

The Triptych of Liberal Education

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A LITTLE BEFORE DAYBREAK

“Socrates, are you awake or sleep?” Our story commences a little before daybreak with the sound of violent knocking on Socrates’s door followed by this petulant cry (*Protagoras* 310b2).¹ A young Athenian nobleman bursts into Socrates’s chamber, not being able to contain his excitement that he might finally be able to receive true education from the genuine master. The teacher he has in mind, however, is not the one we do. The youngster reveals, while feeling his way to Socrates’s bed in the still dark room, that it is not Socrates, but the “beautiful stranger” (*Protagoras* 309c1–10) Protagoras who has inspired his excitement. This is the second visit of the famous foreigner in Athens encouraged most probably by Pericles, a patron of the sophist movement of which Protagoras is the leading figure. Socrates claims that Protagoras is the first who admits to being a sophist, a professional teacher of wisdom, and the first who makes teaching philosophy an economic activity by charging tuition fee. Protagoras is most commonly known for his *homomensura* argument that is paraphrased as “man is the measure of all things.” Socrates himself refers to him as “the wisest man now living” (*Protagoras* 309d1).

Socrates, however — despite his relatively young age at the time of our story — is already set on the path of his characteristic philosophical calling by the divination that he is the wisest man now living. It seems to me that the wake up call Socrates receives at the arrival of the sophist is a comic re-enactment of the famous Delphic calling that sets off the particular — or as put in the *Symposium* and in the *Gorgias*: “strange,” “outrageous,” and “scandalous” — Socratic activity (221d and 494d). The Delphic wake up call for Socrates was delivered by his old friend, Chaerephon, who undertook the trip to Delphi with the sole purpose of inquiring whether there was anyone alive wiser than Socrates. The divine message — also formulated in the negative and comparative structure — said there was no one wiser than Socrates (*CD* 21a1–c3). When this prophecy reached Socrates, however, he has already abandoned the idea that positive wisdom is possible at all.² Consequently, the only meaningful interpretation he could give to the divine message was that he is comparatively the wisest because he is the only one who can fully comprehend that he knows nothing. Moreover, he could not conceive of having even this negative wisdom as a static state but rather a dynamic strife through the never-ceasing challenge of a life-long dialogue with others. In an attempt to avoid contradicting the Delphic God, Socrates invents the only strategy that allows him the fulfilment of the oracle. He decides that his way of pursuing his calling is to choose a life of conversation in which the superiority of his wisdom can unfold without the profession of any wisdom.

Socrates, therefore, becomes a fixture of the market place where he puts himself in the way of anyone who professes knowledge in order to refute them. The Delphic

oracle thus sets Socrates in an *agon* (competition) most of all with the new professional group of teachers of his time, the sophists. Socrates's peculiar or outrageous activity (the Socratic education), therefore, cannot unfold by itself. Socratic education comes into being relative to the sophists' educational activity, as it is articulated through competition (*agon*) with them and not by itself. The specific mode of philosophical creativity that expresses itself by avoiding the profession of knowledge — the Socratic *elenchus* — is conditioned upon an agonistic structure in which a character of *elenchus* challenges an assertive character. Only in the intellectual company of an assertive opponent or pupil can Socrates maintain the consistency of his philosophical scepticism and articulate the wisdom that he has no wisdom. It is the sophist movement that provides Socrates with the foil to reveal himself as the wisest man from the position of the underdog.

THE ODD COUPLE: THE UNDERDOG (*EIRÔN*) AND THE BRAGGART (*ALAZÔN*)

The encounter between Socrates and the Sophist immortalized by Plato in the dialogue named after Protagoras is not a simple anecdote. It is a re-enactment of the birth of higher learning in form of a conceptual drama — a poetic, philosophical, and genealogical project at one and the same time. The dramatic personae of this philosophical allegory possess a certain iconicity, a mixture of concrete historicity and abstract universality melded by Plato's poetic art. The historicity of the figures of Socrates and Protagoras is the kind that is raised through being erased. The question then — “Who are you talking about, Socrates *or* a ‘Socrates’ in Plato?”³ — which dogs our step, barking at us, forcing us to turn and face it in self-defence (to paraphrase Gregory Vlastos) then has to be answered as follows. We are talking about a “Socrates” in Plato, a “Protagoras” in Plato, and a “Plato” in Plato. Yet, more importantly, the matter of our present discussion is how the dynamic constellation of ideas that we see as higher education is born from the interaction of these three.

If we are irked — as Vlastos is — by the dogging question of the Platonic manipulation of Socrates, we should be even more irked by Plato's success of writing the sophists out of the history of philosophy for centuries. Pitching Socrates as an underdog against Protagoras, who is staged as the professional star in the Platonic text, is a dramaturgical figure that serves to trigger the ironic reversal of fortune in which underdog and star change roles in the long (historical) haul. Plato makes Socrates narrate the entire dialogue named after Protagoras. This way the comic staging of Socrates as the philosophical underdog, the reluctant teacher, the anti-professor, together with the farce-like misrecognition of him by the student looking for the true master, is transformed from the crudest form of comic gag into the philosophical irony of Socratic self-presentation. In contrast with the Socratic figure of self-deprecation, the figure of Protagoras is staged as the boaster. He professes knowledge, claims this knowledge to be the best instrument for achieving the good life in the polis, and asserts himself to be its best teacher. Accordingly, he promises the professional transference of his knowledge to his pupil, which transaction he will be paid for in the value the student swears to the gods he received.

Thus the dramatic situation is set up from the start with the ironic doubling of the teacher figure according to the old comic tradition of juxtaposing the underdog

(*eirôn*) and the boaster (*alazôn*). The pupil searching for true education ends up listening to both. What makes up his education is, in fact, the competitive interaction (*agon*) between Socrates and the sophist. The argument about higher education that is unfolding in front of the student is the joint work of the anti-teacher and the professional teacher so much so that the two exchange positions and unwittingly end up with each other's original argument. The initial argumentative position of Socrates in the dialogue is that what would be worth teaching (virtue) is not teachable. Protagoras, on the other hand, claims that he possesses the professional know-how of improving men morally yet is uncomfortable with the thesis that follows from his conviction, namely that virtue is knowledge. At the end of the dialogue Socrates envisions what a neutral bystander would say at the spectacle of their absurd interaction.

What an absurd pair you are, Socrates and Protagoras. One of you, having said at the beginning that virtue is not teachable, now is bent upon contradicting himself by trying to demonstrate that everything is knowledge — justice, temperance, and courage alike — which is the best way to prove that virtue *is* teachable. If virtue were something other than knowledge, as Protagoras tried to prove, obviously it could not be taught. But if it turns out to be, as a single whole, knowledge — which is what you are urging, Socrates — then it will be most surprising if it cannot be taught. Protagoras, on the other hand, who at the beginning supposed it to be teachable, now on the contrary seems to be bent on showing that it is almost anything rather than knowledge, and this would make it least likely to be teachable. (*Protagoras* 361a5–c3)

At the end of the dialogue between our absurd pair, therefore, we are left with an unsolved and insolvable dilemma that virtue is both teachable and not teachable or, in other words, that teaching is both a professional activity (*techne*) and an activity never to be professionalized. Moral education is caught up between sophist craft (*techne*) and Socratic charisma.

THE APORIA OF HIGHER LEARNING

The *aporia* of teaching corresponds to an *aporia* of learning, as Socrates is quick to bring it to the young Athenian's attention. What gives away the crisis of the new higher education from the point of view of the learner is the blush that Socrates teases out of the eager youth as they walk around in the courtyard waiting for daybreak and a more appropriate time to visit Protagoras.

And if you faced the further question, What do you yourself hope to become by your association with Protagoras?

He blushed at this — there was already a streak of daylight to betray him — and replied, If this is like the other cases, I must say "to become a sophist."

But wouldn't a man like you be ashamed, said I, to face your fellow countrymen as a Sophist?

If I am to speak my real mind, I certainly should. (*Protagoras* 311e7–312a7)

The young nobleman cannot wait to become a student of the sophists, yet he is blushing at the thought of learning in order to become a professional; he is torn between professionalism and its opposite: nobility. Aristocratic and bourgeois ideals are crashing in his blush.

If it is so shameful for a nobleman to seek the new education, then what is the force that, overriding shame, can compel Hyppocrates, the young nobleman, to

become a student of a sophist? Is noble learning possible as the result of professional teaching if (as Aristotle claims) learning and teaching are but two sides of the same coin? On the other hand, what would it mean for teaching to be noble, as opposed to professional activity? Would that be Socratic education? Socrates is ready to give a chance for the new learning by offering a definition, which lets the learner (yet not the teacher) off the hook of professionalism.

Perhaps then this is not the kind of instruction you expect to get from Protagoras, but rather the kind you got from the schoolmasters who taught you letters and music and gymnastics. You didn't learn these for professional purposes, to become a practitioner, but in the way of liberal education, as a layman and a gentleman should. (*Protagoras* 312a8–b4).

This, I take it, is the first documentation of the idea of higher education. Socrates's definition for the new education is: general learning extended into adulthood. Higher education is understood to be the kind of education beyond primary and secondary schooling that is not a preparation for a vocation or for a trade, namely, liberal learning. The absolute novelty of the idea of the extended liberal education, a *paideia* for the polis concerning strictly non-professional purposes, is obvious from both the comical excitement of the Athenian youth and Socrates's treatment of it as something that has not yet been examined and properly understood because of its very fresh occurrence.⁴

LIBERALITY AND HIGHER LEARNING

The young man and Socrates as well as Protagoras — after the desired introduction takes place — all agree that the new *paideia* has to be *enkuklios*, that is, general. The fulcrum of the definition of the new higher learning seems to be for the ancients, as it remains to be for the moderns, the principle of generality. The *enkuklios paideia* continues its life in Roman antiquity under the name of *artes liberales* (free disciplines), which in turn serves as the Latin origin of the English terms “liberal arts” and “liberal education.” The appearance of the notion of freedom or liberality connected with the principle of generality could seem incongruous at first but the confusion can be easily cleared. Both generality and liberality can be brought under the semantic horizon of the word “*enkuklios*” in the expression “*enkuklios paideia*.” Most commonly “*enkuklios*” is understood as referring to the scope of learning. This interpretation is supported by Protagoras's description of the typical students of the sophist *enkuklios paideia* as “young men, who have deliberately turned their backs on specialization” (*Protagoras* 318e1). In this context, *enkuklios* refers to “broad learning” as opposed to specialized studies. The modern concept of liberal education adheres to this semantic dimension of “*enkuklios*” indicating an ideal of general cultural literacy and comprehensive, encyclopedic studies across several disciplines.

Notwithstanding this long-lived interpretation of the expression, another look at the Socratic definition of the new *paideia* (this time in the Loeb edition)⁵ brings another meaning of it to the surface — a meaning that is possibly closer to the correct etymological root of “*enkuklios*.” Socrates's emphasis becomes clearer in this translation: the novelty of higher education lies not in its scope, that is, not in the “what” but in the “how” of learning. He argues that the same range of subjects can

be taken “not in the technical way, with a view of becoming a professional [*demiourgos*], but for education’s sake [*epi paideia*], as befits a private gentleman.”⁶ In this understanding of *paideia*, the other meaning of *enkuklios* is implied: not the quality of moving across an encyclopedic range of subjects, but rather the quality of free movement among the citizens of the polis. In fact, this is the meaning that the Latin expression ‘*artes liberales*’ follows: disciplines suitable for those who are free from the care of a profession. If we thus take the meaning of “liberal” in the sense of being anti-professional it will include both the freedom from the burthen of professional purpose and the non-specialized, general nature of studies. Once we agreed, however, that purposelessness is the central and unavoidable element of the definition of higher education, one has to face the fact how much this contradicts common sense.

Socrates’s juxtaposition of the two ways of learning — one with the purpose of making a living as a professional, the other not as a means but as an end in itself — is a decisive moment in the history of ideas. It opens questions that have never ceased to perplex. For instance, the implied hierarchy hinting at the superiority of education for education’s sake over instrumental learning immediately strikes one as immensely problematic morally and politically. Who is paying for the leisure of learning for learning’s sake? On one hand, the university as a concept can only be defined meaningfully in an opposition with instrumental learning, on the other, this fact leaves it vulnerable to demands that the university justify its social and economic utility. The ambivalent position of university education at all times stems from its original Socratic juxtaposition with the principles of utility, purposefulness, or even application. Higher learning as defined by Socrates is the extension of leisure (*skholê*) throughout the entire life of adult citizens. This means that the adult citizens of Athens are to shun utility for nobility; that they are not to care more for financial and social advancement than for their soul. How could Socrates, the commoner, the father, the head of a household, have such expectations?

His educational expectation seems outrageous only if viewed in itself like the posture of a person pressing against a wall that is not visible. Socratic education, indeed, only make sense if one also regards what it presses against, what it balances out: the sophist understanding of liberal education as a new technology by which social and financial success is guaranteed. Higher education, therefore, is to be conceptualized as a coincidence of opposing philosophical attitudes: of the Socratic elenchus (that resists assertion, professionalism, positivism) and the sophistic assertive professionalism. Both of these modes are necessary for the dynamics of higher education and they cannot exist without each other. On the one hand, the Socratic elenchus has no content to refute without the assertive professionalism of the Sophists; on the other, the drive of the sophistic professional self-seeking is blind without the reflective work of Socratic elenchus. In contemporary terms, the more developed the bureaucratic, institutional, professional character of higher education is, the more effective it is in professional terms, the less Socratic it will be; it will lack the non-institutional charisma that makes education worthwhile. Yet, if the Socratic

charisma is allowed to dominate, it will be to the detriment of professionalism, as well as institutional and bureaucratic efficiency.

THE TRIPARTITE ARTICULATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION:
UTILITY, EXCELLENCE, AND HIGHER KNOWLEDGE

One is long used to the thought that there is no Socrates without Plato. The argument above, however, claims that prior to that there is no Socrates without Protagoras. And, there is also no Plato without Protagoras. Socrates, Protagoras, and Plato together form the first philosophical alphabet that is able to spell out the problem of moral philosophy: Can people be made better by education? Is virtue teachable; is virtue transferable by means of reasoning? Is virtue knowledge? The articulation of this alphabet depends on the distinctive features between each pair of its three elements. Firstly, the contrast between Protagoras and Socrates spells out the difference between knowledge produced instrumentally as opposed to knowledge that comes about without a purpose. Secondly, there is the contrast between the conception held both by Socrates and Protagoras that reasoning is a human production of knowledge and Plato's conception of reason as the correct representation of truth. Protagoras and Socrates might disagree about whether learning should be instrumental or pursued for its own sake, but they certainly agree (in contrast to Plato) that knowledge is not eternally given, to be found by those luckily kissed by the Muses, but is being produced in the process of learning. Therefore, each one of the three is a foil to both of the others; the three philosophical positions that form the first articulation of the problem of moral education come into being relative to each other and contrasting each other. Anachronistically, Plato's educational conservatism serves as a foil to Protagoras's educational revolution (the sophist Enlightenment) even if Plato emerges as the leading apologist of the traditional aristocratic order only after Protagoras's death.⁷

The organizing metaphor of Plato's theory of knowledge is visual perception of reflections of external forms. In contrast, the Socratic metaphor for knowledge is the process of ontogeny from conception through gestation to giving birth. The two conceptions sharply differ: knowledge understood as production has the autonomous capacity to bring something forth that hitherto has not existed — and hence has a radically temporal (and personal) nature — while speculative knowledge, as Plato claims, is a copy or reflection of timeless external truths. By this difference of epistemology Plato and Socrates are strongly divided and this division serves well as a guide in sorting out the Platonic thoughts from the Socratic ones in the dialogues.

Accordingly, the contrasts between the Platonic and the Socratic educational and moral philosophy can be delineated from their different epistemological underpinnings. Learning, for Plato, consists of a passive reflection of externally given truths in the learner's mind, that is, that it emanates from the objective externality toward the subjective internality. The direction in the model of Socratic learning is just the opposite: knowledge emanates from a particular mind at work. For Socrates, therefore, learning is personal so much so that it is inseparably bound up with self-knowledge. Any knowledge produced in the process of learning is rooted in the unique character (*ethos*) of the thinking subject. There is no anonymous

knowledge — it is always someone's knowledge, always someone's baby that Socrates as a midwife helps to deliver.

Knowledge in the Socratic view pertains to ethos: it is ethical. The Socratic programme of "virtue is knowledge" understood this way (that is that knowledge always pertains to ethos) is simply a gentler formulation of Protagoras's epistemological perspectivism that denies the anonymity of knowledge including that of demonstrative reasoning. Socrates thus can hardly be told apart from Protagoras as far as their theory of knowledge is concerned. Their revolutionary stance is perceived by the Athenian state as a provocation: Protagoras's books are burnt and he is forced to flee Athens under the threat of execution, a fate Socrates refuses to escape. Protagoras and Socrates together induce an epistemological revolution that introduces knowledge as human production while the youngest of them, Plato (or rather "Plato" in Plato) with his idea-lore, conserves the pre-revolutionary traditional epistemology, claiming that true knowledge is timeless and divine in origin by giving it a philosophical, more precisely, a metaphysical foundation. Despite their antagonism manifested in the dilemma whether virtue is teachable as a *techne* or not, Protagoras and Socrates find themselves in the same camp opposing the dictum of Platonic idealism that true knowledge is timeless and external and only revealed to men of excellence.

If virtue is knowledge, then education must be (at least) a quasi-*techne*⁸ with specialized power to effect moral improvement in human beings. Platonic epistemology, however, does not allow a philosophical conceptualization of education, especially not as a quasi-*techne*. "Plato" can be identified in Plato by the thoughts, which imply that no education, no human institution or single individual can serve as the origin of true knowledge and virtue; the origin has to be divine, timeless, and unchangeable. "Plato" in Plato holds that true knowledge and virtue ultimately depend on good birth and not on human effort, that is, learning. This is an aristocratic theory of education that can be understood either as metaphysical or as biological (racial) or their dangerous mixture. It is this "Plato" in Plato that will fall while Protagoras rises in the chiasmic movement created by the seesaw of the history of ideas.⁹ Socrates, just like Plato, rejects the sophistic practice of education as *techne* (mechanical production or craft), yet admits its analogy with medicine that is an activity in which *techne* is limited by nature, chance, character, charisma, and habit.

In sum: Plato denies that teaching could produce virtue or truth. Teaching, according to him, does not produce but only cultivates excellence in those who are born with it. The metaphor for teaching underlying Plato's educational ideas in the *Republic* is breeding. Protagoras, on the other hand, dedicates his life to teaching as a profession; he believes, not only that he can improve human beings, but also that he possesses the guarantees of doing so in form of his professional skills, that is, what he calls his *techne* of politics. Socrates sacrifices his life for teaching, for trying to improve human beings, yet he vehemently denies that he is a teacher. He has no pupils, not a single one, he declares in his trial in the presence of many (including Plato) who probably think otherwise. Socrates refuses to be seen as a teacher because he sees no possibilities for professional guarantees for the improvement of a human

being even if he is ready to die for it. Socratic teaching is a quintessentially non-professional activity like Olympic sportsmanship. He says in his apology that the fair sentencing in his trial would be to order the state to give him an unconditional living for his dedicated un-professional service to his community the same way Olympic athletes are in the care of the state independently of whether they actually succeed or not in the races. The three positions correspond with the three possible aims of education as mapped by Aristotle's quandary: "The existing practice [of education] is perplexing; no one knows on what principle we should proceed — should the useful in life, or should excellence, or should the higher knowledge, be the aim of our training? — all three options have been entertained."¹⁰ Excellence is the aristocratic value promoted in Plato's elite breeding. Usefulness is the bourgeois value that drives the sophist educational philosophy. The only concern Socratic educational philosophy admits is the prodigious achievement of higher knowledge in which virtue and knowledge coincide. Yet, one can see the Socratic aim of higher knowledge as an intellectualization of aristocratic excellence and the ultimate object of Protagoras's bourgeois self-advancement as the social-economic status of aristocracy. Therefore, Plato's "excellence" could be the motivation for both "utility" and "higher knowledge." One hinge on which the philosophy of education turns is between Socrates and the Sophists. Its other hinge is between Socrates and Plato. Let us picture then the philosophy of education as a triptych with two smaller outer panels hinging as wings on the two sides of a larger middle part, which is entirely covered when the outer panels are folded.

1. All quotations from Plato's dialogues in the text are taken from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

2. After his early frustration with physical investigations, Socrates has concluded that it is impossible to grasp intellectually anything in the incessantly moving phenomenal world. Instead he escapes to the art (*techné*) of logos. This in itself does not differentiate from but rather connects him with Protagoras and the sophists. The linguistic-moral turn of philosophy is a shared project of Socrates and the sophists (*Phaedo* 99e–100e).

3. Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 45.

4. "The earliest examples of its (*paideia*) use show that at the beginning of the fifth century it still had the narrow meaning of 'child-rearing' and practically nothing of its later, higher sense." Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol.1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 5.

5. Plato, *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthdemus*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991)

6. Loeb, 312a8–b4

7. "Basically, Plato's philosophy is a reincarnation of the religious spirit of earlier Greek education, from Homer to the tragedians: by going behind the ideal of the sophists, he went beyond it," Jaeger, 302–303.

8. For a comprehensive discussion of the *techné politike* see: Eugene Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

9. W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

10. Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 1337a40–1337b1.