



Plato: The Great Philosopher-Educator

with David Diener

Lesson 3: The Nature and Purpose of Education

Outline:

Chapter 4: Plato's Understanding of the nature and purpose of education

	The sophists	Plato
Absolute Truth	Does not exist; purport relativism	Exists (i.e., the Forms)
Universal Moral Standards	Do not exist; purport moral relativism	Exist and can be known
Purpose of Education	Civic success (achieved by any means)	Right conduct; living well

Plato's theory of the forms: The forms (ideas) are transcendent, eternal, universal standards. They are unchanging categories, which serve as the patterns that objects in our world (the world of appearances) imitate.

Forms	Objects in Our World
The absolute, perfect, idea	An object in our world, known as "the world of appearances" can only ever imitate the form; it can never perfectly represent it.
e.g., Beauty	A beautiful flower reflects or imitates the form of beauty, but it only ever does so imperfectly.

- "Plato built his system of education on a fundamental belief in truth, and on the conquest of truth by rational knowledge. . . Plato's criterion was not success but truth."¹
- The virtues play such a central role in Plato's thought that some have argued the search for the nature of virtue is the starting point for all of his philosophy.

¹H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb, *Wisconsin Studies in Classics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 66.



- Plato understood education to be fundamentally *teleological* (having a purpose). That is to say, any style of education . . . is directed toward a goal or goals.
- The goal of education is *kalokagathia* (the melding of goodness and beauty).
- He [Plato] explained that [the virtue achieved through education] consists in having one's **loves properly aligned** such that one adores what is good and abhors what is not.

Highlights

- **Plato's understanding of education had very little to do with practical skills.**
 - The primary purpose of education is thus not to transfer to students a body of knowledge or a set of skills. Rather it is to cultivate them into a certain type of human beings who have a certain disposition toward learning, themselves, and the world around them.
 - For Plato, the most significant educational question is how a person lives, not what he or she knows.
- **Education is concerned principally with moral formation and not merely with the acquisition of knowledge.**
 - Knowledge, in other words, is not an intrinsic good, for without a moral compass to guide its use it can bring about great evil.

Curricular Subjects

- Chosen based on their ability to turn the soul toward goodness and truth
- Gymnastic: development of physical skills in order to cultivate a whole and balanced person whose body and mind are in harmony
- Music: by studying beautiful works, students are directed towards morality
- The Pythagorean Quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmonics (music)
- The study of these subjects is thus highly valuable, but not because of any immediate practical ends. Rather, they are studied because they help turn the soul toward the good.
- The ultimate goal of education is not a well-ordered individual but a well-ordered state parallel with health of whole body dependent on health of individual organisms.

Education à Well-ordered holistic individuals à Well-ordered state

- **Recollection:** learning is not a matter of acquiring new information but rather of remembering what one's soul already knows
- Students already have the knowledge within them, as well as the power to learn. What they need is for the teacher to help draw out the knowledge that already is within them.
- **Conversion:** students recollect the knowledge already in their souls by turning from the shadows of this world to the form of the good



- “The instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body.”²
- The craft of education is the craft of turning—redirecting—the soul around.

² Plato, Republic 518c4–d1.