3. Dialogue analysis (case studies)

3.1 Guidelines for the use of a myth/hypothesis – Meno

3.1.1 Introduction

Both the Meno, and the Protagoras which I will analyze after, represent, in a simpler form than later dialogues, a way of approaching a subject that can be labeled a hypothetical method. I aim to analyze the use of hypothesis in the Meno in this chapter by focusing on the way myth acts as a hypothetical proposition. This is very important for testing my theory of mutual scaffolding because proving that a hypothesis is proposed through myth, or a reference to myth, entails demonstrating how the arguments following the myth dialectically refer back to and draw their validity from the myth/hypothesis. In addition, the fact that the proposition constitutes part of the myth and is intertwined in its storyline influences the most important literary and philosophical aspects of the dialogue. When I address the Meno in detail – followed by the Protagoras in the next chapter – I will explain how a myth/hypothesis provides the reader with a horizon for understanding the dialogues’ plot, the place of the characters in the narrative and the significance of particular themes and motifs in Plato’s literary construction. My examination of the place of myth in the Meno and the Protagoras will reflect my comments on hypothesis and provide support for my theory of mutual scaffolding. In order to prepare the reader for my analysis of the place of myth/hypothesis in the Meno it is necessary make some preliminary comments on the use of hypotheses in philosophy in general followed by Plato’s own comments on the use of hypotheses in the Phaedo.
a. Using a hypothesis and considering consequences

An attempt to prove a theory by only presenting logical arguments or empirical evidence to support it can be classified as philosophy in such a basic and general sense that most cognitive activity involving explanation could be classified as philosophy. When a headmaster demands an explanation for a pupil’s behavior the high school student’s answer would not be classified as a philosophical argument even though his answer may be a cogent elaboration and supported by real examples. Part of the necessary criteria for raising an argument to the status of philosophy involves presenting unambiguous propositions to accompany the arguments. The arguments must be constructed using rational principles but need to refer back to the proposition in order to remain cogent. In more detail, an argument must, at least, have some logical order, be based on principles that appeal to our rational faculties, employ a process of selection concerning the place of premises and axioms in an orderly structure, and then evaluate the way and extent to which they must be used and related to each other. All along, one must remain self-conscious and critical of the premises and axioms being handled and what ‘non-philosophical’ features and factors might creep in. In addition, the consequences resulting from a philosophical theory need to be considered as acceptable or unacceptable – not to mention the basis on which the consequences are deemed suitable. Also, one needs to consider the consequences if the theory is rejected. In light of these observations, logical or rational structure is necessary but not sufficient criterion for a philosophical argument. A cogent philosophical theory with a viewpoint or hypothesis and an axiomatic foundation can be used to develop an unfathomable amount of positions, most of which may lead to unacceptable consequences.

When a philosophical theory is put forward it is always, to some extent, in contrast to or in reaction to another position. In this way philosophy begins as a critique of theory and in order to do this a replacement must be rendered. Whether explicitly or implicitly, whether rejecting or accepting a view, philosophical criticism presents theory
but (ideally) presents it in a non-propagandist way that invites further criticism. A philosopher experiences the world like others and deduces conclusions but continually asks himself or herself what other perspectives and theories better apply as experience fluctuates and he or she encounters different phenomena or different instances of a phenomenon.

Plato is often interpreted as dealing with topics such as god, the soul, Forms and the evaluation of the physical world. He proposes certain metaphysical truths that he deductively argues for. However, the transformative nature of his approach to these topics, his ambiguous attitude towards them and the shifting significance of certain issues in different dialogues support the view that labeling Plato a deductive metaphysician is hasty.\(^1\) Plato has Socrates refute a lot of positions but an absolute and clear position hardly comes across.\(^2\) Plato seems to guide the reader to see the world in a particular way and then reveal the spiritual, ethical, intellectual and aesthetic value in seeing it in that way rather than other ways while readjusting the perspective and method to expose any one of the many topics he feels require critical attention.\(^3\) This technique is far from a deductive argument or an attempt to prove a metaphysical reality.

With these observations in mind one must be wary not to over interpret a rigorous and systematic hypothetical theory explained such as we will encounter in the *Meno*. The evidence is scattered and if certain theoretical positions are displayed in a dialogue the descriptive comments are not complete and do not reflect perfect logical order. But this is no reason to reject the view that a systematic hypothetical theory exists in some form and plays a significant role in Plato’s thought.\(^4\) However, the fact that Plato has Socrates

\(^1\) Sternfeld and Zyskind (1978) pp. 30-34.
\(^3\) Bluck (1978) pp. 75-108.
\(^4\) Cristina Ionescu states that the *Meno* represents Plato’s first attempt at blending epistemology, ethics, and the Socratic form of argument (elenchus) with a hypothetical method of investigation. She argues that in this text Plato is not just simply concerned with the essence of virtue but also concerned to justify the search for the essence of virtue ([2007] p. xii). In addition, Ionescu explains how the *Meno* functions as transition and introduces theories and ideas that come up in later dialogues (for further comments on the *Meno* as a transition dialogue see Scott [2006] pp. 6-7 and Thomas [1980] pp. 10-16). In the *Republic*
mention the word hypothesis and its derivatives when discussing methodology does support an analysis of the place of hypothesis in Plato’s philosophical inquiry.

It is important here to separate the meaning of Plato’s use of hypothesis from notions such as possible or tentative. I believe that there is an element of contingency attached to Plato’s use of the concept but hypothesis is not merely a proposition put forward for practical reasons. It is contingent because the way it is presented and used depends on the content of the hypothesis in relation to the issue being dealt with. Also, in Plato’s case, a hypothesis is not an abstract or purely theoretical proposition, waiting to be proved by empirical examples, as in mathematics or geometry, but a perspective that already reflects serious consideration regarding the difficulties with finding working definitions and theories for physical, moral or aesthetic phenomena. As Bluck puts it:

So far as Socrates’ immediate purpose in the Meno is concerned, he is using this method as an expedient to get over, or to get around, the difficulty that what virtue is has not been decided. But he is not simply making a random assumption, any more than the imaginary geometrician is making a random assumption about his figure...if these conditions [suggested in the hypothesis] are not satisfied, his answer will be No. The conditions are limiting conditions, and seeing whether or not they are satisfied will make possible a definite answer to the original question.

In Plato’s case, a philosophically successful hypothesis is, more accurately, a viewpoint that encompasses, as necessary consequences, outcomes that correspond with the Good. That is, when the most beneficial consequences generally result from a hypothesis the hypothesis is justified and accurate.

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hypothesis is used as a technical term and the *Phaedo* provides further elaboration of its use and significance. Crombie (1971) p. 528 also discusses the important place of hypothesis in the *Meno* and its relation to other dialogues.

5 These points may help to provide answers to Thomas’ concerns regarding the problems with basing a theory of truth on coherence and hypothesis (Thomas [1980] pp. 155-156).

6 Bluck (1978) p. 76.

b. Comments on hypothesis in the Phaedo

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates introduces his philosophical contribution to the topic of causation by first describing the method he used to overcome the difficulties he encountered trying to find an absolute and certain metaphysical theory for causation (99d). He begins by comparing his initial approach to someone who studies eclipses by staring at the sun. Unless they look at some form of reflection their eyesight will be damaged. Similarly, Socrates says that by using his senses he was blinding his soul and, instead, had to use theories to uncover the truth about causation (99e). Socrates is not only implying here that reason must be the basis by which to understand reality, instead of our senses, but he is presenting an interesting method of investigation that proposes that one begin with a particular point of departure, namely hypothesis. His ‘secondary approach’ (99d) involved choosing an account that was the most logically valid and applicable in order to distinguish between what is true and false in the world, i.e. what corresponds to the theory is true and what does not is false. A theory is the strongest if its consequences are the most beneficial in all, or most, respects. Socrates admits that theories employ images comparable to the way empirical studies use images (100a). But what distinguishes his theory based approach from an empirical one is that his theory encompasses and is supported by empirical data, rational argument and a deep consideration of their consequences on a number of different levels, whereas inductive research is primarily concerned with proving a theory empirically regardless of the network of influences (epistemological, emotional, social, cultural, political, religious, etc.) it may have.

Socrates presents a methodology for arriving at truth which necessarily entails trial, error and corrigibility. One must begin with a theory that one decides is the least vulnerable to falsification and seek reasons and data (or anything else) that validates the theory (100a). “I am assuming the existence of Beauty in itself and Goodness and

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Largeness and all the rest of them” (100b). Socrates’ theory here, his hypothesis, is what we recognize as the theory of Forms. However, at 101d, Socrates advises us, in the face of criticism directed at the consequences of a hypothesis or the conditions under which something comes to be, to “hold fast to the security of your own hypothesis”. These passages do not provide a justification for why the hypothesis is the best that can be given and we need to look elsewhere for an explanation. The justification can be extrapolated from focusing on points such as –

1) the issue at hand; how it invites a particular view and influences the details surrounding it.

2) and distinguishing Plato’s philosophical hypotheses from those used in science and math due to their attachment to narrative.

3) the structure or plot used to order the information and how this influences the significance and direction of the arguments.

The theory of Forms is presented as the best working hypothesis and the only possible method that strives toward the most desirable consequences. Nothing about the theory and the consequences drawn from it contradicts what the interlocutors, or Athenians in general, would consider as good. Obviously, this is an important feature of a working hypothesis. But, in terms of its relationship with the supporting premises, what is equally important and more interesting is the form (narrative) and content (mythical) of the hypothesis, which I will elaborate below.

I will be sensitive to the nuances associated with the form and content of a hypothesis when I use mutual scaffolding to analyze the use of myth in the Meno, and then treat the other dialogues I have chosen to discuss in the same fashion. The Meno is an important dialogue to use as an example of the use of myth/hypothesis and its

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9 It is interesting to consider how the members of the Academy viewed the theory of Forms and to what extent they interpreted the theory as hypothetical over and against an absolute Platonic metaphysics (see Dillon [2003]).
cooperation with arguments. It is appropriate to begin with since it has a clear instructional sequence and, as I will argue, if the plot or narrative order is considered as a framework for the arguments and the dialogue as a whole then the methodology becomes transparent.

3.1.2 Theme introduction, setting and narrative mode

A number of significant features concerning the aim and technique of the *Meno* can be derived from certain stylistic elements constituting the narrative form of the dialogue. First, the dialogue begins abruptly. There is no background to the story and no introduction explaining what led to the question being raised. Second, there is no setting for the dialogue. The details concerning the place where the discussion is held and the environmental context is not even alluded to, unlike many other dialogues. Finally, Plato does not give any clues pertaining to the narrator in the text. I believe these are important issues for understanding the dialogue and the author’s intention because they suggest a number of structural and interpretative features. The narrative is detached from a scene, i.e. no imaginative space is provided by Plato. Therefore, the content of the dialogue can be interpreted as meta-philosophy, meaning that by using the analysis of virtue as a pretext Plato is actually presenting a didactic manual on how to begin doing

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10 Tarrant (2005) pp. 55-62. However, Tarrant does not discuss the possibility that narrative accounts function as hypotheses in the dialogues.
12 *Meno* begins by brashly asking a question and expects a quick concise and precise answer, which reflects his previous sophistical training, becomes a habit throughout the dialogue and presupposes a particular attitude towards the issue (J. Eckstein [1968] p. 19 and Klein [1989] pp. 38-39).
philosophy – which involves demonstrating the correct and incorrect; successful and unsuccessful; easy and difficult uses of hypotheses.

The lack of setting can be understood as a literary device which itself, through mutual scaffolding, can be related to the philosophical messages in the text. Interpreting these literary and structural features as markers, one becomes increasingly more receptive to the abstract or theoretical and ‘meta’ nature of the dialogue. Many intellectual Athenians at the time of Plato recognized the relevance of questions pertaining to the nature and teaching of arête; these issues had become commonplace within Greek moral thought. It would be a misinterpretation to credit the dialogue on the basis of the topics it discusses, and reducing the philosophical potency of the text to questions about the nature and teaching of virtue is superficial unless rhetorical style, method, context and the literary movements throughout the dialogue are given due attention. In light of these comments and observations the theme of the dialogue is not solely virtue and whether it can be taught but also, as I will analyze next, the place of hypothesis in philosophical inquiry, the responsibility of anticipating the consequences of a hypothesis and the peculiar narrative form hypothesis can take. Comparable to my approach, Klein analyses the dialogue in terms of its likeness to the hypothetical method used by geometers.

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15 E.S. Thompson explains that hardly any dialogue “is so clear-cut and simple in its construction as the Meno” ([1901] pp. xxvi-xxvii).

16 Harold Tarrant argues that the Meno offers the reader a concise explanation of the key elements of Plato’s philosophy and methodology. In particular, he explains how the text is a convenient introduction to Plato’s ethics and epistemology. “The kind of introduction that was then required would include material on Socratic definition, the link between virtue and knowledge, and the rules and importance of co-operative inquiry; the Meno fulfilled these requirements” (Tarrant [2005] p. 4). I find this interpretation persuading. However, I wish to take it further by including the use of hypothesis in a philosophical inquiry, particularly how forms of narrative like myth can provide a satisfactorily rich and exhaustive starting point for intellectual investigation.


18 Other scholars share my view – that questions pertaining to virtue were essentially a pretext for other concerns (I argue that Plato’s concerns are explicating and teaching a methodological program): “But the drama of the episode consists in the fact that Socrates gives virtue a treatment as laudatory (and logically faulty) as anything Gorgias can produce… The principal point is that to find virtue to be knowledge or wisdom (hence teachable) is the wholly laudatory thing to say, and to sing virtue’s praises is undoubtedly the object in the fine speeches Gorgias prepared Meno to make. To construe the hypothetical deductive section dramatically in the way that we have – as saying what Meno finds most satisfying – is more plausible than to consider it the locus of Socrates’ real opinion about virtue, since he subsequently upsets it.” (Sternfeld and Zyskind [1978] pg. 14).
However, while this is insightful and relevant it does not explain the significance of the narrative features used in the hypothesis or the many human implications of hypothetical investigation which can never be understood if the inquiry is interpreted in mere geometrical or mathematical (purely abstract) terms.  

The interpretation that I wish to promote is that, in the Meno, Plato is concerned with, primarily, providing basic instruction rather than theorizing. Also, I will argue that he wants to promote a particular kind of criticism or evaluation of an issue that respects the conditions framing the problem being posed, i.e. certain features of the narrative arrangement and the use of narrative devices. For instance, the text begins by Meno posing a question to Socrates, who by the time of the Meno had established a reputation as the quintessential questioner in Plato’s works. The dialogue begins with Socrates being under investigation and quickly leads to him having to begin his answer by stating a philosophical proposition, i.e. a hypothesis in need of some form of verification. The scenario is unconventional because it reverses the conventions of interaction between interlocutors that precede the Meno. This reversal suggests a shift in mode and intention by adding some more sophisticated techniques. One of these is a move from negative analysis, which is contingent upon a subject or a problem, to a more positive approach that involves methodological instruction and has far reaching consequences. It is also important to keep in mind that Plato implies that Meno will not complete his ‘learning’ experience. This aspect of the plot is suggested when we are told that he must leave before the mysteries (76e). This indicates that Meno, in the dialogue, has not used the method prescribed by Socrates to conduct an ordered and thoughtful philosophical search himself. Therefore, after close engagement with the methodological guidelines promoted by the dialogue, which involves the use of hypothesis, one can only accept the guidelines as themselves hypothetical. Until Plato presents us with examples of an individual who implements the hypothetical method, and therefore replicates the slave boy’s recollection on his/her own and with philosophical aims in mind, then the text can only be considered

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21 In dialogues prior to the Meno Socrates was the character that began the questioning.
a basic introduction to doing one form of philosophy correctly. Tarrant points out how ancient commentators saw the dialogue as an instructional manual to be used for philosophical practice. If they were correct, and the text can be seen in this respect, then it is reasonable to categorize the *Meno*, and its exercises, as a prerequisite for Platonic philosophy. Chronologically, the *Meno* comes after dialogues that are primarily concerned with definition and end in *aporia*, and if the view expressed above is plausible – and I will argue that it is – then its placement is appropriate and important. “The work is an initial close encounter with philosophy, driven more by the interests of the potential recruit than by the philosopher’s own agenda.”

### 3.1.3 The myth/hypothesis

At *Meno* 80d, after being perplexed by Socrates Meno presents an argument regarding learning, more accurately he renders a paradox he sees in the activity of learning. “But how will you look for something when you don’t in the least know what it is?”, alternatively “To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn’t know?”. Meno does not explain what theory of knowledge he holds in relation to this argument against learning but he states the paradox immediately after he has been bewildered and humbled by Socrates, i.e. after a dialectical exchange has left Meno intellectually ‘numb’ and he can not even begin to explain anything about virtue. Historically, Meno had a reputation for being an opportunist and for conducting an inquiry for the sake of presenting a strong argument in order to win the debate and not necessarily for the sake of knowledge. His role in the dialogue is not very far removed from this description except, in the privacy of a conversation with Socrates alone, he seems open to criticism and admits his misgivings.

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24 R. Weiss describes how the paradox is an objection to elenchus, thus marking, in dramatic terms, the correct time to step up to a more advanced method ([2001] p. 52).
Socrates endeavors to show Meno how this argument fails. He takes Meno’s argument extremely seriously which is evident by the well thought out counter-theory he renders. Socrates does not think Meno’s argument is good and his points of reference involved in explaining why it is a bad argument are priests and priestesses who understand the truths of religion (81). Socrates also acknowledges the significance of Pindar and other divinely inspired poets in his account and refutation of Meno’s paradox. The views of these religious figures are true by virtue of them being inspired. Based on two religious ideas, the immortality of the soul and reincarnation, Socrates deduces the theory of recollection.25 By acknowledging the salience of moral insight Plato is giving permission for very human feelings and concerns to take their place amongst the conceptual debates and amoral rhetorical procedures often implemented in philosophy.26 He does not present the theory with any argumentative rigor but explains, based on the religious beliefs, that it is actually what everyone calls “seeking and learning”. Therefore, at this stage of the dialogue, the foundations of the theory of recollection are religious beliefs and myths attributed to Pindar and other poets about the transmigration of the immortal soul.27 My claim is, in light of this influence and without any argumentative support, Plato’s theory of recollection is based on a hypothesis derived from myths and religious beliefs.28 I think his attitude towards the truth of the theory indicates that it has a hypothetical function – it is a myth/hypothesis.29

25 R.S. Bluck provides an interesting study of the place of earlier ideas and beliefs that influence Plato’s theory of recollection ([1978] pp. 61-75).
27 Ionescu attributes the use of myth to three reasons. First, Meno’s lack of intelligence and its appeal to the emotions and the imagination; Second, cultural familiarity and rhetorical appeal; Third, as an introduction or basic facilitator, i.e. a mediator which assists one from moving from a simple story to a sophisticated philosophical theory ([2007] pp. xviii and 47-49). Compare Ionescu’s view of myth to what I described earlier as the dichotomy paradigm, or evaluation using an inferior/superior framework in relation to rational discourse.
28 Later dialogues provide the necessary arguments required for removing the label of myth from the theory of recollection (especially the Phaedo) but as it is represented in the Meno it is a feature of a story without rational justification. One must be careful not to import doctrinal peculiarities associated with Plato’s ‘Middle Period’ and respect the text for its unique dramatic, structural and philosophical arrangement and message (Tarrant [2005] p. 8). For an overview of the different perspectives of Plato’s initial hypothesis in the Meno see Ionescu (2007): “Appendix II – The Initial Hypothesis in the Meno”. I am proposing that the
Some comments must be made about the reference to myth and its components. Plato’s proposition only has affinity with what priests, priestesses, Pindar and other inspired poets tell of. He simply quotes Pindar but his hypothesis, consisting of the theory of recollection, is presented as an interpretation of Pindar’s poem. Plato has carefully selected the poem keeping in mind that the priests and priestesses he mentions, presumably from the Orphic and Pythagorean tradition, are those that share his interpretation that infers from 1) reincarnation and 2) a righteous way of life to 3) good incarnations and ultimately salvation. Socrates’ comments after the poem, while they are not traditionally classified as a myth, are an example of Plato’s endorsement of particular features of an Orphic and Pythagorean understanding of the poem. As I mentioned above, Plato incorporates significant elements from these religious traditions into his theory of recollection (which are appropriated and fused and, therefore, cannot be equated completely with the other religious views because of their new place in Plato’s metaphysical and epistemological framework). Therefore, while the dialogue does not present a myth in a formal sense, it does more than imply or suggest a myth. In the context of the discussion between Meno and Socrates the proposition that it is worthwhile inquiring into what one does not know (solely Plato’s contribution) is combined with

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Footnotes:

29 Harold Tarrant argues that it is absurd to suppose that Plato introduces the theory primarily to combat Meno’s eristic argument (Tarrant [2005] p. 37). I agree that it is implausible to assume that the theory was only developed to respond, ad hoc, to Meno’s paradox. However, I do hold that the theory and the way it is presented is peculiar to the dialogue, which characterizes myth/hypothesis, and is profoundly bound to the scenario in which it takes place. My interpretation, as I will elaborate further, is that, from an epistemological and practical point of view, it provides an inquirer with a better predisposition for learning. From a literary and stylistic point of view, it organizes the structure of the text and the reader’s engagement with it by controlling the plot, the characters, the dynamics between them, and the use of themes and motifs. I will elaborate on these issues later in the chapter.

30 J. Klein discusses the unique notion of soul constituting the myth and its special relationship to learning, knowledge and the world as a whole ([1989] pp. 95-96). Also, see Weiss (2001) p. 67, for comments on the distinction between Plato’s notion of recollection and a similar view implied in Pythagorean thought.
recollection as a myth/hypothesis. Therefore, Socrates’ response to Meno’s paradox takes shape in a mythical setting which takes an esoteric myth for granted with the addition of some important Platonic themes and ideas.

After the myth Socrates makes an interesting comparison between his myth and Meno’s paradox which implies an interesting perspective on the possible hypothetical nature of both the paradox and the myth (the myth/hypothesis detailed above). Socrates states, “We ought not then to be led astray by the contentious argument you quoted. It would make us lazy, and is music in the ears of weaklings” (82d). Here it seems he is refuting Meno on pragmatic grounds and, therefore, in a rather simple way, arguing why the myth is better than Meno’s argument. What his response says about Meno’s paradox is that Socrates sees it as a hypothesis which implies a doctrine that makes some logical sense but is practically dangerous and destructive. Then, Socrates does not give a systematic counter argument in support of his myth but conducts an experiment to prove why his myth/hypothesis is better than Meno’s proposition. When it comes to inquiring into the nature of virtue (or any other matter) the myth is more conducive to philosophical investigation, and therefore ‘true’, whereas the paradox ends the search before it begins. Meno’s view will hinder any inquiry since it holds that learning is impossible. The truth of Socrates’ alternative rests on the fact that the myth is socially and pedagogically practical, i.e. it “produces energetic seekers after knowledge” (81e).

…neither the recollection thesis, as a general account of how knowledge is acquired, nor the metaphysical notions that undergird it are Socrates’ own beliefs, but that his development of, first, the myth and, then, the slave-boy-demonstration constitutes his fight “in word and deed” (M. 86c2-3) for the value of moral inquiry. As Socrates makes clear, what recommends the view that all knowledge comes by recollection is that it

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31 For a comparison and contrast of the idea and use of recollection in other dialogues see Bluck (1978) pp. 47-61.
makes good men of its adherents, whereas the alternative view, Meno’s paradox, makes bad men of those who subscribe to it.\footnote{Weiss (2001) p. 64. Also, see p. 66.}

But once the myth and the demonstration prove that inquiry is worthwhile, i.e. it is possible to learn, and the two want to begin a new search, into the nature of virtue, Socrates holds back from committing wholeheartedly to the truth of the myth itself and is only devoted to promoting the myth’s consequences (86b-c). The consequences are a result of considering the mythic references but also, as an essential partner to the myth, the proposition that it is worthwhile searching for what one does not know (thus completing the hypothesis and making it exhaustive for the purposes of the dialogue). The two together make up the myth/hypothesis that provides one of the pivotal ideas in the dialogue, as opposed to a dogmatic metaphysics and epistemology.\footnote{Weiss (2001) p. 69}

It is not inaccurate, judging by the exchange at this stage of the dialogue, to interpret Socrates’ understanding of Meno’s argument as a hypothesis with consequences that lead to laziness and his myth as a hypothesis with consequences that can eventually lead to truth.\footnote{See Sternfeld and Zyskind (1978) pp. 13-14. The authors discuss how the hypothesis functions as a point from which to make reasonable inferences but may, in fact, be logically faulty. For descriptions of the interpretations of the myth which attempt to demythologize it see Thomas (1980) pp. 127-146. My interpretation, presented here and elaborated on below, allows the myth to remain a narrative which does not require rationalizing. The potency of the myth, therefore, lies in the literary structural features it introduces and how these function in conjunction with the arguments.}

It is only now, after justifying the myth in this way, that Meno asks for arguments in support of whether virtue can be taught or not (they decide to avoid the problem about the nature of virtue).\footnote{One of my intentions for paying attention to the dramatic details of the myth and the dynamics of the dialogue is to offer compelling alternatives to the interpretations that try to reduce aspects of the \textit{Meno} to irony. Also, I do not wish to subscribe to the view that the epistemological position and methodology proposed by the text are exclusively hypothetical or experimental in a purely conceptual sense. It may be too extreme to reduce the meaning of the text to a mathematical style exercise. The model may be mathematical but the conclusions about ethics and its relation to epistemology are far from certain. There are some very irreducibly human factors involved in the exchanges between the interlocutors which distance the scenarios from mathematical and geometrical exercises. In fact, Socrates does not introduce the theory of recollection as his own theory and does not express any true commitment to it but sees it as indispensable to the point he wants to make. (Tarrant [2005] p. 8). I believe these are all indications of Plato’s preference for a hypothetical method but only under the condition that the advantages are appropriate to the topic under investigation and the outcomes one desires to arrive at.}
3.1.4 The philosophical arguments

In the course of the narrative the reason why Socrates introduces ideas such as immortality and recollection becomes obvious: it is to convince Meno that it is “right to inquire into something that one does not know” (86c). Socrates wants to analyze the nature of virtue but, on Meno’s request, must clarify the notions of immortality and recollection. The demonstration involving the slave boy is a compelling technique used to describe Plato’s statement that knowledge is recollection – it instantiates both discursive argument and a demonstration (even though the demonstration is a literary construction). One must keep in mind that both immortality and recollection were expressed to compete with Meno’s paradox. When seen in this context one can better interpret the two views of learning (Socrates’ and Meno’s) in light of Socrates later cautious comments on the validity of the references to myth and religion. It becomes clear that the dual between the two hypotheses and their consequences was illustrated primarily for demonstrative and instructional reasons and this is why Socrates’ mythic style hypothesis, the more convincing, does not play a role in the second half of the dialogue (after the experiment and Meno’s acceptance of the hypothesis).

A number of points must be clarified in relation to the experiment with the slave boy. Socrates tries to convince Meno of the value of searching for knowledge by

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37 One must be careful not to label recollection a theory in the strict sense meaning that it occupied an unambiguous systematic position that could be applied to any dialogue, topic or situation. The description and use of the ‘theory’ in the Meno differs considerably from its appearance in the Phaedo or the Phaedrus, for instance (Tarrant [2005] p. 35).
38 Cf. fn. 35 and 36. Also, there is the structural influence of the myth on the dialogue as a whole which I will discuss later.
39 There are some fascinating and significant features related to the experiment that require deeper analysis but are not essential for this part of my study. In the following sections I will discuss theories regarding ‘liminal’ characters particularly in relation to Socrates as trickster but also in respect to other characters in the dialogues. The use of a slave for his demonstration, a timeless liminal individual from one of the few archetypal liminal classes, has extremely important interpretative potential. Plato has Socrates select another liminal individual to demonstrate the truth value of recollection – a slave that is, in terms of personality and appearance, represented in almost completely dull terms. The two share an affinity that goes beyond their roles as figures on the fringes, or in the interstices, of society. Socrates is dependent on the slave to administer his effect on Meno and it is likely that the inclusion of the slave is an
demonstrating how a slave boy, who is guided correctly, arrives at knowledge. Socrates states that he believes in the immortality of the soul, a belief derived from the wisdom of priests, priestesses and poets. The soul’s immortality, as it is brought up in the *Meno*, is a presupposition and a fundamental element in the theory of recollection. This belief, a constituent part of the myth/hypothesis, controls the course and structure of the experiment. Plato uses the idea that the soul is immortal as one of the basic presuppositions of the demonstration but his purpose is to combat Meno’s criticism of learning, which leaves philosophy pointless, and show that learning is actually recollection, which promotes philosophy as worthwhile and an essential part of a good life. The myth/hypothesis that proposes that knowledge is worth searching for and the theory of recollection – its religious counterpart – are based on religious traditions (81b-d) and are followed by the arguments which support it (arguments surrounding the experiment), the conclusions of which are presented as the logical consequences of the myth/hypothesis (slave boy experiment and the consequent arguments for recollection).

Not unlike the example from the *Phaedo* regarding hypothesis, to focus on the consequences or the conditions under which the theory could have reality would be ineffective if one did not consider the hypothesis simultaneously and in mutual relation to the arguments. What is interesting in this context is that the myth is not referred to by Socrates as a *mythos* but as “something true” (81a). The story is the response to the argument stated by Meno which Socrates describes as influencing people to be “lazy” and as attractive to “weaklings”. It is a hypothesis in the form of a myth which has consequences that Socrates praises as promoting “energetic seekers of knowledge” (81e).

acknowledgement of social justice as an important epistemological factor. Also, the slave may be a literary representation of one dimension of Plato’s teaching process – a stage and technique that he could not add to Socrates’ already complex role in the text. The slave is another face or a mask of Socrates which had to be implemented in order not to confuse the delicate interaction between characters. The function of the slave, for a brief moment in the text, creates an anti-hierarchical and non-abusive milieu needed in order to combine the argument, the myth/hypothesis, the dramatic setting and the overall meaning of the text. Socrates, as a somewhat privileged Athenian citizen could not sufficiently fulfill this role on his own (cf. my section on liminality in the second chapter). As mentioned above, I will briefly discuss the use of liminality in this text later but I believe the dynamic interaction and affinities shared by Socrates and the slave boy requires a specialized academic study in order to provide valuable scholarly results.

There are some interesting insights gained from this dialogue that can be related to the modern debate about theory dependence of observation and experimentation.
The myth’s truth status holds firm until the pair move onto the next question but what
remains is the value of inquiry, the moral that the myth was designed to convey.\textsuperscript{41}

In the ensuing interview with the slave boy, we shall observe him seeking to show: (a)
that in a qualified sense one can pursue meaningfully what one does not know, and, (b)
that there is a sense of “know” in which it is not superfluous to seek what one already
knows. These lessons come out in conjunction with the doctrine of anamnesis.\textsuperscript{42}

3.1.4 Mutual scaffolding

A mutual scaffolding approach illuminates the dialectic taking place between
myth and argument. Even if one does not agree with the view that the paradox and the
myth are hypotheses within the confines of the dialogue setting and, alternatively, holds
that Plato wants to promote his religious position as truths in every possible situation
(which I think is in some sense over-interpreting the points in the dialogues and
neglecting the literary context) it is nonetheless still valid and crucial to recognize the
harmonious exchange taking place between two ‘genres’. Myth can not be understood
here in this particular instance as exclusively illustrative, educative, allegorical, or
mystical.\textsuperscript{43} It can only be a part within a mutual scaffolding unity involving argument;
and an equally important part at that. There is strong evidence suggesting that the
hypothesis evaluation detailed above is closer to Plato’s intention.

For instance, after a number of arguments supporting recollection Meno confesses
that Socrates must be right. Socrates answers without confidence but is unconcerned

\textsuperscript{41} This is an example of the positive consequences of trickster activity. Tricksters usually disrupt the norm
and confuse the situation before they encourage and establish new meaningful possibilities by providing
unconsidered hypotheses. The perplexity that tricksters drive one to must be understood as a means to an
end – a technique that persuades one to try and recollect. I will discuss this in detail in the next section.
\textsuperscript{42} Thomas (1980) p. 123.
\textsuperscript{43} For an interpretation that reduces the mythic elements to metaphor for the purposes of communicating
with and convincing non-philosophers see Ionescu (2007) pp. 49-64.
regarding his uncertainty: “I think I am [right]. I shouldn’t like to take my oath on the whole story” (86b). I believe this attitude is unbecoming of one with strong religious convictions and more in line with one who is comfortable with the benefits in using a particular hypothesis, always recognizing that a hypothesis is in use. The use of irony is eliminated by Socrates’ next comments, which also provide more support for the hypothesis interpretation: “but one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act – that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it is right to look for what we don’t know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don’t know we can never discover” (86c). These qualities constitute the character of someone with virtue and it is significant to mention that Socrates explains, in the context of this scene, that these qualities are brought about as a result of belief in religious views. It is plausible that Plato is making the point that a person’s beliefs, whether religious or not, characterize the degree of virtue they display.\(^44\) Considering these passages closely, it becomes increasingly clear that the myth/hypothesis view opens up more interpretative possibilities. Scott confirms the interpretation that the function of arguing for the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is not necessarily a solution to the problem of teaching virtue. In fact, he explains below, the debate concerning virtue and recollection guides a deeper discussion and a more important meta-philosophical issue –

In short, recollection should not be seen as the philosophical solution to the dilemma. First, the theory is not actually relevant to solving it…Second, in his explicit dealings with Meno, Socrates ignores any epistemological problems the dilemma might raise, and instead focuses on Meno’s psychology: his motives for deploying the argument and the incentives he needs to restart the inquiry. Third, Socrates’ own statement of the challenge that faces him at the end of the passage suggests he is concerned with the possibility of successful inquiry, rather than inquiry per se.\(^45\)

I think it is also important to consider Socrates’ comments about hypothesis after his experiment with the slave boy (86e-87c). After agreeing to move on from providing

\(^{44}\) Tarrant (2005) p. 55.
\(^{45}\) Scott (2006) p. 82.
the definition of virtue and reluctantly beginning a discussion on whether virtue can be taught Socrates proceeds by employing what he calls a hypothetical way. He draws an analogy between this method and the use of hypothesis in geometry which says that, basically, if a shape has a certain property then it relates to another shape in certain ways and has particular consequences in different situations. Therefore, in response to the question whether virtue can be taught Socrates suggests, since he does not know what it is or what it resembles (the pair decided to move on from this unresolved problem), that the best way to address the question is by starting with a hypothesis. In this philosophical case a hypothesis is used not just to be tested but because it implies very specific features and entails very specific results when applied in this context. For example, if virtue is teachable it must be knowledge and, vice versa, if it is knowledge it must be teachable. With this notion of hypothesis, characterized by its consequences, Socrates argues that virtue must be some form of knowledge if it is teachable. And, with this consequence Socrates states that goodness is recollected and not naturally endowed (89b-c). However, once he considers the fact that empirical evidence shows that there are neither teachers nor students of virtue, and that this evidence proves that virtue can not be taught (and is not knowledge), the two arrive, again, at a state of aporia. It is interesting how this dialectical investigation develops out of the hypothesis that virtue must be knowledge if it can be taught (87b-c). There are interesting parallels between this hypothetical process and the earlier inquiry regarding the value of seeking knowledge, which used myth as hypothesis. The important difference is that the inquiry based on myth (Socrates’ hypothesis) led to a constructive and agreeable conclusion (learning or recollection is possible and worthwhile) whereas the other inquiry ended in perplexity (virtue is knowledge). “Taken in its theoretical features the myth provides a direction of search without predetermining an inferential scheme. The objects of inquiry – all nature – are presented as discrete entities. The problem is to reestablish their connections, but the kind of connection is itself left open.”46

46 Sternfeld and Zyskind (1978) p. 36.
On one side of the mutual scaffolding is a myth-based hypothesis. In the case of the *Meno* we have a quote from Pindar along with extra interpretative comments by Socrates (81b-d). In brief, the major constitutive components of Socrates’ view are:

1. immortality
2. prenatal existence and reincarnation
3. cognitive perfection during disembodied state\(^{47}\)
4. connection between knowledge and happiness/salvation

On the other side we are presented with a working example of the myth/hypothesis and a series of arguments. Representing the theory of recollection in an interesting way, one function of the demonstration is to illustrate how the theory can be learnt without teaching in the traditional sense – teaching, as opposed to recollection, Socrates says, is not possible (82).\(^{48}\) One may argue that a demonstration with the intention to convey knowledge is teaching under a different definition. Socrates is, in some way, teaching Meno what recollection means and how to recollect. In fact, by witnessing Socrates conduct the demonstration, Meno gains knowledge of more than recollection. He comprehends what a philosophical inquiry involves: an understanding of what a hypothesis is; correct use of a hypothesis; consideration of consequences; including argument and empirical data into your investigation; arrangement and correlation between hypothesis and argument. No doubt, after the demonstration and the proceeding arguments Meno will have received some education and his understanding of epistemology and philosophical methodology will be more refined. Refining one’s concepts about knowledge and the degrees of knowledge are not the same as learning

\(^{47}\) It is not specified whether an ignorant individual has the same disembodied cognitive state as an enlightened individual. Also, how pre-natal states differ from post-death states is not a consideration nor are transition phases which may occur between the time a soul leaves a body and enters a new one. I believe these ambiguities and Plato’s disinterest with clarifying the details about them lend more weight to the view that recollection and even immortality, in the literal sense, are part of a myth/hypothesis. These issues are more important in a dialogue such as the *Phaedo* but have little relevance, if at all, in the *Meno*.\(^ {48}\) Thomas contrasts the type of instruction Socrates gives Meno, i.e. a shared inquiry leading to personal insight, as opposed to the sophistic style instructions Meno was used to, i.e. listening to a speech about the truth from another ([1980] p. 123).
something completely new and this is a nuance that is not addressed by Plato and is in fact not really important to the emphasis of the dialogue.\textsuperscript{49} The definitions of learning and teaching are here determined by the hypothesis since if we alter the myth in certain ways or replace it we could accommodate for conventional learning and teaching without agreeing with Meno’s argument. But the reality is that we have this myth and these arguments and we must analyze the dialogue accordingly.

On a very simple linguistic level, Socrates’ request that Meno determine whether the slave is “learning from me or simply being reminded” (82b) is semantically determined by the myth. Contrast this with the use of the word ‘teaching’ when Socrates deals with the issue of whether virtue can be taught – there he uses it as a synonym for recollection because he arranges with Meno to use it this way. The reading of the philosophical part of the dialogue, the nuances attached to certain key words and the relationship between concepts all correspond to the framework setup by the myth/hypothesis. No complex definition of learning and teaching can be considered here and problematizing these words and their definitions in the text may end up being counterproductive. This kind of approach to the argument will completely disconcert the relevance and place of the myth and, ultimately, distort any attempt to engage with the dialogue and Plato’s philosophy constructively. Therefore, in the early part of the dialogue learning and teaching must be seen as simply opposites to remembering something, i.e. learning means acquiring something completely new and teaching means passing on something completely new – Plato’s use of the words and the myth’s suggestion seem to be ‘black and white’ for practical and rhetorical purposes.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} By the end of the dialogue Meno improves his understanding by becoming aware of the difference between knowledge and true opinion and their importance.

\textsuperscript{50} Actually, in the experiment with the slave boy I believe, and many scholars have indicated that, it is a contentious issue whether Socrates is helping him recollect or indirectly putting ideas in his mouth. I argue that Socrates’ pedagogical technique, whether it seems contrived to the reader or not, is not an issue of concern. The interaction between Socrates and the slave is a rhetorical scene the purpose of which is not to show how the slave is being taught or the truth of recollection but to show us an individual inspired by the fact that he is gradually arriving at knowledge and that this should encourage one to learn – pragmatic points that Socrates uses to support the position that it is worthwhile inquiring into things.
The experiment with the slave boy ends by Socrates returning to the myth. Prenatal existence, disembodied cognitive states, immortal soul and recollection are the conclusions of the demonstration (86). It is clear, however, that the beliefs from the myth are not the goal of the dialogue. The aim of the myth, as I mentioned earlier, is to function as a working hypothesis, and its use in mutual exchange with the demonstration and arguments informs the reader on how to make use of a hypothesis that has positive consequences. The speculative mythical premises I listed above need to be seen in the context of the myth/hypothesis and their meanings understood accordingly. In addition the “discussion of recollection is about to challenge our notion about what it is really like to learn something from teacher-like figures.”

The aim of the first part of the text is whether it is worthwhile inquiring into the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught. At 86d Socrates reminds Meno that he agreed that it is right to inquire into something one does not know, a result of the hypothesis/myth in interdependence with a combination of experiment and argumentation. The following inquiries, which result in aporia, are not essentially dependent, or interdependent, on the myth and do not concern directly my mutual scaffolding approach. However, it is important and interesting to note that the later investigations (whether one can teach virtue) use unsuccessful non narrative hypotheses similar to Meno’s initial argument against learning (eg. virtue must be knowledge if it can be taught and a thing can be taught only if teachers and students of it exist). By conducting a critique of the Meno using mutual scaffolding one notices an interdependent connection between the myth and the philosophical part of the dialogue directly following it. Important parts of the dialogue acquire new meaning once one recognizes the dialectic between the two ‘genres’ in the passages I have indicated. As a hypothesis, the myth sets up the way we must necessarily understand the slave boy experiment, including the precise meaning of the terms used in that section. The argumentative part in that particular section of the text provides exegesis of the myth and

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assists in recognizing how Plato wants us to use hypotheses constructively and critically. The significance of the problems in the middle and later purely argumentative parts of the dialogue acquire form and impact when seen in contrast to the earlier inseparable *mythos/logos* section. I believe the success of this dialogue rests on recognition of the different examples of hypothetical method, the contrast between them, and the fact that Plato wants to draw attention to the consequences of a hypothesis rather than relying solely on its propositional truth or its correspondence to empirical data.\(^{52}\)

### 3.1.5 Plot structure

The underlying thought is that philosophy is the product either of some initial human unsullied state, where folly had not yet arisen, or of some ancient revelation that cannot be repeated but must rather be restored through the purging of all alien accretions. The parallel with the theme of recollection is striking…\(^{53}\)

When considering the plot structure in relation to the *Meno* one must be careful not to reduce the storyline to one traditional type. The plot is more an example of syncretism which manifests traces of archetypal themes such as ‘ideal origins’ when acknowledging the pure non-physical state which is the source of the human soul. Also, the plot incorporates the esoteric idea of dualism in the sense that interprets the soul and body as essentially distinct, and that they correspond with knowledge and ignorance. These mythic themes are integral parts of perennial plots that are cross-cultural and cross-historical. The idea is that the soul, being distinct from the body and eternal, needs to return to its ideal origins in order to find salvation. Therefore, in the *Meno*, the condition under which the cosmos must be interpreted is the ‘two-worlds’ view. The conclusion of the plot is basically to free the soul from the body or move from ignorance to knowledge.

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\(^{52}\) Sternfeld and Zyskind (1978) p. 42.

The epistemology of the *Meno* is heavily determined by this dualistic worldview. The mythical traditions referenced are characterized by egalitarianism in terms of the potential of every soul to transcend the bondage of the material world since all souls have one homogenous basis.

When the dualism theme plays a metaphysical/ethical role in a narrative the plot is essentially represented as one form of the ‘life-death-rebirth’ structure (Meno’s certainty and challenge - Meno’s *aporia* - Meno’s understanding and acceptance of recollection). Attempts to rationalize myths have reduced this plot to describing the cognitive development of an inquirer who arrives at an understanding but not without a crisis point in between where the individual must completely reevaluate his or her original presuppositions. I do not wish to rely on this rational allegory of the archetypal mythic plot – I have argued that Plato’s use of myth is much more complex and dynamic than that. However, this understanding is undoubtedly one of the many dimensions of the network of functions that the myth occupies. I believe that as a character Meno exemplifies the seeker who goes through the intellectual life-death-rebirth ritual. This role, which I will discuss next, is prescribed by the particular form of dualist plot invited into the dialogue by the myth/hypothesis (i.e. a hypothesis that, resembling a mosaic, incorporates a number of mythic traditions and ideas).

When the universe is dichotomized in this way humans are either on one side or the other, enlightened/unenlightened, good/bad (Meno represents one side of the dichotomy but since Socrates admits that he does not know the other side remains a goal or ideal). However, this vision of the world allows for one other role, i.e. the trickster, who dwells on the threshold. I will explain the place and significance of the individuals in the dialogue who represent these characters below. My mutual scaffolding approach demands that I be sensitive to these particularities because by taking them into account as

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56 For symbolic representation of the trickster see 79e-80d and Socrates’ use of a slave to enlighten Meno. I will discuss both of these ‘trickster’ features below.
interdependent to the arguments I can interpret the arguments as being controlled by the myth and its implications. My analysis of the characters in the dialogue will reveal how important it is to acknowledge these factors because of the fact that character choice is determined by plot.

3.1.6 Character selection

a. Meno

Throughout, Meno’s own personality and his reaction to philosophical cross-examination are vividly portrayed. At a number of points Socrates makes explicit reference to his character, even calling him bulling, spoilt and arrogant.57

The ‘life rejuvenation’ plot (life-death-rebirth) in the form of cosmic dualism must have a figure that traverses the whole journey. In the dialogue, as in real life,58 Meno is an opportunist who is interested in winning arguments and securing his status in society.59 He is introduced in the early part of the text as one who is sure of certain things including the nature of virtue. Through an exchange of question and answer Socrates brings Meno to a state of aporia where he cannot even say what virtue is, let alone whether it can be taught. Meno is saved by Socrates from going down the path to intellectual lethargy and by the end of the dialogue realizes that a philosophical inquiry has been conducted even though he is still unsure what virtue is and whether it is teachable.60

58 For further details see Thompson (1901) pp. xii-xx.
60 In addition to being lazy, Meno has also been described as shallow and unsophisticated. Socrates gives Meno the deceptive impression that the discussion is based on his own lead and interests (Ionescu [2007] pp. xiii-xiv). The fact that Socrates is debating with such a character and tailoring the conversation to suit may also provide some explanation of other dramatic and thematic elements in the text including the
Meno is represented as the character that moves from self assurance to confusion to reevaluation to knowledge. The dialogue is often interpreted as a study of the nature of virtue, whether virtue can be taught and an introduction to the recollection theory. However, understood in light of the plot and its implications, the crux of the text is the example of an individual who proceeds through stages of self-critical evaluation analogous to the life-death-rebirth plot. The issue he is debating happens to be virtue and the metaphysical/epistemological context used to explain learning is recollection, but it is Meno’s recognition of philosophical inquiry and the correct use of hypotheses involved in it that abide by the plot and therefore dominate the meaning of the work.

b. Socrates

When a dualist worldview is accepted one of its concomitant elements is a mediator between the two realms. In different cultures this figure is known as a shaman, priest or priestess, wizard or witch. The important attribute to consider about all these personalities is that they exist on the fringe of society; they disrupt what is commonplace; they break down barriers between levels of society or boundaries of thought; they shatter previous hypotheses and allow new hypotheses to emerge and assist in establishing them as valid, and, sometimes, they are the connection between this world and the next. As a literary device this character is traditionally known as the trickster and has its origins in mythic references because of the religious nature of the statements - they must be believed in and not questioned.

61 In contrast to Klein, Sternfeld and Zyskind argue that the Plato is less concerned with who Meno is and is more interested in illustrating what happens to him ([1978] p. 7). They compare the plot to Sophacles’ *Oedipus Rex* because both Oedipus and Meno are transformed by the realization of their true identities (also see p. 13 for other parallels). And, see pp. 8-18 for a step by step analysis of Meno’s transformations in the dialogue which reflects, to some extent, the plot structure I postulate here. Sternfeld and Zyskind also compare briefly the roles of Meno and Anytos, who is not willing to journey through the course of development that Meno goes through (pp. 8-9).

62 There are many other important features of Meno’s character that I will not go into here. For instance, Scott discusses the influence of Gorgias on Meno’s personality and his arguments ([2006] pp. 23-25). In addition, Scott alludes to the significant differences between Plato’s Meno and Xenophon’s account of Meno up until his punishment and death (pp. 64-65).

all ancient mythologies. The plot used by Plato requires a trickster for many of the above functions.

Trickster is constantly tricking and being tricked. The purpose of such tales is to bring about psychotherapeutic change in the individuals who hear the tales. As Trickster changes from an amoral, instinctual, amorphous, desocialized, subhuman being to a character who has the right to govern an earth of his own, the students of the tale are expected to see their own behavior in the Trickster and to desire such a transformation in themselves.64

There are many features of Socrates’ role in the dialogue that indicate that he occupies the role of trickster. First, he admits to knowing nothing but leads his interlocutor to an advanced position of knowledge. Trickster characters are never simply ‘fools’ but help others access important things through their antics. Second, he drives Meno to perplexity – tricksters are recognized as people that disconcert others by challenging their perspectives. In the next part I will explain the relevance of the themes and motifs in the early part of the dialogue in relation to highlighting Socrates’ trickster status. Third, Socrates sets up the dualist framework of the cosmos and makes reference to traditions well-known for their connection with liminality, i.e. Orphism and Pythagoreanism. Finally, for Meno, Socrates is the mediator between the ignorance associated with this world and the knowledge associated with the beyond.

c. The slave boy

The use of a slave boy is particularly interesting and is an extremely clever tool used by Plato.65 A quintessentially liminal figure, the slave boy gains geometrical

64 Lundquist (1991) pg. x.
65 Thompson, following Fritzscbe’s suggestions, describes the slave boy as an abstraction and not a real character – he represents an example of a blank mind ([1901] pg. xxiv). His social status, his relation to Meno, Socrates’ style of communication with him, and the effect of his participation on the dialogue proves he is much more than a conceptual tool. Thomas also criticizes the view that the slave boy is an abstraction ([1980] p. 24).
knowledge – which indicates the spiritual egalitarianism associated with the plot – but, more importantly, his part in the experiment contributes to Meno’s ‘rebirth’. By learning about geometry the slave ignites an intellectual spark in Meno that leads him to realize what philosophical learning entails. It is possible to interpret the slave as an extension of Socrates’ function in revitalizing Meno. The slave’s lack of physical and personal attributes is a curious technique Plato uses and is unprecedented in other dialogues. Socrates needs the slave for his argument/demonstration and the slave needs Socrates’ assistance to recollect. The dynamic between the two becomes more of a partnership and the liminal features exhibited by the two characters justifies the possibility of a working relationship and combines them in the text on a theoretical as well as a social and personal level.

3.1.7 Index of themes and motifs

a. Setting (critical indications relating to method of analysis and arriving at unreasonable consequences)
   - Reference to Gorgias and the men from Larissa (70b-c):
   - Examples of Meno being quick to answer questions; providing short pithy answers; no use of hypothesis or well thought out inference and no consideration of conclusions (71e-72a)

Recognizing the myth/hypothesis in the Meno as interconnected with the arguments as a mutual scaffolding unity is beneficial for many reasons. One of the functions of the references to mythic ideas and traditions is that it imports the life-death-rejuvenation plot with which to understand the arguments and the course of the dialogue. This in turn

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66 By the end of dialogue it becomes clear that the slave boy is not inferior to both Meno and Anytus. In fact, Socrates is promoting a kind of epistemological egalitarianism unique to the Meno (Scott [2006] pp. 106-108).
influences the character selection and the dynamics of the interaction between the interlocutors and their relation with other figures in the dialogue. In addition the myth assists in interpreting certain motifs and indicators used by Plato. When the plot and the characters are seen as influential to understanding the meaning of the dialogue literary and mythical symbols are illuminated as part of the larger picture instead of reduced to supposedly minor elements for illustration. Plato’s integrated use of mythos and logos, in contrast to other methods of interpreting the relationship, can enhance a reading of the dialogue by decoding some of the peculiar elements of the text that do not stand out or are deemphasized.

b. Indications of, and references to, how a hypothesis must or must not be used

- Failure of investigation without a defined hypothesis (71e-75a)
- Success of investigation with a defined hypothesis (75b-76d)
- Socrates’ reference to his model (75b-76d) of a good hypothesis (79a-b)
- Bad hypothesis and its unsuccessful use (77b-78e)
- Reference to use of agreed terms (79d)
- Bad hypothesis (80d)
- Good hypothesis (81b-c)
- Slave boy reaches perplexity but is in a good situation because myth/hypothesis is good (84b)
- Outcome of a good hypothesis (86b-c)
- Use of hypothesis (86e-87c)

The passages involving Socrates’ argument prior to the myth – Meno’s reactions and Meno’s argument against learning – include some unique transformational symbolism which expresses a quality of liminality. These elements are significant because they indicate, on the one hand, the importance of a radical interference for challenging simple systems of thinking and, on the other hand, Meno’s own subscription to a tendency to
Meno’s submission, in the form of his paradox, comes following a series of questions and answers about the definition of virtue when Socrates leaves Meno in a state of aporia. Meno credits Socrates for perplexing him and uses metaphors such as “magic” and “witchcraft” to describe Socrates’ technique and the sting of a “flat sting ray” to express how he feels after debating with Socrates. Meno also mentions that Socrates’ physical appearance resembles a sting ray and that his behavior will be labeled wizardry if he did the same thing in other cities. I believe Plato selected these symbols very carefully and injected them into the dialogue in order to have a special effect and to foster a particular understanding of the surrounding discussion and the characters involved. The fact that these metaphors and mythic symbols all appear after Socrates confuses Meno, and all in the same paragraph, is not a mere coincidence. It is important to recognize that the first dialectical exchange begins without a hypothesis and ends in aporia. The investigations following the slave boy experiment and the passages dealing with recollection lead to Meno’s approval and consequences promoting philosophical inquiry. The later lines of investigation in the dialogue end in aporia, as well, and, consistent with the first line of inquiry, do not begin with a hypothesis.

The text depicts Meno’s simple uncritical conclusion as being disrupted by trickster devices. For example, the use of terms such as magic and witchcraft to characterize Socrates’ actions along with the feeling that Meno is left with are traits and activities of the trickster figure. The placing of these elements is pivotal since they can be understood after Socrates’ ability to leave Meno confused and unsure of himself. However, more evidence is needed to connect the symbols to the trickster and the trickster to the scene.

c. Liminality (the Trickster)
Socrates perplexing Meno, magic and witchcraft to administer a spell, sting ray or torpedo fish, reference to the possibility of Socrates as a foreigner being arrested as a wizard (persecuted as a trickster) (80a-b)

- The use of the slave boy to demonstrate and humble Meno
- Dualism motifs: Prenatal existence, Post-death existence, Transmigration of soul (Orphic and Pythagorean elements and Pindar’s poem)

There are more fascinating references to ancient mythology to support what I interpret as Plato’s use of the trickster literary device. Meno’s mention of a sting ray is relevant in this respect because of the mythically symbolic connection between the sting ray and Circe, an illusionist and witch. To support this interpretation one need only look at the use of the term wizard and witchcraft in the same paragraph and the connection between wizard and foreigner, which are roles indicative of a trickster. If it is true that Plato is introducing these motifs intentionally, and I believe he is, it will follow that Plato is here presenting Socrates as a trickster and illusionist. An illusionist because his first argument was intended to direct Meno to a state of ‘death’: perplexity involving doubt about one’s positions. In relation to the preceding argument that left Meno numb one can also interpret the whole scene as an illusion designed by Plato to disorient the reader, along with Meno, and setup his argument for the necessity of a hypothesis when conducting a philosophical investigation – something the earlier argument lacked.

Mutual scaffolding opens the possibility for recognizing these features and their importance to the dialogue. The technique shows us that the myth/hypothesis section presents a plot, determines characters and operates with arguments and also allows for the

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67 Scott describes the significance of some of these symbols in relation to Meno’s state of *aporia* but does not make the connection with the trickster or illusionist character ([2006] pp. 69-71).

68 In some cases tricksters have no gender which makes it easy to make the connection between Socrates and Circe, who was well known for casting spells and illusion. She was the one who sent her son Telegonus to find his father Odysseus. Telegonus’ spear had a stingray-spine tip which he used when he unwittingly killed his father. Also, before presenting the myth Socrates acknowledges that he heard the truth from men and women from religious groups. The recognition of women in this case, and not to mention the reverence of Persephone in the poem he quotes, defines Socrates’ character in ways that can be related to the role of trickster.
use of motifs and themes in other sections which surface in the argumentative parts as well as the literary illustration of the scenes.

d. Plot (Life-death-rebirth themes and motifs)

- Meno’s rejuvenation
- Slave’s recollection experience
- Test and modification of definition of virtue and its pedagogical possibilities
- Test and modification of different hypotheses
- Dualism motifs: Prenatal existence, Post-death existence, Transmigration of soul (Orphic and Pythagorean elements and Pindar’s poem)