Education and Politics from Aristotle’s Perspective

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Abstract

The present study investigates Aristotle’s view on education in relation with his view on politics. Two of Aristotle’s works, Nicomachean Ethics and Politics are analyzed for this study. The discussion starts with what science is and how it can be classified according to Aristotle. In the second part where education and politics are in this classification of sciences, what their aims are and how they are connected are discussed. The discussion ends with a third section in which Aristotle’s ideas about the concepts of “good for men” and “happiness” are explored.

Keywords: Aristotle’s Politics, Education

Introduction

In our century there exist many problems related to social, economic, psychological and political lives of millions of people. In trying to solve these, all answers direct the attention towards education. As a key phenomenon to better our lives, it should be considered in detail. The present study explores Aristotle’s two important works, Nicomachean Ethics and Politics, to present his view of education and how he connects education with politics. The classification of sciences and the places of politics and education in this classification are discussed. The concepts of “good” and “happiness” in relation with these two sciences are explained.

Science and Aristotle’s Classification

Science is an activity of soul. As each activity is performed for a reason, so does science. “The subject of science is what is universal, unchanging and out of time.” (Arslan, 2007, 79) In this sense sensation is knowledge but not science because the subjects of sensation are individual and timely. For Aristotle there is another point that differentiates sensation from science. Sensation and perception show merely the fact that has happened but not the necessity of that fact. That the water in a pot is hot may be true knowledge but is not science because science can not be contented with factual relations, but aims at concluding with necessary relations, generalizations and universal judgments by reshaping and expressing these relations. Burnet asserts that “science exists only in so far as some one knows it, and knows it not merely potentially- that is to say, in the sense that he can produce the knowledge if it is wanted – but actively.” (1967, 1-2)

Aristotle is the first philosopher to put forward the concept of independent sciences and furthermore he classified them according to subject they are interested in, the methods they used and their aims. For Aristotle, a person either watches something or thinks about something or produces something. With this point of start, he divided sciences into three. The first one includes sciences depending on seeing and they are theoretical sciences. The second type of sciences is productive in which something is produced. The third type is practical sciences depending on practicing an act or behavior.

The knowledge of theoretical science is knowledge aimed at seeing objects and facts on which we can have no effect and which are independent of us. This type is the knowledge of essence and nature of
the objects. In the knowledge of productive sciences, production or constitution is in question. Just like dressing a stone in order to make a statue, in this kind of sciences, objects are transformed and new things are created. The knowledge of practical sciences belongs to a different activity. Arslan claims that depending on our knowledge of goodness and happiness, we can perform acts that are either noble or generous or contrarily our acts can be rude, bad or mean. (2007)

Burnet (1967) gives the example of a proposition of geometry for a complete knowledge. On the other hand a construction theory is an activity of soul but this can never be complete as a theory. In order for this theory to be complete that road or bridge must be constructed. This latter type is an example of practical science while the type in the former example depends solely on the activity of knowing and is a theoretical science.

Education and Politics as Sciences

When we look at the classification of sciences, education appears as a part of the science of politics. These sciences are not theoretical, rather they are practical. It is true to say that there are many practical sciences that are related to each other. For Plato, one science produces the thing used by another. The science of politics uses the things produced by all other practical sciences and does not itself expose something that can be used for other sciences. (Burnet, 1967)

The first target of education is to train characters that can increase the prosperity and bliss of state. The second target is to prepare the soul to spend spare time in the proper way. The spare time is time left after the soul’s fulfillment of practical needs.

What is meant with the goodness of the state is that the people who accepted that state’s constitution are virtuous. Nature, habit and mind are the things that render people good and virtuous. Nature enables the living thing to be born as a human being. As a result of habituation, people have certain qualities. Finally, human are intelligent beings. The role of education is to make these three stay in harmony. “No one will doubt that he legislator should direct his attention above all to the education of youth; for the neglect of education does harm to the constitution. The citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives.” (Politics, Book VIII, 1) According to Aristotle, children should be brought up as good citizens and seen as statues given form in order to fit into the shape of government. What Aristotle understands from education is the education of citizen as a good citizen of the state. Citizens should be trained to both obey the laws and have the skill to legislate and execute when the right time comes.

For Aristotle the answer for the question that whether education is something that should be done privately or as a public duty is very clear. Aristotle mentions that education is something more important and serious than something that can be left to individual people. It should be a work that is carried out by state and that is the same for all people. “ And since the whole city has one end, it is manifest that education should be one and the same for all, and that it should be public, and not private- not as at present, when every one looks after his own children separately, and gives them separate instruction of the sort which he thinks best.” (Politics, Book VIII, 1) Since people are considered not as individuals but as citizens belonging to the state, the training of them is an important duty and should be organized by the state. Such a serious work can only be realized by professional people.

The fact that laws should be put for education shows that education is a national matter. What kind of education it should be and how this work should be carried out is another subject to be considered. What should be taught to the youth related to virtue and good life? “There can be no doubt that children
should be taught those useful things which are really necessary, but not all useful things; for occupations are divided into liberal and illiberal; and to young children should be imparted only such kinds of knowledge as will be useful to them without vulgarizing them. And any occupation, art or science, which makes the body or soul mind of the freemanless fit for the practice or exercise of virtue, is vulgar.” (Politics, Book VIII, II)

Generally Aristotle’s view of education is closer to moralism than pragmatism, uniformity than pluralism, statism than individualism. Aristotle emphasizes that children should be told stories and tales, be allowed to read book and watch plays that are appropriate for morals.

Aristotle believes that education is possible for children who will be citizens however slaves are taught only how to cook or other necessary arts. These kinds of arts are not included in education of citizens. “The aim of the state is to produce cultured gentlemen- men who combine the aristocratic mentality with love of learning and the arts.” (Russell, 1946, 187)

Politics and Education as Primary and Secondary Sciences

The variety of professions, sciences and arts naturally brings the existence of different aims. For instance the target of the art of shipbuilding is ship, the target of the art of war commanding is to win a victory. The aims of some of these arts and sciences are dependent on higher arts and sciences. In Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle gives the example that the art of making racehorse equipments is dependent on the art of horsemanship. The art of horsemanship is dependent on the art of military acts and commands.

The distinction made here is that some arts are secondary and serve for some other higher arts and therefore some arts are basic and primary and the aims of the latter is are more valuable than that of the former. In any science or art if there is an aim that is desired for its own sake it should be “good”. To reach the “good” belongs to the highest and most basic art or science and this is undoubtedly politics. In a state politics is the one that decides what other sciences or art should be dealt with. The precious practical arts of military, rhetoric and economics are all dependent on politics. “The supreme practical science – that to which all others are subordinate and ministerial- is politics.” (Ross, 1995, 195)

The art of politics benefits from the productions of all other practical arts. The basic and primary art is politics. All other practical arts are dependent on politics. The aim of politics should include the aims of all other practical arts and thus this aim should be “good for men”. The aim of the science of politics is not a theory of a good state but is the actual practice of what is good for men. “We observe that every state is a certain sort of association, and that every association is formed for some good purpose; for in all their actions all men aim at what they think good. Clearly, then, while all associations aim at some good, the association which is the most sovereign of all and embraces all the others aims the highest, i.e. at the most sovereign of all goods. This is the association called the state, the association which takes the form of a state…” (Politics, Book I, I)

As a practical science, education is also dependent on politics and the aim of education should be included within the aim of politics. According to Aristotle, the first aim of education is to train good citizens for the state. These citizens are brought up in order to realize the acts to increase the state’s prosperity and bliss. It is clear that for Aristotle the aim of education serves for politics.
Good and Happiness in the Sciences of Education and Politics

In Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, Aristotle tries to answer the question “What is good for men?” All sciences aim at some good and try to find the way to dissolve a deficiency away. In any science good is the thing for which all activities are done. The aim of all activities is the good.

When we look at the definition of happiness we see that it is the thing for which everything else is desired. “Happiness in particular is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else. Honor, pleasure, intellect, and every virtue we do indeed choose for themselves (since we would choose each of them even if they had no good effects), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, on the assumption that through them we shall live a life of happiness; whereas happiness no one chooses for the sake of any of these nor indeed for the sake of anything else.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, 1097b) The definition of happiness can also be looked from the point of being self sufficient. Happiness when taken into consideration on its own is the thing that makes life worth living. The third point is that we believe that happiness is the most valuable thing. In a sense happiness should include all other good things and have the quality to contribute to them. “Happiness, then, is obviously something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1, 1097b)

The definition put forward by Aristotle is relevant to that in which happiness is considered as a form of the good. Practices that are appropriate for good are nice both on their own and for the people performing them. The delight of practices that are appropriate for good is themselves. Practices that are appropriate for good are good on their own. If happiness is identified with good, it can be gained by education. Happiness is something which all healthy people can reach after hard work and effort. “Virtue, then is one of two kinds: that of the intellect and that of character. Intellectual virtue owes its origin and development mainly to teaching, for which reason its attainment requires experience and time; virtue of character is a result of habituation, for which reason it has acquired its name through a small variation on ethos.” (Nicomachean Ethics, Book II, 1103a)

We know that the aim of politics is the highest good. The science of politics struggles to train the citizens to perform good deeds. Good is problematic for the statesmen because its aim is to create good and obedient citizens. Here good is not the good physical condition of the body but rather the goodness of the soul. Thus the statesmen should have knowledge of the soul.

Conclusion

In this paper Aristotle’s view of education and politics are discussed with analysis of Nicomachean Ethics and Politics. Aristotle has distinguished the arts or sciences as theoretical, productive and practical. He has asserted that education and politics are closely related since both of them are practical sciences. However politics is the supreme practical science using the productions of all other sciences but doesn’t itself produce anything used by other sciences. Thus as a practical science, education creates something that is used by politics and that’s a good citizen. Thus the aim of education is included in the aim of politics. As the highest of all practical sciences, politics should have the highest target and that’s “what’s good for men”. Aristotle also relates the concepts of good and happiness. People perform deeds and desire things in order to be happy. Good and happiness are the things that are desired for their own sake.
References