Meno

Reading a Platonic Dialogue

- Dramatic Structure
- Substantive Issues
- Methodological Issues

Plato

Five Dialogues

Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo

Second Edition

Translated by
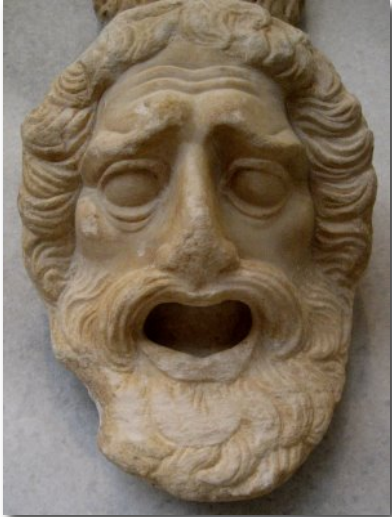G. M. A. Grube

Revised by
John M. Cooper

Reading a Platonic Dialogue

- **Dramatic Structure**
- Substantive Issues
- Methodological Issues

- Place:
- Time:
- Characters:
- Plot:
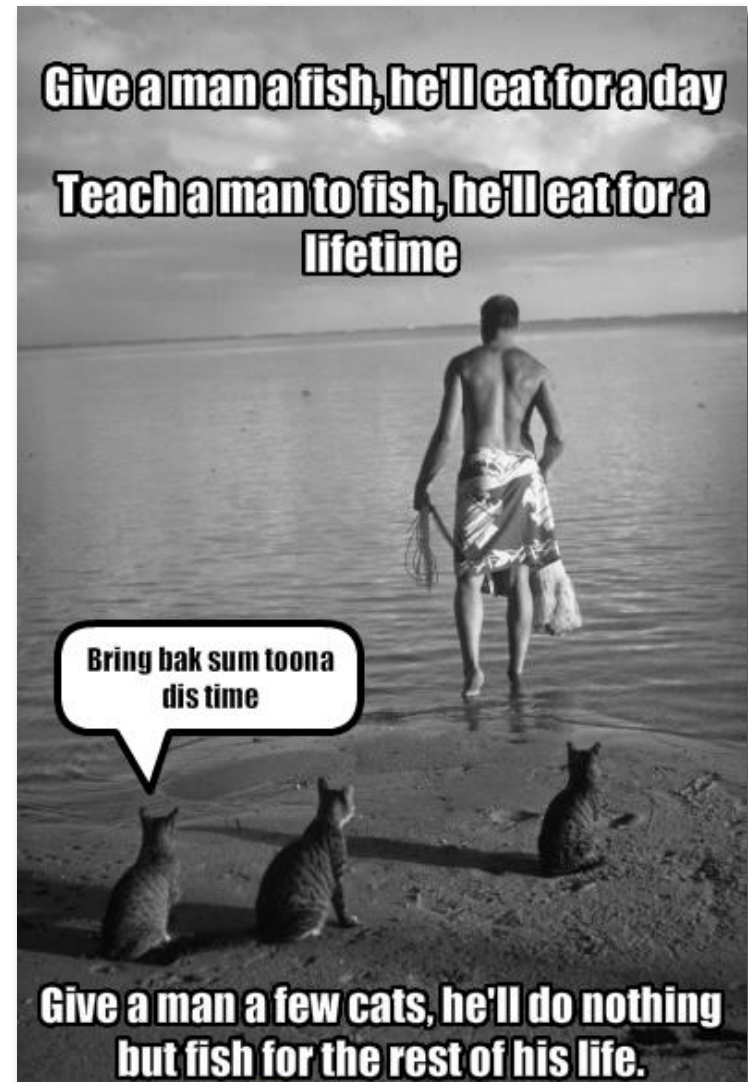- Three parts:
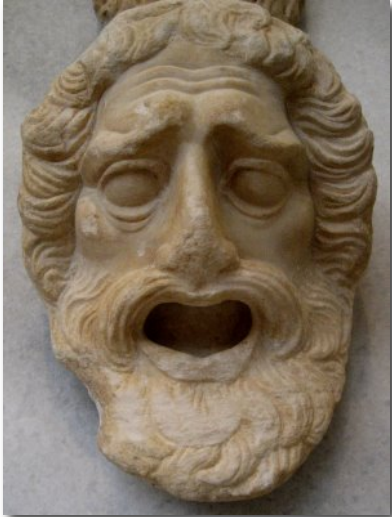
Reading a Platonic Dialogue

- Dramatic Structure
- Substantive Issues
- Methodological Issues

- Place: Somewhere in Athens
- Time: c. 402 BCE
- Characters: Socrates, Meno (a student of Gorgias), Meno's slave boy, Anytus (a powerful Athenian, and one of Socrates's later accusers)
- Plot: Discussing virtue
- Three parts: (1) 70a-79e, (2) 80a-86c, (3) 86c-100b.

Reading a Platonic Dialogue

- Dramatic Structure

- Substantive Issues: the facts of the discipline.

- Methodological Issues: strategies for discovering and evaluating the facts of a discipline.

Give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day

Teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime

Bring bak sum toona dis time

Give a man a few cats, he'll do nothing but fish for the rest of his life.

Substantive Issues

- Definitions of 'Virtue' (*arete*) (70a-79e)
- Plato's Theory of Forms (*eidos*) (72c-e)
- Virtue as Knowledge (77c-78b): "we desire only the good"
- The Learner's Paradox (80d-e)
- Theory of Recollection (81a-e)
- Knowledge vs True Belief (97a-99c)

Methodological Issues
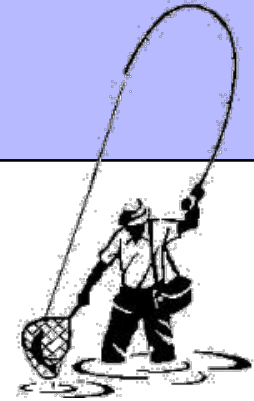
- Define your terms before discussing them (70a-71b)
- Conversational etiquette (75c-d)
- The value of the elenchic method (80a-86c)
- The hypothetical method (86d-96d)

Xenophon on Meno

[21] Meno the Thessalian was manifestly eager for enormous wealth — eager for command in order to get more wealth and eager for honour in order to increase his gains; and he desired to be a friend to the men who possessed greatest power in order that he might commit unjust deeds without suffering the penalty. [22] Again, for the accomplishment of the objects upon which his heart was set, he imagined that the shortest route was by way of perjury and falsehood and deception, while he counted straight-forwardness and truth the same thing as folly. [23] Affection he clearly felt for nobody, and if he said that he was a friend to anyone, it would become plain that this man was the one he was plotting against. He would never ridicule an enemy, but he always gave the impression in conversation of ridiculing all his associates. [24] Neither would he devise schemes against his enemies' property, for he saw difficulty in getting hold of the possessions of people who were on their guard; but he thought he was the only one who knew that it was easiest to get hold of the property of friends — just because it was unguarded. [25] Again, all whom he found to be perjurers and wrongdoers he would fear, regarding them as well armed, while those who were pious and practised truth he would try to make use of, regarding them as weaklings. […]

Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 2.6.1

What do you think?
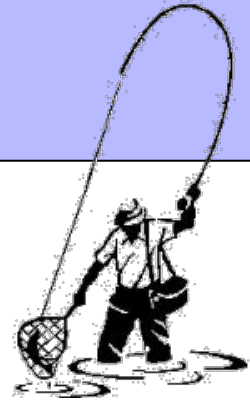
What value is there in defining your terms? Do you agree with Socrates and Plato here?

Definitions of Virtue

Five attempts, five failures …

(1) A list of virtues (71e-72a)

(2) "The capacity to govern men" (73d)

(3) "Desiring the good" (77b)

(4) "The power of acquiring the good" (78b-c)

(5) "Whatever is accompanied by justice" (78e)

"Nor can we reasonably say that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist." [*Cratylus*]
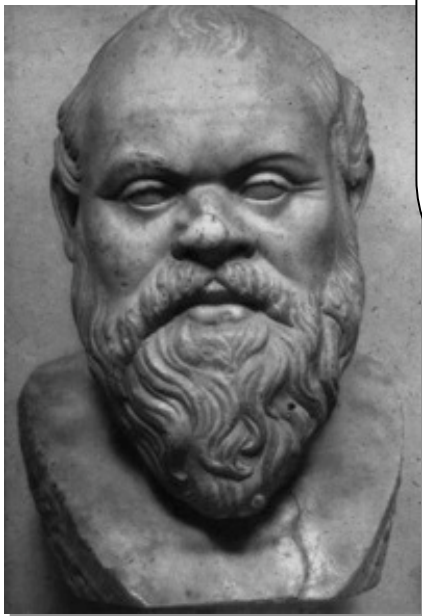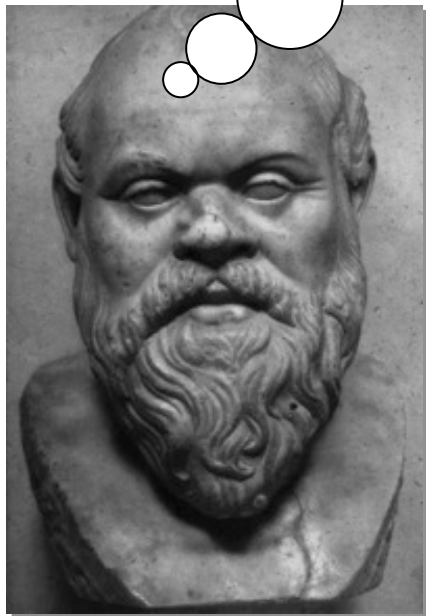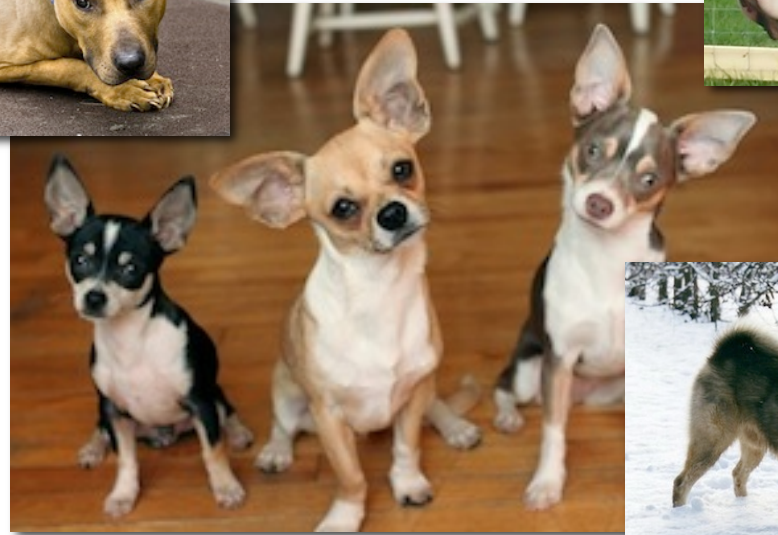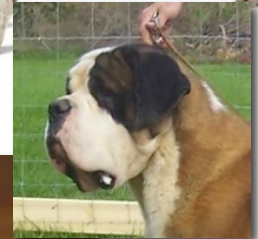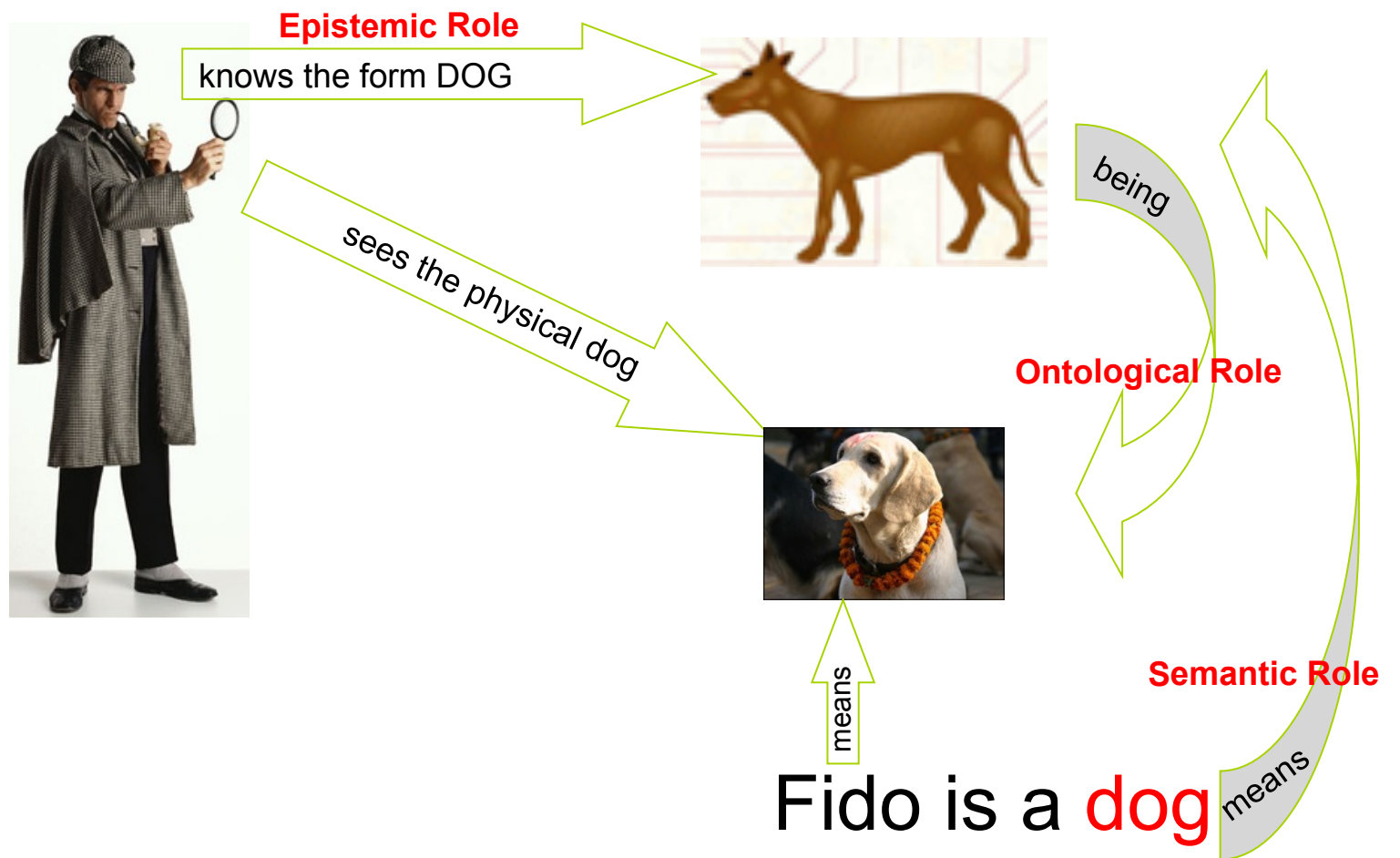
Socrates
(469-399 BCE)

These objects all share something in common — but **where** does this common thing exist? It's not **that** thing, nor **this** thing, but **what they all share**…

Socrates
(469-399 BCE)

Epistemic Role
knows the form DOG

sees the physical dog

being

Ontological Role

Semantic Role

means

means

Fido is a dog

Virtue = Knowledge (77c-78b)

- Socrates/Plato believes that "we desire only the good."
- No one willingly pursues the bad.
- Thus, if we know what is good, then we will pursue what is good.
- Thus, to be taught virtue is to become virtuous.
- No "weakness of the will" (*akrasia*)

The Learner's Paradox (80d-e)

The Paradox: Either I already know X or I don't. If I already know what it is, then I can't learn what it is (because I already know it). If I *don't* know what it is, then I won't be able to recognize it, should I chance upon it, in order to learn about it.

Example: "What is a thromble?" Here we must locate a few thrombles, and then study them to discover what makes a thromble a thromble. (And likewise for every other concept.)
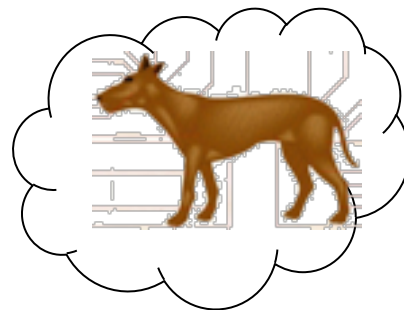
A Torpedo Fish

?

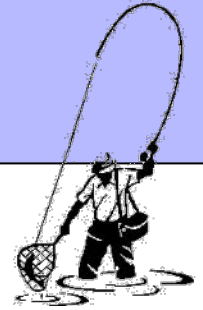A Thromble

Theory of Recollection (81c-82b)

- "Learning" is really just a kind of remembering.
- Concepts (Plato's Forms) enter the soul before birth.
- When I see a physical object, it causes me to recollect the form that is in that object

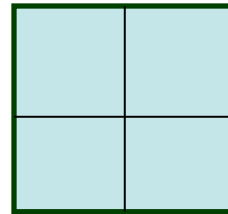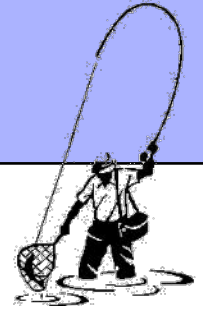 (I recognize the Form DOG in the physical dog before me).

Discuss in your Groups

Meno claimed that Socrates harmed him ("numbed him" — 80a).
Do you agree?

[**facilitators**: start and stop the discussion]
[**monitors**: make sure everyone's ideas are heard]
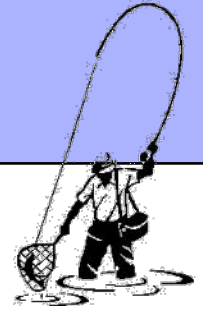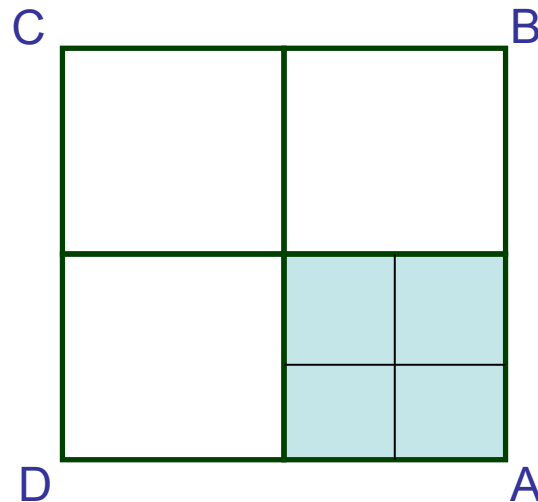[**recorders**: write down your group answer]

Area of original blue square (2 ft. sides) = 4 sq. ft
Area of the desired double-square = 8 sq. ft
Question: What is the length of the side of this double-square?
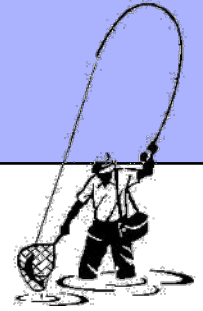
Area of ABCD (with 4 ft. sides) = 16 sq. ft

Area of original blue square (2 ft. sides) = 4 sq. ft
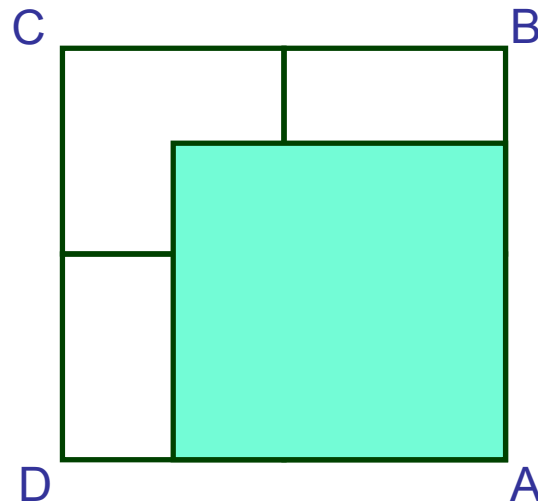Area of the desired double-square = 8 sq. ft
Question: What is the length of the side of this double-square?

Area of ABCD (with 4 ft. sides) = 16 sq. ft

Area of square (green) with 3 ft. sides = 9 sq. ft

C ⬚ B

D ⬚ A

Area of original blue square (2 ft. sides) = 4 sq. ft
Area of the desired double-square = 8 sq. ft
Question: What is the length of the side of this double-square?

Area of ABCD (with 4 ft. sides) = 16 sq. ft

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        C                       B



        D                       A
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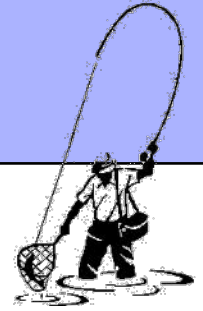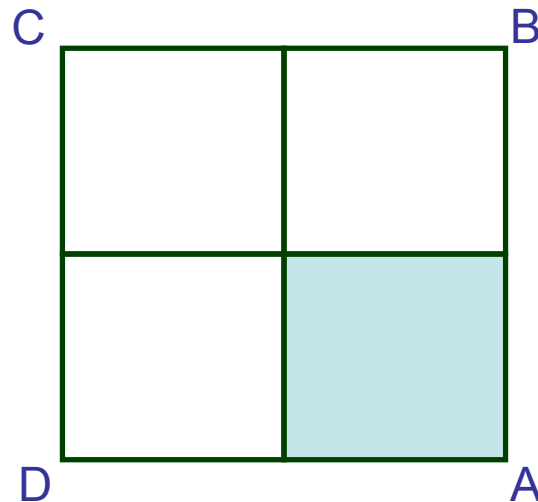
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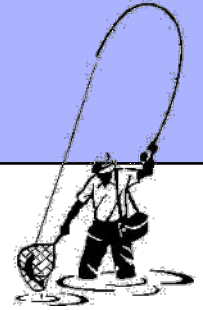
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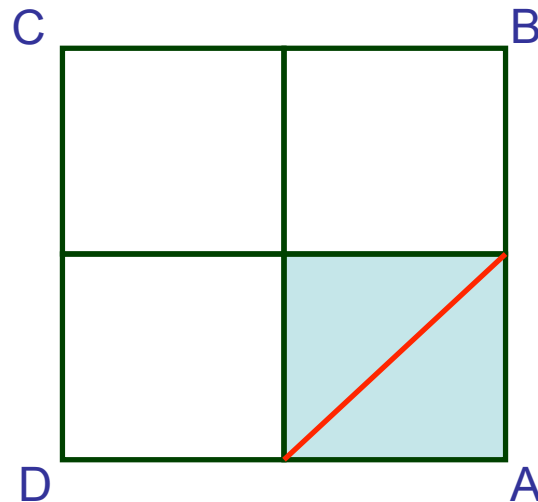**Question**: What is the length of the side of this double-square?

Area of ABCD (with 4 ft. sides) = 16 sq. ft

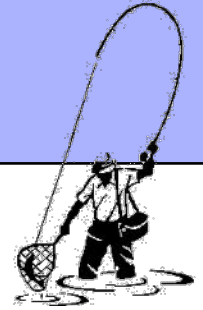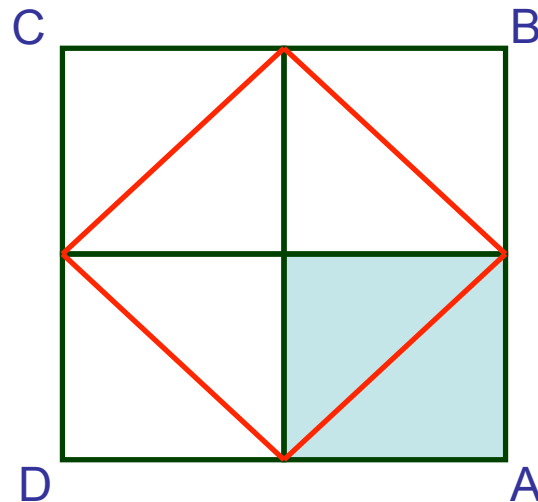Area of red square = 16 sq. ft/2 = 8 sq. ft
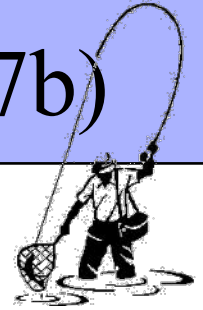

Area of original blue square (2 ft. sides) = 4 sq. ft

Area of the desired double-square = 8 sq. ft

Question: What is the length of the side of this double-square?

The Hypothetical Method (86d-87b)

Allows you "to argue from assumptions" (a kind of ignorance)

(1) Prove A by assuming B.

(2) Prove B by assuming C.

(3) Keep doing this until no assumption is needed.

Discuss in your Groups

What is the difference between knowledge and true belief?
(That is, between knowing something, and just believing something that happens to be true.)

[**facilitators**: start and stop the discussion, and keep the group on task]
[**monitors**: make sure everyone's ideas are heard]
[**recorders**: write down your group discussion]

Knowledge vs True Belief

- Meno: "The man who has knowledge will always succeed, whereas he who has true opinion will succeed only sometimes" (97c).

- Socrates: "Knowledge differs from correct opinion in it being tied down" (98a).

Knowledge vs True Belief

- Meno: "The man who has knowledge will always succeed, whereas he who has true opinion will only succeed at times" (97c).

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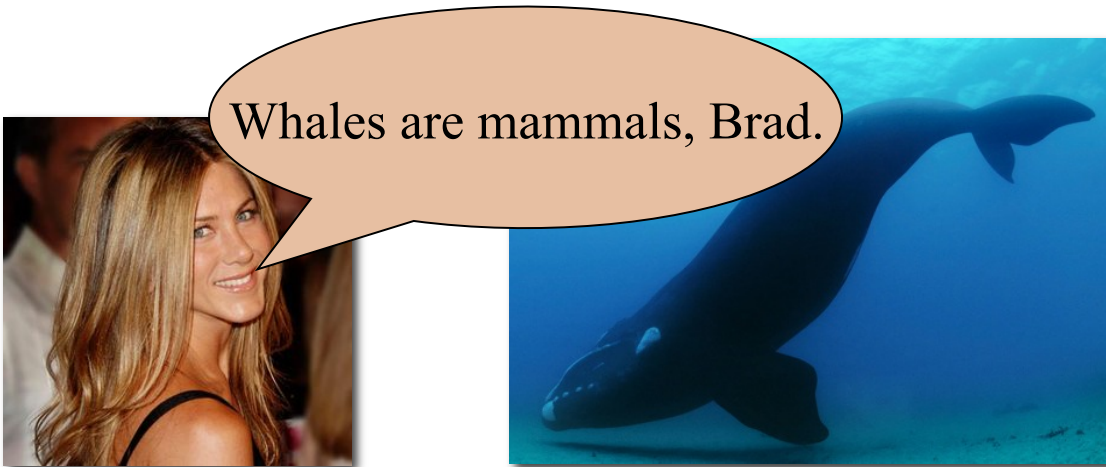
Whales are mammals, Brad.
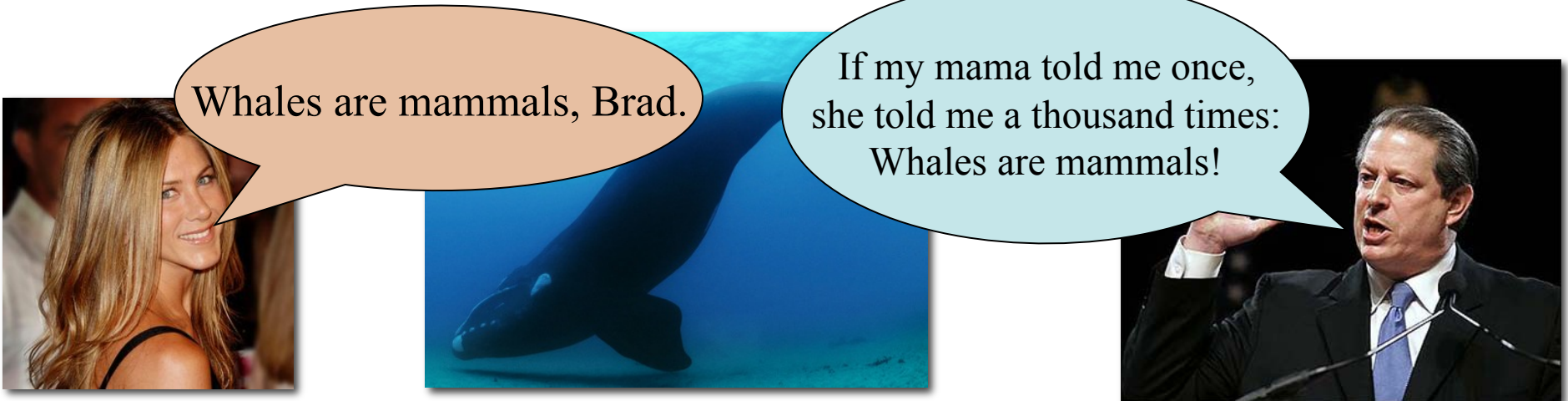
Knowledge vs True Belief

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Whales are mammals, Brad.

If my mama told me once, she told me a thousand times: Whales are mammals!

Knowledge vs True Belief

o has knowledge will
reas he who has true
cceed at times" (97c)

Jen! Al! Whales are, like, so obviously fish! Duh! They **look** like fish, don't they? Living in the water like that? I don't see them walking around scratching their fur and like, nursing their babies and stuff.

Besides, anything with fins is a fish, and whales have fins. End of story, stupid.

Whales are mamma

told me once,
thousand times:
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Knowledge vs True Belief

Jen! Al! Whales are, like, so obviously fish! Duh! They **look** like fish, don't they? Living in the water like that? I don't see them walking around scratching their fur and like, nursing their babies and stuff.

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Anything with fins is a fish, and

End

I don't know, Jen… Brad has a point. I think maybe whales *are* fish.

Whales are mammal

thousand time
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Knowledge vs True Belief

Jen! Al! Wha... like so ... has knowledge will ... e who has true ... times" (97c)

...anything with fins is a fish, and ... End

Whales are mammal...

Al, weren't you paying attention in biology class? Whales *are* mammals. They *do* nurse their young, and they actually do have hair. They give life birth, and so on. Brad is just so full of himself.
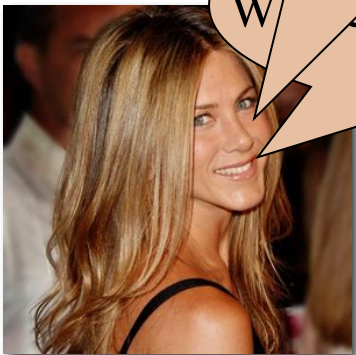
I don't know, Jen… Brad has a point. I think maybe whales *are* fish.

...thousand time... ...e mammals!

What Gorgias believed…

- Virtue cannot be taught (95b-c)
- Truth is whatever you believe it to be; reality is simply how things appear.
- There is no difference between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion/belief (*doxa*).
- Gorgias promises to teach the ability to persuade anyone of any proposition, or its opposite.

The Canine Form