

2012

Intellectualism

William J. Prior
Santa Clara Univeristy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/phi>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Prior, W. J. (2012). Intellectualism. In G. Press (Ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Plato* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group), 184-186.

Copyright © 2012 [Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.](#) Reprinted with permission.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rscroggin@scu.edu.

INTELLECTUALISM

William Prior

Intellectualism is a view attributed to Socrates in several of Plato's Socratic dialogues that treats certain mental states, in particular virtue and vice, as states of the intellect alone, and which, as a result, denies the existence of moral weakness (*akrasia*; q.v.). Intellectualism is especially prominent in the *Laches*, *Gorgias*, *Euthydemus*, *Protagoras* and *Meno*.

(I) VIRTUE IS KNOWLEDGE

Perhaps the most prominent mental state that receives an intellectualist treatment at the hands of Plato is virtue. In the *La.*, while attempting to define courage, Laches comes up with a definition of what Socrates calls 'virtue entire': knowledge of all goods and evils (*La.* 199c–d). Why is virtue knowledge? The *Men.* provides the following argument: virtue is good, makes us good and is thus beneficial. Other goods, such as health, strength, beauty and wealth, or the psychological qualities moderation, justice, courage, intelligence, memory and munificence, are sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful. What renders them beneficial is right use; what produces right use is knowledge (understanding, wisdom). Thus knowledge, as the only intrinsically beneficial quality a person can possess, is virtue (*Men.* 87b–9a). A similar argument occurs in the *Euthd.* (278e–82d).

The *Prt.* offers a detailed account of what is meant by happiness and wisdom, one that is unique to the Socratic dialogues. In an argument with the many, Socrates leads them to admit that they regard pleasure as good and pain as bad (*Prt.* 354c). Given this account of happiness, Socrates argues that wisdom is an art of measurement of pleasure and pain (358a–b).

(II) VICE IS IGNORANCE

If virtue is knowledge, it is easy to understand vice as ignorance. In the passage of the *Men.* discussed above Socrates states, 'all that the soul undertakes and endures, if directed by wisdom, ends in happiness, but if directed by ignorance, it ends in the opposite' (*Men.* 88c). The *Euthd.*, in the same vein states, 'with respect to all the things we called good in the beginning, the correct account is not that in themselves are they good by nature, but rather as follows: if ignorance controls them, they are greater evils than their opposites' (*Euthd.* 281d). The analysis of vice in the *Prt.* yields the following account of ignorance as vice:

If, then, I said, the pleasant is good, no one who either knows or believes other things are better than the things he is doing, and possible, then does those things if he is capable of the better; nor is the 'being worse than oneself' anything other than ignorance and 'being stronger than oneself' anything other than wisdom. (*Prt.* 358c. Tr. Prior)

This ignorance is identified as false belief; the belief in question is a miscalculation of the magnitude of pleasure and pain involved in a particular course of action, an error in perspective (356c–e).

(III) NO ONE DOES WRONG WILLINGLY

Perhaps the most paradoxical claim in the intellectualist position is the denial of *akrasia* (q.v.), moral weakness. The phenomenon of moral weakness is alleged to occur when one, in full possession of knowledge of the best course of action, nevertheless chooses an inferior course, under the influence of some other mental state. 'The many' think of

knowledge 'as being utterly dragged around . . . as if it were a slave' (352c). The position shared by Socrates and Protagoras, in contrast, is that:

knowledge is a fine thing, capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act other than as knowledge dictates, and intelligence would be sufficient to save a person. (352c)

The most elaborate Socratic argument against *akrasia*, of which the above claim is a part, occurs in the *Prt.* and relies on the assumption of hedonism (354b–d). The many believe in *akrasia* because they believe that a person knowing full well that a given action is more beneficial than another, will nonetheless perform that other action because of being overcome by pleasure (352d–e). On the assumption that pleasure is the good, Socrates shows that this view of the many does not make sense by substituting 'good' for 'pleasant' in their position. The difficulty with this argument is that it only works on the assumption of hedonism, and the *Prt.* is the only dialogue in which Plato advocates hedonism, even for the sake of argument.

(IV) LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The intellectualist position described above is prominent in the 'Socratic' dialogues, though it is also present in *Laws*. The *Republic* offers a different moral psychology and a new theory of virtue. For some scholars (e.g. Penner 2002) this change marks a transition between the view of the historical Socrates and the view of Plato. The major development in the *R.* that gives rise to the modification or abandonment of intellectualism is the

introduction, in bk 4, of the tripartite conception of the soul. The soul is divided into three distinct parts: reason, spirit and appetite. Whereas the intellectualist picture identified as virtue as a whole with knowledge, the new theory allocates the virtues to different parts of the soul. Closest to the intellectual conception of the soul is reason, to which is assigned the virtue of wisdom. The spirited part of the soul is assigned the virtue of courage, while the virtues of temperance and justice are allocated to the three parts in combination (*R.* bk 4.442c–d). The *Prt.* had described wisdom as a powerful force, capable of ruling a person; the *R.*, in contrast, describes reason, the seat of wisdom, as requiring the aid of spirit if it is to prevail over the appetites (441e). Further, whereas the Socratic dialogues had insisted that every desire was for the good (cf., e.g. *Grg.* 468b; also Kahn 2008:4 and Penner 2002:195), the *R.* defines thirst in terms of drink and warns against adding ‘good’ to the object of desire (*R.* bk 4.437d–8b). Despite this new theory of the *R.*, aspects of intellectualism reappear in the dialogues generally considered late, in particular in the *Lg.* (5.731c; 9.860d) and *Timaeus* (86d; cf. Kahn 1996:72n). This renders doubtful the claim that Plato ever abandoned the central tenets of intellectualism.

See also: Brickhouse and Smith (2009), Irwin (1977a), Nehamas (1999), Segvic (2002) and Shorey (1903).