The Desire for Good:  
Is the Meno Inconsistent with the Gorgias?  

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At Gorgias 467A-468E, esp. 468C2-8, Socrates puts forward the arresting view that if I (voluntarily) do something and it turns out badly – worse than other alternative actions that were available – then I didn’t want to do the action. Thus, whatever one may have thought at the time, one never in fact wanted to do an action if that action turned out badly. Rather, all that is true is that the action in question “seemed best” to one.

At Meno 77B-78B, esp. 77D7-E4, on the other hand – at least according to Santas’s fine exposition, which has become the standard interpretation of this passage¹ – Socrates seems to say that one can want bad things provided only that one want them believing them to be good. Put in modern terms, one can want things that are in fact bad if one wants them under the description ‘good thing’. This is of course just what most modern philosophers – such as Anscombe and Davidson – would want Socrates to say if he was to say something with a chance of being true.

So the two passages seem to contradict each other.

The apparent contradiction can be brought out in another way. At Meno 77B-78B, Socrates is arguing that ‘Everyone desires the good’. On Santas’s reading of this passage, it can only be saying that “Everyone desires the apparent good”. (And such is indeed Aristotle’s reading of ‘Everyone desires the good’ when he wants it to come out true [Nicomachean Ethics III.4, Topics VI.8.146b36-147a11].)² On the other hand, if ‘Everyone desir-

² How does speaking of desiring apparently good things (Aristotle) differ from using the schema ‘desires object o under description D’, and so speaking of desiring bad things under the description ‘good things’ (Anscombe, Davidson, Santas)? Though we reject both ways of speaking, we think the ‘under the description’ schema far clearer as a way of expressing this sort of view than talk of an apparent good. An apparent good, like an alleged assassin, is a combination of an actual thing with a way that thing appears (perhaps incorrectly). The ‘under the description’ schema breaks down reference to each such apparent object into reference to its two components – the actual object (which

Phronesis 1994. Vol. XXXIX/1 (Accepted April 1993)
es the good' is to be interpreted in accordance with the views of the Gorgias, it would have to be read as saying that "Everyone desires the real good".

It follows either that we have misinterpreted the Gorgias passage; or that shows up in the $o$ position) and the appearance that the object gives off to the relevant desirer (which appearance shows up in the $D$ position). The $o$ position is "transparent", admitting substitution of any true description of the object, whether the agent knows that description to be true of the object or not. We may say that the $o$ position gives the "outside" of the object of desire, it being completely independent of how the agent may view the object "from the inside". The $D$ position, on the other hand, is "oblique", admitting only substitution of such descriptions as the agent believes to be true of the object of desire. We may say that the $D$ position gives the "inside" of the object of desire (relative to that agent). The outside of the object can be identified with the Fregian reference; and some insides — those insides which are true of, and uniquely determine, the reference — can be identified with Fregian senser. (Those insides which are false of the reference will have to be modified if they are to assign a Fregian sense to the $D$ position.)

One benefit which modern philosophers see in thus separating "outside" and "inside" in this way is that it removes the dangers of talk of apparent objects or intended objects. [This is a benefit which Santas unfortunately forfeits. Having introduced the schema 'desires $o$ under description $D$', Santas then reintroduces a distinction between actual object and intended object. But the notion of intended object simply reintroduces the kind of "apparent objects" which the schema avoids. Santas even falls into some confusion over this too: See his hobnobbing with non-existent objects in his n. 22. It is fortunate that these confusions are inessential to the main points Santas is making in his paper. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that, as we shall see, the chances of Santas's interpretation being textually justifiable for the Meno are far greater using the confusing 'apparent good' terminology, there being no real hope of reading the clearer terminology into the text.

But modern philosophers have seen another benefit in thus separating "inside" from "outside". For it enables them to say that different people may desire the same thing (since the objects of their desires have the same outside), but have [type]-different desires (since the objects of their desires have different insides). [Compare the way in which Fodor and Salmon argue that people may believe the same proposition even when the psychological states of the people in question — the beliefings — are type-different. Nathan Salmon, Frege's Puzzle (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge MA, 1986), ch. 8, Jerry A. Fodor, "Substitution Arguments and the Identity of Belief", in A Theory of Content and Other Essays (MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1990), pp. 161-176.] We shall call these ways of thinking of objects of desire "descriptionist" or "separationist", for the way in which they separate the object as it is from the description the agent would give of it, only the latter being relevant to the identity of the psychological state in question.

3 But we think not. See Penner's "Desire and Power in Socrates: The Argument of Gorgias 466A-468E that Orators and Tyrants Have No Power in the City", Apeiron, 1991, pp. 147-202. Provided only that the view we attribute to Socrates makes philosophicaal sense (as we shall argue it does: §1 below), then this interpretation seems to us secure.