

Unity of Virtues according to Socrates and Protagoras

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Abstract

This article deals with the nature of virtues in the Protagoras dialogue and introduces Socrates' and Protagoras' arguments on this issue, and analyzes the logical foundation of their arguments. The difference between Socrates and Protagoras regarding the notion of 'unity of virtues' is due to two different logics of thought. Socrates represents the mental logic, which is based on the principle of conformity and paradox. This logic aims to reach the 'whole,' where knowledge constitutes the measure of judgment, and seeks to reach the desired thing and what should be. Protagoras, however, represents the sensory logic that depends on the principle of 'similarity and dissimilarity.' The human being is the measure of the existence and non-existence of things; it is a relative logic that deals with the existent thing and attributes everything to the senses.

Keywords: Education, Philosophy, Virtue, Socrates, Protagoras

1. Introduction

The issue of 'unity of virtues' constitutes one of the main axes in the dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras. Socrates argues they virtues are one whole-thing, but Protagoras argues that 'virtues' are different parts. This difference reflects the nature of relationship at the epistemological and the existential levels between philosophy and Sophism.

Researchers have introduced several analyses regarding the concept of 'unity.'

"What sort of unity Socrates has in mind is a matter of controversy.

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According to one interpretation, Socrates regards the different virtues as distinct parts of a whole—distinct in the sense that each has its own separate definition, while the thesis that the virtues are knowledge is understood as the claim that each virtue is identical with a particular form of knowledge².

The argument that considers virtues as 'different parts' fits in with Protagoras' attitude, which believes in the existence of various virtues. Socrates, however, maintains that virtues conform with knowledge, which means that all virtues are attributed to knowledge.

"Virtue is knowledge that is whoever knows the nature of things, knows what to do, namely the "ought" question is, ultimately, an "is" question. But then the "ought" is reduced to the knowledge of the "is". He reduces "is" to "ought", and not "ought" to "is", contrary to what it seems at a first glance. He reduces "is" to "ought" but dresses the "ought" with the clothes of being"³

I think that the dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras regarding the unity of virtues represents two different logics of thought. Each type of logic is based on its own concepts and limits. The difference regarding the issues of virtues is attributed to the logical difference between the two sides, because the first is necessarily affected by the other. It is possible to argue that Socrates' logic is purely mental, while Protagoras' logic depends on pure sense. Socrates does not acknowledge the existence of something outside the 'mind' while the real existence for Protagoras is the sensory existence only.

2. The Unity of Virtues and their Logical Origin

When Protagoras finishes his long speech about the possibility of 'teaching virtues,' Socrates asks if 'virtue' is one thing and if so, he asks if justice and practical wisdom and piety are part of it, or are all these things names of one thing and the same thing?

This question reflects Socrates' attempt to push the dialogue a step ahead.

²Devereux, Daniel (1992). The Unity of the Virtues in Plato's Protagoras and Laches. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 101, No 4, 765-789, p.765.

³Balaban, Oded (1999). *Plato and Protagoras*, Maryland, Lexington Books, p. 189, 258.

He tries to define the track of the dialogue towards the goal that he put before, which is: reaching a stable definition of virtue. This qualitative step in the level of the dialogue characterizes Socrates' dialogue strategy, and the issue is not connected to Hippocrates only.

"Socrates has changed direction significantly. He does so because, as the dramatic prologue clearly shows, his main purpose in this dialogue is to refute Protagoras for the benefit of Hippocrates. Since the *techne* analogy has not done the job, he tries something else"⁴. In spite of Protagoras' clear answer that "Excellence is a single thing, and the things about which you ask are parts of it"⁵.

Socrates, however, is not satisfied with this answer and he limits his question more: Is virtue similar to the parts of the face or the parts of gold? Consideration of virtue to be like the parts of the face indicates the qualitative difference between virtues.

We notice that the question about the unity of virtues points out the real difference between Socrates and Protagoras, and reflects two different types of logic:

a) Socrates' Logic

Socrates' logic supposes that virtues are one and the unity of virtues means that whoever owns part of them owns all of them, and similarly; whoever lacks part of them lacks all of them. Since these virtues are the same thing, then they are knowledge and not values. This logic is based on the principle of conformity and contradiction, which means dependence on the realization of the mind, which is a purely mental principle. He denies the existence of sensory existence and attributes it to the mind. "Plato emphasizes the contrast between the passivity of sense perception and the activity of the mind when it attempts to determine what is really true or false by comparing, considering, and reflecting upon what is provided to it by means of the sense."⁶.

⁴Roochnik, David (1996). *Of Art and Wisdom*, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 227.

⁵Hubbard, B. A. F. (1982). *Plato's Protagoras*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p.26.

⁶Lee, Mi-Kyoung (2005). *Epistemology after Protagoras*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 157.

b) Protagoras' Logic

Protagoras' logic supposes that virtues are different parts that converge and diverge. The human being can possess a certain virtue, but at the same time he lacks another. For example, not anyone who possesses bravery necessarily possesses justice. This logic is based on the principle of similarity and difference, which means 'dependence of the realization of the mind.' This indicates that things are similar and dissimilar at the same time, and difference includes 'similarity' and similarity includes 'dissimilarity' and difference.

So, Socrates represents the mind, and his argument is: things that are realized by the senses are not true. Protagoras, however, represents the senses and refers the mind to the senses. His argument is: things that are not realized by the senses are not true.

Socrates argues that it is possible to learn good virtues if they are the same as 'unity of virtues'. Then, virtues are considered to be 'content' that can be learned, which takes place through movement from knowledge of values to knowledge of facts. Consequently, good virtues are learnable as an epistemological stable unchangeable content. Socrates' measure is the content of something and its inner self because he looks for the 'whole' that contains the 'essence.' The judgment of things is objective and based on its inside, not on its outside. Socrates tries to exclude the subjective element from knowledge and nullify it so that the content will be the element that decides the judgment. This way of thinking is characterized by referring formal knowledge to the content of knowledge, and the measure is 'knowledge' and all good virtues are attributed to it.

Protagoras, however, argues that 'good virtues' are learnable only if they are not considered to be an epistemological content. This attitude is based on a thought through which a movement from facts to values takes place. In view of this, there is need to educate people on values in order to know reality because 'man is the measure of everything' "Man is the measure of all things-alike of the being of things that are and of the not-being of things that are not" (152a).⁷ Our knowledge of things decides and judges the thing and not the content. In other words, man's knowledge decides reality. This knowledge is acquired by education that is based on the traditions of the social reality.

⁷Plato (2014). *Theaetetus*. Translated with an introduction by Benjamin Jowett. 152a

There are different explanations to the statement: "Man is the measure."

The meaning that must be attached to the word *ισχυήματα* which is replaced or explained with *πραγματα*, a word that properly indicates not individual beings but facts...not of concrete things or things in some way defined by qualities, but fact that a thing possesses – or does not possess-a certain quality⁸. Some thinkers argue that the statement "Man is the measure" does not bear the quality of 'relativism.'

"There is no indication at all in the Great Speech of any lack of a universal standard. On the contrary, the spirit of the speech is such that throughout universal criteria of justice and injustice, right and wrong, seem to be presupposed.⁹ This analysis separates between universal measures and their different applications. "Genuine relativism consists in the denial of universal standards. There is no relativism in the assumption that the same universal standards require different applications in various societies on account of different conditions".¹⁰ Universal measures of virtues means that they are stable and do not change by the change of reality, but its suitability to the different and changing reality means nothing but their relativity. In this way, the social rule is the source that determines what a virtue. "as a strong believer in the view that morality is dependent on *nomos*, the system of conventions and traditions embodies in the usages of civilized community."¹¹

Since the laws and conventions are products of society, the Sophist educates his pupils according to the social traditions and conventions. In this meaning, he does not have a revolutionary message that seeks to cause a fundamental social change, but the 'change' is within them and towards these traditions and not against them. Therefore, I do not agree with the following opinion:" The Sophist is regarded as capable of changing the views of a whole community as to what is he held just. His function cannot be merely therefore to express and teach what the community already believes."¹²

⁸Levi, Adolfo (1940). Studies on Protagoras, *Philosophy*, 15 (58):147 - 167, p. 148.

⁹Kustas G., S. Moser (1966). A comment on the Relativism of the Protagoras. *Phoenix*, 20, 111- 115, p. 113.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 115.

¹¹Taylor, E. (1957). *Plato: the Man and his Works*, New York, , p.244

¹²Kerferd , G. B. (1953). Protagoras' Doctrine of Justice and Virtue In The Protagoras of Plato, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol, 73, pp 42-45, p.45.

Socrates denies the relativity of virtues because he looks for the "essence" and the "whole" in virtue, which are two stable things. "Plato's and Aristotle's two most significant objections to Protagoras' doctrines were that his human – measure statement refuted itself and that it violated the law of non-contradiction. These objections represent enduring arguments against certain versions of relativism, as is indicated by their reemergence in recent literature concerning rhetoric as a way of knowing."¹³

The concept of 'Man is the Measure' contradicts the concept of conformity and contradiction, which is concerned with the existence and non-existence of virtue, which refuses moral pluralism and difference of values, and believes in the stability of values and absolutism that negate relativity. "Therefore, as having shown that relativism is not an interesting thesis except on grounds that relate formal or logical considerations to substantive considerations bearing on the nature of reality and man's cognitive relationship to reality".¹⁴

Relativity attributes the definition of reality and its judgment to the knowledge of Man, whose source is the social and psychological element rather than knowledge itself. This means that judgment of things is based on a relative attitude. In other words, there is no 'beautiful' thing and 'ugly' thing. However, it is better for people to think in a specific way so that there will be a common mean. In this meaning education becomes a preference of one value over the other, and there is no stable epistemological content. It is possible to say that Protagoras represents the sensory conception that exists outside the thing itself, outside the content, which means that the value-judgment is subjective rather than objective. It is possible to state that "The two interlocutors prepare to part. Socrates notes the confusion of their positions, he denying that virtue is teachable but proving that it is knowledge, Protagoras insisting that it is teachable but denying that it is knowledge".¹⁵

3. Transformation of Virtues into Essences

Socrates goes to the extremes of mental radicalism. He performs the operation of transforming virtues into essences.

¹³Schiappa, Edward (1991). *Protagoras and Logos*, University of South Carolina Press, p.190.

¹⁴Margolis, Joseph (1999). *The Truth about Relativism*, Oxford, Blackwell, p.82.

¹⁵Cropsey, Joseph (1992). *Virtue and knowledge on Plato's Protagoras*. *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*. Volume 19, No' 2, 137-156, p. 155.

In other words, he refers the attributes to essences. The attribute is changeable and interactive with other things and can be loaded onto essences, but 'essence' is independent, stable and unchangeable, and cannot be loaded on other things. This means: transformation of good virtues from changing attributes into stable essences.

Socrates establishes his thought on the notion that justice, for example, is a 'thing'. Justice also is something 'just' because it is created to be that way, i.e. 'just'. The same thing can be said about 'piety' as it is 'pious' in its nature, and 'piety' cannot be but 'just' and 'pious' also. Justice is thing, would be that itself just (*dikaion*), that justice is a just kind of thing. Holy is thing itself is essentially a holy kind of thing, so holiness is a just kind of thing, justice is holy and that holiness is just.¹⁶ Socrates concludes from these introductions that 'justice' is the same as 'piety' or the closest to it as they are similar.

Protagoras objects to Socrates' conclusion arguing that there is a certain difference between them though he agrees that 'justice' is 'piety' and 'piety' is 'justice', but similarity between things does not mean that they are identical. Besides, 'opposites' are also similar in a certain way. For example, 'white' is similar to 'black' in a certain aspect. There is a certain similarity between justice and holiness, there could be for example a certain similarity between black and white, or hard and soft, and so on, though one would say that they were absolute opposites¹⁷.

This way of thinking supposes that 'similarity' has a certain difference and vice versa. Besides, 'negativity' has a certain 'positivity'.

This way of thinking supposes that 'knowledge' is 'self-knowledge' and its attribute. It is a Sophistic idea that puts the human being in the center, as every piece of knowledge is from the 'self' and back to it because the 'self' is the center of any knowledge.

¹⁶For a detailed description of Socrates' concept of 'justice' and 'holiness' see: Hubbard, B. A. F. (1982). *Plato's Protagoras*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p.27.

¹⁷For a detailed description of Socrates' concept of 'justice' and 'holiness' see: Hubbard, B. A. F. (1982). *Plato's Protagoras*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p.28.

In return, Socrates claims that every opposite has one opposite and not many opposites. For example, 'beauty' is the opposite of 'ugliness', and 'good' is the opposite of 'evil'. In addition, opposite verbs are based on opposite principles. Some actions are made on bases of discretion, and others are made on bases of madness. This logic is based on 'pure mind' and believes in the oneness of absolute truth. There is no place for relativity in pluralism. You can be either beautiful or ugly. There are no ranks in between them.

Knowledge starts by knowing oneself. This means that you should know the tools of your knowledge, and after that you can start looking for things outside. This occurs through the examination of the concepts that we use. We try to understand the content of each concept until we reach the entire concept that provides us with the unity of concepts. Knowledge should be known as a subject, because it is impossible to know the operation of knowledge or the epistemological relationship between the knowing self and the known subject.

It is noticed that young Socrates in his initial dialogues tries to argue that everything is an epistemological content. Therefore, he cancels language and argues that 'nouns' are derived from outside the content, and the origin of language comes from outside the languages, and there are no epistemological images, but contents only.

The Theory of Measurement

Socrates criticizes the opinion of the public that says that pleasures overcome human beings: "The phenomenon you describe is quite simply the common experience of doing what we know to be bad, overcome by pleasures like food, drink or sex?... In what respect do you say such things are undesirable? Is it because each of them causes immediate short-term pleasure and is pleasant only in the short term, or because they store up illness, poverty and such like for the future? Or would they still be bad even if they held no trouble in store and produced nothing but pleasure".¹⁸ Socrates believes that these pleasures are epimethic ones that work by the motivation of present instincts and are ignorant of their future outcomes, which are deeds whose goals are in their praxis. These deeds can be bad but they are not bad in their essence, but their outcomes are bad.

¹⁸Ibid., p.55.

Socrates refuses the epimethic motives and sees that the outcome of the action determines whether the deed is good or evil. There are certain deeds that are painful such as gymnastics but their outcome is good. Such deeds are considered 'sacrifice' in the present for the future. This means that the importance of these deeds is judged by their outcome. He argues that if the outcomes are good, then the deed is good. Thus, he attributes the deeds to their outcomes.

Socrates refuses the claim that the control of the present pleasures of the human being makes them painful deeds. He is aware of the pain, as he believes that it is impossible for the pleasure to overcome the knowing human being because pleasure that prevents greater pleasures is a bad one. It is clear here that Socrates prefers the future to the present: "that a man does something bad, let us now say that he does what is painful, knowing it to be painful, overcome by pleasure, although obviously the pleasure does not outweigh the pain. And surely the only way in which pleasure can fail to outweigh the pain must lie in their relative excess or deficiency? That is, in their being mutually greater or smaller, more or less, stronger or weaker".¹⁹ Socrates argues that the pleasing present is not different from the pleasing or painful future except in pleasure and pain. He gives the following example to illustrate his argument:

"So like a man who is good at weight, take all the pleasures together and all pains together, and making allowance in the scales for their relative proximity or distance, tell us which is greater. Thus if you are weighing pleasures against pleasures it is always the more and the greater which must be chosen, but if you are weighing pain against pain, the less and smaller is to be preferred if, however, you are weighing pleasure against pain, then if the pleasure outweighs the pain, be this a case of the more distant outweighing the more immediate or *vice versa*, then we must undertake that action which entails that pleasure, but if the pleasure is outweighed by pain, we must not undertake it".²⁰

Socrates connects between 'behaviour' and 'pleasure' by the mediation of time. The good behavior is the behavior through which a greater pleasure is achieved. The outcome of the pleasure is calculated through calculating its amount in the present and the future. He abolishes the element of time to the advantage of the outcome.

¹⁹Ibid., p.58.

²⁰Ibid., p.59.

Thus, the outcome determines one's behavior. "Thus, as Socrates argues, a science of morality, based on calculus of pleasures and pains, may be constructed, and as a consequence, men maybe taught the art of good citizenship, just as they learn the arts or architecture or painting of sculpture."²¹In this meaning, learning of virtues becomes dependent on knowledge of mathematics, which is a stable knowledge for sure. "Since the hedonic calculus merely serves to illustrate readily what is surely a perfectly general point about any intellectual basis for teachable virtues."²²

Socrates argues that the behavior of the human being should be guided by the theory of measurement, which can be considered a theory of 'decision-taking'. Each pleasure or pain must take place in the present and the future. It is necessary to transform the 'pleasure and pain' into quantitative units and abolish the differences in time. After that, these units should be arranged on the scale of pleasure and pain. At that time, we can know the 'less' and the 'more' and get the needed knowledge on how to choose the greater pleasure. "The theory of measurement is a way to avoid the need to make real decisions, but decisions only in a devaluated meaning-decisions concerning means. Therefore, pleasure is good only insofar as it does not imply, as a consequence, its opposite-pain. And pain is bad insofar as it does not bring into its opposite-pleasure."²³

In view of this, the fault in the person's choice between pleasures and pains lies in his lack of knowledge in the science of measurement. This means that the mistaken behavior is a result of ignorance. Therefore, it is impossible that the person will choose pain instead of pleasure, or take the road of evil, knowing that it is evil. Therefore, it is impossible for 'pleasure' to overcome the knowing person. Socrates does not acknowledge the instinctive needs for what they are, but he should calculate the outcome that occurs as a result of choosing instinctive deeds. This approach makes Socrates closer to Prometheus and his preference to the rest of Greek gods.

In his discussion of the subject of virtues, Socrates aims to reach to the idea of 'unity of virtues', namely, search for the common origin of all virtues.

²¹Watson, John (1907). Plato and Protagoras. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 5, Sep., 469-487, p. 475.

²²Russell, Daniel. C.(2005), *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 242.

²³Balaban, Oded (1999). *Plato and Protagoras*, Maryland, Lexington Books, p.258.

He attributes all virtues to 'knowledge' as the knowing person cannot be but a virtuous one because it is unreasonable that a person will choose 'evil' instead of 'good'. Besides, his choice of 'good' results from his true and real knowledge.

Socrates introduces the tool of 'measurement' as a source of happiness to man. "The art of measurement would have rendered this illusion powerless and in showing the truth would have kept our minds steadily on the truth without confusion, and thus guarded our lives."²⁴

However, "while Protagoras proclaims that after this attribute had been obtained by man, and individual wants supplied, still there was a farther element necessary in the calculation - the social sentiment or reciprocity of regard implanted in every one's bosom: without this the human race would have perished. Prudence and skill will suffice for an isolated existence, but if men are to live and act in social communion, the services as well as the requirements of each man must be shaped in a certain measure, with a direct view to the security of others as well as to his own".²⁵

This logic of measurement is characterized by stability and the claim of 'unity of truth'. It is the pursuit to make virtues stable and constant, like mathematics itself. It is the cancellation of disparity, ranks, and relative differences of virtues and defining them in a strict mathematical logic, namely, subjecting them to not more than two stable limits or opposites "Since it is a skill concerned with excess and deficiency."²⁶ But what is 'excess' and 'negligence'? Where are their limits? These are two concepts that are not subject to fixed limits, but are relative and changeable. Therefore, Socrates refuses to measure virtues on the bases of 'excess' and 'negligence'. On the contrary, he seeks to measure virtues according to the principle of 'conformity and contradiction'. At that point, it is possible to judge the person's behavior or deeds according to their conformity or contradiction with constant stable virtues.

²⁴Hubbard, B. A. F. p.59.

²⁵Grote, George (1865). *Plato and the Other Companions of Socrates*, London, W. Clowes and Sons, p.86

²⁶Hubbard, B. A. F. p.59

4. Summary

From the above discussion, we conclude that the difference between Socrates and Protagoras regarding the notion of 'unity of virtues' is directly connected to their logic of thinking.

Protagoras represents reality as it is and tries to establish it and not to rebel against its values and social and political systems. Education in this sense becomes a tool to preserve the existing things and guarantee their continuity. It is a search that depends on sense and does not go beyond the symptoms of things and the obvious concrete facts. The present instinct is the source and motive of his behavior and deeds. The present is the subject of his search and the center of his interest. This means that the achievement of his goal starts from the real existing things, and the result is produced by the present reality and the future is produced by the present and is an extension to it. Socrates, on the other hand, represents 'what should be'. This means that he is against reality and works to change it, rebel against its social and political systems through arousing doubt about its basic concepts upon which it is established. Education here is a goal more than a tool. The transfer of the concept from being a 'tool' into a 'goal' is in itself a movement from the practical level to the epistemological level. Education in this sense does not care to the educational process from the point of view of tools, but the outcome itself, and since this education goes beyond reality and its symptoms at present in order to reach to "what should be," which is necessarily different from what 'exists', there is no way but to exploit the mind to its farthest limits in order to establish a knowledge according to which he could measure his deeds. This means looking for the 'whole' that guarantees the 'essence' to define the human reality.

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