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Essay

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Introduction

In the history of philosophy there have been many attempts to define virtues and answer the famous question if virtue can be taught or not. The ancient Greek philosophers struggled with this question in the same manner as we struggle with it today. The problem is the definition of virtues and their complex development. Nonetheless is there an importance to the ability to teach virtues, even though nobody can define what a school of virtues could look like. In this essay we are going to look at the different arguments and try to get as near as possible to an answer to the question “Can virtue be taught?”.

Historic background

In the ancient Greek philosophy, there have been multiple theories about what virtues are and based on that definition how to learn them. The first known attempt was made by Socrates who believed that virtues are some kind of knowledge. For all forms of knowledge there are ways to learn it. So, the knowledge of virtues must be learnable too. The only way to learn them was, for Socrates, through philosophical questioning. But the problem with Socrates argument seems to be that he focuses on the ability to learn virtues in the first place, rather than to teach them. That leads to an important premise as Gilbert Ryle showed in his work “Education and the development of reason”. Namely that “if virtue were teachable, we should expect there to exist experts to teach it.”¹ This argument goes back to an early discussion in Plato’s dialog “Meno” where they discuss what virtue even is in the first place and who would be the most suitable teacher for it. As they discuss this question back and forth, they come to the disappointing conclusion that “such teachers and examiners do not exist.”²

Aristotles attempt

From that point forwards there are two options on how the argument can be continued. First, to elaborate on the question of the most suitable teacher and by changing the framework conditions and criteria for teaching virtues. And second, to even question the premise of Socrates, that virtues are knowledge and the basis, that virtues have to be teachable as such a form of knowledge. That’s what Aristotle did, for example. He saw virtues more like habits that come from repeated action and practice. And this makes definitely more sense, as „we do speak of knowing the difference between right and wrong, but we do not think of this knowledge as belonging to a corpus of knowledge.”³ Aristotle even distinguishes between intellectual virtues like practical wisdom (his famous “phronesis”), which can be developed through education and exercise of reason, and moral virtues like justice or courage, which can only be developed through habit and practice.⁴ On that basis we also have to distinguish between the ability to teach those two kinds of virtues. It seems like the intellectual virtues are not only learnable, but also teachable, as it must be treated like any other craftsmanship. So far there must be some experts that know their craftsmanship very well and are able to teach the most important lessons to someone else. But unfortunately, this is not the whole answer, because since it is about practical wisdom that needs to be applied in praxis, it needs training as well, which can only be done by the individual that wants to learn this specific intellectual virtue. The same premise counts for moral virtues only with the difference, that there is still the unanswered question about the most suitable teacher, that we just answered for the intellectual virtues.

¹ Ryle, Gilbert (2010/1972) S. 434

² Ebd. S. 434

³ Ebd. S. 435

⁴ Aristotle. (2014)

Standards of conduct

It differs, because moral virtues are definitely nothing that can be defined timeless and switches between every (social) situation someone acts upon in. That raises the question again if moral virtues can be taught at all. And if so, how and through who? “Protagoras suggests, though we do indeed learn our standards of conduct [...] we learn them from Everyman in the home, in the streets, in the playground and in the market-place.”⁵ His suggestion comes back to the basic premise of Aristotle, namely that virtue depends on the surrounding. If so, then we can apply any theory of averageness or a golden mid. It seems to me, that the key factor for moral virtues is that it can only be measured by the extremes that occur in our surrounding and that there is no normative list of learnable characteristics that can be taught in only one specific way. And I would especially not assume that there is a way to define a better way of being virtuous, because in the end it depends on you, your situation and your habitus if you are virtuous or not. And for that we can be sure that “the learning of them does not require the existence of professors of probity, charity and patience.”⁶ The last thing that remains as probably teachable is the fact that you don’t give up while trying to be virtuous in your own way and situation. Because “acquisition of skills and competence comes, if at all, only with practise.”⁷ And of course that is also valid if you define virtue as a skill or a competence to adapt to your environment which is the case while learning the standards of conduct.

Conclusion

I conclude that the answer on the question “Can virtue be taught?” differs and depends on how to define virtue at first. In fact, I deeply believe that virtues can be taught, even though I can’t prove it flawlessly so far. It seems to me that the main problem is the question of a fitting definition for virtues and what part of those can be and must be taught. I also agree to Gilbert Ryle when he says “that virtues, like skills, crafts and arts, can indeed be taught, not by lectures alone, but by example and critically supervised practise”⁸ Today we use a different modern word for those intelligible but teachable subjects: Softskills. All in all, I am sure that this question will occupy many more philosophers in the future as in the past and that it will remain with the same importance, because virtue will always be defined in different ways. Nevertheless, I also believe that virtues can be taught, depending on your definition of virtues.

Literature

Aristotle. (2014). Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics. (R. Crisp, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryle, Gilbert (2010/1972) "Can virtue be taught?" in Education and the development of reason, R.F. Dearden, P.H. Hirst, and R.S. Peters (eds.), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 434-447.

⁵ Ryle, Gilbert (2010/1972) S. 435

⁶ Ebd. S. 436

⁷ Ebd. S. 436

⁸ Ebd. S. 437