

Understanding plato and the theory of education philosophy essay



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Plato, despite his social class and family connections as the son of Ariston and Perictione, chose not to partake in Athenian political life. Through the Seventh Letter written in his seventies, he sheds light on this choice, as well as the existing social/political arrangements and hierarchies of the time. The two political constitutions that constantly contended for power were oligarchy and democracy. The oligarchs aimed at establishing a state in which only those who with substantial wealth and property are allowed to take part in ruling, while the democrats insisted all citizens are given equal rights in ruling the city. Plato categorizes both of these constitutions as “ unjust” and full of faults. For instance, the oligarchy will be ruled by people who are not fit to rule as they lack education by valuing money most, and will be subjected to internal civil war as the two factions of the rich and the poor will never share common goals. The result is a city without harmony and specialization. In the case of democracy, as Plato elaborated in the Ship Analogy (488), those in power are not chosen based on qualification, instead

by lottery. And similar to oligarchy, there is no harmony and specialization as everyone is free to pursue whatever they like.

Strongly disapproving these corrupt political constitutions, Plato “ withdrew in disgust from the evils being practiced” (ix). However, he “ didn’t cease to consider ways of improving this particular situation, however, and indeed, of reforming the whole constitution” (ix). In order to achieve the ideal state of a rational and just society, Plato argues that only true philosophy enables one to discern what is just for both the individual and the city, as well, “ the human race will have no respite from evils until those who are really and truly philosophers acquire political power or until, through some divine dispensation, those who rule and have political authority in cities become real philosophers” (ix-x). Such argument is the main focus of *The Republic*, and through which Plato explores the topics of justice and education.

The Republic begins with the debate between Thrasymachus and Plato. Thrasymachus, a foil to Plato, attempts to answer Plato’s question of what is justice. He provides a realistic account based on the city, laws and politics at the time. To him, justice is the advantage of the stronger. Thrasymachus argues that a ruler would always rule to his own advantage instead of the advantage of his subjects as justice is determined by the one that is stronger, which is the ruler. And therefore, an unjust person lives better than a just person. This greatly differs from Plato’s philosophy as he believes justice is undertaking and excelling in one’s own particular function.

Therefore, the function of the ruler should be to always aim for the Good, and the good of the city instead of the good of the individual. And since “ justice is a soul’s virtue, and injustice its vice”, “ a just person is happy, and

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an unjust one wretched" (353e). With this debate as a launching point, through the rest of the book, Plato explores the issue of justice, what is a just city, and how to establish such city.

The foremost change to the existing social arrangement and hierarchies is challenging the foundation belief of the city. Plato suggests the need for a "noble falsehood that would...persuade even the rulers...then the others in the city" (414c) to ensure loyalty among all citizens and no disagreement over the selection of the ruler. This noble lie is the myth of the metals.

According to this myth, every citizen is born out of the earth, with the earth as his mother, and other fellow citizens as his brothers. Each person is born with a soul that contains one of three kinds of metal mixed in: gold, silver, or iron or bronze. Those with gold-souls will be the guardians, silver-souls will be the auxiliaries, and lastly, iron or bronze-souls will be the producers. The soul of the offspring usually matches that of the parents, but in occasional cases, a mix of iron and bronze might be able to produce an offspring with silver or gold soul and vice versa. Plato emphasizes the importance of the division of the metals and roles as "there is an oracle which says that the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or a bronze guardian" (415d). This leads into Plato's definition of justice - "Justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (433a). This myth of the metals helps to establish a new social arrangement of the citizens' roles, and makes it possible for everyone to "practice one of the occupations in the city for which he is naturally best suited" (433a). In many aspects, justice and education are connected, as education is needed in order to perform one's function well. Therefore, justice cannot be achieved without education.

Plato formulates a theory of education that is of two parts: the education of the guardians and the education of the philosopher kings. The foundation for the education of the guardians is based on the concept of societal and individual justice derived from the theory of the tripartite structure of the city and soul. In the utopia society, there exist three main classes of people derived from the myth of the metals: producers, auxiliaries, and guardians. Each class performs its appropriate and specific function, with correct position of power in relation to others. An individual mirrors that of a society. Analogous to the three class of society, each individual consists three parts of the soul: appetitive, spirited, and rational. Similarly, the three parts of the soul achieve harmonious relationship with one another. The rational part rules the spirited part with the appetitive part submitting to reason. Combining the two, it is possible to reason that each of the three classes of society is dominated by each of the three parts of the soul. The producers are dominated by the appetitive part of the soul, the auxiliaries by the spirited part, and most importantly, the guardians are dominated by the rational part. Due to this parallel, it is easy to conclude that in order for the society to be just, the ruler to also be just and capable, in turn, the ruler must be governed by reason and wisdom.

This leads to the first account of education, the education of the guardian. For the guardian, “ philosophy, spirit, speed, and strength must all, then be combined in the nature of anyone who is to be a fine and good guardian of our city” (376c). Since nature is not sufficient to produce these qualities, they must be obtained through education. Education of the guardian is in two parts: music and poetry, and physical training.

Education in poetry and music begins with the telling of tales in the earliest years of childhood because that is when people are most pliable as they “assimilates [them]self to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it” (377b). Tales must be strictly censored because young children are malleable and absorb all to which they are exposed. Plato claims, “A young thing can’t judge what is hidden sense and what is not; but what he takes into his opinions at that age has a tendency to become hard to eradicate and unchangeable” (378d). Tales cannot depict gods as having negative attributes, such as unjust, violent, angry, dishonest, cowardly, amorphous, imitating, or with excessive emotions. In the discussion on the education in music, similar to the content and style of speeches, Plato emphasizes the importance of moderation in the rhythm, mode, and lyrics of the music. In order to balance out the education in music and poetry, Plato describes the importance of education in physical training. Since “a good soul by its own virtue makes the body as good as possible” (403d), training of the physically body is necessary. Once again, Plato emphasizes the importance of moderation, such as eating and drinking moderately. More importantly, an equilibrium and balance is needed in both kinds of education, in order for the body and soul to be in harmony with another.

As the discussion delves deeper into more of the specifics of constructing the city, Plato concludes that the only possible way is if and only if the rulers are philosophers, thus deeming the former account of the guardians’ education is incomplete. This introduces the philosopher-king and the education of the philosophy-king. Beyond the four virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice, the highest level of knowledge and the ultimate virtue is the

understanding of the Form of the Good. It is important to not only be “satisfied to acquire things that are merely believed to be good, however, ... things that really are good” (505d). Plato explains the Form of the Good using the power of analogies with the sun, the line, and the cave.

The sun illuminates and provides visibility, sight, and existence in the visible realm. This is analogous to the Good, as it provides a source of intelligibility, capacity for knowledge, and existence of the Forms. The line analogy illustrates the four grades of knowledge and opinion. The lowest two levels, imagination and belief, are in the visible realm, while the highest two levels, thought and understanding, are in the intelligible realm. The highest level, understanding, includes the knowledge of the forms, especially the Form of the Good. The last analogy is the allegory of the cave. In the cave, a group of people are chained from birth facing the wall. Behind them, puppet masters manipulate statues that cast shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. To them, who knows nothing, assumes the shadows to be reality. If one prisoner is freed, after a period of pain in the eyes due to direct exposure to the light of the fire, he would be able to see the statues themselves, which are more real than the shadows he thought was reality. When leaving the cave, after a period of pain in the eyes due to direct exposure to sun light, he would be able to finally look at real objects, which are the most real things, the Forms. And lastly, he will be able to see the sun, which gives existence to all the real objects, and represents the Form of the Good. This series of events demonstrates progressive education. Education is not the insertion of knowledge into the soul, instead, the power is within the soul, and education is turning it towards the correct direction.

The more practical side of the education of the philosopher kings involves not only the education of music, poetry, and physical training, but also mathematics, as “ it leads the soul powerfully upward and compels it to discuss numbers themselves” (525d) as well as philosophical dialectics as it illuminates knowledge. Children with suitable nature, especially those that love to learn, display great potential. From then on, they are taught these subjects and the best performing students are chosen to continue studying dialectics. After another round of evaluation, those best at the task will go on to gain experience in political rule. After fifteen years, those who perform well will now become philosopher-kings after grasping the Form of the Good. They will be imbued with the important task of educating the next generation of auxiliaries and guardians.

Comparing the education of the guardian and the philosopher kings shows great contrast among the two. The education of the guardian is passive, and emphasizes the importance of acceptance, acquiring and approving what is told through censored stories and music. Conversely, the education of the philosopher kings is more active and allows more freedom. When teaching, “ don’t use force to train the children...use play instead. That way you’ll also see better what each of them is naturally fitted for” (537a). As philosopher kings, it is more important to determine the Good and distinguish what is right or wrong for themselves by looking at the entire whole.

Plato’s ideal social arrangement would a city with philosophy-kings, guardians, auxiliaries, and producers. The idea of the possibility of such model of justice and education, thus in turn the utopia city, is of great debate. Plato, especially at the time, is very bold in suggesting the equality
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of women and men in becoming philosophers and rulers, as well as the idea that member of the government should hold no private property or wealth. First, Glaucon raises this question of the possibilities of the model in reality as he states, “ the city we were founding and describing,...exists in theory, for I don’t think it exists anywhere on earth” (592b). Plato himself also agrees, and suggests that such state is non-realistic, “ but perhaps...there is a model of it in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees” (592b). From this, it is evident that Plato himself only proposed this model for purely theoretical purposes, for introducing his ideas of education and justice, rather than providing an actual blue print for the new city and instructing definite change in the social arrangement.

From a contemporary point of view, such a society is nearly impossible as it is built mainly on the foundation of myths and censorship. Despite these being based on noble falsehoods, they are in essence still lies. For instance, the myth of the metals explains why certain people belong to certain class and allows the citizens to be patriotic and harmonious which is beneficial; however, in contemporary senses, such lies are highly difficult to be maintained and propagated. Also, it would be unfavorable from a contemporary political vantage point to adopt this system. Though some argue that the myth of the metals has a redeeming aspect of creating a meritocracy, however, this argument is flawed as it is only valid if it is true that metal of the soul equals one’s true merit. In the current society that emphasizes success as based on one’s hard work, the myth of the metals

would be implying a totalitarian society with inequality and discrimination by restricting those with iron or bronze levels from becoming guardians.

Despite the unrealistic aspect of the ideal city in the physical world, Plato, through *The Republic*, attempts and offers a valuable account for better human existence that was groundbreaking for his time. In the discussion of justice, Plato emphasizes the interconnection and interdependence of justice and education. And despite *The Republic* being written more than two thousand years ago, many of the issues Plato raised and examined, such as forms of government and censorship, are still relevant and applicable in the current society.

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Contemporary Civilization

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ARISTOTLE #2

Aristotle and Friendship

Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, explores the topics of happiness, good and virtue. Friendship, which “ is a virtue or implies virtue” (p. 194), is undoubtedly a major focus of the *Ethics*. Friendship, as a human good, is not only extremely important, but also absolutely necessary as “ for without friends no one would choose to live” (p. 192). Even if one is powerful and rich, one needs a friend, to both preserve prosperity and exercise beneficence. Friendship implies the living beyond singularity and isolation. In the *Politics*, Aristotle emphasizes such importance as “ anyone who cannot

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form a community with others...is no part of a city-state - he is either a beast or a god" (1253a25). Friendship allows men "[to be] more able both to think and to act", "to feel if for offspring", and "to hold states together" (p. 192). Above all, "when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just they need friendship as well, and the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality" (p. 193). Aristotle advocates the Politics that a city-state "comes to be for the sake of living, but it remains in existence for the sake of living well" (1252b30). Living well, is the goal of the citizens as they strive to be virtuous and achieve happiness. And in doing so, they must find genuine friendships that would fulfill their lives.

Aristotle states in Politics, there are three kinds of the good: "external goods, goods of the body, and goods of the soul" (1323a25). Friendship can similarly be categorized as having these three aims: utility, pleasure, or the good. "Those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure" (p. 195). In these two forms of friendship, the pursuit of love is based solely on the love for the sake of what is useful or pleasant for oneself, instead of the love for the person himself. These friendships are fleeting and always changing, since as the motive of the friendship is gone, the friendship ends. The "perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good in themselves" (p. 196). In this form of friendship based on the good, the pursuit of love is based solely on the love for one's sake, given the other man is virtuous. This kind of friendship is everlasting as goodness is an enduring quality, for they become

friends “ by reason of their own nature and not incidentally” (p. 196). This ultimate type of friendship is infrequent, as such men are rare and such friendship requires time to cultivate.

The lower modes of friendship are based on utility and pleasure, while the higher mode of friendship is based on the good. In the Politics, Aristotle concludes that the good of the soul is an end in itself, while the external goods and goods of the body are simply means to this end. Analogously, the differences between these two modes of friendship can be explained.

Friendships of utility and pleasure resemble that of the good, and are sought not for their own sake, but for their ulterior ends. Therefore, “ those who are friends for the sake of utility part when the advantage is at an end; for they were lovers not of each other but of profit” (p. 198). Conversely, friendship of the good is the ultimate good, and sought for its own sake. This separation of the kinds of friendship also separates the kinds of man as one’s values are shown through the people one associates with and values one appreciates. “ Bad men will be friends for the sake of pleasure or of utility, being in this respect like each other, but good men will be friends for their own sake, i. e. in virtue of their goodness” (p. 199). Though there is a distinct difference between the modes of friendship, it is likely they are not mutually exclusive. Often with friendship based on the good, utility and pleasure is also present and can be derived.

Friendship is based on equal exchanges, be it of utility, pleasantness, or goodness. For instance, this is especially evident in the complaints present in the friendships based on utility. Since men use each other for self-interest, they always feel that they received less than what is equal to what they want

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and deserve. To resolve this, Aristotle suggests that the value or utility of the exchange should be determined by the receiver, not the benefactors.

However, there is another kind of friendship that by nature exist between two unequal parties. This is the friendship between father and son, husband and wife, and ruler and subject. In these instances, the amount of love for the other party is proportional to their merit. For instance, because the ruler is of higher merit, the subject should show more love for the ruler. Having love proportional to merit, a sense of equality arises, and this fits into the former definition of the friendship that is said to be of equality. To summarize, “ equals must effect the required equalization on a basis of equality in love and in all other respects, while unequals must render what is in proportion to their superiority or inferiority” (215). However, when this gap of inequality between the parties is too great, friendship ceases to exist and is no longer possible. This is the case with human and kings or gods, “ for they surpass us most decisively in all good things” (p. 204). Since the two parties are completely different in virtue, they cannot form the highest form of the friendship based purely on the good, and also, they cannot form the other kinds of friendships as it would be impossible to attribute love in proportion to the infinitely grand merit of the superiors.

Earlier in the Nicomachean Ethics as well as in the Politics, Aristotle argued that “ a human being is by nature a political animal” (1253a5). This point is expanded further through the illustration of friendships. In the friendships based on utility and pleasure, one seeks out the other for merely for self-interest and gains. This is similar to the symbiotic relationships between two cities or states under agreements or treaties that provides mutual benefits

and works in the advantage of both parties. In the friendship based on the good, one loves another solely for the sake of the person. The vitality of such friendship is again emphasized as “ The city-state is...prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually, since the whole is necessarily prior to the part” (1253a25). This true virtue, when applied to the city-state, is able to bond people and hold society together, in order to form a harmonious community.

Friendship's far reaching effects also extend to justice as “ each of the constitutions may be seen to involve friendship just in so far as it involves justice” (p. 211). The three kinds of relationship that make up the household can be translated to the three kinds of constitutions. In the father son relationship, the father is the superior and rule over his sons, resulting in justice and friendship proportional to merit. This superiority of one party over another resembles that of a monarchy or tyranny when viewed on the two extremes. In the case of husband and wife, justice and friendship is based on worth, and thus this represents an aristocracy or oligarchy. Lastly, the relationship between brothers is equal and based on camaraderie, thus serving the basis for timocracy or democracy.