

Platonic Curriculum and the Allegory of the Cave

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Abstract

The following paper attempts to show and take into account in basic terms the unity and direction of the movement of education as presented in Plato's *Republic*. We show that education, according to Plato, essentially involves a claim to knowledge in the sense of understanding what is valid regardless of space and time and acting on the basis of norming oneself by this understanding. Then, namely, in the sense of this distinction, an educated person is one who is able to distinguish the important and the unimportant in his knowledge and in his life.

Keywords

Idea; Plato; education; philosophy of education; theory; Europe

Introduction

The main goal of the following article is to outline the connection and unity of the educational disciplines that Plato schedules, against the background of his allegory of the cave, presented in the 7th book of Plato's *Republic*. One can argue that Plato's philosophy is more than 2,300 years old, so the effort to update it is at least an anachronism. I tend to agree with this claim, but *this actualization is not my point here*. Plato himself would consider *repetition* of his own thinking to be slave-like. As we shall see, repetition is the lowest form of knowledge for him. Then why is it important to return to Plato? What are we returning to when we return to Plato? Plato is the one who has discovered the Idea of education as a bringing one to the Ideas (to distinguish the Idea in the Platonic sense from the idea in the modern sense – as a content of consciousness, a perception – I write the first with a capital “I”). The return to Plato means the return to the discovery of education as a specific *freedom* that lies in education as a movement towards the humanity of man. This freedom is something that students must be enabled for; insofar as *education regards not only an expert but, more importantly, a human being*. So, the return to Plato here means *initiating the question of the meaning of education*.

And finally, I argue that in his Idea of education, Plato considers the specific kind of freedom that involves the transformation of the soul. (Recently, the aspect of education as a transformative experience was emphasized by Liessmann (2017).) This model of education as a metamorphosis of the soul stays in contrast to the model of man as a human resource that is to be provided with pre-defined skill and competences.

Plato's curriculum

At first, let me briefly summarize the basic moments of the Allegory of the cave. The allegory can be divided into four parts: 1) the situation of those who are imprisoned in the cave; 2) release of one of the prisoners; 3) his ascent from the cave to the sunlit world; 4) his return to the cave and his murder. The cave is an image of our perceptible world. The world outside the cave is an image of the world of Ideas.

It will be important to us that the structure of the whole allegory does not have the character of a mere ascent to the truth, but it forms a circle. We cannot simply ascend to the truth, because truth is not something we can achieve once and for all. But it is possible to enter a certain movement of truth when we enter the difference between the educated and uneducated (cf. Heidegger 1988, 114f.). And movement within this difference is called by Plato education (*paideia*). This movement occurs when we enter into, or rather, we are situated into the abyss between mere opinion and truth. The location in which we are thus situated is called, in our European tradition, the school (*schole*).

In what follows, I would like to indicate the unity of the curriculum Socrates is describing, which is “subjectively” the unity of the movement of the soul to the Idea of the Good that gives Being to all beings. And *the degrees by which the soul ascends concern the degrees of knowledge*.

1 Basics of education or basic education

1.1 Gymnastics

Let us have a look at the curricular disciplines within Plato's project.

The first discipline is *gymnastics*. Gymnastics belongs to the sphere of growing and perishing (*Resp.* 521e). In the dialogue, it is stated that although gymnastics cultivates the body, it also happens that gymnastics primarily serves to educate the soul (403d, 410c). In the context of the allegory of the cave, gymnastics would belong to the field of imitation and shadows. From the perspective of knowing the truth, gymnastics is founded on *repetition of exercises*. But at the same time, this repetition transcends to the *unity* of the body. In order for the body to function well, it must work as a unity. Exercise includes self-overcoming. And this self-overcoming is the performance not of the body, but of the *soul*. Repetition or imitation has the lowest validity from the point of view of knowledge. Indeed, the image of the thing gives me certain knowledge, but if I believe that the image of the thing is the thing itself, I am a victim of deception.

1.2 Music

Music is also located within the cave. However, the shift is that music is performed purely for the soul (376e). Performing music brings *unity and grace* (401d) to the soul by bringing *harmony and eurythmy* to it. Music allows the child to experience the specific harmony that transcends particular tones. And it is constitutive for an educated person as a free being that he is able to perceive beauty and grace for himself (and not slavishly for some profit or lust). It is necessary to say that the title “music” (*musike*) does not mean only music, but refers to

the Muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Plato explicitly states that music also includes drawing, stylistics, or myths. But like gymnastics, music also has limits that must be exceeded. It *lacks the ability to give rational reasons (logoi)* (411d).

Thus, the partners in the dialogue come to the conclusion that music cannot be the education of the soul as a whole. Instead, music and gymnastics form the *strings of the soul* (411e). And these strings should be brought up educationally. *The sense of harmony is not yet an understanding of harmony*. Gymnastics and music belong to the realm of changing being (i.e., into the cave), they are not able to draw the soul towards Being and truth (521d).

2 Exiting the cave

When the prisoner is forced out of the cave, he must first get his eyes used to daylight. What connection to education is expressed in this picture? The sun, which is never visible from within the cave, refers to the Idea of the Good that makes it possible that things appear as true in its light. The difficulty of learning to think with regard to the truth is experienced by the student at the university when entering the field of theoretical knowledge. In common experience with particular things, it suffices to open your eyes and see these tables, chairs, and so on in front of you. You do not have to understand why they are, you just see them in their contingency. On the other hand, in the field of theoretical knowledge, everything creates the necessary system of connections. And this is one of the hardest tasks connected to the ability to think with regard to this necessity. With this point in mind, we can interpret the context of our allegory. Outside the cave, the prisoner cannot see things themselves. He is blinded by the sunlight. So he observes shadows of things and later on the images on water surfaces. Only after some time is he able to look at things themselves (on the role of time, or rather timing, in education, cf. Svobodová 2013). The image of a water *surface* seems to confirm the interpretation that the difference between shadows and mirroring images and things themselves corresponds to the difference between arithmetic and geometry on the one hand and astronomy and harmony of the other (Fleischer 1970, 493). It is necessary to take into account that within the structural analogy the daylight represents the light of truth, which makes it possible not only to perceive by senses but also to *think of the necessary relationships*.

3 Education as such

3.1 Arithmetic

So, where does the prisoner go from the cave, when we interpret the allegory in the context of curriculum? First, it is an arithmetic world and a geometric world.

With *arithmetic*, we are already crossing the boundary between the sensory field and the field of thinking. We need to recall Pythagorean inspiration (Losin 1997, 61), according to which numbers do not mean mere algebraic symbols, but numbers form the world itself, including its sensory components. As stated in the dialogue, mathematics is not reduced to mere calculating (525b-c). The educational value of mathematics lies in the fact that it directs the soul towards a permanent and unchanging being. Thus, it makes it easier for the soul not to range along the realm of sensible and variable, but to learn to look into the realm of the

intelligible (525c). At the same time, however, Plato criticizes the Pythagoreans. The criticism is that Pythagorean mathematicians rely on the unity of numbers as an assumption they no longer question (525e-526a). There is a difference between operating with assumptions (“it is given”) and examining the assumptions as such and trying to understand them (cf. also 510a-511b).

3.2 Geometry

When we move on to *geometry*, its value is underlined by the fact that above the entrance to Plato’s Academy was the inscription: “No one enters who does not know geometry” (or, taking into account Plato’s specific humour: “who is not geometrical”). Although the geometer may be using visible figures and symbols, he is not focused on them in his thinking, but rather using the visible figures, he thinks of intelligible (immutable) essential relations. These essential relations do not apply contingently in some place or time (for instance, only on Monday), but they are true every time and everywhere. As Plato puts it, geometry recognizes an eternal being (527b).

3.3 Astronomy

Why, according to Plato, is *astronomy* higher than geometry? Does not astronomy mean a return to the sensory world of planets and stars? In the dialogue, it is stated that “astronomy ought to be taught contrary to the present fashion” (529c). And this is precisely because contemporary (that means 4th century BC) teaching of astronomy remains with visible bodies and their imperfect orbits. That means that it is not understood that the orbits performed by celestial bodies are themselves only a reflection of true speed and slowness “in true numbers” (529d). According to Plato, what is important in astronomy are the ideal conditions and non-perceptible movements of bodies in the sky. Astronomy is for Plato, the knowledge of idealized orbits. Astronomy adds to geometry a fourth dimension of velocity.

3.4 Harmony

Harmony, as a discipline related to “harmonious motion in music” (530d), also involves sensory perception that needs to be purified by idealization. Harmony is not interested in perceived chords and tones (531a), but in the harmonic numbers themselves. It is worth mentioning that harmony is retroactively related to gymnastics and music: it is a difference if I have a sense for grace and good music (in the widest sense), and if I can calculate the ratios that are constitutive for these in harmony and grace.

In the field of perception, we are bound to contingent place and time. Therefore, the truth appears only to a limited extent in this field. For example, it is true that now I am standing here. But when I take a step forward, this truth ceases to exist. In contrast, mathematical knowledge is not tied to place and time. In idealized knowledge or, as Plato puts it, purified knowledge that purifies also the soul (527d-e), we are *freed from the particular perspective “here and now”*. In Greek, *mathema* is what is teachable. And the teachable is what is true *by necessity*. What is true in mathematics ($2+2=4$) is not true only now and here or only for

someone, but it is true for every reasonable being. Purifying the soul also means freeing oneself from the shackles of one's own particular perspective.

Of pedagogical importance is the emphasis that gymnastics, music, and mathematics are not to be learned by force and in a slavish way, but in the form of play. Play does not mean infotainment, the entertainment into which education is often turned today. The point is that the understanding of the necessity that constitutes knowledge is not possible through force or slavish repetition, but only through one's own free insight. All disciplines should form the synoptic system so that the educated one can understand their kinship and unity (537b-c). That is, the student should understand what is universal in all disciplines despite their differences. Plato speaks of the *synopsis*, literally, of what is "seen together", with regard to the general view of the whole. Such a synopsis gives unity to any knowledge. The requirement of wholeness constitutes an important issue in our epoch of hyperspecialization. In synopsis, we no longer have mere relations, but relations between relations, correlations. Correlation is a specific kind of relation where one pole cannot exist without the other (e.g., father-son, valley-top). The synopsis no longer compares the particulars and their relations, but the wholes and their necessary connections.

4 The acme of education

4.1 Dialectics

Synopsis is the ability of comparison that enables *dialectical understanding* (537c). Apart from the differences in content, it is something that is universal in all disciplines, passing through them and through all knowledge. To be able to understand means to be able to see through the obvious of what is common to all and without which the obvious phenomena would not show at all. To put it somewhat paradoxically, to understand means seeing the unity obviously concealed behind phenomena. This concealed unity is by Plato thought of as Idea. A dialectician is therefore no longer focused on what appears, his view is turned to things themselves, to Ideas.

We can better understand the importance of dialectical understanding when we consider the variability of particular perceptible things. It is this variability that prevents us from understanding their contradictory ontological status. This contradictory status lies in the fact that sensible things are constantly changing, arising, and disappearing. The way of being of this perceived table is occurring in a way that the table is constantly changing over time. Even if we do not perceive this changing, we understand that sooner or later the table ceases to exist and that it will have perished. And also the specific predicates of the table, its brownness, etc., contradict predicates of other tables that are black, white, etc. In contrast, the *Idea* of the table is not itself brown, black, etc. We can only see it with our minds when we focus on the universal that all tables have in common, or more precisely, what is numerically identical in all tables. Thanks to this character, which is present in all possible tables that are numerically identical, the table is a table, and not something else. And again, this is called by Plato: Idea. The starting question that initiates one to aim his mental eyes towards the Idea is: "WHAT is X?". It is precisely this question that puts a cave prisoner in a helpless situation (cf. 515d).

Dialectics is not a discipline. This means that it cannot be learned. To connect the first and the last, let us say that dialectics is the gymnastics of the soul. There is no doctrine that could create a wise man. However, it is possible to train the mind by dealing with the pure measures (Ideas) by which we orient ourselves in our experience.

By taking the whole into account, we are no longer trapped in contingencies but turned to what is necessarily true. Let us quote Aristotle's definition of knowledge: "We all conceive that a thing which we know scientifically cannot vary ... An object of Scientific Knowledge, therefore, exists of necessity." (*Eth. Nic.* 1139b) It is this necessity that Platonic education is aimed at. The educated knows about this necessity. He knows that he is being bound (cf. *zygon* in *Resp.* 507e) by this necessity that forces nothing, and yet it is true no matter what anyone wants or does not want.

Conclusion

So what is at stake in education is the conversion (518d) of the soul to unity, to true things (519a-b). What gives the whole educative motion its unity? The point of individual disciplines is not to gain individual skills or competences, but to self-knowledge and self-transformation of the soul. Education in the Platonic sense of the care for the soul is the caring for the universality, for the whole. But, as much as we do not possess the truth, we do not possess the whole. We must always carry out the movement of education always again. So the prisoner returns to the cave. Education is not a one-way trip to wisdom. Education is a circle (*periodos*) of questioning, and the hardest task is to begin with it always again (cf. Heidegger 1957: 15–17).

Of course, the question whether the freedom of humanity is not lost when we consider a human being as a human resource is still open.

We *are* in this question.

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