Society vs. Individual: The Nature of Education towards Virtue in *The Clouds* and *Protagoras*

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In both Plato’s *Protagoras* and Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, the issue of human nature and political virtue is raised in two corresponding debates. In the former work, the debate is between the philosophers Protagoras and Socrates; Protagoras makes an extensive argument that human nature and political virtue are not naturally paired and that political virtue is a façade constructed over humanity’s naturally individualistic nature. Protagoras’ interlocutor, Socrates, as well as Unjust Speech and Just Speech in *The Clouds*, does not challenge this reality. Yet Socrates does raise a significant concern: if virtue must be imposed on humanity, then how should it be imposed? Protagoras and Just Speech support an organized societal form of education rooted in piety and tradition. Conversely Socrates and Unjust Speech come together in their skepticism of this system, questioning its efficacy. Although divergent in their motivations and conclusions, the two raise a similar question about the rights of the individual in relation to the societal common good.

The first of the debates to be examined is that of Protagoras and Socrates, in which Protagoras sets up a basic framework for the relationship between the individual and societal with his creation myth (320d-323c). In this dialogue, the debate centers on the nature and teachability of virtue and begins with the “great speech” of Protagoras, which itself begins with a detailed myth recounting the origins of humanity. The myth depicts society as an unnatural imposition upon man’s inherent individualism by illustrating humanity’s origin in three instances of divine intervention. The first comes with the gods’ creation of all living beings. They subsequently give Epimetheus and Prometheus the task “to order and distribute powers to all severally, as appropriate” (320d). Epimetheus in turn distributes in such a way that humans are distinguished from beasts, yet holds no superior place over them: humanity is “naked and unshod, without bedding and weapons” (321c). This “weakness by nature” is the fault of humanity’s own creator, Epimetheus, who negligently “used up the
capacities on the nonrational beings” (321c). As a result humanity is naturally weak, helpless, and unable to provide his own sustenance. This human deficiency is only solved through the second intervention: Prometheus enters in to distribute to all the fire of Hephaestus, which bestows upon humanity the gift of “technical wisdom,” allowing it to provide for its own survival. Humans can now sufficiently feed, clothe, and defend themselves (321d). Divine intervention, however, is now no longer a gift but a theft, one that brings with it harsh retribution against Prometheus. This wisdom gives humanity the capacity for individual survival, bestowing on it a stolen “share of the divine allotment.” Humanity has a privileged relationship with the gods, yet only insofar as its wisdom is not naturally its own, but that of the gods (322a). In this way its technical wisdom does not affect any change in its nature, but is more akin to a facade constructed over its own deficiency. This is made clear by how humanity is still “weaker” than the animals and still commits injustices – its share of the “divine allotment” is not its own by nature (322b). The third divine intervention elaborates on this facade, giving humanity the ability of “political virtue” (322c). Whereas the second intervention enables individual survival, the third raises the issue of societal survival and of the common good. Specifically it introduces shame and justice “to all,” and thus allows humanity to finally form “principles of order in cities” and “unifying bonds of friendship” (322c-d). Thus the origin of humanity is told through the lens of three separate instances of divine intervention which impose an unnatural societal framework over its natural individualism.

Since societal life is only possible through the introduction of virtue, it is only natural that Protagoras would task society with perpetuating those virtues among its people. Since it exists as a façade imposed upon humanity’s unruly nature, it can be maintained only by a systematic societal maintenance of conformity. For this reason later in his speech Protagoras recognizes the importance of “diligence and practice and teaching” in inculcating virtue (323d). This education is aimed at uprooting injustice and especially “impiety,” because the acquisition of virtue must be rooted in the pious recognition of it as the fruit of a series of divinely-imposed interventions (323e). To now bring in the corresponding debate from The Clouds, here Just Speech emerges as a natural corollary. In The Clouds, a comedic play criticizing
Socrates and his proposed form of education in wisdom, the debate between Just and Unjust Speech emerges with a theme similar to that of Protagoras, namely the cultivation of virtue. In this regard Just Speech advocates for “good order” in society by means of “upright habits” formed by “many blows” so as to instill virtue in a population (964, 959, 972). Tradition is of particular importance – adherence to what one’s “fathers handed down” and what one received “from his elders” – for it offers experience in upholding the façade of societal virtue (968, 982). Just Speech refers to right piety as well. He explains to Unjust Speech that the virtue of justice exists “with the gods” (904). In this way both Protagoras and the Just Speech treat virtue as unnatural to man, and thus as the sought-after product of discipline, education, and pious action. They encourage man to forfeit his individualistic inclinations for the sake of the society.

In opposition to Just Speech, Unjust Speech accepts the unnatural divine imposition of society, but encourages humanity to work around it rather than to allow it to smother his individualistic desires. This is evident when he comes to the thrust of his counterargument against Just Speech: “pleasures” are natural to humans, indeed they are “necessities of nature” which will often incur shame and punishment from one’s peers (1073-5). Thus he agrees that humanity is by nature driven by desires that are unvirtuous and unjust, and is thwarted in realizing those desires by the strictures of society. Although he does not here explicitly suggest it, he implies that he understands society to be unnatural. This view would correlate well with Protagoras’ creation myth, in which humanity’s technical wisdom led it to survive only at its own cost and according to its own whim. Political wisdom came as a benevolent though unnecessary imposition from Zeus himself which, although it introduced the idea of the common good, necessarily subverted each individual will as well. While Protagoras argues for the benefits of this imposed façade, Unjust Speech points out its deficiencies: not only does it subvert pleasures, it tramples “novel notions” for the sake of tradition, and encourages an impotent “moderation” (896, 1060). Why simply endure this façade when one can work around it? Unjust Speech encourages such resistance, calling on man to “believe that nothing is shameful!” (1078). Shamelessness is distinctly individualistic, as Protagoras has shown: it was humanity engrossed in its own
individual technical wisdom that caused feats of injustice and jeopardized the survival of the race as a whole, and thus required Zeus’ imposition of “shame and justice.” In this way Unjust Speech recognizes shame as the essential cornerstone of societal life, yet encourages humans to not let it define them. He stands as an advocate for individualism against Just Speech’s championing of societal conformism.

As Just Speech opposes Unjust Speech in *The Clouds*, so also Protagoras opposes Socrates in *Protagoras*; thus, to maintain the structure of correlative debates, Socrates must be brought into the camp that prizes the individual above the societal. In this regard Socrates challenges the claim that virtue is “something teachable” (319b), prompting Protagoras’ defense of his role as teacher of sophistry (319b-320b). Here Socrates does not make any definitive statements but simply raising two important questions about the cultivation of virtue. First, society appears to function on the contingency that every person has a stake in political wisdom (319b-d). Second, there are many who are raised by those excelling in political wisdom but who do not themselves attain such wisdom (319e-320b). The first concern is addressed by Protagoras’ myth of creation, as we have seen, for a sort of “political virtue” is indiscriminately imposed by Zeus onto all humanity simply by virtue of their being human. Socrates’ second concern is met with Protagoras’ “argument” (324d-328c) that all are teachers and therefore all have an equal chance at developing virtue. However these questions raise a still larger issue: virtue may indeed be teachable, but how should it be taught? Is it something which can simply be externally imposed on a population, whether by humans or by gods, or are some people naturally more disposed to it than others? In other words, does not the internal reaction to the external application of virtue have any significance on the education’s efficacy? This is undoubtedly an important question for Unjust Speech, who points out that among “the spectators,” there are “many more, by the gods, who are buggered” – who commit injustice in spite of their societal education (1096, 8). Immediately following this observation, Just Speech suddenly gives in to Unjust Speech, exclaiming “We’ve been worsted!” (1102). By his surrender, Just Speech (who has championed habituated education) highlights the fault of such an education, which appears to have failed on a widespread scale. Thus both Unjust Speech and
Socrates are united in their doubts about the perpetuation of imposed virtue through habituated education.

Admittedly, Socrates and Unjust Speech do not hold to one cohesive belief. Socrates’ thought is significantly more nuanced. Unjust Speech is destructive rather than constructive, existing only inasmuch as he opposes Just Speech. Socrates is critically destructive but also markedly constructive. In *The Clouds*, apart from Aristophanes’ sarcastic anti-Socratic bias, Socrates works to correct the wrongs of the city’s education rather than simply denigrate them. He operates the ‘thinkery’ – a mysterious school where he trains his students – which stands as an obvious counter to the city, being located as it is physically outside of the city and behind a veil of “Mysteries” (143). Yet it does not simply advocate for the overthrow of the city, but the education of individuals in the correct manner: for example although Socrates denounces traditional piety and belief in the gods, he does present an alternative devotion to the Clouds, who are conceived of as pseudo-divinities in and of themselves. Of course Aristophanes’ pseudo-religious inclusion of the Clouds is meant to detract from Socrates’ authority rather than add to it, representing his inability to detach himself from even a bastardized form of spirituality. Yet, remaining abreast of the bias, one can detect the greater idea at work: the provision of an alternative rather than simple wanton rebellion. In this way Socrates is shown to take the side of the individual over the societal. This is the case also in *Protagoras*, in which Plato presents a much more sympathetic portrait of Socrates. While Protagoras is a publically renowned orator who attracts large crowds from among the youth, Socrates is a private intellectual. The former sees virtue as being a set of independent parts which are imposed through the rote of society, the latter a unified whole which humanity accesses through a personal attempt to gain wisdom. Thus while Socrates is critical of the societal form of education, just as Unjust Speech is, he is not simply destructive but expressly constructive.

What is more, Socrates at times seems to be an ardent traditionalist. At the very beginning of *Protagoras*, Socrates attempts to dissuade his young friend Hippocrates in his infatuation with Protagoras the fabled sophist, reprimanding him for not first consulting his “friends and relatives” or his “father nor brother nor any of us who are your comrades” (313a). He paints Protagoras as
a “newly arrived foreigner,” suggesting that he is unknown and perhaps even threatening to the city (313b). The Socrates presented here seems to be one completely different from the Socrates described above. Rather than criticizing the educational system of the city, he seems to strongly support themes of traditional patriotism that hearken back to the arguments of Just Speech. This makes Socrates’ juxtaposition with Protagoras, champion of societally imposed virtue, especially interesting. Rather than invalidate the claims made above, it instead serves to nuance them still more. The rift between Socrates and Protagoras exists not on the level of the “what” – the origin of political virtue, its teachability, the importance of societal strictures – but on the “how” of its implementation – is habituated education effective in promoting good citizenship? The fact that Socrates himself accompanies Hippocrates to see Protagoras under the pretenses of helping him learn more about the “foreigner” suggests the opposite: human nature’s innate individualism will inherently be lead beyond the strictures which society places on it.

Thus the problem with the habituated form of education in virtue is that it takes human nature too much for granted. Education in virtue cannot be a zero-sum game, superimposed over man’s inherent individualism; the reality is that some individuals seem more naturally disposed to it than others. This is the case in The Clouds in which Socrates is selective in choosing prospective students for his thinkery, with those extremely tough cases even necessitating “blows” (493). Of course the wisdom offered by Aristophanes’ thinkery cannot be fairly compared to Protagoras’ political virtue, nor can one forget that “blows” are the very thing which the city uses in its habituated education. Nonetheless these are manifestations of the author’s bias which should not be confused with the underlying truth: one’s nature is assumed to play a part in his acquiring of virtue. Protagoras seems to overlook this possibility in his treatment of punitive correction. In his argument in defense of the teachability of virtue, he rightly distinguishes between “bad things” which humanity possesses by nature, and those which come through “diligence,” arguing that we punish the former and thus teach virtue (323c-d). Yet his identification of those things which are naturally “bad” is perhaps too cursory. He confines such a category to physical qualities like being “ugly or small or weak,” not recognizing that nature can in
fact speak to things like impiety and injustice (323d). In short both Socrates and Unjust Speech seem to point out that virtue cannot simply be imposed across-the-board on a naturally unjust population, but must be nuanced depending upon the natural disposition of the individual.

In conclusion I submit that the four voices in the two correlated debates each occupy a distinct place on a spectrum between the societal and the individual. Just Speech has a positive view of societal education which, if adhered to like one’s familial tradition, will lead to positive results. Protagoras largely agrees but is more realistic in his assessment. Society is taken as an unnatural imposition, and it is thus perhaps difficult to convince others to endure it so as to reap the fruit of social cohesion which it is meant to produce. Socrates sits on the other side of the spectrum, though not far from the middle. For him, even though virtue may have been proven to be teachable on a societal level, this does not necessarily imply that it is the exclusive right of the societal construct to teach it. There is something important about tradition and habituated virtue, yet they must never overpower the individual’s quest for wisdom and virtue. Finally, Unjust Speech occupies the most individualistic position, accepting the need for society, yet advocating that man seek to work around its strictures which unduly constrict the free exercise of the human will. The final two voices pose an interesting challenge to Protagoras: perhaps society’s habituated education needs to be reworked so as to take into account the reality of human nature.