

# TRUE BELIEF IN THE *MENO*<sup>1</sup>

by

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## I

Concluding the exhibition (πίδειξις) whose purpose is to show Meno that learning (μάθησις<sup>2</sup>) is actually recollection (*M.* 81e3-5), Socrates states that the boy, without yet having *knowledge* (ε\_δέναι) comes to have *true belief* (ληθ\_ς δόξα) about the solution of the problem at hand (85c6-7). *M.* 85c7 is the first place in the dialogue where *true belief* is mentioned, and not long before, Socrates had announced that Meno was about to watch the boy recollect (82e12-3). So the text leaves no doubt that we are to think that it is recollection which, somehow, is the cause of the slave-boy's coming to have true belief.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I take μάθησιν to be μάθησιν of μαθήματα and I take a μάθημα to be not just any piece of information learned, but a lesson in a systematically arranged body of knowledge. (Cf. τ\_ μάθημα τ\_ περ\_ τ\_ς τάξεις, *La.* 182b6-7). This is how Plato thinks of μαθήματα in the *Meno*, and recollection is only of μαθήματα (ο\_τος γ\_ρ ποιήσει περ\_ πάσης γεωμετρίας τα\_τ\_ τα\_τα, κα\_ τ\_ν\_λλων μαθημάτων\_πάντων, *M.*85e1-3).

<sup>3</sup>Commentators have not paid due attention to this fact. A. Nehamas 'Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1985: 1-30, says that "it is quite possible that recollection, strictly speaking, is not shown to occur anywhere in the *Meno*". Similar tendencies are found in H. H. Benson, 'Meno, the Slave Boy and the Elenchus', *Phronesis* xxxv, 2 (1990): 128-58 (see p. 140). T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, thinks, like Nehamas, that recollection is the process through which true beliefs are converted to knowledge. Hence, Irwin diagnoses the response to Meno's challenge as simply an elenctic exercise, strikingly neglecting even to mention recollection in his account of the slave-boy episode (see p. 139). Also T. Irwin, 'Recollection and Plato's Moral Theory', *Review of Metaphysics*, 27 (1974): 752-72, pp.753-55. And G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', in R. Kraut (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*; pp. 200-26 (p. 207 ff.).

Socrates also asserts that from having such true belief the boy can go on to acquire knowledge if he is asked the same questions many times and from many points of view (πολλάκις καὶ πολλαχῶς) (85c10-d1). But he never offers a demonstration of him doing that. Nor does Socrates *argue* that he could do it; he merely asserts it using up the space of only two lines.<sup>4</sup> Since Plato does not think it necessary to bring the boy to knowledge, he presumably thinks that the exhibition he does provide sufficiently answers Meno's challenge.<sup>5</sup> But that must surely be because he takes what the exhibition does show to be successful in addressing the problem in Meno's challenge, whatever that may be, for the solution of which recollection was invoked.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>And he repeats this claim at 94a4-5, apparently, referring back to this passage.

<sup>5</sup>It is the obstacle Meno raises to Socrates' request to embark on a search for the nature of virtue at 80d5-8 that I refer to as 'Meno's challenge'. It is usually, and to my mind misleadingly, referred to as a paradox about the possibility of inquiry. In section IV I explain exactly what objection I think it raises.

<sup>6</sup>However, H. H. Benson *op. cit.* thinks that "Plato must show not merely that one can come to have true belief, when one fails to know, but that one can come to have *knowledge*" (p. 134) because, according to Benson, Meno "needs an explanation to the effect that it is possible to come to have a belief which one recognizes is true, when one fails to know" (p. 134, n. 20). But according to Benson the boy doesn't even recognize his false answers as false (pp. 133-4). Benson thinks that only the boy's having knowledge can serve as an explanation for how the boy could recognize his belief as true. He is thus forced to say that Plato doesn't address the challenge in substance. But Plato's new and substantive claim, as I'll show, is precisely that thanks to recollection the boy, without yet having knowledge, has sufficient reason for asserting his belief.

Thus Plato offers us the claim that 'learning' comes about by recollection, but unlike what many seem to think, in the *Meno* we are not offered a *theory of recollection* and an example to illustrate it.<sup>7</sup> True, at 81a-b Socrates refers to a λόγος told by priests and priestesses but this only concerns the immortality and reincarnation of the soul. True also that it is this λόγος which is subsequently linked to the claim that the soul has knowledge that it is able to recollect (81c-d). But nowhere are we offered a philosophical account of what it is for the soul to learn something by recollecting it. What we are offered is not more than we ourselves can extract through scrutiny of the slave-boy episode. Plato says so himself in almost so many words. After Meno hears the story about the soul's past and recollectable knowledge, he wants to know how Socrates means that we do not learn but rather recollect (81e3-5). Socrates will spend time to try to instruct Meno, but he makes it clear that he is not going to teach him a theory of μάθησις as recollection. What he will do instead is to enlighten Meno by presenting him with an exhibition. Of course Plato may well have a theory, but if he does, he wants Meno to acquire it in the same manner as the slave boy will acquire the solution to the geometrical problem. Thereby he is telling us that to enlighten ourselves about recollection, we must do exactly as Meno is asked to do. If a theory exists, we shall find it in the way the slave-boy finds the solution to the geometrical problem.

Briefly, here is how the dialogue got to this crucial point. Socrates makes it clear that he must know what virtue is if he is to be able to tell Meno whether it is teachable.<sup>8</sup> Meno claims he knows what virtue is but after cross examination complains that he has become numb (80a8-b2). Socrates says he is as numb himself (80c6-7) and that he wants to embark on a joint inquiry. But Meno doesn't think there is much point in doing that. Recollection is then invoked precisely in order to address Meno's concerns.

*Prima facie*, then, we have here the claim that recollection is the *cause* of the slave-boy's coming to have *true belief* about the answer he is searching for,

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<sup>7</sup>Hence I disagree with H. H. Benson, *op. cit.* that "the slave-boy conversation is offered as an illustration of the theory of recollection" (p. 134). Also G. Fine *op. cit.* (p. 208).

<sup>8</sup>Socrates thinks he (and, presumably, anyone) needs to know what virtue is in order to know whether it is teachable, but we don't know whether he thinks that he will know immediately whether it is teachable when he comes to know what it is. Maybe he does not. For if he did he could infer that Meno does not know what virtue is from the fact that he does not know whether it is teachable. But maybe he does. For he may have inferred that Meno doesn't know what virtue is from Meno's very first question, about the teachability of virtue, but doesn't want to be the one to break the news to him.

without yet having *knowledge*,<sup>9</sup> and that this is sufficient for the solution of whichever problem it was invoked to solve. To see that this is Plato's claim, too, we must find those features in virtue of which the effect of the boy's recollecting, namely the production of a true belief in his soul, provides the required solution. First, then, we must identify exactly and understand correctly the problem for the solution of which Plato resolved to invoke recollection.

## II

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates declines to answer Meno's question whether virtue can be taught, or is acquired by practice, or whether it is the sort of thing one simply has to have by nature, offering the following as his reason:

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<sup>9</sup>I am taking this to be the chief thesis because it is the one most important to Plato's epistemological worries. But I am not taking it to be the only thesis, for, as noted above, Socrates also asserts that recollection's *end* result is knowledge (*M.*85c10-d1, 98a1-5). It is important to distinguish these two theses because commentators think that recollection is invoked not for what Socrates *demonstrates* it to cause, but for what he *asserts it can be made* to cause. (See n. 3 above).

M.71a3-b1: If you come to ask anyone around here [Athens] this question, there is no one who won't laugh and say: "Well, Stranger, you must think I am blessed by the gods if you think I know whether virtue is teachable or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether it is teachable or not teachable that I don't even know at all what virtue in itself is." And I, myself, am like my fellow citizens in this respect.<sup>10</sup>

Indirectly, Socrates disclaims knowledge both of what virtue is and of whether it can be taught. Quite directly, he connects these two disclaimers by means of this assumption: whether virtue can be taught cannot be known without knowledge of what it is. Since he does not know what virtue is he does not know whether it can be taught either. Both these disclaimers he attributes, ironically, to all Athenians, among whom, surely, there were some who would readily claim to know what virtue is. But he is not ironic when he also attributes to them the assumption through which he connects these disclaimers. What he really says is that those who would claim to know whether it can be taught would also claim to know what it is but, really, they know neither. He thinks this assumption is uncontroversial and offers the following general consideration as grounds for its appeal.

M.71b3-7: If I do not know what something is, how could I know what it is like? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know if he is handsome, wealthy, well-born or the opposite of these?

Twice before this statement Socrates has said that he does not know *at all* (παράπαν) what virtue is. When he offers an example to confirm his point, he considers the case where there is some person, say Meno, whom one does not know at all. Thus in his general statement he considers ignorance of the answer to a 'what is -?' (τί \_στιν) question, while in the example he offers he considers ignorance of the answer to a 'who is -?' (τίς \_στιν) question. So at this stage we can't be sure what kind of knowledge it is he says he lacks when he says that he doesn't know what virtue is.<sup>11</sup> Let us for the moment then take Socrates' point for what it appears to be: commonsensical and intuitive. I propose:

(P) For any x if A does not know x at all, then A does not know what x is like.

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<sup>10</sup>All the translations offered here are mine.

<sup>11</sup>It is, therefore, a mistake to think, as do G. Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 201, and others, that the phrase 'what virtue is', in context, suggests that Socrates disclaims knowledge of the definition of virtue. The context suggests that the 'what is -?' question isn't to be treated any different than the 'who is -?' question; hence the former suggests no more ignorance of a definition than does the latter.

Since his assumption about virtue rests on (P), it is no surprise that Socrates thinks it is uncontroversial. Clearly if I told you that I don't know a thing *at all*, you would be puzzled if I, at the same time, were to make assertions about what it's like. If it's true that Socrates doesn't know what virtue is at all, he couldn't know what it is like.<sup>12</sup> Meno, who will be quite outspoken in raising objections later, also accepts (P) without reservation and clearly indicates that he fully understands and accepts its implications. True, he says that he is surprised by what Socrates has just said but notice that he is only surprised, as would be anyone, that Socrates claims not to know what virtue is. Few people have after all addressed the subject as vigorously as he. But once Meno accepts Socrates' disclaimer, he also accepts what, on account of (P), follows from it, namely that he does not know what virtue is like. So Meno seems to be in agreement with Socrates about (P). But what exactly does he have reason to believe he agreed to?

Russell's distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description has been appealed to to make the case that, since Socrates illustrates his point by reference to an individual (Meno), he is committed to the view that virtue can only be known by acquaintance.<sup>13</sup> But everything Socrates says is also compatible with the view that knowledge by description is the one appropriate both for things like Meno and things like virtue. For all we know, he may think that there is a cluster of properties that are attributable uniquely to Meno and that to know Meno is to know that Meno is the possessor of these properties.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>One might say that one does assert, at least, that x has the property of being unknown to oneself. So given (P), asserting that one doesn't know x at all is paradoxical. However, what is meant here is, I think, two things. One doesn't know any of the properties of x that would enable one to identify x. But also: one doesn't know any property of x that could facilitate any reliable and substantive advance toward coming to know those properties that would enable one to identify x. But I think that it is indeed paradoxical, to say that one doesn't know x at all and yet assert that one has true substantive beliefs about it that would facilitate its identification. (See sections III and IV here).

<sup>13</sup>See for instance Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge, 1964 pp. 32-3, 213-4. But see also A. Nehamas' refutation of this view, 'Socratic Intellectualism', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. II 1987, pp. 275-316.

<sup>14</sup>Although he doesn't say, this, I suspect, is the point A. Nehamas, *op. cit.*, exploits when he suggests that not knowledge by acquaintance but knowledge of definitions and essences is what *M.* 71b3-7 implies (see p. 284). I shall argue that the text requires a much simpler interpretation.

It seems to me, though, that (P) makes its point independently of this distinction. In fact its immediate plausibility is a function of its generality; and its generality is, I claim, a function of its being neutral about what should count as an appropriate characterization of 'know'. Someone may wish to recommend Russell's distinction, but the proponent of (P) can put it aside and still say: "Maybe there is a special kind of knowledge that befits *knowing* Meno and things like him; and maybe there is a kind of knowledge that befits *knowing* virtue and things like it. I don't know what these kinds are; they may be the same, or quite different, or they may be otherwise related. Fortunately, you don't have to settle your views about any of this to get, or I to make, my point, which is simple and intuitive. If you don't know Meno at all (putting aside whatever may be revealed by analysis as a suitable characterization of 'know' for this case) you know nothing about him. Similarly, if you don't know virtue at all (putting aside whatever may be revealed by analysis as a suitable characterization of 'know' for this case) you know nothing about it".

Sufficient reason for taking (P) in this intuitive and pre-theoretical vein may be derived from this simple consideration. Since we are dealing with a dialogue, we may lay it down as a maxim of interpretative adequacy that we can reasonably expect the discussants to agree with our characterizations of what they agree to. Let us then bracket whatever views *we* may have about *M.* 71b3-7 and ask how we could reasonably expect Meno, Socrates' interlocutor, to understand it. Were we to put ourselves in his shoes, we surely would insist that no more complicated a view should be attributed to us than our conversation with Socrates warrants.<sup>15</sup> Looking at their exchange up to this point in this light, we would see that nothing ought to give Meno reason to suspect that (P) commits him to a complicated doctrine of whatever kind, only to the innocent and commonsensical point that knowing *x* is a necessary condition for knowing what *x* is like.

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<sup>15</sup>I am suggesting that we extend the courtesy of the Principle of Charity to Meno. By so doing we are being charitable to the one person we really need to be charitable to, namely the author. Since Plato here, as elsewhere, expresses philosophical views through a discussion, charity requires that we observe the following constraints: (a) he provides *all* the discussants with the acumen necessary for making the philosophical points he wants made, (b) he has them *all* participating in their making, (c) we mustn't read into bits of passages more complicated points than we would reasonably expect *all* the discussants to agree as having been made.

Bearing this in mind, we can easily make sense of Meno's first response to the question 'What is virtue?' He answers by explaining what sort of abilities and actions he thinks are required if one is to be a man with virtue, what sorts if one is to be a woman with virtue and so on for children and slaves, etc. All this seems quite reasonable. With (P) best interpreted as being neutral about what should count as the required knowledge for different cases, it follows that Meno has no reason to think that acceptance of it implies that 'knowing x' stands for 'knowing the definition of x' in those cases where a definition of x can be offered. Suppose that, in conversation with me in a garden, you accept (P) and claim to know what a bee is. If I then ask you 'What is a bee?', one way you could reasonably answer is by pointing to a bee buzzing around a flower. Or you could equally well, it seems to me, do as Meno did with virtue and say "look, there are all kinds of bees; there are honey bees, those small insects, you know, with brownish stripes on honey-colored bodies, or sweet bees, or there are the bumble-bees with the loud buzz, black stripes, etc." I would have no reason to be disappointed by you for not venturing a zoological characterization or definition. In either case you would sufficiently have backed up your claim.

The reason why Socrates gets disappointed is that he has in mind a specific interpretation of (P) for the case where virtue replaces x.<sup>16</sup> As he reveals gradually, what he is after is the ε\_δος of virtue, and he expects Meno to disclose it by offering to him a definition that accurately describes its ο\_σία.<sup>17</sup> We must be careful, though, not to misunderstand this as narrowing the scope of his own ignorance. Although he is now asking for the definition of virtue, saying that he does not know it himself, he is not thereby leaving it open that he might in some other sense have knowledge of what it is. His ignorance is still governed by his initial disclaimer, which was that he does not know *at all* what virtue is. That still motivates his question. But he now reveals that only through obtaining the definition of virtue can he remove his ignorance. All the while Socrates has been assuming: (a) not knowing the ε\_δος of virtue one doesn't know at all what it is; (b) to know the ε\_δος of virtue is to know the definition that describes its essence. Hence, by transitivity, not to know the definition of virtue is not to know at all what it is. By substituting identicals in (P) we get Socrates' interpretation of (P) for the case where x stands for virtue.

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<sup>16</sup>He may also know of a way to interpret (P) when Meno or things like him replace x; or he may not. But we have some reason to believe that what Socrates will reveal about (P) when virtue replaces x is not valid for when Meno replaces x. Virtue is a μάθημα (μάθησις as recollection is thus applicable) whereas Meno is arguably not. No reason then why 'know' in (P) should receive the same analysis in both cases. Hence more reason to think, as I do, that (P) makes a pre-theoretical intuitive point. The example at *M.* 71b3-7 was there to simply help make such a point. It left the scene as soon as the point was made.

<sup>17</sup>See 72b1-2, 72c6-d1, 75c4-7, 77a5-b1.

(P') If A does not know the definition of virtue, A does not know what virtue is like.<sup>18</sup>

Meno, who had accepted (P) but couldn't possibly suspect that (P') is how Socrates reads (P) when he talks about virtue, seems to be taken by surprise (73a4-5, 73d1). He doesn't understand why his claim that he knows what virtue is should imply that he has to give a definition of it and resists (P'). Although he never explains exactly why he resists it, perhaps it is because he doesn't share assumptions (a) or (b). In the end he is forced to line up behind (P'), and this throws him out of balance. From then on it is only not to lose face that he tries to offer a definition. But even when it becomes obvious that he can't, and despite Socrates' insinuating the opposite, Meno doesn't concede that he doesn't know what virtue is.<sup>19</sup> He goes on the attack which Plato will try to meet both by novel claims and by rejecting Socrates' transition from (P) to (P'). To diagnose correctly the point of the attack (so that we may be able to understand Plato's answer), we need to appreciate the severity of the problem which motivates it.

### III

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<sup>18</sup>(P') must not be confused with what is often referred to as the principle of the priority of definition. I don't believe that Socrates endorses such a general principle; that for instance if he didn't know the definition of orange he wouldn't know what an orange is like. But he may well be thinking that (P) turns to (P') for any μάθημα x.

<sup>19</sup>All Meno concedes is that though he has spoken often and well in the past about virtue, now he cannot even say what it is (80b4). What Socrates infers from Meno's display is that he is and is behaving like one who does not know (80d2-3).

What exactly is the epistemological environment after both parties line up behind (P') and no acceptable definition appeared to be in sight? T. H. Irwin has maintained that even though Socrates holds that one has to know the definition of virtue to know what it is like, he can still allow us true beliefs about it. "[H]e allows both his interlocutors and himself true beliefs without knowledge"<sup>20</sup>. Now these would have to be beliefs that not only are true but are also identified as such if (as Irwin thinks) the elenchus is to rely on them as true and hence make progress. On this view then Socrates holds (P') and disclaims knowledge of what virtue is (and what it is like), but still makes use of the elenchus as an instrument of discovery because he can identify true beliefs about virtue both in himself and others. Let us call this the True Belief thesis. Myself, I believe that the True Belief thesis is untenable philosophically and exegetically, that Socrates can't allow us or himself true beliefs -identified as such- about virtue (in the absence of knowledge of what it is), and that he doesn't. This thesis has for too long distorted our understanding of Plato's innovations in the *Meno*.

'True belief' is first mentioned in the *Meno* only after Socrates has concluded his discussion with the slave-boy.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as Irwin himself observes, the distinction between 'true belief' and 'knowledge' isn't mentioned in epistemological contexts anywhere else in the early elenctic dialogues. Still, Irwin claims that Socrates may well have observed it and made use of it, even though he hasn't mentioned it. But I am not at all certain exactly what it is we are asked to believe that Socrates has *observed*. Admittedly there is a clear and intuitively accessible distinction between knowledge and belief, and it is reasonable to say that someone may well have observed it. But is it as clear that the same can be said about a distinction between knowledge and *true* belief? Frankly, who would say that we have so clear *intuitions* about such a distinction and what it amounts to? We may have views about this distinction, plenty of which stem arguably from Plato, but then again Plato never behaved as if he simply *observed* it -took it for granted. He took novel and radical theoretical steps to develop it. He introduces it

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<sup>20</sup>T. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, p. 41. Also G. Fine *op. cit.* reiterates the same claim (see pp. 202-4). This has been a very influential view held by most commentators who have been discussing the subject. See for instance M. Burnyeat, 'Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore', *Philosophy* 52: 381-98, p. 384ff., G. Santas, *Socrates, Philosophy in Plato's Early dialogues*, London, 1979 p. 311, n. 26, P. Woodruff, *Plato: "Hippias Major"*, Indianapolis, 1982, pp. 140-1. Contrast Vlastos, *Socratic Studies*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 72-3. But his criticism of this view, and conclusions are radically different than mine.

<sup>21</sup>At 85c7; see above p. 1

in the *Meno* only after introducing the notion of recollection, and when he mentions true belief, he explicitly attributes it to the boy as something he has come to by recollection. One of the notions crucial for the distinction is thus made to depend on another, that of recollection, newly introduced and still in the making. And in order to drive a wedge between knowledge and true belief, Plato also felt he had to explain later in the *Meno* what he means by knowledge (98a3-5).

Nor is it clear to me that one could put such a distinction to use and never feel one had to draw attention to it. We can't simply suppose that Socrates or his interlocutors in the early dialogues have been independently familiar with it, for we don't have reason to believe that it was common in either daily or philosophical use. Notice too that Plato explains what he means by knowledge in response to an explicit and direct question by Meno, who asks what the difference between it and true belief may be, precisely because his own intuitions appeared to fail him (97c11-d3). (Also, Socrates has to work at 97a-b to get the distinction across to Meno in the first place). So even if we were to grant that Socrates had observed it, whatever that now may mean, why should we suppose that his audience had done so as well?<sup>22</sup> But then it simply isn't plausible to assume, as we are required to for Irwin's point to go through, that Socrates, in addition to having observed the distinction, could rest assured that he could use it without mention. We have no reason to believe that he could count on being observed by his audience to have observed it and made use of it.

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<sup>22</sup>Hence, not mentioning the distinction is evidence for not having observed it. Irwin says:  
"M.71b3-7, 100b4-6, HMa.268c8-d2, R.354c1-3, Pr.361c2-6, all say that I must know what x is to *know* anything about x, not `to have any true *beliefs* about x' (*op. cit.* p. 294, n. 4)."  
Irwin's point is that since Socrates says `*know*' in these contexts and not `*have true belief*', he only disallows us knowledge claims but not true-belief claims. But if the distinction is not made, it hardly matters whether Socrates says `*know*' and not `*have true belief*'. Since his interlocutors are not independently familiar with the distinction, Socrates can't possibly expect that when he says `*know*', and not `*true beliefs*', anyone would infer that he disallows knowledge claims, but allows true-beliefs claims. What Irwin presents as evidence for his claim begs the question, for it presupposes the very thing which these texts are called upon to substantiate, namely that the distinction is operative. (This does not apply to M.100b4-6. But this passage comes in the *Meno* after the distinction between knowledge and true belief is explicitly drawn. It is a mistake to treat a passage posterior to the distinction having been drawn on a par with passages prior to it).

It isn't just any distinction between knowledge and true belief that the True Belief Thesis needs to attribute to Socrates. Having come to know, one can say "the belief I had before I came to know was true" and drive a wedge between that kind of thing and knowledge. Socrates, though, would need to drive a wedge between (a) "I know that p" and (b) "I believe that p and this is a true belief" so as to be able to assert (b) while at the same time denying (a). But to do this one needs distinct assertibility conditions for (a) and (b). Since we are asked to believe that Socrates observed a distinction between knowledge and true belief that he didn't care to mention, we are also asked to believe that he not only had intuitions about such distinct conditions, but also thought that they were so clear that everyone else also had them. Well, ask yourself what intuitions you have about distinct assertibility conditions for (a) and (b). Meno obviously didn't have any. That is why, when faced with the fact that true belief, so long as it is actually present, is as good a guide to action as knowledge could be, he needed an explanation of the difference between knowledge and true belief. When I denied above that Socrates had observed and utilized without mentioning it the required distinction, it was because the required intuitions about distinct assertibility conditions for (a) and (b) simply aren't there. One would need to draw freely and amply on such intuitions in order to make this distinction in such a casual way. Things are worse in this respect for Socrates than they would be for anyone else. For suppose p is about virtue and Socrates asserts (b) but denies (a). Clearly, and too obviously to miss, he asserts not only that he believes that p, but also that p is true. But how could he have identified p as true? When assertions about virtue are made by his interlocutors he expects that they are able to justify them through knowledge of its definition. It seems rather that Socrates didn't believe that there were any means of driving a wedge between one's true and the rest of one's beliefs about virtue except by having knowledge of its definition.

If Socrates says things in the early dialogues that make either his interlocutors or Plato's readers think otherwise, that is as it may be. But in the *Meno* he pleads innocent of that charge. Prior to Meno's becoming numb, Socrates' purpose is not to try, together with Meno, to discover the definition of virtue. He has simply asked Meno what it was and tried to get him to say it. This process does not depend on Socrates' committing himself to any views about virtue. Nor need we anywhere during this session take him as committing himself to anything more than simply trying to flesh out Meno's beliefs and getting him to declare whether he is satisfied with them. Only when Meno complains that he has become numb does Socrates say that they should together attempt to discover what virtue is (80d3-4). From then on, true beliefs will indeed be crucial, but this process is

significantly not set under way until after recollection has been introduced.

As in the part of the *Meno* up to 80c, often in elenctic contexts Socrates connects virtue to *καλόν*, *γαθόν* and *φέλιμον*. On the basis of this fact, some have made the claim that Socrates relies on beliefs to make progress in substantive inquiries, substantive in the sense that they disclose -or make progress toward disclosing- the nature of virtue.<sup>23</sup> But it doesn't seem to me that Socrates takes this connection as a belief that can be used to bring about progress of that sort.<sup>24</sup> In the *Meno*, at any rate, all this connection leads to is downfall. Watch how it brings down Meno's definition of virtue as the capacity to acquire good things.<sup>25</sup> Socrates says, and Meno agrees, that for this acquisition to signify virtue and not *κακία* (*M.78d7*), it will have to be done with justice. But this is progress towards disaster

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<sup>23</sup>See G. Fine 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', p. 203 for a claim that this is an entrenched belief on which the elenchus often relies. Also Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, pp. 41, 67. But reliance on a belief doesn't imply that Socrates thinks it is reliable. The evidence suggests that, for him, very entrenched beliefs indeed can't simply be assumed to be reliable because entrenched. Socrates didn't hesitate to reject the very entrenched beliefs about the justice of retaliation. Or take the *Hippias Major* where we find him facing the challenge: "Tell me now Socrates, how do you know what sort of things are fine and foul? For could you please tell me what the fine is?" (*HMa.286c9-d1*). To justify the assertion that the speech was fine the challenger demands "that by which everything to which it is added has the property of being fine, be it a stone or wood, man or god, every act and every piece of knowledge" (*HMa.292d1-3*). In the absence of the definition of fine-ness, the same challenge that is raised with respect to speeches can also be raised with respect to gods. Surely, 'gods are fine' must have been an entrenched belief.

<sup>24</sup>Related to this is another long question which I cannot go fully into here. Plainly, however, we cannot simply assume that Socrates' frequent contribution towards a modification of a proposal of his interlocutor's implies a *commitment on his part to an improved* proposal -one that is now in the right line. Surely, in his conversation with the boy no one would be willing to say that Socrates commits himself to the boy's second suggestion which he more or less puts into his mouth. Nor can he take it as an improvement unless he is misguided. Since the arithmetical approach is infinitely long and will therefore never produce a right answer, the 3-feet proposal is no closer to the truth than the 4-feet proposal was. Socrates' contribution at this stage is to bring the boy a step closer, not to the solution itself but, to numbness. This teaches the boy things about himself which will prove conducive to discovering truth. But that doesn't make the suggestion itself a better suggestion, if what counts as good is the solution. One should bear in mind that in the elenctic dialogues Socrates is examining with the interlocutor the interlocutor's ideas. If Socrates suggests something to him that seems to him true, and maybe also to Socrates, the immediate purpose is to unsettle the interlocutor's confidence. There is no warrant for supposing that Socrates would rely on it in his own right in attempting to work out the truth about the matter at hand, what some particular virtue is.

<sup>25</sup>Good not in the sense in which something is good because it is informed with virtue but in the sense in which valuable commodities, goods like silver, gold, honors and offices, can be good. (*O\_δ\_v\_ρα μ\_λλον\_ πόρος τ\_v τοιούτων\_γαθ\_v\_ \_ \_πορία\_ ρετ\_v\_ε\_η, M.78e6-7*).

for shortly after Socrates will say, and Meno will not contest, that we cannot know what is just without knowing what virtue is (79c8-9). Neither Socrates nor Meno seems to feel that this constitutes progress in an attempt to disclose the nature of virtue. In fact it is at this very point that Socrates concludes that Meno doesn't know what virtue is while Meno himself becomes frustrated and refuses to go on.

Nor did Meno surrender because the assumption that virtue is καλόν, ἄγαθόν and φέλιμον conflicts with some proposition expressed or implied by him. He surrenders because he is frustrated that he is now back full circle reiterating what he has been assuming from the beginning without managing to convince Socrates that he has made any progress. For as the careful reader will have noticed, Meno has been making this assumption all the while. In his initial response to Socrates' question, he made ample use of the adverbs εὖ and κακῶς (71e1-7). Since he thought he knew what virtue is, he never worried about the content of εὖ and κακῶς. But when he becomes perplexed, neither he nor Socrates is able to draw any content from these adverbs to help themselves overcome their perplexity. Apparently, Meno's views on the content of εὖ and κακῶς have suffered from the same blow that hit his views on virtue. What this reveals is that the connection between virtue, admirable, good and beneficial is vacuous, completely empty of substantive content. It provides no information about virtue and consequently no direction to the inquiry. It doesn't help to go around saying that virtue is good and admirable and beneficial if you at the same time believe, as does Socrates, that if you don't know what virtue is, you will know as much about whether an act is good, etc. as you will know about whether it is virtuous.

Irwin also claims that Socrates answers Meno's challenge by merely describing an elenchus, that is the sort of elenchus he has all the time been engaged in in the early dialogues.<sup>26</sup> But Plato claims he answers the challenge by making the boy arrive at a true belief through *recollection*. If the examination of the slave-boy *merely* employs the old, standard elenctic method and so if it is true that these old methods, as Socrates has always understood and practiced them, are of themselves a sufficient answer to Meno's challenge, then why does Socrates in the second half of the *Meno* announce and adopt a new, hypothetical method of discussion and inquiry? The hypothetical method displays some strikingly new features that seem all too clearly inspired by the examination of the slave-boy to be ignored. Socrates for the first time relaxes the usual requirement that knowledge of what virtue is must precede the discussion of how it comes to be and is prepared

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<sup>26</sup>*Op. cit.* p. 315, n. 13. Also G. Fine, *op. cit.* pp. 207-9.

even to assert substantive propositions about the latter (as for instance that it doesn't come by nature, 98d) without knowledge of the former. He had similarly applauded the boy's assertion that the diagonal divides its square in half even making a point of saying that the boy lacked knowledge (85c6-7). But more importantly, the hypothetical method makes sense of what it is to bring the boy to knowledge by asking him *πολλάκις κα\_ πολλαχ\_* (85c10-1). I take it that he doesn't have knowledge because he wouldn't, among other things, be able to give an account of why for instance the diagonal divides its square in half. Once he did come to his true belief and asserted it, one would reasonably ask him or he may ask himself why it is that the diagonal divides its square in half. Since he doesn't know the answer he can't but entertain hypotheses about what the case must be for it to follow. Having true belief, he will have something against which to test his hypotheses. And to do that (i.e. propose and test hypotheses) he will indeed have to be asked or ask himself *πολλάκις κα\_ πολλαχ\_*.

Those who accept the True Belief thesis also maintain -presumably because they believe that true beliefs are usual occurrences in the elenctic dialogues- that the function of recollection is exclusively the transformation of true beliefs into knowledge.<sup>27</sup> But this flatly contradicts what Socrates demonstrates, and we have already taken note of the fact that ignoring the demonstration is like ignoring the very means through which we are to be shown that learning is recollection. Moreover, the passage often cited to support the claim that recollection serves only to convert true beliefs into knowledge seems rather to undermine it. It is this:

*M.98a4-5*: And that [viz. tying down true beliefs *α\_τίας λογισμ\_*] my friend Meno is recollection as we previously agreed.

To disclose the precise content of this passage, however, we have to look to what Socrates and Meno have in fact previously *agreed* to about recollection. Nowhere did they agree that *only* knowledge can be achieved through recollection. *M.85c9-d7*, where Socrates explains how the boy can eventually be brought to knowledge, is the only previous discussion of the issue. That discussion describes knowledge as the end result of a process which starts with the discovery of true belief. Hence, properly understood, 98a4-5 does nothing more than reiterate that old statement which had knowledge as one, and not the only, result of recollection.

Socrates as we encounter him in the first part of the *Meno* does not conduct a substantive inquiry but leads Meno into numbness, the same numbness in which, as he says, he all too frequently finds himself (80c6-8). Further support

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<sup>27</sup>Hence A. Nehamas 'Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher' p. 22. Also Irwin *Plato's Moral Theory* pp. 139-41, and 'Recollection and Moral Theory', pp 753-5.

for this conclusion will be derived from properly understanding Meno's challenge, a task to which the next section is dedicated.

#### IV.

Socrates is numb because, or so I claim, in theoretical contexts he can't make use of whatever it is he may, in other contexts, believe about virtue. Suppose that in a context where the goal is to produce an accurate description of the ο\_σία of virtue, Socrates says that he believes that  $p$  where  $p$  is a proposition about virtue. He would then be committing himself to  $p$ 's being true. To undermine that commitment of his, we only need to remind him of his disclaimer and his other commitment to (P'). Really, we won't need to remind him of anything. (P') isn't just a thesis he holds provisionally. He *believes* (P') just as he believes that he doesn't know what virtue is, and these are beliefs that are vividly present in his mind in theoretical contexts. Consequently, as long as he allows no assertibility conditions for commitment to  $p$  other than knowledge of the definition of virtue, *he believes that his belief that  $p$  is unjustified*. Hence, in theoretical contexts<sup>28</sup> he can't but suspend the beliefs he might otherwise and elsewhere have held about virtue.

In saying this about Socrates, I simply follow his lead. Socrates says he suffers the same numbness he has inflicted upon Meno. Look what happened to Meno. He entered the conversation with a variety of beliefs about virtue, and accepted (P) because it never threatened his claim to knowledge or his beliefs. Subsequently he was forced to line up with (P'), which makes knowledge of the definition of virtue a necessary condition for justifying any proposition about it.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>I am not saying that Socrates doesn't ever hold and make use of beliefs. For rational, moral agents and therefore also Socrates actions do in some sense or other imply beliefs. But in contexts of theoretical investigations, and perhaps only there, his theoretical commitments force him to bracket whatever beliefs he may otherwise hold. I simply draw attention to the fact that there are propositions to which our commitment varies depending on context. As moral agents in daily life we may do  $\alpha$  which implies some degree of commitment to  $p$ , but then, as theoretical agents, deny any commitment to  $p$ , and subsequently, when disengaged from our investigation, do  $\alpha$  again. Beliefs on the basis of which we perform as moral agents don't simply transfer to our theoretical investigations of morality; nor does failure to justify them theoretically bring about their abandonment. Unfortunately, confusion on this point on the part of commentators has obscured much of the philosophically extremely interesting tension displayed in the early dialogues. But this is a topic for another occasion.

<sup>29</sup>The epistemologist's ear is perhaps wary of this casual transition between claims about knowledge and claims about justification. Given P', someone might say, a definition of virtue is a necessary condition for knowing any proposition about it, but not for justifying any proposition about it unless one equates knowledge with justified true belief. But I think, although I won't argue it here, that in this context the transition is entirely

Since he never managed to produce a definition, he is forced, in view of (P') and the context of his discussion with Socrates, to realize that he can no longer uphold and bring to bear any of his beliefs about virtue. This is exactly where the torpedo fish has touched him, which is why he has no answer to give to Socrates (80ab1-2). Socrates has made him *not know what to believe about virtue*.

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appropriate. Socrates translates "one has to know virtue in order to know anything about it" into "one has to know the definition of virtue in order to know any thing about it" precisely because he will not accept any claim to knowing a proposition about virtue unless one can justify one's believing that proposition by connecting it to the definition of virtue.

Forced to bracket his beliefs about virtue, he refuses to depart on a joint search and attacks Socrates with his famous challenge at *M.80d5-8*. According to an influential suggestion by Irwin, Meno's challenge is this. If we don't know what *x* is, we know nothing about *x*. But if we know nothing about *x*, we can't identify *x*. If we can't identify *x*, we can't recognize *x* as the subject of our inquiry. But if we can't recognize *x* as the subject of our inquiry, we can't inquire into *x*. Hence if we don't know what *x* is, we can't inquire into *x*.<sup>30</sup> Not knowing the definition of virtue and what virtue is like "rules out *any search* for a definition".<sup>31</sup> On this account, then, Meno's challenge is that not knowing what *x* is makes it conceptually impossible to *set off on an inquiry* into *x*. Let us call this the Conceptual Impossibility account of Meno's challenge.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*Plato's Moral Theory*, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup>*ibid.* My emphasis.

<sup>32</sup>This is also the account offered by Fine, *op. cit.*, p. 205. Although for somewhat different reasons, N. P. White too diagnoses Meno's challenge as being, essentially, that inquiries cannot be set off the ground. See his *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, Indianapolis 1976 pp. 42-7.

Irwin's suggestion about how to understand the challenge and its solution concerns any  $x$ . Recollection, however, concerns only μαθήματα  $x$ .<sup>33</sup> But even apart from this, the suggestion is implausible. According to Irwin, Socrates' answer to the challenge is that "to inquire into  $x$  we need only enough true beliefs about  $x$  to fix the reference of the term ' $x$ ', so that when the inquiry is over, we can still refer to the same thing." (p. 139). I take this to mean that we need enough true *substantive* beliefs about what sort of a thing  $x$  is to be able, at the outset, to lock the inquiry onto  $x$  and thus ensure that at the inquiry's end we shall have identified the true referent of ' $x$ '.<sup>34</sup> But it is false that I need any such beliefs at the outset to be successful in identifying the referent of ' $x$ '. I could swear that the people I overheard using the term '*Meno*' -a term I was previously unacquainted with- were talking about dogs. Hence I had no true substantive belief about what sort of a thing *Meno* is when I set off to identify the referent of '*Meno*'. Still, I see no reason why that should disable my inquiry. We don't need to have any true substantive beliefs about  $x$  to be able to identify the reference of  $x$ . What we do need is the *capacity to acquire* such beliefs.

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<sup>33</sup>Plato links ζητε\_ν and μανθάνειν directly to \_νάμνησις at 81d4-5. (Also n. 1 above). Much confusion would be avoided if that fact was paid attention too. White *op. cit.* thinks that Plato treats looking for an answer as a case of looking for an object. (See also N. P. White, '*Inquiry*', *Review of Metaphysics* 28 (1974-5): 289-310, pp. 290-4). But, really, we have no reason, textual or other, to attribute to Plato the thesis that searching for the answer to a question when learning a μάθημα is looking for an object. Irwin too thinks that *Meno*'s challenge gains its force from treating  $x$  as an object (*op. cit.* p. 315) and cashes Socrates' response in terms of considerations about reference (p. 139). But, as I'll show, the text requires a simpler interpretation, and Plato's present concerns (*viz.* learning μαθήματα) do not require him to become involved in the metaphysics of reference, nor us to import it in order to understand what he is saying.

<sup>34</sup>Irwin's use of "fix the referent" is peculiar and may lead to confusion. For Kripke from whom the notion I suspect is borrowed, reference fixing is done when a term is first introduced in the language. I can then pick out the object to which, say, '*Meno*' refers through quite incidental features and without a single substantive true belief about what sort of thing *Meno* is. Having overheard people using the term '*Meno*', I can "fix its reference" for myself by the mere belief, call it *M*, that '*Meno*' denotes whatever it is those people were talking about when they said '*Meno*'. If I come to believe, falsely, that these people were talking about a dog, I still refer to what I referred to initially through *M* in spite of my mistaken belief that I have identified the referent of '*Meno*'. Surely though no one would want to say that this is Socrates' solution since that would represent him as being concerned only to guarantee that at the end of the day he still refers to the same thing regardless of whether he has managed to *identify* its reference. So I infer that what Irwin has in mind when he says "when the inquiry is over we can still refer to the same thing" is that the thing to which we then believe we refer is the same as that to which we do refer; *i.e.* we have managed to identify the true referent of  $x$ . But notice that mere true beliefs, like *M* in our example, cannot guarantee success. I take it then that what Irwin has in mind when he says "true beliefs" is "true *substantive* beliefs about what sort of thing  $x$  is".

Most importantly, however, it is false that we need to identify in any way at all the reference of something<sup>35</sup> in order to be able to raise the question 'what is -?' about it and even be successful at answering it. Suppose Meno had raised the question 'what is ether?' Obviously he can't identify the reference of 'ether', but he still raised the question. Obviously he doesn't have *any* true beliefs that would enable him to pick out the reference of 'ether', but he could still be successful in discovering, having raised the question 'what is ether?', that 'ether' doesn't have a reference. Addressing the challenge and its solution in terms of considerations about reference simply generates confusion. Perhaps the confusion is Plato's own, but we should consider other options before drawing this conclusion.

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<sup>35</sup>Not even, that is, in the way we picked out Meno via M in the previous note.

The Conceptual Impossibility account misidentifies the objection raised by the challenge. It takes its point to be that it is impossible to set off on an inquiry. Still, the question 'what is virtue?' has been raised, so some sort of an inquiry is arguably under way. More importantly, recollection, which is Plato's response to the challenge, is focused, not at all on how it is possible to simply inquire, but exclusively on how it is possible to *discover* the answer one is searching for.<sup>36</sup> And there is ample reason, dialectical and philosophical, for Meno to put the challenge exactly on that latter point. Having failed to produce the definition, Meno was forced by (P') to bracket his beliefs about virtue. But then he is right to put it to Socrates, who claims to be in the same cognitive state as Meno, that by the same token, as long as they don't know the definition, they will have to bracket any other proposition about virtue that they may come upon or be presented with. The objection isn't that they couldn't set off on a search. Surely, they could go around gathering propositions or come to them themselves, see what that might lead them to and so on. The objection is rather that they don't have the means to determine whether any of them is true.

I suggest that Meno objects that it is impossible not to conduct an inquiry, but to do so *rationally*, i.e. hoping reasonably to *discover* the answer. Let us call this the Rational Impossibility account of Meno's challenge and oppose it to the Conceptual Impossibility one. We shall now examine the evidence to see which of the two accounts the text favors. Meno says:

*M.80d5-8:* How, Socrates, are you going to search for it if you do not know at all what it is? (a) how can you set something down in advance (προθέμενος) that you do not know and then search (ζητήσεις) for it? (b) Or however much you may happen to meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing you did not know?

In (b) Meno puts it to Socrates that even if he stumbles on the correct answer he will not recognize it, which is exactly what we should expect given what I have urged so far. It is a point not about setting out on a search, but about concluding one successfully. Turning to (a), we find προθέμενος and ζητήσεις to have the same grammatical object. (a) then suggests that it isn't possible to set down in advance something one doesn't know and search for it. In what sense, though, is it

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<sup>36</sup>Having failed to diagnose Meno's challenge correctly G. Fine is forced to say that "recollection is introduced not as a direct reply to the paradox..." (*op.cit.*, p. 213). But it would be grossly misleading and blatantly confused of Plato to offer recollection so clearly as a direct reply to Meno if it were not. As many have done before, Fine calls paradox what I call challenge. However, Plato doesn't seem to address a paradox which is why using this name misrepresents what he does address. He doesn't try to explain why some fact, which according to some seemingly compelling argument isn't a fact, is after all a fact. He answers Meno by simply pointing to a fact the existence of which Meno never doubts.

supposed to be impossible? One possibility could indeed be that proposed by the Conceptual Impossibility account: one can't fix the object of the search in advance. But another possibility is that even if one had a proposed answer to the question one seeks to settle (for instance an answer to the question 'what is virtue?'), and sets that down in advance, one cannot sensibly search to discover that that *is* the answer. Why? Because, as Meno immediately affirms in (b), one will never know it is right, if, *ex hypothesi*, one did not begin by knowing it when one first met with it and set it down as a possible answer. Indeed, if we look in the immediate context for why (a) says searching is impossible, all we find is (b). Hence, as Meno formulates it the challenge seems to be that when one doesn't know the answer to a question one can't search for it rationally hoping to *discover* it.

In his restatement of the challenge, Socrates instructively (μανθάνω ο\_οv βούλει λέγειν, 80e1) supplies it with an additional horn that gives credence to the account I propose.

M.80e2-5: A human being cannot search for anything, either what one knows, or what one does not know; (i) not what one knows because one knows and it is not necessary to search for it, (ii) nor what one does not know for one does not even know what to search for.

Socrates states first the allegation about the impossibility of conducting a search. (i) and (ii) he offers as reasons. (ii) simply renders the objection by Meno.<sup>37</sup> The Conceptual Impossibility account, though, faces problems with (i). Socrates never indicates any misgivings with (i) or suggests that it states a pseudo-problem. Still, on the Conceptual Impossibility account (i) states, falsely, that it is impossible to set off on and sustain a search when one knows the answer. Socrates himself sets off on a search for something he does know and says so, using the same word as in his version of the challenge, when he says that the boy will search with him (ζητ\_ν<sup>38</sup> μετ' \_μο\_, 84c10-1). Obviously he *can*, and does search for what he knows but not even in passing does he mention (i) as an obstacle to his doing that. If he is opposing the challenge as rendered by the Conceptual Impossibility account, why doesn't he use this fact to simply refute it, or at least make the

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<sup>37</sup>(ii) can't support any thesis to the effect that Socrates modifies the objection and Meno doesn't detect any modification. If we still say that Socrates modifies it we say that Plato cheats -quite clumsily too given how easy it would be to hide it- by evading to face the objection put by Meno.

<sup>38</sup>Obviously the grammatical object of ζητ\_ν can't, without much strain, be construed as an object: it is the answer to a certain problem of geometry. Moreover, if inability to identify and recognize x as the subject of one's inquiry is what makes it impossible to inquire into what one does not know, why should it also make it impossible to inquire into what one does know?

comment that, although he is not supposed to, he nonetheless is able to search for what he knows? By contrast, on the Rational Impossibility account, (i) turns out true.<sup>39</sup> It makes perfect sense to say that it is impossible to be rational and at the same time search for the purpose of *discovering* the answer if one knows the answer, simply because one already knows it. Moreover, the Conceptual Impossibility account would, while the Rational Impossibility account doesn't, prevent one who knows the answer, and whose aim is not to discover it for himself but, as in the case of Socrates, assist someone else to discover it, from searching. Socrates doesn't express any worry about (i) because he understands the challenge as I propose. That is why in (i) he says not that one *couldn't* search but that it is not *necessary* (ο\_δ\_ν δε\_) for one to search, which, if anything, implies that one could if one wished to.

I have argued that Meno doesn't raise, and Socrates doesn't address, a general paradox about the possibility of inquiry, but raises the very specific challenge that it is impossible to discover the answer one doesn't know and therefore impossible to conduct a rational search for that purpose. Socrates says himself the very same thing. Having set forth recollection and referring to the challenge he thinks his exhibition with the slave-boy has refuted, he says that it is better to think that we must search for what we don't know than if we thought as the challenge urges that

M. 86b9-c1: what we don't know is not possible to discover (μηδ\_ δυνατ\_ν ε\_ναι ε\_ρε\_ν) and we ought not to search for it (μηδ\_ δε\_ν ζητε\_ν).

This seems to me to be solid proof for the Rational Impossibility account of the challenge. The challenge was, says Socrates in plain unequivocal language, that it is not possible to discover what one doesn't know and for that reason one *ought* not search for it. It never put the objection that one simply *can't* search for what one doesn't know. In fact, as Socrates presents it above, the challenge must have assumed all the while that one can search, for only then can it give, as it pretends

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<sup>39</sup>Socrates doesn't say otherwise so he too believes (i) is true. Nehamas says: "he also denies the claim that 'one cannot search for what one knows' ... For one need not know what one knows since knowledge may be, and usually is, forgotten ..." ('Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher', p. 23). But Socrates never denies that, and only confusing different senses of 'know' would incline one to say that, due to forgetting, one 'need not know what one knows'. Surely, I can't say "I know all the things I have forgotten" unless I equivocate on 'know'. The way Fine interprets the challenge forces her to object to Socrates that it isn't clear why "if one knows x, one cannot inquire into it" (*op. cit.* p. 206). But of course it is very clear why when one knows x one can't be rational and at the same time search to discover it, which is what I claim Socrates says. Nor does the Rational Impossibility account depend on "an exclusive and exhaustive dichotomy between complete knowledge and total ignorance" (p. 220, n. 24). Think of the two as endpoints of a continuum if you wish. You still don't need to search for x to discover x if you *know* x.

to do, the rational advice that one ought not to search because it isn't possible to discover what one is searching for. Offering proof for the Rational Impossibility account, the above passage lends independent support also to what I have claimed motivates the challenge. I have argued that Socrates and, in the end, Meno accept (P'), and I have shown how Meno's inability to offer a definition of virtue and (P') makes them both numb. Numbness as I have explained it justifies and explains the worry that it is impossible to discover what one doesn't know. Since, as *M.* 86b9-c1 makes abundantly clear, this worry is exactly what the challenge expresses and what the answer to it addresses, reasoning to the best explanation requires us to affirm numbness and (P') as the causes of the worry.

## V

To answer Meno, Plato must prove to him that it is rational to search for what one doesn't know. For this purpose he produces the recollection exhibition which is obviously successful since it convinces Meno to join Socrates in a search. Given the challenge as it was handed to us from the previous section we must now seek to identify those features in virtue of which recollection as exhibited is successful in meeting it. But we must first clear up some misunderstandings.

Some have complained that Meno will not have been answered unless Plato demonstrates to him that discovery can be made in the case where all the parties lack knowledge. But what this criticism misses is that Meno has challenged precisely that it is impossible to discover what one doesn't know and would therefore object vehemently, as he has of course done already, to such an attempt being even set off the ground. Clearly Plato has no option but to offer an exhibition in which Meno is able to observe that progress is being made. Making someone else discover the answer to something Meno already knows seems therefore a wise choice.

Another complaint may be that since Meno's challenge is couched in terms of knowledge and arguably the goal of any inquiry is to get to know something one didn't before, not demonstrating acquisition of knowledge is simply being evasive on the part of Plato. Such a complaint however misses important subtleties. The fact that Meno couches his challenge in terms of knowledge doesn't at all imply that he deliberately excludes, for instance, true belief. As I have shown, Meno, or anyone else at that point, knows of no other distinction than perhaps that between knowledge and belief, and mere beliefs, as an outcome of a search, are of course useless. So Meno objects that they won't find the answer they would search for, and be able rationally to adopt it as true, and he reasonably thinks of this as an

impossibility of coming to *know* the *answer*. But all Plato needs to show him is that it is possible to *discover* the answer -and never mind whether the cognitive state one is in when one makes the discovery is still short of strict knowledge. That will be enough to show that searches are rational processes.

Since Plato answers the objection that it is impossible to discover what one doesn't know by claiming that the boy has recollected true belief and doesn't yet know, he must think he can claim that the boy, as he stands there, has sufficient reason, other than that he knows, to assert to himself that he has true belief. Hence, for Plato, or so I claim, recollection supplies assertibility conditions distinct from those supplied by knowledge that permit one to do just that.<sup>40</sup> That is what makes it a direct response to Meno's challenge.

What can be a plausible defence of the claim that the boy, through recollection, can reasonably assert that he has a true belief without yet having knowledge? Let us isolate for treatment one such true belief of his. This is not only most crucial for the solution of the geometrical problem, but its content is also purely about geometry, the very thing the boy is said not to know. It is the belief the boy expresses by responding to this question by Socrates:

*M.84e4-5a1*. Doesn't this line from one corner to the other cut each of these figures in half? The line in question is of course the diagonal and the boy asserts the proposition that the diagonal divides its square in half by answering in the affirmative the above question. Let us call this proposition Q. This is no doubt the clue to the solution of the problem since the rest of his answer is a piece of simple arithmetical computation. On what basis does the boy come to assert Q?

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<sup>40</sup>I am not saying that recollection supplies assertibility conditions *unrelated* to those supplied by knowledge. Plato claims that recollection will in the end result in knowledge -though we still have to find out how. I am saying that recollection, having caused true belief *before* it has caused knowledge, supplies assertibility conditions distinct from those Plato would attribute to knowledge.

In an influential article, G. Vlastos argued that the boy comes to hold this belief through inference he performs on the basis of clues that are set before him.<sup>41</sup> "Knowing that squares have equal sides and equal angles, the boy could *infer* that two sides and the included angle of one triangle equal the corresponding items in the other."<sup>42</sup> I am skeptical about the claim's merits since it doesn't seem to me to be borne out by either text or context. In trying to solve virtually any problem in geometry, there is some diagram on which enough clues are displayed, but often one can't utilize them. And the boy, let us not forget, is ignorant about geometry. Since there exist quadrilaterals with equal sides but unequal angles, we can't even assume that the boy knew that squares have equal angles.<sup>43</sup> Nor can we assume that he has any grasp at all of what it is to have equal angles. That there are things displayed which to someone knowledgeable in geometry are in fact *clues* does not even suggest that the boy sees them as clues, let alone support the contention that he actually uses them in a geometrical inference.

It is also a mistake to make the case, as does Vlastos, that the boy's mathematical reasoning elsewhere in the episode is evidence for the claim that he comes to his belief by way of inference. The mathematical reasoning performed by the boy in the entire episode is confined to simple arithmetical computations. That in itself cannot plausibly support the thesis that he could also master the mode of reasoning peculiar to geometry. In fact, as the careful reader will no doubt have noticed, the boy isn't at all comfortable extrapolating the computations he performed on simple arithmetical problems to include also computations regarding geometrical shapes. Having drawn the diagonals of the four-foot squares and thereby constructed the required square, Socrates asks, "think now; how big is this area?" (85a4). Should the computations the boy has performed so far so easily spill over to geometry, then with the kind of diagram he has at his display the answer should be have been dead easy. But the boy says: "I don't understand" (85a4-5).

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<sup>41</sup>G. Vlastos, 'Anamnesis in the *Meno*', in *Dialogue*, 1965, No 2, pp. 143-67. I shall oppose his view but Vlastos deserves credit for realizing that one has to worry about assertibility conditions before putting to use the notion of true belief.

<sup>42</sup>*Op. cit.* p. 150, my emphasis. Strictly speaking this is only the premise from which a couple more steps are needed to get to Q. Notice also that "angle" has played no part in the discussion about area in the episode and 'triangle' is not even mentioned.

<sup>43</sup>Remarking on the fact that equality of angles is not mentioned, Vlastos says that the concept *equality of angle*, would have been familiar ..." (p. 150, n.8). I don't know how familiar the concept was *to the boy*. Given that there exist quadrilaterals with equal sides but unequal angles, maybe Socrates didn't mention that squares have equal angles for fear that the boy, unfamiliar with the concept of an angle, could be confused.

Only when Socrates breaks the computation task down so as to make it resemble simple arithmetical operations does the boy perform it. Well, if the boy can't perform computations, something he has done before, on geometrical figures all laid out for him, why should we think that he could make such swift inferences on the basis of things like angles, something he has never done before?

The boy's path to the proposition that the diagonal divides its square in half which becomes his belief, is, I submit, not inferential. Indeed if he were to support it by way of inference he would have to produce some kind of proof which, as is clear from the context, he doesn't have and may never get. Most importantly, if Plato wanted to make the point that the boy performed an inference of some sort in order to reach this belief, then, surely, inference of some form is what he would have called it and not recollection. True, inference and recollection may and often do combine for the achievement of some cognitive end. But Plato would have to be utterly confused to come to call the one by the other's name.

Of course it isn't inference Plato means by recollection. Even a brief look at the text will reveal that the diagnosis of the nature of the boy's achievement Plato puts in Socrates' mouth flies right in the face of Vlastos'. Plato says:

*M.85c9-10. These opinions have now just been stirred up in him like a dream.*

Socrates doesn't attribute the boy's performance to anything remotely resembling an inference. Rather he attributes it to the boy's having come to be in a quite particular *psychological* state, other than inference, namely one that resembles dreaming. He says not that the boy has been utilizing clues to actively infer his way to his assertion, but that he came to assent to the proposition he thereby asserted, as it were, dreamlike. Upon acquaintance with the square and its diagonal, the proposition expressed with his assertion is stirred up in him by way of a process which he controls as much, or little, as he controls his dreams. Couching the boy's achievement in these terms, Plato, it seems to me, does what he can to distinguish it from any process of inference.

As Plato presents the case and talks about it in his exhibition, we can't without violence to the text construe the grounds for the boy's assertion as anything else than a quasi perceptual<sup>44</sup> psychological experience -or an a-ha experience if you will- of the sort people get when they remember something. Having thus disengaged the assertibility conditions for this belief from those he attributes to

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<sup>44</sup>I am not saying that the boy sees on the diagram that the two triangles are equal. I am saying that upon acquaintance with the diagram he *sees dreamlike* that they are equal.

knowledge,<sup>45</sup> Plato can allow himself to say that the boy has true belief without yet having knowledge. What we must now ask is whether this psychological mechanism is sufficiently reliable to serve his purposes.

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<sup>45</sup>Vlastos' reasons for spelling out the assertibility conditions for true belief in terms of inference are: (a) Plato's claim that recollection will also lead to knowledge and (b) having access to the inferential routes connecting its propositions is part of knowledge (pp. 152-4). But it doesn't follow that Plato thinks that the cognitive state one is in when one has true belief and not knowledge is the same as that one is in when having knowledge -although the methods through which one arrives at them may be very similar. The fact of the matter is that Plato claims that the two are distinct in the important sense that one can have the former without the latter. So we had better find out what the difference is.

Assume with Plato that the boy's soul knew the answer at some time in the past to the question, which square is double in area to a given square. Then it also knew that Q, i.e. that the diagonal divides its square in half. Assume also, with Plato, that as the soul is now faced with the diagram and Q, a belief with Q as its content comes to be in it. If we grant to Plato that the slave-boy does recollect, then we can't but grant to him that it is the boy's soul's past knowledge that Q that causes him now to come to believe that Q.<sup>46</sup> Allowing that much of Plato's story to pass, we must also allow that this mechanism which produced this belief in the boy's soul is reliable. The boy, recall, *knew* Q. That someone *knows* p implies, for Plato at least, that p is true. Hence Plato can rightly say, as he does say, that the boy has come to have true belief.

Next we need to appreciate the fact that it is an intrinsic part of the psychology of recollection that when it occurs it provides the soul where it occurs a marker signifying, if not more, some vague familiarity with that which is being recollected. We all know the feeling we have when we recollect something. When I say that I recollected p, I clearly don't merely say that I have come to assert p afresh. You would say that what happened to me was recollection only if, in addition to asserting p, I reported having some experience, which, if I described it to you, you could place somewhere on a line at the one end of which I simply say I remember and on the other that p is familiar, or recognizable or it rings bells or something of this sort. Indeed, had you decided that my experience was to be placed close to this latter end of the line, you would find it quite fitting I think if your friend, who also heard my report, described it to you as something "just being stirred up in him like a dream".

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<sup>46</sup>Or more precisely that, insofar as he can be said to recollect, the boy's past knowledge that Q is indispensable in the causal chain that results in the soul's coming now to believe that Q. Past knowledge that Q, though not sufficient, is necessary for the formation of the belief that Q unlike elements such as the diagram and Socrates' probing which are neither necessary nor sufficient.

All Plato needs to do is draw on people's clear intuitions about what it is to recollect, and that is what he does. Recollection is his direct response to Meno's challenge because, or so I claim, it allows him to exploit that psychological experience we all know<sup>47</sup> and declare it the ground, reasonably reliable<sup>48</sup> and thus rationally acceptable, for asserting a proposition, still distinct from what he would characterize as grounds of assertibility supplied by knowledge.

My suggestion is not that inference has no part to play in a process of recollection. One might reasonably say, and Socrates is vague enough to be taken as saying, that the boy, through recollection, has come to the true belief -though he does not yet know- that to double the area of a given square one simply has to construct a new square on its diagonal. Arguably, the exhibition, taken as a whole, has displayed some inference on the part of the boy -although, as we have seen, not of the typically geometrical type. Indeed, a substantial amount of inference will have to be a part of any recollection process that would result in knowledge. My suggestion is that the process we see exhibited cannot be understood, solely, in terms of inference, and that what Plato is crucially interested in is the part of it that is not inference, but an immediate, intuitive grasp of a new truth. This can well be called recollection in the strict and narrow sense of the term. Plato called the whole process he exhibited 'recollection' precisely because he wanted to emphasize its non-inferential part.

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<sup>47</sup>Plato doesn't hesitate to make ample use of this feature of the psychology of recollection in the *Phaedo* 73c-74a relying simply on the fact that we all know what it is.

<sup>48</sup>Those who put it to Plato that he now has to account for how one can tell that one recollects what one is really looking for (N. P. White *op. cit.* pp. 47-53, and C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings*, Princeton 1988, p. 102), do not pay attention to what he is saying. Recollecting p is not mere assertion of p but *assertion on the grounds of a distinct quasi perceptual psychological experience*. Plato can claim that this is reliable grounds because experiences of recollection are usually reliable. We sometimes misremember but I think, although I won't argue it here, that Plato has laid out conditions under which this recollection is to occur that make it more reliable than usual remembering. Suffice it for now to notice that this is not recollecting just any piece of isolated and empirically acquired information, but the soul's specially possessed μαθήματα. So it isn't unreasonable to say that the experience it produces is also distinct. Notice also that Plato doesn't have to guarantee that no recollection-impostor will ever present itself to the mind as long as he has ways to weed those few impostors out.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that Vlastos was right to say that the clues are there for the boy to have been brought to the solution through inference. Plato didn't choose to use this path, although it would hardly have taken him as much as two extra pages to produce explicit definitions and guide the boy through a relatively easy deduction to Q. So why didn't he? Because, I suggest, he is more sensitive than we have realized to the distinction between proof and truth. It is not that he thinks that some such distinction is important in geometry. Rather its importance lies in Plato's concerns that the epistemological innovations he exhibits in the solution of a problem in geometry will be applicable also to the search for virtue. Suppose that Socrates had brought the boy to the solution through the inferential path. The moral would then be merely that geometrical definitions can be exploited to deduce the solution to a geometrical problem. All that would show for the case of virtue is that given *some* definitions of moral terms one can deduce one's way to propositions regarding moral notions. But that would be to evade what makes Meno's challenge interesting. Its objection is that it isn't possible to reach the *real* definition of virtue. It would not meet the objection if Plato showed that given what we believe about virtue and the definitions we can construct on that basis, p or q is what we have to say. He needs to show that when we don't know the definition, we can come reliably to believe that p or q is *true*, and so to reveal the essence and thus be led to the real definition of virtue. Whereas inference from definitions wouldn't, recollection does enable Plato to address this problem. For he can say that if recollection enables us to assert propositions about geometry, the paradigm of deductive science, propositions far removed from the axioms, without the aid of deductive inference, then surely it ought to be able to produce similar truths when the search is aimed at virtue.

Rather ingeniously, Plato has now made it possible to talk about true belief as distinct from knowledge in a way that makes it usable in philosophical and moral searches. To say that the boy does not have knowledge of Q is simply to say that he is far from being able to produce an explanation or a proof for it (cf. *M.* 98a). Still, he was able to recollect Q and thereby believe it and use it if he so wishes as a stepping stone in a possible venture to achieve knowledge. Quite elegantly, Plato nonetheless makes the boy's true belief derive from knowledge. Not knowledge of the sort whose possessor is expected to be aware of, and have easy access to, the standardly acceptable justificatory paths connecting its propositions (call it conscious knowledge or knowledge-c). Rather, it derives from knowledge allegedly possessed by the soul from the past, not readily accessible,

but recollectable (call it unconscious knowledge or knowledge-u).<sup>49</sup> The knowledge the boy doesn't have at the conclusion of the demonstration is knowledge-c. But he does, according to Plato, have knowledge-u, which is ultimately the cause of his true belief. So true belief is brought to the scene and made use of only after Plato provides it with epistemological backing. This backing is knowledge-u and the soul's capacity to retrieve it.

In short, there seem to be two ways in which knowledge and rational acceptability, the upshot of the boy's discovery, differ. If A knows that p, A's belief is *perfectly* reliable, whereas a rationally acceptable belief is only *highly reliable*. But also: if A knows that p, A can give discursive justifications, definitions etc., whereas a rationally acceptable belief can be indefensible by argument.

## VI. Conclusion

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<sup>49</sup>Socrates does not explicitly draw the distinction but the context disambiguates the occurrences of 'knowledge'. In the section 81c9-6c2 we find all occurrences of ο\_δα, in all forms, signifying knowledge-c. \_Επίσταμαι and some of its cognates signify knowledge-c at 85d3-4 (\_πιστήσεται), 86a8, 86b9; it signifies knowledge-u at 85d4, 6, 9, 12. At 85d3-4 knowledge-c and knowledge-u occur in the same sentence.

Plato took seriously Meno's challenge because he was intrigued by what motivated it. To answer it, he both rejects Socratic theses, and makes exciting and substantive claims of his own. He accepts (P); if we don't know *x* in any way at all (*παράπαν*), we don't know what *x* is like. But he finds fault in, and rejects, Socrates' unargued transition from (P) to (P'), that if we do not know the definition of virtue we don't know what it is like. Plato now claims that, for any μάθημα *x*, it is minimally true of us that we know-*u* *x* and we know-*u* what *x* is like. Probably he accepts that if we don't know-*c* the definition of virtue, we don't know-*c* what it is like. But he rejects what Socrates defended in the first part of *Meno*, namely that if one doesn't know-*c* the definition of virtue, one doesn't know what it is like. He claims that although we don't know-*c* its definition, we still know-*u* what it is like, and knowledge-*u*, being recollectable, can produce true beliefs which we can then, eventually, convert to knowledge.

#### APPENDIX

My views in section II conflict with a view recently proposed by A. Nehamas.<sup>50</sup> Nehamas claims that *M.71b3-4* can (and should) be interpreted as "the modest claim that there are *some* features of virtue (those which are as disputable as its definition or essentially connected with it) about which he [Socrates] can have no knowledge, or any other cognitive attitude, without first knowing what virtue itself is" (p. 285). Nehamas argues that the context in "which Socrates illustrates the principle places severe limits on the range of features of virtue about which he claims to be ignorant as long as he is also ignorant of its definition" (p. 284). These limits Nehamas finds in the example with which Socrates illustrates *M.71b3-4*. *M.71b5-7* on Nehamas' reading, mentions as impossible to know without prior knowledge of Meno not any characteristic of Meno but only those that can be said to constitute his essence. "If Meno does have an 'essence' this is an intuitively obvious one: it is his provenance. And knowing this is indeed necessary in order to know (in any sense you like) whether nobility,<sup>51</sup> wealth, and a distinguished birth, all of which are a function of his provenance and to that extent 'essential' to him, do or do not belong to him" (p. 284). So, according to Nehamas, *M.71b3-4* says that if one does not know the definition of virtue, one cannot know, not all, but some of its features, namely the essential ones.

I have argued that it is premature to talk about definitions at *M. 71b3-7*. Hence I don't think that mention of essence is appropriate as it is also not in the text. Moreover, it is unclear to me why the characteristics mentioned by Socrates

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<sup>50</sup>See A. Nehamas, 'Socratic Intellectualism', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. II 1987, pp. 275-316.

<sup>51</sup>Nehamas renders *καλός* as 'noble', and that does make it fit with his claim that Socrates mentions Meno's essential characteristics. Other possible renderings, such as 'handsome' might make it do so less well.

are essential, or why it isn't the essential characteristics that are easier to know without knowing the definition rather than the non-essential ones.

Even if all this is left uncontested, I still think that Nehamas' suggestion lacks foundation. It is usual practice among philosophers, and others, to illustrate principles by examples. Since no exhaustive list of the examples can ever be given, we tend to rest content with one or two. But this in itself doesn't imply that the examples offered are meant to restrict the applicability of the principle. Nothing in the practice itself even suggests that when general statements occur together with examples we should take the latter as limiting the applicability of the former, unless we can appeal to some independent reason. But Nehamas derives his reasons from the example itself. That begs the question. Occasionally a philosopher might of course want to restrict the applicability of his principle by describing cases. But then he offers not examples but counterexamples.

What Plato gets across with his example is that if one is totally ignorant about who Meno is, one knows *nothing* about him. It doesn't make sense to me to say that I don't know at all who Meno is and at the same time say that I can know some things about him. If I don't know Meno at all, I don't know if he is tall or short, handsome or ugly, where he comes from, what he likes to eat; I know, really, nothing about him. There are several simpler explanations why Socrates mentions the characteristics he does, and not the ones I have mentioned. It may be that those he mentions are simply those that interest him. Or it may be that here too, as elsewhere in the dialogue, he is trying to flatter Meno. Since he does know who Meno is, he mentions things about him that he knows Meno would like people who know him to mention about him. But it does not follow, intuitively or otherwise, that Socrates thinks that ignorance of who Meno is implies ignorance of his essential characteristics only.

Not only are Nehamas' grounds for his suggestion shaky; the suggestion itself seems to me incoherent. Nehamas' point, I take it, is that, according to Socrates, without the definition of virtue we cannot know about some essential features of it, but we can know about its other features. This cannot mean that we know about various features of virtue but not which of these are essential, for Socrates and Meno do not investigate whether teachability is an essential feature of virtue or not, but whether it is at all a feature of virtue. So what it must mean is something like this. There are two kinds of features of virtue: essential and non-essential. Without the definition of virtue we can know its non-essential (or some of them) but not the essential ones. Quite clearly, though, this is knowing too much. For it isn't only that we know some features of virtue without knowing its definition. It follows from Nehamas' suggestion that we know that the features we do know are its non-essential ones since we know that not knowing the definition we don't know the essential ones. But, *ex hypothesi*, what will give us the essential characteristics of virtue is its definition. And I fail to see how, without knowing the definition, we are supposed to know that the features, which we know belong to virtue, do not belong to it essentially.