

Plato's Conception of the Role of Philosophy in Human Formation

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In Plato's conception a philosophically and scientifically structured constitution can contribute to a proper human formation. Such a constitution will focus above all on the improvement of the citizens, in order to make them as good as possible and thus capable of achieving happiness: the paramount human good. However, Plato states in the *Republic* (473 d-e) as well as in the *Seventh Letter* (326b), that a philosophical and scientific constitution will be realized only when the genuine philosophers take the reins of the government or when the rulers of the *poleis* learn true philosophy. A philosophically educated leader is the one who will do his best to elaborate educational programs based on true philosophy, which will secure a better future for the political community.¹

Plato believes that the office of Education "is by far the most important of all the supreme offices of a" constitution (*Lg.*, 765e), since education as well as justice is the absolute prerequisite of happiness (*Grg.*, 470e). Plato asserts in the *Laws* that "education (*παιδεία*) from childhood in virtue" is "a training" that focuses on the correct formation of a disciplined human character, harmonious, balanced and able to measure and control the feelings of pleasure and pain (653a-d). A disciplined formed human character with self-control will have "a keen desire to become a perfect citizen, who knows how to rule and be ruled as justice demands" (643e). On the contrary, a training (*τροφή*) which "is directed to acquire money or a robust physique or even to some intellectual facility not guided by reason and justice" has not the right to be called educative but "coarse and illiberal" (644a).

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¹ Plato believes that the true politician is above all an educator, a moralizer, something that is revealed in several political dialogues such as the *Gorgias*, the *Republic* and the *Politicus*.

In the fourth century B.C. the education in Athens was private and the educators were wandering teachers, the so called sophists, that offered their services for a fee.² After a number of social, political, ethical and economical changes, which were in part the direct result of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.),³ new and different educational needs beyond the traditional ones were created. More specifically, in Athens, the restoration of democracy and the Athenian imperial pursuits called for expertise in public speaking and an effective communication with the *dēmos* (δημος), the citizens' assembly. Thus the paid private teachers, who promised to teach young men the art of persuasion and the political virtue⁴ for a fee as a means to personal and political success, became very popular. Yet the sophists, in order to serve and satisfy in the best possible way the new needs of political education, had to follow the desires and the opinions that were expressed by the mass in the assembly and in the courts, lowering in this way the quality level of the professional training they offered.

G. Morrow refers that in “most Greek” *poleis* “the guidance of education was provided by public opinion and informal social forces.”⁵ In the 6th book of the *Republic* (492 a-493 c) Plato notes the weakness of the sophists in resisting misleading public opinion, which proposed in an educational context only what is pleasant for the mass. That means, as Rahana Kamtekar comments,⁶ that Plato does not consider the sophists themselves as the “source of corruption” of the young men. What corrupts them is the context of their teaching, which is a reflection “of popular opinion.”

Plato criticizes the private education of his era sharply, and rejects it as corrupting, since it focuses on the human formation according to

² For more information about the education in Athens see for instance Rachana Kamtekar, “Plato on Education and Art,” in: G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 336-359, and particularly pp. 337-345. General information about the sophists see for instance W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971); G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³ M. M. Austin and P. Vidal-Naquet comment that “the Peloponnesian War marks a decisive turning point in the history of Greece” and “ushered in the beginning of the decline of the” Greek *polis* “as it had existed in the fifth century.” (See *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece: An Introduction* [London: Batsford, 1977], p. 131).

⁴ See for instance Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras* (318e-319a), in which the sophist Protagoras claims that he teaches “sound deliberation, both in domestic matters – how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs – how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action.”

⁵ *Plato’s Cretan City. A Historical Interpretation of the Laws* [Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993 (1960¹)], pp. 297-298.

⁶ “Plato on Education and Art”, p. 339; see also M. Schofield, “Plato in his Time and Place,” in: G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36-62, and particularly p. 40.

the opinion of the masses, the needs and preferences of the crowd and not according to the intellectual and moral improvement. The context of this false education was the so called “wisdom” that included “τὰ τῶν πολλῶν δόγματα,” which means the convictions that the majority express presented as intellectually respectable, and this wisdom was promised to be taught as a means of persuasion of the crowd, without any criterion of propriety and virtue. Plato asserts that such a bad and corrupting education can lead someone to acquire the beliefs that he is wise, since he knows the convictions of the masses well, and that Logos (Λόγος) is not to be trusted. In short this kind of false and harmful education can eventually lead to *misology* (μισολογία),⁷ and even harm and destroy the genuine and extremely rare philosophical natures, corrupting them either with arrogance and vain gloriousness (R. 494 d), or placing obstacles in their attempt to survive and follow the way to wisdom (R. 494 e).⁸

Plato was convinced that the historical constitutions, with which he was familiar, had failed, in his opinion, to improve the morals of the citizens. All of them served the interests and the appetites of their rulers and for that reason they have configured types of human characters (R. 338 d-e), who represent various forms of injustice. In the 8th and at the beginning of the 9th book of the *Republic*, Plato makes a detailed criticism on four basic forms of unjust and non-philosophical constitutions, which are the declinations and degenerations of *aristocracy* (544 e), the good and just philosophically and scientifically structured *Kallipolis* (Καλλίπολις).⁹ The absence of a real education, based on philosophy and science, from those constitutions, leads to a gradual corruption of the human character and soul of the individuals.

The first degeneration is *timocracy* (545 c-550 c) and forms the *timocratic* human character, who is “victory-loving” (φιλόνικος) and “honor-loving” (φιλότιμος) (545 a). A *timocratic* man has less consideration for a balanced and moral education, neglects Logos and philosophy (548 b), and moves towards money-making and the acquisition of private property.

The next degeneration is *oligarchy* (550 c-555 b) and forms the *oligarchic* man that represents the “money-lover” (φιλοχρήματων) or “lover of money-making” (φιλοχρηματιστήν) (551 a) form of human character. The *oligarchic* man values money-making a lot more than virtue.¹⁰ This attitude becomes

⁷ *La.*, 188c-e; *Phd.*, 89d-e; *R.*, 411d-e; cf. *Def.*, 415e “ἀφιλοσοφία (*aphilosophia*), the state whose possessor is misologos.”

⁸ Plato also asserts that the philosophical nature fails to develop its full power and declines into a different character (497b-c «ἐκπίπτει εἰς ἄλλότρου ἦθος»), and even abandons philosophy. In the worst case, the philosophical nature can be totally corrupted to the point of harming the citizens and the *polis* (495a-b).

⁹ *R.*, 527c.

¹⁰ In *oligarchy* “money is valued above everything by both the city and the man” (554b).

stronger in the *democratic* man, whose character is formed in the environment of an *extreme* version of *democracy*, which Plato analyses at the end of the 8th book of the *Republic* (555 b-562 a). What is good for a *democratic* character is the need to become as rich and honored as possible (555 b). The rulers of such an extreme democracy make the young people “fond of luxury, incapable of effort either mental or physical, too soft to stand up to pleasures or pains, and idle” (556 b-c).

The rulers themselves “neglect everything except making-money” and they care no more for virtue and moral human formation (556 c). The extremely tolerance that characterizes *democracy* (558 b) despises the principles of virtue, something that leads to the honoring of a public man not for his morality and education but for saying what is most pleasant for the crowd. Plato says that the *democratic* human character is “empty of knowledge, fine ways of living and words of truth” and his soul is occupied by useless desires and unnecessary pleasures. He is confused regarding what is good and bad, just and unjust, moral or immoral, and considers insolence, as good breeding, anarchy as freedom, extravagance, as magnificence and shamelessness as courage.

This empty uneducated, non-philosophical character is guided by his desires, the love of money-making, and lacks Logos and moral discipline. His utmost good is the extreme tolerance and freedom that goes to all lengths. This extreme freedom, according to Plato, leads to an extreme and dishonored slavery (564 a). The *democratic* character will be transformed into the maddest and most vicious *tyrant*, who is guided by lawless desires and false pleasures. The *tyrannical* man is a poor and empty soul, unjust, wretched, envious, untrustworthy, friendless, impious, host and nurse to every kind of vice (580 a). He tyrannizes himself and the *polis*.

Plato believed that the prevalent conditions of the non-philosophical constitutions, where pleasure, appetites, wealth, political power and success are honored as the paramount good for an individual, prevent the flourishing and prominence of philosophy and make the presence of the philosophers unpleasant and unwelcome (497 a-b). Plato stresses the rejection of philosophy by the Athenians of his era in many dialogues. More specifically, in the *Gorgias*, as D. Wolfsdore comments, Plato describes “the most explicit and sustained attack on philosophy,”¹¹ an attack that challenges “the practicability of philosophy as a collaborative and specifically political enterprise.”¹²

This attack is expressed through Callicles, when he suggests that Socrates abandon philosophy and move on to more important things

¹¹ *The Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 234.

¹² *The Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy*, p. 238.

(484c). Callicles asserts that people should expose themselves to philosophy in moderation and only practice it when they are teenagers. For an adult, philosophy is inappropriate and will constitute him “inexperienced” in public and private matters (484c-d).

The anti-philosophical conditions of the Greek *poleis* of Plato's era are also expressed very well in the 6th book of the *Republic* (488 a-489 a) with the “Ship of the State” analogy, which, according to Plato, explains the reason true philosophers are not honored and are considered as useless (489 a). In this analogy the philosopher is a skilled steersman but dishonored and disrespected by the ship-owner, who symbolizes the *dēmos*. *Dēmos* has limited knowledge of seafaring and is characterized by ignorance and lack of foresight. The sailors, who symbolize the ignorant orators and demagogues¹³ that claim political power for themselves, intoxicate *dēmos* with mandragora, which symbolizes the flattering speeches, and thus they succeed to persuade him to turn the helm of the ship over to them, while they manage as well to turn him against the genuine steersman.

D. Keyt¹⁴ comments that Plato in the “Ship of the State” analogy criticizes “Greek democracy in general and Athenian democracy in particular.” Plato notes that the Athenian *dēmos* is incapable of discerning the right and genuine political leader and conceiving and understanding the value of the true philosopher. The crowd rejects true philosophers considering them as real stargazers, babblers and completely useless (488 e-489 b). The reasons that true philosophers are useless to the majority and thus not honored in the *poleis*, are according to Plato, the following: 1. The ignorance of the crowd about the nature of philosophy and the ways they should use it for their good. 2. The orators and demagogues discredit philosophy and philosophers and turn the ignorant crowd against them. 3. The philosophers themselves are responsible for their derogation and devaluation, because they get disappointed, and thus avoid public life abandoning their attempts to offer their services to the community, and in the worst case they let themselves be corrupted by the non-philosophical conditions of their *polis* (491 b). 4. The greatest and most serious slander on philosophy originates in those who only profess to follow the philosophical way of life. The false philosophers are responsible for the greatest devaluation of philosophical activity. Plato explains (495 d-e) that philosophy, despite its present poor state, is still more high-minded than other

¹³ The term *demagogue* denotes a certain type of politician, which appeared in the 430s in Athens after Pericles' death, and gradually acquired a derogatory meaning. For more information about this matter see for example Melissa Lane, “The Origins of the Statesman-Demagogues Distinction in and after Ancient Athens,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 73 (2012), 179-200.

¹⁴ “Plato and the Ship of State,” in: G. Santas (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 189-213, and particularly p. 194.

crafts, and for this reason many people with defective natures desires to possess it, even though they are completely unsuitable and unworthy for philosophy (495a), and they beget thoughts and opinions that are sophisms and have nothing genuine about them or are worthy of being called true wisdom.

Contrary to all this educational condition of the fourth century, Plato makes his own educational proposal and points out the role of philosophy and Logos in human formation. Since he supports in the *Republic* (518 c-d) that “the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul,”¹⁵ he describes education as the process that activates this power by turning both body and soul “from darkness to light.” That means, as C.D.C. Reeve aptly says, that Platonic education is the “reorientation”¹⁶ of the “appetitive and spirited elements” of the “embodied” human “soul,” which through “habituation”¹⁷ achieves the harmonization of the body and its appetites with Logos. Plato supports that education does not put knowledge into souls that lack it (518 b-c), but taking for granted that this knowledge is there, redirects it appropriately (518 d) and at same time awakens and develops the natural capacities of the virtue of Logos, which pre-exists in the soul and, since it participates in something divine, never loses its power. In order for Logos to become useful and beneficial for the individual, it does not need a teacher to plant doctrines in it (523 c-524 d), but it needs the help of a good education to guide it to the light, and lead it to the philosophical inquiry; otherwise if Logos receives a bad education, it will become useless and harmful (518 e-519 a).

The educational program that Plato suggests in *Republic* (376 c-415 d; 514 a-540 c) is a lifelong learning and he analyses it thoroughly by using at same time three images, the Sun, the Divided Line and the famous allegory of the Cave.¹⁸ Plato at first insists that young people are not suitable for practicing philosophy, because of their lack of experience in life and their difficulty in corresponding to the hardest part of philosophy, which leads them in most cases to abandon it (498 a). For this reason, Plato suggests that philosophical education should be analogous to the age of

¹⁵ Cf. Arist., *Metaph.* 980a «πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.»

¹⁶ *Blindness and Reorientation Problems in Plato’s Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁸ D. Scott comments that the image of the Sun “is an attempt to sketch the nature and power of the supreme object of study, the Form of the Good,” the image of the Divided Line “presents a classification of the four cognitive stages” of education and the allegory of the Cave is an illustration of the “ascent from the sensible world to the intelligible and” the “subsequent return to the world of practical affairs” (“The *Republic*,” in: G. Santas [ed.], *The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic* [Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006], 360-382, and particularly p. 376).

the individual (498 b). As children and youths, till the age of twenty, when the souls are most malleable, people should put their minds to youthful education and philosophy, taking care of their bodies at the same time (376e).

In the first years children will study poetry and music, which will include as many myths containing a grasp of truth (377 a),¹⁹ after which a two or three years physical training will follow. Then they should study mathematics (arithmetic, plane and solid geometry, astronomy, harmonics, 525 a-531d), which are a preparatory for dialectic and which will purify and give light to Logos (527 d-e) preparing it to realize the form of the Good (526e). This youthful philosophical education which lasts about twenty years, will provide the individuals with a good helpful tool for true philosophy (498 b).

So, when they grow into manhood, from the ages twenty to thirty, they will be able to increase their mental exercises, in order to prepare themselves for a five-year training in dialectic at the age of thirty to thirty-five, which will enable them to conceive the being of each thing and will lead some of the most charismatic souls to the grasp of the Good itself (532 a-539e). After the dialectical training the individuals should focus on their practical exercise in politics and military service, from the age thirty-five to fifty (539 e-540 a). Practical knowledge and experience is very important, as is pointed out in the allegory of the Cave, in which philosophers should go back to the dark and help the other prisoners. This also proves that Philosophy is both theoretical and practical and that a person who has acquired philosophical education is well experienced in public and private life matters. At last, at the age of fifty, as Plato says (540 a), they will be able to graze freely in the pastures of philosophy.

N. Pappas²⁰ observes that Plato is “probably the first... in European history,” who “is advocating an education centered on methods of analysis rather than on facts,” and “envisions the” educational “process as a natural growth, at least for talented students” (535 c). Also G. Santas²¹ says that the platonic “system of education is intended to avoid the corruption of reason in the individual, by cognitive learning and habituation, instilling true beliefs and taming the wilder parts of the soul.”

Plato’s educational system has a wide range and in no case can be identified as a sterile acquisition of information and skills. As Plato asserts, the educational program should be structured in such a way as to secure

¹⁹ Poetry and music will help children to identify and love only beautiful and good things and to avoid and reject the ugly and bad ones.

²⁰ *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Plato and the Republic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003 [1995¹]), p. 124.

²¹ *Understanding Plato's Republic* (USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 123.

an all-round healthy and beneficial formation of human character, which will lead the young people “from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of Logos” (R. 401c-d). The best education is a training of both soul and body that forms balanced, harmonious, moral, philosophical and just characters with self-knowledge and self-control and it promotes and encourages the philosophical inquiry, the desire of pursuing the truth, and the love of all kinds of learning. It is a training of young people on how to love beautiful and good things and how to avoid and reject what is shameful and bad. As Plato says in the *Laws* (641 c), if people have received a good education, it will make them good men, and being good they will achieve success in many ways. Good education “leads to victory.”

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