

The Exoteric and the Esoteric: The Dual Logic of Plato's Educational Stratification

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Abstract

In the *Republic*, Plato constructs an ideal city-state centered on justice, and education serves as the essential pathway through which this ideal is to be realized. Taking the exoteric-esoteric logic as its point of entry, this paper analyzes the internal stratified structure of Plato's educational thought. Plato's educational system exhibits a dual character. At the exoteric level, education takes human nature as its criterion and is addressed primarily to the citizens of the city-state. Citizens are divided into three classes - rulers, auxiliaries, and producers - each receiving educational content suited to its nature and cultivating the corresponding virtues. At the esoteric level, education undertakes the functions of elite selection and the maintenance of rule. It joins philosophy with political power through such covert means as the "noble lie". The exoteric logic and the esoteric logic are mutually dependent and complementary, and together they constitute Plato's educational thought. This dual educational logic manifests both the profound insight of ancient Greek educational thought and its inherent limitations, such as natural-endowment determinism and rational despotism. Examining Plato's educational thought from the two dimensions of the exoteric and the esoteric offers significant implications for reflecting on such contemporary issues as educational equity and the modernization of educational governance.

Keywords

Plato, *Republic*, Educational stratification, Exoteric logic, Esoteric logic

Introduction

Plato's *Republic*, Rousseau's *Emile*, and Dewey's *Democracy and Education* are widely recognized by later scholars as the three great classics of educational literature. They have exercised a profound influence on educational practice and thought throughout the world [1]. Plato's *Republic* is not only the founding work of Western political philosophy but also a canonical text of Western educational thought. In this work, speaking through Socrates and through successive rounds of argument with his interlocutors, Plato constructs an ideal city-state in which justice is the supreme principle. Throughout the construction of this ideal city-state, education always occupies a central position. Plato selects men of discernment as his principal objects of education and depicts the difficulties and dangers of the educational process. He rekindles the quarrel between poetry and philosophy in order to win control of the city's education and carries out a programme that fuses

poetry and philosophy. By employing exoteric and esoteric modes of education, he educates ordinary people and lovers of wisdom differently. He proposes that the rule of the philosopher-kings joins philosophy with political power through the rational design of the philosopher. This thereby completes the project of constructing an ideal republic of education [2].

Exoteric and esoteric - these two terms were first advanced by the Straussian school and in fact refer to the art of double writing. The art of double writing means that an exoteric work contains a twofold teaching: an exoteric teaching for the many and an esoteric teaching of heterodox truth [3]. Classical philosophers often adopted a style of writing that combined the exoteric with the esoteric. They conveyed to the general public exoteric teachings in conformity with social custom, while disclosing genuine philosophical truth to the few discerning readers.

This dual logic of the exoteric and the esoteric is embodied not only in Plato's manner of writing; in this author's view, it also permeates his educational thought. Plato's educational system is a two-tier structure of the exoteric and the esoteric. The exoteric level is a stratification of education grounded in nature and addressed to the citizens of the city-state, and the esoteric level is a covert mechanism of elite selection addressed to lovers of wisdom. To uncover this dual logic is of great theoretical significance for understanding Plato's educational thought more deeply from a fresh perspective.

From the standpoint of practical significance, although Plato's educational thought arose more than two thousand years ago in the city-states of ancient Greece, the issues with which it deals remain important topics in educational theory and practice today. These issues include educational equity and the relation between elite education and mass education. Educational equity attracts wide attention, and the debate between elite education and mass education has never ceased. Viewing Plato's educational thought through the dual logic of the exoteric and the esoteric may provide useful enlightenment for reflecting on contemporary educational problems from a philosophical perspective.

Educational stratification under the exoteric logic

Defining the concept of exoteric teaching

Exoteric teaching is addressed to the general public and is open and easy to understand, whereas esoteric teaching is addressed to a small elite and is concealed and difficult to grasp. Together, these two modes of teaching constitute the art of writing of classical political philosophy.

The word "exoteric" derives from Greek and originally means "outer" or "public". Exoteric teaching is the manner of speech that philosophers use when addressing the general public. Taking into account the capacity of ordinary people to receive it, they express their thought in accessible language, so that the public can understand and accept it. Exoteric teaching usually accords with the traditional customs and moral outlook of society and poses no threat to the existing social order.

Plato reversed Socrates' practice of addressing everyone directly and formally inaugurated the tradition of the duality of educational modes. For Socrates,

philosophical dialogue was open to everyone: He conversed in the streets and the marketplace of Athens with all manner of people, seeking to guide them toward the recognition of truth. But after the death of Socrates, Plato came to a profound awareness of the tension between philosophy and politics and realized that all people cannot be educated in the same way.

In the *Republic*, the education expounded by Socrates falls mainly into two parts. One is the basic education of the guardians as a whole, including the education of women among the guardians. The other is the higher education provided for those among the guardians who love wisdom and possess strong rational ability and a gift for dialectic [4]. These in fact correspond to Plato's two educational modes, the exoteric and the esoteric. Exoteric teaching stands at the front of the stage and is addressed to the people of the city, enabling most people to grasp its surface meaning. Esoteric teaching is hidden behind the curtain and is addressed to lovers of wisdom. Only those who understand philosophy can extract the truth from the surface statements.

Exoteric teaching can be readily understood by every reader, whereas esoteric teaching reveals itself only to readers who are careful and well trained. In my view, exoteric teaching is the outward appearance of philosophy - the face that philosophy presents to political society. Its function is to protect philosophy, lest philosophy invite persecution from society by being too direct and radical.

In Plato's educational thought, the exoteric logic refers to the fact that, on the surface, Plato's educational stratification is grounded in human nature. It aims at a just order in which everyone occupies his proper place. This is an open and legitimate educational logic that can be spoken of to everyone. The purpose of exoteric education is to cultivate citizens who meet the needs of the city-state and to maintain the stability and order of the city-state. Plato's education is first and foremost civic education: Addressed to all citizens, it cultivates good citizens in conformity with the principles of the city's justice. This is the basic meaning of its exoteric level.

But exoteric teaching is not a form of deception. It is rather a special way of expressing truth. Plato's lying is not active but compelled by necessity. He has not abandoned the transmission of truth but merely

embellished certain ideas that ordinary people cannot understand. So they may still benefit even if they grasp only the surface of the lie. Exoteric teaching contains elements of truth, only presented in a form acceptable to the many. Although ordinary people cannot understand the deeper truth, their contact with the elements of truth is still beneficial for cultivating their virtue and maintaining the order of the city-state. Lovers of wisdom, in turn, can penetrate the exoteric appearance and extract the genuine truth contained therein. The two modes of teaching complement each other and together constitute the complete system of Plato's educational thought.

The theoretical foundation of exoteric education

The theoretical foundation of exoteric education is the doctrine of natural disposition. Plato holds that human nature differs: Different people possess different natural gifts and capacities. Some are intelligent by nature and suited to be rulers; some are brave by birth and suited to be auxiliaries; some are industrious by nature and suited to be producers. Education should follow human nature and be varied according to different natural gifts, so that each person may engage in the work for which he is best fitted.

The doctrine of natural disposition is an important theoretical foundation of Plato's educational thought and also the basis of his theory of social stratification. In Plato's view, the social division of labour and the division into ranks are not arbitrary but grounded in human nature and in conformity with nature. Therefore, educational stratification based on nature is also just.

Plato uses the myth of gold, silver, bronze, and iron to illustrate vividly the differences in human nature. He states that "they are all brothers, children of the same earth, yet God, in fashioning them, mingled gold into some, and these are the most precious and are rulers; silver he put into the auxiliaries (soldiers); and iron and copper into the farmers and other craftsmen" [5]. The thought expressed by this myth is that human natural gifts differ.

Plato distinguishes three kinds of lies: the true lie, the lie in words, and the noble lie. The noble lie aims to benefit both others and oneself, but because of its subtlety it carries both benefit and risk and therefore requires special caution. What makes the "noble lie" legitimate is the eternal conflict between the city-state and the

philosopher. Although this myth is a "noble lie", in my view the thought it expresses is one Plato genuinely believed: Human natural gifts differ, and education should be adapted to individual differences.

The doctrine of natural disposition determines that education must be stratified. Since human gifts are high or low, the content and methods of education must also differ. Those of superior gift should receive a higher and deeper education so that they may become rulers. Those of ordinary gift should receive an education suited to them so that they may become competent auxiliaries or producers. Only such education is in conformity with nature, and only such education is just.

The myth of the metals and differences in natural gifts

To illustrate the differences in human natural gifts and the necessity of educational stratification, Plato fashioned the famous myth of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. As a "noble lie", this myth vividly expresses Plato's thought on the differences of human nature and serves as an important theoretical basis of exoteric education addressed to the citizens.

The myth runs as follows: "In the tale we shall tell them that they are all brothers, children of the same earth, yet God, in fashioning them, mingled gold into some, and these are the most precious and are rulers;" "silver he put into the auxiliaries (soldiers); and iron and copper into the farmers and other craftsmen". "Yet because all are of the same stock, although natural gifts are generally transmitted from father to son, it sometimes happens that a golden father begets a silver son, or a silver father a golden son, in every possible combination."

As this myth indicates, differences in human natural gifts are inborn and determined by the gods and are therefore unchangeable. It shows that different gifts suit different occupations: Those of gold are suited to rule, those of silver to defence, and those of bronze and iron to production. It also acknowledges that gifts are not wholly hereditary. A golden father may beget a silver son and a silver father a golden son. Thus, social classes are not entirely fixed, and there is a certain degree of mobility.

From an educational perspective, this myth provides a theoretical basis for educational stratification. Because human capacity for cognition, judgment, and action is limited, different approaches must be devised according

to human nature - which may be summed up as teaching according to aptitude and adapting to circumstances [6]. Since human gifts differ as “gold, silver, bronze, and iron”, education should be stratified according to different gifts. Those of golden gift should receive the highest philosophical education so that they may become philosopher-kings. Those of silver gift should receive military and moral education so that they may become competent auxiliaries. Those of bronze and iron gift should receive vocational and basic moral education so that they may become excellent producers.

Of course, this myth should not be taken too literally, for Plato himself acknowledges it as a lie. Yet the thought it expresses is one that Plato genuinely believed: Human natural gifts differ, and education should be adapted to individual differences accordingly. The myth is merely a mode of expression designed to make the thought easier for the public to understand and accept. Genuine philosophical argument must proceed by way of reason, but for most people myth is more persuasive than philosophical argument.

Differences in educational content across the classes

Based on the differences in human natural gifts and on the division of social labour, Plato also designed, to a certain extent, different educational content for different classes. These differences in educational content embody the idea of educational stratification and are an important manifestation of the logic of exoteric education.

Plato says comparatively little about the producing class, because he does not regard producers as the focus of education. Producers need mainly to master productive skills such as handicraft and commerce. Such skills are handed down chiefly from father to son and require no special public education. Producers also need to receive basic moral education, to cultivate the virtue of temperance, and to learn to keep to their place and obey the law. But such education is conveyed chiefly through social custom and religious belief and likewise requires no systematic schooling.

Plato's discussion of the auxiliary class is comparatively detailed. The education of the auxiliaries comprises two main parts: gymnastics and music. “Train the body with gymnastics and mould the soul with music”: Gymnastics is for the training of the body, to strengthen the constitution and cultivate the spirit of courage; music is

for the moulding of the soul, to cultivate the virtue of temperance. Plato regards pleasure and pain as the most basic natural feelings of human beings; to form good dispositions, one must cultivate a correct sense of pleasure and pain so that it accords with reason and thereby raises a person to complete virtue [7]. Gymnastics and music should be combined so that body and soul develop in harmony. Those who emphasize gymnastics to the neglect of music become savage and brutal; those who emphasize music to the neglect of gymnastics become soft and feeble.

In addition to gymnastics and music, the auxiliaries must undergo military training and learn the skills and strategy of warfare: “We must find those who are steadfast guardians, never ceasing to labour for what they believe to be the interest of the state. We must watch them from their earliest years and set them tasks, observing them as they act.” They must be subjected to rigorous training from childhood and undergo all manner of trials, so as to cultivate a spirit of endurance and fearless courage.

For the ruling class - that is, the philosopher-kings - Plato designed the most rigorous educational system. Their education can be divided into several stages. The first stage is elementary education, consisting chiefly of gymnastics and music, the same as that of the auxiliaries. The second stage is military education, from eighteen to twenty years of age, consisting chiefly of military training and practical warfare. The third stage is higher education, from twenty to thirty, devoted chiefly to the four studies - arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and the theory of music. The fourth stage is philosophical education, from thirty to thirty-five, devoted chiefly to dialectic and to the knowledge of the Idea of the Good. Plato states: “Dialectic is the only method of inquiry that can do away with hypotheses and ascend to the first principle itself in order to find firm ground there”. The fifth stage is practical training, from thirty-five to fifty, during which they hold various offices in the city-state and accumulate political experience. He further adds: “When they have reached the age of fifty, those who have survived and have distinguished themselves in every action of their lives and in every branch of knowledge must be brought at last to the final test: They must lift up the eye of their soul to the universal light which lightens all things.” Only at fifty, after they have

passed all the tests, do they become true philosopher-kings and rule the city-state.

The differences in educational content serve the different needs of the different classes. Producers need productive skills and basic morality; auxiliaries need courage and temperance; rulers need wisdom and dialectic. Different educational content cultivates different virtues and produces different kinds of talent. This is the basic content of educational stratification under the exoteric logic.

Educational stratification under the esoteric logic

Tracing the concept of esoteric teaching

Esoteric teaching is a concept opposed to exoteric teaching. It refers to teaching addressed to a small elite, concealed in the depths of the text, and graspable only through deep reflection. The word “esoteric” likewise derives from Greek and means “inner” or “secret”. Esoteric teaching is the manner in which classical philosophers expressed their genuine philosophical thought: It is open only to the wise and closed to most people.

The tradition of esoteric teaching can be traced back to ancient Greece. The Pythagoreans are said to have distinguished between inner and outer doctrines: The inner doctrines were transmitted only to genuine disciples, while the outer doctrines were addressed to the general public. But it was Plato who first systematically elaborated the dual educational mode of the exoteric and the esoteric. Plato reversed Socrates’ practice of addressing everyone directly and formally inaugurated the tradition of the duality of educational modes. The details have been discussed above and need not be repeated here.

Taking the capacity to discern truth as his criterion, Plato distinguished between the shallow audience and the deep audience of education. Most ordinary people lack the capacity to recognize genuine truth; they can only receive exoteric teaching and grasp the surface meaning. As for esoteric teaching - teaching hidden behind the curtain - only those who understand philosophy can extract the truth from the statements of the lie. But the few lovers of wisdom are able to penetrate appearance and reach the essence; they can extract genuine truth from exoteric statements and are therefore capable of receiving esoteric teaching.

In Plato’s educational thought, the esoteric logic means that, at a deeper level, Plato’s educational stratification is not merely grounded in nature. It also undertakes the functions of elite selection and of maintaining the rule of the city-state. This is a concealed educational logic that only the few can truly understand. The purpose of esoteric education is to cultivate true philosophers, to join philosophy with political power, and to maintain the stability of the city-state and the interests of the ruling class.

By employing exoteric and esoteric modes of education, Plato educates ordinary people and lovers of wisdom differently. This differentiated education is in fact the embodiment of the esoteric logic. Ordinary people receive only exoteric education, which teaches them to keep to their place; lovers of wisdom receive esoteric education, which guides them toward the recognition of truth so that they may ultimately become philosopher-kings. The two modes of teaching complement each other: Ordinary people come into contact with the elements of truth, while lovers of wisdom extract the truth itself, and both serve the overall interest of the city-state.

The philosophical foundation of esoteric education

The philosophical foundation of esoteric education is the distinction between knowledge and opinion - an important theoretical foundation of Plato’s educational thought. Book V of the *Republic* draws a clear distinction among knowledge, belief, and ignorance and correlates them with the threefold ontological division: that which wholly is, that which both is and is not, and that which wholly is not. Those who possess knowledge know something, whereas those who possess opinion believe something; and “belief” here does not refer to judgment in general but specifically to judgment grounded in perception and even governed by desire and feeling [8]. “Since knowledge and opinion are different faculties, they must have different spheres”. Knowledge and opinion are two entirely different kinds of cognition, corresponding to different objects and different cognitive faculties.

In Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato uses the analogy of the divided line to illustrate vividly the difference between knowledge and opinion. “Take a line divided into two unequal parts, one corresponding to the visible world and

the other to the intelligible world, and divide each part again in the same proportion, to represent the degrees of clearness and obscurity". One part corresponds to the visible world and the other to the intelligible world. The visible world is further divided into images and real things, to which the cognitive faculties of imagination and belief correspond - all of which belong to opinion. The intelligible world is likewise divided into two parts - mathematical objects and the Forms - to which the cognitive faculties of understanding and reason correspond - all of which belong to knowledge. Opinion is cognition of the visible world: changing and not truly real; truth is cognition of the intelligible world - eternal and real. "The soul is like the eye: When it rests upon that on which truth and being shine, it perceives and understands and is radiant with intelligence; but when it turns toward the dim world of becoming and perishing, it has opinion only, blinks about, shifts from one opinion to another, and seems to lack intelligence." Most people live in the world of opinion, taking appearance for essence and shadows for reality, like the prisoners in the cave. Only the few philosophers can leave the cave, see the real world, attain knowledge, and grasp the truth.

The division between knowledge and opinion in fact lays the theoretical foundation for the stratification of education. For most people, who lack the capacity to attain knowledge and can only remain at the level of opinion, education can only be the education of opinion - the cultivation of right opinion. That is, exoteric education. For the few gifted people who are capable of recognizing truth, education must guide them upward from opinion to truth - that is, esoteric education.

The essence of esoteric education is to guide the soul from opinion to truth, from the world of appearance to the world of the Forms. This is a difficult and lengthy process that requires prolonged study and training. Only those who genuinely love wisdom and possess philosophical talent can complete this conversion, come at last to know the Idea of the Good, and become true philosophers.

The necessity of the esoteric logic

One important feature of the esoteric logic is its concealment. By concealment is meant that the real intention of esoteric education is not open but hidden behind exoteric education. Most people see only the

exoteric stratification of education and take it for the whole of Plato's educational thought, unaware that behind it lies a deeper esoteric logic.

The concealment of the esoteric logic is manifested in several respects. First, in the dialogues Plato rarely speaks directly of the true purpose of esoteric education; he speaks mostly of the exoteric educational programme. Second, Plato frequently expresses his thought through myth, metaphor, and allegory, and his genuine philosophical thought is often hidden behind these literary forms. Third, Plato's dialogues are full of irony and allusion, and their deeper meaning can be grasped only by careful reflection.

Why does Plato adopt this concealed manner? Why does he not simply speak his real thought outright? This brings us to the question of the necessity of the esoteric logic.

The esoteric logic is needed to protect philosophy. Philosophy is the pursuit of truth, and truth often overturns tradition and shakes custom. "If someone should drag a prisoner up a steep and rugged ascent and not let him go until he has been dragged into the sunlight, he would be dazzled by the glare." "He would be unable to see a single one of the things that are now called real." If philosophers were to speak the truth outright, they would provoke the resentment and anger of the public and might even invite persecution. The death of Socrates is a painful lesson. Plato, having learned from that lesson, expresses his thought esoterically, thereby protecting both himself and philosophy.

The esoteric logic is needed to protect society. Social stability rests on traditional customs and moral outlook, all of which belong to the level of opinion. If philosophical truth were widely known to the public, these opinions would be shaken, leading to social disorder and collapse. To maintain social stability, philosophers must conceal the truth, allowing only the few to know it while the majority continue to live in the world of opinion.

The esoteric logic is required by education itself. Philosophical truth cannot be transmitted directly; it must be explored and discovered by the learner himself. If a teacher simply tells the student the truth, what the student receives is opinion, not truth. Genuine education guides the student to discover the truth for himself, and

this requires the teacher to adopt an esoteric manner - to lead the student step by step toward the truth through such means as elicitation.

Socrates directly examined and cross-examined the citizens of the city who held conventional opinions, and the full transmission of reason gave rise to an irreconcilable conflict between the two. Plato, by contrast, avoided on the surface the inherent tension between the philosopher and the people, and used myth or lies to educate the auxiliaries and the citizens of the ideal city in two different modes. In other words, by revising the exoteric mode of teaching that directly expressed justice as a whole, he circumvented the political problem that philosophers had always faced in the actual city-state. And this embellished conception of justice satisfied the moral aspiration of ordinary people to see justice practised in life. By adopting education on both the esoteric and the exoteric levels, Plato guides students to think and explore for themselves and ultimately to discover the truth on their own.

The concealment of elite education

The function of the educational system is to distinguish different kinds of people and to place them in the positions in society that belong to them. The ideal educational system constructed by Plato advocates both public education and elite education [9]. Plato's education centres on the selection and cultivation of the philosopher-kings, and this selection and cultivation is essentially a form of elite education: "Unless philosophers become kings in their states, or those who are now called kings and rulers genuinely and adequately pursue wisdom, so that political power and philosophy come into the same hands, while the mediocre natures who pursue either of them exclusively are forcibly excluded, there can be no end to the troubles of states, my dear Glaucon, nor, I think, of the human race". To make philosophers kings, philosophers must be educated. But this elite education has a concealed dimension that not everyone can see. From the exoteric standpoint, elite education selects the best talent to govern the city-state for the overall interest of the city. From the esoteric standpoint, however, elite education may have a deeper intention - to maintain the interests of the ruling class and to secure the rule of the city by the philosophical elite.

The criteria of elite education are set by the ruling class.

What counts as excellence? What counts as talent? These standards are defined by the philosophical elite who already hold power. Naturally they will define those who resemble themselves as excellent and talented, thereby ensuring that the right to rule remains always in the hands of people of their own kind.

The process of elite education is also a process of socialization. In the course of receiving elite education, the young people who have been selected gradually accept the values and modes of thinking of the ruling class and gradually identify with its interests. When at last they become rulers, they will naturally maintain the interests of the ruling class rather than overturn them. The content of elite education is likewise carefully designed: The four studies and dialectic are relatively advanced disciplines. "Dialectic is the only method of inquiry that can do away with hypotheses and ascend to the first principle itself in order to find firm ground there". By mastering these disciplines, most people can be excluded from the ruling class, ensuring that only the few elite hold the highest power. Those who have survived and have distinguished themselves in every action of their lives and in every branch of knowledge must be brought at last to the final test. They must lift up the eye of their soul to the universal light which lightens all things.

On the one hand, when philosophical truth is joined with power and enters the system of culture and education, it spreads rapidly. On the other hand, lacking the challenge of heterogeneous thought, it gradually becomes rigid and may even harden into a form of intellectual uniformity that constrains free inquiry. In this situation, education also becomes a department that supervises future rulers - an instrument serving the rule of the city-state. The joining of philosophy with political power is an important manifestation of the concealment of elite education. Elite education is ostensibly in pursuit of truth, but in fact it is also in pursuit of the union of philosophy and power, enabling the philosophical elite to take hold of political power.

But it cannot be said that Plato's elite education was entirely in the private interest of the ruling class. Plato genuinely believed that only under the rule of philosophers could the city-state attain justice and happiness. His motives were noble and aimed at the

overall interest of the city-state. Yet it should also be recognized that this elite education did in fact, objectively, function to maintain the rule of the elite. This is its esoteric function.

The relationship between the exoteric and the esoteric logic

Investigating the relationship between these two logics helps clarify their structure within Plato's educational system. Taken as a whole, the exoteric and the esoteric form an outer-inner structure, and the two are functionally interdependent.

The exoteric as the exterior, the esoteric as the interior

The exoteric logic and the esoteric logic are two levels of one and the same educational thought, standing in an outer-inner relation. The exoteric logic is the exterior - the outward level; the esoteric logic is the interior - the inward level. The two are mutually dependent and mutually complementary, together constituting the stratified logic of Plato's educational thought.

The exoteric logic is the cover of the esoteric logic. Without the exoteric logic, the esoteric logic could neither exist nor function. Because the esoteric logic is concealed and cannot be made public, to speak it outright would provoke social resentment and resistance and might even invite persecution. With the exoteric logic as its cover, the esoteric logic can remain hidden in the background and quietly take effect.

The esoteric logic is the essence of the exoteric logic. Without the esoteric logic, the exoteric logic would be an empty shell, having lost its true meaning. On the surface, the exoteric logic is educational stratification grounded in nature, but in fact it serves the esoteric logic and is the means by which esoteric ends are realized. Only by understanding the esoteric logic can one truly understand the meaning of the exoteric logic.

Exoteric teaching is addressed to everyone and is easy to understand; esoteric teaching is addressed to the few and can be understood only through deep reflection. This precisely embodies the outer-inner relation between the two. Ordinary people need only exoteric education and need not know what is esoteric; lovers of wisdom, by contrast, must be guided through exoteric education until at last they grasp the esoteric truth.

How exoteric education covers esoteric education

One important function of exoteric education is to provide cover for esoteric education. This covering function is manifested in several respects.

Exoteric education provides legitimacy for esoteric education. At the exoteric level, education is grounded in nature, aimed at cultivating human virtue and realizing the justice of the city-state - all notions that society can accept and endorse. With the legitimacy provided by exoteric education, esoteric education can proceed under this legitimate cloak without arousing social suspicion or opposition.

Exoteric education provides a mode of selection for esoteric education. Not everyone can receive esoteric education; only the few who are gifted and wise can grasp the esoteric truth, and only those who are suited to it are admitted to the esoteric level of education. In this way, esoteric education remains unknown to most people and causes no shock to society.

Exoteric education provides cover for esoteric education in point of content. The content of exoteric education - gymnastics, music, the four studies, and so on - appears to be ordinary educational content, with nothing remarkable about it. But in fact all of this content prepares the way for esoteric education; all of it is a ladder guiding the soul from opinion to truth. Most people see only the surface meaning of this content and not its deeper function [10].

From the exoteric standpoint, this is the embodiment of natural right and is in conformity with nature; from the esoteric standpoint, it is also a means of maintaining the hierarchical order. The exoteric doctrine of natural right provides cover for the esoteric rule of hierarchy.

But in my view, the cover that exoteric education provides for esoteric education is not deliberate deception but necessary prudence. Plato did not intend to deceive the people; he simply held that ordinary people lack the capacity to understand truth and that telling them the truth directly would harm them and society as well. He therefore chose to express himself exoterically, so that ordinary people could accept his teaching while the few who are wise could grasp the deeper truth. This is an attitude of responsibility toward both philosophy and society.

The tension and unity of the two logics

Between the exoteric logic and the esoteric logic there is not only clear unity but also significant inherent tension. By tension is meant a certain degree of contradiction and reciprocal conflict between the two. This tension is perhaps unavoidable, because the exoteric and the esoteric are two fundamentally different logics to begin with, differing in their respective starting points and ends.

The exoteric logic emphasizes nature, holding that education should follow human nature; the esoteric logic emphasizes deliberate shaping, holding that education should shape people according to the needs of rule. There is tension between the two: To follow nature entirely may conflict with the needs of rules, while to shape people entirely according to the needs of rules may violate human nature.

The exoteric logic emphasizes the fundamental moral character of education, holding that education is for the cultivation of virtue; the esoteric logic emphasizes the central political character of education, holding that education is for the maintenance of rule. Between the two, however, there is likewise an inherent tension: Excessive emphasis on morality may weaken the effectiveness of rule, while excessive emphasis on politics may damage the moral value of education.

But this tension is not an absolute opposition; it can be unified. Plato's wisdom lies in his ability to unite these two seemingly contradictory logics so that they complement and promote each other.

The unity of the exoteric logic and the esoteric logic rests on the overall interest of the city-state: "Our aim in founding the state was not the disproportionate happiness of any one class, but the greatest happiness of the whole". Whether the exoteric stratification of education or the esoteric selection of the elite and ideological guidance, the ultimate purpose is the overall interest of the city-state - the realization of its justice and happiness. Only the means by which this purpose is realized differ at the two levels.

This relation of tension and unity gives Plato's educational thought both stability and flexibility: It can maintain social order while selecting outstanding talent. This is the depth and charm of Plato's educational thought [11].

The limitations of the exoteric and esoteric educational logic***The conflict between natural-endowment determinism and the function of education***

An important theoretical foundation of Plato's educational stratification is natural-endowment determinism. He holds that human gifts are inborn and determined by the gods: Different people possess different gifts and are suited to different occupations. "They are all brothers, children of the same earth, yet God, in fashioning them, mingled gold into some, and these are the most precious and are rulers; silver he put into the auxiliaries (soldiers); and iron and copper into the farmers and other craftsmen". The function of education is only to discover and develop human gifts, not to change them.

But if human gifts are inborn and unchangeable, what use is education? If a person is by nature destined to be bronze or iron, no education can make him gold. In that case, the function of education is greatly diminished: Education can at best discover and select, but cannot shape and transform.

Yet Plato attaches great importance to education. He holds that education is the cornerstone of building the city-state and the key to realizing justice: "The other so-called virtues of the soul seem to be akin to bodily qualities, for even when they are not innate they are implanted later by habit and education." He devotes a great deal of space to the discussion of education and designs a complete educational system. If education can really change nothing, why does he take so much trouble to discuss it?

This is the conflict between natural-endowment determinism and the function of education. On the one hand, Plato emphasizes the importance of natural gifts, holding that they determine a person's destiny. There is tension between the two: On the other hand, he emphasizes the importance of education, holding that education can shape people and transform the city-state. But it cannot be said that Plato wholly neglected the function of education. He did believe that education can develop human gifts and realize human potential: Without proper education, even the best gifts will be wasted. But the function of education is after all limited - it cannot change human nature and can only operate

within the limits of nature. This greatly restricts the function of education.

This contradiction was not well resolved by Plato himself. At times he emphasizes the importance of natural gifts, and at other times the importance of education, so that his theory appears somewhat inconsistent. This is one of the inherent limitations of his educational thought.

The paradox between the monopoly of truth and educational equity

Another internal contradiction in Plato's educational thought is the paradox between the monopoly of truth and educational equity. Plato holds that only the few philosophers can know the truth and that most people can only remain at the level of opinion. "Those who see the many beautiful things, the many just things, and many other things, but cannot see beauty itself or justice itself, even when guided by another - of them we shall say that they have opinion about everything but no knowledge of that of which they have opinion." Truth is monopolized by the few elite; most people are not qualified to know the truth, nor do they need to.

But this gives rise to a problem. If truth belongs only to the few, how can one speak of educational equity? Educational equity means that everyone has an equal opportunity to receive education and to pursue truth. But if truth already belongs only to the few, most people, however hard they try, cannot come to know it, and educational equity becomes empty words.

Plato, of course, also speaks of educational equity: He holds that the children of all free citizens should receive elementary education and should have the opportunity to rise to a higher class through educational selection. But this equity is limited - a merely formal equity - since in essence truth is monopolized and most people are destined to remain at the level of opinion, unable to reach the height of truth.

This is the inherent paradox between the monopoly of truth and educational equity, a fundamental contradiction between the two. On the one hand, Plato advocates equality of educational opportunity, holding that everyone should have the opportunity to truly receive education and to change his destiny through his own efforts. On the other hand, he holds that truth belongs only to the few and that most people are destined to receive only the mere education of opinion and can never

attain genuine knowledge.

The opposition between rational despotism and individual freedom

The third internal contradiction in Plato's educational thought is the opposition between rational despotism and individual freedom. Plato holds that reason is the noblest part of the human soul and that reason should rule over spirit and appetite. Likewise, in the city-state, the philosophers who represent reason should rule over the auxiliaries who represent spirit and the producers who represent appetite. This is a despotism of reason - the rule of reason over the non-rational.

From the exoteric standpoint, this rational despotism is just and in conformity with nature, because reason is indeed the noblest faculty and its rule can indeed bring harmony and happiness to the city-state. But from the standpoint of individual freedom, this rational despotism has its problems.

Rational despotism means the rule of the few over the many. Philosophers are few and possess the truth, and are therefore qualified to rule the many. But why should the many accept the rule of the few - merely because the few are wiser? Do the majority not have the right to decide their own lives? Do they not have the right to participate in political decision-making? These are questions that remain.

Rational despotism means the restriction of individual freedom. In Plato's ideal state, everyone has a fixed place and duty and must live according to the arrangements of the rulers. Individuals have no freedom to choose their occupation, their way of life, or even their spouse or the upbringing of their children. Everything is arranged by the state and the rulers. Such a life, however orderly, loses freedom and individuality.

Rational despotism may lead to the rigidity and dogmatization of thought. If truth is in the hands of the few philosophers alone, and only what they say is right, then everyone else can only obey. They cannot question and cannot hold different opinions. Thought then becomes rigid and society loses its vitality. Moreover, who can guarantee that what the philosophers hold is absolute truth? If the philosophers err, the whole city-state will suffer.

The thesis of the philosopher-kings suffers from such defects as the joining of philosophy with power and the

philosopher's conceit of reason; the educational aims of the ideal state and of the philosopher-kings are neither desirable nor feasible. Philosophy (education) must be separated from power, and philosophers (teachers) must rise above the conceit of reason [12]. From this perspective, Plato's rational despotism indeed has its limitations.

The problem of feasibility in elite selection

Plato's educational stratification has not only internal contradictions in theory but also many practical difficulties. The first of these is the problem of feasibility in elite selection.

Plato designed a rigorous mechanism of educational selection through successive stages, ultimately selecting the finest philosopher-kings. This mechanism appears perfect in theory but is difficult to operate in practice.

What is the criterion for judging natural gifts? Plato says that some people have gifts of gold, some of silver, and some of bronze and iron. But how does one judge which gift a person has? Are there objective criteria? Plato gives no clear answer; he only says that gifts can be discovered through education and trials. But do the results of education and trials necessarily reflect a person's gifts accurately? Can there be no deviation and no oversight? These are questions.

How can fairness and justice be ensured in the process of selection? Selection is carried out by human beings, and selectors, being human, have their own biases and private interests. If selectors choose talent according to their own preferences rather than genuine gift and capacity, the results of selection will be distorted. Moreover, candidates may practise deceit and disguise their gifts and capacities, and the mechanism of selection will then fail to function as intended.

Then there is the problem of cost. Plato's mechanism of educational selection is both rigorous and lengthy - from childhood to the age of fifty before the philosopher-kings are finally determined. This requires an enormous investment of time, energy, and resources. Moreover, in the course of selection, most people are eliminated and only a few ultimately succeed. Is this not a tremendous waste for society?

The paradox of the philosopher-king's rule is an important problem in Plato's educational thought. An important reason why it is a paradox is that true

philosophers may be unwilling to rule: They prefer the contemplative life. "Those who have attained this height are unwilling to descend to the affairs of men; their souls are ever hastening to the upper world, where they desire to dwell". But those who are willing to rule are often not true philosophers. How to make true philosophers willing to come forward and rule is therefore a great problem.

Besides the problem of willingness to rule, the feasibility of selection is also a serious problem. In reality, it is difficult to judge a person's gifts and capacities accurately, and equally difficult to ensure fairness and justice in the process of selection. Moreover, even if the right person is selected, there is no guarantee that he will be a good ruler. These are the difficulties that Plato's mechanism of elite selection faces in practice.

Contemporary implications of the exoteric and esoteric educational logic

The dialectical relation between teaching according to aptitude and educational equity

Although Plato's educational stratification is the product of more than two thousand years ago, it still has significant implications for reflecting today on the question of educational equity. In particular, his thought on teaching according to aptitude is of considerable value for understanding the meaning of educational equity and for handling the relation between teaching according to aptitude and educational equity.

Educational equity is an important idea of modern education and an important goal that is pursued. People often understand it differently. Some think that educational equity means that everyone receives the same education and that everyone is held to the same standard. However, such absolute equality is not necessarily true equity, because people differ in gifts, interests, and capacities; to hold everyone to the same standard is to bury the gifts of some and to overburden others.

Properly handling the relation between teaching according to aptitude and educational equity is an important task facing modern education. Equality of educational opportunity and equal rights to education for everyone must be ensured. At the same time, individual differences should be attended to and teaching should be according to aptitude, so that each student may receive

the education best suited to them. This requires, in educational practice, continuous exploration and innovation until a balance point between the two is found.

Ways to improve the mechanism of educational selection

Although Plato's mechanism of educational selection has its historical limitations, it also has important implications for improving the mechanisms of educational selection today. Educational selection is an important link in education, bearing on both the quality of cultivated talent and the realization of educational equity.

Plato's mechanism of educational selection has several features. First, selection proceeds stage by stage, step by step - not a single examination deciding one's whole life, but assessment over several stages and gradual selection. Second, it is comprehensive assessment and overall evaluation - examining not only knowledge and capacity but also moral character and physical fitness. Third, it is testing through practice and attention to practical results - not only theoretical study but also practical training, in which talent is observed.

All of these features are worthy of reference in improving our mechanisms of educational selection today.

Consideration may be given to changing the model of selection in which a single examination decides one's whole life, and adopting process-oriented evaluation. A single examination is too subject to chance and cannot fully reflect a person's real level. A diversified system of evaluation may be established, which examines comprehensively the student's knowledge, capacities, and other aspects. Process-oriented evaluation should also be attended to by including regular performance in the scope of evaluation, rather than looking only at the score of a final examination.

Education may also strengthen the practical dimension, observing and cultivating talent in practice. Plato's cultivation of the philosopher-kings included not only theoretical study but also prolonged practical training. Educational selection today should likewise give greater weight to practice and attend to the examination of students' practical and innovative capacities. This is especially true of higher education and vocational

education, which should be closely combined with practice so as to cultivate the practical talent that society needs [13].

The cultivation and selection of talent is not accomplished overnight; it is a long-term process. Educational selection today should likewise take a long view and establish long-term mechanisms, rather than seeking quick success and immediate gain and looking only at present results.

The rationale and the limits of differentiated instruction

Plato's educational stratification also has significant implications for the design of educational content today, and in particular for the practice of differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is a common mode of teaching in modern education. It teaches students at different levels according to their different levels and characteristics so as to improve the effectiveness of teaching.

The rationale of differentiated instruction is well illustrated by Plato's thought. Plato holds that human gifts differ, that different people suit different educational content and methods, and that education should be stratified and adapted to individual differences. If the same content and methods were applied to all students, some students would not have enough to learn while others could not keep up. The effectiveness of teaching would be greatly reduced.

But differentiated instruction also has its limits; it cannot be carried to extremes. If differentiation is too rigid, it will produce educational inequality, rank students into grades, and injure their self-esteem and self-confidence. This is especially true of students placed in lower tracks, who may develop self-denial and lose enthusiasm for learning. This is also a warning that Plato's educational stratification provides. Plato's educational stratification was tightly bound up with social stratification: The result of educational stratification was social stratification. Such stratification, however reasonable, easily leads to social rigidity and educational injustice. Differentiated instruction today should avoid these problems.

In implementing differentiated instruction, therefore, it is necessary to grasp the proper measure and keep within proper limits. Educators should acknowledge the differences among students, teach according to aptitude through differentiated instruction, and at the same time

protect students' self-esteem, avoid labelling them, and encourage mobility between different tracks. Differentiated instruction should be dynamic rather than fixed.

Combining general education with specialized education

Plato's design of educational content also has important implications for handling the relation between general education and specialized education. In Plato's educational system there is both basic education for the many and specialized education for the elite. There is also both foundational general education and advanced specialized education, and the two are organically combined.

From the exoteric standpoint, Plato's education emphasizes general education. Producers, auxiliaries, and rulers alike receive basic gymnastics and music and cultivate the basic virtues: "Train the body with gymnastics and mould the soul with music". This is a general education aimed at cultivating competent citizens and well-rounded human beings.

From the esoteric standpoint, Plato's education emphasizes specialized education: Rulers receive dedicated philosophical education, studying the four studies and dialectic and attaining the highest wisdom. This is a specialized education aimed at cultivating dedicated governing talent [14].

Plato's educational design embodies the combination of general education and specialized education. General education is the foundation, and specialized education is the elevation. Without general education, specialized education loses its root; without specialized education, general education remains shallow.

This is of considerable value for China's educational reform today, especially the reform of higher education. In its earlier stages of massification, China's higher education placed strong emphasis on specialized training in order to meet the urgent demand for professional talent in economic and social development. In recent years, in line with the national strategy of building a leading country in education and the goal of fostering students' all-round development, general education has received increasing attention, and many universities have launched reforms aimed at integrating general education with specialized education.

Comprehensive and harmonious development is the core idea of general education. But comprehensive development does not mean uniform development, nor does it exclude specialized education. The right approach is to conduct specialized education on the foundation of general education and to infuse general education into the process of specialized education.

The implication of Plato's educational system is that general education and specialized education are not opposed but unified. General education is the foundational education that everyone should receive, aimed at cultivating sound personality and basic literacy; specialized education is the deepening of general education, aimed at cultivating dedicated talent. The two should be organically combined and mutually promoting.

The unity of value education and knowledge education

Plato's educational thought also has important implications for handling the relation between value education and knowledge education. In Plato's educational system, value education and knowledge education are closely combined and inseparable.

From the exoteric standpoint, Plato's education attaches great importance to value education. Both physical and musical education are ultimately aimed at cultivating human virtue and correct values. The transmission of knowledge serves value education and the better cultivation of virtue.

From the esoteric standpoint, Plato's education also attaches great importance to knowledge education. Rulers, in particular, must study the four studies and dialectic and come to know the Idea of the Good. Plato states: "That which gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the subject is the Idea of the Good; and it is the cause of knowledge and truth so far as known." This is advanced knowledge education aimed at knowing the truth and attaining the highest wisdom. But for Plato, value education and knowledge education are ultimately unified, because the highest knowledge is knowledge of the Good - knowledge of value. To know the Idea of the Good is to know what is truly good and truly just, and thereby to possess the highest virtue. The ultimate destination of knowledge education is therefore value education, and the highest form of value education is knowledge

education. This is of significant implication for education today.

For Plato, moral education is closely combined with knowledge education. Wisdom is itself a virtue - indeed the highest virtue - and to know the truth is naturally to be moral. Knowledge education, likewise, cannot be without an orientation toward value; correct values should be integrated into the process of transmitting knowledge. Only by achieving the organic unity of value education and knowledge education can people be cultivated who are fully developed, possessing both knowledge and virtue.

Conclusion

Plato's educational thought is an important part of the history of Western educational thought. Taking the exoteric-esoteric logic as its point of entry, this paper has analyzed and discussed Plato's thought on educational stratification.

At the exoteric level, education is grounded in the doctrine of nature. The citizens of the city-state are divided into three classes - rulers, auxiliaries, and producers - each receiving educational content suited to its nature and cultivating the corresponding virtues. This is to realize at last a just order in which everyone occupies his proper place. This is an open educational logic - exoteric teaching addressed to the general public. At the esoteric level, education undertakes deeper functions. Education is not only a process of cultivating virtue but also a mode of elite selection: Through successive stages of selection, the finest talent is chosen and cultivated into philosopher-kings. Education is not only a process of transmitting knowledge but also a means of realizing political ends: Through such devices as the "noble lie", it unifies people's thought and maintains social stability. Education is not only a way of realizing justice but also a bridge joining philosophy with power. By cultivating philosopher-kings, it enables the philosophical elite to take hold of political power and brings philosophy to rule over politics. This is a concealed educational logic - esoteric teaching grasped only by the few.

The exoteric logic and the esoteric logic stand in a relation of mutual dependence and complementarity. The exoteric is the exterior, and the esoteric is the interior. Exoteric education provides legitimacy for esoteric

education, and esoteric education is the essence of exoteric education. Although there is a certain tension between the two, they are ultimately united on the foundation of the overall interest of the city-state. Together they constitute Plato's thought of the ideal republic of education.

Plato's educational thought also has its historical limitations. In theory, it faces internal contradictions such as the conflict between natural-endowment determinism and the function of education, the paradox between the monopoly of truth and educational equity, and the opposition between rational despotism and individual freedom. In practice, it faces difficulties such as the feasibility of elite selection and the contradiction between social rigidity and class mobility. These limitations should be clearly recognized.

Despite these limitations, Plato's educational stratification still has implications for contemporary education. With respect to educational equity, it implies the need to view dialectically the relation between teaching according to aptitude and educational equity and to improve the mechanism of educational selection continuously. With respect to the design of educational content, it implies the need to grasp the rationale and limits of differentiated instruction and to combine general education with specialized education. It also implies the need to unite value education with knowledge education. With respect to educational governance, it warns of the need to enhance the transparency of educational governance, to broaden public participation in educational policy-making, and to strengthen the supervision and restraint of educational power.

But it should be borne in mind that Plato's educational thought is, after all, the product of more than two thousand years ago and inevitably bears historical limitations. It cannot be simply copied; it should be viewed with a critical eye, taking its essence and discarding its dross. At the same time, in light of contemporary conditions, Plato's educational thought should be creatively transformed and developed so that it may serve the development of education.

Educational philosophy is an eternal theme and one that is ever new. The questions that Plato pondered more than two thousand years ago - the nature of education, its

purpose, educational equity, the relation between education and politics, and so on - remain important questions that education still faces today. Re-examining Plato's educational thought from the two fresh angles of the exoteric and the esoteric will not only help us better understand the source of the Western educational tradition. It will also provide useful reference for reflecting on contemporary educational problems.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funds.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to show sincere thanks to those technicians who have contributed to this research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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