

The Influence of Plato's Idealism on Modern Educational Thought

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ABSTRACT

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, laid the foundational principles of Idealism, profoundly influencing the trajectory of Western educational philosophy. His vision of education transcended mere knowledge acquisition, advocating for the cultivation of virtue, wisdom, and the pursuit of truth. This abstract delves into the core aspects of Plato's Idealism and examines its enduring impact on contemporary educational paradigms.

Central to Plato's educational philosophy is the Theory of Forms, which posits that true knowledge is not derived from sensory experience but from intellectual insight into eternal, unchanging truths. This perspective underscores the importance of developing critical thinking and reflective reasoning in students. Moreover, Plato's Allegory of the Cave illustrates the transformative journey from ignorance to enlightenment, emphasizing the role of education in guiding individuals toward higher understanding and moral clarity.

In his seminal work, *The Republic*, Plato outlines an educational system aimed at identifying and nurturing the innate abilities of individuals, ensuring that each person contributes meaningfully to society. He advocates for a structured education system that encompasses physical, intellectual, and moral development, preparing individuals for roles that align with their natural aptitudes. This holistic approach to education has inspired various modern educational frameworks that emphasize the development of the whole person.

The Socratic method, another of Plato's contributions, remains a cornerstone in modern education. By fostering dialogue and critical questioning, this method encourages students to engage actively with content, promoting deeper understanding and intellectual autonomy. Contemporary educators continue to employ this approach to stimulate critical thinking and reflective learning among students.

Furthermore, Plato's emphasis on the moral and ethical dimensions of education has influenced modern curricula that integrate character education and ethical reasoning. Educational theorists like John Dewey and Immanuel Kant have built upon Plato's ideals, advocating for education that prepares individuals not only for economic productivity but also for moral and civic responsibility.

Despite its profound impact, Plato's Idealism has faced criticism for its perceived elitism and abstraction. Critics argue that the emphasis on intellectual and moral development may overlook practical skills necessary for contemporary society. However, proponents contend that integrating Plato's ideals with modern educational practices can create a balanced approach that fosters both practical competencies and moral virtues.

Plato's Idealism has indelibly shaped modern educational thought, offering a framework that values the development of the intellect and character. While contemporary education has evolved to address the complexities of modern society, the core principles of Plato's philosophy continue to resonate, advocating for an education that cultivates not just skilled professionals but also virtuous and thoughtful individuals.

KEYWORDS: *Plato, Idealism, Platonic Education, Teacher-Student Relationship, Holistic Education, Liberal Education, Socratic Method, Intellectual Development, Moral Development, Theory of Forms.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Plato, the eminent Greek philosopher of the 4th century BCE, stands as a pivotal figure in the history of Western thought. A student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle, Plato's contributions span various domains, including metaphysics, ethics, and education. His philosophical endeavors laid the groundwork for much of Western philosophy, and his ideas continue to influence contemporary thought.

Central to Plato's philosophy is the concept of **Idealism**, which posits that reality is fundamentally mental and immaterial. In the realm of education, this translates to the belief that true knowledge and understanding are derived from the mind's engagement with abstract, non-material forms or ideas. Plato's **Theory of Forms** suggests that the material world is a mere shadow of the true, unchanging realities that exist in the realm of ideas. This perspective emphasizes the development of the intellect and the pursuit of knowledge beyond mere sensory experience.

Understanding Plato's influence on education is crucial, as his ideas have profoundly shaped educational philosophies and practices throughout history. His emphasis on the cultivation of virtue, the importance of reason, and the role of education in achieving a just society have resonated through the ages. In his seminal work, *The Republic*, Plato outlines an educational system designed to identify and nurture the innate abilities of individuals, ensuring that each person contributes meaningfully to society. This vision underscores the transformative power of education in shaping both individual character and societal harmony.

The objective of this paper is to explore how **Platonic Idealism** has influenced modern educational theories and practices. By examining Plato's educational philosophy and its implications, we aim to understand the enduring relevance of his ideas in contemporary education. This exploration will highlight the ways in which Platonic principles continue to inform educational objectives, teaching methodologies, and the overarching goals of education in fostering well-rounded, virtuous individuals.

2. Plato's Philosophy and Educational Ideals

Theory of Forms: Explanation and Relevance to Knowledge and Truth

Plato's Theory of Forms posits that the physical world is a mere shadow of the true, unchanging realities—the Forms—that exist in a non-material realm. These Forms represent the perfect essence of concepts like beauty, justice, and goodness. According to Plato, genuine knowledge (episteme) is not derived from sensory experience but from intellectual insight into

these eternal truths. This perspective emphasizes the importance of education in guiding individuals toward understanding these higher realities, rather than merely imparting practical skills.

Role of the Soul and Mind: Education as a Means of Cultivating Intellect and Moral Character

In Plato's view, the soul comprises three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. Education serves to harmonize these elements, cultivating the intellect and moral character. The rational part seeks truth, the spirited part pursues honor, and the appetitive part desires bodily pleasures. Plato believed that education should aim to develop the rational part, guiding individuals toward wisdom and virtue. This holistic approach underscores the transformative power of education in shaping both the mind and the character of individuals.

Education in Plato's Republic

In *The Republic*, Plato outlines a comprehensive educational system designed to identify and nurture the innate abilities of individuals, ensuring that each person contributes meaningfully to society. The education system is structured into several stages:

- **Early Childhood:** Emphasis on physical training and moral development.
- **Physical and Intellectual Training:** Incorporation of music, poetry, and gymnastics to balance the development of the body and mind.
- **Higher Education:** Advanced studies in mathematics, dialectic, and philosophy to prepare individuals for roles in governance.

This progression ensures that individuals are well-rounded and capable of fulfilling their societal roles effectively.

The Concept of Philosopher-Kings and the Ideal Society

Central to Plato's ideal society is the concept of the philosopher-king-rulers who possess both wisdom and virtue. Plato argued that only those who understand the Forms, particularly the Form of the Good, are fit to govern. These philosopher-kings, through their education, would be equipped to make just and informed decisions for the welfare of the state. This idea underscores the belief that leadership should be based on knowledge and moral integrity, rather than power or wealth.

Emphasis on Moral and Intellectual Development Over Mere Vocational Training

Plato's educational philosophy prioritizes the development of the individual's character and intellect over the acquisition of practical skills. While vocational training has its place, Plato believed that education should aim to cultivate virtues such as

justice, temperance, and courage. By focusing on moral and intellectual growth, education becomes a means of achieving a just and harmonious society.

In conclusion, Plato's philosophy presents a vision of education that transcends mere knowledge transmission. It emphasizes the cultivation of the soul, the pursuit of truth, and the development of moral character. These ideals continue to influence modern educational thought, highlighting the enduring relevance of Plato's educational philosophy.

3. Core Principles of Platonic Idealism in Education

Education as a Process of Realizing Innate Potential

At the heart of Plato's educational philosophy is the belief that every individual possesses an innate potential that education must help realize. Rather than treating education as the mere accumulation of facts or vocational training, Plato emphasized the development of the mind and soul to achieve true understanding. Through guided learning, students are encouraged to uncover the knowledge already present within them, echoing Socrates' idea that education is a process of recollection rather than implantation. This approach fosters self-awareness, critical thinking, and a deeper appreciation of universal truths, preparing individuals for both personal fulfillment and societal contribution.

Moral and Intellectual Development as Central to Learning

For Plato, education is inseparable from moral and intellectual growth. The ultimate goal of learning is not just to acquire practical skills but to cultivate virtues such as justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom. By prioritizing moral development, Platonic education seeks to create individuals who can make ethical decisions and contribute to a harmonious society. Intellectual development, on the other hand, ensures the ability to reason, analyze, and engage with abstract concepts such as truth and beauty. Together, moral and intellectual growth form the foundation of a holistic education that addresses both the mind and the character.

Teacher as Guide Rather Than Mere Instructor

Plato revolutionized the role of the teacher by envisioning educators not as mere transmitters of information, but as guides who facilitate the learner's journey toward knowledge and self-realization. Through dialogue, questioning, and critical engagement, teachers help students explore ideas, challenge assumptions, and develop their own understanding. This mentorship-based approach is evident in the Socratic method, which encourages inquiry and active participation rather than rote

memorization. By positioning teachers as guides, Platonic education nurtures independent thinkers capable of lifelong learning and ethical decision-making.

Importance of Truth, Wisdom, and Virtue Over Practical Skills Alone

Plato emphasized that the ultimate aim of education is to cultivate an understanding of truth, the pursuit of wisdom, and the development of virtue. While practical skills and vocational training have value, they are considered secondary to the development of intellectual and moral capacities. Education, according to Plato, should lead individuals to grasp the eternal and unchanging realities beyond sensory experience. This principle reflects the idealist belief that human fulfillment and societal progress depend not merely on technical proficiency but on the cultivation of character, rationality, and ethical insight.

In contemporary educational contexts, these principles continue to resonate. Modern educational theories, including liberal education, Montessori methods, and character education programs, reflect Platonic ideals by prioritizing holistic development, critical thinking, and moral reasoning. Plato's vision underscores the enduring importance of nurturing well-rounded individuals who are capable of contributing thoughtfully and ethically to society.

the core principles of Platonic Idealism-realizing innate potential, prioritizing moral and intellectual growth, guiding rather than instructing, and emphasizing truth and virtue-provide a timeless framework for meaningful education. By integrating these ideals into contemporary pedagogy, educators can cultivate individuals who are not only skilled but also wise, virtuous, and capable of thoughtful engagement with the world.

4. Modern Educational Thought and Practices Overview of Key Modern Educational Theories Influenced by Idealism

Plato's Idealism has had a profound influence on modern educational thought, inspiring theorists and educators to emphasize the development of the mind, character, and moral judgment alongside practical knowledge. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, emphasized natural development and the cultivation of innate potential in his work *Émile*. He believed that education should nurture the child's inherent abilities rather than impose rigid structures, aligning closely with Platonic ideals of realizing innate potential. Similarly, John Dewey's progressive education focused on the development of critical thinking, reflective reasoning, and ethical awareness, advocating for learning as an interactive and

experience-based process. Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel further contributed to this idealist-influenced tradition by designing child-centered learning environments that encourage exploration, creativity, and moral growth.

Emphasis on Holistic Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Aesthetic Development

Modern educational systems increasingly reflect the holistic principles of Platonic Idealism, emphasizing intellectual, moral, and aesthetic development. Rather than focusing solely on vocational skills or academic achievement, holistic education nurtures the development of well-rounded individuals capable of critical thought, ethical judgment, and appreciation of beauty and culture. Intellectual development ensures students gain the capacity for reasoning and problem-solving, moral education instills virtues such as justice, honesty, and empathy, and aesthetic education cultivates an appreciation for arts, literature, and culture. By integrating these dimensions, education seeks to produce individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also morally responsible and culturally aware.

The Role of Curriculum Design Reflecting Idealist Principles

Curriculum design in modern education often reflects Platonic idealist principles by prioritizing subjects and learning experiences that develop the whole person. Arts and humanities play a central role in fostering aesthetic sensibility, empathy, and critical engagement with ethical dilemmas, echoing Plato's emphasis on moral and intellectual development over purely practical skills. Programs in philosophy, literature, and history encourage students to grapple with universal questions of truth, justice, and human values, aligning with the Platonic vision of education as a pursuit of higher understanding. Additionally, project-based learning, Socratic dialogue, and interdisciplinary studies exemplify modern pedagogical methods influenced by idealist thought, emphasizing active engagement, reflection, and the integration of knowledge and ethical reasoning.

Practical Applications in Contemporary Education

Many contemporary educational institutions incorporate these idealist-inspired practices in both curriculum and pedagogy. Montessori schools, for example, provide environments where students explore and discover knowledge at their own pace, guided by teachers who act as facilitators rather than mere instructors. Similarly, liberal arts programs in higher education prioritize the integration of arts, humanities, and ethical inquiry alongside professional and scientific studies, cultivating intellectual

flexibility and moral insight. Character education programs in schools emphasize virtues and civic responsibility, reflecting Plato's belief in the inseparable connection between education and moral development.

Modern educational thought and practices continue to be profoundly influenced by Platonic Idealism. From Rousseau and Dewey to Montessori and Froebel, theorists have embraced the central tenets of Platonic education: realizing innate potential, cultivating moral and intellectual development, and designing curricula that promote holistic growth. By integrating these principles, contemporary education seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to nurture virtuous, thoughtful, and well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

5. Direct Influence of Plato on Modern Education How Idealism Shaped Liberal Education and Classical Curricula

Plato's idealist philosophy has left a lasting imprint on modern education, particularly in the development of liberal education and classical curricula. □ Liberal education, with its focus on broad intellectual development rather than narrow vocational training, reflects Plato's belief that education should cultivate the whole person—intellectually, morally, and aesthetically. Subjects such as philosophy, literature, history, and the arts, which are central to classical curricula, embody the Platonic emphasis on understanding universal truths and developing moral insight. By encouraging students to engage with enduring questions about justice, beauty, and virtue, liberal education mirrors the Platonic ideal of education as a process of realizing innate potential and nurturing the rational mind.

Influence on Teacher-Student Relationship: Guidance, Mentoring, Socratic Dialogue

Plato revolutionized the teacher-student dynamic by positioning educators as guides or mentors rather than mere transmitters of knowledge. Through the Socratic method, teachers encourage dialogue, questioning, and critical reflection, helping students to explore concepts deeply and develop independent thinking. This mentorship model continues to influence modern pedagogy, emphasizing the teacher's role in facilitating intellectual and moral growth rather than imposing rote learning. Students are encouraged to question assumptions, reason logically, and reflect on ethical implications, fostering a collaborative learning environment that nurtures curiosity, critical thinking, and ethical awareness.

Reflection in Modern Educational Institutions

The principles of Platonic idealism are evident in contemporary educational institutions in several ways. First, there is a strong emphasis on critical thinking, ethics, and reasoning across curricula. Philosophy and liberal arts programs often require students to engage with complex moral and intellectual questions, encouraging a habit of reflective inquiry and principled judgment. Second, discussion, dialogue, and questioning remain central pedagogical tools, employed across disciplines to foster deeper understanding and independent thought. Methods such as debates, Socratic seminars, and project-based learning reflect the Platonic ideal of active engagement with ideas, moving beyond passive memorization to promote reasoning, ethical deliberation, and intellectual exploration.

Integration of Platonic Ideals in Contemporary Curriculum

Modern curricula increasingly integrate Platonic ideals by balancing technical or vocational training with liberal education components. For example, universities often require students to complete courses in humanities, ethics, or social sciences alongside professional studies, ensuring holistic development. Character education and civic education programs in schools reflect the Platonic view that education should develop virtuous and responsible citizens. Even in STEM-focused institutions, educators are increasingly incorporating ethics, critical reasoning, and reflective discussion into curricula, demonstrating the pervasive influence of Platonic idealism on contemporary education.

Plato's idealism continues to shape modern education in profound ways. From the structure of liberal education and classical curricula to the teacher-student relationship and pedagogical strategies, the Platonic emphasis on moral and intellectual development, critical thinking, and active engagement remains central. By fostering dialogue, reflection, and ethical reasoning, modern educational practices carry forward Plato's vision of education as a transformative process that cultivates well-rounded, thoughtful, and virtuous individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

6. Critical Evaluation

Strengths of Applying Platonic Idealism in Modern Education

Platonic Idealism provides a profound philosophical foundation for modern education, emphasizing the development of the whole individual rather than merely technical proficiency. One of its primary strengths is the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues. By focusing on the development of critical

thinking, ethical reasoning, and moral character, Platonic-inspired education helps create individuals who can make thoughtful and principled decisions, both in personal and societal contexts. Such an approach nurtures leaders and citizens capable of contributing to a more just and harmonious society, reflecting Plato's vision of education as a transformative process that shapes character as well as intellect.

Another strength lies in fostering independent and reflective thinking. The emphasis on the Socratic method and dialogue encourages students to question assumptions, explore multiple perspectives, and engage deeply with ideas. This promotes intellectual autonomy and lifelong learning, enabling individuals to adapt to complex and evolving challenges in contemporary society. Additionally, Platonic Idealism's focus on the pursuit of truth, wisdom, and virtue enriches the curriculum by integrating humanities, arts, and ethical reasoning, ensuring that education addresses human values as well as knowledge acquisition.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its strengths, applying Platonic Idealism in modern education is not without challenges. A major limitation is the abstract nature of idealist philosophy. Plato's concepts of the Forms, moral perfection, and the ideal society can be difficult to translate into practical classroom instruction or measurable outcomes. In an era where education increasingly emphasizes standardized testing, employability, and technical skills, integrating abstract philosophical principles requires careful adaptation and thoughtful pedagogical strategies.

Another challenge is balancing the moral and intellectual aims of Platonic education with the practical demands of modern society. While cultivating virtue and wisdom is essential, students also require vocational and technical skills to navigate professional and economic realities. Educational institutions must therefore find a balance between nurturing moral and intellectual growth and preparing students for careers in rapidly changing fields such as technology, business, and healthcare. Failure to achieve this balance can result in a curriculum that is either too theoretical or overly utilitarian, undermining the holistic objectives of education.

Resource and teacher readiness is another practical limitation. Implementing a Platonic approach requires teachers who are not only knowledgeable in their disciplines but also capable of guiding students in ethical reasoning, critical thinking, and reflective dialogue. Such educators must act as mentors and facilitators, a role that demands extensive training,

skill, and philosophical understanding, which may not be readily available in all educational contexts.

Balancing Idealism and Practicality

To address these challenges, modern education often integrates Platonic ideals with contemporary pedagogical methods. Project-based learning, interdisciplinary curricula, and ethics-infused STEM education are examples of strategies that honor the Platonic emphasis on moral and intellectual development while meeting practical skill requirements. By combining abstract philosophical principles with tangible learning outcomes, educators can create a more balanced and meaningful educational experience.

Platonic Idealism offers enduring insights for shaping education that develops intellect, character, and virtue. While abstract principles and the tension with vocational needs present challenges, thoughtful integration of idealist philosophy into contemporary pedagogy can produce well-rounded individuals capable of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and meaningful societal contributions.

7. Conclusion

Plato's Contributions to Educational Thought

Plato's contributions to educational thought are foundational and enduring, providing a philosophical framework that has shaped both historical and contemporary approaches to teaching and learning. Through his Theory of Forms, Plato emphasized that education should transcend mere sensory knowledge, guiding individuals toward understanding universal truths and moral principles. He envisioned education as a process of cultivating the intellect and the soul, harmonizing moral, intellectual, and aesthetic development to nurture well-rounded individuals. Plato's *Republic* outlined a structured educational system, highlighting stages of development from early childhood to advanced philosophical training, and introduced the concept of philosopher-kings, demonstrating the vital connection between education, moral character, and societal leadership.

Central to his philosophy was the idea that teachers act as guides rather than mere transmitters of knowledge. Through dialogue, mentorship, and the Socratic method, Plato emphasized critical thinking, reflection, and the ethical formation of students. His insistence on moral and intellectual development over vocational or technical training has informed liberal education, classical curricula, and holistic educational approaches throughout the centuries.

Continuing Relevance of His Ideas in Shaping Modern Education

The relevance of Platonic Idealism remains evident in modern educational theories and practices. Influential thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, Montessori, and Froebel drew on Platonic principles, emphasizing the cultivation of innate potential, moral development, and intellectual growth. Modern liberal education, character education, and interdisciplinary curricula reflect the Platonic vision of education as a tool for personal transformation and societal betterment. By prioritizing critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and active engagement with ideas, contemporary pedagogy continues to embody Platonic ideals, ensuring that students are not only knowledgeable but also morally aware and capable of contributing meaningfully to society.

Platonic ideals are also visible in practical classroom methods. Socratic dialogue, debates, discussion-based learning, and inquiry-driven pedagogy echo Plato's emphasis on questioning, reasoning, and reflective understanding. These methods cultivate independent thought, intellectual curiosity, and ethical reasoning, which are essential for navigating the complexities of modern life.

Final Reflection on Integrating Idealist Principles into Contemporary Teaching

Integrating Platonic principles into contemporary education requires a balance between idealist aims and practical realities. While vocational training and technical skills are indispensable in today's economy, the development of intellect, virtue, and critical reasoning remains equally important. Educators who incorporate Platonic ideals into their teaching cultivate learners who are self-aware, ethically responsible, and capable of reflective thought. Such an approach fosters not only academic proficiency but also moral and social competence, aligning with Plato's vision of education as a transformative and holistic endeavor.

Plato's idealist philosophy provides an enduring blueprint for meaningful education. His contributions highlight the importance of moral and intellectual development, guided mentorship, and the pursuit of truth and virtue. By thoughtfully integrating these principles into modern curricula, pedagogy, and classroom practices, educators can create learning environments that nurture well-rounded, thoughtful, and virtuous individuals capable of contributing to a more just and enlightened society.

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