Classical Quarterly 56.1 77–92 (2006) Printed in Great Britain
doi: 10.1017/S0009838806000073

DESIRE FOR GOOD IN *MENO* 77B2–78B6

I. INTRODUCTION

I.i Status quaestionis

At *Meno* 77B2–5 Meno offers his third definition of excellence: the desire for fine things and the ability to obtain them.[1] Socrates elicits Meno's agreement to a redescription of fine things as good things and then develops an argument (77B2–78B6) the conclusion of which is that since all people desire good things and not all people possess excellence, the desire for good things cannot be a constituent of excellence.[2]

Controversy persists over the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good.[3] According to the subjectivist interpretation, the subject desires an object *o* under the impression that *o* is good, whether or not *o* in fact has that value. In other words, desire is for the so-called apparent good or for *o* under the description 'good',[4] a view consonant with the standard philosophical conception of desire.[5]

In the last decade or so, two noteworthy alternative interpretations of the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good have been advanced. Penner, both by himself in 1990 and in conjunction with Rowe in 1994, has argued that Socrates is committed to the view that all people desire what is really good. Penner's position depends upon a radical revision of Socrates' conception of desire that is bound up

[1] *Δοκεῖ τοίνυν μοι, ὦ Σώκρατες, ἀρετὴ εἶναι, καθάπερ ὁ ποιητὴς λέγει, χαίρειν τε καλοῖσι καὶ δύνασθαι· καὶ ἐγὼ τοῦτο λέγω ἀρετήν, ἐπιθυμοῦντα τῶν καλῶν δυνατὸν εἶναι πορίζεσθαι.*

[2] More precisely, the conclusion depends upon the following additional, uncontroversial premise: few people possess excellence.

[3] Even this articulation contains two important difficulties. One is that the various characters named 'Socrates' among a given set of Platonic dialogues need not have a strict trans-textual identity; consequently, Socrates may not, explicitly or implicitly, maintain a proposition such as that all people desire the good *throughout*, say, the so-called early dialogues. The other is that the phrase 'the good' is ambiguous; it can be interpreted to mean *the form goodness*, or it can be interpreted to mean *good things*. Socrates' argument at *Meno* 77B2–78B6 makes no reference to the form goodness, nor do I see legitimate reasons for importing this concept into the interpretation of the argument. Furthermore, a satisfactory treatment of the argument need not and should not indiscriminately import the content of Socratic utterances and commitments from other Platonic dialogues.

[4] Advocates include Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, 'The Socratic paradoxes', *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964), 147–64, reprinted in *Socrates Philosophy in the Early Dialogues* (New York, 1979); George Nakhnikian, 'The first Socratic paradox', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11 (1973), 1–17; John E. Thomas, *Musings on the Meno* (Amsterdam, 1980), 114–7; R. W. Sharples, *Meno* (London, 1985), 138–9; and R. Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave* (Oxford, 2001), 34–7.

[5] A traditional alternative interpretation with some more recent defenders claims that the true self desires what is really good. Advocates include F. M. Cornford, *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge, 1932), 51; E. R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford, 1951), 235–6; J. Moline, *Plato's Theory of Understanding* (Madison, 1981), 71–3; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (Oxford, 1994), 101–2. Cf. also K. McTighe, 'Socrates on the desire for the good and the involuntariness of wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466a–468e', *Phronesis* 29 (1984), 193–236, at nn. 18–19.

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with a distinctive conception of the individuation of actions.[6] On Penner's view, the ultimate end of all humans' desires is what is really good, namely true happiness, 'even if [that] is different from what [they] think it is'.[7]

> Consider what parents want for their children when, as usually, they 'want what is best for them'. Is this wanting what is best for one's children identifiable with wanting what one *thinks* is best for them? I think not. For it is an exceptionally obtuse parent that thinks it very likely that what the *parent* thinks best for the child will be what is in fact best for the child. . . . [W]hat parents want for their children is what really *is* best for their children, even if what is really best differs from what the parents or children think best. So why shouldn't it be the case that what I want for *myself* is: what is really best for me *even if that differs from what I think it is*?[8]

Furthermore, Penner argues that Socrates 'individuates actions by means of a totality of attributes *that includes consequences*'.[9] Accordingly, if a man pursues a course of action, falsely believing that action to be conducive to his true happiness, then that man does not desire that action.

The distinction between Penner's view and the subjectivist interpretation, then, emerges in the following example. Assume marrying an heiress is in fact conducive to John's true happiness and that John desires to marry an heiress, but that John falsely believes Mary to be an heiress. On the subjectivist interpretation, John desires to marry Mary, for Mary appears to John to be an heiress. In contrast, on Penner's interpretation, John does not desire to marry Mary, even though he believes that Mary is an heiress and that marrying an heiress is conducive to true happiness, for he desires true happiness and, contrary to what he believes, marrying Mary is not conducive to true happiness.

Most recently, Segvic has argued that in proposing that all people desire the good, Socrates is introducing an unconventional conception of wanting:

> I (Socratically) want to ϕ only if my wanting to ϕ is linked to my recognition of the goodness of ϕ-ing; if it is a mere coincidence that I believe that ϕ-ing is the right thing to do and that ϕ-ing in fact is the right thing to do, my wanting to ϕ is not Socratic wanting.[10]

Furthermore, the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good is not trivially true just because Socrates stipulatively defines desire in an idiosyncratic way. Socrates' claim is 'meant to express a truth about the underlying structure of human motivation'.[11]

[6] Note that Penner's position differs from the true self interpretation (described in the preceding note) in that Penner makes no appeal to a true self or to one part of the soul as opposed to another that possesses the genuine conative or motivational state.

[7] T. Penner, 'Desire and power in Socrates: the argument of *Gorgias* 466A–468E that orators and tyrants have no power in the city', *Apeiron* 24 (1991), 147–202, at 195.

[8] Ibid. 193.

[9] T. Penner and C. J. Rowe, 'The desire for good: is the *Meno* inconsistent with the *Gorgias*?', *Phronesis* 39 (1994), 1–25, at n. 14, with my italics.

[10] Heda Segvic, 'No one errs willingly: the meaning of Socratic intellectualism', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2000), 1–45, at 11. 'In claiming [in *Gorgias*] that orators and tyrants do not do what they want to do, Socrates is inviting us to think of *wanting* as a volitional state that is in some ways like perceiving. I do not perceive an object if I have some images; I perceive it only if my sensory impressions derive from the object itself in the right way. Socratic volition is likewise a receptivity of the soul to certain evaluative properties of the object of volition, the properties Socrates designates by the term "good". However, wanting is not sheer receptivity; it is mediated by a correct conception of desire as the good or right thing to do' (ibid. 10). For Segvic's criticism of Penner's conception, see ibid. n. 15.

[11] Ibid. 13.

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Socrates seems to propose his special notion of wanting . . . not as a notion we already have at work in our language, but rather as a notion that we occasionally grope for, and a notion that we need. We need it because it enables us to express something that is of relevance to all the willing, wishing, and desiring that we ordinarily do and ordinarily speak of.[12]

Segvic's view of Socrates' conception of desire is, then, of 'a certain ideal'.[13]

Most interpretations of the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good principally derive from interpretations of Socrates' argument against Polus in *Gorgias*, that tyrants and orators have no power and that it is possible to do what one thinks best, but without doing what one desires (466A–468E). This is true of Segvic's discussion and Penner's discussion of 1991.[14] Those who advocate the subjectivist interpretation are an exception since they often appeal to the argument at *Meno* 77–8. And among those who argue against a subjectivist interpretation, only Penner and Rowe seriously consider the *Meno* passage.

Penner and Rowe's analysis of the *Meno* passage specifically develops against Santas's subjectivist interpretation. There has been no published refutation of their position. Moreover, the most recent work in English on *Meno*, Weiss's book of 2001,[15] maintains a subjectivist interpretation, yet without citing Penner and Rowe's discussion.[16] Given the *status quaestionis*, a judicious interpreter must either concede Penner and Rowe's conclusions or demonstrate their inadequacy.

Furthermore, for any number of reasons, Socrates' commitments regarding desire in *Meno* 77–8 need not be consistent with Socrates' commitments regarding desire in *Gorgias* or anywhere else in the Platonic corpus. Yet, as noted above, interpreters tend to speak of *Socrates'* conception of desire as though Socrates, implicitly or explicitly, maintains the given conception throughout at least the so-called early dialogues. Accordingly, Socrates' argument with Polus in *Gorgias* simply serves as a good example of the conception of desire to which Socrates generally is committed. I regard this approach as unwise. One should not assume from the outset that Socrates' utterances or commitments are consistent among a set of texts, or even that there is a character named 'Socrates' whom Plato intended to endow with a strict trans-textual identity.[17] Therefore, although my own discussion does not examine the argument in *Gorgias* or, for instance, *Lysis*, my results challenge interpreters who, on the basis of *Gorgias*, argue for a different, but general Socratic conception of desire to explain the inconsistency between Socrates' conception of desire in *Meno* and elsewhere.

This paper maintains a subjectivist interpretation of the Socratic proposition in *Meno* 77B2–78B6 that all people desire the good. To this extent, my conclusion is consistent with several contributions of the last forty years. On the other hand, my discussion attempts to supersede previous treatments of the passage in at least two respects. First, few commentators adequately engage with the contributions of their predecessors. Thus, for example, in the case of those who argue for a subjectivist

[12] Ibid. 19.

[13] Note also that both Penner's and Segvic's positions, *contra* Weiss's, preserve the entailment between the principle that everyone desires the good and the principle that no one does wrong willingly.

[14] Segvic also engages Socrates' denial of *akrasia* in *Protagoras*.

[15] Weiss (n. 4).

[16] She also does not mention Penner's (n. 7) treatment of the *Gorgias* passage on which his and Rowe's interpretation of the *Meno* passage depends. On the other hand, it must be said that Weiss's treatment of the *Meno* passage is, in comparison to her predecessors', quite comprehensive.

[17] Cf. D. Wolfsdorf, 'Interpreting Plato's early dialogues', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004), 15–40.

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interpretation, there has been inadequate attention to, and discussion of the differences among, individual contributions. This is significant, for clearly it is not the conclusion of a given analysis alone that is important, but the grounds upon which that conclusion is reached. Second, few commentators have treated the full range of problems that the passage presents. To this extent, their results are inconclusive. The following section specifies a number of questions that a judicious account of the passage should address. Most commentators do not, explicitly or implicitly, provide answers to many of them.[18] In short, then, the following discussion of *Meno* 77B2–78B6 attempts both to settle the central problem of the passage and to set, as explicitly as possible, a hermeneutic standard that subsequent challengers must meet.

I.ii Overview of the argument and its problems

It is impossible to provide an overview of the argument that does not to some extent involve interpretation of the argument. But since the paper proceeds to defend the interpretation given, the overview may be taken as provisional and useful for the purposes of explication.

Meno accepts Socrates' redescription of the desire for fine things as the desire for good things. Socrates then questions whether all people desire good things, and Meno claims that:

(a) some people desire bad things.

Socrates questions whether by (a) Meno means that those who desire things that are bad think that these things are in fact good or whether those who desire things that are bad recognize that these things are in fact bad. Meno claims that both psychological conditions occur:

(b) some people desire things that are bad, but believe that these things are good;
(c) some people desire things that are bad and recognize that these things are bad.

Socrates is surprised that Meno commits to (c). First, Socrates elicits Meno's confirmation of (c). Subsequently, he questions what Meno understands by 'desire'. Specifically he characterizes and gains Meno's assent to the characterization of desire in (c) as:

(d) desire that one obtain the *desideratum*.

Socrates now questions whether the people of (c) believe that the bad things that are the objects of their desire benefit them or whether they recognize that the bad things that are the objects of their desire harm them. Meno claims that:

(e) some people desire things that are bad, recognize that these things are bad, but believe that these bad things benefit them;
(f) some people desire things that are bad, recognize that these things are bad, and believe that these things harm them.

Socrates indicates that recognizing that something is bad implies knowing that it is harmful to oneself and therefore the people of (e) do not in fact recognize that the things that they desire are bad. Rather, the people of (e) desire good things. Meno concedes this point.

[18] Indeed, most commentators offer answers to only a few.

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Finally, Socrates argues that the people of (f) are psychologically impossible for the following reason. The people of (f) believe that:

(g) people are miserable to the extent that they suffer harm;
(h) those who are miserable are unhappy.

Therefore, the people of (f) would desire to be unhappy. However, Socrates elicits Meno's assent that:

(i) no one desires to be miserable and unhappy;

Thus, the argument concludes that no one desires bad things.

It is also necessary to mention that at the conclusion of the argument, Socrates, in stating (i) himself, makes the following comment:

(j) being wretched is desiring bad things and getting them.

Given the preceding overview, a satisfactory explanation of the argument should include answers to the following questions:

(1) Why does Socrates present (b) and (c) as explanations of (a)?
(2) Why is Socrates surprised by (c), and why does he seek Meno's reconfirmation of it?
(3) Why does Socrates characterize desire as in (d)?
(4) Why does Socrates offer (e) and (f) as explanations of (c)?
(5) Why does Socrates elicit Meno's assent that the people of (e) do not know that the bad things they desire are beneficial?
(6) Why does Socrates conclude and why does Meno concede that the people of (e) desire good things?
(7) Why does Socrates conclude and why does Meno concede that the people of (f) do not desire bad things?
(8) How can a subjectivist interpretation of the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good be consistent with (i) and (j)?

Questions (1) and (2) will be answered in section II.i; (3)–(6) in II.ii.i; and (7) and (8) in II.iii.

II. AN INTERPRETATION OF *MENO* 77B2–78B6

II.i Socrates' redescription of the original definition and Meno's claim that some people desire bad things

The argument against the third definition begins with Socrates' redescription of fine things (*καλά*) as good things (*ἀγαθά*).[19] Meno permits the redescription, and the discussion proceeds without further comment on the relation between fineness and goodness.

Following the redescription of desire for fine things as good things, Socrates questions whether Meno believes that some people desire bad things and others desire good things.[20] Socrates poses the question because he believes that all people desire

[19] *ΣΩ. Ἆρα λέγεις τὸν τῶν καλῶν ἐπιθυμοῦντα ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμητὴν εἶναι; MEN. Μάλιστά γε.* (*Meno* 77B6–7)

[20] *ΣΩ. Ἆρα ὡς ὄντων τινῶν οἳ τῶν κακῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, ἑτέρων δὲ οἳ τῶν ἀγαθῶν; οὐ πάντες, ὦριστε, δοκοῦσί σοι τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμεῖν; MEN. Οὐκ ἔμοιγε. ΣΩ. Ἀλλά τινες τῶν κακῶν; MEN. Ναί.* (*Meno* 77B7–C3)

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good things. Therefore, he does not believe that the desire for good things can be constitutive of excellence, a property that few people possess. In defence of his definition, Meno responds that:

(a) some people desire bad things.

Meno thereby prompts Socrates' argument to the contrary.

Socrates is surprised that Meno believes that some people desire bad things. This is because, as the ensuing exchange makes clear, Socrates regards bad things as harmful to oneself and therefore finds it remarkable that people would desire things harmful to themselves and that Meno would think that people desire things harmful to themselves.

It is necessary, then, to clarify why Meno submits that some people desire bad things. As the argument ensues, Socrates' comments elicit several reasons Meno has for maintaining (a). Initially, it appears that Meno regards some people as believing that certain things are good that are in fact bad. In this respect, one of Meno's reasons for committing to (a) is that Meno interprets desire in (a) *de re*.

This suggestion is consistent with Socrates' response:

> Do you mean that [those who desire bad things] think that the bad things are good, or do you mean that [those who desire bad things] recognize that the bad things are bad, but still desire them?[21]

In other words, Socrates makes explicit here a distinction between the objective value of *o* and what I will call the 'subjective' value of *o*, that is, the value that the desiring subject attaches to *o*. In short, Socrates' first interpretation of (a), which would allay his surprise at Meno's commitment to (a), is that Meno claims (a) only because he understands desire in (a) *de re*.

In response to Socrates' question, however, Meno replies that both types of psychological conditions exist. Accordingly, Meno now commits to both:

(b) some people desire things that are bad, but believe that these things are good;
(c) some people desire things that are bad and recognize that these things are bad.

Consonant with my suggested interpretation, Socrates is not unsettled by Meno's admission that (b). However, Socrates is surprised that Meno believes that (c). Socrates' surprise is reflected in the fact that he seeks Meno's reconfirmation of (c):

> Does it really seem to you, Meno, that a person could desire bad things, when he recognizes them to be bad?[22]

Meno confirms (c).[23]

It is, of course, a question why Meno commits to (c). The answer, simply, seems to be that at this point in the argument Meno fails to observe that desiring something bad *de re* implies desiring something harmful to oneself.

[21] *ΣΩ. Οἰόμενοι τὰ κακὰ ἀγαθὰ εἶναι, λέγεις, ἢ καὶ γιγνώσκοντες ὅτι κακά ἐστιν, ὅμως ἐπιθυμοῦσιν αὐτῶν; ΜΕΝ. Ἀμφότερα ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ.* (*Meno* 77C3–5)

[22] *Ἦ γὰρ δοκεῖ τίς σοι, ὦ Μένων, γιγνώσκων τὰ κακὰ ὅτι κακά ἐστιν ὅμως ἐπιθυμεῖν αὐτῶν;* (*Meno* 77C5–7)

[23] *Μάλιστα.* (*Meno* 77C7)

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II.ii.i Socrates' argument that no one desires the bad recognizing it to be bad

Socrates now proceeds to argue that no one who recognizes that an object *o* is bad can then desire *o*. The argument ensues in three steps: clarification of the concept of desire, clarification of the concept of recognizing that *o* is bad, and finally consideration of whether some people knowingly desire to harm themselves.

Socrates first elicits Meno's agreement that by 'desire' he means desire that one have *o*.[24] The significance of this clarification is partially explained by a nearly identical clarification in *Symposium*. There, Diotima explains that when one desires *o*, one desires that one have *o* and that one's possession of *o* affects one in a particular way.[25] Likewise, in *Meno* Socrates is clarifying and emphasizing that the people of (c) actually want to possess bad things (*de dicto*). Since Socrates understands badness to imply harmfulness, this implies that some people actually want to harm themselves[26]—and Socrates finds this psychologically unintelligible.

Meno accepts Socrates' characterization of desire as:

(d) desire that one obtain *o*.

Consequently, Socrates proceeds to question Meno's understanding of the concept of recognizing that *o* is bad. Socrates asks whether a person who desires what is in fact bad, recognizing that it is bad, thinks that the bad benefits him or whether he recognizes that it harms him.[27] Socrates' question reflects his own belief that badness implies harmfulness. In posing the question, he is trying to ascertain whether Meno also appreciates this implication. Meno responds by claiming that some people who desire bad things, recognizing those things to be bad, think that those things are beneficial, whereas others recognize that those things are harmful.[28] In short, Meno distinguishes two types of people who conform to (c):

(e) some people desire things that are bad, recognize that these things are bad, but believe that these bad things benefit them;
(f) some people desire things that are bad, recognize that these things are bad, and recognize that these things harm them.

I will refer to the class of people who satisfy the description in (f) as 'masochists'. Socrates does not immediately turn his attention to the alleged masochists. Instead, he focuses on the people of (e), whom I will refer to as 'the base'.

I suggest that Meno commits to (e) for the following reason. Previously, Meno had accepted (b) as one legitimate interpretation of (a). According to that admission, some people desire bad things *de re*, but think that the objects of their desire *o* are good. However, Meno also believes that people desire things that they recognize to be bad, in the sense that they recognize that *o* is regarded as base by the best sort of people. Still, the base believe—from Meno's perspective, misguidedly—that *o* is beneficial. In view of this interpretation, it is evident that the phrase 'recognizing that

[24] *ΣΩ. Τί ἐπιθυμεῖν λέγεις; ἢ γενέσθαι αὐτῷ; ΜΕΝ. Γενέσθαι· τί γὰρ ἄλλο;* (*Meno* 77C7-D1) Like E. S. Thompson, *The Meno of Plato* (New York, 1901), 104 and R. S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno* (Cambridge, 1961), 258, I read αὑτῷ for αὐτῷ, as in *Symp*. 204D, 205E.

[25] *Symp*. 204D, 205E.

[26] This interpretation is consistent with the remarks of Bluck (n. 24), 257 and Sharples (n. 4), 138.

[27] *Πότερον ἡγούμενος τὰ κακὰ ὠφελεῖν ἐκεῖνον ᾧ ἂν γένηται, ἢ γιγνώσκων τὰ κακὰ ὅτι βλάπτει ᾧ ἂν παρῇ;* (*Meno* 77D1–3)

[28] *Εἰσὶ μὲν οἳ ἡγούμενοι τὰ κακὰ ὠφελεῖν, εἰσὶ δὲ καὶ οἳ γιγνώσκοντες ὅτι βλάπτει.* (*Meno* 77D3–4)

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o is bad' in (e) is ambiguous. It may mean *recognizing that o is held to be bad* or *recognizing, in the sense of knowing, that o is in fact bad*. I suggest that Socrates poses the following question regarding the base in order to resolve precisely this ambiguity of the phrase:

> And do you really believe that they *recognize* that the bad things are bad, when they believe that the bad things are beneficial?[29]

Given Socrates' own view that what is good is beneficial and what is bad is harmful, he is committed to the view that the base cannot recognize, in the sense of know, that *o* is bad, while at the same time believing that *o* is beneficial.

Meno seems to grasp the thrust of Socrates' question, for he concedes the point:

> No, not at all, I grant you that [*Οὐ πάνυ μοι δοκεῖ τοῦτό γε*].[30]

I interpret the '*γε*' here as concessive and limiting. That is to say, Meno concedes Socrates' point about the base: according to Socrates' conception of *recognizing that o is bad*, the base do not in fact recognize that *o* is bad. But at the same time, Meno maintains that the other class of people, the masochists of (f), do in fact desire bad things while recognizing that they are bad.

II.ii.ii Socrates' argument that the base do not desire bad things

Given Meno's concession that the base do not recognize, in the sense of know, that *o* is bad, Socrates now draws the conclusion that the base do not desire bad things:

> Clearly, then, (1) these people who are ignorant that [the objects of their desire] are in fact bad do not desire bad things. (2) Rather, they desire those things that they have been considering good,[31] (3) even though these things in fact are bad. (4) Consequently, those who are ignorant that the objects of their desire are bad and think them good clearly desire the good things. Right?[32]

Santas and Penner and Rowe have focused on this passage as crucial to the interpretation of Socrates' conception of desire in *Meno*; hence, I will follow Penner and Rowe in speaking of it as the 'crucial' passage. I will present my subjectivist interpretation of the passage and then criticize Penner and Rowe's considerations against a subjectivist interpretation of the passage.

In view of the preceding discussion, it is clear that Socrates' aim in the crucial passage is to confirm that the base do not desire bad things. Once he has made this point, he turns to the only remaining set of people who allegedly desire bad things, the masochists of (f). In short, the function of the crucial passage is conclusively to eliminate one of the last two sets of people from the class of those who, Meno alleges, desire bad things.

(1) [*Οὐκοῦν δῆλον ὅτι*] *οὗτοι μὲν οὐ τῶν κακῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτά*

[29] *Ἦ καὶ δοκοῦσί σοι γιγνώσκειν τὰ κακά ὅτι κακά ἐστιν, οἱ ἡγούμενοι τὰ κακὰ ὠφελεῖν;* (*Meno* 77D5–6)

[30] *Meno* 77D6–7.

[31] On this interpretation of the imperfect, see below.

[32] *Οὐκοῦν δῆλον ὅτι οὗτοι μὲν οὐ τῶν κακῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτά, ἀλλὰ ἐκείνων, ἃ ᾤοντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι, ἔστι δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά· ὥστε οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ οἰόμενοι ἀγαθὰ εἶναι δῆλον ὅτι τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν· ἢ οὔ;* (*Meno* 77D7-E4) I have inserted numerals into the passage following Penner and Rowe (n. 9), 11.

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The demonstrative pronoun *οὗτοι* refers to the base. The particle *μέν* alerts that these people will be contrasted with another class of people, namely the masochists to whom Socrates addresses himself in the exchange following the crucial passage.[33] Socrates' claim in (1) is that the base clearly do not desire bad things. The reason he gives is that the base are ignorant that *o* in fact is bad. The participial phrase *οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτά* is, accordingly, explanatory. In view of the preceding discussion—specifically Socrates' distinction between the objective and subjective value of *o* that emerges from Socrates' explanation of (a) as (b)—the participial phrase explains that the base do not desire bad things; this *because* they regard *o* as beneficial and so good. This indicates that desire is for *o following* an evaluation of *o* as good. This interpretation is further supported by (2) and (3):

(2) *ἀλλὰ ἐκείνων, ἃ ᾤοντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι,*
(3) *ἔστι δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά.*

Instead (*ἀλλά*), the base regard *o* as good and desire *o* because they believe that *o* is good. And yet *o* is in fact bad. The emphasis here in (3) is on the distinction between the objective value (bad) of the things that the base desire and the subjective value (good) that the base mistakenly attach to those things. In short, the contrast precisely serves to distinguish the value that the desiring subject attaches to *o* and the objective value of *o*.[34]

Note also that I translate the imperfect *ᾤοντο* in (2) as a genuine imperfect.[35] I believe that the subtle emphasis the imperfect, as opposed to the present, gives to the meaning of the passage is this. The desire of the base *temporally follows upon* the belief, *previously formed and maintained from an indefinite point in the past to the present*, about the value of *o*.

(4) *ὥστε οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ οἰόμενοι ἀγαθὰ εἶναι δῆλον ὅτι τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν·*

It follows from this (*ὥστε*) that clearly (*δῆλον*), since the base are ignorant that the objective value of *o* is bad and the value they attach to *o* is good, they desire good things. In other words, they desire *o* because they have the false belief that *o* is good.[36]

[33] Socrates' remarks following the crucial passage begin: *Τί δέ;* I take the *δέ* here (*Meno* 77E5) to answer to the *μέν* of the crucial passage.

[34] Penner and Rowe (n. 9) argue for a punctuational emendation of Burnet's Greek text that involves the separation of (2) and (3). Taken as a unit, (2) and (3) present a problem for them: 'They desire things they have been considering good, though they are in fact bad.' As such, this unit suggests that people can desire things under the impression that they are good, although those things are in fact bad. Penner and Rowe argue for the separation of (2) and (3) as follows: 'The Greek supposed to yield "though they are in fact bad", *ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά*, does not seem to us to be quite so parenthetical and unemphatic as this English translation suggests. A more suitable Greek version for 'though they are in fact bad' might be *ὄντα κακά*—or some other phrase rather simpler than *ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά κακά*. Why, for example, on Santas's view, do we have the emphasis which the *γε* gives to the *ταῦτά* in "though they are in fact bad"?' (ibid. 20). My response to Penner and Rowe's emendation is in part that it is fine and well. (3) is not merely parenthetical. I agree that it is important, 'emphatic' as they claim. But so what? The question is what it is intended to emphasize.

[35] Richard D. McKirahan, Jr, *Plato's Meno* (Bryn Mawr, 1986), ad loc. and Penner and Rowe (n. 9), n. 27, interpret *ᾤοντο* as a philosophical imperfect, that is, an imperfect of a truth just recognized and thus to be rendered as a present. In support of this interpretation they cite H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, 1920), §1902.

[36] Penner and Rowe (n. 9) argue that if in (4) 'desire good things' is to be taken as *desire apparently good things*, then (1) must mean *does not desire apparently bad things*, and that 'this is a

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In sum, the conception of desire implicit in Socrates' psychological explanation of the base is that desire for an object *o* results from an evaluation of *o* as good.

Meno responds to the crucial passage by conceding Socrates' point, that the base in fact desire good things:

In their case, at least, it seems so.[37]

Having eliminated the base as possible candidates for the set of people who desire bad things, Socrates proceeds to the last remaining group, the masochists of (f).[38]

II.ii.iii Penner and Rowe's contextual considerations for rejecting a subjectivist interpretation of the crucial passage

Penner and Rowe's interpretation of the crucial passage and the argument in general opposes the kind of subjectivist interpretation I advocate. Their discussion specifically targets Santas's subjectivist interpretation. Penner and Rowe claim that contextual considerations 'make it virtually certain that Socrates' intention in the crucial passage 77D4–E4 must have been to reduce [the proposition that people desire bad things thought good] to [the proposition that people desire really good things]'.[39] In this section I consider four of their five contextual considerations.[40] To facilitate discussion of their ideas I must also symbolize the following proposition:

(*Ω*) some people desire good things.

The first contextual consideration pertains to the initial stage of the broader argument. Once the third definition is redescribed as involving desire for good things, Socrates asks whether (*Ω*) some people desire good things, while (a) some people desire bad things. Penner and Rowe claim that, on the subjectivist interpretation,

very unlikely way of taking (1). Far more likely is that (1) is saying "those who don't know the bad things that they are bad do not desire the really bad things . . ." ' (ibid. 19–20). Penner and Rowe do not provide any evidence for this here. Rather, they say: 'Such a reading, we have seen, is strongly suggested by the contextual considerations adduced in the preceding section' (ibid. 20). Accordingly, if the preceding considerations are unpersuasive, as I will show, then there is no impediment to interpreting (1) subjectivistically.

[37] *Κινδυνεύουσιν οὗτοί γε*. (*Meno* 77E4) I interpret the *γε* here in the same way as in 77D7, concessive and limiting.

[38] Santas orients his interpretation of the crucial passage around the relation between two sets of sentences: an apparent contradiction between (1), on the one hand, and (2) and (3), on the other; and an apparent non sequitur between (2) and (4). The apparent contradiction is that (1) states that the base do not desire bad things, whereas (2) and (3) imply that they desire bad things. Clearly there is no real contradiction here. Indeed, it is questionable whether (2) and (3) really imply that the base desire bad things. Given the distinction of objective and subjective value, (1) and (2) indicate that the base do not desire bad things *de dicto*. Yet since *o* is objectively bad, they desire bad things *de re*. The apparent non sequitur between (2) and (4) is that (2) states that the base desire things that they have been considering to be good, whereas (4) states that they desire good things. But the inference of (4) from (1)–(3) is, again, clear enough. (4) does not merely state that the base desire good things. It states that since the base are ignorant that *o* is actually bad, but think that *o* is good (*οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ οἰόμενοι ἀγαθὰ εἶναι*), they desire *de dicto* good things. In short, the fact that the participial phrases in (4), as in (2), serve an explanatory function informs us that desire for *o* follows from an evaluation of *o* as good.

[39] Penner and Rowe (n. 9), 18.

[40] I will consider their third contextual consideration in the subsequent section since it concerns a passage in the argument that I have yet to discuss. Note that in their discussion of the argument, Penner and Rowe use different symbols to refer to the various propositions (n. 9), n. 15. For convenience, I have substituted mine.

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Socrates must mean by (*Ω*) that some people desire the *apparent* good, that is, *o* evaluated as good. However, they claim:

> it seems certain that case (*Ω*) is *not* a case of desiring things under the description 'good'. If it were, we should have to wonder where in the text we were to find the words for 'under the description "good" '. From a linguistic point of view, it will be far easier on Santas's reading to take (*Ω*) as 'desiring *apparently* good things', with the '*apparently*' simply *understood*. But this will not work. The whole point of Meno's dividing desire into (*Ω*) desiring good things and (a) desiring bad things must, even on Santas's view, be (*Ω*) desiring things that are *in fact* good and (a) desiring things that are *in fact* bad … So Santas's view of the Socratic thesis 'Everyone desires the good' can only be that *the Socratic thesis is ambiguous*, saying that there are two cases: (*Ω*) which speaks of desire for *really* good things and (b) which speaks of desire for *apparently* good things. This seems to us a most unfortunate result, both philosophically and exegetically.[41]

As I have discussed above, the expression '*s* desires good things' is genuinely ambiguous, both in English and in its Greek equivalent. This is precisely why the terminological distinction between desire *de re* and desire *de dicto* has been found useful. Socrates himself does not introduce a terminological distinction to facilitate the intelligibility of the discussion. Of course, this is consistent with the generally non-technical character of Socratic discourse throughout the early dialogues. But as we have seen, Socrates is aware of and, without introducing specific terminology, introduces conceptual distinctions between *s*'s evaluation of *o* and *o*'s objective value. In short, it is clear that Socrates appreciates the ambiguity and that he strives to obviate confusion and disagreement between himself and Meno on this superficial account.

Finally, as we have seen, Meno *initially* does commit to (a) and so presumably (*Ω*) according to an interpretation of desire *de re*. But this obviously does not imply that Socrates himself is deploying the concept of desire inconsistently. The reason Socrates is provoked to enquire of Meno whether Meno believes that some people desire bad things is that Meno defines the desire for good things as a constituent of excellence and Socrates regards excellence (and correctly assumes that Meno does as well) as a characteristic of few individuals. Thus, Socrates is led to assume that Meno thinks that some people desire bad things. Socrates understands this to mean that some people desire things that they regard as bad and therefore harmful. However, this strikes Socrates as psychologically implausible. That is why Socrates' initial response is to clarify whether, as we have put it, Meno understands desiring bad things *de re* or *de dicto*.

Penner and Rowe's second contextual consideration is this. They claim that the fact that (b)—some people desire things that are in fact bad, but thinking that they are good—is not reduced to impossibility might be interpreted to indicate that Socrates is committed to the 'admission that one sometimes desires things that are in fact bad'.[42] However, they claim that 'this would be a serious mistake' and that 'Socrates is not committed to (b)'. Their defence is that (b) 'is a possibility introduced, not by Socrates, but by Meno—and in opposition to Socrates' claim that everyone desires good things'.[43]

But Socrates *does* introduce (b). He introduces (b) in his attempt to clarify what Meno means when he claims that (a) some people desire bad things. The question Penner and Rowe need to consider, but do not face, is why Socrates himself regards (b) as the first, natural response to Meno's claim that (a).

[41] Ibid. 14. [42] Ibid. 15, n. 20. [43] Ibid.

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Penner and Rowe's third contextual consideration pertains to a part of the argument that I have yet to discuss. I will return to their point in the following section.

Penner and Rowe's fourth contextual consideration is expressed as the following question:

> Could Meno really have intended to suggest that virtue is desire for, and ability to get, *apparently* good things? Surely it is clear here too that it is the *really* good which is intended.[44]

The question is irrelevant since our concern here is with Socrates' conception of desire, not Meno's. In any event, as we have granted, Meno initially understands desire in (a) and so presumably (Ω) *de re*. But given Socrates' following comments and clarifications, Meno concedes Socrates' points, and these, as Socrates clarifies, turn on a conception of desire *de dicto*.

Penner and Rowe's fifth and 'final point about the context which invites reflection on Socratic ethics generally, and indeed which shows that "desires good things" in Meno's proposed account of virtue must be desiring *really* good things' is that their interpretation is consistent with Socrates' view that virtue is knowledge and that no one errs willingly.[45] This consideration would carry some weight if it could be shown that a subjectivist conception of desire were inconsistent with these other ethical principles. But what reason do we have for thinking this? Admittedly, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider those principles. But at the present state of our research, there is no reason to think that a subjectivist account will be incompatible with these other ethical principles. Consider that if all people desire objects that they have evaluated as good, then if someone comes to know what is in fact good, that person will pursue and (presumably) obtain what is in fact good and thus be truly happy. Likewise, if all people's desire for given objects follows upon their evaluation of those objects as good, then if a person does something that is in fact bad and so harmful, that person has done something contrary to the evaluation implicit in his desire.

I conclude, then, that four of Penner and Rowe's five contextual considerations are incorrect, weak, or irrelevant.

II.iii Socrates' argument against the existence of masochists

Following the crucial passage and Meno's admission that the base do not desire bad things, Socrates turns to the alleged masochistic set of (f). First, he confirms Meno's claim about such people:

> I presume, then, as you say, that those who desire bad things and believe that the bad things are harmful to those who have them, recognize that they will be harmed by these bad things [that they desire]?[46]

Meno confirms that this follows from the previous admissions.[47] Consequently, Socrates elicits Meno's assent to the following implications. The alleged masochists believe that:

(g) those who are harmed are wretched (*ἀθλίοι*) insofar as they are harmed;

[44] Ibid. 16. [45] Ibid. 17–18.

[46] *Τί δέ; οἱ τῶν κακῶν μὲν ἐπιθυμοῦντες, ὡς φῂς σύ, ἡγούμενοι δὲ τὰ κακὰ βλάπτειν ἐκεῖνον, ᾧ ἂν γίγνηται, γιγνώσκουσι δήπου ὅτι βλαπήσονται ὑπ' αὐτῶν;* (*Meno* 77E5–7)

[47] *Ἀνάγκη.* (*Meno* 78A1)

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(h) the wretched are unhappy (κακοδαίμονες).[48]

From this it follows that some people desire to be miserable and unhappy, and Socrates now asks:

So is there anyone who desires to be wretched and unhappy?

Meno concedes that:

(i) no one desires to be wretched and unhappy;[49]

Consequently, masochists do not exist, and Socrates concludes and Meno admits that therefore no one desires bad things.[50]

This concludes Socrates' argument against (f) and more generally against the view that some people desire bad things.

Penner and Rowe raise a difficulty for my interpretation of Socrates' argument against (f) that pertains to (i) and to a comment Socrates makes related to (i):

(j) being wretched is desiring bad things and getting them.[51]

Note that the following is Penner and Rowe's third contextual consideration against a subjectivist interpretation of Socrates' conception of desire in the crucial passage. If (a) is interpreted subjectivistically, as for example in (b), then one must also suppose that (f) is about desire for things *thought* bad. But assuming this, Penner and Rowe argue:

(1) the point [in (i)] that no one wants to be unhappy must [consequently] be the point that no one wants what *appears* to them to be unhappiness; (2) and to be unhappy must be to desire *apparently* bad things and get them. But this is plainly unsatisfactory. (3) What if the apparently bad things are really good? Will it really be unhappiness to desire and get things which, though they appear bad, *are really good?* Surely that is not Socrates' intention. (4) His intention must be that unhappiness [as in (j)] is desiring *really* bad things and getting them.[52]

Penner and Rowe are correct in stating (1). According to a subjectivist interpretation, Socrates' claim that no one desires to be unhappy must mean that no one desires what that person takes unhappiness to consist in. However, Penner and Rowe are wrong to claim that (2) follows from a subjectivist interpretation of (i), that is, that according to a subjectivist interpretation of (i), to be unhappy must be to desire *apparently* bad things and get them. A subjectivist interpretation of (i) suggests that people will think that they are unhappy if they come to have things that they regard as bad. However, this is compatible with the view that happiness consists of having truly good things. In any event, according to a subjectivist interpretation, Socrates obviously is not committed to the view that people desire apparently bad things.

The other question Penner and Rowe raise for a subjectivist interpretation lies in

[48] *ΣΩ. Ἀλλὰ τοὺς βλαπτομένους οὗτοι οὐκ οἴονται ἀθλίους εἶναι καθ' ὅσον βλάπτονται; MEN. Καὶ τοῦτο ἀνάγκη. ΣΩ. Τοὺς δὲ ἀθλίους οὐ κακοδαίμονας; MEN. Οἶμαι ἔγωγε.* (*Meno* 78A1–4)

[49] *ΣΩ. Ἔστιν οὖν ὅστις βούλεται ἄθλιος καὶ κακοδαίμων εἶναι; MEN. Οὔ μοι δοκεῖ, ὦ Σώκρατες.* (*Meno* 78A4–5)

[50] *Οὐκ ἄρα βούλεται, ὦ Μένων, τὰ κακὰ οὐδείς, εἴπερ μὴ βούλεται τοιοῦτος εἶναι . . . MEN. Κινδυνεύεις ἀληθῆ λέγειν, ὦ Σώκρατες· καὶ οὐδεὶς βούλεσθαι τὰ κακά.* (*Meno* 78A5–B2)

[51] *τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἄθλιον εἶναι ἢ ἐπιθυμεῖν τε τῶν κακῶν καὶ κτᾶσθαι;* (*Meno* 78A7–8).

[52] Ibid. 16. I have inserted the numerals to facilitate exposition.

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(4). According to a subjectivist interpretation, (j) must be understood as *being wretched is desiring things that one thinks are bad and getting them*. Yet Socrates surely thinks that wretchedness and so unhappiness consists of having things that are truly bad. Consistent with their non-subjectivist interpretation, Penner and Rowe, of course, claim that Socrates here intends 'desire for bad things' in (j) to be understood as desire for what is truly bad.

Before granting this conclusion and all else that it may suggest, there is a further difficulty in (j) that any satisfactory account must resolve and which should give all interpreters pause.[53] The argument at *Meno* 77B2–78B8 is for the proposition that all people desire the good and so that no one desires the bad. What sense is, then, to be made of (j)? Surely Socrates is not committing to the proposition that no one is unhappy because no one desires bad things. Yet, strictly, (j) and Socrates' commitment to the proposition that all people desire the good suggest this. We have already seen that (g) and (h), to which both Meno and Socrates commit, indicate that possessing bad things is sufficient for unhappiness. I see no reason to reject the view that Socrates is also committed to the position that possessing bad things is necessary for unhappiness. Since no one desires bad things, what could the desire for bad things possibly have to do with the unhappiness that would come from possessing bad things? To this extent, it seems that Socrates must be stating (j) as an ironic contrast to the original definition, and as such not intend that (j) be taken strictly as a definition of unhappiness.

This suggestion is further supported by the following consideration. According to a subjectivist interpretation, desire for *o* follows an evaluation of *o* as—in this case and contrary to the broad argument—bad. But unlike desire, *possession* of good or bad things is not an intentional state. Thus, we need not interpret (j) as:

(j_2) being wretched is desiring things that one thinks are bad and getting things that one thinks are bad.

Rather, (j) may be interpreted as:

(j_3) being wretched is desiring things that one thinks are bad and getting things that are bad.

If, moreover, one desires things that one thinks are bad, but does not get things that are actually bad, then one has not gotten what one desires. Therefore, (j_3) will have to be understood to mean:

(j_4) being wretched is desiring things that one correctly thinks are bad and getting them.

But, again, since no one desires bad things, (j) simply cannot be intended seriously. As such, Socrates' expression of (j) bears some resemblance to his concluding statement in *Hippias Major*: 'now I think I know (εἰδέναι) the meaning of the saying "fine things are difficult".'[54] Socrates initiated the investigation of the identity of fineness on the very grounds that one could not know about fine things without knowing the identity of fineness. Moreover, the investigation concludes with a failure adequately to define fineness.

[53] Nakhnikian (n. 4), 5 argues that Socrates has simply made a logical error. Sharples (n. 4), 139 takes this as a 'playful inversion of the original definition', as does Weiss (n. 4), 36.

[54] *Hi. Mai*. 304E7–9.

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III. CONCLUSION

III.i Socrates' conception of desire in Meno 77B2–78B6

The preceding discussion suggests that in *Meno* 77B2–78B6 Socrates operates with a subjectivist conception of desire. According to this conception, desire is for an object *o* evaluated as good. Precisely, the sort of desire with which Socrates is concerned in the *Meno* argument follows upon the subject's evaluation of *o* as good. Since individuals may misjudge the objective value of *o*, they may pursue objects whose acquisition is not good for them. Consequently, human excellence requires the knowledge of what is good.

Since the word 'desire' may correctly be used to refer to a number of other kinds of motivational states, it is convenient to characterize the kind of desire with which Socrates is concerned in the *Meno* passage in a distinct way. I suggest the phrase 'evaluative desire'. Furthermore, I am content to follow Penner in categorizing what I am calling 'evaluative desire' as a species of what Penner calls 'executive desire', that is, desire that leads directly to, or causes, particular actions.[55] Evaluative desire is also to be distinguished from, among other things, brute impulse. Weiss has argued that in the *Meno* passage Socrates actually distinguishes desiring (ἐπιθυμεῖν)—which I am calling 'having an impulse'— from wanting (βούλεσθαι)—which I am calling 'having an evaluative desire'.[56] However, although there may be some evidence for Socrates' deployment of this terminological distinction in at least one other text,[57] I do not see any evidence in the *Meno* passage that Socrates is employing this distinction here. When Socrates clarifies the meaning of 'desire' as desiring to obtain *o*, he may well be clarifying that by desiring bad things he does not mean merely having an irrational impulse toward bad things. But at that point he uses the verb ἐπιθυμεῖν. So this only supports my contention.[58]

It must also be stressed that in the *Meno* passage Socrates is not attempting to present a theory of what desire truly is. Rather, he reasonably takes Meno's original definition to imply or at least suggest desire of a particular kind, namely evaluative desire. That is to say, Socrates initially interprets Meno's definition to mean that excellence implies desiring things that one has evaluated as good and obtaining them.

Finally, Meno introduces his original definition through reference to a poet, perhaps Simonides. Since the poets were traditionally regarded as 'repositories of wisdom',[59] specifically wisdom consistent with aristocratic ideals, Socrates' criticism

[55] As Penner (n. 7), 153 writes with regard to *Gorgias* 466A–468E: 'The exclusive concern with desires that are directly connected with action should be no surprise: the theme of the argument about power is the ability to *do what you want*.' Likewise, in *Meno* Socrates' argument develops in response to a definition of excellence as the desire for and ability to obtain good things. In other words, Socrates is concerned with evaluations of objects that motivate the acquisition of those objects.

[56] Weiss (n. 4), 35 ff. Cf. 'Desire, brute appetitive craving (*epithumein*), for bad things is able to persist even in the face of one's recognition that the objects of one's desire can cause harm. Desire can remain unaffected by judgment; wanting (*boulesthai*), by contrast, takes as its object only things one judges to be good or beneficial' (ibid. 35).

[57] The one passage that seems to me a clear case is *Chrm*. 167E4–5.

[58] It must also be noted that although, strictly, a subjectivist conception of desire entails that one may desire things that do not exist, Socrates is wholly unconcerned with such conditions. His concern is with the psychological relations of evaluation and motivation between people and real objects.

[59] The phrase is from Sharples (n. 4), 137.

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of Meno's definition can, therefore, be viewed as targeting a traditional aristocratic ideal through a representative aristocrat's unreflective endorsement of that ideal and incapacity to provide an adequate defence of it. In short, by arguing that all people desire those things that they have evaluated as good, the force of Socrates' conclusion is that excellence requires the ability to evaluate accurately what is good.

III.ii Significance of the results

The preceding results challenge interpreters such as Segvic to explain the inconsistency between Socrates' subjectivist conception of desire in *Meno* and Socrates' putatively non-subjectivist conception of desire elsewhere. The question that remains for me is whether Plato intended to endorse the Socratic proposition that all people desire the good interpreted subjectivistically according to the argument in *Meno* or whether Plato makes Socrates develop the argument to some extent *ad hominem* or *ad hoc*.[60] A reasonable answer to this question must await satisfactory consideration of Socrates' treatments of desire elsewhere in the corpus, above all in *Gorgias* and *Lysis*. To my mind, it remains to be seen to what extent there is consistency among these.

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[60] As my discussion has shown, the argument is not deliberately fallacious.

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