

Plato and Aristotle on Teaching Virtue: Contrasting Literary Styles and Ontologies

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Introduction

Plato and his excellent student Aristotle thought and wrote extensively on virtue.¹ In the course of their lives, they each confronted the question of whether or not virtue can be taught. Plato's *Meno* explicitly presents this question. Aristotle outlines his answer to this question in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In many ways, the similarities between Aristotle's response and Plato's end at the fact that they are confronted by the same essential question. Plato and Aristotle contrast styles of writing and ontologies, their fundamental beliefs regarding the scope and substance of existence. These differences ultimately shape their answers to the question of whether or not virtue can be taught. Plato concludes that virtue can not be taught, and -- even if certain aspects of attaining virtue might be susceptible to "teaching" (i.e., Socratic questioning) -- these methods can only be taught *indirectly* through the immortal soul's recollection of past learning. Aristotle takes a contrasting view. He speaks about many aspects of virtue directly and assertively. A reader of the *Ethics* might fairly conclude that Aristotle has taught him something about virtue and how to live a virtuous life. Aristotle does, however, come short of claiming to directly teach the whole of every specific virtue for every individual person. Instead, Aristotle's teaching on human excellence is largely situational, utilizing the "golden mean" to speak of virtue in a general and universal sense in his attempt to discern the ultimate human good "in outline."²

¹ I.e., Arete (*ἀρετή*), roughly translatable to "excellence" according to <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=LSJ%20a%29reth/&lang=original>

² *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a 25.

Literary Forms: Is Direct Communication Possible?

The most obvious difference between Plato and Aristotle is their literary form. Plato writes in dialogue form, a format where two or more interlocutors engage in conversation. Aristotle writes in dense expository prose. This difference in style has implications reaching beyond the merely superficial or cosmetic; the way each thinker writes parallels his position regarding virtue and its teachability. Plato's indirect style speaks to his conclusion (or lack thereof) that virtue can not be taught directly; Aristotle's method implies that direct understanding between human beings is certainly possible, even if that understanding is less than holistically comprehensive.

Plato's *Meno* wastes no time introducing its central question, but it never comes around to decisively answering it. In the first line of the dialogue, Meno asks Socrates, "Can Virtue be taught?"³ Socrates quickly replaces this question with a more basic question: what is virtue?⁴ Meno offers several examples of specific virtues for different people, but Socrates is not satisfied with this response. He seeks an understanding of the *form* of virtue, the way "in which [Meno's examples] are all the same and do not differ from one another."⁵ Meno struggles with this question and eventually accuses Socrates of "bewitching and beguiling [him], simply putting [him] under a spell, so that [he is] quite perplexed."⁶ This exchange exemplifies the beautifully nuanced, ironic mechanics of Plato's literary form. Ostensibly, *Plato* is the one philosophizing, but he never writes in his own voice and makes it difficult to discern exactly what *he* thinks -- what *the* author's message is supposed to be. Additionally, Socrates -- the paradigm of wisdom --

³ *Meno* 70a.

⁴ *Id.* 71.

⁵ *Id.* 72c.

⁶ *Id.* 80a.

obviously knows far more about virtue than young and overconfident Meno, yet Socrates claims that he is “more perplexed than anyone.”⁷ The dialogic format of Plato’s writing enables these ironic components. Plato structures his dialogues in a manner that forces readers to seek true meaning underneath the ostensibly “true” positions his characters offer. This esoteric style substantively factors into Plato’s answer to the specific question of whether virtue can be taught. Virtue can only be taught indirectly, and this idea itself is conveyed indirectly.

Aristotle’s methodology also reflects his thoughts on virtue, though this methodology could hardly be further from Plato’s. Plato asked questions and reaches seeming dead-ends; Aristotle wrote treatises on myriad subjects filled with direct and assertive claims. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, like Plato’s *Meno*, quickly introduces its central question: What is the good life for human beings (and, subsequently, what is happiness)? Unlike the *Meno*, the *Ethics* immediately starts providing *answers* to its central question. This answer -- the *Ethics* itself -- is multifaceted and extensive, but it is also almost always declarative. For this reason, Aristotle’s writing arguably leaves less room for misinterpretation than Plato’s. No one really knows for sure what *Plato* himself actually thought, but we can claim fairly confidently that Aristotle meant what *Aristotle* said. One potential weakness of this style of writing is that its lack of subtext largely removes the reader’s intellect from the process of reading. For example, in the first sentence of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle proclaims, “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”⁸ Especially in comparison to Plato’s writing, there is little room for esotericism or intentional literary irony in this statement or the

⁷ *Id.* 80c.

⁸*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a 1-3.

many statements like it. That is not to say that there is not room for nuance; Aristotle's tendency to divide and subdivide concepts and thoughts speaks to his incredible ability to discuss complicated ideas with grace and aptitude. Virtue is an example of such an idea.

Aristotle's inquiry turns to a discussion of virtue in *direct* connection to his fundamental inquiry into the ultimate human good, happiness. After concluding that happiness is the ultimate good for human beings, he defines happiness as "an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue."⁹ From here, Aristotle goes on to subdivide virtue into two categories: moral virtues¹⁰ which are formed via habit (such as courage or moderation) and intellectual virtues¹¹ formed through education and instruction (such as craftsmanship or scientific knowledge). Beyond the obvious fact that the latter variety of virtue clearly indicates that Aristotle thinks that at least some virtue may be taught, the direct structure of the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself implies Aristotle's belief that many aspects of virtue can be taught. The opposite conclusion would mark the *Ethics* as a sort of fool's errand.

Ontologies: Is Teaching Possible?

In addition to their contrary literary styles, Plato and Aristotle also operate using contrasting ontologies. This difference has consequences for each philosopher's views on whether virtue can be taught. Plato's ontology includes a few seemingly mystical claims that transcend the everyday "reality" of human beings. He believes in an eternal and unchanging intelligible realm, a transcendental reality outside the visible where mathematical truths and eternal, perfect "forms" reside. He also expresses his belief in the immortality of the human soul. This belief supports the Socratic doctrine of all learning as recollection. Learning and teaching,

⁹ *Id.* 1102a 5-6.

¹⁰ Aristotle discusses the moral virtues in Books II, III, and IV.

¹¹ Aristotle Discusses the intellectual virtues in Book VI.

in the sense people commonly use these terms, makes no sense because “the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld. [T]here is nothing which it has not learned.”¹² Socrates demonstrates this belief by probing Meno’s slave towards expression of complicated geometric truths.¹³ In this exchange, Socrates only asks simple, mostly yes-or-no, questions. This supports Socrates’ claim that “the truth about reality is always in our soul.”¹⁴ In this way, Plato’s ontology necessitates a negative answer to the question of whether virtue can be taught. Neither the form of virtue -- nor anything else residing in the intelligible realm-- can ever be taught. Instead, humans can gain understanding of concepts such as virtue through the dialectical process that catalyzes recollection.

Aristotle rejects Plato’s ontology and consequently his belief about the impossibility of teaching virtue. In his intellectual quest to uncover the universal good, Aristotle explicitly confronts Plato’s theory of forms and the dualistic -- i.e., two-part (visible realm and intelligible realm) -- ontology that underlies it. Citing his belief that “piety requires us to honour the truth above our friends,”¹⁵ Aristotle rejects Plato’s belief in an eternal form of the good. Aristotle has several reasons for this position. One such reason is that Plato’s doctrine would necessitate that “there would have been one science of all the goods; but as it is there are many sciences even of the things that fall under one category.”¹⁶ Following his situational mode of understanding, Aristotle hesitates to pick one science (body of knowledge) that presents every aspect of the good. Book One’s discussion of the three lifestyles (pleasure, politics, and contemplation) demonstrates that *hierarchies* of goodness may exist, but a science’s *monopoly* over goodness

¹² *Meno* 81c.

¹³ *Id.* 82b-84b.

¹⁴ *Id.* 86b.

¹⁵ 1096a 17-18.

¹⁶ 1096a 30-32.

may not. Aristotle also criticizes Plato's apparent assumption that the eternal nature of a form somehow makes it more correct or relevant to human life. He remarks, "That which lasts longer is no whiter than that which perishes in a day."¹⁷ It seems that Aristotle philosophizes within the same material world that human beings live in from day to day. His ontology reflects this and rejects the mystical world of Plato's forms and its doctrine of learning as recollection. In his view, the peculiarities of virtue cannot be taught with exacting precision, but human beings like Aristotle can nonetheless teach the basic components of virtue to other beings in a shared material world.

Conclusion

I have now reached the point where I will explain which arguments I find most persuasive regarding whether or not virtue can be taught. This paper seeks to point out two points of disagreement between Plato and Aristotle over whether virtue can be taught: whether or not direct communication is possible and whether or not teaching as we usually understand it is possible. Plato answers negatively to both questions, and Aristotle answers both positively. Instead of siding with one of these great thinkers on both questions, I find each more persuasive than the other on one of the questions.

Regarding direct communication, I find Plato more persuasive than Aristotle. My experience reading Plato's work substantiates this belief. The experience of reading a Platonic dialogue is one of life's greatest treasures. Even the tiniest glimmer of understanding of Plato's hidden meanings sticks with you because you have to be actively engaged with his text in a manner I have never seen duplicated in another author. Untangling Aristotle's dense prose can be

¹⁷ 1096b 3-5.

satisfying and thoroughly rewarding, but, at best, a reader can claim he believes to know what Aristotle was trying to say. In contrast, the truly vital substance in Plato's work comes from within the reader, in the form of their own revelations. From what I have read, Kierkegaard expanded on this idea and further examined it in a way I find very compelling (though this is not the place to linger long over 19th-century Danes).

On the ontological question, Aristotle makes more sense than Plato. In my mind, Plato never sufficiently provides adequate proof for his ontological dualism. I believe that Socrates severely underplays the extent to which he is teaching the slave in the *Meno*. He seems to suggest that the simplicity of his yes-or-no questions implies that he is almost entirely irrelevant to the process, but it seems to me that these extremely limited questions will guarantee that the slave's intuition will kick-in very rapidly. Socrates is arguing for far more than just a general sense of intuition, but I think that is all he has proven at best. Aristotle's rebuttals presented above resonate with me as well, so this is not a hard call for me to make.

Both Aristotle and Plato provide interesting, nuanced responses to the question of whether virtue can be taught. Regardless of who one thinks was right, we certainly have much to learn from study of both of these exceptional thinkers.