I. Introduction

Can one know that Dorothy’s ruby slippers are red, even if one does not know the definition of “red”? Common sense would say, yes, one can. Surely it would be absurd to demand a definition before one could make claims using a term. Can one know that reporting one’s father for letting a servant die is pious, if one does not know the definition of “piety,” i.e., if one does not know “what piety is”? Or can one know that aborting a fetus is a case of murdering a person, if one does not know “what a person is”? These cases seem more problematic. Of course, people do make knowledge claims using terms they cannot define; the question is, should they be doing so? In the early definition dialogues, Plato portrays Socrates as believing that they should not.

The so-called “Socratic Fallacy” was first named by Peter Geach in his 1966 commentary on the Euthyphro. My focus here is the first half of Geach’s fallacy, also known as the priority of definition principle (PD), which states that “if one fails to know what T is, then one fails to know anything about T” (Benson’s formulation, 1990, 19). That is, knowing the definition of T is a necessary condition for knowing anything about T. Most scholars deny that the Socratic

1. This principle is applied to ethical concepts, the ones which seem subjective and difficult to define; Plato may have no trouble defining terms such as “shape,” and “color.” In the Meno (76a-d) Socrates defines these two terms to show the sort of definiens he is seeking. But I am not entirely confident that PD is limited to only ethical terms. Socrates’ definitions of “color” and ‘shape’ in the Meno do not strike me as completely serious, and there are dialogues in which the definiendum is not an ethical term: the Protagoras asks what is a “sophist,” and the Gorgias asks what is “rhetoric.” But I will not pursue this doubt here.
Fallacy or PD can be found in Plato’s early dialogues, as for instance, Vlastos (1990), Santas, Beversluis, Woodruff, and Nehamas (1975). The consensus seems to be that PD is absurd and Socrates could not believe such an absurdity. Hugh Benson is the most vocal proponent of the view that PD is expressed in the definition dialogues, although he does find it problematic insofar as “it is difficult to understand how Socrates hopes to acquire knowledge of the nature of F-ness” while committed to PD (1990, 63). William Prior argues that what Geach calls the “fallacy” does in fact occur in the dialogues, but rather than really being a fallacy it is “a perfectly innocent consequence of Platonistic epistemology” (97). That is, for Plato, to have “knowledge” or episteme that something is T does in fact require having a correct definition of T.

Let me first note that I am assuming the traditional interpretation of Plato’s development. That is, in the early period dialogues, including the five definition dialogues I address below, Plato is recording and accepting his version of Socrates’ views and methodology. In the middle period dialogues, such as the Republic, Symposium, and Phaedo, Socrates becomes a literary device to display Plato’s own mature philosophy. And the Meno is transitional between these two periods, showing Plato’s emerging philosophy as he struggles to solve certain problems bequeathed by Socrates. I agree with Benson and Prior that the Socrates of the early definition dialogues does endorse PD, and I think Prior is right that it is a consequence of Plato’s epistemology, although I would add that it is also a consequence of Socrates’ epistemology, insofar as he has one. But I argue that Socrates’ adoption of PD leads to problematic consequences which the maturing Plato cannot accept and which he attempts to evade. Thus I argue for a developmental thesis.

2. See References.

3. Here I am not committing myself to any view about how historically accurate Plato’s portrayal of Socrates is in the early period dialogues. I merely believe that in these dialogues Plato is expressing the philosophy of his youth, which is roughly Socratic, as far as we can tell.

4. BENSON’S Socratic Wisdom explains his interpretation of Socrates’ epistemology, and I am very sympathetic to his view.

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More specifically, in the early dialogues Socrates makes many claims that together suggest that he assumes PD to be true. Socrates cannot successfully define any ethical term T, and the consequence of this failure combined with PD is that he cannot know anything about T. This consequence commits Socrates, and so Plato, to a serious form of skepticism at this point. In the Meno, where Plato’s own views begin to replace those of Socrates, Plato still assumes PD to be true, but Meno’s Paradox for the first time indicates explicit consciousness of the consequences of this principle: how can one even begin to search for something one does not know at all? Plato’s response to this question—the doctrine of recollection and then, in the middle period dialogues, the transcendence of the forms—is his way of avoiding the skepticism to which Socrates is committed.

The nature and depth of Socrates’ "skepticism" is, of course, controversial. While everyone admits that he disavows some sort of knowledge, it is usually denied that he is "really" a skeptic. I agree with Brickhouse and Smith ("Socratic Ignorance and Skepticism") that Socrates often avows knowledge (and not mere belief, true belief, etc.), that he considers this knowledge "trifling and insignificant" (24), and that he disavows what is better understood as "wisdom" than as "knowledge" simpliciter. But they conclude that Socrates' similarity to ancient and modern skeptics is only apparent, because "the knowledge he disclaims is not the knowledge skeptical doubts assail — it is a kind of knowledge even dogmatists have often doubted mere mortals can have" (ibid.). I believe this greatly understates the importance of the knowledge, or wisdom, that Socrates disclaims. His commitment to PD, coupled with his inability to ever successfully define an ethical term, results in his inability to know anything about any of these ethical terms. His skeptical doubts concern the ability to know anything about the qualities of virtue, bravery, piety, temperament, beauty, etc. His fellow citizens did not share his doubts — they were exceedingly confident that they knew all about these qualities, at least until Socrates got hold of them. And so the knowledge that

5. At least this is the result that should follow, if Socrates were completely consistent. But I do not claim that he is consistent, and in fact believe that he realized that he was not. This point will be addressed below.
Socrates disclaims as beyond mortal grasp is not the “kind of knowledge even dogmatists have often doubted mere mortals can have.” It is, rather, the kind of knowledge that most people (for instance, those making moral claims about abortion) believe they do possess. So while I admit that Socrates is not a full-blown skeptic in the sense that Arcesilaus, for instance, is, I insist that his form of skepticism is significant. My present purpose is not to argue in detail for a particular version of skepticism to which Socrates is committed. Rather, I argue that in the early dialogues Socrates is, like it or not, committed to an important form of skepticism which Plato, in the Meno, becomes conscious of and attempts to evade by his own philosophical innovations.

I shall first briefly survey the evidence for PD in five early dialogues. Then, I shall argue that the Meno is the precise point at which Plato recognizes the problematic consequences of PD and offers a multi-dimensional solution to this problem.

II. PD in the Early Dialogues

In this section I shall merely present a number of passages which suggest that Socrates does in fact assume PD. While this is the minority position, I shall not spend time addressing the scholarly literature opposing this interpretation, for two reasons. First, Benson has already done an incredibly thorough job of this in “The Priority of Definition and the Socratic Elenchus,” and anything I could say here would merely repeat his arguments. Second, my intention in this paper is not to argue that Socrates is committed to PD, but rather to start from the claim that he is so committed. The following passages serve to illustrate his commitment.

The first instance of PD is Republic I, 354bc. After an unsuccess-

ful search for the definition of justice, Socrates says: “The result of our discussion for me is that I know nothing; for, when I do not know what justice is, I shall hardly know whether it is a kind of a virtue or not, or whether the just man is unhappy or happy.” That is, if one does not know “what justice is,” then one cannot know whether it is a virtue or whether the just man is happy. Socrates even says here that the result of not knowing what justice is is that he “knows nothing” presumably nothing about justice. This is a specific instance of PD: if one does not know “what justice is,” then one cannot know anything about it.

A second instance of PD occurs in Laches 190bc. In the Laches, Socrates is inquiring how to make the sons of Lysimachus and Melesias virtuous, but, in order to achieve this, they must first know what virtue is. Socrates asks: “Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are wholly (to parapan) ignorant?” This rhetorical question clearly implies that one must know “what virtue is” before one can determine the best way to achieve it, which is another particular instance of PD.

A third instance is Charmides 176a. Failing to find an adequate definition of sophrosyne, temperance, Charmides says at the end: “But heavens, Socrates, I don’t know whether I possess it or whether I don’t. How can I know it, when, on your own admission, not even you and Critias are able to discover what on earth it is?” The point of this rhetorical question is that if one does not know what temperance is, one cannot even know whether one possesses it oneself.

A fourth occurrence of PD is at the conclusion of the Lysis, after they have failed to define what a friend is. At 212a Socrates says: “I’m so far from acquiring one that I don’t even know how one man

6. In “Was Socrates a Skeptic?” SULLIVAN and REEDY argue that he was not. They base this conclusion on their view that the “most interesting” form of skepticism to which Socrates might have been committed – “that no one knows anything infallibly” (28) – is one to which he is not committed. I feel no need to address their argument in detail, because the form of skepticism I attribute to Socrates is different.

7. I use the following translations: G.M.A. GRUBE’s Republic and Meno (the latter from his Plato: Five Dialogues); BENJAMIN JOWETT’s Laches and F.M. CORNFORD’s Theaetetus (from The Collected Dialogues of Plato, edited by Edith HAMILTON and Huntington CAIRNS); DONALD WATT’s Charmides and Lysis, and ROBIN WATERFIELD’s Hippas Major (from Early Socratic Dialogues, edited by TREVOR J. SAUNDERS).

8. The significance of to parapan will be discussed in section III.
becomes the friend of another.” While this is not quite an instance of PD, it shares the same spirit: one must know how friends are made before one can acquire a friend oneself. But the dialogue concludes with a clear instance of PD when Socrates says: “Lysis and Menexenus, we’ve now made utter fools of ourselves, an old man like me and you, since these people will go away and say that we think (oiometha) we’re friends of one another—for I consider myself one of your number—though we were not as yet able to find out precisely what a friend is” (223b). This remark implies that one must know what a friend is before one can even think that one is or has a friend. Socrates has made a fool of himself insofar as he does think he is and has a friend, but he is unable to define what a friend is.

A fifth, and very explicit, instance of PD occurs at the close of *Hippias Major*, after Socrates has failed to define to kalon, the fine. He says of his alter-ego, “the son of Sophroniscus,” i.e., Socrates himself: “He asks me if I am not ashamed of my effrontery in discussing fine occupations, when questioning shows how obviously ignorant I am even about what fineness itself is. ‘And yet,’ he continues, ‘how can you know whose speech or other action is finely formed, if you’re ignorant about fineness? Don’t you think you might as well be dead, in such a condition?’” (304de). The point here is quite obviously that without knowledge of “what fineness is,” one cannot know whether any speech, occupation, or action is or is not fine. That is, if one fails to know what fineness is, one cannot know whether anything anyone does is fine.

Summarizing the instances of PD in these five dialogues reveals the following. The interlocuters could not find the “what it is” of 1) justice, 2) virtue, 3) temperance, 4) a friend, and 5) fineness. Consequently, they could not know 1) whether justice is a virtue, whether the just man is happy, or anything else about justice, 2) the best way to attain virtue, 3) whether they themselves possessed temperance, 4) whether they are or have a friend, and 5) whether anything anyone does is fine.

Critics argue that Socrates and/or Plato are not committed to a general principle such as PD because there are only isolated instances of Socrates saying some particular thing cannot be known because of the lack of knowledge of the definition of some particular term. But expression of PD by means of particular instances is no evidence against the claim that Socrates or Plato holds the more general assumption. The whole point of calling PD an “assumption” is to indicate that it is largely implicit in the dialogues and only occasionally manifests itself in passages such as those I am now discussing. PD itself is, of course, a scholar’s explanatory device; Socrates does not run around saying “you can’t know that anything is T unless you know what T is.” And, as Benson so persuasively argues, the sum of the particular instances does seem to suggest a more general viewpoint. That general viewpoint is that one must know the “what it is” of a term in order to know anything about that term.

Socrates seems to recognize how problematic PD is in that he himself does at times make claims about an ethical term without having a definition for it. However, this is not evidence that Socrates does not hold PD, but rather manifests the difficulties inherent in Socrates’ manner of seeking definitions. He believes that all particular instances of T have something in common, some immanent quality, by virtue of which they all are T: this quality is “the T” or “T-ness.” His criteria for an adequate definition of T are so stringent that they prove impossible to satisfy. So, as long as Socrates holds such definitional knowledge to be a necessary condition for knowing that an ethical term applies to any particular case, he cannot know whether or not the term applies. Laches says that he likes to hear a man who is in tune with his words, who lives by his principles (*Laches* 188c-e), i.e., who is consistent. After several failed attempts to define bravery, Socrates tells Laches that they must not be “tuned,” because their words and actions do not harmonize: “If people judged us by our actions, they might well say that we had our share of bravery; but to judge from this conversation, I don’t think they would if they could hear us discussing it” (193e). This and similar passages (e.g., *Lysis* 223b, *Hippias Major* 304de) suggest that Socrates is cognizant of a conflict, and recognizes his own inconsistency. If he is aware of it, and Plato takes steps in the *Meno* specifically to resolve this conflict, why should we, his readers, be so eager to deny that there is a problem?

9. This is exactly Benson’s point, 1990, 22-44.
III. PD in the Meno

The Meno opens with Socrates ironically praising Meno for his wisdom. Socrates contrasts Meno’s teacher, Gorgias, who has a ready answer for any question, with the Athenians as a whole. If any Athenian were asked whether virtue were teachable, he would respond: “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 (to parapan) knowledge of what virtue itself is” (71a).  

Although this clear instantiation of PD is attributed to the Athenians at large, Socrates immediately claims the assumption for himself, and expands it into the completely universal principle I am calling PD: “I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete (to parapan) ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is (ho ti esti), how could I know what qualities it possesses (hypoion ti <esti>)? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all (to parapan) who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these?” (71b).

This explicit and universal formulation of PD—if one fails to know what something is, then one fails to know anything about its qualities—echoes the more limited instances of it in the earlier dialogues discussed above. What is strikingly new is the explicit and thrice-repeated qualification to parapan. This adverb occurs only a few times in the early Socratic dialogues, but nearly 150 times in Plato’s later works. Interestingly, in the Laches passage where PD occurs (190bc, discussed above), to parapan is used exactly as it is here in the Meno. Socrates there asks: “Then must we not first know the nature of virtue? For how can we advise anyone about the best mode of attaining something of whose nature we are wholly (to parapan) ignorant?” This is taken quite seriously in the Laches and, like all the other early definition dialogues, this one is aporetic. No other occurrence of to parapan in the early dialogues (or elsewhere) is used to qualify a knowledge verb as in the Meno.

I suggest that Plato repeats the assumption of PD in the early dialogues as an authentically Socratic view, but is by the Meno quite aware of its problematic consequences. So here the view is stated quite self-consciously, the gist of it being that a total ignorance of a thing’s “what it is” (ho ti esti) results in a total ignorance of that thing’s qualities (hypoion ti esti). But this suggests that some sort or degree of knowledge of (or acquaintance with, etc.) what a thing is may yield a corresponding degree of knowledge of that thing’s qualities. In other words, Plato’s set-up of this assumption at the very opening of the Meno is deliberate, and, while he still accepts PD as true, he is going to offer a way around it.

PD comes into play a second time in Meno’s Paradox at 80d. After several unsuccessful attempts to define virtue, Meno complains that although he has made many fine speeches about virtue, now he cannot even say what it is—Socrates has transferred his own state of being at a loss or in doubt (aporein) to Meno. Yet Socrates still wants to continue the search for “what virtue is.” Now Meno objects: “How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all (to parapan) what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all?” If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?” (80d). Note that to parapan recurs here for the fourth time. Socrates restates this paradox: “Do you realize what a debator’s argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for” (80d). This problem seems to be a direct consequence of PD. By PD, if Socrates does not know “what virtue is,” then he cannot know anything about virtue, and if he does not know anything about virtue, how can he even know that an instance of virtue he stumbles upon is in fact an instance of it?

10. Socrates is obviously being ironic here— if the Athenians really believed this, his mission from the Delphic oracle would have been unnecessary.
11. NEHAMAS (1992, 300-303) also notices the repetition of to parapan in the Meno, but he does not make of it what I do.

12. The phrase to parapan does not occur in this sentence; Grube’s translation is a bit misleading.
Socrates’ goal, as reported in the *Apology*, is to make men who think they are knowledgeable, recognize that they do not in fact know, thus making them eager to search for true knowledge. At this goal, Socrates is, at least sometimes, successful. But he never actually succeeds in finding the sort of definitions he seeks, and perhaps this is unimportant to him. We may never know how skeptical Socrates the man actually was, but the evidence from the early dialogues suggests that, for him, exposing ignorance is much more important than attaining positive knowledge. After recording so many aporetic dialogues, however, Plato seems to tire of Socrates’ repeated failures. I suggest that Meno’s criticism is really Plato’s realization that he will never be able to find the “what it is” of virtue, justice, temperance, etc., as long as he continues to follow Socrates. Here, in the *Meno*, “Socrates” escapes Meno’s Paradox and the consequences of PD by the doctrine of recollection, a Platonic innovation.

Socrates does not deny the truth of Meno’s criticism. Rather than saying Meno’s paradox is false, i.e., just denying it, Socrates offers recollection as a way around it. Socrates affirms as a true conditional that if we have no knowledge of a thing whatsoever, then we can know *nothing* about it, and hence cannot even begin to search for it. But he now, for the first time, denies the antecedent: in a way, we do have knowledge. The doctrine of recollection is his attempt to explain in what way we have it and how it can be extracted from the soul.

After explaining to Meno how learning is really recollection, Socrates wants to launch into a second attempt to “recollect” what virtue is. Meno, however, insists on inquiring whether virtue is teachable, which is after all his original question. Socrates then seems to affirm PD again when he tells Meno that they should not investigate whether virtue is teachable before investigating what virtue is. But he gives in to Meno, saying: “So we must, it appears, inquire into the qualities of something the nature of which we do not yet know” (86e). Socrates agrees to do what he really should not do, if he can begin the inquiry with a hypothesis. This hypothetical method, which Socrates attributes to the geometers, is new in the dialogues, and in conjunction with other evidence in the *Meno*, it indicates a radical shift to a mathematical paradigm of investigation. This new method is presented as a direct solution to the problem of seeking that of which one is totally ignorant. After explaining a geometrical example of the hypothetical method, Socrates says: “So let us speak about virtue also, since we do not know either what it is or what qualities it possesses and let us investigate whether it is teachable or not by means of a hypothesis” (87b). By this method, instead of asking directly whether virtue is teachable (or now, recollectable), they will ask whether virtue is a kind of knowledge: if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught; if not, then it cannot, since only knowledge can be taught (87b-c).

As it turns out, Socrates concludes that virtue is not knowledge nor is it teachable. The *Meno* concludes with the doctrine that virtue is neither taught, nor a natural endowment, but is, rather, a gift from the gods. Not only poets and prophets, but also statesmen are divinely inspired when they utter true opinions but lack *nous* (99b-100b). Socrates mentions no other source of our true opinions. At 85c, the slave boy is said to have true opinions “in him;” 85e-86a seem to say that since these opinions were not acquired in his present life the boy “had them and had learned them” at a prior time “when he was not a human being.” All this suggests that Socrates thinks of true opinions in general as divinely bestowed, though divine dispensation may consist of whatever happens to souls between incarnations. The turning of opinion into knowledge, however, is a human activity, achieved by the dialectical process exemplified in Socrates’ lesson to the slave boy. This is the process of “tying down” true opinions “by giving an account of the reason why,” which, Socrates says, is recollection (98a).  

13. See VLASTOS’ “Elenchus and Mathematics” for a persuasive argument for this claim.

14. I shall happily sidestep all the controversies surrounding the details of the doctrine of recollection and the hypothetical method. My point is merely that in the *Meno* Plato offers these two innovations as solutions to the problem of Meno’s paradox.
IV. Conclusion

In the _Meno_, we find Socrates espousing many doctrines unheard of in earlier dialogues. The doctrine of recollection, the argued belief in the immortality of the soul, the hypothetical method, the mathematical paradigm – all these themes recur in middle period dialogues. These innovations coincide with Plato’s abandoning: of Socratic skepticism and his embracing of his own peculiar dogmatism. And yet Plato does not abandon PD: this principle remains central to his mature epistemology. In the _Republic_ (534b-c), Socrates claims that one who cannot define (diorsasthai) the form of the good does not really know the good itself, or any particular good; and now only the dialectician, with his many years of mathematical training, can do so. The knowledge of the “what it is” of ethical concepts, which Socrates sought but never captured, is now difficult – but not impossible – to attain, and can only be attained by the true Platonic philosopher. Such a man is as close to the gods as a mortal can be, having transcended the merely human wisdom (i.e., awareness of one’s ignorance) which made Socrates superior to all others.

In the _Theatetus_, Socrates asks “doesn’t it strike you as shameless to explain what knowing is like, when we don’t know what knowledge is?” (196d). This rhetorical question is on a par with the specific instances of PD found in the early dialogues, and the _Theatetus_ is likewise an aporetic dialogue seeking the “what it is” of an important concept – this time the concept of “knowledge.” I believe that this dialogue, along with the _Parmenides_, represents an older Plato who is questioning his earlier epistemological and ontological dogmatism, and reconsidering (not to say reverting to) his skeptical Socratic roots. There is no room here to argue for this larger claim, but I leave it as a suggestion that Socrates and Plato were throughout their lives committed to PD, and both continually struggled with the consequences of this principle. 15

15. BENSON makes such a suggestion concerning Plato and also Aristotle in _Socratic Wisdom_, ch. 10: “The epistemological work of … Plato and Aristotle, can plausibly be understood as an attempt to avoid the absurd or dubious consequences without abandoning Socrates’ model of knowledge” (222).

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The _Meno_ records a moment of intellectual turmoil in Plato’s thought, when he is pulling away from the Socratic views he has been recording and is struggling to find his own way. In this dialogue, Plato affirms the priority of definition principle as a true conditional (i.e., if one has no knowledge whatsoever of “what a thing is,” then one can know nothing about that thing’s qualities), but he now denies the antecedent. _Meno_’s Paradox illustrates the skeptical consequences of PD, and Plato’s new views on recollection, the hypothetical method, and soon, the transcendence of forms, offer an escape from Socratic _aporia_.

References

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