

Myth, Virtue, and Method in Plato's *Meno*¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the prevailing interpretations about the role and the function of recollection in Plato's *Meno* by suggesting that recollection is a cognitive process inaugurated by a myth. This process sets out the methodological and epistemological context within which two transitions are attainable: on the one hand, the methodological transition from the elenchus to the method of hypothesis, and on the other hand, the cognitive upshift from opinion(s) to knowledge. This paper argues, furthermore, that Socrates uses the myth of recollection just when Meno begins to object and tries to give up on their inquiry. Socrates' myth accordingly imprints on Meno's soul a true belief that facilitates the process of recollection

by emboldening Meno to continue the inquiry.

Keywords: Recollection, Myth, Virtue, Socratic Elenchus, Method of Hypothesis

I. INTRODUCTION.

Interpreters agree that in the *Meno* Plato uses the method of elenchus and the method of hypothesis. However, they disagree about the function and status of recollection. No fewer than five interpretations of recollection have been proposed. According to Guthrie (1956), Benson (1990) and Scott (2006), recollection is a robust method for acquiring knowledge that Socrates experimentally implements on the slave. In an alternative interpretation by Sternfeld and Zyskind (1978), recollection is only a myth used by Socrates to motivate inquiry. Moravcsik (1971), by contrast, suggests that recollection is a metaphorical account of how we learn empirically. Against all of these interpretations, Landry (2012) argues that recollection is but a hypothesis for learning. A fifth approach takes recollection primarily as a theory that ‘accounts for the metaphysical horizon within which the method of hypothesis, coupled with elenchus and perhaps other dialectical methods, can lead us from opinions to knowledge’ (Ionescu 2017, p.9).²

This paper offers an alternative interpretation: that recollection is a cognitive process inaugurated by a myth. This process sets out the methodological and epistemological context within which two transitions are attainable: on the one hand, the methodological transition from the elenchus to the method of hypothesis and, on the other hand, the cognitive upgrade from opinion to knowledge. Furthermore, this paper argues that Socrates uses the myth of recollection just when Meno begins to object and tries to give up on their inquiry. Socrates’ myth imprints on Meno’s soul a true belief that facilitates the process of recollection by emboldening Meno to continue the inquiry.

II. BEFORE THE MYTH OF RECOLLECTION: THE SOCRATIC ELENCHUS AND THE PARADOX.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Meno claims to know what virtue is and is challenged by Socrates to define it.³ The young Thessalian then begins to present his false beliefs about virtue, and Socrates applies the elenchus in order to examine them.

In his first attempt to define virtue, Meno enumerates a series of virtues: the virtue of a man, the virtue of a woman, the virtue of a child, the virtue of an elderly man and many other kinds of virtue (71e1–72a5). He thus fails to give a unitary account of virtue, as Socrates points out.

Meno then provides a second definition, according to which virtue is the ‘ability to rule over people’ (73c9). However, the Socratic elenchus reveals this account to be problematic to the extent that it cannot be applied to children and slaves. The definition also fails because it does not specify the kind of ruling, and unjust ruling is clearly not virtue (73c–d).

In his third and last attempt to define virtue, Meno argues that virtue is ‘to desire fine things and have the power to get them’ (77b2–5). This third definition is more unified and complete than the previous two. Nevertheless, Socrates thinks it is insufficient for two main reasons. First, no one could desire bad things unless they have a false perception that leads them to believe that they, somehow, will be benefitted by those same things. Second, the acquisition of good things cannot be considered virtuous if is not combined with justice, prudence, and piety. However, justice, prudence, and piety are virtues (77b–79e), and as such, they cannot be included within the definition of virtue since the latter is still being explored

for. Defining virtue in such a manner breaks virtue into pieces and leads Socrates to reject two possible scenarios: that virtue can be defined in terms of its parts and that virtue's parts, such as justice, piety, and prudence, can be defined independently of virtue.⁴

The second criticism of the third definition of virtue sets the stage for the introduction of recollection. This becomes obvious if we reconstruct Socrates' argument as follows: if we know parts of virtue and we agree on them – just like Socrates and Meno at this point in the dialogue – then it is impossible not to know *somehow* what virtue is. The myth of recollection is then introduced to explain *how* we know what virtue is: it is through our soul's pre-empirical grasp of things like virtue.

After three unsuccessful attempts to define virtue, Meno is now embarrassed and reluctant to continue their inquiry into what virtue is. The Socratic elenchus has revealed to Meno that his beliefs are false, and he himself admits to being in *aporia* (80a). Meno consequently interrupts the inquiry and introduces the famous 'learner's paradox.' The paradox seems to demonstrate that learning is impossible. For if someone already knows something, he cannot learn it. But if someone doesn't know what he is searching for, even if he finds the object of his inquiry, he will not be able to recognize it (80d–81a). Given this paradox, any effort to seek what virtue is seems to Meno to be feckless and otiose. Even if by luck they came upon the essence of virtue, they wouldn't be able to recognize it.⁵

III. THE INTRODUCTION OF THE MYTH OF RECOLLECTION.

In order to save their inquiry into virtue, Socrates tells a 'good' and 'true' story that

introduces recollection (Weiss, 2001, p.46).⁶ It is a story he heard from divine priests and poets who are able to 'give a reasoned account of their ministry.'⁷ Socrates characterizes these poets in a way similar to that of the philosopher-poet in the *Phaedrus*. There, Plato propounds that there is a type of poet that is able to demonstrate the connection between their writings and the truth, and that is the philosopher-poet (*Phdr.* 278c–d). However, in the third and last part of the *Meno*, Plato sketches another kind of poet, whose work derives from divine inspiration and who therefore can narrate true things without knowing them. A poet of this kind is not wise in that he cannot justify in reason his true opinions. He is in the cognitive state of true belief (*Men.* 99b–100c).

There are consequently two kinds of poets in the *Meno*: (1) the divine and wise poets, who know what they are talking about and are able to justify the truth of their speeches or writings; (2) those who are inspired by the gods, who have true beliefs but cannot give a reasoned account of what they say or write. The fact that Plato chooses to present the first kind of poets as the supporters of the recollection doctrine indicates, in my opinion, that he struggles to conjoin the content of his myth with the dialectical method, and thus to give it validity and legitimacy.

Weiss (2001, p.62-76), by contrast, advocates that we should not take seriously the theory of recollection,⁸ for three main reasons: first, because it is introduced by a myth, and the *mythos* that Socrates narrates is subordinate to the *logos* (the paradox) of Meno; second, because, by having Socrates narrate a myth, Plato seems to approve the thing that Socrates previously prevented Meno from doing – namely, referring to others' opinions and accounts; third, because Socrates hints that

the priests and the priestesses, who constitute the source of his myth, enunciated these assessments in order to justify and defend their ceremonies and duties.

But if we accept Weiss's opinion, we should accept the following absurdity: though Plato could use *logos* instead of *mythos* to introduce recollection, as he does in the *Phaedo*, he intentionally chooses to misfire at the most critical point of the dialogue. Additionally, if the myth of recollection was not a serious answer to Meno's paradox, as Weiss claims, then the inquiry into virtue's essence should have stopped at this very moment. Yet not only does the inquiry continue, but it continues with a new, more advanced method: *hypothesis*. Weiss's opinion accordingly fails for two main reasons: it not only deprives myth of any contribution to the dialectical argument of the dialogue, it also portrays myth as a misplaced choice by Plato at the most critical stage of the inquiry.

I will instead argue that Plato introduces recollection via myth at the very moment that Meno eristically attempts with the paradox to intercept the dialectical inquiry.⁹ The myth functions as a sophistic and a rhetorical tool with which Meno, as a student of Gorgias, was fully familiar. It defuses the tension caused by the previous discussion, and, by doing this, encourages Meno to continue his search for what virtue is under Socrates' guidance.¹⁰ The myth of recollection, therefore, serves as a methodological and gnoseological intermediate to the extent that, as we will see, it facilitates the methodological transition from the Socratic elenchus to the method of hypothesis, on the one hand, and the epistemological upgrade from opinions to knowledge, on the other hand. These transitions occur, as I will try to show, because the myth of recollection imprints in Meno's soul a true belief

that encourages him to continue the inquiry about virtue. Such a true belief is necessary for the cognitive process of recollection to be performed.

IV. THE MYTH OF RECOLLECTION.

According to Socrates' myth, the soul is immortal and indestructible. Because of its immortal nature, it has been born in bodies many times and has acquired knowledge of all and everything,¹¹ in both this world and the nether realms, including virtue.

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;
since, it would seem, research and learning are
wholly recollection.

Meno, 81c8-d6

Clearly enough, the myth of recollection reopens inquiry's road after Meno's paradox tried to block it. This happens because the myth presents the soul as having the knowledge of everything, despite the fact that it has for some reason forgotten it. This makes it possible for the knowledge to be recollected through the learning and research. Learning is consequently not the acquisition of new knowledge but rather the retrieval – the recollection – of existing knowledge in the soul. Recollection seems to provide an alternative and sufficient answer to Meno's paradox. It enables Socrates to refute Meno's claim that we cannot learn what we already know, as we

already know it. In fact, he somehow even reverses the argument: the things we pre-empirically already know are the only things that we can learn, and the only way to learn (anew) these things is through recollection.

At this point in the dialogue, Plato gives us a key to unlock the mystery of *why* he uses a myth instead of a *logos* to introduce recollection. That key is the presupposition Socrates sets for the achievement of recollection: courage.¹² Only if one is courageous in research will he manage to recollect the things which his soul has seen before incarnation. The question then becomes, *how* is courage imprinted on a student's soul? The *Republic*, a dialogue composed a few years after *Meno*, provides us with an answer to this question by describing courage as the virtue that presides over a well-nourished spirited part. It is through the acquisition of true beliefs imprinted by mythology that a spirited part is effectively nourished (*R.* 429b–d; 442b–c).¹³ In this light, it would seem that the myth of recollection nourishes Meno's spirited part with a true belief in order to make him courageous and willing to continue with the inquiry. This paper will elaborate on this notion and attempt to show that the myth of recollection serves as a true belief in the *Meno*.

This myth is offered at the very moment when Meno is possessed by timorousness and bewilderment. Meno himself admits that he stands perplexed and is no longer able to speak about virtue, even though he has given countless speeches on virtue on countless occasions. He describes himself as in a condition of complete puzzlement, numb in both soul and language (80a–b). He increasingly realizes – along with the people that are following the discussion – that he does not know what he claimed to know. Timid and reluctant to continue the inquiry, Meno introduces his

paradox to avoid further embarrassment.¹⁴ Socrates' myth is therefore inserted by Plato as a methodological and epistemological bridge in order to achieve the transition from the Socratic elenchus – which demonstrated Meno's beliefs as false – to the continuing of the dialectical inquiry using the method of hypothesis.

Plato purposely constructs this myth so as for it confer neither ignorance nor knowledge, but the intermediate cognitive state of true belief.¹⁵ The myth places Meno between *poros* and *aporia* (See *Sym.* 203b–204c) inasmuch as it provides him with the belief that learning and research are possible to the extent that they constitute recollection. The myth thereby makes Meno wonder how this belief can be proven true (81e–82a). Thus, the eristic manner of Meno¹⁶ gives way to the philosophical desire for knowledge of Socrates. Meno, who was more than ready to relinquish the inquiry, is now encouraged by the myth of recollection to forge ahead and expects Socrates to demonstrate his claim that learning is recollection.

The myth of recollection can, however, be interpreted in a more profound manner that fits in with the idea that it imprints a true belief in Meno's soul. Tarrant (2005, p. 46) observes that the myth establishes two kinds of recollection: one occurs through so-called teaching, the other through self-discovery. According to Tarrant, recollection in the *Meno* seems to be much more of the first kind. The *Phaedrus* seems to support such an interpretation insofar as the myths of dialecticians are portrayed as reminders (*ὑπομνήματα*) that seem to facilitate recollection by instilling true beliefs when used properly (*Phdr.* 249b–c; 276d–277a).

Dorter (2006, p.46) argues that by using myths, dialecticians provide their students with temporarily acquired opinions. Only a

student who understands the teachings can epistemologically upgrade from the acquired opinion to innate knowledge. The process of recollection carries out this transition since it indicates that we are able to discover the innate knowledge, which is already inside us, forgotten and not accessible to our senses. Only if we take the right dialectical guidance will this knowledge be activated.

I suggest that the myth of recollection in the *Meno* should be taken as a reminder. It is an acquired opinion which Socrates as dialectician imprints on Meno's soul, and as such, if it is understood by Meno, it could activate the innate knowledge in his soul. But the question that arises here is *how* a teaching could be understood by the student. Meno challenges Socrates to prove his claim that learning, and research are recollection. In other words, Socrates is challenged by Meno to verify and confirm in a rational way the belief he introduced mythologically. Socrates accepts the challenge and undertakes to prove the truth in his mythological account by examining Meno's slave.

V. AFTER THE MYTH OF RECOLLECTION: THE SLAVE'S GEOMETRICAL EXAMINATION.

Socrates poses a double geometrical problem¹⁷ to the slave, who never had received geometrical education. Despite the relative deficit, the slave, guided by Socrates, reaches the correct answer. After examining the slave, Socrates summarizes the teaching using the following abductive reasoning: since solving a geometric problem requires geometric knowledge which the slave had not acquired in this life,¹⁸ then he should have acquired it in a previous existence, and that is why he was able to recollect it (85d–86a). With the aforementioned abductive

reasoning, Socrates secures two things: he not only connects the examination of the slave back to the myth of recollection but also recalls what the myth says about recollection.

Let us now take a look at how Socrates guides the slave during the process of recollection. He begins by making the slave realize that his initial estimations were false. This leads the slave to experience *aporia*. After this refutation, the slave is directed by Socrates to the right answer to the geometric problem he was trying to solve. According to Socrates, this right answer is only a true belief and does not yet constitute knowledge. Having true beliefs differs from having knowledge in that in the cognitive state of true belief, someone cannot give a reasoned account of the right opinion he or she has. There is therefore a third and final stage in the process of recollection through which the transition from true belief to knowledge is achieved.¹⁹ This transition is achieved by fastening the true belief with causal reasoning (*Men.* 98a).²⁰

It is safe to say that Socrates leads the slave through the first two stages of recollection. Under the guidance of Socrates, the slave first rejects the false beliefs he had, reaching *aporia*, and then moves from *aporia* to the acquisition of a true belief. Since he does not connect his true belief with causal reasoning, he never reaches the end of the cognitive process of recollection, which is knowledge. A true belief is, however, inferior to knowledge as it is not permanent and cannot serve as a constant guide for virtuous behaviour (97e–98c).

At this juncture, Plato seems to implement everything he attributes to the philosopher-poet of the *Phaedrus*. Let us be more precise: As we read at 278c-d, poets are considered philosophers *if* they meet three criteria,²¹ specifically (1) that their writings are composed in accordance with the truth; (2) that they

have the ability to prove the truthfulness of their writing by examining and discussing that which they have written; and (3) that they can show by their own speech that the written words are of little worth. To determine whether all three criteria have been met, let us now turn back to the *Meno*.

Plato, firstly, places Socrates narrating a myth to introduce the belief that we can recollect things like virtue through learning and research as we already know them pre-empirically. Plato through Socrates, as we have seen, claims that this myth is good and true. By composing a myth in accordance with truth, Plato fulfils the first criterion. He then presents Meno contesting this belief's correctness. To prove the truth of this belief, Plato inserts Socrates' examination of the slave. At the same time as examining the slave, Socrates examines his mythological belief to prove its validity. In having the uneducated slave answer the geometrical problem which Socrates posed, Plato demonstrates the possibility of pre-empirical knowledge recollection. More precisely, he indicates that recollection can be activated²² *only* under the dialectical guidance of a philosopher such as Socrates. Having proved the accuracy and truth of his writings, Plato meets the second criterion of the *Phaedrus*' philosopher-poet. Lastly, the philosopher argues that a true belief, such as the one I contend he introduced with the myth of recollection, is of little worth if not associated with causal reasoning. Hence, he seems to imply that, even though his own mythological, true belief activated the recollection process, this process cannot be accomplished without causal reasoning implemented through further investigation. Toward this end, as we will see, he introduces the hypothesis method. The third criterion for a philosopher-poet is satisfied by Plato by undervaluing his own writings.

In my judgement, the slave scene should be taken as a dramatic repetition of the method by which Meno was previously guided by Socrates. A brief retrospection of what was presented so far would be enlightening. The dialogue begins with Meno asking Socrates if virtue is teachable and the philosopher trying to steer the discussion toward the philosophical question of *what* virtue is. Meno, who at the beginning believes he knows what virtue is, attempts thrice to define virtue, insufficiently as the Socratic elenchus shows. With the right questions, Socrates impels Meno to get rid of the false beliefs he had about the essence of virtue and leads him to *aporia*. Meno's *aporia* comes to its peak with the so-called 'learner's paradox', by which he tries to abort the discussion. Then, Socrates narrates the myth of the soul's immortality and recollection, by which, as I suggested, he imprints a true belief on Meno's soul regarding the nature of knowledge. After that, Meno asks Socrates to prove his claim that learning and research are recollection, and thus, the episode with the slave is inserted. Plato wittingly places Meno in the viewer's position, so that he can watch a replication of the stages he already passed through: from false beliefs to *aporia* and from there to the acquisition of a true belief. The fact that the slave, despite his ignorance, succeeds in giving a correct answer to the geometric problem that Socrates sets for him encourages Meno to continue his own research on virtue under the philosopher's auspices.

VI. THE METHOD OF HYPOTHESIS.

After the geometric discussion between the slave and Socrates, Plato introduces a new kind of method, the method of hypothesis.

Most commentators consider this method as inferior to the dialectical method presented in the *Republic*,²³ but superior to the Socratic elenchus.²⁴ The so-called higher dialectic of the *Republic* constitutes the highest form of theoretical research, since through it reason upshifts from sensory perception and changeable opinions to the unchangeable intelligible entities of knowledge, i.e., the Forms. According to Berns (2011, p. 108-109), the essence of each object is its Form, so the 'higher dialectic' investigates the essence of things. The ultimate goal of this method is the ascension of *logos* to the unhypothetical first principle of everything, the Form of the Good. The method of hypothesis, by contrast, is the 'second-best method' for Plato, since its object are not essences, but rather particular beliefs deemed beneficial to society.

However, as has already been said, most scholars deem the hypothetical method superior to the Socratic elenchus, since the latter leads inquiry into a deadlock, while the former equips them with a sufficient hypothesis with which to resume their research. In the so-called elenctic dialogues, Plato presents Socrates as implementing a method which cannot achieve anything more than examining the opinions of the philosopher's interlocutors. This method fails because it cannot succeed in its initial goal of acquiring knowledge of the most important things, like the knowledge of the good and the evil (Benson 2003, p.98). So, although the Socratic method succeeds each time in exposing the false opinions of interlocutors, it fails to equip them with any knowledge. The hypothetical method is intended to help meet this need.

In any case, Plato introduces the method of hypothesis right after the slave's examination. Meno again insists on his question as to whether virtue is teachable. The inquiry

continues, escaping the pitfall of Meno's paradox, but with a significant concession from Socrates, according to the scholars. For Socrates allows the conversation to focus not on the question of the essence of virtue, but rather on Meno's question as to whether virtue is teachable. This is why many commentators either characterize the hypothetical method as inferior to the dialectic method or instead suggest that this method is just Plato's contrivance (e.g., Beddu-Addo, 1984, p. 3) by which Meno eventually turns to consider the nature of virtue.

Benson (2003, p.98) disagrees with both interpretations. He suggests that the method of hypothesis explains *how* someone who is aware of their false beliefs should proceed with their inquiry. The Socratic method is necessary for someone to move from false beliefs and ignorance to *aporia*. The new method of hypothesis is essential for overcoming this *aporia* since it leads one to restart inquiry by providing a hypothesis to examine. And, as has already been stated, only someone courageous in research can recollect the knowledge of the things he already has seen.

At 86d3–e4 of the dialogue, Socrates invites Meno to join in inquiring whether virtue is teachable employing the method of hypothesis. To understand what this method requires and how Plato uses it in the *Meno*, we should examine *why* it is inserted at this particular point of the dialogue. We accordingly need to answer *who* usually uses the method of hypothesis and *why*. The method of hypothesis is the method that geometers use when they do not know the answer to the question they are trying to answer. In such a case, geometers choose a hypothesis, the implementation of which they think will lead them to the right conclusion (Benson, 2003, p. 104-105). Meno and Socrates at this point of the dialogue are

in a similar position: they are struggling to determine whether virtue is teachable. Because they do not know the answer to this question, they are forced to begin their inquiry anew using a hypothesis.

In order to determine whether virtue is teachable, Socrates suggests they first have to find out whether virtue is knowledge (87b–c).²⁵ For only if virtue is knowledge could it be teachable. By doing this, Socrates effectively returns them to the question concerning the nature of virtue.²⁶ The inquiry shows that virtue is neither teachable, and so cannot be identified with knowledge,²⁷ nor something inherited by nature. Meno and Socrates agree that virtue comes to us by divine dispensation (100a–c). Divine men, like statesmen, soothsayers, poets, and diviners, do and say the right things without having knowledge of them (99c–d). The conclusion is then reached that ‘correct action is guided either by true opinion or by knowledge’ (96d5–98c). That is, true opinion is as good a guide to right action as knowledge (97b). The argument for *why* virtue is action-guiding true opinion can be formalized in the following way:

P1: Only knowledge and true opinion guide us to right action (96d–98c).

P2: The rightness of action is the outcome of virtue (97a; 99c–d).

P3: Virtue is not teachable, so it is not knowledge (89a–96d).

C: Therefore, virtue is the true opinion that guides us to right action.

It becomes obvious that along with the question as to whether virtue is teachable, the question of virtue’s definition is still under research. The method of hypothesis seems to be a device by which Socrates deludes Meno into thinking that their inquiry will turn to

the question he chose. Yet, this only happens ostensibly as the philosophical question concerning the essence of virtue is examined at the same time. By using dialectical reasoning, Plato’s dramatic characters indirectly define virtue through the method of hypothesis. This definition is stated in the conclusion of the aforementioned argument.

VII. MYTH AND METHOD.

In the *Meno*, Plato uses two methods, an old and a new one: the Socratic elenchus and the method of hypothesis. In between those, the myth of recollection is inserted. The dialogue’s structure and form may be used to summarize the relationship between these two methods and the myth of recollection, indicating that the myth serves as a bridge between the method of examining beliefs, namely the Socratic elenchus, and the method of hypothesis, which aims at knowledge. But why is the myth so inserted? In this paper, I have argued that the answer lies in the myth of recollection itself, as it introduces a process that advances through three cognitive states. (1) from false beliefs to *aporia*, (2) from *aporia* to true belief and (3) from true belief to knowledge by fastening the true opinion with causal reasoning. The first stage is the objective of the Socratic elenchus; the second is the target of the myth of recollection, and the third is the purpose of the method of the hypothesis. But let me be more specific:

The Socratic elenchus is the method Plato uses in all his early dialogues. It helps Socrates’ interlocutors to realize they have false opinions about the object under investigation. We could say that it is a method of preparation insofar as it prepares the student’s soul for knowledge by cleansing the soul of untrue beliefs and

leading it into a state of *aporia*. The Socratic elenchus, however, does not provide a motivation for the student to continue his research. It only leads to deadlock and puzzlement. We find this in the *Meno*: after being subjected to Socratic elenchus, Meno realizes that he does not know what virtue is and so attempts to end the discussion with his paradox. Having arrived at *aporia*, Meno seems to have completed the first stage of recollection. But, as has been argued, he cannot proceed to the second stage because he lacks courage.

In order to instil this courage, Socrates offers the myth of recollection and thereby attempts to imprint a true belief in Meno's soul. The belief which the myth imprints in is confirmed by the geometric examination of the slave. In this way, the myth provides Meno with a new perspective about the acquisition of knowledge, as something already existing in our souls. At the same time, it makes him wonder *how* this belief can be confirmed. The myth, therefore, encourages Meno and renders him willing to continue the inquiry.

Thereafter a new method is introduced: the method of hypothesis. This method allows them to overcome the deadlock brought about by the Socratic elenchus. It does so by providing a hypothesis about virtue for them to examine. I have tried to show that, although this method seems to turn the inquiry *away* from the definition of virtue to the question of its teachability, in point of fact it investigates both questions. Even if the inquiry is not entirely successful, the method of hypothesis enables Socrates and Meno to reach their first indirect definition of virtue, using dialectical reasoning, as the belief that leads to the right actions. That is why, contrary to what most scholars believe, the method of hypothesis is not inferior to dialectic, but rather a mechanism through which dialectic operates. As

such it appears to be part of the method for acquiring knowledge. The method of hypothesis does not replace the Socratic elenchus, as many believe,²⁸ but complements its weaknesses and defects (Benson, 1990, p. 129-130).

In summation, it becomes clear that no transition – either methodological or epistemological – would be feasible if the myth of recollection was not part of the dialogue. This is because, on the one hand, Meno would have remained fearful, cowardly, and in total puzzlement of the *aporia* into which the Socratic elenchus led him. On the other hand, even if cleansed of false beliefs, Meno would not have been able to move to the cognitive state of true belief, which – as we saw – is necessary for the process of recollection to be achieved. Thus, the dialogue would have come to a deadlock like all the other early dialogues of Plato. Moreover, we would not have had the introduction of the hypothetical method: a new method that not only enables the continuation of inquiry after its being stalled by the Socratic elenchus but a method that also initiates the pursuit of genuine knowledge by means of dialectic.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of PLATO JOURNAL for their constructive suggestions and comments. They provided me with valuable feedback that significantly improved my article.
- 2 All five interpretations are insufficient. The first seems problematic to the extent that it takes recollection to be a method of acquiring knowledge but fails to clearly define its objects. It simply takes for granted that refutation (Socratic elenchus) examines beliefs (*doxai*), while the hypothetical method examines hypotheses. The problem with this interpreta-

- tion is that though it considers recollection as only complete when true belief is fastened with explanatory reasoning it also incorrectly sees the method as employed by Socrates in his refutation of the slave, who only reaches the cognitive state of true belief. The second interpretation, which takes recollection as a mere myth motivating inquiry, fails to connect the myth both epistemologically and methodologically with the rest of the dialogue. The third one is inconsistent with Plato's intention to connect recollection to the *a priori* beings which the soul has grasped before its incarnation. The fourth interpretation, according to which the recollection myth should be taken as a hypothesis, falls into epistemological and methodological errors in that it seems to conflate true belief and hypothesis, and consequently does not demarcate the methodological limits of the Socratic elenchus from those of the hypothetical method. The last interpretation seems to be incomplete in that it does not define the 'other possible dialectical methods' to which it refers. For the failure of the first three accounts, see also Landry 2012, p. 144.
- 3 Balaban, 1994, p. 266 points out that Plato's interpreters have traditionally understood *Meno* as only ostensibly addressing the question "What is Virtue?"
 - 4 See also Bluck who claims that such a definition "amounts to the statement that *that is virtue which is done with a part of virtue* -an absurdity which involves both the fragmentation of virtue, and circularity." (Bluck, 1961, p.5).
 - 5 Klein, 1965 claims that Meno's paradox is consistent with his reluctance to put in as much effort as the inquiry requires under Socrates' guidance. Moline, 1969, p. 155–159 argues that Meno's reaction, at this point of the dialogue, is sarcastic and emotional, because he suspects that Socrates is pretending not to know what virtue is. On the other hand, Guthrie 1975, p.238–239 does not detect sarcasm in Meno's question. Devereaux 1978, p.118-120 suggests that Meno here implies that it is only with the help of the sophists-teachers that we learn.
 - 6 Some commentators argue that the theory of recollection is introduced by Socrates in order to overcome Meno's paradox. See for example Berns, 2011; Landry, 2012; Benson, 2015 and Ionescu, 2017. Other scholars, on the contrary, argue that the theory of recollection is introduced neither to solve the paradox in a serious way nor to give an answer to Meno's sophistic dilemma. See for example Ebert, 1973; Rohatyn, 1980; Jenks, 1992; Weiss, 2001 and Scott, 2006. Cf. also Anderson, 1971 who suggests that Socrates' solution to Meno's paradox consists of two parts: the theory of recollection and the demonstration with the slave-boy.
 - 7 Unless otherwise noted, I am using Lamb's, 1967 translation.
 - 8 See also Ebert, 1973, p.163 who argues that the theory of recollection "is of little genuine philosophical interest" because it does not provide a philosophical answer but only pretends to solve Meno's paradox".
 - 9 See *Men.* 80e, where Socrates emphasizes the eristic manner in which Meno expresses his paradox.
 - 10 In the *Symposium* we encounter an analogous incident. After Socrates refutes Agathon (198a–201c) and drives him to *aporia* about the nature of *Eros*, he introduces Diotima's myth. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, when Socrates leads Phaedrus to *aporia*, he introduces the central myth of the dialogue so the inquiry about love will continue normally.
 - 11 Scholars disagree about what 'all things' (πάντα χρήματα) mean here. For example, Scott, 2006, p.96 suggests that this term refers "to the soul's experience of particular events, both when incarnate and when in Hades," whereas Moravcsik, 1978, p.60 interprets the same term as referring to "*a priori* concepts and propositions." See also Bluck, 1961, p.288, who suggests a broader meaning, according to which 'all things' refer to "everything that exists".
 - 12 Similarly, Carelli, 2015 argues that in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Republic* courage appears to be a prerequisite for philosophical investigation. See also *Phaedo* 89d-90e, where Plato claims that someone ought to be courageous and eager to research *if* he wants to become a philosopher and avoid falling into the trap of becoming a misologist.
 - 13 More specifically, one is characterized as courageous when his or her spirited part preserves in the midst of pains and pleasures true beliefs about what should and should not be feared. These beliefs are inculcated by musical, mythological education (*R.* 429b–d; 442b–c).
 - 14 Meno, at this point of the dialogue, compares Socrates to a flat torpedo sea-fish (80d). Socrates uses the same simile to speak to the slave's condition after he examines him (84b), which strengthens my forthcoming argument, according to which the examination of the slave by Socrates constitutes a repetition of the same cognitive stages that Meno went through.
 - 15 At *Sym.* 202a Plato presents true belief as this sort of cognitive intermediate between ignorance and knowledge.
 - 16 According to many commentators, Meno's paradox is inspired by Gorgias' sophistic teachings. See Ebert, 1973, p. 91 and Canto-Sperber, 1991, p. 247–248, note 104.
 - 17 There is a debate amongst scholars whether the two problems of geometry presented in the *Meno* are connected to each other and to the method of hypothesis. I will not further address this issue here, as it goes beyond the present study's framework. See, respectively, Iwata, 2015 and Bagce, 2016.
 - 18 See also *Phd.* 76c11–13, where Plato repeats the argument that knowledge is recollection, as our souls encountered and learned mathematical concepts before their incarnation.
 - 19 According to Dimas, 1996, p. 4, note 9, "Socrates asserts that recollection's *end* result is knowledge."

- 20 There are various interpretations of *αἰτίας λογισμῶ*. For example, Desjardins, 1985, p. 265 identifies it with causal or deductive reasoning, whilst Scott, 2006 define it as ‘explanatory reasoning’. Cf. also Gulley (1962,14), who argues that Plato associates “the chain of causal reasoning” with the method of hypothesis.
- 21 On this, see also Moore, 2015, p.74.
- 22 I only claim that Socrates’ examination triggers the cognitive process of recollection, not that the slave completes this procedure. See also Franklin, 2009, p. 351 who claims that recollection is a two-stage course of learning “that begins at the inception of speech and thought and proceeds through philosophical inquiry to knowledge.”
- 23 Cf. Seeskin, 1993, and Berns, 2011.
- 24 According to Benson, 2015, p. 94, “this reading of the method of hypothesis is reinforced by the manner in which the method is introduced ... in the *Phaedo*.” In that dialogue, the hypothetical method is introduced as a ‘second sailing’ (*δευτερος πλους*), ‘which has generally been taken to mean a “second best.”’ On the subject, see Tait, 1986.
- 25 There has been wide disagreement among scholars in regard to the main hypothesis of the argument. Most scholars identify it with the simple proposition ‘virtue is knowledge’ (see Bedu-Addo, 1984; Benson, 2003; Bluck, 1961; Canto-Sperber, 1991; Scott, 2006). Others take it to be the conditional ‘if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable’ (see Wolfsdorf, 2008), and some think of it as the biconditional ‘if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable, but if not, it is not’ (see Weiss, 2001). On this scholarly debate, see also Zyskind & Sternfeld, 1976.
- 26 See Ionescu, 2017, p. 16; Benson, 2003, p. 109–115, and Benson 2015, p. 95–102.
- 27 The outcome of this syllogism is that virtue cannot be identified with knowledge. However, the possibility of virtue being a kind (or maybe a part) of knowledge, not knowledge itself, is still open.
- 28 It is commonly believed that Plato replaces elenchus with recollection and the method of hypothesis. See on this Ionescu, 2017, p.9; 15.

