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ARISTOTLE, PLATO, AND SOCRATES:
ANCIENT GREEK PERSPECTIVES ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING*

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The intention of this paper is to briefly sketch several of Socrates and Plato's contributions to experiential education, and then, in more detail, examine Aristotle as a progenitor of the experiential learning cycle and a potential catalyst for a moral renaissance within outdoor education. Special attention will be given to Artistotle's notions about practical wisdom, and his arguments about transforming experience into informed judgment. We understand learning through experience, experiential learning, to be a theory of education that broadly encompasses many contexts. One context is outdoor education, which uses the outdoor environment as the locus for learning experientially. It is in this outdoor context that the experience of the authors lies, but our references to the philosophy of experiential learning in this paper are intended to be relevant for a more general readership.

Socrates and Plato

The contributions of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to the philosophies of experiential learning are well documented (Kraft, 1985, pp. 9-10; Crosby, 1995, pp. 6-8; Wurdinger, 1997, pp. 1-6; Hunt, 1999, pp. 115-117). We want to explore some aspects of their philosophies that we believe to be interesting and informative to current thinking and practices, although in a short paper it is only possible to sketch some general ideas.

Socrates (469-399 BC) was a veteran of the Peloponnesian war, a father, husband and master debater. He was also Plato's teacher, and we know of Socrates chiefly through Plato's dialogues. Much scholastic debate surrounds the possibility of separating their views (Blackburn, 1996, p. 355-356). Socrates was a paragon to philosophers, literally, lovers of wisdom (see *Phaedo*, *Crito*, and *Apology* in Plato, trans. 2002). In valuing truth above all else, even life (he died by imbibing hemlock while under arrest), Socrates established a high calling (and responsibility!) of all educators in their pursuit of understanding.

Perhaps Socrates' greatest contribution to experiential learning was his *elenctic* method. Plato calls the Socratic method *elenchus* (*Apology* 21c-e, 23a), meaning, positively, a way of asking questions that helps the interlocutor know what they know and do not know (Long, 2002, p. 55). Here, the skillful teacher only facilitates learning, thoughtfully assessing where the student is, and prompting the student's own discovery. The point of all these questions is captured in his often quoted line, "An unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology* 38a), where Socrates proffers reflection, the linchpin of the experiential pattern of inquiry, as indispensable to living well (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 8).

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*Two different types of notation are used in this paper to cite works of antiquity. Plato's works use Stephanus pagination (e.g. *Apology* 38a). Here, the work cited is Plato's *Apology*. The number "38" is page 38 of the Stephanus edition. The letter "a", is section a on page 38. When citing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g. VI 5§2), the following notation is used. The Roman numeral is the book within the *Nicomachean Ethics* (VI), the number after the Roman numeral (5) is the chapter within the book. The number after the "§" symbol is the section within the chapter.

Plato's influence on experiential learning comes particularly through the adventure vein, with Kurt Hahn implementing many ideas from *The Republic* (Plato, trans. 1987; James, 1995, p. 35). Describing what experiential educators would call holistic education, Plato says the two branches of education, one philosophical, broadly meaning intellectual pursuits, and the other physical,

> ...are not intended the one to train body, the other mind, except incidentally, but to ensure a proper harmony between energy and initiative on the one hand and reason on the other, so we may venture to assert that anyone who can produce the perfect blend of the physical and intellectual sides of education and apply them to the training of character, is producing harmony of far more importance (411e-412a).

Plato (427-347 BC), means in Greek "broad," and was allegedly a nickname for the breadth of his shoulders (Laertius, 1979). He was born an Athenian aristocrat and was greatly influenced by Socrates' life and death. He founded a school which he called "The Academy." Life at The Academy highlights an indirect but important association to experiential learning, particularly relevant to the outdoor education sector: the Greek word for leisure, which in Latin is *scola*, in English is *school* (Pieper, trans. 1998, pp. 3-4). For the Greeks, the re-creative activities of reflection, exercise, and study were the epitome of leisure. Pertinent to outdoor educators and often related or associated with fields such as Recreation and Leisure Studies, the Greek ideal of leisure is more than mere vacation (literally to be unoccupied); it is "a disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real" (Pieper, trans. 1998, p. 31). That the Greeks associated school with leisure, Plato's Academy being an exemplar, may be the source of the conviction often held by those involved in experiential learning: that learning can, and should, be enjoyable.

When one speaks of philosophical influences on experiential learning, it is generally implied that certain attributes of experiential learning have their roots in particular schools of philosophical thought or specific philosophers. However, there is another positive form of influence. Much like Socrates' metaphorical self-appellation, the gadfly (*Apology* 30e-31a), Plato, in several places, intellectually buzzes, bites, and irritates his modern readers into defining their positions. For example, Plato's pejorative views of democracy are both stimulating and potentially challenging for those involved in experiential learning who hold democratic values to be central to their practice:

> I dare say that a democracy is the most attractive of all societies. The diversity of its characters make it look very attractive… [But], we said that no one who had no exceptional gifts could grow into a good man unless he were brought up from childhood in a good environment and trained in good habits. Democracy with a grandiose gesture sweeps all this away and doesn't mind what the habits and background of its politicians are; provided they profess themselves the people's friends (*The Republic*, 557c, 558b).

Instead of a democratic society, governed by the elected, Plato envisioned a state ruled by philosopher kings (guardians). Philosopher kings were chosen over a five-decade selective process. The candidate pool initially consisted of *all* citizens and was gradually reduced throughout a rigorous education: primary, physical training, mathematics, philosophy, and a 15-year internship. One could only become a philosopher king through successfully enduring the whole course. Far more than intellectual ability, philosopher kings had to prove themselves

morally, having an appropriate motivation for power, as well as a flawless public *and* private moral character. At the very least, Plato causes the modern experiential practitioner to pause and reflect how citizenship education can be better refined and more intentional.

Another area where Plato acts as gadfly to experiential learning is in his epistemological convictions. Plato, through Socrates says:

> Now, how about the acquirement of pure knowledge? Is the body a hindrance or not, if it is made to share in the search for wisdom? What I mean is this: Have the sight and hearing of men any truth in them, or is it true, as the poets are always telling us, that we neither hear nor see any thing accurately? And yet if these two physical senses are not accurate or exact, the rest are not likely to be, for they are inferior to these. In thought, then, if at all, something of the realities becomes clear to it? (*Phaedo*, trans. 1966, 65a-c).

Plato developed a concept of Ideal Forms to cope with several conundrums he found in experience. For example, although the potter's pot is never truly round, we conceptualize roundness as an ideal; or just as no human institution is completely just, we hold an ideal, an abstract and theoretical form of Justice (Blackburn, 1996, pp. 143-144). Although we cannot seem to provide a general definition for "Justice," it must exist, for we often agree when we see it. Thus, Plato posited that "Justice," and other ideals, existed in an alternate reality to our own, a reality of the *Ideal Forms*. Plato, mistrusting the physical, for it is only a poor reflection of the realm of the Forms (see the cave analogy in the *Republic* 514a-521b), uses unassisted reason to gain "pure knowledge," and thus is considered a rationalist (Blackburn, 1996, p. 381). We offer this example as helpful for experiential educators, because we need to consider: the limits of what can be known experientially; and appropriate learning strategies for educating complexities inaccessible to experience (see Higgins, in press, pp.7-9).

Plato thought knowledge could be discovered through dialectical discussion. By dint of intellectual debate and examination, one could increasingly approach "the truth," as represented by the Ideal Forms. This pursuit of knowledge of the ideal, resulted in a tendency towards general definitions as found in many of the dialogues.

One definition of particular interest to the outdoor experiential practitioner is that of virtue (*Meno*, trans. 2002, p.77a). We highlight virtue because ethics and values were a significant motivation in the inception of outdoor education in the 20th century. For example, Outward Bound, drawing its inspiration from William James' *Moral Equivalent of War* (1949, pp. 311-328) was interested less in skills sets, and more in moral formation (Hunt, 1996, p. 15). This is captured grammatically in Lawrence Holt's comment about sail training at Aberdovey, which he said must be less about training for the sea than through the sea (Miner & Boldt, 1981, p. 33). Critiquing the increasing tendency towards algorithmic, assembly line, product-oriented outdoor experiential learning programs, Loynes, contemplating alternative models, briefly considers bringing back an ethical emphasis, a moral paradigm, for outdoor education (2002, pp. 119-120). Bowles, in personal communication with Loynes, remembers the overtly ethical agenda of the early Hahn, before his ideas were marketed, saying: "I firmly believe that the work of Kurt Hahn is waiting for an informed re-appraisal" (Loynes, 2002, p. 119). The ethical vision Bowles references, is Hahn's hope that education through service could instill a love for humanity (Richards, 1981, pp. 22-23). Facilitating the development of compassion was at the core of Hahn's mission and he considered it the most urgent of the declines (Hahn, 1960, p. 7). He believed that Samaritan service—the compassionate passerby whose selfless care to a person

of different ethnicity extended the domain of neighbour to all humankind—provided a vehicle to stir compassion once again (Hahn, 1958, p. 6):

> Our conscience is always struggling against what seem irresistible temptations - of greed, of prestige, of malice of comfort. Over these temptations conscience could triumph every time if it could call to its help a counterforce, an ally. Compassion is that ally, the most powerful that conscience can have; compassion that is forever in vigilant readiness to dominate the inner life (Hahn, 1940, p. 6).

Plato's influence on Hahn (Richards, 1981, pp. 49-56), lies behind this moral renaissance that Bowles (in Loynes, 2002, p. 119) suggests. For the early Greeks, the ethical life was a life of virtue. For Socrates, and to a significant degree Plato, virtue is obtained through knowledge: "It is from defect of knowledge that men err, when they do err, in their choice of pleasures and pains - that is, in the choice of good and evil" (*Protagoras*, trans. 1967, 357d). Aristotle enters here because he fundamentally disagrees with Plato's approach to virtue and the good in general, introducing his critique with this statement: "though we love both truth and our friends [Plato], reverence is due to the truth first" (*Aristotle*, trans. 1999, I 6§1).

Aristotle

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was born in the Greek colony of Stagira. His father, Nicomachus, was physician to the King of Macedonia (Denise, White, & Peterfreund, 2005, p. 22). Early exposure to his father's habits of scientific observation is thought to be a significant reason for his drifting from Plato's idealism

In 367 BC, Aristotle was sent to Plato's Academy in Athens where he spent the next 20 years, until Plato's death (Crisp, 2000, p. vii). Plato and Aristotle appear to have had great admiration for one another (I 6§1). Plato nicknamed Aristotle "the mind," but did think of him as something of a dandy, paying more attention to clothes "than was becoming for a sincere lover of wisdom" (Milch & Patterson, 1966, p. 6; Thomas, Thomas, & Lewis, 2001, disc one, track 13).

At Plato's death in 347 BC, Aristotle left for Asia Minor under invitation from the philosopher King Hermeias, whose niece, Pythias, he married and with whom he had a daughter, also named Pythias (Blackburn, 1996, p. 24). Persian military pressure in 345 BC interrupted this fruitful time of biological study and he moved to the Isle of Lesbos, later hearing that his friend and patron Hermeias had been executed. Aristotle so valued friendship, which accounts for a fifth of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, that he wrote a eulogistic hymn to Hermeias which he sung after dinner every evening (Pakaluk, 2005, p. 20).

In 343 BC biological studies in Lesbos where again interrupted when King Philip of Macedonia's wished that Aristotle tutor his son, Alexander (Denise et al., 2005, p. 22). Although only teaching Alexander for four years, Aristotle stayed in Macedonia for eight. His wife died tragically during this time (Hughes, 2001, p. 3), and Aristotle later lived with Herpyllis, with whom he had a son, Nicomachus (Blackburn, 1996, p. 24).

Aristotle, now 49 (335 BC), moved back to Athens and founded the Lyceum, which would last for eight centuries (Miltch & Patterson, 1966, p. 7), where he taught and researched for 11 years (Hughes, 2001, p. 3). While this decade was thought to be Aristotle's most prolific, the height of his mental powers (Denise et al., 2005, p. 22), his prowess apparently did not extend to the physical. In his early 50s he is described as balding, pot-bellied, thin-legged, still with a

boyhood lisp, restless, preferring to deliver lectures while walking under the colonnade, earning his school the name "peripatetics" (Thomas et al., 2001, disc 1, track 16; Blackburn, 1996, p. 24).

Aristotle's student, Alexander, by then known as Alexander the Great, died in 323 BC with anti-Macedonia sentiment sweeping over Athens. Aristotle's Macedonian association soon landed him on trial from impiety (Crisp, 2000, p. xxxvi). Unwilling to let Athens sin against philosophy a second time, and unlike Socrates, he chose exile to the island of Euboea (Hughes, 2001, p. 3; Denise et al., 2005, p. 23). A year later, now 63 (322 BC), after making arrangements for Herpyllis and Nicomachus (Irwin, 1999, p. xiii) and freeing his slaves, the gentle and unperturbed philosopher died of a digestive illness (Crisp, 2000, p. xxxvii; Thomas, et al., 2001, disc 1, track 20-21).

Aristotle is credited with one of the largest libraries in the Greek world (Denise et al., 2005, p. 22) and to have written over 400 works ranging from the "nature of reality, physics, knowledge, the mind, language, biology, physiology, astronomy, time, theology, literature, rhetoric, the nature of human happiness, and much else" (Crisp, 2000, p. vii). Only a third of his work has survived, but it alone requires 1.5 million words to translate. "An account of Aristotle's intellectual afterlife would be little less than a history of European thought" (Barnes, 1982, p. 86).

For our discussion regarding the renewal of a moral paradigm for outdoor education, the primary Aristotelian text of interest is the eponymous *Nicomachean Ethics*, of such renown, that it is simply referred to as *The Ethics* (Aristotle, 1999). Aristotle's ethical enterprise is not to provide a moral argument, but to make us good (II 1§1). His is a search for "the good" for humankind (I 1-2). Although Plato has suggested the search should endeavor to identify a universal Ideal Form of the Good, Aristotle finds this impractical:

> It is a puzzle to know what the weaver or carpenter will gain for his own craft from knowing this Good Itself, or how anyone will be better at medicine or generalship from having gazed on the Idea Itself. For what the doctor appears to consider is not even health [universally], but human health, and presumably the health of this [particular] human being even more, since he treats one particular patient at a time (I 6§16).

This passage captures the fundamental difference between Plato and Aristotle, beautifully portrayed in Raphael's *The School of Athens*, where Plato's finger reaches for the sky, and Aristotle's hand motions towards the ground. Plato searched for general truths, Aristotle looked to apply truth in context. Like Plato, reason plays an immense role in determining the good for Aristotle, but unlike Plato, understanding is in large part gleaned from and applied to experience.

In order to distill Aristotle's contribution to a moral paradigm within outdoor education, it will be helpful to sketch his argument, thereby providing exposure to its main tenants and vocabulary. Aristotle believed all animate objects to have a *telos*, a purpose they were created to fulfill. *Eudaimonia,* often translated as happiness, a flourishing life, fulfillment, or well-being is the *telos* that Aristotle generally identifies for humans. How this *eudaimonia* is reached, is connected to the function, the *ergon*, of the being. The *ergon* is related to how something is supposed to function, what is natural to it. Like Socrates and Plato before him, Aristotle stressed the rational function of the human species (Denise et al., 2005, p. 23). For humans to live eudaimonistically, they must live in accordance with right reason (VI 13§4-5). To live "excellently" in harmony with our reason, is to live "virtuously", which means excellence in Greek. Thinking virtuously requires the intellectual virtues (found in Book VI), while acting

virtuously requires what are called the moral virtues (found in Books II-IV). These two sets of virtues are interdependent for they can not operate without one another (X 8§3), and they make up an agent's virtue. The sum of this virtue, or lack thereof (vice), over a life-time, forms a person's character (I 10§11).

Aristotle's ethic is a character-ethic, based on his concept of virtue. It is important at the outset to note the criticisms that character has received within outdoor experiential learning contexts as early as the 1970s (Drasdo, 1973/1998, p. 28; Roberts, White & Parker, 1974, pp. 148-150) and more poignantly in recent years (Brookes, 2003a; 2003b). These criticisms raise valid questions about the amorphous nature of the concept of character, and the lack of evidence that it is enhanced through outdoor experiential techniques.

For Aristotle, virtue is: "a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person [the person with *phronesis*] would define it" (II 6§15). It is Aristotle's intellectual virtue *phronesis* that provides the judgment that discovers the mean. Aristotle describes *phronesis* as the "eye of the soul" (VI 12§10). Irwin translates *phronesis* as "prudence" (1999, p. 345), Crisp as "practical wisdom" (2000, p. xxiv), Pakaluk as "intelligence and foresight in action' or 'sagacity" (2005, pp. 214-215), and Hughes as "moral discernment" (2001, p. 224). It is important to note that although the mean is reached through intellectual activity under the auspice of *phronesis*, this in no way precludes the affective, but to the contrary assumes its necessity for proper moral function. "[V]irtues are concerned with actions and feelings says Aristotle in II 3§3 (see also II 6§10, 12; II 9§1; III 1§1; X 8§2).

For Aristotle, developing *phronesis* is a cyclic matter of reflection and experience. Here we see the beginnings of what Dewey detailed as the pattern of inquiry (Dewey, 1973, pp. 223-239; Wurdinger, 2005, p. 8). Experience provides the raw material for reflection. As knowledge is gleaned from each particular experience, more general understanding is developed. When a particular morally salient instance presents itself, the *phronimos*, the person with *phronesis* draws on previous knowledge amassed through former experience, and makes an informed contextual judgment.

Aristotle identifies two significant spheres within experience, which foster this growth in *phronesis*, and virtue in general: the shared life and practice. In the shared life, he recognizes that virtue is learned through community: family, education, and friendship. *The Ethics* does not advocate a self-help approach, but instead recognizes growth in *phronesis* to be a community affair (Pakaluk, 2005, p. 98; X 9§14). Aristotle's suggestion that "partners in deliberation" (III 3§10) are needed to fully understand, supports the experiential education practice of small group interactive processing. These references to real-life ethical instruction are only part of Aristotle's understanding of moral education - a part that has been further developed by Taylor (1991) in some useful ways.

Arts and literature can also enrich and inform moral dialogue (Carr, 2005, p. 149). Aristotle blended fiction and non-fiction into his teaching, drawing on dramatists and tragedians such as: Euripides (III 1§8) and Homer (III 3§18; III 8§10; III 11§1). This emphasis on the potent role of narrative and story raises some questions and ideas that may be useful to experiential educators such as – could interaction with literature be a vicarious primary experience? (Dewey, 1973, p. 254). As a moral agent experiences the shared life, both fictionally and non-fictionally, the reflective process orchestrated by phronesis garners new understanding, informing future practice.

The other significant sphere for growth in *phronesis* is practice. For Aristotle, an act is virtuous only when it is done from an established state of character. Gradually, as right reason, according to the *phronimos,* is achieved, and as the moral virtues, having to do with appetitive control, are refined and heed this reason, a moral agent becomes predisposed to strike the virtuous mean. This predisposition, is just that, a disposition, a state. Practicing virtue is key to this habituation: "We become just by doing just actions and become temperate by doing temperate actions" (II 4§1). For Aristotle, habituation is not mindless, but a "cognitive shaping" through time, allowing the agents to act from their accrued states (Sherman, 1991, p. 7). Habits then, are established patterns of judgment, towards or away from virtue, not robotic conditioning. As practice occurs the reflective process, via *phronesis,* refines understanding, informing practice the next time round.

It is worth noting here that judgment, *phronesis,* is often placed at the core of experiential models of outdoor education, for example:

> It is experience processed in the mill of reflection and feedback that yields refined insight – the kind of insight that satisfies our hunger for understanding, develops our body of knowledge, and strengthens our capacity for sound judgment. (Drury, Bonney, Berman, and Wagstaff, 2005, p. ix).

Aristotle's comprehensive and sophisticated discussions of character, virtue and *phronesis,* are pertinent to current scholarship within the field of experiential learning. For example, the "situationist" critique, which draws largely on social psychological research, is claiming behavior to be situationally bound—that there are no traits of character that a person carries between situations (Brookes, 2003a; 2003b; Fenwick, 2000, pp. 11-14). Brookes' critique particularly targets outdoor adventure education: "the idea that personal traits (character) can be acquired in one setting... which will then persist in other settings, remains foundational to much outdoor adventure education theory, research and promotion" (2003a, p. 49). Brookes' observations, and research citations, seem to match general experience: significant character formation does not appear to happen in on-off adventure courses.

Aristotle's understanding of character, based on dispositions of judgment, developed through *a lifetime* (I 10§11) of experience, seems to explain this paucity of transformation, moral and otherwise, better than the situationist critique. For the situationists tends to reduce the palette of moral response to one empirical dilemma-fraught assessment, and greatly simplify the complexity of human morality (Milgram, 1963; Swanton, 2005, pp. 30-33). In Aristotle's philosophy, that a one, two or three week expedition is insufficient to permanently inculcate virtue, is to be expected.

What outdoor experiential learning *can* do well, is to provide a new way of seeing, by creating space for participants to better know themselves and others, and become more aware of their own moral journey. In Aristotelian terms, experiential learning can create opportunities for students and educators to develop their *phronesis.*

Implications for EE Philosophy

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the influence of early Greek thought on experiential learning. Whether Socrates' contemplative questions, Plato's leisure- oriented holistic curriculum, or Aristotle's reference to the role of experience in character development, as

educators we benefit from exposure to these philosophical roots. The value of this encounter comes not merely in confirming our beliefs and positions, but also in confirming them as seen in Plato's epistemological rationalism. Finally, the ancient emphasis on virtue has increasing contemporary relevance for the renewed ethical interests within the associated fields of experiential learning.

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