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The Effects of Mythos’ on Plato's Educational Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this study, by examining the findings related to education in Greek mythos, is to reveal Plato's contributions to the educational approach. The similarities and differences between Plato’s educational approach and the education in Mythos are emphasized in this historical-comparison based study. The effect of mythos, which in fact give ideal education of the period, with the expressions they made about Gods’ and heroes’ education, on the educational approach of Plato, known to be intensely against the mythos, is rather surprising.

Keywords: educational approach, educational history, mythology.

1. Introduction

Plato is the first thinker of philosophy as well as of education. His ideas about education still have influence on schooling. Thus; Plato is a decent starting point in the studies over the meaning and the philosophy of education. Thinkers like Aristoteles, John Locke, J. J. Rousseau, and John Dewey, who produced education theories couldn’t help challenging Plato. However; Plato’s challenge was mostly with the mythos. In ancient Greece, one of the three words meaning ‘say’ is ‘mythos’. Epos and logos are the other two. The exact meaning of mythos is considered as ‘word’, ‘tale’, ‘story’ or ‘myth’ which are said or heard. Logos, however, means the utterance of the truth with human sayings. That is; mythos and logos are two opposite words. Therefore, Plato despises mythos as he did to Heraclitus and describes it as fake, vain and ludicrous. However, it is known that Plato couldn’t think separately from mythos and even created his own mythos as mythos is identical to Greek thought and language and therefore is impossible to isolate mythos from Plato’s thoughts. (Erhat, 1996)
Over the past few decades many emphasis has been given to the importance of myth in Plato’s philosophy (Hooger, 2010). A rational philosopher, Brunschvicg, sees Plato’s making use of mythos as a forceful return of a primitive way of thinking which means questioning the state before the existence of the earth and alike the sort seen in Hesiod. Burn, however, sees Plato’s making use of mythos as an essential part of philosophy. V. Broachar also defines mythos as a complementary parts of Plato’s teachings. (Brun, 2007)

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of Greek mythos on Plato’s educational approach. The writing out of the Greek mythos began with Homer and Hesiod, yet further flourished with new narrations and interpretations. For this reason, mythological sources, starting with Homer, spans to the explanations of the twelfth century Byzantanian scholars. Of course, the works of Homer and Hesiod on which Plato frequently emphasized were used in this study. However, not limited with those above, some mythological dictionaries prepared with the use of a great many mythological sources were also taken advantage for this study. Also the study focuses on Plato’s educational thought in Republic and Laws.

1.1. Mythos

In advance of the twentieth century, mythos was regarded as ‘tale’ or ‘fiction’, but in this century, addressing mythos as adopted in archaic societies enabled itself to be considered as historical knowledge. ‘Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." ‘(Eliade, 1993, p.13). Mythos, which usually carries a cosmogenic meaning, appeared as an effort to describe natural events. For humans, mythos is a symbolic instrument that helps understand the world, the cosmos and he himself.

Myth is covering stories that utilize fantasy to teach people about the nature around them (Hooper, 2010). Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. (Eliade, 1993). The basis of Greek education was poetry and the content of Greek poetry was the myths. Mythos is the oldest education system and in this respect it is not surprising that Homer and Hesiod were used in ancient Greek education. Herein Dupont is noteworthy with these words: ‘Homer’s poetry is the only educational book for common saga, poetical memory, the guardian of the culture and for all children’ (Dupont, 2001). In Republic, Plato mentions that as a result of a mythos which brought all the Greeks together, Homer with Iliad describes it as the foundation of the Greekness (Republic, 607a). However, his poems, tragedies and the sources of these describes Homer and Hesiod as figures who could never reach the reality, create fictional characters and are of no help to the society (Republic, 595-601).

Plato is known to have great influence on mythos gaining such meanings as ‘tale’ ‘history’ (Peters, 2004). He registers his objections to some of the dangers of an educational program which are based on the myths (Republic, 398a-b). But he also supports the use of children in education, but only the beautiful ones (Republic, 377c).

1.2. Traces related to education in Mythoses.

When mythoses are analysed, it is possible to reach some information, although limited, about the education of some mythological characters. That from infancy, how some gods and heroes are raised is cited in mythoses. It is known that wetnurses, nannies and nymphas, known as natural and heavenly bodies living in the moorland, waters and forests played some roles during the infancy of gods and heroes. Even the king of the Gods, Zeus, was brought up and breastfed by nymphas (Grimal, 1997). Plato leaves the role of nursery and nutrition of the babies to wetnurses and nannies (Republic, 460d).
In mythoses, as an instructor there were gods and semi-gods, but the most commonly aforenamed instructor is Centaur (Kentaur), which is a creature made up of half man and half horse called Chiron. The name of Chiron (Kherion), which is the most famous, the wisest and the best horseman, derives from ‘Kheir’ meaning ‘hand’. (Çelgin 2011). This centaur who was seen as instructive roles in mythoses is a man of nature and with the lessons he learned from the nature, he raised gods and heroes. In addition to gods such as Apollo and Asclepius, the instructor of Achilles, one of the main actors of *Iliad*, was Chiron (Erhat, 1996). The lessons that Chiron taught can be listed as arts of war and hunting, medicine, ethics and music. By saying that Achilles, brought up by Chiron, cannot be bad (*Republic*, 391c).

Achilles is the hero who was the most commonly referred subject in Greek mythos. *Iliad* is more of a saga of Achilles than Troia. Achilles was taught by the horseman, Chiron. As well as music education like playing the reed, singing and elocution, Achilles was educated in such physical education lessons as spear throwing, fighting, war making, riding and running. He learned the art of medicine and making drugs. In addition to these, he is said to have had any kind of virtues. These virtues can be listed as resisting to pain, not telling lies and being sober and sturdy in Mythoses (Erhat, 1996). In his work *Republic*, Plato criticizes Homer saying that Achilles cannot foster evil in him as he is not only the descendant of God but also being well educated (*Republic*, 391c). What attracts attention here is Plato’s complete approval of the education that Achilles, a fictional character, received.

When the disorganized data in mythoses is analysed together, it can be perceived that education can be classified under two main headings as mental and physical education as in Plato. However, another point that attracts attention is especially musical education is more emphasized in mythological stories. For Plato, the education of the guard of the state starts with music (377 a) and that education should be based on music is emphasized (*Republic*, 401a-e), for spiritual education can be realized through music and the music symbolizes the universe (Nietzsche, III,9 (90)). Here it is necessary to mention inspiration fairies (muses) called ‘mousa’ in Greek mythology. Deriving from the root of ‘men’ meaning mind, thought and the power creativity as a word, ‘mousa’ constitutes the etymologic root of ‘music’. Mousas are the daughters of Mnemosyne and Zeus (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 75). Zeus took the lead by defeating the tough powers and so as to establish his sovereignty he adopted powers which are creative in proportion to regular and moderate. Mouses are the products this power (Erhat, 1996). Here the terms regular and moderate are important as the order and harmony that Plato constantly emphasized (*Republic*, 410a ff; 430 e ff.) are valid in Greek mythologhy too. These terms are stressed with Zeus’ being the father of Mousas and that the new order is moderate and harmonious is emphasized. Mousas defined as heavenly singers are also the managers of the thought (Grimal, 1997). Music is known to have a fundamental role in enabling the oral culture to be kept in mind and passing over to the next generations. In this respect, Mousas are accepted as references by poets, for they have a broad memory, tactful thinking and conscience (Dönmez; Kılınçer, 2011). Two great sagas of Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* start with an addressing to Mousas. Hesiod begins *Theogony* with a praise to Mousas. Plato is known to refer to Mousas and praise them as poets. (*Republic*, 545e-549a). Moreover as an actual Mousa, he points at dialectical and philosophical Mousa, namely Mousa Ourania (*Republic*, 548c).

Another mythological entity interested in music is Apollo. Apollo, known as the manager of Mousas, is a one of the second generation gods. He is mostly viewed as the god of poetry, dance and prophecy. One of the musical instruments played by Apollo is the lyre. In one of the traditions, the lyre is written to have been given to Apollo by his father, Zeus, yet in another generation is narrated to have taken the lyre from Hermes in return for his herds (Grimal, 1997). Plato is known to have mentioned about Apollo’s lyre in ideal education about musical education (*Republic*, 399d).

Marsyas is regarded as the founder of two – hole shepherd’s pipe. Marsyas, mastered at playing the pipe, becomes the manager of the Mousa choir. In an Anatolian based legend, Marsyas maintains that the reed could compete with the lyre of Apollo and as referees Mousas and Midas, the Phrygian King, were
chosen. When Mousas chose Apollo and Midas chose Marsyas, Apollo changed his ears into those of an ass and punished Marsyas by excoriating (Erhat, 1996). As mentioned above, the preferring of Apollo is ture for mythos.

Apart from this, the fact that Apollo is a bright god emitting light can be understood from the adjective Phoibos (bright). Apollo, as the god of sun, is the successor of Hyperion and is associated with Helios (Bulfinch, 2011). Considered to be the father of Pythagoras, Apollo was thought to have lived on the Leuce Island (White Island), known to be the heaven for orpheusicism and pythagorascism (Grimal, 1997). Apollo symbolizes the enlightened, stagnant and moderate power. It is the light, the power of seeing the nature and perceiving the entity with mind and the power of shaping (Erhat, 1996). For this reason, Plato interpreted Apollo as 'mask of the Form of the Good'. The significance of Apollo in Platoic philosophy has been suggested in Christina Schefer’s book (Schefer, 1996). Apollo has the power of inspiration as Dionysos, yet the difference of him is his moderate power of inspiration (Grimal, 1997). Plato talks about Apollo as the god who first makes the nicest Laws.

“For us nothing, but for the Apollo of Delphi, the chief, the fairest and the first of enactments.” “What are they?” he said. “The founding of temples, and sacrifices, and other forms of worship of gods, daemons, and heroes; and likewise the burial of the dead and the services we must render to the dwellers in the world beyond to keep them gracious. For of such matters we neither know anything nor in the founding of our city if we are wise shall we entrust them to any other or make use of any other interpreter than the God of our fathers. For this God surely is in such matters for all mankind the interpreter of the religion of their fathers who from his seat in the middle and at the very navel of the earth delivers his interpretation.” (Republic, 427 b-c).

The son of Apollo, Asclepius, is known as the god of medicine in the Greek mythology. The one who taught Asclepius the art of medicine is again the horseman Chiron. Asclepius taught his daughter Hygieia and the sons of Asclepius the art of medicine (Erhat, 1996). While Asclepius was growing up, he was becoming even more famous as a highly-regarded healer with exceptional skills. Aside from the art of surgery, Chiron had also taught him the effective use of drugs, incantations and aphrodisiacs as aids to healing (Grimal, 1997). Chiron, however, is stated to have learnt all this from the nature (Erhat, 1996). Plato’s description of Asclepius is as:

“Then, shall we not say that it was because Asclepius knew this—that for those who were by nature and course of life sound of body but had some localized disease, that for such, I say, and for this habit he revealed the art of medicine, and, driving out their disease by drugs and surgery, prescribed for them their customary regimen in order not to interfere with their civic duties, but that, when bodies were diseased inwardly and throughout, he did not attempt by diet and by gradual evacuations and infusions to prolong a wretched existence for the man and have him beget in all likelihood similar wretched offspring? But if a man was incapable of living in the established round6 and order of life, he did not think it worth while to treat him, since such a fellow is of no use either to himself or to the state.” “A most politic Asclepius you're telling us of,” he said.” (Republic, 407 d-e).

As a result of Apollo’s and Mousa’s copulation, musicians Linos and Orpheus, who were yet again mentioned as an instructor in mythological tales, were born (Graves, 2010). There are legends saying Linos was the person who invented melody and the rhythm (Grimal, 1997). Linos is known as the music teacher of Heracles. He punished Heracles as he didn’t have the talent for music, but Heracles got furious and killed his teacher. We can conclude from this mythos that Heracles having brute force cannot be educated as he has lacking in music, or rather delicate thinking (Dönmez,Kılınçer, 2011). Linos, thought to have universal wisdom, was the teacher of Thayris and Orpheus (Graves, 2010). There are mythoses saying that Linos also learned Phoenician (Fenike) alphabet from Kadmos and the name of each letter and the final form was given by Linos (Grimal, 1997).
Another musical instrument that Plato introduced in education is the cithara. In some traditions, cithara is described as an instrument invented by Orpheus, yet in some other traditions it is stated that Orpheus increased the number of cithara’s strings to nine from seven as is the number of Mousas. Orpheus could also play the lyre apart from the cithara. As an instrument of harmony, with seven sympathetic strings, the lyre also represents the harmony of the cosmos. Thracian hero Orpheus is stated as Kalliope from the Mousas or the son of Polhymnia. There are mythoses as regards to the fact that Orpheus learned musicianship from Linos or Apollo. He sings in Olympos as Mousas and with his music he soothes animals, plants, humans and genies (Grimal, 1997).

Another musician that is referred as the teacher of Orpheus in some traditions and as a student in some others is Mousaios. Mousaios is the son of goddess of Moon known as Selene and was brought up by nymphas as many other mythological characters were. The music of Mousaios were used to heal patients (Republic, 365a; Grimal, 1997).

Heracles, about whose education we know more than that of any other heroes, were taught by many different teachers for physical and spiritual education. However he is known to be better in physical education. It is stated that he was educated in not only calisthenic subjects such as car driving, swordplaying, war techniques on horse or without horses, fighting, archery but also playing the lyre and singing, literature, astronomy and philosophy (Graves, 2010). The education that Heracles received in classical period is the education that Greek kids received, but the teachers of Heracles were mythological characters just like himself. Heracles killed Linos, who taught him music and literature, as a result of anger fit and later were taught to shoot arrows from an Scythian cowman called Teutaros.

1.3 Plato’s Educational Approach

Plato is described as the first great educator and founder of educational thought (Cooney, Cross and Trunk, 1993). With Academy, Plato became the founder of the first systematic education and the school where the education would be conducted. The intellectual environment of his Academy continued activities more than 900 years and in A.D. 529 it was closed by the emperor Justinian (Cooney, Cross and Trunk, 1993). However, although the Academy was closed down later, the philosophy (teachings) of Plato lasted throughout Archaic Age and the Renaissance and reached to the modern day (Brun, 2007).

Plato’s educational approach can be found in Dialogues of the Republic (Politeia) and the Laws (Nomoii) in which he develops his ideas about education (Lodge, 1947). As in many other examples presented in the history of thought, Plato’s educational idea appeared in association with idea cumulation, understanding and views of the period when he initially lived. The educational approach of Plato, who went after ‘good’ as a perfect Socrates follower, was deeply affected by the educational approach of two crucial city states, Sparta and Athens. Especially in the Republic, it can easily be understood that the model he presented in Sparta is the idealized sample of the education named agoge he practised (Russell, 2000). Plato thinks that education is the main responsibility of the state as in Sparta. According to Plato, only a state established within a proper system is perfect.

Plato classifies people as having gold, silver, iron and bronze in their nature. According to him, people with gold in nature are the managers, the silver are the assistants of them and, the iron and the bronze are farmers and labourers. This metaphor is like the mythos in which Hesiod tells the creation of the roots of human beings (Hesiod, Works and Days, 106-200). In the Republic, Plato talks about the necessary education that the managers would receive in his ideal state. Education is a part of Plato’s ideal state in which philosophers should rule. According to Plato, for the education of these ideal prospective managers verbalized as wardens (gatemen) there are two important ways are Physical education and music. There are also rhetorics in musical education (Republic, 376e). In this part of the dialogue Plato describes the
role of poetry in education and criticizes Hesiod and Homer (376d- 412b). Music educates the soul but the significant role of music education for Plato is that it educates philosophical part of the soul.

For Plato, physical education is important, yet just because the physical condition is good doesn’t mean that the mankind is ‘good’. However ‘good’ man is the one who looks after his body well (Republic, 403 d). In the ‘Laws’, it is stated that after the age of six, irrespective of their being girl or boy, every kid is supposed to go through physical education (Laws, 794 c). Plato’s sayings about girls’ education are different from the ones expressed by mythoses. Because, in mythoses, it is generally seen that female characters were engaged in handcrafts. Plato begins his physical education with nutrition and recommends the diet expressed in Homer’s epic stories (Republic 404 c). For Plato gymnastic is not only produces bodily health, also disciplines the psychological element of the spirit.

Plato emphasizes the role of abstract sciences in education for the age group between 20-30 which are choosen to be soldiers and guardians They should be trained in abstract sciences, numbers, astronomy, geometry and harmony. After this stage comes the dialectical education. With the help of this education, they go into the way of discussing the universe of ideas and gaining the actual knowledge. (Aytaç, 1992).

Cave allegory in the Republic, the myth itself is nothing but a shadow, a mere likeness of reality, and not reality itself. But a myth, if it is to be at all useful as a means for education, must inform the audience of its own nature: the best myths, then, will be shadows that inform the reader of their shadow-like nature. With the cave allegory, Plato turns the underworld of Hades, expressed by Homer, upside down and hence emphasized the immortality of spirits (Arent, 1996). Homer’s lines about Hades are as such:

“How didst thou dare to come down to Hades, where dwell the unheeding dead, the phantoms of men outworn” (Homer, Odyssey, XI, 475).

With these lines of Homer, that souls lacking in the power of thought without their own bodies is expressed and the life on the earth is dignified. The perception expressed by Homer with this passage is a prevalent idea in the whole Greek mythology. However, Plato thinks just the opposite and criticizes Homer by the cave allegory stating that what is essential is the soul itself and the earth where we have the body is not the real world but the shadow. In Plato’s theory of ideas, what is important is not the body that mythoses dignified but reaching the world of ideas which is the source of eternal life. Here, the effect of Orphic—Pythagoric approach is felt in Plato’s philosophy. With this allegory, Plato tries to associate his ideas of theory with the teaching that things are composed of numbers (Zeller, 2008). To Plato, reaching the world of ideas is only possible through education.

“... But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth1 in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.” (Republic, 517b-c).

In the Laws, Plato discusses a practical code of Laws for a state (Cooper, 1997). Education is the most important thing in Plato’s ideal state in which philosophers should rule. In this dialogue, he insists on the dogma that virtue is knowledge. Edelstein says, Plato bases the life of the ideal state not on philosophy but on mythology (Edelstein, 1949).

2. Conclusion

Plato had two programs of education: unphilosophic and philosophic man. In Republic, the education of unphilosophic is also for the early education of philosophers. And this early education has two parts as in mythoses: music and gymnastic. Music education includes myth, rhythm and harmony to make the soul graceful and harmonius. In the myth in which Hercules, who cannot use his power moderately, killed
Linos, it is seen that the mental state of the hero who had no talent for music was not in an order and continuously in pain. (Grimal, 1997). Hercules seen as the mythological interpretation of the disorder which was brought on by those who only trained their bodies as stated in the Republic of Plato (Republic, 410d). For Plato gymnastic education is also necessary to the health of soul. In the ideal education of Plato, musical and physical education are to be given moderately (Republic, 411e-412 b).

Myth plays a continuing role in Plato’s education. The presence of myth in his dialogues is the strongest evidence. Plato uses myths to teach his paradoxial views. He thought myth to be a kind of logos, a likely logos. In Republic Socrates says “the myth, taken as a whole, is false, but there is truth in it also”. (Republic, 377a). Plato uses myth as pedagogical devices. He found myth to be a perfect means for teaching crucial doctrines. A principle used by educators is that one leads the student from what is better known to what is lesser known. It seems Plato’s technique is this principle (Republic, 368d-369a).

Most scholars argue that mythos and logos are on occasion interchangeable in Plato’s dialogues. Indeed, sometimes Plato writes of myth as a kind of logos. Plato uses images in his dialogues because the images help a student to understand and learn. Finally, for Plato education is to create in young people an imagination because without imagination education is useless and he creates this imagination with myths in his dialogues. Also he doesn’t create his ideal education apart from Greek mythos that it seems on his works.

References


