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"TIMELY" MUSINGS ON THE CONCEPT OF MATURITY
or, How age influences the teaching and acquisition of the virtues

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1. The specificity of virtue to the subject in which it inheres

A clear teaching of classical Greek ethics is the specificity of virtue to the subject in which it inheres. We understand by the word "subject" the corporeal or spiritual potency which virtue invests, or the *suppositum* which it integrally perfects —the human person—. The relationship established is not at all simple: when a good habit contributes directly to the betterment of a certain faculty, it likewise produces —obliquely— a qualitative increase in the subject of which it is an attribute. Later on we shall show how virtue does not only not cause the distortion or fragmentation of the many human operative faculties, but on the contrary, it consolidates them, fostering their dynamic and vital unity.

In what refers to concrete and individual men, each one with his necessary charge of the circumstantial, both Plato and Aristotle take care of distinguishing between the young and the old. At the same time, they take pains to describe the virtue or ἀρετή (originally, a morally neutral quality, a mere trait in which one excels) which characterizes each of these age groups. Among the young they include those who still have not shown sufficient signs of the use of reason, those who are in the midst of their learning process, and those in whom visible traces of physical maturity have not yet appeared. On the other hand, among the old they count those of an advanced age and now close to death, those whose memory has already begun to falter, and above all, those who, after a long and fruitful life, seem drunk with the liquor of wisdom and experience.

The *loci* in which Plato mentions the virtues characteristic of youth are very numerous, and in many of them, he explicitly draws a contrast

with the temperament and behavior proper to people of an advanced age. As we have earlier indicated with regard to virtues, they are usually the result of morally indifferent observations in which the distinctive mode of functioning or the generalized predisposition of every group of people —the young and the old in this particular case— simply comes to fore.

The *Apology* narrates the court proceedings between Socrates and the sophists, represented by Meletus, Anytus and Lycon.[1] We read as one of the principal accusations against Socrates that of unjustly taking advantage of the weaknesses of the youth.[2] Among these weaknesses, their credulity and gullibleness are singled out. Nevertheless, Socrates points out that his opponents are guilty of the same faults that he is being accused of, due to their efforts of widespread calumny against him among the youth:

> And they are many, and their charges against me are of ancient date, and they were made by them in the days when you were more impressible than you are now —in childhood, or it may have been in youth— and the cause when heard went by default, for there was none to answer.[3]

Meletus is tagged "reckless and impudent", since he has presented his accusation "in a spirit of wantonness and youthful bravado,"[4] riddling it with all sorts of contradictions.[5] Socrates, on the other hand, in articulating his own defense, strives to be serene and to avoid expressions which

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[1] Cf. *Apology* 23e.

[2] Cf. *Apology* 24 b: "Socrates is a doer of evil, who corrupts the youth; and who does not believe in the gods of the state, but has other new divinities of his own." In the *Euthyphro* we find a very enlightening note regarding this accusation formulated by Meletus. It is but fitting to occupy oneself primarily with the youth —here Socrates and the sophists coincide—; but whether that interest translates to their proper education and betterment, and not in their corruption is the controversial issue: "Of all our political men he is the only one who seems to me to begin in the right way, with the cultivation of virtue in youth; like a good husbandman, he makes the young shoots his first care, and clears away us who are the destroyers of them." (*Euthyphro* 2d–3a).

[3] *Apology* 18c.

[4] *Apology* 26e.

[5] Cf. *Apology* 27a: "I shall see whether the wise Socrates will discover my facetious contradiction, or whether I shall be able to deceive him and the rest of them. For he certainly does appear to me to contradict himself in the indictment as much as if he had said that Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods, and yet of believing in them..."

incite strong feelings thereby obfuscating the truth: "At my time of life I ought not to be appearing before you, O men of Athens, in the character of a juvenile orator—let no one expect it of me."[6]

With his more than sixty years and with death now imminent, he considers himself to be a guardian of the prophetic gift,[7] one of the ancient forms of wisdom.

Socrates discusses for the first time the problem of the unity of virtues and their epistemic nature with a study of courage or valor in the *Laches*. Once more he reflects on the differences in virtue between the young and the old. Lysimachus asks the able and veteran generals, Laches and Nicias, their "opinion about this art of fighting in armor, and about any other studies or pursuits which may or may not be desirable for a young man to learn",[8] with a view to the acquiring of the virtue which, for a long time now, they doubtlessly possessed. He speaks with the supposition that what characterizes the young —not only in chronological age but also in spirit— is the "wish and desire to be learning so long as he lives, and (will) not think that old age of itself brings wisdom".[9] Certainly the passing of years by itself does not cause an increase in wisdom; rather, it often brings about its decrease, as Lysimachus laments:

> For I am old, and my memory is bad; and I do not remember the questions which I am going to ask or the answers to them; and if there is any interruption I am quite lost.[10]

At the end of the dialogue, nevertheless, the ironical note is not lacking, since stimulated by Socrates to introspection regarding this particular virtue of courage, Lysimachus himself pleads:

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[6] *Apology* 17c. Aside from confessing to his little ability —in truth, disinterest— in the art of words, Socrates affirms with decision that brevity is an unmistakable mark of real wisdom, such as it was found among the ancients who were then the recognised authorities (cf. *Protagoras* 343b), or among the older people, who were quite impatient with long speeches due to their experiences in life (cf. *Gorgias* 449b–c).

[7] Cf. *Apology* 39c.

[8] *Laches* 180a.

[9] *Laches* 188b.

[10] *Laches* 189c.

I like your proposal, Socrates; and as I am also the most eager to go to school with the boys. Let me beg a favor of you: Come to my house tomorrow at dawn, and we will advise about these matters.[11]

It is but fitting that we find in the *Protagoras*, the first major dialogue in its date of composition,[12] a clear and unequivocal statement regarding the connection, between the age of the subject and the virtue proper to him. Socrates hastens to a meeting presided by Protagoras in the company of Hippocrates, a young and becoming friend. Hippocrates wishes to be instructed from the mouth of the aging sophist himself about the virtue which the latter claims to apportion. Without the slightest hesitation Protagoras responds:

Young man, if you associate with me, on the very first day you will return home a better man than you came, and better on the second day than on the first, and better every day than you were on the day before.[13]

Socrates expresses a natural dissatisfaction with the answer of the former who, "even at his age, and with all his wisdom",[14] nevertheless, smacks of ambiguity. A further explanation then seems to be needed. Protagoras, the old sage, teaches young men like Hippocrates, predisposed both by their nature and wealth, "prudence in affairs private as well as public; ...to order his own house in the best manner, and to be able to speak: and to act for the best in the affairs of the state."[15]

During the second interlude of the dialogue *Gorgias*, marked out by the intervention of Polus the sophist, Socrates makes a flattering observation on the auxiliary role of the youth with respect to the old, helping them in their path towards virtue:

Illustrious Polus, the reason why we provide ourselves with friends and children is, that when we get old and stumble, a younger generation

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[11] *Laches* 201b–c.

[12] Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. IV. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, pp. 213–15.

[13] *Protagoras* 318a.

[14] *Protagoras* 318b.

[15] *Protagoras* 318b–319a.

may be at hand to set us on our legs again in our words and in our actions.[16]

Rather than merely to reverse the traditional roles of *docent-discent* attributed to the old and the young respectively, what Socrates does here is to emphasize the mutual benefit that both parties derive from such an association. The young do not only learn what their masters teach them directly —the objective content of their magisterium—, but likewise, from what they receive obliquely, that is, from the vaster field of exemplariness in behavior, even from their errors or mistakes which are of an insubstitutable didactic worth.

When Callicles takes the initiative in the dialogue, the reticence or the solidly founded fear of the sophists that their doctrines be taken too seriously is highlighted. Under no pretext whatsoever should their students arrive at the ultimate consequences of their teachings; for then they would have to battle with some unresolvable difficulties which would destroy their illusory happiness of knowing. Philosophy is but a game, a madness forgivable in youth, but tremendously nocent for the old:

> And this is true, as you may ascertain, if you will leave philosophy and go on to higher things; for philosophy, Socrates, if pursued in moderation and at the proper age, is an elegant accomplishment, but too much philosophy is the ruin of the human life. Even if a man has good parts, still, if he carries philosophy into later life, he is necessarily ignorant of all those things which a gentleman and a person of honor ought to know.[17]

Later on Callicles shall again insist on the already familiar distinction between children, who are easily fooled since they accept anything to be true,[18] and the careful discretion of experienced men.[19]

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16 *Gorgias* 461c.

17 *Gorgias* 484c–d. Identical in meaning, though not in words is the following quotation from the same dialogue: "And I have the same feeling about students of philosophy; when I see a youth thus engaged —the study appears to me to be in character, and becoming a man of liberal education, and him who neglects philosophy I regard as an inferior man, who will never aspire to anything great or noble. But if I see him continuing the study in later life, and not leaving off, I should like to beat him, Socrates" (485c–d).

18 Cf. *Gorgias* 499b–c.

19 Cf. *Gorgias* 500a.

The *Meno* probably is the Platonic work which most deeply investigates the Socratic method, as directed towards the coming to light of virtue. In this particular case, virtue takes the guise of a mathematical and analytical truth. In his desire to underscore the specificity of virtue to its subject, Meno stresses the variability of age as an element of his first definition:

> Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bound or free has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do.[20]

He shall proceed later on to a detailed examination of the method, paying closer attention to its memoristic or anamnesic phase, without losing view, however, of maieutics. The power of reminiscence, perhaps more than any other faculty of knowledge, is subject to modifications due to age. Children, aside from lacking dominion over their intellectual faculties, still have to develop their memory; in any case, they have not lived long enough for them to remember anything significant or substantial. The elderly, for their part, despite the richness of their experience, unfortunately possess a memory that is beginning to falter, due to the inevitable organic decay. It is among the young that the critical equilibrium between experiences and the capacity to summon them at will is to be found.

The paedagogic dimension of virtue inchoated in the *Meno* receives a more complete elaboration in the educational project designed for the guardians in the *Republic*. We shall recall just a single text, meant to be representative of various passages, which deals with the necessity of imparting, and conversely, of receiving, an education adequate to the age and stage of development of an individual's faculties:

> In childhood and youth their study, and what philosophy they learn should be suited to their tender years: during this period while they are growing up towards manhood, the chief and special care should be given to their bodies that they may have them to use in the service of philosophy; as life advances and the intellect begins to mature, let them increase the gymnastics of the soul; but when the strength of our citizens fails and is past civil and military duties, then let them range at will

20 *Meno* 71e–72a.

and engage in no serious labor, as we intend them to live happily here, and to crown this life with a similar happiness in another.[21]

And to close this brief survey, we find in the *Symposium* —specifically in Pausanias' discourse about love— a few interesting lines which link virtue to age. In the lamentable and anti-natural case of paederasty he observes how the old "love not boys, but intelligent beings whose reason is beginning to be developed, much about the time at which their beards begin to grow."[22]

2. The teachability of virtue

In an attempt to categorize the merely anecdotical, and to situate the apparent triviality —as these tangential references that we have drawn from the *corpus Platonicum*— in its proper place, we have almost accidentally discovered the latent theme of the teachability of virtue. Differences in age —time virtually accumulated and incorporated— are significant to the degree that they predispose the subject to an easier or more difficult assimilation of virtue. Virtue, in turn, consists fundamentally in knowledge. Age, therefore, represents time apt or unapt for learning. Of course, the matter of acquiring virtue through learning is not to be dealt with one-sidedly, as it may appear to have been treated thus far: What do we understand by "virtue"? Are we concerned with virtue in general or with some virtue in particular? If virtue is, in principle, knowledge, what specific objects is it concerned with? What concrete aspects of these objects does it touch on? What are the corporeal and spiritual human faculties involved?... Nevertheless, precisely because in philosophy —which claims to be universal knowledge— every single thought is connected with the rest, we think that it is worth the effort to probe deep into this point, for later on, whatever lights gained shall be of invaluable help in explaining, step by step, other more complex ideas. We initially renounce, then, to a complete and global answer to the query regarding the relationships between virtue, its teaching and its learning, in order to take it up later on and to understand it with greater clarity and firmness.

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[21] *Republic* VI 498b–c. See also VII 534b ff. which collates the plan of studies for the class of guardians according to ages and subject-matter.

[22] *Symposium* 181d.

It is not our ambition to propose a final and definitive (and on that very same account, novel) solution to this inveterate question. We simply wish to unravel it a bit, to acquaint ourselves with the "horns" of the dilemma and to test the possibilities which the criterion of time affords us.

One receives a not so slight surprise when, upon thumbing through the pages of different works of the history of philosophy, he discovers that not even on this nuclear element of Socratic ethics —i.e., the teachability of virtue— there is unanimous agreement. Everyone admits and affirms that Socrates establishes an equivalence —such the more timid— or a complete identification —such the more daring— between knowledge and virtue.[23] According to the outrightness with which one understands this maxim, he may be subject to the anti-intellectualist criticism originally formulated by Aristotle and since then a *cliché* among philosophers. Usually called for as a proof of this assertion is its corollary nature to the principle that no one errs —does evil or commits mistakes— vol-

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[23] Cf. Eduardo Zeller-Rodolfo Mondolfo, *La Filosofia dei Greci nel suo sviluppo storico*, Parte II, Vol. III/I. Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1974, p. 520: "Socrate aveva posto la virtù totalmente nel sapere, affermando per conseguenza che in verità solo un'unica virtù può esistere e che anche la disposizione alla virtù deve essere intutti dello stesso tipo;..."

Francis M. Cornford, *Before and after Socrates* (Spanish edition). Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1980, p. 35, after explaining that the originality of the socratic answer to the question "what is happiness?" lies in equating it to the perfection of the soul through wisdom or knowledge, he continues: "Tal es el conocimiento que Sócrates identificaba con el bien en la paradoja que generalmente se traduce con los términos 'la virtud es conocimiento'".

W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greek philosophers from Thales to Aristotle* (Spanish edition). México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1967, p. 75: "La mayor fama de Sócrates descansa probablemente en la célebre sentencia que suele traducirse por 'virtud es conocimiento'".

Theodor Gomperz, *Pensatori Greci: Storia della filosofia antica*, Vol. II, Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1950 (3a. ed.), p. 453: "Ogni azione è determinata dall'inteletto. E l'inteletto è onnipotente. Riconoscere qualche cosa come bene e non comportarsi in conformità de questo riconoscimento, considerare una condotta come non retta e tuttavia assogetarsi agli impulsi che inducono ad essa, non è soltanto per Socrtae alcunchè di deplorevole: è alcunchè di impossibile."

See likewise Victor Brochard, *Estudios sobre Sócrates y Platón*, Buenos Aires: Losada, p. 17; Alfred Edward Taylor, *Socrates*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1952, p. 144; John Burnet, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Plato*, London: Macmillan, 1960, p. 771; Léon Robin, *Platon*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968, p. 187; Giovanni Reale, *I problemi del pensiero antico*, Vol. 1, Dalle origini ad Aristotele, Milano: CELUC, 1972, p. 282.

untarily.[24] If vice is the fruit of ignorance, it is therefore licit to infer that virtue is engendered by knowledge. There are even those who affirm — annuling the very possibility of causality and what it implies of distance— that to Socrates' mind, granted that his speculation was never carried out without regard to the morality of actions, the knowledge of virtue is, already and by itself, virtue proper. The purely intellectual object of moral science acquires for itself the value of a moral "thing", of normativity.[25] This knowledge of virtue is not merely a means to moral living but is an end in itself, because it constitutes the very morality of the subject who possesses it. Obviously, there is a legitimate cause here for distinguishing theory from praxis, and either of the above from the theory that concerns praxis in ethics. But again, the matter of debate is whether virtue as knowledge is teachable...

Zeller-Mondolfo,[26] Gomperz[27] and Burnet advocate, in broad outlines, an affirmative answer to this issue. The opinion of this last author, however, deserves a closer look:

> The question between Socrates and his contemporaries was not [whether virtue or goodness was teachable], but the much more fundamental one of what goodness was identical with knowledge and therefore teachable. The Sophists were not wrong in holding that goodness

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[24] Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 450; Gomperz, *Pensatori Greci*, p. 451f.; Taylor, *Socrates*, p. 141; Reale, *I problemi...*, p. 283, etc.

[25] Cf. Emile Callot, *La Doctrine de Socrate*. Paris: Marcele Rivière, 1970, p. 66: "Le speculatif n'est pas cultivé pour lui—même lorsqu'il s'agit de morale: il est la morale même. La connaissance de la vertu est déjà la vertu. C'est par cette affirmation que l'objet purement intellectuel de la science morale que nous venons de circonscrire, prend tout sa valeur de chose morale, c'est-à-dire sa normativité"; p. 67: "Ainsi la science de la vertu n'est pas un moyen en vue de parvenir à la vie morale, elle est sa fin en elle-même puisqu'elle constitue la moralité même du sujet qui la possède. Si donc nous admettons qu'entre le savoir et l'acte il y a une solidarité profonde et même une identité (puisque la vertu est une science), la science morale, si spéculative qu'elle paraisse, n'est pas une étape vers l'acquisition de la moralité, mais se confond avec la vie morale..."; etc.

[26] Cf. Zeller-Mondolfo, *I pensatori*... Parte II, Vol. III/I, p. 520: "Socrate...aveva poi messo come presupposto che la virtù, ai pari del sapere, è producibile mediante insegnamento..."

[27] Cf. Gomperz, *Pensatori greci*, Vol. II, p. 463: "In quanto sapienza, essa (la virtù) può essere insegnata e —certamente in quanto un insegnamento così importante non può più cancellarsi nello spirito— essa non può andare, una volta acquistata, mai perduta."

> could be taught; they were wrong in so far as the goodness they professed to teach was just that which, not being knowledge, could not be taught, and in so far as they ignored altogether that higher kind of goodness which alone was knowledge and therefore alone teachable.[28]

The principal thread of Burnet's argument cannot be simpler: if virtue is the same as knowledge —something unquestionable in the Socratic school—, therefore, as with all other knowledge, it would be the object of a peculiar kind of teaching. Among the essential characteristics of knowledge or science in general is its communicability. In conclusion, this feature cannot be lacking in virtue, once its identification with knowledge has been established and admitted.

On the other hand, Cornford, Taylor, Reale, and Guthrie in one of his earlier works, take the opposite stand on this issue. Placing the emphasis on the personal and non-transferable character of knowledge as the total and integral perfection of the soul, Cornford adds:

> The most that another person can teach me is that these or those things are supposedly good, such and such actions, reputed as just by some external authority or by society itself. Instruction can provide us information of this class; as a matter of fact, this constitutes the integral substance of moral education such as it is commonly practiced. Nevertheless, this is not what Socrates called knowledge: I will not know whether this thing or that thing is good or just until I can see it for myself directly; and inasmuch as this is true, such knowledge will invalidate what I am told other people believe or seem to believe. The knowledge of values, in effect, is a matter of direct intuition, as seeing that the sky is blue or the grass green.[29]

Ethical knowledge, properly speaking, is brought about by direct intuition on the part of the subject of values or virtues. Education in the virtues, therefore, does not consist in any vulgar teaching, but in opening

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[28] J. Burnet, *Greek Philosophy*, p. 171. Compare this opinion with that of Donald Zeyl ("Socratic virtue and happiness", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1982, Vol. 64, p. 228): "It is their failure to know what virtue is which, that, in Socrates' view, disqualifies the sophists from being legitimate virtue-teachers."

[29] F. M. Cornford, *Before and after Socrates* (Spanish edition), pp. 41–42. Cornford's opinion here, nevertheless, is at variance with his other opinion contained in *Principium Sapientiae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, pp 47–48). In the latter he excludes all empirical models for ethics.

the eyes of the soul and clarifying the vision of one's disciple, freeing him from prejudices and second-hand opinions.[30]

Taylor likewise insists that virtue is a matter of a specially intense conviction on the part of the will and of a singular apprehension on the part of the intellect.[31] Truly knowing what is good may be translated to mean knowing what is good for me, in my concrete circumstances.[32]

On the other hand, this "personalization" of virtue does not run counter to its universality and transcendence. Unlike sophistic virtue-knowledge which is restricted to a limited domain or to a technique with a very definite end, Socratic ethics is directed towards the irrestrictive knowledge of good on the part of the person who has exercised self-examination.[33] In this manner we understand why the role that teaching or education in general plays is merely ancilliar:

> The truth so "learned" is reached by a personal "discovery", to which the "learner" has simply been stimulated by his "teacher", and yet is also "recognized" as already implied in what the "learner" had known all along.[34]

In Taylor's opinion, such is the inevitable position of he who would later on like to introduce the theory of anamnesis in the process of acquiring knowledge.[35]

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[30] Cf. ibid., p. 43.

[31] Cf. A. E. Taylor, *Socrates*, p. 144.

[32] Cf. ibid., p. 146.

[33] Cf. ibid., p. 147: "What the sophist can teach is at best a professional specialty of some kind (...which may be put to a good or bad use...), how to do something which men in general cannot do. But virtue, or goodness, is no specialty with its restricted domain; its sphere is the whole domain of human conduct. At best the sophist can impart the specialist knowledge, what he cannot impart is 'knowledge of good' which will ensure that the use made of it shall be good and not evil."

[34] Ibid., p. 149. Alexander Nehemas ("Meno's paradox and Socrates as teacher". *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1985, vol. III, pp. 9–11) argues on the basis of a double meaning of the word 'to learn'" (μανθάνειν): as the absolute acquisition of virtue-knowledge or as the mere exercise of a virtue-knowledge acquired in the past. He thinks that Socratico-Platonic discourse refers more to the first, thereby eliminating its factual possibility.

[35] Cf. A.E. Taylor, Socrates, p. 148: "...the acquisition of knowledge generally is in reality a process of 'recollection' or 'recognition' (ἀνάμνησις) in which particular sensible facts prompt or suggest the assertion of a universal principle which transcends the facts themselves."

Socratic ethics as a unique science rises in answer to sophistic polymathy. Its method of investigation is simple, although rich in analogies and moments or stages, such as, in Reale's opinion, irony and maieutics. These suppositions shed light on their object —virtue convertible with knowledge— and explain why it cannot be a matter of instruction:

> As a matter of fact, that virtue-knowledge which he preached did not consist at all in learning some determined objective contents, but rather in investigating, in discerning, in rationally judging...[36]

The unteachability of virtue represents another proof in favor of Socrates' critical stance against some dominant habits and customs of the age, precisely in his effort to base it solidly on reason.[37]

As we have mentioned earlier, Guthrie sides himself with the opinion that virtue, although synonymous with knowledge, nevertheless, is not the object of any instruction whatsoever. He summons to his defense several historical proofs; above all, the controversy which Socrates maintained against the sophists, whose doctrine included the teaching or infusion of virtue.[38] This stand is then justified in the measure that it

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[36] G. Reale, *I problemi*... p. 289: "Infatti, quelle virtù-scienza che egli predicava, non consisteva affatto nell'apprendimento di determinati contenuti, ma proprio nel ricercare, nel vagliare, nel razionalmente giudicare..."

[37] Cf. Ibid., p. 285: "Per lui la virtù non è e non può essere semplice adeguarsi ai costumi, alle abitudini e nemmeno alle convizionni generalmente accolte: deve essere qualcosa di fondato razionalmente, di giustificato e fondato sul piano della conoscenza."

[38] Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *Greek philosophers*... (Spanish edition), p. 75: "Los adversarios contra quienes se dirigía la enseñanza de Sócrates pretendían dos cosas: a) que podían enseñar o infundir ἀρετή; b) que el conocimiento, por lo menos, el conocimiento que pudiera ser compartido, es una quimera. No existe tal conocimiento."

As regards the second point, we have to clarify that the object of the sophists' attacks here is the universality of virtue (and not the possibility that it be possessed, individually, by many). This derives from the scope of its end, which is the perfection of man as such. Later on Guthrie himself guards against similar misunderstandings (p. 76): "Asi, pues, —añadía Socrates— si se puede hablar legítimamente de una ἀρετή absoluta o general, como la que pretendían enseñar los sofistas (no en cuanto absoluta o general, sino en cuanto ἀρετή), es decir, si hay una eficacia para la vida que todo hombre debe poseer en cuanto hombre, síguese de ahí que debe haber un fin o una función que todos por igual, en cuanto seres humanos, tenemos que desempeñar." See also Christopher J. Rowe, "Plato on the Sophists as teachers of Virtue", *History of Philosophical Thought*, 1983, Vol. IV, pp. 409–27.

launches a challenge or directly runs counter to the pretensions of the sophists.

Robin, Guthrie in his later works and Callot opt for more conciliatory attitudes in this matter.

By way of some passages from the *Phaedo,*[39] Robin distinguishes between two notions of virtue: the traditional or popular and the philosophical one. The first notion, determined by maxims which emanate from the authority in a social group and are tacitly accepted by its constituents, is more political than personal or individual. Insofar as it is a custom or practice, it is teachable, almost mechanically, as the moral code of a collective conscience.[40] The second concept, unlike the first one, is not at all susceptible to any form of teaching since it entails an immediate inherence in the thought and mind of the subject. Any attempt to educate in this respect is limited to self-discipline, purification and conversion.[41] In the end, the cultivation of virtue —beginning with natural dispositions and always taking into account divine benevolence— is a matter of philosophical or dialectical love: "Love is, then, the most powerful helper (συνεργόν) in order to elevate oneself in and with virtue, until he reaches that to which virtue is related, that is to say, the idea."[42]

In order to emit judgement on such a thorny topic Guthrie stops to consider in detail two dialogues, the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. In the first one, aside from analyzing specifically political virtue, he likewise sinks deep in the φύσις-νόμος controversy. The question posed with certain artificiality is whether virtue is a gift of nature, freely dispensed by the gods, or, on the contrary, it is a certain usage or custom, strengthened by tradition or practice itself.[43] Protagoras' response, of course, leans towards νόμος (the object of which is teachable); otherwise, sophistry will find itself without any foundation. Consequently, Socrates will assume the cause in favor of φύσις (the object of which is not teachable), presenting objections which, though not necessarily a reflection of his own personal opinion, nevertheless represents generalized beliefs

[39] Cf. *Phaedo* 82a.

[40] Cf. L. Robin, *Platon* p. 188.

[41] Cf. ibidem.

[42] Ibid., p. 191: "L'amour est donc l'auxiliaire (συνεργόν) le plus puissant pour s'élever, avec et dans la vertu, jusqu'à ce à quoi celle-ci est apparentée, c'est-à-dire l'Idée".

[43] Cf. *Protagoras* 320c.

among the Athenians. The first focuses on the fact that, while in matters of teaching and learning, such as architecture and naval design, they admit advice only from the experts, in politics, nonetheless, every citizen has the right to opine and to be heard. The second argument is based on the failure of illustrious statesmen to impart their political abilities even to their own sons.[44] From both arguments it is inferred that there are no possible teachers in virtue, nor appropriate method for its instruction.

The second dialogue, the *Meno*, shows a rare laconic quality since it begins with the following query:

> "Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, of in what other way?"[45]

There are three commonly recognized factors which influence a subject in the acquisition of virtue: his natural gifts, learning and practice. These different elements are skillfully interwoven in the process of reminiscence. Memory, above all, has to be enraptured by a previous and unsubstitutable "heavenly" vision. Afterwards, a sensible experience evokes the still hazy remembrance which, through a battery of skillfully formulated questions and honest answers, begins to take on clearer forms. An activity which in the beginning is slow and difficult, its frequent practice will later on provide ease and deftness. Perhaps Plato is not too original in choosing the constituents of virtue, nor the method by which it is put into act; but not for this reason is his solution to be considered less ingenious.

> Knowledge, in and by itself, of the nature of virtue was sufficient to make a man virtuous; but there was little chance of his learning the truth of it if he had not subjected his body to the negative discipline of resisting sensual indulgence and his mind to the practice of dialectic, the art of discriminating and defining.[46]

For Callot, the question on teachability of virtue boils down to the teachability of dialectic, the latter being understood as the generic name of the method appropriate for moral knowledge. The learner's principal

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[44] W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. III, p.64.

[45] *Meno* 70a.

[46] W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 457.

instrument is reason, motivated by an impulse of ἔρως, the love of knowledge. Through the exercise of reason the truth is known in the intimacy of individual conscience. As a consequence we may say that all teaching, all effort to transmit or to take thoughts from another as one's own is useless; and it will never yield the desired moralization of the soul by revealing to it —through knowledge— the essence of virtue.[47] Nonetheless, even when Callot admits that in substance, virtue cannot be taught, in obedience to the individual character of reason which grasps truth, he does not eliminate the necessary though "accidental" influence of instinct, education and practice to bring about the virtuous act: "Study and exercise, that is, knowledge and its application—these are the things that constitute a virtuous act!"[48]

3. *Age as aptitude for virtue*

Some observations before ending, on the treatment which the unmistakably Socratic topic of the teachability of virtue has received. We have intended to place virtue in relation to the differences in age of the subjects who acquire or simply develop it.

We have to point out, in the first place, the notable discrepancies in the understanding of the terms "virtue" and "teaching". Throughout our survey of the Socratic dialogues, we constantly had to clarify whether we were dealing with virtue in general,[49] its conceptual knowledge, or that of some particular specie of virtue, such as courage, piety, rhetoric,[50] or the concrete act in which a virtue is realized and manifested. In a similar manner, the word "teaching" suffers significant modifications as regards its meaning. One can understand it in a purely instrumental or mediate manner as the commerce or trade of objectivized knowledge —the so-

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47 Cf. E. Callot, *La doctrine de Socrate*, p. 82: "Par là Socrate apprend au disciple que c'est dans la conscience individuelle que se révèle le vrai, qu'en conséquence il faut penser pour son compte et qu'on ne réfléchit pas par procuration. Enfin cette pédagogie de l'esprit rejoint la moralisation de l'âme dans une doctrine intellectualiste du bien, puisque être vertueux découle d'une connaissance même de la vertu."

48 Ibid. p. 98: "L'étude et l'exercice, c'est-à-dire la science et son application, voilà ce qui rend l'acte vertu."

49 Bear in mind the *Protagoras* (349d ff.) which refers to the unity of virtue and the relationship between virtue and knowledge; and the *Meno*, which, although it resorts to a mathematical example, theorizes about the nature of virtue in general.

50 Consider *Laches*, *Euthyphro* and *Gorgias*, respectively.

phistic merchandise—; the transmission of truths and abilities between two interested parties. Another possibility is to understand teaching from the point of view of its co-relative activity and to grant it a certain immanent, final or praxis value. By this we refer to the learning which one achieves by oneself, under mystical-religious (ἀνάμνησις), mythical-poietic (ἔρως) and logical (διαλεκτική) guises. In whichever case there is an inescapable dual reference to the subject and object of teaching. This characteristic is permanently reflected in the very structure of the dialogue.

In order to acquire virtue, in order to think, we have to establish a continuous dialogue, an open interrogatory process. Our thoughts always have the structure of a question and its corresponding answer. Until we are not asked or until we do not ask ourselves, we will never properly begin to think and to advance in virtue. But every question demands an answer, whatever form it might take, even that of silence. In the dialogue, in thought, in teaching and learning, in the ascent to virtue, there is a constant, self-feeding balance between these two poles or terms.

We would also like to underscore the importance of other factors aside from knowledge (from which the question of teachability is derived) in the genesis of virtue. We consider, in the first place, the "brute" natural disposition of the subject, which, in the finaly analysis, represents the concrete divine favor (θεία μοῖρα) which he enjoys. Secondly, we bring to mind the intensity of practice or exercise, through which one tries to cultivate his natural potencies, transforming them to stable habits. And finally, the implicit or actual voluntariness with which the individual carries out each of his free actions—this, too, should be taken into account.

Such is the complexity of the matter that one side becomes as defensible as the other, with respect to the teachability of virtue. And what is even more significant for our present purposes is that, basing our arguments on a sound textual and critical apparatus, each of these positions could legitimately claim a Socratico-Platonic filiation (a masterful example of irony!). What is certain is that although age exercises unsubstitutable protagonism in the actualization of virtue in a subject, it does not present any guarantee that this will be effectively realized. At the most, chronological age offers an easily recognizable and determinable reference (as the psychological maturity of the agent) among the set of factors which dynamically constitute virtue, rendering the process easier, faster and more efficient. Through age, the basic

natural conditions of both the physical and psychological planes —one's intellectual and affective tendencies— are known and concretized; what is actual in him and his real capacity for growth are determined. In the end, age is a trustworthy indicator of many factors pertaining to the external aspect of virtue, or to virtue itself as potency or potentiality.

With the purpose of illustrating how Aristotelian ethics maintains firmly its belief in the influence of time (chronological and psychological age) in the "external" aspect of virtue, let us fix our attention on some phrases from Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. These bring to mind the problem of whether happiness, the nominal reference of supreme virtue, "is to be acquired by learning, by habituation or some other sort of training, or (comes) in virtue of some divine providence or again by chance".[51] Each of these possibilities, nevertheless, is momentarily shelved, and Aristotle tries out another solution. He returns to the previously proposed definition of happiness according to which it is a "virtuous activity of soul of a certain kind",[52] in order to insist, as it were, on the fact that it derives from a double source: interior activity and exterior divine favor. Thereupon he establishes politics as the activity corresponding to this definition, since its end consists in making citizens good and capable of noble actions.[53] And in conformity with the above-mentioned view, he argues:

> It is natural, then, that we call neither an ox nor a horse nor any other of the animals happy; for none of them is capable of sharing in such activity. For this reason also a boy (παῖς) is not happy; for he is not yet capable of such acts, owing to this age; and boys (παῖδες) who are happy are being congratulated by reason of the hopes (ἐλπίδες) we have for them.[54]

We find sonorous echoes of these phrases in Book X of the same work: "It is to be expected, then, that as different things seem valuable to boys and to men, so they should to bad man and to good."[55]

Due to the anti-intellectualist rectifications which Aristotle has tried to introduce in the Socratic ethics known to him through the mouth of his

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[51] *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 9, 1099b9–11.

[52] Ibid. I, 9, 1099b26–27.

[53] Cf. Ibid. I, 9, 1099b29-33.

[54] Ibid. 1, 9, 1099b33–1100a3.

[55] Ibid., X, 1176b23–25.

master, Plato, virtue cannot anymore be considered as a matter primarily of knowledge. It is strikingly strange, that in the end, in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he pays too much attention to theory or contemplation as the "content" of happiness and he admits that this consists in an intellectual activity of the purest form. For this reason the connection between time and virtue cannot be made by way of its teachability, exclusively, but through some other path. In spite of everything, Aristotle does not manage to liberate himself from the dialectical tension between the external and the internal factors for the genesis and development of virtue. We can perhaps indicate as his principal merit that of underscoring what, however, was already known: the connection between virtue and activity, and the relation of both with happiness.

After having tackled Aristotelian criticism, the question that we now would have to analyze is that of the incidence of age (as time internally accumulated and lived by a subject) in happiness through virtue. In this context, virtue is to be understood not so much as knowledge but as activity or an operation.

The child is excluded from happiness because he is as yet unable to practice the optimum virtue. The Aristotelian insistence on the supremacy of the reason over the other different human faculties is unrelenting. It is only logical, then, to infer that the highest activity which man is capable of realizing will not only have to be in conformity with reason, but one eminently rational. Such an activity is, in Aristotle's opinion, participation in political life. In politics human potentialities are put freely at the service of the mutual perfection of citizens.

Although due to his political incapacity the child is, *de facto*, in a situation similar to that of animals, *de iure*, nevertheless, his state is completely different. It is the difference between someone who, by not being, in his essence, rational, will never exhibit signs of rationality —dialogue or discourse— and another one who, although being in essence rational, for lack of age —time, in other words— still does not possess full use of reason. Neither can be an author of virtuous actions, that is to say, of operations according to reason.[56]

[56] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In X Libros Ethicorum Aristotelis Nicomachum Expositio*, L. 1, lectio XIV, n. 176: "...etiam puer non potest dici felix. Quia propter defectum aetatis nondum plenum habet usum rationis, ut possit esse operator virtuosarum operationum." Recently, Nancy Sherman (*The Fabric of Character*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 144) has once again reminded us about the inculpable inaptitude of children with regard to the exercise of virtue and their resulting dependence on the

Since the child is in proximate potency (following nature's due course) of exercising reason and acquiring virtue, we can consider him happy. But we do so exclusively in attention to the hope (ἐλπίς) — based, of course, on peculiar external manifestations— that in the future, he will reach the perfection of reason and virtue. In the present, though, he is not yet happy, because he lacks the perfect virtue. This is acquired only once a perfect and mature age is reached; it is not sufficient that one do a good act, but one must perform the best act and that for a continuous or permanent duration.[57] In effect, firmness or stability is another feature which virtue and happiness demand, and which unfortunately is absent in the child.

The situation of the child or the young man with respect to virtue is then that of imperfection due to immaturity. We know that immaturity is possible at whatever age, even for people who are well advanced in years.[58] There should be, therefore, two types of immaturity or imperfect states with respect to virtue: that of the child or the young man and that of the old. We qualify the lack of maturity in an old person as a privation, the absence of a necessary good. In principle, a person well into the years already has his capacities for choice (προαίρεσις) and action (πράξις) developed, under the tutelage of reason and not solely on impulse. This is, broadly, the determining feature of psychological maturity. Nevertheless, due to having led a life of wantonness and pleasure, of lack of moderation in his baser instincts, a person may become deaf to rational persuasion and have his tastes for the noble deadened. After having reached a certain degree of corruption, psychological deficiencies are already irreversible, and the person does not any more react to attempts at reform through dialogue. Such a person, impenitent in his vice, cannot anymore reach either virtue or happiness since his potencies have been irrecuperably damaged through his own choice and fault.

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tutelage of their parents: "Lacking in mature rational capacities, the child relies upon the parent's reason. A parent makes choices (προαίρεσις) for a child and promotes his good [...]. The absence of fully-fledged prohairetic capacities does not entail that the child lacks all rational capacities; the cultivation of cognitive and perceptual capacities must be part of the child's early moral training."

57 Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In X Libros Ethicorum...*, n. 176: "Ideo autem in praesenti non sunt felices, quia felicitas [...] indiget virtute perfecta ad hoc, quod sit, non solum bona, sed optima operatio et vita perfecta ad hoc quod sit bona operatio continua et diuturna."

58 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 3, 1095a8.

A case apart is, clearly, that of the child. Of course he suffers an imperfection of virtue, due to his immaturity; but unlike the former, it is a mere "temporal" fault, provisional, not permanent. Furthermore, it is a natural and inculpable fault, because one cannot say truthfully that the child or the young man is responsible for it. As the person advanced in years but immature, he possesses the capacity for virtue; nevertheless, whereas the former has "freely" chosen not to develop this faculty well, the young man simply has not yet had the opportunity or time to develop it. This imperfection is not, properly speaking, a privation, but one caused by the lack of sufficient duration[59] (of the years necessary to develop harmonically human potencies and thereby reach maturity and perfection in virtue). To have the capacity but not to have developed it yet to the full is different from having the capacity but already having it corrupted and useless for all practical purposes. For the first one, there is still a well-founded hope; and this hope bears fruit through education and formation.

Education (παιδεία) means the correct formation or development of man's potencies, of each one according to the exigencies of its own nature (this of course includes the attention to the place which corresponds to each faculty in the structural hierarchy incorporated by the virtuous human being), and in the precise moment of its apparition or manifestation. The key to a good education is that it be started early: firstly, one would have to attend to the corporeal potencies such as sensibility (pleasure-pain) and the locomotive (dexterity, coordination) powers; later, to the tendencies and affections (feelings and the will); and even later still, to the intellectual or rational potencies (conceptuation, judgement and discourse). Educating the child in this manner, we hope that when tomorrow comes he may possess not only the internal goods (virtues) but also the external goods (health, riches, friends, etc.) necessary for happiness. If education is the process of maturation, the passage, development, flourishing or eclosion of the child into a fully developed human being, then what is certain is that it cannot be instantaneous, but rather requires a long period of time.

A way of demonstrating the unquestionable relevance of time to what we have called the external aspect of virtue in the *corpus aristotelicum* is

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[59] Inspiration for this distinction and the terminology here used has come from the commentaries of St. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Libros Sententiarum*, distinctio VIII, quaestio II, art. 1, ad. 5.

through the examination of chronological age as an index of rational age or intellectual maturity. Reason, an essential and therefore a temporal gift of all human beings, nevertheless, needs a dialogical-temporal development. And the process of its being perfected turns inevitably parallel to the increase —a real vital growth— in age.[60]

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[60] René Antoine Gauthier and Jean Yves Jolif, in their commentaries to the Nicomachean Ethics (*L'Éthique à Nicomaque*, Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1970, II-1, pp. 75–76) glean through the works of Aristotle a not very flattering attitude towards childhood. Aside from gathering the deficiencies which we have already mentioned —children are devoid of freedom and reason, like animals, the insane and the drunk—, they likewise compare them to the vicious, since they are full of evil instincts which still have to be mastered, and they are always after false pleasures. Instead of concentrating excessively on all these negative traits, we should direct our attention to the promise or well-founded hope in the intrinsic capacity —though still unactualized— of the child for virtue and happiness. Neither is this stand foreign to the Aristotelian mind, since he conceded a tremendous importance in his works to the topic of education (primarily in the moral sense) which has among its prime destinatories, the youth.