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Intellectualism and the Method of Hypothesis in Plato's Early Dialogues

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Plato's early dialogues have often been read as expressing his commitment to *Socratic intellectualism*, a kind of ethical rationalism centring on the thesis that virtue [*aretê*] consists in knowledge [*epistêmê*].[1] Socratic intellectualism comprises a whole cluster of theses organized around that one: that all the virtues are one; that virtue is acquired by purely cognitive means, so that affective factors are irrelevant to it; that weakness of will [*akrasia*] is impossible; that no one does wrong voluntarily; that the human soul is wholly rational; and that all desire is for the good. These views are standardly attributed at once to the Socrates of the early dialogues, to Plato as his author, and to the historical Socrates: the presumption is that the intellectualist package represents Plato's philosophical inheritance from his teacher. And as far back as the Aristotelian *Magna Moralia*, histories of ethics have often told a narrative of philosophical progress on which this ensemble of strange views is corrected by Plato in later works. When Plato divides the soul into rational and irrational parts in *Republic* IV, it is on this reading precisely in order to give non-rational motivations their due, to account for weakness of will, and in general to develop a more empirically adequate moral psychology (*Magna Moralia* I.1.7, 1182a24).

I will refer to this as the *Aristotelian reading*; and I will argue against it by proposing two claims, one about method and one about content. First, the early dialogues do not propound Socratic intellectualism *as doctrine*. Rather, they investigate it as a hypothesis, roughly in terms of the method of hypothesis proposed in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*.[2] Second, the Aristotelian reading distorts

[1] This 'standard intellectualist reading' has in recent years been subjected to several forceful challenges. (1) Kamtekar 2017, with which my reading has considerable common ground, uses hypothesis to explain what Socrates is up to in dialogues including the *Republic* and *Protagoras*. However, she does not use hypothesis as a framework for the kind of overall reading of the early dialogues which I here attempt. (2) Brickhouse and Smith 2010 offer a new reading of Socratic intellectualism which avoids committing him to denial of the reality and importance of non-rational desire. (3) Several recent studies have argued for continuities between the psychology of early/Socratic and middle/Platonic dialogues: see Carone 2001 and the other works cited in n. 69.

[2] So I take hypothesis to be Plato's method from the start; the *Meno* and *Phaedo* accounts represent a new reflectiveness about method rather than a change from one method to another. For what this implies about the 'Socratic *elenchus*', see the latter part of section 3.

Rachel Barney, *Intellectualism and the Method of Hypothesis in Plato's Early Dialogues* In: *Psychology and Value in Plato, Aristotle, and Hellenistic Philosophy: The Ninth Keeling Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*. Edited by: Fiona Leigh and Margaret Hampson, Oxford University Press. © Oxford University Press 2022. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192858108.003.0002

what intellectualism is. Its central thesis is not Socratic but sophistic, originating with Protagoras, and it is more precisely the claim that there is a *politikê technê*: an art of decision-making sufficient for expert political rule and for success in private life as well. Not all of the propositions traditionally taken as part of Socratic intellectualism form part of a natural package with that thesis, nor does Plato ever think that they do; and there is no reason to assume that its purpose or upshot was ever to downplay the ethical importance of our emotions and irrational desires. It is not a revisionist theory of human nature, but an educational and political programme, aimed at the reliable production of expert statesmen.

On the reading I propose, Plato's early dialogues—most of them, anyway—undertake to investigate this sophistic programme from a number of different angles.[3] The strategy by which they do so is sophistic as well: they present arguments both for and against it in the manner of Protagorean *antilogia*, 'argument on both sides of the question'.[4] What gives the investigation a distinctively Platonic twist is that these arguments are further structured by the method of hypothesis. How to understand that method is a notoriously difficult and controversial question. But I think it is safe to say that hypothesis is at once explanatory and, insofar as possible, deductive: a method for tracing the complex ways in which different philosophical theses are connected to each other in relations of grounding or explanation, entailment, and contradiction. In particular, by enabling us to hunt down and exclude propositions from which contradictions follow, the method promises a kind of magical way to get something for nothing, to make epistemic gold out of straw. For (like the other wonder-working method of early Greek philosophy, Gorgias' method of argument by elimination in the *Helen* and *On Not-Being*) it enables us to move from the unknown to the known, to eliminate certain positions as false without having to already know the true state of affairs. The early dialogues depict a single, awe-inspiringly complex inquiry in which Socrates applies this method to the most exciting ethical theory of the day: the Protagorean thesis that virtue is a *technê*.[5] It seems fair to presume that Plato

[3] By the 'early dialogues' I mean a conventional list linked both by thematic and by stylometric considerations, including the works on which Aristotle and the *Magna Moralia* evidently rely. I take the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Euthyphro*, and *Hippias Minor* to be the core texts in which the intellectualist hypothesis is investigated. Other early dialogues (including the *Ion*, *Hippias Major*, *Apology*, *Gorgias*, and *Lysis*) have distinctive agendas which set them somewhat apart. Still, each can be seen as contributing indirectly to the larger project I discuss. For instance, the inquiry into rhapsody in the *Ion* clarifies the requirements for something to be a craft [*technê*], which is obviously useful for determining whether virtue could be one; and the *Gorgias* can be read as interrogating the claims of Gorgianic rhetoric to be the art of successful living postulated by the hypothesis.

[4] Cf. Diogenes Laertius IX.51 (cf. IX.55) (DK80A1), Seneca *Letter* 88.43 (DK80A20).

[5] So I take Socrates to proceed on Plato's behalf, as his protagonist and philosophical deputy: Plato's texts *are* investigations of the intellectualist hypothesis, and they investigate by depicting Socrates' investigations. Whether there is daylight between the two—whether Plato ever presents his hero as going wrong, and other characters as having insights he lacks—are questions we can here leave open.

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hopes for a positive result: that he would not bother to work out in such tremendous detail a hypothesis which he did not find philosophically attractive and important. But that is not the same thing as even provisional *acceptance* of it; and his purpose in writing is to subject it to thorough scrutiny, not to persuade us of its truth.

This paper argues for this hypothetical reading in four stages. I begin in section 1 by noting some of the problems with the Aristotelian reading; turning to positive argument, section 2 then proposes that intellectualism is not Socratic but sophistic, and gives an account of what Plato takes it to mean. In section 3 I spell out what I take to be the key features of the method of hypothesis; section 4 shows that many discussions in the early dialogues are organized around intellectualism seen as a hypothesis in this sense. I conclude with some preliminary remarks on the question of what, by the time of the *Republic*, Plato might have taken his inquiry to have shown.[6] To do all this will require covering a lot of terrain quickly, and no doubt my argument will be insufficient to be fully convincing. But then the hypothetical reading is itself a hypothesis: my aim here is simply to set it forth, and to point out some of its advantages over the traditional alternative.

1. The Aristotelian Reading

According to Aristotle, Socrates claims that all the virtues are 'kinds of wisdom' [*phronêseis*] (*EN* VI.13, 1144b19–20) or 'kinds of knowledge' [*epistêmai*] (VI.13, 1144b28–30).[7] As corollaries to this intellectualist thesis, he also holds that we attain the virtues simply by coming to know them (*EE* I.5, 1216b4–11) and that weakness of will [*akrasia*] is impossible (*EN* VII.2, 1145b22–31). Further implications are spelled out in the *Magna Moralia*, a work included in the Aristotelian

[6] In holding that the positive upshot of the early dialogues is postponed to the *Republic*, the hypothetical reading is akin to the very illuminating proleptic reading of Kahn 1996. However, Kahn's framing sometimes suggests that the answers given in the *Republic* are already in the back of Plato's mind as he writes the early dialogues; on my reading, the early dialogues are the vehicle by which Plato figures out for himself what he thinks.

[7] My concern in this paper is with Plato's Socrates; if, as seems likely, Aristotle means to be reporting both on that figure *and* on the historical original, I set aside the question of what his further evidence for the latter might be. As will become clear in the latter part of section 1, a major difficulty with the standard intellectualist reading is that in the early dialogues the discussion of intellectualism sits uneasily alongside what looks like an *echt*-Socratic stratum of ethical commitments: these include a conception of wisdom as consisting essentially in humility and self-knowledge (*Apology*), a conception of justice as a kind of psychic health (*Crito*, *Gorgias*), and a strong skepticism about whether virtue can be taught (*Apology*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*). If *these* are the views which Plato's dialogues mean to depict as characteristic of Socrates, and if their attribution should be extended to the historical figure as well, then the historical Socrates was not an intellectualist either, and Aristotle's reading could not be derived from any *accurate* non-Platonic evidence regarding the historical original. But then I doubt that any of the authors of *Sokratikoi logoi* were primarily concerned to give a historically faithful portrait of Socrates himself.

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corpus but the authenticity of which is disputed.[8] The *MM* emphasizes Socrates' commitment to the thesis that the virtues are kinds of knowledge [*epistêmai*] (I.1.7, 1182a15–31, 1183b9–18, I.20.4, 1190b28–32) or reason [*logos*] (I.34.25, 1198a10–12). It also emphasizes the negative implications of that thesis: Socrates recognizes only a rational soul in human beings, 'doing away' with the irrational part; and he denies the importance of 'passion and character'—the emotional, affective, and non-rational factors in virtue and moral education (I.1.7, 1182a15–31). On this view, any non-rational virtues are otiose, since knowledge of virtue suffices for virtue (I.1.7, 1183b9–18); vice is involuntary (I.9.7, 1187a5–12) and, again, *akrasia* is impossible (II.6.2, 1200b25–30). The *MM* spells all this out the better to condemn it. That virtue involves only the rational soul is clearly false; and the denial of *akrasia* even more so:

> Because of this sort of argument he did not think that there was *akrasia*. But he was wrong. For it would be absurd for us, persuaded by this argument, to abolish what indisputably occurs. For people *are* akratic, and do bad things at the very time at which they themselves know them to be such.
>
> (*Magna Moralia* 1200b25–33)

So Plato sets moral psychology on the right track on the *Republic* when he divides the soul into rational and non-rational parts, and Aristotle makes further corrections: the *MM*'s story is one of rapid philosophical progress.

Now as presented by Aristotle and the *MM*, Socratic intellectualism is a deeply puzzling theory. Socrates is supposed to just insist, apparently with no attempt to 'save the phenomena', on some claims which seem to be refuted by our most ordinary experience of human action: that no emotional or irrational forces ever determine our agency, that no one ever acts out of weakness of will, and that philosophical discussion magically makes people good. But why would he, or anybody else, say such things?

Despite its apparent lack of charity, descendants of the Aristotelian reading remain prominent today, in the form of the 'standard intellectualist reading'.[9] So for instance in *Plato's Ethics*, Terence Irwin says, 'the doctrine we have found in the early dialogues corresponds very closely with the views that Aristotle ascribes to the historical Socrates'.[10] Charles Kahn, after a heroic attempt to make sense of intellectualism so understood, ends up describing it as essentially 'normative' or

[8] On the *MM*, see Simpson 2017. Nothing I say here depends on deciding the much-debated question of its authenticity.

[9] I do not mean to attribute the whole of the Aristotelian reading to any particular modern scholar: I take it to operate as a kind of shared baseline, subjected in each case to individual modifications. The most impressive account of Socratic intellectualism remains Irwin 1977: but some of Irwin's most interesting claims are not a standard part of the Aristotelian reading, so I do not focus on it here. Brickhouse and Smith 2010 discuss the recent history of the intellectualist reading in some detail.

[10] Irwin 1995, 242.

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'protreptic' rather than as a genuinely descriptive moral psychology.[11] Less sophisticated and sympathetic readers tend to end up suggesting that Socrates was engaging in a kind of projection, misled by the workings of his own psyche. For instance the translator of the Loeb edition of the *Magna Moralia* says in a footnote: 'Probably his extraordinary power of self-control made him under-rate the force of passion in others.'[12] This is obviously unsatisfying—as if we could explain the philosophical appeal of Kantian rationalism or Humean sentimentalism (or Cartesian dualism, for that matter) by proposing that it was true, or almost true, of the philosopher himself.

More important, anyone turning from these ancient or modern readings to the early dialogues themselves is in for a surprise. For there is remarkably little textual evidence here for some of the key propositions of 'Socratic intellectualism'. Plato's early dialogues simply do not discuss either the emotions or the nature of the soul, let alone propound sweepingly radical theories of them.[13] Nor does Socrates ever present a theory of how virtue is acquired: the only full picture of moral education given in the early dialogues belongs not to him but to Protagoras, and his 'Great Speech' emphasizes the importance of early non-rational conditioning (320d–328d).[14] *Akrasia* is denied in only one place, the *Protagoras*, and on the basis of a hedonistic hypothesis from which Socrates himself is markedly distanced (353a–358e). Moreover, that virtue is knowledge is firmly tied to the proposition that it is teachable; and Socrates regularly expresses scepticism about the latter, not only in the *Protagoras* (where it is presented as a standing conviction at 319a9ff.) but in the *Meno* (89d–96d) and *Apology*. The case of the *Apology* seems particularly significant, given its self-presentation as the defence of the historical Socrates and thus its self-appointed standing as a specially authoritative locus for *echt*-Socratic views. It is an underappreciated basic problem for the Aristotelian reading that in the *Apology* Socrates not only disavows any teaching of virtue himself, but refers to the sophistic project of doing so in snarky, implicitly condemnatory terms, as involving a claim to a wisdom beyond the human (20c–e).[15] That nobody has any such thing is not only clear from the tone of Socrates' remarks: it is also presented as the verdict of the Delphic oracle, which

[11] Kahn 1996, 226–33, cf. 241–75. [12] Armstrong in Tredennick and Armstrong 1935.

[13] This observation is at the root of the important and innovative reading of Brickhouse and Smith 2010, who credit the inspiration of Devereux 1995. Devereux infers that Socrates is in effect a Kantian: well aware of the power of our non-rational motivations, he ignores them because ignoring them, and behaving instead as reason dictates, is precisely what virtue requires (see esp. 406–8). In Barney 2021 I present a reading which reaches the same conclusion by a different route: a Platonic craft imposes unhypothetical imperatives on the genuine practitioner (the 'doctor qua doctor'), so if virtue is a *technê* it too must involve a commitment to following the dictates of a disinterested practical reason.

[14] *Gorgias* 460a–e is sometimes cited as support for the Aristotelian attribution to Socrates of a simplistic intellectualism about moral education: but the argument here is *ad hominem* against Gorgias, and tells us nothing about what Socrates or Plato himself thinks that learning justice might require.

[15] Given that perhaps the strongest count against taking Plato's Socrates to be an intellectualist is his skepticism about the teaching of virtue, it is possible that we should read him as simultaneously

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would otherwise be making a terrible mistake in his regard (23a–b). All this should give us a serious *evidentiary qualm* about several key parts of the Aristotelian reading.

And this dovetails with the *philosophical* qualm at which I have already hinted. When Plato introduces the new moral psychology of *Republic* IV, it is on the basis of utterly unsurprising observations about irrational desires, mental conflict, and *akrasia*. It is hard to believe that in his earlier work Plato meant simply to deny the reality of these phenomena. If on the other hand he was for all that time reflectively committed to an intellectualist theory which in his considered view had an adequate way to account for them, how could that commitment be so easily dislodged?[16]

Finally, the aspects of Socratic intellectualism which do make an appearance in the early dialogues are not discussed in the *spirit* which the Aristotelian reading would lead one to expect: so there is room for a third, *methodological* qualm here as well. Though the idea that virtue is knowledge does figure heavily in the early dialogues, there is not a single dialogue in which Socrates explicitly and unequivocally defends it as doctrine.[17] The *Protagoras* seems to be Aristotle's principal source;[18] and it does include arguments for the identity of the other virtues with wisdom. But again, the only general and conclusive-looking argument to that effect is *ad hominem*, dependent on the hypothesis of hedonism and distanced from Socrates himself in a number of ways. Moreover, the *Protagoras* opens with Socrates presenting an argument *against* the claim that virtue can be taught, suggesting a presumption on his part that it is *not* knowledge (319a–320c). Most readers feel that Protagoras refutes this successfully, but it is hardly obvious that in doing so he speaks for Plato—let alone, somehow, for Socrates. Socrates' own conclusion in the *Protagoras* is thoroughly aporetic: if the discussion had a voice of its own, he says, it would say that both he and Protagoras were ridiculous for changing sides, and that further investigation is needed (361b–c). The *Meno* in

inclined to believe (a) that virtue is a kind of knowledge; (b) that virtue cannot be taught; and (c) that whatever is knowledge is teachable—so that the urgency of his investigations comes from the awareness that his own views on the topic are in an unacceptable state of incoherence.

[16] In his comments, Terence Irwin refers to my view as being that 'Aristotelian Socratic intellectualism (i.e. Socratic Intellectualism as expounded by Aristotle), is not only false, but so boringly false that we ought to doubt whether Socrates could have seriously affirmed it.' And he notes that the position in question is taken very seriously by Aristotle as well as being revived by the Stoics, showing that it is a worthy view for an intelligent philosopher to have held. I do not really disagree, and do not mean to claim that the 'Socratic' view is boringly false. What I do claim is that it is *prima facie* subject to certain obvious empirical objections, against which careful explanation and defence is required. If Socrates and Plato mean to assert the 'Socratic' view in the early dialogues, it is surprising that so little defence along these (later, Stoic) lines is provided; and if Plato is for mysterious reasons keeping such a defence in reserve, it is surprising that he would later take the story of Leontius as decisive against it.

[17] Here and in the first part of the next section I rehearse a line of argument now published as sections I and II of Barney 2021. I have tried to avoid redundancy in the framing.

[18] This is of course speculative, but the *Protagoras* is the only obvious source in Plato for the denial of *akrasia*, and an equally good source for the claim that all the virtues are *phronêseis* or *epistêmai* (cf. 357b–e, 361b).

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a way comes closer to fitting the Aristotelian reading; for it does include a clear and complete argument to the effect that virtue is knowledge (86e–89a). However, Socrates then proceeds to argue *against* that conclusion, recycling arguments from the *Protagoras* (89d–96d). And the upshot seems to be that at least *some* virtue is *not* knowledge, but rather a matter of divine luck and correct belief (99a–b).

So neither the *Meno* nor the *Protagoras* propounds the intellectualist thesis in the single-sided, unambiguously affirmative way that we standardly take as the marker of authorial doctrine. And it is not that Socrates argues only tentatively and dialectically for what is nonetheless clearly his own view: rather, these dialogues present inconclusive arguments on *both* sides, and in doing so exemplify a recognized ancient philosophical genre. For they are exercises in sophistic *antilogikê*, 'argument on both sides' of a disputed question. The form of *antilogia* was associated with Protagoras; and one thing the *Protagoras* is evidently intended to prove is that Plato can do it better than the master himself. But how to extract positive philosophical morals from Platonic exercises in this sophistic form is surely a tricky question, to be handled with caution.[19]

Now in one dialogue, the *Euthydemus*, Socrates does argue, with no counter-argument in sight, that knowledge or wisdom is the cause of happiness: for it is knowledge which reliably causes success in deliberation and in the use of other goods (281b). And this idea, which has echoes in the *Meno* (88a–89a) and *Protagoras* (344e–345c, 352b–358c), gives us a helpful sense of how intellectualism might first have been attractively formulated. It suggests that we are to hear the intellectualist hypothesis as the claim that only the person with practical wisdom—a kind of generalized deliberative expertise [*technê*] analogous to that of the specialized craftsperson (cf. *Protagoras* 318e5–319a2)—acts with reliable success, and so counts as having virtue. (I will turn in a moment to the question of what that line of argument presupposes about 'virtue'.) But the *Euthydemus* argument proceeds by linking knowledge and happiness without using virtue as middle term, so that it can only be rather oblique evidence for the intellectualist hypothesis strictly speaking.[20] In the *Meno*, a similar argument from successful agency *is* taken as a reason to identify virtue with knowledge—but this is the later argument overturned by the counter-argument that true belief should also count. So the argumentation of the *Euthydemus* is neither complete nor the final word. And this is unsurprising given that it is explicitly offered as an exercise in *protreptic*—that is, as an advertisement for philosophy, not an exposition of its final results.

[19] The problem is most obvious in the case of the *Cratylus*, an exercise in *antilogia* on the question whether there is a natural correctness of names, the upshot of which is unclear and remains highly controversial.

[20] This is all the more puzzling given that Socrates does group wisdom and virtue together just before and after the argument at 278d3 and 283a4 (cf. 283b3 and more generally 273d–275a).

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The dialogues which discuss the particular virtues provide even less compelling evidence for taking 'Socratic intellectualism' as Platonic doctrine. The relation of virtue to knowledge is certainly a central topic. The *Laches* and *Charmides* discuss definitions of courage and *sôphrosunê* respectively as knowledge or wisdom (*Laches* 194d–199e, *Charmides* 165c–175a); and one definition of piety in the *Euthyphro* is as knowledge of how to sacrifice and pray (14b–15c). Indeed at *Laches* 194d, Nicias introduces his intellectualist account of courage by saying to Socrates: 'I have often heard you say that every one of us is good with respect to that in which he is wise and bad in respect to that in which he is ignorant' (194d).[21] But all of these definitions are *rejected* for various reasons: these definitional dialogues end in *aporia*, with no satisfactory account of the virtue in question.

The aporetic form of these dialogues, and their deployment of *antilogikê*, do not imply that it is *impossible* to extract any positive philosophical results from them. Nor does the complexity of their interrelations, with the *prima facie* results of one dialogue reconsidered and sometimes overturned in another, show that no overall story about their doctrinal content can be told. But both factors should make us wary of any assumption that they *must* be read as straightforward exercises in the exposition of doctrines to which Socrates and his author are themselves committed. On the contrary: the discussions in which Socrates considers the intellectualist hypothesis have none of the conclusiveness, comprehensiveness, and consistency which would provide the appropriate basis for the Aristotelian reading. Were it not for Aristotle, and certain modern assumptions about what philosophical writing must do, we would find it natural to speak of intellectualism not as a theory being affirmed by Socrates, but as a topic of debate: a fascinating proposal being subjected to repeated and apparently inconclusive examination. It isn't like empiricism in Epicurus or materialism in Hobbes, a dogma to be hammered home; it's more like forgiveness in Mozart and marriage in Wagner—a thematic obsession, an endlessly fascinating possibility returned to with different results every time.

2. The Intellectualist Hypothesis

In this section I will say a bit more about what I take the appeal of the intellectualist hypothesis to be, and how we should understand 'virtue' and 'knowledge' in its equation of the two. To begin with another negative point: it should already be

[21] This usually is read as attributing the whole of the account which follows to Socrates, as a matter of standing conviction. But not only does he go on to reject Nicias' definition in the *Laches* itself; all that is here ascribed to him is the sort of inductive inference from non-moral kinds of goodness (the person who is good at playing the lyre is the one who wise about it, i.e. has been educated in it, and so forth) which we see in the *Euthydemus* argument, and which the *Meno* refutes. Except as otherwise noted, translations of Plato are from the various hands in Cooper (ed.) 1997, sometimes with revisions.

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clear that the traditional phrase *Socratic* intellectualism is a misnomer. For, on Plato's own evidence, that virtue is knowledge is the signature promise of the professional sophists who present themselves as teachers of it—above all, Protagoras in the *Protagoras*. The advanced version of the *politikê technê* which he teaches consists, as he says, in the art of 'good deliberation [*euboulia*]', sufficient for success in both private life and politics (318e5–319a2).[22] As already noted, both the *Apology* and the *Protagoras* represent Socrates himself as deeply skeptical of this advertisement (319a–320b, 361a, *Apology* 19d–20c with 22a–23b). If anything, Plato's Socrates is presumably meant to strike us—and to indicate that the historical Socrates struck Plato—as a powerful prima facie *counterexample* to this intellectualist hypothesis. For he is clearly presented in the early dialogues as an exemplar of virtue (at least of a 'human' kind); and a crucial part of that virtue is the epistemic humility expressed in his vehement disclaimer of any teachable moral knowledge himself.[23]

It is worth saying a bit more about the kind of knowledge which Protagoras claims to teach. First, as the Great Speech spells out, the concept of knowledge in play here is that of a *technê*: a skilled, specialized, systematic practice which produces reliable success in action. Shoemaking is a *technê*; so is horse-training; so is medicine. Since a *technê* can be taught, each *technitês* can be seen as having a double function: his proprietary activity, which is always in the service of some end or good, and the production through training of 'another like himself'. The claim—or hope—that virtue might thus be teachable was advanced by Protagoras and a range of lesser sophists, who offered themselves as teachers of it. And this promise of the kind of virtue ('the human and social kind', as Socrates says in the *Apology* (20b4)) is the historical seed of the optimistic vision which, appropriated and transformed by Plato, flowers in the *Republic*: the dream that with the right educational programme, a city might be able to reliably produce practically wise statesmen.

It is worth pausing to note what does *not* follow from the intellectualist hypothesis so understood. For, contra the *Magna Moralia*, it is wholly compatible with the acceptance of non-rational prerequisites for virtue: almost every acknowledged *technê* involves non-rational training and practice. It does not immediately imply that all the virtues are the *same* body of knowledge (it is interesting that the Aristotelian and *MM* versions of the intellectualist reading, as cited in section 1, speak of *epistêmai* and *phronêseis* in the plural). In its original, Protagorean form it is not even a theory about *all* the virtues: at any rate in Plato's presentation of him, Protagoras is emphatic that courage is wholly distinct from the kind of

[22] In work in progress I argue for taking the *Protagoras* to present an accurate, terminologically careful picture of the historical Protagoras.

[23] Cf. Forster 2007 for a reading of Socrates which emphasizes the religious dimension of his disavowal of knowledge.

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social or political virtue he teaches, so that Socrates' hard-fought identification of wisdom with courage amounts, for him, to the deduction of an unwelcome consequence (*Prot.* 329e, 349d, 350e–351a).[24] Without further substantial argumentative moves, it does not imply any particular conception of human motivation: it certainly does not entail that the emotions are motivationally inert, or that they can be reduced to intellectual judgements. The hypothesis is not really a *psychological* thesis at all; or at any rate the investigation which it prompts belongs not to psychology but epistemology. The question it poses is: what else can we determine about virtue, if we can determine it to be a kind of knowledge?

So much for what 'knowledge' means in the intellectualist hypothesis. It is when we turn to the term 'virtue' that matters get really complicated. For the early dialogues make clear that several competing conceptions of *aretê*, virtue or excellence, were current in Socrates' day. On one side stands what we might call the Homeric or *functional* conception of virtue: *aretê* is what makes someone function successfully in his social role.[25] So *aretê sans phrase* is what enables the successful functioning of the best person, the adult male aristocrat-warrior like Achilles or Odysseus: it consists in the practical intelligence and courage which make such a person honoured as a 'speaker of words and doer of deeds'. But Homer also recognizes other, less self-serving virtues such as piety, reverence, and pity, whose relation to *aretê* is unclear. And the virtues of justice and moderation are traditionally conceived in very different, more obviously 'moralistic' terms; here the *locus classicus* of the tradition is instead Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which preaches the central values of law-abidingness, fairness, and self-control.

Now the virtue Protagoras promises is thoroughly functional: an art of successful living through sound deliberation. In Plato's *Protagoras*, he explicitly promises to make his students 'most powerful' (or 'most effective') [*dunatôtatos*] both in private business and in matters of state, and in the latter respect to be effective in both

[24] Thus Plato himself signals that the intellectualist hypothesis as investigated in the early dialogues, as a thesis about virtue *in toto*, is not identical with the original Protagorean version: we might think of it as 'intellectualism 2.0'. I take it that Plato's alterations are intended as, so to speak, internal improvements, designed to clean the hypothesis up and present it in the most viable form available. After all, how could the virtue allegedly acquired by teaching ensure good deliberation *everywhere*, even on the battlefield; how could it demonstrate the sovereignty of knowledge over emotions and external stresses; how could it make a person steadily better and guarantee their success in life; how, in short, could it possibly have all the powers *which Protagoras himself claims for it* if it does *not* include courage? One way to read the *Protagoras* is as inaugurating Plato's investigative project by arguing for this swapping out of version 1.0 for 2.0. (For a very different courage-centric reading of the *Protagoras* cf. Segvic 2008.) The *Protagoras* also features another plausible candidate for a Platonic alteration in the very 'scientific' understanding of knowledge or *technê*, modelled on *epistêmai* such as geometry and weighing, which is imported into Socrates' understanding of the hypothesis in the form of the 'measuring art'. It seems unlikely that Protagoras' own art was conceived along such quantitative lines.

[25] See e.g. *Meno* 71e–72a, and Adkins 1960, with its still-helpful contrast between the cooperative and the competitive virtues. Cf. also Finkelberg 1998.

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action and speech—a promise which hearkens back to the double Homeric ideal.[26] So in its original sophistic form the intellectualist hypothesis seems to presuppose an updated version of this ancient conception, given an exciting modern sheen by the framework of *technê*.

However, nobody in the Platonic dialogues, least of all Socrates, is committed to thinking about virtue *only* in functionalist terms. All show some loyalty to the moralistic or Hesiodic conception as well, particularly as regards the virtues of justice and moderation.[27] And in working through the hypothesis and its consequences, Plato seems *also* to be attempting to work out whether the two conceptions can combined to produce a coherent theory. That is: 'virtue' in the hypothesis as discussed in the early dialogues is intended to stand *both* for the Protagorean art of successful living through deliberative skill *and* for the 'other-regarding' or cooperative norms of Hesiodic justice. Plato's discussions of the hypothesis embed a presumption that the two conceptions must somehow denote the same thing: that the science of successful living must converge with or incorporate justice, piety, and moderation rightly understood. In Plato's attempt to work out this bold equation, each conception is transformed, and in the process the bar for the possession of virtue is dramatically raised. For mere cleverness in decision-making does nothing to entail Hesiodic justice, nor does the latter do anything to generate the former: the two must be fused in a practical wisdom which is (as Aristotle's *phronêsis* will be) at once moral and intellectual, both other-regarding and the key to one's own success. And if that synthesis can be worked out, a further equation which lurks within the hypothesis will go through: namely that the *virtuous life* (understood at least in part in moralistic Hesiodic terms) *is also the happy life*.[28] For some kind of happiness, success, flourishing [*eudaimonia*] is what the art of successful deliberation promises; if that art runs through justice and moderation, then Hesiod was right to insist that the practice of these virtues is in the agent's own interest. Thanks to this inbuilt conceptual

[26] Strikingly, Protagoras' phrase 'most powerful in word and deed' is also used by Thucydides to describe Pericles in introducing his first speech (I.139). For discussion see Segvic 2008 (17ff.).

[27] So for instance Meno advances a debased version of the functionalist conception, cuttingly summed up by Socrates as 'virtue is the acquisition of gold and silver' (78d); but then he immediately grants that this acquisition must be accompanied by justice and the other parts of virtue (78e). Socrates' third, abortive eristic argument in the *Protagoras* begins by establishing that most people believe that *sôphrosunê* (here meaning, apparently, a kind of self-serving good sense) can be exercised in unjust actions; but his planned refutation would presumably have made use of intuitions to the opposite effect (333c–d). Note also the dramatic but utterly unacknowledged conflict between the conceptions of justice presented by Cephalus and Polemarchus in *Republic* I.

[28] I do not mean by this anything so precise (or extreme) as that virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness, so that (as the Stoics will later claim) the wise man is happy under torture. Rather, I take it that the Platonic position involves the looser traditional idea of a 'path'—a chosen way of life with a determinate result, contrasted with alternative 'paths' leading elsewhere. That the path of virtue is the way to happiness is a doctrine common to all the philosophical descendants of Socrates, and also ancient competitors such as the Epicureans. We might fairly think of it as a shared commitment partially constitutive of 'philosophy as a way of life' in the ancient Greek world.

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complexity, in exploring the intellectualist hypothesis, the early dialogues also indirectly explore the viability of the proposal for which the *Republic* will explicitly argue: that the fully rational agent—the expert deliberator, master of the art of politics—will practice the other-regarding or cooperative virtues as a part of his excellence, and will attain happiness in so doing.

If this is the origin and import of the hypothesis, then when Plato undertakes to investigate it—sympathetically, reflectively, and in great detail, with Socrates cast as lead investigator—he is performing a very complex philosophical operation. There is an aspect of reconciliation to it, an attempt to progress dialectically beyond the opposed camps of the earlier generation. His thought, I take it, is that the historical Socrates was quite right to suppose that Protagoras and the other sophists had no hope of making a *technê* out of virtue and teaching it, not least because they failed to fully grasp what either virtue or knowledge really is. But that does not show it to be an impossible dream. Perhaps a very different kind of philosopher—a *Socratic* philosopher, indeed—might be able to succeed where Protagoras failed. Such a philosopher is at any rate in a position to give the sophistic proposal the kind of rigorous philosophical development and examination it deserves.

3. The Method of Hypothesis

So, in place of the enigmatic little slogan 'virtue is knowledge', the proposal on the table in Plato's early dialogues may now be put as follows: there *is* an art of politics—more generally, an art of living—along the lines of the deliberative *technê* which Protagoras advertised but failed to deliver, which incorporates the traditional moral virtues including Hesiodic justice, and which promises its possessor happiness. I now want to turn to questions of method, and to the status of this as a 'proposal'. More precisely put, the intellectualist thesis is discussed by Plato *as a hypothesis*—in fact, as *the* hypothesis around which the early dialogues are organized.[29] What this status as a hypothesis means can be gathered from the two pre-*Republic* passages in which Socrates discusses hypothesis explicitly, the *Meno* and *Phaedo*.[30] (In addition to the arguments which directly accompany

[29] 'Hypothesis' is a fortunately close counterpart to the Greek *hupothesis:* literally something one *hupotithêtai,* 'sets down <underneath>'. Wolfsdorf 2008a gives a helpful survey of the early usage of *hupothesis* (2008a, 37–41). He concludes that Plato's use in the *Meno* is of 'a method of reasoning from a postulate' (161; cf. also Wolfsdorf 2008b). This sounds right to me—but only because I do not hear 'postulate' as implying certainty or knowledge, as Wolfsdorf does. Obviously 'a cognitively secure proposition' (2008a, 177) would be the *best* kind of starting point for argument, but certainty is by no means presupposed by that functional role; an overt act of adoption or postulation indeed may draw attention to its absence.

[30] After long neglect, the method of hypothesis has recently been the subject of welcome interpretive attention: in addition to Wolfsdorf 2008a and 2008b, see Gentzler 1991, Benson 2015, Palmer 2021, and the more specialized discussions of Bailey 2005, Benson 2003, Byrd 2007, Ebrey 2013, 2016, and

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Plato's two discussions, our sample set includes the discussion of the theory that the soul is a harmony, referred to as a hypothesis at *Phaedo* 93c10.) Hypothesis is also prominent in the *Republic* and in the *Parmenides*, but these later versions are more philosophically technical and specialized; I will set them aside here. The accounts of the *Meno* and *Phaedo* raise enough puzzles of their own: they seem to use the concept 'hypothesis' in quite different ways, and the relation of Socrates' programmatic remarks to his practice is not very clear in either case. What follows is an intentionally low-resolution sketch of the kind of procedure which seems to be envisaged and applied in the two texts.[31] My hope is only to get clear enough about how hypothesis works in these cases to explain the central claim of this paper: that, if we pull the camera back, we can recognize the same kind of pattern, on a grander scale and with vastly greater complexity, structuring the early dialogues as a whole.

In the *Meno*, Meno repeatedly asks Socrates to pronounce on whether virtue can be taught, while Socrates tries to shift the discussion to the more basic question of what virtue *is*. Socrates finally agrees to investigate Meno's question 'by means of a hypothesis' (86e). Hypothesis as introduced here seems to be related to the geometrical procedure known later as analysis;[32] the use of hypothesis is thus part of a broader Platonic aspiration to bring mathematical-style rigour to bear on questions of ethics, also visible in his enduring fascination with the idea of measurement (*Euthyphro* 7b–d, *Protagoras* 356a–357d, *Statesman* 283c–285c). Socrates even gives a geometrical illustration of the method, though this is so confusingly expressed that it only makes matters more obscure.[33] Still, the basic procedure emerges clearly enough. If I want to know whether X has some property Y, I can adopt a biconditional to the effect that all Z's are Y and all not-Z's are not-Y. Then I can answer my question by determining whether X is or is not a Z, which may be more tractable than my initial question. In the case at hand, Socrates proposes, something is teachable if and only if it is a kind of knowledge. So if I want to know whether virtue is teachable, I can answer my question by discovering whether or not virtue is knowledge. Socrates then proceeds to argue that, since virtue is always beneficial, and of all the things in the soul only wisdom is reliably so, virtue must be wisdom (87d–89a)—i.e. knowledge, so that it is indeed taught and learned (89b–c). He then reconsiders, however, arguing on a range of empirical grounds that virtue cannot be taught and so must not be knowledge after all (89d–96c, cf. 98e). The way out of the impasse is to see that

forthcoming, Franklin 2010, Ionescu 2018, Iwata 2015 and 2016, Landry 2012, Menn 2002, Scolnicov 2018, Scott 2006, Sedley 2021, and Costello (ms). The classic account of Robinson 1953 also continues to be very useful, and what follows is close to it on many points.

[31] Palmer 2021 and Costello (ms) argue for readings of the *Phaedo* as deploying the method still more widely (cf. also Byrd 2007, 150–1), which seems to me highly plausible.

[32] On the mathematics, see Menn 2002, Iwata 2015, and Wolfsdorf 2008a, 170–7.

[33] Socrates' geometrical example may be intended to confuse Meno, who has expressed a preference for pretentious definitions (cf. Weiss 2001 and Lloyd 1992). But cf. Menn 2002.

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true opinion is also beneficial, and that the virtue of respected statesmen is due to divine luck—though the possibility of a virtue constituted by knowledge is carefully left open (97a–100b).

The tricky question here is exactly which of these propositions count as hypotheses.[34] The claim that virtue is good is explicitly labelled a hypothesis when introduced at 87d3;[35] but since the biconditional is the central structural feature which Socrates' procedure shares with his geometrical example, it seems to me natural to suppose that this is the *principal* instance of the method being displayed.[36] Moreover, Meno goes on to speak of the application of the hypothesis in a way which implies it is the biconditional, remarking at 89c2–4: 'And it is clear, Socrates, that according to [*kata*] the hypothesis, if virtue is knowledge, it is teachable' (cf. 87c2–3). Thus, as a method, 'hypothesis' seems to be a strategy for reducing an obscure problem to one which I know how to solve by using *both* unargued postulates as starting-points *and* biconditionals so as to substitute coextensive concepts.

The more complex use of hypothesis comes in the *Phaedo*, in the wake of Socrates' famous account of his youthful enthusiasm for, and disillusionment with, natural science. In describing his own alternative, the so-called second sailing, he refers to it as proceeding by hypotheses:

> Well then I started in this manner: taking as my hypothesis [*hupothemenos*] in each case the account [*logon*] which I judged to be strongest [*errômenestaton*], I set down [*tithêmi*] as being true, both about cause and everything else, the things which seem to me to agree [*sumphônein*] with this, and as not true whatever does not. (100a2–5)

Socrates' hypotheses here are centred on the Forms; his demonstrandum, and so the rough counterpart here to the *Meno* problem about the teachability of virtue, is

[34] Iwata 2016 gives a helpful scorecard of positions in the recent English-language literature.

[35] It is introduced as 'standing' or 'staying in place' for us [*menei*]: a suggestive hint as to the norms governing Socrates' procedure, along with 'strongest' [*errômenestaton*, *Phaedo* 100a4] and 'sufficient' [*hikanon,* 101e8]. The statues of Daedalus passage later in the *Meno* (97e) indicates that even a true claim may fail to 'stand' for us if we consider it to have been refuted or otherwise lose faith in it, and that we are at risk of this happening so long as we do not understand *why* it is true. So if these norms are related, and a strong hypothesis is (perhaps among other virtues) one that will 'stand' for us, then we should from the start be looking for a hypothesis for which we have an explanatory higher hypothesis ready to hand.

[36] This is controversial. A more popular alternative candidate for the hypothesis, preferred by Robinson in his second edition (1953) and followed by many interpreters since, is 'virtue is knowledge'. This would obviously be useful for my argument that this thesis is the organizing hypothesis of the early dialogues as a whole! Alas, 'virtue is knowledge' is here *deduced* as the conclusion of a complex chain of reasoning at 87d–9a: it is not something hypothesized, 'set down', at all. Robinson is thus forced to admit that the passage is 'not very like Platonic hypothetical method in general as I described it in the previous chapter' (1953, 121). It also entails a very strained reading of Meno's remark at 89c2–4; and there is no obvious parallel with the geometrical example.

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the immortality of the soul. There is again some blurriness as to the identity of the hypothesis itself: so far as I can see it could be any or all of (a) the relevant Form (so that the hypothesis proper is not a proposition at all, but an *object*, the Beautiful itself), (b) the thesis *that* the Form exists (and has the predicate which it *is*: the Beautiful itself is beautiful, for instance), or (c) the causal claim linking Form and explananda ('beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful itself'). Each of (b)–(c) seems to presuppose and incorporate its simpler predecessor(s), and I suspect that the hypothesis should be thought of as comprising the whole package (a)–(c). Socrates goes on to explain how the hypothesis itself may become the object of explanation and argument. One should hold fast to the hypothesis as a 'safe' answer:

> but you, afraid, as they say, of your own shadow and your inexperience, would cling [*echomenos*] to the safety of your own hypothesis [*hupothesis*] and give that answer. And if someone were to take hold of [*echoito*] your hypothesis itself, you would ignore him and would not answer until you had examined the consequences that follow [*ta hormêthenta*] from it, to see if they agree [*sumphônei*] with one another or disagree [*diaphônei*]. And when you must give an account of your hypothesis itself you would give it in the same way, setting down [*hupothemenos*] another hypothesis again, whichever one seems to you best of the higher ones until you come to something sufficient [*ti hikanon*]; but you will not jumble the two as the debaters [*antilogikoi*] do by discussing the principle [*archê*] and its consequences [*hôrmêmena*] at the same time, if you wish to discover any truth. (101c9–e3)[37]

We do not see either a refutative attack on the hypothesis or regress to a higher one on display in the *Phaedo* argument itself, which from here on proceeds only 'downwards' to the desired conclusion that the soul is immortal. But Socrates concludes with a reminder that more discussion is needed (107b). Moreover, earlier in the *Phaedo*, the theory that the soul is a harmony of the body (91d–95a) was identified as a hypothesis (94a12–b2); and here the hypothesis *is* attacked. The soul-harmony hypothesis was shown to be incompatible with

[37] I follow Grube's translation (in Cooper 1997), with modifications, which is especially controversial on two points. Sedley 2021 argues, first, that Socrates intends at 101d2 to distinguish between the safe *part* of the hypothesis, the 'ultra-safe virtual tautology' (53) that it is (for instance) by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful, and the unsafe part, namely the postulation of metaphysically transcendant Forms such as Beauty itself. I am not convinced, however, that Plato would allow that the parts of his causal hypothesis can be separated in this way. Second, Sedley rejects Grube's translation of *echoito* as 'were to attack', arguing for a new understanding of it as non-hostile (2021), 57. I translate 'take hold of', for to preserve neutrality on that question; but it seems to me that Grube is likely right to suppose that hostile ways of 'taking hold' are primarily in view. It seems relevant that 'safety' is, unlike the other terminology here in play, quasi-technical as a term of dialectical art: a safe answer is one which an eristic opponent will be unable to refute (cf. 100d8, 100e1, 105b7–8, c1, *Protagoras* 351d3, *Sophist* 231a7, *Statesman* 262b6).

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the better-warranted theory of recollection, and also with a set of uncontroversial truths about souls and harmonies. A harmony is determined by its parts; a soul is not. A harmony cannot be disharmonious; a soul can be. A harmony can exist as a matter of degree; not so a soul. A harmony could not rule what it is a harmony of; the soul can rule the body.

As even this rough sketch shows, the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* references of hypothesis are, at least superficially and in emphasis, quite different from each other; and Plato's practice is another can of worms again. With those large caveats, Plato's pre-*Republic* method of hypothesis seems to me to have six principal features:[38]

(1) A hypothesis is a thesis literally *set down or posited* [*tithetai*], with the *hupo* suggesting a 'below' or 'underneath', i.e. a kind of floor or starting-point for argument. It is not itself presented as established by argument; and even if a hypothesis might be chosen as secure or self-evident, to explicitly perform positing something is to flag it as having this functional role rather than any particular epistemic status.[39] The identity of some thesis as a hypothesis is thus situational, and hypotheses are unrestricted as to content.

How then do we select a hypothesis, and what counts as a good one? In the *Phaedo*, Socrates says only that we select whatever thesis seems 'strongest', which looks like deliberate vagueness on his part. Given the explanatory role of hypothesis (see (2) below), 'strength' presumably involves both explanatory power and some independent philosophical attraction.[40] The hypothesis that the soul is a harmony, for instance, is one which deeply attracts Simmias, and has the merit of being compatible with some of Socrates' earlier arguments (85e–86d); the hypothesis of Forms as causes is one Socrates himself takes to be explanatory and defensible across the board.

(2) A hypothesis is used to derive other propositions: the consequences [*hormêthenta* and *hôrmêmena*]. This derivation of consequences is, in the *Phaedo*, initially phrased in terms of setting down what agrees or harmonizes [*sumphônei*] with the hypothesis as true, and whatever doesn't so harmonize [*diaphônei*] as not true (100a). 'Consequences' is a standard but perhaps misleading overtranslation of the plural participle, 'things coming from'. This is more

[38] Cf. Robinson 1953, esp. 105–9, and Benson's four-stage analysis (2015).

[39] Cf. Iwata 2016, 'a plausible but still suppositional starting-point' (210).

[40] A deliberate untechnicality, even for Plato's day and by his own standards, pervades the *Phaedo* passages: notably, he does not use *sumbainein*, to 'result'. This is the closest thing to a standard term for entailment (as at *Phaedo* 80b1), though the root idea is the broader one of how something 'turns out' to be (e.g. *Phaedo* 67c5, 68e4, 74a2 (cf. Benson 2015, 144)). And *archê*, 'first principle' or 'starting-point' is used for a hypothesis (apparently) only towards the end (101e2). This supports my sense that what *most* interests Plato about hypothesis is explanation, and that he is groping towards a new vocabulary for explanatory adequacy. He does use *sumbainein* in the more deductively oriented passage of the *Meno* (87a6, b1).

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commonly used for people physically coming from some place: a deliberately vague 'what proceeds from' or 'comes out of' the hypothesis might be better. 'Harmonizing' and 'disharmonizing' or 'disagreeing' (as I will translate) are, as applied to propositions, likewise hard to pin down—though here too, as with *hupothesis* itself, the English is a luckily close counterpart to the Greek, similarly used for musical chords.

It is easy to see why Plato is vague here. For harmonizing, as the norm governing both the hypothesis–consequence relation and the relation of consequences to each other (*Phaedo* 100a5–7, 101d4–6), is very tricky to make out. It cannot consistently be taken either as mere logical compossibility *or* as entailment, on pain of absurd results. To understand harmonizing as mere compossibility might work for the desired relation of consequences to each other, but gives hopeless results as a standard for their derivation. If harmonization is restricted to *entailment*, though, then it seems impossible as a demand on the consequence–consequence relation.[41] The 'disagreement' of propositions with a hypothesis, and of consequences with each other, presents similar puzzles.[42] To make sense of Socrates' programmatic remarks, as scholars have noted, we may need to allow that harmonizing represents something different in the two relationships; and it must in any case pick out some relation between the extremes of strict entailment and mere compossibility.[43] Scholars have also argued that the process of deriving consequences must involve bringing to bear other relevant beliefs and assumptions to combine with our hypothesis, as when a scientist incorporates background assumptions in order to determine the implications of a theory—or when Socrates introduces anodyne-looking auxiliary premises in order to refute some interlocutor's definition of virtue. Insofar as such auxiliary premises are secure, the hypothesis itself can then be taken to bear full responsibility for any philosophically decisive consequences, whether welcome problem-solving ones or an unacceptable contradiction.[44] I would note, though, that in the case of the harmony theory, Socrates' refutation proceeds by a rather precise method of teasing out the opposed necessary properties of souls and harmonies, which show that the two cannot be identified. This suggests a capacious view of the

[41] But see Forster 2006.

[42] I take it that *diaphônia*, disharmonizing or disagreement, is the same relation as when a proposition 'does not agree' [*ou sumphônei*] with the hypothesis; and that it is to be understood as a relation of conflict, i.e. contradiction. But if harmonizing must be a tighter relation than mere compossibility, we get the paradoxical-sounding result that the two relations are not exhaustive, even though the one is presented simply as the negation of the other: that is, many propositions will *neither* agree nor disagree with the hypothesis, and some consequences may neither agree nor disagree with each other. But this is perhaps as it should be; if the agenda of the method is explanatory, many propositions will have no interesting relation to each other.

[43] See Gentzler 1991, followed by a number of more recent scholars, for argument that the relation of harmonization should be seen as one of coherence (268–9). Cf. also Bailey 2005, for a corrective emphasis on the important of explanatory relations here.

[44] Cf. Benson 2015, 173–5, 182; Gentzler 1991, 273ff.

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soul-harmony hypothesis as involving the postulation of *souls conceived as harmonies*, pregnant with all the implications of the essential properties implied by both terms. On this conception of what a hypothesis is, the contradictions which Socrates elicits could indeed be seen as coming out of the hypothesis alone.[45] So perhaps, at least in this kind of definitional case, the derivation of consequences from a hypothesis should be seen as a kind of *making-explicit*: a matter of spelling out the properties of the definiens and definiendum which the hypothesis of identity transfers from the one to the other.[46]

(3) This procedure of deriving consequences is a *multi-purpose* tool.[47] It is open to deployment in at least three kinds of philosophical inquiry: it may be aimed at (i) settling an open question, or (ii) establishing a desired demonstrandum, or (iii) testing the hypothesis itself for acceptability. This is where the *Meno* and *Phaedo* present very different pictures. In the *Meno*, which seems to represent the simpler form of the method, the project at hand is of type (i), founded on the analysis-like use of the biconditional. In the *Phaedo*, it is (ii): there is a puzzle to be solved, but one side of the question is presumed to be correct, and the task at hand is to deduce that desired result (viz., that the soul is immortal). Task (iii) is the critical version of the method, exemplified in the examination of the thesis that the soul is a harmony.

(4) At least in the third kind of deployment, the consequences of the hypothesis are examined for harmonizing or the lack of it, their disharmony or disagreement [*diaphônia*]—in practice, for any *contradictions*. And this emphasis on contradiction is worth highlighting as an important clue to the significance of the method. We are not to reject a hypothesis on the basis of a vague intuition that it is implausible, but only if its consequences are such that it can be excluded as impossible. The method is a vehicle for tracing networks of entailments and

[45] Compare the important account of Socratic refutation given by Forster 2006, defending Robinson's much-deprecated (but textually well-supported) claim that Socrates in his refutations at least sometimes aims to show the thesis of his interlocutor to be *self*-contradictory, *without* the introduction of any genuinely independent auxiliary premises (9). The account of 'sense-internality' by which Forster supports this reading comes close to being an account of what a capacious understanding of hypothesis might look like.

[46] On this reading the method emerges as a kind of missing link between fifth-century eristic and Aristotelian science. In eristic, a respondent might undertake to defend the thesis: 'The soul is a harmony.' The questioner would try to refute him by forcing him to assent to the claim that the soul is *not* a harmony, by the same sorts of steps as we see in the *Phaedo* refutations. (Socrates' strategies of attack are all natural candidates for sophistic *topoi*, applicable to any proposed identity claim: 'Do both these things come in degrees?' 'Do they have the same opposite?' 'Does each have the same relation to its parts?') This eristic method becomes philosophically constructive dialectic whenever the players are less interested in victory than in figuring out what the soul really is, by figuring out what exactly the proposed definition entails and so reaching a verdict on its acceptability. In Aristotle's scientific (and no longer dialogic) version of the method, a person with knowledge of a certain kind deduces the necessary properties of that kind from its definition—a constructive version of the procedure, starting from a hypothesis known to be correct.

[47] Robinson 1953 argues plausibly that the *Meno* version, in which the hypothesis is a tool for the deduction of consequences, is prior, and that the *Phaedo* version, in which the hypothesis itself becomes the demonstrandum or refutandum, evolves from it (110–13).

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conceptual connections, and detecting options which can be eliminated. As Sherlock Holmes says, 'when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.'[48]

(5) The hypothetical method is multi-level and open to *regress* or ascent, in that a hypothesis can itself, as the *Phaedo* rather vaguely explains, be supported by relation to a 'higher hypothesis'. Like being a hypothesis, the status of a higher hypothesis is situational: a higher hypothesis will be any thesis selected as having suitable explanatory power to ground the original hypothesis—and, perhaps, some independent philosophical attraction. In section 4 I will briefly note a possible candidate in the early dialogues for a 'higher hypothesis' in relation to the intellectualist hypothesis. In the *Republic*, the Divided Line presents the Form of the Good as a special limit case: an unhypothetical highest principle for the Forms as a whole (511b–d). However exactly this is supposed to work, it brings out the essential limitation of the method in the earlier dialogues, where there is no such *deus ex machina*: hypothetical reasoning, because its starting-points are unproven, can never be fully demonstrative.[49] And this seems worth listing as a final feature:

(6) Hypothetical argument is inherently *provisional and defeasible*, always open to rethinking and further examination—a status ostended by Socrates through his immediate reconsideration in the *Meno* (96dff.) and warned of in the *Phaedo* (107a–b). To fully demonstrate a hypothesis, one would have to somehow establish the truth of the associated highest hypothesis and deductively confirm everything said to 'follow' from it—thus rendering the whole package *un*hypothetical. In the absence of this, the method must start from unproven postulates. And so it is perhaps more decisive as a critical tool than a constructive one: it can only clarify the menu of philosophical options, enabling us to exclude some of them as impossible.

So much for hypothesis as it appears in the *Meno* and *Phaedo*. As I have noted, many difficulties and controversies surround Socrates' remarks on his method; and they are less than a perfect fit either with each other or with Platonic practice. But I think it should be uncontroversial that the six features I've identified do all characterize the dialectic of the early dialogues quite generally. In them, Socratic argument typically (1) starts from posited theses (such as candidate definitions of the virtues) from which (2) consequences are elicited, with (3) a range of argumentative agendas and results, but (4) often so as to elicit a contradiction, (5) sometimes with a regress to the positing of some

[48] *The Sign of Four*, ch. 6. Given that the last words of Conan Doyle's 'The Final Problem' allude to those of the *Phaedo* (118a15–17), the resemblance between Holmes' methods and Socrates' seems unlikely to be coincidence. David Ebrey points out to me, however, that Socrates' method cannot really be meant to exclude *all* the alternatives in the Holmesian manner.

[49] I here assume that the Good is a grounding for lower hypotheses *in the same way* that they ground each other: for a challenge to this conventional reading see Broadie 2021.

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more explanatorily basic thesis,[50] and (6) always with defeasible, provisional results—as Socrates habitually reaffirms by emphasizing the need for re-examination and further discussion.

Many of these features are obvious and pervasive, and all have been widely recognized. But in recent accounts they have tended to be distorted or obscured by an overly restrictive conception of the method of the early dialogues, framed in terms of the 'Socratic elenchus'.[51] By the *elenchus*, commentators mean the kind of refutative argument in which Socrates elicits a target thesis (usually a proposed definition) from his interlocutor; adds some auxiliary premises presumed to be uncontroversial; and, eliciting their joint consequences, derives a contradiction. The target thesis is then rejected as responsible for the contradiction, though all that the method can prove strictly speaking is that some *one* of the premises must be false—and therefore, importantly, that the interlocutor is not wise. That some of Socrates' arguments are of this form is indisputable; but we should now be able to see that the *elenchus* is just a subspecies of the hypothetical method. Elenctic arguments are hypothetical arguments of type (iii) above, also sharing three further specific characteristics: (a) the hypothesis is one advanced by the interlocutor, (b) the discussion proceeds by question and yes–no answer, and (c) the result is a contradiction or otherwise unacceptable result. The broader framework of hypothesis should be preferred as better capturing the texts, for there is no significant subset of the early dialogues in which *all* of Socrates' arguments belong to this narrower subspecies. He is also setting down hypotheses of his own and working out their consequences even in *echt*-Socratic dialogues like the *Euthyphro* (11e–12e), *Crito* (46b–49a), and *Protagoras* (352a–d). (As David Wolfsdorf has noted, Socrates himself proposes eight of the twenty-nine definitions considered in the early dialogues (2008a, 150).) In the *Apology*, in addition to describing his refutative mission, Socrates affirms the importance of examining the ethical principles guiding one's *own* life (38a); and the *Crito* depicts him doing precisely that (most explicitly at 46b–49e). This is sufficient to show that if Socrates' arguments in *most* of the other early dialogues skew towards the refutation of

[50] This is probably the least obvious of the features listed. I have in mind cases like the shift in the *Protagoras* from Socrates' arguments for the piecemeal unity of various virtues (329d–334a) to the argument that they are all wisdom (349a–360e); unlike the first round of arguments, the second would *explain why* justice and piety are the same, and it in turn is explained by the principle that everyone pursues what seems best to them (358c–d). Cf. Allen 2006 for an account of the difference, and Kamtekar 2017 for a reading of the latter part of the dialogue as structured by hypotheses. The *Gorgias* seems to me also structured as a regress of hypotheses, here organized for the purposes of refutation (like those of the first part of the *Theaetetus*, incidentally): Gorgias holds that rhetoric is the finest of crafts, Polus that power is sufficient for happiness (which would *explain why* rhetoric is finest of the crafts), Callicles that pleasure is the good (which would *explain why* power is sufficient for happiness).

[51] Cf. Robinson (1953), 106–7; Benson, 'it must be admitted that the difference between the method of hypothesis and *elenchos* may appear rather slight' (2015, 100). For a helpful survey of the elenchus literature (up to 2010), see Wolfsdorf 2013. For a welcome array of heterodox readings see Scott (ed.) 2002.

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others, this is a function not of his method as such but of the ongoing philosophical project in which he has been enrolled by his author. And the hypothetical reading can explain why his project has this other-directed slant: *the intellectualist hypothesis is not Socrates' own*, and the obvious way for him to examine it is by interrogating those who do propound it, or who lay claim to wisdom or virtue in some way which might illuminate it.

In the next section I will put the results of this and the preceding section together to sketch how the early dialogues are organized around the intellectualist hypothesis. But first it is worth pausing briefly to say a bit more about the hypothetical method itself, and in particular about what makes it distinctive and exciting. For if the details are murky, we can still see in hypothesis a powerful contrast to the alternatives of the day. That contrast is thematized in the *Gorgias*, where Polus is simply dismissive of Socratic refutation, on the basis of an appeal to 'witnesses', i.e. to what most people would find credible (471e–472c, 473e). Though conflated here, really there are a pair of alternative strategies of argument which Polus simply assumes to be jointly decisive: appeals to *intuitive plausibility* and to *testimony*. Both are native to the Athenian courtroom, where arguments typically appeal either to eyewitness testimony or to *to eikos*—to what is probable, plausible, likely, or reasonable to expect, particularly in relation to human motivations and to patterns of cause and effect.[52] Plato dramatizes this pair of methods at the start of the *Laches*, where Laches and Nicias give opposed speeches on whether young men should study fighting in armor (181e–184c). Nicias appeals to *to eikos*, giving a long list of the beneficial consequences we would expect to result from the training. Laches refutes him with testimony, telling a long unfunny story about a teacher of the training who made a fool of himself in actual combat. When Socrates enters the fray, his strategy is very different from both. He proceeds by identifying a single general point of principle which would settle the question: *if* this training makes men courageous, it should be practiced. What follows is a regress of hypotheses to determine whether the antecedent is something we have reason to accept.[53]

The *Laches* thus enacts the basic proposal involved in the hypothetical method. When faced with a controversial ethical question, rather than trying to assemble a mass of considerations which would tip the balance of probabilities one way or

[52] Cf. Wohl (ed.) 2014 for a range of aspects of the *eikos* in Greek thought.

[53] Of course, that courage is a kind of knowledge would not be a sufficient condition for determining that it is taught by *this* form of instruction. Strictly speaking, the investigation undertaken in the *Laches* could be sufficient neither to prove that fighting in armour should be studied (since even if courage is knowledge, it might not be learned through *this* discipline) nor to refute it (since even if courage is not knowledge, there might be other reasons to study it). In this it exemplifies the necessarily incomplete and provisional character of any one line of hypothetical argument. On the other hand, the hypothesis which Socrates investigates, as it eventually emerges, is not just the bare thesis 'courage is knowledge' but something richer: a conception of courage as a kind of science of goods and evils analogous to the other *technai*. And *that* hypothesis not only implies that learning to fight in armour could not contribute to the acquisition of courage, but enables us to see why it could not.

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another, we should try to identify a single thesis which would be sufficient to settle the question at hand—one with some explanatory power, not just giving a verdict on the question but enabling us to see *why* it is so. We are then to investigate that thesis, working upwards to more basic principles which would ground it, and downwards to what would follow. Throughout, we are to seek implications, explanations, and contradictions instead of merely gauging the levels of intuitive plausibility which might accrue to each thesis in isolation.

4. Intellectualism: Consequences and Higher Hypotheses

We can now put the pieces together to consider my central proposal: that the early dialogues are collectively organized around the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge or craft. Of the kinds of hypothetical argument I identified in the previous section, type (iii), in which the aim is to test the hypothesis itself, seems to be the pattern applicable to the inquiry as a whole. However, local arguments that look more like cases of the first or second will still fit this reading: for the ability of a hypothesis to (i) successfully solve open questions and (ii) secure important demonstranda are among the main advantages that might commend it. And the grounding of a hypothesis through a higher hypothesis will also obviously be in order here: given the novelty and importance of intellectualism, it is well worth Plato's while to consider what deeper principle might explain it in turn.

The most striking evidence in favour of the hypothetical reading is the way in which the early dialogues showcase discussions, for and against, of propositions which are best understood as 'consequences' of the intellectualist hypothesis. The single most prominent consequence is *Teachability*: if virtue is knowledge, then virtue can be taught. As I argued in section 2, and as the dialectic makes clear in all of the *Protagoras*, *Laches*, and *Meno*, this sophistic aspiration provides the original philosophical impetus for the hypothesis and its investigation as a whole. As noted already, the investigation of this question is complex, and does not yield a simple yes–no verdict: the results of the *Protagoras* are avowedly confusing and inconclusive (360e–361d), likewise the *Meno* (86e–100b). Indeed in the *Meno* it seems that the hypothesis is refuted by the derivation of contradictory consequences. For Socrates argues here as follows: (1) Whatever is teachable is knowledge (87b–c); (2) virtue is knowledge (87d–89a); (3) therefore virtue is teachable (89b–c); (4) but, empirically, virtue seems *not* to be teachable (89d–96d); (5) so virtue is not knowledge, or at least not always knowledge, after all (96d–99a).[54] Since the

[54] Again, we are faced with the question why the contradictory claims here, (2) and (5), would be seen as 'coming out of' the hypothesis, given that (2) and (4) (on which (5) depends) seem to be independent of it. The only explanation I can see is that Socrates takes the biconditional to be pregnant

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inquiry shows that *neither* accepting that application *nor* rejecting it gives a viable result—for Socrates can refute both 'virtue is knowledge and is teachable' and 'virtue is not knowledge and is not teachable'—then it would be reasonable to conclude that the fault is with the hypothesis itself. At the same time, the case of the *Meno* shows that such a finding of disharmony may represent only a preliminary result. Socrates goes on to provide what later dialecticians would call a *lusis* of the problem: both (2) and (4) (and with it (5)) need to be rethought and more carefully put, and when we do so the contradiction is eliminated.[55] For knowledge is *not* the only beneficial thing in the soul, and so it need not be the case that all virtue is knowledge: most often it consists in divine luck and right opinion. This still leaves open the possibility that some *is* knowledge and that this kind *could* be taught, if only by a rare 'Teiresias' figure.[56] So the *Meno* shows that even conclusive-looking type (iii) uses of hypothesis are only provisional: when the consequences of a hypothesis *are* disharmonious, the right response may still not be to reject it, but rather to see whether a more careful rethinking might dissolve the problem. In truth, neither the biconditional nor the opening hypothesis that virtue is good and beneficial is here at fault.

The consequences of intellectualism also include a different kind of application of the central hypothesis: namely the claims discussed in the *Charmides*, *Laches*, and *Euthyphro* that the *specific* virtues or parts of virtue—respectively, *sôphrosunê*, courage, and piety—are kinds of knowledge or *technê*.[57] These *Specification*-consequences figure in the dialogues as both an attraction and a locus of problems. The *Charmides*' investigation of *sôphrosunê* increasingly comes to focus on the idea that it is a *reflexive* kind of knowledge, a knowledge of knowledge itself and of ignorance (165c–176b). Thus it recalls the suggestion made by the *Apology* that Socrates' self-knowledge and humility—his awareness of what he does *not* know—might itself be what human virtue is. By representing such self-awareness as an *epistêmê* and *technê*, the *Charmides* explores the prospects for reconciling this anti-intellectualist-looking *echt*-Socratic conception of virtue with the intellectualist hypothesis. The *Laches* and the *Protagoras* both discuss the hard case of

with all the implications of its application to the case at hand—that is, to virtue. *Republic* 436eff. confirms that for Plato the consequences [here *sumbainonta*] of a hypothesized principle include the implications of its application to a particular case, the case in point being the application of the 'principle of opposition' to cases of desire and aversion. Cf. also the consequences of the hypothesis deduced in the latter part of the *Parmenides* [*sumbainonta ek tês hupotheseôs*, 136a1, 142b4, with talk of examining them in relation to itself and each of the others 136c1].

[55] Socrates' procedure is easier to understand if we bear in mind that hypothesis bears the DNA of eristic as well as of geometry. When eristic arguments reach contradictory conclusions (as for instance at the start of the *Euthydemus* (275e–278b)), solving them standardly involves some kind of *disambiguation*—which is what Socrates' distinction between the virtue of the statesman and that of the Teiresias figure supplies.

[56] On which see Scott 2006.

[57] The *Hippias Minor* in effect does the same for justice, though it does not present as a 'definitional' dialogue.

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intellectualism about courage, with ambiguous results. The *Laches* finds that it conflicts with the commonsensical presumption that courage is merely a part of virtue, at least if we suppose that the knowledge which is courage consists in the knowledge of goods and evils (199e). The *Protagoras* vindicates the identity of courage with wisdom only via the higher hypothesis of hedonism, the status of which is notoriously in question. So the results in all these dialogues are largely negative and inconclusive. The *Hippias Minor* raises a further problem, regarding the specific virtue of justice: if a craft is a power for opposites, then it must be the part of the just person to do wrong voluntarily and with skill (376b). This problem of *Bivalence* is raised again in *Republic* I.[58]

These *Specification* consequences are enmeshed with some of the others. One of these is *Content*: if virtue consists in knowledge, it must have some determinate subject matter distinct from that of all the other crafts and sciences. (In fact Plato seems to assume that the subjects of real *technai* cannot even overlap, and that this stipulation can be used to weed out suspiciously broad-looking pseudo-crafts such as rhetoric (*Gorgias* 453d–459c, and cf. *Ion* 537d–540b).) We can distinguish as a second-generation consequence Plato's preferred conception of that content, namely the knowledge of good and evil (*KGE*)—or, less misleadingly, of good and bad things, i.e. of value in general (*Laches* 199e, *Protagoras* 352b–360d, *Charmides* 174b–175b, cf. *Euthydemus* 292a–e). *KGE* is a promising and ingenious way to spell out *Content*, for it provides the determinacy which is distinctive of a craft while having the universal scope required for virtue conceived as a functional art of living, able to govern all deliberation. But *KGE* also presents problems of its own. For one thing, it implies that all the parts of virtue are really the same. Moreover, the early dialogues present as *echt*-Socratic, and independent of intellectualism, the idea that virtue itself is the human good, by being a kind of health of the soul (*Crito* 47e–48a, *Gorgias* 506c–509e). And in conjunction with *KGE* this produces a vicious circularity, in which the good is defined as knowledge of the good. This third-generation consequence *Circularity* is noted as a worry in the *Euthydemus* and *Republic*—and from another angle in the *Charmides*, which discusses whether there can be a knowledge which knows only itself (165e–171c). A solution is suggested in *Republic* VI: even if the human good is knowledge of the Form of the Good, since the two are distinct the claim is non-circular (505aff.).

[58] At *Republic* 332b–334a the idea of justice as a bivalent *technê* is again shown to lead to hopeless paradoxes; and at 335a–e it is established, *contra* Polemarchus, that the function of a just person can only be to benefit, not to harm. This entails not that justice could not be a craft, but only that if it is one, craft must not be bivalent. And sure enough, a new account of craft as unidirectional and inherently beneficent is then sketched in the discussion with Thrasymachus. One sign that we should not take either the *HM* or the discussion with Polemarchus as simply rejecting the conception of justice as a craft is that the paradox-generating final argument of the *HM* is presented as applying *whether justice is a craft or a power* [*dunamis*] (375d–376c). I take the latter to be the broader genus of which craft is a species—one so broad, indeed, that a virtue will count as one on almost any conception of it. So intellectualism is no worse off than any other theory here; and the revised, unidirectional conception of *technê* in *Republic* I shows how it alone can escape the paradox. Cf. Barney 2021.

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KGE is one of the consequences which seem to particularly occupy Plato, being important to the discussion in more than one dialogue. Another, derived from it in turn, is *Unity*: that is (as I understand it), that the virtues are not only mutually entailing but identical, consisting in a single psychological power. This perhaps could be viewed as a direct consequence of the intellectualist hypothesis itself; but it would seem to be possible in principle that each virtue might consist in a *distinct* body of knowledge. It is only once all the virtues are identified with a universal, comprehensive knowledge of goods and evils that there is no room left to differentiate them. Meanwhile *Unity* is problematic in turn: the *Protagoras* and *Laches* both bring out how implausible it (and for that matter *Specification* itself) is for the case of courage (*Prot.* 329e, 349d, 350e–351a, *Laches* 199e, cf. 190d).

Several of these consequences point in the same further direction. If the whole of virtue must be present in the same person; if it requires an awe-inspiringly comprehensive grasp of all the goods and evils attainable by action; if to acquire it requires expert instruction (as well as practice, like any proper *technê*)—then it must be extraordinarily difficult to achieve. And so we must also suppose it to be vanishingly rare; and most of the people we usually count as in some way virtuous can only have attained some lower level of (or surrogate for) the art. I will call this pair of consequences *Difficulty* and *Levels* respectively. These are particularly evident in the *Meno*—and from there must feed in somehow to the 'higher' and 'lower' kinds of virtue we encounter in the *Phaedo* (68b–69d) and *Republic* (430c), though we should not assume that Plato's distinctions are identical in all these texts. The end of the *Meno*, as I noted above, seems intended to disambiguate virtue into two levels, one constituted by knowledge and teachable, the other a matter of right opinion and due to divine luck. The former is clearly superior: but it is confined to the Teiresias figure, evoked in a conditional suggestive more of an aspiration or educational programme than an achieved reality. And the same aspirational stance is implicit in the *Protagoras*, if we are to take Socrates' 'art of measurement' as a serious (not merely ad hominem) proposal for a practical wisdom constitutive of all the virtues. For surely almost no one has ever attained such a comprehensive, scientific, illusion-free grasp of the weight to be accorded to every possible deliberative consideration.

Difficulty and *Levels* are triply important consequences of the intellectualist hypothesis. They are, for Plato, likely to have been independently attractive: not only for their moral elitism, but because they give the right kind of limited endorsement of Socratic virtue.[59] They also give a new configuration of a

[59] That Socrates is intended as an exemplary figure in the early dialogues is hard to doubt. But he is also markedly apolitical in any normal sense, and certainly not an obvious candidate for political office, as the possessor of the Protagorean *technê* would be. It is thus reasonable to suppose that his is not the highest form of social virtue conceivable. This is compatible with his claim that he alone 'puts his hand to' the art of politics at *Gorgias* 521d, which is hardly a resounding boast of expertise or success.

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powerful traditional Greek idea, that humans are precluded—or, perhaps, *almost* precluded—from a highest, divine kind of virtue. And third, they show that once the hypothesis is properly understood, some of the most intuitive objections to it miss their mark. For instance, the unity of the virtues strikes interlocutors such as Protagoras as quite obviously empirically false: but the problem vanishes once we see that *Unity* is meant to hold only for the vanishingly rare virtue which is knowledge. (It's no surprise if the dispositions we commonly accept as virtuous are found separately—that's part of what makes them inferior to the real thing.) Likewise with *Teaching*. The highest virtue must be taught, since it is a *technê*; but how the second-rate, piecemeal kind we typically encounter is to be acquired is another question altogether. (In the *Meno*, real learning turns out to consist in recollection: so perhaps 'teaching' and 'learning' need to be disambiguated into higher and lower varieties as well.)

Teaching, *Content*, *KGE*, *Circularity*, *Unity*, *Difficulty*, *Levels*, and the *Specifications* are the consequences which run from one dialogue to another, discussed over and over from different angles, with different-looking but complementary results—the red threads which bind together the early dialogues, revealing them as a single project of inquiry. And their investigation appears, in a general way, to give results supportive of the hypothesis. All told, these consequences *do* harmonize, interlocking to support and clarify each other and to disarm potential objections. So far, it seems that under full examination, intellectualism turns out to be defensible.

However, this is not the whole story. There are three further important theses which are standardly treated as part of 'Socratic intellectualism', but which I have so far set aside because they do *not* seem to be consequences of the intellectualist hypothesis itself. (My discussion of these will necessarily be brief and dogmatic; my aim is only to sketch how these endlessly controversial doctrines fit into the hypothetical reading.) These are: (i) the denial that *akrasia* or weakness of will is possible, which so scandalizes the *Magna Moralia* (*No Akrasia*, as I will call it); (ii) the notorious 'Socratic paradox' that no one does wrong voluntarily (*Nemo*, from the Latin tag *nemo sua sponte peccat*); and (iii) the thesis that all desire is for the good (*DG*). None is in any obvious or direct way a consequence of the Protagorean thesis that political virtue can be taught; but all are discussed by Socrates in the relevant contexts, as somehow bound up with it.

To see the status and role of these theses on the hypothetical reading, we need to start by locating them in their dialectical context, and seeing how they are connected. *No Akrasia* is confined to the *Protagoras*, which diagnoses akratic experience as a kind of cognitive error, comparable to being taken in by an optical illusion.[60] The akratic—contrary to the self-interpretation of 'the Many'—pursues

[60] On the massively complex and controversial latter part of the *Protagoras*, see Kamtekar 2017.

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what in the moment appears best to him, in what looks like a *strengthened* version of *DG*. (Strengthened in that simply to say that all desire is for the good is not yet to say that we only ever pursue what seems best to us, all things considered; and it is only the latter claim which rules out *akrasia*.) The belief which the akratic acts upon is a matter of temporary deception by 'the power of appearance'—an intermittent false belief, of a kind which the right kind of expertise can block. So the *Protagoras* is in accord with the *Meno*: the special power of knowledge is that it renders impossible the kind of lapse into false belief which leads to deliberative mistakes.

Nemo has traditionally has been taken as the heart of 'Socratic intellectualism'. But though it is a recurrent Platonic commitment, it seems not to be theoretically fundamental, and its connection to intellectualism seems adventitious. In the early dialogues it is associated with intellectualism at *Gorgias* 509e, *Protagoras* 345e, and implicitly at *Hippias Minor* 376b; but Plato continues to hold it in late dialogues such as the *Timaeus*—on quite different grounds, having to do with the limits imposed by incarnation (86b–87b). Interestingly, *Nemo* in the early dialogues is not as radical as it sounds: at any rate Plato does *not* take it to entail that wrongdoers should receive forgiveness rather than punishment and blame. In the *Timaeus*, though, he *does* seem to infer that blame for the morally defective person is misguided (86d–e, 87b). So evidently *Nemo* is for him a thesis of enduring independent moral importance: but also one which needs to be derived from some more basic principle or other, with implications which vary according to what that grounding is.[61] In the *Gorgias*, it seems that *Nemo* follows from the conjunction of two theses: *DG* and the *echt*-Socratic idea which helped to generate *Circularity*, that virtue is itself the greatest good for us. Together, these imply that unjust action, which confirms and increases injustice in the soul, can only frustrate our desire and so is possible only on condition of ignorance. The *Hippias Minor* leads us to the complementary suggestion that if justice is a *technê* (another instance of *Specification*), it must be the case that the person who has it will understand, as part of his art, that it is never in his interest to do wrong, and so will never be motivated to do it.

Thus *DG* stands as a hypothesis in relation to both *No Akrasia* and *Nemo*. In addition to the *Protagoras*, it figures, by different argumentative routes, in the *Meno* (77a–78a), *Gorgias* (466a–468e) and *Republic* (505a–b). Its explanatory priority is somewhat obscured by the way in which, in the *Protagoras*, it is introduced as if inferred from *No Akrasia* at 358b6–c3. This order of appearance is, I would suggest, somewhat misleading: *DG* is not the *result* of the argument (which would be invalid if it were), but for Plato represents a kind of first principle [*archê*]. Here and elsewhere, it is supported not by deduction from anything more

[61] Cf. Kamtekar 2017 for a full and insightful discussion.

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basic but by explanations of why apparent types of counter-example do not count: the person who seems to desire bad things in the *Meno*, the person who undergoes medical treatment in the *Gorgias*, and the akratic agent in the *Protagoras*. Hence my use of the term *archê*. According to Aristotle, a true first principle can only be supported dialectically, by disarming any alternatives and objections (cf. Arist. *Metaph*. IV.3–6); this is, it seems to me, roughly what Plato is doing in these much-debated passages. His purpose in doing so is to propose and defend *DG* as the strongest available higher hypothesis for intellectualism itself. In effect, he asks: on what condition would it follow that the possession of a deliberative art—the Protagorean *technê*—would be sufficient to guarantee success in life? It would follow only if our desire is already oriented to what is best for us, so that the only obstacles are recognizing what it consists in and how to obtain it.

How exactly we should understand *DG* is an enduringly tricky question, which I cannot address properly here.[62] So far as I can see, *DG* as presented in the *Meno* and *Gorgias* claims only that every human desire is prompted by the apprehension of its object as good or beneficial in some way for the possessor.[63] Thus it amounts to the claim that all human behaviour is ultimately motivated by self-interest. This thought (also found in Gorgias' *Palamedes* and Thucydides *passim*) should probably be seen as a commonplace of fifth-century thought, essential then as now to explanation in the social sciences—compare the 'economic man' of the modern era. Only in the *Protagoras* do we find the more precise and less intuitive claim that the strength of our various desires *tracks* the comparative expected utility of their objects: that all our desires, whether based on knowledge or mere opinion, are (to put it in a few different ways) systematically regimented, reason-responsive, all-things-considered, or good-*maximizing*. Here Plato seems to mix in with *DG* some independent claim about the structure of desires which, taken together with it, gives the result that we can never be motivated to pursue a lesser good over a larger one: we only ever act on a desire for what we consider *best*. This result seems to me worth distinguishing from *DG* proper: I have already alluded to it as *strengthened DG*. It is strengthened *DG* which grounds *No Akrasia* and *Nemo*; is it also strengthened *DG* which he takes to best ground the intellectualist hypothesis? Without it, there would at least be an important loophole in the Protagorean promise. For possession of the deliberative art could not guarantee success in life if the possessor remained vulnerable to desires which are unresponsive to reason, and excessive and irrational in relation to the value of their objects. This seems to be part of the point of *Protagoras* 352e, where Protagoras agrees that wisdom and knowledge are rulers in our soul, not to be overthrown by emotional

[62] I do my best in Barney 2010. Note that the difference between *DG* and strengthened *DG* which I note here is orthogonal to the distinction between the object of desire understood as the apparent and as the real good.

[63] Cf. *Gorgias* (367c–368e), *Meno* (77c–78b); also *Protagoras* (358b–c), *Republic* (505a–b; for a banal application cf. e.g. 369c), and Gorgias *Palamedes* (13, 19).

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pressures and temptations: tellingly, he says that it would be shameful for him 'above all people' to say otherwise. But whether he, Socrates, or their author has thought through what this stance presupposes about the structure of human motivation is another question.

In sum, it seems to me that *DG* should be seen as a higher hypothesis relative to the intellectualist hypothesis, and *No Akrasia* and *Nemo* as a kind of collateral 'branch line' of consequences, reached via strengthened *DG*, by which it is to be tested. That *all* the consequences of a higher hypothesis should be explored, so as to test it in turn in the manner of hypothesis type (iii), is nowhere explicit in Plato's discussions of the method, but seems a natural extension of it. These two are not themselves first principles, then, nor *echt*-Socratic paradoxes, but a second set of consequences—a bonus or penalty, as the case may be, attached not to sophistic intellectualism itself but to the best grounding Plato can supply for it. Plato is sufficiently content with *Nemo* to retain it even in his latest works; but *No Akrasia* is of course rejected in *Republic* IV. The verdict on the intellectualist package as a whole, then, appears to be mixed.

5. Conclusions

So much by way of a sketch of the intellectualist hypothesis and Plato's investigations of it in the early dialogues. I have passed over many difficulties and left any number of questions unanswered; but I hope what I have said is sufficient to show that the hypothetical reading doesn't boil down to the unexciting claim that the early dialogues assert 'virtue is knowledge' in merely a provisional or tentative way. I would prefer to say that they do not assert it at all, and that this tells us something important about Platonic philosophical writing. In reading philosophical texts we habitually presuppose that the central operation of the text is doctrinal assertion. We assume, in the absence of explicit instruction to the contrary, that when a work of philosophy advances an argument for a thesis it is because the author endorses that thesis as true and that argument as sound, and that he puts them forward in order to urge us to join him in that endorsement. That package of assumptions is fair enough for most philosophical writing from Aristotle onwards; and it has for centuries made the Aristotelian reading of the early dialogues seem natural. But applied retroactively to Plato's early works, as to the texts of the sophists who so deeply influenced him, it gives grotesque results. Here, no one argument gives more than one side of the story; in advancing arguments on both sides, Plato merely commends them to our philosophical attention and further investigation. And this is not merely because of a general spirit of provisionality, of the kind which we also find in (for instance) Cicero's more skeptical works—a rote commitment to only weakened assertion, so as to leave room for future inquiry. It is because Plato's texts *are* inquiry: philosophy being done in real time, not a report on its results.

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To see what those results might be, when the inquiry is at last complete, we can do no better than to turn to the *Republic*; but the evidence it presents is complex and ambiguous. The tripartite psychology presented there looks like Plato's solution to at least some of the problems which the early dialogues have disclosed, and especially to the difficulties with strengthened *DG*. Tripartition explains how an agent may have desires which float free of his considered opinion as to what is best: it can be seen as designed not to reject *DG* but to rescue it, by showing that is indeed compatible with the phenomena *if conjoined with a suitably complex and psychologically realistic account of the agent who believes and desires*.[64] But Plato in the *Republic* is less interested in spelling out the results of his old inquiry than in diving into a new one, built around just the kind of substantive theorizing in moral psychology from which the early dialogues refrained. In fact, how we see his overall verdict on the hypothesis depends on how we resolve a question which the explicit argument of the *Republic* leaves open. If the knowledge of the Good possessed by the Guardians according to Books V–VII is just a greatly elaborated version of the *euboulia* attributed to them in Book IV, then it is distinct from the virtues of courage, *sôphrosunê*, and justice. So the art of living is at most one of the virtues; and the hypothesis as construed in the early dialogues, where it entailed *Unity*, has failed. (At the same time, we might see here a reversion to the original Protagorean form of the hypothesis, on which the *politikê technê* is by no means identical with all the virtues.) Alternatively, if we suppose that the wisdom which flows from the Guardians' dialectical grasp of the Good *replaces* in them the ensemble of the Book IV virtues,[65] the *Republic* would in effect be reapplying the consequences *Levels*, *Difficulty*, and *Content* so as to distinguish the virtue of the Guardians from even the best lesser kind, as outlined in Book IV. Since that higher virtue would consist in a deliberative *technê* qualifying them to rule, it would be fair to read the *Republic* as in the end *affirming* the intellectualist hypothesis. I see no simple or decisive way to decide between these two readings of the *Republic*; that being so, Plato's verdict on the early dialogues likewise seems to me to remain open. That the grand project of investigation presented in the early dialogues does not in the end give a simple and decisive result—that Plato's answer in the end is apparently, 'it depends what you mean by virtue'—makes it, it seems to me, not a failure but a model of philosophical inquiry.[66]

[64] For recent readings bringing out this kind of continuity between 'Socratic' psychology and that of the *Republic* see Carone 2001, Moss 2008, Gerson 2014, Wilburn 2015, Kamtekar 2017, and Butler 2019.

[65] This would explain why the Auxiliaries have merely 'civic courage' (430c): only a courage constituted by knowledge, which the Guardians alone will possess, deserves to be called courage *sans phrase*. At the same time it is only the Auxiliaries who exercise courage on behalf of the city; so their courage is 'civic' in a positive sense as well.

[66] This first version of this paper was submitted for a graduate school 'unit' to a deeply unconvinced Alexander Nehamas in 1992. Since then ancestors of it have been presented at Washington University (St. Louis), Durham University, Oxford University, King's College London, University of Michigan, Harvard University, the Universidade São Paulo, and other locales, in addition to the Keeling

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Colloquium at UCL; I am afraid that this almost geological timescale prevents me from thanking all the colleagues who have corrected errors and otherwise helped me with it, but I know that they include Hugh Benson, Tad Brennan, Eric Brown, Rachana Kamtekar, Fiona Leigh, Stephen Menn, Marco Zingano, and of course Alexander Nehamas. I am also grateful to Terence Irwin for his acute but generous comments; and to Merrick Anderson, Julia Annas, Taylor Barinka, David Ebrey, Mark Gatten, Rachana Kamtekar, and David Wolfsdorf for their very helpful comments on the final draft.

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