Education as a Tool of a Tool in Plato and Aristotle

Education is how a state transfers its traditions, values, and knowledge between generations, and is the crucial link between present and future that both preserves and evolves the identity of any polity. For both Plato and Aristotle, education is a means to a means to an end. Both posit, in the *Republic* and *Politics* respectively, that education serves as the primary instrument in preserving the stability of a society which itself exists for the fulfillment of some end or telos to human life which is itself determined by some unyielding natural order. The two disagree not only in what must be taught but also to whom as well, with Plato fixating more on an elite guardian class in the kallipolis, whereas Aristotle gives a more egalitarian view of the educational responsibilities of the state. Their conclusions about education can be understood in the context of a three-tiered hierarchy or sequence: the most fundamental entry for both philosophers in this structure is some natural purpose which determines the essence of happiness. This is followed by the form of the ideal polity, and the hierarchy is closed out by the role of education in the theoretical society, with the characteristics of each level determined by its relationship to the other terms in the sequence. Plato and Aristotle diverge in their exact specifications of who learns what subject due to their different formulations of the ultimate human good, but both conceptualize education as a tool to transmit certain virtues in alignment with the constitution of a polity, giving insight in fashioning durable political orders in the face of an immutable natural world, the characteristics of which necessarily trickle down to the organization of the state.

To understand the role of education as a means to an end in Plato and Aristotle, it is critical to first examine the structure in order, beginning with the most fundamental level; this allows for understanding the relationship between the state and education in terms of the relationship between the natural world and the state. Central to both the Platonist and Aristotelian conceptions of the good life is the imposition of some immutable natural order on human societies which determines the essence of happiness and sets the basis for their views on the state and education. For Aristotle, this order becomes apparent in the opening line of the *Ethics*, where he writes, “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Crucially, he also perceives a difference within the quality of such ends, noting that “clearly not all ends are final ends; but the chief good is evidently final,”[[2]](#footnote-3) setting the groundwork for this construction of the idea of telos, the ultimate end goal of someone or something. The pursuit of this final end in some hierarchical order of goods and ends leads finally to the pursuit of happiness, a good which is “final and self-sufficient, … the end of action.”[[3]](#footnote-4) The Aristotelian order is one that is defined not in-between and in terms of other men, but rather between individual men and the world that surrounds them - even if personal purpose and telos varies, Aristotle’s examination in the *Ethics* and *Politics* is not offered in specific distinct types of purpose such as guardianship.

The existence of an analogous order for Plato is first made clear in the *Republic* by the discussion on happiness in Book IV, where Socrates responds to the inquiry that the guardians of the kallipolis do not seem happy: “we must leave it to nature to provide each group with its share of happiness.”[[4]](#footnote-5) In Plato’s account, some external natural order determines what happiness looks like to each man, with the conditions of happiness for a guardian and a farmer looking vastly different. This diverges from Aristotle’s formation of happiness, which avoids the class distinctions of guardian and farmer in favor of a more universal examination of human purpose, whereas the argument in the *Republic* draws clear distinctions between subclasses of people in the kallipolis. This divergence - Plato’s distinct classes of people compared to the more universalizing happiness of Aristotle - characterizes a strain of thought that prevails throughout the analyses of both authors, and will shape the forms that they prescribe for the ideal polity and that polity’s educational system.

Moving to the next tier in the structure, the common ground shared between Plato and Aristotle of viewing happiness as a function of some natural order out of human control undergirds a further commonality between Plato and Aristotle in that they both view politics as a means to an end. Instead of formulating their ideal constitutions as ends in and of themselves, they instead decide what is best for a political system in terms of this fundamental order. Plato makes this clear in the *Republic* with the discussion of justice at the level of the city, which is the condition that “every child, woman, slave, freeman, craftsman, ruler, and ruled each does his own work and doesn’t meddle with what is other people’s.”[[5]](#footnote-6) This is directly inherited from his view that happiness is handed down externally. The political organization of the kallipolis is then an instrument to be designed and put to use, where different classes must then also fulfill disparate roles in order to realize that happiness since different classes have different conditions of happiness, resting on this fundamental belief in the natural difference in type between subpopulations of the city.

Aristotle, in the *Ethics,* makes his own attitude towards politics as a tool explicit when he writes that “political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, namely, good and capable of noble acts.”[[6]](#footnote-7) The essence of politics is again handed down explicitly from the natural order of things, as “man is by nature a political animal”;[[7]](#footnote-8) read in the context of the earlier quote from the *Ethics*, this can be understood in the framework of telos in the sense that the pursuit of the realization of telos is for mankind the study and performance of politics, and therefore political associations such as the city exist by nature. However, just as his perception of the natural order was different in a more universal description of happiness, Aristotle continues to diverge from Plato in appealing more to the common interest as a general phenomenon. In particular, he steps back from prescribing individuals with some naturally given purpose in the city, either as potters or guardians or cobblers, and instead draws only the distinction between ruler and ruled, demarcating wrong constitutions as those who “consider only the personal interest of the rulers.”[[8]](#footnote-9) This does not imply, however, that Aristotle seeks to eliminate professional divisions between citizens of his ideal city, but rather that he does not incorporate them as a fundamental and unchangeable imposition of nature, at least among the context of freemen implicit in his writing. This interplay between the formulations of the natural world and the states both authors seek to construct as a response will be mirrored in the relationship between the polity and education, with many of the differences in educational policy mirroring the differences in the earlier, more fundamental parts.

Education, as the last and bottom rung of the hierarchy, is viewed as the legislative tool of most importance in maintaining stable political orders, which itself is a tool wielded in pursuit of the highest good of happiness. Aristotle writes in *Politics*, “The greatest, however, of all the means we have mentioned for ensuring the stability of constitutions … is the education of citizens in the spirit of their constitution.”[[9]](#footnote-10) Crucially, Aristotle believes education to be of enough import to break away from Greek customs. Education can no longer “be left, as it is at present, to private enterprise,”[[10]](#footnote-11) but rather taken as a communal effort by the entirety of the polis. This is deeply rooted in his study of politics as a means to human flourishing: the city, as an entity that exists for the actualization of the good life of all of its citizens, must then take responsibility in the upbringing of all of its citizens. Plato takes a similar stance in the Republic, claiming that any specific condition one might place on the guardians is “insignificant, provided … that they guard the one great thing [education and upbringing].”[[11]](#footnote-12) In fact, Plato draws such an importance on education that he actively declines to guide other seemingly relevant things, proclaiming that processes like market business, contracts, lawsuits, etc. all do not need to be dictated to “men who are fine and good.”[[12]](#footnote-13) This shows the primacy of education in the order of the kallipolis; in Plato’s eyes, providing responsible education is a better and more effective tool than any other in maintaining the polis. The focus that both authors give to education force their educational philosophies to directly align with their philosophies about the good life because both take the same approach in constructing education as a means of creating and sustaining the tool of the polis, which exists in pursuit of happiness. Every link in this chain is tightly coupled with the others, and thus it is foundational to their account of education that the characteristics of education mirror the characteristics of their formulations of the natural world.

The dichotomy between Plato’s and Aristotle’s respective natural orders is then reflected deeply in the recipients of education in their ideal polities as well. Plato reserves the majority of his discussion on education to the guardian class, writing that it will be the philosophers which are compelled to become guardians of the city, who “must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark.”[[13]](#footnote-14) In particular, this must be a selective caste of citizens - a farmer cannot, after all, become a philosopher-king in the kallipolis that abides by Plato’s natural hierarchy - who have the “best natures” which “make the ascent and see the good.”[[14]](#footnote-15) Clearly, Plato distinguishes between the guardians, who in the allegory must through their education penetrate to the real world outside of the cave, and the normal citizens who dwell in the dark and perceive only shadows. Plato’s education is stratified between classes in the polis because his natural order focuses on those very same stratifications between guardians and normal citizens, but because Aristotle’s natural order focuses on the telos of a more general human subject instead of codifying fundamental differences between people, he is able to promote a more egalitarian approach in the sake of the common interest. It is because the “city as a whole has a single end” that the “system of education must also be one and the same for all,”[[15]](#footnote-16) a far cry from Plato’s distinction between guardians and non-guardians. This difference in the educational demographics of their respective cities again mirrors the difference in their accounts of the natural order.

These differences are inherited even into the discussion of appropriate curricula, where Plato describes a far larger and longer span of deliberate educational topics. Whereas Aristotle digresses only shortly at the end of the *Politics* into the appropriate subjects of teaching, Plato spends the latter half of Book VII discussing a curriculum that lasts beyond childhood, spanning a decade of mathematical education before another five years of training in dialectic before a final fifteen years of practical political training, all after the elementary upbringing in music, writing, and physical training.[[16]](#footnote-17) Aristotle, comparatively, only offers an explanation of the first sequence of “reading and writing, physical training, and music.”[[17]](#footnote-18) He halts after this elementary upbringing precisely because he does not center his analysis around different social castes in the city, as Plato does. Plato’s natural segregation between guardians and non-guardians allows him to condition further education to the “ones who most of all … remain steadfast in their studies, in war, and in the other activities laid down by law”,[[18]](#footnote-19) whereas the Aristotelian view of the natural order has no analogous differentiation between citizens. The long winding nature of Plato’s curriculum compared to Aristotle’s relatively short syllabus in this way embodies the distinction between the two author’s formulation of the natural world.

There is a common methodology between Plato and Aristotle where both establish the properties of the city in pursuit of the realization of the good life and then education in the pursuit of the realization of the city. This then forms a very tightly coupled sequence where the ideal life, the polis, and education form its terms; as a result, the nature of the ideal life influences heavily the nature of the ideal polis, which influences, in turn, the nature of the ideal education. Both examine the world and identify some fundamental organization to the universe, the structure of which flows down the sequence and determines the vision of education promoted in their respective work.

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1. *Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics,* 10*9*4a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1097a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* 1097b [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Plato, *Republic,* (421c) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Plato, *Republic,* (433d) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1099b27) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1253a2) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1279a8) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1310a12) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1337a21) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Plato, *Republic,* (423e) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Plato, *Republic,* (425d) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Plato, *Republic,* (520c) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Plato, *Republic,* (519c) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1337a21) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Plato, *Republic,* (535a-540a) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Aristotle, *Politics,* (1337b23) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Plato, *Republic,* (536d) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)