

The Virtues of the Student

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What are the qualities of an excellent student? In the language of classical Greek philosophy, this question would typically be phrased in terms of “virtue,” or excellence: thus, we can ask: what are the virtues which characterize students in general, and especially students of philosophy? Here, we are not asking about what makes a good human being in general, but specifically, what makes for a good (or excellent) student.

To explore these questions, we can examine several accounts of the ideal student from the ancient world. The first comes from Plato himself, as he describes a mature Socrates discoursing on the education given to the sons of the Great King of Persia, from birth until they reach adulthood. The later accounts come from Proclus, the head of the Platonic Academy in Athens in the mid-to-late 5th century CE. His remarks are occasioned by another passage from Plato, in which we witness the elderly Parmenides reflecting on the educational preparation of a very young Socrates himself. Here, we are directed not to the virtues of a very young child (as in the first passages), but to the requirements of someone who would advance to the heights of philosophical understanding — that is, to the heights of wisdom.

I. Plato: The Education of a Young Person

We can begin by thinking of the student as a young person, receiving whatever education his or her society deems necessary to prepare a person to flourish in life. In Plato’s *First Alcibiades* (121c–122a), we witness Socrates discussing this issue with the young Alcibiades. Alcibiades is the son of a prominent family in Athens, who is preparing to enter into the political life of the city for the first time. Here, Socrates describes the education which is provided to the son of the Great King of Persia. In Socrates’ day, Persia was the “great power” on the edge of the Hellenic world, the enemy of Athens and the Greek city-states in general, and also a model to which the Greeks might look, and find themselves lacking by comparison. Socrates introduces the comparison explicitly to show Alcibiades how his own education may have been insufficient.

When the king’s eldest son, the heir apparent to the crown, is born, all the king’s subjects in the city of his residence keep that day an original feast-day: and from thenceforward the anniversary of that day is celebrated with sacrifices and feasts by all Asia. But when we came first into the world, alas, Alcibiades! our very neighbours, as the comic poet says, little knew what happened. After this the child is brought up, not by some insignificant nurse, but the best eunuchs about the king’s person. And these have it in their charge to take care of the royal infant in every respect, but especially to contrive the means of his becoming as handsome as possible in his person, by so fashioning his pliant limbs, and giving such a direction to their growth, that they may be straight: and for executing this office well they are highly honoured.

When the young princes have attained the age of seven years, they are provided with horses and with riding-masters, and are initiated in the exercise of hunting.

At fourteen years of age they are put into the hands of those who are called the royal preceptors. And these are chosen out from such as are deemed the most excellent of the Persians, men of mature age, four in number; excelling severally in

wisdom, justice, temperance, and fortitude. By the first of these [who excels in wisdom] they are taught the magic of Zoroaster the son of Oromazes, by which magic is meant the worship of the Gods: and the same person instructs them likewise in the art of government. He who excels in the science of justice teaches them to follow truth in every part of their conduct throughout life. The person who excels in temperance enures the young prince not to be governed by sensual pleasure of any kind, that he may acquire the habits of a free man, and of a real king; by governing first all his own appetites, instead of being their slave. And the fourth, he who excels in fortitude forms his royal pupil to be fearless and intrepid; for that his mind, under the power of fear, would be a slave.

We might examine closely the entire process by which the young heir is brought to adulthood, in three stages, but especially the final stage (from fourteen years of age), where we see an account of the four classical virtues — wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage — as applied specifically to the problem of the Persian heir’s education. In what ways are these virtues necessary for a student? In what ways do the earlier stages serve as necessary pre-requisites (and thus, perhaps, virtues in their own right) for the final stage? And what ways might any of these virtues, or some analogues, apply to our own lives and times?

II. Proclus: The Virtues of the Advanced Student

Jumping ahead roughly 900 years, we find another account of the virtues of the student, offered by Proclus, the head of the Platonic Academy in Athens in the mid-to-late 5th century CE. In Proclus’ *Parmenides Commentary*, the discussion of the qualifications of the student (and of her teacher) come in the midst of Book IV, where Proclus is commenting on the following bit of Plato’s text:

The worst difficulty would be this, though there are plenty more. Suppose someone should say that the forms, if they are such as we have been saying they must be, cannot be known. One could not convince him that he was mistaken in that objection, unless he chanced to be a man of wide experience and natural ability, and were willing to follow one through a long and remote train of argument. Otherwise there would be no way of convincing a man who maintained that the forms were unknowable.¹

Taking this text as his invitation, Proclus elaborates in his commentary.² Note how, while the lemma dealt explicitly with the forms — i.e., at an intellectual level — Proclus joins this with the higher, theological³ realities toward which the conversation between Parmenides and Socrates is leading.

1 *Parmenides* 133b.

2 Columns 926–928 in Cousin’s edition of the Greek, after the translation of Glenn Morrow and John Dillon.

3 The import and meaning of “theology” — literally, “discourse about the Gods” — is well beyond the scope of tonight’s session. For now, we can simply bear in mind Proclus’ remark in the third chapter of the *Theology of Plato*: “All those who have ever touched upon theology, have called those things that are first according to nature, ‘Gods.’” Thus materialists will use the term “God” to describe the first, most foundational forms of matter; those who acknowledge both bodies and souls will call the best sorts of souls “Gods;” naïve Aristotelians will call the first intellects “Gods;” while the Platonist will use the term “Gods” for the first, most primary individuals, or ones.

First, Proclus remarks upon the virtues of the advanced student (the “hearer” or “auditor” of philosophic teachings), in general terms:

Turning now to the details of the text, we may say that it gives us a picture both of what goes to make a worthy auditor of such a lesson, and what makes a competent instructor. For the auditor must be of outstanding natural ability, that he may be a philosopher by nature and eager for immaterial being, always pursuing and assuming something else beyond what is visible to the senses and not resting content with what presents itself, and in general just such a person as Socrates in the *Republic* portrays as he who has a natural love of contemplating universal truths.

Then he should have a wide range of experience, and by this I don't mean of human affairs (for these are of small importance and quite irrelevant to divinised life), but rather of logical and physical and mathematical subjects. For such things as our intellect is not capable of contemplating on the divine level, it may contemplate on these levels as it were in images, and in beholding them will find repose in their contemplation and will trust also in what is said about the higher realities. I mean, for instance, if someone were to wonder how many can be in one, and all things in something that has no parts, let him remember the number one, and how all the numbers, both even and odd, are demonstrated to be in it, and the circle and the sphere, and all the other types of number. If one were to wonder how the divine creates by virtue of its simple existence, he will recall that in the physical sphere fire heats and snow cools, and so with other entities. If one were to wonder how causes are everywhere present to their effects, he will be able to observe in logic a perfect image of this; for genera are always predicated of those things of which their species are predicated, the species along with the genera, but the genera even without the species. And so in each case where one is not able to observe something on the divine level, he will be able to observe it one of these levels in images.

One must therefore first of all possess good natural tendencies, which are akin to the realm of real being, and able to “sprout wings” and grasp hold of thoughts about being as firm cables. For even as for every activity we need some preparation, so also for the ascent to true being, we have need of untainted and purified knowledge, with the prerequisite of a suitable cast of mind, which one might term “good natural tendencies,” inasmuch as they spring from the nature both of the universe and of so-called naturally gifted souls.

Our candidate, then, as we have said, must possess such natural ability as this. Next, as has been said, he must possess experience of many and varied disciplines, by means of which he may be raised to an understanding of things intelligible. And, thirdly, he must have such intense alacrity towards this study that, when his instructor gives only a hint, he may be capable of following such hints by virtue of an alacrity which concentrates his attention.

Summarizing the effects of each of these virtues, Proclus concludes his account of the student:

There are three things, then, which he says are required by anyone embarking on the study of the intelligible nature — natural ability, experience, and alacrity.

Natural ability will naturally endow him with trust in the divine, experience will enable him to hold fast to the truth of paradoxical doctrines, and his alacrity will stir up in him a love of this study, that in this sphere of activity also there may be faith, truth, and love, those three qualities that preserve souls through the natural suitability which joins one to them. And, if you like, through experience he will acquire receptivity in the cognitive part of his soul, which through alacrity he will gain an intensification of the vital part, directed towards the intelligibles, and through natural excellence the pre-existing basis for both these, since right from birth all these qualities have been granted to him. So the prospective student should be of this nature, and have a character made up of this triad of qualities.

Proclus then considers the virtues of the teacher, which complement those of the student:

As for the teacher, having journeyed long before along the same path, he will not want to expound the divine truth with elaborate verbosity, but rather to reveal much through few words, uttering words of like nature to the concepts they express; nor will he proceed from widely acknowledged and obvious concepts, but will contemplate reality beginning from above, from the most unitary principles, taking a remote point of departure for his systematic treatment, inasmuch as he has separated himself from his immediate surroundings and drawn close to the divine; nor will he take thought so that he may seem to speak clearly, but he will content himself with indications; for one should convey mystical truths mystically, and not publicise secret doctrines about the Gods. Such should be the nature of both the auditor and the purveyor of such discourses.

Finally, Proclus applies these general accounts of teacher and student to the specific cases of Parmenides and the young Socrates, as they appear in Plato's dialogue:

One may take Parmenides as an ideal example of such an instructor, whence one will be able to gather the manner in which he will deliver his discourses, namely that he will convey much in a small compass, that he will proceed from the top down, and that he will discourse only in hints about the divine. As for the pupil, he will be naturally apt and of an erotic nature, but not yet fully experienced, for this reason it is that Parmenides urges him to become practised in dialectic, that he may gain experience of technical argumentation. Parmenides welcomes Socrates' natural ability and alacrity, and adds to that the bringing up to par of what is deficient. The object of this triple excellence (or virtue) he has stated himself, being proof against deception in argument about the divine. For he who is deficient in any of these respects will be compelled to agree to many false propositions, if he enters naively upon the contemplation of reality.

What guidance do these final paragraphs, ostensibly about the teacher, give to us *as students*? What should we be seeking in our studies, and (beyond what Proclus has already mentioned in his descriptions of the student) is there anything we might do, to prepare ourselves to learn from such a teacher as Parmenides? What sorts of help can a leader offer, and what must we do on our own, as it were? We might also consider the person of Zeno, as situated between Socrates as the nearly ideal pupil in the process of perfection and Parmenides as the ideal teacher.

III. Damascius: Critiques of Peers and Predecessors

Finally, we turn to Damascius, the final head of the Athenian Academy, until the school's property was confiscated and the philosophers sent into exile (in, of all places, Persia!) by the Roman emperor in 529 CE. Damascius' *Philosophical History* (a.k.a. *The Life of Isidore*) survives only in fragments, but paints a vivid account of the philosophical schools of Athens and Alexandria, Egypt in the 4th and 5th centuries.⁴ As he critiques his predecessors, Damascius appeals to the same triad of virtues described by Proclus, to show both their strengths and their failings.

First, we might consider Damascius' presentation of the basic principles, following his teacher Isidore, where the seeker after truth is compared to a hunter in pursuit of his quarry:

All agree that there are three primary and essential principles for an enquiry which contemplates reality: love, industry, and sagacity. Love is the first and greatest principle, the most wondrous tracker after all that is beautiful as well as good. Then one needs sharp and sagacious mental powers, capable of covering much ground in a short time, truly adept at following up and recognising which of the quarry's tracks are genuine and which are false for the purposes of the chase. The third requirement is relentless industry, not allowing the soul to rest until it has reached the end of the hunt, which is the discovery of truth.

As regards divine principles, Isidore laid down well-defined terms and criteria to distinguish them from things human: in industriousness, he required absolute efficiency; in quick intelligence, aloofness from the obvious and habitual conformity with the multitude; in love, an unswerving impulse towards that delight in intelligible beauty which is never diverted elsewhere.

Isidore used to say that sagacity and acuity are not the same thing as a swift imagination or a conjectural talent or merely — as one might think — an intelligence which is quick and productive of the truth; for these are not causes in themselves, but serve the cause of divine intellection. As for intellection, it is the possession by the divine which gradually opens up and purifies the eyes of the soul, illuminating it with its divine light to allow the perception and understanding of the true and the false. This is what he called "good fortune," also maintaining that nothing is of any use without good fortune, just as healthy eyes are of no use without the heavenly light.

Damascius reports that Isidore himself applied these criteria to the already-ancient philosophers of nearly a thousand years before:

He thought that those who dedicated their labour to things mortal and human, or merely had a sharp intelligence or desired to amass knowledge⁵ would never go far towards the acquisition of the great and divine wisdom. He used to say that, among the ancients, Aristotle and Chrysippus, who were supremely gifted and at the same time keen on learning and also hard-working, nevertheless did not reach the summit.

4 All quotations are based on the edition and translation by Polymnia Athanassiadi.

5 Literally, they desired to be lovers of learning (*philomatheis*, from *philomatheia*) rather than lovers of wisdom (*philosophēs*, from *philosophia*).

Damascius also applies these criteria to a number of recent predecessors, such as Hermias, a fellow student of Proclus, whose notes on their teacher Syrianus' lectures on the *Phaedrus* have come down to us:

Hermias had a decent nature and an unaffected character. Having studied philosophy under the great Syrianus, he proved second to none of the pupils in hard work, not even to his famous fellow-student Proclus. Nor was he deficient in his love of those truly gratifying sciences supplied by philosophy. Yet he was not very sharp, nor was he one to invent demonstrative arguments, and he was not a powerful seeker of the truth. Thus he could not hold his own against those who set him questions for discussion, though he had memorized virtually everything that he had heard his master explain and everything that was recorded in books. But in him originality of mind did not blossom in harmony with erudition.

He was more deficient in his ability to argue than in accuracy, but was so well exercised in virtue that not even Momus (Blame) himself would have found fault with him, nor Phthonus (Envy) taken an aversion to him. Such was his gentleness and sense of justice.

And on Asclepiodotus, a contemporary of Proclus:

Asclepiodotus' mind was not perfect, as most people thought. He was extremely sharp at raising questions, but not so acute in his understanding. His was an uneven intelligence, especially when it came to divine matters – the invisible and intelligible essence of Plato's lofty thought. Even more wanting was he in the field of higher wisdom – the Orphic and Chaldean lore which transcends philosophical common sense. In the natural sciences however he was by far the best among his contemporaries. Likewise, he was strong in mathematics, and this is what earned him the reputation of an overall genius. Finally, in the field of moral philosophy he constantly attempted to innovate and to limit research to the visible realm below, without rejecting any of the doctrines of the ancients, but packing everything together and bringing it down to the level of the physical world.

We might consider how the different limitations of each of these scholars play out in practice, and reflect on the ways in which the all-too-human failings of these predecessors can be both a comfort in our own limitations, and an encouragement to strive for excellence.