

## **Can there be a Teacher of Virtue? Socrates' Doubt in the Protagoras**

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### **Abstract**

This paper, through a close reading and analysis of the *Protagoras*, argues that Socrates' inclination in the dialogue towards the position that virtue is not teachable is founded on strong doubts on whether there can be a teacher of virtue. First, an explication of Socrates' conception of what teaching is and what it entails is presented, and it is argued that for Socrates, teaching requires mastery. Second, it is argued that in the exchanges between Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue, Protagoras did not demonstrate a strong mastery of virtue and thus he proved to be an unqualified teacher of virtue. Lastly, it is speculated that based on Socrates' conception of the nature of virtue expressed in the *Protagoras*, it can be asserted that Socrates has strong doubts on whether virtue can be mastered by anyone and thus he has strong doubts on whether virtue can be taught at all.

**Keywords:** Protagoras, Plato, Socrates, Socratic dialogues of Plato, teaching virtue, virtue as knowledge

## Introduction

The primary aim of this paper is to attempt to argue that Socrates' inclination in the *Protagoras*<sup>1</sup> towards a negative position on the question of whether or not virtue is teachable is founded on strong doubts on whether there can be a teacher of virtue. In other words, this paper attempts to argue that Socrates thinks in the *Protagoras* that the key barrier against teaching virtue is that there seems to be no qualified teacher of virtue. The methodology by which this study is carried out is through a presentation of a close reading of the dialogue interspersed with expositions of the thoughts of other commentators and interpreters of the *Protagoras* and of other related relevant subjects.

This study is structured as follows: First, the paper provides explication on Socrates' conception of what teaching is and what it entails by showing that for Socrates, teaching requires a teacher's mastery of the subject matter being taught. Next, it is argued that in the exchanges between Socrates and Protagoras in the dialogue, Protagoras appeared to be an unqualified teacher of virtue primarily because he did not demonstrate a strong mastery of virtue. Lastly, the paper speculates that based on Socrates' conception of the nature of virtue expressed in the *Protagoras*, it is plausible to assert that he also has strong doubts on whether the subject matter of virtue can be mastered by anyone at all.

Apart from presenting a close reading of the *Protagoras*, a classic philosophical text from ancient times, another intent of this paper is to provide a modest enrichment to the discourse on ethics education. While the main thesis of this paper is primarily focused on Socrates' position on whether or not there can be a teacher of virtue as expressed in the *Protagoras*, this study likewise aims to provide sufficiently comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the *Protagoras* made in this paper are based on Plato, "Protagoras," Translated by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell, In *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 747-790.

characterizations of other important philosophical perspectives, either adjacent or counterpointed, towards a hopefully more nuanced and integrative view on central questions about teaching virtue.

### **Teaching Requires Mastery**

Before examining Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* on the question of whether or not virtue is teachable, Socrates' conception of what teaching is and what it entails must be expounded on first. Socrates' account of this is not very explicit in the dialogue but is implied in the manner by which he questions Hippocrates and Protagoras.

Early on in the dialogue, when Socrates questions Hippocrates on what Protagoras is and what he expects to become by going to Protagoras (311b-312e), Socrates implicates in his remarks that teaching requires a teacher's mastery of the subject matter being taught, or its corollary, namely that learning entails learning from a master or an expert of the subject matter that one wishes to learn. This can be seen in the analogies that Socrates uses in his questioning (311b-c). If one desires to become a physician or a sculptor, one must go to a person who is an expert on the subject matter that one wishes to learn – to a physician or a sculptor, respectively. As Socrates proceeds with his questioning, he makes the distinction between two types of education – technical instruction, within which an education from an expert physician or sculptor could be categorized, and general education wherein Socrates cites learning grammar, music, and wrestling as examples (312b). Nonetheless, it can be seen that learning about the subject matters considered by Socrates to fall within the scope of general education likewise entails taking lessons from a teacher who has mastery of these subject matters – “from your grammar instructor or music teacher or wrestling coach.”

The early part of the dialogue where Socrates converses with Hippocrates about his motivations for going to Protagoras,

from 310a to 314b, is what John S. Treantafelles calls the “Hippocrates section.” Treantafelles argues that in this section, Socrates in his philosophizing acts more as a “tester” than as a “questioner.” For Treantafelles, in the “Hippocrates section,” Socrates paradigmatically demonstrates the public character of philosophy by acting as a philosophical “tester” who engages with a non-philosophical subject (Hippocrates), and in doing so provides an elucidation of this other important dimension of the practice of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it can be said that in this section, Socrates employs an alternative philosophical approach, that of “testing,” to somewhat demystify the idea of what teaching is, and how teaching requires mastery, through his engagement with Hippocrates, who can be deemed as the non-philosophical test case of the exercise. Therefore, it can also be said that Socrates’ conception of what teaching is has both philosophical and practical dimensions.

The notion of Socrates on how teaching entails mastery on the subject matter being taught is further reinforced through similar analogies when Socrates asks Protagoras directly what students would get from him if they study with him, and Protagoras gives a vague reply.<sup>3</sup> To elaborate on his question, he again provides analogies which implicate that if one wishes to learn something, that person must go to someone who is a master of the particular subject matter that the person wishes to learn (318b-d).

Thus, in the manner by which Socrates questions both Hippocrates and Protagoras in the *Protagoras*, it can be inferred that Socrates’ notion of teaching is in terms of teaching as instruction (*didakticos*), which is a notion of teaching that is focused on the content of the sort of knowledge that is being taught, as Sobhi Rayan argues. This Socratic view on teaching is

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Treantafelles, “Socratic Testing: *Protagoras* 310a-314b,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 147-174.

<sup>3</sup> In 318a-b, Protagoras says, “Young man, this is what you will get if you study with me: The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better.”

in conflict already at the basic epistemological level with the Sophistic view that Protagoras espouses, which is an account of teaching as education (*paideia*) which is focused on the form or methodology of teaching, not on its content.<sup>4</sup> As it shall be elaborated on later in this paper, the evidently different philosophical orientations of Socrates and Protagoras are at the root of Socrates' doubts on whether virtue is teachable in the *Protagoras*.

In the *Meno*<sup>5</sup>, Socrates is more straightforward in asserting the claim that teaching requires mastery of the subject matter being taught. Early on in the dialogue, when Meno asks Socrates whether virtue can be taught or not, Socrates responds by saying, "I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."<sup>6</sup> It can be said that this response touches on an even more fundamental concern in the sense that Socrates claims that before one could even examine the question of whether virtue is teachable or not, and more so attempt to teach it, one must first have an understanding of what virtue is<sup>7</sup>. On the claim that teaching entails mastery of the subject matter being taught, Socrates is more explicit in putting this claim forward in 96a-b.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the *Meno* concludes with Meno

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<sup>4</sup> Sobhi Rayan, "Teaching Good Virtues in Protagoras," *Journal of Education and Human Development* 3, no. 4 (December 2014): 345-351.

<sup>5</sup> All references to the *Meno* made in this paper are based on Plato, "Meno," Translated by G.M.A. Grube, In *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 870-897.

<sup>6</sup> In 71a.

<sup>7</sup> Linking this remark more directly to the thesis argued for in this section, it can be further said that for Socrates, before anyone can claim to be a teacher of a certain subject matter, that person must be certain that the particular subject matter is teachable. And before one can figure out whether a subject matter is teachable, that person must have mastery and understanding of the fundamental nature of the subject matter. Therefore, for Socrates, teaching requires mastery of the subject matter being taught.

<sup>8</sup> Socrates says, "Can you mention any other subject of which those who claim to be teachers not only are not recognized to be teachers of others but are not recognized to have knowledge of it themselves, and are thought to be poor in the very matter which they profess to teach? Or any other subject of which those who are recognized as worthy teachers at one time say it can be taught and at other times that it cannot? Would you say that people who are so confused about a subject can be effective teachers of it?"

accepting that virtue cannot be humanly knowable and that it must be a gift from the gods and thus the interlocutors in the dialogue can be said to have failed in developing a robust account of how virtue can be acquired. This seeming impossibility of acquiring human knowledge of virtue is analogous to what Rosemary Desjardins expounds on in her interpretation of the *Meno*.<sup>9</sup> However, William Wians argues that it is in this impossibility or failure itself that the interlocutors, namely Socrates and Meno, successfully hints at how virtue can be acquired not through teaching or instruction, but through practice.<sup>10</sup>

### **Protagoras Proved to be an Unqualified Teacher of Virtue**

After showing in the previous section that for Socrates, teaching entails a teacher's mastery of the subject matter being taught because Socrates fundamentally conceives of teaching as instruction (*didaktikos*) as opposed to the Sophistic or Protagorean notion of teaching as education (*paideia*), it is next shown that in the dialogue, Protagoras, who claims to be a teacher or educator of virtue, proved to be an unqualified teacher because he was not able to demonstrate mastery and understanding of the subject matter of virtue.

After Socrates initially asserts his position that virtue is not teachable (319b), Protagoras' response first through a myth (320d-323c) and then through argumentation (323d-325b) can be said to result to a plausible account of 1) how every person has a share of virtue and 2) how virtue is indeed teachable. This methodological approach of Protagoras is characterized by Robert Zaslavsky as the movement from a genetic account (*mythos*) to a descriptive account (*logos*) of virtue. In his genetic account of virtue (*mythos*), Protagoras conceives of virtue as

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<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Desjardins, "Knowledge and Virtue: Paradox in Plato's *Meno*," *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1985): 261–281.

<sup>10</sup> William Wians, "Virtue, Practice, and Perplexity in Plato's *Meno*," *Plato, The Electronic Journal of the International Plato Society* 12 (2012): 1-24.

justice, which is the synthesis of nature (represented in the myth by Epimetheus and the subterranean gods), art (represented in the myth by Prometheus), and convention (represented in the myth by Zeus and Hermes). From his genetic account of virtue (*mythos*), Protagoras develops his descriptive account of virtue (*logos*), wherein he develops, as Zaslavsky argues, an account of teaching virtue through punishment, or as Zaslavsky calls it, through “gangsterish coercion.”<sup>11</sup> This can be rooted in Protagoras’ fundamental conception of teaching as education (*paideia*), as previously explicated, which is focused on the methodology of teaching, not on its content. Another perspective on Protagoras’ myth in the *Protagoras* is the anthropological interpretation of Dan Sperber, which is again linked to Protagoras’ notion of teaching as education (*paideia*). Sperber argues that through the myth in the *Protagoras*, Protagoras posits that virtue is learned through shared culture, not through instruction which is the way by which special knowledge (such as in the arts and crafts) is learned.<sup>12</sup>

After presenting this account, Protagoras claims in 328b-c that even though every human has share in virtue, he is “more advanced in virtue” compared to others and is thus qualified to teach students how to be virtuous. From this point on, Socrates endeavours to put to test Protagoras and his claim about himself being a qualified teacher of virtue, primarily by examining Protagoras’ understanding of his own account of the nature of virtue.

The recurring theme in Socrates’ examination of Protagoras is the discussion on the unity of virtue, particularly the question on whether virtues are different from each other or if virtues conventionally deemed as different actually constitute just one and the same virtue. When Socrates throws this question to Protagoras in 329d, Protagoras’ initial position is

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Zaslavsky, “The Platonic Godfather: A Note on the *Protagoras* Myth,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (1982): 79-82.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Sperber, *On Anthropological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-8.

that virtue is a single thing and the different virtues (e.g. justice, temperance, and piety) are its parts that are different from each other both in terms of their natures and in their functions, and it is possible for a person to have some virtues and not have the others (329d-e). After Socrates proceeds with his questioning however, Protagoras admits that justice and piety resembles each other while also making a dismissive remark as if to imply that such an admission does not drive any relevant point.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the incoherence in Protagoras' position becomes more apparent in 333b when Socrates catches him to have agreed to two contradictory propositions – that a certain thing has only one opposite and that wisdom is different and distinct from temperance.

Socrates begins to question Protagoras again on his position on the unity of virtue in 349b after which Protagoras puts forward the more refined position that virtues are indeed similar to each other but courage is different from the rest of virtues in the sense that a person can be lacking in all other virtues and yet still be courageous (349d). In the discussions that follow, Socrates builds up his argument that all virtue is wisdom and is thus one and the same. The discussion ends in an embarrassing admission from Protagoras in 360d-e that courage is essentially wisdom about what should and should not be feared and is thus not dissimilar to other virtues as he initially claimed.

Thus, on several occasions, particularly during discussions on the unity of virtue, Socrates exposes that Protagoras does not have a coherent understanding of the nature of virtue and since for Socrates, teaching requires the teacher to have mastery of the subject matter being taught, Protagoras is an unqualified teacher of virtue. In a related note, Marina McCoy argues that the philosophical approach carried out by Socrates in the *Protagoras* wherein he exposes Protagoras' position and its deficiencies is a deliberate exercise

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<sup>13</sup> “Anything at all resembles any other thing in some way.”

with the aim of presenting an *ad hominem* argument vis-à-vis his own arguments and positions and to provide a holistic view of the limitations of both sides of the debate, namely the Socratic view and the Protagorean view.<sup>14</sup>

It can also be said that one important contributor to Socrates' judgment of Protagoras as an unqualified teacher of virtue is his disapproval of the oratorical style of speech typical of sophistry which Protagoras often employs in his responses, as opposed to the philosophical style of discourse that Socrates practices and promotes. In 331c, after Protagoras' admission that justice and piety resemble each other, and Protagoras says, "If you want, we'll let justice be pious and piety just," Socrates reacts in a rather strong way which explicates and clarifies the brand of philosophical discourse that he would like to engage in.<sup>15</sup> In 333c, Socrates stresses his characterization of the type of philosophical discussion that he would like to engage in – one that puts primacy on argumentation rather than on personal politics or the politics of opinions.<sup>16</sup> In 334d, after Protagoras gives a speech that is well-applauded, Socrates expresses his disdain for long speeches and to some extent, threatens that he would need to end the discussion if Protagoras is unwilling to provide clear and brief answers (335c). This resulted to Prodicus intervening to arrive at a compromise (337c-338b). Beginning in 339a, Protagoras invokes poetry in his questioning and although Socrates himself offers his own interpretation of the poem in question (342a-347a), afterwards he undermines discussions about poetry (347c-348a), as something that is "no different from the second-rate drinking parties of the agora crowd." These episodes in the dialogue support, to some extent,

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<sup>14</sup> Marina McCoy, "Protagoras on human nature, wisdom, and the good: The Great Speech and the hedonism of Plato's Protagoras," *Ancient Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 21-39.

<sup>15</sup> Socrates says, "Don't do that to me! It's not this 'if you want' or 'if you agree' business I want to test. It's you and me I want to put on the line, and I think the argument will be tested best if we take the 'if' out.

<sup>16</sup> Socrates says, "I am primarily interested in testing the argument, although it may happen both that the questioner, myself, and my respondent wind up being tested. "

the assertion that at least a part of Socrates' judgment of Protagoras as an unqualified teacher of virtue is driven by Socrates' aversion against the oratorical style of speech that the sophist Protagoras practices.

It has been emphasized earlier in this paper that Socrates and Protagoras have fundamentally disparate philosophical conceptions of what teaching is. As a synthesis of the discussions that have been presented thus far, and of the basic conflicts between Socrates and Protagoras that have been shown, it is important to also summarize at this juncture the basic philosophical differences between Socrates and Protagoras as inferred from the *Protagoras*. In his introduction to the ancient Greek text of the *Protagoras*, E.G. Sihler characterizes the basic tenets of Protagorean philosophy:

“Protagoras professed that the sole of cognition was sensuous perception, and that (individual) man was the standard of all things, both in affirmation and negation, the sentient subject the only judge; objective cognition, however, was out of the question, sensuous perception being both varying in a number of persons, and not consistent in the development of one and the same person. The statements of mathematics, too, were purely subjective, and effective or real refutation of statements was impossible.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Protagorean philosophy is often thought to be relativist or subjectivist. However, C. M. Gillespie argues that this is not the case, but rather, the Protagorean view is a pragmatist account of truth, wherein the validity of a truth claim depends on the conditions or values of the common human way of thinking, not on its correspondence to an independent archetype of truth.<sup>18</sup> Contrasting Protagoras' philosophy with

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<sup>17</sup> E.G. Sihler, “Introduction,” In *The Protagoras of Plato*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Franklin Square, 1881), viii-ix.

<sup>18</sup> C.M. Gillespie, “The Truth of Protagoras,” *Mind* 19, no. 1 (1910): 470-492.

Socratic philosophy, Oded Balaban summarizes it as such – “The subject matter of Protagoras’ philosophy is the subject. The subject matter of Socrates’ thought is the object.”<sup>19</sup> Muyiwa Adeniyi Sholarin, et al., on the other hand, contrasts between Protagoras and Socrates by invoking the following dualisms – “between dialectic and rhetoric, appearance and reality, being and becoming or between sophistry and philosophy” – in their critique of the Protagorean philosophy of “man is the measure of all things.”<sup>20</sup>

Given the seeming diametrically opposed fundamental philosophical orientations of Socrates and Protagoras, it is to be expected therefore that they would also have opposing views on knowledge and how knowledge can be acquired or imparted (i.e. how knowledge can be taught). For Socrates, knowledge is not an object in itself and objects of knowledge are independent and thus there can only be knowledge of these objects. For Protagoras, on the other hand, knowledge can be an object in itself, which is distinct from the objects of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, for Socrates, virtue is an object of knowledge, and thus acquiring or imparting knowledge of virtue necessitates an understanding of the independent archetype of the object of virtue, and thus teaching virtue can only be done through instruction (*didakticos*) and the teacher of virtue must have a mastery of virtue as an object of knowledge. For Protagoras on the other hand, it is possible to acquire knowledge of virtue in itself through subjective cognition and through the collective way of thinking of human subjects in a society or culture, in line with his philosophy of “man is the measure of all things.” Thus, teaching virtue can be carried out through education (*paideia*) wherein the subjective cognition of the knowledge of virtue is

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<sup>19</sup> Oded Balaban, *Plato and Protagoras: Truth and Relativism in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999), 190.

<sup>20</sup> Muyiwa Adeniyi Sholarin, Ikedinachi Ayodele Power Wogu, Funke Omole, and Benedict Emerenwa Agoha, ““Man Is The Measure Of All Things”: A Critical Analysis Of The Sophist Conception Of Man,” *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 178-184.

<sup>21</sup> Balaban, *Plato and Protagoras: Truth and Relativism in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 134.

cultivated through a particular form or methodology. For Protagoras, it is possible to have knowledge of virtue without a complete understanding of the truth of what virtue is. Thus, given these disparate philosophical orientations, it is also no surprise that Socrates would deem Protagoras to be an unqualified teacher of virtue, while Protagoras would claim that he is a proficient teacher of virtue.

### **Can Virtue be Mastered by Anyone at all?**

Apart from deeming Protagoras to be an unqualified teacher of virtue given the notion that teaching requires mastery of the subject matter being taught, Socrates also expresses strong doubts in the *Protagoras* on whether virtue can be mastered by anyone at all. Early on in the dialogue, Socrates seems to already make an indirect expression of this doubt when he admonishes Hippocrates to be cautious about the teachers he would go to especially if such teachers claim to teach about matters of the soul<sup>22</sup> (313a-c).

Socrates expresses more clearly his doubts on whether virtue can be mastered, and therefore taught, by anyone at all when he cites examples of sons of virtuous fathers not being virtuous themselves both in the *Protagoras* (319e-320b) and in the *Meno* (93c-94e). These examples are important supporting elements to Socrates' position that virtue cannot be taught because they implicate that although there are people who can be deemed virtuous (i.e. possessing virtue), these same people do not seem to have mastery of the virtue they possess such that they are not able to teach even their own sons about these virtues. Although Protagoras' response to Socrates seems plausible – that the teaching of virtue is in a sense “democratized,” such that everyone in a society is eager to teach everyone else especially the young about virtue so that everyone has equal likelihood of becoming virtuous regardless of the family or class that a person belongs to – his response hardly

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<sup>22</sup> A category within which conceivably, Socrates would deem virtue to fall under.

addresses the doubt on whether anyone can truly master virtue to the point where someone becomes a qualified teacher of virtue, consistent with the sense of teaching that Socrates is inclined towards i.e. in the same sense that technical instruction and general education are conducted. Along the same line of discussion, Protagoras' argument that the reason why people who act contrary to standards of virtue are punished is that virtue can be taught by correction (323d-324d) can be challenged by pointing out that although people in a society can collectively recognize offenses against virtue (in the same way that people can also collectively recognize virtue when it is evidently possessed by a certain person)<sup>23</sup>, and likewise decide to punish an offender in order to correct a certain behavior that is offensive against virtue (given the ability to recognize what virtuous behavior is the opposite of the offensive behavior), recognition still does not necessarily entail mastery and understanding of virtue. Thus, consequently, the common capability of humans to recognize virtues and their opposites when they are present does not necessarily entail that virtue is teachable in the same sense that subject matters included in the practice of technical instruction and general education are taught.

It can also be said that Socrates' doubts on whether anyone at all can master virtue is founded as well on his conception of the nature of virtue. His notions on the unity of virtue and on virtue being wisdom are already mentioned above. The notion that virtue is wisdom, particularly the sort of wisdom which directs the soul to the good, is likewise presented in the *Meno* (e.g. in 88c-d) and so is the notion on the unity of virtue (e.g. in 72e ff). In general, it can be said that Socrates' conception of virtue is that it has an "essence"<sup>24</sup> which also makes all virtues one and the same.<sup>25</sup> Although Plato makes it clear that this

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<sup>23</sup> Which can be linked to Protagoras' argument that everyone has some share in virtue.

<sup>24</sup> What follows from the ongoing discussion is that this "essence" is wisdom or is closely associated with wisdom.

<sup>25</sup> This is expounded in the *Meno* 74a ff.

“essence” has very close affinity with wisdom and knowledge, it is also made clear that it is not the same sort of wisdom and knowledge that is associated with subject matters that can be taught through technical instruction or general education. Although Socrates elaborates in the *Protagoras* that the sort of wisdom or knowledge that has affinity to the “essence” of virtue has something to do with the capability to employ the art of measurement over the power of appearance in making choices and even likens the art of measurement to arithmetic and is thus labelled as knowledge (356c-357b), Socrates postpones the elaboration on what sort of knowledge the art of measurement exactly is (357b-c) and contents himself for the meantime on the establishment of the proposition that the art of measurement is a kind of knowledge. This brings back the question on whether anyone can have a full grasp of this “essence” of virtue and thus become a qualified teacher of virtue in the same way that presumably a physician or a grammar instructor can have a full grasp of the “essence” of medicine or grammar in such a way that the physician or grammar instructor can be deemed as qualified teachers of the respective subject matters they have an expertise in. Proceeding to address this question again considering Socrates’ notions about virtue mentioned above inevitably entails further elaboration on his conception of the nature of virtue.

In the *Meno*, Socrates invokes the idea about learning as recollection<sup>26</sup> (81c-e) which eventually becomes pivotal as he clarifies his position on whether or not virtue is teachable. Towards the end of the *Meno* (97a until the end of the dialogue), Socrates makes a distinction between knowledge and true belief or opinion and argues that neither is inferior as compared to the other in the sense that both can lead to and be directive towards correct action. Because it seems in the dialogue that no one can be deemed to have a coherent understanding of what virtue is,

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<sup>26</sup> This is also one of the key themes discussed in the *Phaedo*. See Plato, “Phaedo,” Translated by G.M.A. Grube, In *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 49-100.

Socrates is compelled to not categorize virtue as knowledge, more precisely within the sorts of knowledge that can be learned by recollection. Instead, he categorizes virtue as true opinion which “comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding.”<sup>27</sup> This brings the discussion to Socrates' assessment of the exchanges between him and Protagoras towards the end of the dialogue wherein Socrates imagines their discussion telling them that they seem to have both fallen into inconsistencies – Protagoras by claiming that virtue is not knowledge and Socrates for claiming that virtue is not teachable (361a-c).

Given what has been said thus far in this paper, Socrates' criticism of his own arguments and of his position that virtue cannot be taught can be evaluated. The main criticism is founded on the assertion that if virtue is essentially wisdom or knowledge, then it must be teachable. A response can then be provided as such: Indeed, it seems that virtue has an “essence” and this “essence” is wisdom or knowledge or has a very close affinity to wisdom or knowledge, but not knowledge in the same sense as medicine or grammar are considered knowledge. The key difference is that it appears that virtue cannot be learned by recollection and so it seems that no one can have a full understanding and mastery of its nature. Since teaching, at least in the same sense wherein medicine and grammar are taught, requires mastery of the subject matter being taught, it follows that virtue cannot be taught.

Linking the ongoing discussions based on a close reading of the dialogue to the exposition of the fundamental principles of Socratic philosophy with regards to knowledge and teaching as presented in the previous two sections of this paper, it can be said that Socrates expresses strong doubts in the *Protagoras* on whether anyone can have a clear and robust understanding of the object of virtue. Thus, he expresses strong doubts on whether anyone can acquire a knowledge of virtue, given that in

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<sup>27</sup> In 99e-100a

Socratic philosophy, there is no knowledge in itself and knowledge is not independent from the object of knowledge.

In response to Socrates' strong doubts on whether virtue can be taught as expressed in the *Protagoras*, some commentators have responded with some proposed solutions. Thomas D. Eisele points out that a possible reason why Socrates is unable to fully characterize the nature of virtue is that virtue is possibly not a matter of propositional knowledge. In other words, virtue is possibly not a matter of "knowing-that" or knowledge that can be articulated as an indicative proposition or a declarative sentence, which is usually epistemologically contrasted with "knowing-how." In response to this, Eisele proposes an expansive notion of virtue based on its etymological root (*arête* or excellence) towards a conception of virtue as performative knowledge, which is knowledge that can be embodied and thus in a sense taught through exemplification.<sup>28</sup> Russell Kirk, on the other hand, provides an Aristotelian response to Socrates by emphasizing the distinction between intellectual virtues which can be taught through instruction, and moral virtues which can also be taught through the cultivation of habit (*ethos*).<sup>29</sup> Gregory Pence, still on the other hand, argues for an essentially Protagorean reply to Socrates in which he argues that virtue (particularly compassion) can be taught through a pragmatic social network which develops and enhances the subjective cognition of virtue.<sup>30</sup> Lastly for the purposes of this discussion, Alexander Rajczi presents a somewhat integrative theory of virtue, following Gilbert Ryle, wherein he asserts that virtue is composed of three elements, namely moral skills, moral knowledge, and moral desires. Rajczi argues that moral skills and knowledge can be taught through the enhancement of human sensitivity and moral reasoning, but he also recognizes it

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas D. Eisele, "Must Virtue be Taught?" *Modern Age* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 235-248.

<sup>29</sup> Russell Kirk, "Virtue: Can it be Taught?" *Modern Age* 24, no. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 1982): 343-349.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory E. Pence, "Can Compassion be Taught?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 9 (1983): 189-191.

is a more problematic to assert that moral desires can be taught. Thus Rajczi maintains that the Socratic puzzle on whether or not virtue is teachable remains.<sup>31</sup> What is shown in these sample responses to Socrates' doubt in the *Protagoras* on whether virtue can be taught is that the response to the question of whether or not virtue can be taught is ultimately parasitic on the fundamental philosophical principles on knowledge and virtue that are adapted, and given that there are different such defensible fundamental philosophical principles, responding to this question is a complex exercise, where a terminal solution is unlikely and thus the puzzle is most likely to persist.

## Conclusion

All in all, based on the discussion presented in this paper, it appears that Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* that virtue is not teachable stands, and this position is primarily grounded on strong doubts on whether there can be a qualified teacher of virtue. In examining the question of whether or not virtue can be taught, Socrates' notion of what teaching is and what it entails is closely associated with the sense of teaching in which the practices of technical instruction and general education are practiced, and ultimately based on the fundamental Socratic philosophy of knowledge and truth. Thus, Socrates' notion is that teaching requires the teacher to have a mastery of the subject matter being taught. In the case of virtue, it seems that no one, whether Protagoras or anyone else, can have a coherent understanding of the nature of virtue, and thus, even though virtue is wisdom or knowledge, it is not the sort of knowledge that can be taught.

While the main thesis of this paper is evidently consistent with the traditional reading of the *Protagoras*, it can be modestly advanced that this paper's possible distinct contribution to scholarship is in its somewhat deep and comprehensive

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<sup>31</sup> Alexander Rajczi, "Why are there No Expert Teachers of Virtue?" *Educational Theory* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 389-400.

elaboration of the connections between Socrates' position to their underlying philosophical foundations, such as Socrates' fundamental views on the natures of teaching and virtue. These foundations are discussed primarily in comparison or contrast against Sophistic or Protagorean philosophical positions, which in most junctures are provided with roughly equally substantial elaboration. Aside from this primary comparison and contrast, various other supplementary philosophical perspectives are also provided towards a hopefully more integrative and nuanced discussion. Moreover, significant attention is also provided in multiple junctures on the immanent contradictions in Socrates' arguments, as he himself articulated in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, as well as Socrates' examinations of such contradictions. Thus, this paper characterizes Socrates' position on whether or not there can be a teacher of virtue not as a categorical claim, but rather only as a (strong) doubt.

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