

# Everyone Desires The Good

Socrates' Protreptic Theory of Desire

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WHAT IS THE FIRST PRINCIPLE of Socratic ethics? Socrates' oft-repeated contention that everyone desires the good is a reasonable candidate. For consider what its competitors might be. Socrates also believes that one ought to devote one's life to care for the soul,<sup>1</sup> that no one willingly does wrong,<sup>2</sup> that wisdom is the only thing that is (really) good, ignorance the only thing that is (really) evil,<sup>3</sup> that being wronged is better than wronging,<sup>4</sup> that justice is piety and temperance is wisdom,<sup>5</sup> that only good men have the power to do evil,<sup>6</sup> and that a good man cannot be harmed.<sup>7</sup> Assuming that some of these Socratisms are grounded on others, the desire thesis is likely to stand in a relatively foundational position. As Rachana Kamtekar observes: "it does seem more likely that the doctrine that wrongdoing is unwilling should be a consequence of some deeper philosophical commitment about our orientation towards the good [that is, the desire thesis], rather than the other way round."<sup>8</sup> The desire thesis may, then, be conceptually prior to Socrates' other views; it is also, I think, prior in another way.

Socratic theory-building happens via conversation, and these conversations have practical as well as theoretical aims. Socrates is speaking not only with a view to discovering the truth, but also for the sake of redirecting both himself and his interlocutor onto a pursuit of virtue and wisdom. Paraphrasing Plato, we can say that he aims to turn misdirected souls, his own included, toward the light.<sup>9</sup> Consider a few examples of Socrates' characteristically protreptic conversational style.

He concludes the discussion of the *Laches* with the striking injunction: "What I don't advise is that we allow ourselves to stay as we are."<sup>10</sup> He has managed to divert a conversation about educating children to the topic of the adults' need for moral improvement. Plato indicates that this was a habitual Socratic practice by having Nicias predict early on that the conversation would turn inward.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Socrates ends his discussion about *akrasia* with "the many" in the *Protagoras* by chiding them for not directing themselves to acquiring the art of measurement that would be their salvation. He tames the vaulting ambition of Alcibiades ("you want your reputation and your influence to saturate all mankind"<sup>12</sup>) into an avowed commitment on the part

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<sup>1</sup> *Phaedo* 65d.

<sup>2</sup> *Protagoras* 358e, *Gorgias* 509e4–7.

<sup>3</sup> *Euthydemus* 281e.

<sup>4</sup> *Gorgias* 469c.

<sup>5</sup> *Protagoras* 331b, 333b.

<sup>6</sup> *Hippias Minor* 376b.

<sup>7</sup> *Apology* 41d.

<sup>8</sup> Rachana Kamtekar, "Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 88 (2006): 140.

<sup>9</sup> *Republic* 518d3–7.

<sup>10</sup> *Laches* 201a.

<sup>11</sup> *Laches* 188b6–c1.

<sup>12</sup> *Alcibiades* 105c3–4.

of Alcibiades to “start to cultivate justice in myself right now.”<sup>13</sup> In the *Euthydemus* he both asks for and himself offers “an exhibition of persuading the young man that he ought to devote himself to wisdom and virtue.”<sup>14</sup> His own “exhibition” concludes with the claim that “it seems to be necessary that every man should prepare himself by every means to become as wise as possible.”<sup>15</sup>

For all his humility, Socrates seems to arrogate to himself a limitless power to transform any desire anyone approaches him with into an impetus to inquire after virtue. It is as though Socrates takes himself to be able to say something like this to anyone he meets: “If you like power (or pleasure or money or honor or health or beauty or fame or not fearing death or educating your children or ...) you’ll *love* virtue and wisdom.” Readers are often struck by Socrates’ many pedagogic failures (Meno, Alcibiades, Anytus, and so on), but the other side of that same coin is Socrates’ remarkable willingness to take on the hardest cases. One thing Plato may be trying to show us by filling his dialogues with “bad” interlocutors is that no one is too avaricious (Meno), cynical (Calicles), self-satisfied (Hippias), belligerent (Thrasymachus), scatterbrained (Hippocrates), sophisticated (Euthydemus and Dionysiodorus), fixed in his ways (Protagoras, Gorgias, Cephalus), naïve (Charmides, Lysis), power-hungry (Polus), conventional (Anytus), spoiled by flattery (Alcibiades), narcissistic (Agathon), or pompous (Euthyphro) for Socrates to deem him worthy of his pedagogic efforts. Socrates seems to think that virtue and wisdom will get someone (anyone!) what he really wanted out of the (possibly bad) actions he was antecedently inclined to perform. The desire thesis could explain why he thinks this: Socrates can convince anyone to pursue virtue and wisdom, because everyone desires the good. The desire thesis would, then, be more than a premise on the basis of which Socrates draws some of his more idiosyncratic conclusions. It would also serve to underwrite his protreptic activity, fortifying Socratic protreptic against charges of futility and foolhardiness. This would, then, be a second way in which the desire thesis might be foundational for Socrates. In this paper, I will explore a closely related third way. Beyond believing that the desire thesis makes his conversations profitable, Socrates actually uses the desire thesis to make them profitable. He seems to think that explicit acknowledgement of the desire thesis has an educational function. I will examine how, in the *Meno* and the *Gorgias*, Socrates introduces the desire thesis as a way to encourage his interlocutors to reflect critically on their own desires. But how can claiming that everyone desires the good motivate a turn toward virtue and wisdom on the part of interlocutors who do not already identify virtue and wisdom with the good?

Before answering this question, we must settle what the desire thesis actually says. Despite its importance for both Socratic ethical theory (sometimes called “Socratic intellectualism”) and Socratic ethical practice (protreptic conversation), scholars have

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<sup>13</sup> *Alcibiades* 135e4–5.

<sup>14</sup> *Euthydemus* 278d2–3.

<sup>15</sup> *Euthydemus* 282a5–6.

not been able to come to a consensus as to what Socrates means when he says that everyone desires the good. Some have taken him to mean that people desire what appears to them to be good, while others hold that Socrates thinks people desire what really is good. In this paper, I will show that it is possible to make use of the foundational status of the desire thesis, specifically its protreptic function, to help us adjudicate this interpretative dispute. I argue that the two standard interpretations are less opposed than they might seem: both sides pick out what Socrates takes to be a necessary but insufficient condition on desiring. If what we desire must both be and appear to us to be good, then people desire a subset of the things they take themselves to desire and a subset of the things that really are good. Pointing this out to people is an effective way of turning them toward inquiry about the good, since they will be motivated to discover which appearances are mistaken and which goods they have missed out on. And this, I argue, explains why Socrates so frequently asserts that everyone desires the good: it serves his protreptic purposes.

## I

Consider some statements<sup>16</sup> of the desire thesis:

No one wants what is bad.<sup>17</sup>

It's because we pursue what's good that we walk whenever we walk; we suppose that it's better to walk. And conversely, whenever we stand still, we stand still for the sake of the same thing, what's good.<sup>18</sup> [E]veryone wants to have good things forever and ever.<sup>19</sup>

Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Socrates expresses the idea of desiring the good using a variety of words/expressions: he describes the good as proper to everyone (*Lysis* 222c4: οἰκεῖον παντί), and people as going toward (*Protagoras* 358c7: ἐκὼν ἔρχεται; *Protagoras* 358d2: εἶναι ἐθέλειν) or pursuing it (*Republic* 505d11: διώκει; *Gorgias* 468b: διώκοντες). Most common is some form of βούλεσθαι (*Meno* 78b, *Symposium* 205a7, *Euthydemus* 278e3). In the passages I discuss below (from *Meno* and *Gorgias*) he mostly uses βούλεσθαι, with the notable exception of *Meno* 77b–e which uses ἐπιθυμεῖν exclusively. I do not take anything to turn on this verbal variety; I argue, with a focus on the *Meno* and *Gorgias*, that Socrates' expressions of the desire thesis in these texts can be read consistently. I do not, however, make the much stronger claim that the desire thesis can be read into each of the many words for “desire” in Plato. See, for example, the examples cited in Kamtekar, “Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 127 n. 1 and 143. In particular, I do not speak to the vexed question of whether, outside these passages, Socrates admits of the existence of irrational desires.

<sup>17</sup> *Meno* 78a6.

<sup>18</sup> *Gorgias* 468b1–4.

<sup>19</sup> *Symposium* 205a6–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Protagoras* 358c6–d2.

Every soul pursues the good and does its utmost for its sake.<sup>21</sup>

Do all men wish to do well? Or is this question one of the ridiculous ones I was afraid of just now? I suppose it is stupid even to raise such a question, since there could hardly be a man who would not wish to do well... Well then, I said, the next question is, since we wish to do well, how are we to do so? Would it be through having many good things? Or is this question still more simple-minded than the other, since this must obviously be the case too?<sup>22</sup>

And shall we suppose that the good belongs to everyone, while the bad is alien?<sup>23</sup>

On one reading of these sentences, Socrates is saying everyone desires the thing that appears good to him.<sup>24</sup> For instance, the person who takes inflicting pain on others to be good desires to cause pain; whereas the one who takes giving comfort to be good desires to give comfort. I call this interpretation “apparentism” because it presents Socrates as asserting that desire is directed at the apparent good—though not, of course, under that description. The apparentist acknowledges that a person who desires X thinks that X is really good, but insists that X may, nonetheless, actually be bad. Apparentism is a natural way to hear Socrates’ claim in the *Meno* that “[i]t is clear then that people who are ignorant of bad things do not desire them, but rather they desire those things they believe to be good.”<sup>25</sup> When Socrates goes on to say that these people “clearly desire good things,” he seems to be using the phrase “good things” to mean “things people take to be good.” The *Protagoras* passage quoted above is, likewise, grist for the apparentist’s mill, in that Socrates speaks of someone going toward or shying away from what he “believes to be” good or bad.

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<sup>21</sup> *Republic* 505d11–e1.

<sup>22</sup> *Euthydemus* 278e2–6.

<sup>23</sup> *Lysis* 222c3–5. Lysis and Menexenus answer this question in the negative, and opt for the other horn: “the bad belong to the bad, the good to the good, and what is neither good nor bad to what is neither good nor bad.” And Socrates doesn’t contradict them. But he does respond by throwing up his hands at this point, and opting for an abrupt aporetic ending: “Well, here we are again, boys... We have fallen into the same arguments about friendship that we rejected at first... So what can we still do with our argument? Or is it clear that there is nothing left? ... I have nothing left to say.” And this suggests that on Socrates’ own view, the profitable route would have been to give the other answer. On the basis of this dialectical consideration, as well as on the strength of the resemblance to the other formulations, I cite this question as an expression of the desire thesis. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> For the canonical statement of apparentism, see Gerasimos Santas, “The Socratic Paradoxes,” *The Philosophical Review* 73 (1964): 147–64. More recently, apparentism is defended by David Wolfsdorf, “Desire for the Good in *Meno* 77b2–78b6,” *Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 77–92; Kevin McTighe, “Socrates on Desire for the Good and the Involuntariness of Wrongdoing: *Gorgias* 466a–468e,” *Phronesis* 29 (1984): 193–236; and Rachel Barney, “Plato on the Desire for the Good,” in *Desire Practical Reason and the Good*, ed. Sergio Tenenbaum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> *Meno* 77d7–e2.

On an alternative reading, the desire thesis says that everyone desires that which, as a matter of fact, is good—regardless of whether he takes it to be such. To illustrate the force of this interpretation, suppose for a moment that Socrates believes wisdom is the only thing that is, as a matter of fact, good. If this alternative reading of the desire thesis is right, then Socrates would be in a position to conclude that everyone, despite his protestations to the contrary, desires wisdom. I’ll call this version of the desire thesis “externalism,”<sup>26</sup> since it holds that the objects of desire are not fixed by the first-personally introspectible details on which desire-ascription is usually taken to rest: “we desire not whatever may be in accord with our conception of good ... but rather whatever the good may really be, even if we don’t know what it is.”<sup>27</sup>

The externalist interpretation of the desire thesis is a better fit for the desire thesis as it is expressed in the *Gorgias*. There, Socrates elicits Polus’s agreement to the claim that “if a person who’s a tyrant or an orator puts somebody to death or exiles him or confiscates his property because he supposes that doing so is better for himself when actually it’s worse, this person” is not “doing what he wants, if these things are actually bad.”<sup>28</sup> The tyrant in question certainly takes himself to want to kill or exile or rob the person in question; if Socrates is arguing that this is not what he in fact wants, he seems to be using “wants” in the externalist’s way. Likewise, in the *Republic*, the statement of the desire thesis I quoted above is prefaced by the observation that “[n]obody is satisfied to acquire things that are merely believed to be good, however, but everyone wants the things that really are good and disdains mere belief here.”<sup>29</sup> That, too, sounds like externalism.

I propose that the truth lies at the intersection of the two standard interpretations, with apparentism and externalism stating several necessary conditions of desire.

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<sup>26</sup> Following Kamtekar “Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 131. There are a few species of externalists: Francis Cornford (*Before and After Socrates* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1932], 5), Eric Dodds (*Plato – Gorgias* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1959], 235–36), and Charles Kahn (“Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 [1983]: 75–121) take desire to be for what one’s “unconscious, or only partly conscious,” “true will” desires (quoting from Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic,” 114). Norman Gulley (“The Interpretation of ‘No One Does Wrong Willingly’ in Plato’s Dialogues,” *Phronesis* 10 [1965]: 82–96) and Roslyn Weiss (“Killing, Confiscating, and Banishing at *Gorgias* 466–468,” *Ancient Philosophy* 12 [1992]: 299–315) take desire to be for what one would desire if one were to reflect/be appropriately informed. Terry 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) and Terry Penner and Christopher Rowe (“The Desire for Good: Is the *Meno* Inconsistent with the *Gorgias*?” *Phronesis* 39 [1994]: 1–25) are the most radically externalist, since they suppose that we need no access to the goodness of something in order for it to count as an object of our desire. A course of action qualifies as the object of someone’s desire if, in fact, it leads to his happiness.

<sup>27</sup> Terry Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism: Some Existence Arguments in Plato’s Middle Dialogues* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987), 314.

<sup>28</sup> *Gorgias* 468d1–4.

<sup>29</sup> *Republic* 505d7–9.

Socrates' view is that in order to desire something it must both be good and appear good. The objects of desire lie in the overlap between what is good and what appears so.<sup>30</sup> I will argue that this interpretation produces the best reading of the texts that have seemed most strongly opposed to one another: the *Meno* says not that we desire all good things but that we desire only what appears good to us; likewise, the *Gorgias* says not that we desire all things that are good but that we desire only things that are good. Before presenting that argument, I want to consider some methodological points.

## II

An assumption of intertextual consistency stands at the background of the interpretative dispute between apparentism and externalism. Why think that Socrates is saying one and the same thing every time he asserts that everyone desires the good? We ought to consider the possibility that the texts are more equivocal than they are usually taken to be: perhaps Plato changed his mind; perhaps Socrates is speaking dialectically in some of these contexts;<sup>31</sup> perhaps he means different things by “desire”;<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> I do not speak to the issue of whether they are jointly sufficient for desire. In the *Symposium*, Socrates says that someone “who has a desire desires what is not at hand and not present, what he does not have, and what he is not, and that of which he is in need; for such are the objects of desire and love” (200e2–5). In order to desire something, I must also lack it. But I might have what is, or what is taken by me to be, good. This suggests that perhaps no condition in the vicinity of those under dispute will suffice for desire.

<sup>31</sup> As McTighe (“Socrates on Desire for the Good”) and Weiss (“Killing, Confiscating, and Exiling”) indeed suggest with reference to the *Gorgias*.

<sup>32</sup> As Kamtekar (“Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes”) and Heda Segvic (“No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19 [2000]: 1–45) hold. They elude my classification into externalist versus apparentist views, because they posit two sets of desires. They read the *Meno* as asserting that everyone desires what appears (but may not really be) good, and the *Gorgias* as asserting that everyone desires what is, as a matter of fact, good. Kamtekar takes these two kinds of desire to be connected: “the explanation for our desiring things which appear good to us is that we want what is truly good, and our appearances of goodness (especially when we seek to align these with reality by inquiry) are our route to what is really good for us” (156). But the connection between them is not completely clear. In particular, how does the fact that a person has a “latent” (148) desire for the (true) good with which she is not in cognitive contact move her to question the appearances—especially when those appearances constitute genuine desires of hers? Segvic goes further than Kamtekar on several points. First, she takes the form of wanting that is directed at what is, in fact, good as entailing knowledge of the good. Second, she takes the distinction between the two forms of desire to be marked verbally by a distinction between ἐπιθυμεῖν and βούλεσθαι. There may be some such distinction as Segvic claims in the Socratic corpus generally; certainly ἐπιθυμεῖν is associated more with bodily desire and βούλεσθαι more with rational desire (see, especially, *Charmides* 167e1–5). But Segvic’s division is not borne out in expressions of the desire thesis specifically. As observed in n. 16 above, Socrates expresses the desire thesis in a great variety of ways, and within the *Meno*, where he ought, by Segvic’s lights, use ἐπιθυμεῖν exclusively, he shifts to βούλεσθαι when expressing the conclusion of the argument (78a4).



perhaps some of these assertions represent the views of Socrates, and others those of Plato. We have a variety of interpretative tools ready at hand to justify accepting intertextual discord; let me make the case that we should not make use of them simply to accept the tension between the two texts at the heart of this dispute, namely *Meno* 77b–78a and *Gorgias* 466b–467d.

First, there is the fact that in the case of the *Meno* and *Gorgias*, the interpretative puzzles are also intratextual. The language of the *Meno* does suggest apparentism, but apparentists have not been able to produce a wholly satisfying reading of the argument; and the same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the *Gorgias* and externalism. I will argue that each of these texts, taken on its own terms, calls out for something other than the traditional (apparentist or externalist, respectively) interpretation. But I also think there is independent reason not to take each fully on its own terms. Meno's connection to Gorgias—Gorgias is his teacher—is explicitly thematized in the *Meno*,<sup>33</sup> encouraging us to be on the lookout for intertextual connections between these two dialogues, specifically. I believe we find such a connection precisely in their respective arguments for the desire thesis. In the *Meno*, the desire thesis comes up in the context of Meno's definition of virtue as a combination of desire (for good things) and power (to achieve them). While working through the first half of this definition—what is the desire for good things, and who desires bad things?—Socrates offers an argument for the desire thesis. In the *Gorgias*, the desire thesis surfaces in the context of an argument about power—what is it, and who has it? Socrates is arguing against a conception of power as the ability to do whatever seems best to you. Instead, he thinks it is the ability to do whatever you want. He invokes the desire thesis as a way of insisting that people do not want the bad things they pursue, and therefore that a tyrant without wisdom is powerless to get what he wants. The fact that the desire thesis shows up in the *Meno* to explain one half of Meno's definition of virtue (desire), and in the *Gorgias* to explain the other half (power), suggests that the *Meno* and the *Gorgias* take up one another's slack. It is hard to believe that Plato did not intend us to see these connections, and thus that he would speak in a thoroughly equivocal way across the two dialogues.

Nonetheless, the reader might have hoped that making the connection would yield a more attractive theory than the hybrid one I put forward here. A theory of desire on which it is defined by a single condition has an appealing unity and simplicity by comparison with one that posits multiple conditions. In response to this worry, we might first observe that the question of what is good and the question of what appears good do not have the total independence from one another that would render the theory that conjoined them an incoherent jumble.<sup>34</sup> What seems good to me is, as

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<sup>33</sup> See *Meno* 70b3, 71c5,7, 73c7, 76c4.

<sup>34</sup> See Kamtekar, "Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes," 158–61, and Segvic "Meaning," 63–65, who offer these responses on behalf of a theory that divides desire for the apparent good from desire for what is really good. (See n. 32.)

even apparentists acknowledge,<sup>35</sup> what I take to be (really) good. And we do encounter such hybrid phenomena in the cognitive domain: something counts as having been remembered or having been seen only if it both is and is taken to be the case. But this line of argument can, at best, excuse the conceptual untidiness<sup>36</sup> of a hybrid approach. I think we can do more by way of defense if we turn to examine the protreptic role of the desire thesis in Socratic conversation. I will show that the desire thesis serves as a stepping stone in Socratic pedagogy if and only if it is understood as the claim that people desire what both appears and is good.

In sections III through V, I argue for this reading of the desire thesis on textual grounds, contending that it fits what Socrates says better than the other interpretations. In section VI, I make the case that it also puts us in a better position to explain why he says those things. I propose a reading of the desire thesis that compensates us in protreptic functionality for what it lacks in theoretical tidiness.

### III

Consider the argumentative trajectory of *Meno* 77b–78b. Meno defines virtue as desiring good things and having the power to secure them. His definition presupposes a separation of desirers into two classes: those who desire good things and those who desire bad things. Socrates is incredulous that any people belong in the second category, and asks Meno for clarification. At Socrates' prompting, Meno divides (purported) desirers of the bad into those who (1) believe that the bad things are good, and those who (2) know that they are bad. Meno further divides (2) into those who (a) believe the bad things benefit them, and those who (b) know that the bad things harm them.

Socrates expresses skepticism about 2a: “And do you think that those who believe that bad things benefit them know that they are bad?”<sup>37</sup> Meno grants that they do not. Socrates thereupon takes himself to be licensed to claim that not only these people (2a) but also all the people in the first camp (1) really desire good things:

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<sup>35</sup> Barney (“Plato on the Desire for the Good,” 35) argues that the point of asserting the desire thesis is to acknowledge this fact.

<sup>36</sup> There is a deeper advantage of untidiness that I can only allude to here. A more synoptic look at the various principles that, together with the desire thesis, constitute Socratic intellectualism (see my opening paragraph) might show that desire is, as a whole, a defective variant of another condition of soul. In that condition, to wit, knowledge, what seems to be the case and what is the case are bound in a unity that is simpler than its parts. For when I know something, it seems to me to be the case precisely because and insofar as it is that way. Knowledge must meet the two conditions, but it is not, at least according to Plato and Socrates, a hybrid state. The hybrid condition of the desirer would reflect the fact that he is not yet a knower. Intellectualists are, after all, less likely than the rest of us to assume any kind of simple conceptual coherence is achievable at the level of desire.

<sup>37</sup> *Meno* 77d4–6.

T1: Οὐκοῦν δῆλον ὅτι οὗτοι μὲν οὐ τῶν κακῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτά, ἀλλὰ ἐκείνων ᾧ ὥντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι· ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά· ὥστε οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ οἰόμενοι ἀγαθὰ εἶναι δῆλον ὅτι τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν.<sup>38</sup>

T1 is standardly translated as follows:

It is clear then that those who do not know things to be bad do not desire what is bad, but they desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad. It follows that those who have no knowledge of these things and believe them to be good clearly desire good things.

Gerasimos Santas analyzes this passage by way of a highly influential distinction between an “intended object” and an “actual object.” He offers the example of a man who reaches for the salt shaker in the belief that it is the pepper shaker, and observes, “there is no contradiction in saying, for example, both that the intended object of the man’s desire was the pepper mill and that the actual object of his desire was the salt shaker.”<sup>39</sup> Virtually everyone writing in Santas’s wake has accepted that some such distinction is in play.<sup>40</sup> Santas’s discussion of the distinction is, however, less helpful than it might be, because he vacillates between taking the distinction in question as a distinction between two different things, as in the quotation above, and two different descriptions of a single thing. So, consider this passage: “it is his conception of what the object is that is the ground of his desire, not (necessarily) what the object in fact is (he may be under a misconception as to what sort of thing the object is or unaware that it has a certain property).”<sup>41</sup> In this passage, there is one single object of desire, which may be conceived of in two different ways. Santas does not appreciate the significance of the difference between saying, as he does in one place, that “‘salt shaker’ is not

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<sup>38</sup> *Meno* 77d4–e4.

<sup>39</sup> Santas, “Socratic Paradoxes,” 155.

<sup>40</sup> Even Penner, whose view is most diametrically opposed to Santas’s, hears the passage as drawing some distinction in this vicinity. But I think Penner is wrong to identify the operative distinction as Keith Donnellan’s (“Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *Philosophical Review* 75 [1966]: 281–304) distinction between referential and attributive uses of a description. Donnellan’s distinction is linguistic, while Socrates’ is epistemic. For instance, Donnellan (290–91) observes that two people, neither of whom believes that a certain person is the true, rightful king, could communicate to one another by describing him referentially (and cynically) as “the king.” By contrast, it is crucial to Socrates’ point (on all accounts) that the agent believes the relevant description. And there is another problem: Donnellan’s distinction applies to terms within a proposition, that is, definite descriptions, but Penner needs it to apply to whole propositions. For if someone’s desire, for example, that he become the ruler is, in fact, a desire for the good, there is no single term in the former description that can be heard referentially. But referential use is made possible by the fact that a definite description can serve a (referential) purpose within a proposition even when the description is (attributively speaking) false. If there is no larger proposition, there is no referential work to be done.

<sup>41</sup> Santas, “Socratic Paradoxes,” 154.

the description under which he desires” a pepper shaker, and saying that he desires a pepper shaker and does not desire a salt shaker.<sup>42</sup>

A lot hangs on the way we cash out this distinction. On the twoobjects way of hearing Socrates’ point, he is saying that when something bad is the actual object, we do not desire that bad thing but instead the good thing we confused for that bad thing. On the two-descriptions way of hearing Socrates’ point, he is saying that we can desire bad things, so long as it is under some good description. If the latter were correct, it would be possible to desire bad things. This would make apparentism the only viable interpretation of the desire thesis. I am going to argue, however, that it is not correct: the text of the *Meno* argument calls for a distinction between two objects and not two ways of describing a single object.

The two-descriptions reading has the disadvantage of construing Socrates as talking past Meno. For Meno’s original contention, against which Socrates is (purportedly) arguing, is that we can distinguish two kinds of people, those who desire bad things and those who desire good things. This is a point with which Socrates, on the two-descriptions account, agrees: “it is important to realize that Socrates is not denying (he certainly does not have to) that the actual objects<sup>43</sup> of these people’s desires are indeed bad things.”<sup>44</sup> It is true that Socrates thinks that Meno’s two kinds of people do not disagree in respect of their intended object, but once one has this distinction in place it is clear that Meno’s claim is better read as a claim about the actual than the intended object.<sup>45</sup> Meno’s thought was that virtuous people can be distinguished from vicious ones by attending to the differing quality of the (actual!) objects desired by each group. If Santas were right, it would border on sophistry for Socrates to conclude the argument by saying of Meno’s definition of virtue as “the desire for good things and the power to secure them” that “[t]he desiring part of this statement is common to everybody, and one man is no better than another in this.”<sup>46</sup> For Socrates to respond to Meno’s claim that people differ in respect of the actual objects of desire by insisting that they all have the same intended object is, at best, a non sequitur. By contrast, on the two objects view, Socrates’ point is that people do not desire the actual object

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<sup>42</sup> Santas’s privileged formulation is that of the two descriptions. But see p. 155 n. 21 of “Socratic Paradoxes,” where Santas defends the possibility of having something that does not exist (a loaf of wheat bread) as one’s intended object. The existence of the loaf would be an issue only if he were talking about the object rather than the description. In that footnote, he himself notes that “I have already switched from ‘description of intended object’ to ‘intended object,’” but he does not seem disturbed by this shift.

<sup>43</sup> It may be worth noting that the way I disambiguate the two interpretations of Santas’s distinction leads to a terminological divergence from Santas. As I use the phrase “actual object,” it does not necessarily refer to an object of desire. For the actual object is not desired when it comes apart from the intended object. The “actual object” in these cases is the object we get as a result of having wanted, and pursued, something else.

<sup>44</sup> Santas, “Socratic Paradoxes,” 156.

<sup>45</sup> Penner and Rowe (“Desire for Good,” 16) also make this point; Kamtekar (“Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 150) understands Meno’s claim in the same way.

<sup>46</sup> *Meno* 78b4–6.

when it differs from the intended one. This conception of Socrates' point allows him to contend, against Meno, that people do not desire (actually) bad things.

It may seem, however, that the two-descriptions view is the only possible reading of T1. For there Socrates says that people “desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad.” This translation does indeed require that there be one set of objects that are (a) desired, (b) believed good, and (c) really bad. I am going to propose a different translation of that sentence, but before doing so I want to note that the two-descriptions view does not provide a fully satisfying reading of the passage even at it is standardly translated. For it is puzzling that Socrates is willing to describe the person in question as desiring bad things (believing that they are good); and then, in the next sentence, describing the same person as desiring good things. Given that this is the place where Socrates is introducing the distinction in question, it is strange that he does not consistently adopt a terminology in which “good things” means either the (bad) things that appear good or the things that are actually good. Rachana Kamtekar is right to complain that “given that Socrates has just distinguished between the really good things and the apparently good things we may desire, one might have expected a shorthand that does not confuse this very distinction (as does ‘good things’ for ‘things believed to be good’).”<sup>47</sup>

I propose a new a translation of T1, on which Socrates retains terminological consistency:

It is clear then that people who are ignorant of bad things do not desire them, but rather they desire those things they believe to be good. But *these* things [that is, by contrast with those things] are bad—so that people who are ignorant of bad things and believe them to be good, clearly desire good things.

Οὐκοῦν δὴλον ὅτι οὗτοι μὲν οὐ τῶν κακῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν, οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτά, ἀλλὰ ἐκείνων ἃ ὥροντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι.<sup>48</sup> ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά· ὥστε

<sup>47</sup> Kamtekar, “Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 152. Kamtekar also goes on to note that Santas’s reading doesn’t fit the argumentative language of the paragraph: “if the inference consists in a substitution of semantically equivalent terms, then Socrates’ emphatic ‘therefore’ and ‘clearly’ are overly dramatic, even misleading.”

<sup>48</sup> I punctuate with a full stop here, as do Penner and Rowe (“Desire for Good”) and Fabricius. Ast punctuates with a colon, which would be equally appropriate. We should avoid Bekker and Burnet’s comma for the reason given by Penner and Rowe, which is that we undertranslate the phrase by turning it into a parenthetical: “a more suitable Greek version for ‘though they are in fact bad’ might be ὅντα κακά or some phrase rather simpler than ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά” (Penner and Rowe, “Desire for Good,” 20; see Penner and Rowe for citations of the various editors). But Penner and Rowe themselves miss the way the emphasis they rightly note is on the contrast between ταῦτά (the evils that are not desired) and ἐκείνων (the goods that are desired). A major source of the misunderstandings of this passage is the fact that the pronouns are standardly taken to refer to the same things, instead of to two different classes of things. Wolfsdorf, who accepts Penner and Rowe’s emended punctuation, rightly criticizes what they make of it: “my response to Penner and Rowe’s emendation is in part that it is fine and well [that is,

οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες αὐτὰ καὶ οἰόμενοι ἀγαθὰ εἶναι δῆλον ὅτι τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐπιθυμοῦσιν.<sup>49</sup>

The main differences between my translation and the standard translation are:

(1) I break up the two sentences differently. I take the clause “but these things are bad” to belong to the second sentence, rather than the first.

(2) According to the standard translation, there is one group of things under discussion: things that are bad but are believed to be good. According to my translation, there are two groups of things under discussion: these (ταῦτά/αὐτά) bad things, and those (ἐκείνων) good things.

On my translation, the crucial distinction is between two candidates for the role of object of desire. Socrates is saying that ignorant people desire the good things they think they are getting, as opposed to the bad things they actually are getting. He emphasizes the separateness of these two sets of things with his emphatic choice of demonstratives: he contrasts these bad things τῶν κακῶν ... ταῦτά γε with those (ἐκείνων) things over there that are believed, or simply are, good. Socrates’ claim is that the object of the ignorant person’s desire is not a bad thing but rather the good thing that he represents that thing as being (ἃ ζῶντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι).

We can illustrate with the following familiar sort of example. George believes that the glass contains the medicine that will make him healthy, but in fact it contains poison, which will cause sickness. In drinking, George confuses a bad thing (being poisoned) for a good thing (being healed). For we can describe someone who pursues (what is in fact) B in the belief that he will get G, as confusing B and G, or, equivalently, as believing that B is G. Despite their identification in George’s mind, a good thing like health is quite distinct from a bad thing like sickness. Which of these two distinct things does George want? Socrates contends, plausibly, that George wants the good thing he thinks of—health—and not the bad one he does not—sickness.

Socrates describes the people in question as “ignorant” (οἱ ἀγνοοῦντες) on the grounds that they do not have in mind the evils they are getting. This is true of those who supposedly “knew” that the bad things were bad but believed them to be beneficial. And it is true of those who believe bad things to be good. Socrates thinks

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ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά] 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” (“Desire for Good,” 85 n. 34). Wolfsdorf is content to break the sentences up as they do, but nonetheless opts for a Santas-like reading. Thus we can separate the grammatical point of how to order the two sentences—to my knowledge, Penner and Rowe’s argument on this point has not been challenged, and is compelling—and the interpretative point about the significance of the punctuation. On the problems with Penner and Rowe’s translation of the passage as a whole, see Mariana Anagnostopoulos (“Desire for Good in the *Meno*,” in *Desire, Identity and Existence: Essays in Honor of T. M. Penner*, ed. N. Reshotko [Kelowna: Academic Printing & Publishing, 2003]) and Kamtekar, “Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes.” In particular, note Kamtekar’s excellent point (152 n. 49) that Penner and Rowe’s way of taking ἐπιθυμοῦσιν ... ἐκείνων ἃ ζῶντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι—as a discarded suggestion, rather than an assertion—is unmotivated.

<sup>49</sup> *Meno* 77d4–e4.

none of these people can possibly desire a badness of which they are ignorant. What the apparentist gets right about this passage is that Socrates is indeed assuming that one desires only what one is aware of. Since badness, such as being harmed, is the last thing on the minds of these blissfully ignorant people, they cannot be said to desire it. He contrasts their ignorance of the bad things that he takes them not to desire, with their belief—he cannot credit these people with knowledge, given their confusion—as to the goodness of the things that they do desire.

The interpretation I have offered of *Meno* 77b–78b may seem to decide in favor of apparentism over externalism. If I am right, Socrates is claiming that in order to be an object of desire, the item in question must make an appearance in the mental life of the desirer. And this cannot be squared with the externalist’s contention that we desire that which is, in fact, good, irrespective of whether we take it to be good. The claim that people cannot desire things of which they are unaware is the backbone of Socrates’ argument that those who are ignorant of evils cannot desire them.<sup>50</sup> I do, therefore, reject externalism.

But I do not quite get all the way to endorsing apparentism. What Socrates asserts in the *Meno* is that in order for me to want something, it must seem best to me. He does not assert the converse. Socrates’ claim that people desire what they believe good (ἃ ᾗοντο ἀγαθὰ εἶναι) as opposed to what is, unbeknownst to them, bad (ἔστιν δὲ ταῦτά γε κακά) does not commit him to the apparentistic principle that people desire whatever appears good to them. His point is not that people desire everything they believe good, but that people desire only what they believe good.<sup>51</sup> For he is engaged

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<sup>50</sup> See Anagnostopoulos (“Desire for Good in the *Meno*”), who points out that on the Penner/Rowe reading, Socrates is missing an argument for his central claim.

<sup>51</sup> Like most interpreters who turn to the *Meno* for understanding of the desire thesis, I have discussed only half of Socrates’ argument: the claim that the people in 1 and 2a desire the good. What of the people in 2b? Socrates argues that they don’t exist, because in order to desire to be harmed, a person would have to desire to be miserable. But no one wants to be miserable. Socrates then makes an observation that is puzzling on every interpretation: “For what else is being miserable but to desire bad things and secure them [τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἐστὶν ἄθλιον εἶναι ἢ ἐπιθυμεῖν τε τῶν κακῶν καὶ κτᾶσθαι]?” (78a7–8). Since the point of the argument is to show that no one desires bad things, it is very hard to explain why Socrates seems to be concluding by granting that some people desire bad things. An apparentist will have trouble explaining why Socrates is here, of all places, using “desires bad things” as shorthand for “desires things that appear to be good but are in fact bad.” What can this accomplish but to underscore the fact that the entire argument has been a non sequitur? But things are even worse on my view and on the externalist’s view, as Kamtekar notes (“Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 153), for we hold that no one desires what is actually bad. I believe that Socrates’ phrase ἐπιθυμεῖν τε τῶν κακῶν καὶ κτᾶσθαι is a mocking echo of Meno’s poetic definition of virtue, χαίρειν τε καλοῦσι καὶ δύνασθαι (77b3). Meno’s definition of virtue connects it with happiness (χαίρειν) in a way that suggests, to Socrates, a corresponding definition of misery. On this reading, when Socrates says, “For what else is being miserable but ...,” what he means is “What else can you, Meno, say that misery is, but ...” Socrates is pointing out that a certain definition of misery comports with Meno’s definition of virtue; if Meno identifies virtue with joy (χαίρειν) and with desire for good things, he should identify vice with misery and the desire for bad things. We are meant to notice the absurd implication that on that definition of misery, there are no miserable people, and this absurdity strikes a final blow against

in refuting the idea that the difference one observes in people when one calls some of them “good” and others “bad” corresponds to a difference in the ethical quality of the objects they desire. Everyone desires good things, and no one desires bad things. As I will explain below (section V), this interpretation characterizes the desire thesis in a recognizably intellectualist way, as a variant of the claim that no one wrongs willingly.

## IV

In *Gorgias* 466b–468e, Socrates is engaged in refuting Polus’s conception of tyrants as all-powerful. Having defined power as the ability to do what one wants, Socrates points out that a tyrant does not necessarily do what he wants when he, for example, exiles someone from his country. For the tyrant only wants to exile someone when doing so benefits himself. If, unbeknownst to him, the exiled person was the tyrant’s greatest supporter, then the tyrant did not do what he wanted in exiling her. Socrates concludes that it doesn’t follow from the fact that the tyrant always does what seems best to him that he always does what he wants.

The crux of Socrates’ argument lies in his observation that the tyrant’s desire to exile is conditional:

T2: Hence, we don’t simply want to slaughter people, or exile them from their cities and confiscate their property as such; we want to do these things *if they are beneficial* [ἐὰν μὲν ὠφέλιμα ᾗ ταῦτα, βουλόμεθα πράττειν αὐτά], but if they’re harmful we don’t.<sup>52</sup>

The externalist and the apparentist have different ways of interpreting the conditional desire described in this passage. The apparentist thinks that Socrates is saying that we desire to kill, exile, and so forth, because we believe these things are beneficial for us (irrespective of whether they actually are). The externalist thinks that Socrates is saying that we desire to kill, exile, and so forth, because these things actually are beneficial for us (irrespective of whether we believe they are).

Each interpretation has advantages. The apparentist rightly emphasizes the fact that Socrates grounds the conditionalization in the agent’s own attitudes. Socrates’ argument for T2 relied on the observation that no one simply pursues killing or exiling; rather we pursue these actions with a view to the benefit we will thereby obtain:

T3: we put a person to death, if we do, or exile him and confiscate his property *because we suppose* [οἰόμενοι] that doing these things is better for us than not doing them.<sup>53</sup>

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Meno’s definition of virtue. I am, in effect, suggesting that we put quotation marks around the phrase “to desire bad things and secure them” at 78a7–8, as we do when we translate Meno’s definition at 77b3.

<sup>52</sup> *Gorgias* 468c2–5, emphasis added.

<sup>53</sup> *Gorgias* 468b4–6, emphasis added.



The externalist cannot explain the relevance of the fact that the tyrant represented killing as the means to self-benefit. As a result, the externalist cannot explain why Socrates spells out the specific benefit on which the desire is conditioned. Socrates began the argument by offering the following two exemplars of conditional desire:

SOCRATES: Do you think that people who take medicines prescribed by their doctors, for instance, want what they're doing, the act of taking the medicine, with all its discomfort, or do they want to be healthy, the thing for the sake of which they're taking it?

POLUS: Obviously they want their being healthy.

SOCRATES: With seafarers, too, and those who make money in other ways, the thing they're doing at the time is not the thing they want—for who wants to make dangerous and troublesome sea voyages? What they want is their being wealthy, the thing for the sake of which, I suppose, they make their voyages. It's for the sake of wealth that they make them.<sup>54</sup>

If Socrates were an externalist, he would not make the desire to, for example, take a sea voyage<sup>55</sup> depend on the production of wealth specifically. He would instead say that someone wants to take a sea voyage if it is in fact good for him. Suppose two people take sea voyages in the belief that they will thereby become wealthy; one of them does, whereas the other is benefitted in some other way (for example, he becomes healthy). The externalist sees no difference between these two people's desire to take the sea voyage: both wanted to take the sea voyage because both were benefited by it. The externalist bypasses the tyrant's own conception of his action in such a way as to miss out on the argumentative force of the fact that the tyrant is failing by his own lights. As a result, the externalist seems to race past Socrates' argumentation, and to help himself to the conclusion that the tyrant cannot desire what is actually bad.

The apparentist can make use of those premises—but the conclusion he derives from them is not the right one. Socrates wants to drive Polus to the admission that they tyrant “does not do what he wants” when he exiles his greatest supporter. On the apparentist reading of the conditional, such a tyrant does do what he wants, because he does want to exile that person, on the basis of his (false) belief that exiling that person is beneficial to himself. Apparentism can secure only the weaker conclusion that the tyrant would not desire to kill (exile, torture) if he were to learn that these actions do not produce the results he anticipates. Some apparentists have taken this to

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<sup>54</sup> *Gorgias* 467c7–d5.

<sup>55</sup> Gulley (“Interpretation”) is an externalist who denies that any object is ever desired for the sake of another: he restricts the objects of desire to ends. As a result, he does not offer a reading of Socrates' claim that we desire the means if it is good; nor can he explain why the tyrant who exiles his greatest supporter is in an especially bad position as regards doing what he wants. (No one, on Gulley's view, ever does what he wants when he takes the means to his end—even if he thereby secures the end.) Against this view, see also Penner (“Desire and Power,” 178–79).

show that the argument is simply invalid.<sup>56</sup> But we need not resign ourselves to that conclusion.

Let us remind ourselves that the claims causing trouble here are in the negative. He says, in one place (T2) that we do not desire something unless we think it benefits us. In another place (T3), he is most naturally read as saying that we do not desire that thing unless it really does benefit us. These claims are not incompatible with one another, and so we need not try to interpret either out of the picture. Consider the “externalist” passage of the *Republic* mentioned above:

In the case of just and beautiful things, many people are content with what are believed [τὰ δοκοῦντα] to be so, even if they aren’t really so, and they act, acquire, and form their own beliefs on that basis. Nobody is satisfied [ἄρκεῖ] to acquire things that are merely believed [τὰ δοκοῦντα] to be good, however, but everyone wants the things that really are good and disdains mere belief [δόξαν] here.<sup>57</sup>

In this passage, Socrates distinguishes our attitude toward just and beautiful things from our attitude toward good ones. He says we want the things that really are good, rather than those that are merely thought to be good. In making this claim about our attitude toward good things, he does not suggest that belief/appearance (δοκοῦντα/δόξα) is unnecessary, only that it is insufficient for desire.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, I suggest T2 tells us that the fact that something appears good to someone (ἃ δοκεῖ αὐτῷ) is an insufficient basis for thinking that he desires that thing. But why should Polus accept this? Socrates thinks that the case of the tyrant’s conditional desire will awaken Polus to this fact.

When the tyrant asserts a conditional desire (“because it will benefit me, I want to exile”), the apparentist hears a desire conditional on a belief: “because I believe that it will benefit me, I desire to exile.” But this is a different desire. Consider a case in which the latter form of desire-expression might be appropriate: “because I believe I am unworthy, I want people to go out of their way to encourage me.” My low self-confidence grounds a desire to be treated with extra consideration—irrespective of whether I am right to believe that I am unworthy. This is what a desire conditional on a belief looks like, and the tyrant is not this condition. He does not want to exile on the condition that he believes exiling is beneficial; rather, he wants to exile on the condition that exiling actually is beneficial. His desire is conditional not on the belief

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<sup>56</sup> McTighe (“Socrates on Desire for the Good”), Weiss (“Killing, Confiscating, and Exiling”), and Barney (“Plato on the Desire for the Good”) take the inference from this point to the conclusion to be in some way fallacious.

<sup>57</sup> *Republic* 505d5–9.

<sup>58</sup> This aside does not seem to rely on the radical epistemology of the *Republic*, in which belief and knowledge have different objects. Even if it did, the underlying point holds. For if what we want in relation to the good is knowledge (as opposed to belief), that still presupposes, contra externalism, that we be in some kind of cognitive contact with it.

but on the fact. So the externalist is right that in the event that it does not benefit him, he does not desire it—even if, believing it benefits him, he believes he desires it. But the tyrant’s conditional desire is not exhausted by the externalist’s conditional. For T3 can be paraphrased as a statement on the part of the tyrant that “if I didn’t believe it benefited me, I would not want to exile him.”

Socrates thinks, quite simply, that the tyrant’s instrumental desire to exile presupposes both that exiling actually be beneficial, and that the tyrant believe it to be such. Thus it is relevant that a person envisions some specific form of benefit from what he does, and the desire is conditional not on the goodness of the object generally but on the correctness of that belief specifically. The tyrant wants to exile only if it is the case both that exiling benefits him and that he believes exiling benefits him.

Our discussion of the *Gorgias* thus pits us against apparentism: contra apparentism, we must maintain that no one desires anything that is, as a matter of fact, bad. It follows that we can be mistaken as to what we desire, since people can certainly take themselves to desire things that are, in fact, bad. We can acknowledge this corrigibility without endorsing the externalism, for we need not accept the possibility of desiring something unbeknownst to ourselves. But even this much common ground with externalism may invite an objection that is sometimes levied against externalism on philosophical (as opposed to textual) grounds: haven’t we implausibly severed the connection between desire and motivation? In the next section, I defend my interpretation against this objection.

## V

The externalist thinks that a person desires all and only what really is good, irrespective of whether he knows it to be good. It follows that (a) people have desires that cannot motivate them, and (b) they perform actions from some motivation other than desire. What, then, accounts for motivation? Perhaps we will say that people are motivated by appetite, understood now as distinct from desire, or by the “seemings best” from which Socrates distinguishes desire in the *Gorgias*. But this makes it hard to see what work desires do. My desires might represent the (latent) attitudes buried in my true self, but they do not explain my actions. Even in the case where I do what is in fact good, this will not be because I desired to do it. Rather, it will be because the action in question seemed good to me, or I had an appetite for it. Apparentists will complain that these seemings or appetites deserve the name “desire.” What externalists are calling desire should really be called “my interest” or “what is as a matter of fact good for me.” For apparentists share Socrates’ intuition that desiring refers to an experience of attraction of the sort which moves one to act.

The interpretation I propose is relatively safe from the above line of objection, for it holds that all desires are such as to motivate people to act. There will be no idle desires, incapable of motivating a person, since all desires are introspectively accessible.

But how will I account for cases of motivation in which people do what they (according to Socrates) do not desire to do? Take a tyrant who exiles his greatest supporter, in the belief that she was trying to poison him. The object of his desire is the health he took himself to be getting, rather than the sickness he would in fact be getting when she was not there to shield him from the true poisoner. He banished her because he desired health, and believed, falsely, that he would get it by banishing her. As a result, he believed that he desired to banish her, but he did not in fact desire to do this.<sup>59</sup>

On this account, action-explanation divides asymmetrically into the explanation of good actions, which are motivated by the desire to do them, and bad actions, which are motivated by the desire for something else. This is just the asymmetry Socrates relies on when he claims that bad actions, unlike good ones, are not done willingly. At 509e4–7, Socrates summarizes (to Callicles) the conclusion of the relevant section of his discussion with Polus: “we agreed that no one does what’s unjust because he wants to, but that all who do so do it unwillingly [ἄχοντες]?” Desire can figure in the explanation of bad actions only when conjoined with ignorance, because all desires are directed at what is (in fact) good. No one wrongs willingly, because no one wants to wrong; hence wrongdoing is caused by ignorance. I do not deny that these are counterintuitive claims, but they are counterintuitive in quite a different way from a nonmotivating theory of desire. They allow us to locate Socrates’ innovation in its rightful place: in ethics, not in moral psychology.

## VI

*Protreptic Function.* The apparent tension between the *Meno* and the *Gorgias* comes from the fact that Socrates is correcting Meno and Polus in complementary ways. Meno is in danger of missing the fact that we desire what seems good to us; Polus, by contrast, needs to be reminded that we desire what really is good.

Consider the opening exchanges of the two discussions. First, Socrates to Meno:

Do you mean that they believe the bad things to be good, or that they know they are bad and nevertheless desire them?<sup>60</sup>

Here, Socrates is calling Meno’s attention to the fact that, in addition to the question of whether something is fact good or bad, there is another question to which Meno has given insufficient thought: whether someone takes it to be good. In Polus’s case, Socrates distinguishes the same two questions, but with the opposite emphasis. Socrates to Polus:

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<sup>59</sup> And he did not do the thing he in fact desired to do, which was to attain health (I am assuming that health was in fact good for him). Hence Socrates can say that such misguided people “do just about nothing they want to” (*Gorgias* 466d8–e1).

<sup>60</sup> *Meno* 77c3–5.

In that case, are you asking me two questions at once? ... Weren't you just now saying something like "Don't orators, like tyrants, put to death anyone they want, don't they confiscate the property of anyone they see fit, and don't they exile them from their cities?" ...

I say that these are two questions, and I'll answer you both of them. I say, Polus, that both orators and tyrants have the least power in their cities, as I was saying just now. For they do just about nothing they want to, though they certainly do whatever they see most fit to do.<sup>61</sup>

Socrates tells Polus that in addition to the question of whether something seems good to someone, there is the question of whether he wants it. Polus is perplexed that there could be anything to wanting other than seeming good. Socrates will have to explain to him that there is more, because we want only what really is good.

These dialogues, taken together, articulate the two faces of desire: the inner face championed by the apparentist (what seems good), and the outer face championed by externalists (what is good). The hybrid account of the desire thesis for which I have been arguing has put us in a position to spell out the way the two dialogues work together to constitute a theory of desire. I want to offer a final argument for this interpretation by way of the role of the desire thesis in Socratic protrepsis.

One can represent the disagreement between apparentism and externalism in terms a shared agreement as to the importance of the distinction between what seems good to a person and what is, in fact, good.

<center> Figure 1. </center>

We can use this picture to distinguish apparentism, as the theory that identifies desire with what is contained in the left-hand circle (what seems good), from externalism, as the theory that identifies desire with what is contained in the right-hand circle (what is good). The view I have been proposing identifies desire with their intersection.

To understand the protreptic bearing of this dispute, it will be helpful to compare figure 1 with the picture of desire assumed by Socrates' two interlocutors before his intervention. Or rather, let us restrict ourselves to the part of that question that has educational relevance: the picture each interlocutor has of his own desires. For, though Meno and Polus disagree on the question of what people in general desire—Meno (initially) thinks some of them desire bad things—they have quite a similar picture of their own desires as directed at simply what is good.<sup>62</sup> Figure 1 represents a correction that Meno and Polus agree to, having initially held something like the following picture of their own desires:

<center> Figure 2. </center>

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<sup>61</sup> *Gorgias* 466c7–e2.

<sup>62</sup> Meno takes himself to belong to a privileged class of people, as he makes clear with, among other things, his second definition of virtue. Having separated the virtues of a man, woman, child, slave, and so forth, he then gives as definition of virtue in general: "to rule over people" (73d). As Socrates drily points out, this doesn't seem to cover the case of the slave.

It is true that Meno's initial perspective on desire is one on which what I have called the outer face of desire—the question of whether the object is in fact good—came to the fore. But this is not because Meno took desire to be directed at what Santas calls the actual object as opposed to the intended object. If he had, he would never have agreed when Socrates pointed out that desiring requires taking the object to be good. Likewise, if Polus had been clear in his own mind that he was using the word “desire” to refer to what I have called the inner face of desire, he would simply have rejected Socrates' contention that, in order to be desired, the object must be good.<sup>63</sup> The right way to understand Meno and Polus's original conceptions of desire is as undifferentiated in respect of the appearance/reality distinction. It is upon meeting Socrates that each of them realizes, “What I take to be good can come apart from what really is good!” Given this fact, we can articulate the interpretative dispute as one over which part of the picture in figure 1 represents the (pedagogically) best clarification of the picture in figure 2.

Neither externalists nor apparentists seem to have picked out the part of figure 1 that Socrates can get his interlocutors to acknowledge as desire, given the indeterminate picture of desire with which those interlocutors entered the conversation (figure 2). For they both require Socrates' interlocutors to ignore the face with which those interlocutors were antecedently preoccupied. Why should Meno, of all people, accept a theory of desire on which what makes something a desire is (only) how it seems? How will Polus be brought to ignore seeming altogether? This is, I believe, the underlying explanation of the problematic status of both apparentism in relation to the *Meno* and externalism in relation to the *Gorgias*. Each interpretation provides us with a good reading of Socrates' conclusion but a bad reading of how he gets there, distorting the rhetorical force of his argument in such a way to make Socrates come off as unfair to his interlocutor. It is more plausible that Socrates is attuning each of the two interlocutors to also acknowledging the face to which they have given less attention. Thus, on the interpretation I propose, Meno is brought to recognize that in addition to the outer face, desire has an inner face, whereas Polus awakens to the outer one.<sup>64</sup>

Socrates' message to Polus and Meno is that, insofar as what seems good and what is good come apart, their desiring is awry. It is precisely Meno's failure to factor in

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<sup>63</sup> Kamtekar rightly observes (“Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 135), with reference to the apparent good and the real good, that Polus “initially takes the two to be equivalent.”

<sup>64</sup> On my interpretation, Socrates tells his interlocutors that “you desire a subset of the things you take yourself to desire.” It is important to see that there is a protreptic advantage to making this sort of an intervention, as opposed to the kind that, for example, Kamtekar (“Plato on the Attribution of Conative Attitudes,” 144 n. 32) would take him to be making. On her view, he would be telling his interlocutors that they desire many more things than they took themselves to desire. If Socrates' intervention amounted to enlarging Polus's and Meno's set of desires, then he would be giving them license to pursue what they currently took themselves to desire. They would be (at least subjectively) right to go off and try to secure any of the things they currently take themselves to want. If they got any of those things, they would be getting what they wanted. If, by contrast, Socrates is shrinking their set of desires, he holds them in check, suggesting that inquiry must precede action.

the inner face of desire that gives rise to his arrogant self-conception as someone who belongs to the privileged group of right-desirers. “That’s how it looks to everyone from the inside, Meno,” chides Socrates. The purpose of the argument at *Meno* 77b–78a is to destabilize Meno’s sense that he belongs to any privileged class. The message to Polus is that he should pay less attention to pursuing what he wants and more attention to knowing what he wants. Polus’s ambitious thirst for tyrannical power is predicated on ignoring the outer face of desire. Socrates’ message to Polus is, in effect, “be careful what you wish for.” Socrates’ intention is to arrest Polus’s and Meno’s agency in favor of self-scrutiny. His corrections encourage them to spend some time thinking about what they want, so that they can stop taking themselves to desire what they do not, as well as to start desiring the actually good things they do not yet desire.

A fuller picture of the protreptic import of the desire thesis would require an extended discussion of the tenets of intellectualism that surface in the other parts of the *Meno* and the *Gorgias*, as well as in other Socratic dialogues. Without bringing in more text, I want nonetheless to end with a speculation as to how the piece on which I have been focusing fits into the larger puzzle. I posit that Socrates does not intend for his interlocutors to reject figure 2 altogether. Figure 2 is an incorrect picture of desire, but it is a correct picture of something else. Socrates does think that there is a condition a person can be in when all and only what is really good seems good to him. This condition is not desire, but virtue. Look again at figure 1. Imagine the circle containing what seems good to me traveling to the right. This is the process by which I start to desire more and more of what is actually good, and I become less and less susceptible to being fooled by false appearances of goodness.<sup>65</sup> The shape of my desire—its growth—is, then, a record of my progress in desiring. Figure 2 is a picture of the endpoint of the process underway in figure 1. If this is right, then the fact that Meno and Polus are possessed of figure 2 from the outset is what makes it possible for Socrates to play the role of midwife. They may mislabel it as “desire,” and they may think they have it rather than needing to acquire it; nonetheless, each of Socrates’ interlocutors comes to the discussion with an idea of virtue that needs only to be excavated, not implanted.

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<sup>65</sup> The claim that there is a systematic connection between desiring more of what is actually good and being freed of false appearances of goodness requires an additional Socratic thesis, which is that virtue is knowledge. Socrates argues that those who have such knowledge are also freed from the deceptive power of appearances at *Protagoras* 356c–357e, which I discuss in my “Ignorance and Akrasia-Denial in the Protagoras,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 47 (2014): 31–80.

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Everyone Desires The Good  
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