



Plato: The Great Philosopher-Educator

with David Diener

Lesson 5: Plato's Legacy and Relevance

Outline:

Chapter 6: Plato's Educational Legacy

Plato's Academy (387 BC - 529 AD) was generally considered to have been the first fixed European institution of higher learning.

Plato directly educated numerous intellectual and political leaders, including:

- Dion of Syracuse
- Python and Heraclides (the liberators of Thrace)
- Chabrias and Phocion (great Athenian generals)
- Zenocrates (adviser to Alexander the Great)
- Euphraios (adviser to Perdiccas III of Macedonia)
- Erastus and Coriscus (governors of Assos)
- **Aristotle** (a central axis of ancient Greek philosophy, a founder of Western thought, and tutor to Alexander the Great)

The influence of Plato's philosophical thought on the history of education:

- Plato was the first person in the Western tradition to offer a systematic theory of education.
- Regardless of whether his ideas were accepted, Plato asked the questions that framed educational theory from the fourth century BC onward.
- Often, however, throughout history Plato's educational ideas were accepted and implemented (e.g. the Renaissance).
- Some of the answers Plato gave to the educational questions he posed have shaped educational practice for nearly two and a half millennia, including his emphasis on:
 - A liberal view of education as opposed to a utilitarian one
 - Continuous student evaluation
 - The compulsory nature of education
 - The state as ultimately responsible for education instead of parents

Chapter 7: The Relevance and implications of Plato's thought for twenty-first-century education

What does Plato's educational thought have to offer to twenty-first-century education?

- Three important aspects of Plato's thought that challenge the assumptions of our contemporary education milieu:
 - Plato conceived of education, even formal education, as a lifelong process.
 - In the twenty-first century, we draw a sharp distinction between formal education during an individual's childhood and young adult years and "real life" following this period.



- Versus: Plato conceived of a formal education that lasted until the age of 50, at which time individuals entered alternating periods of study and practice for the rest of their lives.
- Plato understood education to be primarily about cultivating people's character, not about equipping them for specific occupational tasks or functions within society.
 - In the twenty-first century, most people assume that the primary purpose of education, if not its only purpose, is to equip students with the knowledge and technical skills that they will need in order to go out into the world and "be successful."
 - Versus: Plato thought that the principal question that must be asked of any educational proposal is not what practical or economic impact it will have but whether it promotes the moral formation of those toward whom it is directed.
- Plato argued vehemently that a system of quality education is essential for the survival of society.
 - Within the twenty-first century, most would agree that the survival and health of a society is at least partially a function of the quality of education provided for its citizens. However, many assume that the primary benefit of education to society is of an economic nature.
 - Versus: For Plato, education's primary benefit to society is not economic but rather its formation of virtuous character.
- Plato recognized that the health of a society is dependent not merely on the knowledge it possesses but on the values that govern the use of that knowledge.

Closing Thoughts

- Plato's understanding of education offers a sharp challenge, not only to twenty-first assumptions about education, but also to our understanding of the role that virtue must play in society if it is to survive.
- Plato offered his educational model as a corrective to his contemporary Athenian culture. While we may not agree with every aspect of his analysis, it's undeniable that the profound questions he raised and the answers he gave to those questions offer a compelling corrective to our own contemporary culture as well.