

## THE SOCRATIC QUEST FOR DEFINITIONS AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE THEORY OF FORMS. A DISCUSSION NOTE

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It is often assumed that: (a) in his early dialogues Plato uses the character of Socrates to present some of his own views concerning the search for definitions in ethics, and (b) starting with the middle dialogues Plato's interests shift radically; in them he seems to be concerned with ontology, i.e. the theory of forms. Hence an exegetical puzzle arises: What *exactly* is the connection between the project of the early dialogues, the quest for Socratic definitions, and the emergence of the theory of Forms in the middle dialogues? In his early dialogues Plato often refers to what has come to be known as the "Principle of the Priority of Definitional Knowledge". However, if we accept G. Matthews' thesis that we ought to adopt an *aporetic* reading of the passages where this principle is referred to, the aforementioned exegetical problem can be readily resolved.

**Keywords:** Early dialogues – G. Matthews – *Meno* – Middle dialogues – The principle of the priority of definitional knowledge – *Phaedo* – Plato – Socrates – The theory of Forms

### I

Contemporary scholars accept that the Platonic works may be divided into three categories: (a) the early or Socratic dialogues, e.g. *Apology*, *Protagoras* and *Euthyphro*, (b) the middle dialogues, e.g. *Phaedo*, *Republic* and *Symposium*, and (c) the late dialogues, e.g. *Statesman*, *Laws* and *Timaeus*.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it seems that nowadays most interpreters reject the view that in the early dialogues Plato simply records what his teacher, Socrates, actually said.<sup>2</sup> They maintain that in these works, as in the rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there is intense disagreement among scholars about: (a) the basis on which this division is to be made, and (b) the precise membership of each one of these three categories. These are issues I do not intend to address here. For further details concerning these matters, see e.g. Demas, 2000: 120-124, Kraut, 1992 and Prior, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> This view is usually associated with the work of J. Burnet (1928). For a useful discussion concerning the content of Socrates' teaching, and whether this may be discerned through the Platonic dialogues, see Prior, 2006.

*corpus*, Plato expounds his own philosophical ideas.<sup>3</sup>

In *Metaphysics* A. 6. 987b1-10, Aristotle makes some interesting comments about Socrates and Plato.<sup>4</sup> He states that Socrates, the historical person, was only concerned with ethical matters. If we are to believe Aristotle, he focused exclusively on the quest for definitions within the field of ethics. What's more, the *Metaphysics* A. 6 report tells us that although Plato embraced Socrates' teaching, he eventually broadened the scope of his interests. He went on to deal not just with ethics but also with matters pertaining to the "world of nature as a whole" (987b2). And as Aristotle claims, Plato's greatest innovation, and his main difference from Socrates, was the introduction of the theory of Forms.

The majority of commentators acknowledge that Aristotle's report is congruent with the textual evidence. If the modern orthodox position regarding the early dialogues is accepted, then it seems that in these works Plato in effect continues with his teacher's project. He uses the character of Socrates in order to present some of his own views concerning the search for definitions in the field of ethics. On the other hand, it is quite clear that in the middle dialogues Plato begins to explore issues beyond ethics. What is most significant is that in these dialogues he moves away from the Socratic project aimed at providing satisfactory analyses for moral concepts. He is now pre-occupied with an ontological theory, i.e. the theory of Forms.

To sum-up, many scholars adopt a developmental approach to the Platonic works. They assert that in the early dialogues Plato carries on with his teacher's philosophical project, whereas in the middle dialogues he expands his interests and he formulates the theory of Forms.<sup>5</sup> Although I find this general line of interpretation to be credible, it seems to me that commentators have not adequately dealt with two related questions. Is there a connection between the project of the early dialogues, i.e. the quest for definitions, and the introduction of the theory of Forms in the middle dialogues? If so, then what *exactly* is this connection? In this paper I propose to address the questions just posed. To anticipate briefly, I intend to argue that:

– There is no doubt that in the Socratic dialogues Plato is concerned with the task of defining various moral concepts.

– Apparently, in these works Plato often mentions the "Principle of the Priority of Definitional Knowledge" = "If a person fails to know what *F*-ness is, then this person fails to know, for any *x*, that *x* is *F*".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Demas, 2000: 123-124 and Kraut, 1992: esp. pp. 3-4, and fn. 11. Compare with Prior, 2006: esp. pp. 31-35.

<sup>4</sup> See also *Metaphysics* M. 4. 1078b12-32 and 9. 1086a24-b4.

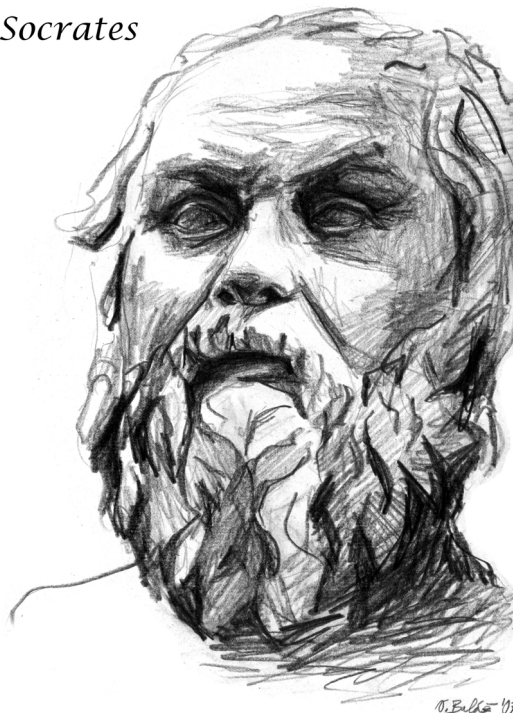
<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this issue, i.e. the developmental reading of the Platonic dialogues, see Rowe, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Not all commentators adopt this terminology. What is here labeled as the "Principle of the Priority of Definitional Knowledge" is sometimes referred to as the "The Socratic Fallacy" or "The Intellectualist Assumption". For further discussion of this point, see e.g. Dancy, 2006: 72. See also the relevant material in section II below.

– If we admit an aporetic reading of the passages where this principle is referred to, as it has been suggested by G. Matthews, then we can also explain the seemingly sudden emergence of the theory of Forms in the middle dialogues.<sup>7</sup> We may readily construe this ontological thesis as part of the attempt to resolve an epistemological puzzle that arises within the context of the Socratic dialogues.

In other words, I mean to argue that there is a certain kind of thematic continuity between the early and the middle Platonic works.

## Socrates



## II

In the early dialogues, the character of Socrates asks his interlocutors questions such as these: “What is piety?” and “What is courage?”<sup>8</sup> If we are to make any progress with our discussion, then we need to consider, albeit very briefly, the general structure of the Socratic search for definitions in these works.

Let us take a quick look at the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue Socrates encounters Euthyphro on his way to the court. Socrates inquires about his interlocutor’s business there and is told that he is prosecuting his father for the murder of a servant. Furthermore, Euthyphro states that: (a) both his father and the rest of his relatives believe that “... it is impious for a son to prosecute his father” (4e), (b) his relatives’ attitudes towards piety are plainly wrong (4e), and (c) he has “accurate knowledge of all such things” (5a). This much gives Socrates the opportunity to launch the process that has come to be known as the “Socratic *elenchus* (ἐλέγχος)”<sup>9</sup>. To begin with, he gets Euthyphro to admit that all “impious actions are impious and all pious actions pious through one form (ιδέα)” (5d).<sup>10</sup> And subsequently, he

<sup>7</sup> Matthews, 2006: esp. pp. 109-112.

<sup>8</sup> In this paper I assume that the name “Socrates” simply refers to one of the characters in the Platonic dialogues.

<sup>9</sup> There is quite a bit of literature on the Socratic *elenchus*. However, the following are particularly useful: Benson, 1987; Vlastos, 1983; Young, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> As Dancy, 2006: 73 points out, the word “ιδέα” was “... common enough in Greek as a term for characters or qualities of things”, and it was “... used by people who had no profound ideas about the ontological status of characters or qualities”. It appears, then, that in the early dialogues “ιδέα” is used

makes a request:

Tell me then what this form itself is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not (*Euthyphro* 6e).<sup>11</sup>

There are quite a few issues here that deserve examination.<sup>12</sup> For our present purposes, however, it suffices to note just two things. First, in this passage Socrates asks his interlocutor, who has just claimed that he knows what piety is, to provide him with the relevant definition. More specifically, he expects Euthyphro to supply informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for any action or person to be pious. And second, in the *Euthyphro* the search for a definition of piety ends up in impasse. Socrates' request for such a definition remains unfulfilled, as he manages to find fault with all the proposals put forward by his interlocutor.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Laches* the initial topic of discussion is whether instruction in the art of fighting in heavy armor is advantageous for young men (181c). Soon enough though, Socrates directs the focus of investigation towards a related question: "What is courage?" (e.g. 190e). That is to say, in this dialogue Socrates asks his interlocutors to provide informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for any action or person to be courageous. Socrates' principal interlocutor, the distinguished general Laches, makes several attempts to give a definition of courage. As expected, however, Socrates manages to find problems with all the suggestions made by Laches (191a-201c). Hence, this quest for a definition also ends up in impasse.

The pattern we find in the *Euthyphro* and the *Laches* is repeated in each and every one of the early dialogues. Socrates asks his interlocutors questions like the following: "What is piety?", "What is courage?", "What is friendship?", "What is justice?" and "What is the fine, or the beautiful?". His interlocutors do their very best to satisfy his demands for a definition of *F*-ness, where *F*-ness is a moral concept, but invariably their efforts prove to be unsuccessful. It seems, then, that in every early dialogue the character of Socrates launches a search for the definition of some concept within the field of ethics. Yet, all attempts to reach a result fail, and thus the dialogues culminate in stalemate.

At this point one obvious question arises: "What is Plato trying to do in the early dialogues?". As is well known, in these works the character of Socrates professes ignorance.

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in this non-technical sense; i.e. it does not refer to the transcendental entities of the middle dialogues. More generally, it makes good sense to speak of "forms" in the early dialogues, and of "Forms" in the middle dialogues.

<sup>11</sup> Grube's (1981: 10-11) translation.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in our passage Plato seems to suppose that in a proper definition the *definiens* must provide us with a paradigm by comparison with which cases of its *definiendum* may be determined. This is undoubtedly an idea that feeds into the theory of Forms in the middle dialogues. Nevertheless, this is an issue that cannot be dealt with here. For a detailed treatment of the issue just noted, as well as of some other related ones, see Dancy, 2006: esp. pp. 71-79.

<sup>13</sup> *Euthyphro* 6e-16a.

To return to the two examples examined above, in the *Euthyphro* and the *Laches* Socrates explicitly states that he does not himself know what piety or courage are.<sup>14</sup> In addition, he asserts that the issues under consideration are of some importance. For instance, he claims that it is beneficial for one to possess knowledge of what piety is, as such knowledge is required if one is to lead a virtuous life.<sup>15</sup>

Some interpreters suppose that the Socrates of the early dialogues does in fact know the answers to the questions he poses. They assume that he does possess knowledge of what, let us say, piety or courage are, and that he does in general have the kind of knowledge that is conducive to moral life. In these works, the argument goes, Socrates' primary aim is to expose his interlocutors' ignorance about the matters discussed. Thus, his own ignorance is really insincere and ironic.<sup>16</sup> This thesis is certainly plausible and worth examining. Nonetheless, it will not be further discussed in this paper. In what follows I will directly proceed to argue that: (a) it makes sense to suppose that Socrates' declarations of ignorance are in fact sincere, and (b) his ultimate goal in the early dialogues is to highlight a particular epistemological puzzle.

Many scholars take it that in the early dialogues the character of Socrates expresses his firm commitment to the Principle of the Priority of Definitional Knowledge (**PDK**):

**PDK** = If a person A fails to know what *F*-ness is, then A fails to know, for any *x*, that *x* is *F*.<sup>17</sup>

The fact of the matter is that there are plenty of places where Socrates appears to be making references to **PDK**. For example, in the *Euthyphro* (6d-e) he informs his interlocutor that he is asking for a definition of piety, as he wants to be in a position to determine whether any action or person is pious (rather than impious). In the *Hippias Major*, where the issue under consideration is "What is the fine/the beautiful (τὸ καλόν)?" Socrates closes his final speech to Hippias with the following question:<sup>18</sup>

... how can you know whose speech, or any other action, is beautiful/fine or the reverse when you have no knowledge of the fine?

Apparently, the question posed here is this: If one does not know what the fine is, i.e. if one fails to give informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be fine, then how can one know of anything that it is fine?

In light of the above, can we presume that in the early dialogues Socrates affirms his

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<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *Euthyphro* 15c-16a, and *Laches* 200e-201b.

<sup>15</sup> *Euthyphro* 15e-16a.

<sup>16</sup> For a defense of this view, see Kahn, 1996: e.g. pp. 201. See also Ferejohn, 2006: esp. pp. 147-151.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Benson, 2000: 113 and Dancy, 2006: 72. It is worth noting that Benson, 2000: 113 takes it that **PDK**, as stated above, forms only part of the Principle of the Priority of Definitional Knowledge. See Matthews, 2006: 107-110 for a discussion of this point.

<sup>18</sup> *Hippias Major* 304e. The following is Jowett's (1961: 1559) translation, with some modifications.

commitment to the priority of definitional knowledge over knowledge of instances? That is to say, is it reasonable to suppose that he adopts the thesis that: If A does not have prior knowledge of the definition of *F*-ness, then it is not possible for A to know, for any particular *x*, that *x* is *F*? There are quite a few difficulties for this reading of the related texts. I will sketch out just two of them.

To assume that in the early dialogues Socrates expresses his allegiance to *PDK* is to impute on him a fallacious position. Somebody may not quite know what the definition of a cat is, but this same person may very well be in a position to state correctly, and with epistemic confidence, that the animal before him is a cat and not a dog. Likewise, even though we may not be able to say what courage is we can still identify central cases of courage, as well as central cases in which this is lacking. In other words, it turns out that even if we don't possess knowledge of a pertinent definition, we can still identify individuals within a certain kind. And, if this ability we have to identify individuals doesn't count as knowledge, then it is very hard to see why this is so.<sup>19</sup> In fact, this is precisely why some commentators insist on labeling *PDK* as the "Socratic Fallacy".<sup>20</sup> It transpires, then, that it would be uncharitable to suppose that in the early dialogues Socrates affirms his commitment to *PDK*.

There is yet another obvious problem with the interpretative claim that Socrates is committed to *PDK*. If we do allow that in the early dialogues he asserts his allegiance to this principle, then a certain conclusion seems to follow. Socrates himself cannot consistently state that he knows of any action or person that they are *F*, where *F* is a moral concept, unless he can offer a definition of *F*-ness. As some recent commentators have pointed out, however, there is textual evidence which indicates that Socrates is prepared to say of some *x* that it is in fact *F*, even though he can't provide a definition of *F*-ness.<sup>21</sup> Consider, for example, *Apology* 29b where Socrates states that: "I do know ... that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong [and] to disobey one's superior".<sup>22</sup> In the *Apology* Socrates does not provide informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for an action to count as being wicked and shameful. Yet, he is prepared to claim that he does know that to do wrong and to disobey one's superior is wicked and shameful. In a similar manner, in the *Laches* (191d-e) Socrates states that there are certain people who are obviously courageous. And again, he makes this statement without having first provided a relevant definition.

Are we to suppose that in the early dialogues Plato, through the character of Socrates, expresses his commitment to a position that is fallacious? Or, are we to take it that in the *Apology* and the *Laches* Socrates blatantly flouts a principle he has putatively asserted elsewhere? It seems that there is a way to rescue Plato from these problems. What I would like to suggest is that that we ought to adopt G. Matthews' proposal that in the early dia-

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Dancy, 2004: ch. 2, esp. pp. 35-41.

<sup>20</sup> See Dancy 2004: ch. 2 for some relevant references.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Matthews, 2006: esp. pp. 107-109 and Dancy, 2004: ch. 2, esp. pp. 39ff.

<sup>22</sup> Grube's (1981: 34) translation.

logues Socrates does not quite assert the priority of definitional knowledge over knowledge of instances. Rather, we should admit an aporetic reading of the passages where **PDK** is referred to.

The thesis Matthews puts forward is roughly the following:<sup>23</sup>

1. Socrates' declarations of ignorance in the early dialogues are sincere.
2. In these dialogues the character of Socrates, very much like a modern philosopher, is trying to analyze a number of concepts within the field of ethics.
3. As the results of his various quests for definitions indicate, Socrates, like his modern counterparts, discovers that it is "maddeningly difficult ... to arrive at a satisfactory analysis of any philosophically interesting concept" (Matthews, 2006: 106).
4. In the passages where **PDK** is referred to, Socrates does not assert his unyielding commitment to this principle. His real objective in these texts is to express 'perplexity' (*ἀπορία*). More specifically, he is trying to point out that:
  - (i) It seems *prima facie* plausible to assume that if A is to know that some particular *x* is *F*, then A must be able to say what *F*-ness is.
  - (ii) Every attempt to reach a definition of *F*-ness, where this in the early dialogues is some moral concept, results in stalemate.
  - (iii) We appear to be in a position to state that we do know of some particular *x* that it is *F*, even when we don't know what *F*-ness is.
  - (iv) In light of the above, i.e. (i)-(iii), an epistemological puzzle arises: How is it possible for us to know that some *x* is *F* given the fact that we have no prior knowledge of what *F*-ness is?

The suggestion made here is that in the early dialogues Socrates does not firmly assert his commitment to **PDK**. He only admits that this principle seems to be initially plausible. Furthermore, he implies that more often than not we are not able to provide a satisfactory account of what *F*-ness is, where *F*-ness is some moral concept. Despite our failure to give a definition of *F*-ness, Socrates goes on to claim, we seem to be in a position to assert that we do know of an individual *x* that *x* is *F*. Now, given the initial plausibility of **PDK** an obvious question crops up: How is it possible for one to know of an individual *x* that *x* is *F*, if one cannot provide a definition of *F*-ness? In other words, it appears that in the early dialogues Plato is in principle prepared to question the validity of **PDK**.

To spell things out a bit, Matthews' interpretation is based on a simple fact concerning philosophical inquiry. Anybody who has ever tried to do philosophy knows that it is extremely difficult to provide satisfactory definitions not just for moral concepts, but for just about any philosophically interesting concept. This is attested by the current state of the discussion concerning questions such as "What is a cause?" or "What is knowledge?". Our very best attempts to provide informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be *F* are constantly met by legitimate objections. To use one of Matthews' examples, after arduous efforts I may formulate the best possible analysis of what it is to

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<sup>23</sup> What follows is a very brief summary of Matthews, 2006: 105-111.

tell a lie. Let us suppose that our analysis of lying is this:

In saying to B that  $p$ , A tells a lie iff

- (i) it is false that  $p$ ;
- (ii) A believes that it is false that  $p$ ; and
- (iii) in saying to B that  $p$  A means to deceive B.<sup>24</sup>

Whether we like it or not, one may come up with a counterexample to this definition. For example, one may come up with a scenario where somebody does recognize that he is telling a lie, and nevertheless the case in question cannot quite fit the definition at hand.<sup>25</sup>

Matthews' thesis is that something akin to this is going on in the early dialogues. Plato uses the character of Socrates to establish certain things about the limits of epistemology. Through his various searches for definitions in the field of ethics he shows that the concepts under investigation are in the best of cases extremely difficult to analyze in a satisfactory way. He also recognizes that the thesis for the priority of definitional knowledge over knowledge of instances is initially plausible. That is to say, he recognizes that it is initially natural to assume that: if I am to know that any particular  $x$  is  $F$ , then I should first of all know what  $F$ -ness is. Finally, he acknowledges that we often seem to know that some  $x$  is  $F$  despite the fact that we can't give a satisfactory definition of  $F$ -ness. Thus, the ἀπορία noted earlier on arises: How can we possibly know that some  $x$  is  $F$  given the fact that we cannot give informatively necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be  $F$ ? Are we to question the priority of definitional knowledge? Or, is there something else here that is amiss with our epistemological assumptions?

The aporetic reading of the passages where references to **PDK** are made may help us cope with the problems noted earlier on. In particular, it may help us rescue Plato from the charges of (a) subscribing to a fallacious thesis, and (b) blatantly flouting **PDK** at a number of different places within the early dialogues. The question that remains to be addressed is this: Is such a reading of these texts exegetically sound?

It seems to me that there is no direct textual evidence in the early dialogues that can definitively settle this issue. *Euthyphro* 6d-e is open to the rival interpretation. It may be construed as a case where Socrates affirms his commitment to **PDK**. On the other hand, *Hippias Major* 304c-e is open to the aporetic reading sketched out above.<sup>26</sup> It is not my intention, however, to try to resolve this issue through a painstaking analysis of all the passages where Socrates makes references to **PDK**. As just noted, the aporetic reading may help us rescue Plato from some problematic views. What I would like to submit at this point, is that it is equally significant to recognize that this construal of the relevant texts can also help us put in to context the core thesis Plato introduces in the middle dialogues. To be more specific, it can help us explain the seemingly sudden emergence of the

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<sup>24</sup> See Matthews, 2006: 110.

<sup>25</sup> For example: A may tell B that  $p$ ;  $p$  is in fact false; A does know that  $p$  is false; but, A does not tell B that  $p$  with the intent to deceive him.

<sup>26</sup> This interpretation of *Hippias Major* 304c-e is argued for by Matthews, 2006: esp. pp. 107-109.



theory of Forms in these works. We will see how this may be done in the next part of the paper.

### III

The *Meno* is widely believed to be a transitional dialogue. Most commentators suppose that it stands somewhere between the early and the middle Platonic works.<sup>27</sup> This is not the place to indulge in a detailed analysis of the *Meno*. Nevertheless, I intend to argue that even a cursory consideration of this dialogue suffices to show that in it Plato takes the first step towards tackling the ἀπορία identified above. In what follows, we will also see that Plato pursues this task in a more systematic way in one of the middle dialogues, namely, the *Phaedo*.<sup>28</sup>

In the *Meno* Socrates asks his main interlocutor to give him a definition of ‘virtue’ (ἀρετή) (71c-d). To begin with, Meno is confident that he can provide a satisfactory analysis of the concept under investigation (71e). Soon enough though, Socrates’ interrogation (ἐλεγχος) forces him to admit that he cannot respond to the question he was asked (80a-b). Moreover, when Socrates invites him to join him in a common attempt to provide a definition of virtue (80c-d), the frustrated Meno states the notorious Paradox of Inquiry:<sup>29</sup>

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

It would certainly be a mistake to oversimplify what is going on in this passage as well as in the rest of the dialogue. At the very same time, I believe that it is fair to say that at least part of what Plato is trying to do in the *Meno* (80e-100b) is to prepare the ground for a response to the epistemological problem detected in the early dialogues.<sup>30</sup>

In our passage, *Meno* 80d, Socrates’ interlocutor poses at least one question: “If we don’t know anything at all about virtue, then how can we really even begin to inquire into what virtue is?”. What we need to acknowledge here is that although Meno’s challenge relates specifically to the effort to define virtue, the argument that follows in the dialogue, i.e. *Meno* 81a-86c, focuses on a wider epistemological issue. This is an argument to the effect that it is not futile to inquire into any *F*, even if we don’t presently know *F*.

The material in *Meno* 81a-86c is admittedly complex, and its reconstruction has caused quite a few disputes among scholars.<sup>31</sup> Yet, it seems to me that we may give a very

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion of this issue, see Matthews, 2006: 112.

<sup>28</sup> The same claim seems to apply to *Republic* V. 475c-480a. However, we will not have the chance to examine this text here.

<sup>29</sup> *Meno* 80d. The translation that follows is by Grube (1981: 69).

<sup>30</sup> It should be clarified that I don’t intend to give a thorough analysis of Meno’s Paradox of Inquiry. For a detailed treatment of it, see Kahn, 2006: esp. pp. 120-122. See also Fine, 1992.

<sup>31</sup> See some of the relevant references in Kahn, 2006: 132.

brief and sufficiently neutral description of the general argument in this difficult stretch of text. In order to rebut Meno's challenge, that if one does not know anything at all about *F*, then one cannot even begin to inquire into *F*, Socrates proceeds with the well-known interrogation of the slave-boy who has no knowledge of geometry whatsoever. Socrates presents the slave-boy with a specific problem in geometry, i.e. how to double the area of an arbitrary square. In the process of his customary questioning, he shows that his interlocutor goes through a number of stages:

Stage 1: The slave-boy falsely believes that he does know the solution to the problem.

Stage 2: The slave-boy recognizes the falsity of his belief and realizes his ignorance.

Stage 3: By means of constant examination the slave-boy is led to a number of innate true beliefs concerning the problem under examination.

Finally, Socrates asserts that if he further persists with the interrogation, then his interlocutor will eventually acquire knowledge that is "... as accurate as anyone's" (85c-d).

For our present purposes, it is important to note just two things. In the *Meno* Socrates clearly recognizes that a quest for knowledge cannot begin with the learner being in a state of an epistemic vacuum. He maintains that the slave-boy may achieve knowledge by means of considering a number of innate true beliefs.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Socrates takes it that learning is in fact recollection. That is to say, he supposes that to learn something is in effect to recover innate (but forgotten) knowledge (*Meno* 86b).<sup>33</sup>

To see how the material in the *Meno* is connected to the ἀπορία identified in the early dialogues, we need to take a quick look at the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo*, esp. 72e-77b, Plato revisits the main thesis of the *Meno*, i.e. the claim that "... what we call learning is really just recollection" (72e). Very briefly, in this stretch of text the character of Socrates argues along these lines:<sup>34</sup>

(i) We all seem to have some knowledge of what, let us say, equality is. That is, we all seem to have the kind of knowledge that is required to make judgments like the following: this stick here is equal (in length) to that other stick over there (e.g. 74a-b).

(ii) We could not possibly have acquired this kind of knowledge by means of observing particular objects, e.g. sticks, stones, etc. This cannot be the case as two particulars can remain the same, but they may still appear to one person to be equal and to another to be unequal (74b). In other words, we could not have acquired knowledge of what equality is by observing particular objects in the world, as all particulars suffer from some kind of ontological instability or deficiency (74d-e).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See e.g. *Meno* 85b-c.

<sup>33</sup> On this point, see also fn. 37.

<sup>34</sup> What follows is only a very brief outline of the argument in *Phaedo* 72e-77b. For a far more detailed treatment of it, see Bostock, 1986: 60-121.

<sup>35</sup> The issue of the ontological instability/deficiency of the particulars is dealt with in greater detail in *Republic* V. 475c-480a.

(iii) How are we, then, to explain our ability to make judgments about the various objects in the world? To return to our example, how can we explain the fact that we can tell that these sticks here are equal (in length) to each other? The only way to explain this ability of ours is to accept the existence of an entity beyond all particulars: the Equal itself. That is to say, we have to accept the existence of the Platonic Form of Equality (e.g. 76e-77a).

(iv) Putatively, our souls exist before we are born. And, before incarnation our souls somehow manage to acquire knowledge of the Forms. Upon birth, however, a man's soul forgets everything it has learned about the Forms (76c-77a).

(v) Given the background of the theory of Forms, we can explain our ability to make judgments about particulars. When we do recognize that two particular sticks are equal (in length) to each other, what happens is this: by observing these particulars we somehow recover or recollect our latent inherent knowledge of the Equal itself; thus, we recognize that the individual sticks are equal in the sense that they strive (unsuccessfully) to be like the corresponding Form (74d-75c).

In light of the argument in the *Phaedo*, we may now return to our point of departure. That is to say, we may now proceed to spell out the relation between the early and the middle Platonic works.

The aporetic reading of the passages in the early dialogues where *PDK* is referred to has many things going for it. As we have seen in the last part of the paper, it may help us shirk the claim that in the early dialogues Plato commits some serious blunders. If one accepts a developmental approach to the Platonic works, as we have done in this paper, then the aporetic reading may afford one with yet another significant advantage. The aporetic reading gives us the opportunity to claim a real continuity in Plato's thought. We may assume that in the early dialogues, and while attempting to carry on with his teacher's project, Plato discovers an epistemological puzzle. It seems natural to suppose that if A is to know that  $x$  is  $F$ , then A must have prior knowledge of what  $F$ -ness is. All our efforts to provide a satisfactory definition of  $F$ -ness end in impasse. And yet, we do seem to be in a position to recognize that some  $x$  is  $F$  despite our failure to know what  $F$ -ness is. How are we to resolve this rather disturbing epistemological puzzle? How are we to explain the fact that we can recognize that  $x$  is  $F$ , even though we don't have a relevant definition? This seems to be a recurring problem for the Socrates of the early dialogues.

As already indicated, in the *Meno* Plato takes the first step towards tackling the puzzle of the Socratic dialogues. In his effort to rebut Meno's paradox, Socrates claims to have established at least two things. First, if A is to get to know something, for instance that  $x$  is  $F$ , then A cannot begin from a state of an epistemic vacuum. All learning seems to be based on some pre-existing epistemic background that is germane to the issue under consideration. And second, and perhaps most important, Socrates contends that learning is nothing more than recollection. He supposes that to learn something is to gain access to latent innate knowledge.

One of the many exegetical problems facing the modern interpreter is that of ex-

plaining how Plato is led to the introduction of the theory of Forms.<sup>36</sup> More specifically, the question for the commentator is this: what is it that drives the move Plato makes *from* the Socratic project of the early dialogues *to* the seemingly sudden introduction of the theory of Forms in the middle dialogues? The answer to this question lies with the epistemological puzzle detected in the early dialogues. In the *Meno* Plato brings in the claim that learning is nothing more than recollection. As he moves into the *Phaedo* he further elaborates on this idea. He argues that when A recognizes that some particular  $x$  is  $F$ , A in reality gains access to his inherent knowledge of the Form of  $F$ -ness. In more detail, when A faces  $x$ , A gets to somehow acquire access to his innate but latent knowledge of the Form of  $F$ -ness. Thus, A recognizes that  $x$  is  $F$ , in the sense that A becomes aware of the fact that  $x$  is striving (unsuccessfully) to be like  $F$ -ness itself.

Under the interpretation advanced here, in the *Meno* Plato sets up the theoretical background for the resolution of the epistemological puzzle identified in the early dialogues. The theory of recollection is an important step towards the eventual introduction of the theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*. It is this theory that allows Plato to claim that human beings have access to latent *a priori* knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the Forms.<sup>37</sup> And, the theory of Forms appears to be Plato's response to the puzzle of the early dialogues. In light of this ontological theory, he can now formulate an answer to the question Socrates has struggled with in the early dialogues: How is it possible for us to know that  $x$  is  $F$ , given the fact that we have failed to provide a definition of  $F$ -ness? His response to this puzzle is quite easy to state. If one is to know that  $x$  is  $F$ , then one must have prior knowledge of what  $F$ -ness is.<sup>38</sup> To know what  $F$ -ness is, however, does not consist in being able to formulate a relevant definition by observing particulars in the world of the senses. In fact, this was the main problem with the Socratic project of the early dialogues, i.e. the quest for definitions. In the *Phaedo* Plato suggests that to know what  $F$ -ness is, is to be epistemically acquainted with a certain entity: the Form of  $F$ -ness. And, knowledge of the Form of  $F$ -ness cannot be attained *via* empirical observation. It is innate or *a priori* knowledge.

In other words, Plato responds to the epistemological puzzle of the early dialogues by claiming that it is in fact true that: to know of any  $x$ , that  $x$  is  $F$ , we need to have prior knowledge of what  $F$ -ness is. Stating this much, however, does not amount to asserting the priority of definitional knowledge over knowledge of instances. In the early dialogues Plato has established that every attempt to reach a definition of  $F$ -ness culminates in stalemate. As he explains in the *Phaedo*, and in a far more detailed manner in *Republic V* (esp. 475c-480a), we can't achieve a satisfactory analysis of  $F$ -ness by considering enti-

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<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Dancy, 2004: e.g. pp. 1-19.

<sup>37</sup> There are some indications in the texts, see e.g. *Meno* 86b-c, that Plato does not mean the talk about recollection to be taken quite literally. This seems to be his figurative way of referring to the manner in which we acquire access to innate or *a priori* knowledge. This is another issue we will not have the chance to deal with here. For a discussion of it, see Kahn, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> In the middle dialogues, Plato is no longer exclusively concerned with moral concepts. In these works,  $F$ -ness could be any type of philosophical concept.

ties in the world of the senses. Knowledge of what *F*-ness is constitutes epistemic acquaintance with the Form of *F*-ness which has existence beyond any of the particulars we customarily observe. This is *a priori* knowledge, and it is the kind of knowledge that enables us to recognize that some *x* is, let us say, *F*.

In the final analysis, the suggestion made here is that the theory of Forms is essentially Plato's answer to the epistemological puzzle of the early dialogues. It seems, then, that saving Plato from the charge of committing a number of obvious blunders is not the only advantage of accepting the aporetic reading of the passages where *PDK* is referred to. This reading of the texts can also help us connect the emergence of the theory of Forms to the project of the early dialogues, namely, the search for Socratic definitions.

#### IV

Obviously, there are a number of things that remain to be done here. For instance, we have seen that Plato's final verdict is that to know of any *x* that *x* is *F*, we need to have prior knowledge of what *F*-ness is. As it turns out, however, knowledge of *F*-ness is not quite definitional knowledge anymore. One thing that needs to be determined is the exact nature of the kind of knowledge Plato has in mind when he asserts that to know what *F*-ness is, is to be epistemically acquainted with the Form of *F*-ness. Furthermore, we need to determine whether the theory of Forms, as presented in the *Phaedo*, can actually perform its assigned task. That is to say, can it actually explain why a particular *x* may be said to be *F*? These issues, however, as well as some other related ones, cannot be dealt with here. The modest plan in this discussion note was to give a presentation of Matthews' aporetic reading of the early dialogues, and to highlight its merits as a means of connecting the Socratic quest for definitions to the introduction of the theory of Forms.

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