

Can Virtue Be Taught?

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One of Plato's liveliest Socratic dialogues, the *Protagoras*, stages a debate between the greatest philosopher and the greatest sophist of their time, with other leading sophists in the audience. The debate concerns Protagoras' own specialty: the teaching of 'virtue' or *aretê*, a crucial term in ancient Greece that involves both moral goodness and human greatness. Protagoras and Socrates end up with oddly overlapping intellectual positions: Socrates contends that virtue is not something that's taught, though he believes that all of virtue is essentially a kind of knowledge. Protagoras denies that all virtues are forms of knowledge, though he maintains that they are in fact commonly taught, and taught especially well by himself. This historical fiction was composed some forty or fifty years after its dramatic setting, but its colourful and inconclusive portraits are probably roughly correct. (Most scholars consider Protagoras' main speech there a paraphrase or imitation of his original writings, which have not survived.) These men were debating in new ways what was already an ancient theme. But since sophists won their fame and wealth through public speeches and private courses on matters social and ethical, and since these new professionals were often suspected as charlatans, old questions about virtue and teaching were a persistent element in the sophists' environment.

The sophists and Socrates gave new life to such traditional subjects with their especially intellectual approaches. Their innovative verbal arts included the beginnings of grammar, rhetoric and logic, and though the sophists were not generally interested in Socrates' attempts to *define* virtues, the best of them used their new kinds of speeches and reasoning to explain and advocate traditional virtues in a spirit of reform and progress. In spite of some important disagreements, Socrates and the major sophists were all elaborating traditional Greek themes about human nature and society, justice and happiness. Broadly they agreed that successful communities and lives require civic virtues like justice and moderation; that cultivating those virtues requires some kind of moral education; and that moral education requires natural talents and practical training in addition to verbal instruction. Their own contributions concerning virtue were basically intellectual and theoretical, no matter how much their theories might emphasise the role of practical training. The

20. Can Virtue Be Taught?

same is true of later philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who were after all much influenced by these sophists.

Ancient ideals of virtue and justice

When Socrates asks Protagoras what he offers prospective students, Protagoras replies that he can make them better each day, and better not in some technical skill or specialised subject but in a quite general human virtue:

my subject is good judgment [*euboulia*]: in private matters, so he may best manage his own household, and in public matters, so he may be most capable in the city's affairs, both in action and in speech (*Protagoras* 318e-19a).

This bold promise of success in human activity generally, of private and public excellence in word and deed, is Protagoras' professional formulation of the traditional ideal of *aretê*. Ever since the earliest Greek literature, *aretê* is a central ideal and basic motivator, embracing goodness and greatness, as an excellent human being and as an outstanding member of a human community. Protagoras calls his version the art of the citizen (319a), political virtue (322e, 324a), and man's virtue (325a). His promise about being 'most capable in the city's affairs, both in action and in speech' attracts the ambitions of wealthy young men to win power and honour in Greek politics, with effective public speaking in law courts and assemblies. It is the fifth-century political descendent of the *aretê* pursued so memorably by the epic heroes – such as Achilles and Odysseus in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – who were literally cult figures in their hometowns as well as cultural icons throughout Greece. Homer was composing three centuries before Protagoras, working his poetic art and moral vision on stories that were much older still. His heroes strive for greatness, and constantly compete for honour, not only in the deeds of war and sport but also in persuasive and appropriate speech. Odysseus was especially recognised for his speaking abilities, and even the greatest warrior Achilles, who was enjoined by his father

always be excellent, and be superior to others (*Iliad* XI.784)

was trained for that purpose by his personal mentor Phoenix

to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds (*Iliad* IX.443).

These slogans express an ideal of aristocratic education in the centuries leading to our sophists: to win honour and power through *aretê*, the manly virtues of courage, strength and skill, both in action and in speech. Such competitive virtues were thought to constitute greatness in a man, the

way that beauty and fidelity were the virtues of his wife, speed the virtue of his horses, and fertility the virtue of his land.

But sophists also drew from another deep current in Greek culture, which prized modest good sense or self-restraint (*sôphrosunê*) and justice (*dikaïosunê*). Hesiod, who was second only to Homer in antiquity and authority, made justice and humble hard work the theme of his *Works and Days*. He describes a former Golden Age without competition for honour or any other kind of strife; for his own bleak times, he values only that competition which inspires honest toil to earn a good living. His *Theogony* ranks Justice (*Dikê*) as a goddess, daughter of Zeus and divine Right Rule (*Themis*). In Hesiod's vision, Zeus rewards justice with peace and prosperity, and justice even distinguishes humans from mere animals (*Works and Days* 274ff.):

Dear Perses, take this to your heart:
listen to justice and forget all violence.
That's the lawful way of life that Zeus assigned for men.
Fish and beasts and birds of the air may eat
each other; among them is no justice.
But humans he gave justice, which proves to be much better.

Homer's honour-loving heroes do not identify justice and self-restraint as part of their virtue or *aretê*; but on the whole Homer shares Hesiod's love of these more cooperative virtues. While the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* worked their ethical legacy largely through glorious episodes of honour-seeking competition, their plots as wholes celebrate something different: Achilles' friendship with Patroclus and his return to civilised compassion, Odysseus' enduring heart of reverence and the harmony of spirit he shares with his wife. Homer even agrees that justice suits human nature: when Achilles predicts his great outrages against Hector, he calls himself a lion and a wolf rather than a man (XXII.250-67, 337-54); and Odysseus' brutish enemy the Cyclops is less than human because he lacks law and justice (*themis*, IX.105-15).

The combination of these two ideals, harmonious justice and competitive manly *aretê*, shaped Greek ethics and politics for centuries. Generations of poets and philosophers gradually internalised both *aretê* and justice as matters of mind and character (*psychê*), rather than merely of actions and material goods. And they gradually incorporated civic virtues like moderation and justice as part of human virtue or *aretê* itself. Most sophists agreed, joining the tradition of the legendary Seven Sages, the Delphic oracle, and many works of Greek theatre and history, which constantly warn that wrongheaded pursuit of *aretê* leads to *hubris* – the boundary-breaking arrogance and violence that is the opposite of moderation and justice.

Learning virtue: teaching, training, and nature

Such constant exhortations to virtue testify to the difficulty of properly learning it, and here too the sophists add their voices to an ancient chorus. Even the earliest poetry, as it explores and celebrates human virtue, acknowledges the necessity and the limits of moral education. In the *Iliad*, when Phoenix reminds Achilles of his training in good words and deeds, he is trying to persuade Achilles back to a more honourable, less destructive path – but Achilles doesn't listen. The *Odyssey* foregrounds the late education of Odysseus' son, whose good nature deplores the *hubris* of his mother's suitors, but fails to produce good leadership in the absence of a good role model. And Hesiod's teachings in the *Works and Days* are framed as corrective lessons to his brother, who has fallen to the point of stealing Hesiod's inheritance after wasting his own. Hesiod implores (293ff.):

Best is the man who sees all for himself,
perceiving what's better in the future and in the end.
And good is the man who listens to good advice.
But he who neither sees for himself nor takes to heart
what he hears from another – that is a useless man.
So you, Perses, *born* of good blood, remember what I *tell* you,
and *work*!

Centuries later, the sophists' educational theories face the same challenge of combining verbal teaching with natural abilities and personal effort – but in a different kind of social environment.

In the generations after Homer and Hesiod, the somewhat feudal aristocracies developed into sophisticated governments with civic centres and citizens' rights. A kind of people's assembly was typical even in the aristocratic 'dark ages,' convened at the nobles' discretion to serve their own agenda. But as populations and economies grew, assemblies grew in size and influence. Groups that had been subjects of the traditional noble families earned increasing shares of political power. Laws were written down for public view, and participation in real decision-making spread out from the nobles to other landholders and to those who earned through trade and industry. Some of these independent city-states became democracies – most notably Athens, where elections and lotteries and pay for public service effectively extended political rights to even the poorest citizens (but not to slaves or women). Any male citizen in Athens could serve as councillor and magistrate and judge, and formally address the whole assembly. Other city-states, with broad or narrow oligarchies, had greater restrictions on citizenship and citizens' rights, but often with corresponding kinds of assemblies and courts requiring effective public speaking. This is the social and political background to the professional success of the sophists in teaching their verbal arts. While old aristocratic

families still often dominated politics (and athletics and priesthoods and social prestige generally), now their traditions of winning honour for *aretê* were pursued largely through political debate, in arguments about justice and good sense no less than in speeches about competitive greatness. Many now paid sophists to teach them how to do it effectively. In principle that success would be taught to anyone who could afford the classes.

So in part, debates about whether *virtue* can be *taught* were implicitly debates about whether the upper classes should have to share political power with lower classes. Some denied that virtue was the sort of thing that could be taught as sophists taught things: to anyone who can pay their fees and succeed in their courses. Even before such travelling teachers existed, great poets spoke for the waning aristocracies, lamenting the diffusion of traditional privileges among *nouveaux riches*. When Theognis famously pronounced that

teaching will never make a base man noble (437-8)

these loaded terms refer at once to moral qualities and social class. And Pindar, just before the age of the sophists, proclaimed (*Ninth Olympian Ode* 100-3):

What comes by nature is always best.

But many strive for fame with virtues merely taught.

He too is supporting the aristocratic notion that real virtue comes through 'nature' by being born into the right families. These poets also praise teaching in the sense of personal mentoring and training within the privileged group (Theognis 33-6, 69-72; Pindar, *Tenth Olympian* 16-21). But they emphasise inherited nature to preserve that distinction over others who have won political and social concessions. By contrast, sophists' claims to teach all customers were seen as continuing the process that undermined the old order. It's no accident that they were most successful at Athens, in the thoroughly political atmosphere of the radical democracy recently established there.

However, if this new profession of teaching political skill was in principle progressive, the sophists' expensive courses were in effect exclusive, full of the sons of the very wealthy. So in addition to the elitist resistance from traditionalists about aristocratic personal mentorship, there was popular resentment for perpetuating class privilege by teaching rich boys to manipulate crowds with fancy talk. To top it off, other intellectuals like Socrates offered their own versions of both kinds of criticisms. So their undeniable commercial success and cultural influence was attended by disapproval and fear. Underlying it all was a common concern for the overwhelming importance of justice and the other virtues about which the sophists spoke so powerfully. The social upheavals of the Peloponnesian

20. Can Virtue Be Taught?

War highlighted the vulnerability of civic virtues, and if the sophists' exclusive clientele suggested a lack of real seriousness about justice, their intellectual focus suggested disdain for what matters more: training from an early age to be a man of good character. But we shall see that various leading sophists show genuine interest in (1) advancing that moral training through their public addresses and private seminars, and (2) exploring all the elements of moral education that were implicit since Homer and Hesiod: inherited nature (*physis*), personal effort and practical training (*meletê*, *askêsis*), and verbal teaching (*didachê*).

Four sophists on the teaching and learning of virtue

Many classical authors concerned themselves with moral education, including playwrights, historians, statesmen and philosophers beyond those we call sophists, but most were somehow influenced by sophists. Specific debate about whether virtue can be taught is most explicit in just two sources: the schematic summaries in the anonymous *Dissoi Logoi*, and the more philosophical representations in Plato's *Protagoras* together with parts of his *Meno*. But the teachings of many of the sophists implicated and affected the teaching of virtue. Here I survey the relevant remains of four leading sophists. Protagoras was first and most important, but their careers overlapped and interacted. Since Protagoras' influence on later philosophers is clearest, I discuss Protagoras last. (I use evidence from Plato broadly and cautiously, and especially when it resonates other sources.)

Gorgias allegedly called himself an orator but not a sophist (a point highlighted in Plato's *Gorgias* but ignored in other dialogues). He claims to make men powerful speakers while denying that he teaches them virtue (*Meno* 95c). Yet Gorgias spoke powerfully *about* virtue in public gatherings throughout Greece, and his professional displays included answering questions about any subject whatever (*Gorgias* 447c-8a, *Meno*, 70b-c). He taught the same young men who studied virtue with other sophists. So his denial of teaching virtue may have been occasional and strategic, perhaps a marketing ploy against his commercial rivals. In Plato's *Gorgias*, when Socrates presses the point that Gorgias teaches men to be persuasive about justice and injustice, Gorgias concedes that he will teach them what justice is if they don't already know, though he shouldn't be held responsible for their speeches and actions (456c-60d).

But the real Gorgias may have believed that in a sense virtue cannot be taught at all. One of his compositions argued (if partly in fun) that nothing really exists, and if something did exist we couldn't know it, and if we could know it we couldn't communicate it. About virtue in particular, he would 'define' it only by enumeration, with different kinds of qualities for different kinds of people (Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a14-28; Plato, *Meno* 71cff.). So

he probably believed that there is no essential truth about virtue to be learned as a matter of theory, but he may have believed that students become virtuous through the *practice* of making good speeches about noble ideals. That was the professional theory of his influential student Isocrates, and a memorial statue at Olympia claimed that 'no man yet has found a fairer art than Gorgias, to train the soul for contests of virtue'. Although Aristotle reports that Gorgias' students learned by memorising and imitating his speeches, the few models that survive are not exhortations to virtue.

Gorgias seems to have developed a theory that persuasive speaking effects its power independently of truth. He aimed at a new art of prose that works like poetry, moving its audience with quasi-metrical rhythm and balance, striking metaphors, and rhyme. In this connection, he noted that tragedy (important public poetry in Greek life) produces a kind of deception 'in which the deceiver is more just than the nondeceiver, and the deceived is wiser than the nondeceived' (Plutarch, *On the Fame of the Athenians* 5). Was he thinking only of aesthetic suspension of disbelief, or also of possible moral effects? His *Encomium of Helen* 'demonstrated' playfully that since we live by opinion rather than knowledge, speech persuades with another form of the same power exercised by physical compulsion. In any case, Gorgias was loosely 'teaching virtue' whether he admitted it or not – in the tradition of helping young men win honour from their peers and others. That was the allure of his promise to make them powerful speakers.

Hippias, in the next generation, pursued a career like that of Gorgias: while travelling as ambassador throughout Greece, he gave private classes and public displays with open question-and-answer sessions, using the kind of florid style that Gorgias introduced. But Hippias also went further. He attempted expertise in all arts, theoretical and practical. If Gorgias tried to be persuasive about all kinds of subjects without having to understand them, Hippias tried to learn all things through wide-ranging study and personal experience. Plato portrays him as boastful and overconfident, but even so his curiosity and talents must have been remarkable. He performed at public festivals in clothes and shoes and jewellery made by himself, and he taught mathematics, astronomy, music, poetry, history and genealogy. Among it all, he gave special attention to virtue, trying to encourage noble pursuits through inspiring literature. In addition to writing his own tragedies (Plato, *Hippias Minor* 368c-d), Hippias delivered speeches on ethical themes in traditional poetry. For example, he argued that Homer makes Achilles a much better man than Odysseus, and he added an episode to the Trojan saga in which Nestor teaches the orphaned son of Achilles about honourable activities and noble customs. We don't know how good his stories were, as no ancient sources preserve or discuss them in any detail.

20. Can Virtue Be Taught?

Hippias was among the first to teach a broad antithesis between the claims of nature (*physis*) and those of custom or law (*nomos*) – and here he contributes to a momentous development in ethical debates. Earlier literature mentions divine and unwritten laws that have priority over human conventions, but Hippias alleged some kind of general opposition between conventional and natural laws. This kind of antithesis would later be used in various ways, sometimes even serving crass hedonistic egoism, as with Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*. But Hippias represents the more humane general trend among sophists, privileging nature over convention to promote unity among men (at least among intelligent men) and to advocate harmonious reconciliation. That is the spirit in which he offers to mediate between Socrates and Protagoras in Plato's *Protagoras* (337d-e). Hippias' belief in the justice of universal, unwritten laws is reported by Xenophon too (*Memorabilia* IV.4). His ideal of a natural kinship, immune to artificial social boundaries, suggests that his stories about virtuous practices were intended as lessons for everyone everywhere.

Prodicus is often cited for his attention to fine distinctions among related terms. Plato parodies him with a speech distinguishing four pairs of ethical terms in just a few sentences (*Protagoras* 337a-c), and suggests that his attraction to fine distinctions misses the point of some ethical discussions (341e-42a, 358d-e). Yet Plato knew the importance of speaking precisely about virtues and vices, and there is something positive in his suggestion that some who aren't prepared for Socrates' exercises in definition should first study with Prodicus (*Theaetetus* 151b). The great historian Thucydides, who denounced the opportunistic perversion of ethical terms during the Peloponnesian War, was thought to have learned something from Prodicus (Marcellinus, *Life of Thucydides* 36; see Sprague, 74).

Prodicus had a striking theory about the origin of religion, in which humans first worshipped the parts of nature that were useful in their struggle to survive. Some considered this atheistic and corrupting, but Prodicus shows his support for social virtues in his rhetorical display on 'The Choice of Hercules'. He invented this tale, in which Virtue and Vice compete for the attention of the young Hercules with opposed speeches advocating different paths of life: one of easy selfish pleasure and apparent beauty; the other of hard work and generous service that eventually leads to genuine friendship, honour and satisfaction. The rhetorically polished original is lost, but the rough paraphrase recorded by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* II.1) is enough to glimpse a heavy-handed lesson for impressionable young minds. The theme of the 'Choice', and the focus upon struggle and survival in the theory of religion, follow the path of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, emphasising above all the role of hard work in achieving virtue. *Protagoras* (339e-42a) associates Prodicus with poetry by Simonides (c. 556-c. 468) about how hard it is to become good. That is the main point delivered by his Virtue personified, though she begins by noting Hercules'

inherited good nature and she also mentions the need for expert teachers. The speech of Virtue itself, like the whole 'Choice of Hercules' debate, has its role in moral education as verbal instruction: encouraging precepts and reasons in favour of taking the more difficult path.

Protagoras. We have detected, in the remains of three major sophists, various explorations of teaching, training and nature in moral education. Now we are prepared to appreciate the work of Protagoras, which influenced all the others. Few direct quotations survive from this versatile intellectual pathfinder. He is now most famous for two striking claims:

Man is the measure of all things: the being of what is and the nonbeing of what is not¹ (Fragment 1; see Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a, *Cratylus* 385e; Waterfield 2000, 213).

Concerning the gods I cannot know that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have. Much prevents knowing it: its obscurity, and the shortness of human life (Fragment 4; Diogenes Laertius IX.52; Dillon and Gergel 2003, 21).

But more to the point of our survey, he argued in a *Great Speech* that

teaching requires natural talent and practice ... one must start learning young (Fragment 3; Waterfield 2000, 219).

Since the original contexts of all these lines are lost, we confront an apparent conflict: general scepticism and relativism about gods and 'all things' versus a practical realism about good education. But some scholars argue that the 'man-measure doctrine' need not imply a radical form of relativism; it could be about a kind of relative judgments that is compatible with a substantial measure of realism in science and education. (See for example the treatments by Kerferd and Woodruff.) In any case, our survey must include the debate in Plato's *Protagoras*, where Protagoras argues that real virtue is taught and learned by everyone throughout life – an argument that beautifully elaborates the quotation from the *Great Speech*.² That argument includes a defence of democratic assemblies, which suits Protagoras' association with the great Athenian democrat Pericles, and the fact that he wrote the laws for the democratic, pan-Hellenic settlement of Thurii. So I accept the main speech in the *Protagoras* as reconstructing Protagoras' own views, and ignore here the less reliable evidence in Plato's *Theaetetus*, which is our earliest source for the relativism of Fragment 1 above. Anyone interested in classical debates about teaching virtue must study the *Protagoras* (especially 316b-328c).

In that dialogue, when Protagoras promises to make his students good men and good citizens, Socrates explains why he doubts that virtue is taught. He cites two widely experienced facts with powerful implications:

on it. While its cultivation requires teaching and training, it is more basic and universal than the variable customs of different societies. 'It is necessary that each have some share in justice, or not be among human beings' (323b-c). So Protagoras, like Socrates, rejects the aristocratic notion that only certain families have a proper capacity for virtue. Differences in natural ability at *all* levels of society are what explains why children of prominent citizens often turn out useless or bad. But all normal humans are born with a natural capacity for justice, and everyone raised in civilisation develops at least some measure of it (327c-e).

The legacy of the sophists on the teaching of virtue

So we discard the old prejudice that sophists were all radical relativists or amoral opportunists. The best sophists were contributing much to early philosophy, and helped shape the ethical philosophies of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

When Plato has Socrates praise Protagoras' speech, it isn't just sarcasm; he doesn't dispute any of its main points as they continue the debate. Apparently Socrates' famous '*technê*-analogy,' comparing and contrasting virtues with the knowledge embodied in technical skills, was already practised by Protagoras (321d, 322b-d). Though Protagoras rejects Socrates' particular brand of ethical intellectualism – that virtue is essentially knowledge, such that knowing what's right entails doing it – both of their approaches express the confidence in progress through reasoning that characterised the work of all the early sophists.

The new kinds of theory in Plato's *Republic* go much beyond the reasonings of Socrates or any of the sophists. But there was an ancient rumour that most of Plato's *Republic* was already contained in a work by Protagoras (Diogenes Laertius III.37, 57). However that unlikely notion came about, Plato himself suggests Protagorean influence by incorporating the elementary education he had already attributed to Protagoras: organising the child's daily life as a constant lesson in virtue, moulding character through imitation, play and punishment, and the rhythms of good music and exercise. In Plato's thinking, these measures prepare youths for complete virtue by forming well-ordered minds that can recognise the transcendent source of good order itself.

When Aristotle rejects the transcendent orientation of Platonic higher education, he maintains the emphasis on early habituation to good character. His masterfully detailed theory of virtues retains a roughly Protagorean shape: (1) we are born with a natural capacity for virtue – and for vice, though human nature and society really require the virtue; (2) virtues of character are instilled by practical training, involving imitation, punishments and rewards; (3) this training is completed through intellectual teaching and study. Aristotle's intellectual virtue of 'practical wisdom' (*phronêsis*) is much like Protagoras' 'good judgment' (*euboulia*) three

20. Can Virtue Be Taught?

generations back: a general skill in public and private words and deeds, which is necessary for flourishing in a civilised society, and which completes the ordinary course of education in virtue.

Notes

1. *pantôn chrêmatôn metron estin anthrôpos, tôn men ontôn hôs estin, tôn de ouk ontôn hôs ouk estin*. 'Man is the measure' is the standard translation. I prefer 'the human being is the measure', which better preserves an ambiguity in *metron estin anthropos*: does he mean each individual human, or humans collectively?

2. Compare also Fragment 11: 'Education doesn't sprout in the soul if one doesn't go very deep.'

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