

Teaching Good Virtues in Protagoras

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Abstract

This article deals with the issue of learning good moral virtues (*arête*), and analyses the differences in attitude towards moral virtues between Socrates and Protagoras. In regard to the possibility of learning virtues, Socrates uses the term "learning" in relation to "teaching," whereas "learning" for Protagoras means "education." This implies that Socrates denies the possibility of "teaching virtues" if it means "education of values." However, Protagoras claims that it is possible to teach virtues only if "virtues" means "education of values" and not teaching "epistemological content." Socrates uses the "mind" as a means of discussing the topic of virtue. He tries to transfer the search for real "facts" from "what exists" into "what should exist" – from the "real" into the "ideal." The subject of this search is the "subject itself" or "essence of things." However, for Protagoras, the measure is the knowing self that exists outside of the subject.

Keywords: Education, Philosophy, Teaching, Plato, Protagoras

1. Introduction

This article discusses the subject of moral virtues (*arête*) through the debate in the dialogue between Protagorasⁱ and Socrates, examines the differences between Socrates and Protagoras regarding this issue, and analyses the basic hypotheses on which their attitudes are based.

The dialogueⁱⁱ between Socrates and Protagoras focuses on the question: Is moral virtue teachable?

What characterizes this dialogue is its exposition of two different thoughts: the first is philosophical thought, which is represented by Socrates, and the second is Sophist thought, which is represented by Protagoras.

The debate develops into a discussion of the subject of moral virtue. "There are three distinct levels of *arête* manifest in *Protagoras*. There is the managerial, amoral, level at the beginning; next, there is the conventional morality represented by any teacher, including Protagoras, who has no standard beyond the *doxai* of the community; and the third, there is the intimation at the end of a moral level related to knowledge of an absolute standard."ⁱⁱⁱ Socrates and Protagoras differ in their points of view regarding the meaning of the concept of good "moral virtue." Virtue, according to the Socratic idea, constitutes the epistemological content of knowledge, but according to Protagoras, virtue is an epistemological form of cognition. The difference lies in the meaning of virtue itself and not only in the method of searching for it: "We must keep in mind the fact that, despite the differences in the way they approach the problem of *arête* and its teachability, Socrates and Protagoras arrive at remarkably similar conclusions"^{iv}. "Both halves of the speech argue that *arête* is similar to other *technai* in that it is taught, but different from them in that it should be possessed to some degree by all."^v

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The Sophist defines himself as an educator of moral virtues. "Protagoras claims to teach how to be successful in managing one's private affairs and in contributing by word and action to the affairs of the city. That kind of instruction was what young men wanted, and the sophists claimed to provide."^{vi} This type of education is established on a specific philosophy that is focused on the knowing self and not on the subject. Thus, Sophism is a philosophy and not merely a discourse that is motivated by profit. In spite of that, I do not agree with Balaban, who sees Sophistic philosophy as more original than other philosophies. "I would even venture to say that the sophists are more genuine philosophers than those who fail to take into account the method of thinking, the form of thought as a subject matter, not just for the sake of knowledge or theoretical analysis, but for the sake of political improvement and of values. Protagoras at least tried to distinguish between knowledge and valuation."^{vii}

I believe that Sophism represents a method of thinking which is established on sensory perception and deals with relative sensory reality.

This way of thinking does not aspire to what should exist, but deals with the existing situation. Socrates, however, deals with the "constant whole" and aspires to "what should exist." The difference is quite clear between a philosophy that deals with reality, aiming to improve it, and a philosophy that refuses reality and aims to rebel against it and change it.

2. Teaching Good Moral Virtues

At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates takes the role of the questioner, while Protagoras replies extensively, using a "myth" to confirm his claims. The myth represents Protagoras' attitude as an educator of moral virtues that are accepted and agreed upon by most people, and agrees with inherited customs and traditions. *Myth* is a basic component of the Greek heritage.

Socrates frankly states that the cause of this meeting is his pupil Hippocrates. Addressing Protagoras, Socrates says: "I think he [Hippocrates] desires a name in the community (*polis*). This he thinks he would be most likely to achieve by associating himself with you."^{viii}

This introduction indicates that Socrates was not convinced of this desire and shows his doubt. In fact, it is Hippocrates' aspiration and not Socrates', but it is an indirect doubt that Socrates' expresses in order to preserve the polite manner of dialogue and tactfulness of the speech.

Socrates continues his dialogue on behalf of Hippocrates and says: "So he wishes to learn what, if he does associate with you, the outcome of his studies will be."^{ix}

The importance of the "question" lies in examining the relationship between actions and outcomes. It has a purpose and refers deeds to their outcomes. If the outcome is good, then the deed is also good, and vice versa. Socrates tries to shed doubt on the result of teaching virtues, as he is not satisfied with Protagoras' answer. "If you associate with me, young man, then you will be able at the end of your first day in my company, to go away a better man and the same will happen on the next day, and each day after that you will continue to grow better and improve."^x

Socrates' doubt appears in his questions, which he draws from the world of professions. He claims that the pupil increases his knowledge and becomes better by learning photography or playing the flute, but he doubts the argument that the increased knowledge improves his learning of virtues. Socrates' objection is based on two arguments that are derived from Athenian reality:

- a) When the people of Athens meet at the Public Assembly to discuss a certain issue such as "architecture" or "building a new ship," they ask specialists in this art, but do not listen to the opinion of anyone except the professionals. In addition, they reprimand and dismiss anyone who dares to speak. However, when the discussion is related to the policy of the city, they share all the citizens including carpenters, smiths, merchants, ship-owners, rich people, poor people, nobles, and even the lowly people. All these people are allowed to express their opinions and give counsels, though they did not learn about the subject that was discussed.
- b) Socrates states his attitude clearly: "I do not consider that excellence can be taught."^{xi} This objection contributed to the change of the track of the dialogue and raised the level of debate. "What Socrates does is to take the discussion one step further; he shifts the consideration of *arête* from a sociological plane to an ontological one."^{xii}

The reader might wonder: How can Socrates, the philosopher and researcher of virtue, deny the possibility of teaching and learning it? This ambiguity disappears when we understand the semantic difference of the words "learning/teaching" and that the question is not related to the meaning of the word "virtue" only. "To account for this peculiarity requires, at least, tracking the different meanings of the word 'virtue' in the dialogue."^{xiii} The difference lies in the meaning of the word "learning/ teaching" as an instrument and as a "virtue" in itself.

Socrates objects to the possibility of teachability when it is used in its educational sense as "education for virtues as values," but he believes that it is possible when it indicates epistemological content. The difference here is in the concept of "education" and the concept of "instruction." Education is based on values accepted and agreed-upon by most people, and this implies that "education" is a relative and changing reconciliatory issue that is made by agreement. However, instruction is more concerned with epistemological content that is characterized by "stability."

"Protagoras attempts to explain that actually there is moral education and not merely 'instruction.' Then he goes beyond that and explains the pedagogical methods of the Greeks (*paideia*). However, Socrates, understands education to be only instruction (*didakticos*), and that instruction has no methodology, only a content."^{xiv}

Protagoras replies to Socrates' argument and tries to prove the possibility of learning/ teaching moral virtues as "education" and not only as "knowledge" by depending on the method of *mythos* (myths) and mind (*logos*).

3. The Greek Myth

Protagoras' choice of a famous myth among the Greeks is a natural thing because myth plays an important part in Sophistic education, and this is not a foregone issue, as some researchers claim. "The fact is that Plato puts the myth in Protagoras' mouth."^{xv}

This myth includes different characters and sometimes contradictory ones, and every character represents a different type in ability, thought and human activity.

Zeus, the greatest of the Greek gods, asked Epimetheus and Prometheus, to brothers and gods, to distribute attributes to creatures. Epimetheus then asked if he could distribute them himself, after which he would come back to Prometheus to discuss with him what he had done. After getting Prometheus' agreement, Epimetheus started working. "He distributed, to some he added strength without speed, while the weaker he furnished with swiftness. And some he armed, while to others he gave an unarmed nature, devising for them instead some other power for their safety.

For whichsoever he confined and made small of stature, to these he distributed a refuge of wings or dwelling under the earth, but whichsoever he made great of stature, by their very greatness he kept them safe."^{xvi}

After he had finished distributing all the abilities among all the non-speaking animals, he noticed that the human species remained without attributes and abilities. While he was still in his anxiety and puzzlement, Prometheus arrived and examined how Epithemeus had distributed abilities.

He found his distribution satisfactory, but the human species was still without abilities and characteristics, and the day on which man would come out of the earth into the light was approaching.

Here, Prometheus found himself obliged to steal from Hephaestus and Athens the knowledge of arts and fire, and gave them to human beings. "Then the kindness of Prometheus granted to these creatures, so exposed to *tuche* (luck), the gift of *technai* (teaching), house building, farming, shipbuilding, hunting, yoking and taming, metal-working...with all these arts they preserved and improved their lives. Human existence became safer, more predictable, there was a measure of control contingency."^{xvii}

However, man could not get the science of civil politics, including the art of war possessed by Zeus, which could be found at the Acropolis shrine. Therefore, human beings remained separate, with a social system, and remained exposed to the attacks of wild predatory animals. Man did not succeed in establishing a civil human society because he did not obtain the art of politics. Zeus was disturbed, thinking that the human species might perish. Therefore, he sent Hermes to give the human being feelings of shyness and the tendency to be just. Hermes planted these two attributes in an equal way among human beings.

"In short, this is the basis of all cultural phenomena. Man, for Protagoras, is man the 'maker.' Language, religion, the polis: none of them is 'natural' in the sense of formally existing before human activity. They are all made by human beings and for one reason only: survival, the guiding principle of the Protagorean story. As such language, religion and the polis are analogous to the bird's wing and the wolf's thick skin: they are attributes of the human species that are best comprehended by their contribution to our survival."^{xviii}

The exposition of this myth is intended to prove teachability, but what is the connection between "myth" and "teaching moral virtues"?

The relationship between the two aspects can be understood by analyzing the characters of the participants in the myth.

a) Epimetheus is the god who puts thought after action. He is motivated by instinct and deals with the external aspects of affairs without going deep to fathom them. He enjoys action, and this explains his insistence for Prometheus to allow him to distribute the attributes on his own. Epimetheus' work is focused on instruments rather than on goals, and he performs missions in a wonderful and delightful way. However, he lacks the ability to plan and think.

Therefore, he falls into an unexpected impasse in the process of distributing attributes and powers, which shows his inability to face the situation. He does his best to make the distribution fair, but his limited thinking ability prevents him from making the right calculation to guarantee perfection of the work. This god invests all his abilities and sources in enjoying the present and safeguarding his need for pleasure in executing the work. The power of his instincts focuses most of his attention and effort on the present rather than on the future.

b) Prometheus is the god who thinks before acting. His role is limited to dialogue and debate upon observing Epithemeus' work. He does not interfere in the execution of the work, but he plans without participating in the performance. Therefore, he agrees to his brother's request to distribute the attributes. This god has a goal and cares about the results, but not about the path that leads to them. He feels happy when someone else does the work instead of him. However, in spite of his laziness, he is willing to take the necessary means to achieve the goal if he does not find someone else to perform the task. The means is not important in itself, and he exploits all of the available possibilities to achieve his goal. The moral dimension is absent in his calculations, and therefore, he can take the path of evil means if it leads to his end.

As Prometheus premeditates and plans for the future, his efforts and interests are focused on the future results, and this explains why he does not invest in the present, but suppresses it for the future. He curbs his instinct in the present in order to achieve a larger goal in the future. So his instinct is not an end in itself.

Zeus' interference is intended to save the human species from destruction and disappearance by providing human beings with two characteristics: shyness (*aidós*) and justice (*dikē*). Shyness is an internal deterrent to instincts and to the teleological internal purposes that cannot be restrained except when the damage of the means is greater than the means.

Justice, however, includes civil politics, which gives people the opportunity to build a civil society, a governing system, and legislature to put down laws. Thus, Zeus achieves the continuity of human life and the removal of internal dangers that are represented in the conflict of man with his brother man, and the dangers of wild predatory animals that threaten man's existence.

In this way, he possesses the necessary abilities to build up the city-state (*polis*) and enable people to cooperate and live together in peaceful coexistence.

Protagoras introduces real life as it is in order to point out the shortcomings of human beings and their need for perfection through the learning/teaching process. There are deficiencies and drawbacks in man's nature, and there is no way to make him perfect except through his learning good moral virtues. "So, also in education, it is necessary to remove (men) from a disposition to better one, but the physician brings about the changes with medicines and the Sophists with his speeches."^{xix}

Protagoras exhibits these two characters as two types that represent two contradictory aspects in human beings: the Promethean teleological aspect, which lacks a moral dimension in order to achieve perfection, and the *Epimethean* aspect, which arouses the instincts and the principle of pleasure and delight, but lacks the virtues of thinking and recognition. When each of these aspects is exposed to good moral virtues and is brought up upon them, man becomes fully virtuous. The intention of the word "learning/teaching" is "education" and not "instruction," because education deals with behavioral forms whose contents are not subjects of the essential content of virtue.

4. Achievement of Good Moral Virtues

The cause of sharing all the citizens in discussing the issue of "political virtue" is its connection to justice and actual wisdom, which constitute a right that Zeus gave to all people equally. However, people do not consider this virtue as a naturally known thing, but as something that should be taught and acquired. "Once it be granted that for Protagoras Aidos and Dike, though shared in by all, are not by nature, and are not shared equally, the inconsistencies and contradictions of which Protagoras has been accused fade away."^{xx}

Protagoras distinguishes between *natural virtues* and *acquired virtues*. People do not generally reprimand or punish or give lessons to people who lack natural virtues, but they pity them. However, if a person lacks some good, acquired moral virtues, he is very likely to be reprimanded and punished.

Therefore, anyone who commits any injustice is punished. Punishment is not administered for some injustice that happened in the past, but as a lesson for the future, so that further injustices will not be committed by the doer, and other doers will learn a lesson.

This punishment, which is intended to teach the mind, rectifies and reforms the mind; it does not seek revenge on the doer, but educates him.

Protagoras objects to Socrates' claim that the greatest politicians and sages cannot pass political virtues on to their sons. Protagoras' argument is based on his argument that the acquisition of various virtues takes place through education. He maintains that teaching children should start at an early age, by the nanny, the mother, the educator or the father. Then, children are sent to teachers to teach them reading, writing, music, poetry, and physical education. After graduation from school, the State takes care to teach them the laws of the State, so that they will know how to live accordingly.

Protagoras attributes the success of children in acquiring virtues to their talent, training and persistence in learning. Therefore, good flute players may not be as famous as their parents, due to their lack of talent for music. This sample applies to the sons of politicians. "The son of a virtuous father needs to have his father's talent, which should not be less than good education, if he wants to repeat his father's success. However, talent is distributed randomly, and therefore, there is no guarantee that good fathers will have good sons like them also."^{xxi}

Protagoras believes also that people should teach one another about the just things and the accepted rules, so that the city-state can be established. It is clear that education for Protagoras involves learning the appropriate ways of behaving for a free man and the virtues that are socially accepted by most people. "Both halves of speech argue that *arête* / virtue is similar to other *technai* that it is taught, but different from them in that it should be possessed to some degree by all."^{xxii}

At this point in the dialogue, it is possible to say that Socrates understood Protagoras' logic, but the opposite is not true. This conclusion is based on understanding the style of the Socratic question and its development towards its purpose. Socrates gradually poses questions that confuse Protagoras. The Socratic question is characterized by being structured upon Protagoras' words in order to prove contradiction in his arguments. "Socrates wants to show that Protagoras' Sophistry is inconsistent with the Protagorean view of the relations between virtues."^{xxiii}

It is possible to say that Protagoras' employment of the mind (*logos*) to prove the importance of learning virtues represents a development in the Sophistic style. "Protagoras (*logos*) thus referred to discourse and reality, and his process of making the weaker *logos* stronger could be described as psycho-physical. Understood accordingly, Protagoras' place in the development of theories becomes clearer. While his efforts at rationalizing the *logos* seem simplistic and Platonic and Aristotelian standards, his fragments nonetheless what were clearly seminal insights."^{xxiv} This difference clearly indicates two different styles of thinking: the first is philosophical, and its tool is "pure mind"; the second is social, and its tool is "sense and experience."

5. Conclusion

We conclude from what has been said above that the debate regarding the teachability of good moral virtues in Protagoras' dialogue reflects two different philosophies: Sophistic philosophy, which claims that learning and acquiring virtues is possible, as values are considered educational values, which means that education should be based on the existing social and political values that are agreed upon by most people. Knowledge here takes care of the epistemological process and is related to the knowing self. This makes education relative and changing. There is no good in itself or evil in itself. Education becomes a preference of one value over another.

Socrates believes also in the teachability of virtue but in terms of epistemological content, which means that the achievement of virtues takes place through instruction that takes care of content rather than form. Knowledge here is related to the object itself rather than to the knowing self, which is outside the subject. In this context, virtue becomes absolute and constant.

End Notes

- ⁱProtagoras (d. 320 B.C.) is the greatest of the Greek Sophists. He was called the "Sage" and "The Father of the Scholars" of his age. He was a philosopher, politician, moralist, teacher, educator, an orator, and a rhetorician. He used "myth" and "legend" to support his arguments. He became famous in all of Greece, and many people followed his way in different cities. Protagoras enjoyed the respect of most philosophers, including Socrates, who clearly said that talking and listening to Protagoras was a great joy. (See: Plato in: *Fi al-Sufista'yinwa al-Tarbiya*(Muhawarat Protagoras). Translated and introduced by: IzzatQurni (2001), Dar Qiba, Cairo, p. 19.
- ⁱⁱPlato wrote this dialogue after Socrates' death.
- ⁱⁱⁱJoseph P. Maguire, (1977). Protagoras ... or Plato?Phronesis, 22 (2): 103-122) p. 122.
- ^{iv}M. Gagarin, "The Purpose of Plato's Protagoras", Transactions and Proceedings of the AmericanPhilological Association, 100 (1969): 133—164, p.163.
- ^vGagarin, M. "The Purpose of Plato's Protagoras," Transactions and Proceedings of the AmericanPhilological Association, 100 (1969): 133-164, p. 144.
- ^{vi} Plato, Protagoras, Translated with notes by C. C. W. Taylor, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 71.
- ^{vii}Balaban, Oded (1999). Plato and Protagoras, Maryland, Lexington Books, p. 74.
- ^{viii}Hubbard, A.A.F and Karnofsky (1982).Plato's Protagoras, Chicago, the University of Chicago.P. 10.
- ^{ix}Ibid., p. 12.
- ^xIbid., p. 12.
- ^{xi}Ibid., p. 87.
- ^{xii}M. Gagarin, "The Purpose of Plato's Protagoras," Transactions and Proceedings of the AmericanPhilological Association, 100 (1969): 133-164, p. 145.
- ^{xiii}Robert C. Bartett (2004). Plato – "Protagoras" and "Meno," Ithaca, Cornell University, Press, p. 88.
- ^{xiv}OdedBalaban (1999).Plato and Protagoras. Maryland, Lexington Books, p. 187.
- ^{xv} Joseph P. Maguire (1977). Protagoras ... or Plato?Phronesis, 22 (2): (103 - 122) p. 114.
- ^{xvi}Hubbard, A.A.F and Karnofsky (1982).Plato's Protagoras, p.16.
- ^{xvii}Martha Nussbaum (2001)."The Protagoras: a science of practical reasoning". In Varieties of practical reasoning, ed. Elijah Millgram, Bradford: MIT Press, (202-153),p.155.
- ^{xviii}David Roochnik (1996). Of Art and Wisdom, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 219.
- ^{xix}Levi, Adolfo (1940) . "Studies on Protagoras", Philosophy ,15 (58): (147 - 167), p. 163
- ^{xx}G. B. Kerferd (1953). Protagoras' Doctrine of Justice and Virtue in the "Protagoras" of Plato, The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol., 73, pp 42-45, p. 43.
- ^{xxi}Patrick Coby (1987). Socrates and the Sophistic Enlightenment, London, Bucknell University Press, p. 61.
- ^{xxii}Gagarin, M. (1969).The Purpose of Plato's Protagoras.Transactions and Proceedings of the AmericanPhilological Association, 100 (1969): 133-164, p. 14.
- ^{xxiii}Daniel. C. Russell (2005). Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 241.
- ^{xxiv}Edward Schiappa (1991). Protagoras and Logos. South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, p.163.