

## A CRITIQUE OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

*It poses little difficulty to argue in support of Plato that every child grows under the tutelage of a teacher. Nevertheless, one may ask, what is the significance of Plato's philosophy on the Education? How does Plato's philosophy connect with educational theory and practice? To Plato, the role of a teacher can never be over emphasized in the development of any nation. This is because, at any level of Education, such as primary, secondary, colleges, technical institutions and universities, one is bound to come in contact with specialised professionals whose responsibility is to promote teaching and learning while at the same time parents, pastors, friends and others also serve as teachers informally. However, can a teacher be sure that what he is imparting to the younger ones is knowledge and not just his own opinion? Hight Gilbert (1989) in his research on the Art of Teaching submitted that one of the forces which have helped to make our civilization is the influence of teachers who aim at the achievement of learning. Based on this, the paper attempts a critique of Plato's philosophy of education with reference to the Meno as a model.*

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Education, Meno, Teaching, Knowledge and learning

### **Introduction.**

Plato was a friend and devoted disciple of Socrates. He was a teacher, philosopher and mentor born into a distinguished Athenian family in the year 428 BC. His father was Aristone and his mother Perictione. He was born into an ancient family that had political connections in high places. The mother was the sister of Charmides and niece of Critias both of who were removed in the Oligarchy that directed the affairs of Athens before democracy was restored.

Plato was obviously brought up in an atmosphere of turgid aristocratic setting. Hence one can say that due to the family into which Plato was born and the connections that the family had, the spade work of launching Plato into a noble and respectable career began even before his birth. The belief then was that nobility begot nobility, that is, that one needed to be a freeborn and of a noble birth before one can contemplate occupying a place in the socio-political

structure of Athens. This basic requirement Plato had, and hence was set on the road to greatness from youth.

Plato's works are in the form of dialogues. Some of them are *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo* and among others are about Socrates' last days. Some others are not directly about Socrates, but Socrates is made the chief speaker in the dialogues. The speaker who expresses Plato's own views and doctrines include, *Protagoras*, *Georgias*, *Meno*, *Hippias*, *Symposium* *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, the latter being the most famous of Plato's books. It is in the light of his teachings in education that his profound theories have become permanent elements in today's educational process.

### **Plato's Philosophy of Education**

Plato's philosophy of education is expressible in his theory of knowledge which was heavily informed by pythagoreanism, as well as the works of Heraclitus and Parmenides. These epistemological paradigms were very significant in the formulation of Plato's epistemology. Bertrand Russell in his book *History of Western Philosophy* clearly stated that Plato's philosophy when closely x-rayed shows nothing but pythagoreanism both in form and in contents. What this means is that Plato had Pythagorean turn of mind and made reasonable his beliefs by couching them in Pythagorean garment. Plato is seen in his philosophy as raising the soul above thought and being, and making the soul to be united with the transcendental *good* which is believed rather than known. The issue is that we cannot behold the Good except in thought. Brugger Walter's et al, in their '*Philosophical Dictionary*', said that theory of knowledge seeks to discover how we can arrive at certain and absolute truth about the world, whether it is through the psychological method which will make knowledge relative or through a transcendental or logical method which seeks to separate contingent truth from necessary truth. The process of thinking could only arrive at transcendental truth. What Plato should be said to have done is to show that it is through this that we can apprehend the truth, that is, that reality is supersensible and not physical. Plato's obsession was with how to account for the problem of the one and the many, appearance and reality and the reconciliation of the views of Heraclitus and Parmenides. To attend to these problems, Plato posited a reality that is dualistic. One world is our physical world which is in a perpetual state of flux and what he called world of the forms which is eternal, immutable, non physical, non spatial and non temporal.

In understanding Plato's theory of knowledge, we have to first of all understand that Plato was a realist and that his realism was anchored on the

basement of real existence. He believed that philosophy should concern itself with existence and not with appearance. The world of the sensible things constitutes the fleeting things of our daily perception. He maintained that they do not give us knowledge since they lack the permanence and stability that ensures certainty of perceptions hence they fall into the class of phenomena. To Plato, the admission of phenomena as knowledge will bring with it a heap of problems, which we cannot explicate. He therefore saw knowledge as that which we are certain about and which cannot fail us. He contrasted it with opinion. In effect, Plato's aim was to show that there is a demarcation between '*the sensibles*' and '*the intelligibles*'. Since '*the sensibles*' can never at any point in time be seen to have the mark of stability, it means they are not exact at any time but correspond to our different subjective states. Plato thought that knowledge will be doomed if it had such a nature. He therefore enunciated the reality of forms, which he sees as abstractions in the realm of the world. These forms account for the existence of the many in the one. They can only be apprehended in thought.

In the theory of *Forms*, it constitutes the fulcrum on which Plato had to anchor the whole of his philosophy. He said that philosophers are concerned with truth and not with opinion. This shows that he, like his teacher and mentor-Socrates, believes that universal truth can be arrived at. This debunks the position of the Sophist who held a contrary view, that truth is relative. It is in his quest to solve the puzzle of change that he came to understand that there is an epistemological necessity to adopt the existence of two worlds.

The truth according to him is that things participate in the world of ideas from where they get their being but to a lesser degree. What Plato is saying is that, a philosopher should endeavour to perceive things with reason and not with the senses. Perhaps, the earliest definition of education was that given by Plato in one of his dialogues '*The Laws*' cited by Adeleye (2015) that education is:

.....that training which is given by suitable habits to first, instincts of virtue in children when pleasure and pain are rightly imparted in non-rational souls. The particular training in respect of pleasure and pain, which leads you to hate and love, is called education.

Plato opines that mind or spirit as each man experiences is fundamentally real and that the totality of the universe is spirit in essence. The physical world is just a manifestation of this Great Spirit behind it. The physical world is destructible and changeable. This implies that for Plato, we educate the child

out of two major considerations. First of all education is a spiritual necessity. It is not just a natural necessity. Nature may give life, but it is education that shows the art of living. Man is born with a biological heritage into a social heritage (culture). It is this culture that he acquires through education that makes a man an individual. Man's nature is spiritual and divine. He can realize this only through education. A natural life will not help in this goal. Secondly Plato sees education also as a social necessity. Man is an objective projection of society in an individual form. Such a projection should reflect the 'good' in the society. Hence, this necessitates the need for education and schools. Basically, Plato considers education as a process, which leads one to the highest moral conduct and deepest spiritual insight.

This is an insight into the Truth, the Beauty and the Goodness. Education is a linkage channel between the individual mind and the spiritual environment. It is education that helps an individual to seek the truth and avoid error, enjoy the beauty and discard ugliness, espouse the Good and deprecate evil. As Ross (1958) puts it:

The function of education is to help us in our  
Exploration of the ultimate universal values so  
that the truth of the universe may become our  
truth and give power to our life.

This laudable aim of education can only be achieved through good teaching.

According to Plato, man must not submit himself to his natural tendencies and desires. He must be able to suppress them and at times, conquer too. For this, he needs a strong will power. Education must be able to develop and fashion this will power in man. Education has to feed the conscience by nurturing it in the desired direction. Plato said further that all knowledge is innate and is 'brought out' by physical experience. Our purpose is to gain knowledge through The Forms, the Ultimate form of abstract notions such as Truth and Beauty. As we experience life, we are able to judge these experiences, or make sense of them, by comparing them to our innate knowledge of the appropriate form.

He maintained that truth is achieved through the spirit and knowledge of the forms, which is superior to physical experience, as the senses cannot be trusted. The senses can be duped or simply mistaken, and so cannot be used to affirm knowledge - this is achieved by means of the spirit and knowledge of the forms. Thus ultimate reality should be regarded as spiritual rather than physical.

What is spiritual is eternal, and what is physical is temporary. Thus Plato has established the great spiritual and physical division where the latter experience should be regarded as merely a means to the former's development.

### **Plato and Education - The Meno as Model**

In the *Meno*, Plato sees the school, as a medium through which the society expresses itself. The atmosphere of the school should be able to influence the moral and spiritual development of children. Therefore, the school should build up its own ethos and traditions. Plato considers the child as a 'self', a spiritual being and also a social being. He is not just a reality but basically a spiritual reality that is in the process of becoming. Horne (1942) amplifies Plato's teachings when he wrote:

'our philosophy dares to suggest that the learner is a finite person, growing, when properly educated, into the image of an infinite person, that his real origin is deity, that his nature is freedom, and that his destiny.

The ultimate reality is a 'being' and the individual is a 'becoming'. The Absolute 'is', the finite 'becomes'. The learner is in a process of self-actualisation. Education is a necessary condition for the process.

The child or learner is also a social being. He can actualize his 'self' only through the service of other 'selves'. The child has the potential ('will') either to be good or bad, and depends on the environment and education for its actualization. The teacher and the pupil are equals as both of them are spiritual in nature and have a common goal-'self-realization'. The teacher because of his age and experience has to be ahead of the pupil towards the goal. He is just like the member of an advance party in a mountaineering expedition.

On teaching, Plato advances the use of ideal-centred methods of teaching. While teaching any subject, emphasis should be placed upon the dignity of man, grandeur and worth of human life and the goals of living. Plato also believed in self-education of the child, which is achieved through speculation, meditation and other mental activities. As the researcher can make out of Plato's philosophy, appreciation of art is as equally a self-activity as creation of art itself. However, the child must always be conscious of his goals either when he takes to overt activities such as talking and interacting with people or covert activities like meditating and speculating. Plato values making use of interests, efforts and most of all the will power of the child more than imposing ideas on

them. So the researcher may say that for Plato, teaching can at best be only a condition of learning and never the cause of it.

For classroom practice, Plato encouraged the use of the discussion along with the lecture methods. Plato maintained that teaching should not be done in an autocratic way but it should rather be participatory. He sees the teacher as one whose position in the scheme of education is focal. It is the teacher who provides the key to the educative process. He decides the opportunities for learning and growing for the students and also makes the environment congenial for that. He has to organise the subject matter and is the gatekeeper through whom the pupil learns. He confronts the child as a master of knowledge, which the child is going to learn. Plato expects so much from the teacher in terms of his learning and behaviour.

The teacher is reality personified to the child. He is seen as a specialist in the knowledge of his subject and his pupils. He is expected to command the respect of his pupils by virtue of his scholarship, his teaching, his concern for the pupils and his overall behaviour, rather than demand it from them. He must awaken in the child the desire to learn. He must make effort to be like a personal friend of the learner. This accounts for the opinion in our contemporary educational practices that the teacher is often described as a friend, parent, philosopher and guide. He is also seen as a co-worker with God in perfecting man, a priest of man's spiritual heritage. A perfector of the mind – the highest form of existence in the cosmos, a maker of democracies, an apostle of peace and progress, and a compendium of all virtues.

However, the teacher should be seen as a continuous learner. The adage goes that 'pupils catch fire from a teacher who is himself aflame'. Dongerkerry one of Plato's contemporary faithful quoted by Ayeni (2001) submitted that:

He who learns from one who is himself occupied in  
learning drinks the fresh waters of the running stream.  
But he who learns from one who has learned all that one  
is to drinks the green mantle of the stagnant pool.

Plato urges the teacher not to impose himself on the children and glorify himself. He must try to eliminate himself from the scene as much as possible. He must lose himself in helping the children to grow. Froebel has very well compared the teacher to a committed gardener who would see that all his varieties grow to their capacity.

On discipline, Plato prefers teachers to give 'freedom' to children. But that will be a qualified freedom. It should be for activity. Freedom does not mean license for waywardness. It implies responsibility. It should be a regulated, guided, and restrained freedom. His emphasis is on 'self-discipline'. He believes that human behaviour should have internal controls rather than such external controls as praises and punishments. The place of 'volition' in discipline is highly valued in Plato's teachings.

Seetharamu (2004) agrees that Plato advocates the use of ideal-centred methods of teaching. That is, while teaching any subject emphasis is placed upon the dignity of man, grandeur and worth of human life and the goals of living. Plato valued the interests, efforts and most of all the will power of the learner more than instructions. The focal point of interest in this research is Plato's teachings on classroom practices; Plato encouraged the use of the questioning and analytic discourse methods. The questioning method of teaching is popularly known as the Socratic method and this involves questioning, discussion and possible answers.

This implies that the teacher education in Plato's thought occupies a central position in the teaching learning situation. It is the teacher who provides the key to the educative process. He decides the opportunities for learning and growing for the students and also sets the environment conducive for that. Here, the teacher must be a specialist in the knowledge of his subject and of his students. He should be able to command the respect of his pupils by virtue of his scholarship, his teaching, his concern for the students and his overall behaviour, rather than demand it from them. The teacher must awaken in the learner the desire to learn.

His teaching is therefore one of the great examples of the power of positive motivation. What a teacher says sometimes may not be heard by some of his students but what he stimulates his students to think out for themselves often has a far more potent influence upon them.

### **Conclusion**

Plato's teachings undoubtedly contributed to our educational thoughts. He has provided reasonable and lofty aims of education. Our educational system has roles to play as a choice of matter, method and techniques of evaluation are determined through a chain process of education. Nevertheless there are some criticisms advanced against Plato's Teachings. One of such criticisms refers to its abstractness. Some said it is an abstract philosophy and a visionary utopia.

It hijacks one from immediate realities as it is biased towards ultimate realities. Another significant criticism though not fully justifiable to the researcher's mind, is that it undermines the study of science and technology and is inimical to experimental methods of learning. It is also criticized for supporting the over-dependence of the learner on the teacher. To the researcher's mind, the criticism against Plato's teachings does not detract anything from the values of Plato's philosophy as a distinct contributor to teaching. In the sense that Plato's philosophy of teaching helps in the development of the mind of both the teacher and student since this is the aim of education.

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