

# Plato's Philosophy of Natural Education and Its Contemporary Value: A Textual Analysis Based on *The Republic* in Pursuit of "Natural Justice"

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**Abstract:** Plato's philosophy of natural education revolves around his conception of "natural right." The primary goal of natural education is to guide learners to consciously reflect on the "Form of the Good," thereby fostering the natural reorientation of the soul and its inner harmony through the influence of Eros and the process of recollection. This transformative process facilitates the spontaneous emergence of a socially stratified order rooted in natural right. Embedded primarily in *The Republic*, Plato's philosophy of natural education emphasizes child-rearing practices as foundational to cultivating virtuous citizens. This study examines *The Republic* as its central text, analyzing the theoretical underpinnings, practical principles, and ultimate aims of Plato's natural education philosophy. Additionally, it explores the contemporary relevance of this philosophy for modern educational theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Plato; *The Republic*; Natural justice; Philosophy of education

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## 1. Natural right: The foundational core of Plato's philosophy of education

In the ancient Greek context, "*physis*" (φύσις) stands in radical opposition to "*nomos*" (νόμος), with the distinction between "*physis*" and "*nomos*" constituting a "fundamental antithesis" <sup>[1]</sup>. Following Strauss's hermeneutic, "natural right" is grounded in the universality of an immutable human nature, whereas "conventional right" derives from the plurality of human enactments. As Strauss explicitly states: "Natural right is a right that is discernible by the unassisted human mind, accessible to man as man, and therefore universal. It is the standard for the critical evaluation of positive law and political institutions." <sup>[1]</sup>. In this framework, "natural right" refers to "the order inherent in the nature of man as a rational and political being" <sup>[1]</sup>, transcending temporal and cultural contingencies. Conversely, "conventional right" pertains to "the rules established by human agreement, which vary according to time, place, and regime" <sup>[1]</sup>.

In *The Republic*, Plato stages Socrates' dialectical encounters with *Cephalus*, *Polemarchus*, and *Thrasymachus*, dramatizing the fundamental tension between "natural right" and "conventional right." The

dialogue begins with *Cephalus* invoking the authority of *Pindar*'s idea and *Simonides*'s theory to define "justice" as "speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed"<sup>[2]</sup>. For *Cephalus*, a just man is one who adheres to socially sanctioned contracts, while injustice manifests as "failure to fulfill obligations"<sup>[2]</sup>.

Socrates, however, interrogates this conventional bound conception through a thought experiment<sup>[2]</sup>: "If a friend, when in his right mind, deposited weapons with you and then asks for them when he is out of his mind, ought you to return them? No one would say you should, or that such a man is 'just' for doing so."

Subsequently, *Polemarchus*, as the successor of *Cephalus*, further adjusted and refined his father's concept of justice. He attempted to invoke the ancient Greek poet *Simonides*' maxim—"Justice consists in rendering to each his due"—to circumvent the potential contradictions in *Cephalus*' original formulation. Socrates, however, guided *Polemarchus* to interrogate the ontological basis of this "due." By analogizing justice to the craft, such as medicine's end being bodily health, cookery's end being seasoning, and the judge's craft being virtue. Socrates exposed *Polemarchus*' reliance on conventional morality.

When *Polemarchus* asserted that justice entails "the craft helping friends and harming enemies," Socrates deconstructed this through dialectical irony: If justice is useful only when the craft fails, then justice becomes a supplement to incompetence rather than an independent virtue. This reduces justice to an instrumental value, contingent on external circumstances rather than intrinsic goodness. *Polemarchus*' final claim, "justice is useful for the useless," collapses into self-refutation, as Socrates demonstrates that such a definition negates justice's essence as a virtue.

Ultimately, the intervention of *Thrasymachus* shattered the superficial consensus in the debate on justice. He invoked the example of *Polydamas* to assert his radical thesis: "Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger." According to *Thrasymachus*: The ruling class establishes laws as instruments of domination; The subjects must obey these laws, which constitute "conventional right"; True justice, for the rulers, lies in maximizing their natural advantage through regime manipulation. Socrates dismantles this position through the irony: If rulers err in discerning their true interest, their laws would become self-defeating<sup>[3]</sup>. This exposes *Thrasymachus*' conflation of apparent power with true political art.

The Telos of craft: Socrates reorients the debate toward the intrinsic end of governance. Just as medicine aims at health rather than the physician's profit, true statesmen must serve the "common good" through education that elevates the moral nature of citizens. *Thrasymachus*, clinging to the Sophist dogma, insists that ruling is a craft for subsistence akin to shepherding, where the ruler's aim is exploitation. Socrates attempted to lead *Thrasymachus* to focus on the essential purpose of the art of governance, regarding it as a natural teleology in a skill that enhances the morality of the governed, and to draw the conclusion that "natural right" is more beneficial everywhere.

In conclusion, Plato's conception of "true justice" transcends the conventional notions defended by *Cephalus*, *Polemarchus*, and *Thrasymachus*. Socrates' dialectical pursuit reveals that genuine justice is rooted in natural teleology, it is "the intrinsic harmony of the soul," whereby each part fulfills its natural function. Contrary to the "conventional right" advocated by the interlocutors, whether as "truth-telling" (*Cephalus*), "helping friends and harming enemies" (*Polemarchus*), or "the advantage of the stronger" (*Thrasymachus*). Socrates' justice embodies "natural right." This justice is not merely a social contract but the actualization of the soul's telos, which spontaneously engenders flourishing through alignment with the cosmic order. As the cornerstone of Plato's philosophy, this teleological justice fundamentally shapes his educational theory. By orienting education toward cultivating the rational soul, Plato's "natural education" becomes a divine intellect, guiding individuals to perceive justice not as external conformity but as internal harmony with nature's order.

## 2. The education of natural right: The essence of Plato's educational thought

In the Hellenic context, “paideia” signified “nurturing children.” *Werner Jaeger* rightly identified “paideia” as the “soul of Hellenism,” a fusion of cultural, religious, and political forces that molded citizens in accordance with “Form of the Good.” Plato's natural education, grounded in his theory of “natural right,” is systematically expounded in *The Republic*. Through the allegory of the cave, Plato reveals education not as information transfer but as the “turning of the soul” toward truth and virtue. This process operates through three dialectical tiers: “Theoretical Basis,” “Practical Principles,” and “Fundamental Goal.” By orchestrating this “guidance of souls,” Plato's education achieves “the natural order harmony” in both individual and political unity, where justice is the health of the soul actualized through “paideia.”

### 2.1. Theoretical basis: The natural pursuit of the Form of the Good

The foundation of Plato's natural education lies in liberating the soul from the bondage of the visible realm through dialectical training. In *The Republic*, Plato prescribes arithmetic games and geometric exercises not merely as intellectual tools but as psychagogic instruments to awaken the soul's innate affinity for the “Form of the Good.” This “natural enlightenment” constitutes a radical critique of traditional poetic “paideia,” which Plato deemed a mimetic deception.

In archaic Greece, poets functioned as the custodians of mythopoeic wisdom that rooted human order in fate and divine will <sup>[4]</sup>. *Werner Jaeger* noted, this “mythical education” fused cultural, religious, and political norms into a cosmic order. However, with the rise of the polis, poetic paideia degenerated into ideological indoctrination, reducing truth to image and virtue to unexamined belief.

Plato's condemnation stems from poetry's ontological deficiency: Firstly, poetry as Mimetic Deception. Tragic and epic poetry, by imitating human passions rather than divine nous, traps the soul in doxastic oscillations between “true” and “false,” “good” and “evil” <sup>[2]</sup>. Secondly, Political Peril. The “stimulating elements” in Homeric epics, such as Achilles' wrath or Odysseus' cunning, corrupt the soul of guardians, breeding anarchy in the polis <sup>[2]</sup>.

Contrasting poetic, Plato's mathematical paideia initiates a noetic ascent. By contemplating number itself, the soul purges sensory illusions and apprehends immutable being <sup>[2]</sup>. The study of ideal forms in geometry reawakens the soul's prenatal knowledge of the “Form of the Good.” As Plato declares, “The Form of the Good is right and beautiful forever. Every soul pursues it as the ultimate telos, though most grope blindly as in a dream.” <sup>[2]</sup>. Thus, natural education's primary task is to orient the soul toward the “Form of the Good,” which alone grants true knowledge and flourishing.

### 2.2. Practical principle: The natural turn of the soul

The practical principle of Plato's natural education lies in achieving the “turning of the soul” through the natural arousal of eros and rational desire. For Plato, the soul operates according to its natural motion, unconstrained by conventions. The rational part must govern the spirited part and appetitive desires toward harmony <sup>[2]</sup>.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Plato dramatizes this transformation: prisoners chained in darkness gradually ascend to the sunlight through a self-propelled noetic process. This ascent is driven not by external coercion but by the soul's innate erotic longing for truth <sup>[2]</sup>.

In Plato's theory, “pleasure” as “desire” can be divided into threefold. The first is the “Appetitive Hedonē,” which is derived from material wealth. The second is the “Thymoeidic Hedonē,” which is rooted in honor. The third is the “Noetic Hedonē,” which is found in philosophical contemplation. While the first two belong to the

phenomenal world, noetic hedone transcends them as the highest good, unifying all desires under wisdom. Thus, philosophical eros becomes the true path to eudaimonia.

Therefore, in *The Republic*, Plato prescribes music and physical training as natural tools for harmonizing the soul. In Plato's view, "music," with its unique "mode," can guide children's "love and desire" to a higher level of "restraint." The "physical training" can discipline the body to purify primitive desires. They can naturally harmonize the passion and desire in children's souls and help them complete the natural transformation from a "bronze" to a "silver" before the age of 12, and prepare for the final ascent to "gold" <sup>[2]</sup>. Plato's way of educational practice is to achieve the natural transformation of the human soul through the natural awakening of the soul and the stimulation of love and desire. This principle of "paideia" is not the indoctrination of external "customs" but rather enabling the educated to naturally pay attention to the inherent virtues of things, consciously pursue a good life, and achieve the natural harmony of the soul.

### 2.3. Fundamental objective: The natural harmony of the polis order

The ultimate goal of Plato's natural education is to realize the intrinsic harmony of the soul's order through "soul-turning," thereby achieving natural harmony at the level of the polis. For Plato, each citizen's role in the polis must align with their natural rank and innate talent. Though all humans are born from the "Earth Mother" mythos <sup>[2]</sup>, nature endows them with hierarchical aptitudes: "Gold for philosopher-kings, silver for auxiliaries, iron and bronze for producers." <sup>[2]</sup>. This myth of metals symbolizes the ontological correspondence between the tripartite soul and tripartite polis <sup>[2]</sup>:

- (1) λογιστικόν (gold/rational part) → Philosopher-Kings (wisdom)
- (2) θυμοειδές (silver/spirited part) → Guardians (courage)
- (3) ἐπιθυμητικόν (iron and bronze/appetitive part) → Producers (temperance)

Indeed, all are brothers, but the nature shaped us incorporated gold into those who could become rulers at the time of creation, making them the most noble; and silver was injected into the assistants or guardians. As for farmers and other artisans, they endowed iron with the characteristics of copper. In Plato's view, the choice and granting of city-state identities were not based on customary identities and ranks, but rather on the natural matching and selection of individuals themselves, engaging in different positions in accordance with people's distinctive natural natures <sup>[5]</sup>.

According to this distribution method, the duties of the polis can flow naturally along with the natural changes of the soul. Everyone can naturally find a position that suits them based on their own soul characteristics and achieve natural division of labor, and this precisely constitutes the foundation of the harmony of the polis. In *The Republic*, Plato described: "If among their offspring there are those mixed with copper and iron, they must have no compassion at all. Instead, after making an assessment of their value in accordance with their nature, they must be abandoned among artisans or farmers." On the contrary, if a person who is mixed with gold or silver emerges from the latter, after making an evaluation, the former must be promoted to the position of guardian, and the latter to the position of assistant or guard. The natural order of the human soul should naturally determine the harmonious order of the polis, all based on natural nature and free from external customs and ritual regulations. Therefore, the fundamental goal of Plato's natural education lies in achieving the internal harmony of the soul order through the natural stimulation of the human soul, and thereby naturally realizing the harmony of the polis order.

### 3. Contemporary implications of Plato's philosophy

Plato's natural education embodies natural teleology. Its rationality lies in addressing the Socratic question, "How ought one to live?" through dialectical pursuit of the "Form of Good." Its naturalness stems from classical rationalism's fusion of nature and reason, manifesting humanity's innate erotic striving toward virtue and wisdom.

This "paideia" concerns the whole person, the natural bond between the individual soul and the political community. By cultivating recollection of the Forms, it enables autonomous actualization of noble virtues, thereby realizing "natural right" as the harmonic order of existence <sup>[2]</sup>. Plato's genius lies in mediating "natural right" and "conventional justice" through "paideia." Education becomes the art of intermediacy that weaves the soul's erotic ascent into the polis' nomotic framework. As Strauss observed, "The philosopher's return to the cave signifies not resignation but the political duty to translate contemplation into action, elevating the city toward natural hierarchy while respecting its conventional necessities" <sup>[1]</sup>. In today's education, teachers should also pay attention to the intellectual development of the educated while emphasizing the improvement of their inner virtues. While paying attention to how the educated become "Good Citizen," we should also attach importance to how the educated become "Good Men." This is not only the fundamental requirement of "education" as an activity of "nurturing," but also the fundamental direction for educators to implement towards "flourishing."

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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