

Why Does Socrates (Sometimes) Think Virtue Can't Be Taught?

Donovan Cox

Philosophy Club, University of Hartford, October 11, 2018

1 Text: *Protagoras* 319b-e

It's only right that I explain where I got the idea that this is not teachable, not something that can be imparted from one human being to another. I maintain, along with the rest of the Greek world, that the Athenians are wise. And I observe that when we convene in the Assembly and the city has to take some action on a building project, we send for builders to advise us; if it has to do with the construction of ships, we send for shipwrights; and so forth for everything that is considered learnable and teachable. But if anyone else, a person not regarded as a craftsman, tries to advise them, no matter how handsome and rich and well-born he might be, they just don't accept him. They laugh at him and shout him down until he either gives up trying to speak and steps down himself, or the archer-police remove him forcibly by order of the board. This is how they proceed in matters which they consider technical. But when it is a matter of deliberating on city management, anyone can stand up and advise them, carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born – it doesn't matter – and nobody blasts him for presuming to give counsel without any prior training under a teacher. The reason for this is clear: They do not think that this can be taught.

2 Validity

Socrates points to a pair of Athenian practices as a reason for thinking that virtue cannot be taught. One practice, *not* allowing just anyone to advise on technical matters and crafts, Socrates connects to the teachability of such subject matters – this is the attitude the Athenians take toward “everything considered learnable and teachable.” The second, contrasting practice is to allow just anyone to advise on virtue and city management. Socrates suggests what explains the Athenians' different attitudes toward the two types of subject matter is the Athenians' belief that virtue cannot be taught. Notice that the argument seems to reach the conclusion without any discussion of what relation teachability might have to fitness for advising.

In this sparse form, the argument is invalid. If the conclusion of the argument is supposed to be that virtue is not teachable, then the non-

teachability of virtue would have to be the only explanation for the difference in Athenian attitude, at least if we assume the argument is meant to be deductively valid. The argument could also be a sort of abductive argument, taking the non-teachability of virtue to be the best, but not the only possible, explanation for difference in Athenian attitude.

Protagoras' great speech, however, provides a solid refutation of the argument on either reading. In this speech, Protagoras describes a scenario in which every Athenian is a fit advisor on virtue, because all have some share of knowledge about it. They have this knowledge because they have all been taught it, receiving their education piecemeal from many different sources, the same way they learned Greek, since the city has a culture that prizes virtue above all things.

On this model, all of Socrates' assumptions are true

1. Not just anyone can advise on technical matters;
2. Anyone can advise on virtue;
3. Technical matters are teachable;

– but his conclusion is not. Not only is the teachability of virtue logically consistent with these assumptions, but, in the event we read the argument abductively, Protagoras has given us a rival and highly plausible explanation for the difference in Athenian attitude.

3 Dilemma: Wise or Not?

So far I have assumed that when Socrates claims the Athenians have different attitudes toward technical skills and virtue because they believe virtue is not teachable, he has this belief, too. He is endorsing this belief and trying to explain why he has it. He reasons from the response the Athenians have to their belief about the teachability of virtue, to the appropriateness of that belief. This suggests that he thinks the response, the practice of allowing just anyone to speak on virtue, is itself an appropriate practice.¹

But there is something odd about Socrates thinking that this practice is appropriate. To see this, we need to assume one bit of information about *why* the Athenians admit everyone as an advisor on virtue: that everyone has some share of knowledge about virtue.² But it would be odd to attribute to Socrates the assumption that all Athenians had knowledge of virtue: what he is most famous for is showing that most of his fellow citizens only *thought* they had knowledge of virtue, but were mistaken. We can't be very

¹Otherwise, by modus tollens, he would be committed to the teachability of virtue.

²Protagoras also makes this assumption, or one very near to it, 323c.

confident in attributing many claims to Socrates, but it seems safe to say that he thought the Athenians did not understand virtue very well.

So we have an interpretive dilemma here: Socrates seems to endorse a view here that is very un-Socratic. In some ways, this is not news: Socrates himself points out at the end of the dialogue that he has gravitated toward an opposing view during the course of the conversation. Sometimes, it seems as if Socrates takes virtue to be analogous with *technē*, so it is odd to see him endorsing a model here that regards it as very different.

I think developing the tension here will be useful in creating possible interpretations of the argument, so I'd like to spend some time doing that.

The strongest reason to think that Socrates, at this point in the dialogue, regards the Athenian practice of allowing just anyone to speak on virtue as a wise or appropriate practice is the language he uses to introduce his argument (my emphasis):

It's only right that I explain where I got the idea that this is not teachable, not something that can be imparted from one human being to another. *I maintain, along with the rest of the Greek world, that the Athenians are wise.* And I observe that when we convene in the Assembly...

He then goes on to describe the Athenian attitude toward *technē*, followed, without any transition, by his description of their contrasting attitude toward virtue. The structure of the passage seems to be that Socrates first claims the Athenians are wise, and then goes on to describe two Athenian practices, each of which we should take to be examples of the just-mentioned Athenian wisdom. There are no natural seams in the language Socrates uses that would allow us to put one of those practices under the umbrella of Athenian wisdom, but not the other.

As I've already noted, this would seem to entail that Socrates thought the Athenians were fit advisors on virtue, and that would in turn entail that he thought they had knowledge of virtue. But this conflicts with our classical notion of Socrates from the *Apology*.

Let us call the Socrates that is sceptical of his fellow citizens' wisdom *Classical Socrates*. Are there any other views we associate with this Socrates? On some views, Classical Socrates also espouses the *unity of the virtues thesis*, as well as *Socratic Intellectualism*.³ The development of these two views constitute the third part of the *Protagoras*. These classically Socratic views are where Socrates ends up, in this very dialogue.

Earlier I noted that Socrates himself notes that where he winds up in this dialogue is in conflict with where he began. He ends by arguing for the view

³We might stop short of assimilating the Socrates who holds these views to the Socrates who claims to hold no views, of course. I don't want to open this debate here. But many have thought there was some doctrinal continuity between the views of the *Apology* and those espoused in later dialogues, pre-*Phaedo*.

that virtue is knowledge (it is from this view that the two views I mention above are developed), and if it is knowledge, “it would be very surprising indeed if virtue could not be taught.” (361b). I am tempted to read this passage as Plato giving the reader permission to treat the Socrates of early in this dialogue as a different Socrates (doctrinally) from the Socrates of the end, and consequently, as different from Classical Socrates. In other words, we should feel no obligation to offer a reading of the dialogue that makes what Socrates says at the outset of this conversation consistent with what he says at the end, or by extension, what Classical Socrates says elsewhere.

If this is true, we are not constrained by Classical Socrates’ reluctance to attribute wisdom about virtue to his fellow Athenians, and we can read the argument at 319 as the surface language and logic of the passage suggest.

That said, I think exploring the implications of each horn of our earlier dilemma will be instructive in understanding what the argument may be trying to accomplish. We have some decent textual reasons for reading the argument either way, and given what I just argued, there is no need to try to reconcile the tension between the two readings. But let us see what follows from each reading.

4 Paths to the Conclusion

Key:

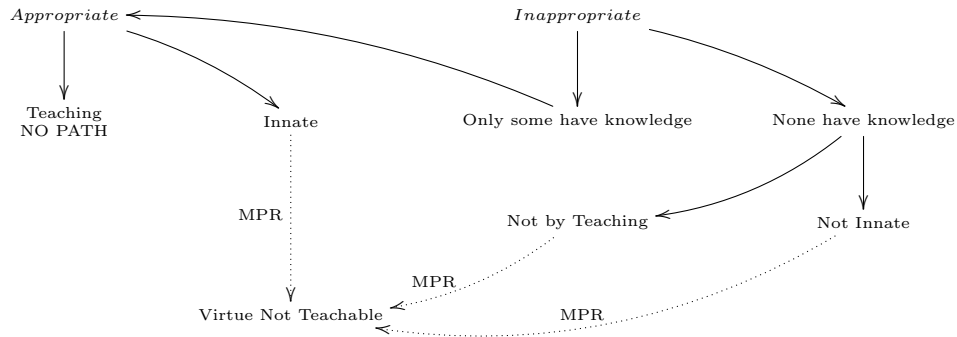
Appropriate: Socrates thinks the Athenian practice of letting just anyone speak on virtue is wise or appropriate.

Inappropriate: Socrates thinks the Athenian practice of letting just anyone speak on virtue is unwise or inappropriate.

Teaching: Those who are fit advisors have knowledge through teaching.

Innate: Those who are fit advisors have knowledge innately.

MPR: More premises required.



To take the left side first, if Socrates thinks the Athenian practice of allowing anyone to advise is appropriate, then he must think so either because the Athenians have learned about virtue through teaching, or because they know about virtue innately. I put the latter option on the table because Protagoras does. At 323c, after he concludes his myth establishing that all Athenians “have some share” of virtue, he attempts to show that “people do not regard this virtue as natural or self-generated, but as something taught and carefully developed in those in whom it is developed.” This suggests that it is possible to possess or understand virtue innately or naturally is an operative assumption in the conversation.

There is no path to Socrates’ desired conclusion from the former option, obviously, because they are contradictory: if the Athenians have learned about virtue through teaching, then virtue is teachable. Is there a path from the latter option? In a nutshell, not an obvious or direct path, and we would certainly need some non-trivial additional premises. Just because some knowledge were had innately doesn’t mean it could not also be got through teaching.⁴

It is worth noting that Protagoras seems to think the position he is attacking is this latter one, and in doing so, he chooses the former alternative, which entails that virtue is teachable.

Now to the right-hand side. If Socrates thinks it is inappropriate for the Athenians to let just anyone advise on virtue, it is because either no one has knowledge of virtue, or only some do. If no one does, then *ipso facto* no one has knowledge of it either through teaching or innately. If no one has knowledge through teaching, that does not entail that virtue is not teachable, since it may be only a matter of contingent fact that the Athenians were not taught. If the Athenians do not possess knowledge of virtue innately, we can still draw no conclusion whatever about the teachability of virtue: their not actually possessing such knowledge is compatible with them possibly possessing it innately, in which case virtue may still be teachable, as we just noted.

⁴If someone already has knowledge of some subject *s*, then obviously *she* could not also come to know *s* through teaching; but someone else might.

On the other hand, if some, but not all, Athenians possessed knowledge of virtue, then we simply get the left-hand side of the chart reproduced under this option: those who do have such knowledge either got it through teaching, or have it innately, therefore, etc.

5 A Closing Thought

One other option might be worth considering. Suppose Socrates thought the Athenian practice of allowing just anyone to speak were appropriate, but *not* because he thought they had the requisite wisdom. We haven't attempted, at this point, to fill in many of the details that explain the link, or lack thereof, between teachability and fitness for advising. In the case of the crafts, the explanation seems ready-to-hand: teachability provides a convenient and relatively reliable tracking mechanism for those with knowledge. We can easily figure out who is a fit advisor and who isn't by noting who has been trained or taught.

If virtue were not teachable, there would be no such tracking mechanism for that subject matter. There might be many wise on city management and private virtue milling about the city, but there would be no reliable way to tell who they were. So perhaps, believing there to be no reliable tracking method available for virtue, since virtue cannot be taught, the Athenians allow anyone to speak on the topic, hoping that those with wisdom will reveal themselves in their speech.