

PLATO'S METAPHYSICS OF EDUCATION

Samuel Scolnicov

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Volume 16

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1988

This edition first published in 2013

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-59194-2 (Set)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10006-6 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-415-62553-1 (Volume 16)

eISBN: 978-0-203-10058-5 (Volume 16)

Publisher's Note

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Routledge
London and New York

For Hanna, again

First published in 1988 by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Published in the USA by
Routledge
in association with Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© Samuel Scolnicov 1988

Set in 10/11pt Times by
BookEns, Saffron Walden, Essex
and printed in Great Britain by
T. J. Press (Padstow) Ltd. Padstow, Cornwall.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Scolnicov, Samuel.

Plato's metaphysics of education/Samuel Scolnicov.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Plato—Contributions in education. 2. Education, Greek—Philosophy. I. Title.

LB85.P7S36 1988

370'.1—dc19 88-11450

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data also available

ISBN 0-415-01864-1

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Preface

This is a book about how Plato developed his metaphysics with a view to supporting his deepest educational convictions. It leads from the reaction of Plato's Socrates against the ethical and epistemological relativism of the sophists, to Plato's mature conception of education as a profound transformation of the personality, and to his considerations about education as the development of reason, understood as a normative principle of order.

The factual points of Plato's theory of education have been dealt with abundantly and adequately, and I shall not rehearse them here. My main interest is in the relation of Plato's metaphysics to the epistemological, ethical and political aspects of his theory of education. Without unduly modernizing Plato, I shall try to show how his basic positions – even when they seem to us, on the face of them, most outlandish – bear directly and heavily on modern educational problems.

The book is primarily aimed at educationalists, philosophers and historians of philosophy, although each will find in it, so I hope, something different. No knowledge of Greek is assumed in the text, but some philological material is found in the notes, where deemed necessary or desirable. A general acquaintance is presupposed with at least those of Plato's dialogues discussed below. A basic bibliography is provided at the head of the notes to each chapter.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of Chapters 3 and 6 were published in *Scripta Classica Israelica*; a version of Chapter 6 was also published in *The College* (St John's College, Annapolis, MA). I thank the editors for their kind permission to use this material.

Friedrich Solmsen, Ernst Manasse, Abraham Edel and David Heyd read parts of the manuscript and commented on them in detail. I profited much from my discussions with them, and where I did not the fault is mine. The initial research for this book was carried out at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, to whose first president, the late Charles Frankel, I owe a special debt. Israel Scheffler

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instigated all the stages of this book. Without him it might have never come about.

My thanks to Allan Tuttle, the Librarian of the NHC, to Lea Metsch and to Hagar Rosen for helping me with the bibliography. Hagar Rosen also prepared the index.

References to classical works

Plato is referred to by dialogue, page number, page section and line number of the standard edition by Henricus Stephanus, Paris, 1578. Stephanus' page numbers appear in the margin of all modern editions and translations. The text assumed, except where otherwise indicated, is that of J. Burnet in the Oxford Classical Texts series, *Platonis Opera*, 5 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1900–07.

Aristotle is referred to, except where otherwise indicated, by title of work, book and chapter, where appropriate, then page, column and line of the standard edition by Immanuel Bekker, Berlin, Royal Prussian Academy, 2 vols., 1831–1870. Bekker's pagination appears in the margin of all modern editions and translations. The text assumed is that of W.D. Ross in his various editions of the principal works of Aristotle, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Pre-socratic philosophers and the sophists are quoted by the number of the fragment in the sixth edition of Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, edited by Walther Kranz, 3 vols., Dublin and Zurich, Weidmann, 1951. Fragments believed by Diels and Kranz to be genuine *verbatim* quotations of the philosopher are referred to as, e.g., fr. 3 or fr. 3 DK. *Testimonia*, i.e. reports of later authors about the philosopher, but not direct quotations of his works, are put by Diels and Kranz in section A of the chapter dealing with the philosopher, and are accordingly referred to as, e.g., A 5.

Homer, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates and Plotinus are referred to by title of work, then, where relevant, book, chapter, and paragraph or line, according to the Oxford Classical Texts series.

Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus and Pausanias are referred to by title of work (if more than one extant, as in the case of Sextus Empiricus), then book, chapter and paragraph, according to the Loeb Classical Library edition, London, Heinemann.

Introduction

One cannot hope to discuss Plato's philosophy of education without discussing also Socrates'. A neat separation between master and disciple is notoriously impossible. From our point of view, however, we are interested in the Socrates that influenced Plato, as Plato perceived him. We must then try and make some sort of distinction between the Socratic and the Platonic elements in Plato's dialogues (rather than between the historical and the literary Socrates), i.e. between Plato's portrait of Socrates and Plato's literary and philosophical extrapolation of Socrates' views as Plato understood them.¹

The question is too complex to be dealt with in this introduction and goes well beyond the scope of this book. Very broadly, one can say that Plato's Socrates is that Socrates in the dialogues who is still innocent of the doctrine of the ideas, of Pythagoreanism and of eschatology. But the venerable distinction between the early 'Socratic' dialogues and the middle and late 'Platonic' dialogues has to be handled with care. In the end, the line between the Socratic and the Platonic must be drawn within the dialogues themselves. But it passes inside the dialogues, not between them. In some dialogues, such as the *Gorgias* or the *Theaetetus*, Socrates is a highly composite figure. Elements such as the distinction of dialectic from rhetoric in the *Gorgias* or the art of midwifery in the *Theaetetus* could be genuinely Socratic, but the Pythagorean influence and the interest in eschatology and epistemology are best understood as Platonic.² Nevertheless, as a rough guide, one could point to the final myth of the *Gorgias* and the second part of the *Meno* (from the introduction of the myth of recollection) as the nearest one can come to identifying a watershed between Plato's 'historical' Socrates and the Platonic Socrates, who is hardly more than a literary figure.³

There is also a difference in method between Plato's Socrates and the Platonic Socrates. Plato's Socrates is dialectical and elenctic. He will argue from the premises of his interlocutor and try to force him to go back on them. This means that elenctic dialogues have their scope circumscribed from the beginning by the positions put forward for discussion by Socrates' opponents. It is part of Socrates' educational approach that one has to come to see the shortcomings of one's opinions 'from within'.

It is in this sense that Socratic dialectic is intrinsically ironic. Socrates will always accept his opponent's view, for the sake of the argument, taking up from there. Socrates' attitude to his opponent's opinions is thus essentially ambivalent; he will accept a position in which he does not believe, only in order to disprove it.

The fundamental shortcoming of Socratic dialectic is plain; it is exclusively destructive. Socrates did have ethical convictions of his own, and his method implied some very strong underlying assumptions. But Socrates was prevented precisely by his method from arguing directly for his convictions. These could perhaps be summarized in the double assumption that – against sophistic relativism – there is a real difference between good and bad and between true and false.

Plato saw the limitations of Socratic elenchus. These are made clear towards the end of the *Gorgias*; Callicles, Polus and Gorgias, 'the three wisest among the Greeks of today' (527 B8–9), could not withstand Socrates' examination, and so Socrates is entitled to presume that his own view stands, as expressed in the concluding myth. But no real support has been given to it.

In the *Meno*, Plato proposes a new method, the method of hypothesis.⁴ With his new method, Plato also implicitly puts forward a different conception of the task of philosophy. Philosophy is to provide the metaphysical foundation for the ethical and epistemological convictions which withstand elenchus, and specifically the Socratic convictions that doing evil is always wrong and that no one does evil willingly.

The absolute distinction between true and false, and good and bad, is to be assumed. The premises (in Plato's terminology, the *hupotheseis*) are sought which make such distinction possible, and the premises of these premises, until something is arrived at which is in no need of further support. Plato was well aware that metaphysical assumptions cannot be proved or deductively demonstrated. Their worth is in their power to provide a synoptical and unifying view, and to give support to a philosophical position whose alternative is considered untenable.⁵

Plato was thus led to consider firstly the kind of interest or utility Socrates was opposing to the sophists' utilitarian or individualistic concept of interest. He came to interpret it as non-empirical utility. Socrates had indeed talked of the care of one's soul as something opposed to simple utilitarianism, but he seems to have left it at that.

Plato was trying then to find out what reality must be like so that Socrates' moral and his own epistemological intuitions are vindicated. This implied the consideration of the nature of knowledge and its objects, the nature of the soul as the seat of cognition and desire and as the Socratic unity of the moral personality, and finally, the

relation between subjectivity, as desire and personal conviction, and objectivity, as goodness and truth.

Socrates saw the individual as the object of education. Necessary conditions of the success of education were personal effort and personal commitment and conviction. But personal conviction had to lead to objectively valid truth and goodness. Socrates left Plato the question: How can the results of education both originate in each individual and yet be binding for all individuals? Plato saw the only solution in the assumption that the individual's real nature is not *in* him (in a sense to be explained below) and that his real desires and interests are transcendent to him, much as they are akin to him.

Education was then for Plato the leading of the individual from the empirical and particular to the purely intelligible. As with Socrates, the starting-point is always the world of everyday experience, from where the process of the development of reason has to start. But most people will not make it to full intelligibility, not because they will be kept behind but because, as a matter of fact, they will be incapable of continuing their education beyond a certain point. Platonic education is thus graded and selective; it is a gradual process of clarification of the irrational or semi-rational cognitive and emotional contents of the soul, leading to the realization of the objectivity of these contents, according to the capabilities of each individual. That most people cannot hope to be more than imperfectly educated is presumably a necessary consequence of such a view.

In the *Protagoras*, the *Gorgias* and the *Euthydemus*, Plato explores the opposition and the borderline between Socrates' and the sophists' conceptions of education. The *Meno* asks how Socrates' view of learning is possible, and the *Theaetetus*, a later dialogue, re-examines the nature of the objects of knowledge required by Plato's solution to the problem of Socratic learning. The *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* consider desire and its object, and their relation to knowledge and reality. The *Republic* unfolds the whole process of education in its social context, from its irrational beginnings to the full apprehension of intelligible reality. Here Plato addresses himself not only to the attainment of full rationality and intelligibility but also to the semi-rational stages of education, through literature and art, and to the political management of a society most of whose members will not transcend subjectivity and particularism.

I have only occasionally referred to the earlier dialogues, in order not to tip the balance of the book to the Socratic side. At the other end, I have omitted a discussion of the *Laws*. With all its importance to Plato's theory, and his recommended practice, of education, the main philosophical foundations had already been laid in Plato's middle dialogues.

The background and the challenge: sophistic education

In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, Hippocrates, a young man of good family, excitedly awakens Socrates before dawn, and urges him that they go and see Protagoras, the sophist, who had just arrived in town.¹ Although Socrates seems nonplussed and restrains Hippocrates from rushing to Protagoras' lodgings at that early hour, yet the sophist's visit to Athens was some reason for excitement.

The sophists brought about a revolution in Greek education. Until the middle of the fifth century BC, education had been traditional, and human and political excellence² were considered primarily a matter of birth and family, not of training and formal education. But by the middle of the fifth century traditional education and the customary ways of managing political life in Greece, and especially in Athens, were proving inadequate. The rise of democracy posed the question of the education of political leadership. True, in Athens political leaders still continued to come, for some time, from the wealthy aristocratic families – a phenomenon not unknown in our own times. But statemanship was now considered an art to be mastered, and the sophists provided for the need for instructors in that art. The sophists maintained, for the first time in Western history, that family education ought to be supplemented and completed by professional educators.³ The ideal of the well-educated person from now on rivalled that of the nobleman.

The sophists held out the promise of civic and political excellence for all – or at least for those who could pay. Some of them announced themselves educators in political excellence and individual success. In Athens, civic upbringing had traditionally occurred by direct participation in the city's life. The education of the youth was considered the concern of all citizens alike. Political excellence was not thought of as a technique to be learned, but as a mode of life which the young absorbed through living in society. To be educated was not on the same footing as having a trade or having mastered an art. Thus, it is not strange that the sophists, coming from outside Athens, unable to participate actively in her political life yet influencing it to a great extent, were looked upon with a mixture of admiration and distrust.

Their educational outlook was eminently pragmatic. In political

life absolute theoretical truth is irrelevant: it is success that counts. In stressing success, the sophists were continuing and reinforcing one main strand of the Homeric tradition. Manly excellence was, in Homer, military prowess, success in war and in the defence of one's household, and the skills which contributed to it. Closely related to such success, as both a prerequisite of it and justified by it, were the privileges of a high social position. Obviously, the notion of excellence was different for women and for the dependents of the household.⁴ This aristocratic aspect of excellence is considerably weakened by the fifth century BC, especially in Athens. Out of it, however, arose various forms of ethical relativism.

At the same time, the sophists were reacting against the philosophy of nature that had developed in Ionia and in Greek Italy since the end of the seventh century BC. The outlandish claims of the earlier natural philosophers about the nature of reality had led to a complete dissociation of scientific, i.e. speculative, knowledge from the workaday opinions by which men live their lives. The older sophists did not negate this dissociation, but they gave it a new slant by shifting the interest from the speculative to the practical and the inductive. For them, the relevant questions were not those of truth and falsehood, but those of what is and what is not effective in this or that situation, of expediency, of know-how, of what are the best means to further one's own ends. Even Protagoras' essay on Truth and Gorgias' treatise on What-is-not, speculative as they may be, served them as epistemological foundations for practical positions.⁵

It is not that the natural philosophers of the sixth century BC were not interested in human and social affairs. Much on the contrary, some of them were reputed to have drawn constitutions for Greek cities and to have taken an active part in politics. The Pythagoreans may even have tried to integrate their philosophical speculation and their political activity. But the sophists reversed the priorities and came to see the justification of speculative thinking in its relevance to human concerns.

There is thus no point in teaching others, if by 'teaching' one means conveying the truth about the way things are. Rather, one seeks to convince, to persuade, to prevail, by psychological means more than on logical grounds; for in the world of action it is not the dispassionate logical arguments that carry the day, but – as in Parliament and in the court house – psychological motives and considerations. Sophistic education as a preparation for practical, and especially political, success dealt heavily in rhetoric, the instrument of persuasion and of public life. Some sophists also pursued other branches of knowledge, for the first time in a systematic manner; they inquired into the possibility of knowledge, into the foundations of society, into the sources of language and of religion, into grammar and poetry