

The Perennial Value of Socratic and Aristotelian Paideia

Marie George

St. John’s University, New York, USA
georgem@stjohns.edu

DOI: [10.17421/2498-9746-01-01](https://doi.org/10.17421/2498-9746-01-01)

Abstract

I intend to discuss the perennial value of the form of education proposed by Socrates and by Aristotle, by comparing it to the alternative forms of paideia proposed in their day, as well as in our own day. Before we examine views on what constitutes paideia, understood as a means of educating people, we need to examine views on what the end of education is, for the end dictates the means. As Aristotle notes «sometimes the aim has been correctly proposed, but people fail to achieve it in action, sometimes they achieve the means successfully but the end that they posited was a bad one, and sometimes they err as to both.» [*Politics*, 1331b30-34.]

CONTENTS

1 The Goal of Education	7
2 What Paideia Consists In	10
Notes	16

1 THE GOAL OF EDUCATION

Aristotle maintained that the ultimate end of education was wisdom, i.e., knowledge of the highest things. While political activities are perfective of human beings, they are not principally desired in themselves, but they are ordered to peace within society, and military activities are ordered to peace with other nations. Once peace is achieved, what are people to do? Some will say it should be used to pursue various forms of amusement. Aristotle

thinks otherwise: it is «the activity of reason, which is contemplative» that «seems both to be superior in serious worth and to aim at no end beyond itself.»¹ Reason is of course most perfect by the contemplation of the highest objects:

The most divine science is also most honourable; and this science [i.e., metaphysics] alone must be, in two ways, most divine. For the science which would be most meet for God to have is a divine science, and so is any science that deals with divine objects; and this science alone has both these qualities; for God is thought to be among the causes of all things and to be a first principle, and such a science either God alone can have, or God above all others. All the sciences indeed, are more necessary than this, but none is better. (*Metaphysics*, 983a6)

Accordingly, for Aristotle, an education ordered to metaphysics is education in the fullest sense; the education of a person whose goal is to play a role in politics takes second place to it.

In Aristotle's day, however, many held education to first and foremost have a practical goal, one that would allow a person to assume a role in politics.² Some thinkers proposed a political education aimed at enabling people to genuinely contribute to the common good of society. This was arguably the case of Isocrates. Aristotle himself proposes such an education in the *Politics*, as he realizes that a philosophical education is beyond most people.³ Too often, however, a political education in ancient Greece was seen as a means to get ahead in life, i.e., to gain political power, positions of honor, reputation, and material advantages. This was the kind of education offered by the Sophists whom Socrates repeatedly criticizes in the Platonic *Dialogues*.⁴ Aristotle criticizes it as well: «But the Greek peoples reputed at the present day to have the best constitutions. . . did not construct their laws and their scheme of education with a view to all the virtues, but they swerved aside in a vulgar manner towards those excellences that are supposed to be useful and more conducive to gain» (*Pol.* 1333b4-12).

It is easy to see that worldly success is frequently proposed as the goal of education nowadays. When institutions of higher education were founded in America, they had mottos such as: *Veritas* (Harvard) and *Lux et Veritas* (Yale). Nowadays, the unspoken motto of many institutions is *Negotium* and *Quid est Veritas?* The attitude of the majority of college students in the United States is that one does not go to college in pursuit of truth, but rather to obtain a diploma, as it is well-known that statistically a person with a college degree earns thousands of dollars a year more than a person without one. Institutions of higher learning, especially when faced with financial

concerns, yield to a greater or lesser extent to the pressure put on them to be a means of securing employment, and sometimes even proudly acknowledge that the value of the education they offer is measured primarily by career placement.

As for the more idealistic politically-oriented education, there may be a few institutions (e.g., Hillsdale College, Michigan, U.S.) that still hold this up as an ideal, and specific departments within colleges that do so, but this end of education is not one that is common among institutions of higher learning in the United States. Civic sense in America has declined; radical individualism is the norm.

There were other thinkers who, like Aristotle, gave primacy to speculative thought as the ultimate goal of education. However, unlike him, they held that man is the highest object of contemplation. In response to these thinkers, Aristotle urges us: «We must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us» (*NE* 1178b32-35). And he makes a point of saying elsewhere: «Of the highest object, we say; for it would be strange to think that the art of politics, or practical wisdom, is the best knowledge, since man is not the best thing in the world» (*NE* 1141a20-22). Modern day humanists promote the educational ideal that Aristotle rejects here. For example, Stanford University prefaces its numerous humanities programs with these words:

The humanities can be described as the study of how people process and document the human experience. Since humans have been able, we have used philosophy, literature, religion, art, music, history and language to understand and record our world. These modes of expression have become some of the subjects that traditionally fall under the humanities umbrella. Knowledge of these records of human experience gives us the opportunity to feel a sense of connection to those who have come before us, as well as to our contemporaries.⁵

Many proponents of “Great Books” education propose this as well. Aristotle would not agree that the *primary* goal of education was to help us feel connected to other people, much less that it was to study what people have thought about things. While other humanities programs offer somewhat different rationales than Stanford’s, common to all is a focus on knowledge of human achievements in art, history, science, etc., rather than on an understanding of reality as ordered ultimately to understanding the highest realities.

2 WHAT PAIDEIA CONSISTS IN

With such disparate understandings as to purpose of education, there is no wonder that what Socrates and Aristotle saw paideia as consisting in was quite different than those of their contemporaries who were of these other persuasions. Of the two main educational approaches alternate to theirs, one proposed a single method as key to education, and another proposed the acquisition of encyclopedic knowledge; some combined both approaches.

Hippias, at least as portrayed in the *Dialogues*, was an illustrious proponent of an approach to educating people which consisted in imparting to them an encyclopedic knowledge of facts. Hippias claimed to be competent in grammar, music, literary criticism, astronomy, geometry, and history, and (according to Plato) boasted that he would answer any question put to him at the exhibitions at the Olympic festival, yet when it came to knowing how to proceed in defining a thing, he was utterly ignorant.⁶ The “arguments with quick replies” that Hippias prided himself on are characterized by a simple exchange of information, rather than a genuine discussion, which is generally a slow process involving the formulation of difficulties and the examination of many things with an eye to ultimately setting to rest all of the difficulties. However, to a listener less probing than Socrates, the extent of Hippias’ knowledge, superficial though it might be, is impressive.

The Hippias approach is still alive in contemporary higher education. Students are “taught” by being presented with various “facts” that have been discovered in different areas; this is typical of survey courses. Alternately, they are exposed to a variety of opinions that have been held in the various areas. In both cases, what students are not taught is how the various conclusions or views were arrived at, and what is and is not the correct way to proceed when thinking about a given subject matter. Students then are unable to make any progress in an area on their own.

This deficient educational practice has been compounded by the current social practice of using internet search engines which seems to put encyclopedic knowledge at our fingertips. Too many students labor under the false impression that if they have looked something up on the internet, that they know the answer to the question they typed in. Although they know in general that the internet can give a false answer as readily as a true one, they frequently fail to apply this knowledge and confuse belief for knowledge. In addition, their internet use tends to blind them to the comparative difficulty of certain questions. The internet will supply an answer to the question of whether a scientist can be a religious believer just as readily as it supplies an answer to how to make meatballs. People too often take the first answer

that sounds good to them, oblivious that in order to really know whether an answer to a philosophical question is true, one generally has to consult multiple authors presenting opposing viewpoints and then reflect upon what they have said alongside what one knows from experience, a process that may need to be carried on over considerable period of time. Social media for many is the modern version of the cave of Plato's *Republic* where people look at representations of things and repeat what is trendy, instead of formulating their thoughts on the basis of their own experience and careful reflection. For too many students, to Google an answer is the same thing as to know. Socrates' call to self-knowledge is as urgent as ever and perhaps even more urgent:

I set myself at last with considerable reluctance to check the truth of it [the oracle] in the following way. I went to interview a man with a high reputation for wisdom, because I felt that here if anywhere I should succeed in disproving the oracle... Well, I gave thorough examination to this person... and in conversation with him I formed the impression that although in many people's opinion, and especially in his own, he appeared to be wise, in fact he was not. ... I reflected as I walked away, Well I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know. (*Apology*, 21c)⁷

Students whose facility at using the internet has led them to think that they already know things which in fact they do not know are in desperate need of the first step of paideia which consists in leading them, as Socrates did, to recognize their double ignorance.⁸

Turning now to the other popular method of education: Some advocated a single method for all disciplines. Included here are those who promoted the study of rhetoric, and also Plato who placed central importance on dialectic. The writings of those who sought to educate by means of techniques applicable to any subject for the most part have not come down to us. However, their approach has been criticized and caricatured by Plato and Aristotle, among others. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, while discussing what the rhetoric consists in, Socrates remarks: «And can we leave the admirable Evenus of Paros out of the picture, the inventor of covert allusion and indirect compliment and, according to some accounts of the indirect censure in mnemonic verse. A real master that. But we won't disturb the rest of Tisias and Gorgias, who realized that probability deserves more respect than the

truth, who could make trifles seem important and important points trifles by the force of their language... » (*Phaedrus*, 267a).

Plato, of course, rejected rhetoric's superficial and at times distorting treatment of things and proposed dialectic in its place. The dialectician alone has «full reason and intelligence about things,» since he alone is «able to render an exact account of the essence of everything» (*Statesman*, 286b), and especially of the highest things. Plato sought to know the natures of things, but since as yet the logic of definition had not been developed, he devotes considerable effort to clarifying what a definition is and how one is to arrive at one, and not as much time actually defining specific things.

Aristotle, while acknowledging the utility of dialectic in coming to know things, distinguishes dialectic from the knowledge obtained from demonstration, i.e., scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*). Dialectic for him is not the highest logical art; the art of demonstration as he sets forth in his *Posterior Analytics* is. And he clearly distinguished knowledge of the art of demonstration from knowledge about things obtained through demonstration.

The one-method-fits-all approach is very much alive today in competencies-based education. Here it does not matter what one studies, but all studies are looked at as equally apt to foster the development of a list of abilities which are diced up in a wide variety of categories, some broader and some narrower. The broader categories generally include critical thinking, speaking well, and writing well, whereas one example of narrower categories would be: to conceptualize, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply.

Aristotle does not reject every aspect of this form of education. He agrees that it is important to be able to read, write, and speak well. And the logical arts fit his definition of *paideia* (discussed in more detail below) insofar as they allow one to judge the way of proceeding without being able to judge the conclusion for so much. Logic is a tool necessary for the acquisition of knowledge. Plainly, knowledge of the *Analytics* is needed if one is to formulate arguments whose conclusions are certain. Dialectic is generally needed to clear the ground for such conclusions, as well as being needed to defend first principles (see *Topics* 101a34-b4). Knowing the fallacies plainly aids one in avoiding them. Even learning rhetoric is useful to the one seeking wisdom as it teaches one to weigh the strength of an argument and also to pick out those that have emotional appeal, but lack any grounding in reason.

Aristotle would, however, find the competency-based approach deficient on two counts. First, this approach maintains that one can hone one's skills whether one is taking sociology or ethics, literature or metaphysics—taking

one subject is just as good as taking another. Aristotle rejects the notion that all disciplines contribute equally to the crowning study of metaphysics, and he also maintains that there is an order according to which one is to study the various disciplines.⁹ For example, he would place little, if any, importance on studying sociology, since its focus is on human customs and it lacks the characteristic of universality. As to order, (e.g.,) it is plain that he regards a general study of natural things as prerequisite to investigating the soul.

Secondly, this approach fails to recognize that there is a need to treat different subjects differently. Both rhetoric and dialectic treat matters in a superficial manner: «Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic. Both alike are concerned with such things as come, more or less, within the general ken of all men and belong to no definite science.»¹⁰ In order to gain proper and certain knowledge of things, the logic of the *Analytics* must be employed. But even this does not suffice. In addition, each particular discipline has its own proper methodology:

There are, as it seems, two ways in which a person may be competent in respect of any study or investigation, whether it be a noble one or a humble: he may have either what can rightly be called a scientific knowledge of the subject; or he may have what is roughly described as an educated person's competence (*paideían tiná*), and therefore be able to judge correctly which parts of an exposition are satisfactory and which are not. That, in fact, is the sort of person we take the man of general education to be; his education consists in the ability to do this. In this case, however, we expect to find in the one individual the ability to judge of almost all subjects, whereas in the other case the ability is confined to some special science; for of course it is possible to possess this ability for a limited field only. Hence it is clear that in the investigation of Nature, or Natural science, as in every other, there must be certain defined rules by which the acceptability of the method of exposition may be tested, apart from whether the statements made represent truth or do not. (*Parts of Animals*, 639a1-16, trans. A.L. Peck)

A person who is educated in a field, i.e., possesses paideia, as opposed to a person who is an expert in a field, is able to judge whether an explanation pertaining to that field respects the methodology of that area without for so much being able to judge the conclusion drawn. A person of general paideia can do this for almost all subjects. Aristotle gives examples of the sort of thing paideia embraces in the opening book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-

matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion... We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects...to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true...to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. (1094b 12-28)

The educated person knows what type of reasoning should be offered in a given area. For example, a person who has *paideia* in the area of science or is scientifically literate can pick out as poorly done a study lacking a control without for so much being able to judge whether the conclusion of that study is true or false. If one has *paideia* in a specific branch of science, say genetics, one will not only be able to pick out so crude an error as to the way of proceeding as a lack of control, but also errors in the way of proceeding proper to genetics, again without for so much being able to judge the conclusion. General *paideia* would immunize students against scientism, so widespread nowadays, which claims that the scientific method is the sole method to arrive at truth.

There is a second aspect to Aristotle's *paideia*:

And we must remember what has been said before, and not look for precision in all things alike...Nor must we demand the cause in all matters alike; it is enough in some cases that the fact be well established, as in the case of the first principles; the fact is the primary thing or first principle. Now of first principles we see some by induction, some by perception, some by a certain habituation, and others too in other ways. But each set of principles we must try to investigate in the natural way, and we must take pains to state them definitely... For the beginning is thought to be more than half the whole. (*NE*, 1098b5)

Knowledge in different areas proceeds from different starting points. The educated know that to truly understand a matter means seeing how it follows from the principles proper to a discipline and know how to look for such principles in the disciplines they are educated in. There is an especially pressing need for such *paideia* today as internet usage tends to cut people off from their own experience, and thus from the reflection on that experience which leads to first principles. Internet authors present things

the way that they want us to see them, which is not necessarily the way they are in their totality; we are looking at shadows in the cave. The lack of the habit of turning to one's own experience hinders one both from finding starting points and from recognizing their appropriateness. Answers comes up on Google based on the words used in the question typed in, but words can have many meanings and the answer that comes up may in fact have no relevance to the question at hand. Unless one has a sense of what kind of experience needs to be looked to and further, some knowledge of the principles apt to illuminate a given subject area derived from that experience, one cannot progress.

Education in science aimed at science majors more often respects Aristotle's model of paideia than education in the humanities. It is not uncommon for science textbooks to have titles such as *principles* of cell biology or *methods* in genetics. Without a grasp of the appropriate fundamental concepts combined with knowledge of methods for designing and carrying out experiments in a field, one cannot become a scientist in that field. An element of practicality enters into science in a way it does not in non-scientific disciplines; science is expected to yield tangible results, whereas the knowledge in other areas is purely mental. Paideia is, however, no less needed in these others areas if we are to attain truth as a goal.

The judgments one makes in virtue of paideia are superficial by comparison with those made by an expert in a field. However, these judgments, while embracing those made by use of dialectic or rhetoric, go still further since they are based on methods and principles proper to understanding a given matter. While it is true that «it is absurd to seek simultaneously for knowledge and the way of knowledge; and it is not easy to get even one of the two» (*Meta.* 995a12)—whence the need to first acquire paideia—at the same time knowledge is obtained by employing the proper methods starting from the appropriate first principles, and paideia is knowledge of these methods and principles. The difference between the expert in a field and a person educated in a field is that the former has far more experience of using the method and resolving back to the appropriate experience and principles, and so is able to arrive at and judge conclusions on his own with a certain facility and consistency. Although the educated person *qua* educated is only able to judge the manner of proceeding and not the conclusion, that does not mean that the person in question can never judge the conclusion. He grasps some of the same things that are requisite to arrive at genuine knowledge, albeit generally in a less perfect manner. The educated person thus is able to gradually become an expert. Even if he does not, his literacy in a given area is apt to afford him some modicum of knowledge and a number of rea-

sonable opinions, which Socratic humility acknowledges as often being the most we can expect to gain.

Aristotle's *paideia* then with its emphasis on discovering principles proper to a field, along with the methodology appropriate to it reveals its superiority to forms of education that leave off with rhetoric and dialectic, for it alone is capable of leading to certain knowledge of the truth. Thus, its use as an educational approach should be recuperated by all institutions of higher learning that still recognize truth as the goal of education. Prior to imparting this form of *paideia* is Socratic *paideia*, for one cannot educate a person who is under the illusion that he already knows. Further investigation is needed to settle the tremendously important question of what disciplines should be studied and in what order.

NOTES

1. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b17-20. All translations of Aristotle are from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Random House, New York 1968, unless otherwise noted.
2. See Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 266-267 in *Works*, trans. George Norlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1961: «I do not, however, think it proper to apply the term “philosophy” to a training which is no help to us in the present either in our speech or in our actions, but rather I would call it a gymnastic of the mind and a preparation for philosophy. . . for students when they have labored through their lessons in grammar, music, and the other branches, are not a whit advanced in their ability to speak on affairs, but they have increased their aptitude for mastering greater and more serious studies. I would, therefore, advise young men to spend some time on these disciplines, but not to allow their minds to be dried up by these barren subtleties, nor to be stranded on the speculations of the ancient sophists, who maintain, some of them that the sum of things is made up of infinite elements; Empedocles that it is made up of four, Ion, of not more than three [etc.].»
3. Aristotle proposes a form of education in the *Politics* that would enable people to use their leisure in a genuinely human manner through the appreciation of the fine arts (see 1338a15-19); however, he never completes his promise at 1338a33-34 to set forth what subjects, in addition to reading, writing, and music, should be studied.
4. See for example, Plato, *Protagoras*, 318e.
5. <http://shc.stanford.edu/what-are-the-humanities>.
6. See Plato, *Hippias*, 363b-364b.
7. All translations of Plato are taken from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Hamilton and Cairns, Pantheon Books, New York 1961).
8. Space does not allow for an examination of the Socratic method of putting questions to students as opposed to presenting them with an exposition of a given

matter, aside from the following very abbreviated remarks. When the teacher proceeds by asking questions, students are far more likely to arrive at a genuine understanding of the matter. However, there is a difference between leading the student to the truth by asking relevant questions in a determinate order and throwing out a question and letting the students figure out (or fail to figure out) the appropriate sub-questions and responses. The latter helps students become more able to find the truth through discussion, whereas the former affords greater assurance and rapidity in learning various truths. When the latter method alone is used there is a danger that students fall into skepticism, insofar as it prioritizes discussion over knowing the truth. Both approaches are needed, and expositions of difficult matters also have their place.

9. There is no one place where Aristotle states what subjects he thinks student should study and in what order and to reconstruct his thought is beyond the scope of this essay; this is unfortunate as these matters are of immense importance for educators.
10. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354a1. See also what Aristotle says about dialectic in the *Topics*: 100a18: «Our treatise proposes to find a method whereby we shall be able to reason from opinions that are generally accepted about every problem propounded to us. . . .»

© 2015 Marie George & Forum. Supplement to Acta Philosophica



Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza [Creative Commons Attribuzione - Non commerciale - Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

[Testo completo della licenza](#)