

# The role of education in plato's republic

[Philosophy](#)



The role and significance of education with regard to political and social institutions is a subject that has interested political philosophers for millennia. In particular, the views of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, as evidenced in *The Republic*, and of the pre-Romantic philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, present a striking juxtaposition of the two extremes of the ongoing philosophical and political debate over the function and value of education.

In this paper, I will argue that Rousseau's repudiation of education, while imperfect and offering no remedy to the ills it disparages, is superior inasmuch as it comes closer to the truth of things than does Plato's idealized conceptions. To do so, I will first examine Plato's interpretation of the role of education and its function in shaping the structure of society and government and in producing good citizens. I will then introduce Rousseau's view of education and the negative effects of the civilized culture which it produces, and using this view, will attempt to illustrate the naivete and over-idealization of Plato's notions.

Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate that it is Rousseau's view, rather than Plato's, that is ultimately more significant in assessing the actual (vs. idealized) merits (or lack thereof, in Rousseau's case) by which education should be judged with regard to the nurturance of good citizens. For Plato, the question of the role of education arises near the end of Book II (377e), after a discussion of both the necessary and consequent attributes of Socrates' kallipolis or "Ideal City."

Such a city, Socrates argues, will, before long, have need of both a specialization of labor (in order for the greatest level of diversity and luxury of goods to be achieved) and of the establishment of a class of "Guardians" to protect the city from its envious neighbors and maintain order within its walls (i. e. , to police and govern the city). This, in turn, leads inexorably to the question of what attributes the Ideal City will require of its Guardians, and how best to foster such attributes.

The early, childhood education of the Guardians, Socrates argues, is the key. What, then, asks Socrates, should children be taught, and when? This quickly leads to a discussion of censorship. Socrates cites a number of questionable passages from Homer which cannot, he thinks, be allowed in education, since they represent dishonorable behavior and encourage the fear of death. The dramatic form of much of this poetry is also suspect: it puts unworthy words into the mouths of gods & heroes.

Socrates suggests that what we would call "direct quotation" must be strictly limited to morally-elevating speech. Nothing can be permitted that compromises the education of the young Guardians, as it is they who will one day rule and protect the city, and whom the lesser-constituted citizens of the polis will attempt to emulate, assimilating, via the imitative process of mimesis, to the Myth (or "noble lie") of the Ideal City in which justice is achieved when everyone assumes their proper role in society.

The process of mimesis, is, of course, yet another form of education, in which those of Iron and Bronze natures are "instructed" and inspired by the superior intelligence and character of the Gold and Silver members of the

Guardian class. It is therefore a form of education without which the polis cannot operate. Thus, for Guardian and ordinary citizen alike, the education of the young and the continuing "instruction" of the citizenry are crucial. In addition to these aspects, Plato also conceives of another function of education, and one which is quite significant in its relation to Rousseau's views.

For Plato, education and ethics are interdependent. To be ethical, in turn, requires a twofold movement: movement away from immersion in concrete affairs to thinking and vision of unchanging order and structures (such as justice) and then movement back from dialectic to participation and re-attachment in worldly affairs. It is a temptation to become an abstract scholar. But the vision of the good is the vision of what is good for oneself and the city -- of the common good.

If one does not return to help his fellow human beings, he becomes selfish and in time will be less able to see what is good, what is best. An unselfish devotion to the good requires an unselfish devotion to the realization of this good in human affairs. Just as the purpose of understanding order and limits in one's own life is to bring about order and restraint in one's own character and desires, the understanding of justice requires application in the public sphere (through education). A man who forgets the polis is like a man who forgets he has a body.

Plato thus advocates educating both the body and the city (for one needs both), not turning one's back on them. If education is, for Plato, the means by which man comes to fully realize (through society) his potential as

ahuman beingand by which society as a whole is in turn elevated, for Rousseau it is quite the opposite. Education, argues Rousseau, does not elevate the souls of men but rather corrodes them. The noble mimesis which lies at the heart of education in Plato's kallipolis is for Rousseau merely a slavish imitation of the tired ideas of antiquity.

The ill effects of this imitation are manifold. Firstly, argues Rousseau, when we devote ourselves to the learning of old ideas, we stifle our own creativity and originality. Where is there room for original thought, when, in our incessant efforts to impress one another with our erudition, we are constantly spouting the ideas of others? In a world devoid of originality, the mark of greatness, intelligence, and virtue is reduced to nothing more than our ability to please others by reciting the wisdom of the past.

This emphasis on originality is in marked contrast with Plato, who finds no value in originality, deeming it antithetical to a polis otherwise unified by shared Myths of the Ideal City and of Metals. Rousseau rejects this "unity", rightly denouncing it as a form of slavery, in which humanity's inherent capacity for spontaneous, original self-expression is replaced with the yoking of the mind and the will to the ideas of others, who are often long dead.

In addition to suppressing the innate human need for originality, education (and the appetite for "culture" and "sophistication" that it engenders) causes us to conceal ourselves, to mask our true natures, desires, and emotions. We become artificial and shallow, using our social amenities and our knowledge of literature, etc., to present a pleasing but deceptive face to

the world, a notion quite at odds with the ideas of Plato. We assume, in Rousseau's words, " the appearance of all virtues, without being in possession of one of them.

Finally, argues Rousseau, rather than strengthening our minds and bodies and (a critical point) moving us towards that which is ethical, as Plato contends, education and civilization effeminate and weaken us physically and (perhaps most significantly) mentally, and cause us, in this weakness, to stoop to every manner of depravity and injustice against one another. " External ornaments," writes Rousseau, " are no less foreign to virtue, which is the strength and activity of the mind.

The honest man is an athlete, who loves to wrestle stark naked; he scorns all those vile trappings, which prevent the exertion of his strength, and were, for the most part, invented only to conceal some deformity. " Virtue, as opposed to Plato's conception, is an action, and results not from the imitation inherent in mimesis, but rather in the activity -- in the exercise -- of the body, mind and soul. Education, however, demands imitation, demands a modeling upon what has been successful. How, then, do we rightly assess the merits of education with regard to its it molding of the public character -- in its ability to produce " good" citizens.

The answer to this hinges, I submit, on how we choose to define the " good" citizen. Clearly, if obedience (or " assimilation to a political ideology", or perhaps " voluntary servitude") is the hallmark of the good citizen, then we must regard Plato's disposition towards education as the proper one. However, obedience, despite its obvious centrality to the smooth operation

of society (as we would have social chaos were it completely absent), has its useful limits. Over-assimilation to a political idea or "blueprint" is every bit as dangerous -- indeed, far more so -- as the utter under-assimilation of anarchy.

For those inclined to dispute this, I would urge them to review the history of Nazi Germany as perhaps the definitive example of what sad, awful spectacles of injustice we humans are capable of when we trade in our mental and spiritual autonomy for the convenient apathy and faceless anonymity of the political ideal. Furthermore, if, as Rousseau contends, our civilization is such that, "Sincere friendship, real esteem, and perfect confidence [in each other] are banished from among men," what is the quality of the society for which education -- any modern education -- purports to prepare us?

When, "Jealousy, suspicion, fear coldness, reserve, hate, and fraud lie constantly concealed under ... [a] uniform and deceitful veil of politeness," what is left to us to educate citizens for, other than the pleasure we seem to derive in pedantic displays of hoary knowledge? If we remove the civility from "civilization", what remains to us that any education will remedy?