Plato's Meno 89C: 'Virtue is Knowledge'
A Hypothesis?

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The major point of controversy in the interpretation of Plato's argument by hypothesis in the Meno is simply what is or are the hypothesis or hypotheses. This question narrows down for most of the major commentators to the conclusion that the statement "virtue is knowledge" is the, or at least a, primary hypothesis. In particular Richard Robinson was forced by the criticisms of the first edition of his Plato's Earlier Dialectic to revise his interpretation of this question. And in his second edition he credits Harold Cherniss and Paul Friedländer with the common position taken on this point; that is, that the basic hypothesis is "virtue is knowledge," that this is equivalent to "virtue is teachable," and that the former is then also proved from the proposition "virtue is good" which is also an hypothesis. Robinson was not entirely satisfied with this solution and raised various objections, but he evidently found Cherniss' and Friedländer's arguments convincing. For example, he states that "Socrates calls 'if virtue is knowledge, then it is teachable' and 'virtue is good' 'hypotheses' much more distinctly than he ever calls the proposition 'virtue is knowledge' an 'hypothesis'." But he concludes that this account "is the most satisfying I have found; but there seems to be no perfectly convincing interpretation of this passage." He summarizes after examining unsuccessfully the objections to this interpretation that "thoughts created 2,000 years ago seem odd to us sometimes," and "that Plato was writing in a rather confusing way".

Plato did write in a confusing way, since keen interpreters have given a confusing account of the argument. It is imperative then that we first examine the basic evidence for their determination that the hypothesis is "virtue is knowledge," and that we second, follow out

1 We gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness to Professors G. B. Kerferd, G. R. Morrow, and G. K. Plochmann for suggestions and criticisms which have improved our argument.


4 *ibid.*, p. 117.

5 *ibid.*, p. 120.
various of the arguments which have been adduced to support this position on this point. And finally, we shall consider an alternative interpretation of the Greek upon which the basic evidence rests and appropriate counter arguments to the interpreters’ supporting arguments.

1) The basic evidence is the concluding passage in which Meno summarizes the argument. The common reading is: “and plainly, Socrates, on our hypothesis that virtue is knowledge, it must be taught” (89 C). Clearly, it appears that Meno is saying that on the basis of the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge the conclusion that virtue must be taught can be drawn.

2) Cherniss in his review says that the position of oti before “it is teachable” shows that the preceding eiper clause states the hypothesis.

Paul Friedländer cites another passage (87 B 2-4) to support the view that the hypothesis is “virtue is knowledge.” Criticizing Robinson’s first edition translation of the passage, Friedländer says: [the passage] does not mean “let us … inquire on an hypothesis whether it is teachable or not teachable” (p. 119) but “hypothesizing it let us inquire whether...” The very act of hypothesizing, and the object of hypothesizing is it, namely, virtue or the nature of virtue. This, moreover, and only this, renders the analogy with the mathematical example precise: the geometer makes a hypothesis about the nature of his figure (“this figure is such”) and then he draws his conclusion (“Whether it is possible or not...”).

R. S. Bluck also accepts the view that the hypothesis is “virtue is

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9 R. S. Bluck, Plato’s Meno (Cambridge, 1964) p. 325. Bluck’s syntactical argument against Friedländer’s reading of auto as the object of hypothemeno is further supported by his paralleling the use of these two words in the case of virtue with their use in the geometrical example. Following Bluck’s suggestion, we find a difficulty in the analogy of hypothesizing virtue to hypothesizing a geometrical figure. Socrates hypothesizes not the given figure or its nature but that the relation of an area to a line in a circle is determinative of the area’s inscribability in the circle. Similarly, in the case of virtue the hypothesis states that the presence or absence of knowledge is determinative of virtue’s teach-ability or non-teachability.