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**The Puzzle, the *Praxis*, and the Product
An Aristotelian Account of the Value of Public
Education**

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An Aristotelian Account of the Value of Public Education

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1. Introduction

Contemporary debates in the philosophy of education have been influenced by the Aristotelian corpus. Aristotle does not present a treatise on education, but we can turn to *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and *The Politics* (*Pol.*) to see his defence of public education. Civic education and schooling for children are of paramount importance in the *polis*: Citizens are expected to engage with the law and partake in constitutional democracy as part of public life. The core of this thesis will explore the following: What is the *value* of public education and what makes it worthwhile? I hope to understand this question in both an interpretive and philosophical register.

Literature in response to an Aristotelian conception of education has predominantly stemmed from Chapter IX, Book X of *NE* and Book VIII of *Pol.*: These sections will be the focus of my discussion. I think that these texts spell out a puzzle: Public education is good for the sake of a product, but there are also textual and philosophical pressures that show it is *valuable independent* of a product. I want to give an account of what each of these goods are. *Prima facie*, it is obvious that education is a productive good. What is less obvious is what Aristotle thought it was for education to be an intrinsic good. I will go on to place the puzzle in relation to contemporary debates.¹

¹ In this investigation, I will: Set out the puzzle in further detail (Section 2); highlight exegetical evidence from Aristotle (Section 3); present one strand of the debate called the *Phronesis Praxis Perspective* (*PPP*) (Section 4); and offer suggestions as to how education is manifested independent of a product (Section 4).

I hope to show that education has *two-fold* value. First, education has a *practical* purpose that produces a product: It sustains political life and allows citizens to become better politicians and policymakers. Second, education has a value that is *autonomous* from any product: It encourages the development of virtues and an enjoyment of the learning process *for its own sake*. In doing so, I hope to provide an insight into the multifaceted qualities of educational practice.

2. The Puzzle

Two distinct ideas emerge from the discussion of *NE* and *Pol.*: They concern whether education is an instrumental or intrinsic good. The puzzle can be set out as follows: We have reason to believe that education is about producing citizens who contribute to the structure of life in the *polis*, but we have equal reason to believe that education is valuable for its own sake, regardless of whether a person goes on to work for the government, becomes a teacher, and so on. I mean to say that it would be a poor view of education more generally if we believed that it has little to no intrinsic value and is only used for one's political aspirations.

The upshot of the puzzle is that education has *some* stake in forming astute and knowledgeable citizens, but it is not the be-all and end-all of education to produce such citizens. For example, Aristotle turns to reasons for thinking that music, which is part of education, is for some particular end. This is true, in so far as people try to become professional singers, hit high notes, and so on. This does not happen in most cases, but there is immediate pleasure to be gained from musical education, irrespective of whether one's goals are achieved: "Since it rarely happens that [people] attain their goal... there is surely a useful purpose in periodic refreshment in the pleasures derived from music" (*Pol.* VIII.5, 1339^b28-30).

3. Aristotle on Public Education

3.1 *Nicomachean Ethics*

It is useful to consider the value of education in light of Aristotle's metaphysics. In order to understand its value, we need to know what education is, what it is for the sake of, what form it takes and what its outcomes are. The what or the why of an object helps us to gain knowledge about it. The four causes correspond to the process that the object undergoes, i.e., its material, formal, efficient and final cause (*Physics* II.3, 194^b23-32). *Eudaimonia* (happiness) is defined as the highest good that men hope to achieve. There are differing options as to what the highest human good could be,

including pleasure, *theoria* (contemplation), wealth and leisure (*NE* I.7, 1097^b1). The detailed discussion of candidates for the highest human good in Book I shows us that Aristotle has some stake in developing the kinds of goods that enable us to lead our lives. To say that the happiest life is one led in contemplation is to value it *for its own sake*.

Aristotle compares contemplation to great and noble military actions (X.7, 1177^b15-25). Let us use the example of a woman engaged in ancient warfare. She is distinguished by her great and noble actions: Astute sword-handling, ferocious protection of her troops, and so on. These actions are *not* desirable for their own sake. She fights with an end in mind, in this case to win the battle and overpower the opposing side. She does not need to value the mechanisms to achieve this end result. Contemplation as an activity of reason is leisurely and pleasurable to pursue, unlike the harsh demands of warfare strategy.

In Chapter IX, there is a change in tack. Aristotle states that theories are not enough. Contemplation needs to be accompanied by legislation, which addresses the further work that needs to be done within the *polis* to ensure that human beings develop their virtues: “Surely, as the saying goes, where there are things to be done the end is not to survey and recognise the various things, but rather to do them; with regard to virtue, then, it is not enough to know, but we must try to have and use it” (X.9, 1179^a35-1179^b1-3). The focus of this chapter is on political and civic life, and the place of education. It is important that we know what to *do* with our capacity for virtue, rather than simply recognising it (1179^b2-3). Performing virtuous actions makes us good. There are several contenders regarding how we are made good: Nature, habituation or education (1179^b20).

In the case of young people, a student must have a good upbringing and experience in life so that she can acquire facts about the world: She must then acquire the tools to promote virtue and happiness. There must be good laws in the community to shape this upbringing (1179^b31-35). Aristotle identifies that concerns for good laws and education are prevalent. Oftentimes, men govern the lives of women and children as they please. Parents try to inculcate value in their children’s lives, but the absence of strict laws has made this challenging (1180^a25-32).

Aristotle uses the Spartans as a paragon: They have rightly made education the focus of law-making. Education is integral to law-making because it shows people how they can be effective legislators within the community (1180^a33-35). For the *polis* to function smoothly, it needs educated people who have *practical* experience in understanding the right course of action. Aristotle uses the example of medicine to stress the importance of practical experience: “Individuals can be best cared for by a doctor... or anyone else who has the universal knowledge of what is good for everyone

or for people of a certain kind” (1180^b13-15). I take Aristotle to mean the following: Education, akin to medicine, is a form of *care*.

Teachers are able to provide students with the relevant tools to aid them in their studies. There is a slight divergence from medicine here. We do not think of medicine as providing those who are unwell with “tools” to better their health. Doctors prescribe pills to improve health, e.g., antibiotics to cure tonsillitis. The pills are instrumental, as tools are. Even so, medication does not help a patient to do something *as an agent*, as an axe or a wrench does. In the case of education, the tools that I speak of are *supervisory*: The students are guided via laws and educators to discover things for themselves, rather than being spoon-fed.

Aristotle closes *NE* by presenting a programme of study in politics and the constitution (*politeia*) “in order to complete to the best of our ability the philosophy of human nature” (1181^b14-15). Through the collection of studies on different constitutions, forms of government and educational practices, I think that Aristotle hopes to present a thesis on what makes us political beings, i.e., people of *action*. In Chapters XII-IX, it is important to bear in mind the contrast between a life of contemplation and a life of action that has been presented. *Theoria* as the highest and most superior form of happiness is a *good in itself*: It is a reflective process that allows citizens to attain truth through an examination of the self and one’s surroundings. Education in this respect is more insular and discursive. Alternatively, Aristotle offers a model for political life. In order to create a constitutional democracy, one’s education is *good for an end*: It produces knowledgeable politicians, lawmakers and lay persons who have civic responsibility and a stake in the running of society.

3.2 The Politics

The affairs of daily life in the *polis* are captured in *Pol.*, pertaining to what makes a citizen, the tasks of political theory and the best state that a citizen can reside in.¹ Of specific interest to this enquiry is in Book VIII, which discusses the citizens of and education in the ideal state. Human beings are political animals (*politikon zōon*) and “need to live together in cities in order to live the best kind of life” (Curren 2010, p. 549). I think that Randall Curren makes a conceptual and metaphysical point with the use of “need”: It is in the nature of the best life for humans to live together in the *polis*. Education is needed to unify societies, moulding them into a community. Common schools are public day schools that allow children to grow up and learn together for a few hours each day. There are three institutions that are beneficial to providing social unity and encouraging virtue: Common meals, also called dining clubs; common

¹ Not everyone is considered a citizen in the *polis*. There are also slaves and non-citizen manual labourers, including artisans, traders and farmers.

religious observances; and common schools (Ibid, p. 550). Every citizen is to receive an education in virtue via common schools.

The picture that is forming here involves education possessing *instrumental* value through the cultivation of politically minded citizens. Aristotle maintains that education must be public, the same for all and focused on young people (*Pol.* VIII.1, 1337^a10-24). This stems from his view that education is a *public* concern. Every citizen “[belongs] to the state, for each is a part of the state; and the responsibility of each part naturally has regard to the responsibility for the whole” (1337^a32-33). The suggestion here is that education supports the functioning of the state: Educated individuals directly contribute to the running of affairs in the *polis* upon completion of their studies.

Aristotle takes education to be a good for two reasons: The first concerns its relation to virtue (1337^a20-21); and the second concerns its part in forming a just government (1337^a11-19). I will start with the first reason. Education is a good because it helps us to develop our virtues. For Aristotle, a central purpose of education is to cultivate one’s ability to perform good and right actions. For example, a student may become more benevolent and generous through guidance from his teacher. In the future, he will put these virtues into practice and use them to become a fair and kind politician.

It seems that education serves as an end to producing a strong workforce. Note however that Aristotle says that one should be “delighting in good characters and [those] noble actions” (*Pol.* VIII, 1340^a17). I think that citizens delight in good characters while they are in the process of being educated, e.g., being taught about Maths is enjoyable while the student is learning about multiplication, how numbers work, and so on. Education is instrumentally valuable not only because of the strong workforce that it produces, but because there is value in the pleasure that is promoted when students are taught well, and virtues develop.

Another end of education which I will briefly mention is leisure: “Our nature itself, as has often been said, wants to be able not merely to work properly but also to be at leisure in the right way” (*Pol.* VIII.3, 1337^b30-31). Part of what education is for is to enable us to spend time at leisure. Examples of leisure include competitive sport contests and drinking parties. Such activities are able to express “the best in human nature, or best and most complete virtue” (Curren 2010, p. 551). For instance, drinking parties in Greece were not always rowdy and debauched. Rather, they provided a space for virtuous behaviour and the fostering of talent, often through elaborate music recitals.

Now, I will move on to the second reason for why Aristotle takes education to be a good. It moulds citizens to suit the form of a just government or constitution: “Education

must be related to the particular constitution in each case, for it is the special character appropriate to each constitution that sets it up at the start and commonly maintains it” (*Pol.* VIII.1, 1337^a13).¹ The constitution is determined as a democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, and so on according to the character of the citizens who determine and adhere to the conditions of the state. Public education ensures that defective regimes will not be perpetuated.

Aristotle strives to create a society in which citizens can exercise good practical judgement (*phronêsis*). Education is a reform of the greatest value in responding to unjust political systems and it should serve the interests of all citizens. In the context of common schools however, Aristotle does leave room for pursuits that have value distinct from government related issues: “We do require a certain amount of learning and education... [that] must have their own intrinsic purpose, as distinct from those necessary occupational subjects which are studied for reasons beyond themselves” (*Pol.* VIII.3, 1337^b10-12). These subjects are taught when students are younger: “The young must be educated in [music]” (*Pol.* VIII.5, 1340^b11-12). There is an imperative force behind this. Music can promote education as students grow older, but in and of itself it is an amusement that is enjoyable for students to learn (1339^b12-13).

In a just government, citizens are expected to have certain desirable qualities that contribute to the formation of a constitution. Citizens must cooperate with one another to live the best kind of life. Aristotle states that “one needs to learn to be a citizen, just as a craftsman needs to be trained in his particular skill” (*Pol.* VIII.1, 1337^a14-15).² That is to say, an artisan may have a disposition for producing decorative tables, but his status as the best carpenter will be determined by the effort and time he dedicates to his craft. Similarly, Aristotle wants a citizen to develop her virtues to be the best sort of citizen within the *polis*.

¹ In theory, there could be a situation in which one’s virtues develop but they do not have a stake in political life.

² This is especially relevant and a matter of urgency today, given the political climate in Western democracies.

4. Contemporary Debates

4.1 *Phronesis Praxis Perspective (PPP)*

The relevant strand of the debate to this enquiry is the *PPP* thesis.¹ Kristján Kristjánsson interprets the *PPP* as follows: “It resolves the uneasy relationship between educational *theory* and *practice* “by reconfiguring... the very dichotomy underlying it, through retrieval of certain Aristotelian insights” (Kristjánsson 2005, p. 456). The *PPP* consists of two important Aristotelian concepts: *Phronesis*² (practical wisdom) and *praxis* (thoughtful, practical doing). Commonly, the former is linked to educational reasoning and reflection, and the latter is linked to education itself (a lecture is an example in which both processes are taking place). The *PPP* argues that education is not a theoretical activity, but a practical one (Carr 1995, p. 33).

To get a clearer understanding of how these concepts operate, I will use two examples. First, we can imagine *phronesis* to be the intersection of values and knowledge. A magistrate who has practical wisdom understands the true nature of justice and so she is just. She uses social interactions with her colleagues and an understanding of the law to make the best decisions for the common good. Second, we can turn to Auguste Rodin’s sculptures to represent *praxis*: *Le Penseur*³ (1903), which depicts a man engaged in deep contemplation with his hand on his chin, is the thoughtful part of *praxis*; and *The Cathedral*⁴ (1908), which depicts two hands clasped together, is its practical doing component.

A strict account of the *PPP* would hold that teaching is a practice that engages with itself, *without* aiming at something beyond itself, i.e., its value is never to be understood in terms of its aiming at something (or exhaustively so understood). The suggestion here seems to be that we should spend our lives as educators or only do things which are for the sake of education as the most final end. Examination results, test scores and the number of people in the workforce after their education is complete would not have a bearing on an educator’s success.

¹ The impetus for my thesis is a conversation between Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne (2002) who appeal to the role of education in current economic and cultural conditions. Dunne is a proponent of the *PPP* thesis.

² *Phronesis* can also be defined as the “systematic understanding of the human good and how to promote it” (Curren 2010, p. 545).

³ <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/thinker>

[Date Accessed 05.11.23]

⁴ <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/sculptures/cathedral>

[Date Accessed 05.11.23]

One criticism of the *PPP* is that it fails to account for a central core of Aristotle's programme: The education of citizens via interpersonal means in order to integrate them into political life. For example, if education existed merely for itself, there would be no need to have common schools in which students are forced to engage with other people's children. Part of what makes primary co-education important is that girls and boys learn to respect one another, develop self-esteem among the sexes and celebrate their differences. This also has instrumental value: Teaching aims at the formation of students who are able to engage with a variety of issues, both in the classroom and daily political life. One example that springs to mind is quotas for women in Parliament, the development of which is education put into a practice *beyond* itself. For the final part of this thesis, I want to tie together the ideas I have discussed in neo-Aristotelian discourse and return to my original point of interest: What the value of education independent of a product actually is.

4.2 Value Independent of a Product

I do not think that *theoria* alone can provide this value. If this was the case, the role of schools would be redundant: Students would not need to study together to pursue a reflective education of the self, nor would teachers need to guide students to cultivate virtues if this was something that they could achieve by themselves.¹ In life after twenty-one, i.e., once the state system of education is completed, students officially "become citizens and are assigned to posts of active service, where they may put to practical use their philosophy" (Robb 1943, p. 213). This changes as they grow older because "they gradually rise to positions demanding less practice and more thought" (ibid, p. 213). One example is the life of a priest. It seems that a person's life in the *polis* requires attention to contemplative and practical matters, the latter of which is the immediate concern of a student who has recently qualified.

If we accept that a great deal of importance is placed on how a student contributes to society and how she flourishes as a human being (*eudaimonia*), it seems that education is: First, student-orientated, i.e., provided for the sake of students flourishing in society; and second, aimed primarily at daily political life, i.e., to produce a stable government which is free from tyranny and other abuse.

I want to use this section to answer a thought experiment, which in turn will highlight what the value of education independent of a product actually is: Why not give students a learning pill or hypnotise them if the sole end of education is to create political

¹ One would still need to "learn the ropes" about how to learn properly. There is also a social element in schools: Learning with others may aid in your discovery to truth by considering different answers and suggestions offered by your peers.

beings? This sense of learning would be fabricated. Students could read volumes of books in an unconscious state, ignore everyone around them (i.e., not talking to fellow students) and write thousands of words of an essay without consciously thinking about the words they write. This would be a *passive* learning process, where students do not interact to appreciate different perspectives. Rather, they remain aloof while taking in information for which they lack passion.

The idea that I put forward replaces the role of teachers with drugs and mind-tricks that are guaranteed to produce the desired result. The suggestion is cost-effective and answers a worry that the *PPP* also poses: The existence of non-expert educators who are not able to fulfil goals or desired outcomes.¹ The *PPP* cannot say why it is bad to have bad teachers, but simply why there must be teachers generally (educators who teach for the sake of teaching alone). This is problematic because there is limited pressure on these educators to fulfil certain aims, e.g., making sure everyone in the class gets an A* in their Spanish GCSEs. Without examination results and test scores being monitored, we might as well give students a learning pill. Offering students some pills and hypnotism certainly ensures the success of future politicians and policymakers. And yet, I would argue that many of us are not drawn to this suggestion and consider it to be harmful to the learning process.

First, the value of education often lies in the teachers themselves. The autonomy of teachers must be respected, alongside the merits of getting a student from “A” to “B”. This trajectory is noteworthy because the question of value is from the perspective of the educator and focuses on the process that allows a student to achieve a particular end. For instance, a chess teacher’s job is to teach her student about the sixteen pieces he controls on the board, how they move and how to achieve checkmate. The aim of the student is to win a game by achieving checkmate, after which the teacher encourages him to enter chess tournaments.

Chess, like most board games, is played to win. It is clearly valuable for the student to achieve checkmate and win tournaments because it shows that he has fully grasped an understanding of the game. Even so, more seems to be going on for the teacher.² Pleasure is one of the candidates: Regardless of how well her student does in competitions, the process of getting her student from “A” to “B” brings her great pleasure. She sees her student enjoying the game for its own sake and this is sufficient to warrant her happiness.

¹ Part of education is about making mistakes and learning from them, but this is arguably aimed at students rather than teachers.

² What we want is “more going on” in a way that is relevant to the value of education. It is important for the teacher in light of the fact that she is adding value to the student’s education.

Another candidate is knowledge: There is an intellectual change in the educator and those she has educated. The chess teacher takes her student and moves him from a place of ignorance to a place of knowledge. This can be linked to Aristotle's notion of causality: The student's final state is the attainment of knowledge and an expression of himself as a rational, thoughtful human being (*Physics* II.3, 194^b32). Part of the reason that hypnotism makes us recoil from it is because the *transition* itself (getting the student from a place of ignorance to a place of knowledge) is valuable.

Hypnotism would subvert rational activity and prevent the student from coming to know the facts of a subject. Students could be brainwashed into getting correct answers on a verbal test, but the process of how language and syntax works would be foreign to them. It would be as if they skipped to the answers, gained the marks for the answers, but completely missed out marks for their workings. A better example of this is a Maths GCSE exam, in which many questions award you more points for showing your working out and showing that you understand what the question is asking you to do, rather than marks for the answer itself. The change in the student's state corresponds to a "change in me" for the educator. This is because the teacher has guided the student to their final state. It is clearly important to Aristotle that education plays a role in bringing about a product, but as we can see it does not follow from that that it is *all* that education is.

Second, the value of education is linked to what it is in our *nature* to do. The aim of *Pol.* is to teach young potential citizens practical knowledge: The kind that each of them will need to fulfil their *telos* (purpose) and perform their duties as citizens. Taking a learning pill skips over the essential component of what makes us human, namely our ability to exercise virtues in accordance with our reason. A passage of interest occurs in Chapter IX, Book X of *NE*. Aristotle says that education should follow medicine, centring around practice and theory (1180^b10-20). Teachers are well-placed to guide students: "If anyone can do it, it is the man who knows, just as in medicine" (1180^b25-26).

Those who can teach have an obligation to do so: "To have made statesmen of their own sons or any other of their friends... it was to be expected that they should if they could" (1181^a5-6). This section is significant: The final good is to make statesmen, but this cannot be done without *theoria*, i.e., a systematic knowledge of politics. Those without *theoria* will be awful teachers. To say that "they should if they could", Aristotle points to education as an activity, i.e., an exercise of skill in passing knowledge on.¹ What he is saying here is not pointing to fact that they need to "know stuff". Part of

¹ Education is worthwhile not only for its outcome: It represents what rational agents embodied in time do, as beings that we are.

what it is to be a statesman is to be subject to these obligations to educate, and so teaching or educating itself is good just in virtue of the activity itself being a manifestation of these underlying obligations, imposed by the very fact that one is an individual who has political skill.

There is also the suggestion that education should be preserved and passed onto future generations of statesmen. One must fulfil their role as a statesman if they want to carry on the lineage. In the case of reproductive sex, what makes it good for an animal to procreate according to Aristotle is that you get another animal as part of the process.¹ Even so, independent of the offspring it is significant because it is good *qua* animal. There is something similar happening in education: It is valuable for the product, i.e., producing statesmen that contribute to the *polis*, but also valuable for the ability to pass on knowledge to future generations.² There is arguably nothing more natural than teaching people if it is in our nature to do so.

5. Conclusion

Aristotle's conception of public education has provided a useful framework to explore issues related to the value of teaching, the role of education in forming a constitution and the learning process that a student undergoes. I have shown that education has two-fold value, paying particular attention to its value independent of a product in the latter part of the thesis. I have contextualised contemporary debates in the philosophy of education through reference to the *Phronesis Praxis Perspective (PPP)*, which I have used to highlight problems that educators face in relation to examination results, test scores and the number of people in the workforce after their education is complete.

The final part of my argumentation has taken the form of a thought experiment, in which students are given learning pills or hypnotised in order to succeed. I have ultimately argued against their use and noted two distinct ways in which education has value that is separate from practical matters. The first shifts the focus onto teachers and their role in the education system, rather than the achievements of the students. The second discusses the temperament of human beings and our desire to pass on knowledge to future generations. I hope to have shown Aristotle's impact on the

¹ This is part of his RI thesis, i.e., organisms reproduce for the sake of their immortality. The relevant quote can be found in *De Anima*: "For the most natural of functions in living beings... is to produce another such as itself, animal producing an animal... in order that it may partake in the eternal and divine insofar as it is able" (*De Anima* II.4, 415^a26-415^b1).

² This is instrumental in that future generations will be educated; however, there is value in teaching others about what we know, and this is irrespective of what they then do with that information. There is almost something natural about passing on things that we know to someone we do not know, even if simply to spark their curiosity.

philosophy of education and the myriad of ways that educational activities are manifested.

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