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THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS

ABSTRACT

Aristotle analyzed the problem of education in the seventh and eighth books of *Politics*. Most researchers interpret his thoughts on education as "the education of the youth". Some authors try to convince us of the significance of contemplation and the problem of the best possible way of life in analyzing Aristotle's education theory. We would like to regard the problem of education in another frame. The role of education is exceptionally significant, judging from the central theme of *Politics* – the political practice of human beings. Therefore, the critical question we want to ask here is – what is the reason for creating a polis? Only when we understand Aristotle's answer to this question will we know why education plays such an essential role in a polis. Aristotle avoids definitively prescribing and ordering what music children and citizens should listen to. He leaves open the critical question about "how children and citizens should be educated". Disagreeing on the proper way of education is the very essence of education. No ready-made best way to be educated has to be applied in every case. The best way is only the one that is the outcome of the particular dispute. Just as citizens, while in power, have to think about those who are subordinate because they replace each other, when thinking about the aim of education, they have to think about each other. Outside of that process, there is no ideal form of education, the application of which would improve the political community.

KEYWORDS

education, political community, politics, virtue, happiness, disagreement, dispute

Introduction

The standard approach to the problem of education in Aristotle's *Politics* usually follows the natural path from *Nicomachean Ethics* to *Politics*. Aristotle firstly established the anthropological foundation of education (*paideia*) (EN I, 1,5,6,13). The first book of *Nicomachean Ethics* defined happiness as the most critical aim of human life. He did not explicitly claim, but it is evident that education is a part of how happiness is supposed to be achieved. In the second and sixth book Aristotle analyzed the two areas of education's responsibility. The first one is a moral habit (ἔθος) (EN II, 1–6), and the second one is common sense (ὀρθὸν λόγον) (EN, VI, 1–9 13). Within *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle did



not refer to the education problem directly, but he just described the broader field of its practice and contribution. However, he analyzed this problem in the seventh and eighth books of *Politics* most straightforwardly. If we want to talk about Aristotelean educational theory, we should indispensably consider these two books in *Politics*. However, most researchers interpret his thoughts on education in *Politics* as the “education of the youth” (Destrée 2014: 301). It is just partly true. Judging the appropriate education of the youth is not the main subject in Aristotle’s sphere of interest. Although Destrée put in relationship the problem of education and the definition of human being as political animal, he misses to realize the central position of education in polis. (ibid.: 303)

Some authors (Depew, Destrée, Tuozzo) try to convince us of the significance of contemplation and the problem of the best possible way of life in analyzing Aristotle’s theory of education. Depew sets the problem of education in the frame of analysis of the problem of self-sufficiency, happy life, and leisure (Depew 1991: 354). He considers Aristotle’s thought on education interesting in the analysis of the relation between action and contemplation (ibid.: 374).

We would like to regard the problem of education in another frame. The role of education is exceptionally significant, judging from the central theme of *Politics* – the political practice of human beings. Therefore we want to praise Lord’s idea to frame the discussion on the problem of education in *Politics* between Aristotle’s analysis of the state (πόλις) and his analysis of the “regime” or constitution (πολιτεία) (Lord 1990: 203). Lord clearly marked Aristotle’s position: “his belief in the necessity of education for the constitution of perfection of the city has been largely missed” (ibid.: 204). Consequently, we cannot understand why education is such an essential topic in *Politics* until we consider the fundamental goal of politics in general. Contrary to Hobbesian and modern views on politics, according to which politics is firstly a matter of reaching security, Aristotle claims that true politics should aim at “happiness” (εὐδαιμονία). City-state (πόλις) is not established just for barely living. It is the household (οἰκία) that is made for everyday life and the security of the family members (Dimić 2022: 33–47). Therefore, the critical question we want to ask here is – what is the reason for creating a polis? Only when we understand Aristotle’s answer to this question will we know why education plays such an essential role in a polis.

The Origin of Polis

Aristotle gives us the most detailed and explicit account of why a polis is created in the third book of *Politics* (Pol., III, 5). After he presented some degenerated forms of political power in the previous chapter, here in the fifth one, he firstly analyzes the principle of justice and its complexity. Aristotle notices that the meaning of justice is not the same in oligarchy and democracy (Pol. 1280a 7). For instance, justice (δικαίον) is equality (ἴσον) for those who are equal, but not for those who are not. Justice can also be an inequality (ἄνισον), though not for everybody, but only for those who are unequal. However, the point is not the

relativity of justice. Aristotle here follows a different logic, contrary to our intuition. He points out that “most men are bad judges when their own interests are in question” (Pol. 1280a 17). Thanks to Aristotle, we actually learn indirectly that justice and politics have to do with something other than self-interest. Aristotle does not believe that men formed the political community and came together for the sake of wealth. The aim of this community could not also be military alliance (συμμαχία). In addition, polis exists not for trade and business relations. As we can see, Aristotle anticipated a modern view of the essence of the state and referred to it very critically. He effortlessly expresses his crucial thought: “the state (πόλις) was formed not for the sake of life only but rather for the good life” (Pol. 1280a 32).¹ Since he claims that a household (οικία) is a specific community for the sake of life, Aristotle doesn’t consider polis as a community that specifically has to do something with essential maintenance of everyday life.² Therefore regarding polis, he has much more expectations than from military alliance, trade union, or household. Aristotle provides here arguments that sound a little odd to contemporary readers. If the state was formed for the sake of life, “a collection of slaves or of lower animals would be a state, but as it is, it is not a state, because slaves and animals have no share in well-being (εὐδαιμονία) or in purposive life (κατὰ προαίρεσιν)” (Pol. 1280a 34). Thanks to Aristotle, we again learn indirectly that polis has to do something with well-being and purposive life.

In addition, he delivers a few precise arguments why the collection of slaves or lower animals, military alliance, or trade union could not be considered polis. Firstly, since the slaves and lower animals are occupied with everyday life maintenance, they cannot search for something more than bare life. The well-being is beyond their reach. Secondly, since the slaves were the tools of their masters, they could not make decisions independently and live in purposive life. Thirdly, the members of a military alliance or trade union come together “for defense against injury by anybody” or for the “sake of trade and business relations” (Pol. 1280a 33). It is a fact that they have agreements (συνθήκη) about imports and covenants (σύμβολα) as to abstaining from dishonesty and treaties (γραφαι) for a military alliance. Still, the point for not considering them polis is that they are not the citizens of a single state, and they don’t have “officials common to them”. They are just members of an accidental community made for one specific purpose. Here we come to the crucial part of this argument: the members of these communities don’t take any concern “but only that they shall not commit any wrong against each other” (Pol. 1280b 6). Aristotle tells us here indirectly that it is impossible to reach good life and have purposive life in polis if you don’t have concern for other people. In addition, he states clearly what he expects from the members of polis. Since this thought is crucial for what Aristotle tells us about the origin of the polis, we will deliver

1 Aristotle 1944: 213. Here we used the following translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*: Aristotle (1944), *Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; translated by H. Rackham.

2 On the specific role of the household for the sake of life, see in more detail: Dimić 2022: 33.

this quote as a whole: “All those on the other hand who are concerned about good government do take civic virtue and vice into their purview. Thus it is also clear that any state that is truly so called and is not a state merely in name must pay attention to virtue; for otherwise the community becomes merely an alliance, differing only in locality from the other alliances, those of allies that live apart” (Pol. 1280b 7).

Aristotle tells us that one of the most dangerous consequences of bad government is the degeneration of a polis into an alliance (συμμαχία). This is one of the most critical spots in *Politics* where Aristotle doesn't only describe the political world he is facing but refers to it in a normative manner. He differs between the polis that is “truly so called” and the one that is “a state (πόλις) merely in name”. Since it doesn't concern civic virtue, the second form of a polis appears much closer to an alliance. If the members of a polis want to live in a proper form of political community, they must pay attention to virtue. This thought brings us to the specific role of education in a polis. As we will see in the following analysis of Aristotle's thoughts on education in the seventh and eighth books of *Politics*, there is a direct relationship between virtue, law, and education. We will close this analysis on the origin of a polis with one significant Aristotle statement regarding the difference between polis and alliance. If the members of a polis live in a political community that is “a state (πόλις) merely in name”, which means that they live in an alliance rather than a polis, then we have the following situation: “And the law is covenant or, in the phrase of the sophist Lycophron, a guarantee of men's just claims on one another, but it is not designed to make the citizens virtuous and just” (Pol. 1280b 11). One of the most significant differences between polis and alliance is in the role of law. Within the military alliance (συμμαχία), or trade union, a law, represents merely a “covenant”. It guarantees that the members will be together “for defense against injury by anybody” or for the “sake of trade and business relations”. However, within the polis, a law becomes one of the essential pillars of the community. As we can see from this quote, Aristotle claims it is up to the law to “make the citizens virtuous and just”. Since Aristotle does not understand laws as a “covenant”, a kind of a “guarantee of men's just claims on one another” (Pol. 1280b 10–12), he was far away from the modern perspective on the aim of politics. If the main aim of the members of a polis should be something more than just security, a law has to be something more than just a covenant. If the main task regarding a law should be just its simple application as a guarantee, a human being would never reach the political community. It was evident to him that politics as much as ethics deals with much more complicated things, human affairs (περὶ τὰ ἀνθρώπεια) (EN, 1181b 15). Human affairs are not solved by applying ready-made solutions or theoretical models but by arguing about possible solutions under concrete circumstances. If the law does not go beyond the “guarantee of men's just claims on one another”, the city-state would never be established. Therefore we refer now to the relationship between virtue, law, and education to realize why education is so significant for the political community's well-being.

The Origin of Education in Polis

Aristotle brings us to the phenomenon of education in a manner that is pretty counterintuitive for the contemporary reader. The main difference between polis as a political community and a military alliance or trade union is the lack of “mutual dealings” (Pol. 1280b 22). The state (πόλις) has to do nothing with sharing a common locality for the purpose of “preventing mutual injury and exchanging goods”. You can bring the sites of two cities together, for instance, “so that the city walls of Megara and those of Corinth were contiguous”, but even so, they would not be one city. You can also enact the rights of intermarriage with each other. However, intermarriage between citizens is one of the elements of community which are the main feature of a polis, but it would still not make them the citizens of a polis. It is necessary for the group of people to be called a state (πόλις) to have something more in common than just an exchange of commodities and military alliance. Sharing a common locality to prevent mutual injury and exchange goods are necessary pre-conditions of a state’s existence, but they are not enough. Gathering and making community is not the crucial point of humans as political animals.³ Before we analyze the most significant of Aristotle’s thoughts on education, we want to draw readers’ attention to a specific quote from the third book of *Politics*. Bringing once again the concepts of virtue, morals, and polis together, Aristotle states the following: “the political fellowship must therefore be deemed to exist for the sake of noble actions, not merely for living in common” (Pol. 1281a 3). We arrive here at the critical topic of this paper – the significance of education for the emergence and maintenance of a political community. If noble actions are so crucial for the polis, what is the relationship between education and “noble actions”? Answering this question could lead us to a better understanding of the relationship between education and polis.

Aristotle’s account of the role of education in polis starts in the twelfth chapter of the seventh book of *Politics*. The specific topic of the twelfth chapter is the aim (τέλος) of the best constitution (πολιτεία). Most of Aristotle’s 35 pages account on education in the seventh and eighth book of *Politics* deals with two very concrete questions: how to educate children in their first seven years and how to educate young people in music. Aristotle focuses on general questions about education at the beginning of this account. The seventh book’s topic is the polis’s well-being and its members’ happiness. Aristotle analyzes different aspects of the citizen’s life: the best way of life, the appropriate size of the best polis, its geographical suburb, the connection of a polis with the sea, and the behavior of citizens and their social status.

Aristotle’s vocabulary here is exact, and we will pay a lot of attention to it. While “polis” is a slightly more general word, and Aristotle uses it when he talks about the political community in a general sense, the term “constitution”

³ On the essence of Aristotle’s definition of man as a political animal, see in details: Dimić 2022: 110.

is much more specific.⁴ Aristotle uses it when he wants to determine the relationships in the polis precisely. The general analysis of education Aristotle starts in the same way he researches the origin of a polis in the third book. The main concepts in this analysis are quite the same as in the research on the origin of a polis: well-being, happiness, and virtue. Aristotle introduces the concept of education for the first time while answering the question: “what and of what character should be the components of the state that is to have felicity and good government”? (Pol. 1331b 26) The welfare of the members of the polis consists of two essential things: the first one is the correct establishment of the aim and end of their actions, and the second one is the ascertainment of the activities leading to that end. Here we are again convinced of how pragmatic Aristotle is in his approach to the problems that characterize the political community. He pays equal attention to defining the end of one constitution and determining the practical means leading to it. Here it is stated once again what we could also learn in the third book of *Politics* – the aim of a constitution is “good life and happiness” (Pol. 1331b 39). Here we come very close to the problem of education. It is clear that all people aim at good life and happiness, but some possess the power to achieve these things, and some do not. They can not do that owing to some factor of fortune or of nature. People differ in the sense of better or worse natural disposition or specific equipment of means. Although they have the power, some people “go wrong at the start of their search for happiness”.

The exact meeting place of education and the political community occurs at the moment when Aristotle explicitly formulates what he sees as his main task in *Politics*: “But the object before us is to discern the best constitution, and this is the one under which a state will be best governed, and a state will be best governed under the constitution under which it has the most opportunity for happiness” (Pol. 1332a 6). It is evident that, according to Aristotle, there is no such thing as the ultimate best constitution. The members of one state should search for the best constitution under which they have the most opportunity for happiness. It will depend on many factors, and we can not just state that democracy or monarchy is the best constitution because it had good outcomes in the neighboring state. The problem becomes more complicated if we consider the definition of happiness.

Happiness, Virtue and Education

As we could also see in *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN, 1102a 22), Aristotle’s definition of happiness indirectly includes education. In *Politics*, he similarly repeats this definition: “happiness is the complete activity end employment of virtue” (Pol. 1332a 12). Regarding happiness and virtue, it is necessary that “some goods must be forthcoming to start with”. Some members of the political community are naturally gifted; for them, it is much easier to live by virtue. For the state

4 On the specific meaning of the term “constitution”, see in details: Dimić 2022: 141.

it is much more significant that “some goods must be provided by legislator (νομοθέτην)” (Pol. 1332a 29). It is crucial for a better understanding of Aristotle’s comprehension of education to mark that his direct analysis of education starts with considering the role of a legislator. Here we find one of the most significant of Aristotle’s thoughts on the relationship between human political nature and education. Education becomes an essential issue in Aristotle’s analysis of politics because the state should not wait for the virtue to be realized in the citizens, but it should produce it. Aristotle stated: “but when we come to the state’s being virtuous, to secure this is not the function of fortune but of the science and policy” (Pol. 1332a 35). Shortly, the members of the polis start to think about education and how to organize it when they want to make their citizens virtuous. Therefore, the main point the government must consider is how the political community members become virtuous. That is precisely the spot for the role of education.

Regarding being virtuous, some things can be controlled by people, and there are some which cannot be. Since there are things by which men are made good and virtuous (nature, habit and reason), it is evident that we can not influence nature. One must be born as a human being and not as an animal to talk about whether they are virtuous or not. According to Aristotle, we can not also influence the quality of our body or soul. However, even if some people possess the quality of body and soul, they become modified by habit in the wrong direction. Habit is a factor that a human being can modify. This process is going on with the help of human reason (logos). Aristotle states that these “three things must be in harmony” (Pol. 1332b 6). The guarantee for this harmony can only be provided by education (παιδεία). Shortly, habit and logos need education to enable virtuous citizens. Here, Aristotle connects education with the legislator’s task to produce virtuous citizens in the most straightforward way: “Now we have already defined the proper natural character of those who are to be amenable to the hand of legislator; what now remains is the task of education, for men learn some things by practice, others by precept” (Pol. 1332b 11).

Therefore we claim the central role of education in Aristotle’s idea of a well-governed political community. Since every political community is composed of rulers and subjects, Aristotle intends to consider whether the rulers and subjects should change or remain the same throughout life. Here we find one of the most significant pieces of proof for our claim that education is one of the pillars of the human political community. Aristotle effortlessly states this thought: “for it is clear that their education also will have to be made to correspond with this distribution of functions” (Pol. 1332b 15). The way of education depends directly on the political constitution of a particular state. If the rulers and subjects remain the same throughout life, specific education should be applied to realize the aim of the community. However, Aristotle is not convinced that it is a good solution. He is much closer to the opposite position: “it is clear that for many reasons it is necessary for all to share alike in ruling and being ruled in turn” (Pol. 1332b 25). His argument is quite simple: “it is difficult for a constitution to endure that is framed in contravention of

justice”. If the rulers and subjects are ruling and being ruled in turn, the chances for more just for all community members increase.

Education and Dispute

After this extended analysis of Aristotle’s statements in *Politics*, we can slowly put together a picture of how he sees the role of education in a polis. Regardless of how we see Aristotle’s determination regarding the best constitution, here we want to emphasize that it is much more significant to note that Aristotle thinks that it is much better for the citizens if those who rule and the subjects alternate with each other.⁵ In the following quote, he explains how he sees the role of education in the such community: “Hence their education also is bound to be in one way the same and in another different. For he who is to be a good ruler must have first been ruledruled [...]” (Pol. 1333a 1). Now we can complete the whole picture of Aristotle’s theory on education.

We can not ultimately realize the role of education in polis without understanding the essence of Aristotle’s theory of human political practice. At this point, we come to the fundamental concepts around which Aristotle bases his political theory in the most immediate sense. Namely, focusing on the very core of the organization (τάξις) of the political community is the way to answer the question of what is just and what is not. At the same time, justice (δικαιοσύνη) is not something predetermined or given that the members of the polis already possess, something that is written somewhere or that resides in some eternal world of ideas. On the contrary, the only way to determine whether something corresponds to justice is to discern and decide (κρίσις); therefore, judge, weigh, and evaluate whether a particular act is just (τοῦ δίκαιου) or not. However, the members of a political community do not do it in the traditional way, as it is, for example, done by the head of the household or the head of the village by “delivering” the decision about what is just to others or by turning to the gods to get answers to these questions.⁶ Still, they constantly criticize (κρίσις) and discuss it (ἀμφισβητέω), using, of course, speech (logos) and arguments. Right here, we are in the very center of Aristotle’s political theory, that is, his definition of the content of political practice and the definition of man as a political animal. We should seek the answers regarding Aristotle’s understanding of the essence of politics in that intermediate space between the terms “κρίσις” (distinguishing, deciding), “ἀμφισβητέω” (disputing, debating), and “δικαιοσύνη” (justice).

From how questions of justice are determined in a polis, it is immediately apparent why polis has nothing to do with anything traditional or natural. Since the reasons these questions are determined in the political community do not concern anything already established, which is a part of custom or

⁵ For instance, Höffe claims that Aristotle was closest to liberal democracy (Höffe 2001: 187).

⁶ See the difference in decision-making in household and polis in more detail: Dimić 2022: 110–115.

tradition in advance, we can freely conclude that polis is a radically modern occurrence. We can say the same about the way of decision-making that is established in it. Given that the authority of the decision about justice has become disputed and it is no longer “guaranteed” to the master or elder, in the new context, it becomes challenging to determine precisely the source of this authority. Therefore it begins to change from one person to another, depending on the arguments presented. Hence, justice ceases to be delivered but begins to rely on the angle of view, that is, the position of the one who judges. If, in a specific situation, we want to know what is just and what is not, then we have to investigate and observe the particular problem from different sides (ἀμφισ), which is precisely the original meaning of the verb “ἀμφισβητεῖν”. The fate of the policy members lies in the fact that they do not have a ready and once and for all answer to the question of what is just and what is not, but that every time it is necessary, they have to discuss this question anew. In this sense, we could say that disagreement about the issue of justice is the natural state of state members.

In further elaboration of Aristotle’s understanding of the political character of the human being, we could then say the following. How the logos determines in polis what is just and what is not is entirely consistent with how power circulates in the same polis between those who rule and those who are subjects, which is precisely the essential characteristic of the political community that separates it from the household or village. While in the household and village, it is always unequivocally known who rules and who is subordinate, and what is just and what is not, the situation is significantly different in a polis. Namely, in a political community, the holder of power is never the same, but those who are rulers and subjects are constantly changing in that position. Hence, no person gives the final judgment about what is just and what is not, but the citizens always decide by disputing and arguing. Therefore, we claim fundamental instability of any constitution. The critical thing on which the very organization (τάξις) of the political community is based is not something that is known in advance, something solid, reliable, and unchanging. It is controversial and subject to constant disagreement and reconciliation. Therefore, we claim that the debate (ἀμφισβητεῖν) is the keyword of Aristotle’s entire *Politics*, and consequently, it marks his understanding of education.

The contents of the seventh and eighth books of *Politics* represent Aristotle’s exposition of many different approaches to the problem of raising children, that is, their musical education. In the eighth book, Aristotle presents arguments for different musical rhythms or gymnastic exercises. He examines all the statements in detail and presents their strengths and weaknesses. However, Aristotle avoids definitively prescribing and ordering what music children and citizens should listen to. On the contrary, he leaves open the critical question about “what music should be listened to”, that is, “how children and citizens should be educated”. He clearly states: “But consideration must be given to the question, what constitutes education and what is the proper way to be educated. At present there are differences of opinion as to the proper tasks

to be set; for all people do not agree [...]” (Pol. 1337a 36). Disagreeing on the proper way of education is the very essence of it. There is no ready-made best way to be educated that has to be applied in every case. The best way is only the one that is the outcome of the particular dispute. Just as citizens, while in power, have to think about those who are subordinate because they replace each other, when thinking about the aim of education they have to think about each other. The parents should think about children, a teacher about students, a legislator about the citizens, and vice versa. Mutual comparison and assessment of those who educate and those who are being educated is the essence of the educational process. Outside of that process, there is no ideal form of education, the application of which could improve the community. That is precisely the outcome of Aristotle’s account of education in the seventh and eighth books of *Politics*.

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Uloga obrazovanja u Aristotelovoj *Politici*

Apstrakt

Aristotel problem obrazovanja analizira u sedmoj i osmoj knjizi *Politike*. Većina istraživača njegova razmišljanja o obrazovanju tumači kao „obrazovanje mladih“. Neki autori, analizirajući Aristotelovu teoriju obrazovanja, pokušavaju da nas uvere u značaj kontemplacije i problema najboljeg načina života. Ovdje želimo da problem obrazovanja sagledamo u drugom okviru. Uloga obrazovanja izuzetno je značajna, sudeći po središnjoj temi *Politike* – političkoj praksi čoveka. Stoga je ključno pitanje koje ovde želimo da postavimo – koji je razlog stvaranja polisa? Tek kada shvatimo Aristotelov odgovor na ovo pitanje, moći ćemo razumeti zašto obrazovanje igra tako bitnu ulogu u polisu. Aristotel svakako izbegava da propisuje i naređuje koju muziku deca i građani treba da slušaju. On ostavlja otvorenim ključno pitanje „kako obrazovati decu i građane“. Neslaganje oko ispravnog načina obrazovanja je zapravo

njegova suština. Ne postoji gotov, najbolji način obrazovanja koji se može primeniti u svakoj situaciji. Najbolji način je samo onaj koji je rezultat sporenja na ovu temu. Kao što građani, dok su na vlasti, moraju misliti na one koji su podređeni jer jedni druge smenjuju, isto tako kada razmišljaju o cilju obrazovanja jednako moraju misliti jedni na druge. Izvan tog procesa ne postoji idealan oblik obrazovanja čijom bi se primenom mogla unaprediti politička zajednica.

Ključne reči: obrazovanje, politička zajednica, politika, vrlina, sreća, neslaganje, spor.