Abstract

While the writer Allan Megill, mentioning in his book Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida has labeled them, “Prophets of Extremity”, by referring radicality of their attack on normal canons of rationality. It is not important for me whether this labeling is true or false. However, inspired by this labeling, I will call Socrates, “the prophet of lifelong learning”. Socrates, who left no written work and only expressed his thoughts verbally, is probably the most ambiguous thinker in the history of philosophy. This is called the “Socratic problem” in that he has been defined in a vast variety of etiquettes such as sophist, or elitist or even hedonist. His ambiguous identity has prevented us to settle the debate about “who is the real Socrates?” However after so many historical studies and philosophic investigations on Socrates now we have come to understand and identify him more accurately. When we try to understand this majestic figure in a more holistic and humanist approach and try to place him in contemporary developments in education, it seems reasonable to label Socrates as “the prophet of lifelong learning”. Like the sophists Socrates put forth a human centered view by arguing that human beings are the only imperfect beings in the universe and yet has the ability to develop into perfection. For Socrates, human being comes to being as an imperfect entity, yet by lifelong learning mankind can reach to a level of self-fulfillment and completeness. Socrates called his conduct as “philosophy” and himself as a “philosopher” in a way that suggested learning is an unceasing search for knowledge without any regard to finding the right action or reaching an end. Therefore the process of human development goes on and on till death. No one except Socrates deserves to be labeled as “the prophet of lifelong learning” since neither his antecedents nor his descendants insisted on learning as a process of search as much as he did.

Keywords: Socrates, prophet, lifelong learning, development, humanistic education.

Introduction

Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it seems that beyond differences in emphases and formulations there is a wide agreement that humanism consists of a cosmopolitan worldview and ethical code that posits the enhancement of human development, well-being, and dignity as the ultimate end of all human thought and action; namely, giving priority to the values of human dignity, equity, growth and solidarity over any alternative set of values – religious, ideological, economic or national. Human-centered education is above all committed to a social and intellectual climate protecting students from intellectual oppression, physical punishment, and dishonor. Based on the humanistic stance that people’s unique dignity lies in their critical reason, moral sensitivity, creative imagination, autonomous will and unique personality, it is essential for humanistic education to prioritise the value of human dignity – including freedom of thought, moral autonomy and personal authenticity — over any other religious, nationalistic, economic, or ideological set of values (Aloni, 2011: 35). This marked the transition to a human-centered education model from an authority-centered one and also the emphasis laid on the huge learning capacity and creativity of mankind fostering human-centered education as inclusive of lifelong learning. As Ken Robinson,
well-known for his studies concerning creativity and education, has expressed creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status (http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html). This and similar debates bring in the questions about the purpose and method of education reminding us of Socrates who visited the issue of human centered education for the first time in the history of philosophy as an issue that is never out of date.

Knowledge and Education according to Socrates

Allan Megill, mentioning in his book Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida has labeled them, “Prophets of Extremity”, by referring to the radicalism of their attack on normal canons of rationality. I do not intend to discuss the validity of this labeling however inspired by this labeling; I will call Socrates, “the prophet of lifelong learning” there are a myriad of approaches concerning education however it is only the understanding of Socrates that deserves to be called “humanitarian” or “human centered”.

Russell asserts that according to the humanitarian understanding children have a unique nature of their own and at the center of this lies the creative impulse. Following this understanding, the target of education should be providing the necessary grounds and liberties for fostering this creative impulse. This approach that aims to adorn the child with an environment where he can creatively explore building up his unique creative impulses and enrich his life in a rich variety of complex modes forcing the child to thinking, rests on the principles of service and modesty. Admiration for the principle of life’s precious, various, individual growth which cannot be pre-determined together with modesty against intuition and apprehension of the owners of pursuit and aims are needed. This view also suggests that the target of education cannot be inspecting the development of the child in connection with a private, predetermined aim. Since all such targets should be determined using familiar totalitarian tools (Otero, 2007: 173-174). The mentioned understanding of education almost matches the definition of Socrates’ idea and it is based on an eternal desire of learning and a perpetual search for truth. Socrates names this universal knowledge as episteme that he differentiates from doxa, which is not universal and has the possibility of being wrong since it varies from person to person (Ağaoğulları, 2011: 82). The aim of Socratic questioning is reaching the episteme and avoiding the doxa.

In Russell’s words, in all history, nothing is so surprising or so difficult to account for as the sudden rise of civilization in Greece. What they achieved in art and literature is familiar to everybody, but what they did in the purely intellectual realm is even more exceptional (Russell, 1965: 25). The cosmologists (philosophers of nature) of 5th century BC Athens, usually referred to as Pre-Socratic philosophers, were the first to gather and compare phenomena from all ancient societies and join them together as a coherent whole and explain the universe without reclining to magic and superstition (Ronan, 2005: 65). Thus the age of holy traditions and mythology gradually came to an end for the Greeks (Aydm, 2004: 11). The cosmologists (philosophers of nature) pioneered by Thales (Russell, 1965: 25), produced ideas, made sound explanations, and did not take refuge in mythology and the gods to conceal the dark points in their explanations. The main concern of all natural philosophers from Anaximander to Democritus was forming an intellectual basis for the entire nature. However, the philosophers of nature neglected human condition and morals while focusing solely on physical nature (Versenyi, 2007: 11-12).

Like the Sophists, Socrates developed a human-centered thinking during this time period when people forgot thinking about themselves lost in their material concerns (Conford, 2003: 45). This is the main reason why even Socrates was seen as a Sophist. However, Socrates shared the ideas of the Sophists only in being human-centered and refusing traditional knowledge sources of Ancient Greece such as mythology. They had no common features except the mentioned. Despite all Socrates is depicted as a sophist, for instance in Aristophanes’ Clouds, in contrary with what we have learned from elsewhere especially from Plato (Konstan, 2011: 76).
Socrates did not consider whether someone was a natural elite or had an inherited or gained social standing (Versenyi, 2007: 156) and thus not only revised the views of the Sophists but also refuted those of his contemporaries (Russell, 1965: 82) especially the views of those entirely materialist philosophers like Democritus (Russell, 1965: 89) who defended that everything was made up of matter. Socrates, who resembles the Sophists with his criticism of the natural philosophers and human-centered thought is seen as the main debater in Plato’s writings however it is not Socrates speaking, it is the voice of Plato which produces two Socrates: “Platonic Socrates” and “Historical Socrates”. However, the historical Socrates gets fuzzier through the effect of his many followers such as Aristotle, Cynics, Epicureans and Stoics. This and similar delineations result in the emergence of the issue known as the “Socratic problem”. Then what kind of a person is the real Socrates, I mean the historical Socrates? What is his understanding of human and related views concerning education?

Socrates was a contemporary of the Sophists. He was not one of the Sophists since the Sophists traded their knowledge with money and thought of themselves as the teachers of the Athenians. However, they resembled Socrates in view of their refusal of mythological and traditional knowledge sources and acceptance of reason based knowledge acquisition methods and consideration of humane problems. As a matter of fact Plato, in one of his dialogues, reports that Socrates has told himself about the revolution of thought he has realized, that is how he directed philosophy from studying internal nature to the exploration of human and his actions within society (Conford, 2003: 10).

The Greek cosmologists (philosophers of nature) were the first to gather and compare phenomena from all ancient societies and join them together as a coherent whole and explain the universe without reclining to magic and superstition (Ronan, 2005: 65). Some of the Greek natural philosophers who used fact-based research methods -these are referred to as atomists- have developed an utterly materialist worldview which entails that the universe is composed of atoms and there is nothing in the universe except atoms and further argue that concepts like happiness and soul might be only accounted for by the movement of the atoms (Ağaoğulları, 2011: 65). According to Macdonald Conford, Socratic philosophy is a reaction against such materialist tendencies in science. In order to rediscover the spiritual world philosophy had to omit concerns for entities in external life, for a limited time, and looked inside to the nature of human soul. This was a revolution initiated by Socrates with the order “Know Yourself” (“Gnothi sauton” - "Know thyself") in the Delphoi Temple (Conford, 2003: 34).

**Socrates and Human Centered Education**

Socrates who agrees with the Sophists about returning to human, disagrees with them in terms of method. The Sophists’ returning to human prepares the necessary basis and ground for Socrates’ philosophical activity by focusing on humanitarian problems and enhancement and educating human rather than the physical nature and the God (Versenyi, 2007: 75-77). However there are some certain points on which Socrates disagreed with the Sophists who focused on the principle of “homo mensura” (man the measure) which means it is necessary to take the human as a basis for every topic (Ağaoğulları, 2011: 67-68). The Sophists who made a revolution in the Greek system of education, especially of Athens, were professional teachers and they taught rhetoric, philosophy and politics to young men who had enough free time and money to pay their high fees. They stated that all beliefs and institutes should be analyzed in a rationalistic way and should be altered or totally rejected if necessary (Finley, 2003: 121). This approach led them to absolutising relativity and the understanding of non-existence of reality. The fact that they insisted on relativity and their belief that reaching universal definitions is impossible (Versenyi, 2007: 78) led them to the idea that the objective as some of the sophists brazenly declared, was not to look for truth, but to find effective ways of convincing the people, the authority, the court of justice, to accept one’s point of view. Some of them went even so far as to argue that there is no objective truth, truth being what is the interest of the contender for power (Roshwald, 1999: 143).

Socrates absolutely rejects this view. Because for Socrates reaching or achieving truth is the final aim of intellectual questioning and the aim of an intellectual questioning is not to win a debate but to reach truth, which is the essence of philosophy (Roshwald, 1999: 144). The philosophical conclusion of this way of thinking for Socrates is the rational theory of ethics that identifies with elenchus- the question and answer method which puts knowledge and wisdom together (Rosen, 2005: 44). Socrates regards the “elenchus” as a touchstone for wisdom or knowledge. If you are a religious expert, you can explain what piety is, and defend your definition against objections. To be politically wise, you must understand justice, and thus be able to define it and defend your definition (Morrison, 2006: 109).

Socrates’ philosophy is a consequence of his understanding of knowledge. As a person who asked for definitions of things and concepts around the streets of Athens and then tried to find out the correct definition.
Socrates spent much of his adult life conversing with others about such questions as “What is justice?” and “What is law?” He discussed these matters daily with a close circle of friends and admirers (Morrison, 2006: 101), wanted to get rid of the other incorrect definitions and searched for a total and complete answer for the question of “What is human?” Socrates, who shared a human-centered idea with the Sophists, differed from them with his postulates concerning human similar with the axioms in mathematics. For example, according to Socrates, virtue is knowledge, that is to say, if we know what is right we shall perform right actions; and no one does wrong voluntarily (on purpose), that is, if our right actions are based on our knowledge, wrong acts must spring from ignorance rather than from a will which intends evil. This means that the source of evil is lack of knowledge (Rosen, 2005: 44). He also thinks that every person is autonomous and the first duty of every person should be to rule over his own life and get to know himself to this end.

This theory of Socrates is a consequence of his understanding of human. His understanding of human is primarily a consequence his understanding of human nature (Demirci, 2007: 110-11). It is said that, the words written on the gate of the Ancient Greek Temple named Delphi: “Know yourself” (Gnothi Seauton) is one of the basic principles of Socrates’ philosophy (Anil, 2006: 150). According to Socrates, for a person knowledge of oneself is a prerequisite for being virtuous. Virtue is identical with knowledge, which means virtue equals with knowledge. In other words a wise person is virtuous. Because knowledge is like a road map which shows a person what is right and what is wrong. A person who has such a road map would not do wrong on purpose. For Socrates who believed that a person would not do wrong on purpose, human nature is good. Every person is born with a good human character and will of being happy (Aydın, 2004: 14-15). This view, accepts in advance that every person’s spirit owns the power necessary for understanding and perceiving the good and the evil (Conford, 2003: 52-53). Human is neither a god nor an insensitive animal but something in-between, so he is devoid of competence in terms of knowledge and illiteracy, virtue and fault, and as he is aware of this inadequacy, he wants to improve and develop.

Then, what is exactly the nature of a human who has such an essence? Human being is a creature born with an essential imperfection and a fatal defect instead of a self-assured and self-sufficient personality. He is incompetent in nature, but is full of the desire to cover up his deficiency and to be complete. To become a whole at any time he is less than he needs to be by nature; however, he is always full of the desire to become a whole. The entity called human, is somehow not what it is but what it should be, not a completion but volition, not a success reached but a promise, an attempt. This desire for self-realization and self-completion is the essence of human being (Versenyi, 2007: 135-136). However, in order to release this potential power he needs to be enlightened by the instructive light of knowledge. In this context, according to Socrates, education helps the seeds of good will grow inside human (Aydın, 2004: 14-15).

Socrates thinks that human is a weak and fragile being full of deficiencies (Versenyi, 2007: 79), so that the only creature that comes to world deficient is human. This view is similar with Kant’s understanding of human. According to Kant, the only creature that needs education is human and he needs education all through infancy, childhood and pupilage. Animals, on the other hand, use their power and skills as for a never changing plan. Animals do not need care and surveillance; they may only need food, warmth, guidance or a kind of protection (Kant, 2007: 27). This is how they are because only human is born as a deficient being. But for Socrates, this is not a negative quality but a positive one. Although human comes to world as a deficient being, he is the only creature that can learn and improve (develop) himself. Therefore, development is a distinctive feature of human and he develops by learning. Again as Kant states, a person can only be human with education. A man is only what education makes out of him. The great secret of human’s perfection is hidden in education. It is necessary to be aware of the fact that human nature will continuously develop with education and will be worthy of human nature (good nature of human) (Kant, 2007: 32).

Life-Long Learning

It is known that “philosophy” as a concept was coined by Socrates. Socrates, in contrary with the Sophists who held that they had knowledge, defined himself as a lover of knowledge (philosopher) and the ends of life for him was attaining true knowledge and the search for knowledge. For Socrates, questioning was one of the most important ways of attaining true knowledge and an unquestioned life was not worth living (Rowe, 2011: 201). As a moral philosopher Socrates defended that the soul is more precious than the body and learning is the cultivation of the soul. When he told Athenians that the only thing worth studying in life is the soul he meant that the essence of man was not the body but the soul. And knowing yourself meant recognition of the real essence. However, this discovery is to be carried out by the person himself. For him, every individual, as an autonomous person, should know what to do and what is better and judge accordingly. If he is a complete human he must be morally
independent (autonomous) and take control of his own life. This is a responsibility that no individual could avoid. No individual can transfer such an authority and responsibility to another person (Conford, 2003: 55-56). Socrates notes that the individual is sovereign on his body and soul (Finley, 2003: 96), and he is not a teacher like the Sophists. Socrates’ method of dialogue actually seeks to inform people how less they know and start to search for knowledge with him. When the search for truth starts he includes the other party (interlocutor) in the dialogue not as a rival but as a friend and ally (Conford, 2003: 51). Thus thinking Socrates resembles himself to a midwife rather than a teacher (Mintz, 2006: 486). Born to a marble sculptor father and a midwife mother Socrates adopts the profession of his mother as his method. The best metaphor that defines Socratic education is that of midwifery. Socrates tells that:

“Give yourself to me as I am the son of a midwife and that I understand the art of midwifery, and try to give the best answer possible to my questions. My art of midwifery is in general like theirs; the only difference is that my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth” (Anl, 2006: 166).

In this context, the task of the educator according to Socrates is not conveying knowledge to the learner but disclosing the existing internal knowledge. According to Socrates knowledge is attained not through conveying knowledge but through research (Anl, 2006: 161) and this research lasts for the life. Keeping in our minds that Socrates calls himself not a wise man but a philosopher, it should be noted that the pursuit of knowledge and the search for knowledge is a lifelong process.

For Socrates education is not a process of teaching but one of learning. The definition of education by OECD “All purposeful learning activity, whether formal or informal, is undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence” (Holmes, 2002: 8), almost entirely matches Socrates’ understanding of education and learning.

Recalling that lifelong learning is an inherently personal affair (Holmes, 2002: 10) and there is not another name for training, one might deduce that what Socrates points at is lifelong learning. Since, as Martyn Sloman asserts, training, is the process of acquiring the knowledge and skills related to work requirements using formal, structured or guided means, but excluding general supervision, job-specific innovations and learning by experience. Training lies within the domain of organization: it is an intervention designed to produce behaviors from individuals that have positive organizational results. However, learning is the physical and mental process involved in changing one’s normal behavioral patterns and habits. Learning lies within the domain of the individual, can result from a whole range of experiences, and can be positive, negative or neutral from the organization’s point of view. (Holmes, 2002: 8-9). From this vantage point, it might be asserted that Socrates’ understanding of education and learning, like Popper’s understanding of science, suggests that the process of learning is incomplete (Popper, 2006: 39-40) thus lifelong learning is indispensable.

**Conclusion or the Perpetual Questioning**

Roshwald rightfully asks whether we might learn from the teaching of Socrates who lived approximately 2500 years ago and who never saw the contemporary age of development or not and he justly answers that “Socrates is one such figure whose teaching is not dated and whose inspiration may greatly benefit us” (Roshwald, 1999: 141). Socrates’ importance and influence would never decrease since he considers human not only in view of his shortcomings but also with his capabilities and potentials. It should not be considered that Socrates provides answers to the problems of his age given that in an age where creativity and innovation gain importance there is a deeper need for Socrates’ human-centered understanding of education.

**References**


