At Phronesis 33 (1988) 208-215 Gerard J. Boter suggests that the lines διὰ μέσου at Plato, Meno 82c2-3 are diagonals of the first square drawn in the demonstration with the slave-boy (AC and BD in fig. 3), rather than, as other modern interpreters have supposed, “transversals”, lines (EG and FH in fig. 1) each of which is parallel to two of the sides of the square and joins the mid-points of the other two. Boter’s interpretation, even though it goes against received opinion, has the property – aptly enough in the Platonic context – of making one wonder why one didn’t think of it oneself once it is pointed out; and it may well be right. But there are some questions still to be asked.

Boter argues that the drawing of the transversals would be insufficiently motivated. The most obvious reason for drawing them would be to help to indicate that a square of side two feet, like ABCD in fig. 1, has an area of four square feet (cf. Boter’s “III” on p. 209). As Boter points out, however (209-210), the actual discussion does not involve measuring the size of larger squares by counting the number of smaller squares that go to make them up, but rather calculation of the area by multiplication of the sides. The reader or hearer, who would surely either have a diagram before him or else construct his own, might still be helped in the multiplication by looking at such a division into smaller squares. But an interpretation based on what is actually said in the text is in principle preferable.

What then would be the purpose of drawing the diagonals, as opposed to the transversals? A distinction should perhaps be drawn here. One consequence of drawing the diagonals at this point is to add to the irony of the whole passage, as Boter suggests (pp. 214-215). The square that is double the area of ABCD is BDMK; and the starting-point of the right answer (BD) was present in the diagram all the time, for those who had eyes to see it.

This on its own, however, cannot be a sufficient reason for drawing the diagonals at the outset. Boter in effect recognises this, by postponing discussion of the irony until the end of his article. If the diagonal BD is drawn at the outset, the slave-boy may not know how it can help him to a solution, but he can

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1 I am grateful to Dr Malcolm Schofield for comments on an earlier draft of this Note. The responsibility for remaining errors and infelicities is my own.
certainly see it in the diagram, and unless there is some other more obvious reason for drawing the diagonals he will be puzzled by them – a puzzlement that one might expect to find reflected in the text. Irony, to be effective, needs to have a superficial meaning that makes sense, as well as the underlying one. Unless the drawing of the diagonals has a motive in its own context, the result will be, within the dialogue, that Socrates will seem to be deliberately mystifying his interlocutor; and, for the reader outside the dialogue, that Plato’s attempt at irony will seem gratuitously contrived. It is after all easy enough to achieve “ironical” effects if you allow your characters to make otherwise motiveless statements, or perform otherwise unmotivated actions, for the purpose.

Boter suggests (pp. 210-12) that the immediate point of the drawing of the diagonals is to indicate that the initial τετράγωνος figure ABCD is a square rather than a rhombus. Here again, it may be helpful to note a distinction, indicated by Boter on p. 211. Within the dialogue, as it were, Socrates needs to give the slave-boy sufficient information for him to understand the problem and its solution. On another level, though, Plato himself as author also needs to make the problem clear to his readers or hearers. The needs of the two may not necessarily be the same. The slave-boy and the other interlocutors do, as Boter says, have the advantage over the readers that they can see the diagram Socrates is drawing, while the readers will need to imagine the diagram or (more likely) construct it for themselves from Plato’s indications. A remark or an action intended to guide the reader thus does not have to have an explanation within the dialogue as well, but it seems desirable that it should – especially when the effectiveness of Plato’s irony is bound up with this.

2 This would not be as pointless as it might seem, for there are in fact two audiences of the exchanges between Socrates and the slave – ourselves and readers outside the dialogue, and Meno, for whose benefit the whole experiment is laid on, within it. If we are to suppose that Meno himself knows how to double the square, the drawing of the diagonals at 82c2-3 would have dramatic point as making clear to Meno that the slave-boy cannot see the answer when it is under his nose, even if there was no other motive for drawing the diagonals and the slave-boy himself was left mystified as to their significance. But while Socrates leads the slave-boy to wrong answers (notably at 83d4-5), it is not in accordance with the emphasis on the slave-boy’s answering for himself that he should at any point be left failing to understand what is going on at all.

3 If Plato’s dialogues were written in the first instance with a view to more or less public recitation by Plato himself, which does not seem unlikely in the context of ancient literature, Plato could indeed provide his hearers with the diagram just as Socrates does in the dialogue. But if he had any expectation that people would read or publicly recite the dialogue when he himself was not present, he would need to make the nature of the figure clear for such reciters or readers.

4 It is true that characters in Greek tragedy sometimes announce their own identity in an artificial way – often in prologues, and one may compare Oceaneus at Aeschylus (?), Prometheus Vinctus 296; but Plato seems to be more naturalistic in such matters.