

"Is Virtue Teachable": An Interpretation of Protagoras and Meno

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Abstract: Whether virtue is teachable or not is a prerequisite question that moral education theories must answer. Throughout the Protagoras and the Meno, Socrates debates on the theme of "Virtue", and Socrates puts forward the proposition of moral education that "Virtue is Knowledge" in the dialogues. Throughout the text, however, Socrates expresses himself differently in different contexts, which leads to a paradox that is essentially a difference in the understanding of "teaching". Unlike the emotional theory of moral education held by the sophists, Socrates elevates virtue to a universal meaning and proposes a rational theory of moral education, and there is a great tension between the two theories. In today's moral education, the best way to achieve the best results in moral education is to look at and apply theories dialectically without being partial to one or the other.

Keywords: Virtue; Moral Education Theory; Moral Education; Socrates.

1. Introduction

For the traditional Chinese view of education, the learning of morality is integrated into all disciplines, and "moral teachability" is a prerequisite assumption of education. Under the influence of traditional Confucianism, people hold the optimism that morality can be taught and the ideal pursuit of becoming a gentleman and a sage. Although it is said that Chinese education has been influenced by Western thought since modern times, there is still no skepticism or questioning in the educational community as to whether morality is teachable. This idea is strongly related to the traditional Chinese culture represented by Confucianism, in which the ethical concept centered on "benevolence" defines the nature of human beings through strong emotional implications, and in which "morality is teachable" is self-evident, so that anyone who still asks for it is accused of having made a mistake in his or her educational methods. If we turn our attention to the West, we find that the proposition "whether virtue is teachable or not" has remained unresolved in the history of Western educational thought.

In the Western context, philosophers and educators have debated this issue since the time of ancient Greece. Beginning with Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and extending to the recent intellectual constructs of Rousseau, Kant, Herbart, and Dewey to Piaget and Kohlberg, they have all tried to answer this question. On this proposition, the polarized difference between Chinese and Western views of education is a phenomenon worth studying. Looking back at the current low effectiveness of moral education and the proliferation of formalism, exploring the philosophical proposition of "whether virtue is teachable" is of value and revelation to moral education in China today.

2. The Paradox of Virtue Education in Socrates' Philosophical

The question of virtue, the ultimate of Socrates' philosophical propositions, is often seen as a paradox in his proposition that "virtue is knowledge". By extending it, we can conclude that no one intends to do evil, but that people do

evil because of their own ignorance, while in fact it is easy to see that some people intend to do evil even though they have knowledge of good and evil. This is often interpreted in the academy as a Socratic theory of the moral education of reason, which emphasizes the high unity of reason and goodness. This argument does explain this paradoxical phenomenon, but it downplays the context and intent of Socrates in proposing this theory. Analyzing Plato's dialogues, we can easily find that Socrates opposes the monopoly of the wise over virtue and wisdom, and therefore he explores a presuppositional question several times before making this proposition, namely, "Is virtue teachable?".

2.1. Theoretical Background: The Current State of Virtue Education in Ancient Greece

Plato's dialogues, the Protagoras and the Meno, take place at a time when the activity of the wise men was at its height, when the young men of Athens were fervent admirers of the sophists, and paid money to them for their virtues. Hippocrates, the interlocutor of the previous Psalm, has a strong desire to learn from the sophists, and when he hears of the arrival of Protagoras in Athens, he is extremely excited to find Socrates and ask him to introduce him, intending to learn the virtues from Protagoras. In the preparatory dialog between them, however, Socrates asks, "Aren't you ashamed that you want to be a wise man and present yourself to the whole Greek world?[1]312b" The latter's affirmative answer cannot help but contradict his behavior, and the dialogue presents us with the phenomenon of people learning virtues from wise men who shame them. This is an extremely contradictory and ironic behavior, which suggests that the teacher has no shame and even disregards the shame of his students, but wanders around teaching virtues that are sought after by the public. There are many other episodes like this, such as in the dialogue where Protagoras blatantly admits that the activities of the wise have a negative impact and that the skill of the sophists invites resentment. Such subversion of shame clearly does not count as a sound teaching of virtue in Socrates' eyes, but rather corrupts the souls of the young.

The main interlocutor of the Meno, Meno, has studied

under Gorgias, a famous sophist. From the content of the dialogues, Meno is characterized by excellent external qualities, as he is rich in power and possesses a good memory, and he is able to answer quickly when Socrates asks him to recall Gorgias's views on virtue, which suggests that Meno is endowed with a certain amount of learning talent. In the dialogues, however, Meno is characterized by a "severe lack of thought and curiosity, to the point of losing the capacity for self-reflection". At the same time, he is extremely arrogant and brash, and Socrates' repeated attempts to lead him to define and explore the universal meaning of virtue end in failure. Instead, Meno posits a paradox of learning, "A man cannot search for what he knows - because since he knows it, he doesn't need to search for it anymore - and he cannot search for what he doesn't know - because he doesn't know what he is looking for" [1]80e. This paradox justifies his unlearning and laziness, which shows the extremely poor state of Meno's soul. Stupidity, the worst disease of the soul, is triggered when the body is out of proportion to the soul[2]. Not only that, but Meno's great faith in authority and lack of enthusiasm for knowledge makes him want the answer to a question to be presented in the way he prefers - by quoting an authoritative sophist. This is the very phenomenon that Socrates decries, that the sophists crammed knowledge of virtues and other things into young people in the form of indoctrination, and that this kind of subjective education, which destroys the young man's ability to reflect and his desire to know, is an extremely depressing form of education.

Socrates' proposal that "virtue is knowledge" is based on the background that the concept of the sophists' denunciation of the traditional notion of virtue and his exploration of virtue in terms of the natural desires of the individual is corrupting the young generation. Ancient Greece was in the midst of a period of disintegration, and as the status of knowledge declined, the sophists' view of moral education was contributing to the degradation and disorganization of the whole society. In order to set things right, Socrates had to step forward and try to revive the spiritual civilization of the Greek world with a more rational and deterministic view of moral education.

2.2. Theoretical Intent: The Intellectual and Teachable Nature of Virtue

The intellectual nature of virtue is a prerequisite for teachability, and Socrates' proposition that "virtue is knowledge" is always based on the question of whether virtue is teachable. Throughout the Protagoras and Meno, the question of whether virtue is teachable is discussed, and the basic logic of Socrates' proposition in the dialogues is: "The teachability of virtue depends, first, on the nature of virtue, i.e., on virtue in the universal sense; and second, on the relation of virtue to knowledge: 'If virtue is knowledge, then virtue is teachable; and if virtue is teachable, then there should be teachers and students in the world who specialize in teaching virtue. Conversely, if virtue is not knowledge, or if there are no teachers and students in the world who specialize in teaching virtue, then virtue is not teachable.[1]98e'" Understanding the intellectual and teachable nature of virtue in its philosophical propositions is an appropriate way to resolve the paradox of Socratic virtue education.

The characteristic of knowledge is its truthfulness, equating virtue with knowledge and inferring the universality and certainty of morality through the objectivity, universality and certainty of knowledge[3]. In other words, Socrates

understands the essence of virtue as the unity of truth and goodness, and knowledge as the medium that connects these two parts. In the dialogues, Socrates likes to compare virtue with skill, and the similarity between virtue and skill lies in the fact that both have perfect knowledge of the nature of the object as well as a high degree of unity of knowledge and action[4]. That is, a man with perfect knowledge of skill must be a perfect technician, and a man with perfect knowledge of virtue must practice good behavior. But the difference between virtue and skill lies in the fact that the former is concerned with the person himself, while the latter points to a certain category of external objects (medicine, architecture, etc.). The externality of the object to which a skill refers leads to its merely instrumental value, and the holder of the knowledge of the skill acts according to his own ideas of what is good or bad. Unlike virtue, the knowledge of virtue refers to the idea of universal, absolute goodness. This idea of goodness exists in the world of ideas in the human mind, and once formed, it does not easily escape.

But this idea of goodness is not the same as good behavior, or else the paradoxes mentioned above would not have arisen. In the dialogues, Socrates' proposition that "virtue cannot be taught" is essentially a rejection of moralizing. Just as Socrates tries to guide Meno out of the limitations of knowledge through reminiscence, the cultivation of virtue requires a guided approach that allows young people to discover their own knowledge of the good and the idea of the good. The intellectual nature of virtue lies in its universality and certainty, and the teachability of virtue lies in its edifying nature. Socrates' proposal that "virtue is knowledge" is an attempt to adopt a method of moral edification that awakens the idea of goodness in the souls of young people through dialectics and prompts them to reflect on it constantly.

3. Emotional and Rational Theories of Moral Education

The Protagoras and the Meno show Socrates and the sophists arguing with each other over their different views of virtue, taking two different paths from knowledge, to virtue, to the practice of moral education.

3.1. The Sophists' Theory of Emotional Moral Education

From empiricism, sophists derived moral relativism on the basis of his theory of sensory relativism and advocated the theory of emotional moral education[5]. Protagoras put forward the philosophical idea that "man is the measure of all things", and that for the same gust of wind, some people feel cold while others feel hot, which shows that there is no absolute definition of things. How things are perceived depends on the subject's experience, i.e., the feeling that the subject and the object are in a constant state of flux. This philosophical idea contributes to the wise man's virtuous relativism, which sees morality as a relative, fluid thing. Further, man is the measure of all things, and there is no absolute standard for morality; it depends entirely on man's ever-changing feelings. Thus in the Protagoras, he views virtue as "food, drink, medicine, and other things that are good for some and bad for others.[1]334a" The ethical significance of Protagoras' proposition that "man is the measure of all things" implies that one should use one's personal desires and interests as the source of morality and the standard of moral behavior in social and moral life. This

view directly recognizes that one can know good but not do it, and know evil but do it, and condones the behavior of "seeking pleasure, avoiding pain, and knowing and doing differently," which is exactly what Socrates attacked. Affective virtue theory also leads to another error. Protagoras argues that virtue is made by agreement, that is, he argues for the teachability of virtue through its contractual nature, but he also strongly emphasizes the individual sensory basis of virtue. That is to say, he recognizes both the common aspect of the social contract of virtue and the individual private aspect of virtue, an idea that is contradictory in its own right. The wise man's views on virtue are inconsistent, lacking in wholeness, and relying on the "illusory opinions" that his own senses perceive, he is unable to establish the rightness or wrongness of his understanding, the goodness or badness of his soul, and in the end, what he captures is only a phantom.

3.2. Socrates' Theory of Rational Moral Education

Socrates, who described himself as a man without wisdom but in love with it, argued that virtue (*arête*) is the soundest principle for individual action in all circumstances. He proposes that "whatever appears to be in accordance with this principle, whether in terms of cause or otherwise, is true; whatever is not in accordance with it is not true." In Socrates' philosophical proposition, "virtue is knowledge" and "know thyself" are two principles that echo each other, i.e., the individual's knowledge of himself is the knowledge of virtue. Socrates' aim in proposing that "virtue is knowledge" is to emphasize the unity of knowledge and action, and the unity of the good and the true.

Socrates' rational theory of moral education is based on a reflection on traditional virtue education and a critique of the sophists' emotional theory of moral education. The proposition that "virtue is knowledge" rests on the universality and particularity of virtue as knowledge. Socrates believes that it is human reason that is the measure of all things, and as seen in the *Meno*, he holds a rational view of knowledge and philosophy and uses it to refute the sophists' vacillation of truth. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates is always searching for a universal definition, and he will ask people "What is X?", to which the responder would often respond by giving an example. At this point Socrates would say, "I asked for one and you gave me a bunch, as if I asked you what a bee is. And you tell me there are many kinds of bees, big ones and small ones. Plato, following Socrates, introduced the concept of form (*eidos*), which gives virtue the possibility of applying to anyone. That is to say, in order to know, the diversity of the external forms of things should be put aside, and the universal form should be the embodiment of the essence. With this view of knowledge as his theoretical foundation, Socrates advocates a rational theory of virtue - a theory that allows the moral subject to control his or her own behavior without external influences by refining morality into a certain kind of wisdom.

The only thing I know is that I know nothing. Socrates always uses an active dialectic (art of midwifery) in his dialogues to point out the contradictions in his opponent's argumentation process, thus forcing him to admit his ignorance. According to Socrates, it is only through dialectics that one can get rid of the empirical phenomena of the sensible world and thus reach the world of ideas and grasp the commonality of things. In other words, the Socratic theory of rational moral education proposes an ultimate goal of virtue

education: to allow the individual to transcend the personal desires and emotional entanglements of the real world and to seek the universal meaning of virtue, so as to reach the realization of virtue in the world of ideas and to awaken the idea of goodness embedded in the body.

4. Implications of "Is Virtue Teachable" for Moral Education Today

4.1. An In-Depth Study of the Proposition "Is Virtue Teachable?"

"The two main key words in the proposition "Is virtue teachable" are "virtue" and "teaching". "Socrates, like a "mad watchmaker", elevates virtue to universal significance through an extremely rigorous and never-ending questioning, which allows his interlocutors to engage in soul-searching. Therefore, in-depth consideration of the concept of "teaching" in moral education and reflection on the significance of "teaching" have certain value and significance for current moral education.

The word "teach" in the Dictionary of Modern Chinese (7th edition) has two meanings: one is "teach", which is a neutral word meaning "to pass on knowledge or skills"; the other is "teach", which is a normative word with a strong value orientation, meaning "to teach; to educate". In ancient Greece, "teach" was a social proposition, and the main body of education in that period was different from the modernized school system. The Academy of Athens vividly depicts the educational scene at that time: the person in the center of the picture walks and discusses, and the people around him sit on the ground in a posture of listening. It can be seen that the "teaching" in Socrates' proposition of virtue is mainly the second meaning, which refers to the dissemination of universal and good ideas through educational activities. Since the popularization of education in modern times, schools have assumed the main responsibility for education, and the moral cultivation of the individual has also been classified as part of school education.

Herlbart was the first to integrate the theories of "education" and "teaching" and put forward the idea of educational teaching, which is an extension of his ethical and psychological ideas in the field of teaching, the ultimate goal of teaching is to achieve its ethical orientation[9], this idea is the same as Socrates' idea of moral education. Socrates' idea of virtue education. He expresses that the content or knowledge of teaching has the role of moral education, and that "virtue" is the ultimate goal of educational teaching[6]. That is to say, knowledge as a teaching content for students to master, its ultimate goal is to achieve the cultivation of students' interest, virtue, teaching is the means in the process of moral cultivation. With the pragmatization, scientization and intellectualization of the curriculum, the educational value of teaching is gradually reduced, and the crux of the problem of solving the cultivation of students' virtues and the problem of "pedagogical teaching" lies in the reform of the curriculum-teaching[7]. In this regard, Dewey clarified the propositions of "concepts about morality" and "moral concepts", he believed that the former is only the information and knowledge about morality, which does not point to any behavior, which leads to the inconsistency of knowledge and behavior, while the "moral concepts" is only the information and knowledge about morality, which does not point to any

behavior, which leads to the inconsistency of knowledge and behavior, while the "moral concepts" is only the information and knowledge about morality. "Moral concepts" refer to moral motives and qualities, so the classroom should cultivate students' "moral concepts" rather than simply inculcate moral knowledge. With this conception of moral education, he criticized a series of moralistic practices such as "morality classes" and "civic training" and took the lead in initiating the idea of a fundamental change in the school curriculum.

4.2. Criticism and Inheritance of Socrates' Thought on Moral Education

Socrates believed that education was a trust of the soul and that seeking instruction was an adventure of the soul. In other words, the virtue education advocated by Socrates was a rational and philosophical education, which established the theory of moral education through reason and emphasized the unity of truth and goodness. But from the theoretical point of view, this theoretical temperament inevitably went to the extreme of moral education, overemphasizing the role of reason leading to its difficulty in becoming an education for the masses; from the practical point of view, he ignored the finiteness of the mass of reason, and ultimately hit a wall in the practice of moral education. Ironically, Anitus, one of the interlocutors in the *Meno*, after being educated by Socrates, eventually took him to the Athenian court and executed Socrates for bewitching the youth. Socrates' moral education, which he put into practice with his life, left only a trace among the few elites of ancient Greece, and his noble and subtle philosophical wisdom may have been appreciated only by a few noble minds.

The philosophers and educators of the ancient Greek period defined man by reason, and man's rational thinking was the essence that distinguished him from all animals. Under the influence of this idea, rationality and logic dominated the interpretation of language in moral education, and the rational language of moral education reigned supreme. Socrates abandoned the study of nature in favor of the study of human beings after his "second voyage"; however, he favored the so-called universal definitions, which led to the loss of all senses and feelings of the "human being" in Socrates' philosophy, and he was not a human being in reality[8]. Aristotle criticized this absolute purity of reason when he established his own theoretical system of moral education, believing that reason and emotion work together in human behavior. Thus, in the matter of virtue, Aristotle advocates the combination of reason and experience, where virtue is associated with reason and emotion, where emotional desires set the purpose for choices, and practical wisdom makes the right choices in order to arrive at the purpose[9]. Therefore, what we have to do is not to negate reason and abandon it, but to put it in a reasonable position. To look at Socrates' idea of moral education dialectically, it has certain biases and deficiencies, but somehow promotes people's reflection and scrutiny of the issue of virtue, with a strong sense of relevance and reality, and pulls the education of virtue down from the sky to the earth, and the heart of the ultimate happiness of mankind.

Aristotle built a comprehensive theory of happiness and moral education on the ideas of his two teachers, and it is

interesting to note that modern moral philosophers criticize Aristotle's ideas on moral education for failing to give a universal moral principle. The history of moral philosophy is, as Hegel put it, a battlefield "littered with the bones of the dead." History is like a pendulum, and the proliferation of moral relativism caused by the sophists who took the theory of emotional moral education to an extreme in their argumentation necessitated the emergence of another kind of thought to set things right. It was against this background that Socrates put forward the idea of rational moral education theory, but he could not help going to the other extreme in his argument. This pendulum phenomenon cannot be simply dismissed or criticized, and Socrates' approach is justified by a certain historical cross-section. When the lapse in moral education has been resolved, new ideas are again needed to correct the bias of the former. Learning from the past and studying the ideas of ancient Greek philosophers, rather than discarding the paradigms of the former as old clothes, we should understand that the relationship of various moral education concepts may be symbiotic, mapped onto each other, and opposite. We should then structure the third way of moral education: we should dialectically look at rational and emotional moral education in the practice of moral education, and we should not only accept the emotional side of moral education, but also incorporate Socrates's rational moral education idea, in order to obtain the best effect of moral education.

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