

On Thoughts of Socrates about Virtue in *Menon* and Whether Virtue is Teachable

LE COMMENTAIRE D'ESSAI SUR *MENO* DE SOCRATES POUR SAVOIR SI LA MORALITÉ ET LE VERTU SONT ENSEIGNABLE

ZHOU Qi¹

Abstract: What is virtue? Is virtue teachable? These are two important propositions in moral philosophy. This paper starts from these two propositions, through Socrates thoughts about virtue in *Menon*, to explore the essence and meaning of virtue and the issue whether virtue is teachable. This paper also demonstrates that virtue is good and knowledge, which is teachable and can be taught well.

Key words: Virtue; Socrates; Moral education

Résumé: Qu'est-ce que la vertu? Peut t-elle-êre enseignée la vertu? Il s'agit d'une proposition importante de la philosophie morale, il s'agit d'un départ de ces deux propositions, à travers la *Meno*, la pensée de Socrates à la vertu d'explorer la nature et le sens de la vertu et la question morale si elle peut être enseignée. Cet article montre également la vertu est bonne, la connaissance est la capacité d'enseigner, mais aussi peut être bien enseignée.

Mots clés: La vertu; Socrate; Et l'éducation morale

Morality and education have always been closely related. And "whether virtue is teachable" is the core issue of the relation between the two, and it is also an important proposition of all ages discussed by many philosophers. This issue was first originated in Plato's dialogues, in which several articles involved the explanation of "virtue"² by Socrates and *Menon* involved most. In *Menon*, Socrates discusses with *Menon* in dialogues by questions and answers what virtue is and whether virtue is teachable. To explore the proposition, "whether virtue is teachable", we first need to understand the meaning of virtue. Therefore, we will discuss the essence of morality and its meaning, and then discuss the issue whether virtue is teachable.

1. WHAT IS VIRTUE

To discuss the meaning and essence of virtue and whether virtue is teachable, we first need to clarify the definition of virtue. In *Menon*, Socrates and *Menon* discuss moral issues in dialogues. Although there is no specific conclusion, we can see the basic ideas of Socrates on virtue from it:

1.1 Virtue is "one" instead of "many"

Socrates argues that true virtue is a virtue to cover all the virtues, and applicable for all human, which is also the essence of virtue. In real life, the specific virtue includes a lot of things, such as courage, fortitude, justice and temperance. However, among them there is something about the essential attribute of virtue, which is Socrates' concept of virtue. Moreover, this is "one" instead of "many". The concept of virtue that Socrates pursues is of one essence rather than of multiple essences.

¹ Doctor candidate. Specializes in studying virtue ethics and moral education. School of Social Sciences, Shanghai University, China.

² In *Menon*, Socrates generally uses dharma, virtue to refer to morality, so in this paper "morality", "dharma", and "virtue" mean the same.

*Received 17 February 2011; accepted 12 April 2011

1.2 Virtue is good

Socrates believes that to obtain that "one" is to obtain good. In other words, the essence of virtue is good.

1.3 Virtue is knowledge

Socrates thinks that virtue is knowledge. In his view, nobody would go after 'evil'. If someone pursues "evil", then he must lack the knowledge of "evil", in other words, it is because he does not understand correctly or does not understand at all what "evil" is. Therefore, a virtuous person must know and understand the knowledge for virtue, and thus would not go after "evil".

1.4 Virtue is teachable

Socrates believes that knowledge is teachable, and if virtue is knowledge, then virtue is also teachable. This can be proved indirectly by the spirit midwifery of Socrates. In Socrates' opinion, virtue is a concept, not a norm. In fact, this concept is "justice". "Justice and all other virtues are all wisdom."³ This is not directly and clearly stated in *Menon*. Only when the practice of virtue is mentioned, justice must be possessed under any conditions. We can see that what Socrates understands about virtue is justice. Further, to obtain this, we need to obtain good, since virtue is good. Therefore, virtue is to have knowledge. Those who have virtue will only pursue good, except that they are ignorance. Virtue is knowledge, and thus it is teachable.

2. VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE

Socrates discusses "virtue is knowledge", together with related nature of human moral behaviors, and evaluates the moral activities themselves from this. The meaning of "virtue is knowledge" is that those who have the knowledge of virtue must have virtue and a virtuous person is bound to have the knowledge of virtue. Socrates argues "virtue" is "good", and thus the concept of virtue is also "good." Moreover, "justice" and all other nice things are all "good." As long as one has such knowledge, one would choose good things to do and will only choose good, while ignorant people are the opposite. Even if they want to do good, they can't make it. Although by chance they have done a good thing, it is not from the understanding of good and thus it is not good. Thus, Socrates proves that it is meaningful and valuable only to have both virtue and knowledge, so "Virtue is knowledge." However, Socrates has says that everyone including himself is ignorant. From this we can see for the wisdom and cognitive ability, although people can have them innately, but they are not obvious shown, so still need to rely on education. Otherwise, it may result in "ignorance." Inspiration and guidance of education enable people to obtain "wisdom". To obtain wisdom is to obtain "virtue" and "good", and then people can avoid the ignorance and the resulting pursuit of "evil". Wisdom or knowledge is the cornerstone of "good ". Socrates believes that knowledge is the premise of good and is also the prerequisite of virtue. Then how can we get rid of ignorance and obtain knowledge? It must be through education to realize this so that people can pursue good and practice it according to their own nature. Therefore, virtue should and must be teachable.

3. VIRTUE IS TEACHABLE

The issue whether virtue is teachable has existed for a long time. This issue involves three parts: first, whether virtue belongs to knowledge; second, whether virtue as knowledge is teachable; third, if virtue is teachable, then how to teach. We take a look at these problems through discussion of Socrates' concept of virtue.

3.1 Whether virtue is teachable or whether virtue is knowledge

Some scholars divide knowledge into three types: factual knowledge, skill knowledge and normative knowledge. The factual knowledge is at the cognitive level. When teachers state the fact proposition to students, students believe that this proposition is true and there is evidence to support it, and then students accept this proposition. Thus, we can say that students have cognized this factual knowledge. To obtain skill knowledge, students must not only cognize the factual knowledge that this proposition states, but also practice repeatedly following teachers' demonstration. Normative knowledge is at the practical level of knowledge. Normative knowledge is beyond the cognition of the facts, since it also includes practical actions. Although skill knowledge and normative knowledge are both manifested as behaviors, the former is only a capacity while the latter is a tendency. Skill knowledge is a demonstrated ability of free choices after repeated practice, while normative knowledge is the internalization of knowledge, in which practice is an intrinsic element. Virtue belongs to normative knowledge, because factual knowledge and skill knowledge will be forgotten after a

³ Xenophon. (1984). *Memories of Socrates* [Ancient Greece] (WU Yongquan, Trans.) (P. 117). Beijing: Commercial Press.

long period of no touch, while normative knowledge will not. We will not forget how we should practice virtue, which is different.

Socrates argues that virtue is teachable. However, this virtue is built on the basis of knowledge. Therefore, to practice good and virtue, we must have the knowledge of good and virtue. "Socrates' proposition, "virtue is knowledge", includes the meaning that virtue is teachable. The teachability of knowledge means teachability of virtue. In Socrates' view, all knowledge is rooted in the rational and is the human spirit itself, so is virtue. Knowledge is not accidental, individual, but general, communicable. Virtue is also a universal good and it comes from the spirit itself. Education can lead to the rational, can impart knowledge, and it also can rouse, inspire and guide people to pursue virtue. Therefore, education can cultivate people's characters of virtue."⁴

3.2 How to teach virtue

Socrates argues that teachable virtue is from the overall sense, and he illustrates his education method for virtue from the philosophy theory such as "conscious ignorance". In *Apology*, Socrates once asked wise men, politicians and poets at that time whether they have wisdom or knowledge, and they hold an affirmative answer. However, when Socrates asked them to clearly express some concepts that they know, they are all in doubt. Therefore, Socrates thinks that people are all actually ignorant. Only with the humble attitude and awareness of our ignorance, can we suspect things and desire to seek the knowledge about these things, so that we are in the pursuit of true knowledge. In this sense, Socrates keeps spurring himself on and educating others by "I know nothing." After obtaining the attitude of "pursuit of knowledge", how can we obtain knowledge? Socrates believes that people's knowledge, virtue and good are all innate, while people's ignorance is because the knowledge is not obvious revealed and needs to be recalled, which is the spirit midwifery of Socrates. This shows that in the eyes of Socrates, knowledge is "discovered" rather than "invented." The ideology introduced by the spirit midwifery is the concept of education. Knowledge, virtue and good for people are "innate ideas" when they were born. Therefore, what education should do is to lead out the innate knowledge. In the opinion of Socrates, knowledge can not be obtained by cramming. Therefore, teachers should teach the method of acquiring knowledge rather than knowledge itself. Socrates basically uses dialogues to let people think themselves, find their own ignorance, regain the correct knowledge, and obtain the answer. Socrates believes that empirical knowledge is obtained through our perception and sense and thus it is not objective, while rational knowledge is composed by the concepts and definitions and thus it is objective and universal. Virtue and knowledge are innate as good. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to guide people to clarify their thoughts and obtain correct answers through thinking and introspection. Accordingly, we believe that virtue is teachable. However, it is not to be taught by the way of cramming, but by the way of guidance to let students themselves find true knowledge. From this point, we also see that Socrates believes that knowledge can not be directly taught to students by teachers, but only be obtained by the students themselves through their own efforts.

REFERENCES

- JIN Shenghong. (2003). *Virtue and Civilization - from Socrates to Nietzsche: Philosophical Study of Western Moral Education*. Changsha: Hunan University Press.
- John. L. McKay. (2007). *Ethics: Invention of Right and Wrong* [Australia] (DING Sandong, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- LIU Xiaofeng and CHEN Shaoming. (2006). *Xenophon's Taste* (Rongnv Chen, etc., Trans.). Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House.
- MIAO Litian. (1989). *Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.
- Plato. (2002). *Plato Complete Works* [Ancient Greece] (Volume 1) (WANG Xiaochao, Trans.). Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Plato. (2004). *Plato's Dialogues* [Ancient Greece] (WANG Taiqing, Trans.). Beijing: Commercial Press.
- Xenophon. (1984). *Memories of Socrates* [Ancient Greece] (WU Yongquan, Trans.). Beijing: Commercial Press.
- YANG Shi. (2003). *Exploration of Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Beijing: Commercial Press.

⁴ JIN Shenghong. (2003). *Virtue and Civilization* (P. 45). Changsha: Hunan University Press.