

Virtue Before Knowledge: *Docilis* as Vice in Jerome

Douglas Estes

Associate Professor of New Testament and Practical Theology
South University
Columbia, SC
USA
E-Mail: DouglasEstes@gmail.com

DOI 10.25784/jeac.v2i0.295



“People are only teachable when they are young; they become incorrigible once they are old,” writes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as then “they are like patients, stupid and without courage, who tremble at the sight of medicine.”¹ Here Rousseau implies an idea that has become a truism in the post-Enlightenment Western world: Knowledge is the medicine that can cure the ills of the world. For this reason, society must impress knowledge on people while they are still *docile* and willing. Rejecting knowledge is like rejecting medicine – it leaves the person unwell.

Modern society esteems knowledge. More than any time prior, people are surrounded by knowledge (or, perhaps, information). Difficulties in life result from a lack of knowledge, and encourage a search for a greater quantity of knowledge. If Rousseau had written in an earlier age, he may have used the example of virtue instead of medicine to make his point. Medicine is a future-facing idea; and virtue, by the time of Rousseau, passé. This was a result of thinkers such as René Descartes, whose arguments sundered the link between knowledge and virtue that had existed for two millennia.² Because of this break, virtue and knowledge slipped into separate spheres of influence. Knowledge became the public face of progress, while virtue retreated to more private spheres of influence. Increasingly, there is an awareness in various social sectors that knowledge must somehow be tied to ethics,

but there seems to be little consensus on how that can or should occur.

In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates famously argues that virtue (*ἀρετή*) is a type of knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*).³ From a post-Enlightenment perspective, it is understandable that a world with limited knowledge would produce the argument that knowledge produces virtue. However, from Plato’s perspective, knowledge is not merely information; it is perhaps better understood as everyday wisdom (esp. *φρόνησις*).⁴ Once virtue was tied to knowledge, the acquisition of knowledge slowly and steadily increased in importance, relative to the amount of knowledge available. Gaining knowledge is an act of gaining virtue, and therefore the more a person could grow in knowledge, the greater their capacity for virtue.⁵ Thus, a person who was teachable was more likely to gain knowledge, and therefore more likely to be virtuous (and possess *εὐδαιμονία*,

¹ My paraphrase of “La plupart des peuples ainsi que des hommes ne sont dociles que dans leur jeunesse, ils deviennent incorrigibles en vieillissant ... semblable à ces malades stupides et sans courage qui frémissent à l’aspect du médecin,” from ROUSSEAU, *Du Contrat social*, 96. Several centuries earlier, Meister Eckhart more mildly linked learning with healing, see MEISTER ECKHART, *Complete Mystical Works*, 553.

² CULHAM, “Reuniting Virtue and Knowledge,” 295.

³ This view, known as moral intellectualism, seems to originate with Socrates. For example, “πρὸς τί βλέπων δυσχεραίνεις αὐτὸ καὶ ἀπιστεῖς μὴ οὐκ ἐπιστήμη ἢ ἡ ἀρετή;” see PLATO, *Meno* 87b, and ARISTOTLE, *Eth. eud.* 1.5.15, 8.1.3; cf. PRIOR, *Virtue and Knowledge*, 3; PANGLE, *Virtue is Knowledge*, 5–10; COPLAN, “Feeling Without Thinking,” 134. This is a fundamentally different type of knowledge than that described in New Testament texts such as 2 Petr; see CHARLES, *Virtue Amidst Vice*, 132.

⁴ PLATO, *Phaed.* 69b; plus see GRECO, “Episteme,” 285; and PRIOR, *Virtue and Knowledge*, 3, respectively. On *φρόνησις*, see ARISTOTLE, *Eth. nic.* 6.5.5; and ARISTOTLE, *Virt. vit.* 1.3.

⁵ Knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are good, and therefore gaining these are good. This idea is reflected outside of the Greek tradition – a prime example occurs in biblical literature (e.g., Prov 10:14; 11:9; 13:16; 18:15; Phlm 6). The perspective is different, however, as biblical literature sees knowledge in relation to God’s provision; what knowledge produces in people is a divine work, which is always something to be gained for blessing and the betterment of life. Knowledge outside of God’s provision and work is fruitless (1 Tim 6:20).

or “human flourishing”). From this, we can draw the conclusion: Being teachable is a virtue. This conclusion represents the long march from early philosophers such as Socrates and Chrysippus to pre-modern thinkers such as Meister Eckhart and John Calvin to the perspectives of Western education today.⁶ As an example of this evolution, Eckhart’s original encouragement – that for a person to be truly teachable by God the person must empty themselves of their own creaturely selves – has today become transformed into the apocryphal internet meme, “Be willing to be a beginner every single morning.” Teachability to one’s own self, life, and knowledge has become the highest ‘virtue.’⁷ Virtue, at least in the modern Western sense, comes from being open to new truth; perhaps the greatest ἀπορία is today the “teachable moment.”⁸ This has resulted in a new interest in the relationship between virtue and knowledge.⁹ As everyday wisdom has moved to knowledge, and knowledge to information, the acquisition of information has moved to the top of the modern virtue list – with ignorance falling as the greatest vice.

1. A Forgotten Footnote: Jerome’s Argument Against Being Teachable

Famously, Protagoras and Socrates debated whether or not virtue is teachable.¹⁰ If virtue *is* teachable, does this mean that being teachable is a virtue? There appears to be an unexamined presupposition hidden in the argument of Socrates and Plato – being teachable is a necessary precursor to virtue. After all, if one is unable or unwilling to learn, then one cannot learn virtue; therefore, that person cannot be virtuous in the Socratic sense. Thus, there is a certain assumption in place about the virtue of being teachable, and from this, the general principle that a willingness to learn is a positive trait that an ethical life would embrace. This is why it is surprising for Jerome (ca. 347–420), the highly knowledgeable church father, to be so dismissive of *docilis* (“teachable” or “open to learn”) that he would be led to argue that one “would certainly have a difficult time finding it in conjunction with the other vir-

tues.”¹¹ Especially in the context of the habits of Christian leaders, who should – at least according to modern expectations – be the most teachable of all. In the subsequent sentence, Jerome links *docilis* with other vices such as brawling and greed that Paul would also reject.¹² At first glance, it would appear that Jerome is either confused or incorrect, or perhaps overstating his case given the nature of the apologetic work. Or worse, perhaps Jerome holds to an elitist position that bishops, in light of their already-possessed knowledge or esteemed position, have little else to learn, unlike the ignorant and unteachable as described by Eckhart, Calvin, and Rousseau. Since a posture of openness is a positive trait for an ethical life, Jerome seems to be mistaken.

Later in the same section, however, Jerome recognizes that even bishops are human, and will not be perfect.¹³ It seems then that Jerome’s motivations are not animated by hyperbole or elitism, but are more general in nature: As a quality, perhaps *docilis* is a vice, and not a virtue. Since in this section Jerome is commenting on the translation of διδακτικός (“skilled in teaching”) in 1 Tim 3, it is likely 2 Tim 2 is on his mind, since both are ethical recommendations for Christian leadership *and* the only two occurrences of the word διδακτικός in the Greek New Testament.¹⁴ And a few sentences later, in 2 Tim 3, Paul explains how unethical people will come in the last days, and among their many activities they will confuse people (notably women in their homes) who are “always learning yet unable to come into knowledge of truth,” (2 Tim 3:7 NASB). These people who Paul describes as always learning are *docilis*, and this very quality of being *docilis* prevents them from knowing the truth.¹⁵ From Jerome to

⁶ For example, Calvin speaks of the importance for people to be teachable from teachers such as himself (CALVIN, Institutes 1.7.5, 1.13.21). Still, Calvin roots his view of being teachable primarily in the divine work within people (CALVIN, Institutes 1.7.3, 2.5.13).

⁷ ECKHART, Complete Mystical Works, 534–35.

⁸ For the intersection of ἀπορία and inquiry in the ancient world, see by way of example ESTES, Questions and Rhetoric, 174–79.

⁹ LITTLE, “Virtue as Knowledge,” 59. Laurence D. Houlgate also argues the timelines of the issue, a generation before Little, and points to similar arguments from the generation prior to himself, in HOULGATE, “Virtue Is Knowledge,” 142.

¹⁰ PLATO, Prot. 320a.

¹¹ JEROME, Adv. Pelag. 1.22; translation from ID., Dogmatic and Polemical Works, 264. Specifically, “Deinde, unius uxoris virum, sobrium, pudicum, ornatum, hospitem, ‘ut reperias: illud certe quod sequitur διδακτικόν,’ qui possit docere; ‘non ut interpretatur Latina simplicitas, docilem, cum ceteris virtutibus difficulter invenies’; HIERONYMI, Dialogus Adversus Pelagianos (PL 23:539a). In contrast, Cicero adds *docilitas* to a list of virtues; see CICERO, Fin. 5.7.36.

¹² Jerome admits that his views of virtue and vice have little to do with Aristotle and everything to do with Paul; JEROME, Adv. Pelag. 1.19. As such, this raises the same question posed by Ulrich Volp, “Wie fasst das frühe Christentum den Tugendbegriff im Verhältnis zum vorfindlichen christlichen Ethos?” in his essay, VOLP, “Der Tugendbegriff des Origenes,” 464.

¹³ JEROME, Adv. Pelag. 1.22.

¹⁴ Like Jerome, Philo also views διδακτικός as a virtue; see PHILO, Prelim. Studies 35; cf. ESTES, “Teaching and Virtue,” 4.

¹⁵ I gloss *docilis* as “teachable,” and this generally conforms with ancient usage, as noted in lexicons such as GLARE, Oxford Latin Dictionary, 568. It is not a common word, occurring in notable uses in the works of Cicero and Horace. Horace especially uses *docilis* with some breadth; in one place he uses it as part of a euphemism to mean “trained” (see WIMMEL, “Zum Problem doppelsinniger Formulierung beim späten Horaz,” 241–

Paul, being teachable *can be* a vice. Especially when *teachable* turns to *pliable*.

2. Teachable and Pliable

Philosophers often note that in English *virtue* can carry a sense of purity, whereas in classical Greek thought ἀρετή (“virtue”) carries with it a sense of excellence.¹⁶ On a basic level, virtues “were simply the qualities that made a life admirable or excellent.”¹⁷ Therefore, when Socrates suggests that knowledge is a virtue, he is not arguing that knowledge makes one morally pure, but capably excellent. The Greeks rooted this sense of excellence in the myth of the hero, the great person, who personified excellence. Yet Jerome’s understanding of virtue is at odds with that of Socrates and most Stoic philosophers – instead of promoting excellence, Jerome believed that virtues were the “conditional elements of living in a state of grace” so that a person may live life according to God’s expectations.¹⁸ Since Jerome held that virtue originated with God more than human knowledge, this freed him to reject *docilis* as a virtue.

Knowledge is not virtue.¹⁹ Knowledge can lead to virtue, especially in the sense that the *right* kind of knowledge applied in the *right* way can make a person more excellent and possess greater εὐδαιμονία. But not all knowledge can, and not any knowledge applied in non-virtuous ways. Knowledge does not lead to human perfection.²⁰ This may not have been apparent to Socrates and Chrysippus, but in the digital age, an era of information overload, it is overwhelmingly obvious. Knowing the components of mitochondria in lung cells or how to code with CSS, though useful, does not in and of itself increase virtue.²¹ In fact, a case can be made that too much knowledge can lead one away from virtue. The extreme example of this is artificial intelligence, the greatest potential progeny of humanity. AI may have near limitless knowledge, but whether it possesses (human) virtue in any degree remains to be seen. There is a greater concern. It is not merely *what* we learn that matters, it is *how* and

why we learn (and likely, *who* we learn from). In order to grow in virtue, and personify excellence, there must occur a sifting in the knowledge that we take in. The human mind has a limited capacity, and so virtue does not begin with an increase in knowledge – virtue must precede knowledge, as virtue must select the kind of knowledge acquired. This preceding condition must come alongside *docilis* if it is meant to increase virtue.

There is a finer line between being teachable and pliable than philosophy often acknowledges. When a teacher presents knowledge leading to excellence, it is virtuous for the student to be teachable. But the student must sift and discern whether the knowledge in question leads to excellence. If the student does not, then the student becomes pliable. When Solomon asks God to give him “a heart of understanding” (*cor docile* in the Vulgate of 1 Kgs 3:9), it is so that Solomon can sift between good and evil for the good of God’s people.²² This is a specific request wherein Solomon desires greater knowledge that will lead to greater virtue on account of the condition from which the knowledge is given and applied.

3. Pliable and Emotional

There is another reason Jerome argues *docilis* is a vice not a virtue. While Hellenistic philosophers most often linked virtue with knowledge in the ancient world,²³ there was a minority view wherein philosophers linked virtue with human emotion. Presumably Posidonius (ca. 135–51 BC) is one of the more noteworthy examples of a philosopher who held that virtue built upon emotion.²⁴ When Hellenistic thought did turn to the relationship between virtue and emotion, the discussion often focused on how the control of emotions helped produce virtue.²⁵ Thus, Aristotle could argue that a lack of control on the emotions, or allowing emotions to become extreme, was a vice.²⁶ In fact, we can trace the relationship between virtue, knowledge and emotional self-control to a more likely corollary for Jerome: In 2 Petr 1:5, Peter explains that to one’s faith one needs to add virtue (ἀρετή); and to virtue, knowledge (γνώσις); and to knowledge, emotional control (ἐγκράτεια). When Jerome argues that *docilis* is a vice, he then goes on to paraphrase three vices from 1 Tim

50). More significantly, for this essay, Horace does use *docilis* in a similar, negative sense as Jerome. For example, Horace uses *docilis* to describe someone who is quick to learn immoral behavior (HORACE, Sat. 2.2.52). Even more significant, Horace uses *docilis* to suggest pliability, and then uses the metaphor: “While the colt has a tender neck and is able to learn, the groom trains him to go the way his rider directs” (HORACE, Ep. 1.2.64). For Horace, as in Jerome, *docilis* can be used to describe a person who is easily-swayed.

¹⁶ E.g., PLATO, Resp. 353b.

¹⁷ PRIOR, Virtue and Knowledge, 3.

¹⁸ BEJCY, Cardinal Virtues, 19.

¹⁹ LITTLE, “Virtue as Knowledge,” 76.

²⁰ JEROME, Adv. Pelag. Prol. 1.

²¹ To some degree, this argument contrasts with Aristotle’s view of virtue; for discussion, see SANFORD, Before Virtue, 188.

²² More precisely, Solomon asks for a heart that hears (לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ in the Hebrew, and καρδίαν ἀκούειν in the LXX). This is a more specific request than merely being teachable.

²³ PRIOR, Virtue and Knowledge, x.

²⁴ Posidonius is cited by Galen as his extant works are fragmentary; see COPLAN, “Feeling Without Thinking,” 133.

²⁵ E.g., PLATO, Resp. 389d; and PLATO, Phaed. 82b. William Prior notes that a prime example, perhaps an archetype, of this view is found in Homer – the great hero Odysseus uses his mind and will to subdue his emotions; see PRIOR, Virtue and Knowledge, 107.

²⁶ ARISTOTLE, Eth. eud. 8.1.5.

3:3, all of which are demonstrations of a lack of emotional self-control from the perspective of the ancient world (desire, for self-pleasure; anger, toward others; and greed, for money and possessions). Since *docilis* is by definition a lack of control – the inability to sift knowledge – Jerome’s argument suggests that *docilis* is an emotional, not intellectual, vice. When diagnosing emotional vices, a commonly held view in the ancient world was that extreme emotions were vices and virtue was found in a moderate middle.²⁷ Later in his argument, Jerome admits to something similar to this commonly held belief: “Especially since vices neighbor so closely on virtues, and, if you turn to one side just a bit, you must either go astray or fall down headlong to destruction.”²⁸ Thus, the problem with *docilis* is that it is indicative of an intemperate emotion. To Jerome, the people Paul describes in 2 Tim 3 are not virtuous because their lack of self-control affects their knowledge of the truth (again, cf. 2 Pet 1:5). The Christian leader who one could label as *docilis* has turned too far to one side, and must demonstrate more emotional control (ἐγκράτεια) so that they can fruitfully increase in knowledge (γνώσις) and virtue (ἀρετή).

4. Virtue and Knowledge

What creates virtue is not the attainment of knowledge, but the discernment of what knowledge to attain, and the self-control to implement this knowledge. This discernment comes from virtue, and when coupled with the knowledge attained, when applied temperately, grants wisdom. This fits with Thomas Aquinas’ definition of wisdom, that it is “a certain rectitude of judgment according to the divine ideas.”²⁹ The “certain rectitude of judgment” is that which sifts and filters knowledge, not merely to be useful, but to grant the truly virtuous and wise person the *summum bonum*. Similarly, vice is neither the lack or rejection of knowledge,³⁰ it is the lack or rejection of the kind of knowledge that leads to virtue or the inability to handle knowledge wisely.

Duncan Pritchard sums up well the ethical challenge of the relationship between knowledge and virtue:

While the acquisition of knowledge through learning – whether in infants or mature adults; the uninitiated or the expert – will certainly demand the possession of relevant cognitive traits on the part of the agent, it need not thereby demand that relevant *reflective* cognitive processes are in operation or even that such reflective processes are availa-

²⁷ ARISTOTLE, *Eth. eud.* 2.5.11, 2.10.30.

²⁸ JEROME, *Adv. Pelag.* 3.11 (emphasis mine); translation from JEROME, *Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, 364. Specifically, “*praesertim cum vicina sint vitia virtutibus; et si paululum declinaveris, aut errandum tibi sit, aut in praecipitium cadendum*”; HIERONYMI, *Dialogus Adversus Pelagianos* (PL 23:608a).

²⁹ For further discussion on Aquinas’ views, see SUTO, “Virtue and Knowledge,” 61–79.

³⁰ MILO, “Virtue, Knowledge, and Wickedness,” 196–215.

ble to that subject at that time. In short, knowledge acquisition is sometimes a *completely* unreflective matter.³¹

It seems that Socrates and Plato never conceived of a place where knowledge was so plentiful and promiscuous that people would engage it in a completely unreflective manner. Without reflection and discernment, in the information overload of the digital age, not only will knowledge not necessarily lead to virtue, it may lead away from virtue. Without the ability to sift knowledge, and the ability to reject unethical knowledge, virtue cannot grow. Virtue is not knowledge; it is the discernment of the best knowledge, and the conviction to reject inferior knowledge. Virtue is knowing the origin of particular knowledge, and its *telos*. Without this, teachability becomes pliability, pliability becomes a lack of self-control, and excellence becomes mundane (cf. Prov 2).

Bibliography

ARISTOTLE, *Athenian Constitution, Eudemian Ethics, Virtues and Vices*. Translated by H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library 285; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin (2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

BEJCZY, ISTVÁN P., *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages: A Study in Moral Thought from the Fourth to the Fourteenth Century* (Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 202; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

CALVIN, JOHN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 vols. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960).

CHARLES, J. DARYL, *Virtue Amidst Vice: The Catalog of Virtues in 2 Peter 1* (JSNTSup 150; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997).

CICERO, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. Translated by H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library 40; New York: Macmillan, 1914).

COPLAN, AMY, “Feeling Without Thinking: Lessons from the Ancients on Emotion and Virtue-Acquisition.” in BATTALY, H. (ed.), *Virtue and Vice, Moral and Epistemic* (Metaphilosophy 41; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 133–151.

CULHAM, TOM, “Reuniting Virtue and Knowledge,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 49 (2015) 294–310.

ECKHART, MEISTER, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. Edited and translated by Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007).

ESTES, DOUGLAS, *Questions and Rhetoric in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

ESTES, DOUGLAS, “Teaching and Virtue,” *Didaktikos* 2.1 (2018) 4.

³¹ PRITCHARD, “Virtue Epistemology,” 239.

GLARE, PETER G. W., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

GRECO, JOHN, "Episteme: Knowledge and Understanding" in TIMPE, KEVIN and BOYD, CRAIG A. (eds.), *Virtues and Their Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 285–301.

HORACE, *Odes and Epodes*. Edited and translated by Niall Rudd (Loeb Classical Library 33; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

HORACE, *Satires, Epistles, Art of Poetry*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough (Loeb Classical Library 194; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

HOULGATE, LAURENCE D., "Virtue Is Knowledge," *The Monist* 54 (1970) 142–53.

JEROME, *Dogmatic and Polemical Works*. Translated by Hritz, John N. (Fathers of the Church 53; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

LITTLE, MARGARET OLIVIA, "Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind," *Noûs* 31 (1997) 59–79.

MILO, RONALD D., "Virtue, Knowledge, and Wickedness," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998) 196–215.

PANGLE, LORRAINE S., *Virtue is Knowledge: The Moral Foundations of Socratic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Patrologia Latina. Edited by MIGNE, JACQUES-PAUL, 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1855.

PHILO, *On the Confusion of Tongues, On the Migration of Adam, Who is the Heir of Divine Things, On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*. Translated by COLSON, FRANCIS H. and WHITAKER, GEORGE H. (Loeb Classical Library 261; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

PLATO, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. Translated by Fowler, Harold N. (Loeb Classical Library 36; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

PLATO, *Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus*. Translated by W. R. M. Lamb (Loeb Classical Library 165; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

PLATO, *The Republic*. 2 vols. Translated by Paul Shorey (Loeb Classical Library 237 and 276; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937–1942).

PRIOR, WILLIAM J., *Virtue and Knowledge: An Introduction to Ancient Greek Ethics* (Routledge Library Editions: Ancient Philosophy 6; London: Routledge, 1991).

PRITCHARD, DUNCAN, "Virtue Epistemology and the Acquisition of Knowledge." *Philosophical Explorations* 8 (2005) 229–43.

ROUSSEAU, JEAN-JACQUES, *Du Contrat social, ou Principes du droit politique* (Leipzig: Gerard Fleischer, 1796).

SANFORD, JONATHAN J., *Before Virtue: Assessing Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2015).

SUTO, TAKI, "Virtue and Knowledge: Connatural Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas." *Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2004) 61–79.

VOLP, ULRICH, "Der Tugendbegriff des Origenes – eine Erwiderung auf Christian Hengstermann." in HORN, FRIEDRICH W., VOLP, ULRICH AND ZIMMERMANN, RUBEN (eds.), *Ethische Normen des frühen Christentums* (WUNT 313; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 455–64.

WIMMEL, WALTER, "Zum Problem doppelsinniger Formulierung beim späten Horaz." *Glotta* 65 (1987) 241–50.