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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Clayton Willis Carden entitled "On Beliefs "Worth Risking" in Plato." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Philosophy.

J. Clerk Shaw, Major Professor

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On Beliefs “Worth Risking” in Plato

A Dissertation Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Clayton Willis Carden

May 2023

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I ask and answer the question “What is a belief ‘worth risking’ in Plato?” This question arises in light of some peculiar passages in the dialogues, particularly in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, in which Plato’s Socrates appears to advocate for adopting certain beliefs specifically in virtue of their goodness rather than their likelihood of being true. I claim that the reason for this is that Socrates regards the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry as being uncertain given certain challenges: namely, Meno’s paradox (which threatens the possibility of inquiry as such) and the formidable threat of hopelessness on the part of the would-be inquirer, given the difficulty of actually arriving at knowledge of how to live well—at least during this lifetime. I argue that, because Socrates regards inquiry as the first moral imperative for one who wants to live well but lacks knowledge of how to do so—i.e. knowledge of virtue—he accepts certain “grounding” beliefs that are necessary for getting such inquiry “off the ground.” These beliefs—specifically, in the *anamnesis* myth as it appears in *Meno* and in a happy afterlife for philosophers as presented in the myths of the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, are “worth risking” because of what they will *do* for believers; because they can’t be proved by logical demonstration, they must be posited as a matter of faith—because they *must* be true if we are to be unwavering in the search for the good life, and the alternative to this is intolerable for one who is committed to living well rather than badly.

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Introduction

For Socrates, inquiry is a moral imperative.¹ This proceeds from the conjunction of two factors: first, Socrates claims to be ignorant—especially of virtue. Second, Socrates believes that virtue, whatever else it may turn out to be, is a kind of knowledge. Since virtue is or requires knowledge—at the very least, knowledge of virtue—and since Socrates claims to be ignorant of it, his inquisitive “mission” is in the first place a moral event: that is, in the absence of knowing how best to live, his first priority is to investigate this question. Furthermore, one may reasonably believe that this inquiry is itself morally praiseworthy on Socrates’s part;² again, in the absence of knowing how best to live, Socrates can at least be confident that in conducting this inquiry he is satisfying a fundamental moral requirement. Additionally, the same would presumably be true for any of us for whom Socrates’s conditions obtain. My primary aim is not to make the latter case decisively, but such an implication would be of some significance beyond the narrower domain of Plato scholarship.

However, *IMP* becomes problematic for Socrates in light of certain threats to the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry. The possibility of inquiry, I claim, faces a serious challenge in the form of Meno’s Paradox. This challenge is under-appreciated in conventional and historically prevailing Plato scholarship. There is good textual evidence for the claim that

¹ Hereafter, for shorthand, this claim will (occasionally) be referred to as *IMP*.

² Here one may be put in mind of the so-called “Merton Prayer”: “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going / I do not see the road ahead of me. / I cannot know for certain where it will end. / nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. / But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.” (Merton, 1956)

Socrates finds the threat formidable, and Socrates's own reasons again plausibly apply to those of us for whom Socrates's relevant conditions obtain. It is in fact not clear whether we can identify a target when investigating what we don't know, nor is it clear how we could know if we ever came across it; hence we have good reasons to doubt our chances of successful inquiry. But *IMP* seems to require the possibility of successful inquiry,³ otherwise we appear unequipped to satisfy this first demand of morality.

Importantly, and as scholars often fail to appreciate, Socrates's "solution" to Meno's Paradox is not rationally complete: he does not demonstrate conclusively that the argument's premises are false and therefore that the possibility of successful inquiry is guaranteed. Instead, he effectively claims that we had better *believe* it is possible⁴ if we are committed to the hope of living well. In this case, that turns out to mean believing on the authority of Orphic priests and Pindar that our souls are immortal and undergo various earthly incarnations, and that therefore we have acquired knowledge of all there is prior to our current go-round. This is a strange approach⁵ for Socrates, who we so often find suspicious of religious authorities—even at the risk of his own life!—and characteristically hesitant to make claims about such things as immortality and the afterlife.

³ Or perhaps more precisely, *IMP* seems to require that we *believe* in said possibility.

⁴ Which, as I will show, includes positing that its necessary conditions obtain, despite the inherent uncertainty of this claim.

⁵ Though not as "strange" as we may be inclined to think—see for instance the use of Diotima as a religious authority in the *Symposium* (201d), as well as the myths of *Gorgias* (523a-524b), *Republic X* (614b-621d3), and the *Phaedo* (107d6-115a2). That Socrates is prepared to trust in religious authority in such instances does not undermine the clear sense at least in "early" dialogues that Socrates's default position is skeptical on such things.

This uncharacteristic reply to Meno has naturally led to various interpretations. Some try to “rescue” Socrates from his mystical leanings, while others claim that he is dogmatic here in a fashion appropriate to his time. Both of these interpretations are mistaken, and both neglect a critical element of Socrates’s thought that is not only relevant here but can be found in other key passages that are similarly misunderstood. The *anamnesis* story is not “wishful thinking” on Socrates’s part, and its significance is primarily ethical rather than epistemic. Socrates is effectively articulating necessary beliefs, or we might say “postulates,” not unlike those we find in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. The value of these beliefs does not depend on the credibility of their sources, and is not a function of their likely truth—like Kant’s postulates, they are not the kind of beliefs that admit of truth or falsity, as they do not belong properly to the realm of theoretical reason. Rather, Socrates endorses them because they *must be* endorsed in light of our prior and most basic commitment to the possibility of living well rather than badly.

Hence, Meno’s Paradox is not overcome by proof but by faith on Socrates’s part, and in this way the possibility of successful inquiry is sufficiently “grounded” (indeed, as it must be). But this is not the only threat Socrates is concerned with. The *possibility* of successful inquiry does not, after all, guarantee its *actual* success, and lingering doubts remain about the likelihood of the same. That being the case, there is a relevant danger of hopelessness in the would-be inquirer; without hope of success or confidence that the effort is worth its costs (*Meno* 86b1-c3), one may lack the requisite courage “not to faint in the search” (*Meno* 81d). It is for this reason that Socrates introduces the next set of “postulates” we have to consider: these pertain to judgment in the afterlife.

The Socrates of Plato's *Phaedo* is concerned, unsurprisingly, with death and its potential significance for a lover of wisdom (φιλόσοφος). Here, unlike in the *Meno*, Socrates bothers to give some positive arguments for the immortality of the soul. It is surely no slight against Socrates or his author that these arguments are neither decisive nor even among their most formidable; the dialogue's dramatic setting gives reason enough for regarding them as "optimistic," or as reasons for "clinging to" (66d6-67c3) hope that the soul may survive death—reasons, at least, for resisting the plausible claim of Simmias that the soul surely can do no such thing.

Additionally, shades of the *Meno* recur in the form of Socrates's *anamnesis* story, which is here maintained as the sole premise by which we may have reasonable hope of inquiring successfully. It cannot be upon this life, after all, that we may stake such hopes: the world we encounter by way of perception resists our knowing about it for reasons that were well understood in Socrates's own time. But there *is* reason to hope, as Socrates reassures his soon-to-be-mourners, that death for a philosopher is no harm. If throughout one's life she cultivates love of mind over body; if one devotes herself singularly to the risky notion that we should strive to live well despite the hardships thereby attending, the lover of wisdom may have "great hope" that her striving will be rewarded and therefore will have been worthily taken up. Here again we see shades of Kant's own "practical postulates": in this case, as above in the *Meno*, Socrates avails himself of Orphic myth to communicate his point—but his point is not about the details of his myth nor its veracity in reporting about the afterlife. Rather, his point is that the philosopher must keep faith in the worthiness of her pursuit, and if

this is not sufficiently motivating given the vicissitudes of life on earth, then she had better put her hope in whatever may follow.

For Socrates (and maybe us), inquiry is the first moral imperative—it is the first thing required of us who commit to striving to live well. But there are obstacles to inquiry, specifically, to the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry, and these may (understandably) threaten our acting according to that imperative.

The problem with existing accounts of the above challenges to inquiry and Socrates's hypothetical solutions, is that they assume too much dogma on the parts of both Socrates and Plato. The conventional view claims that Plato's Socrates is well aware that successful inquiry is possible⁶; this ignores the characteristic ignorance of Socrates, which deserves to be taken seriously. It also ignores how seriously Socrates evidently takes the paradox prompted by Meno. To put the matter starkly, Socrates would not be troubled by claims whose implications are clearly false. It may be in character for Socrates to "play" with such claims and especially the speakers espousing them, but it would not do for Socrates to reply by appealing to religious mysteries, especially in light of his own uncertainty, if their implications were simply and clearly false.

Secondly, it is sometimes thought that Plato "derives" Forms from the fact that knowledge is clearly possible. This is similarly unclear according to the Dialogues themselves, in which advocates for "Forms" virtually always express doubts; the arguments tend to be of the same structure as above (if we are to know x, we may infer its necessary conditions); again, the conventional view attributes certainty to Plato where it is not at all

⁶ See for instance Fine (68).

warranted—Socrates is asking what we have to accept (*ἀποδέχομαι*) if we're going to inquire as though this is a worthwhile endeavor. This is not at all the same as deducing what must be the case given what we already know (that knowledge is possible; i.e. not only that (a) proper objects of knowledge exist, and that (b) we may come to know by inquiry; but also that (c) it will have been worth the struggle to try and do so, despite clear evidence suggesting otherwise).

To put it still another way, the essential question is this: what must I believe in the interest of satisfying my ethical commitments? Or perhaps, what beliefs are implicit in my pursuit? And how, if at all, might these beliefs be grounded?

Plato's Socrates is by no means certain that the postulates in question may be held in such a way as to be answerable to theoretical reason; but he is nonetheless certain that they *must be held*. This (perhaps surprising) feature of Plato's dialogues is under appreciated and widely misinterpreted, missing strands of thought that are not only essential to a coherent reading of the dialogues but also present in various "canonical" works throughout the history of Western thought.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation aims at correcting conventional literature on the subject, while defending the value of the line of thought in question independently of interpreting Plato. In the first chapter I explain why, as it seems to me might plausibly be the case for would-be inquirers in general, in the absence of their already knowing how to live well, inquiry is one's first moral imperative; in the second chapter I argue, by way of commentary on Plato's

Euthyphro, *Apology*, and *Crito*, that inquiry is evidently the first moral imperative for Plato's Socrates.

Chapter Three deals with the first of two threats to the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry: namely, that of Meno's Paradox. Here I argue that Socrates's answer to this threat in the form of the *anamnesis* story is the first of two "practical postulates" put forth by Plato, both of which are put forth as uncertain but nonetheless as "beliefs worth risking," specifically in light of *IMP*.

Chapter Four deals with the second of these threats—this being the reasonable doubt that our inquiry may be worthwhile, even if we are satisfied that it may reasonably be believed to be possible. Here I outline the second "practical postulate" put forth by Plato's Socrates in the afterlife myths of the *Gorgias* and *Phaedo* in order to address this threat, whereby we are called to trust that such a pursuit will not have been in vain, despite not-unintelligible reasons for "faltering in the search."

On Method and Translations

In what follows, I proceed largely by way of "running commentary" on a number of Plato's dialogues, including his so-called "early" dialogues—here, the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito*—as well as some of what are referred to as Plato's "middle" dialogues—specifically, the *Meno*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Phaedo*, with brief references to other passages in Plato's dialogues as they recommend themselves. My aim in doing so is first, and most importantly, to address said passages in their specific contexts, as Plato presents them; and

secondly, to offer by way of illustration evidence that some of the relevant themes recur throughout Plato's corpus, and are not exclusive to one dialogue or another.

I should also note here at the beginning of this project that I intentionally take up neither the "Socratic problem" nor any version of a "developmental thesis" of Plato's thought or authorship; with respect to both controversies, I am agnostic in the present work. Though such questions are clearly interesting and, if soluble, promise great interpretive value, I believe the theses with which this dissertation is concerned are viable and—I hope—interesting, independently of whatever stances one may take with regard to those issues.

In what follows, my references to English translations of Plato come almost exclusively from the volume of Plato's *Collected Dialogues* that is edited by Cooper; parenthetical exegeses or translational preferences of my own, as well as occasional italics for emphasis, are noted accordingly throughout.

Chapter One: Inquiry as a Moral Imperative

In the chapter that follows, I explain and defend the claim that living well depends first on inquiry into the question “how should I live?”, and that this inquiry is therefore our first moral imperative; that is, that my characteristic activity as a moral being, whatever else it may involve, must begin with inquiry into the question of what it is I ought to do in the interest of living well. I suspect that this claim, if true, has serious implications for how we should think about the conditions for the possibility of inquiry, especially for *fruitful* inquiry; but first it will be necessary to consider what this claim means and whether it is true. I will begin by clarifying what I mean by “inquiry” here.

By “inquiry” I mean, in the first and most basic sense, looking into something with the aim of better understanding it. I leave methodological principles governing better and worse inquiry to the side for now, as well as various conceptions of “inquiry” that are theory-laden, in the interest of discussing the concept as we use it in ordinary thought and language. The relevant conception of inquiry, then, should be understood as relatively “thin”: for our purposes, inquiry simply the process by which we try to find something out.

Suppose, for instance, that I would like to know what time my spouse and I are expected for dinner with her parents. My subsequent inquiry could take several forms: I could ask my partner if she knows what time we’re expected; I could consult past text messages to see whether the agreed upon time appears in them; I could call my mother-in-law and ask her directly; or I could sit and try to remember—that is, I could sit and *think* (my soul could have

discourse with itself, as Socrates sometimes describes it⁷). I could inquire into my own recollection of past events, asking myself and attempting to answer questions about where I was when we made the date for this dinner. Successful inquiry, regardless of which of the avenues I opt for, will result in me knowing—or to use language that is perhaps less technically loaded, since this conception of inquiry is meant to be commonsensical and familiar—having something which before I was missing and the lack of which prompted me to begin asking questions.

Because I had a practical interest in knowing when I was expected for dinner—practical, because I needed to decide what I would need to *do*, and because I needed certain information before I could prudently choose my doings, inquiry was clearly my first priority. In the absence of having a (true) belief about when I will need to leave the house, I am unable to judge whether it would be best to go ahead and shower now or whether I in fact have plenty of time to get ready before we leave and so would be wise to spend some time preparing tomorrow's lecture. In the absence of knowing what time I should be ready, I am not equipped to budget my time properly and therefore to act as I deem best. Indeed, it may be that in such a moment the only “right thing” for me to do, the only thing I can be confident would be acting well, is to inquire.

My point with this relatively commonplace example is to illustrate both that: (a) “inquiry” in the sense I’m using it need not (yet, at least) involve much in the way of technique or precision, nor need it imply a rigorously academic undertaking; and that (b) deciding how to act routinely involves some amount of investigation. I take it for granted that

⁷See for instance *Theaetetus* (189e-190a) and *Sophist* (263e-264b).

this is a common process and that is not the sole purview of the philosopher or the rhetorician, the scholar or the scientist. This is a fundamental process that appears to begin early in most of our lives, as we inevitably begin to notice that we often need more information than we currently have in order to decide how to act (i.e. what to do). Indeed, in the absence of true beliefs about the world, it is difficult to understand how one could choose an action that could plausibly be regarded as freely chosen (and therefore an action for which one could plausibly be held morally responsible). The relation between knowledge and the possibility of free choice (and therefore of moral responsibility) is much discussed in literature on the wrongness of lying; Kant, for instance, famously goes so far as to claim that one cannot act in a morally relevant way *at all* when their beliefs have been manipulated. For our purposes, we need not go so far as Kant on this point—it is enough to establish that it is difficult to decide how to act in the absence of relevant information, and that this effectively makes inquiry the necessary and appropriate next step for someone who is deciding how to act.

When I say that one's next step is necessary and appropriate given that agent's aim of deciding how to act, I am effectively saying that inquiry is for that person an *imperative*, at least hypothetically so. Because this involves deciding how to act, one may already be inclined to regard this as always being specifically *moral* imperative. But this assumes too much. It may not be, for instance, that all action is morally relevant: I may be trying to decide what shirt I should put on, because I'd like to be as comfortable as possible at the picnic to which I'm about to be headed. If I don't know the temperature outside, I will need to inquire into that before I am able to select an appropriate shirt; but it is not clear that this is a morally relevant decision, and so it is not clear that this inquiry is a specifically *moral* imperative.

I say that inquiry into living well is the first *moral* imperative for the following reasons: first, because I take it that trying to live well is an essentially moral undertaking. Next, I take it that we are not born knowing what it is to live well and hence we probably aren't born knowing how to do it. I take it as evidence for this claim that when we reflect on good people we have known, we don't typically imagine they were born this way; more plausibly, people we take to be models of good living have probably worked at it—indeed, their (often difficult and unpleasant) work toward that goal may be part of what we admire about them. So if by (1) I want to live well, but if by (2) I don't know how to do that, then it is clear that my first task is must be to inquire into it. That is, the first thing I am called to do in the interest of living well is to try and find out how to do that, and that seems to make my inquiry a specifically *moral* imperative.

Now it may turn out that I cannot by inquiring learn how to live well—it may even turn out that for that reason it is not possible for me to do so—but even this claim would have to be arrived at by first inquiring. Or it may be that it is possible to live well without knowing how to do so—but surely this too must come to be understood as a result of inquiry. Again, by 'inquiry' I don't mean a specific process governed by specific rules and guiding principles as we find, for instance, in the so-called Socratic dialogues; I mean simply the process by which one seeks to find something out. In the sense I'm using the term, it would have been *inquiry* for Socrates simply to turn to Crito and say, "Crito, what should I do?" If Crito then goes on to say "There is no real answer to that question, because 'should' here raises metaphysical questions that are beyond our ability to answer," and Socrates (implausibly and

catastrophically) agrees, it would still be true that he began, *first*, by inquiring; indeed, that in the absence of relevant information he *had* to begin by doing so.

Hence, I claim that inquiry is the *first* moral imperative—not just for Socrates, but plausibly for anyone who both (a) wants to live well—i.e., to *do* well; to be good/happy—and also (b) doesn't innately know how to do so (that is to say, I suspect, *everyone*). And when we do not know what we should do, it seems that our necessary first step is to begin trying to find out what we should do (that is, to inquire).

So inquiry is not only an imperative arising as a result of ignorance or uncertainty for anyone who aims to act according to her beliefs; and it is not only a *moral* imperative in virtue of our needing to understand living well in order to do so; it is the *first moral imperative* because until we have settled the question of what we should do if we are going to live well we are not likely to do so. If I aim to be a good carpenter, I must first find out how to do carpentry; if I aim to be a good general, I must first understand what generals do—similarly, if I aim to be a good person (whether this turns out to mean “happy” or “dutiful,” or “thoroughly pleased,” is not important at this level of analysis), I must start by undertaking to discover how I might do that.

Here is the argument as I have tried to articulated it:

- (1) I want to live well
- (2) I do not know how to live well; but
- (3) In order to live well I must first know *how* to live well
- (4) If there is something I must know and I don't currently know it, then I must inquire into it.

Therefore:

(5) I must inquire into living well.

I take (1) for granted; indeed, I suspect it is a necessary (even if implicit) premise for anyone who thinks about how they should live or what they should do (which is to say again, I claim, *everyone*). Importantly, we should not mistake the philosophic-theoretical richness of the terms “want,” and “live” and “well” (even “I”) as reason for thinking the claim is in fact obscure or doubtful. It is true that all of these concepts can and have been theorized and disagreed about at length, and this kind of treatment certainly has its place; here, though, my aim is to make explicit an argument based on premises that I suspect most of us would accept with relatively little hesitation—provided, of course, that we understand the relevant terms in a sufficiently non-technical way consonant with our usage in ordinary speech. So I will assume for the sake of what follows that we in fact understand these terms in our ordinary thought and speech and hence that their meanings don’t call for further clarification for our purposes here.

It may be worth acknowledging that my phrasing and construal of the above may already imply a theoretically laden, virtue-based conception of morality; this is perhaps not surprising as I draw largely from Plato, whose Socrates routinely helps himself to versions of the claim that, more than anything, people want to be happy. In fact, Socrates *and* his interlocutors treat this as so obviously true that it needs no argument. Of course, readers of the dialogues know that the relevant (eudaemonistic) conception of happiness often turns out to be less commonsensical than the relevant interlocutors suspect when they agree to this claim, but that need not concern us here. For our purposes, “I want to live well” may mean “I want to do what is right”; or “I have an interest in advancing my own good”; or “I desire experiences

that are pleasant rather than painful”—I’m assuming that any of these interpretations amount to the same thing on this “thin” conception of living well, and hence that virtually everyone accepts (1) at least implicitly.

Premise (2), however, may seem less plausible *prima facie*. If I am right that the relevant sense of “living well” is thin enough that it is or should be acceptable to virtually everyone who conceives it, then it seems unlikely that “I do not know how to live well” would be true very often, or at least that most people would say it were true of themselves. But bracketing self-deception about how much one actually knows, it is enough to note that this at least *has* been true of everyone at some point (with apologies to Plato, I’m denying his occasional suggestion⁸ that moral goodness (virtue) is a gift from the gods that one simply is born with or not). I suspect that when we reflect on the lives and practices of people we regard as living well, most of us do not come away jealous that we were not also both with this ability; rather, we regard it as something that we, too, may become able to do at some point, whether through education, practice, training, obedience, or some other process. The point is that we either do not currently have this knowledge or at least have lacked it somewhere along the way, in which case premise (2) either is or has been true for virtually everyone, so is worth taking seriously.

One may be tempted to doubt premise (3) for a number of reasons, perhaps beginning with the suggestion that it’s not *in general* true that one must know how to do something before one can begin doing it. Some counterexamples immediately recommend themselves: though I don’t yet know how to play the violin, for instance, I may still in some sense be said

⁸ See for instance *Meno* 99e.

to do so just by dragging an un-rosined bow across the open strings of a fiddle someone left unattended at a party. If this is right, then perhaps I can also successfully live well without knowing how to do that, in which case it's not clear that inquiry into virtue is a moral imperative at all. There are at least two important considerations that speak against this objection.

First, one may doubt that the would-be violinist above actually "plays the violin" in a meaningful sense, just as one would presumably doubt that a babbling infant successfully speaks Attic Greek when uttering a syllable that happens to be a Greek preposition. Intuitively, it seems a stretch to describe either the "violinist" or the infant as engaging in the same activity as the concertmaster or the Attic Greek speaker; both cases seem to involve a difference in *kind* rather than degree. But it would take us too far afield to develop this argument here, especially given the exceedingly plausible claim that one can at least sometimes learn by doing. I leave this to the side for now.

A better reply to the above objection would point out that moral agents, when they act, need to do so *knowingly*: we speak of someone "knowing what they are doing," for instance, not only to praise someone's skill ("That concert violinist really knows what she's doing!") but also with respect to moral evaluation ("Did you *know* what you were doing?"), and the latter case especially illustrates a dependency relation in ordinary thought between knowledge and morally relevant action: often, apparent wrongs done in ignorance are forgiven because we typically think one needs to act "knowingly" in order for their action to be morally evaluable. If I tell you something that I believe to be true, for instance, then I am not *lying* to you

(whatever else I may be doing) even if that statement turns out to be false⁹; but if I were to make that same utterance while in full view of the facts—i.e. to *knowingly* mislead you—my action would have a moral valence that my “innocent” misstatement plausibly does not.

At this point one may reasonably contend that it is a mistake to treat our ordinary usage of “knowingly” in the above as a reason for thinking that premise (3) is true—by “acted knowingly,” one might think, we simply mean that one acted “deliberately,” i.e. “on purpose,” which one can surely do even in the absence of relevant knowledge. Indeed, depending on the relative demandingness of one’s view of knowledge, it may be that many of us do not really “know” very much at all, certainly about how one ought to live, yet we clearly are and ought to be held morally responsible for what we do. To this I reply:

Remember that I mean the terms in the argument above as we typically mean them in ordinary thought and usage. We routinely speak of “knowing” and “acting knowingly” as though these are neither obscure nor hard to come by. No doubt we could be mistaken about this—in fact I suspect we often are—but concerns about what “counts” as knowing, or how precisely knowledge relates to action or is required for moral responsibility, all come downstream of what I take to be the initial position of a being who wants to live well. In the first place, I claim, we wonder how we ought to live. It is uncertainty that prompts us to investigate this question—that is, to inquire—and presumably we are uncertain about how we ought to live because we don’t know. If this is right, then it seems that our first order of

⁹ For the sake of simplicity, let’s assume that I am not “culpably” ignorant here—imagine that I am telling you something that I believe with good reason to be true, and that another well-meaning person could easily had the same mistaken belief in my situation.

business is to investigate what it is we ought to do; that is, inquiry is our first moral imperative.

Chapter Two: Socrates's Mission

On Plato's *Euthyphro*

In the *Euthyphro*, we are presented with a lively picture of Socrates in action, i.e., up to his usual work, according to the mission with which he regards himself as being tasked. I will proceed with commentary on some key passages that give us specifics about this mission, including what Socrates takes to be the most important concern for himself and others—namely, that one should take care always to try and be as good as possible. We will see that, for Socrates, acting rightly (living well, being good) depends on possessing some virtue, which in turn depends on some kind of knowledge; here, as so often in the Socratic dialogues, Socrates looks for evidence of such knowledge in the form of one's being able to give a satisfying definition of the virtue in question, in this case *piety*. Denying that he knows piety himself, Socrates is eager to learn from Euthyphro, whose actions are taken to speak for such knowledge. In this way, Socrates acts out his commitment to *IMP* and his implicit acceptance of the argument I outlined for it in the previous chapter.

Euthyphro 2-3e: Meletus's charge against Socrates

SOCRATES: What charge? A not ignoble one I think, for it is no small thing for a young man to have knowledge of such an important subject [τοσοῦτον πρᾶγμα]. He says he knows how our young men are corrupted [διαφθείρονται¹⁰] and who corrupts them. He is likely to be wise, and when he sees my ignorance corrupting his contemporaries, he proceeds to accuse me to the city as to their mother. I think he is the only one of our public men to start out the right way, for it is right to care first that

¹⁰ From διαφθείρω, “to destroy utterly”. Though commonly used, as here, to indicate *moral* corruption, the same term will be appear in this chapter's discussion of *Crito* and the later discussion of *Parmenides*, where its force as “to destroy” will be especially relevant.

the young should be as good as possible, just as a good farmer is likely to take care of the young plants first, and of the others later. (2c-3a1)

Here, Socrates begins to outline his understanding of what he takes to be most important: as always, for Socrates, this pertains to the ethical.¹¹ Socrates does not deny that concern for the souls of the youth in one's city is appropriate; far from it. Socrates implies that Meletus *would* be right to have concern for the souls of the youth and for their risk of being corrupted, as it is right to take care that the young be “as good as possible” [ἔσσονται ὅτι ἄριστοι], and in line with this worry, that Meletus at least appears to have his priorities straight. In the present chapter's discussion of the *Apology*, however, we will learn that Socrates finds this appearance misleading: the actions of Meletus, in bringing an innocent man to court, will turn out to speak against Meletus's actual priorities.

Euthyphro 3e7-4e3: Euthyphro's case against his father

In this part of the dialogue, Euthyphro explains to Socrates why it is not only morally permissible but necessary that Euthyphro should prosecute even his own father: because, on Euthyphro's analysis, his father has acted wrongly by effectively killing a slave whom Euthyphro's father thought to have done wrong—namely by killing a slave—justice demands that Euthyphro's father be “cleansed” (ἀπόσιος) and thereby Euthyphro's house also, because with regard to questions of justice, says Euthyphro, one's relationship to a guilty party, familial or otherwise, is irrelevant:

¹¹ I follow Baima (25) in thinking that, despite variations in his terminology (here, τοσοῦτον πρᾶγμα, “so large a thing,” variations to be noted as they arise) Socrates consistently uses “the most important things” to refer to ethical matters.

EUTHYPHRO: It is ridiculous, Socrates, for you to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative. One should only watch whether the killer acted justly or not; if he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, if, that is to say, the killer shares your hearth and table. (4b7-c2)

We should notice that Plato here puts into the mouth of Euthyphro a plausible view of justice—it is not hard to imagine Socrates arguing along the same lines—despite Socrates’s apparent skepticism that Euthyphro’s acting on that view is righteous.¹² It will not be until the *Crito* that we see Socrates’s reverence for (credible) authorities—fathers, for example—on full display, but Socrates is clear enough here that one should at least be *reluctant* to prosecute his father unless they are quite convinced it is right to do so.

It is in light of Euthyphro’s demonstrated (and in words, avowed) confidence that Socrates sees fit to “test” Euthyphro’s claim to knowledge of piety and impiety—Euthyphro *must* be confident, after all, in his knowledge of the divine, to risk going so badly wrong by prosecuting his own father:

SOCRATES: Whereas, by Zeus, Euthyphro, you think that your knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that, when those things happened as you say, you have no fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial? (4e4-7)

Socrates takes for granted that Euthyphro’s action in taking his own father to court for murder must be testament to Euthyphro’s knowledge of piety and impiety. Evidently the default position would so surely speak against one’s prosecuting his own father that to do so

¹² Indeed, it is a mark of the author’s genius and one reason why there are so few good philosophical dialogues outside of Plato’s that he can write such subtle characters even while showing them to be ridiculous.

would surely proceed from exceptional knowledge of piety and impiety. In response, Socrates affirms this inference while referencing his own case by analogy:

SOCRATES: It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil, and as regards this indictment, challenge Meletus about these very things and say to him: that in the past too I considered knowledge about the divine [τὰ θεῖα] to be most important, and that now that he says that I am guilty of improvising and innovating about the gods I have become your pupil. (5a3-b2)

Socrates, in my view, is too often understood as being ironical here; I don't see any conclusive evidence that his claim above is insincere. Socrates claims that he has thought for a long time that knowledge about the divine is “most important” (περὶ πολλοῦ), so his interest in Euthyphro's esoteric knowledge is not obviously insincere or farcical. Again, Socrates's interest in the “most important things” (the ethical) will be relatively stable as the “Socratic” dialogues proceed, and I see no reason here to think that Socrates doesn't mean exactly what he says.

Euthyphro 6a6-c8: Socrates against conventional religion

In search of a working definition of piety and impiety, Socrates asks Euthyphro for the “one form or appearance” that would make it possible to distinguish the pious from the impious, and Euthyphro famously responds with an example rather than a definition. More important, perhaps, than the formal lesson implicit in this exchange—that one example is not a definition—is Euthyphro's appeal to conventional beliefs about the gods:

These people themselves believe that Zeus is the best and most just of the gods, yet they agree that he bound his father because he unjustly swallowed his sons, and that he in turn castrated his father for similar reasons. But they are angry with me because I am prosecuting my father for his wrongdoing. They contradict themselves in what they say about the gods and about me. (5e4-6a5)

Euthyphro's appeal here is not obviously wrong or inappropriate—he claims confidently that the very Athenians he risks scandalizing by prosecuting his father claim to believe that Zeus—the most just of the gods—bound and castrated his own father for bad behavior. But Socrates does not take up this piece of evidence as though it were evidence; quite the contrary:

SOCRATES: Indeed, Euthyphro, this is the reason why I am a defendant in the case, because I find it hard to accept things like that being said about the gods, and it is likely to be the reason why I shall be told I do wrong. (6a6-8)

We should pause to note that Socrates evidently thinks *this* is what best explains his being brought to court: Socrates finds it hard to accept (ἀποδέχομαι) this claim about the gods: that they would do such things as were conventionally understood; in this case, that a god would bind and castrate his own father for bad behavior. Modern readers surely wish for elaboration on this point, and rightly so—the Socrates of the early dialogues is perhaps too quiet on this point for our satisfaction, especially as he hints of a more coherent view of the gods than he acknowledges in response to the accusation of atheism—but for now we must leave this aside.

Socrates is interested, for now, in better understanding what are “piety” and “impiety,” asking again for a single account that would enable him to distinguish actions of the former kind from actions of the latter.

Euthyphro 7-11b5: The pious is what is dear to the gods

This section of the *Euthyphro* deals with Euthyphro's second stab at answering Socrates's question: what is dear to the gods, says Euthyphro, is pious; what is not is impious. Socrates likes the form of this answer, if not its content: "You have now answered in the way I wanted. Whether your answer is true I do not know yet, but you will obviously show me that what you say is true." (7a3-5)

The logic puzzle that follows this answer of Euthyphro's has garnered most of the attention that has been paid to this passage; but this neglects an interesting and important claim by Socrates that is made along the way: when interlocutors find themselves at odds—in the grips of hatred and anger—says Socrates, this tends to be when they are disagreeing about the just, the beautiful, and the good (i.e. the most important things). It is disagreement about these subjects, and these alone, says Socrates, that puts men at odds with one another. Were we to disagree about some measurement or other, or about the weight of this object as opposed to that, we would surely turn to observation and cease to differ. But when we disagree about the most important things—the just, the beautiful, the good—we become hostile to each other. Even though Socrates, as we have seen and as is widely understood, makes no confident claims to knowledge, he is quite convinced that what is most important is (or should be) self-evident.

Though the *Euthyphro* will go on to end, as is characteristic of the so-called "Socratic" dialogues, in *aporia*, we nonetheless come away with some valuable insight into Socrates's perhaps unconventional religious beliefs, as well as his own understanding of just what he's up to when engaging in conversations of this kind.

On the *Apology* of Socrates

Here I attempt to outline an argument somewhat indirectly, by attending closely to several passages in Plato's *Apology*. Most of the passages considered include Socrates's own account of his philosophical mission, of its origins and justification, and implicit support of my claim that, for Socrates, inquiry is a moral imperative. As I have suggested, we should note that his reasons are presumably as compelling for any of us who may identify with his own condition: that is, of wanting to be as good as possible while not knowing how this is to be done. My primary aim, for the purpose of this dissertation, is to justify the former claim, but suggestions in support of the latter may be useful for continued investigation on the subject.

Apology 17-18: Socrates's Preliminary Remarks

At the very outset of his defense, Socrates mentions two key terms that will be relevant in subsequent chapters of this dissertation:

From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust [πιστεύω] in the justice of what I say, and let none of you expect anything else. It would not be fitting [πρέπω] at my age, as it might be for a young man, to toy with words when I appear before you. (17c)

As will be seen, the crucial passage at *Phaedo* 114d includes both *πιστεύω* (faith, trust) and *πρέπω* (to be clearly seen, fitting) in a similar construction, but there in reference to faith

in an immortality myth despite its not being “fitting” to assert such a story’s details confidently.

One is inclined to ask: whence the “trust” on Socrates’s part? What does this mean for the rest of his speech? If Socrates means that he will speak *truly*, faith seems unnecessary. In the text’s immediate context, Socrates seems to be “priming” his jury for what is to come—he has not prepared an “embroidered, stylized” speech for his defense, but will instead express himself in the “first words that come to mind.” Presumably he “trusts,” then, that his speech will serve its purpose (for better or worse!) despite his ostensibly cavalier approach. We are asked, along with Socrates’s judges, to attend only to whether Socrates’s words are *just* and not to his “manner of speech” (18a3).

The notion of “fittingness” is quietly relevant here as well: it would not be *fitting* for Socrates, at his age (of 70), to “toy with words” [πλάττοντι λόγους, i.e. to “fabricate” or “speak from invention” (rather than truth)], as in the manner of a child (μειράκιον). This notion, that one should do what is “fitting” (in light of who and what one is), in addition to being perhaps a barely-veiled slight toward Socrates’s accusers, looms largely throughout the dialogues and especially in the key passages on “risky belief” in *Meno* and *Phaedo*.¹³ Socrates will say there that it would not be fitting for someone to insist on the truth of his stories; note that this is far more subtle than a mere expression of doubt—there is an important element of believing appropriately. I pursue this theme later.

There have been many who have accused me to you for many years now, and none of their accusations are true. These I fear much more than I fear Anytus and his friends, though they too are formidable. These earlier ones, however, are more so, gentle-men;

¹³ See also justice in *Republic* as “doing one’s own work”

they got hold of most of you from childhood, persuaded you and accused me quite falsely, saying that there is a man called Socrates, a wise man, a student of all things in the sky and below the earth, who makes the worse argument the stronger. Those who spread that rumor, gentlemen, are my dangerous accusers, for their hearers believe that those who study these things do not even believe in the gods. Moreover, these accusers are numerous, and have been at it a long time; also, they spoke to you at an age when you would most readily believe them [μάλιστα ἐπιστεύσατε], some of you being children and adolescents, and they won their case by default, as there was no defense. (18b-c8)

It is worth noting that Socrates finds something more fearful [δεινός] about his “earlier” accusers than those who are currently accusing him *in court* and calling for his execution. As will become clear, of course, Socrates does not in fact *fear* death, and so he is not concerned with his current accusers (especially given that a worse cannot harm a better man, as will become clear). But why does Socrates find his “earlier” accusers “much more” fearful? If he does not fear death, nor harm by someone who is wicked, whence his fear of any accusations however recent or long ago?

Part of the answer comes from Socrates himself, though I submit that his answer is incomplete as stated. Socrates’s earlier accusers, as he tells us twice in the above passage, got hold of his current judges when they were children—when they would “most readily believe” the accusations in question. Now this is surely relevant for the outcome of Socrates’s case as a matter of epistemic psychology: one is especially vulnerable to believing too easily what one hears from youth, especially if one hears it constantly. But this doesn’t explain why Socrates “fears” the older accusations’ “stickiness”—remember that he does not fear death nor harm by someone worse, so why should he fear these things with regard to his case and its outcome?

It doesn't seem sufficient to say simply that Socrates "fears" losing his trial in the sense that, presumably, one wants to defend himself successfully if he in fact is innocent, and so "fears" losing just as much as anyone in a competition of any kind. Here I point to Socrates's concern for the goodness of his fellow citizenry, especially as it pertains to what they are led to believe—to "trust," in fact [πιστεύω]—and in particular to what they are trusting as children.

19-24: Socrates vs "Earlier Accusers"

Let us then take up the case from its beginning. What is the accusation from which arose the slander in which Meletus trusted when he wrote out the charge against me?" (19a9-b1)

Here, "trusted" is again *πιστεύω*.

Yet I think it a fine thing to be able to teach people as Gorgias of Leontini does, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis. (19e-e2)

What does Socrates really think of the sophists? This is never quite clear. He can be understood as sincere insofar as "to be able to teach" would be a fine thing—if it could be done—but we have formidable reasons for doubting whether teaching (of the relevant kind) is possible.

I then tried to show [the politician] that he thought himself wise, but that he was not. As a result he came to dislike me, and so did many of the bystanders. So I withdrew and thought to myself: "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile [καλὸν κάγαθόν], but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know." (21c8-d8)

Though “worthwhile” is a fair translation, readers of Plato may balk at the absence of “fine” [*kalon*] and “good” [*agathon*]. In one way, this only gestures toward a more difficult question—i.e. with respect to Socratic “ignorance”, but it is worth noting that Socrates does not here deny knowing *anything at all*; rather, he denies knowing about, perhaps among other things, the just and the good. This subtle point has the advantage of explaining how Socrates can be said, and why he so often claims, to “know” something or other. This also helps explain why Socrates notes even in the *Apology* that there are “knowers” around—craftsmen especially meet this mark, independently of what we may accept about Socrates’s own background and whether his father was, indeed, a maker of statues.

To put things simply, one may worry not only from having heard of Socrates that he knows *nothing*, but also perhaps from claims that Plato puts in the mouth of Socrates that sound like credible claims to knowledge, that knowledge as Plato(’s Socrates) understands it is probably impossible—at least in this life—and so it is strange not only that Socrates sometimes helps himself to the claim that he knows nothing at all, and at other times to the claim that, at least with respect to virtue, no one else does either. The important distinction in this short passage is between “human knowledge” and knowledge that is/that is of the fine and good. It may be that there is something to human knowledge after all—Socrates’s point here is that, by *comparison*, the knowledge of what is most important almost certainly eludes us.

In what follows, Socrates speaks with similar confidence of the “more” and “less knowledgable”. This gives interpreters a reason to resist claims¹⁴ that, for Plato, knowledge is an all-or-nothing concept. That is, one either knows completely—meaning, *everything*

¹⁴ As we find, for instance, in Fine.

completely—or else one does not “at all” know. Here it sounds as though Socrates thinks one can be said to “know” by greater and lesser degrees. This surely accords with common sense on the subject, and speaks against interpretations that would attribute to Plato’s Socrates an idiosyncratic (at best) sense of what it means to know something; here, Socrates claims that craftsmen really do know something; their mistake is in taking their relatively specialized knowledge as reason for thinking they are also wise with respect to the “most important things.”

In light of Socrates’s (failed) encounters with politicians, poets, and craftsmen, he tells his judges that he figured he would be better off acknowledging his own ignorance (presumably, again, with respect to the *most important things*); so perhaps Socrates *was* the wisest of men, insofar as he did not claim (expert) knowledge of what is most important.

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, b Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless.” (23b)

It is worth noting how different is this claim from the one we are all-too-easily inclined to relate to undergraduate students when teaching Plato’s “early” dialogues: Socrates does not in fact claim to know nothing of anything at all; rather, he denies knowledge of what is most important.

24bff: Socrates vs later accusers i.e. Meletus and Anytus

He says that I am guilty of corrupting the young, but I say that Meletus is guilty of dealing frivolously with serious matters, of irresponsibly bringing people into court, and of professing to be seriously concerned with things about none of which he has

ever cared, and I shall try to prove that this is so. Come here and tell me, Meletus. Surely you consider it of the greatest importance that our young men be as good as possible?—

Indeed I do. (24c-d2)

This short statement from Socrates is rich with significance for the overall task of the current chapter: Socrates here, perhaps uncharacteristically, makes a definite claim against his accuser Meletus: Meletus is himself guilty of at least three wrongs, two of which are deeply related and get right to the bottom of Socrates’s own “mission” in Athens. Meletus is accused of dealing *frivolously* with *serious matters* (all while claiming to be seriously concerned with such things but clearly having no real concern for them). Separate but related questions arise here: first, what is (supposed to be) wrong with this accusation? Independently of whether Socrates is right about this accusation, we may wonder what is worrisome about it.

At one level of analysis, it seems relevant for Socrates’s rhetorical purpose that the original accusation against *him* effectively amounts to “dealing frivolously with serious things,” where “serious things,” as he and his interlocutor agree, means that the young men of Athens be as *good as possible*. It is from this agreement that Socrates is able to show that Meletus must be either confused or disingenuous in his indictment: no one, it turns out, would deliberately (ἐκῶν) corrupt the character of those around him, required as he is to continue living in community with them—and therefore, so it is said, to risk [κινδυνεύω] being harmed by them. So if Socrates has indeed corrupted anyone, this must have been involuntary [ἀέκων],¹⁵ but, as Socrates asserts, the court does not prosecute involuntary wrongs.

¹⁵ I follow Grube’s rendering of ἐκῶν as “deliberate”, but I find “unwillingly” for ἀέκων unsatisfying as its opposite (partly as it may inadvertently smuggle in a conception of “will” that is overly loaded for Plato’s Greek term; hence my preference, “involuntary.”

That Meletus has not considered this before Socrates's questioning appears to confirm Socrates's third accusation against him: Meletus has claimed to be seriously concerned with the character of the youth of Athens, but if this is his real concern, he should have privately corrected Socrates's obviously *involuntary* error.

In addition to the rhetorical force of Socrates turning the table on Meletus in this way—of his showing not only that Socrates wouldn't corrupt intentionally, but also that Meletus himself is the one being careless with important things—Socrates gives us more insight into what he has in mind by the “most important things”. The “most important thing” in the given scene is evidently that the young men of Athens be as good as possible. However, the wrongness of “dealing frivolously” with such things is not yet clear: beyond the specific worry of having to live among people of vicious character and therefore to risk being harmed by them—as we later hear, not something that can happen to someone who is better(!)—is there a specific wrongness to dealing frivolously with what is important? I submit that finding this wrong is not difficult to understand despite our distance historically from the action of this dialogue, though it takes reading the text carefully to draw out the significance of such a wrong.

Having apparently made the case persuasively that Socrates either: does *not* corrupt the youth, or if so; does not do so *willingly*, Socrates turns now to the alleged vehicle of said corruption. This may seem unnecessary but, as Socrates reminds us, there is longstanding gossip that he must contend with; false beliefs about Socrates instilled early and often, such that these are to be feared than the later accusations (see above) of Meletus and Anytus (gossip, as Socrates notes more than once throughout the dialogues, has been known to take

down many a good man). It is also worth noting that, as has been argued persuasively by a number of Plato scholars, that there was in Athens at the time a moratorium on prosecuting political opponents; and Socrates was widely understood to have been guilty of bad political associations.

Here, Socrates addresses the accusation of religious innovation. He does so first by showing that Meletus contradicts himself even in his own formulation of the indictment: Socrates is accused of being an atheist, and of corrupting the youth by teaching atheism. This is a strange tack, as the indictment itself alleges no such thing! As Socrates reports it, the indictment says that Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods *of the state* (in whom the city believes, but rather in other, new spiritual things. The significance of “new spiritual things” is quickly made clear in Socrates’s clever argument that he cannot be an atheist if he indeed teaches about “spiritual things” new or old: one presumably couldn’t speak on such a subject without believing in spirits, and spirits are surely gods (or children of gods). But let us focus for a moment on the significance of “of the state”.

Strictly speaking, the sworn affidavit¹⁶ does not accuse Socrates of atheism; but rather of being out of step with the religious customs of the polis. It is unfortunate but unavoidable that Greek does not always translate neatly into English, and here Plato’s text introduces an important ambiguity with respect to the alleged offense of Socrates. To be sure, νομίζω often means something like “believe/accept”; however, the word carries with it a relevant sense of “custom”—i.e., “nomos”, suggesting that the *kind* of believing in question is not a matter of epistemic norms but of customary, common practice. This will be especially important when

¹⁶ as per Guthrie

in subsequent chapters we look at the contrasting language related to belief/faith in relevant passages of “later” dialogues, etc. I set this aside for now except to flag its later significance, where it will matter that for Socrates there is (potentially) a difference between customary religious practice and religiosity as a matter of (epistemic) judgment/description.

Note also that Socrates has earlier linked (18c) the rumors of his “earlier accusations” to the specific accusation of religious impropriety: those who *hear* that one is a student of “all things in the sky and below the earth”—plausibly, a student of natural philosophy—*believe that such students do not even believe in the gods*. Socrates does not admit to doing natural philosophy, but he is aware that this belief is out there—indeed, he tells us in other dialogues that he was at one time taken with the teachings of Anaximander, and he certainly knows the work of Heraclitus. But here Socrates appears to question the relation of such study and religious belief, claiming not that “those who studies these things do not believe in the gods,” but rather, that those who *hear* such rumors tend to make this assumption. Again, this is not especially relevant for present purposes, but it will be important when we address the status of Socrates’s “risky beliefs”—perhaps said beliefs are not meant to be like scientific claims, i.e., claims that admit of truth and falsity? Taken together with religious “belief” as practice $\nu\omicron\mu\acute{\iota}\zeta\omega$, this question deserves consideration.

Returning to the substance of Socrates’s defense, then, it does not appear that Socrates denies innovation with respect to religious matters. Given that this is the sworn accusation from Meletus, it is unclear why Socrates makes the conversation one about atheism vs theism—except perhaps that Socrates knows there are rumors out there, some relatively well-founded, which may mislead people into thinking he is an atheist.

28b3ff: Socrates's defiance

If Socrates's defense against the accusations given above *is* incomplete for the reason given, it doesn't appear to draw rebuttal from his accusers or judges. Furthermore, it may be that Socrates discussion of deliberate vs involuntary (get consistent on this) corruption may have been enough to establish that any wrong he *could have done* must have been involuntary.

“You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man.” (28b5-c1)

Here, Socrates denies fear—more specifically, the species of fear attending shame (cf Euthyphro)—for having committed to the practices that have gotten him here. Socrates's rejoinder is that a man who is *any good at all* should be concerned with the risk of death; his *only* concern should be with whether his actions are right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or a bad man.

Here we see the unusual (for Plato) identification of action and character—one that even modern-day views of virtue ethics maintain.

This is the truth of the matter, men of Athens: wherever a man has taken a position that he believes to be best, or has been placed by his commander, there he must I think remain and face danger, without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace. It would have been a dreadful way to behave, men of Athens, if, at Potidaea, Amphipolis and Delium, I had, at the risk of death, like anyone else, remained at my post where those you had elected to command had ordered me, and then, when the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others, I had abandoned my post for fear of death or anything else. That would have been a dreadful thing, and then I might truly have justly been brought here

for not believing that there are gods, disobeying the oracle, fearing death, and thinking I was wise when I was not. (28d5-29a5)

Here Socrates gives us a good deal of insight into his motivations. First we have his claim that “when a man has taken a position he *believes to be best*, he must remain and face danger without a thought for death or anything else, rather than disgrace.” On what basis does Socrates make this claim? He certainly appeals to what appears like a commonsense view of responsibility to authority—here, the “obvious case” he uses for the relevant analogy is that of his obeying the commands of a (just) commander. Just as the people of Athens would rightly expect soldiers to obey the commands of the commander they elected, they should expect Socrates also to be brave in his obedience to the “command” of the god—in this case, his understanding of the Oracle’s riddle that compels Socrates to inquiry. Just as the faithful soldier should not abandon his commanded position for fear of death, he must not now abandon the position he was ordered into by the god. Importantly, though, Socrates includes in his imperative the idea of sticking to what one *believes to be best*. Presumably, for Socrates, one is right in believing a just command to be best, but this is only a species of “what one believes to be best”; surely there could be positions, military or otherwise, that one believes to be best that are in fact not commands of the gods.

Not much hangs on this, perhaps, but it is worth noting that Socrates by his own testimony was not *directly* ordered by the god to do anything; it is Socrates’s best understanding of the oracle’s meaning that he should inquire into virtue and go about questioning his fellow Athenians, always with an eye to “checking” that they are indeed concerned with the most important things—in particular, that they should become “as good as

possible.” To portray this as a divine command is perhaps misleading, at least if this is taken literally. One thinks, no doubt, that Socrates would not have accepted an interpretation of the oracle that would require him, for instance, to disregard the well-being of his soul and those of his citizens. He is a lover of inquiry after all—and one must follow his beloved “wherever it should lead him” (*Euthyphro*).

But if we read the “divine command” of the Oracle in the context of Plato’s corpus and Socrates’s discussions of it, we would be right to regard it as a kind of imperative—if it is “divine,” this need not mean that it is uttered directly by a god; perhaps it is “divine” in that it regards the most important things; whatever the case, it looks an awful lot like a command. And perhaps, understood as a moral imperative, this “divine command” is not issued only to Socrates.

The end of the above passage is also very helpful for understanding Socrates’s mission: had Socrates abandoned his “post”—for fear of death or any other reason—then Socrates could “justly” be taken to court for: not believing there are gods; disobeying the oracle; fearing death; and thinking he was wise when he was not.

It is striking that Socrates should derive so many accusations from his hypothetically having “fainted in the search” (*Meno*). Had he abandoned philosophy for fear of death, Socrates tells us, he could be credibly charged with *not believing in the gods*. This is a bold statement that modern readers surely struggle to empathize with. Believers or not, we are all familiar with the experience of making errors in our judgment and action; one who does the

wrong thing from being overcome with fear, for instance, is not typically taken to be a “false-believer”.¹⁷

Similarly, an atheist may well identify with the same experience, of doing something wrong despite believing they could/should have done better, and we would not usually deny from this fact alone that they did not believe in, say, principles of morality or at least the idea that one should act rightly.

But according to Socrates, “giving up philosophy” alone would make valid the accusation that he did not believe in the gods, and also that he disobeyed the oracle. Again, we know the Oracle’s utterances are characteristically cryptic, and it would be strange if Socrates’s perhaps esoteric reading of the Oracle’s command would mean he could be legitimately accused, *in court*, of having disobeyed! Further, Socrates could apparently be legitimately brought to court for “fearing death.” What?! Everyone fears death. Should everyone be brought to court for this offense? Add to this, “for thinking I was wise when I was not.” Is this an offense against justice? If it is, Socrates has *effectively* accused everyone he has ever talked to—the politicians, the poets, the craftsmen—of thinking they were wise when they were not. Is this a prosecutable offense? Given that Socrates has already established that one should not be taken to court frivolously—that one who is doing wrong

¹⁷ For example, the apostle Paul famously contends with acting out things contrary to his beliefs in his letter to the Romans: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing... For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind.” (ESV)

unwillingly or unknowingly should be privately corrected, not taken to court—whence the boldness of this claim?

It is hard to understand Socrates's meaning here, but we may confidently assert a few things: for Socrates, *belief in the gods* just means obeying their commands, just as acknowledgment of a general's authority means obeying the commands of one's commander; and fear of death is no excuse for failing to do so—it just demonstrates that one does not really believe in what they claim to believe in; that they are not really committed to the commitments they claim. To disobey the gods—to “faint in the search”—is to show that one does not believe in the gods; to do so for fear of death is already “dreadful,” but this is compounded as it is based on the (unlikely) premise that one knows what one does not (cannot) know—here, that death is a fearful thing. We may set aside the suggestion of Socrates's rhetoric that these should be triable offenses—perhaps it is enough to note that, by their own logic, there is no evidence of disbelief on Socrates's part from his commitment to inquiry, quite the contrary. If anything, one's refusal of the divine command to try to become as good as possible should be taken as evidence of unbelief. Or are we to say that the gods don't want this? Or if we agree they do, what do we say when we fail to do it? Plausibly, that we are not in fact committed to our own “commitments.”

This kind of line is also to be found throughout the *Euthyphro*, where the entailments of knowledge and belief (and actions ostensibly done in their name) are put to the test. Euthyphro must know piety, after all, or he would not risk the shame of (wrongfully) prosecuting his own father. Meletus must know about the “most important things,” or he would not accuse Socrates of corrupting the youth. Though the actions of Euthyphro and

Meletus appear to depend on such knowledge, however, they are unable to explain themselves consistently or to share their knowledge with an eager Socrates.

Even if you acquitted me now and did not believe Anytus, who said to you that either I should not have been brought here in the first place, or that now I am here, you cannot avoid executing me, for if I should be acquitted, your sons would practice the teachings of Socrates and all be thoroughly corrupted; if you said to me in this regard: “Socrates, we do not believe Anytus now; we acquit you, but only on condition that you spend no more time on this investigation and do not practice philosophy, and if you are caught doing so you will die;” if, as I say, you were to acquit me on those terms, I would say to you: “Men of Athens, I am grateful and I am your friend, but I will obey the god rather than you, and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy, to exhort you and in my usual way to point out to any one of you whom I happen to meet: ‘Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul? ’Then, if one of you disputes this and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him and test him, and if I do not think he has attained the goodness that he says he has, I shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things. I shall treat in this way anyone I happen to meet, young and old, citizen and stranger, and more so the citizens because you are more kindred to me. Be sure that this is what the god orders me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city than my service to the god. For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul, (29c2-30b2)

The above brings out several relevant considerations in the interest of making sense of Socrates’s “mission.” First, for our purposes, is Socrates’s explicit claim that the possession of ‘wealth, reputation, and honors’ is decidedly *not* what he considers the ‘most important things.’ Just as he has claimed that his accuser, Meletus, is guilty of impiety specifically because Meletus *claims* to care about what is most important while acting otherwise, Socrates now claims that he means to be doing *nothing but* exhorting his fellow Athenians to get their

priorities straight. What is most important for Socrates, and this is beyond question, is the best possible state of one's soul. Or perhaps more accurately, that we treat what is most important as what is indeed most important. In the interest of this latter concern—that we are correct when we claim to have the utmost care for what is of utmost importance—that Socrates insists he will continue to practice philosophy even in the face of many deaths (30c2). In the interest of “checking” this claim which, presumably, no one explicitly committed to living well could deny, Socrates will let no one go without reproach if he seems on examination to fall short of the virtue he attributes to himself.

From this passage we can also make some observations about Socrates's understanding of *commitment*. There are two potential controversies running parallel here: first, there is Socrates's concern that someone who claims to care most of all for the state of her soul is telling the truth. Interestingly, though, this is not (at least, not *obviously*) the same as wondering whether one is as good a person as she claims to be. This can be read in different ways, of course, and these readings may not be mutually exclusive. First, we might suppose that Socrates treats one's apparent ‘goodness’ as evidence for or against her claim to regard nothing else as more important. This would be consistent with the way Socrates has treated concern-claims throughout the Apology, and perhaps in the *Euthyphro*: Socrates doubts that Meletus is *genuinely* concerned with the souls of the Athenian youth, and he doubts this on the basis that Meletus's behavior doesn't bear this out; if Meletus *genuinely* cared for the well-being of the youth, Socrates has claimed, he would presumably have bothered to wonder whether they are corrupted by the one or the many, or whether Socrates

would do such a thing deliberately; evidently both questions are easily answerable upon minimal reflection, and both speak against bringing Socrates to court.

Similarly, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates treats Euthyphro's prosecution of his own father as evidence that Euthyphro is very wise when it comes to piety: after all, Socrates claims, Euthyphro would not himself risk impiety by prosecuting his father unless Euthyphro was quite sure he was in the right—and, by inference, he could only be sure of such a thing if he had exceptional knowledge of piety and impiety.

In light of these instances, wherein Socrates evaluates the truthfulness of one's belief/knowledge claims against said person's actions, it might seem appropriate to read Socrates as saying in the above passage that one's claim to care for the state of her soul is evaluable according to her evident goodness; that is, if one claims to care for her soul but is not obviously good or virtuous, this disproves her claim. I think this reading is mistaken.

Another interpretation fits the same text: suppose that one genuinely is concerned above all that his soul be as good as possible; for Socrates to then "check" such a one's apparent goodness against this claim, Socrates would need to know what goodness amounts to. But we have myriad reasons for thinking that Socrates is uncertain in this regard, and it would be a mistake to attribute such a clear and settled view to the Socrates of Plato's "early" dialogues; whatever else we know of Socrates, we can be sure that he disavowed such knowledge. So how are we to make sense of Socrates's claim to "check" one's goodness against their claim to care for the state of their own soul?

I submit that our best interpretive bet depends on the idea that goodness or virtue, in the absence of certainty as to what exactly that amounts to, may be manifest in one's earnestly

looking to get this question answered and hesitating to make confident assertions on the subject. Meletus falls short in this regard—he claims to care for what is most important but brings Socrates to court on the confident assumption that he really understands these things, and his deeds speak against his words; Euthyphro claims to know piety and impiety, but his deeds speak against his words. To be pious, we may infer, one must (among other things) not claim knowledge where one lacks it—as Plato himself writes, there may indeed be nothing worse for a man than this.

A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive for even a short time. I shall give you great proofs of this, not words but what you esteem, deeds. Listen to what happened to me, that you may know that I will not yield to any man contrary to what is right, for fear of death, even if I should die at once for not yielding. The things I shall tell you are commonplace and smack of the lawcourts, but they are true. (32a-b1)

Here again Socrates offers his own deeds as evidence that his claims are true. First, we should note that Socrates pairs, as he so often does, words and deeds (*logoi kai erga*), as though they are two versions of the same thing; this is crucial for making sense of the “risky belief” passages to be discussed in subsequent chapters. As we have seen throughout Socrates’s defense, he seems to find nothing odd about identifying words and deeds in this way—from the very beginning he has treated *erga* as standing in for *logoi*. This is the case in *Euthyphro*, as I have mentioned above: Socrates infers confidently that Euthyphro *must* (believe himself to) be expert on the subject of piety, even before Euthyphro himself announces as much, just in virtue of Euthyphro’s deeds: in this case, bringing his own father to court. Early in the *Apology*, as we have seen, Socrates claims that Meletus has in fact never

cared for what he professes to be seriously concerned with—that is, for piety and the well-being of the youth—*just* because Meletus has taken Socrates to court on charges he evidently has not thought through; that is, just in virtue of Meletus’s deeds.

Shortly after the brief cross-examination of Meletus, Socrates argues that the fear of death—surely an event, rather than a proposition—is *nothing but* one’s believing that one knows what one does not (indeed, cannot) know. Socrates goes so far as to claim that he would have been justly brought to court for atheism had he abandoned his philosophical mission—this clearly depends on the notion that one’s deeds “speak” for one’s beliefs; or perhaps more precisely, one’s deeds just *are* one’s *logoi* at a different level of analysis. For Socrates, there seems to be no difference between believing that there are gods and obeying their commands. As we will see in the *Crito*, this seems to go for Athenian law as well. The close relation between word and deed is a thread that can be found throughout Plato’s corpus, and it is a mistake to think that this is merely a one-way relation; in subsequent chapters I will claim that viable interpretations of the “risky belief” passages of *Meno* and *Phaedo* (and perhaps in *Parmenides* as well) depend on the same.

Now one may understandably read Socrates’s remarks in the above passage as somewhat patronizing: he offers “not words but what *you* esteem, *deeds*”¹⁸ to the jury, as “proofs” that one who cares for justice “must lead a private, not a public, life if he is to survive.” Socrates goes on to detail his brief but tumultuous tenure as a member of the Athenian Council, claiming to have been the only councilor concerned with “the side of law and justice,” while “*you* [the jury] were engaged in an unjust course.” Socrates’s accusatory

¹⁸ italics mine

tone, in addition to perhaps doing him no favors with respect the vote that is still to come, may seem to suggest that *deeds* as opposed to words are comparatively vulgar, in which case the “close relation” between the two that I’ve suggested above may seem in doubt. But we need not draw this inference.

At 32d, Socrates offers another example of the kind of activity that would signify belief or the lack thereof:

Do not deem it right for me, men of Athens, that I should act towards d you in a way that I do not consider to be good or just or pious, especially, by Zeus, as I am being prosecuted by Meletus here for impiety; clearly, if I convinced you by my supplication to do violence to your oath of office, I would be teaching you not to believe that there are gods, and my defense would convict me of not believing in them. This is far from being the case, gentlemen, for I do believe in them as none of my accusers do. I leave it to you and the god to judge me in the way that will be best for me and for you. (32d1-d9)

At this point Socrates doubles down on the notion that deeds represent words: to act pitiable before the jury, as so many evidently do when facing death, would be a disgrace; to convince the jury to have mercy, for Socrates, would amount to *teaching them not to believe that there are gods* while convicting himself of the same! To act piously or impiously—we may as well say “to act well or badly”—is to practice a certain belief-commitment. And Socrates has made it his life’s work to persuade people to act out the right belief—that one should care for nothing before one’s being as good as possible (36c5):

I did not follow that path that would have made me of no use either to you or to myself, but I went to each of you privately and conferred upon him what I say is the greatest benefit, by trying to persuade him not to care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible, not to care for the city's possessions more than for the city itself, and to care for other things in the same way. (36c-d1)

This is perhaps the “earliest”¹⁹ passage in which Plato’s Socrates seems to identify usefulness, benefit, and goodness. Euthyphro has said something similar, speaking of himself, but here Socrates groups the three terms himself for the first time; this is another thread that runs throughout Plato’s corpus, and one that is often (surprisingly) overlooked. The “risky belief” passages in subsequent chapters will invoke the same apparent interrelation, and this interrelation is essential for making sense of Socrates’s otherwise obscure claims there.

Here is a passage that merits close inspection:

Perhaps someone might say: But Socrates, if you leave us will you not be able to live quietly, without talking? Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less. (37e5-38a7)

It is not obvious why Socrates introduces the above disjunction: I have claimed, and Socrates has at least implied, that “keeping quiet” would mean disobeying the gods—not believing in them, in fact!—which would be essentially the same as contradicting his famous “unexamined life” maxim. But in the above passage, these are presented as two alternative explanations, *both* of which Socrates endorses, for his commitment to philosophy. But why does he pose them this way?

To you, as being my friends, I want to show the meaning of what has occurred. A surprising thing has happened to me, jurymen—you I would rightly call jurymen. At all previous times my familiar prophetic power, my spiritual manifestation, frequently opposed me, even in small matters, when I was about to do something wrong, but now

that, as you can see for yourselves, I was faced with what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils, my divine sign has not opposed me, either when I left home at dawn, or when I came into court, b or at any time that I was about to say something during my speech. Yet in other talks it often held me back in the middle of my speaking, but now it has opposed no word or deed of mine. What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my c familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right. (40a-40d1)

In addition to the familiar “word and deed” relation, we hear from Socrates “convincing proof” that we are mistaken if we think that death is an evil: this is because Socrates’s ‘divine sign’ did not Socrates’s showing up at court, nor his speaking to the jury in such a way as to guarantee his conviction and sentencing. In the past, Socrates tells us, his divine sign (my spiritual manifestation(!)(40a)), has opposed him when he was about to do something wrong(μὴ ὀρθῶς πράξειν).²⁰ We should notice that this is certainly not meant to be “convincing proof” for the jury that death is not an evil—or perhaps, that we are mistaken if we happen to think so(!)—Socrates has established since early on that he is aware the “divine sign” defense is not likely to be effective. More likely, Socrates is reporting that he is himself convinced that death is something one should not fear.²¹

Let us reflect in this way, too, that there is good hope that death is a blessing, for it is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place. (40c3-d1)

²⁰ One wishes Socrates would tell us more about said moments of divine opposition. What could it be that he was about to do?

²¹ It is worth mention that Plato’s dialogues maintain this thread throughout, cf especially Republic

Here Socrates speaks of hope (ἐλπίς)—in particular, reason to hope that death is a good thing. Socrates himself is convinced, in light of his divine sign not having intervened, that at least it is not a “wrong”(bad?) thing, but this perhaps does not warrant hope that it is a blessing. There is much hope that it is a good thing, it turns out, because it has to be either like dreamless sleep, which is a great advantage; or it is travel to “another place”. Twice Socrates appeals to “what we are told” (40c3-d1) about such things—this perhaps coming as somewhat of a surprise, given both that (1) Socrates evidently has his own ideas about the gods (cf Euthyphro the stories we’re told and this is why I’ll be convicted), and (2) Socrates has said that neither he nor anyone has any (credible) knowledge of such things.

Even so, death *must* be either sleep or relocation—if one can survive death in any fashion, it is implied, one must “be” at some place, and wherever that may be, it is not with his corpse—and if death is being nothing this would plausibly be as pleasant as a night of dreamless sleep; if it is relocation, it is at least possible that one would join everyone else who has died, including heroes and everyone else who has ever been great. Better than this, Socrates claims, would be the chance to spend time “testing and examining” people there in the interest of discovering who among them is wise and who thinks he is but is not.

Apparently, and perhaps surprisingly, Socrates wants to “examine” the likes of Achilles, Odysseus, and Sisyphus. I say this may be surprising for a few reasons, not least of which is that it isn’t clear what either Socrates or his interlocutor would stand to gain from better understanding virtue, now that their respective races have been run.

Socrates asserts with confidence that “they are happier there than we are here,”
 “IF WHAT WE ARE TOLD IS TRUE” (third time).

You too must be of good hope as regards death, gentlemen of the jury, and keep this one truth in mind, that a good man cannot be harmed either d in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. (41c9-d2)

On Plato's *Crito*

SOCRATES: Have you just come, or have you been here for some time?

CRITO: A fair time.

SOCRATES: Then why did you not wake me right away but sit there b in silence?

CRITO: By Zeus no, Socrates. I would not myself want to be in distress and awake so long. I have been surprised to see you so peacefully asleep. It was on purpose that I did not wake you, so that you should spend your time most agreeably. Often in the past throughout my life, I have considered the way you live happy, and especially so now that you bear your present misfortune so easily and lightly.

SOCRATES: It would not be fitting at my age to resent the fact that I must die now. (43a8-b10)

Bracketing for now the significance of Socrates's bearing (in light of his misfortune)—this is echoed in the *Phaedo's* famous report of Socrates's easy temperament while draining the poisonous cup—we may note again the notion of “fittingness.” Socrates opened the *Apology* with remarks about what may or may not be “fitting,” especially in light of his age, and he will return to this kind of remark again in the *Phaedo* (cf it would not be fitting to insist etc.).

SOCRATES: Come now, if we ruin that which is improved by health and corrupted by disease by not following the opinions of those who know, is life worth living for us when that is ruined? And that is the body, is it not?

CRITO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And is life worth living with a body that is corrupted and in bad condition?

CRITO: In no way.

SOCRATES: And is life worth living for us with that part of us corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits? Or do we think that part of us, whatever it is, that is concerned with justice and injustice, is inferior to the body?

CRITO: Not at all.

SOCRATES: It is more valuable?

CRITO: Much more. (47d8-48a5)

Socrates's main point here is clear enough: the question is, in the immediate context, whether we ought to be concerned with "*all* the opinions of men"²²; or instead, only with the good ones and not the bad ones. And Socrates makes the case here, as before in the Apology, that the many are not experts—it is the one who improves; specifically, the one who is expert in the relevant area—and one would be imprudent to treat the opinions of non-experts as authoritative. An athlete, as we would presumably all agree, ought to hold the doctor or trainer's opinion in higher regard than the opinions of painters. Similarly, Socrates implies, one would be imprudent to look to the opinions of non-experts when it comes to virtue: life is not worth living, says Socrates with Crito's agreement, with a body that has been ruined, and failing to take the appropriate counsel can have that unfortunate result; in the same way, for Socrates, it is not obvious (perhaps even unlikely) that the judgment of the many with respect to virtue will facilitate a healthy soul. Just as one can go wrong by failing to attend to the wisdom of the expert, it is implied, one can go wrong by over-privileging the opinions of the many. For this reason, Socrates tells Crito, there is no need to countenance the opinion of the many as it may pertain to how he is perceived to have handled Socrates's situation.

It is worth noting, if only briefly for now, that Socrates does indeed speak of what may be fitting or not in light of one's reputation—this despite Socrates's adamance regarding the overvaluing of reputation among his fellow Athenians, especially as compared to the value one should place on virtue. This being the case, one may wonder whether Socrates is

²² italics mine

consistent in claiming on the one hand that one should not care for honors or reputation; while claiming on the other that Socrates would be rightly indicted for acting in ways that would speak against his reputation (Apology). I put this aside for now.

SOCRATES: We should not then think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice, the one, that is, and the truth itself. So that, in the first place, you were wrong to believe that we should care for the opinion of the many about what is just, beautiful, good, and their opposites. “But,” someone might say, “the many are able to put us to death.”

CRITO: That too is obvious, Socrates, and someone might well say so.

SOCRATES: And, my admirable friend, that argument that we have gone through remains, I think, as before. Examine the following statement in turn as to whether it stays the same or not, that the most important thing is not life, but the good life.

CRITO: It stays the same.

SOCRATES: And that the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same; does that still hold, or not?

CRITO: It does hold. (48a5-b9)

Here, as so often in the Dialogues, we see the grouping of the “just, beautiful, and good.” This is not unique to the so-called “Socratic” dialogues; Plato maintains this grouping throughout his corpus. That these descriptors should appear together is perhaps not surprising; but we should pause and reflect on the inclusion of the “beautiful” (*kalon*) in this group, especially as they are apparently identical at least when referring to one’s life. Note that *kalon* is often Plato’s preferred term when describing a good argument (Meno ‘does that seem to you to be well said?’)—used in this way, *kalon* is often (and in my view, mistakenly) reduced in English to “true” or “sound,” though Plato’s Socrates will regularly use *kalon* in specifically aesthetic contexts

SOCRATES: One should never do wrong in return, nor do any man harm, no matter what he may have done to you. And Crito, see that you do not disagree to this, contrary

to your belief. For I know that only a few people hold this view or will hold it, and there is no common ground between those who hold this view and those who do not, but they inevitably despise each other's views. So then consider very carefully whether we have this view in common and whether you agree, and let this be the basis of our deliberation, that neither to do wrong nor to return a wrong is ever correct, nor is doing harm in return for harm done. Or do you disagree and do not share this view as a basis for discussion? I have held it for a long time and still hold it now, but e if you think otherwise, tell me now. If, however, you stick to our former opinion, then listen to the next point. (44c9-e3)

Socrates appeals again to his peculiar sense of “belief” that has been present from the beginning: Crito is asked to see (to discover) whether he *indeed* agrees with Socrates’s long-held claim that one should do no harm, as Crito’s utterance is apparently not enough to guarantee said agreement. Socrates characteristically wants to know whether Crito actually “sticks to” this claim—whether he *means* what he is saying—and as we see in later dialogues, dialectic differs from battle insofar as its participants proceed as *friends*. In the *Meno*, specifically, Socrates asserts that “friendly” dialectic requires that parties proceed in terms that are mutually understood. Here, then, Socrates elicits Crito’s agreement in order not only to be sure that Crito is not at odds with himself regarding the “harm” claim in question, but also to be sure that the subsequent investigation is proceeding on shared terms.

SOCRATES: Look at it this way. If, as we were planning to run away from here, or whatever one should call it, the laws and the state came and confronted us and asked: “Tell me, Socrates, what are you intending to do? Do you not by this action you are attempting intend to destroy us, the laws, and indeed the whole city, as far as you are concerned? Or do b you think it possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals?” (50a4-b4)

Socrates puts formidable challenges into the mouth of the personified laws. Supposing Socrates went ahead with Crito's proposal that he flee the city, Socrates has the laws straightaway charge him with intent to *destroy the laws and the whole city* by the action of evading its (just) sentence of death: how could a city not be destroyed, after all, if the verdicts of its courts were as nothing to private citizens?

We must pause here to reflect on the puzzling use of “destroy” (ἀπόλλυμι) at play in the above. To start with, Socrates himself cannot plausibly be accused of, by attempting to flee his sentence, “intent to destroy the laws/city” for at least two reasons: first, no reasonable person could imagine that one individual's act of fleeing into exile could bring about the destruction of codified laws, much less the city of Athens. This is obvious at least from the fact that fleeing into exile is by no means unheard of for someone in Socrates's position; hence Crito's fear of garnering himself a bad reputation should he not to all in his power to secure Socrates's escape. Such escapes have happened before, and yet the laws—not to mention, *Athens* herself—have continued to exist.

Secondly, even if we interpret the relevant sense of ἀπόλλυμι in an extended way that makes the charge more plausible, it is not at all clear that we could attribute such an intention to Socrates based only on his hypothetical attempt to flee: presumably, one thinks, Socrates's proximate intention would be to simply to escape execution. We have seen in the Apology that, for Socrates, this would be acting out the mistaken belief that death is something to fear—but in what way could this be thought to substantiate the laws's attribute of *intent to destroy the laws and the city*?

Restricting our analysis of this passage to its context in the present dialogue, we must acknowledge that Socrates raises neither of the above challenges to the charge of intent to destroy. This at least implies that it strikes Socrates as a reasonable charge, strange as it may sound; if this is right, then Socrates appears to think both that the charge would be aptly raised (as though one individual's (unjust) action could do such a thing), and also that his attempt to flee would be sufficient to prove his intent to destroy.

It may be helpful here to refer back to Socrates's defense in the *Apology*; there, we recall, Socrates implied repeatedly that one's deeds may justly be taken as evidence of one's beliefs. Socrates infers confidently that Euthyphro must have unusual knowledge of piety—or believe he has such knowledge—in light of Euthyphro's prosecuting his own father; Meletus must have knowledge of how the youth are corrupted and who corrupts them, as he has gone to the trouble of bringing Socrates to court on that charge. Similarly, one's fear of death is nothing but one's presumption to know whether death is to be feared.

Ultimately, though, the most helpful analogy may be found in Socrates's claim that, *were he to abandon philosophy*, it would be just for Socrates to be charged with atheism. This apparently proceeds, at one level, from Socrates's claim to have been ordered to do philosophy by the god's oracle—to disobey, then, would be to believe that the commands of gods have no force, and therefore that the gods in some important sense are not "gods" at all. At another level, I have argued, Socrates seems to hold that to abandon philosophy would be to deny that there is a highest good to pursue, and therefore again that there are no gods.

If this is right, then we could speculate that the relevant sense of “destroy” above is related to denial or rejection (as opposed to affirmation/commitment) rather than actual, effective obliteration. We find more on the relevant sense of “destroy” in Plato’s *Parmenides*:

SOCRATES: For many things could be said, especially by an orator on behalf of this law we are destroying, which orders that the judgments of the courts shall be carried out. Shall we say in answer, “The city wronged me, and its decision was not right.” Shall we say that, or what?

CRITO: Yes, by Zeus, Socrates, that is our answer.

SOCRATES: Then what if the laws said: “Was that the agreement between us, Socrates, or was it to respect the judgments that the city came to?” And if we wondered at their words, they would perhaps add: “Socrates, do not wonder at what we say but answer, since you are accustomed to proceed by question and answer. Come now, what accusation do you bring against us and the city, that you should try to destroy us? Did we not, first, bring you to birth, and was it not through us that your father married your mother and begat you? Tell you, do you find anything to criticize in those of us who are concerned with marriage?” And I would say that I do not criticize them. (50b5-d6)

This reaffirms the claim discussed above that, at least from the perspective of the laws, Socrates’s hypothetical escape plan is evidently *destroying* said laws; Socrates and Crito would not be *trying* to destroy the laws here, but from Socrates’s own mouth comes the description of his interlocutor as speaking on behalf of “the laws we *are destroying*.” This much by way of confirming that the relevant sense of *destroy* lingers beyond what might otherwise be thought of as a brief moment of hyperbole.

Next, we should note another distinction that is perhaps not obvious or intuitive: Socrates proposes to explain his destructive act by claiming that “The city wrong me, and its decision was not right.” In response, Socrates has the laws question this justification: “Was *that* the agreement between us Socrates, or was it to respect (ἐμμένω, “abide in; or closer to the meaning of μένω, to remain fixed in/stand fast in”) the judgments that the city came to?”

The implication of the laws' challenge is that Socrates's implicit—or perhaps *explicit*, provided we take one's deeds as standing in for one's words—agreement was *not* to stand by the city's judgments only if said judgments were made *rightly* (ὀρθῶς) and brought no harm to Socrates, but rather Socrates's agreement was evidently to respect the city's judgments period. Now it isn't entirely clear where the evidence of this agreement is supposed to have been found; on the contrary, Socrates has testified to having resisted judgments of the state which he has found unjust (unlawful, interestingly). And lest we think that the relevant difference between his resistance of the Council's orders and the current situation is the legality of things, we must note that in Socrates's Apology he flatly denies the charges levied against him—i.e., he claims not to have broken the relevant laws. Is Socrates then trying to have his cake and eat it too?

Furthermore, the laws don't appear to have evidence that Socrates agreed to obey the state's verdicts categorically, rather than obeying only those verdicts which are just. Presumably this has not been put to the test, at least with respect to the question of Socrates being sentenced to death; yet, Socrates appears to concede that he has agreed by his deeds to obey all its verdicts—or at least he does not challenge this claim.

Apparently part of the answer to this questionable accusation has something to do with what we owe to those who have brought us to (civilized) life—we might say, with *gratitude*, understanding by this term an appropriate thankfulness in recognition of conferred benefit(s), together with a willingness to return kindness with kindness. This is an appropriate interpretation of the laws' reasoning at 50d and following: Socrates had no complaints when the laws regarding marriage and reproduction brought him to birth, nor when by the laws

Socrates was nurtured and educated and eventually brought to full citizenship. Given that Socrates has apparently not been critical of the laws in the past, and further that he has received every good by way of the laws, it would be right for the laws to expect gratitude on Socrates's part rather than for him to return destruction for destruction now that the laws have judged against him. (N.B. this is probably two different points: no evidence of criticism, plus reasonable expectation of gratitude)

In addition to these factors we should consider the caveat in the following:

Do you think you have this right to retaliation against your country and its laws? That if we undertake to destroy you and think it right to do so, you can undertake to destroy us, as far as you can, in return? And will you say that you are right to do so, you who truly care for virtue? Is your wisdom such as not to realize that your country is to be honored more than your mother, your father, and all your ancestors, that it is more to be revered and more sacred, and that it counts for more among the gods and sensible men, that you must worship it, yield to it and placate its anger more than your father's? You must either persuade it or obey its orders, and endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure, whether blows or bonds, and if it leads you into war to be wounded or killed, you must obey. To do so is right, and one must not give way or retreat or leave one's post, but both in war and in courts and everywhere else, one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. It is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother or father; it is much more so to use it against your country." What shall we say in reply, Crito, that the laws speak the truth, or not? (51a4-c5)

Once more Socrates confirms that Crito's hypothetical escape plan aims in essence at the destruction of his city and its laws. Importantly, however, we have the caveat admitted by the laws themselves that he may have persuaded them as to the nature of justice: presumably he had this opportunity by way of his defense before the Athenian jury. So it is not simply that

Socrates is charged with having agreed to abide by the state's verdicts, whether judged rightly or not, but it is understood that within this arrangement Socrates is not without recourse. In addition to the laws' mention of said recourse twice in the above, Socrates himself gives the same consideration more than once in the Apology. We are not equipped to know whether or to what extent Socrates's present discussion with the laws would be different were this not in place—after all, one may reasonably think that Socrates's defense against the charges of Meletus and Anytus should have been more than sufficient for legal purposes, and therefore that his “right to persuade” was only nominal at best—but it seems an important aspect of the “just agreement” appealed to by the laws.

In addition to the above considerations—that Socrates should return the kindness shown him by the laws of the state with kindness and not retaliation, and that Socrates has up till now showed no hint of criticism by his deeds—the laws introduce the consideration that Socrates, like any Athenian citizen of voting age who has had ample opportunity to become familiar with the doings of its laws, could at any time have taken his property and left the city to be governed under a different set of laws. But Socrates, indeed more than any Athenian, has dwelt most consistently in Athens, not even leaving for a vacation as his fellows are wont to do. So the laws are apparently on solid ground in claiming that the preponderance of evidence speaks in favor of Socrates's agreement to be governed by them, said agreement being proved not only in words but in deeds:

SOCRATES: Now, however, those words do not make you ashamed, and you pay no heed to us, the laws, as you plan to destroy us, and you act d like the meanest type of slave by trying to run away, contrary to your commitments and your agreement to live

as a citizen under us. First then, answer us on this very point, whether we speak the truth when we say that you agreed, not only in words but by your deeds, to live in accordance with us.” What are we to say to that, Crito? Must we not agree?

CRITO: We must, Socrates.

(52c8-d7)

Here again we have the relevant pairing of “word and deed,” this time coming from the mouth of the laws, but with the agreement not only of Socrates but Crito as well. Additionally, the laws add to Socrates’s demonstrated *agreement* (ὁμολογία) to be ruled by the laws his commitments (συνθήκας) as well. Though not always explicitly stated as above, commitments will be increasingly relevant in chapters to come. In some instances, especially with respect to “risky belief,” it will become clearer that *commitment* may be a species of belief rather than the other way around.

52d8-54d: Concluding remarks of the laws

In the final pages of Crito the laws recap their arguments, reiterating that Socrates would rightly be regarded as a “destroyer of laws” not only by neighboring Thebes and Megara were he to flee there, but even in death the by the laws of the underworld. Socrates has dwelt more faithfully in Athens than any Athenian citizen, demonstrating by his deeds his agreement and commitment to governance by Athenian law; he has enjoyed every possible benefit conferrable by law without a word of protest, and to flee now that the law judges against him would be for Socrates to return “wrong (by men) with wrong (toward the laws)

and mistreatment with mistreatment, proving at the same time that Socrates's self-professed and overriding concern with virtue and justice was only farce, a fair-weather convenience.

Socrates is apparently unwilling to make himself ridiculous in these ways, especially from fear of death which he has argued consistently amounts to thinking oneself wise when one is not (as we cannot know enough about death to fear it), and Crito believes Socrates when the latter claims to be so committed to the answers he has given the laws that he will not be moved—this being the way, says Socrates, that “god is leading us.”

Summary Remarks

In this chapter I have tried to show by reference to Plato's dialogues pertaining to the trial of Socrates that, for Socrates, his philosophical “mission” is neither to embarrass public figures for the public's amusement, nor by conversing with the allegedly wise simply to acquire knowledge for its own sake. Socrates's mission aims at the best possible state of the soul—his own and those of his neighbors—and this is to be brought about by inquiry into virtue.

Other themes introduced here that will stay relevant for future chapters include Socrates's understanding of belief as evident (or absent) in action and the notion that one's behavior may imply “destructive” belief(s) on their part, where “destructive” must be interpreted metaphorically rather than literally (as will also be true of the *Parmenides* passage in Chapter Four)—this will be especially important as we consider the relevant meaning of “eristic” in the *Meno*.

Chapter Three:

Meno's Paradox and Inquiry Under Threat

On Meno

But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite is the case, as if there were a dearth of wisdom, and wisdom seems to have departed hence to go to you. If then you want to ask one of us that sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: "Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is." (70c3-71a5)

It is not at all clear why Socrates would claim here that Athenians in general—"everyone" in Athens that Meno might ask or have asked about virtue—would themselves disavow any and all knowledge of virtue: allegedly they would deny knowing what virtue is at all, much less whether it can be taught. Interpreted this way, it cannot be sincerely meant: obviously Socrates would ultimately be taken to court by Anytus (whom we are about to meet) and Meletus for, in part, bad behavior. Socrates himself attributes to Meletus and, as we have seen, Euthyphro, confidence in their respecting understandings of piety and corruption (as opposed to benefit), which clearly imply some kind of belief on their part that they know what they're talking about. Furthermore, Socrates helps himself more than once to what he and Meno both treat as obvious claims about virtue—that it is one, for instance; that character traits must be exercised with moderation, justice, and wisdom if they are to rightly be called virtues; indeed, in the course of the dialogue, Socrates appears to have some pretty settled opinions about what virtue must or must not involve, and this only adds to our

aforementioned evidence that Athenians in general and even Socrates himself could not honestly claim to have no knowledge at all of virtue.

One might rather be inclined to read the above as a thinly-veiled sleight aimed not only at Thesalians at large but Meno himself; this would perhaps be an uncharitable interpretation if it were not the case that Socrates has just begun what will turn out to be a series of sleights directed at Meno and his ilk.

I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that is possible? (71b1-6)

This is a strange remark for Socrates to make at this juncture for more than one reason. Socrates, as we have seen—despite his disavowal of any meaningful knowledge (cf Apology)—has already presented himself as confident enough that he is better off with respect to wisdom (especially as regards the most important things, i.e. justice/piety, in a word, virtue) than his fellow Athenians, at least insofar as he doesn't claim knowledge that he doesn't possess. This alone would seem to suggest that, whatever else is true of Socrates, he is at least not “as poor as his fellow Athenians” when it comes to knowledge of virtue; indeed, his allegedly divinely ordered philosophical mission has Socrates checking the goodness of those who claim to be good, and it would be strange for Socrates to sit in judgment of his fellows with respect to virtue if he were actually in a state of “complete ignorance” (οὐκ εἰδὼς περὶ ἀρετῆς τὸ παράπαν) of the quality in question.

Additionally, it is not at all obvious that someone who does not know what something is would necessarily be equally ignorant of its qualities. Socrates's own example makes this

point obvious: How could someone who doesn't at all know Meno, asks Socrates, know whether Meno is good-looking? One can easily imagine seeing someone they've never met, or even heard of, and asking the nearest onlooker "Who is that handsome gentleman?" This or a nearby (and easily conjured) counterexample should have come readily to Meno, not to mention to Socrates himself; but Meno agrees with Socrates's example and, by implication, with the more general principle it was evidently meant to justify.

Perhaps Socrates means something more technical by this example: if I do not at all know (who) Meno (is), I cannot know (any of) his qualities—on the assumption that to know the qualities of 'x' would at least require being able to name 'x'. That is, I might be unequipped to know, in a strict sense, that Meno is good-looking, if I cannot name the subject to whom the predicate is supposed to apply; even if we were fairly lenient with respect to what should reasonably count as knowledge, then, I would at best be entitled to claim to know "that man is good-looking," which, strictly speaking, may not be the same as knowing whether or not this is true of Meno.

But this cannot be right—even if it were the most plausible working interpretation of the above in other respects, this would omit the bizarre notion, which Socrates clearly leans on (with Meno's agreement), that I can't know anything about an x if I don't know what x is. If we aim to interpret Socrates's claims throughout this dialogue properly, we must take this notion with us.

MENO: ...but, Socrates, do you really not know what virtue is? Are we to report this to the folk back home about you?

SOCRATES: Not only that, my friend, but also that, as I believe, I have never yet met anyone else who did know.

MENO: How so? Did you not meet Gorgias when he was here?

SOCRATES: I did.

MENO: Did you then not think that he knew?

SOCRATES: I do not altogether remember, Meno, so that I cannot tell you now what I thought then. Perhaps he does know; you know what he used to say, so you remind me of what he said. You tell me yourself, if you are willing, for surely you share his views.—I do.²³

Here is the first of many memory puns that will recur not only in the present dialogue but also in the *Phaedo*—as we will see, the relevant passages in both dialogues deal with what has been called Plato’s “theory (or doctrine)” of recollection.

SOCRATES: Is it possible to manage a city well, or a household, or anything else, while not managing it moderately and justly?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Then if they manage justly and moderately, they must do so b with justice and moderation?

MENO: Necessarily.

SOCRATES: So both the man and the woman, if they are to be good, need the same things, justice and moderation.

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: What about a child and an old man? Can they possibly be good if they are intemperate and unjust?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: But if they are moderate and just?

²³ 71b7-d2

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: So all human beings are good in the same way, for they become good by acquiring the same qualities.

MENO: It seems so.

SOCRATES: And they would not be good in the same way if they did not have the same virtue.—They certainly would not be.²⁴

Socrates helps himself to the widely-held view of ancient Athens that justice and moderation are “cardinal virtues,” despite having “blamed [him]self” for being in a state of “utter ignorance” with respect to virtue, before going on to claim that it is surely not possible to know anything about an *x* if one does not know *x* at all. Even so, Socrates evidently is confident in asserting that good city-management—and by implication, plausibly, acting well in general (i.e. virtue)—requires at least justice and moderation. Further, Socrates claims that “all human beings” become good by acquiring the same qualities.

Given the conversational nature of this dialogue and Plato’s dialogue form in general, it would be a mistake to read every claim and inference uttered by Socrates as earnestly-held, settled beliefs on the subject. It is not until later in the dialogue that Socrates introduces inquiry-by-hypothesis explicitly, but there is no question that something like this method is present from the earliest dialogues: Socrates draws out a potential definition from his interlocutor, usually with some amount of prodding, and then puts that definition “to the test” in various ways; such tests are typically involve reference to claims that understood to be widely accepted or commonsensical, and sometimes Socrates gives what seem to be his own

²⁴73a8-c4

reasons. It is not always clear which of the above Socrates is up to, and as a result we can only read into the specific text of the dialogue in question, including its unique drama and characters, while taking what we can from other dialogues where this appears to be reasonable.

So I think we may read Socrates' introduction of justice and moderation as necessary features for acting well as at least an appeal to a view widely-held among people of his day—Meno's easy agreement supports this view—without having to read Socrates as contradicting his early claim to know nothing at all about the qualities attendant upon virtue (not to mention virtue itself). This same kind of move will appear throughout the dialogues, and Socrates will usually retain a kind of plausible deniability given his characteristic disavowal of knowledge for similar reasons, notwithstanding the fact that even a cursory read of Plato's dialogues would leave one unable to doubt that his Socrates is not as uncertain as this might suggest.

In summary, then, we note that (1) Socrates regards the view that justice and moderation are necessary elements of acting well as a widely-held view deserving of serious consideration, and his assumption is supported by Meno's agreement; and (2) regardless of his own earnestly-held views, Socrates would be entitled to introduce this view on the basis of its conventionality even if Meno didn't accept it, even though (3) Meno evidently does accept it, which would also be sufficient cause for introducing it at this juncture.

Now the idea that specific virtues (if there are any) must have something in common such that they can be identified as members of one and the same class we may regard as commonsensical—the notion of a “class” seems to guarantee this—and as an assumption implicit (if not explicit, when Socrates has to explain that instances of an x are not x itself)

every time Socrates asks for a definition of something. This all by way of reconciling Socrates's perhaps surprising amount of confident assertions about virtue with his earlier claim of utter ignorance about virtue and its qualities.

SOCRATES: It is not likely, my good man. Consider this further point: you say that virtue is to be able to rule. Shall we not add to this justly and not unjustly?

MENO: I think so, Socrates, for justice is virtue.

SOCRATES: Is it virtue, Meno, or a virtue?—What do you mean?

SOCRATES: As with anything else. For example, if you wish, take round-ness, about which I would say that it is a shape, but not simply that it is shape. I would not so speak of it because there are other shapes.

MENO: You are quite right. So I too say that not only justice is a virtue but there are many other virtues.

SOCRATES: What are they? Tell me, as I could mention other shapes to you if you bade me do so, so do you mention other virtues.

MENO: I think courage is a virtue, and moderation, wisdom, and munificence, and very many others.

SOCRATES: We are having the same trouble again, Meno, though in another way; we have found many virtues while looking for one, but we cannot find the one which covers all the others.

MENO: I cannot yet find, Socrates, what you are looking for, one virtue but for them all, as in the other cases. (73d7-74b2)

Although, in my view, readers are perhaps too quickly inclined to read Socrates's remarks as ironical (usually at the expense of his interlocutor)—there is rarely reason to doubt that Socrates is earnest in treating his interlocutor as at least potentially knowledgeable on some subject—we find here some evidence for thinking that Socrates is toying with Meno to some extent. That he calls Meno an “excellent (ἄριστος, i.e. virtuous) man” would perhaps be

evidence enough, given that Plato's readership certainly knew of Meno and his poor reputation. But Socrates, after prompting Meno to include justice in his account of virtue, and then suggesting this must be only one of many virtues, asks Meno to name others of the many virtues, before complaining at the end of this sequence that Meno has made the same mistake he made earlier: Meno again has identified several particular virtues rather than virtue itself.

Why Socrates to prompt Meno to make this mistake and then chastise him for it is unclear.

MENO: But that is foolish, Socrates.

SOCRATES: How do you mean?

MENO: That shape, you say, always follows color. Well then, if someone were to say that he did not know what color is, but that he had the same difficulty as he had about shape, what do you think your answer would be?

SOCRATES: A true one, surely, and if my questioner was one of those clever and disputatious debaters, I would say to him: "I have given my answer; if it is wrong, it is your job to refute it." Then, if they are friends as you and I are, and want to discuss with each other, they must answer in a manner more gentle and more proper to discussion. By this I mean that the answers must not only be true, but in terms admittedly known to the questioner. (75c2-d4)

In an effort to elicit from Euthyphro a definition of virtue that is at least of the right structure (that is, a definition of the class as such rather than a list of instances of it), Socrates has given an example, presumably one that could function as a model. In an attempt to define "shape"—or more precisely, in an attempt to "tell [Meno] what shape is," Socrates offers the following: "shape is that which alone of existing things always follows color" (75b9). It is in response to that proposed definition that Meno replies in the above.

Lest we attribute to Socrates an unwarranted level of meanness in light of considerations already mentioned, we should note that it is Socrates, not Meno, who first

problematizes “color”: says Socrates, “if [you were asked] what color is, and you said it is white... you would say that it is a color, because there are also other colors?” (74c4-6). This comes well before Socrates’s “model” definition of shape (as alone following color) and Meno’s subsequent questioning on the basis that color has not been sufficiently defined. Some scholars have taken Meno throughout this dialogue to be challenging Socrates, trying to catch him in a contradiction or to “trip him up” rhetorically—indeed, this is one reason why “Meno’s Paradox” is sometimes taken to be nothing but bad-faith sophistry on Meno’s part. I think this interpretation of the dialogue and the overarching relation between its interlocutors is not borne out by the text: as things stand at this point in the *Meno*, Socrates has (despite some perhaps uncharitable jabs at Meno) “walked” Meno through thinking about the questions at hand, and Meno has not been especially combative or contrarian—on the contrary, if anything, one might wonder whether Meno has given too much to Socrates by way of agreement.

The passage quoted above also introduces into this dialogue a term that is key for interpreting the *Meno* properly: namely, “ἐριστικός” (rendered in the above passage as “disputatious”). Socrates replies to Meno’s challenge (re: color) in an uncharacteristic way: first, by making clear that he apparently would not countenance Meno’s question were Meno of the “disputatious” sort—rather, Socrates says he would leave it to his interlocutor to refute his answer if indeed he could. However, since Socrates and Meno are ‘friends’, it is more appropriate that they should speak to each other in terms that both parties agree they understand. The lines that follow show Socrates inviting Meno to a revised definition of shape, one whose terms are “checked” with Meno explicitly before Socrates employs them in

his new definition. Meno is at perhaps his most incorrigible in his immediate reply to this carefully crafted revision by Socrates: “And what do you say color is, Socrates?” (76a7).

Socrates does not conceal his annoyance with this response—“You are outrageous, Meno”.

Even so, Socrates goes on to make an offer to Meno which the young man evidently finds quite enticing: “Do you want me to answer after the manner of Gorgias, which you would most easily follow?” (76c4):

MENO: Of course I want that.

SOCRATES: Do you both say there are effluvia of things, as Empedocles does?

MENO: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And that there are channels through which the effluvia make their way?

MENO: Definitely.

SOCRATES: And some effluvia fit some of the channels, while others are d too small or too big?

MENO: That is so.

SOCRATES: And there is something which you call sight?

MENO: There is.

SOCRATES: From this, “comprehend what I state,” as Pindar said; for color is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived.

MENO: That seems to me to be an excellent answer, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Perhaps it was given in the manner to which you are accustomed. At the same time I think that you can deduce from this answer what sound is, and smell, and many such things.—Quite so.

SOCRATES: It is a theatrical answer so it pleases you, Meno, more than that about shape.

MENO: It does.

SOCRATES: It is not better, son of Alexidemus, but I am convinced that the other is, and I think you would agree, if you did not have to go away before the mysteries as you told me yesterday, but could remain and be initiated.

MENO: I would stay, Socrates, if you could tell me many things like these. (76c6-77a1)

Evidently, by promising to answer “after the manner of Gorgias,” Socrates means that his ‘Gorgian’ answer is “theatrical” (τραγικός, “tragic, stately, majestic”; alternatively, “pompous, ranting”) and one that Meno will find pleasing (and Meno confirms that he does).

It is not clear what is supposed to be tragic about Socrates's "tragic" definition, allegedly given for Meno's gratification; while it is not obvious that Socrates thinks this definition has nothing going for it, he is convinced his own earlier definition of "shape" is better than this one.

This point aside, we should note at this juncture that Socrates associates his "tragic definition" with both Gorgias and, perhaps surprisingly, Pindar. Gorgias, as we have seen, has lingered in the background throughout the progression of this dialogue, and Socrates has not given us much reason for thinking that he regards the wisdom—or at least, the "teaching"—of Gorgias as something to admire. Pindar, on the other hand, "rears his head" throughout the dialogues, and almost always as a reliably authoritative source. Indeed, we will see Socrates refer again to Pindar when he challenges Meno's Paradox by appealing, among other things, to the same poet's authority. Given Socrates's typically reverential attitude toward Pindar, despite his often harsh attitude toward the poets, this later reference would not seem at all out of place; but in the context of this dialogue, in which Socrates has humored Meno with a "tragic" definition—one which Socrates evidently finds lacking—the fact that he would invoke Pindar here in the company of Meno's own Gorgias must be noted and kept in mind.

Socrates and Meno have arrived at an impasse in the course of inquiring into the nature of virtue. While Meno began by asking Socrates how virtue is acquired, the conversation has taken a typically Socratic turn: Socrates denies having any knowledge of virtue, and in short order demonstrates that Meno, too, is also unable to give a satisfying answer to the question, "What is virtue?" This experience of ignorance is, of course, a motivating force for Socrates that drives him to press onward; Meno, however, has been

reduced to a kind of intellectual paralysis. After another ill-fated attempt on the part of Meno to put forth a definition of virtue that will satisfy Socrates, Meno, surely exasperated, introduces (a broad outline of) what will become known as “Meno’s Paradox”:

MENO: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with (ἐντυγχάνω) it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d4-7)

Here, in a few short lines, Meno confronts Socrates with the statement of a problem that has lingered unuttered since the earliest dialogues, discussed above: though Socrates has proceeded as if his own (self-professed) ignorance is unproblematic relative to his inquisitive mission in Athens—that is, Socrates’s implicit assumption has been that not knowing something need not undermine one’s ability to look for it, and finding, to recognize it—it is not at all clear to Meno that this is a reasonable hope. And lest we take Meno for a mere obstructionist, we should recall that, as we have seen above, Socrates himself introduces the difficulty, albeit in vaguer terms. So Meno’s questions at 80d-e are not inconsistent with reading Meno as a “good-faith” interlocutor who is at least trying to take Socrates’s own claims seriously.

It is clear enough that, for Socrates, Meno’s Paradox represents a serious challenge to the possibility of inquiry. It is true that Socrates calls it an “eristic” argument,²⁵ but this by no means indicates that we ought simply to dismiss it as frivolous. Certainly Socrates’s response to it is challenging and elaborate enough to warrant our taking the paradox seriously. In fact, it

²⁵ *Meno*, 80e1-5. Taken from Fine’s translation: Fine, 83. In the next section I consider what Socrates may mean by ‘eristic’ in this context.

is Socrates who fully articulates what we commonly refer to as “Meno’s Paradox,”²⁶ and he seems convinced that there is a great deal at stake for anyone who is confronted with it. This being the case, we owe it to Plato to consider the argument on its own merits.

Meno does not, as it stands, pose a dilemma—Meno is concerned with the possibility of recognizing the correct answer to a question if one does not already know it (again, how will I recognize Meno if I do not know who Meno is?). This alone is not sufficient to nullify the potential possibility or value of searching, whether it may be possible by searching to narrow the field of candidates, or whether one may fruitfully inquire into that which one already (to some extent) knows. Indeed, Meno’s challenge mimics Socrates own earlier terminology; particularly his repeated use of τὸ παράπαν, as in “not knowing at all”:

“[Soc:] οὐδὲ αὐτὸ ὅτι ποτ’ ἐστὶ τὸ παράπαν ἀρετὴ τυγχάνω εἰδώς.” (71a7-8)

“[Soc:] ἐμαυτὸν καταμέμφομαι ὡς οὐκ εἰδώς περὶ ἀρετῆς τὸ παράπαν

“[Soc:] ἢ δοκεῖ σοι οἷόν τε εἶναι, ὅστις Μένωνα μὴ γινώσκει τὸ παράπαν ὅστις ἐστίν” (71b5-6)

In a sense then, we may even think that Meno is holding Socrates’s feet to the fire with respect to his own claims and terminology (perhaps he has learned more from Socrates than is obvious!): Socrates speaks of ignorance (especially his own) as inherently complete, even while claiming some wisdom for himself (in knowing that he does not know), presuming to

²⁶ As Fine points out (Fine, 1), Meno only asks questions—it is Socrates who raises them to the status of a dilemma. Taken together, Meno’s questions and Socrates’ dilemma imply an argument. Following Fine, I use ‘Meno’s paradox’ to refer to the conjunction of the two and the argument implied therein.

“test” his fellow Athenians’ claims at every opportunity, and entreating his interlocutors always to join in the search for what is unknown. But we may put aside for now the question of Meno’s motives in introducing what becomes the paradox synonymous with his own name, as well as the important question of what Socrates actually thinks of its merit or lack thereof. For now, we turn to Meno’s questions, as stated, on their own terms. Is there any reason for taking Meno’s questions seriously in the first place?

There is intuitive force in the objection Meno poses, even before Socrates reformulates it more precisely (indeed, more formidably) into a proper dilemma. If I were asked to locate an object which I admit I do not at all know, I would surely be at a loss. Presumably I would lack, if not all, at least the most essential narrowing features that would allow me to target the thing in question, and I would certainly be ill-equipped to know whether I had found it even if I had it in hand.

Suppose I am told that I am to meet someone for lunch, and that I should recognize him by the carnation on his lapel. Not knowing a carnation from a daisy (or a tulip or an iris), I will not know what to look for. Even if I know at least that it is a flower of some kind—just as Socrates knows at least that virtue is an idea—I will be searching for a long time; and even if I chanced upon the flower and therefore the individual in question, I certainly couldn’t know that I had done so.

The terminology of Meno’s objection seems, perhaps counterintuitively, to foreclose the possibility of somewhat-knowing, but if anyone is to blame for this it is not Meno but Socrates himself: Socrates laments his condition of utter ignorance (Grk) with respect to virtue and his example of not knowing Meno proceeds along the same lines, so it is not at all

clear that Meno is merely toying with, or arbitrarily obstructing, Socrates in the style of the sophists of Plato's *Euthydemus*, despite the surface similarities between objections we find in both dialogues. So even if Meno's objection assumes a questionable implicit premise—that one either knows something completely or not at all—it is still reasonably introduced given Socrates's apparent commitments earlier in the dialogue.

Despite these reasons for treating Meno's motivations for introducing the objection as benign, or at least as uncertain, Socrates counters with what could reasonably be interpreted as a reprimand for bad faith—at least on first reading when he reinstates Meno's questions in the form of a dilemma:

SOCRATES: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument (ἐριστικὸν λόγον) you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80e1-5)

If we are going to understand what Socrates thinks of Meno's Paradox, it is essential that we understand what Socrates means by *eristikos* in this context. As commentators have often failed to appreciate, the term can have related but importantly different connotations. The most commonly employed in existing interpretations are not tenable given Socrates' reply to the Paradox. Historically, English translators have almost exclusively rendered ἐριστικὸν λόγον as something like “debater's argument” in the above, typically retaining a similar connotation. We do not encounter *eristikos* often in Plato's dialogues, and when we do it is virtually always used in this sense. However, I do not believe this is a viable interpretation of *eristic* in the above passage and its sense in the remainder of the dialogue. I do not deny that it

has a pejorative connotation, as aforementioned translators have maintained, but the relevant meaning here is not well-understood as indicating mere frivolity, linguistic trickery, or sophistry; rather, I will follow a translational option that is suggested by Fine but, in my view unfortunately dismissed too lightly: eristic here means “destructive,” as is consonant with its etymological link to the goddess of strife and discord, Eris. Of course, an argument can involve, express, or introduce strife and discord without necessarily being mere sophistry (where this is understood as aiming at victory rather than truth).

The conventional interpretation of eristic as “mere sophistry” as it pertains to Meno’s Paradox (hereafter, MP) is inadequate for at least three reasons: first, this use of eristic, when it occurs in Plato, is always aimed primarily at the motivations of the speaker. According to this conception, eristic is nothing but frivolity; the deployment of wordplay merely for the sake of conflict rather than for the discovery of truth. This conception is implied in various canonical translators’ renderings of *eristikos logos* as a “trick” or “debater’s argument;”²⁷ others have rendered it as “captious.”²⁸ Conception (a) finds textual support in Plato’s *Euthydemus*, where eristic is presented as characteristically involving juvenile language games that are comically farcical but ultimately harmless—they are only language games after all, easily dissolved through (for example) the simple disambiguation of terms or

²⁷ For ‘trick argument,’ see W.K.C. Guthrie, trans., 363, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); for ‘debater’s argument,’ see G.M.A. Grube, trans., 212, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 3rd ed. ed. S. Marc Cohen et al., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005).

²⁸ Lamb, trans., 301, in *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library 165 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

satirized by a demonstration of the myriad absurdities an eristic argument can be made to prove.²⁹ On this interpretation, then, Meno's argument being 'eristic' may suggest that it is not to be taken seriously: it is sophistic trickery that is only pertinent insofar as it gives Socrates an opportunity to introduce his theory of recollection.

But we have no obvious reasons for regarding Meno's motivations as similar to those of Euthydemus and Dion, though these latter are called "eristics"; if anything the preponderance of evidence suggests, as I have argued above, that Meno is conversing in good faith (or at least is not obviously refusing to do so), according, for example, to the "friendship constraint" suggested by Meno himself and articulated explicitly by Socrates, whereby those engaged in dialectic are to speak as friends, i.e. according to terms that both parties agree they understand. As we have seen, it violates the "friendship constraint" to define some term *x* (in Socrates's example, shape), by using another term *y* (in the same example, color), that the interlocutor does not already understand. It is Meno who raises this objection initially, but Socrates agrees that dialectic calls for the use of agreed-upon terms and revises his definition accordingly. If Meno's contributions to the dialogue are lacking, it is not obviously as a result of his wanting to "defeat" Socrates at any point prior to the introduction of the paradox, so the burden of proof would presumably be the interpretation that would suddenly recast Meno's motivations.

On the other hand, I suggested above that by the time his objections to inquiry appear, Meno is surely frustrated; this is supported by his "image" of Socrates as the torpedo-fish. Perhaps this is a reason for thinking Meno's motivations may not have begun as but have now

²⁹Euthydemus 277b-278b

become merely contentious: Meno is annoyed and looking for some trick that would put Socrates on the defensive, so that his own embarrassment at lacking an adequate definition of virtue, despite his many speeches on the subject, would at least be matched by Socrates's inability to justify his own inquisitive project. But this too is little-supported by Plato's text.

In fact, it is Socrates himself that gets this argument off the ground by suggesting that knowing something at all means knowing it *completely*: Socrates implies from the very beginning of this dialogue that he and his fellow Athenians (and indeed, everyone Socrates has ever met) are in a state of *utter ignorance* with regard to virtue (71a5-71c4):

SOC: I am so far from knowing whether or not virtue is taught that I happen not to know what in the world [ὅτι ποτ'] virtue is at all [τὸ παράπαν]... I share my fellow citizens' poverty in this matter, and I blame myself for not knowing about virtue at all [τὸ παράπαν]. And if I do not know what something is, how can I know of what sort it is? Or does it seem to you to be possible, if one does not know who Meno is at all, to know whether he is handsome or wealthy or even well-bred, or in fact the opposite of these? Does it seem to you to be possible?

MEN: Not to me. But you, Socrates, truly do not know what virtue is? [...]

SOC: Not only that, friend, but it seems to me that I also haven't yet met anyone else who did know.³⁰

In light of the above, it is not hard to understand why Meno goes on to ask how Socrates will fruitfully inquire into that which he doesn't know at all [τὸ παράπαν].

Recall once more that it was Socrates who suggested that he (not anyone, in the first instance, but Socrates himself) could not possibly know whether virtue was teachable while not at all knowing what it is, just as one could not possibly know whether Meno were handsome, well-born, etc., while not knowing at all who Meno is. Following this line of thought, one might indeed be perplexed at the possibility of recognizing something not-at-all-

³⁰ Translation mine.

known in general, whether this is a quality of the another unknown, as Socrates suggests (teachability/handsomeness), or the unknown thing in question (virtue, Meno), as Meno's objection implies. Nothing about Meno's objection suggests equivocation or linguistic trickery on his part, especially given the "not-at-all" (parapan) modifier came from Socrates himself from the beginning of the dialogue. So even if Meno is indeed frustrated, even looking for an "out" that would make Socrates look as silly as Meno, it isn't obvious that this proceeds from bad motives on Meno's part; at most we could charge Meno with looking for Socrates to be consistent with his own utterances—a standard which Socrates himself maintains as a guiding principle in all such conversations.

Finally, regarding my "motivational" objection to the "sophistic" interpretation of eristic, note that Socrates nowhere calls Meno himself (an) eristic: Socrates invites Meno to notice a quality of the argument in question: "Do you realize what a[n eristic] argument you are bringing up?"(cite). If I am right that Meno's motives are at least uncertain, this would seem to mean that the argument is the intended target of Socrates's charge, but it seems unlikely that a logos as such could be possessed of bad motives. What is more likely is that the argument is by its nature destructive; surely it is easier to understand how an argument could be destructive without being itself an agent (i.e., one with its own motives). If a valid argument would purport to show that something good is impossible—especially if it were to succeed!—we might well call it "destructive"; this need not imply that it is frivolous, mere trickery, or unsound.

Secondly, the "mere sophistry" interpretation of eristic fails given Socrates's role in the argument's development. Meno himself, as has been well-documented, only asks

questions, and their scope is relatively limited: namely, to Socrates in particular; and to Socrates's searching for what he doesn't himself know. It is Socrates who formalizes the questions raised by Meno as a properly constructed argument with the conclusion that fruitful inquiry is impossible. Socrates "elevates" this objection to the status of a proper dilemma, expanding its scope first to include any and all would-be inquirers, and secondly to inquiry into what one already knows. Meno has not foreclosed the possibility of the latter; indeed, as I have mentioned above, this may seem *prima facie* the less problematic of what become in Socrates's mouth two horns of a dilemma. Perhaps I already know who Meno is, for instance, but I happen not to know whether he is well-bred. Plausibly, I could investigate that which I already know—the person "Meno"—and in so doing come to know more about Meno, for instance, that he is well-bred. Perhaps it is for this reason that Meno himself doesn't mention this worry; the question, then, is why Socrates would do so, and why he would introduce the impossibility of searching for what one knows as part of formalizing what we know as Meno's Paradox. Given his readiness to read into Meno's "real" meaning and his extension of the stakes of the argument, it seems that Socrates has worries of his own about the possibility of inquiry; it is as if Meno has chanced upon a subject that Socrates has been waiting for an opportunity to address. Whatever the answer, I suggest, it is not because Socrates takes the argument lightly or as mere sophistry.

In order to construct this argument, Socrates has to add a premise that Meno doesn't mention. Socrates has already introduced a universalized version of Meno's question, asserting that one could not fruitfully inquire into what one doesn't know because he would have nothing to set as the target of his inquiry. This is enough to apply to Socrates's situation,

but it does not preclude the possibility of all inquiry: it is not yet clear that one couldn't inquire into something already knows, or knows in some special, qualified way. Socrates goes further, however, by adding the premise that one couldn't fruitfully inquire into what one already knows because one already knows it, and thus has no need to inquire. These two premises taken together, along with a version of the law of the excluded middle³¹ (for any x , one either has knowledge of it or not). According to Socrates, Meno's argument³² holds that these two options are exhaustive, and that whichever option obtains, inquiry is impossible; therefore, inquiry is impossible.

With Socrates's problematization of inquiry into something known, Meno's objection becomes a logical dilemma: One cannot inquire into to what one doesn't know, as one will be unequipped to recognize it even if "found"; and one cannot inquire into what one knows, since there can be no meaningful searching for what one already has in hand. Hence, inquiry is impossible.

Third, the "mere sophistry" interpretation of "eristic" fails in light of Socrates's elaborate reply to it: were the "eristic argument" that is Meno's Paradox a merely "verbal" challenge—one that depends on (bad-faith) rhetorical gymnastics rather than truth—it should not take an expert dialectician of Socrates's stature much to refute it. Indeed, Socrates dispenses with a similar dilemma in the Euthydemus in short order, and with no appeal to poets or trust in the goodness of what they report. But in the Meno we have a response of a

³¹ Fine, 88.

³² Although as we have seen, it seems to be at least as much Socrates's argument as it is Meno's, if not more so.

very different nature, uncharacteristic of Socrates in general and especially when confronted with language games as in the case of other “eristics”.

A subtler and more formidable conception of ‘eristic’ would be that Socrates means that the argument appears to establish its conclusion but fails, and is therefore either unsound or invalid. This is the understanding of eristic that we find in Aristotle,³³ and it has the interpretive advantage of explaining why Socrates treats the argument as though it is worth taking seriously even though it ultimately fails. Furthermore, it has been thought that this finds textual support at *Meno* 81a1-3 where Socrates claims that the argument is not a good [kalon] one.³⁴ Fine has some seemingly straightforward reasons for resisting this view:

Socrates says that he is convinced that the theory of recollection is true (81e1-2): *that's* why we should believe it. Further, its truth shows how inquiry is possible. If inquiry is possible, the dilemma is unsound.... In saying that the eristic argument isn't a good one, he doesn't mean that the dilemma is a bad argument for a true conclusion. He means that it fails to establish its false conclusion. Hence he thinks it is either unsound or invalid.³⁵

There are two problems with the first claim: first, it is misleading to say that Socrates tells us he is 'convinced' that the theory of recollection is true. In the passage that Fine is referring to, Socrates says, "Putting my trust in its truth, I am prepared to inquire with you into the nature of virtue."³⁶ Obviously there is an important difference between being convinced that something is true and putting one's trust or faith in a claim--especially when one has explicitly

³³ *Sophistici Elenchi* 165b.

³⁴ Fine 84.

³⁵ Fine, 107-8.

³⁶ *Meno*, 81e1-2. The Greek for 'trust in' here is *pisteuon*, which can also be rendered as 'put faith in,' or 'rely on.'

pragmatic reasons for accepting a belief, as Socrates does. This brings us to the second problem with Fine's claim: even if we accept her reading that Socrates is *convinced* that his story is true, that is not why he says *we* should believe it.

His remark that the argument is not a good [kalon] one is not sufficient to establish that Socrates views the argument as unsound. Readers of Plato well know that, in the Dialogues, *kalon* often refers to what is noble, or fine, or beautiful. And it would not be uncharacteristic of Socrates to use *kalon* in just this way, to denote the nobility (or moral goodness) of a belief. Consider the following from the *Phaedo*, where Socrates encourages his interlocutors to believe in an afterlife where one's having lived virtuously—i.e., philosophically—is rewarded (114d):

No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble (καλός) one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places...and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been prolonging my tale (μῦθον).³⁷

There is more to be said about this passage, but for now it is sufficient to note the use of *kalon* in this context where it signifies the nobility or moral goodness of a belief—notably, of a belief that is choice-worthy *because it is noble*. It's clear in this passage that Socrates does not think the 'risk' is noble because the belief being risked is true or probably true; rather it is worth believing the belief is true *because the belief is noble*. If, as I suspect, Socrates is using *kalos* in a similar way in the relevant passage from *Meno*, then Socrates's remark that Meno's

³⁷ Translation Grube: in Cooper, 97.

Paradox is not a good (*kalon*) argument is insufficient for establishing the conception of ‘eristic’ to mean unsound.

However, in response to Meno’s question following Socrates’s articulation of the dilemma—“Does that argument not seem sound (καλῶς λέγεσθαι, “well said”) to you, Socrates?”—Socrates claims after some marked hesitation that he doesn’t think so, explicitly on the basis of a myth related by some “wise men and women,” including the aforementioned poet Pindar, who spoke of divine matters in a way that was both “true and beautiful:” the soul, they claim, is immortal, therefore one must live one’s life as piously as possible. Meno’s Paradox is not *kalon*—which, in addition to “good” and “admirable,” can also be rendered as “beautiful,” “noble,” or “fine”—but what we are about to hear *is*. Note also that Socrates distances himself from the tellers of the story, invoking them as authority figures whose credentials include “hav[ing] studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry.”³⁸

It would be a gross understatement to note that this would be a strange way for anyone, much less Socrates, to answer the dilemma that has grown out of Meno’s objection. Not only does this reply from Socrates fail to address either horn of the dilemma specifically; it appeals to the kinds of authorities for whom Plato’s Socrates has famously little regard. In addition, one wonders why Socrates would treat such authorities as credible given his own “utter ignorance” with respect to virtue and, one assumes (cf Euthyphro), piety: elsewhere Socrates helps himself to skepticism of such religious authorities despite claiming, as in the present dialogue, no knowledge of the subject. Nonetheless, Socrates reckons this particular

³⁸ Ibid., 81a10-12.

story is true and noble, and evidently sufficient to overcome the challenge posed by Meno's Paradox; how precisely this is supposed to work, though, is by no means obvious.

Furthermore, he invites Meno to judge whether their story is true;³⁹ but on what grounds could Meno (or Socrates) possibly make this determination? So far in the dialogue, neither participant can say whether virtue is teachable; indeed, neither participant can give a satisfying answer to the question "what is virtue?" Socrates's and Meno's shared ignorance has led them now to the possibility that they may not even be able to inquire into anything at all since they don't know what it is, and Socrates's explicit defense against this argument is the story we are about to hear, told on the authority of religious figures of whom Socrates is usually notoriously skeptical. Here is what Socrates says:

As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul d has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. We must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. (81c4-e1)

For Socrates to call his myth an "argument"—a foil to that "eristic" paradox we have been discussing—is perhaps overstating the case. The word of religious authorities is that the soul is immortal; Socrates accepts their claim and infers that the soul has previously acquired knowledge of "all and everything," since it is immortal. Elsewhere in the dialogues, the

³⁹ Ibid., 81b2-3.

immortality of the soul is not so easily taken for granted.⁴⁰ It is surprising, then, that Socrates would (i) appeal to the soul's immortality in order to explain how fruitful inquiry could be possible in light of the challenges brought by Meno's Paradox; and (ii) base his reasons for trusting that the soul is immortal on a story from Pindar. Remember that we have strong reasons for thinking that Socrates is genuinely troubled by Meno's Paradox, which as an argument has the advantage of being based on *prima facie* plausible premises. One would think that Socrates would give a more rationally compelling reply to such a foundational challenge. Instead we are offered a story that would provide an escape *if we were to accept it*. The question, then, is this: why should we accept this story? The following passage reveals Socrates' answer to this question:

For as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no reason why we should not, by remembering but one single thing—an act which men call learning—discover everything else, if we have courage and faint not in the search...So we must not hearken to that [eristic] argument: it would make us idle, and is pleasing only to the indolent ear, whereas the other makes us energetic and inquiring. Putting my trust in its truth, I am ready to inquire with you into the nature of virtue.⁴¹

This passage is absolutely crucial for understanding what Socrates really thinks about the challenge of Meno's paradox and what it means for potential inquirers: here we are given an explanation for how it is that recollection is supposed to answer (or not) the concerns raised by Meno's Paradox; most importantly for our purposes, we have our first clear indication that Socrates has potentially pragmatic motives for positing the story of recollection. Indeed,

⁴⁰ See especially *Phaedo*, 70b, in which the notion of the soul's immortality is treated as a claim that requires justification, and “no small amount of faith and persuasion” to be accepted.

⁴¹ *Meno*, 81d1-e2; I substituted “eristic” for Lamb's “captious.”

Socrates has "definite, assignable reasons"⁴² for why we should accept his own account over Meno's.

MP, whatever its defects, at least involves articulated premises and a conclusion; Socrates's anamnesis story is essentially the assumption that this particular Orphic myth, passed down by Pindar (who was earlier associated with Gorgias and Socrates's "tragic" definition(!)), is accurate, and therefore that its premise that the soul is immortal is true. Having been through multiple go-rounds, then, the soul (every person's soul, evidently) has learned all there is to learn before arriving on the current scene. But it arrives having "forgotten" this knowledge—presumably from drinking of the river Lethe in the Underworld as Socrates claims in Republic X—so it is up to each person to "recollect" what he once knew. That Socrates would resort to a myth at this juncture, and then reason from it in this way—when the possibility of inquiry appears to be genuinely in question—clearly calls for some explanation.

First, we should note that the "argument" is obviously question-begging: assuming that the soul is immortal doesn't make it so, and the myth's being passed down by religious "experts" lends it no guarantee of credibility, especially given Socrates's characteristically skeptical attitude toward received myths and (so-called) religious expertise: recall, for instance, Socrates's argument in the Apology that to fear death is nothing but to assume knowledge one does not—indeed, cannot—have; namely, knowledge of the afterlife.

⁴² This may remind one of William James' definition of truth from *Pragmatism*: "The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons," (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 37.

Secondly, the anamnesis story doesn't actually explain what it is ostensibly introduced to explain, which is how learning is supposed to be possible despite MP. Even if we assume, with Socrates, that the soul is immortal and has learned all things, the same question remains: how did we acquire the knowledge in the first place? Meno's Paradox still seems to obtain, as having "seen all things here and in the underworld" doesn't explain how we could recognize what we don't already know.

In order to better understand how Socrates's account of recollection and Meno's paradox are opposed, it will be helpful to borrow some terms from Leo Strauss. Strauss frames a large part of the action of *Meno* as a story of two competing *logoi*: Meno's "lazy logos," and Socrates's "holy logos."⁴³ Meno's Paradox seems to demonstrate that (fruitful) inquiry is (or should be) impossible, whether the inquirer knows about what he or she is going to inquire into or not; Socrates has called the argument 'eristic' twice already, and I have suggested that we might read this as "destructive," rather than "*unsound*," as Fine suggests. Here we have a compelling reason for reading 'eristic' in this way: Socrates tells us that, if accepted, the Paradox would make us lazy, idle, and uninquiring. Socrates implies that we could be persuaded by Meno's argument if we chose to be or, perhaps, if we allowed ourselves to be persuaded; and if we were so persuaded, we would be made lazy. This is why Strauss calls Meno's paradox a "lazy logos." In the passage above, Socrates asserts that there is nothing to prevent us being able to recollect—which men call 'learning'—except for the possibility that we would lose courage and falter in the search.

⁴³ Strauss, April 19, 1966; note that the contrast of 'Meno's' argument with 'Socrates's' argument is for ease of reference—as I have argued, the argument is not attributable to Meno alone but to both men.

Perhaps the strangest part of the anamnesis story, posed as it is in opposition to Meno's "eristic" argument, is that Socrates's explicit reason for preferring his "holy logos" is that it will make us better—specifically, more energetic and "keen on the search" for what we don't know—than Meno's "lazy" alternative, which would make us "idle". Socrates is unambiguous about the choice at hand: we must choose between Meno's lazy logos and Socrates's own holy logos, and we should choose the latter *because* it will benefit us. If readers have any doubt as to how seriously this 'because' should be taken, Plato has Socrates tell us the following at 86b:

Most of the points I have made in support of my argument are not such as I can confidently assert; but that the belief in the duty of inquiring after what we do not know will make us better and braver and less helpless than the notion that there is not even a possibility of discovering what we do not know, nor any duty of inquiring after it—this is a point for which I am prepared to do battle, so far as I am able, both in word and deed.⁴⁴

This is a very different justification than one might reasonably expect: Socrates does not say that Meno's argument is false and therefore that we shouldn't believe it—rather, we should reject Meno's paradox because of what it would do to us if we believed it, just as we should believe with Socrates in anamnesis because of what that belief would do in contrast.

It surely comes as no surprise, in light of the above, that scholars have struggled to make sense of this section of Plato's *Meno*. Interpretations have varied fairly widely—here I will mention two of the most prevalent:

One interpretive strategy is to regard the anamnesis story as a kind of farce: Meno's attempt to challenge Socrates with some sophistic trickery he probably learned from his

⁴⁴ Ibid., 86b7-c2.

teacher, the more competent sophist Gorgias, is met with some trickery of Socrates's own; just as Socrates earlier indulged Meno with a "tragic" definition of shape, he now tells Meno the kind of story Meno likes to hear, and the lesson for readers is supposed to be that this obviously a poor imitation of dialectic rigor. This would explain, presumably, why Socrates would appeal here to otherwise questionable authorities, and why he would help himself to the assumption that the soul is immortal—a claim which is decidedly not taken for granted elsewhere in Plato, when Socrates is in a less playful mood and conversing with more competent interlocutors. So goes the "farce" interpretation.

But this cannot be right. I have argued above that the text doesn't justify an interpretation of "eristic" as mere sophistry: Socrates clearly takes the argument quite seriously, as we see by his own substantial involvement in formalizing the dilemma, and by its having arisen from Socrates's own commitments about knowledge as they appear from the very beginning of the dialogue. Additionally, the stakes are too high for the "farce" interpretation to be viable: inquiry is something on which Socrates literally stakes his life, and a valid argument that would show it to be impossible is a threat that must be dealt with sincerely and in earnest.

Alternatively, one might interpret this exchange as something like a "how-possibly" account that explains, serviceably enough, why successful inquiry is possible, at least until a better account comes along. This is because, in the first place, successful inquiry is clearly possible because it in fact occurs; Socrates's geometry example would be sufficient to make this plain, even if it weren't already obvious. And since we know that successful inquiry is possible, we know that Meno's argument cannot be right—i.e., it is unsound—so the details

of Socrates's myth are relatively unimportant: the soul must be immortal, so this interpretation goes, because it is observably true that inquiry can succeed, which it could not do if we could only inquire into we-know-not-what, as per the "targeting" objection already discussed. So it must be that the knowledge is already in our souls, albeit "forgotten," and this could only be the case if we had learned it prior to this earthly life.

This interpretation has a few things going for it: first, it would explain why Socrates helps himself to a myth by way of religious authorities. This would indeed be an odd strategy for Socrates were it not the case that his myth is only a vehicle, a symbolic representation, for communicating what has to be true given what we already know: namely, that successful inquiry is possible because it clearly occurs. Second, the "how-possibly" interpretation of anamnesis apparently does justice to Socrates's not insignificant role in developing the paradox: Socrates overcomes the dilemma while granting its premises—since we can inquire neither into what we don't know, nor into what we currently know, and yet we can successfully inquire, it must be that there is a third possibility: we can inquire into what we knew but have forgotten. So goes the "how-possibly" interpretation.

But this interpretation fails to take Socrates sufficiently seriously. For all its strengths, the how-possibly interpretation has the defect of disregard Plato's actual text. If this were Socrates's argument—if he knows that Meno's paradox can't be right because successful inquiry is obviously possible, we should expect Socrates to say as much. But he does not; in fact the case that Socrates makes for believing in anamnesis depends explicitly on the likely consequences of our adopting either the "lazy" or the "holy" logos. Indeed, Socrates's argument here has been pointed to as the earliest instance in western literature of a

specifically pragmatic argument. If my reader is unpersuaded, consider Socrates's summary thoughts on the issue, including its stakes and significance:

SOCRATES: I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (86b6-c2)

We must appreciate Socrates's explicit uncertainty about the argument "in all other respects" here: evidently the only part of the argument to which Socrates is steadfastly committed is the claim that we will be better if we (choose to) believe it; this means plainly, by Socrates's own account, that he is not prepared to insist on the accuracy of his anamnesis story as a true account of the soul's activities between earthly manifestations; neither is Socrates insisting, by inference, that the soul is immortal(!), as this too is presumably among the anamnesis argument's 'other respects,'—i.e. beyond the specific claim that this story will make us better if we believe it—regarding which Socrates casts doubt. The part for which Socrates is prepared to do battle (*διαμάχομαι*), and to do so at any cost, both in word and deed, is identified in no uncertain terms. This is why the alternative interpretations I discuss above cannot ultimately be right—those interpretations only work if we completely disregard the reasons Socrates plainly gives for his view and for why belief in anamnesis is worth risking.

In setting up his "holy logos," Socrates starts by saying that he thinks his story is true *and* admirable (*kalon*). Note that he marks these two features of his account distinctly. In saying that his account is both true *and kalon*, it seems likely that Socrates has something

beyond truth in mind in speaking of his account as *kalon*. This reading has the added interpretive advantage of echoing moments in other dialogues where Socrates draws a similar distinction between an idea or theory's being "true" in a plain, straightforward sense, and its being "worthy of belief." For instance, at *Republic* 377d, the possibility of a "*kalon*" lie is introduced, and this idea is later developed in the form of the infamous "noble falsehood."⁴⁵ Furthermore, a revealing passage in the *Phaedo* implies that one can and should "risk belief" in certain circumstances, expressly when the belief being risked is a noble (*kalon*) one.⁴⁶ It is not at all difficult to see how this anticipates the thought of the American pragmatist William James; it is similarly easy to see why one might be inclined to take up the pragmatic reading that Fine so easily rejects.

Now one may want to object that Meno's lazy logos is not a viable candidate for belief given that inquiry is evidently possible. We seem to inquire successfully all the time: e.g., "What time is our date?", "Where are you living now?", or, "Who's that at my door?" Indeed, this conviction has played a significant part in shaping various interpretations of the *Meno* and of these passages in particular. If we read Socrates as being thoroughly unimpressed with Meno's Paradox because it is obviously false, then it seems clear that 'eristic' in the relevant context just means "frivolous" or "sophistic," and that, when Socrates remarks that Meno's argument is not a good one, he just means that it is wrong. An advocate of this reading would likely see the slave example as thoroughly sufficient justification for this view, and would thereby be led away from some subtle (and some, not so subtle) indicators that Socrates is not

⁴⁵ *Rep.*, 414b-c.

⁴⁶ *Phaedo*, 114d.

just peripherally interested in the stakes of Meno's Paradox; they would miss what I argue in this paper is strong evidence that Socrates sees it as a potentially serious problem for the possibility of inquiry, that can lead to the destruction of inquiry in practice if one is persuaded by it and thus loses the will and energetic spirit necessary to engage in inquiry.

A relevant consideration lingers throughout this section of the dialogue, though it is not explicitly stated: for Socrates, as I have argued, inquiry is the first moral imperative. If we want to live well rather than badly—and plausibly we cannot fail to want this—we are as it were always already committed to the possibility of successful inquiry. However our respective moral developments ultimately unfold, they must begin in the same place: with the search—i.e. with inquiry into—virtue. In the absence of standing knowledge of virtue, which Socrates claims never to have found in himself or indeed anyone, the only thing we can know we ought to do is, first, to inquire. This in mind, we are in a better position to make sense of Socrates's claim that Meno's paradox is an eristic argument: it is destructive, precisely because, as Socrates tells us, it would make us lazy. It would sap us, if we believed it, of the necessary energy and courage required to remain faithful in the search for what we don't know, these things being necessary given formidable reasons for doubt, and even hopelessness.

On Plato's *Gorgias*

SOCRATES: I hope you won't say what you've said many times, that anyone who wants to will put me to death. That way I, too, won't repeat my claim that it would be a wicked man doing this to a good man. And don't say that he'll confiscate any of my possessions, either, so I won't reply that when he's done so he won't know how to use them. Rather, just as he unjustly confiscated them from me, so, having gotten them, he'll use them unjustly too, and if unjustly, shamefully, and if shamefully, badly.

CALLICLES: How sure you seem to me to be, Socrates, that not even one of these things will happen to you! You think that you live out of their way and that you wouldn't be brought to court perhaps by some very corrupt and mean man.

SOCRATES: In that case I really am a fool, Callicles, if I don't suppose that anything might happen to anybody in this city. But I know this well: that if I do come into court involved in one of those perils which you mention, the man who brings me in will be a wicked man—for no good man would bring in a man who is not a wrongdoer—and it wouldn't be at all strange if I were to be put to death. Would you like me to tell you my reason for expecting this?

CALLICLES: Yes, I would.

SOCRATES: I believe that I'm one of a few Athenians—so as not to say I'm the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the true political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what's best. They don't aim at what's most pleasant. And because I'm not willing to do those clever things you recommend, I won't know what to say in court. And the same account I applied to Polus comes back to me. For I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, “Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes, on you. He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses them. He gives them the most bitter potions to drink and forces hunger and thirst on them. He doesn't feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do!” What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say? Or if he should tell them the truth and say, “Yes, children, I was doing all those things in the interest of health,” how big an uproar do you think such “judges” would make? Wouldn't it be a loud one?

It is perhaps unfortunate that we don't hear more from Gorgias in this dialogue which bears his name; the bulk of Socrates's conversation is with Callicles, as in the above. I say this is unfortunate because it would no doubt inform a clearer interpretation of the *Meno* if we did, taken as *Meno* is with Gorgias's “wisdom”; it is a characteristic feature of Plato's brilliance that we see enough of Gorgias here to wonder, not *entirely* speculatively, how the *Meno* might

have turned out if Gorgias were speaking for himself rather than indirectly through Meno and some unfriendly jabs from Socrates (though we may reasonably suspect at least some of said jabs to be aimed at Meno's idolization of the sophist—if that is indeed what Gorgias is). But this is by no means to take anything away from Callicles, who acquits himself competently despite “digging his heels in” to some extent.

In the above passage, Socrates echoes several of the key themes that we associate with Plato's Socrates: that a wicked man cannot harm a better; that Socrates's “speeches”⁴⁷ aim at what is best, not gratification; that Socrates's position with respect to his judges would be like that of a doctor before a jury of children, facing charges brought by a pastry chef(!)—a wonderful analogy as funny as it is biting;⁴⁸ Socrates “plays the hits” here.

In what follows, we encounter another eschatological myth not unlike those of the *Meno* and *Phaedo*, as well as the “Myth of Er” that concludes Plato's *Republic*

SOCRATES: Give ear then—as they put it—to a very fine account. You'll think that it's a mere tale, I believe, although I think it's an account, for what I'm about to say I will tell you as true. As Homer tells it, after Zeus, Posidon, and Pluto took over the sovereignty from their father, they divided it among themselves. Now there was a law concerning human beings during Cronus' time, one that gods even now continue to observe, that when a man who has lived a just and pious life comes to his end, he goes to the Isles of the Blessed, to make his abode in complete happiness, beyond b the reach of evils, but when one who has lived in an unjust and godless way dies, he goes to the prison of payment and retribution, the one they call Tartarus. (523a-b4)

Note first the ambiguity with which Socrates frames his story: it is a ‘very fine account,’ (μάλα καλοῦ λόγου), says Socrates, though Callicles may well take it to be a mere

⁴⁷ In quotations here because Socrates does not characteristically engage in the performative kind of “demonstration” we associate with Gorgias and the like.

⁴⁸ See *Republic* for similarly poignant analogies to the same effect

tale (μῦθος)—a claim Socrates repeats after he has relayed it. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this dissertation to try and settle just what Socrates makes of the mythos/logos distinction, though it is worth noting here if only in passing that the Greek words share a fundamental meaning, namely that of “a thing said”: our conventional use of “myth” as pure fiction or fabrication no doubt does little justice to its subtler sense for the ancient Greeks. But it will be sufficient for our purposes to notice that Socrates seems open to the possibility that it could be regarded either way—one must ultimately admit uncertainty with respect to such things—even while making clear his trust in and commitment to the account in virtue of its goodness:

So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates. Let someone despise you as a fool and throw dirt on you, if he likes. And, yes, by Zeus, confidently let him deal you that demeaning blow. Nothing d terrible will happen to you if you really are an admirable and good man, one who practices excellence. And then, after we've practiced it together, then at last, if we think we should, we'll turn to politics, or then we'll deliberate about whatever subject we please, when we're better at deliberat-ing than we are now. For it's a shameful thing for us, being in the condition we appear to be in at present—when we never think the same about the same subjects, the most important ones at that—to sound off as though we're somebodies. That's how far behind in education we've fallen. So e let's use the account that has now been disclosed to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death. Let us follow it, then, and call on others to do so, too, and let's not follow the one that you believe in and call on me to follow. For that one is worthless, Callicles. (869c6-e6)

The similarities between this passage and those of the Meno's recollection myth are striking; scholars are probably right to place the Gorgias next to the Meno in order of composition, though such questions need not concern us here.

Both accounts are introduced as “fine” (kalon); both are told with some uncertainty, though this is more explicit in the Meno; even so, Socrates expresses commitment to both

accounts in virtue of their goodness—not, we must note, their likelihood of being true⁴⁹:

Socrates in the *Meno* says plainly that the belief-worthiness of his myth is specifically to do

with its beneficial function for the believer. That, recall, was the (only!) part of the

recollection story for which Socrates claimed to be willing to fight, at any cost. Similarly,

Socrates in the *Gorgias* admits the possibility of a better and truer account than the one he has

just offered (527a5-8), but nonetheless takes his stand on the worthiness of its upshot for the

believer:

But among so many arguments this one alone survives refutation and remains steady: that doing what's unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it's not seeming to be good but being good that a man should take care of more than anything" (869b3-7).

As with recollection in the *Meno*, where the myth serves to ground the claim that we should

strive to live as piously as possible—and we will be better if we believe we (can and) must

search for what we don't know, rather than if we believe the “eristic” argument—the *Gorgias*

myth similarly ends with a “call to action” of sorts: let us be led by *this* account, says

Socrates, rather than that of the rhetorician, as the former speaks in favor of living virtuously

while the latter speaks only for flattery. So again, the choice-worthiness of the “holy logos” is

explicitly based on the good it would do for us if we believed it, or, as it is most helpfully put

here, if we would “use it as our guide.” Indeed, this is perhaps the clearest description we get

of what Socrates means in general when he speaks of *choosing* this rather than that belief—an

activity that one may reasonably doubt is open to us if we take believing to be nothing but an

attitude toward the truth or falsity of a proposition. If by “risking a belief” Socrates means

⁴⁹ Though by flagging this I don't mean to suggest that Socrates thinks they are false.

what he says here in the *Gorgias*—using an account (a story, a thing said) as a guide; following and so being led by it—then the “belief-act” in question appears more like a *commitment* to the principles that would sustain us, that we need in order to make sense of striving to learn how to be good, of being steadfast in the search, of clinging to hope in the face of serious doubt and adversity; the belief-act, then, is less like deciding what one thinks is true, and more like insisting that it *must be* by staking one’s life on it, at any cost, and in both word and deed.

Summary Remarks

Here we have “met” the first of what I have called “threats” to the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry, in the form of Meno’s Paradox. Socrates does not object to either horn of the dilemma; rather, he introduces a third possibility with respect to the relation between inquirer and target: we may inquire, says Socrates, into what we *have* known but have forgotten between our many earthly lives. This is “justified” entirely on the basis of the transmigration myth, which Socrates calls for believing just in virtue of the good it would do if believed—we are better off believing it is possible to inquire than believing it is not, since (as established in chapters 1 and 2) that is the first moral imperative.

The *Gorgias*, in addition to presenting the first “judgment” myth with which we are concerned, also sheds some light on what it may mean, practically, to “risk” a belief. Whereas it is perhaps doubtful that one can simply *choose* to think something is (propositionally) true, one *can* adopt a belief as a guiding principle for one’s life—as a commitment to be held fast whatever may be said against it.

Chapter Four Hope in the Afterlife

Remarks on Plato's *Phaedo*

We must start by noting that the “framing” of this dialogue, which concerns Socrates’s last hours and death, explicitly distances Plato himself from the events reported: in his list of the companions present at Socrates’s death, Phaedo, who was there, tells us that Plato was not—he is believed to have been ill (59b5-8). It has been speculated that this may be an effort on Plato’s part to acknowledge that this doesn’t mean to be an historically accurate account of Socrates’s last conversations. Perhaps, then, Plato gives himself permission to explore some of his own philosophical innovations while honoring his teacher, without attributing views to Socrates that Plato’s readership would no doubt find uncharacteristic of the former: these include relatively settled views of immortality, about which Socrates elsewhere expresses agnosticism; about Forms, which Socrates elsewhere treats essentially as definitions rather than as independently existing metaphysical entities; similarly, about the metaphysically “lofty” status of things like integers and properties, while Socrates elsewhere is mainly concerned with moral concepts.

Throughout this dissertation I have been agnostic both about the “Socratic problem” and any version of a “developmental thesis” regarding Plato’s work and thought, and I continue to think these issues are relatively unimportant for my purposes here. Still, I think a hard division between “early” and “middle” dialogues is unnecessary given the relative stability of Socrates’s primary commitments throughout; indeed, I will try to show that immortality, transmigration, and even the Forms, are all in the first instance introduced for the

purpose of grounding Socrates's philosophical mission. If this is right, then we need not distinguish sharply between earlier dialogues which are truer to the historical Socrates and later dialogues which focus more on Plato's own contributions while retaining Socrates as a "mouthpiece." The dialogue form itself makes the relationship between Plato and his characters ambiguous, and this was obviously deliberate on the author's part: we are invited to read the texts as Plato wrote them, on their own terms and in light of themes that run throughout, and that is what I have tried to do in this work.

Our dialogue begins—appropriately, as we'll see—with a brief discussion of fables. Socrates claims to have been inspired since his trial, at the bidding of a dream, to try his hand at poetry. He is evidently in such a mood from the start of the conversation:

Socrates sat up on the bed, bent his leg and rubbed it with his hand, and as he rubbed he said: "What a strange thing that which men call pleasure seems to be, and how astonishing the relation it has with what is thought to be its opposite, namely pain! A man cannot have both at the same time. Yet if he pursues and catches the one, he is almost always bound to catch the other also, like two creatures with one head. I think that if Aesop had noted this he would have composed a fable that a god wished to reconcile their opposition but could not do so, so he joined their two heads together, and therefore when a man has the one, the other follows later. This seems to be happening to me. My bonds caused pain in my leg, and now pleasure seems to be following." (Phaedo 60b2-c5)

Word of Socrates's poetic turn has apparently gotten around before the events of this dialogue, as we hear from Cebes, who is eager to know what led to such a thing. Socrates replies, as alluded to above, that he was trying to "find out the meaning of certain dreams, and to satisfy [his] conscience":

The dreams were something like this: the same dream often came to me in the past, now in one shape now in another, but saying the same thing: "Socrates," it said, "practice and cultivate the arts." In the past I imagined that it was instructing and advising me to do what I was doing, such as those who encourage runners in a race,

that the dream was thus bidding me do the very thing I was doing, namely, to practice the art of philosophy, this being the highest kind of art, and I was doing that. But now, after my trial took place, and the festival of the god was preventing my execution, I thought that, in case my dream was bidding me to practice this popular art, I should not disobey it but compose poetry. I thought it safer not to leave here until I had satisfied my conscience by writing poems in obedience to the dream. (60d6-61b2)

This passage has sometimes been interpreted as portraying Socrates in an unusually sentimental light, as he is facing the end of his life, and so turning to more lighthearted activities; the time for serious philosophical work has largely passed for Socrates.

Even if this is right, we should not disregard the significance of Socrates's dream: he has always taken it to mean he should practice philosophy—'the highest of arts'—but now he is wondering whether the same dream was in fact calling him to poetry, not just now but *all along*. That this is for Socrates a viable interpretation calls for a deeper analysis than can be offered here, but we should note that it surely speaks against a hard opposition between mythos and logos; subsequent passages in the *Phaedo* similarly seem to blur this distinction, as have aforementioned passages in previous chapters of the present work.

Socrates concludes his answer by asking Cebes to pass along a word of advice to their friend Evenus, also a philosopher: "[B]id him farewell, and tell him, if he is wise, to follow me [in death] as soon as possible" (61b6-8). Simmias is taken aback at this advice, being unconvinced that Evenus would be in a hurry to take it—is Socrates advising suicide? Socrates, in reply, asks whether Simmias and Cebes have not heard about such things from

their associate Philolaus, a leading Pythagorean⁵⁰. They have heard no clear account on such matters, so Socrates continues thusly:

Indeed, I too speak about this from hearsay, but I do not mind telling you what I have heard, for it is perhaps most appropriate for one who is about to depart yonder to tell and examine tales about what we believe e that journey to be like. What else could one do in the time we have until sunset?

But whatever is the reason, Socrates, for people to say that it is not right to kill oneself? As to your question just now, I have heard Philolaus say this when staying in Thebes and I have also heard it from others, but I have never heard anyone give a clear account of the matter.

Well, he said, we must do our best, and you may yet hear one. And it may well astonish you if this subject, alone of all things, is simple, and it is never, as with everything else, better at certain times and for certain people to die than to live. And if this is so, you may well find it astonishing that those for whom it is better to die are wrong to help themselves, and that they must wait for someone else to benefit them.

And Cebes, lapsing into his own dialect, laughed quietly and said: “Zeus knows it is.” Indeed, said Socrates, it does seem unreasonable when put like that, but perhaps there is reason to it. There is the explanation that is put in the language of the mysteries, that we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away. That seems to me an impressive doctrine and one not easy to understand fully. (61d9-62b5)

Socrates couches his account in hearsay and in the language of “mysteries,” as we have seen him do with similar accounts before, here again blurring the line between *mythos* and *logos*: Socrates begins his remarks above by announcing the he is pleased at the prospect of “telling tales” —i.e. mythologizing (*μυθολογεῖν*), as is appropriate for one who is about to die—and ends with the claim that this story, again told by way of *hearsay and the language of mysteries*, is an impressive *logos* (albeit difficult to understand, and naturally so: “fine things are difficult,” after all). The explanatory power of this *logos* as it pertains to the question at

⁵⁰ Pythagoreans being known for their belief in the immortality and transmigration of the soul, and therefore for their overriding concern with the soul’s purity (as per Cooper).

hand—namely, the moral status of suicide—is perhaps doubtful; more relevant for our purposes is the mood Socrates here perpetuates by continuing to straddle the line between story and argument. At any rate, Simmias and Cebes remain unconvinced that Socrates’s lightheartedness toward his own death is appropriate; Socrates defends his bearing as follows:

Come then, he said, let me try to make my defense to you more convincing than it was to the jury. For, Simmias and Cebes, I should be wrong not to resent dying if I did not believe that I should go first to other wise and good gods, and then to men who have died and are better than men are here. Be assured that, as it is, I expect to join the company of good men. This last I would not altogether insist on, but if I insist on anything at all in these matters, it is that I shall come to gods who are very good masters. That is why I am not so resentful, because I have good hope that some future awaits men after death, as we have been told for years, a much better future for the good than for the wicked. (63b4-c6)

Socrates appeals for the first time in this dialogue to his hope for an afterlife, one that is better for the good than for the wicked, as we have seen above in the myths of the Meno and Gorgias. These eschatological myths all serve, ultimately, to “ground” the same premise: we should try to be good, and we should hope to be rewarded for doing so. This is Socrates’s antidote for despair and idleness, and his justification for hope, courage, and vigor. These are not defended discursively—perhaps they cannot, or need not be so defended. They are foundational commitments that are necessary for getting our moral projects—that is, our lives—off the ground, by promising the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry. We can hope to inquire successfully only if we can recollect; we can hope to persist in the struggle to know, absent the fear of death, only if we can expect a rewarding afterlife: hence, it *must be* that we can recollect; it *must be* that we can expect a happy afterlife. These must be our guiding principles, we must be led by them.

Socrates now moves to a more discursive mood in defense of his relative cheerfulness with respect to his imminent death, claiming that the soul must reason best apart from the body: death being the separation of these, then, the philosopher may reasonably look to his bodily death with hopeful expectation—if anyone reaches reality in itself, in its pureness, says Socrates, it is one who approaches it by thought alone:

All these things will necessarily make [παρίστημι, “cause to stand, place aside”] the true philosophers believe [δοξάζω, “think, imagine”] and b say to each other something like this: “There is likely to be something such as a path to guide us out of our confusion, because as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth. (66b1-5)

The true philosopher is *made* to believe that there must be a way out of the confusion that results from the soul’s union with the body, says Socrates, explicitly for the reason that the object of her desire—the truth—will not be attainable otherwise. This is not an argument from what is known for certain; rather, it is of a more pragmatic bent. Socrates puts the situation plainly in the following:

If we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves e with the soul by itself. It seems likely that we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom, as our argument shows, not while we live; for if it is impossible to attain any pure knowledge with the body, then one of two things is true: either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death. Then and not before, the soul is by itself apart from the body. While we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself frees us. In this way we shall escape the contamination of the body's folly; we shall be likely to be in the company of people of the same kind, and by our own efforts we shall know all that is pure, which is presumably the truth, for it is not permitted to the impure to attain the pure.” Such are the things, Simmias, that all those who love learning in the proper manner must say to one another and believe. Or do you not think so?

I certainly do, Socrates. (66e1-67c3)

Again Socrates speaks of what lovers of learning *must* say and believe: it must be that we can attain knowledge after death, as this evidently is not possible under conditions of embodiment. The implicit premise, it seems, is that the object of their desire *must* be (at least, must be thought to be) attainable. Such an argument would be dubious—question-begging at best—were it not the case that this proceeds from a *personal commitment* rather than a rationally justified set of premises. Suppose, for example, that I could only acquire the object of my desire if I happened to purchase a winning lottery ticket: in no way would it follow that I *will* (as a master of fact) purchase a winner, as history doesn't typically unfold solely according to what I wish would be the case. But if I am going to purchase a ticket in the first place, presumably I *must* say and believe that I have some chance of winning—this appears to be a necessary prerequisite for the fact's coming to be at all.⁵¹ Similarly, it appears, philosophers find themselves committed to the possibility that they may attain knowledge after death (and therefore that they could survive it) just in virtue of being philosophers; i.e., as a consequence of their prior and more foundational commitment to philosophy as such. The alternative, that pure knowledge is impossible, is intolerable for one who would devote his life to pursuing it.

Hence, Socrates does not speak as a prophet who is by divine revelation certain of his pronouncements, nor even as a geometer who is certain of his proofs. Rather, Socrates speaks (repeatedly) of hope:

⁵¹ As William James would likely agree.

And if this is true, my friend, said Socrates, there is good hope that on arriving where I am going, if anywhere, I shall acquire what has been our chief preoccupation in our past life, so that the journey that is now ordered for me is full of good hope, as it is also for any other man who believes that his mind has been prepared and, as it were, purified. (66d6-67c3)

Socrates expressly clings here to hope and therefore to the conditions for its possibility, rather than the beliefs that would lead only to despair, as we have already seen in the *Meno* and the *Gorgias*.

I will pause briefly on an anecdote,⁵² acknowledging that while it may not have happened, it easily could have and probably has: A mother, who is an avowed atheist, is at her ailing son's death bed. The dying boy asks her, "Is heaven real?", to which she replies, "yes, heaven is real." When she is later asked by a friend, who knows her and knows how seriously she takes her atheism, how she could so brazenly lie to her own son, she replies as follows: "I did not lie to my son. No, I don't believe that heaven is real—and yet I know that it *has to be*, because I have to see him again."

With gratitude to my reader for indulging some sentimentality, I note that there is a recognizably similar spirit at work throughout the *Phaedo*: the philosopher's belief in an afterlife, says Socrates, is a direct result of his commitment to the possibility that knowledge can be attained; since that cannot be done in this life, it must be that knowledge can be attained elsewhere, and therefore it must be that there is (reasonable hope for) a future after death:

⁵² From Dr. Stephen D. Carden, to the best of my recollection.

Many men, at the death of their lovers, wives or sons, were willing to go to the underworld, driven by the hope of seeing there those for whose company they longed, and being with them. Will then a true lover of wisdom, who has a similar hope and knows that he will never find it to any extent except in Hades, be resentful of dying and not gladly undertake the journey thither? One must surely think so, my friend, if he is a true philosopher, for he is firmly convinced that he will not find pure knowledge anywhere except there. And if this is so, then, as I said just now, would it not be highly unreasonable for such a man to fear death? (68a3-b3)

Just as many people have been known to face death with hope, says Socrates, knowing their only chance of seeing their dearly departed again would have to be in some hereafter, the true philosopher faces death with similar hopes; this he ‘must surely think,’ for the alternative is intolerable. It is in light of such hope that Socrates faces his own imminent death with cheerfulness, having been eager at all times to be counted among the true practitioners of philosophy. Whether Socrates’s eagerness to this effect will have been worthwhile, he tells us, will only be proved with certainty upon his “arriving yonder.” (69d4-7) So this appears to be a matter of trust—of commitment—on Socrates’s part, rather than a claim that admits of discursive proof. Thus ends Socrates’s “defense” of his cheerfulness in the face of death.

Cebes claims to be mostly on board with Socrates’s speech, with one exception: “everything else you said is excellent, I think, but men find it very hard to believe what you said about the soul” (69e4-70a2). Of course, all that Socrates has just said depends entirely on what he had to say about the soul!—Plato’s keen sense of humor is especially welcome in such a somber context. To believe that the soul could survive the death of the body, says Cebes, would require “a good deal of faith and persuasive argument” (70b2-3), and Socrates agrees; this in contrast with aforementioned *Meno* passages in which the immortality of the soul is taken for granted on the authority of Pindar.

Socrates's first argument for the soul's immortality begins with reference to an "ancient theory" which holds that the souls of men arriving in the underworld come from here, and similarly that the souls arriving here come from the underworld; as the living can come from no other source than the non-living—i.e. the dead—this is "sufficient proof that these things are so." (70c6-d4). Thus begins a series of "proofs" for the soul's immortality, and readers should be forgiven if they find subsequent proofs as wanting as this one. This is not Socrates's best work, and it would not do to imagine that Plato means to present it as such. More likely, I would suggest, is that Plato's Socrates is here demonstrating the inadequacy of theoretical reason for establishing what must ultimately be a matter of trust, i.e. of faith. But not much hangs on this for my purposes, so for now I leave it to the side.

I will not analyze Socrates's "proofs" in more detail here, as I don't believe this is necessary for establishing the point I want to make: namely, that we should "cling to" belief in the soul's immortality for reasons independent of its likelihood. Socrates has already said as much and he will make the same case toward the end of the dialogue. For now, I only note that the role of recollection in the *Phaedo* appears to be the reverse of that in the *Meno*: In the *Meno*, as we have seen, it is claimed that recollection must be possible given that the soul is immortal. Here, however, it is claimed that the soul must be immortal given the fact of recollection. Whatever else is the case, Plato effectively calls both claims into question by relating them in these opposite ways: clearly they are interdependent, but neither is obvious *prima facie*; we are clearly invited to wonder why one should be taken for granted in order to justify the other when both claims can be reasonably doubted, as both indeed are in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, respectively.

Plato has Socrates acknowledge the interdependence of Forms and immortality in the following:

So this is our position, Simmias? he said. If those realities we are always talking about exist, the Beautiful and the Good and all that kind of reality, and we refer all the things we perceive to that reality, discovering that it existed before and is ours, and we compare these things with it, then, just e as they exist, so our soul must exist before we are born. If these realities do not exist, then this argument is altogether futile. Is this the position, that there is an equal necessity for those realities to exist, and for our souls to exist before we were born? If the former do not exist, neither do the latter? (67d5-e5)

Evidently, according to Socrates, the existence of Forms and the immortality of the soul must stand or fall together: if the former do not exist, Socrates admits, then neither do the latter. This, of course, is not obvious—presumably it could be true, for example, that souls are immortal (given that, as we have been told, the living must come from the dead, i.e. from the having-previously-lived), even if there do not exist immaterial Forms such as Justice, Beauty, Bigness, etc., in which perceptible particulars participate. But Socrates is not sensitive to this fairly obvious counterexample—or at least he doesn't say as much—and this might be reasonably taken to be bad reasoning on the part of Socrates if, again, these were not implications of a personal commitment of Socrates rather than inferences from what is already obvious or discursively justified.

It will be helpful at this juncture to consider a passage from Plato's *Parmenides*, concerning the choice-worthiness of a young Socrates's early version of a theory of Forms against all that is (and could be) said against it:

And yet, Socrates," said Parmenides, "the forms inevitably involve these objections and a host of others besides – if there are those characters for things, and a person is to mark off each form as 'something itself.' As a result, whoever hears about them is

doubtful and objects that they do not exist, and that, even if they do, they must by strict necessity be unknow-able to human nature; and in saying this he seems to have a point; and, as we said, he is extraordinarily hard to win over. Only a very gifted man can come to know that for each thing there is some kind, a being itself by b itself; but only a prodigy more remarkable still will discover that and be able to teach someone else who has sifted all these difficulties thoroughly and critically for himself.” “I agree with you, Parmenides,” Socrates said. “That's very much what I think too.” “Yet on the other hand, Socrates,” said Parmenides, “if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the c same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic entirely. But I think you are only too well aware of that. (134e7-135c3)

Thus the older and wiser Parmenides to a young Socrates. This word of encouragement—or perhaps more accurately, this exhortation for Socrates to “keep the faith,”—comes after a number of devastating objections on the part of Parmenides himself. Prior to this remark, Parmenides has already bewildered his young interlocutor with objections to nascent version of a theory of Forms; indeed, objections as formidable as any that subsequent Plato scholars have managed to produce. Even so, says Parmenides, Socrates must cling to his theory at any cost; this is because its alternative is intolerable, and if accepted, would “destroy” (διαφθείρω) the power (δύναμις; alternatively, “meaning” or “function”) of discourse entirely. Plato’s reader is invited to wonder at how we are to believe that one person could, by his beliefs, destroy the significance of discourse. Here we are reminded of similar passages from the *Crito* in Chapter 2 of the present work, in which the personified Laws of Athens charge Socrates with undertaking to destroy (διαφθείρω) them should he attempt to flee their judgment.

As in the *Crito*, it is clearly not the case that one could successfully destroy the significance of discourse (nor in the *Crito*, the laws themselves) simply by adopting this or that belief or plan of action; it is not as though the meaning of language nor the laws of Athens would suddenly cease to exist if a private individual had wrong opinions about the meaning of words or the force of laws. But I have suggested above that, at least in some instances, Plato's Socrates appears to regard belief-adoption as one's choosing a rule for life, a guiding principle for action; just as one could commit to some belief as a guide, one could plausibly commit to its opposite, as is implied in the *Meno* when Socrates speaks against the "eristic" argument while seemingly admitting its availability as a "live" option (the same kind of argument, as we have seen, concludes the *Gorgias*). That is, if one were to commit his life to the belief that laws are toothless, or that inquiry is impossible, or that one should flatter rather than pursue what is best, he would effectively commit himself to the destruction of laws, inquiry, or truth, respectively). That is not to say his commitments would in fact destroy, but they would in effect aim at destruction and so would be rightly called destructive.

Returning to the *Phaedo*, we have most recently heard Socrates defending the soul's immortality on the basis of recollection. Simmias and Cebes find this a viable proof of the soul's pre-existence prior to earthly life, but persist in their skepticism that it could survive the death of the body. Socrates replies as follows:

It has been proved even now, Simmias and Cebes, said Socrates, if you are ready to combine this argument with the one we agreed on before, that every living thing must come from the dead. If the soul exists before, it must, as it comes to life and birth, come from nowhere else than death and being dead, so how could it avoid existing after death since it must be born again? What you speak of has then even now been proved. However, I think you and Simmias would like to discuss the argument more fully. You seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and

scatter the soul, as it leaves the body, especially if one happens to die in a high wind and not in calm weather. Cebes laughed and said: Assuming that we were afraid, Socrates, try to change our minds, or rather do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child in us who has these fears; try to persuade him not to fear death like a bogey. You should, said Socrates, sing a charm over him every day until you have charmed away his fears. Where shall we find a good charmer for these fears, Socrates, he said, now that you are leaving us? Greece is a large country, Cebes, he said, and there are good men in it; the tribes of foreigners are also numerous. You should search for such a charmer among them all, sparing neither trouble nor expense, for there is nothing on which you could spend your money to greater advantage. You must also search among yourselves, for you might not easily find people who could do this better than yourselves. (77c5-78a8)

According to Socrates, one could spend her money no more wisely than by hiring someone that would “charm away” her fear of death. If a philosopher’s hope for a happy afterlife could be grounded as surely as her confidence that a three-sided figure must contain 180 interior degrees, this would be an extravagant waste of money. But evidently that is not the case, by Socrates’s own admission; evidently something like a “charm” is appropriate, even necessary, in light of the uncertainty attending such matters.

It is in this same mood that Socrates relays the myth that effectively concludes, according to the *Phaedo*, his time on earth. He claims to be “convinced” [Grk] of a peculiar story about the shape of the earth and the nature of its regions, though he is not prepared to try and prove it; even if he were so prepared, say Socrates, there would not be time enough for him to do so as his execution is fast approaching (108d4-e3).

We hear from Socrates that the earth is very large, and that we live in a certain hollow of it, thinking wrongly that we live on its surface. Though Socrates calls this a *logos* at 108e1, he calls the same story a *mythos* as soon as 110b: “If this is the moment to tell a tale, Simmias, it is worth hearing about the nature of things on the surface of the earth under the

heavens.” On the earth’s actual surface, Socrates tells us, which we mistakenly call the heavens, live people superior to ourselves, in whose temples the gods actually dwell (111b-c). This, says Socrates, is the “nature of the earth”; a phrase he will repeat after detailing a topology of the rivers in Tartarus on the authority of Homer (113d1: “Such,” says Socrates, “is the nature of these things.”)

Only one Stephanus page later, however, Socrates calls his own story into doubt, in much the same way as he does following the anamnesis myth in the *Meno*. In both cases such expressions of doubt follow an exhortation, on the authority of their respective myths, that one should do one’s best to become as good as possible:

Those who are deemed to have lived an extremely pious life are freed and released from the regions of the earth as from a prison; they make their way up to a pure dwelling place and live on the surface of the earth. Those who have purified themselves sufficiently by philosophy live in the future altogether without a body; they make their way to even more beautiful dwelling places which it is hard to describe clearly, nor do we now have the time to do so. Because of the things we have enunciated, Simmias, one must make every effort to share in virtue and wisdom in one's life, for the reward is beautiful and the hope is great. No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat this to himself as if it were an incantation, which is why I have been prolonging my tale. That is the reason why a man should be of good cheer about his own soul, if during life he has ignored the pleasures of the body and its ornamentation as of no concern to him and doing him more harm than good, but has seriously concerned himself with the pleasures of learning, and adorned his soul not with alien but with its own ornaments, namely, moderation, righteousness, courage, freedom and truth, and in that state awaits his journey to the underworld. (114c1-115a2)

That this or ‘something like it’ is true, says Socrates—namely, that good things are in store for the soul of a philosopher who dedicates himself to the proposition that virtue and wisdom are both worthy and attainable—is a “belief worth risking,” for the risk is a noble

one, even though no sensible person would insist on the details of the story Socrates has told, as we have already heard Socrates say of the *Meno*'s recollection myth.

Summary Remarks

In this chapter we examined the nature of Socrates's hope for a happy afterlife as it appears in the *Phaedo*. Despite what purport to be arguments or proofs for the aspects of the stories told, we note that Socrates regards himself from the dialogue's beginning as being in a mode of mythologizing; his repeated "hedging" with respect to the claims made, and especially the climactic passage at 114d, make clear that Socrates's thoughts on the matter amount to another instance of overcoming a formidable threat to the meaningful possibility of successful inquiry—in this case, the threat of hopelessness, of despair given reasonable doubt that one's striving to live well will turn out to have been worthwhile. We are asked to believe, not from decisive proof, but as one believes in the interest of "charming" oneself into hope despite the tumult and uncertainty that attends the pursuit of the good.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have argued for only a few claims: first, that for Plato's Socrates, inquiry is a moral imperative—in fact, the *first* such imperative for anyone who wants to live well but lacks knowledge of how to do so. Additionally, I have claimed that Socrates regards the meaningful possibility of fruitful inquiry as being under threat: first from Meno's paradox which challenges the very possibility of successful inquiry; and second, from the plausible risk of despair. It is one thing, I've claimed, to establish that inquiry may have some chance of success, but it is something else to establish for the sake of would-be inquirers that it may be a worthwhile endeavor despite evidence that might suggest otherwise.

Socrates's answer to the first threat comes in the form of his anamnesis myth, the choice-worthiness of which he grounds in its beneficial effects for believers. Socrates's second answer, given in the face of reasonable doubt that, even if possible, inquiry may turn out not to be worthwhile, comes in the form of the myth that concludes the *Phaedo*: it is worth risking the belief, says Socrates, that we may reasonably hope for a happy afterlife—a claim which Socrates again grounds in what that hope would do for believers. Both of these replies, explicitly given to overcome what Socrates seems to take as formidable threats to the meaningful possibility of inquiry, proceed from Socrates's philosophical mission: that is, from his commitment to the notion that one must take the utmost care to become as good as possible, and therefore that one must never falter in the search for what one does not know; especially for knowledge of the good and how one may hope to cultivate it in his own person.

What are generally understood as the most basic Platonic commitments: truth, for instance, and rigorous dialectical methodology governing argument and the acceptance of beliefs, are challenged by the implication that some beliefs are choice-worthy in virtue of their beneficial effects, or that it could be appropriate to believe something without sufficient evidence for similar reasons. This would suggest that the epistemic norms often attributed to Plato could in some cases play second fiddle to even more basic, ethical commitments.

This reading emphasizes the potential benefit—practically—of things like useful beliefs and “epistemic risk” in Plato. Evidence for these is thought to be found in many of the texts discussed here, The *Republic*’s “noble lie,” the education of its guardians, the preludes in the *Laws*, and elsewhere. If it is true that Plato sometimes endorses “risky belief,” explicitly because of what that belief can *do* for the believer, and that the danger of believing falsely can be outweighed by the goodness of the belief, then it would seem that we should understand Plato as being closer to philosophical pragmatism—especially as articulated in William James⁵³—on the subject of epistemic norms, the priority of ethical commitments, and perhaps on the concept of truth. James himself may have these very considerations in mind when he calls Socrates an “adept” practitioner of pragmatic philosophical methodology, as evidence for James’ claim that his ideas are not new.⁵⁴ Indeed, the *Meno* passage above has been identified as likely the first recorded employment of such.⁵⁵ Of course, there is no shortage of

⁵³ Baima (6) makes this same point

⁵⁴ William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), 27.

⁵⁵ Fine (107) admits this is a tempting interpretive option though she finds it ultimately unpersuasive; Jordan (39), however, claims that this is a paradigmatic instance of pragmatic argumentation. Incidentally, similar claims have been made about the *Phaedo* passage above: see Brown (1984), 469 (cited in Baima 107).

resistance to this kind of interpretation, which would no doubt mark a serious paradigm shift in understanding Plato if it should manage to take hold and prove itself viable. Perhaps the strongest *prima facie* reasons for such resistance are to be found in Plato's own work; I have aimed in the above to argue that, on closer inspection, said reasons do not outweigh the significance of "risking belief" when it comes to what must be believed in the interest of satisfying the first moral imperative.

Furthermore, Socrates is effectively articulating necessary beliefs, or we might say "postulates," not unlike those we find in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. The value of these beliefs does not depend on the credibility of their sources, and is not a function of their likely truth—like Kant's postulates, they are not the kind of beliefs that admit of truth or falsity, as they do not belong properly to the realm of theoretical reason. Rather, Socrates endorses them because they must be endorsed in light of our prior and most basic commitment to the possibility of living well rather than badly. Hence, Meno's Paradox is not overcome by proof but by faith on Socrates's part, and in this way the possibility of successful inquiry is sufficiently "grounded" (indeed, as it must be).

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Vita

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