



Individuality between Destiny and Duty. Platonic-Aristotelian Remarks on Opportunities and Limits of 'Becoming who you are'

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**Individuality between Destiny and Duty.
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This paper aims to clarify how the well-known programmatic statement by the early Greek poet Pindaros, that one should learn and become who one is¹, can or should be understood in educational terms. To this end, the 'Zopyros anecdote' used by both Aristotelians and the Stoics, the 'Allegory of the Cave' from Plato's 'Republic', and the pedagogical 'art of midwifery' demonstrated in practice in Plato's dialogue 'Meno' are used to understand and explain this formula. The thesis is that these schools of thought confirm and reinforce the approach that character development means training the faculties of cognition and judgment. This can never succeed without an individually tailored combination of the elements of character taught, caught and sought.

Introduction: Character Education between free will and determinism

Personal development, like education in general, requires the individual to be teachable and willing to learn. What at first glance appears to be a truism raises, on closer inspection, the question of the prerequisites for teachability and willingness to learn. This brings into focus very fundamental and at the same time contemporary questions about free will and autonomy, determinism and fatalism, and ultimately their respective consequences for the possibilities and limitations of education.

Heredity research, genetics, evolutionary biology, brain research, and neurobiology, to name just a few research disciplines, have fuelled this discussion in recent decades.² The questions addressed were: what is within the control of the individual, how much is genetically predetermined, and, last but not least, how much scope for free will does the brain leave as an empirically verifiable decision-making authority or participant in humans?³

This also stimulated and influenced debates on education, at least implicitly. Discussions about the nature and extent of an individual's educability, i.e., the possible determination of human beings by their character traits, the role of the social environment, and the consequences of these factors for free will, were driven forward by ever new insights and impulses.⁴

¹ Pindar, Pythian Ode II, verse 72.

² Given the flood of publications on this topic, see Kane (2011) for an overview, and Geyer (2004/2016) for the German-speaking countries.

³ Key terms in the debate surrounding the mutual exclusion or compatibility of determinism and free will are the concepts of 'compatibilism' and 'incompatibilism'; see McKenna & Coates (2024).

⁴ For the follow-up questions on education, see, for instance, Rhonheimer (2015), Giesinger (2015), Dahlbeck (2018), and Langer (2021).

For the theory and practice of character development, it must therefore always first be clarified whether and to what extent the set of innate and developable character traits is a determining factor.

In line with the preceding remarks and the educational philosophical positions yet to be considered, two different pedagogical approaches can be contrasted in a pointed manner. Based on deterministic assumptions, either pedagogy must limit itself to helping develop a predetermined ideal and thus a hardly or not at all changeable set of human abilities and innate aptitudes into a unique self. Or this set of innate, universal human and individual potential abilities and characteristics calls for an indeterministic pedagogy that promotes the identification and development of an individual personality as part of a causal network that also includes external influences such as family and social environment, as well as coincidences. However, this latter approach is based on the remarkable and humble maxim that the assistance in character development can ultimately only contribute to *one* of the numerous possible realizations of a specific set of predispositions: Certain educational preferences, family constellations, external influences, and individual decisions or judgments take shape and result not in a preformed character, but in a form of inherent individuality that could also have developed in a different direction. In this case, the development of a character is understood as an option that considers human freedom, its finiteness, and, not least, the diverse external factors as influential elements of the educational process.

I. Character and Disposition: The ‘Zopyros anecdote’

The contrasting juxtaposition of determinism and free will, i.e., of a limited or very broad scope for action and options for action per se, and pedagogy, also brings theological and philosophical aspects to the fore: Fate or predestination on the one hand and freedom of choice on the other have, as is well known, played a decisive role in the anthropological and ethical concepts of theology and philosophy from the very beginning. In the context of character development, a quote from the early Greek philosopher Heraclitus aptly illustrates this: “Character is the *daímon* of man.”⁵ The ambiguity or philosophical openness of the word *daímon* is evident in the various translations available as fate, inner voice, conscience, or divine guiding force within humans.⁶ However, due to the lack of context surrounding this fragment, it remains unclear whether the character is a task, a helper, or a kind of guide.

Even in one of the most influential debates between philosophical schools in ancient Greece, namely between Platonism-Aristotelianism and Stoicism, the question of free will or fate played a decisive role in anthropology and ethics.⁷

⁵ Heraclitus (1934), fragment 119 DK.

⁶ For translation possibilities and their philosophical connotations, see Geldard (2000: 85 ff).

⁷ For Stoic conceptions of fate and responsibility, see Rist (1969: 112-132), and Forschner (1995: 98-113).

This is illustrated by the so-called ‘Zopyros anecdote’⁸, as recounted by both the famous Roman politician, author, and philosopher Cicero⁹ from a Stoic perspective in the 1st century BC and the Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias¹⁰ around 200 AD. With remarkable unanimity, they defend the freedom of individual development against a strict interpretation of deterministic fatalism, as propagated by some representatives of Stoicism.

Cicero and the freedom to develop character

The anecdote centers on the Syrian physiognomist Zopyros, who, according to tradition, was a contemporary of Socrates (i.e., from the 4th century BC) and who met Socrates and his circle of friends in Athens. He uses the encounter to study Socrates' appearance in detail and to make a judgment about his predispositions and thus his defining character traits based on his observations of physical characteristics. His conclusion: the absence of indentations behind the collarbones reveals the philosopher to be stupid and dull-witted, and his overall physiognomy also reveals a great heterosexual lustfulness. Alcibiades, a close friend of Socrates, immediately burst out laughing at the supposed absurdity of this analysis. Cicero initially comments on the anecdote by implicitly agreeing with Zopyros. He concedes that the diagnosed vices could arise from natural causes, i.e., causes inherent in the nature of the individual. However, he adds, confirming Alcibiades and deviating from strict Stoic theory, that, as the example of Socrates shows, this predisposition to certain vices can also be completely overcome – through one's own will (*voluntas*), effort (*studium*), and education (*disciplina*). Cicero summarizes these three key factors in another reference to the Zopyros anecdote elsewhere, distilling them into the concept of rational activity (*ratio*).¹¹ Socrates, he says there, overcame the (negative) passions inherent in him through *ratio*, i.e., through his own reason.

With this clear plea for free will and its status as an accountable and morally evaluable cause of action, Cicero places himself in the tradition of an inner Stoic movement which questions a rigid deterministic worldview.¹²

The Aristotelian affirmation: Alexander of Aphrodisias

This is precisely the line of thought pursued by the Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias, who devotes a work to the discussions about fate and human responsibility that bears the same title as Cicero's. In his treatise ‘On Fate’ (*peri heimarménes*), he examines the sometimes contradictory perspectives of the Stoics and the Peripatetics on human determinism

⁸ For the transmission of the anecdote and a bibliography, see Gerlach (2000: 572) and, with archaeological expertise, Giuliani (1996: 10).

⁹ Cicero (1942) in his treatise ‘*De Fato*’, i.e. ‘On Fate’, ch. 5, § 10.

¹⁰ Alexander von Aphrodisias (1887: 171) in his treatise ‘*Peri heimarménes*’, i. e. ‘On Fate’; see on age dating, the text, and an English translation Sharples (1983).

¹¹ See Cicero (1927), *Tusculan Disputations*, book IV, 80, where it deals with questions central to Stoicism concerning how to deal with emotions, which they generally view in a negative light.

¹² On these internal Stoic differences in interpretation and debates, see Rist (1969: 128f) and Forschner (1995: 110-113).

or freedom, not least with regard to the formation of character.¹³ In chapter VI, Alexander raises the question of the extent to which nature or the character traits inherent in human beings can be equated with fate, as part of his refutation of the Stoic argument of determinism.¹⁴ He concedes that certain character traits, such as recklessness, licentiousness, or greed, often fundamentally shape such a lifestyle, but they are not always and necessarily implemented. Natural predispositions may prevail during life in the sense of destiny, as Alexander emphasizes, but the life and development of the individual could also take a completely different course than, for example, the fortune tellers and physiognomists claimed. So, Alexander continues, the physiognomist Zopyros made absurd and misguided judgments about the nature of Socrates. When Socrates' followers mocked Zopyros with their supposed knowledge of his true character, Socrates, according to Alexander in agreement with Cicero, replied that Zopyros was actually right about his natural predispositions, but that he had succeeded in becoming better than his original predispositions through his intensive study of philosophy (*áskesis philosophías*).

With this argument, Alexander rejects the fatalism inherent in Stoic thinking and the implicit restriction of human freedom and options for development. Instead, he provides both philosophical and anecdotal justification for the malleability of human beings and thus their inherent ability to actively discover and develop their own talents to unfold their character. It should be emphasized that Alexander is thus entirely in line with Aristotle, who in his work on 'Politics', but above all in his 'Nicomachean Ethics', emphasizes the possibility for individuals to become good and virtuous characters on the basis of three factors: their own specific talents, practical habituation, and the development and use of rationality.¹⁵ And this rationality, he adds in Book VI of 'Nicomachean Ethics', as practical wisdom, i.e., in the sense of *phrónesis*, is the decisive factor in all education and especially in the acquisition of virtue.¹⁶ In this short sentence, Aristotle succinctly explains what constitutes character formation and development: ultimately, it is about the development of a person's own capacity for insight and discernment – depending on the individually varying extent of these innate abilities – in order to recognize what is appropriate for them in a specific situation, i.e., what is good or better, and to translate this into action.¹⁷ This rationality distinguishes humans from all other living beings and enables them to acquire virtue, i.e., to acquire criteria of judgment and learn how to apply them appropriately (*phrónesis*)¹⁸, in order to make

¹³ For the historical background of the work, its transmission history, and information about the author and his intentions, see Sharples (1983, as stated above in footnote 10) who also provides an English translation and a commentary, and see also Zierl (1995).

¹⁴ Alexander von Aphrodisias (1887: 170f); for an objective analysis of his argumentation, see Long (1979: 268) and Sharples (1983: 47f).

¹⁵ Aristotle (1944), *Politics*, book VII, 13, 1332a35ff.

¹⁶ Aristotle (1934), *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI, 13, 1144b30-1145a2.

¹⁷ For a concise presentation of Aristotle's concept of character, see Schulte-Altendorneburg (2001: 96ff; and, with a focus on character and emotions, 2022).

¹⁸ See Aristotle (1934), 1144b30-1145a2, where he explains the specific role of *phrónesis*, i.e., practical wisdom, in the acquisition of virtue. On how to define and understand the concept of *phrónesis*, see also Cessi (1987) and Kristjánsson/Fowers (2023).

intellectually, morally, socially, and performatively appropriate judgments in everyday decision-making situations and to act accordingly.

II. Character and cognitive ability: Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave'

In the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of knowledge and education,¹⁹ this development and expression of rationality is of vital importance for character development and, at the same time, is a task that places high demands on both learners and teachers. Plato illustrates this very vividly and pointedly in his famous 'Allegory of the Cave' at the beginning of Book VII of the 'Politeia', his treatise on the conditions for a successful state.²⁰

The allegory is prepared by the preceding considerations, especially in Books V and VI of the 'Politeia', in which Plato has Socrates develop fundamental distinctions regarding human rationality in dialogue with Glaucon. In Book V, Socrates contrasts the philosopher, or more literally, the "lover of wisdom," with the mere "observer": In anticipation of the differentiations still to come in the 'Politeia', he already contrasts here those who devote their cognitive abilities to the search for the truth accessible to the human mind behind the perceptible, and those who, despite their ability to recognize ideas (as the true), are content with the perceptible and opinion-based.²¹ Socrates then illustrates the epistemological and pedagogical difference between the two 'approaches to the world' in Book VI in the so-called 'Parable of the Line'. Here Plato distinguishes and classifies the distinct levels of human knowledge, from the initial stage of the sensually perceptible to the highest level of the purely intelligible, i.e., that which can be understood exclusively by the intellect.²²

And this is where the 'Allegory of the Cave' comes in, which Socrates introduces with the quasi-pedagogical remark that Glaucon should apply what has been said previously about the levels and objects of knowledge to the realm of human education and ignorance using the following allegory.²³

The line of argument in the allegory

Socrates begins the parable or allegory with a brief description of a fictional scenario in a cave: Glaucon should imagine people who, bound by their legs and necks from childhood, sit in a certain place, and can only look at the cave wall opposite them. The cave is lit by a fire behind the people. Between the fire and the chained people, a higher path runs along the cave and is fortified by a wall on the prisoners' side. Along the towering wall, people walk along the path, carrying objects back and forth, either silently or in conversation with

¹⁹ In focusing on the similarities between the two philosophers in their epistemology and its foundations, I follow the argumentation of Schmitt (2012: 70ff).

²⁰ Plato, Politeia VII, 514a-517a.

²¹ Plato, Politeia, Book V, 475c-480a; see Cludius' commentary on this passage (1997: 6-140), which unfortunately has not been published.

²² Plato, Politeia, Book VI, 509d-511c; see also the convincing and clear commentary by Cludius (1997:141-2239).

²³ Platon, Politeia, Buch VII, 514a1.

each other (514a1 – 515a4). At this point, Socrates interrupts himself and asks questions to make sure that Glaucon has understood that the prisoners can only see the shadows of the objects, talk about them, and consider only these shadows to be the truth (515a5 – c3). After Glaucon's agreement, he continues by considering the solution to the bonds of one of the cave dwellers, described as a 'cure' for the folly of fixation on shadows: The freed man, forced to turn his head, is deeply confused by the sight of the fire and the objects whose mere shadows he had seen before, and, in view of his confusion, is initially more inclined to return to the 'comfort zone' of his original position in the cave (515c4–d8). Worse still, Socrates describes, would be if he were then dragged out of the cave and, blinded by the sunlight there, were initially unable to recognize anything at all. After a brief time, however, he would have the opportunity to recognize and distinguish shadows and other images as well as the objects themselves and to see the sky. After this literal and epistemological ascent, Socrates says, the man would certainly be happy about this change compared to the limitation of knowledge in the cave and would hardly want to return there (515e1 – 516e2). But if he were to return to the cave and his old position, he would once again be restricted in his perception for a certain period of time due to the change from light to darkness. And this would earn him the ridicule of the remaining cave dwellers since, from the perspective of their comfort zone, leaving the cave is clearly not worthwhile, but dangerous for them, and therefore ultimately justifies killing those who want to free them and lead them out of the cave into the light (516e3 – 517a7). Socrates uses this brutal ending to the parable to briefly outline his highly implicative theory of knowledge once again, following on from the above-mentioned 'Parable of the Line' from Book VI of the 'Politeia': Overcoming the fixation on the sensually perceptible, for which the shadows stand as images of objects, and rising from this perception of objects to the recognition of the underlying (purely intelligible) idea, and especially the idea of the good²⁴, leads to a consequence relevant to action: According to Socrates, anyone who wants to act sensibly and appropriately in their private life and for the community must strive to understand the idea of goodness as the foundation of reason—despite all the difficulties implied in the parable in terms of advancement and dealing with fellow human beings who cling solely to what is perceptible (517a8–518b5).

Implications for education

Socrates does not leave it at this epistemological and ontological explanation of the allegory, but also explicitly draws conclusions for education and character formation: From the anthropological premise that every individual possesses the capacity for knowledge and discernment, Socrates concludes that education is a deliberate "redirection" (*periagogé*) of the soul, by means of which the individual learns to see and recognize what is right. However, the cultivation of virtues, based on habituation (*éthos*) and practice (*áskesis*), is only possible with a corresponding orientation and training of the cognitive faculties (518b6 - 519b6).

²⁴ See Cludius (1997), as stated above in footnote 22. On the "path from imperfect to full cognitive capacity" according to Plato, see also Schmitt (2011: 91–116).

In his complex 'Allegory of the Cave'²⁵, which is at least partially recognizable in the preceding paraphrase, Plato shows that humans possess a rational nature, i.e., the capacity and ability to recognize, whose expression can protect them from morally and factually false opinions or prejudices and lead to the formation of their character. In a partly drastic manner, he emphasizes that this path of education is arduous and fraught with setbacks, requires leaving the comfort zone of prejudice, and seems difficult or almost impossible to achieve when confronted with less reflective opinions and their proponents. And this path out of the comfort zone, as illustrated by the 'Allegory of the Cave', cannot be achieved without a 'guide' or, better said, a teacher, the *paidagogós*, who guides the 'path to the light', i.e., the habituation and practice of forming virtues and thus the "redirection" needed.

Plato does not stop at this view of the foundations and prerequisites of education but introduces the derivation of a comprehensive educational program with a single sentence rich in implications. Following the 'Allegory of the Cave', Socrates and Glaucon discuss the question of which knowledge or sciences enable the training of rational nature, i.e., the ability to recognize and distinguish (521d2 – 535a2). After the two interlocutors have ruled out gymnastics, music, and commercial activities as fundamental stages of knowledge, Glaucon asks what, in Socrates' opinion, forms the foundation of all arts, rational activities, and sciences alike. And Socrates replies that it is simply the ability to distinguish between one, two, and three to acquire knowledge. Using this simple statement,²⁶ Socrates then derives arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and dialectic as the elementary components of an appropriate curriculum for the education of the "lover of wisdom" and the virtuous – a curriculum from which the *Artes Liberales* tradition has subsequently developed²⁷.

III. Character and the teacher's role: Plato's 'intellectual midwifery'

In the passage from the 'Politeia' mentioned above, in which Plato has Socrates describe the necessity of a "redirection of the soul" as a core pedagogical task (518b6 – d8), it becomes clear once again that, in Plato's understanding, human beings are not like completely blank sheets of paper that a teacher can or must write on from scratch as he sees fit. Socrates emphasizes instead that each individual possesses a set of cognitive abilities, but that the individual extent and strength of these abilities vary, thus predisposing the uniqueness of each individual. According to Socrates' implicit description, the core task of (character)

²⁵ In this article, the focus is understandably on the pedagogical dimension of the allegory, even though the anthropological and epistemological levels must also be considered repeatedly. For more on this and on the political theory and ethical perspectives of the parable, see, for example, White (1979: 183-188), Kraut (1993: 10-13), and Szlezák (2011: 155f).

²⁶ Plato, *Politeia*, Book VII, 522c5/6. The fact that this passage not only introduces the numerical nature of arithmetic and other sciences but also introduces the ontologically understood basis of the philosophy of distinction in Plato and Aristotle, cannot be pursued further here. See Schmitt (2011: 127-132; and 2012: 225-233).

²⁷ On this development and its importance for the intellectual history see Radke (2003).

education, therefore, is to give these cognitive abilities, i.e. the capacity to distinguish and connect, the right direction²⁸.

Socrates' self-image as a 'spiritual midwife'

In his dialogue 'Theaetetus'²⁹, Plato compares Socrates' achievement in helping a student to use reason correctly on the path from prejudiced to idea-based knowledge to the art of midwifery. Socrates logically describes his pedagogical approach – and in analogy to the genuine midwifery of his mother Phainarete – as that of a “spiritual midwife.”³⁰ His specific achievement consists in helping students cope with their ‘intellectual labour pains’, i.e., enabling them to recognize what is right and reject what is wrong on their own responsibility – without teaching them himself or, to stay with the image of the intellectual midwife, without giving birth to anything himself. However, Socrates also sees the limits of his midwifery very clearly: some students do not appreciate the educational midwifery, the guidance to think for themselves, or they attribute their learning success solely to themselves; some students break off the learning process too early and lose some or all of the activation of their cognitive abilities, accelerated by an unhelpful social environment.

Pedagogy as an aid to 'recollecting': the dialogue 'Meno'

In his dialogue 'Meno', Plato illustrates how Socrates' midwifery technique, his '*maieutiké téchne*', initiates progress in knowledge. The conversation begins with the young nobleman Meno asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught, or learned by experience, or virtue is exclusively a natural, i.e. innate predisposition.³¹ In the first part of the dialogue³², the two men embark on a joint search for the answer, with Socrates – pedagogically skilful – first asking Meno about his views on the nature of virtue, pointing out his own ignorance on the subject. In the ensuing conversation, Meno makes several attempts to answer the question of the essence of virtue by referring to specific concrete manifestations of virtue. All these attempts at definition—from the exercise of power and the enjoyment of beauty to gender-specific virtues and the cardinal virtues—ultimately prove inadequate to identify the essence, as Meno must admit in response to Socrates' questions and despite his assistance in the form of analogous examples of definition.³³ The contradictions pointed out by Socrates and the growing annoyance at the inevitable realization of ignorance about the nature of virtue lead Meno to accuse Socrates of not really helping in the search for knowledge and therefore of not being a true teacher. Instead, he says, Socrates causes his interlocutors to freeze like electric rays do, thus preventing progress in knowledge. Socrates gratefully

²⁸ Plato, *Politeia*, 518d4/5, speaks of a redirection of existing souls or powers of discernment in the sense of an effective focus on what is right.

²⁹ Plato (1967a: 29ff).

³⁰ Schmitt (1999), 34f.

³¹ For a commentary and English translation of the dialogue 'Meno', see Sharples (1983), and for the German translation Reich (1993); for the method of recollection through “spiritual midwifery” (*anámnesis*) exemplified there, see the convincing interpretation by Lee (2001).

³² Plato (1967b: 265-299).

³³ Examples include questions about what “form” or “colour” essentially are, to show Meno that the multitude of possible realizations of a particular thing do not lead to its essential core.

accepts this comparison to reveal the goal of his dialogical approach: Meno, having touched the electric ray, is now like one who knows nothing. In other words, through dialogue, Meno's supposed knowledge of the nature of virtue has been proven to be false knowledge, so that Socrates sees them both now back at the starting point of their search. Meno's offended question at the beginning of the second part of the dialogue, asking how Socrates intends to define something he supposedly knows nothing about, is answered by Socrates, with Meno's consent, through a kind of 'teaching experiment'. He turns to a young slave of Meno's to illustrate, through dialogue with him, the path to the admission of pseudo- or non-knowledge as the pedagogically indispensable preliminary stage of pre-judgment for the full recognition of what is right. Socrates calls the path to knowledge that he takes with the slave to stimulate his cognitive abilities and encourage him to solve a geometric problem, using his own powers of discernment and association, a kind of 'recollection' (*anámnesis*).³⁴

'Recollection' and ignorance: the dialogue with the young slave

In the famous dialogue (82b3 – 84a2), Socrates leads the young slave, without any instruction, but through targeted questions, to answers that prove to be contradictory and insufficient. But it implicitly reveals the slave's opinion-based prior knowledge, i.e., his basic ability to distinguish, connect, and conclude.³⁵ In the first step, Socrates looks at a square with a side length of two feet with the slave, who has no knowledge of geometry. The question about the area of this square, which the slave answers correctly without difficulty, leads to the next question about the side length of a square whose area is twice as large as that of the present one, i.e., eight square feet. Socrates uses the slave's answer, that the side length is logically twice as large as that of the square from the beginning, to get the young 'student' to realize on his own that the double side length leads to four times the area and not to the desired double area. The same result is obtained from the 'student's' proposed solution, which is that the side length is three feet. Realizing that the resulting area is nine square feet, the young slave admits that he cannot solve the problem. At this point, Socrates turns to Meno, who has been observing the 'teaching conversation', and, by asking Meno a series of prudent questions, draws an initial conclusion: together they notice that the slave – just like Meno himself earlier – has come to realize his ignorance after having disclosed and overcome a merely assumed, rather opinion-like knowledge, without instruction, but solely through questioning. And this state, Socrates concludes as an optimistic educator, is essential for the resulting need to now find the right solution 'with joy', as the text says, and to acquire true knowledge. He then continues the conversation with the slave.

³⁴ For the historical background and intention behind Socrates' quasi-religious allusions to the immortality of the soul as the cause of prenatal knowledge as an element of 'remembrance', see Sharples (1983: 144-150). In line with Schmitt (1999: 34-36) and Lee (2001: 148-152), I understand the concept of Platonic recollection (*anámnesis*) as a "methodologically correct guide to one's own search" (Schmitt, 1999: 35), which at the same time presupposes the seeker's ability to gain knowledge, as demonstrated by both Menon and his slave in their attempts to answer, their admission of ignorance, and their renewed attempt to find a solution.

³⁵ For a more detailed interpretation of the dialogue with the slave, see Lee (2001:189-203).

Using the drawing of the square with a side length of two feet and the extension or quadrupling of this square to a square with a side length of four feet, the slave and he gradually come to the conclusion that the square they are looking for, with an area of eight square feet, is formed from the diagonals of the four squares contained in the large square.³⁶

As the subsequent reflection with Meno (85b8 – 86c3) shows, Socrates is apparently concerned with two things: Once again, through skilful questioning, he concludes, with Meno's agreement, that every human being has opinion-based knowledge that can be brought to light through questioning to be developed into true knowledge. While Socrates doubts the possible explanation for the slave's learning success through prenatal knowledge, it is clear to him that the evidence of prior knowledge, also in the sense of cognitive ability, means that the acquisition of knowledge is possible for every human being.

Implicitly, Socrates' interim conclusion also makes it clear that this capacity for cognition, as a prerequisite for the acquisition of knowledge, must be deliberately awakened and developed as an initial mere possibility in human beings. In the 'Meno', Socrates repeatedly and explicitly argues that the development of a student cannot be achieved through "dogmatically fixed instruction ... but only through methodically correct guidance toward one's own search."³⁷ This seemingly trivial statement implies not only the necessity of pedagogical guidance and instruction for the student, but also the high demands placed on the educator: Comprehensive expertise and didactic skills are essential in order to successfully implement Socrates' midwifery or Socratic questioning and thereby awaken the student's thirst for knowledge, enable the advancement of knowledge and the development of judgment, and thus ultimately contribute to the formation of character.

In the final part of the dialogue (86c4ff) after this 'teaching experiment', Socrates and Meno return to the initial question of whether and how virtue can be taught. Virtue, according to the first new attempt at a definition, is insight and knowledge, which in turn justifies the teachability of virtue. But Socrates objects, teachability implies the existence of teachers of virtue. If, as Socrates and Meno subsequently agree, the Sophists, as self-appointed teachers of wisdom and virtue, proved to be just as incapable of teaching virtue as great politicians and statesmen who were considered virtuous, then virtue is probably not teachable after all.

However, this line of argument is only convincing at first glance: in their dialectical teaching geared towards practical success, the Sophists are not serious teachers of virtue, as Plato never tires of emphasizing in his dialogues,³⁸ and outstanding individuals cannot, of course, be regarded as guarantors of the successful transmission of knowledge of virtue. But to identify these two groups as the only potential teachers of virtue and to exclude them to deduce the non-existence of teachers of virtue is obviously too simplistic. The further conclusions that Socrates draws with Meno's agreement show that such doubts about this line

³⁶ For this line of argument, see the concise presentation, supported by graphics, in Reich (1993: 102f).

³⁷ Schmitt (1999: 35; translated by JSA).

³⁸ See especially the dialogues 'Sophist' and 'Gorgias'.

of argument are appropriate, if not intended: if virtue as knowledge of virtue cannot be taught, but people who are considered virtuous nevertheless act virtuously on the basis of a kind of opinion-based, non-taught prior knowledge, then virtue can only be understood as a divine gift, as Socrates concludes. This apparently ironic remark reveals that the logically constructed line of argument merely follows a formal dialectic, i.e., sophistical reasoning, and is therefore only seemingly conclusive in its exclusivity: According to this line of thought, Socrates argues that it seems to be proven that virtuous people have apparently received their virtue through divine providence. However, this does not fully answer the question of teachability, as he emphasizes, as the key question of the nature of virtue remains open. In another ironic twist, Socrates leaves his conversation partner Meno after this remark and encourages him to share the insights he has gained with others³⁹.

IV. (Character) education as an opportunity and an imposition: concluding remarks

Based on the pedagogically essential questions about the malleability of human beings in view of current discourses on free will and determinism, the intention of the preceding considerations was to present or recall some answers to these questions from the Platonic-Aristotelian school of thought. The aim is to make them fruitful for the ongoing or yet to be launched debate on a contemporary educational paradigm and for the definition of the nature of character education.

In this sense, three conclusions or insights arise from the consideration of the 'Zopyros anecdote', the 'Allegory of the Cave' and the dialogue 'Meno':

- I. As Stoic and Aristotelian thinkers agree in rare unanimity, it is the task of the individual and his community to identify and help develop the character traits inherent in the individual to make the uniqueness of a person perceptible and effective. This implies the freedom and opportunity for individuals, under the guidance of an educator, to develop their character through their own intellectual efforts, while refraining from developing negative or undesired certain character traits or overcoming them, as illustrated by the 'Zopyros anecdote'.
- II. In the 'Allegory of the Cave' from his 'Politeia', Plato describes the educational process, sometimes very drastically, as a breakout from the intellectual comfort zone of the purely perceptible and prejudice. The high demands placed on the education of individual human reason are evident, on the one hand, in the arduous ascent from fixation on the diffuse to the light and clarity of the principles of knowledge and the intelligible ideas behind the purely perceptible world. This

³⁹ This aporia caused by Socrates at the end of the dialogue illustrates that the aim was not so much to answer the questions of the teachability of virtue as to introduce the appropriate path to genuine knowledge every individual is equally capable to follow – if guided appropriately.

development of the intellect and, in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, of the character is not possible without qualified pedagogical guidance and support and without the active participation of the learner. On the other hand, the return of the now 'educated' person to the people who have remained in their comfort zone in Plato's parable illustrates the frustrating experience of the educator with educational refusal and intellectual inertia.

- III. Plato makes the decisive importance of the pedagogical method itself the subject of almost all his dialogues. Targeted questioning and a sort of classroom discussions illustrate the Socratic "art of midwifery" as a guide to break down the aforementioned resistance and ignorance and start independent thinking. Identifying mere opinion-based knowledge, pseudo-knowledge, and prejudices in consensus and, through skilful questioning, clearing the way for the learner to work out the solution to a problem or the answer to a fundamental question for themselves – this is the essence of Socratic 'maieutics', as a look at the dialogue 'Meno' should prove.

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