

Plato's Philosophy of Education and the Common Core debate

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EDUCATION IN ANCIENT GREECE

In Greece we find the origins of many of our educational policies and systems as it is the originating sources of Western civilization. Greek ideas about education and their educational practices have been very influential to other cultures. One of Rome's greatest service to mankind is that it carried the Greek tradition to all the Western lands. Greek civilization developed between 1200 and 490 B.C. It is in the Age of Pericles, around 500 B.C., that we see the first organized effort in a Western society for formal education. ¹

The study of ancient Greek civilization provides valuable lessons on citizenship and civic education that illustrates the important role of education in shaping good citizens. Textual analysis of his various dialogues reveals Plato's views on the purpose of education, what it is that should be taught to others and how the teacher should impart this knowledge. Plato's educational thought illuminates many problems today's educators

face: Who are worthy models for children to imitate? How does education help to shape good citizenship? How does education serve humankind's search for truth? In particular we will extrapolate Plato's response the current common core debate.

PLATO'S LIFE AND FAMILY

We know about Plato and his family from the comments he makes in his dialogues. Plato was born in 427 B.C., the son of Ariston and Perictione, both of whom were descended from distinguished Athenians of royalty. His father died when Plato was a few years old and his mother remarried a friend of the great Athenian statesman Pericles which meant that Plato was familiar with Athenian politics from childhood and was expect to take up a political career himself.²

Plato received the typical education of a youth in Athens, where the education of the young was looked at as a public rather than a private matter and was entrusted exclusively to professional hands. In the Republic, Plato outlines the normal education of a Greek boy, which he also received – learning to read and write and study the poets. Education began in Athens around 640-550 BC with Solon's edict that every boy should be taught to swim and to read in schools and *palestras*, or the gymnastic schools. Solon did not define the curriculum or the methods but only the age and rank of students and the qualifications of the pedagogues, that is the slaves who tutored each student. Athenian citizens were expected to be able to read and write, to count and sing or play the lyre. Schools in Athens were not a creation of the state but a private enterprise with the teacher supported by tuition payments. School was not compulsory in Athens, nor was it open to all, but only to the male children of the citizens. Between the ages of eight and sixteen some Athenian boys attended a series of public schools.³ The Athenian educated ideal

was a well-rounded, liberally educated individual who was capable in politics, military affairs and general community life and could take part in the direct participatory democracy.

Education of Athenian women

The aim of education for Athenian women was more at the level of training, enabling them to master domestic tasks rather than intellectual. Most Athenian girls were only educated in the home. A few women's schools existed. Sappho of Lesbos, most notably, operated a school that taught women of rank such subjects as singing, music, dancing, and sports.⁴ Most characteristic of Athenian life was the general opinion that education – culture and civic education– was an art to be learned by each individual.⁵ This is particularly strong in Plato's philosophy of education. He was the first to suggest equal education for men and women; based on their natural ability. He was perhaps influenced by the system of education developed in the south of Greece in Sparta.⁶

We see the influence of this Spartan philosophy of education in the system worked out by Plato in his *Republic*.

For Plato grew up in a city at war; the Peloponnesian war began before he was born and lasted until he was 23 years old. The demoralization of Athens due to defeat during the war led to an oligarchy revolution, followed by a savage tyranny that finally gave way to the re-establishment of a democratic constitution. During this turmoil, Socrates was put to death on a charge of impiety and corrupting the youth. Some scholars maintain that Plato served as the "defense attorney" for Socrates during his trial. The fact that he lost the case and his beloved mentor had a profound effect on him made him anxious to preserve the memory of Socrates.⁷

The Academy

Plato founded **The Academy** in 387 BC, the first institution of higher learning in Greece. It became the intellectual center in Greece and the equivalent of the first university in the history of Europe. It continued for over 900 years until it was dissolved by Justin in 529 A.D. along with other Pagan institutions.⁸ The ultimate object of all activities at The Academy was to achieve final philosophic truth. The method of teaching was by question and answer, argument, and discussion. Plato did give some lectures but his main method was oral discussion and dialogue (comparable to the modern day seminar class). The subjects taught at the academy included philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and geometry.⁹ It is interesting to note that two women students were members of the academy: the idea of collegiate co-education is apparently as old as the idea of a college itself. This, like other ideas proposed by the school, provoked criticism, as higher education for women went directly against the tradition of the times.¹⁰ The Academy was a great success. Aristotle came to Plato's Academy in 367 B.C. at the age of 17 and remained there until Plato died in 347 B.C. Plato wrote the *Meno* and *Protagoras* around the same time as he founded the Academy; one can clearly see in the dialogues how much Plato was thinking about education and educational issues at the time.¹¹

Plato the philosopher

Plato dedicated his life to the vindication of Socrates' memory and teachings. He wrote 34 dialogues, with [The Republic](#) in the middle. It is of general consensus that the first dialogues written by Plato were the immortalization of his mentor's thoughts, and

indeed a uniquely distinctive Socratic philosophy and philosophy of education is presented in these works. Beginning with the Republic and the following later dialogues, a Platonic philosophy and philosophy of education is outlined.

Plato remained at the Academy teaching, writing, and living comfortably until he died in 347 B.C. at the age of 81. Aristotle eulogized his teacher by saying that Plato "clearly revealed by his own life and by the methods of his words that to be happy is to be good." ¹²

PLATO'S CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT

One of the astounding facts in the history of culture is that the first coherent treatise on government and education which we possess in Western civilization, Plato's *Republic*, is the most profound. Plato's penetrating mind revealed the problems with which mankind has struggled, consciously or unconsciously, ever since it has had an organized society and education. Plato treats the subject of education in *The Republic* as an integral and vital part of a wider subject of the well-being of human society. The ultimate aim of education is to help people know the Idea of the Good, which is to be virtuous. ¹³ According to Plato, a just society always tries to give the best education to all of its members in accordance with their ability.

Plato's Philosophy of Education

In *The Republic*, Plato sets up a theory of what education means for both the individual and the state, focusing on the important role of those who must carefully choose

the material to teach the future guardians of the state. Implicit in a philosophy of education is an underlying understanding of who the student is to be educated; in other words what is Plato's philosophy of the human person? Plato explains his philosophy of the person in several dialogues, the *Republic*, *Timeaus*, *the Laws*. In Platonic philosophy, the highest faculty for man is reason which is rooted in the spiritual soul. In the *Laws* x. 892 he states: *the soul is one of the first existences, and prior to all bodies, and it ...governs all the changes and modifications of bodies*. In *The Republic*, book IV.. he proposes a tripartite nature to the soul; the soul consists of three "parts" – *the rational part, the courageous or spirited part and the appetitive part* 441d. In *Timeaus* 70a Plato locates the rational part of the soul in the head, the spirited part in the breast and the appetitive part in the stomach. The soul, especially the rational soul, is immortal according to Plato and in some way has pre-existent knowledge which must be 'drawn out' by the process of education. He says:

That part of the soul, then, which partakes of courage and spirit, since it is a lover of victory, they planted more near to the head, And the heart, which is the junction of the veins and the fount of the blood which circulates vigorously through all the limbs, they appointed to be the chamber of the bodyguard, to the end that when the heat of the passion boils up, as soon as reason passes the word round that some unjust action is being done

Plato saw equality in men and women in their personhood as so he was one of the first to propose equal education for men and for women based on their ability to learn, not on their gender. In the *Republic* he states

"If women are to have the same duties as men, they must have the same nurture and education?.. Then women must be taught music and gymnastics and also the art of war, which they must practice like the men?"
Book V

The teacher's role is to be both a master and a mentor for the student. Regarding the teaching of the 'vocational subjects' the teacher would 'train' the students in order for them to learn the arts, crafts and job skills necessary. The student would learn by observing the teacher, participate in the activity under the direction of the expert and then imitated the movements and skills of the teacher, practicing until he or she has mastered the skill. The apprentice must abide by the methods of his master. This brings us to a more important role for the teacher in the Platonic system of education and that is the relationship that should form between the teacher and the student. Plato feels that learning will take place more easily when the learner and the teacher have a great love for one another, for thus, the young students will be willing to listen to the master and try to emulate him because he loves him. The teacher must have a deep affection for his/her students in order to be successful teaching them.

But are we to believe that ...Protagoras and many others are able by private teaching to impress upon their contemporaries the conviction that they will not be capable of governing their homes or the city¹ unless they put them in charge of their education, and make themselves so beloved for this wisdom² that their companions all but³ carry them about on their shoulders. The Republic Book X, 600

Plato's curriculum is carefully chosen to include training for the spirit (music) and training for the body (gymnastics), with more difficult academic subjects added when the child is developmentally ready. In the Republic, Book II, Plato tells Galucon.

*"What will be the education of our heroes? --the two divisions, **gymnastics** for the body, and **music** for the soul. gymnastic has also two branches—dancing and wrestling Music includes **literature**. they will begin by telling young children fictitious stories; ... But it is important that only good stories be told so there must be censorship of the writers of fiction, keeping the good, and rejecting the bad; authorizing mothers and nurses to only tell their children the good ones only.*

*At the age when the necessary gymnastics are over: the period, whether of two or three years, those who are selected from the class of twenty years old will be promoted to higher honor, and the **sciences** which they learned without any order in their early education will now be brought together, and they will be able to see the natural relationship of them to one another and to true being.*

*who are most steadfast in their learning, and in their **military** and other appointed duties, when they have arrived at the age of thirty will have to be chosen by you out of the select class, introducing them to **dialectic** the study of philosophy ...for five years, At the end of the time they must be sent down again into the den and compelled to hold any military or other office which young men are qualified to hold for **Fifteen** years ...and when they have reached **fifty** years of age, then let those who still survive and have distinguished themselves in every action of their lives, and in every branch of knowledge, come at last to their consummation: the time has now arrived at which they must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which lightens all things, and behold the absolute good; for that is the pattern according to which they are to order the State and the lives of individuals, and the remainder of their own lives also; making **philosophy** their chief pursuit, but, when their turn comes, toiling also at politics and ruling for the public good, not as though they were performing some heroic action, but simply as a matter of duty; for you must not suppose that what I have been saying applies to men only and not to women as far as their natures can go.*

We see that Plato supported a type of vocational education, education to complete your role in life; education for the producer, the guardians and the philosopher kings, enough education to do your job well, but each grouped according to one's abilities. Just as he said for me, he said for women

“One woman has a gift of healing, another not; one is a musician, and another has no music in her nature? And one woman has a turn for gymnastic and military exercises, and another is unwarlike and hates gymnastics? Republic V

Plato's Contribution to the Common Core debate

In as much as the common core states that *“The standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.”* He would be in favor of them if they are truly tied to specific skills needed in various career jobs as we can see that he was a proponent of ‘vocational education’ or getting the education that you need in order to do a particular job; but in the sense that the common core standards are “to be clear, consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th”, I think Plato would agree with those parents who protest against the common core saying that they are lowering or education by specifying minimum standards for all. Plato would not support the common core in that he sees that education should be different for those who possess more ability. In that the Common Core says it “focuses on developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful.” Plato would be in favor of it as he insists on the great importance of role of education, to bring the young to gradually behold eternal and absolute truths and values; to be saved from passing their lives in the shadow-world of error, falsehood, prejudice and blindness to true values. The allegory of the cave in the Republic makes clear that the ‘ascent’ of the line was regarded as progress, but a progress that needs effort and mental discipline to be realized, thus the importance of education. For Plato, education is a matter of leading a person from

mere belief to true knowledge. This education is of primary importance in the case of those who are to be statesmen, and leaders.

Plato's educational theories have the practical aim of training for citizenship and leadership; his chief interest is education for character. ¹⁴

An important maxim proposed by Plato is, "The quality of the State depends on the kind of education that the members (groups) of the state receive" and so again he would be in favor of the American federal government promoting the various states adoption of the common core standards

Plato followed the question-answer method employed by Socrates, especially at the advanced levels of education. By using penetrating questions, the teacher can go beneath the surface of the things which the sense perceive and arrive at a purely intellectual understanding of the essence behind the objects of sense. The good teacher must become a dialectician who does not permit students to accept the appearances of things, but makes them use the eyes of the soul to perceive their real meaning. The teacher thus brings out the truth which is in the mind of the student, taking him out of the realm of sense experience. This dialectical method forces the student to leave the realm of sense knowledge with practical applications to life and soar to the heights of pure reason. *"This is the alternative I choose," he said, "that it is for my own sake chiefly that I speak and ask questions and reply."* Book VII, 528. Plato's method support the 'deep thinking and close reading methods' proposed as important to the common core curriculum.

Another method used by Plato, but often overlooked when synthesizing his philosophy of education, is his use of imaginary situations. Plato asks his audience to project themselves into these problematic situations, or case studies as we call them

today, and reason about them, solving the problem by posing the ifs ands, buts, pros and cons.

When a man tries by discussion--by means of argument without the use of any of the sense--to attain to each thing itself that which is and doesn't give up before he grasps by intellection itself that which is good itself, he comes to the very end of the intelligible realm just as that other man was then at the end of the visible Republic Book VII (532b).

The purpose of education is directed toward the attainment of man's highest good in its possession is true happiness. The goal of education is the true development of man's personality as a rational and moral being, the right cultivation of his soul, the general harmonious well-being of life. When a person's soul is in the state it out to be in, then that person is happy. Thus education must help man to develop balance and a true blend; it must address both the life of the mind and a correct life of sense pleasure in due proportion. The purpose of education is to help the students to grow and develop their character and ability to do good. Plato accepted the Socratic identification of virtue with knowledge found in *Protagoras* and that if virtue is knowledge, it can be taught found in *Meno* and thus in the *Republic* he says *It is only the philosopher who has true knowledge of the good for man. Happiness must be attained by the pursuit of virtue which means to become in as like to god as possible for man to become.* Will the common core curriculum lead to college and career readiness and true happiness? That has yet to be seen.

Reference Notes

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- ⁴ Haward, Anne.1992. *Penelope to Poppaea: Women in Greek and Roman Society*. Surrey, England: Nelson
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- ⁶ ibid., p. 46-7, Gwynn,Aubrey. 1926. *Roman Education from Cicero to Quintillian*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 26-29, Pomeroy,Sara. 2002. *Spartan Women*. New York: Oxford University Press
- ⁷ Hare, T.M. 1999. *Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 113
- ⁸ Day, 1994, p. 7
- ⁹ Loshan, Zhang.1998. *Plato's Counsel on Education*. p. 37-38
- ¹⁰ Frank, Rabbi Solomon. 2000. *Education of Women According to Plato*. London: Routledge, p. 302-03
- ¹¹ Day, 1994, p. 11
- ¹² Smith L. Glenn and Joan K. Smith, 1994. *Lives in Education: A Narrative of People and Ideas*. New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 25
- ¹³ ibid., p. 52
- ¹⁴ Lodge, R.C. 2000. *Plato's Theory of Education*. London: Routledge, p. 12-14, 65

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