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Fit For a Guardian: How my Academic Schedule Fulfills Plato's Requirements

Submitted by: Alicia Schaumberg

Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to describe the appropriate education for a guardian of the *kallipolis*, a completely just city that Socrates and his companions conceive. The goal is for the guardians to be educated and trained in a way that they are capable of being only courageous, hard-working and just. This is an ideal combination of traits for a guardian to acquire. By studying subjects such as music and poetry (the arts), mathematics and philosophical dialectics, a student ought to acquire these traits and should be mentally well-prepared for a position as a guardian, as well as for future study. My own academic schedule for this semester includes four classes: two required communication courses for my major, an applied calculus class, and Humanities I. Based on Plato's requirements and on the objectives of my individual courses, my schedule would qualify as a proper education for the guardians.

Music and poetry were meant to be part of the education for the guardians, but Plato argues that only some forms of each should be shown to the students. According to Book II of *The Republic*, "When [a] story gives a bad image of what the gods and heroes are like..." it should not be told to students (Plato, 53). Poems and stories that portray important figures in a negative light must be either manipulated to show the characters positively or not told at all. If the students are taught about cowardice and fear, Plato worries that they will not be fit to rule justly and courageously because they will

have an understanding of what it is like to be the opposite; in other words, Plato believes it is best for a student guardian to only learn how to be brave, for then they will not know how to be cowardly.

Mass Communication and Public Relations are two of my academic courses that parallel music and poetry in a guardian's education. In both courses, one of the main objectives is to learn about the ways media influences the public, or specific target audiences, and to understand how to provide the public with positive information regarding companies and their products. To demonstrate my understanding, I must be able to establish a positive image for a college organization.

In a way, I am being taught the same skills a guardian would be taught, since I am examining the constructive aspects of media and public relations. I am also learning the negative parts, however. Plato would disapprove of this strongly, only because he would not want the guardians to have the capacity to think harmfully or pessimistically. While explaining to Adeimantus the rationale behind his theory of only telling manipulated versions of true stories to the students, Socrates reasons that when students are younger, it is important to teach them good traits. He goes on to say, "It's at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it" (Plato, 52). By learning only positive characteristics about

my area of study, as the guardians are to learn only positive characteristics about the gods and heroes, I would have no capacity to think negatively about media and public relations.

After weighing the positive and negative aspects of the media that I learn in both Mass Communication and Public Relations, I believe Plato would agree that this area of study would equal the education of the guardians. Both courses provide more positive outlooks on the media than negative ones, which implies that the students are supposed to emerge from the course valuing the respectable sections of the media over the flawed sections.

Plato considered the study of mathematics to be extremely necessary in a guardian's education. As mentioned in previous Books of *The Republic*, he believes that future rulers must be taught fundamental subjects at a young age, but this time it is in preparation for the study of dialectics, not to teach them good character traits. Using Socrates again, Plato explains that the study of mathematics must come in childhood, before physical training or philosophical study: "People's souls give up much more easily in hard study than in physical training, since the pain – being peculiar to them and not shared with their body – is more their own" (Plato, 207). The students must learn to focus and work hard to succeed in mastering mathematics (a demanding subject for most children) prior to their physical training, most of which is based on human instinct. For this reason, Plato suggests that mathematics be taught to the students as a form of play, so they may be interested and motivated to learn rather than feel as if they are being forced into their education.

For my applied calculus class, I am expected to learn concepts and formulas derived from basic math. Nearly all of the linear,

logarithmic and other such formulas that will be taught this semester can be used outside of the classroom to help solve everyday problems. This is different than other higher mathematics, as most other courses offered involve math that seems irrelevant to a good number of people. I am not very skilled in mathematics, but by taking this course I am pushing myself to learn more, not just giving up and focusing on only courses that pertain to my major. Plato would approve of my choice to increase my intelligence and thus bring myself from the visible to the intelligible realm of knowledge.

The final area of education that a future guardian must study is philosophical dialectic. Plato sees this as the highest form of study, as it should only be taught after a student has mastered the other subjects, and because it will lead the students to find the form of the good. Since it is so valuable, only certain people who can be trusted with its content should learn it. If taught to the wrong kind of student, dialectic could be harmful. Socrates' argument is that some people, if taught, would argue for the sake of arguing, "and, as a result they themselves and the whole of philosophy are discredited in the eyes of others" (Plato, 211). As a precaution, even the right kinds of people should not be educated in philosophical dialectic when they are too young, for the misuse of this sort of knowledge could give the person and philosophy itself a bad reputation, contradicting Plato's idea that philosophers are best-fit to rule.

Humanities I is the course most like dialectic in the way we are to read works by Plato, Thucydides and Dante, as well as writings by other notable figures, then discuss and debate certain points brought up in each work. We do not argue because we want to be right, but because we desire a greater knowledge and understanding of what we have studied. Just as Plato displays Socrates as a philosopher and

leader of discussion, each student must pick a topic on which to lead a debate among the entire class. We must come up with a question that forces our peers to delve into their minds to find reason. Also, Humanities courses are not recommended for students until at least their sophomore year of college, because the material tends to be difficult for younger students to understand. Plato asserts: “when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction” (Plato, 211). This parallels Plato’s opinion that philosophical dialectics should not be taught to children at a young age.

If my Humanities course was to be examined carefully by Plato, it would qualify for a guardian’s education. This course compels students to think theoretically and to study works by philosophers whose main goals were not just to have others understand their opinions, but to have others form opinions of their own based on the works the philosophers provided and to question what was being discussed. In Humanities, we do not abuse our power to debate with others; we are disciplined, unlike those who Plato describes as being “filled with lawlessness” (Plato, 209). Rather, we exercise our minds and practice respectable skills while debating with our classmates to find the good, which is just how Plato believes dialectic should be used.

Plato is very keen on ensuring that the future guardians’ education will prepare them well enough to rule the kallipolis. He believes this good city has the ability to succeed as long as its rulers are just and sufficiently educated, giving them the competence to make the right decisions that will benefit the society as a whole. The especially rigorous education structure illustrates Plato’s belief that intellect is the most important thing for a guardian ruler to have along with the power to rule fairly and

honestly. My academic schedule is an ideal combination of subjects that Plato would want the future guardians to study, as the courses will mold me into a knowledgeable and just person for the future.

Work Cited

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1992.