love in the *Symposium*: how can the levels of *eros* be related as "steps of a stair" and there still be an absolute primacy to the top step? If the "lower" steps aren't somehow preserved rather than annulled, the whole ladder would collapse—including the top step.

The images at the heart of the *Meno*, then, may well be characteristically self-defeating. Might there nonetheless be a way of understanding the dialogue which would hold on to both the peculiar character of the images in the text and to what they purport to show?

II. THE STRUCTURE OF THE *MENO* AS A WHOLE

The first step in understanding Plato's use of the images in this part of the *Meno* in a way more consonant with the explicit action of the text might well be to situate them within the action of the dialogue as a whole. And to do that I propose we first consider briefly the structure of the Platonic dialogue in general.

In his two recent books on the *Statesman* (1980) and the *Parmenides* (1986), Mitchell Miller has made a bold proposal about the structure of Plato's dialogues. Claiming that "the same fundamental structure recurs in dialogue after dialogue," Miller isolates four key moments within "the encounter of philosopher and nonphilosopher" (1986, 6) that constitutes the Platonic dialogue: (1) First the philosopher elicits from the nonphilosopher a statement of the latter's position, the goal of this *elicitation* being "the strongest and most transparent formulation" of that view. The philosopher then proceeds (2) to refute the nonphilosophical position of his or her interlocutor, the culmination of this *refutation* being the *aporia* into which the nonphilosopher then falls. The "darkness" of such *aporia* "is really an achievement; it marks the release from the false light of presumption and opinion," and thus serves as a precondition for the third moment of the dialogue: (3) "the *reorienting insight* that shows a path through the *aporia*." Here the dialogue moves forward thanks to the "most basic contribution" of the philosopher, "characteristically the most profound and original" insight of the dialogue.³ There remains, however, a question about the extent to which the nonphilosophical interlocutor of the dialogue understands this philosophical insight: "no dialogue ever ends" at the point of reorientation. Instead, (4) "there is invariably, as the fourth and final moment, a *return* to the issues or difficulties or, even, the plane of discourse prior to the basic refutation" (emphasis added). The character of this return depends on the extent to which the nonphilosopher is able to appropriate the reorienting philosophical insight: the receptivity of the interlocutor to this insight and the philosophical depth of the "return" are directly proportional (see 1980, xviii).

Miller's proposal, though largely ignored in recent scholarly literature on Plato, has important implications for how we read the Platonic corpus. I can only begin to sketch them here. Accounts of Plato's development like that in Vlastos's *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* need to take into consideration the possibility that "elenchus" is *always* a part of Plato's dialogues. If Miller is right it is what fuels the opening sections of all the dialogues, even the "middle" and "late" ones. (Miller's own work on the *Statesman* and *Parmenides* points in this direction for these particular "late" dialogues.) Thus Vlastos's talk of Plato's scuttling the elenchus (1991, 123) would be premature. Similarly, recognition of the "reorienting insight" of the philosopher, if it is indeed a structural element of all the dialogues, would put to rest once and for all the notion of the "aporetic Socratic dialogue" (cf. Kahn), because Plato would be seen as presenting substantive philosophical insight from the beginning of his corpus to its end. "Plato's development" may not be nearly as simple as is usually thought—it may not be a simple progression from dramatic "aporetic" dialogues to dogmatic treatises where the dramatic form is a mere cover for the author's own views (cf. Miller, 1986, 168–83).

An important advantage of Miller's approach is that it enables us to accept, without reducing interpretation to merely subjective speculation, the fact that both Socrates within the dialogue and Plato outside of it often proceed by way of irony. The interpretive danger in admitting irony as a textual strategy is that of opening a Pandora's box, because one interpreter's irony is another's dead seriousness: it's hard to tell when the Socrates of Plato's dialogues is being ironic. (How much better things would be if no philosopher were ever ironic!) But if Miller is on the right track about the general structure of the dialogues, we can accept Socratic *and* Platonic irony without falling into an exegetical schizophrenia: we will have some sense of what the philosopher is trying to do in the part of the text in question, and thereby have some handle on whether she or he might be employing irony. With a grasp of the "rhythm" of the dialogue as a whole comes the advantage of knowing when to expect irony and what the grounds for that irony might be.

This way of putting the point brings to light another advantage of Miller's strategy: it allows us to consider the philosophical significance of the *dramatic* aspects of the text without falling into reading those aspects too "subjectively." Because his readings of the drama of the dialogues are situated within a structural claim about the whole dialogue, Miller is able to check such readings with the *action*—especially the "logical action" or argumentation—*of the dialogue as a whole*. This perspective on one's interpretation of dramatic elements can offer an important line of response to the criticism, in itself quite natural, of "overreading" the drama of Plato's dialogues. It should be noted, however, that Miller's structural claim also helps one to make more sense of the arguments within the text: by keeping in mind the position of the argument in question within the action of the whole dialogue, one can place the argument in its

dialogical context, thereby paying due heed to “the specific work that *Plato* [rather than the reader] intends [it] to perform” (1986, 3 f.; emphasis added).

With some relatively minor modifications, I want to use the hermeneutical strategy Miller has proposed as a hypothesis in this paper and thereby situate *Meno* 82b9–85b7 within the whole of that dialogue. Indeed, the *Meno* seems quite well suited to the kind of structural analysis Miller has proposed: its parts are well demarcated by signposts Plato himself has left for us. By considering some aspects of its structure more closely, I can both indicate the modifications to Miller’s proposal I wish to suggest and also begin to situate the example of mathematical instruction in the *Meno* within the whole of that dialogue.

To begin with, note that the first two structural moments Miller proposes, the *elicitation* and *refutation*, seem intertwined in the *Meno*. The initial refutations of Meno’s definitions of *arete* lead to reformulations on Meno’s part: Socrates’ *refutations* are in an important sense themselves *strategies for elicitation*. By continuing to refute Meno’s definitions, Socrates presses him onward, and the increasing frustration Meno must surely feel—which of course finally explodes in insults at 79e7–80b7, and in his eristic argument at 80d5–8—leads him to offer definitions closer to his heart. Nor is this structural feature peculiar to the *Meno*: it seems rather to be essential to the philosopher’s attempt to draw out the nonphilosopher’s opinions that she or he then refute them, and equally essential to such initial refutation that it be for the sake of progressively deeper elicitation. Were this not so, philosophy would be indistinguishable from eristics: it is precisely the philosopher’s interest in “progressively deeper elicitation” that distinguishes his tactics from the merely refutative tactics of a Euthydemus or (perhaps) a Protagoras. One can see this even in those dialogues Miller himself analyzes (see e.g. 1986, 49 f., 54, 56 on the young Socrates’ responses to Parmenides’ pointed questions); hence rather than separating elicitation from refutation I prefer to link them together as one structural moment: the *elicitation-and-refutation*.

As a second minor modification, it seems important to note that the aporia which follows this elicitation-and-refutation neither exclusively nor always straightforwardly pertains to the “nonphilosopher.” Miller does not rule out that the philosopher might in an important sense be in aporia, too (see esp. 1986, 6, concerning the aporia of the *Sophist*): I propose simply to state the point a bit more explicitly. In some dialogues one might wish to speak of a “hidden aporia”: the interlocutor is perplexed from the standpoint of the philosopher, but refuses to acknowledge this fact openly. Consider for example the *Protagoras*: At 334a2–c6, Protagoras’ relativistic outburst brings a premature end to Socrates’ argument for the “unity of virtue.” What follows is a brief but important methodological skirmish between Socrates and the great sophist. This skirmish clearly constitutes the aporetic section of the dialogue, insofar as Protagoras is unwilling to continue under the present arrangement and Socrates is prepared to leave should he not “get his way.” Unless this aporia is resolved, the whole

conversation will come to an end. But Protagoras himself never admits to being perplexed; instead he adopts precisely the opposite posture with his militant statements at 334d6–335a8. This hostile posture nonetheless constitutes the “hidden aporia” of the dialogue: Protagoras is in fact in aporia insofar as he has now contradicted himself (behind his own back, as it were) about the unity of arete. In his “great speech” the sophist had claimed that arete was one (324e2–325a2), and yet his relativistic outburst utterly opposes such a view. Until this contradiction is in some way brought out into the open, any genuine conversation with Protagoras is utterly impossible. The methodological discussion which follows (334c7–338e5) is meant to do just that.

Here in the *Meno* we see the need for a similar revision in Miller's conception of the aporetic moment of the Platonic dialogue: consider Socrates' response to Meno's portrayal of him as a “torpedo fish”:

S. I know why you drew this image of me.

M. Why do you think I did?

S. So that I should draw an image of you in return. I know that all handsome men rejoice in images of themselves; it is to their advantage, for I think that the images of beautiful people are also beautiful, but I will draw no image of you in turn. Now if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, *for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others*. So now I do not know what *arete* is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be. (80c1–d4, emphasis added)

Socrates' claim that he is even more perplexed than his interlocutor ought, I think, to be taken seriously. Note first of all that Socrates never gives an explicit answer to the question leading the conversation into aporia: as Miller's interpretive strategy would lead us to expect, his “reorienting insight” is expressed indirectly. Part of the reason for this may well be that Socrates is aware of more levels of aporia in the conversation than is his interlocutor. Perhaps, then, it is best to see the aporetic moment of the dialogue as predicated of the *conversation as a whole* or, to put it in Miller's own terms, of the *relation between* the philosopher and the nonphilosopher: as he himself puts it, the aporetic moment “appears to bring dialogue itself to a decisive impasse” (1986, 6).

Now the task of applying this structure to the *Meno*, and so giving the context for 82b9–85b7, seems relatively straightforward. Notice that *apor-* occurs *six* times from 80a1–d1, and that Socrates explicitly attempts to return to the “what is arete?” question at 86c4–6. These signposts no doubt mark the *aporetic moment* and the beginning of the *return*; the “reorienting insight” of the *Meno* surely falls in between. And so the example of mathematical instruction in that dialogue is meant to offer a philosophical way past the aporia into which the discussion has fallen.

It might be best, then, to begin by recounting the nature of that impasse. It seems to me to be multileveled; without claiming to provide an exhaustive list, I offer the following four aspects of the aporetic moment of the *Meno*:

1. At the most explicit level, the inquiry into “what arete is” has lost its way. Meno has given all of the definitions he has to offer, and they have led to a dead end: if the discussion about arete is to continue, as Socrates seems to want it to (79e5–6), we must find a way past Meno’s previous definitions, which have shown themselves to be unsatisfactory.
2. An implicit theme of the inquiry into what arete is, however, was the question of its *unity*. In several places, but most clearly in reformulating and then refuting Meno’s third and final definition, Socrates steered the conversation in the direction of the problematic character of the relation between arete itself and its “parts.” Thus e.g. at 79c3–7 Socrates says, “I think you must face the same question from the beginning, my dear Meno, namely, what is *arete*, if every action performed with a part of *arete* is *arete*? For that is what one is saying when he says that every action performed with justice is *arete*.” *But it is Socrates who led the conversation into this conundrum*: in response to all three of Meno’s attempted definitions, Socrates added a “part” of arete to Meno’s definition, only then to complain about the resulting circularity! What can be said about the unity of “excellence” if both “every action performed with justice is excellence” *and* we do not want to define it in a circular way?
3. There also seems to be an *aporia* at work about the *way* conversations about arete should be conducted. After admitting his own *aporia*, Meno offers his unflattering image of Socrates and then—as if to admit how deeply he has been wounded—says, “Yet I have made many speeches about *arete* before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is” (80b2–4). When coupled with Meno’s obvious lack of acquaintance with dialectic, this seems tantamount to an admission that Meno is now unclear not only about what arete is but also about how one should speak about it. Socrates must somehow find a way past this methodological impasse, even as he addresses the other more substantive levels of *aporia*.
4. One final, and related, point: the section of the dialogue immediately preceding the example of mathematical instruction involves an *aporia about aporia itself*. For Meno’s admission of his own perplexity is *immediately* followed with an attack on Socrates for having put him in that position, and he quickly turns against the whole conversation with his *eristikos logos*. Meno is clearly uncomfortable about having lost his way. Socrates, on the other hand, seems both in deed and word to *welcome* the *aporiai* into which the conversation has fallen: as noted above, after admitting his perplexity Socrates proceeds to say that he wants to continue

the examination with Meno. Socrates is confronted, then, with the task of showing Meno that being perplexed is itself something to be welcomed rather than avoided, of showing him a way beyond his hostility to perplexity.

It is in the context of these four levels of *aporia* that whatever “reorienting insight” Socrates has is made available to Meno. Having formulated these *aporiai*, though, it does not seem to me to be sufficient to say simply that this insight is that “learning is recollection.” The insight seems to resist such dogmatic statement, for over and above the vexing question about what “learning is recollection” *means*, it is not at all clear just how it addresses the several perplexities into which the dialogue has fallen. Even if we grant Socrates that the soul is immortal, that “the whole of nature is akin . . . the soul has learned everything . . . [and] searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (81c8–d5), how *exactly* does that show us a way through the *aporia* about *aporia*? What role does “perplexity” play in recollection? How does it show us that when in pursuit of *arete* one must follow the Socratic way of dialectic rather than the (apparently sophistic) method of “speeches before large audiences”? What does it say about the unity, and nature, of *arete*?

Rather than give Meno a direct answer to any of these questions, Socrates does here precisely what he said he would not do, just a moment ago: he offers Meno an image of himself. By looking more carefully at that image we might later return to the idea that “learning is recollection” with a better sense of what Socrates is trying to show Meno.

III. THE IMAGES OF ENSLAVEMENT AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

Socrates’ attempt to “reorient” his interlocutor in this dialogue takes the form of putting Meno on stage for himself, for Socrates’ conversation with the slave is an imitation of his conversation with Meno (Thomas, 156–62; contrast Vlastos, 1991, 119). The point of Socrates’ little drama is both to show Meno himself and to show this in such a way that Meno is called upon to transcend that very self which he sees. To do this Socrates presents Meno with a pedagogical drama which has the capacity both to repel and to attract him.

Understood as a drama, the two most salient features here are: (a) Socrates’ interlocutor is one of Meno’s “attendants” (*akolouthos*; 82b1; later *pais*); (b) as Vlastos noted, the “solution” to the mathematical problem discussed here *necessarily* involves a shift from the arithmetical paradigm to the geometrical, from what (in the context of Ancient Greek mathematics) can be calculated to what can only be shown. It seems clear enough that Meno is aware not only of the first but also the second of these features (see 82e4–11); let us follow up on what they might mean for him.

(a) In choosing as the interlocutor here one of Meno's attendants—or rather, allowing Meno to choose one (“whichever you like,” 82b1)—Socrates draws an image of Meno as a slave, as one who is at the mercy of another's desires. Note how Socrates names his interlocutor at the crucial moment when he also names the solution to the problem of doubling the square:

S. Clever ones (*hoi sophistai*) call this the diagonal, so that if diagonal is its name, you, Meno's boy (*o pais Menonos*), say that the double figure would be that based on the diagonal.

B. Most certainly, Socrates.

At the very moment that he brings this little drama to its *telos*, Socrates names the one to whom he is speaking—“Meno's boy.” Given that the point of this drama is to show Meno an image of Meno, Socrates thereby invites him to recognize his own deeply slavelike character.⁴ Such a recognition has the potential to cut right through the conception of power animating all of Meno's previous definitions: whereas Meno attempts to define arete as “being able to manage the affairs of the city and in so doing to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies . . .” (71e1 ff.), as ruling over men (73c9–d1), or in short, as “desiring beautiful things and having the power to acquire them” (77b2–5), Socrates' insight is that underneath all of these attempts is a kind of *enslavement*. In putting forth these definitions Meno is a slave not only to the popular opinion which sets forth the Homeric code alluded to in his first definition, but also to the poet who supplies him with his final definition of arete. But most of all, no doubt, Meno is a slave to himself, to that “spoiled” and tyrannical part of himself “forever giving orders” (76b8–c1).

Were Meno to see that the “boy” now before him is no more and no less than an image of himself, he would be face to face with the terrible realization that the basic ontological premise underlying all his definitions of arete—namely, that he himself instantiates it—is false.⁵ Rather than being able to rule over others, Meno cannot even rule himself: he follows the opinions of others just as the boy follows those of Socrates.

(b) Seen this way Meno would no doubt be repelled by the image Socrates has drawn of him. But consider more closely the character of the problem Socrates sets for the slave boy, and the nature of its solution. The diagonal is incommensurable with the sides of the square, and it is precisely this incommensurability which Socrates exploits in this conversation. The slave boy “could have gone on till doomsday,” as Vlastos puts it, and he would never have reached the right answer; only Socrates' reorienting insight, shifting the discussion to a different medium, offers the correct path. That insight, *when present, clearly exhibits its character as a solution*, but its strange presence is after all the issue: it exists (as a geometrical solution) and yet it does not exist (as an arithmetical solution). From where could this solution have come, if not from Socrates (or someone else who “already knew” it)?

Insofar as this problem is meant to imitate the very problem perplexing Meno—the What is arete? question—the nature of its solution might well hold a clue to a way past the aporiai into which that earlier conversation had fallen. Of particular interest here is the fact that Socrates has cleverly chosen a problem which exploits the one characteristic preventing Meno from being convinced by his own eristic argument: Meno's desire to delve into hidden matters. For recall that immediately after giving that argument he had been drawn back into the conversation by Socrates' reference to "wise men and women talking about divine matters," "priests and priestesses whose care it is to be able to give an account of their practices" (81a5–b1). It is precisely this esoteric conceit which violently reawakens Meno from his misologistic slumbers: he cannot remain within the confines of his own aporia, as Socrates jokingly points out. "You now ask me if I can teach you, when I say there is no teaching but recollection, in order to show me up at once as contradicting myself.—No, by Zeus, Socrates, that was not my intention when I spoke, but just a habit" (82a1–5).

The need to grasp the diagonal as the solution to the mathematical problem *represents* Meno's need to raise his concern with the esoteric to the level of philosophical insight. John Thomas, in his *Musings on the Meno*, puts the point this way:

The failure is a failure of computation. Plato and his contemporaries lack the means to compute the length of these lines. But the failure does not seem to be a failure in principle. Plato is not inviting us to calculate the incalculable, but rather showing that, given current techniques of computation, an answer was not possible. *Ideally*, however, the line must have a determinate length. . . . The shift to geometry makes this clear. (161)

On this view the shift from arithmetic to geometry *represents* a movement towards the ideal, which—to follow the dramatic action of the conversation with the slave boy—is first of all *shown* rather than proven or even argued for. Socrates shows the slave boy an answer which, when made present, is nonetheless present in a strange way, not reducible to the familiar terrain of arithmetic. By doing so he invites Meno not to lessen but to heighten his own interest in the esoteric: he invites Meno to take the strange step of seeing himself in the slave boy, and thereby seeing himself overcome aporia first of all by *accepting* it *as his own* and then—but only then—by accepting the guidance of Socrates.

IV APORIA, ARETE, AND ANAMNESIS

Let us now turn back to the aporiai of the *Meno* and consider the way Socrates' example of mathematical instruction addresses them. Without claiming to provide a final statement of the way past all of them, I consider them in reverse order, moving from form to content.

4. With respect to the aporia about aporia, Socrates' interruption at 84a3–d1, where he questions Meno about the aporia into which he has now delivered the slave boy, seems crucial. In language quite ironically mimicking Meno's own, Socrates asks whether the slave has been harmed by being perplexed:

S. Do you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?

M. I do not think so, Socrates.

S. Has he then benefitted from being numbed?

M. I think so. (84c4–9)

If Meno answers honestly here, *and if he sees himself in the slave boy*, then Socrates will have shown him a way past his hostility to aporia. Seeing that longing to know what one does not know is more important than appearing to know when one doesn't, Meno will be released from his self-enslavement. In fact, if these two conditions of honesty and insight are met, then Meno's answers themselves instantiate, at a different level, that very "longing to know" of which Socrates speaks. By the very act of saying that the slave boy has been benefitted by Socrates' stinging questioning, he thereby says that he himself has been benefitted by the same—*if he sees himself in the slave boy*.

3. Meno's despair at having lost his way was in part a despair concerning the manner of speaking about these matters: accustomed to giving "many speeches about *arete* before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches" (80b2–3) as he thought, in the face of Socrates' questioning he realized the fundamental emptiness of those speeches. Socrates mimics this very language back at Meno: the irony here is rather heavy since it is unlikely that the slave boy ever gave *any* "speeches to large audiences about the square of double size" (84b11–c1), let alone fine ones. But Socrates' purpose is clear: by quoting Meno's description of his own earlier speeches, Socrates invites Meno to see himself in the slave boy.

Were Meno to see himself this way, he might well find a way through his resistance to dialectic. In the methodological digression after his second attempted definition, Meno had tried to bully his way along, pressing Socrates for one definition and then another in order to forestall having to submit to Socrates' questioning (75b1–77a2). But the conversation with the slave boy shows how such "dialectical tyranny" is itself a kind of enslavement: if Meno's boy had given speeches about the square of double size, his very desire to give such speeches would have kept him from the truth. The more he longed to give fine speeches rather than to know, the more he would trap himself in ignorance. To the extent that Meno sees this *and identifies with the slave boy*, he gives up his desire to give fine speeches for the sake of Socratic "longing to know." Thus the methodological aporia might be overcome by Meno's own longing to know.

Now this way of articulating a way through the last two aporetic moments of the *Meno* is predicated upon what I have called Meno's "seeing himself in the slave boy." In order for Meno to overcome his aporia about aporia and his habitual commitment to dialectical tyranny, Meno needs to *see the slave as an image of himself*. Before we turn to the first two aporetic moments, concerning the unity and nature of virtue, it will be useful to consider what this seeing would involve.

Note first of all that Socrates never draws explicit attention to the fact that the slave boy is meant as an image of Meno. He never asks, "Do you see that you are just like the slave?" At first glance this seems odd: why does Socrates not simply *present* his "reorienting insight"?

Might there nonetheless be pedagogical wisdom in leaving this question implicit? Meno's responses to Socrates' "metaquestions" (his questions about the slave boy's progress) express straightforward agreement with Socrates: here if anywhere in the *Meno* we have Vlastos's "yes man of the middle dialogues." But therein lies the danger, as Plato cleverly makes his readers feel (since we may well be inclined to disagree with Meno at these points). Because it is not at all clear that Meno is thinking for himself when he considers the slave boy's progress, Socrates would only compound the problem further were he to offer an explicit statement of his "reorienting insight" that Meno is slavelike. If Meno is to understand that his (multilevelled) acquisitiveness marks him as a slave, this is something he must do on his own.⁶

And if Meno succeeds in doing this, it will be by virtue of a radical self-transcendence; his usual strategies of memorizing the opinions of others (his former teachers or the poets) will not work here. The image of incommensurability Socrates uses expresses this nicely: the "solution" for Meno's perplexity involves something which when made present, is nonetheless present in a new or strange way. Once one sees Meno's character for what it is, the necessity in his overcoming his slavery to acquisitiveness seems obvious. But for Meno to see this in himself would require an insight not at all unlike a shift to a different medium, a shift away from his own usual strategies of self-conception.

2. and 1. What then, of the unity and nature of arete? Socrates had formulated the earlier perplexity about the unity of arete by saying that "any action done with a part of arete is arete"—and yet in a sense this seemed to be *his* aporia, something toward which he was constantly leading the discussion. To what extent does the drama he then plays out for Meno offer a way through *this* aporia?

Might the goal of Socrates' little drama with "Meno's boy" point the way here, even if it does not of itself offer a final "definition" of arete? The notion that arete is knowledge surfaces quite soon after the episode with the slave boy (87b7 ff.). Consider the *act* of "seeing himself in the slave boy," of seeing the slave boy as an image of himself, which Socrates holds out before Meno: might

this be precisely the kind of act which expresses the unity of arete? Where such self-understanding occurs, one might say, there too is human excellence—whether it be on the battlefield, in the assembly, or in philosophical conversation. And where it is not, there human excellence is not, no matter what appearances tell us. In having such self-understanding one is not courageous rather than just, temperate rather than pious: one is all of these at once. And so human excellence might indeed be “knowledge,” though at least in part a very different kind of knowledge than we might have expected.

These issues require more substantial treatment than is possible here. Instead let us turn back, briefly, to *anamnesis*. Some commentators on the *Meno* feel uncomfortable at the thought that Socrates’ conversation with the slave boy requires Meno to “see” something. Nehamas, for example, finds Bluck’s appeal to seeing “rather empty” (1985, 18), and Vlastos spent more than half of “*Anamnesis in the Meno*” arguing against an “empirical” construal of the recollection thesis (in terms of *literal* seeing), only to fall back on the visual metaphor himself, without saying much about *what it would mean* to speak of “the perception of logical relationships.” (Where he does try to make this clear, it seems to amount to “analytic a priori” knowledge: see Vlastos, 1965, 156). Given this, it might be helpful to consider whether Plato’s use of the images of enslavement and incommensurability offers us a way of understanding why the visual metaphor for recollection seems so compelling, and, if we can, to give some sense to the kind of “seeing” at stake here.

Consider first of all that the slave boy’s recognition of the diagonal as the solution to the mathematical puzzle and Meno’s recognition of himself as a slave (were he to perceive this) have something important in common: they both require what one might call “seeing through” the images put before them; they require, that is, *seeing an image as an image of something else more original*. For “Meno’s boy” to understand that the square of double size is the one built on the diagonal, he must “see through” the image Socrates draws for him in the sand, to “the diagonal itself”; for Meno to see himself as a slave he must “see through” the image Socrates draws in that very conversation, to his own slavelike character. “Seeing through” is required to understand either mathematics or drama, because in both of these arenas we are called upon to understand what is before us as something else: to “get the point” of a proof or a play, one must see through the words, diagrams, speeches, or characters to something else.⁸ Understood this way, Socrates’ “claim” would be that *all* learning is “seeing through” from image to something more original.

And yet why call such an experience *anamnesis*, “recollection”? Socrates himself calls attention to the way in which such “seeing through” requires an important shift in epistemic criteria, when he responds to Meno’s image of him as a torpedo fish: “Now if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I

cause perplexity in others" (80c6–d1). Seeing through an image, in this case the image of Socrates as a "torpedo fish," brings with it the necessity of judging the image in terms of the original: Meno's image of Socrates is a good one if the torpedo fish has other qualities Socrates has, not the other way around (as Meno may well have intended with this unflattering portrait). The measure of "seeing through" is the original, not the image.

This means that in order to "see through" an image, one must already have some understanding of *what the image is an image of*. In this sense one might well call this way of understanding "recollection": we need some "prior" understanding of the thing imaged in order to understand the image itself. The "prior understanding" here, though, is radically one's own: Socrates can "hand it over" neither to the slave boy nor to Meno.

What then is the relation between the example of mathematical instruction in the *Meno* and Socrates' "claim" that learning is recollection? I suggest that it is best understood in terms of the relation between image and original. We should not see this part of the text as "data" for Socrates' (or Plato's) "theory," unless those terms are themselves understood in terms of "seeing through." Socrates is not trying to amass many instances of learning, and then show that a probable generalization about them is that learning is recollection; nor is he offering a deductive argument to that effect. Instead he puts an image before Meno (and Plato puts one before us), an image we need to see through if we are to understand its point.

If we read the dialogues as containing "data" for "theories," rather than trying to "see through" them, we run the risk of overlooking Plato's artistry; if we read them only as artistic creations, we run the risk of missing the source of their peculiar pedagogical power. "Seeing through" allows us to do justice to the sense in which Plato's artistry and his love of mathematics come together in his dialogues. By longing to "see through" the conversations in them, the dialogues themselves become occasions for us to recollect ourselves.

NOTES

1. In this paper I use slightly amended versions of Grube's translations of Plato's *Republic* and *Meno*.

2. Something like this interpretive theory is adopted by many commentators on the *Meno*: see e.g. Irwin, 139.

3. Miller mentions here as examples of such insight "the introductions of the concepts of justice in the *Euthyphro* (11e ff.) and the intermediate in the *Symposium* (202a ff.), of the method of hypothesis in the *Phaedo* (99c ff.) and the figure of the philosopher in *Republic V*, and of the notions of communion and difference in the *Sophist* (251a ff., 257d ff.) and the paradigm and the mean in the *Statesman* (277d ff., 283b ff.);" (1986, 7).

4. For first bringing this point to my attention, as well as for reminding me not to overlook it in this paper, I thank Charles Salman. The reading of the image of enslavement in this paper is deeply indebted to a reading of the *Meno* he presented in an unpublished lecture on the dialogue in 1985.

5. Cf. Alexander Nehamas, 1975. Nehamas is right to claim that the interlocutors' definitions *do* constitute universals; but his way of putting this point obscures the equally important point that

precisely insofar as such definitions do constitute "universals," Socrates' interlocutors in the "early" dialogues all have the presumption that the path to the universal comes through stressing that they themselves have the virtue in question. It is precisely this ontological presumption (rather than simply "looking at particulars," as Nehamas' argument shows quite well) which Socrates refutes time and time again in the early dialogues.

6. It is often said that "Socratic intellectualism" leaves no room for moral choice. Might one say instead that such intellectualism is methodological, and that choice is left where it must be left, as one's own? Cf. Vlastos, 1991, 44,: "The concept of moral autonomy never surfaces in Plato's Socratic dialogues—which does not keep it from being the deepest thing in their Socrates, the strongest of his moral concerns."

7. I borrow this term from Maurice Natanson.

8. Note that what I am calling "seeing through" is not just a "feeling of inner conviction" (cf. Nehamas, 1985, 18–19), it is a cognitive act, in part—though perhaps not completely—under one's own control.

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