

Personal Practice Theory and Philosophy of Education Statement

by
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Aristotle writes in his opening of his *Metaphysics* Book I that “All men by nature desire to know; an example is the delight we take in our senses, quite apart from their usefulness.” People have an innate sense and need to know and to learn. Discovery and learning have utilitarian, intellectual, and at times spiritual value. Discovery through our senses is what satisfies our need to know things in the world around us that helps us to survive. We want to learn so we can get through life. The search for truth is the driving force for life’s intellectual journey. A distinguishing character of humans compared to other creatures is that we have *rational ability*. We can produce ideas, think about them, anticipate a future, and solve problems. Part of knowing is gaining scientific knowledge (just the facts), but we can also contemplate abstract ideas. Knowing extends well beyond the senses; for we can articulate that there are times when we see with “the mind’s eye.”

Knowledge should not be gotten for knowledge sake alone but to serve the dual purpose of developing oneself to the fullest and participating in and contributing to community. Life should be a quest to develop self perfection. This is made possible through our reason and the ability to live a *contemplative life*. Given rational thought, one can reason between good acts and bad acts and meditate and reflect on foundational philosophical questions such as 1) What is the purpose of one’s life?; 2) How should I behave?; and 3) What do I owe others?

Each of us has a *duty in life* and we should be driven by identifying that duty and performing the duty to the best of our ability. Identifying that duty can be assisted by good guidance. This guidance often comes from educators. We each need to be on our own vision quest; otherwise, we are left at a lower developmental state and become prisoners of our senses. Intellectual virtue is the willingness to live a contemplative life. Whatever our station in life, at some point we should be pleased with it. At some point we need to gain a healthy self esteem. Educators play a role in this process. In our day to day living contentment is made easy if we are directing our minds to that which we can control, rather than be responsive to the myriad of sense impressions. We have the ability to make these impressions good, bad, or indifferent. Education is about learning *self mastery* to *habituate the mind* to organize, prioritize, and appropriately react to impressions in our lives. However, the test of the value of the individual is not solely individual achievement but how the individual responds to a lived social experience.

Aristotle also noted that “Man is by nature a *social animal*.” We desire and are drawn to living in the company of others. We aspire to belong to the *polis* and be in harmony not simply for protection or economic benefit but because there is a personal desire to develop camaraderie and friendship. Humans are *political beings* as well. Humans believe that they are able to improve the human condition (natural, social, and political) through reason and a scientific approach to life. This is another motivating

factor to improve thyself via education. *Empathy* is another unique characteristic of humans which involves feeling and caring for others and having concern for the common good, even when it is not seen. Remarkable educators assist their students in this process.

Given that man/women is a social being and longs to relate to others, there are three somewhat related areas that need developing, each in which education can play a key role. First, although we are unique beings, life is not to be lived simply to advance one's personal agenda but to contribute to the interests of the *community*. Second, people living in a healthy polis will aspire toward virtuous conduct and agree to be law abiding citizens developing a *habit of moral order*. We are *citizens* who have responsibilities in a participatory democracy. Third people should strive for *moral excellence*.

Although we live in a diverse society, we have a lot more in common that is good and gives us something to work with during difficult times. Instead of focusing on the values, customs, and conventions in which we differ, we should first identify what values we can agree on and work from there. These values would include the inherent dignity of all people, tolerance versus discrimination, peaceful resolution over conflict, truth telling versus lying, democracy over totalitarianism, giving people their just desserts in the marketplace versus cheating, having a free market of ideas versus censorship, and preserving our natural assets versus squandering resources. These are the values that Americans all share, and these can be taught in schools at all levels.

Citizens form governments voluntarily, not because they are forced to; it is a moral imperative. It is natural order that people form a *social contract*. Democracy cannot exist without a sense of community; therefore, a major goal for schooling is to develop *good citizenship* among students. People have a responsibility to become apprised of the issues of the day and then discuss and deliberate about these public policy issues. People should make critical reflection and advocate for policies that will solve community problems and improve the human condition. Therefore, education is important because it helps fulfill one's duty and when people fulfill their duty, the whole community benefits. Schools should value *academic freedom* for both students and faculty. Faculty should promote diverse ideas and encourage critical thinking. Schools should seek a high level of tolerance not simply related to the corporeal but to the intellect. Students should not be fearful to be different; possibly even eccentric, and if no harm comes to others, down right dissident. The role of education is to help groom "disinterested, critically minded persons" who can advocate for meaningful social and political change.

Schools should unabashedly provide both formal and informal character and moral education. Good character is when an "individual has developed self-discipline—an enduring capacity to act in ways that are consistent with beliefs about right and wrong—and when he and she has developed self empathy." Character is not something innate; it must be taught, practiced, and refined. Self discipline is one of the enduring characteristics of a civil human being; it involves knowing the good, desiring the good and actually doing the good. Schools should make development of good character a priority because character building of people supports a democratic, civil society.

Furthermore, virtue must not only be understood; it must be practiced and it can be learned. A teacher can easily integrate knowledge and virtue. Examples of good virtues are as follows:

Justice is the highest moral virtue and involves how human beings should relate to each other always for the better ends. Justice is the “right objective of human nature.” Justice is the constant and enduring will to render to others what is due each.

Prudence is called a practical intellectual virtue versus a theoretical intellectual virtue. Prudence allows one to be in the right disposition when faced with choices on how to act; it is about what one should do or not do to achieve the proper ends of human action. Prudence involves three actions of reason: 1) deliberating well; 2) judging rightly; and 3) commanding what one should do or not do. One needs to be “solicitous” in order to be prudent. Prudence is a responsibility you will have in your personal life, but it is even of greater concern for those who manage our public affairs.

Fortitude or courage is the ability of one to resist difficulties to repel the will from acting according to reason. One must be firm in spirit to resist the great difficulties that will take us away from what is good for us and doing good. Fortitude is exhibiting reasonable strength in the face of danger. Fortitude requires balance; not too much boldness or too much fear. Fortitude involves perseverance and patience in actions.

Temperance is moderation about the myriad of sense desires. Man is unique because he can reason. This separates us from other living species. Temperance keeps us from being out of balance toward sense desires, e.g. food, drink, sex that may seem to be the pleasures of life but do not compare to the intellectual pleasures and the spiritual pleasure in the next life. These body and sensual pleasures can be distracting and get in the way of reason.

A good school curriculum teaches students 1) *Habits of Industry*; 2) *Habits of the Heart*; and *Habits of the Mind*. Habits of Industry are those activities that support an individual in self improvement. This would include gaining knowledge, learning skills and competencies that can be used in an occupation (trade, business, service or profession). It also includes improvements in general skills such as writing or learning a new language. Habits of the Heart are those activities that give appreciation for and exposure to aesthetics, such as art, literature, poetry, and music. The aesthetics are the elixir of life. Habits of the mind are those activities that cultivate the rational, scientific, and analytic. Furthermore a curriculum, through either single courses or integrated in any curriculum, should give students healthy exposure to our Intellectual (Western) Heritage. A well-educated person is one who has attained good character, high morals, and knowledge that can make him/her a valued citizen of society.

Educators at any level of teaching have a tripartite role as 1) subject matter expert; 2) facilitator of learning; 3) role model for moral excellence. Given that man is by nature desires to know, the teacher should be as free as possible to make inquiries into any areas of interest and import and report the findings of these inquires at the appropriate time and place and in the appropriate manner. This is *academic freedom*. Each educator develops his/her philosophy and style. One teaching style that should be attempted, if not perfected, by every educator is the use of the Socratic Method. Here the teacher works to have students question their assumptions, premises, and final conclusion and seek the implications of their beliefs, if these beliefs were to hold true.

There are differences in learning styles among individuals and at a young age and even gender. But *ceteris paribus* there is no inherent difference in intellectual attainment and character among all people regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or place of birth or living in the world. Differences are most often explained by social and political constructions. A liberal, democratic, and just society ensures *equality of conditions*. This includes the equality of conditions for education for primary and secondary levels. However, schools and educators have a moral obligation to identify leaders in basic societal functions and nurture those leaders. If a society aims to sustain itself, it must identify competent leaders. The best and the brightest should continue learning; we have an obligation to see that these individuals are well educated, trained, and mentored to be the leaders of tomorrow. Society must balance resources going to our value for equality of conditions and that for excellence. Civic and moral education should start in the home and continue with planned scope and sequence in schools. History has shown that the best leaders are those not with narrow schooling and interests but with a range of interests and models of thinking and appreciation--a true Liberal Education.

Make no mistake, there is good and there is evil in the world; we must learn how to do things that are good and avoid evil. Nature is orderly and with the proper effort and discipline one can live an orderly and purpose-driven life. To help counter evil we can look to *Divine Virtues* of faith, hope, charity, and love. Education is what is needed to preserve liberty and ensure that we have an opportunity for happiness. If we are happy, then we will flourish.

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