

Majerník, Jozef

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THE PROBLEM OF TEACHING VIRTUE BETWEEN THE *PROTAGORAS* AND THE *PHAEDRUS*

JOZEF MAJERNÍK

Schwarz Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia
jozo.majernik@gmail.com

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Abstract: Socrates' final argument in the *Protagoras* is premised on the surprising identification of the pleasant with the good and argues that virtue is the “art of measurement” that can be easily taught to the Many. The view that virtue can be taught is also espoused by Socrates elsewhere, notably in the *Phaedrus*. However, while the *Protagoras* identifies virtue with the art of calculating the greatest pleasure, which is identified with the greatest good, in the *Phaedrus* virtue is shown to consist in the ceaseless *search* for the good. I argue that the picture of virtue presented in the *Protagoras* is in agreement with that of the *Phaedrus* in that the *Protagoras* depicts the first stage of the process of learning genuine virtue, which is outlined as a whole in the *Phaedrus*. The argument of the *Protagoras* then works as a protreptic: it teaches an elementary way of thinking about the ends of one's actions and opens up the way toward genuine virtue.

Keywords: Plato; *Protagoras*; *Phaedrus*; virtue; education; Jan Patočka; political philosophy

Introduction

In the final part of the *Protagoras* (351b–62a), Socrates makes the surprising argument that the good and the pleasant are the same and that becoming virtuous is a matter of learning to practice the “art of measurement”, that is to say: of correctly assessing the pleasures and pains involved in different courses of action, the good being identical with the greatest pleasure. This seems to run contrary to Socrates' critiques of hedonism in the *Gorgias* (492d–500d) and in Book IX of the *Republic*. The account of becoming virtuous as learning the “art of measurement” is also at odds with other Socratic accounts of moral education, such as that in the latter part of the *Phaedrus* (261a–79c).

I propose a reading of this argument based on the *parallels* this account of education toward virtue has with that of the *Phaedrus*. In both dialogues, Socrates argues that virtue is a kind of knowledge that is teachable by rhetoric. However, there are also marked differences regarding the necessary conditions for teaching virtue as well as the manner of teaching it. In the final part of the *Phaedrus* (261a–79c), Socrates presents the art of teaching virtue as the highest kind of rhetoric (or as that which alone truly deserves to be called rhetoric) that is accessible only to the genuine philosopher, a ψυχαγωγία capable of leading the individual soul toward the good. *This* good is, furthermore, not identical to pleasure.

I will argue that these two pictures of teaching virtue are essentially in agreement with each other because the two dialogues describe two different stages of the same process. To make this clearer, I will first give a fuller account of the presentation of the teachability of virtue in the two dialogues. I will then compare the differences between the two arguments and show how the “art of measurement” provides an elementary way of deliberation about one’s life that is accessible to the Many. However, it also prepares the ground for overcoming the view of virtue as a calculation of pleasures and pains and for seeking virtue in the proper sense of the word, ultimately for becoming a philosopher or a genuinely virtuous person. I will then argue that the presentation of virtue as a matter of calculation of pleasures in the *Protagoras* is a protreptic on Socrates’ part: a way to make the life of virtue seem easy enough that anyone interested in it may be encouraged to attempt to lead it, regardless of how close is one able to come to true virtue. Thus, it remains true that “knowledge is something good and noble and capable of ruling the human being” (*Protagoras* 352c), while this knowledge is not identical with the hedonic calculus of the *Protagoras* – but the hedonic calculus is a part of it nevertheless.

Interpretations of the “hedonistic” argument (by which I mean the conjunction of the identification of the good with the pleasant and of proposing the “art of measurement”) vary: some hold that Socrates believes hedonism to be true (such as Irwin 1995, chapter 6), while others espouse accommodationist theses such as that this argument is premised on the understanding that the pleasant is a guise of the good (Moss 2014). Finally, there are those who believe Socrates argues *ad hominem* here, such as Landy (1994), Kahn (2003), Vlastos (1969), or Zeyl (1980). My reading belongs to the latter group: I believe that Socrates argues for hedonism not because of its truth but because of its usefulness in discussion with the Many. However, unlike Kahn (2003) or Zeyl (1980), I take the purpose of this to be genuinely educative rather than showcasing the vulgarity of the Sophists or attaining eristic advantage, respectively.

The main advantage of my interpretation is that it pays attention to the processual character of teaching virtue and distinguishes the stages of this process; the “hedonistic” argument of the *Protagoras* is shown to form the first stage. Thereby it reconciles the “hedonistic” argument with the views espoused by Socrates in other dialogues and preserves the unity of his overall view of virtue across the dialogues.¹ In doing so, it highlights the ever-present educational dimension of Socrates’ arguments. Finally, it also offers an insight into Socrates’ political philosophy in the *Protagoras*.

The “Art of Measurement” as Virtue in the *Protagoras*

The *Protagoras* is concerned with teaching virtue from beginning to end. Socrates comes to the house of Kallias, in which Protagoras is staying and the dialogue takes place, as a friend of the young Hippocrates, who desires to be made wise by Protagoras, whom he believes to be “the only wise man” (310d); in other words, he desires to learn virtue from one who already possesses it and who claims to be able to teach it to others as well.² Virtue remains a major subject in the

¹ In holding that there is a single, unified Platonic view of virtue as well as of other subjects, I follow the arguments of Cooper (1997, xii–xiv) and Zuckert (2009, 2–5). I thus reject the developmentalist theses of authors like Rowe (2003) or Taylor (2003).

² When Socrates shows him that Protagoras will teach him how to become a Sophist (and hence that he is hardly a teacher of virtue), Hippocrates blushes out of shame (312a); cf. Zvarík (2023, 30–2) for an analysis of the function of shame in leading toward virtue in the *Menexenus*.

dialogue's arguments, up until the final argument, which is concerned with hedonism and with virtue as the "art of measurement". The question of whether virtue can be taught or not accompanies us throughout the dialogue and may be considered its explicit topic.

The debate between Socrates and Protagoras begins as Protagoras attempts to defend his claim to make his students "better" (318a) by every day they spend in his learning, this being the promise which has lured Hippocrates to him. Socrates questions this claim out of his concern for Hippocrates, who does not actually know what exactly Protagoras is going to teach him (312a), and thereby risks the corruption of his soul; Protagoras' teaching may be harmful to the soul, and Hippocrates is not in a position to assess it (313e–4a). Protagoras says he teaches the art of good judgment (εὐβουλία; 318e), or the capacity for taking good care both of one's own affairs and of the city's: he claims to be a teacher of both private and civic virtue. Socrates challenges Protagoras' claim to be a teacher of virtue by pointing to the example of Pericles, who wasn't able to inculcate his virtue to his own sons, to Alcibiades, or to his brother Kleinias. Based on this evidence, Socrates concludes that "virtue is not teachable" (320b) and challenges Protagoras to demonstrate its teachability in order to persuade the audience of the truthfulness of his claims.

Protagoras' initial attempts to do so fail, and after several digressions, the discussion finally returns back to the subject of the good life – the life of virtue – at 351b. Socrates suggests that to live pleasantly is to live well, while to live unpleasantly is bad, but Protagoras hesitates to unequivocally identify the pleasant with the good (351e). In order to come to an agreement about this issue, Socrates leads the discussion. He first inquires whether Protagoras agrees that "knowledge is something good and noble and capable of ruling a person" (352c). Protagoras does agree, and the rest of the argument unfolds from this agreement that the good life consists in being led by some not-yet-specified kind of knowledge. However, while the two thinkers agree about the power of knowledge, this view is not immediately obvious to "the Many". Knowledge is rather weak in the experience of the Many, and in particular, it is weaker than pleasure and pain.³ Thus it is possible to know what is best, they say, and "refuse to perform it, though they have the power, and do other things instead" (352d), namely those which are worse but more pleasurable or less painful.

Socrates now presents to the Many an argument for the power of knowledge and against *akrasia* on behalf of both himself and Protagoras. He identifies the pleasant with the good and the painful with the bad provided that the future pleasant or painful consequences of the action are included in its evaluation as pleasant or painful (354c). The Many agree that they actually want what is more pleasant overall, including the future consequences. On the basis of these premises, they have to agree that what is commonly called "being overcome by pleasure" is, in fact, choosing to pursue a good – albeit a lesser good than that which they allegedly know to be best. The moral weakness of the Many then does not lie in the weakness of their will, since they desire the good; it lies rather in their incapacity to correctly assess the relative greatness of the goods they can choose from. In other words, it is a problem of their faulty *knowledge* of the good and bad things. If they had better knowledge, they would choose the better or more pleasant things.

Socrates can now specify the knowledge that is necessary for living well, the knowledge that "would be our salvation in life" (356d): it is the "art of measurement" (ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη), in effect

³ Moss (2014, 301) argues that although Protagoras agrees with Socrates regarding the power of knowledge to rule human life, he implicitly espouses a moral psychology that leads to the same view on *akrasia* as the Many hold. In this respect Socrates also silently corrects Protagoras' own error.

a version of the hedonic calculus. This art allows its practitioner to correctly judge the pleasurable and/ or painful consequences of one's actions, regardless of whether they are temporally close to us or far away, just as one who is skilled in measuring material things can judge their relative size regardless of one's distance from them. Thus, a skillful measurer will no longer succumb to the deceptive power of appearances and will live pleasantly, which is to say, well. We now know that "it is from defect of knowledge that men err, when they do err, in their choice of pleasures and pains—that is, in the choice of good and evil" (357d), and that this ignorance is the source of the Many's faring badly (κακῶς πράττετε; 358a). The virtue that allows one to live well is *knowledge*, and ignorance is the sole vice, the sole source of faring badly – a deeply Socratic claim made by deeply un-Socratic means.

Socrates and Protagoras have begun with the view that knowledge is noble and capable of guiding human life. Knowledge, identified here with "the art of measurement", allows the knower to choose the most pleasant, i.e., best action in any situation.⁴ Thereby the knower will be able to live pleasantly and without pain, and actions that constitute such life are said to be noble (358b). This knowledge is rather simple to learn: even the Many, the common people, are capable of learning it. What is even more surprising, the Sophists, who are elsewhere criticized by Socrates precisely for their ignorance of the question of the good life,⁵ are capable of teaching it (357e). While I agree with others who consider this proposal to be ironic (cf. Callard 2014, 78) and I don't think Socrates actually believes that Sophists are teachers of virtue, it is important to notice that this view is not contrary to the argument about virtue as knowledge of the pleasant and painful things. Insofar as we accept the "hedonistic" argument, we ought to accept the conclusion that Sophists can teach virtue as well, and this conclusion is not necessarily ironic or paradoxical.

Socrates seems to have overcome his initial reservations about the teachability of virtue, as he explicitly says in his closing speech: he has the personified discussion say of him that he has "attempted to show that everything is knowledge—justice, moderation, and courage—in which case, virtue would appear [φανεῖν] to be eminently teachable" (361b).⁶ The "hedonistic" argument indeed shows it to be such: virtue is a species of technical knowledge⁷ that can be taught even by the Sophists and understood by virtually anybody.

This kind of knowledge is furthermore easily disseminable, even by the means of books: one can imagine a textbook that supplies the standardized relevant factual information and is complemented by the guidance of a teacher, who is relatively easy to train and who can teach many students at

⁴ We are not told anything specific about how the "art of measurement" works, but the basics are easy to deduce: if its goal is to determine which course of action is the most pleasant, it has to involve an examination of the pleasure and pain entailed in various actions, both immediately and over time, assigning equal importance to pleasures and pains of equal duration irrespective of whether they occur now or later. Taken to its farthest limit, the art of measurement will involve deliberation about the most pleasant way of life as a whole.

⁵ E.g. the sarcastic praise of various Sophists in the *Phaedrus* 266e–7d; interestingly, the Sophists are said there to be able to "make small things appear large and large things appear small" (267a).

⁶ This is only an appearance if we talk about virtue proper, which is something different from the "art of measurement" (see section 4 below); in a sense, one can learn this virtue only by oneself; the need for it has to arise from one's own soul and it cannot be inculcated as e.g. multiplication tables or good manners. But if as we mean virtue as it was discussed in the *Protagoras* – virtue as the "art of measurement" – this "virtue" is actually teachable.

⁷ This would be consistent with what Roochnik (1996, 3) calls the "standard account of *techne*": the view that *techne* is a "clear, reliable, specialized, and authoritative knowledge". The "art of measurement" fulfills all these conditions and is a *techne* on the common understanding of the term.

once, as it is done with various other subjects in our contemporary schools. If this kind of education in “the art of measurement” became more widespread, it could result in a society where the Many would become rationally calculating individuals who maximize their pleasure by peacefully cooperating with each other.⁸ I agree with Landy (1994, 287) that this proposal “describes what a complete art of living might look like”, how it may be possible to organize the lives of individuals and even entire societies on a rational basis. Socrates’ “hedonistic” argument can be understood as a pointer to something that was named *universal enlightenment* at a later point in history: the struggle to attain peace and happiness for all by replacing superstitions with rational understanding, especially of the most important things – of goods and evils.⁹ Hippocrates, a young man who knows that he wants to be “better”, but who does not know what it means to be better, is the exemplary audience for this argument (as he originally was for Protagoras), and the kind of person whom Socrates is trying to persuade to take up the “art of measurement” for himself. He (and the likes of him) was Socrates’ concern throughout the dialogue.¹⁰

An objection may arise at this point: the *Protagoras* itself mentions that there are people who act unjustly and who use their unjust deeds as a means for faring well (333d). Wouldn’t the “art of measurement” foster a great evil by enabling such people to commit injustice more efficiently? I believe this question has to be answered in the negative, for reasons that will become apparent if we consider the nature of the “measurement” in question more closely. The deliberation of the tyrannical soul is purely instrumental; its goal is set in advance – namely whatever it currently desires – and the deliberation is concerned only with the most expedient means for attaining that goal. The “art of measurement” is instrumental too, but at a higher level: its goal is not any given pleasure, but the greatest possible pleasure. This abstraction from the particular goal of action enables elementary deliberation about the ends themselves: the question will arise whether pleasures that can be obtained by unjust means are in harmony with the greatest pleasure or not, and whether they generate more pleasure than pain at all. The originally unreflective conduct of the tyrannical person is brought into question, and insofar as they practice the “art of measurement”, it is no longer possible for them to assume that the proper end of their actions is the satisfaction of their whims, and that only the means to it are to be found. Plato himself supplies multiple arguments to the effect that the tyrannical life is, in fact, a life of misery in the *Republic* (esp. 580d–3a), and the calculating tyrannical soul, insofar as it is calculating, is open to such arguments. Thus, adopting the “art of measurement” by a tyrannical soul does not foster its tyrannical tendencies, but rather hinders them: the “art of measurement” itself is capable of revealing the misery of the tyrannical life and leads to a search for pleasures that will not make one more miserable as a consequence. And insofar as the “art of measurement” opens up the way to seeing the misery of the tyrant as rooted in their insatiable desire for pleasure, it also points to a critique of the idea that pleasure is the human good. The “art of measurement” itself shows the way in which its mistaken fundamental premise can be overcome.

⁸ This species of hedonism is quite different in scope and meaning from that originally espoused by the Many: it is not simply desire for pleasure, but desire for the greatest pleasure, and this desire ultimately encompasses the whole of human life. This “Socratic Hedonism” then constitutes an example of Socratic irony (Moss 2014, 317).

⁹ For a more thorough argument to this effect cf. Lampert 2010, 115–7.

¹⁰ Kahn (2003, 172–3) argues that Socrates’ hedonistic argument serves the purpose of prevailing in the public contest with Protagoras, “the wisest man alive” (314d). This is suggested also by the unusually large audience present at the dialogue (314e–16a). His hypothesis doesn’t contradict mine: they are both based on the recognition of the importance of the popular appeal of the hedonistic argument.

But even so, the view of virtue as “the art of measurement” suffers from two major problems. First, it rests on the questionable assumptions that “all pleasures are commensurable and that the future consequences of one’s future actions can be known” (Landy 1994, 296), which Socrates does not examine here.¹¹ Second, the (real) benefits that adopting the “art of measurement” has for the Many do not make it identical with virtue in the Socratic sense: as long as one calculates the greatest pleasure, one acts for the sake of pleasure and subordinates all one’s actions to it. The practitioner of the “art of measurement” is, in effect, enslaved by the pleasure they seek. Virtue as the “art of measurement” cannot be understood as choiceworthy for its own sake and as its own reward. In other words, the “art of measurement” is virtue instrumentalized.

This point is explicitly made in the *Phaedo* (68c–9d). Socrates points out here that all virtues are more characteristic of the philosophers than of anyone else because the ‘virtues’ of other people are paradoxical – they are courageous out of fear (of death) or moderate so that they may better indulge in their preferred pleasures.¹² Genuine, philosophic virtue does not consist in trading greater fears for lesser ones and lesser pleasures for greater ones – it consists first of all in wisdom, which alone gives rise to other virtues, as is explicitly stated at 69b (“true virtue exists only with wisdom”). On the contrary, all virtue that does not aim at wisdom is merely “painted imitation of virtue and is really slavish and has nothing healthy or true in it” (69b). Genuine virtue then is what Jan Patočka called *care for the soul*, that is, “the inner formation of the soul itself, formation into something solid in its unity and in this sense existing”, this formation being the result of the soul’s ceaseless search for the good and examination of its opinions – as opposed to the state of the soul of the ordinary person, which “falls apart in the indeterminacy of pleasures and naturally also pains, which go together hand in hand” (2002, 86; translation modified). As we will see, such genuine virtue is the goal of the *ψυχαιγωγία* of the *Phaedrus* and it is prepared for, but not attained, by the “art of measurement” of the *Protagoras*.

If this is so, why is Socrates endorsing the problematic argument about the “art of measurement”? I will now turn to the *Phaedrus*, another dialogue that suggests that rhetoric can be a means for teaching virtue, and then I will explain this conundrum by considering these two accounts of teaching virtue together.

The Noble Rhetoric of the *Phaedrus*

Speeches are, along with love, one of the two main subjects of the *Phaedrus*. The argument of the latter part of the dialogue, which begins with the question of how to write and speak nobly (καλῶς; 258d), shows that noble speeches are the means by which the soul can be led toward virtue, and considers at length the nature of and the prerequisites necessary for such a noble speech. This account of teaching virtue by rhetoric differs significantly from that in the *Protagoras*.

Socrates says here that in order to speak nobly, the speaker must first know the truth about the subject of the speech (259e). If they don’t, they will either appear ridiculous, or worse, be dangerous to his listeners (260b–c): the speaker’s ignorance may be harmful to their audience,

¹¹ Although these premises are questionable philosophically, from the perspective of whether they are true or not, they may nevertheless be eminently useful for instilling a public morality, especially if they were upheld as an authoritative teaching.

¹² This picture of people who “conquer pleasures because they are conquered by other pleasures” (69a) seems like a direct reference to the practitioners of the “art of measurement”.

since a speech has the power to persuade and influence those who listen to it.¹³ Socrates, therefore, defines rhetoric as “an art which leads the soul (*ψυχᾶγωγία*) by means of words” (261a).

This power of speech further underscores the importance of knowing what it means to speak nobly. People are namely most confused and in disagreement with each other (and hence most susceptible of being led, for good or ill) over what is good and what is just (263a; cf. *Euthyphro* 7d), that is, over those things that most directly affect their way of life and the happiness they will be able to attain.¹⁴ The noble speaker turns out to be a rare kind of human being – one who has knowledge of what is genuinely just and good.

The speaker can attain such knowledge by having mastered dialectical thinking in its two forms: bringing into a single idea the “scattered particulars” (265d) that belong under it, thus attaining clarity about its subject as a whole; and dividing the whole into the natural classes that comprise it, thus attaining clarity about its structure (265e). Socrates’ two speeches about *eros* in the earlier part of the dialogue exemplify these two procedures: the first one takes the synoptic view of *eros* and the second one divides it into its natural constituents (Benardete 1991, 179). Consequently, only both of his speeches taken together comprise a full account of *eros* and “emerge as one living being” (Burger 1980, 82). Such dialectical knowledge of things and their natures, of what things are as a whole and in their parts, can also be attained of rhetoric itself: a would-be speaker that is ignorant of dialectics is ignorant also of rhetoric itself and hence is incapable of speaking truthfully and nobly (269b).

The rest of rhetoric, or what is popularly understood to be the whole of rhetoric, namely rhetorical figures, the composition of speeches, narrating stories and giving proofs, or relating testimonies, are all secondary to the knowledge of the ends toward which the speaker wants to lead their listeners; these are “mere preliminaries to any true art of speaking” (Burger 1980, 71). The knowledge of ends must precede the application of the technical means. If this knowledge is lacking, the speaker may still be able to lead their audience – but he will not know *where* they are leading them. Socrates likens such a speaker to a man who knows how to manipulate the physiological states of the human body (e.g. heating it up or cooling it down), but who has no idea what the good of the body (health) is and hence when it is appropriate to use any of the means he had mastered – but who nevertheless fancies himself to be a doctor. Such a “doctor” would be more likely to kill his patients than to heal them, and Phaedrus calls him a “madman” (268c). Yet when it comes to the art of leading our souls, no such standards are applied to those who can bring great good as well as great harm to them (cf. *Protagoras* 313c ff.).

Socrates names Pericles as the exemplary speaker, as “the most perfect orator to have come into being” (269e). Pericles possessed a natural talent for speaking, thanks to which he easily mastered the various rhetorical techniques. In addition to this, he associated himself with the philosopher Anaxagoras, with whom he could pursue the “discussion about the nature of the celestial things” (*μετεωρολογίας*; 270a) that all great arts, including rhetoric, demand. From these discussions, he

¹³ The speaker needs to know the truth of the matter even if he wants to lie in their speech (262a) – otherwise their lies would be easily unmasked and they’d become a subject of ridicule or anger on part of the audience. The same is true for speakers who don’t aim at the truth, but only at probability: that which is probable seems as such to us because of its likeness to the truth, but only one who knows what is true can safely say what is probable (273d–e).

¹⁴ The fact that love also belongs among the contentious things of the highest importance to human life (263c) provides a transition from the discussion of love in the first half of the dialogue to the discussion of noble speaking in its second half.

came to understand the nature of reason (φύσιν νοῦ; 270a), and from this compound knowledge of the *kosmos* and of reason, from knowledge of the *whole*, he came to understand the nature of the human soul (270c) and learned that its good is virtue (270b). The noble speaker, then, can only be a philosopher or at least a very advanced student of philosophy.¹⁵ And conversely, because the art of speaking presupposes both the knowledge of the soul and of the whole, “Socrates defends the art of speaking as a necessary supplement to the knowledge of the truth” (Burger 1980, 76), as a practice complementary to the philosophic θεωρία.

We now know that virtue is the end to which the noble speech should lead the souls of its listeners. It follows that in order to do this, the speaker needs to know not just the proper natural end of the soul to which he leads them but also the less perfect but much more common ends that actual souls tend to pursue. In other words, the noble speaker must know all the kinds of human souls that exist and the various states they find themselves in (τὰ τούτων παθήματα; 271b), and hence also what motivates each kind of soul in every state. In addition to that, they must also know the kinds of speeches that exist and how each of them affects each kind of soul in every state. Mere theoretical knowledge does not suffice here: if one wants to speak well, one has to be able to quickly recognize the kind of soul one’s interlocutor has and then choose the kind of speech that will have the greatest effect on the particular audience (271e ff.).

All this amounts to what could be called the “occasional” character of every noble speech. Such a speech is given to a specific audience in specific circumstances, and even though its end remains always the same – leading the audience toward virtue – the means used for this end must vary according to the occasion and the soul(s) addressed. Socrates expressed this principle of logographic necessity earlier by likening the noble speech to a living being: having all the necessary parts in the right proportion and arranged with a view to the overall purpose of the speech (264c). It should express the truth about its subject in a manner befitting for and appealing to its audience. And, as Prodicus said, such a speech should be “neither long or short, but measured” (μετρίων; 267b).¹⁶ Socrates is aware that attaining all the necessary theoretical knowledge of the soul (if that’s possible at all), having the necessary practical knowledge of the kind of speeches and their effects, and being capable of thus orating according to the needs of the situation, is an enormous task. But as he says at 274a–b, the noble things are worthy of such an effort, the art of noble speaking perhaps especially so.

Socrates then turns to the question of writing. Unlike speeches, the written word is the same for everyone; consequently, it cannot speak to different people according to their different natures, it cannot respond to questions, and it cannot defend itself when it is “unjustly reviled” (275d–e). It does not have the capacity to “be written with knowledge into the soul of the learner” (μετ’ ἐπιστήμης γράφεται ἐν τῇ τοῦ μανθάνοντος ψυχῇ) that the “living and breathing word” (276a) possesses; it cannot properly lead the soul, but gives only an illusion of true knowledge, dangerous precisely because the illusion obscures one’s *actual* ignorance. Attempting to teach others by the

¹⁵ The “ambiguity” (Benardete 1991, 183) in Socrates’ account of Pericles’ Anaxagorean oratory suggests that a better, Socratic grasp of the nature of the soul is necessary for a truly noble rhetoric. After all, given that Socrates criticizes Pericles in the *Protagoras* (319e ff.), the *Gorgias* (515e–6d), and the *Meno* (94b) for failing as a teacher of virtue, his praise here is more a picture of the ideal orator than of the actual Pericles.

¹⁶ Socrates has demanded that this standard be upheld in his debate with Protagoras; cf. *Protagoras* 334d–e.

means of the written word is the same as trying to “write into water” (ἐν ὕδατι γράψει; 276c).¹⁷ Insofar as the written word is useful at all, it is so only as a reminder or a pastime for one who already understands that which it says (276d).¹⁸

Finally, Socrates gives a sketch of the genuinely virtuous person, of one who has been fully educated by the noble speeches. Such a person would be a noble speaker themselves. They would possess a dialectical knowledge of the things about which they speak or write, ultimately of the whole; they would know the nature of the soul and how to address each type of the human soul; and they would know that true rhetoric is not a matter of persuading the audience to act in the speaker’s favor (as the ordinary rhetoric is), but of instructing those who seek knowledge about the things that determine how one lives one’s life, namely “about justice and beauty and goodness”, in a way that suits their souls (277b–8b). It is a manner of leading those who seek by one who has progressed further in the same search. This knowledge written in one’s soul furthermore makes their possessor “as happy as any human being can be” (277a): this knowledge is the true virtue which alone leads to happiness, it is *the* human good.¹⁹ Instructing others in the same manner in which one had been instructed before is the way in which this knowledge, and the accompanying happiness, perpetuates itself. These noble speeches written in human souls should be considered the speaker’s “own legitimate children” (278a): they do not reproduce life as such, but something higher – the good life (cf. *Crito* 48d). To underscore both the great importance and the great difficulty of becoming such a noble speaker – even its impossibility, for human beings cannot be wise, but can only love wisdom and search for it, i.e., philosophize (*Symposium* 204a–b) – Socrates himself prays to become one (278b). The fitting name for the genuinely virtuous person and the truly noble speaker is the *philosopher* (278d).

Teaching Virtue as a Process

Socrates argues in both the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus* that 1) virtue is a kind of knowledge 2) which can be taught 3) by the means of the rhetorical art. But apart from these three basic principles, the ways in which virtue can be taught are very different in these two dialogues. In the *Protagoras*, the good is simply identified with pleasure, and virtue thereby becomes a kind of instrumental knowledge that consists in finding the best means to acquire what we already ‘know’ to be good – pleasure. This knowledge is easily taught and easily learned.

In the *Phaedrus* he also argues that virtue, the excellence of the human soul, consists in knowledge, but this knowledge is very different from the hedonic calculus of the *Protagoras*. It is characterized as the compound of knowledge of the whole and knowledge of the human soul that allows one to

¹⁷ The contrast between the dead knowledge written in books and the living knowledge written in one’s soul is structurally analogous to Callard’s (2014, pp. 71–9) distinction between the vulgar “container view” of knowledge (which equates knowledge with merely being aware of certain facts) and the properly Socratic view that knowledge is “inalienable” (ibid., 74; emphasis original) and can only arise as the result of one’s own active understanding. Only such knowledge is capable of guiding one’s actions. On this analogy, books contain only simulacra that do not amount to knowledge until they are understood – until they begin to live in one’s soul.

¹⁸ There are obviously exceptions to this rule, notably the Platonic dialogues themselves. For a thorough examination of this problem cf. Burger 1980, chapter VI, esp. 103–9.

¹⁹ These claims made by Socrates on the behalf of the noble rhetoric are analogous to Protagoras’ claims about his teaching at *Protagoras* 318e–9a. They represent Socrates’ statement of the benefits his activity is capable of conferring on his companions – and also on us, the readers of the noble speeches left to us by Plato which reproduce the character of Socrates’ actual conversations.

understand what the good of the human soul is. Such knowledge is available to us only as the ideal limit of our effort to know. The good, or virtue, of the human soul then consists precisely in getting to know what the good of the human soul is: in wisdom, or rather in the process of approaching wisdom, in the *love of wisdom* – in the activity of philosophizing. Unlike the “art of measurement” from the *Protagoras*, this search for wisdom makes no assumptions as to whether pleasure is or is not the good. It rather consists precisely in the ceaseless examination of our opinions about the good that refuses to accept pleasure (or anything else) as *the* good without an argument that would ground the nature of the human good in the nature of the whole. Unlike the “art of measurement”, it is not knowledge of the means to an already established good, but an effort to determine what the human good itself is, which starts from the awareness of our ignorance regarding this most important matter of our lives.

The difference of this knowledge to the “art of measurement” is naturally reflected in the wholly different way in which it is learned and taught. The Sophists are no longer held up as good teachers of virtue in the *Phaedrus*, and their lacking knowledge of the art of noble speaking is criticized (266e–7d). The teacher of the philosophic search for the good must be one who had already gotten far along the way to it, farther than the vast majority of humans, and must be able to find suitable students. The student can only be a person who desires and makes a serious effort to actually understand the good, to have it written into their soul.²⁰ The suitable students, in effect, choose themselves; they have to have “by nature a certain inclination to philosophy” (279a–b), which consists at least in understanding the dissatisfactory character of pleasure as it is ordinarily understood. The teacher has to share with the student such speeches as are suitable for the student’s soul in particular, for their actual strengths, weaknesses, and needs. That is impossible for the written speech, which “knows not to whom to speak or not to speak” (275e), i.e., cannot select a suitable audience for itself; the written speech also cannot adapt itself to the reader’s individuality.²¹

We can now ask why Socrates proposes such an underwhelming view of virtue as he does in the *Protagoras* if he holds a much loftier (and much more *Socratic*) view in the *Phaedrus*. I believe the answer becomes clearer if we think about becoming virtuous as a *becoming*, i.e. as a process. At the beginning of this process, the teacher deals with completely uneducated persons to whom virtue nevertheless needs to be presented as something rather simple and accessible. The would-be students would not have any motivation to care about virtue at all without such an accommodation, for without it “virtue” would be just strange talk that has no basis in their experience of the world. On the other hand, pleasure and pain are experienced by all humans on a daily basis, regardless of how they live or what their intellectual capacities are. For such people, the conception of virtue as the calculation of what brings about the greatest pleasure and the least pain is comprehensible and immediately useful; they are likely to value it and be motivated to attempt it. Even if their search for virtue won’t go any further than to the adoption of the “art of measurement”, they will thereby become more thoughtful in their actions: reasoning will become as permanent a presence in their lives as pleasure and pain are. This already is a good result: it helps people make better decisions in their lives and live more happily as a result; thereby it makes them value reason more and makes them more tolerant of philosophy in general (cf. Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* § 328).

²⁰ See Muir (2000) for an account of the importance of *eros* on the part of both the teacher and the student.

²¹ Cf. Plato’s *Second Letter* (314a): there is nothing more ridiculous [οὐκ ἔστιν ... καταγελαστότερα] to the Many than that which fills the noble [εὐφροεῖς] men with wonder and enthusiasm.

Taken together, these two teachings have a powerful effect. The Many, to whom the “hedonistic” argument of the *Protagoras* was addressed, will satisfy themselves with the slavish imitation of real virtue that is the “art of measurement” – and they will be better off for it nevertheless. It is an elementary way of giving an account of one’s actions and of deliberating about one’s way of life, the effects of which are beneficial both for the individual and for the community. However, a few of the more thoughtful practitioners of this art, originally motivated by the search for the greatest pleasure (assumed to be the greatest good), will realize the fundamentally dissatisfactory nature of the pursuit of pleasure as such and question the very identification of pleasure with the good which was at the outset of their search. Because they have understood the dissatisfactory nature of the pursuit of pleasure and seek something higher, they will be suitable listeners for the noble speeches of the philosopher which will lead their souls (and which will eventually enable them to lead their own souls by themselves) to virtue in the proper sense of the word, to the search for wisdom which gives their souls a true unity of form and the true happiness that comes along with it (*Phaedrus* 277a).²²

In this light, the “hedonistic” argument of the *Protagoras* that identifies the good with pleasure and virtue with the “art of measurement” can be accorded a double significance. For the meaner capacities, it indeed is something like a piece of universal enlightenment; the more rationally they will lead their lives, the better for them and for everyone else, even if their ‘rationality’ remains on the level of calculating the greatest pleasure for oneself and does not arrive at the recognition that Socratic virtue is the genuine human good. For the more serious adepts of the life of virtue or wisdom, the sham virtue of the “art of measurement” has a protreptic purpose: it provides a solid ground from which true virtue may be sought by those who feel a need – a desire – for it. By being a ground which can and should be overcome, it is a “demonstration of the first steps of a philosophical education”, as Rider (2012, 209) argues in the context of the *Euthydemus*. It is the first step of the process that will eventually lead them to the true virtue that consists in searching for the good and examining one’s opinions, as described in the *Phaedrus*. The point of the “hedonistic” argument is not so much to persuade the audience of its conclusions, but rather to alert them to the importance of the questions discussed and to induce them to independent thinking about them. In this capacity, Socrates’ argument from the *Protagoras* can be seen as an example of his *ψυχαγωγία*, a well-crafted, noble speech that induces its audience to pursue philosophy to whatever extent their natures are capable of it. In other words, it aims to be the beginning of the audience’s philosophic journey rather than its end.

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²² Phaedrus himself is an example of a listener that has transcended the pursuit of pleasure: he rejects bodily pleasures as “slavish” (258e) and is said to be “divine” [θεῖος] in his love for speeches (242a), i.e. for the cultivation of his soul, and the pleasures concomitant with it. That he cares about pleasure at all does not yet make him a pleasure-seeker: being aware of the dissatisfactory character of the pursuit of pleasure does not mean pleasure is absent from one’s life, but only that one does not pursue pleasure as an end in itself. Socrates argues in the *Republic* (585e–6e) that the pleasures that belong to the philosophic activity – to the formation of one’s soul – are genuine pleasures not accompanied by pains (and hence are not “slavish”, in Phaedrus’ words).

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