

MENO

HOW PLATO INTENDED THE DIALOGUE TO
BE READ

Ivor Ludlam

Book Extract - TOC and Introduction

© Ivor Ludlam 2026

First edition, 2026

Published independently by Ivor Ludlam

All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-965-597-917-6 (paperback)

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. DELIBERATELY BAD ARGUMENTATION	8
2.1. Meno’s First Question (70).....	9
2.2. Socrates’ Profession of Ignorance (70).....	11
2.3. The Swarm of Virtues (71-74).....	13
2.4. Shapes and Colours (74-76).....	17
2.5. Meno’s Third Answer (77-79).....	20
2.6. Meno Evades Answering a Fourth Time (79-82)	23
2.6.1. Meno’s Paradox (80).....	23
2.6.2. The “Theory of Recollection” (81-82).....	25
2.6.3. The Geometry Lesson with Meno’s Slave (82-85).....	33
2.6.4. Meno Continues to Evade (86)	37
2.7. The Hypothesis (87-89)	39
2.7.1. Meno’s First Question, Again.....	39
2.7.2. The Hypothesis (87).....	40
2.7.3. Incorrect Usage Exemplified.....	42

2.8. Testing the Conclusion to the Hypothesis.....	49
2.8.1. Anytus (89-95)	50
2.8.2. Theognis (95-96).....	52
2.9. True Opinion (97-100).....	54
2.9.1. <i>Epistēmē</i> not the Only Guide (96e).....	54
2.9.2. Larissa (97).....	56
2.9.3. Daedalus (97d-e)	58
2.9.4. Politicians and the fourth option (98-100)	58
2.10. Incorrect Usage of Bad Argumentation	61
3. THE CHARACTERS	67
3.1. Meno	68
3.1.1. The Play on the Name “Meno”	68
3.1.2. <i>Anamnēsis</i>	69
3.1.3. Meno and <i>Epistēmē</i>	81
3.2. Theognis and Anytus	82
3.2.1. Theognis, Anytus, and Misdirection	82
3.2.2. Theognis.....	84
3.2.3. Anytus	93

3.2.4.	Theognis, Anytus, and <i>Epistēmē</i>	98
3.3.	Thessalians and Anthemion	107
3.3.1.	Thessalians	107
3.3.2.	Anthemion	110
3.3.3.	Craftsmen and <i>Epistēmē</i>	111
3.4.	Meno's Slave	113
3.4.1.	<i>Anamnēsis</i> Revisited	113
3.4.2.	The Slave and <i>Epistēmē</i>	116
3.5.	Gorgias	125
3.5.1.	The Font of all <i>Sophia</i>	125
3.5.2.	Gorgias and <i>Epistēmē</i>	130
3.6.	Socrates	132
3.6.1.	The Font of all <i>Aporia</i>	132
3.6.2.	Socrates and <i>Epistēmē</i>	134
4.	EPISTĒMĒ AND EDUCATION	136
4.1.	Meno	136
4.2.	Theognis	145
4.3.	The Thessalians	148

4.4. Anthemion and Anytus	150
4.5. Gorgias	152
4.6. Meno's Slave.....	155
4.7. Socrates	158
5. CORRECT USAGE (<i>orthē chrēsis</i>).....	160
5.1. <i>Epistēmē</i>	163
5.2. <i>Technē</i>	168
5.3. <i>Empeiria</i>	170
5.4. <i>Mnēmē</i>	172
5.5. <i>Idea, Eidos, Paradeigma, Deigma</i>	174
5.5.1. <i>Idea</i>	174
5.5.2. <i>Eidos</i>	175
5.5.3. <i>Paradeigma</i>	176
5.5.4. <i>Deigma</i>	178
6. CONCLUSIONS	191
6.1. The Dramatization of Real and Apparent <i>Phronēsis</i>	191
6.2. Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics I</i>	198
6.3. Summary of Conclusions to the Dialogue	204

6.4. Glossary of Terms.....	207
7. REFERENCES.....	212

Online Supplement

A structural diagram of the dialogue, together with a concise exposition of the present approach, may be found at:

<https://theplatoparadigm.com/home/dialogues/meno/>

1. INTRODUCTION

Platonic dialogues notoriously fail to meet modern philosophical standards, primarily because of the dialogue form itself. Plato's presentation is not merely untidy, but often appears utterly disorganized. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what Plato's own claims are since he never participates as a speaker in his own dialogues. This latter problem is commonly overcome in the secondary literature by relying on the traditional assumption that one or other principal speaker (namely, Socrates, Timaeus, the Athenian guest, or the Eleatic guest) must be Plato's mouthpiece.¹ Since the putative mouthpiece regularly makes inconsistent statements, the Platonist is at liberty to select quite arbitrarily which statements are to be deemed Plato's actual opinions, while rejecting just as arbitrarily the remainder as ironic or added for dramatic effect. Since all Platonists are people with their own peculiar tastes, this arbitrary procedure based on personal preferences leads to a number of Platonisms, both dogmatic and sceptical.² My work is an analysis and explanation of the dialogue *Meno*, and as such is not a polemic against the content or even, more fundamentally, against the methodology, of Platonism. Addressing at the outset, however, a few difficulties inherent in any

1. E.g., Guthrie (1962), Vlastos (1973), Annas (1981).

2. Cf. Ludlam (2015) 8.

Platonic interpretation which ignores, either explicitly or implicitly, the dialogue form itself may assist the reader in situating the present dialogic analysis among competing approaches.

The conspicuous absence of Plato as a speaking character should already give pause for thought. Even more problematic for anyone attempting to glean Plato's thought directly from what is said in the dialogue is the messy and fallacious nature of many, if not all, the arguments. The traditional method for dealing with this drawback is to explain what Socrates the mouthpiece of Plato, or Socrates the philosopher being criticized by Plato, probably meant to say.³ It is assumed by many commentators that a philosophical text is only as good as the philosophical arguments in it, so that any appeal to the treatment of a dialogue as a conversation between characters, none of whom is Plato, is met with dismay, if not utter horror.⁴ I shall be arguing that the fallacious arguments

-
3. Eg. Scott (2006), 4, talking about our dialogue, *Meno*: "Where the quality of the arguments is at issue, I shall discuss possible objections and then consider different ways of addressing them. Usually, this involves searching for premises that might be implicit and that would improve the quality of the argument; or, failing that, at least bringing out its interest and importance, whatever the flaws that remain".
 4. See, e.g., Scott (2006), 4, criticizing such an alternative to his approach: "Faced with the prospect of having to redeem what looks like a bad argument, some commentators pronounce it as bad, but add that Socrates was perfectly aware of the fact. Interpreters who take this route claim that he ingeniously tricks Meno into accepting a bad argument, or deliberately confuses him with muddled

are actually a necessary outcome of Plato's distinctive use of the dialogue form.

As I have already mentioned in passing, sceptical Platonists essentially adopt the same methodology as dogmatic Platonists, treating Socrates as the mouthpiece of Plato, differing only in that Socratic professions of ignorance are taken seriously rather than explained away.⁵ Such scholars, however, rightly see the fallacies as an educational strategy.⁶ Nevertheless, they remain committed to the assumption that Plato's philosophical position must be located in what is said in the dialogues, rather than in how the dialogues are constructed.

There is, however, a simple alternative to the competing but similar approaches of dogmatists and sceptics, and that is to look for Plato's own views not in what is actually said but in what is dramatized in the dialogues.

exposition. ... one would end up writing off much of the dialogue as self-consciously bad argument." The assumption that a Platonic dialogue must be a conversation with philosophically sound arguments if it is to be worthy of philosophical attention seems to be one of the main causes for Platonists feeling the need to knock Platonic dialogues into shape, albeit unrecognizable shape.

5. E.g., Socrates in the early dialogues reflects Plato's early scepticism, so Vlastos (1991), whose influence on a generation of scholars cannot be overemphasized.
6. Such an approach may be traced back to the third century BCE Academic, Arcesilaus; cf. Ludlam (2015) 8-11.

Treating the dialogues as dramas is nothing new. As I have demonstrated in my previous analyses,⁷ stability, a prerequisite for knowledge or understanding, is to be found not in a mouthpiece's inconsistent positions or in the many fallacious arguments, but in a dialogue's characters.⁸ My previous analyses have found that the characters themselves are *deigmata* (detailed concrete representations) based on *paradeigmata* (minimalist concrete representations) of *eidē* (specific abstract aspects) of one or other *idea* (general abstract aspect), the central concept informing the entire dialogue. It would seem reasonable, therefore, to hypothesize that that is the case here too, subject to revision if the participants are found to be inconsistent as characters (that they are inconsistent in argument is not at issue), and fail to explain the structure of the dialogue.

-
7. Ludlam (1991); Ludlam (2015); Ludlam (2017); Ludlam, Plato's Euthyphro. (unpublished).
 8. This seems to be where I stand apart from other proponents of a more dramatic approach to the dialogues. Even the most outstanding of these, such as Leo Strauss, well sampled in Pangle (1989), and Jacob Klein's commentary on *Meno*, Klein (1965), still adduce other Platonic dialogues to elucidate apparent Platonic positions hinted at in one or other dialogue. Klein's commentary on *Meno* is split between an incisive analysis of the conversation and an uneasy discussion of Plato's views through digressions on other dialogues such as *Republic* and *Theaetetus*. Such an approach fails to embrace the full import of dialogue form and is a compromise with traditional Platonism.

The notion of character consistency requires clarification. Characters are not consistent in what they say, but in who they are, for the duration of a dialogue. In earlier work, particularly on *Hippias Major*, I had referred to characters as models. Subsequent analysis of *Politeia* (Republic), however, has led me to treat them more precisely as samples or examples (*deigmata*) derived from paradigms (*paradeigmata*). A paradigm, in this context, is a minimalist human representation of an abstract idea; it does not itself participate in the dialogue. The characters who do participate are constructed by enriching such paradigms with distinguishing features, often drawn from historical figures, much as a potter produces a range of saleable vessels according to a single unsaleable template that determines shape but not decorative detail.⁹

A simplified illustration may clarify how a single dialogue may combine multiple paradigmatic strands without committing Plato to any doctrinal position. In *Hippias Major*, the central abstract idea is *to prepon* (the Fitting), which is not explicitly identified in the course of the dialogue with *to agathon* (the Good), but is demonstrably the case. If the Good is the Fitting, then there is no absolute Good in the sense assumed by certain forms of Platonism. Rather, something is good insofar as it is fitting for

9. A *deigma* means “something to be shown”, while a *paradeigma* means “something to the side of the things to be shown”. The *paradeigma* is not for sale, but is the template according to which the samples are made, and to which details are added to make them attractive; see further §6.4 s.v. “*deigma*” and “*paradeigma*” below.

something else. A clay pot, for example, is fitting for the preparation of soup, whereas a golden pot, though aesthetically pleasing, is pragmatically useless for that purpose. Conversely, a clay pot may appear aesthetically unfitting, yet be pragmatically fitting if it is well made for its intended use.

Given *to prepon*, there necessarily follows a second abstract idea, *to phainomenon prepon* (the Apparently Fitting), to be identified with *to kalon* (the Fine or Beautiful), although the identification is dramatized rather than stated explicitly. What appears to be good is fine, but what is fine is not necessarily good. *Hippias Major* dramatizes the consequences of this distinction by showing how fittingness and apparent fittingness manifest in three spheres: the pragmatic, the aesthetic, and a confused amalgam of the two, the social. Pragmatic fittingness is grasped by the intellect; aesthetic fittingness by the senses; while social fittingness is conceived by opinion. The Many sense but never intelligize fittingness. They infer pragmatic fittingness from sensed or conceived fittingness, pragmatic unfittingness from sensed or conceived unfittingness. Thus the socially and aesthetically fine sophist, Hippias, is inferred to be beneficial when he is actually harmful, while the ugly and socially insignificant Socrates is inferred to be harmful, when he is actually beneficial.

The dialectician, by contrast, senses aesthetic *kala* just like the Many do, but he also intelligizes pragmatic *kala*. This means that he does not infer from a man being handsome that he is also necessarily beneficial. Plato presents this contrast not through explicit doctrine, but through the *deigmata* of the sophist Hippias and the dialectician Socrates. One *deigma*

derives from the pragmatically unfitting paradigm (his actions are harmful) while simultaneously deriving from the aesthetically and socially fitting paradigm (he looks and sounds good and fits into high society). The result is a complex paradigm which would appear to the Many to be beneficial, while being harmful. To this complex paradigm Plato adds features drawn from the historical sophist Hippias, to create the *deigma* of Hippias who participates in the dialogue. It is because of the underlying *paradeigma* that the character of Hippias appears to be overdrawn and comedic; it is not a true representation of Hippias, but it is a true representation of the *paradeigma*. The *deigma* of Socrates derives from the opposite complex *paradeigma*, a mix of the pragmatically fitting *paradeigma* and the aesthetically and socially unfitting *paradeigma*, to which have been added details from the historical Socrates. Socrates, too, appears to be overdrawn, but this is not intended to be a true representation of the historical Socrates. It is a true representation of the complex *paradeigma* Plato created as part of his dramatization of the Fitting, real and apparent.

This is what I mean by saying that Plato's philosophy is to be seen in what is stable in the dialogue - not in what is said, but in what is shown. Ultimately, Plato is dramatizing aspects of a concept, and a concept per se does not change.