

IS GOODNESS REALLY A GIFT FROM GOD?  
ANOTHER LOOK AT THE CONCLUSION OF PLATO'S *MENO*

MARK REUTER

I. INTRODUCTION

WHAT WOULD SOMEONE IN THE ACADEMY, shortly after the death of Plato, have thought of the conclusion of the *Meno*: "that virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the gods" (100b)? This particular question will forestall or at least postpone (for a while) the deep questions about Platonic hermeneutics. It will also force a contrast between ancient and modern approaches to the dialogue's conclusion. The modern approach—still considered orthodox within many circles—views the *Meno* as a "transitional" dialogue. In it Socrates first takes on the role of the didactic philosopher and begins to expound truths that are really Plato's.<sup>1</sup> But the dialogue *fails* to come up with a conclusion and so fits closely with the early "Socratic," "elenctic," or "aporetic" dialogues. The dialogue's apparent conclusion then is read as an expression of Socratic ignorance. It expresses something we might express by saying, "Virtue? God only knows how it comes about," or less politely, "How the hell should I know?" Reasons for this sceptical conclusion or failure are not lacking, as the extensive literature on the "Socratic fallacy" makes clear. The words of Santas from an early article on this problem capture the views of both Plato and the *Meno* that come with this orthodox view: "In the shifting scenes of the aporetic Early Dialogues there are no such hardened doctrines . . . . There are, instead, questions, puzzles, and difficulties; and attempts, *sometimes desperate ones*, to work them out."<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this portrait of a Plato in dire straits, lost and struggling and groping for philosophical answers is the ancient conception of Plato as "divine" or "godlike" (ὁ θεῖος Πλάτων).<sup>3</sup> The title is of course one of eulogy and respect (cf. *Meno* 99d), but it is also meant to convey the insight, wisdom, and authority of the master, the master who never falters, who hovers above his dramatic writings with the serenity of an Olympian god. I am not happy with either of these views. I say this up front, because when I introduce my thesis I do not want it thought that I am trying to rehabilitate a "neo-Platonic" view of Plato.

This paper, then, in an attempt to avoid the impasse suggested by the choice between a divine or desperate Plato, will look instead at one ancient Platonist

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>1</sup> This orthodox view I take to be represented by Vlastos 1991: 47 and 50.

<sup>2</sup> Santas 1972: 141, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> This expression is used twice by Plotinus, at 4.8 [6].1.23 and 3.5 [50].1.6—both in an early and a later treatise. He twice uses the plural forms (τοὺς θεῖους ἄνδρας at 2.9 [33].6.36 and γένος θεῖων ἀνθρώπων at 5.9 [5].1.16) to refer to Platonists in general.

who takes the conclusion of the *Meno* as expressing a serious doctrine of Plato's. The Platonist is the author of the anonymous text *On Virtue*. To see the grounds that this author had for attributing this view to Plato, it will be first necessary to look at the influence of the *Meno* on the debate about goodness and at how the *Meno* was read by later Platonists. The paper's further and more elusive aim is to lay the groundwork for an understanding of goodness (ἀρετή) that far from being esoteric, unwritten, or neo-Platonic is widely present within the corpus. Failure to have an outline of this concept has led to needless puzzlement and misunderstanding of the *Meno*'s conclusion.

But first a caveat. The sceptical way of reading the *Meno*'s conclusion—"that virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the gods" (100b)<sup>4</sup>—has always looked attractive (at least to me) because the alternative, more literal reading, sounds so simplistic. It conjures up the picture of a Zeus-like deity handing out parcels of virtue to some individuals but not others. This picture is unfortunate and I shall be at pains to distance myself from it. The thesis found within the conclusion of the *On Virtue* text and read back into the conclusion of the *Meno* is far more nuanced and subtle. It will not emerge clearly until section VIII, after we have considered the Platonic claims that goodness (ἀρετή) consists in likeness to god, that there is a portion of the divine within the rational psyche, and that it is our responsibility as philosophers to appropriate this divine authority and to make it our own. In short, the conclusion of the *Meno* will not be understood until we have a clear understanding of a Platonic notion of goodness.

## II. AN OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

I begin with my more elusive goal: the good. Whether we consider Platonism in particular or ancient philosophy in general, the concept of the good functions in two closely related ways: it serves both as a paradigm and as a goal. Its former role raises the question of the criterion: what is it? Its latter role raises the question of means: how is it attained? While the form of the good is notoriously elusive in the Platonic corpus, the idea of the paradigm is not. In conscious opposition to Protagoras' "man is the measure of all things" (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἄνθρωπον εἶναι [DK 80 B1]) the Athenian spokesman in the *Laws* claims that god is the measure or criterion. He says:

ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἡμῖν πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἂν εἴη μάλιστα, καὶ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἢ πού τις, ὥς φασιν, ἄνθρωπος (Laws 716c4–6)

In our view it is God who is pre-eminently the "measure of all things," much more so than any "man," as they say.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Tr. G. M. A. Grube in Cooper and Hutchinson 1997.

<sup>5</sup>Tr. Saunders 1975.

What this text means and how it squares with others in the Platonic corpus will be fleshed out more along the way. Here we need only highlight two points of contrast that will be developed more fully below. Firstly, the opposition of Plato to Protagoras is *not* that of an ethical realist versus a subjectivist. For as we shall see *our* contrast between objective and subjective, especially when applied to ethical or normative concepts, cannot be made to fit with the conception of measure expressed here in the *Laws*. Secondly, the Athenian spokesman's idea that god is the measure of all things is intimately connected with the theme—emphasized far more by ancient interpreters of Plato than their modern counterparts—that goodness consists in becoming as like to god as possible (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν).<sup>6</sup> This theme expresses the goal of philosophy, at least as it was celebrated by some Platonists.<sup>7</sup> Paradigm and goal are here linked.

### III. THE DEBATE ABOUT ἄρετή WITHIN THE ACADEMY

In the period of time shortly following the death of Aristotle debates about goodness (ἄρετή) and the good life (τὸ εὖ ζῆν) tended to harden along school lines. The Aristotelians aimed at the rational activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Stoics advocated a life in accordance with nature. The Epicureans touted the value of pleasure. And sceptics of various sorts advocated tranquility (ἀταραξία). Platonists, of course, remained part of this debate as well. Each rival school advocated its differing conception of the good life (τὸ εὖ ζῆν) and the corresponding role that “virtue,” “excellence,” or “goodness” (ἄρετή) played in the acquisition of such a life. While there is a clearer picture of this debate for the period of time after Aristotle, the evidence for this debate prior to the death of Aristotle is more sketchy. Nevertheless, if even the gods dispute on this subject (cf. *Euthyphro* 7d), there can be little doubt that it was debated within the Academy prior to the death of Aristotle, and little doubt of the influence of the *Meno* on this debate.<sup>8</sup> I begin with Aristotle himself.

<sup>6</sup>The most celebrated text in this connection is *Tht.* 176a5–d1, but compare *Phdr.* 248a and *Ti.* 90a–d and the insightful recent discussion by Sedley 1999. For an ancient discussion of this theme, cf. the treatise by Plotinus “On Goodness” (περὶ ἀρετῶν) 1.2 [19].

<sup>7</sup>The interpretation of Plato has always been a matter of dispute. Cf. Cic. *Acad.* 1.46: “They call this Academy new [that of Arcesilaus], though I think it is old if we count Plato as one of the old Academy. In his books nothing is asserted and there is much argument pro and contra, everything is investigated and nothing is stated as certain” (tr. Long and Sedley 1987: 68 A). On Arcesilaus Long and Sedley comment: “In fact there had been no consensus interpretation of Plato’s philosophy at any time since his death, some seventy-five years before Arcesilaus’s election. If, as seems likely, Polemo and his contemporaries had already begun to react against the efforts of their predecessors, Speusippus and Xenocrates, to create a hard-and-fast system out of Plato’s dialogue, this will have encouraged Arcesilaus to challenge the whole enterprise of reading Plato as a doctrinaire philosopher” (Long and Sedley 1987: 445).

<sup>8</sup>For the broader context of this debate cf. Isoc. *C. soph.* 14–18, 21; *De perm.* 186–192, 274–275; Alcidas *Soph.* 3–4; Democritus, DK 68 B33, B56, B183, B242; Critias, DK 88 B9; Xen. *Mem.* 3.9,

Aristotle opens the *Eudemian Ethics* with a discussion of the good life (τὸ εὖ ζῆν). Immediately in the first chapter we see him raising the following questions:

But first we must consider what living well consists in and how it is to be attained. Is it by *nature* that all those become happy who win this appellation at all—just as men are naturally tall, or short, or of different complexions? Or is it through *learning*—happiness being a form of knowledge? Or again, is it through a kind of *training*? (Many things come the way of human beings neither in the course of nature, nor after learning, but after *habituation*—bad things to those with the wrong sort of habituation, good to those with the right sort.) Or is it in none of *those* ways, but one of two further alternatives: either a *divine dispensation*, as if by divine inspiration, like those in the possession of a deity or supernatural powers, or is it a matter of *luck*?<sup>9</sup> (1214a15–25)

Right at the start of his book Aristotle canvasses five suggestions about how human beings acquire the good life: from nature, learning, training (or habituation), a divine dispensation, or luck. All of Aristotle's suggestions can be readily traced back to the *Meno*. Once we see how, we will then be in a position to understand how a Platonist could read the *Meno* as a type of elimination game. But first a closer look at Aristotle's text.

The opening of the *Eudemian Ethics* shows Aristotle to be occupied with the two questions central to the *Meno*: what is goodness and how do human beings acquire it?<sup>10</sup> With respect to the second question—how do human beings acquire goodness?—Aristotle presents his suggestions in a two-tiered fashion. The contrast between the two tiers or types of explanation I see expressed in the phrase “or is it none of *those* ways, but one of two further alternatives” (1214a23). Acting on a hint found at *Meno* 99a where it is claimed that “the things that turn out right by some chance are not due to human guidance,” I take Aristotle's division to correspond, on the one hand, to factors that lie within human control or at least for which some (human) explanation may be given, and, on the other hand, to factors that lie outside of human control and (human) explanation.<sup>11</sup> Thus we have in the first group nature (φύσις), education (μάθησις), training or habituation (ἄσκησις); and in the second group we find luck (τύχη) and divine inspiration (ἐμπνευσία δαίμονιου τινός). Faced with this list, any Platonist would be well aware of Aristotle's debt to the *Meno*. He would know that the division of the standard views into two classes is found, albeit cryptically, in the abrupt opening question of the dialogue:

Can you tell me, Socrates, is goodness teachable? Or if not teachable is it habitual? Or if it is neither teachable nor habitual, does it come about for human beings by nature or in some other way? (70a1–4)

1–3; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1.9, 1099b9–11; 2.1, 1103a23–26; 10.9, 1179b20–31; *Pol.* 7.13, 1332a38–40; ps.-Plato *De virtute*. For general discussions, see Shorey 1909 and Hoerber 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Tr. Woods 1982. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> The connection between ἀρετή and τὸ εὖ ζῆν I take to be transparent.

<sup>11</sup> *Meno* 99a2–4: τὰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τύχης τινὸς ὁρθῶς γινόμενα οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνῃ ἡγεμονίᾳ γίνονται.

Our Platonist would note that nature, habituation, and education correspond to the first three items on Aristotle's list. All these are items that we think we have some control over and can explain. He could also read into the vague phrase "or in some other way" (ἄλλῳ τινὶ τρόπῳ) Aristotle's two remaining items, luck and (what comes as a surprise ending to the dialogue) the view that goodness comes about through a divine dispensation (θεῖα μοίρα [99e6]). (We shall come back to this surprise ending in a moment.) Our Platonist, then, well versed in the *Meno*, will be able to see Aristotle's list as familiar. Hence, it would not be surprising to imagine that he did have a ready-made, Platonic response not just to Aristotle's position, but also to any of the other views that did not square with the master's.

A Platonist, then, would doubtless be equipped to approach this list with (let us call it) a "Platonic style of argument" in mind. What I mean by this phrase is nothing more than a habitual or well established pattern of argument used to support or defend Platonic doctrines. That this doctrinaire reading and defence of the master should grow up within the Academy should not surprise us, for we are accustomed not only to different schools of thought, different "readings," or different ideological perspectives on philosophical issues in general, but more to the point we are also accustomed to a lack of consensus on the interpretation of Plato.<sup>12</sup> So the vexed question of Platonic hermeneutics does not have to derail the discussion. All we need to keep the discussion going is to realise that at least some later Platonists took Plato to have been a doctrinaire philosopher. Faced with a list of standard views about how human beings acquire goodness (ἀρετή) a Platonist would have a standard, argumentative response. Hence it would be easy for such a doctrinaire Platonist to read the *Meno* as presenting an elimination game. The strategy might be as follows. For the reason we have already seen, luck falls out of the competition rather quickly: it is not something subject to human influence (99a). Nature, too, drops out quickly, for it seems that there are no people with the skill to spot the good natures as is the case with horse breeders or dog breeders.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, goodness is not teachable, for there are simply no teachers or students of it (96c). This leaves two items: goodness comes about by training (ἄσκησις), or it comes about as a divine gift. In terms of the *Meno*, both items are somewhat mysterious, though for different reasons.

#### IV. HABITUATION AND GOODNESS: A CRITIQUE

Let us first look at the notion of habituation or training (ἄσκησις). Although mentioned in the opening question of the *Meno* (70a1–4), it has silently fallen out of the discussion when Meno restates his initial question about halfway through the dialogue (86c7–d2). Furthermore, the issue is never really touched on within the dialogue. What is to be made of this silence?

<sup>12</sup> See above, n. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Meno* 89b and 98c–d; for the examples, cf. ps.-Plato *De virtute* 378c–d.

I do not think that it would be difficult for a later Platonist to read this silence as a deliberate snubbing of an Aristotelian position. In particular the Platonist is going to target the notion of habituation or training (ἄσκησις) in ethics. Let us look briefly at the Aristotelian approach. In *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 2, Aristotle reverses the priority of the questions as they are presented in the *Meno*. There Socrates had claimed that he must first know what goodness is before he can determine any of its attributes (for example, whether it is teachable). In contrast, Aristotle begins his treatment by asking first how we become good (chapters 1–4) and then goes on to inquire what goodness is (chapters 5–9). Aristotle's view is that goodness comes about by training and habituation.<sup>14</sup> His emphasis is on actions as opposed to theoretical knowledge (1103b26–30), right upbringing and habit as opposed to study (1103b23–25), and his aim is for the distinctively human good as opposed to the good itself (1096b31–34). By focusing on the distinctively *human* good Aristotle tries to bring the subject of ethics back down to earth. This move is to counter the Platonist tendency to take an heroic or superhuman view of ethics. (What this last view is we shall consider later.) All these claims point to an explicit polemic with Plato on the part of Aristotle. How might our Platonist respond to this polemic? Given Aristotle's emphasis on the role of training in ethics, we shall begin by examining this issue. What might a later Platonist take to be Plato's view about the role of habituation in ethics? It will be worth our while to pause briefly over this question before returning to our discussion of the *Meno* and its surprise ending.

In the opening pages of the *Phaedo* Plato puts the following remark into the mouth of Socrates:

ναρθηκοφόροι μὲν πολλοί, βάκχοι δέ τε παῦροι.

Those who carry the fennel-stalk [the Dionysiac thyrsos] are many, the [true] initiates are few (69c8–d1).<sup>15</sup>

This remark comes at the end of the contrast Socrates has drawn between the ethical belief and practices of the philosopher and those of ordinary people (67e6–69e5). Its religious character (probably Orphic in origin)<sup>16</sup> reveals the primary subject of Platonic ethics: the interior state of the psyche. Since anyone can perform the rites of religion, what is important is not the actions, but the internal state of the worshiper. So it is, Socrates has argued, with ethics. Only actions that are inspired by wisdom (φρόνησις) can be considered genuinely good actions: all others are merely pretence (σκιαγραφία [69b3–8]). The image of the Bacchic inspiration of wisdom puts the emphasis on the internal motivation of the psyche. Socrates' arguments in this early section of the *Phaedo* show that it is only when one has understood *what* goodness is and *why* certain actions are good that one

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1103a14–1103b25.

<sup>15</sup> Tr. Rowe 1993: n. *ad loc.*

<sup>16</sup> See Bluck 1955: n. *ad loc.*

can be truly good. This argument, then, is another statement of the Socratic claim that goodness (ἀρετή) is a type of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the philosopher ordinary people not only fail to understand what goodness is, but they also fail to understand their own thinking about it. In this opening argument of the *Phaedo* Plato seems to delight in pointing this out. But he has more in mind than exposing the folly and hypocrisy of ordinary human ethical behaviour. Rather, he wants to defend the much stronger claim that all ordinary ethical actions are simply window-dressing, mere show. No action that fails to arise from wisdom can be good, or so our Platonist would claim.

Socrates' criticisms focus on two facets of ordinary ethical belief and practices: (i) that they are the result of confused thinking, and (ii) that they originate from external pressure. The first point is amply illustrated from the dialogue, when Socrates makes short work of the popular conceptions of 'courage' (ἀνδρεία) and "self-control" (σωφροσύνη). He has no trouble in showing that these beliefs are the product of fuzzy thinking and are contradictory in nature. Consider courage.<sup>18</sup> In a popular sense "courage" is taken to be "fearlessness." But Socrates has no trouble in drawing a contradiction from this conception, for people can often be "courageous" (for example, staying at their post in battle rather than running away) as a result of fear, i.e. fear of being dishonoured in front of their friends. Hence, on the popular understanding, they are taken to be fearless through the presence of fear. This makes no sense. Likewise with self-control.<sup>19</sup> On the popular understanding "lack of self-control" (ἀκολασία) is understood as "being ruled by pleasure." But many people often use some pleasures to curb others (for example, the pleasures of the spotlight may enable a politician to refrain from the pleasures of certain vices). Hence, they avoid being ruled by pleasure by being ruled by pleasure. Again nonsense. These Socratic criticisms show that most people have not reflected on their basic ethical conceptions. Consequently, they do not have a clear idea about the views they hold.

Furthermore, these criticisms reveal more, if not about Plato's own view, at least about a view that it would be eminently reasonable for a later Platonist to ascribe to him. In claiming that popular morality lacks wisdom (φρόνησις) Socrates' criticisms are designed to cut through any external factors or forces that have come to shape the ethical views and practice.<sup>20</sup> It is not just that popular morality hides contradictory beliefs. This is bad enough, for it shows the beliefs

<sup>17</sup> The celebrated conclusion of the *Protagoras*: cf. 361a–b.

<sup>18</sup> *Phd.* 68d.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 68e2–69a4.

<sup>20</sup> *Contra* Rowe (1993: 148). Rowe is inclined to see Socrates in this section of the text (67e–69e) as making a "provocative use of paradox." I agree with this, but for the reasons I present below, I do not see Plato as offering two *different* diagnoses for the failing of popular morality. Here and subsequently Socrates attacks popular morality for its lack of understanding (φρόνησις). Rowe claims in his comments on 68d11–12: "Later, however, Socrates offers a *different* diagnosis of popular 'courage,' and a *different* reason for treating it as spurious—namely that it stems from habit and training (82a10–b3). It is thus legitimate to doubt the seriousness of his conclusion here [my emphasis]."

to be unreflective or non-philosophical. But Socrates' criticisms show that the solution to this problem is not simply found in the correction or emendation of the false beliefs. It is not just a matter of "changing one's mind" as we might say. Rather, because these false beliefs have been acquired in the *wrong way*, what is needed is for the right beliefs to be acquired in the *right way* and this, as we know more clearly from the *Republic*, involves, quite literally, a complete change of mind, a complete restructuring of the psyche. This same emphasis upon the internal state of the psyche is also present in the *Phaedo*. In worrying that courage may be produced by fear, or self-control by the lack of self-control, Socrates has in mind the general, philosophical worry about something being produced by its opposite. This type of explanation is not in keeping with the type of explanation preferred later in the dialogue (100c–e), that of the formal causes, and is regarded by Socrates as not simply wrong but impossible.<sup>21</sup> Hence, if we apply the Platonic criticism of this type of explanation to ethical beliefs, we see that Socrates is worried about how things that are not in themselves good can produce or explain an internal state of the psyche that is good. How can actions or training that are under some circumstances good and under other circumstances not make a person truly good? Consequently, those who are "good" due to either fear, or pleasure, or those who are "good" merely out of habituation (ἄσκησις), must be viewed as acting under the constraint of factors external to the rational psyche. Consequently, the non-philosophers who are shaped by such pressures will only be going through the motions of morality: they will be the *ναρθηκοφόροι* (bearers of the fennel-stalk). The philosophers in contrast will be the *βάκχοι* (true initiates): they will be inspired by philosophical wisdom and understanding (φιλοσοφίας τε καὶ νοῦ [82b2–3]). In making wisdom (φρόνησις) the *sine qua non* of all morality Socrates is maintaining that such inspiration must come from within. Pleasure, fear, habit, or training cannot in themselves produce this internal state. This point is graphically illustrated in the myth of Er (*Republic* 614b–621b) when the psyche that makes the worst choice about its next incarnation has been the one that was carried along in its previous life by the external pressures of a well ordered city, and whose actions were produced by custom or habit "without philosophy."<sup>22</sup> Plato seems adamant that nothing external can produce this internal state of wisdom. In light of these other texts, briefly mentioned, we can see that it would be easy for a later Platonist to read the Bacchic image of the *Phaedo* as referring to the inspiration of wisdom. The complaint against the Aristotelians is that their notion of training or habituation (ἄσκησις) cannot take them far enough in their pursuit of the good life. Failure to accept Plato's

Robin (1934: n. ad. 82b3) takes this later criticism to have been implicit in the earlier critique. Cf. below, n. 28.

<sup>21</sup> I am generalising the point made at 68e2–4 with respect to self-control: popular morality regards this as produced by its opposite "even though *we* say that this is impossible." For more on this notion of a cause, see Sedley 1998.

<sup>22</sup> *Resp.* 619c7–d1: ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας ἀρετῆς μετεληφότα; cf. 619b7–e5.



view leaves the Aristotelians as *ναρθηκοφόροι*, simply bearers of the fennel-stalk.

This brief look at Socrates' criticism of ordinary ethical beliefs and practices has shown that these practices arise from external constraints and, consequently, can be nothing more than pretence or show (*σκιαγραφία*). What we still do not have a clear idea of is why attributing importance to the inner state of the psyche results in a view of ethics that is much more heroic than Aristotle's. To see more clearly this aspect of Platonic ethics we need to go back to our discussion of the *Meno* and consider its puzzling ending. If we recall the elimination strategy, we can now see that with the removal of training or habituation from the list, the only remaining option is the view that goodness comes about by divine allotment (*ἀλλὰ θεία μοίρα παραγιννομένη ἄνευ νοῦ* [99e6]).<sup>23</sup>

In light of our discussion the conclusion of the *Meno* is surprising for two reasons. To begin with, recall that luck was eliminated from the discussion for its failure to come under human authority. So we may well wonder how divine action could ever be thought to do so, for this would surely turn the Greek world upside down. Humans are subject to divine authority, not vice versa. Also, in light of the Socratic criticisms of popular morality, we may well wonder how a divine gift could impart wisdom in the Platonic sense, for as we saw wisdom is an internal state of the psyche and it is not something that can be caused by anything outside. And more, as the *Meno* text makes explicit (with one possible exception which we shall consider below) the acquisition of goodness as a divine gift seems to preclude understanding (*νοῦς*), the very condition that Socrates argued was the *sine qua non* of goodness. What then are we to make of these puzzles? How are we to understand the ending of the *Meno*?

#### V. GOODNESS AS A DIVINE GIFT: THE *ON VIRTUE* TEXT

It is here that the later academic text *On Virtue* can be of help. This short dialogue is nothing more than a précis of the *Meno*. Nearly two of its five pages in the Oxford Classical Text are direct quotation of the *Meno*.<sup>24</sup> And when one adds to this the ideas that have been adapted or paraphrased, there is next to

<sup>23</sup> On the initially puzzling phrase "without understanding" (*ἄνευ νοῦ*), see section v below.

<sup>24</sup> The passages shared by the two dialogues (cf. *On Virtue* 377b–378c = *Meno* 93d–94e and the conclusions of both dialogues) raise the elusive question of their dates. While I know of no evidence internal or external to the dialogue that will conclusively settle the question, there seem to be three plausible positions. (i) My own preference is to view the *On Virtue* text as a later academic précis or pedagogical abbreviation of the *Meno* and to see it as part of the debate within the Old Academy when both Xenocrates and Aristotle were dealing with questions about virtue. Consequently, I date this text to the last third of the fourth century B.C. (ii) Müller (1975: 260) views this text as belonging to the Hellenistic period, when Arcesilaus as head of the Academy was using the Platonic corpus to draw sceptical and anti-Stoic lessons. Consequently, he dates this text to the early or middle part of the third century, but no later than 260 B.C. Müller's view appears plausible if we are inclined to interpret the conclusion of this text (and the *Meno*) as expressing an inconclusive or sceptical result. But this is precisely the point that I take issue with. (iii) Ryle (1993) on the basis of the shared texts

nothing that is interesting or original. Or at least that seems to have been the judgement of most scholars.<sup>25</sup> As a result the dialogue has simply been ignored. Nevertheless, I find some of the dialogue's subtle omissions and additions worth considering in more detail.

To begin with, we shall see that this short dialogue encapsulates the same elimination game as the *Meno*, and embraces the same conclusion, namely that goodness comes from a divine dispensation, although this conclusion diverges slightly from that expressed in the *Meno*. We shall then be in a position to see that later Platonists, the author of this treatise included, read the conclusion of the *Meno* as expressing a doctrine that Plato accepted. How did they arrive at this view?

The dialogue opens with a slightly simplified version of the question that opens the *Meno*:

Can goodness (ἀρετή) be taught? If not, do men become good by nature or in some other way? (376a1–2)

Of the five items mentioned in Aristotle's list the dialogue explicitly discusses three. Presumably the absence of an explicit discussion of luck (τύχη) and training (ἄσκησις) can be accounted for by the reasons given above. Luck is omitted for the reason given in the *Meno* (99a2–4), that it is not subject to human authority. The absence of a consideration of training is a sign of prejudice: unplatonic explanations are not to be countenanced. Both omissions can be viewed as a sign of faithfulness to the master. What the dialogue demonstrates (following the *Meno*) is that goodness comes about neither by teaching (μάθησις) nor by nature (φύσις) (379c1). Hence only one other alternative remains.

The conclusion reveals its heavy dependence on the *Meno*. With Socrates having shown his anonymous interlocutor that goodness (ἀρετή) comes about neither by nature nor teaching, the question is repeated: How else could they become good? Socrates' answer concludes the dialogue.

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argued that this text is actually an earlier draft of the *Meno*: "Whoever wrote the [*On Virtue*] had under his nose the text of Plato's *Meno*, or else Plato wrote our terminal *Meno* with the [*On Virtue*] under his nose" (88; cf. 87–89, 93). Ryle's claim rests on two supports: the lack of dramatic life in the *On Virtue* text and the lack of a name for Socrates' interlocutor. Together both of these characteristics, he claims, provide evidence that the *On Virtue* is an early draft of the *Meno*. Ryle's first piece of evidence is two-edged. Where Ryle prefers to see a dry, skeletal structure that is later fleshed out dramatically by Plato, I prefer to see the common passages as cuttings from the *Meno* that have wilted in a later pedagogical context. Ryle's other piece of evidence can also be dismissed on the basis of Diog. Laert. 3.62. It is not Diogenes' claim that the dialogue in question is spurious that I am relying on. What Ryle fails to note is that Diogenes refers to a group of dialogues as ἀκέφαλοι, of which the *On Virtue* seems to be one. These are dialogues not only "without titles" or "without heading"; they are also without named interlocutors. For more on this issue see Souilhé 1930b: v–xi, esp. n. 1; Müller 1975: 38–44.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Müller 1975: 249–252.

I don't think it's very easy to explain this. My guess (τοπάζω), however, is that the possession of virtue (ἀρετή) is very much a divine gift (θεῖόν τι) and that men become good just as the divine prophets and oracle-mongers do. For they become what they are neither by nature (φύσει) nor skill (τέχνη): it's through the inspiration of the gods (ἐπιπνοίᾳ ἐκ τῶν θεῶν) that they become what they are. Likewise, good men announce to their cities the likely outcome of events and what is going to happen, by the inspiration of god (ἐκ θεοῦ ἐπιπνοίᾳ), much better and much more clearly than the fortune-tellers. Even the women, I think, say that this sort of man is divine (θεῖος), and the Spartans, whenever they applaud someone in high style, say that he is divine. And often Homer uses this same compliment, as do other poets. Indeed, whenever a god wishes a city to become successful, he places good men in it, and whenever a city is slated to fail, the god takes the good men away from that city. So it seems that virtue is neither teachable nor natural, but comes by divine allotment to those who possess it (θεῖα μοῖρα παραγίνεται κτωμένοις) (379c2–d10).<sup>26</sup>

Thus, both dialogues—the *Meno* and this later Academic text—appear to embrace the same conclusion. With all other reasonable possibilities eliminated the only thing that can be said is that goodness is a divine gift. But do both dialogues really reach this conclusion in the same way? A more careful look will begin to reveal some differences. I want to consider two places where the text departs from the *Meno*, one by an omission, the other by an addition.

Let us first consider an omission. Where the *Meno* states “but goodness comes about by divine allotment *without understanding* to whomever it comes” (ἀλλὰ θεῖα μοῖρα παραγιννομένη ἄνευ νοῦ οἷς ἂν παραγίγνηται, 99e6–100a1; cf. 100b2–4) the *On Virtue* omits the qualification “without understanding” (ἄνευ νοῦ). What does the author gain by such an omission? Recall that our earlier discussion noted that the *Phaedo* criticised the notion of goodness that was acquired as a result of training for its lack of philosophical understanding (ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας τε καὶ νοῦ [82b2–3]). Might it not be the case that the author of this text has comfortably omitted the phrase “without understanding” (ἄνευ νοῦ) to bring his conclusion more easily in line with the view about goodness expressed in the *Phaedo*? For presumably a later Academic writer would be well aware of Plato's dialogues in general and the passage from the *Phaedo* in particular. And

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Leg.* 875c3–d5, 951b5. An obvious worry presents itself in relation to the conclusion of this dialogue. If luck was eliminated as an explanation of human goodness (*Meno* 99a2–4), then *a fortiori* a divine allotment or dispensation (θεῖα μοῖρα) should be eliminated for the same reason. The reasoning behind these two claims, however, is not on par. Suffice it to say here that human beings cannot gain authority or mastery over luck precisely because it is something random and capricious. If there really were a science of luck, then casinos would soon be out of business. A science of luck would entail that it is something that can be predicted, regulated, and controlled, and so not really luck at all. But it is here that the comparison breaks down. To be sure human beings do not *control* the divine allotment or dispensation (θεῖα μοῖρα). Obviously, the authority here will be on the side of the divine. Nevertheless, as I argue more fully in section VIII below, human beings do have control and authority over how they use this divine gift. It is precisely the Platonist conception of philosophy that reaches us how to cultivate and appropriate the authority of this divine gift until it becomes our own (οἰκείον).

once we note the omission are we not forced to ask how this conception of goodness—without understanding—as expressed in the *Meno* squares with that presented in the *Phaedo*?

Let us first consider the relation of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. Do these texts express incompatible conceptions of goodness (ἀρετή)? Must we view the *Meno*'s conclusion about the acquisition of goodness as incompatible with the claim made in the *Phaedo* that wisdom (φρόνησις) is the condition *sine qua non* of goodness? These claims will be incompatible if the possession of goodness as a divine gift is meant to exclude understanding on the part of the recipient of the gift. Elsewhere in the Platonic corpus we find just this exclusion. In his criticisms of the poets, Socrates claims that it is not through wisdom (σοφία) that the poets write their poetry, but through divine inspiration. Socrates makes clear that the poets lack knowledge of those subjects about which they are inspired. Hence, if the same consideration that applies to the poets applies to those who receive goodness through a divine dispensation, we would have to assume that they too would lack wisdom or understanding about goodness (ἀρετή).<sup>27</sup> *Prima facie*, this is just what the *Meno* echoes with its explicit claim that those who have goodness have it through a divine dispensation *without understanding*.<sup>28</sup>

But what many scholars—even the most astute—forget to take into account is the very exception that Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates. We have seen the conclusion expressed in the following lines:

but goodness comes about by divine allotment *without understanding* to whomever it comes

ἀλλὰ θεία μοῖρα παραγιννομένη ἄνευ νοῦ οἷς ἂν παραγίνηται (99e6–100a1; cf. 100b2–4).

<sup>27</sup> On poetic inspiration cf. *Ap.* 22c; *Ion* 534c1, 535a4, 536c2, 536d3, and 542a4; *Leg.* 3.682a; note that the same phrase θεία μοῖρα is used in all these passages from the *Ion* to describe the gift of poetic inspiration which is explicitly contrasted with knowledge or skill (τέχνη). At *Ap.* 22c the inference is made that since the poets do not know what they are saying, they do not possess wisdom. Hence, it would be valid to conclude that if they did possess wisdom, they would know what they were speaking about. The picture that Plato paints suggests that the possession of wisdom entails both the possession of knowledge and the transparency condition: one both knows and knows that one knows. Note too that at *Ap.* 33c6 Socrates uses the same expression (θεία μοῖρα) to describe one of the ways that his divine mission has been pressed upon him, but here this use does not suggest that he failed to know about his mission. For more on the meaning of θεία μοῖρα in the *Apology*, see de Strycker and Slings 1994: n. *ad loc.* and n. 30 below. While I agree with Souilhé (1930a: 24) when he says, “Il semble donc que, chez le philosophe, l'action de la θεία μοῖρα produise des effets tout autres que chez le devin, le poète ou l'homme politique. Elle ne supprime pas la faculté de penser, elle ne la remplace pas, mais elle l'excite plutôt, elle est un stimulant de l'âme, une auxiliaire pour connaître la vérité,” I disagree with his interpretation of the “divine dispensation” as love. For the interpretation I favour, see the discussion of the myth of Kronos below (94–95).

<sup>28</sup> Robin (1934) takes the conclusion in this way. At his note on *Phd.* 82b with reference to the goodness that comes about from habit and training he remarks: “Telle est la vertu qui a été analysée 68b–69b. La conscience collective en fonde les maximes (*Rep.* VI, 492a–493d). Ceux-là même qui l'ont due à une *dispensation divine* (*Menon* 99b–100a) n'en sont pas moins ceux qui, appelés à renaitre, se trompent le plus lourdement sur le choix de leur destinée (*Rep.* X, 619c–e).”

What we must, however, consider is that the text immediately continues by noting an exception:

unless he be the kind of statesman who can make another like himself

εἰ μή τις εἴη τοιοῦτος τῶν πολιτικῶν ἀνδρῶν οἷος καὶ ἄλλον ποιῆσαι πολιτικόν (100a1–2).<sup>29</sup>

This exception noted, the *Meno* fits with other Platonic writings where it seems clear that goodness can be taught. In *Republic* 6 we find that the philosopher-statesman will be the sort of person who can make others like himself with respect to goodness. Once we step outside the chronological and developmental assumptions that we have about the *Meno* we can easily see its more immediate connection to the wider corpus. Indeed the image with which Plato concludes the dialogue invites this wider comparison. The *Meno* concludes with the Homeric image of Tiresias that allows Plato to draw a contrast that is pregnant with meaning when read in the light of the metaphysical views expressed in both the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. The statesmen who are canvassed and categorically dismissed in the *Meno* for their inability to teach goodness are nothing but *shadows* (σκιαί) (100a5). The statesmen-philosophers who can teach goodness and make others like themselves are the genuine article, the true reality (ἀληθὲς πρᾶγμα) (100b6–7). The common failure to note this exception that Plato makes plain in the text stems from the initial assumption that the *Meno* is nothing more than an early, aporetic, Socratic dialogue. It is this assumption too that prejudices the way we read the conclusion.

I now return to the text *On Virtue* to examine a subtle but interesting addition to the closing paraphrase of the *Meno*. What this text has and the *Meno* lacks is a more explicit reference to good men and divine providence. In the text quoted above, the good men are favourably contrasted with the fortune-tellers (χρησμοφοί). The good men are better able to predict the future for their cities. The idea of predicting the future is not meant to be mysterious or occult. Rather it refers to the role of the good men in guiding and directing the city. For example, they may advise the city to go to war and make a reasonable prediction about the likely outcome of events (cf. 379c7–d2). What the author is claiming is that good men will be better at this sort of thing than fortune-tellers (χρησμοφοί). The implication is that the good men are there to rule the city. But to someone familiar with the issues discussed in the *Meno* the question will naturally arise: How does it come about that a city is so fortunate as to have good men who can advise and perhaps rule it? In response to this question what we find in this dialogue is a more explicit view about providence than what is found in the *Meno*.

Indeed, whenever a god wishes a city to become successful, he places good men in it, and whenever a city is slated to fail, the god takes the good men away from that city. So it

<sup>29</sup> Translation follows Guthrie 1956.

seems that virtue is neither teachable nor natural, but comes by divine allotment to those who possess it (θεία μοῖρα παραγίγνεται κτωμένοις) (379d6–d10).

In place of the bald phrase “by divine allotment” (θεία μοῖρα) of the *Meno*, what we learn from this text is that good men are in fact the instruments of divine providence.<sup>30</sup> Their presence in a city causes it to flourish. Their absence brings about its decline. What is interesting about this claim is that it is much more Platonic than it may seem at first glance. In fact what the author of the *On Virtue* has in mind is the belief that the good men are the philosophers. While this claim is not controversial, what does seem to be controversial (or at least unusual) is to claim that Plato believed that philosophers come to positions of power in a city through an act of divine providence. How might a Platonist support this claim?

#### VI. GOODNESS AS A DIVINE GIFT: OTHER PLATONIC TEXTS

The simplest way for a later Platonist to do this would be to quote from the seventh letter. A passage there gives Plato’s belief (well known from the *Republic*, cf. 473c11–d6) that troubles will not cease from the human race until either philosophers enter positions of power or those in power take to the study of philosophy. What the letter adds, however, and the *Republic* text lacks is an explicit reference to the fact that this conjunction of events could only be brought about through divine providence.

The human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.

τὸ τῶν δυναστευόντων ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἔκ τινος μοίρας θείας ὄντως φιλοσοφίῃ (326a5–b4).<sup>31</sup>

We might not, however, find this convincing. The letter has after all been a subject of controversy.<sup>32</sup> But even if its authorship had not been contested one might still reject this view. Could not this reference to divine providence, like that of the *Meno*, be read as a mere *façon de parler* emphasising the remote possibility of such a chain of events coming to pass? What is needed then is an uncontested text and some reference to providence that is more difficult to deny.

<sup>30</sup> With reference to the phrase θεία μοῖρα at *Ap.* 33c6, de Strycker comments: “Depending on the context, this phrase can either identify divine Providence with God himself, or define it as a divine dispensation, viz. God’s will with regard to a particular individual in a specific situation. In Plato, the distinction is not clear-cut” (de Strycker and Slings 1994: 352). This view of providence is also traditional with roots in Homer: “One man is a splendid fighter—a god had made him so—/ one’s a dancer, another skilled at lyre and song / and deep in the next man’s chest farseeing Zeus / plants the gift of judgment, good clear sense” (*Il.* 13.732–734; tr. Fagles 1990). The lines I wish to emphasise are 732–733: ἄλλω δ’ ἐν στήθεσσι τιθεὶς νόον εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς / ἐσθλόν.

<sup>31</sup> Tr. L. A. Post in Hamilton and Cairns 1961.

<sup>32</sup> Arguments in support of its authenticity can be found in Morrow 1962; Brisson 1987; Ledger 1989; Sayre 1995; the case against is presented by Edelstein 1966.

First the authentic text. In his discussion of the education of the philosopher in *Republic* 6 we find Plato aware of the effects that context and environment have on people's character. Someone endowed with a philosophical nature is no exception. He wonders, given the bad environment and mob influence found in the non-ideal city, how it is that the person with this nature could ever escape corruption and become a philosopher? What is there that one can set against these influences? To this question Socrates replies:

There is not now, has not been in the past, nor ever will be in the future a man of character so unusual that he has been educated to virtue (πρὸς ἀρετήν) in spite of the education he received from the mob, a human character that is, for the divine, as the proverb goes, we exclude from our argument, my friend. We must realise that if any character is saved and becomes what it should, in the present state of our societies, you would not be wrong to say that a dispensation from god has saved it (θεοῦ μοίραν αὐτὸ σῶσαι λέγων) (492e2–493a2; cf. 499a–c).<sup>33</sup>

This text suggests that it is Plato's belief that the character of the philosopher is saved from the mob's corruption through some divine act. It lends support to the view we found expressed in the conclusion of the *On Virtue* that goodness—in this case the goodness of the philosophers—comes about by divine intervention. Thus, we can at least see that it would be reasonable for a later Platonist to attribute this belief to Plato even if we are not inclined to interpret Plato in this way. Nevertheless, this alternative interpretation that takes seriously Plato's theological beliefs confronts us with a question. The *On Virtue*, this text of the *Republic*, the conclusion of the *Meno*, the seventh letter—all these texts we have considered—conspire to force the question of how we are to understand Plato's belief in divine providence.

In considering this question I shall begin with one text from the *Laws* that was much quoted in later antiquity. This text can be used to support the view of divine providence found in the Platonic writings we have considered as well as the *On Virtue* text. Whether or not we decide to read this view back into Plato will doubtless remain a moot point. Nevertheless, this text is important for it helps us to understand how later Platonists arrived at their own, more unified, interpretations of Plato, which depend in a large part on taking Platonic theology seriously. Hence, if we adopt the view that the Athenian spokesman of this dialogue comes closer than any other character in the corpus to representing Plato's own views as an interpretative hypothesis, then we shall find in the *Laws* uncontested Platonic texts relating to divine providence that can be used as a framework within which to provide a unified interpretation to the texts that we have been considering from the *Phaedo*, *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Epistle* 7.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Translation adapted from Grube 1974.

<sup>34</sup> This hypothesis has been made in recent times by Morrow (1960) and in antiquity by Alcinous (Louis and Whittaker 1990). Morrow, after making a number of cautionary remarks and noting that this equation does not always hold, says (1960: 75): "In any case, the problems discussed and

The following text from the *Laws* was often cited by later authors, and it was so well known that some writers simply quote the first line and assume that readers will know the rest.<sup>35</sup> It refers to a point in the discussion when the Athenian spokesman and his interlocutors imagine an ideal group of colonists who are standing before them and about to found a city. The Athenian then addresses them about the divine origins of justice that are taken to be the foundation of any social order. He says:

Men, according to the ancient story, there is a god who holds in his hands the beginning and end and middle of all things, and straight he marches in the cycle of nature. Justice (δίκη), who takes vengeance (τιμωρός) on those who abandon the divine law, never leaves his side. The man who means to live in happiness latches on to her and follows her with meekness and humility. But he who bursts with pride (ἐξαρθείς ὑπὸ μεγαλαυχίας), elated by wealth or honours or by physical beauty when young and foolish, whose soul is afire with arrogant belief (φλέγεται τὴν ψυχὴν μεθ' ὕβρεως) that so far from needing someone to control and lead him, he can play the leader to others—there's a man whom God has deserted. And in his desolation he collects others like himself, and in his soaring frenzy he causes universal chaos. Many people think he cuts a fine figure, but before very long he pays to Justice no trifling penalty and brings himself, his home and state to rack and ruin.<sup>36</sup> Thus it is ordained (πρὸς ταῦτ' οὖν οὕτω διεταταγμένα) (715e7–716b7).<sup>37</sup>

Later Platonists like Alcinous used this text and the lines that immediately follow (quoted below) to attribute to Plato a belief in divine providence. This text, together with the texts we have examined from the *Republic* and the seventh letter were used to show that Plato believed that god's response to the rulers of a city depended on their moral outlook. Rulers with no respect of limits and measures, who in acts of hubris (ὑβρις) set themselves up as the measure, god abandons. Left to their own haughty devices (μεγαλαυχία), such rulers will ruin not only themselves but also their own city. If only this text is read, then we might think that Plato was singling out exceptionally corrupt rulers. A wider reading of the *Laws* will show, however, that this tendency to excess (πλεονεξία) is the response of any mortal soul when placed in a position of authority.<sup>38</sup> The remedy for this human weakness comes in the recognition that "it is god who is pre-eminently

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the solutions proposed in this latest and longest work of Plato's are certainly intended to be taken seriously; and we can properly substitute Plato for the Athenian Stranger on most occasions, if we remember that the real Plato, more than most authors, remains inscrutable." For Alcinous' views, cf. *Didaskalikos* 28 and below, n. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Cf., for example, Alcinous 181.38.

<sup>36</sup> It is hard not to imagine that Plato is here thinking of Alcibiades.

<sup>37</sup> Tr. Saunders 1975. This text was so well known in late antiquity that when Alcinous refers to it he only quotes the first line: cf. 181.38. In his note on this passage Whittaker refers to it as a "texte célèbre et très fréquemment cité" and refers to ps.-Arist. *De mundo* 7, 401b24–28; Plut. *De exil.* 601b, *Adv. Col.* 1224f; Atticus fr. 3.16–18 (des Places); Ireneus *Adv. haer.* 3.25.5; Hippolytus *Ref.* 1.19.6; Celsus *apud* Origen C. *Cels.* 6.15; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 69.4, *Stromata* 2.22.132.2 and 7.16.100.3; Apul. *De dog. Plat.* 2.23.253; Plotinus *Enn.* 2.9.17.12–13; Euseb. *Præp. evang.* 11.13.5–6, 15.5.2; Stob. *Flor.* 1.64.16–65.2, 1.83.13–15 (W); cf. Louis and Whittaker 1990: 138, n. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. 691c1–d6; 875b1–c3.



the measure of all things" (716c4–6). If god is the measure, then what will be dear (φίλη) to god will be a lifestyle that observes measure and moderation. Hence, for Plato, it is the temperate man (ὁ σώφρων), the man with the proper respect for measure (τὸ μέτρον) who becomes friendly (φίλος) with god (716d2). This view is taken to be expressed in the ancient proverb

like is friendly to like in true measure; excess is unfriendly both to itself and to those who are moderate.

τῷ μὲν ὁμοίῳ ὄντι μετρίῳ φίλον ἂν εἴη, τὰ δὲ ἄμετρα οὔτε ἀλλήλοις οὔτε τοῖς ἐμμέτροις (716c2–4).

What the proverb suggests is rather cryptic. But there can be no doubt about how Plato understood it: what we need more than all else is to find the "true measure" and become like it. Hence the remedy for vice and the road to goodness will be found in the effort to become *like god*. Making god the measure or standard, rather than a (wise) man in contrast to both Protagoras and Aristotle, pushes the Platonist to take a heroic or superhuman view of ethics.

The recognition of the view that goodness consists in becoming like god brings us back to the more familiar—mainstream?—Platonism of the *Theaetetus* with its theme of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ and the beginning of our discussion. These texts from the *Laws* have helped us to see, even if we do not agree, that later Platonists had grounds for supposing that (i) this was indeed Plato's view of goodness, (ii) that he truly believed that philosophers could attain goodness and succeed in passing it on to others, and (iii) that success in this endeavour would be assisted by divine providence.<sup>39</sup>

## VII. THE CONCLUSION OF THE *MENO*

Two loose ends remain before we can conclude our discussion. First, having framed our discussion around the *Meno* and its puzzling conclusion, it will be worthwhile to recall another point of contrast. While not really ending in aporia, the conclusion of the dialogue remains tentative.<sup>40</sup> Socrates explains that both he and Meno arrived at this state because they failed to recognise that the questions of their investigation have a certain priority (100b). One must first ask the question, What is goodness?, before one can ask, How do human beings become good? Could our ancient Platonist have failed to see that "likeness to god" (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ) serves equally well as an answer to either question? Where we are inclined to see puzzles, perplexity, fallacies, and even desperation on Plato's part, the ancient

<sup>39</sup> If the *Laws* text quoted above (92) puts us in mind of Alcibiades, we should also remember that Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates the words: "I was attached to this city by the god" (*Ap.* 30e) and five times within the space of about a dozen lines he repeats this idea (cf. 30e–31a). So it is hard not to think that the author of the text *On Virtue* is expressing a genuine Platonic idea when he relates the actions of divine providence to the presence or absence of good men in the city: either a Socrates or an Alcibiades holds sway (cf. 378d6–9).

<sup>40</sup> Note the phrase "we shall talk to him [Anytus] again" (τοῦτο καὶ αὐθις διαλεξόμεθα, 99e2–3) and the expression of the conclusion in cautious terms "it appears to us" (ἡμῖν φαίνεται, 100b2).

Platonist sees a detailed teaching that, when carefully understood, serves as an answer to both questions. In saying this much I do not mean to suggest that our ancient Platonist is drawing on the infamous unwritten or esoteric teachings of Plato in order to dissolve the puzzling ending of the *Meno*. And since Plato never drops his dramatic mask and baldly says, "This is my view," I willingly give ground to the sceptic: what Plato himself thought will always remain a moot point. Nevertheless, my review of the above texts was meant to show that the doctrine is hardly a secret. The ancient interpreters move beyond the "Socratic fallacy" because they look at the *Meno* from a more unified and complete view of the corpus. Modern interpreters seem stuck there because they only look at the dialogue from within the narrow frame of a moment in Plato's development. Hence its epithet "transitional."<sup>41</sup>

#### VIII. DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

Secondly and finally, our discussion of the thesis that goodness is indeed a gift from god will remain hopelessly incomplete unless we have some way of linking this claim to our own human predicament. Without such a link the good person deserves no praise, the corrupt no blame, and the attainment of the good life would be more like winning the lottery than an object of serious pursuit. While working out the details of the link between divine providence and human responsibility deserves a study all its own, our discussion nevertheless has brought enough to light that we can begin to make some sense of this connection.

We have seen on at least one Platonic reading that the remedy for vice and the road to goodness will be found in the effort to become like god. This goal is attainable for human beings because we already have a portion (*μοῖρα*) of the divine present within our rational psyche. Neither god nor this gift is something imposed on us from the outside. Rather, the recognition of this gift, its cultivation, and development, represent a type of understanding. It is the recognition of our divine origins that give us our impulse (*ὁρμή*) to take up philosophy (cf. *Republic* 611e4) and our love of wisdom that prescribes the path of purification (*κάθαρσις*) whereby we attain goodness (cf. *Phaedo* 69a–e). How far down this path we go remains up to us.

In Plato it is the philosopher-statesmen who have developed this gift most fully. What the texts from the *Laws* and the *On Virtue* that we have looked at help us to see is that the ideal age, the age of Kronos, will be achieved to the extent that we as ordinary mortals obey the philosophers and the philosophers in turn obey this divine principle. Plato draws on the myth of Kronos to show this:

The story has a moral for us even today, and there is a lot of truth in it: where the ruler of a state is not a god but a mortal, people have no respite from toil and misfortune. The lesson is that we should make every effort to imitate the life men are said to have led

<sup>41</sup> More support for what I am suggesting here is given by Poster 1998.

under Cronus; we should run our public and our private life, our home and our cities, in obedience to what little spark of immortality lies in us, and dignify this distribution of reason with the name of “law” (713e3–714a2).<sup>42</sup>

The expression of this same idea in the *Republic* can be used to help fill in the role of human responsibility in the acquisition of goodness. There the best person (ὁ βέλτιστος) has the divine ruler within him (τὸ θεῖον ἄρχον [cf. 590d1]). The best person will of course be the philosopher who alone amongst the classes of people in the ideal city has succeeded in producing a unity out of the complex mass of materials he finds within himself. It is the philosopher who has appropriated and internalised the ethical precepts (λόγοι) of this authority and made them his own. By so doing he sets the appropriate measures and limits on the other two parts of his psyche. The unity and moderation that is achieved is both the expression and embodiment of goodness (ἀρετή). And this goodness as we know from our discussion of the *Phaedo* (cf. section iv above) is both the expression and embodiment of wisdom (φρόνησις). Through the principle of like causing like, the philosopher-statesman can then communicate this goodness to others. Somewhat more optimistically than the *Laws* text the *Republic* suggests that it is open to everyone to become *like* and *friendly* with the divine ruler that is found within.

It is better for everyone to be ruled by divine intelligence (ὑπὸ θεοῦ καὶ φρονίμου ἄρχεσθαι) and best that he should have this within himself (οἰκεῖον ἔχοντος ἐν αὐτῷ); but if not, then it must be imposed from outside (ἐξωθεν ἐφεστῶτος), so that, as far as possible we should all be alike (ὅμοιοι) and friendly (φίλοι), given that we are governed by the same principle (590d3–6).<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, based on our quick look at these texts, we can now see that to claim that goodness comes about as a gift from god is not to claim that god seizes or possesses a person and makes him good. Rather, as these texts emphasize, the best course of action is for us to cultivate and appropriate this divine authority until it becomes our own (οἰκεῖον). We do this, as the *Phaedo* and *Republic* make clear, through the study of philosophy. The alternative is to look upon this divine gift (θεῖα μοῖρα) as something alien (ἀλλότριον) and to let it lie fallow. In that case the only goodness that can be achieved will have to be imposed from the outside.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Tr. Saunders 1975. The text reads: λέγει δὴ καὶ νῦν οὗτος ὁ λόγος, ἀληθεῖα χρώμενος, ὡς ὅσον ἂν πόλεων μὴ θεὸς ἀλλὰ τις ἄρχη θνητός, οὐκ ἔστιν κακῶν αὐτοῖς οὐδὲ πόνων ἀνάφυξις· ἀλλὰ μιμεῖσθαι δεῖν ἡμᾶς οἶεται πάση μηχανῇ τὸν ἐπὶ τοῦ Κρόνου λεγόμενον βίον, καὶ ὅσον ἐν ἡμῖν ἀθανασίας ἔνεστι, τούτῳ πειθόμενους δημοσίᾳ καὶ ἰδίᾳ τάς τ' οἰκήσεις καὶ τὰς πόλεις διοικεῖν, τὴν τοῦ νοῦ διανομὴν ἐπονομάζοντας νόμον (713e3–714a2).

<sup>43</sup>Translation follows Grube 1974.

<sup>44</sup>On the opposition of τὸ οἰκεῖον and τὸ ἀλλότριον, cf. *Symp.* 205e, where Socrates corrects the speech of Aristophanes (192a–b). Aristophanes had there said that we love and “embrace” (ἀσπαζόμενος) what is like to us and akin (τὸ ὅμοιον and τὸ συγγενές). Aristophanes can only be right, Socrates claims, if we understand the good (τὸ ἀγαθόν) as our own (οἰκεῖον).

## IX. CONCLUSION

I do not claim to have solved once and for all the thorny theological issue of divine providence and human responsibility. Nor do I claim to have adequately circumscribed a Platonic conception of goodness. Rather, I have simply tried to suggest a way of taking the conclusion of the *Meno* seriously, that for a Platonist goodness (ἀρετή) is a divine gift (θεία μοῖρα). What is perhaps the most difficult aspect of this thesis I have not even touched on. I began the discussion by laying out the contrast between Plato and Protagoras concerning the measure. I said there that the contrast looks *to us* like a contrast between an objectivist and subjectivist view of ethics. But this cannot be right, for the Platonic move also seems strongly subjective: we must turn *within* to find the principle of order and measure. What remains mysterious for us is how this move to the interior of the psyche leads to a view about the order present in nature. What some ancient Platonists see so easily and we do not see at all is how an exploration of the microcosm (a subjective examination of our own minds or souls) entails a link with the macrocosm, how looking within enables us to look without.<sup>45</sup> To those like myself who are drenched by the rains of secularism it is hard to take this conception of goodness seriously except as a piece of philosophical history. Nevertheless, I find something gentle and attractive in Plato's conception of τὴν τοῦ νοῦ διανομὴν ἐπονομάζοντος νόμον (*Laws* 714a1), in a view of ethics that is objective without being religious in a traditional sense and rational without being coldly scientific. For with all our revolutions in wisdom, with all our scientific progress, with all our attempts to firmly grasp the "objective order" we are still without a cure for "the wound that is human nature" (*Symposium* 191d2).<sup>46</sup>

48 BERRYMAN ST.  
TORONTO, ONTARIO  
M5R 1M6

mark.reuter@sympatico.ca

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<sup>45</sup> Our difficulty in seeing the legitimacy of this point of view is argued for extensively by Taylor 1989: chapter 25, "The Conflicts of Modernity," esp. 510–512.

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