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Irony and *Reductio ad Absurdum* as a Methodological Strategy in Plato's *Meno*

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Abstract

Meno is a good example of the use of Socratic irony as a way of refutation. From the perspective of logic, the *reductio ad absurdum* argument constitutes a device closely related to irony. In this article, I examine analytically the four elements of irony as they are presented in the dialogue: 1. False knowledge as an initial position assumed by Socrates's interlocutors; 2. Socratic ignorance; 3. the *reductio ad absurdum* argument; and 4. the acknowledgement of the initial error and ignorance.

KEYWORDS: Socrates, sophists, false knowledge, virtue, definition.

Resumen

El Menón es un buen ejemplo del uso de la ironía socrática como forma de refutación. Específicamente, la forma lógica de reducción al absurdo constituye un dispositivo muy relacionado con la ironía socrática. En este artículo, se examinan analíticamente los cuatro elementos de la ironía que se presentan en el diálogo: 1. el conocimiento falso como una posición inicial asumida por los interlocutores de Sócrates; 2. la ignorancia socrática; 3. la reducción al absurdo del falso saber inicial; y 4. el reconocimiento del error y la ignorancia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sócrates, sofistas, falso conocimiento, virtud, definición.

By Heracles, he said, that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned you, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer.

Republic, p. 337a¹

The Socratic and Platonic interest in distinguishing ἐπιστήμη—a hallmark of philosophical reasoning—from τέχνη as instrumental knowledge turned into an effort to underscore the dialectic form to expound philosophy, as well as a criticism on the discursive form adopted by sophists: “The dialogues are both the locus for discussing these issues and exempla of alternatives to linear, monologue, and written discourse paradigms. The defense of dialogue and the critique of sophistic rhetoric are related to each other”.²

Irony is one of these paradigmatic forms, and it was exercised by both Socrates and Plato. However, ἐπιστήμη is different in each one. In Socrates, it is characterized by ignorance, not only as a rhetorical device of counterargument, but also—as will be noted in the following—as a genuine “non-knowledge”.³ By contrast, Plato understands irony as a didactic previous step to positive knowledge, i.e., to the development and accounting of his various theories.⁴

¹ All quotations from Plato's dialogues are from Plato 1991 y 1997. Pagination is provided in the text.

² Swearingen, 1991, p. 58. See also Bravo, 2009, p. 27-43.

³ In his large dissertation on Socratic irony, and after reviewing the main philological sources on the issue —Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes—, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard argued that Socrates' ignorance was indeed real. See Kierkegaard, 1989, specially the chapter “The World-Historical Validity of Irony, The Irony of Socrates”, p. 259-71. The term employed by Plato —and in Greek Classical literature in general— is ἀμαθία, which is traditionally translated as “ignorance” or even “foolishness”. An important source on the interpretation of this term is Crombie, 2013, p. 33-63.

⁴ In *Meno*, we find the concept of ἐπιστήμη as a type of knowledge that involves awareness and understanding of *cause* (αἰτία), as opposed to common true opinion (ὀρθὴ δόξα): “Indeed, I too speak as one who does not have knowledge but is guessing. However, I certainly do not think I am

In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel mentions *Meno*⁵ as an example of Socratic irony as a method, focusing on its aporetic nature, and argues that “philosophy must, generally speaking, begin with a puzzle in order to bring about reflection; everything must be doubted, all presuppositions given up, to reach the truth as created through the Notion”.⁶ However, the purpose of this dialogue is not to make an account of a concept, as might be suggested by Meno's opening question: “Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught?” (70a). For even if Socrates immediately redirects Meno's inquiry into the more general question about what is virtue, the dialogue is not an account of the essence of virtue. At the end, Socrates excuses himself and leaves this last question unanswered (100b). A reader that expects a lucid exposition about the teaching or the concept of virtue will in all probability be disappointed.⁷

The aim of this essay is to offer an analysis of the ironic structure of *Meno*. In order to do this, I will divide the essay in two parts. In the first one, I will offer an introduction to the general concept of irony and Socratic irony. In the second part, I will discuss four primary features of Socratic irony as we find them in *Meno*.

There is a wide diversity of scholarly studies on this dialogue and particularly about Socratic irony. My interpretative angle, nonetheless, does not attempt to incorporate the vastly different discussions on specific issues in the hermeneutic and philological debate around this work. I have chosen instead to sketch an outline of the ironic method as it appears in various passages of *Meno*, and to present, in a more formal fashion, the *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning that is so important in Socrates' method.

guessing that right opinion [ὀρθὴ δόξα] is a different thing from knowledge [ἐπιστήμη]” (98b2). See also *Theaetetus* for a similar text (210a9-b2). To the same extent, we see an account of τέχνη when Socrates suggests an analogy to compare the practical knowledge of the shoemaker and the physician with the way in which the sophists claim to teach virtue (90d); even though, in this case, Socrates makes an ironical use of the term ἐπιστήμη.

⁵ I shall write *Meno* in italics when I refer to Plato's dialogue, and Meno without italics when I make reference to the character.

⁶ Hegel, 1892, p. 406.

⁷ “A number of dialogues end in the same manner, both in Xenophon and Plato, leaving us quite unsatisfied as to the result” (Hegel, 1892, p. 406).

I. Introduction to the Concept of Irony

Irony as a literary form is the free play of language in which the implicit meaning of an expression appears as different from its literal meaning.⁸ It is ordinarily a discontinuity between the subjectivity of the person who speaks or writes, and the external appearance of that which he or she is saying; it is a discontinuity between the true intention of the person and the literality of that which he or she is conveying.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle associates irony with magnanimity and sincerity. The magnanimous character, he claims, is arrogant and frank in his or her self-confidence, even though he or she is ironical when addressing the uneducated (p. 1124b32).⁹ Later on, he refers to irony as the opposite of pretentiousness or haughtiness, inasmuch as ironists minimize their merits as a manner of avoiding ostentation: "These also mostly disown qualities held in high esteem, as Socrates used to do" (p. 1126b25). In this sense, Aristotle opposes irony to pretense and refers to it as self-depreciation (p. 1108a21).¹⁰ In *Rhetoric*, irony is described as a form of contempt directed to those who speak in earnest (p. 1379b31), or a manner in which the speaker can express when enraged (p. 1408b8). Also in this rhetorical context, irony offers a way to ridicule another person in a debate. In this regard, Aristotle quotes Gorgias when he claims that ridicule is "to confound the opponents' earnest with jest and their jest with earnest", and argues that "irony is more gentlemanly than buffoonery, for the first is employed on one's own account, the second on that of another" (p. 1419b8).

Let us consider a literary example that was paradigmatic—in this ironical sense—in Romanticism during the XVIII century. When considered as a criticism of chivalric novels, *Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra should not be reduced to a mere satirical form or mock humor, even though it shares characteristics from both. The language used in this work, as well as its

⁸ See, for example, Behler, 1990.

⁹ Quotations from Aristotle 1926-57, vols. XIX and XXII, pagination is provided in the text.

¹⁰ To be more accurate, Aristotle actually uses the term εἰρωνεία, which, in this particular context, is translated in English as "self-depreciation".

characters and situations, shows clearly the aforementioned ironical discontinuity: madness and good sense, earnestness and triviality, ideality and disillusion. One may even think of a contrasting reduction in its use of language: the colorful descriptions of the absurd adventures; the hyperbolic and nonsensical added to the implausibility of many scenes; the discourses against imaginary enemies that lack all logic when heard by third parties; the idealized love expressed in an embellished language, but directed to an inadequate woman. Let us take as an eloquent example that scene with the merchants where Don Quixote "exclaimed with haughty gesture, 'All the world stand, unless all the world confess that in all the world there is no maiden fairer than the Empress of La Mancha, the peerless Dulcinea del Toboso'".¹¹ All these contrasts, along with the diverse imagery, constitute an ironical comment on the social, historical and cultural reality of the time. In this sense, *Don Quixote* offers a splendid universe of allegories that aims not only to the destruction of the well-known chivalric model, but also criticizes a grotesque and vulgar society that claims to be ruled and measured by a standard of disproportionate legalism and morality. In his *Charakteristiken und Kritiken*, Schlegel underscores this ironical character of *Don Quixote*, inasmuch as Cervantes "from the very beginning makes the exaggerated chivalric ideas collide with the vulgar actuality, leaving thus no room for anyone to save themselves".¹²

As mentioned earlier, irony appears in many parts of *Meno*. In this regard, Plato successfully reflects this particular trait of his teacher. As an ironist, Socrates reveals the discontinuity. With his questions, observations and arguments, he leads those who claim to be bearers of a certain knowledge to eventually acknowledge their initial error: to believe that they knew.¹³ The ironical discontinuity is the knowledge that ends up revealing itself as a non-knowledge: Meno was convinced that he knew what virtue was, but at the

¹¹ Cervantes, 1994, p. 127. We quote the English translation by John Ormsby.

¹² Schlegel, 1975, p. 138.

¹³ Theodor Ebert distinguishes between learning something that has been forgotten and the learning that is preceded by an error. In the latter, the correction of the error also implies the recognition of a lack of knowledge that went hitherto unnoticed. See Ebert, 1973, p. 163-80.

end of the dialogue he has to admit that he does not know. With Socrates, on the other hand, there is an element that makes the discontinuity more palpable, for Socrates himself repeatedly claims that he knows nothing. Thus, the one that does not know (Socrates) causes through his questions that the “knower” (Meno) reveals and acknowledges himself as ignorant. The positive element of this negative way is the acknowledgement of ignorance and the admission of the first mistake—the belief that one is in the possession of knowledge—as there is an important improvement in being aware that one was on the wrong path.

In the following, I will offer an analysis of this ironical structure in *Meno*. To achieve this, I will discuss discontinuity according to the four elements previously mentioned: 1. the initial position of those who claim to know what virtue is (Meno), or how it can be taught (Anytus); 2. Socrates’ ignorance as a first contrasting standard or discontinuity; 3. the *reductio ad absurdum* of the proposed definitions; and 4. the acknowledgement of the initial error. Although these four elements are properly distributed in the dialogue, I will make a separate analysis of each so they can be identified in a more distinct manner.

II. Analysis of the Ironic Elements in Meno

1. The Initial “Knowledge” or False Knowledge: Meno, Anytus and the Sophists

Socrates’ irony attempts to show the false wisdom of several of his interlocutors. To this end, the dialogues underscore how these characters are convinced of their possession of truth and capacity to argue on behalf of it. In *Meno*, this false wisdom has several faces. There are three characters that converse directly with Socrates: Meno, Anytus, and the slave. However, we should also note the general allusions to sophists, two of which are mentioned specifically: Gorgias and Protagoras. Let us turn to these points in *Meno*.

The dialogue starts by establishing the initial roles of Meno and Socrates.

Meno: Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? (p. 70a)¹⁴

Meno is the one who seeks wisdom in Socrates. However, the roles are swiftly turned around by the latter, who claims that, in order to know if virtue is teachable, one ought to find out first what virtue is. At this point, Socrates admits his ignorance and entrusts Meno to offer an adequate definition.

Here we can observe a direct comparison between the “acknowledged” sophistic wisdom and that of Meno (p. 71c). The following lines present Socrates’ “praise” of Gorgias and his “conviction” that Meno would be able to speak his own thoughts in a similar fashion, or even better, than the absent Gorgias (p. 71d). In order to encourage Meno to share his own arguments on the question about virtue, Socrates says:

Socrates: Before now, Meno, Thessalians had a high reputation among the Greeks and were admired for their horsemanship and their wealth, but now, it seems to me, they are also admired for their wisdom, not least the fellow citizens of your friend Aristippus of Larissa. The responsibility for this reputation of yours lies with Gorgias, for when he came to your city he found that the leading Aleuadae, your lover Aristippus among them, loved him for his wisdom, and so did the other leading Thessalians. In particular, he accustomed you to give a bold and grand answer to any question you may be asked, as experts are likely to do. Indeed, he himself was ready to answer any Greek who wished to question him, and every question was answered (p. 70a-c).¹⁵

Meno claims that Gorgias does know what virtue is, and that he has heard the definition from the sophist himself (p. 71d). To this Socrates answers:

¹⁴ See Kirkland, 2012. It is important to note that virtue (ἀρετή), the main theme of the dialogue, was in Greek culture a pivotal concept that supported the whole idea of human excellence. Unlike the more contemporary definition, associated mostly to morality and ethics, Hellenic virtue encompassed the many features of an aristocratic ideal: nobility, prestigious lineage, courage, outstanding abilities and strength, and cultural superiority. See Jaeger, 1946.

¹⁵ On occasion, it might be necessary to quote large fragments of the dialogue to offer a proper analysis of the ironical structure of *Meno*.

Socrates: [...] Perhaps he [Gorgias] does know; you know what he used to say, so you remind me of what he said. You tell me yourself, if you are willing, for surely you share his views.

Meno: I do.

Socrates: Let us leave Gorgias out of it, since he is not here. But Meno, by the gods, what do you yourself say that virtue is? Speak and do not begrudge us (p. 71c-d).

It is then that Meno asserts without hesitation his knowledge on the subject and offers his first definition of virtue:

Meno: It is not hard to tell you, Socrates. First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists of... (p. 71e)

Socrates explains Meno the inadequacy of his definition and, after going into detail about the requirements of a proper definition (p. 72a-e),¹⁶ he asks for a new answer. A still confident Meno ventures a second definition:

Socrates: Since then the virtue of all is the same, try to tell me and to remember what Gorgias, and you with him, said that that same thing is.

Meno: What else but to be able to rule over people, if you are seeking one description to fit them all (p. 73c-d).

Socrates refutes again this new attempt of definition. He illustrates what a good definition is with the examples of figure and color (pp. 74b-76d). As Meno inquires about the definition of color, Socrates exclaims:

Socrates: You are outrageous, Meno. You bother an old man to answer questions, but you yourself are not willing to recall and to tell me what Gorgias says that virtue is.

Meno: After you have answered this, Socrates, I will tell you (p. 76a-b).

¹⁶ On the requirements of an adequate definition, see Fine, 2010, pp. 125-52. See also Xenophon Santas, 1979.

After satisfying Meno's request, he adds:

Socrates: [...] Come now, you too try to fulfill your promise to me and tell me the nature of virtue as a whole and stop making many out of one, as jokers say whenever someone breaks something; but allow virtue to remain whole and sound and tell me what it is, for I have given you examples.

Meno: I think, Socrates, that virtue is, as the poet says, "to find joy in beautiful things and have power". So I say that virtue is to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them (p. 77a-b).

It is thus that Meno begins his third attempt of a definition. As Socrates refutes it yet again (pp. 77b-79e), Meno is forced to admit his perplexity. He has to accept that his position is that of non-knowledge, by comparing explicitly his initial certainty with his current state of confusion. For now, I would like to underscore Meno's original conviction about his own knowledge. He was confident of it, for he had spoken well about virtue many times and in front of many people:

Meno: [...] Indeed, if a joke is in order, you seem, in appearance and in every other way, to be like the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb, and you seem to have had that kind of effect on me, for both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you. Yet I have made many speeches about virtue before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is (p. 80a-b).

These are the main passages regarding Meno's initial "wisdom" in the first part of the dialogue, which deals with the question about the essence of virtue. In the second part, which approaches the issue of whether virtue can be taught, Anytus is the "wise" interlocutor. Once again, we observe an ironical play in which Socrates seems to praise sophists as those who know and are able to teach virtue. Using various analogies about the learning of crafts, Anytus admits along with Socrates that the best choice would be to send he who wishes to learn a trade to those who know the craft, teach it, and charge for this:

Socrates: Look at it in this way: if we wanted Meno to become a good physician, to what teachers would we send him? Would we not send him to physicians? [...] Tell me again on this same topic, like this: we say that we would be right to send him to the physicians if we want him to become a physician; whenever we say that, we mean that it would be reasonable to send him to those who practice the craft rather than to those who do not, and to those who exact fees for this very practice and have shown themselves to be teachers of anyone who wishes to come to them and learn. Is it not with this in mind that we would be right to send him?

Anytus: Yes (p. 90b-d).

After several analogies of this sort and the corresponding assent by Anytus (p. 90c-e), Socrates compares this teaching with that offered by sophists:

Socrates: Quite right. However, you can now deliberate with me about our guest friend Meno here. He has been telling me for some time, Anytus, that he longs to acquire that wisdom and virtue which enables men to manage their households and their cities well, to take care of their parents, to know how to welcome and to send away both citizens and strangers as a good man should. Consider to whom we should be right to send him to learn this virtue. Or is it obvious in view of what was said just now that we should send him to those who profess to be teachers of virtue and have shown themselves to be available to any Greek who wishes to learn, and for this fix a fee and exact it?

Anytus: And who do you say these are, Socrates?

Socrates: You surely know yourself that they are those whom men call sophists (pp. 90e-91b).

Anytus' answer reveals his annoyance at sophists and at Socrates himself for speaking their "praise":

Anytus: By Heracles, hush, Socrates. May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers (p. 91c).

At this point, Socrates starts a play of presuppositions and uses the occasion to describe with further detail—again in an indirect and ironical fashion—the various “qualities” of sophists. The following passage is of great importance to understand properly the play of meanings included in the dialogue:

Socrates: How do you mean, Anytus? Are these people, alone of those who claim the knowledge to benefit one, so different from the others that they not only do not benefit what one entrusts to them but on the contrary corrupt it, even though they obviously expect to make money from the process? I find I cannot believe you, for I know that one man, Protagoras, made more money from this knowledge of his than Phidias who made such notably fine works, and ten other sculptors. Surely what you say is extraordinary, if those who mend old sandals and restores clothes would be found out within the month if they returned the clothes and sandals in a worse state than they received them; if they did this they would soon die of starvation, but the whole of Greece has not noticed for forty years that Protagoras corrupts those who frequent him and sends them away in a worse moral condition than he received them. I believe that he was nearly seventy when he died and had practiced his craft for forty years. During all that time to this very day his reputation has stood high; and not only Protagoras but a great many others, some born before him and some still alive today. Are we to say that you maintain that they deceive and harm the young knowingly, or that they themselves are not aware of it? Are we to deem those whom some people consider the wisest of men to be so mad as that? (pp. 91c-92a).

Once more, Anytus does not hesitate to discredit the sophists in their role as teachers of truth. His conviction and anger does not require a more profound reasoning; simple disqualification is enough for him:

Anytus: They are far from being mad, Socrates. It is much rather those among the young who pay their fees who are mad, and even more the relatives who entrust their young to them and most of all the cities who allow them to come in and do not drive out any citizen or stranger who attempts to behave in this manner.

Socrates: Has some sophist wronged you, Anytus, or why are you so hard on them?

Anytus: No, by Zeus, I have never met one of them, nor would I allow any one of my people to do so (p. 92a-b).

Right after this harsh criticism, we see the assumption of “knowledge” by Anytus. Inasmuch as sophists are bad teachers of virtue, Socrates asks Anytus to whom would Meno have to go in order to learn virtue. It is regarding this issue that Anytus is convinced of his own knowledge:

Socrates: I did mention those whom I thought to be teachers of it, but you say I am wrong, and perhaps you are right. You tell him in your turn to whom among the Athenians he should go. Tell him the name of anyone you want.

Anytus: Why give him the name of one individual? Any Athenian gentleman he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man than the sophists would.

Socrates: And have these gentlemen become virtuous automatically, without learning from anyone, and they are able to teach others what they themselves never learned?

Anytus: I believe that these men have learned from those who were gentlemen before them; or do you not think that there are many good men in this city? (pp. 92d-93a)

Socrates concludes this part of the dialogue when he refutes Anytus’ point of view by alluding to the failed upbringing of the children of these Athenian gentlemen (pp.93c-94e).

This represents the first step of the dialectical irony in *Meno*. It is in virtue of this irony that those who claim and believe to know—Meno and Anytus in a direct manner, but also the sophists and the slave in an indirect form—present themselves as bearers of the truth. In the following, I will show the contrast with Socratic ignorance.

2. The Socratic Ignorance

As said before, the discontinuity of irony occurs when someone who admits not to know, Socrates, makes those who claim to know

become aware of their ignorance. In several occasions, Socrates asserts that he does not know the answer to the fundamental question about the essence of virtue, an answer that would lead to the original issue posed by Meno: how does one acquire virtue? Let us examine the texts in which Socrates alludes to his own ignorance and to the ignorance of others.

Already in his first intervention, right after Meno’s initial inquiry, Socrates declares that neither the Athenians nor he would be able to answer that question, as there is a certain “dearth of wisdom” in the city:

Socrates: [...] But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite is the case, as if there were a dearth of wisdom, and wisdom seems to have departed hence to go to you. If then you want to ask one of us that sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: “Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue is” (pp. 70c-71a).

After this prelude, Socrates states bluntly that he does not know at all what virtue is:

Socrates: I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that is possible? (p. 71b).

Socrates insists that he has never heard of anyone that has knowledge on this matter:

Socrates: Not only that, my friend, but also that, as I believe, I have never met anyone else who did know (p. 71c).

We find another reference to Socrates’ ignorance right after Meno’s third failed attempt to define virtue. Here, Meno suggests that

Socrates resembles a torpedo fish that makes anyone that touches it become numb (p. 80a-b). Socrates' answer constitutes a new assertion of his ignorance:

Socrates: Now if the torpedo fish is itself numb and so makes others numb, then I resemble it, but not otherwise, for I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others. So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be (p. 80c-d).

In the second part of the dialogue, there are also several allusions to Socratic ignorance. At Meno's request, Socrates agrees to examine whether virtue can be taught. Nevertheless, he stipulates that this will be done by means of a "hypothesis", as they do not know the essence of virtue:

Socrates: If I were directing you, Meno, and not only myself, we would not have investigated whether virtue is teachable or not before we had investigated what virtue itself is. [...] So we must, it appears, inquire into the qualities of something the nature of which we do not yet know. However, please relax your rule a little bit for me and agree to investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis (p. 86d-e).

The first hypothesis examines the issue whether virtue is a sort of knowledge or something different, as it would be evident that if the former was the case, virtue would be teachable (p. 87b-c). It is in this context that Socrates distinguishes right opinion from that knowledge that involves a reasoning on cause (pp. 97e-98a). This is important, for right opinion, as a form of knowledge, is not necessarily related to reasoning or its teachability. Here we can see yet another reference to ignorance:

Socrates: Indeed, I too speak as one who does not have knowledge but is guessing. However, I certainly do not think I am guessing that right opinion is a different thing from knowledge. If I claim

to know anything else—and I would make that claim about few things—I would put this down as one of the things I know (p. 98b).

Socrates ends the dialogue abruptly, but as he excuses himself, he insists on the need to know what virtue is in order to know if it can be taught:

Socrates: It follows from this reasoning, Meno, that virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the gods. We shall have clear knowledge of this when, before we investigate how it comes to be present in men, we first try to find out what virtue in itself is (p. 100b).

Finally, it is important to underscore that Socratic ignorance should be understood in reference to particular and fundamental issues, not as a generalized and absolute non-knowledge.¹⁷ The latter would lead to several contradictions and absurdities (Socrates, for example, does know his name, the definition of a swarm, who Themistocles was, etcetera). Thus, ignorance should be comprehended as a lack of profound and detailed knowledge. For instance, we may not know exactly—more than twenty five centuries after Socrates—what is the essence of man, justice, being, etcetera.¹⁸

In the particular case of *Meno*, it might be important to consider the way Socrates manages the things he does know. I will refer to two instances. As mentioned previously, right before Meno's last attempt to define virtue, Socrates defines the concepts of figure and color as a way to explain to Meno what a definition ought to be. It might seem as if there was a contradiction in this course of action, for Socrates apparently is able to define with ease certain things. In all fairness, one may argue that Socrates himself admits at this point that he would not be able to offer many definitions of this sort (p. 77a).

On the other hand, the things he can define—or that he can help others to define, such as in the case with the slave—are unrelated

¹⁷ See Ebrej, 2014, pp. 4-24.

¹⁸ Gerasimos Xenophon Santas argues that Socratic irony refers to the epistemic aspect of definitions. See Xenophon Santas, 1979, p. 130.

to the main issue of the dialogue, that is, the essence of virtue. They are rather examples that helped illustrate his method or incidental subjects that were outside Socrates' scope of interest.¹⁹ Socrates suggests something similar at the end of the dialogue when he distinguishes between right opinion and knowledge. He indicates there that unfortunately he can claim to know almost anything only about a few things (p. 98b).

3. Socratic Reasoning as *Reductio ad Absurdum*

If irony is considered as a negative form of reasoning that aims to demonstrate the contradictions that lie in a given context, the logic form of the *reductio ad absurdum* becomes the most adequate and natural way to reveal such contradictions. In the particular case of *Meno*, we have to take into account its dialogue form. In a dialogue, the contradiction arises through the acceptance of certain premises that eventually show the inconsistency of the initial assumptions. Thus, he who is convinced of knowing what virtue is, is forced to admit that there is a contradiction in his proposed definition.

The dialogue has a clearly outlined structure divided in two groups of arguments. In the first group, Socrates' main interlocutor is Meno, and it includes Meno's three unsuccessful attempts to define virtue. In the second group, Socrates and Meno examine by means of a hypothesis the issue of whether virtue is teachable. In this part of the dialogue, Anytus appears as a third interlocutor. Between these two groups of arguments, Meno presents his famous dilemma, according to which it is impossible to seek that which one does not know, for one would be unable to recognize it; Socrates responds with the notion of reminiscence, helped by one of Meno's slaves. Irony as a *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning is present throughout the dialogue in most of Socrates' rebuttals. I will examine one example from each of the two groups of arguments.

The first part of the dialogue includes Socrates' three refutations to Meno's definitions of virtue. Of these, the third rebuttal is by far

¹⁹ It might be important to note in this regard the hermeneutic problem about Plato's influence on the content of the dialogue. It might be argued that the passage of the slave corresponded more to Plato's philosophy rather than Socrates'.

the most sophisticated, and is the one I will discuss in detail. In this argument by Socrates, we find one of his most famous theses: No one does wrong knowingly (pp. 77b-79e).

In the following, I would like to present this argument in a more formal fashion. While I will move away slightly from the literal wording of the text, the general sense of the argument is preserved. Next, I will revisit the argument following closely the text by Plato, even though I will only consider those fragments that contain the essential points of the argument.

After Socrates' first two rebuttals to the corresponding definitions of virtue proposed by Meno, the latter tries a third definition: "So I say that virtue is to desire good things and have the power to acquire them" (p. 77b).²⁰ Let us examine the argument used by Socrates to refute this new attempt:

A. Formal Presentation of the *Reductio ad Absurdum* Argument as a Response to Meno's Third Definition

Issue:

Is it correct the definition suggested by Meno, that virtue is to desire good things and have the power to acquire them?

1. If Meno is right, then the conjunction of these two qualities, "to desire good things" and "to have the power to acquire them", should define adequately what is virtue.
2. The quality "to desire good things" does not meet with the following characteristic of a good definition: "A definition must distinguish between those things that fit the definition and those that does not".²¹ For instance, it should distinguish virtuous men from those who are not virtuous. However, Meno's definition does not distinguish, as every man desires the good. Thus, no one does wrong knowingly. With this definition, it would be impossible to distinguish between the man who is virtuous and the man who is not virtuous.²²

²⁰ In fact, Meno asserts that virtue is to "desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them". Socrates clarifies: "Do you mean that the man who desires beautiful things desires good things?" Meno agrees with this.

²¹ See Copi, *I and Cohen*, C., 1994, p. 192.

²² Premises 2 and 3 are discussed further in the following.

The quality “to have the power to acquire them” does not meet with the following characteristics of a good definition: “The defined object should not be contained in the definition” and “A definition should not define the whole by means of a part”. Because it does not suffice to have the power to acquire these things, but it is necessary to acquire them with justice; justice, however, is part of the definition. Furthermore, it is inadequate to identify virtue with the capacity to acquire good things, as there are good things that might not be possessed or cannot be acquired, and this lack can also be virtuous.²³

Thus, none of these two qualities define virtue adequately. Therefore, Meno’s definition is incorrect.

α. Argument to support premise 2:

- 2.1 Someone can either desire the good or desire the bad.
- 2.2 If the bad is desired, this might be desired either ignoring it is bad or knowing it is bad.
- 2.3 If there is no knowledge that the bad thing is bad, the thing that is consciously desired is actually the good (the useful). Therefore, the bad cannot be desired, only the good.
- 2.4 If someone desires the bad consciously and knowingly, he or she ought to know that:
 - The bad is harmful.
 - The harmful makes them miserable.
 - Those who are miserable are unhappy.

Therefore, no one desires to do wrong knowingly.

- 2.5 Thus, no one desires the bad, for either it is desired in ignorance and that which is actually desired is a good thing (2.3), or it is not desired knowingly (2.4).
- 2.6 Therefore, everyone desires the good (taking into account 2.1 and 2.5).

²³ Gerasimos Xenophon Santas notes the following example of circularity: “Meno defined virtue as the power to acquire goods. Socrates objects to this definition as being too wide, since goods may be acquired justly or unjustly, piously or unpiously”. (Xenophon Santas, 1979, p. 130). See also Copi, *I and Cohen*, C., 1994, p. 193.

- 2.7 Consequently, if everyone desires the good, to desire the good cannot be used in a definition, because such a definition would not distinguish those who are virtuous from those who are not. The non-virtuous would also desire the good (2).

β. Argument to support premise 3:

- 3.1 Examples are given of good things: health, riches, gold, silver, honors, to have offices in the city.
- 3.2 These and other goods may be acquired justly or unjustly.
- 3.3 If the goods are acquired with a part of the virtue, the definition commits the “swarm definition” mistake: it defines by means of the parts instead of proposing a general definition of virtue. Moreover, this had been refuted twice in the dialogue before.
- 3.4 Additionally, lack can also be a virtue. For instance, not to acquire riches through theft, bribery or any sort of injustice.
- 3.5 Therefore, it is not essential to virtue to have the power to acquire good things.

B. *Reductio ad absurdum in its literal form*

In order to get a better and more precise view of the reasoning sequence in the dialogue, I would like to rephrase Plato’s text by removing its rhetorical structure, but preserving its literal meaning.²⁴ I think that a parallel reading of this kind will help us observe more clearly all the sequences of assertions that are relevant for the argument.

As seen in the formal argument presented in the previous section, the *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning in the dialogue follows these steps: first, a new definition of virtue is proposed by Meno.

²⁴ In this manner, when Socrates asserts something by means of a question, and Meno assents to this assertion, we would preserve only the assertion. For example:

Socrates: *What do you mean by desiring? Is it to secure for oneself?*

Meno: *What else?* (p. 77c)

We would rephrase this passage thus: “To desire is to secure something for oneself”.

Second, the dialogue expands on the consequences of the first part of the definition, “to desire good things”, and concludes that it fails to distinguish the virtuous from the non-virtuous. Third, the dialogue addresses the second part of the definition, “to have the power to acquire them”, and comes to the conclusion that this cannot define virtue either. Finally, Socrates explains the inadequacy of Meno’s definition and asks him to offer a new one. I shall divide the presentation of the text in these four steps.

α. Definition of virtue posed by Meno:

- Virtue is to desire good things, and to have the power to acquire them (p. 77b).

β. *Reductio ad absurdum* argument on the claim that virtue is to desire good things:

- In that case, there would be some that desire bad things and others that desire good things (p. 77b).
- Some of the former believe that the bad things are good (useful). Others desire bad things knowingly, even though they believe they are bad (p. 77c).
- To desire is to want to secure something for oneself (p. 77d).
- *Reiteration*: there are some that consider bad things as useful, and there are some that know that bad things are harmful (p. 77d).
- Those who deem these sort of things as useful, do not know that bad things are bad (p. 77d).
- Therefore, it is evident that those who do not recognize bad things as bad, do not actually desire them, but desire things they consider to be good, but are in fact bad. Thus, those who do not know them as bad and believe them to be good, evidently desire them as if they were good things (p. 77e).
- It also follows from this that those who desire bad things, and yet consider them as harmful to those who secure them for themselves, must know that they would be harmed by these things (p. 77e).
- However, those who are harmed are miserable inasmuch as they are harmed (p. 78a).
- Those who are miserable, are unhappy (p. 78a).
- No one desires to be miserable or to be unhappy (p. 78a).

- Consequently, no one desires bad things, unless they desire to be miserable, for “what else is being miserable but to desire bad things and secure them?” (p. 78a)
- Therefore, it is common to everyone to desire (good things), so no one is better than another in this (p. 78b).

The *reductio ad absurdum* argument in this sequence also reveals itself in the contradiction that Meno is forced to admit. He initially accepted as true the claim that some desire the bad knowingly, but then he has to admit that no one desires bad things (p. 78b).

γ. *Reductio ad absurdum* argument on the claim that virtue is to have the power to acquire good things:

- From the things said before, it would be evident that if one is to be better than another, he would be so in relation to his power (p. 78b).
- It has been accepted that virtue is to have the power to acquire good things (p. 78c).
- Good things are, for example, health, wealth, gold, silver, honors, offices in the city, and all things of this kind (p. 78c).
- It is necessary to add that this acquiring should be done justly and piously, as it would not be virtue, but wickedness, if someone acquires these things unjustly (p. 78d).
- This acquisition, therefore, must be accompanied by justice, moderation, piety or some other part of virtue. Otherwise, it would not be virtue, even though it provides good things (p. 78d).
- The failure to secure gold and silver unjustly, either for oneself or another, would be virtue (p. 78e).
- Thus, the acquisition of good things would not be virtue any more than the failure to do so, but whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and whatever is done without this kind of qualities will be wickedness (p. 78e).
- But justice, moderation and the other qualities of this sort are a part of virtue (p. 79a).

In this sequence, the contradiction is more profound, because it is the same contradiction that Socrates had showed to Meno in the two previous arguments: A definition should be about the general,

“what virtue is as a whole”, but Meno “fragments it into parts” (p. 79b-c).

Socrates: Then you are playing with me, Meno.

Meno: How so, Socrates?

Socrates: Because I begged you just now not to break up or fragment virtue, and I gave examples of how you should answer. You paid no attention, but you tell me that virtue is to be able to secure things with justice, and justice, you say, is a part of virtue (p. 79a-b).

This is the core of Socrates' argument. It is on account of this that Socrates' final comments on Meno's definition underscore this criticism: “[...] you tell me that virtue is to be able to secure good things with justice, and justice, you say, is a part of virtue” (p. 79a-b). And further:

Socrates: It follows then from what you agree to, that to act in whatever you do with a part of virtue is virtue, for you say that justice is a part of virtue, as are all such qualities. Why do I say this? Because when I begged you to tell me about virtue as a whole, you are far from telling me what it is. Rather, you say that every action is virtue if it is performed with a part of virtue, as if you had said what virtue is as a whole, so I would already know that, even if you fragment it into parts. I think you must face the same question from the beginning, dear Meno, namely, what is virtue, if every action performed with a part of virtue is virtue? (p. 79b-c)

G. *Factual reductio ad absurdum argument. Socrates' response to Anytus*

The final part of the dialogue includes several *reductio ad absurdum* arguments and other ironic features. In this section, I will focus in the counterexamples that Socrates uses to refute Anytus. This would constitute, I would like to argue, a different form of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that is not conceptual, but factual.

After Anytus vehemently rejects sophists as educators, Socrates asks him to name an Athenian who could be a good teacher. Anytus answers:

Anytus: Why give him the name of one individual? Any Athenian gentleman he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man than the sophists would (p. 92e).

However, before Anytus can name any individual good educator, Socrates mentions four examples of good and noble Athenians who were unable to educate their sons adequately: Themistocles and his son, Cleophantus; Lysimachus and his son, Aristides; Pericles and his two sons, Paralus and Xanthippus; and Thucydides and his sons, Melesias and Stephanus (93a-94e). This is a factual issue: whether people who are considered good and exemplary have been capable of teaching the virtue they had to their children.

Here we can observe the *reductio ad absurdum* argument by means of counterexamples. Let us examine the first one:

Socrates: [...] Look at it this way, from what you yourself have said. Would you not say that Themistocles was a good man?

Anytus: Yes. Even the best of men.

Socrates: And therefore a good teacher of his own virtue if anyone was?

Anytus: I think so, if he wanted to be.

Socrates: But do you think he did not want some other people to be worthy men, and specially his own son? Or do you think he begrudged him this, and deliberately did not pass on to him his own virtue? Have you not heard that Themistocles taught his son Cleophantus to be a good horseman? He could remain standing upright on horseback and shoot javelins from that position and do many other remarkable things which his father had him taught and made skillful at, all of which required good teachers. Have you not heard this from your elders?²⁵

Anytus: I have.

Socrates: So one could not blame the poor natural talents of the son for his failure in virtue?

Anytus: Perhaps not.

²⁵ Bluck notes: “Cleophantus' ability to learn horsemanship and the like is taken to show that he certainly had the basic minimum of native endowment which, in the opinion of people like Anytus, was all that was required for the acquisition of virtue” (Bluck, 1964, p. 371).

Socrates: But have you ever heard anyone, young or old, say that Cleophantus, the son of Themistocles, was a good and wise man at the same pursuits as his father?

Anytus: Never.

Socrates: Are we to believe that he wanted to educate his son in those other things but not to do better than his neighbors in that skill which he himself possessed, if indeed virtue can be taught?

Anytus: Perhaps not, by Zeus.

Socrates: And yet he was, as you yourself agree, among the best teachers of virtue in the past (p. 93b-e).

In this example, the *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning is simple and can be schematized as follows:

1. If someone is an Athenian gentleman, then he is a good educator.
2. Themistocles was a good and noble Athenian.
3. Therefore, Themistocles was a good educator.
4. However, in reality Themistocles was not a good educator.
5. There is a contradiction between 3 and 4, as it cannot be true that "Themistocles was a good educator" and "Themistocles was not a good educator".
6. Consequently, it would be absurd to claim that if someone is a good and noble Athenian, then he is a good educator.

To expose with more clarity the contradiction in Anytus' assertion according to which "Any Athenian gentleman he may meet will make him a better man" (p. 92e), Socrates uses another *reductio ad absurdum* argument within the one indicated above. Socrates poses a new hypothetical disjunction: "Or do you think he begrudged him this, and deliberately did not pass on to him his own virtue?" (p. 93c-d).

To counter this hypothesis, Socrates refers to Themistocles' moral qualities and to his interest in teaching his son good horsemanship. Thus, neither Socrates nor Anytus can admit that this was a deliberate action by Themistocles.

4. The acknowledgement of "false knowledge". Conclusion

Socratic irony represents a new philosophical attitude. Irony reveals dialectically the errors and exposes the false knowledge by purifying the arguments by means of a *reductio ad absurdum* reasoning. To use a more contemporary expression, this is a philosophical therapy. Nonetheless, this philosophical exercise is not of an abstract sort. Irony involves a subjective relation between the interlocutors. It is the actual individuals that become aware of their ignorance, even though they were adamantly persuaded of their own knowledge. Thus, *Meno* has been considered many times as a pedagogical dialogue.

Irony performs an important role as part of a dialectic method. It should be noted, however, that in Socrates' particular case, irony was not a mere methodological element. Rather, it was a philosophical and, it might be argued, existential position: a response to an environment ruled by false knowledge, and a form of inoculation against this confusion.

Socrates' irony is essentially linked to his ignorance. Descartes formulated his philosophy by means of a methodic doubt, and refused to admit as true anything he presumed to know before this doubt. Descartes wanted to build a system of thought. This is the main difference between Socrates and many other philosophers. To the former, the negative point of departure of "non-knowledge" does not constitute a previous step to some positive knowledge: a formulation of concepts, the reminiscence of ideas, a system of thought, etcetera. Thus, irony was not a form of *preambula sapientiae*, even though it encouraged others to pursue this knowledge. It is not a sort of skepticism either, for true knowledge is considered as a real possibility, not with standing the ironist does not possess it.

In the interventions of the three interlocutors, we can observe references to this educational purpose (pp. 84a-c, 80b, 94e). The most obvious one appears in the scene of the slave:

Meno: That is true.

Socrates: So he is now in a better position with regard to the matter he does not know?

Meno: I agree with that too.

Socrates: Have we done him any harm by making him perplexed and numb as the torpedo fish does?

Meno: I do not think so.

Socrates: Indeed, we have probably achieved something relevant to finding out how matters stand, for now, as he does not know, he would be glad to find out, whereas before he thought he could easily make any fine speeches to large audiences about the square of double size and said that I must have a base twice as long.

Meno: So it seems.

Socrates: Do you think that before he would have tried to find out that which he thought he knew though he did not, before he fell into perplexity and realized he did not know and longed to know?

Meno: I do not think so, Socrates.

Socrates: Has he then benefitted from being numbed?

Meno: I think so (p. 84a-c).

Even though Socrates maintains the possibility of pursuing positive knowledge with his interlocutors, the fact is that this joint quest for knowledge does not occur, because Socrates usually leaves without answering the main question. This seems to confirm that the Socrates' ironical purpose is an end in itself.

In *Theaetetus*, Socrates revisits this same notion when he discusses his midwifery art, and adds two more benefits to ignorance: to be less tiresome, as the ignorant and aware person has detached him or herself from false knowledge, and to be less arrogant, because ignorance is nothing to brag about:

Socrates: And so, Theaetetus, if ever in the future you should attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think you know what you don't know. This is all my art can achieve (p. 209b-c). ☞

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