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# Elenchus, Recollection, and the Method of Hypothesis in the *Meno*

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## ABSTRACT

The *Meno* is often interpreted as an illustration of Plato's decision to replace elenchus with recollection and the method of hypothesis. My paper challenges this view and defends instead two theses: (1) that far from replacing elenchus, the method of hypothesis incorporates and uses elenctic arguments in order to test and build its own steps; and (2) that recollection is not a method of search on a par with elenchus and the method of hypothesis, but is rather primarily a theory that accounts for the metaphysical horizon within which the method of hypothesis, coupled with elenchus and perhaps other dialectical methods, can lead us from opinions to knowledge.

Keywords: Elenchus, Method of Hypothesis, Recollection

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The *Meno* is often taken to showcase Plato's decision to replace elenchus with recollection and the method of hypothesis. The purpose of the present paper is to challenge this reading and to advance, instead, a different understanding of the relations among elenchus, recollection, and the method of hypothesis in the *Meno*. In particular, I am going to defend two theses: (1) that far from replacing elenchus, the method of hypothesis incorporates and uses elenctic arguments in order to test and build its own steps; and (2) that recollection is not a method of search on a par with elenchus and the method of hypothesis, but is rather primarily a theory that accounts for the metaphysical horizon within which the method of hypothesis, coupled with elenchus and perhaps other dialectical methods, can lead us from opinions to knowledge.

In recent literature, Landry (2012) and Benson (2003, 2015) come closest to defending a similar view, as they both argue that elenchus is not replaced by the method of hypothesis, but rather supplemented by it. My own view differs in some respects from theirs, and where it is consistent with theirs, it takes their findings a step further. More specifically, Landry argues that the method of hypothesis is to be applied only once elenchus has finished cleansing the mind of inconsistent beliefs, and that the method of hypothesis proceeds alone and unaided by elenchus to seek knowledge. I argue that elenchus is used not only before the method of hypothesis, but is in fact also incorporated within the method of hypothesis. While Landry believes that the method of hypothesis cannot reach knowledge, I, on the contrary, argue that it can, as long as it is employed within the metaphysical horizon revealed by the theory of recollection. Benson's views are more akin to mine, especially since his recent book offers a detailed account of how elenchus can

be interwoven with the method of hypothesis (Benson 2015). While my present interpretation is consistent with Benson's, it takes the investigation further in two respects: 1) I provide an explanation for the failure of the method of hypothesis as applied in the *Meno*; and 2) I explain how elenchus and the method of hypothesis are related to recollection such that, together, the methods and the metaphysical horizon can account for full epistemic success.

The paper proceeds in four parts, elucidating, in turn, elenchus (I), recollection (II), the method of hypothesis (III), and, finally, the possibility of reaching knowledge through intertwining elenchus with the hypothetical method in the metaphysical horizon opened up by recollection (IV).

## I. ELENCHUS IN THE *MENO*

The first third of the dialogue consists of Meno's repeated attempts to define virtue and Socrates' rejections of each of these attempted definitions. Socrates rejects Meno's proposals through his typical elenctic arguments: a) Socrates' interlocutor proposes a thesis; b) in his attempt to test this thesis Socrates secures his interlocutor's agreement to further premises; c) Socrates then shows that the initial thesis leads to inconsistencies when combined with some other premises agreed upon.<sup>1</sup> If no inconsistency is revealed in the last step, the initial thesis has passed the first test. Elenchus is most often taken to mean 'refutation', but the word also has the broader meaning of 'test' or 'cross examination.' Not every elenctic argument has to end by revealing inconsistencies, for sometimes the argument is not carried far enough, and other times there simply is no inconsistency to reveal (see also Vlastos 1983, 39-40). The possibility that elenchus might be used

as a test, yet not end by revealing inconsistencies, means that elenchus might be implicitly at work more often than we realize. As I will argue in section III, we use elenchus implicitly as part of the method of hypothesis in testing, deriving consequences, or in putting forth a plausible claim as hypothesis. In cases in which it reveals an inconsistency, elenchus cannot by itself show which one of the premises must be rejected as false. Upon repeated applications, it can, at most, show which premise needs to be rejected as less plausible.<sup>2</sup>

Meno's first definition of virtue consists of a list of virtues corresponding to a variety of classes of people. It enumerates a plurality that is loose, random, and indefinite:

First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue is being able to manage the affairs of the city and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care that he may not experience anything like that. If you want the virtue of a woman, it is not difficult to say in detail that she must manage her household well, looking after its possessions and being obedient to her husband. And another is the virtue of a child, whether female or male, and another, again, that of an elderly man, whether free or, if you like, slave. And there are many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss in saying about virtue what it is (71e1-72a5).<sup>3</sup>

Socrates refutes Meno's account by repeating his demand for a unitary account of virtue. Just as, while there is a wide variety of bees there is just one essence that makes them all bees, so too, regarding virtue, even if there are many and diverse virtues, they all have one and the same form (*eidos*), through which they all