

Protagoras versus Socrates

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One of the central characteristics of liberal education has always been its intellectual integrity or authenticity. For Socrates this is manifested in his skepticism and “consistency” criteria; for Protagoras, in his relativism or *Homo Mensura* criterion, which means “man is the measure.” *Mensura* criterion is simply this: what *seems* to us to be the case is the case, and that is all we are able to claim if we are honest with ourselves. Claiming anything more is beyond our epistemic reach. This is an epistemology, which prevents us from making claims we cannot and we ought not. *Mensura* reveals to us that all human knowledge and values may ultimately turn out to be “relative” and that we may be imprisoned within the five walls of our senses; that we may only know what things seem to us and never what they may be in themselves.

Such homocentric epistemology, however, does not have to leave us with epistemic doom and gloom. That we can, with some degree of confidence, know the world and even the ultimate reality from human perspective, and this by itself is enriching, fulfilling, and insightful. Simply put, knowledge requires a knower. However, this claim neither denies us knowledge nor truth. Any knower has inherent epistemic limitations and that she understands reality only from her own perspective. Despite Plato’s caricaturization, the latter does not lead to epistemological egoism. Protagoras’s relativism entertains the possibility of cultural relativity and even universal relative knowledge and truth. Thus, relativism is a worthwhile thesis, which has never been given the full treatment it deserves in academia, let alone in liberal education. I think Protagorean relativism can easily replace Socrates’s brand of skepticism, and function as the motivation for learning for the sake of learning, which Kiss relegates only to Socrates.

Furthermore, Protagoras’s instrumentalism is equally worthy of consideration. Every philosophy has its roots in the soil of experience and every philosophy is said to be the biography of its philosopher. In this spirit Protagoras believes that there is a useful and necessary reciprocity between good philosophy and good living. Kiss’s worry about overemphasis on instrumentality in liberal education is understandable, in light of her correct assessment that instrumentalism and conventionalism have overshadowed the Socratic purposeless learning. But Protagoras was successful in carving up a practical philosophy that neither sacrificed philosophical rigor nor trivialized human experience. He even advocated a judicious acceptance of traditional customs because no one lives in a cultural/historical vacuum.

Yes, Protagoras practiced sophistry for forty years and charged his students big tuitions, equivalent to thousands of dollars. Should this fact by itself demote him to a rank or two below Socrates? Although Socrates did not charge tuition for his teachings, he was well taken care of by his wealthy, Athenian patron-admirers.

Therefore, it's a bit disingenuous for Socrates to look down upon Protagoras who made a living out of teaching.

Although some of my suspicions about Socrates's authenticity are tongue in cheek, nevertheless a few writers have taken them seriously.¹ This is especially disconcerting because Plato has sold us a "Socrates" that is intellectually the most honest and self-critical of all philosophers in his time. I think Socrates is disingenuous when he denies that he is not a teacher. Kiss calls him an "anti-professor professor." By any definition of teacher he is a teacher just the same, and it is clear that he loves it. For someone who says he is not a teacher it's strange that he shows up everywhere in Athens, seeking audiences at whom to lecture.

Another source of his disingenuousness is his Hollywood style of epistemological humility. He famously confesses that he only knows that he knows nothing. Is he serious? After all he is known to have deep knowledge of many fields, including mathematics; even divine oracles have dubbed him the wisest man in all of Greece, and he himself somewhat has accepted it. Only a high-class Madison Avenue image consultant could have come up with such ingenious ad campaign for fame and respect.

Another problem that bothers me is that he is willing to teach only those who are motivated, which reeks of eclecticism. That is part of the formulation of a Socratic liberal education. Of course, Socrates has given up on children and youth because he thinks they are not mature enough for his version of higher liberal education. You have to be almost a middle age man in order to participate in his liberal education enterprise. This is just as mysterious as Kant's claim for moral maturity.² It's mysterious because neither Socrates nor Kant tells us how moral and intellectual maturity is supposed to develop from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood.³

Another troublesome area is Socrates's teaching style. I find many of his practices contrary to Kiss's dictum of learning for learning's sake. Although he is said to have awakened many Athenians from their dogmatic thinking, many others found his style frustrating, juvenile, and a waste of time. In general, his style of teaching is pushy, over-choreographed, and controlling. He is a passive aggressive teacher and philosopher. He holds his listeners as intellectual hostages and forces them to admit to contradictions they never intended to commit, and would not have committed if they were not manipulated by Socrates in such a way. These do not look like good pedagogical practices for liberal education.

Socrates's pedagogical pushiness is evident throughout Plato's *Dialogues*, which upon closer examination sound more like rigged up, long monologues, punctuated only by his listeners' anemic consents, agreements, and canned admirations for his stunning logical performances. In *Meno*,⁴ for example, Socrates tries to extract the famed Pythagorean theorem out of Meno's slave boy. I calculated the Slave Boy's responses in that, so called, "dialogue." There are 53 interactions between the Slave Boy and Socrates. In each piece of dialogue Socrates makes a short speech and the Slave boy gives one-word or two-word responses. Slave boy's

responses consist of: 28 “Yeses”; 10 one-word responses, for example, “No” or “Certainly”; 10 two-word responses, such as, “Of course” or “I do”; and 6 small sentences, such as, “I don’t understand, Socrates” or “I believe so.” Now, do you call this a dialogue?

It gets worse. Socrates, just like my grandfather, engages in public and private shaming in order to force his listeners into intellectual submission. In fact, in *Apology*, Socrates boasts about his shaming techniques. He proudly announces that he usually stops well-to-do Athenians in the city and interrogates them with questions like this: “Aren’t you ashamed that you are concerned to have much money, fame, and honor as you can while you are not concerned with true wisdom...?”⁵ What is certain is that he, like my grandfather, has irritated a lot of people. And that is not a good way to teach them to love learning for its own sake.

A good example of this style of pushiness appears in Protagoras’s own frustration with Socrates who bullies him to silence. In this episode in *Protagoras*, Socrates wants him to finish the conclusion Socrates has been trying to extract from him. Protagoras had enough of Socrates’s bullying and finally falls silent. Socrates chides him for this silence: “What, Protagoras, won’t you say yes or no to my question?” Protagoras, perhaps angrily, barks back at Socrates: “Finish it yourself.” Socrates does not give up and he continues harassing Protagoras: “Just one more question first....” At that moment finally Protagoras tells Socrates what he is up to: “You seem to be bent on having your own way, Socrates, and getting me to give you the answers.”⁶ This “ironic” style of teaching in Greece in Socrates’s time may have been fashionable. Irony, a literary or artistic practice that relies on disingenuousness, may be quite useful occasionally. But for one’s entire life?

And, finally, Socrates’s notions of learning and teaching for their own sakes sound ominously like Kant’s notion of doing the right thing for its own sake (acting *from* duty not *according* to it.) Both these claims sound dangerously like empty tautologies. Based on these worries the following questions may be in order: “What does it mean to learn for learning’s sake?” and “Even if we know what it is, why does Kiss think that it’s necessary for her version of liberal education and why should it occupy the larger, centerpiece of her triptych?”

1. For example, see Paul Woodruff, “Socratic Education” in *Philosophers of Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (London: Routledge, 1998), 14–30.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

3. Immanuel Kant, *On Education* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

4. Plato, *Meno*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 82b–85d.

5. Plato, *Apology*, in *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Hamilton and Cairns, 29a–b.

6. Plato, *Protagoras*, in *The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Hamilton and Cairns, 360e.