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Owning Virtue:
The *Meno* on Virtue, Knowledge, and True Opinion

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Abstract

At the end of the *Meno*, Socrates suggests that genuine virtue is knowledge. This is surprising because he has recently concluded that virtue is (mere) true opinion. I show that Socrates' new position is motivated by two commitments. First, that being virtuous requires being responsible for the correctness of one's actions. Second, that only a knower has this kind of ownership of action. An implication of my argument is that, despite his emphasis on virtuous *action* in the *Meno,* Socrates endorses an *agent*-centred ethics. He thinks the epistemic status of the agent is essential to the assessment of her goodness.

Keywords

Plato, virtue, knowledge, true belief, true opinion

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1 Introduction

There is a major plot twist at the end of Plato's *Meno.* Socrates has just concluded that virtue is true opinion (ἀληθὴς δόξα) and not knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, 99a1–b11).[1] This enables him to finally answer the overarching question of the dialogue. If virtue is true opinion, then it must be acquired through divine lot and not by nature or teaching. However, Socrates immediately qualifies his conclusion. He says the conclusion holds,

> *unless* one of the statesmen is also capable of making another person a statesman. If there were such a person, he could almost be said to be among the living as Homer says Teiresias is among the dead. For Homer says that, of those in Hades, Teiresias "alone is

[1] In the *Meno* Socrates sometimes uses the phrase "true opinion" (ἀληθὴς δόξα) and sometimes "correct opinion" (ὀρθὴ δόξα). The two phrases are used interchangeably. Similarly, Socrates uses a range of knowledge words throughout the dialogue (including φρόνησις, ἐπιστήμη, and σοφία). In the context of the *Meno,* nothing turns on the semantic differences between the words.

Here and throughout I shall translate δόξα as "opinion" in order to better emphasize that when Socrates considers true δόξα as a candidate for virtue, he is investigating the possibility that virtue might be a cognitive state that is different from (and incompatible with) that of knowledge. This is a point that is obscured if one translates δόξα as "belief." For if one thinks (as some commentators do) that Socrates takes knowledge to be a form of true belief, then there will be a sense in which a virtue that is knowledge will also be true belief. But this is clearly not what Socrates has in mind when he considers true δόξα as an *alternative* candidate for virtue. For the purposes of this paper, I shall remain neutral on the question of whether knowledge is a form of δόξα (see also n.34 below), but see Moss and Schwab 2019, 4–11 (esp. 9) for a compelling argument in support of the translation of δόξα as "opinion" and against the view that knowledge is a form of δόξα.

> fully conscious, but the others dart about as shades." The same would be true here on earth for a person of this sort. He would be, in respect of virtue, like the genuine article next to shades. (100a1–7, emphasis mine)[2]

This is not a benign qualification. Statesmen have been the main examples of virtuous people in the dialogue, and a statesman (or virtuous person) who could make another like himself would have to have knowledge, since it was earlier agreed (99b5–9) that only a person with knowledge could pass his virtue to another. Moreover, Socrates' comparison between the knowledgeable statesman and Teiresias implies that only a virtue that is knowledge is genuine; a virtue that consists in true opinion is, at best, merely a pale imitation of the real thing. Thus, in the final moments of the dialogue, Socrates upends the conclusion he and Meno have been at such pains to reach.[3]

It is no secret that Socrates is enticed by the thesis that virtue is knowledge.[4] However, Socrates' last-minute reversal in the *Meno* is surprising, both because it is immediately preceded by an argument for the claim that virtue is actually true opinion and because the argument Socrates

[2] εἰ μή τις εἴη τοιοῦτος τῶν πολιτικῶν ἀνδρῶν οἷος καὶ ἄλλον ποιῆσαι πολιτικόν. εἰ δὲ εἴη, σχεδὸν ἄν τι οὗτος λέγοιτο τοιοῦτος ἐν τοῖς ζῶσιν οἷον ἔφη Ὅμηρος ἐν τοῖς τεθνεῶσιν τὸν Τειρεσίαν εἶναι, λέγων περὶ αὐτοῦ, ὅτι "οἷος πέπνυται" τῶν ἐν Ἅιδου, "τοὶ δὲ σκιαὶ ἀίσσουσι." ταὐτὸν ἂν καὶ ἐνθάδε ὁ τοιοῦτος ὥσπερ παρὰ σκιὰς ἀληθὲς ἂν πρᾶγμα εἴη πρὸς ἀρετήν. Translations are my own, based on the Burnet OCT 1903 text.

[3] For a similar assessment of the dialogue's conclusion, see Perin 2012, 27–28 and Scott 1995, 44–45.

[4] See, e.g., *Charmides* 164d, *Laches* 194d, and *Protagoras* 329d. That Socrates is interested in (and perhaps committed to) the thesis is a commonplace in overviews of the philosophy of Socrates. See, e.g., Grube 1964, 216; Guthrie 1960, 104–105; Rowe 2010, 206–207; Taylor 1971, 28; and Woodruff 2018, sec. 8.

deploys for that conclusion undermines one familiar argument for why virtue is knowledge. In other dialogues, Socrates considers the possibility that knowledge is uniquely eligible to be virtue because of its special relationship to correct action. He frequently observes that knowledge reliably (and perhaps infallibly) yields correct action. Knowledge is able to do this, at least in part, because it ensures that any decisions the knower makes are themselves correct and entrenched in such a way that the agent's commitment to acting on them cannot be undermined.[5] This kind of argument for why virtue is knowledge is undermined by the arguments of the *Meno*. Although Socrates acknowledges that there is a link between knowledge and correct decision and action that makes it a candidate for virtue, he also argues that true opinion is just as capable of securing correct decision and action as knowledge is (96e–97c and 98c). As a result, appealing to knowledge's relation to the practical sphere provides no special reason to identify virtue with knowledge rather than true opinion.[6]

The primary aim of this paper is to show that Socrates' unexpected reversal is well-motivated, given assumptions and claims that he makes over the course of his discussion with Meno and Anytus. My argument hinges on two central claims. First, I will show that, for Socrates in the *Meno*, a person does not count as genuinely virtuous unless that person is the *source* of the correctness of her actions. More precisely, the fact that her actions are correct must ultimately be due to the person's exercise of her own capacities. Second, I will argue that, given Socrates'

[5] The idea that knowledge reliably yields correct decision and action is prominent in a number of dialogues, including *Euthyphro* 6e and 15d, *Euthydemus* 280a–281c, and *Laches* 184d–185b. *Protagoras* 357a suggests that knowledge *always* results in correct decisions. For the purported invulnerability of knowledge to any kind of undermining, see *Protagoras* 356c–357e.

[6] Cf. Irwin 1977, 143 (cf. 92) for a similar observation about the implications of the *Meno's* arguments.

account of the nature of knowledge and true opinion in the *Meno*, only a person with knowledge can meet this requirement. When a person acts on the basis of true opinion, the correctness of her actions is always ultimately due to something beyond herself (e.g., the influence of fortune).

According to one interpretation of Socratic ethics, Socrates (at least in Plato's early dialogues) holds that virtue has merely instrumental value.[7] This account locates non-instrumental value in certain states of affairs that are distinct from virtue. One implication of this view is that the virtuous person's role in securing the relevant states of affairs is not in itself a source of value.[8] It does not matter whether the person herself brings about those states of affairs or whether they are brought about for her through luck or the agency of someone else; all that matters is that the relevant states of affairs obtain. Socrates' focus in the *Meno* on the results of virtue, and in particular on the correct actions that virtue guides, lends itself to the instrumentalist interpretation. As a result, one might conclude that, for Socrates, the ultimate source of value lies, not in the possession of virtue (e.g. knowledge or true opinion), but in the performance of the correct actions that virtue is supposed to guide.[9] However, the argument of this paper shows that we should reject this conclusion. If I am right, Socrates is committed to the view that a person's role in bringing about good states of affairs is a source of value. It is important not just that good states of affairs be brought about—i.e. that correct actions be performed—but that the virtuous agent herself be responsible for the fact that those states of affairs obtain. That is why it is crucial that we be able

[7] Irwin 1995, 65–77 makes the case for this interpretation.

[8] See McCabe 2015b, 258–259 for a recent discussion of this implication.

[9] Alternatively, one might conclude that the ultimate source of value lies in the material goods that are themselves the products of correct action. In either case, the de-centralization of the person is clear.

to locate the source of the correctness of a person's actions in the person herself. Moreover, Socrates recognizes that only a virtue that is knowledge can ensure that the person is a locus of responsibility. This suggests that Socrates' interest in the thesis that virtue is knowledge may be part of a broader project that seeks to secure for the person a place at the center of his ethical theory.

In section 2, I present two requirements for virtue that Socrates commits himself to in the *Meno*: the virtuous person must act correctly (when she acts), and she must be the ultimate source of the correctness of her actions. In section 3, I turn to true opinion and knowledge, arguing that true opinion does not meet the second condition and that knowledge does. In section 4, I discuss evaluate my interpretation of the *Meno* relative to two alternatives.[10] I return to the broader implications of my argument in section 5.

2 Virtue and correct action

Over the course of the *Meno*, Socrates makes two important assumptions about virtue.[11] The first is that when a virtuous person acts she does so *correctly*. This assumption emerges especially clearly in an exchange between Socrates and Meno toward the end of the dialogue:

[10] One alternative has been proposed to me by Alex Long in correspondence; the other is defended in Perin 2012, 32.

[11] I am not claiming that Socrates takes himself to *know* that these assumptions are true. The question of what, if anything, Socrates knows is a fraught one (see Matthews 2008, 114–123 for a good overview of some prominent positions).

> –Soc. Weren't we right in agreeing that it was necessary for good men to be beneficial and that it couldn't be any other way? –Men. Yes. –Soc. And didn't we also rightly agree that they are beneficial if they guide our affairs correctly? –Men. Yes. (96e7–97a5)[12]

Socrates' backreference is to the earlier discussion of the thesis that virtue is knowledge. In that discussion, the interlocutors agree to assume that virtue is good (ἀγαθόν, 87d2–3) and therefore beneficial (ὠφέλιμον, 87e3), and they also agree that virtue is the source of the goodness and beneficialness of persons (87e1–2). Socrates then claims that correctness is a condition of beneficialness: "The soul makes things beneficial when it uses and guides [them] correctly, but it makes them harmful when it does not use and guide correctly [ἡ ψυχὴ ὀρθῶς μὲν χρωμένη καὶ ἡγουμένη ὠφέλιμα αὐτὰ ποιεῖ, μὴ ὀρθῶς δὲ βλαβερά]" (88e1–2). At this point, Socrates' focus is on the beneficialness of *things* (e.g. wealth). However, the implication for *persons* is clear. If a person is to count as being beneficial (and hence as good), the things she does—her actions—must be done correctly. If she acts incorrectly, then she is harmful (i.e. not beneficial), and thus she no longer qualifies as good.[13]

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[12] —Σωκράτης. ὦδε· ὅτι μὲν τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς ἄνδρας δεῖ ὠφελίμους εἶναι, ὀρθῶς ὡμολογήκαμεν τοῦτό γε ὅτι οὐκ ἂν ἄλλως ἔχοι· ἦ γάρ; —Μένων. ναί. —Σωκράτης. καὶ ὅτι γε ὠφέλιμοι ἔσονται, ἂν ὀρθῶς ἡμῖν ἡγῶνται τῶν πραγμάτων, καὶ τοῦτό που καλῶς ὡμολογοῦμεν; —Μένων. ναί.

[13] It is unclear whether Socrates is making the strong claim that the virtuous person is *only* beneficial when she acts (and acts correctly) or whether he is making the weaker claim that *if* a virtuous person acts correctly, she is beneficial. The latter leaves open the possibility that a virtuous person who doesn't act all but instead spends her life, e.g., contemplating the Form of the Good is nonetheless good and beneficial; the former precludes this possibility. The *Meno* emphasizes the relation between virtue and action, so perhaps Socrates is genuinely attracted to the idea that

The second—and for my purposes more important—assumption that Socrates makes has to do with the *source* of the correctness of the virtuous person's actions. He assumes that the virtuous person herself is the source of that correctness, in the sense that it is something *in her* that makes her actions correct; the correctness of her actions cannot be traced to the intervention of any person or thing beyond the person herself. This idea is already implicit in the passages just discussed. As we have seen, Socrates holds that virtue is the source of the goodness and beneficialness of persons. When Socrates eventually identifies wisdom as a candidate for virtue, he takes care to locate it in the soul and also to establish a link between the soul's wisdom and the correctness of the actions the soul undertakes. He claims that "the wise soul guides correctly, while the unwise soul guides erroneously [ὀρθῶς δέ γε ἡ ἔμφρων ἡγεῖται, ἡμαρτημένως δ' ἡ ἄφρων]" (88e3–4), and he concludes from this that the goodness of everything that belongs to a person (including her actions and possessions) ultimately depends on the soul's wisdom: "for man, the things that belong to the soul itself depend on wisdom, and everything else depends on the soul, if they're going to be good [τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα πάντα εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν ἀνηρτῆσθαι, τὰ δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτῆς εἰς φρόνησιν, εἰ μέλλει ἀγαθὰ εἶναι]" (88e5–89a1).

Socrates also relies on this assumption about the relation between the person and her correct actions towards the end of the dialogue. At this point, Socrates and Meno are investigating the source of the virtuous actions of good people, focusing on the correct guidance given by rulers and statesmen. Socrates claims that only two things can be responsible for correct guidance:

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only the person who acts can be beneficial. However, the text does not require this strong reading, and the difference between these two interpretations of Socrates' claim does not matter for the purposes of my argument. In either case, Socrates is assuming that the actions of the virtuous person are always correct.

> These two things alone, knowledge and true opinion, guide correctly, and when a man has them he guides correctly—for what happens correctly through fortune does not happen by human guidance, but where a man is a guide to what is correct, there are these two things, true opinion and knowledge. (99a1–5)[14]

Along the way to identifying the source of the statesmen's correct guidance, Socrates takes the time to explicitly rule out fortune (τύχη) as a candidate.[15] The reason he gives for his rejection of fortune is that fortune's intervention precludes specifically *human* (ἀνθρωπίνη) guidance. Socrates' focus is on who, or what, should be identified as the real source of something's being done well. His claim is that in cases where fortune intervenes for the better, it would be a mistake to identify the human as the source of the good thing that happens. This is an intuitive point. Imagine, for a moment, a caravan on its way to Larissa. The party comes to a crossroad, and its leader must decide whether the group should go left or right. To make his decision, the leader consults the heavens for a sign, and one obligingly appears to indicate the left-hand fork.

[14] ὀρθῶς δέ γε ἡγεῖσθαι δύο ὄντα ταῦτα μόνα, δόξαν τε ἀληθῆ καὶ ἐπιστήμην, ἃ ἔχων ἄνθρωπος ὀρθῶς ἡγεῖται— τὰ γὰρ ἀπὸ τύχης τινὸς ὀρθῶς γιγνόμενα οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνῃ ἡγεμονίᾳ γίγνεται—ὧν δὲ ἄνθρωπος ἡγεμών ἐστιν ἐπὶ τὸ ὀρθόν, δύο ταῦτα, δόξα ἀληθὴς καὶ ἐπιστήμη.

[15] In Greek, τύχη can refer to chance (i.e. the random), but can also refer to divine providence (see McPherran 2005, 56–57 (esp. nn. 24 and 27) for helpful discussion of the issue and primary sources). Socrates does not disambiguate the sense of the word in this passage, but divine intervention into human affairs is thematized throughout the *Meno*, while there is no discussion of randomness. Thus, it seems likely that Socrates has divine providence in mind here. I will say more about this in the following section. However, for the time being, the precise meaning of the word does not matter. The general point Socrates is trying to make will be the same whether τύχη refers to chance or divine providence.

Accordingly, the leader gives the order that the party should go left, and, as it turns out, the left-hand road does indeed lead to Larissa. In this case, correct guidance was given (it was even voiced by the leader of the caravan), but the leader of the caravan is not responsible for the correctness of the guidance. He made the right decision because he was privy to a heavenly sign.[16] Thus, it would be misleading to say that the *leader* gave correct guidance.[17] This in turn sheds light on how Socrates is conceptualizing virtue. The fact that Socrates denies that fortune is relevant to the cases they are considering (i.e. the cases of virtuous people) suggests that in these cases the person herself is assumed to be the source of her good actions. That is to say, the fact that she "gets it right" is due to the virtuous person herself. If it turned out that a statesman's good decisions and recommendations were actually due to fortune, then they would no longer count as instantiations of *his* beneficialness and goodness at all.

[16] One might reasonably think that the proximate cause of the caravan leader's decision is a *true opinion* caused by his interpretation of the heavenly sign. In that case, it is extremely puzzling why Socrates aligns true opinion with *knowledge* (and not with *fortune*) at 99a1–5. At the beginning of Section 3, I explain why Socrates places true opinion on the side of knowledge in this argument. However, I shall also go on to argue that Socrates' considered view is that true opinion actually belongs on the side of fortune.

[17] The identification of the human being and fortune as competing sources of actions and outcomes would have been familiar to Socrates' audience. In the ancient Greek world, the workings of fortune and the capacities of human beings are frequently pitted against one another. For example, in Euripides' *Alcestis*, Heracles advises a servant that the results of fortune are unclear (τὸ τῆς τύχης γὰρ ἀφανὲς οἶ προβήσεται, 785) and recommends, "[c]ount this day's life as yours, but count the rest as belonging to fortune" (τὸν καθ᾽ ἡμέραν / βίον λογίζου σόν, τὰ δ᾽ ἄλλα τῆς τύχης, 788–89). Underlying the advice is the idea that where fortune is in control, humans are not (and cannot be). It would be foolish to try to assert authority over what does not belong to one. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112a30, where human agency is distinguished from the workings of nature, necessity, and fortune (τύχη).

The same assumption emerges, though less directly, when Socrates introduces Anytus as a candidate co-investigator of virtue. Socrates says that one of Anytus's qualifications for this role is the fact he "has a wealthy and wise [πλουσίου τε καὶ σοφοῦ] father, Anthemion, who did not get his wealth automatically or as a gift [ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου οὐδὲ δόντος τινός]. . .but who acquired it through his own wisdom and effort [ἀλλὰ τῇ αὑτοῦ σοφίᾳ κτησάμενος καὶ ἐπιμελείᾳ]" (90a1–5). The fact that Anthemion is wise suggests that he is virtuous, according to the conclusion reached at 89a1. The fact that Anthemion is wealthy shows that he has also been successful in a conventional way that both Meno and Anytus would acknowledge. But Socrates does not leave it at that. He also shows that Anthemion is the source of his material success. Anthemion's wealth did not just appear. He used his wisdom to make sound financial decisions that ultimately led to his becoming rich. It is unlikely that Socrates actually means to attribute genuine virtue to Anthemion.[18] However, even if the description of Anthemion is not supposed to be completely accurate, it nevertheless presupposes that the virtuous person is responsible for the good outcomes she attains and (*a fortiori*) for the correct actions that lead to those outcomes.

Together Socrates' two assumptions suggest two conditions that a person must meet in order to count as being virtuous. First, if and when the person acts, she must act correctly. Second, the person must be the source of the correctness of her actions. I will call this second condition "the source requirement," and it is our key to understanding why Socrates ultimately concludes that genuine virtue is knowledge rather than true opinion.

[18] Cf. Bluck 1961, ad 90a2–3.

3 True opinion, knowledge, and the source requirement

The central claims of this section are that (a) a person whose actions are based on true opinion cannot meet the source requirement, while (b) a person whose actions are based on knowledge does meet that requirement. It will be relatively easy to show that the second claim is true, and I will turn to a discussion of knowledge toward the end of this section. However, the first claim requires more defence, so I will devote the bulk of this section to my argument for it.

At first glance, the claim that true opinion fails the source requirement might strike the reader as simply confused, given the argument of the previous section. At the end of section 2, I discussed a passage in which Socrates contrasts human guidance with the guidance of fortune, and I argued that in drawing this contrast Socrates is distinguishing between cases in which humans are the source of their correct actions and cases in which something beyond the human is ultimately responsible for those correct actions. However, in the same passage, Socrates explicitly identifies both knowledge *and* true opinion as sources of human guidance. This suggests that a person who acts on the basis of true opinion is the source of the correctness of her actions after all.

A closer look at the context of this passage shows that Socrates is not committed to this view. The passage contrasting human guidance with the guidance of fortune is part of Socrates' broader argument for the conclusion that virtue is true opinion.[19] Allying true opinion with knowledge (and against fortune) accomplishes two important things for Socrates, relative to the broader argument. First, it ensures that true opinion is included on the initial exhaustive list of candidates for virtue.

[19] The overall argument runs from 96e1, when Socrates remarks that knowledge is not the only thing whose guidance enables humans to act correctly, to 99b11, when Socrates finally eliminates knowledge as a contender for virtue, leaving true opinion as the only remaining candidate.

This is what enables Socrates to use an argument from elimination to show that only true opinion is the source of virtuous action. Second, if I am right that Socrates holds the source requirement for virtue, then part of what he needs to show is precisely that a person whose virtue is true opinion meets the requirement. Since (as we have seen) actions based on fortune fail the source requirement, it will be important that true opinion be distinguished from fortune if virtue is indeed true opinion. Thus, we should not be surprised that in the context of this argument Socrates identifies true opinion as a source of correct (and distinctively human) action.

However, although the alignment of true opinion with knowledge has a clear role to play in Socrates' argument for virtue as true opinion, it does not follow that this is Socrates' final take on the matter. The fact that Socrates changes his mind about the nature of virtue in the final moments of the dialogue suggests that we should be wary about accepting his argument for virtue as true opinion wholesale. If genuine virtue is knowledge after all, then there must be something wrong with the argument for virtue as true opinion. The challenge for Plato's reader is to find *where* the argument has gone wrong. One of the advantages of the view I develop in this section is that it yields a diagnosis of the problem with the final main argument of the *Meno*. Socrates' mistake is precisely that he includes true opinion as a source of distinctively human action.

The first piece of evidence for my claim that the person with true opinion fails the source requirement comes from a passage that immediately follows the one in which Socrates contrasts fortune and human guidance. Socrates has concluded that the goodness and beneficialness of statesmen is not a result of knowledge, on the grounds that statesmen did not acquire their ability to guide correctly through learning (99a7–b9). This leaves only one option:

–Soc. Thus, if it is not by means of knowledge [that they guide the citizens], the only other option is that they do so by means of good opinion.[20] Statesmen set their cities straight using this, and when it comes to being wise they're no different than soothsayers and prophets. For the latter also say many true things when they are inspired, but they don't know what they say. –Men. That's likely so. –Soc. Well, Meno, is it appropriate to call such men divine, who, although they lack comprehension, succeed in doing and saying many great things? –Men. Absolutely. –Soc. So it would be correct to call divine all those to whom we just now referred—soothsayers, prophets, and all poets—and it would be especially appropriate to say that statesmen are divine and inspired, since they are inspired and possessed by god whenever they succeed in saying many great things, despite not knowing what they say. –Men. Absolutely. (99b11–d6)[21]

[20] Socrates' choice of the word εὐδοξία here is odd. Roslyn Weiss 2001, 164–167 argues that the word here means "good reputation," so that Socrates' conclusion is actually that virtue is good reputation. It is true that εὐδοξία can refer to a good reputation, but it would be extremely odd if that is how Socrates uses the word in this passage, given that the overall focus of the discussion has been on true opinion; cf. Bluck 1961, ad 99b9. I take it that the word is being used as a synonym for true opinion, but in order to convey the peculiarity of the expression, I translate it more literally as "good opinion." I discuss why Socrates might choose such a peculiar word later in this section.

[21] —Σωκράτης. οὐκοῦν εἰ μὴ ἐπιστήμῃ, εὐδοξίᾳ δὴ τὸ λοιπὸν γίγνεται· ᾗ οἱ πολιτικοὶ ἄνδρες χρώμενοι τὰς πόλεις ὀρθοῦσιν, οὐδὲν διαφερόντως ἔχοντες πρὸς τὸ φρονεῖν ἢ οἱ χρησμῳδοί τε καὶ οἱ θεομάντεις· καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι ἐνθουσιῶντες λέγουσιν μὲν ἀληθῆ καὶ πολλά, ἴσασι δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσιν. —Μένων. κινδυνεύει οὕτως ἔχειν. —Σωκράτης. οὐκοῦν, ὦ Μένων, ἄξιον τούτους θείους καλεῖν τοὺς ἄνδρας, οἵτινες νοῦν μὴ ἔχοντες πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα κατορθοῦσιν ὧν πράττουσι καὶ λέγουσι; —Μένων. πάνυ γε. —Σωκράτης. ὀρθῶς ἄρ᾽ ἂν καλοῖμεν θείους τε οὓς νυνδὴ ἐλέγομεν χρησμῳδοὺς καὶ μάντεις καὶ τοὺς ποιητικοὺς ἅπαντας· καὶ τοὺς πολιτικοὺς οὐχ ἥκιστα τούτων φαῖμεν ἂν

In the course of establishing true opinion as the source of the virtuous action of statesmen, Socrates draws a connection between statesmen and the divine. A statesman succeeds in speaking true things and doing what is right because he has true opinions, but he only has true opinions because he is inspired by god. Socrates reiterates the point a few lines later, claiming that virtue (understood as true opinion) "comes to those who have it by divine lot [θείᾳ μοίρᾳ] and without comprehension [ἄνευ νοῦ]" (99e6–100a1). The example makes it clear that the fact that the statesman has a grasp of the truth is not due to his exercise of his own cognitive capacity for opinion, but rather to the intervention of something (or someone) external to that capacity. This already suggests that the statesman fails the source requirement, but it is important to specify what, precisely, occasions this failure.

One possibility is that the statesman fails the source requirement because he would never have *acquired* his true opinions, and so would never have acted correctly, without the intervention of something external. This requires us to read the passage as identifying god as the *origin* of the statesman's true opinions. Divine intervention consists in instilling true opinions in the statesman. This is a common way of understanding Socrates' reference to divine inspiration, especially for those who think that Socrates does not actually intend to attribute the statesmen's true opinions to divine intervention.[22] Unfortunately, this interpretation has a serious flaw. It requires us to hold

θείους τε εἶναι καὶ ἐνθουσιάζειν, ἐπίπνους ὄντας καὶ κατεχομένους ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὅταν κατορθῶσι λέγοντες πολλὰ καὶ μεγάλα πράγματα, μηδὲν εἰδότες ὧν λέγουσιν. —Μένων. πάνυ γε.

[22] Scott 1995, 43 suggests that the references to divine intervention are ironic but that the deeper point is that the statesmen "hit upon the truth only in spite of themselves." Bluck 1961, ad 100a1 also reads the passage this way:

that Socrates simply ignores the possibility that the statesmen were born with true opinions, which they became aware of through a process of recollection. This possibility is salient in the context of the *Meno* because it was made available by Socrates' illustration of recollection in the geometry lesson. Over the course of that lesson, Meno's slave becomes aware of some true opinions that he has, but Socrates also heavily emphasizes the fact that those opinions were already in the slave prior to beginning the process of recollection (see esp. 85c4 and 85c6).[23] If Meno's slave has latent true opinions about abstract geometrical principles that he is capable of uncovering through recollection, then surely it is possible that the statesmen's true opinions about how best to run their cities had a similar origin. The fact that Socrates fails to consider this possibility demonstrates either careless reasoning or (more darkly) deliberate obfuscation.[24]

"Anyone who, without knowledge and without instruction. . ., managed to hit upon true opinions about virtue might well be said to have succeeded through divine inspiration or through some sort of miracle."

[23] For an illuminating defense of the view that (according to Socrates) we are born in possession of truths that are capable of becoming the contents of the cognitive states of either opining or knowing, see Bronstein and Schwab 2019.

[24] Recognition of this difficulty has led some scholars to distinguish between true opinions that are acquired through recollection and those that are not (cf. Scott 1995, 42). However, this distinction alone does not solve the problem. Even if we grant a distinction between true opinions that are recollected and true opinions that are not, it remains unclear why Socrates thinks he is entitled to assume that the true opinions of the statesmen belong to the latter rather than the former class. Panos Dimas's interpretation of the passage avoids the problem entirely by arguing that the statesmen have been divinely inspired in the sense that they are more likely than others to recollect the latent true opinions required for virtue (2007, 19-20). This is an ingenious solution, but it seems a clear strike against this reading that Socrates makes no reference to recollection in his description of the statesmen. Although I think we need an interpretation of the passage that allows for the possibility that the statesmen might have recollected their true opinions, I also think (given the paucity of evidence) that we should be wary of a reading that *requires* their opinions to have

Fortunately for us, however, a different interpretation of divine intervention is available, one that has (to my knowledge) gone entirely unnoticed by commentators. Socrates says of the statesmen's counterparts that "*when they are inspired* [ἐνθουσιῶντες] they say many true things" and that the statesmen themselves "are inspired and possessed by god *whenever* [ὅταν] they succeed in saying many great things." This description of the statesmen's condition suggests that divine intervention is ongoing. The god does not merely intervene once, at the beginning of an episode of correct acting, to instill true opinions in the statesman (winding him up, as it were, and then letting the true opinions play out on their own). Rather, the god is acting on the statesman for the duration of the time that the statesman acts and speaks correctly. This supports a new interpretation of divine intervention. The god is not being identified as the *origin* of the statesman's true opinions but as the *sustainer* of those true opinions. Socrates is drawing our attention to the fact that the statesman's *continued possession* of true opinion is dependent on factors that are external to him. When divine intervention ceases, the statesman will cease to have the relevant true opinion and will, accordingly, cease to speak and act correctly. Since the issue of how the true opinions have been acquired is distinct from the issue of how they are sustained, this interpretation of divine intervention allows for the possibility that the statemen have acquired their true opinions through recollection. Thus, it avoids the problem faced by the first interpretation. However, it resembles its predecessor in one important respect: it has clear implications for the statesman's ability to meet the source requirement. Regardless of how he has acquired his true opinions, the divinely inspired statesman will fail the source requirement. This is because something external to

been recollected. The interpretation I am about to propose meets both these desiderata and draws directly on Socrates' characterization of the statesmen.

him (a god) is responsible for the fact that, at this very moment, he continues to possess the true opinion that guides his correct action.

In the previous section, we saw that Socrates initially aligns true opinion with knowledge and opposes both knowledge and true opinion to fortune (τύχη). Knowledge and true opinion are compatible with human guidance while fortune is not. One result of Socrates' vivid depiction of the inspired statesmen is that it suggests that this initial squaring off is mistaken. It turns out that fortune and the statesmen's true opinions are fundamentally alike in that both are sources of correct action that are not under a person's control. A person does not get to decide when to have fortune intervene on her behalf and, similarly, the statesman does not get to decide whether god continues to sustain his true opinions. The conceptual alignment of true opinion with fortune is underscored by two additional features of the passage. First, as I noted above (n. 15), the ancient Greek conception of fortune includes the notion of divine providence.[25] Thus, someone who has benefitted from divine providence can be said to have experienced a kind of good fortune.[26] It follows that by attributing the statesmen's good actions and true opinions to divine intervention, Socrates can also be understood as attributing those actions and opinions to good fortune. Second, I earlier pointed out (n. 20) that Socrates uses a peculiar word for the true opinions of the statesmen. He initially says that they act by means of εὐδοξίᾳ or good opinion. This word choice is a striking departure from the phrases that Socrates has been using for true opinion (ἀληθὴς δόξα and ὀρθὴ δόξα). However, the selection is less puzzling when we realize that the word εὐδοξία bears a strong

[25] Some examples of fortune being used in this sense (also cited by McPherran 2005, 57 n. 27) appear in Pindar's *Olympian* 12.1–2, where Fortune is identified as a child of Zeus, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 663–680, where "saving fortune" (τύχη σωτήρ) is linked with Zeus and divine power.

[26] In the *Eudemian Ethics,* Aristotle argues that good fortune (εὐτυχία) *is* divine providence (1248b5).

linguistic similarity to the Greek word for good luck or good fortune, εὐτυχία. Given Socrates' recent reference to a τύχη that is responsible for things turning out well, and given the references to divine providence (themselves linked to good fortune) which will shortly follow, it may be that Socrates intends the use of εὐδοξία to remind his audience of εὐτυχία and to prime them to appreciate that there is a fundamental similarity between good (true) opinion and good fortune.

Additional support for my overall interpretation of the implications of the discussion of the inspired statesmen also comes from the *Ion's* discussion of poets. In the *Meno,* Socrates eventually includes poets (οἱ ποιητικοί, *Meno* 99d1) among the class of those whom we correctly call divine (together with soothsayers, prophets, and statesmen). This inclusion is puzzling in the context of the *Meno,* where poets have not been directly discussed. But a look at the *Ion* explains why Socrates thinks they deserve this classification. Socrates' characterization of the poets in the *Ion* is remarkably similar to his characterization of the statesmen in the *Meno*. Socrates repeatedly says that the poets say fine and true things (*Ion* 533e7; 534b3, b7–c1, d2–3), despite lacking comprehension (νοῦς: *Ion* 534b5–6, c8, d3). He claims that they are possessed (κατεχόμενοι: *Ion* 533e7; 534e5), and he compares them to soothsayers (χρησμῳδοί: *Ion* 534d1) and prophets (οἱ θεομάντεις: *Ion* 534d1). Most striking of all is Socrates' explanation of *why* the poets lack comprehension:

> God removes the comprehension of these people and uses them as servants, just as he uses soothsayers and divine prophets, *for this reason*: that we who hear them may know that they are not the ones who say these worthy things, since they lack comprehension,

but rather it is god himself who speaks and addresses us through them. (*Ion* 534c7–d4, emphasis mine)[27]

By removing the comprehension of a person, the god makes that person a mere conduit of divine power. As a result, the person himself is not responsible for the fact that he says worthy things; the responsible party is the god who acts through him. Given the broad similarities between the statesmen of the *Meno* and the poets of the *Ion,* it seems likely that in linking the statesmen to the divine, Socrates also means to be suggesting that these statesmen are not the source of their good actions. Whatever good they do cannot be credited to them but should instead be attributed to the god who has possessed them.

The description of the statesmen as under the heady influence of the divine is clearly designed to be provocative. When Socrates finishes, Meno remarks that Anytus will likely be annoyed (ἄχθηται, 99e2) by this depiction, and, as I noted above, it is unclear whether Socrates himself really thinks that there are any Athenian statesmen who have been divinely inspired.[28] Despite this uncertainty, the passage is significant because it highlights a feature of the statesmen's true opinion that actually belongs to all true opinion. As I argued above, the statesmen run afoul of the source requirement because their continued possession of true opinion depends on something external to them. What I will now show is that in the *Meno* the continued possession of true opinion *always* depends on something external to the person, regardless of whether that person is divinely inspired.

[27] διὰ ταῦτα δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἐξαιρούμενος τούτων τὸν νοῦν τούτοις χρῆται ὑπηρέταις καὶ τοῖς χρησμῳδοῖς καὶ τοῖς μάντεσι τοῖς θείοις, ἵνα ἡμεῖς οἱ ἀκούοντες εἰδῶμεν ὅτι οὐχ οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ταῦτα λέγοντες οὕτω πολλοῦ ἄξια, οἷς νοῦς μὴ πάρεστιν, ἀλλ᾽ ὁ θεὸς αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ λέγων, διὰ τούτων δὲ φθέγγεται πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

[28] See n. 22.

My evidence for these claims comes from one of the most notorious passages in the *Meno*: Socrates' discussion of the statues of Daedalus.

Socrates' introduction of the statues of Daedalus is sparked by a challenge from Meno. If, as Socrates has just argued, true opinion and knowledge are equally valuable when it comes to guiding our actions correctly, then, asks Meno, why is knowledge considered to be more honourable (τιμιωτέρα) than true opinion and why should we think that they are two different things at all (97c11–d3)? Socrates responds:

> [A]–Socrates. You haven't paid attention to the statues of Daedalus—or perhaps you don't have them. –Meno. What's your point? –Socrates. I'm talking about the fact that those [statues] escape and run away, unless they are bound, but if they are bound, they remain. –Meno. And? –Socrates. It is not worth a whole lot to possess one of that man's [Daedalus's] creations when it has been let loose, as is the case with a runaway slave, for it doesn't stay. But it is worth a lot when it has been bound; for they are very fine works. [B] To what does this relate? To true opinions. For true opinions are also a fine possession and produce all good things, as long as they stay. But they don't like to stay for long, and instead run away from the soul of man, so that they are not worth much, until one binds them with explanatory reasoning.[29] And this, dear Meno, is recollection, as we earlier agreed. [C] Once they are bound, first they become knowledge and then stable. And it is

[29] The translation of this phrase is difficult. αἰτίας λογίσμος might also be translated as "causal reasoning." I have opted for the translation "explanatory reasoning," since in the *Meno* Socrates seems more interested in developing accounts that are properly explanatory than he is in reasoning about causes or first principles. Cf. Fine 2004, 55–61 for detailed discussion of this issue.

because of these things that knowledge is more honourable than true opinion and surpasses true opinion by its bond. (97d9–98a8)[30]

Socrates' response to Meno's question unfolds in three parts (labelled (A), (B), and (C) above). In order to see how the problem with the true opinions of the statesmen generalizes to all true opinions, it will be helpful to begin by reflecting on what the statues of Daedalus analogy tells us about true opinion. This is covered in parts (A) and (B) of the analogy. In (A), Socrates describes some salient features of the statues of Daedalus: they are fine works and for this reason are worth possessing, but their worth is diminished by the fact that, unless they are bound, they run away. (B) shows that true opinions share these properties: they are fine works and worth possessing, and, like the statues, their worth is diminished by the fact that they run away unless they are bound. Most interpreters take Socrates' claim about the nature of the statues and true opinions to be a modal one.[31] It would be extremely surprising if Socrates holds that each true opinion always

[30] [A]—Σωκράτης. ὅτι τοῖς Δαιδάλου ἀγάλμασιν οὐ προσέσχηκας τὸν νοῦν· ἴσως δὲ οὐδ᾽ ἔστιν παρ᾽ ὑμῖν. –Μένων πρὸς τί δὲ δὴ τοῦτο λέγεις; —Σωκράτης. ὅτι καὶ ταῦτα, ἐὰν μὲν μὴ δεδεμένα ᾖ, ἀποδιδράσκει καὶ δραπετεύει, ἐὰν δὲ δεδεμένα, παραμένει. —Μένων. τί οὖν δή; —Σωκράτης. τῶν ἐκείνου ποιημάτων λελυμένον μὲν ἐκτῆσθαι οὐ πολλῆς τινος ἄξιόν ἐστι τιμῆς, ὥσπερ δραπέτην ἄνθρωπον —οὐ γὰρ παραμένει—δεδεμένον δὲ πολλοῦ ἄξιον· πάνυ γὰρ καλὰ τὰ ἔργα ἐστίν. [B] πρὸς τί οὖν δὴ λέγω ταῦτα; πρὸς τὰς δόξας τὰς ἀληθεῖς. ὅσον μὲν ἂν χρόνον παραμένωσιν, καλὸν τὸ χρῆμα καὶ πάντ᾽ ἀγαθὰ ἐργάζονται· πολὺν δὲ χρόνον οὐκ ἐθέλουσι παραμένειν, ἀλλὰ δραπετεύουσιν ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὥστε οὐ πολλοῦ ἄξιαί εἰσιν, ἕως ἄν τις αὐτὰς δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ. τοῦτο δ᾽ ἐστίν, ὦ Μένων ἑταῖρε, ἀνάμνησις, ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν ἡμῖν ὡμολόγηται. [C] ἐπειδὰν δὲ δεθῶσιν, πρῶτον μὲν ἐπιστῆμαι γίγνονται, ἔπειτα μόνιμοι· καὶ διὰ ταῦτα δὴ τιμιώτερον ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης ἐστίν, καὶ διαφέρει δεσμῷ ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης.

[31] Examples of those who hold the modal interpretation include Fine 2004, 72; Perin 2012, 17–18; Scott 2006, 133; Taylor 2009, 172; Williams 1978, 38; and Williamson 2000, 78–79.

leaves the soul at some point, since there are clearly cases in which a cognizer might cling to a true opinion throughout his life. For example, if the cognizer has a dogmatic character, he may manage to hold onto a true opinion despite pressure from countervailing evidence. A more plausible interpretation of Socrates' claim is that, *in certain cases* (e.g. when one encounters a powerful but misleading argument), true opinion *can* be lost. In what follows, I assume this standard (modal) interpretation of Socrates' claim.[32] Together, (A) and (B) identify a problem with both true opinion and the statues: when they are not bound, they are unstable, i.e. in certain situations they can be lost. In the case of true opinion, this is problematic because it means that the cognizer's grasp of truth is unstable.

(A) and (B) also identify a solution to the problem. In (A) Socrates claims that "*if they [the statues] are bound,* they remain [ἐὰν δὲ δεδεμένα, παραμένει]." In (B) Socrates states that true opinions "don't like to stay for long, and instead run away from the soul of man, so that they are not worth much, *until one binds them with explanatory reasoning* [ἕως ἄν τις αὐτὰς δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ]." Bondage is supposed to be the general solution to the instability of both the statues and the true opinions. However, it is important to notice that (A) and (B) differ in the specifics of what they propose. (A) does not specify how the statues should be bound. This suggests that any kind of bondage will do, as long as it makes the statue secure. By contrast, in (B) Socrates states that true opinion requires a particular kind of bondage: they must be bound *with explanatory reasoning.* That is to say, not just any kind of bond will do. On the face of it, this is surprising. So far, we have been operating on the assumption that the problem with true opinion is simply that true

[32] However, the point that I aim to defend (that the continued possession of all true opinion depends on something external to the cognizer) does not depend on the modal interpretation. This point holds even if one thinks that Socrates is making the categorical claim that all true opinion will in fact leave the soul at some point.

opinion can depart from the human soul, taking with it the cognizer's grasp of the truth. But if that is right, then Socrates' claim that the bond of explanatory reason is necessary to secure true opinion seems false. For binding true opinions with explanatory reasoning is surely not the *only* way in which true opinions can be secured for an agent. In fact, the divinely inspired statesmen from the end of the dialogue offer a prime example of an alternative kind of bond: their true opinions are secured for them by god. A statesman in the grips of divine inspiration cannot lose his true opinions, even if he is confronted by misleading arguments, since those opinions are guaranteed to remain as long as divine inspiration persists.

The fact that Socrates insists on a particular kind of bondage for true opinion suggests that the problem with true opinion goes deeper than its instability. In order to make sense of the specific solution that Socrates proposes, we need to think more carefully about what true opinion's instability implies. One thing that the instability of true opinion indicates is the corresponding lack of control that the cognizer has over her retention of that opinion (and, in consequence, over her retention of the truth). This feature of the relationship between the cognizer and true opinion is made especially clear by the way that Socrates develops his account of the value of an unbound statue in (A). Socrates compares the value of *possessing* (ἐκτῆσθαι) an unbound statue to the value of a runaway slave (δραπέτης ἄνθρωπος). The emphasis on possession invites the audience to evaluate the worth of the statue, and of the runaway, from the perspective of a possessor. From this perspective the issue of lack of control is readily apparent. What the possessor of an unbound statue and the possessor of a runaway slave have in common is precisely that both are unable to prevent the departure of their possessions.[33] The same applies to someone who merely believes a

[33] There is an ambiguity in the case of the runaway. It is unclear whether Socrates is imagining a case in which the legal owner of a slave loses the slave or a case in which someone (not the legal owner) comes into possession of a

truth. Even if a true opiner would prefer to retain her grasp of the truth, she cannot prevent its loss should her true opinion "decide" to leave (e.g., in the face of a persuasive but misleading argument).

Importantly, this lack of control cannot be remedied through just any kind of binding of the true opinion. Consider a statesman whose true opinions are sustained for the duration of his life by means of divine inspiration. In this case, the statesman's opinions are modally stable: they cannot be lost, given the fact of divine inspiration. Despite this stability, however, the statesman is manifestly not in control of whether he continues to believe what is true. It is a god who ensures his continued grasp of the truth by ensuring his continued possession of true opinion. Thus, if the deeper problem with true opinion is that it places the grasp of the truth beyond the opiner's control, then it is clear that not every kind of binding will provide an adequate solution to the problem. What is required is a specific kind of binding, one that places the *cognizer* in charge of the continued possession of the truth.

The bond of explanatory reasoning meets this condition. The precise nature of this bond is unclear, but there are two points that I think scholars would agree on. First, at the very least, the bond of explanatory reasoning ensures that the cognizer retains her grasp of the truth, even when she is placed in situations where a true opiner might lose that grasp. In (C), Socrates puts this point in terms of the stability of knowledge: "Once they [true opinions] are bound, first they become

runaway slave. In either case, however, the possessor lacks control over the slave, either because the slave has run away against the possessor's wishes or because the possessor will eventually be obliged by law to return the slave to his legal owner.

knowledge and then *stable* [μόνιμοι]."[34] The stability of knowledge is the result of explanatory reasoning and is clearly supposed to contrast with the instability of the true opinions that is emphasized in (A) and (B). Thus, the bond of explanatory reasoning addresses the surface problem with true opinions by ensuring that the cognizer has a stable grasp of the truth. Second, and crucially, the bond of explanatory reasoning secures the cognizer's grasp of the truth in a way that locates that security in the cognizer herself and specifically in an epistemic capacity. Again, the details of how exactly the bond of explanatory reasoning ensures stability are contentious. One popular view is that the bond of explanatory reasoning provides the agent with an understanding of *why* some fact obtains.[35] This understanding, in turn, enables the agent to withstand arguments that are persuasive but misleading and ultimately to avoid succumbing to falsehood. However, even if someone rejects the claim that explanatory reasoning gives rise to understanding (as opposed to some other cognitive state), they should still agree that the focus of the passage is on the cognizer's *internal* transformation from being an opiner to being a knower. The bond of explanatory reasoning is not something external to the cognizer, imposed on her by (e.g.) a god.

[34] There is a debate about what happens to true opinions once they have been bound. The central point of contention is whether the resulting knowledge is itself a form of belief (see Fine 2004 for an argument in favor of treating knowledge as a form of belief in the *Meno*; for a counter-argument see Moss and Schwab 2019, 9). However, the issue need not concern us. My focus is not, in the first instance, on the relationship between the agent and her true opinion but between the agent and the truth. Regardless of whether knowledge turns out to be a form of true belief, all parties to the dispute should agree that it ensures a stable connection to the truth.

[35] This way of fleshing out understanding comes from Schwab 2015, esp. 17–20, but the idea that Socrates has something like understanding in mind in this passage is widespread. See, e.g., Bluck 1961, ad 98a3; Dimas 2007, 17; Ebrey 2014, 19–20; Moravcsik 1970, 65–67; Nehamas 1985, 20; and Wedgwood 2018, 34.

Rather, it is something she forges for herself, by engaging in a process that places her in a new relation to whatever truth or truths she grasps. This implies that the cognizer's subsequent ability to retain the truth, even in adverse circumstances, is genuinely *her* ability, the direct result of her exercise of her capacity for knowledge.[36]

My analysis of the statues of Daedalus analogy shows that true opinion suffers from a very specific problem. Its problem is not merely that its instability makes the cognizer's grasp of the truth unstable. The deeper problem—the one that only a bond of explanatory reasoning can solve—is that the continued possession of true opinion is not up to the cognizer. As a result, when a cognizer does end up retaining a true opinion, it would be a mistake to identify her as the source of this cognitive success. The fundamental source of this success will always be due to something beyond her exercise of her capacity to believe: e.g. the fact that (as luck would have it) she was never exposed to powerful persuasion or, perhaps, the fact that divine inspiration prevented her from succumbing to the persuasion she encountered.

[36] I have deliberately avoided substantive discussion of the implications of my analysis for the *value* of knowledge and true opinion. Defending a view on this issue is beyond the scope of the paper. However, I do think that my analysis suggests a distinctive account of what makes knowledge more valuable (τιμιωτέρα) than true opinion. Socrates' point is that it is better to be the source of one's own cognitive success than to be at the mercy of fate or chance. The value of this kind of mastery might be partly due to the fact that it ensures *practical* success, but that needn't be the whole story. Another possibility is that—as in the case of virtue—we reserve a special regard for those whose success (practical or cognitive) is truly their own. We admire the master craftsman more than we admire her apprentices, even if the apprentices reliably produce excellent shoes by following the master craftsman's orders. On this reading, knowledge is more honorable than true opinion precisely because it makes one the master of one's own success. I plan to develop this view in future work. Thanks to a referee for encouraging me to address this point. For the defense of a similar view in contemporary philosophy, see Greco 2003; thanks to Juan S. Piñeros Glasscock for the citation.

At the beginning of the previous section, I sketched two conditions a person must meet in order to count as virtuous. First, if and when she acts, she must act correctly. Second, she must be the source of the correctness of her actions. Although it is difficult to meet the first condition without having knowledge, it is not impossible (as we have seen). It is implied that the inspired statesmen manage to consistently act correctly for a long period of time, despite the fact that they have only true opinions. However, someone whose correct action is based on (mere) true opinion fails to meet the second condition. This is because the fact that she continues to possess the true opinions on which her actions are based is due to something external to her. Thus, when she does and says the right things, it is not appropriate to say that she is responsible for her correct actions. The real source of the correctness of her actions is whatever external force is securing her true opinions, whether it be luck, divine providence, or the workings of nature. This shows that the statesmen at the end of the *Meno* are not anomalies. They offer an especially vivid example of how the retention of true opinion is due to something that lies outside the agent and his own cognitive abilities, but they are not the only true opiners who require intervention in order to maintain their true opinions. According to the statues of Daedalus analogy, anyone who possesses true opinion is in the same position.

By contrast, an agent who acts correctly out of knowledge meets both the conditions for virtue. The knower meets the first condition because knowledge (like true opinion) provides the agent with a grasp of the truth. In the *Meno*, it is assumed that the agent's grasp of the truth always guides action well. So, the knower will always act correctly, whenever she acts. Moreover, and more importantly, I have argued that the knower's continued possession of truth is due to her own cognitive ability as a knower. Part of what it is to be a knower is to be able to retain one's grasp of the truth even when (e.g.) one is under the influence of persuasive speech. Thus, the source of the

correctness of the knower's actions is located in the knower herself; it cannot be traced to some further thing external to her cognitive abilities. This is why, in the last moments of the dialogue, Socrates changes his mind about the nature of virtue. A statesman who acts correctly out of knowledge "would be, in respect of virtue, like the genuine article [ἀληθὲς…πρᾶγμα] next to shadows" because he alone would meet both conditions for virtue.

4 Two competitors to the source requirement

I have argued that the source requirement for virtue motivates Socrates' final position in the *Meno*. We are now in a position to evaluate my proposal relative to two alternatives. First, it has been suggested to me that the problem with those who succeed without knowledge is not that they fail to meet the source requirement but that they fail to meet a different requirement for virtue, namely, that the virtuous person must be able to make others virtuous like herself. The lines that immediately precede the reference to Teiresias might be thought to support this interpretation. For there, the main difference between the statesman with knowledge and the statesman with true opinion is that the knower—but not the true opiner—can pass his virtue on to others.[37] However, I think this reading of the *Meno's* final passage misses its argumentative point. The transmission of virtue is presented as potential evidence for the claim that virtue is knowledge. Socrates' point is *not* that being able to make other people virtuous is a condition of *virtue,* but that being able to make others like oneself is a condition of *knowledge*. If a virtuous person were to meet this condition, then that would show that their virtue is knowledge and not true opinion. Other passages

[37] I am grateful to Alex Long for raising this objection.

in which the possibility of transmitting virtue is discussed show a similar focus. The question is what the transmission of virtue (or lack thereof) means for the claim that virtue is *knowledge*.[38] Of course, on the view I have defended here (and given Socrates' assumption that knowledge is teachable), it will be the case that all genuinely virtuous people will be able to transmit their virtue to others, since all such people will be knowers. But their ability to transmit their virtue is merely evidence that they possess knowledge; it is not the explanation for why they count as virtuous to begin with. Moreover, even if one were to show that Socrates thinks the ability to transmit one's virtue is a condition of virtue, that would not undermine the source requirement. Indeed, the source requirement offers a natural explanation for why one would want to count as a condition of virtue the ability to transmit it: the inability to transmit one's virtue to others might demonstrate that one is not actually responsible for one's cognitive and practical success and so is not truly virtuous after all.

The second alternative has recently been defended by Casey Perin. Perin argues that Socrates ultimately denies that true opinion is virtue because a person whose actions are based on true opinion fails to meet what Perin calls "the counterfactual requirement on virtue." The counterfactual requirement is the requirement that "*if* things had been different in certain ways—if one had found oneself in circumstances different in certain ways from those in which one does find oneself—one's behavior *would have been* no less consistently virtuous."[39] Given that a person's opinions guide his actions, Perin concludes that in the context of the *Meno* the counterfactual requirement "is the requirement that if the virtuous person *were* exposed to any

[38] See 89d4–e3, the discussion that immediately follows, and its conclusion 96a6–d4; cf. 98d4–13.

[39] Perin 2012, 32, emphasis Perin's.

argument designed to lead him to abandon any of his true beliefs about virtue, he *would not* abandon any of these beliefs."[40]A person who acts on the basis of true opinion fails the counterfactual requirement because true opinion is modally unstable. Since there are situations in which a person would be led to abandon his true opinions about virtue, there are situations in which such a person would fail to act correctly. Perin's interpretation invites two questions about my own. First, what is the difference between Perin's counterfactual requirement on virtue and my source requirement? Second, if there is a difference, why prefer my view to Perin's? I will take these questions in turn.

Regarding the first question, it is important to acknowledge that my view and Perin's will yield the same verdict about the virtuousness of a person across a wide range of cases. A person who meets the source requirement will meet Perin's counterfactual requirement since it is true that if her circumstances were to change in the ways Perin discusses (e.g. if she were to encounter a sophist), she would not lose her grasp of the truth. However, although there is broad agreement in the verdicts of the two requirements, the verdicts are not coextensive. To see this, simply recall Socrates' divinely inspired statesman. Imagine now that this statesman is fortunate enough to have his true opinions secured by a divinity for his entire life. It would be true of this agent that, *if* he were exposed to an argument designed to lead him to abandon one or more of his true opinions, he *would not* abandon any of these opinions. Thus, the divinely inspired statesman would meet Perin's counterfactual requirement. However, he would not meet the source requirement. That is because we can trace the correctness of the agent's actions back through his true opinions to the divinity that sustains them. Moreover, even if Perin could show that the two requirements yield

[40] Perin 2012, 33, emphasis Perin's.

the same verdict in every case, there would still be an important difference between the two requirements. The counterfactual requirement is silent about the reason *why* the relevant counterfactuals are true of the virtuous agent. By contrast, the source requirement tells us that if the relevant counterfactuals are indeed true of the virtuous agent, it is because the agent is exercising her own cognitive ability.

Second, Perin does not provide any direct textual evidence in support of attributing the counterfactual requirement to Socrates. His main argument for the attribution seems to be that if someone holds the counterfactual requirement, then they also have good reason to think that genuine virtue is knowledge and not true opinion, given the modal instability of true opinion. Thus, attributing the counterfactual requirement to Socrates would explain why he ultimately rejects the view that virtue is true opinion. My source requirement is an improvement on the counterfactual requirement because it does not rely on an inference to best explanation. As we saw in section 2, there is strong textual support in favour of attributing the source requirement to Socrates. It is supported by Socrates' defence of the thesis that virtue is knowledge, by the contrast he draws between human guidance and fortune, and by his explanation of why Anytus is qualified to give advice about the teachability of virtue.

5 Conclusion

My interpretation of the *Meno* offers a solution to the puzzle posed by the end of the dialogue. I have argued that Socrates' assumption of the source requirement for virtue, together with his account of the nature of true opinion and knowledge, explains why only knowledge can be genuine

virtue. As I suggested in the introduction, the interpretation I have developed also has broader implications. The source requirement places the person squarely at the heart of Socrates' ethical theory. It tells us that, despite Socrates' emphasis on the results of virtue (i.e. correct actions and their outcomes) in the *Meno*, we should not assume that he thinks the person's role in bringing about those actions and outcomes is ethically irrelevant.[41] On the contrary, according to the source requirement, the fact that a person is responsible for the correctness of her actions is crucial to our assessment of her goodness.

Moreover, focusing on the source requirement reveals an important point of agreement between Socrates and his interlocutors. Despite the deep disagreements that arise over which actions count as good and what virtue itself consists in, the idea that virtuous agents are themselves responsible for their good actions appears to unite many of Socrates' interlocutors, from Meno in the present dialogue to Lysimachus and Melesias in the *Laches* to Callicles and Thrasymachus in the *Gorgias* and *Republic* (respectively).[42] For all of these figures, part of what it is to be virtuous is to possess within oneself the ability to act effectively in the world, and this inner strength is, at

[41] Here I disagree with McCabe 2015a, 239, who claims that the arguments of the *Meno* suggest that Socrates "should be indifferent. . .to whether [good] states of affairs are brought about by the agent who enjoys them, or not brought about by him but merely enjoyed by him." McCabe 2015b, 260 n.13 also says that it is only in dialogues like the *Euthydemus* that Socrates first turns toward an agent-centered ethics. However, if I am right, he evinces an interest in an agent-centered ethics in the *Meno* as well.

[42] Meno defines virtue in terms of the capacities of the agent at 71e1–72a5 and 77b2–5. Callicles argues that the truly admirable man is the person who is naturally powerful and who is able to overturn conventional norms in favor of natural justice (*Gorgias* 483a7–484c3). Thrasymachus makes a similar case for the virtue of the naturally powerful at *Republic* 338c2–4. Lysimachus also presupposes that the accomplishments of virtuous men will be the result of their own efforts (*Laches* 178a1–180a5).

least in part, what makes the virtuous person an appropriate object of praise and admiration. Socrates' defence of the thesis that virtue is knowledge is sometimes portrayed as part of a radically revisionist ethical program. However, if I am right, there is at least one respect in which the thesis is actually motivated by a conventional—or at least widely-shared—assumption about the nature of virtue. Socrates, like his interlocutors, is committed to the source requirement. But he also realizes that, given the nature of knowledge and true opinion, only a virtue that is knowledge can satisfy that requirement. Unlike the true opiner, the knower does not rely on the support of something external in order to retain the truth he currently possesses and, ultimately, to act well. The knower makes his own luck and is, as it were, his own inspiration.[43] As a result, his success is his own.[44]

[43] This thought may be behind Socrates' notorious claim, in the *Euthydemus*, that wisdom is good fortune (279d6), though the issue is fraught. See Jones 2013, 3–8 and McPherran 2005 for helpful discussion (and contrasting views).

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