Journal of Applied Philosophy of Education

ISSN: 3108-5571
Vol 1 Issue 1 (2025) 51-63

The Relevance of Platonic Paideia: Philosophical Proposals for Contemporary Education

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Abstract

This study centers on the question, "How can Plato's conception of paideia respond to the crises of knowledge, technology, and human relations in the contemporary world?" and discusses the reinterpretability of classical philosophical education in the modern context. The concept of paideia is examined under its essential elements: the understanding of knowledge (anamnesis), the master–disciple dialogue, readiness (preparedness), eros, holistic education, experiential learning, liberation from false ideals, and the unity of the individual and society. Plato's texts—particularly Republic (Politeia), Meno, Theaetetus, and Seventh Letter—are analyzed through a philosophical lens, and, based on this analysis, the notion of "human learning," which has lost its meaning in contemporary education, is re-evaluated. Findings indicate that paideia should be understood not as the consumption of knowledge but as inner transformation; that the teacher is not a transmitter of information but a guide who awakens the soul; and that education is an ethical and existential process rather than a utilitarian or performance-oriented one. Consequently, Plato's conception of paideia offers a vision of holistic education directed toward the good—grounded in critical thinking and interpersonal learning—in opposition to the digital age's obsession with speed, data, and efficiency.

Keywords

Paideia,
Plato,
Eros,
Anamnesis,
Wonder,
Learning,
Holistic education,
Ethics

Article Info

Published Online: 09.11.2025

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1. Introduction: Contemporary Problems and the Crisis of Education

We live amid an ever-accelerating world overwhelmed by an onslaught of data and ready-made information. In recent years, especially with the widespread use of social media, individuals—regardless of their expertise or knowledge—have begun to produce content independently on nearly every subject. These topics range from pure entertainment to matters with serious implications for society and humanity, such as history, politics, philosophy, ecology, and economics. The effects of this situation on individuals and communities can be observed in many recent examples. For instance, research and reports by international organizations have shown that Facebook's algorithms played an indirect role in inciting violence by amplifying hate speech during attacks by Buddhist mobs on Muslim communities in Myanmar. Harari (2024) likewise notes that digital platforms are designed in ways that can intensify such social tensions by manipulating user engagement.

More importantly, with the public release of advanced versions of artificial intelligence, people have begun to delegate decision-making in numerous aspects of their lives—those that influence their opinions, psychology, and lifestyles—to such systems. As a result, they experience what could be called "the unbearable lightness of being freed from responsibility." Today, AI applications have come to occupy a decision-making role not only for individuals but also for corporations and even certain public institutions, in areas ranging from psychological counseling and economic decisions to love and partner selection. This process—one we have willingly approved and implemented—has penetrated the deepest layers of our lifestyles.

This development points to a fundamental issue: entrusting decision-making to machines without knowing the criteria by which they decide or the margin of error they possess. Whether this process will grow into an uncontrollable "snowball effect" in the future, or whether it can ever be reversed, remains uncertain. What begins with algorithms recommending "what to buy, where to travel, what to eat," has now extended to shaping how we think and live. The data we voluntarily share have begun to determine product and service markets through increasingly sophisticated algorithms designed to heighten engagement. Moreover, this "success," sanctioned by our own consent, continues to reinforce itself—gradually gaining more power to determine everything from start to finish.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of this process is the growing belief that knowledge "exists somewhere out there" as a ready-made commodity to be simply acquired and used.

Prepackaged information circulates freely, regardless of where, how, or by whom it was produced. At precisely this point, Plato's notion of paideia—particularly his view that knowledge is essentially recollection (anamnesis)—becomes highly relevant. Let us now turn to some aspects of this understanding that speak to our age, especially those whose absence is increasingly felt today.

2. The Fundamental Principles of Paideia in Plato

Amid the deepening crises of knowledge, technology, and human relations in our age, Plato's conception of paideia invites us to rethink education not as mere transmission but as the turning of the soul toward the right direction. Within this framework, paideia emphasizes that knowledge is not a "ready-made commodity" but a process of recollection (anamnesis) and orientation. The revelation of truth occurs through the master–disciple dialogue and the learner's state of readiness. The ultimate goal of education is the orientation toward the Idea of the Good; methodologically, it requires harmonizing the soul as a whole through play, music, and physical training. The integration of theoretical knowledge with lived experience, purification from false idealizations, and the unity between the individual soul and the political community (the microcosm–macrocosm relation) constitute the essential dimensions of this understanding. The following subsections examine these principles both in their conceptual rationale and in relation to contemporary educational challenges.

2.1 Knowledge Is Not a Ready-Made Commodity

Knowledge cannot be bought, sold, or handed down as a transferable good. According to Plato's conception of paideia, education does not consist in giving sight to a blind eye, for the eye already possesses the capacity to see. What matters is turning this natural capacity in the right direction. In the Republic, Plato argues that education does not mean implanting knowledge into a soul (psyche) that lacks it, as though granting sight to the blind. Rather, it is the art of reorienting the thinking power already present in the soul from the wrong direction toward the Idea of the Good (agathon):

"Education is not what some people declare it to be; they say that knowledge is put into the soul that lacks it, as though putting sight into blind eyes... The power to learn and the organ with which to do so are present in everyone's soul; and just as the eye has to be turned from darkness to light, so the whole soul must be turned from the world of becoming to the world of being, until it can bear to look upon what is brightest there, namely, the Good." (Republic, 518b–d)

This view must be considered together with the idea that 'learning (mathesis) is, in fact, recollection (anamnesis)'. If learning is recollection, then teaching should, strictly speaking, be impossible. Yet Socrates demonstrates in the Meno that teaching as recollection is indeed possible when he guides an uneducated slave boy step by step through the solution of a geometric problem (Meno, 82b–85b). Thus, the fact that learning is recollection does not render teaching meaningless—it redefines it as a process of awakening or "midwifery." In the Theaetetus, Socrates explicitly compares himself to his mother, a midwife, explaining that while she helps deliver bodies, he helps deliver souls. His art, he says, enables others to "give birth" to their own thoughts and to distinguish between true and false offspring (Theaetetus, 149a–151d).

2.2 The Master–Disciple Relationship and Dialogical Learning

All traditional forms of instruction are founded on a master–disciple relationship. Plato's Academy, as is well known, functioned not as a conventional classroom but as a community of inquiry devoted to philosophy, mathematics, and the study of nature. Knowledge was not transmitted unilaterally from teacher to student but emerged through shared dialogue and collective investigation (Klein, 1965; Guthrie, 1978). Thus, the Academia differed fundamentally from a modern "school" in the institutional sense; it was a philosophical research collective where learning occurred through dialectical exchange rather than didactic instruction (Klein, 1965). In modern education, such intimate, dialogical interactions survive only in limited domains—graduate supervision, the arts, psychotherapy, and similar contexts.

Today, however, even direct human-to-human interaction is diminishing. In an era increasingly dominated by machine learning, online programs and applications have replaced much of the immediacy and intimacy of human educational relationships. While this digital mediation brings certain advantages, for Plato, genuine truth—profound knowledge and understanding—can only emerge through direct dialogue between teacher and student. Plato describes this process in the Seventh Letter:

"[Philosophical knowledge] cannot be put into words like other sciences. It is born in the soul of the student after a long period of dialogue with the teacher, when, like a spark leaping from a flame, it suddenly kindles and feeds itself." (Seventh Letter, 341c–d)

2.3 Readiness: Motivation, Interest, and Inner Disposition

In education, readiness refers to the state in which an individual becomes open to learning—a condition shaped by motivation, prior experience, and cognitive-emotional maturity. In Plato's paideia, this corresponds to the process of cleansing oneself of false opinions, acknowledging one's ignorance, and directing oneself toward genuine knowledge. At the beginning of learning, one must free oneself from superficial fragments of information that create the illusion of knowing. This process is often unsettling, for it involves confronting and dismantling one's mistaken beliefs. Yet this discomfort is a necessary step toward truth.

This refutation of false opinions, that is, elenchus (the method of refutation), is presented in detail in the Meno dialogue. Similarly, Socrates' comparison of himself to a midwife in the Theaetetus dialogue illustrates this process; according to Socrates, false births must occur before true births can take place. This analogy explains that temporary and superficial ideas formed in the individual's mind at the beginning of the learning process must be weeded out. In Plato's narrative, purification means preparation for the birth of knowledge. When a person is purified of ideas they have heard from others but believe to be their own, they gain the capacity to recognize the truth within themselves. In Socrates' words, the task of the midwives who deliver the soul is the art of discerning which thoughts are worthy of birth and which are stillborn, just as in physical births. In the Theaitetos dialogue, Socrates first delivers the false and foreign opinions in order to deliver the correct ones; he refutes them, so to speak, 'cleanses' them. In this way, he purifies the soul of the views of others. Only after this necessary cleansing can true births occur in the soul. This true birth ensures that the word becomes the person's own child, its own (Plato, Theaetetus, 149a–151d).

According to Plato, the movement toward philosophy begins in a specific affective state: wonder (thaumazein). This is the archē—the very origin—of philosophy (Theaetetus, 155d). As understood from the dialogues, this emotion also varies according to the level of the soul as a state of mind, and includes admiration as well as mental curiosity. Heidegger attaches particular importance to Plato's statement that "the beginning of philosophy is wonder (thaumazein)". According to Heidegger, Thaumazein is not a simple curiosity in the modern sense, but rather an ontological experience in which humans are deeply shaken by the mysterious openness of being; this existential astonishment felt when humans encounter being itself is their most authentic way of relating to the world (Heidegger, 2010).

In the philosophical understanding expressed in the dialogues, for the human mind to be set in motion, it must encounter a problem that does not fit with its concepts and feel curiosity/wonder. This is necessary for the first movement; however, it is pointed out that curiosity directed toward philosophy is not sufficient for the soul to turn without eros. For the soul to transcend the "rational mind" that sees the world of being as merely the world of becoming and return from the stage of becoming to the stage of being, the soul must be winged by eros and, through this emotion that affects the soul as a whole, lose itself.

Regarding the preparation of the soul, the Phaedrus dialogue mentions eros, the soul's inner driving force. In Plato, the concept of eros has a meaning so rich that it cannot be translated simply as "love" or "desire." In its origin, it initially expresses sensual attraction, that is, physical or passionate love; however, in Plato's dialogues, it transcends this meaning and becomes the soul's creative desire directed toward beauty, wisdom, and goodness. According to Diotima's teaching in the Symposium, eros is the power that desires "the birth of the beautiful and the immortalization of what is born" (Symposium, 206e); therefore, it is a kind of rational and spiritual love that enables humans to ascend from sensory beauty to "beauty itself" (to kalon auto). In Phaedrus, eros is defined as divine madness (theia mania) that causes the soul to take flight again by remembering divine beauty (Plato, Phaedrus, 249d). Heidegger interprets Plato's concept of eros as a response to the call of being and as man's longing to become one with being. According to him, eros is, at its origin, an enthusiastic expression of openness directed toward the beauty of being; that is, it is a fundamental orientation that expresses humanity's desire to participate in the truth of being (Heidegger, 2002).

Therefore, in Plato, eros is not merely an emotional passion, but a cosmic and epistemological force that elevates the human soul from the world of the senses to the world of ideas; it can be understood as "creative love" or "divine desire directed toward beauty." In this process, the soul ascends from the beauty found at the sensory level to increasingly higher, abstract, and true ideals of beauty. In this sense, learning is not merely a cognitive activity; it is the process of the soul recognizing its own fertility and turning towards truth. Curiosity/wonder must be considered together with eros. For this process, which begins with curiosity and wonder, can only continue with eros. From this perspective, these two principles appear to be complementary. According to Pierre Hadot, these two concepts can be interpreted as two complementary orientations: Curiosity/wonder (Thaumazein) is "the beginning of philosophical inquiry; eros is the inner power that enables the transformation of the soul" (Hadot, 2004, p. 56).

2.4 The Ultimate Aim of Education: The Idea of the Good

Plato depicts the effect of education on human nature through the allegory of the cave. According to this allegory, human life begins in a cave; there, one sees only shadows, that is, reflections of truth. However, those who undergo a long and arduous educational process emerge from the cave and attain the faith to see the Good Idea. Accordingly, if we do not receive an education, we risk spending our entire lives in the cave, and indeed, people obsessed with fame, fortune, pleasure, status, and property spend their entire lives this way. Because they are addicted to individual beautiful things, they live their lives without awareness of beauty and goodness itself. Without harmony among their faculties, they live tossed about here and there within existence. They are swept along wherever the tide of fashion takes them. This way of life, enslaved to pleasures, causes the soul to live in a constant state of internal conflict. However, if a person undergoes the aforementioned long process of education, they may have the chance to emerge from the cave and reach the light of truth. This occurs when the soul returns from the universe of becoming to the universe of being, as described above. The essence of philosophical education is "transformation," which means "to turn." 'Transformation' means "the whole soul" turning toward the light of the Idea of Goodness, which is the divine origin of the universe (Jaeger, 1944: p. 295).

In this case, it becomes possible for a person to gradually move towards a more authentic, more profound way of life that is in harmony with themselves. Being a just person means that the spirit as a whole is in an inner order and harmony:

"To be one's own master and ruler of oneself, to bring harmony among the parts of the soul, is to be a friend to oneself; just as musical harmony unites high, low, and middle notes into one, so must the soul bring all its elements into tune, becoming moderate and wholly one." (Republic, 443d–e).

Werner Jaeger (1944) interprets this process as the turning (periagōgē) of the soul toward the Idea of the Good—the essence of paideia. Education, for Plato, is not the transmission of information but the awakening of the soul's inner nature. The teacher, as a philosophical midwife, guides this inner rebirth. Through this process, the philosopher-in-training embodies phronesis—practical wisdom—which Plato regards as the guiding virtue among all others (Protagoras, 352b). Unlike temperance, courage, or justice, which depend on habit and practice, phronesis arises only when the soul turns toward the Good and becomes conscious of it. As Jaeger observes, by striving toward phronesis, the soul shapes itself into likeness with the divine

and attains a higher state of perfection (Jaeger, 1944, p. 296). For this reason, Plato insists that such formation must begin from early childhood and continue throughout life: “Hence they must receive a careful education from childhood upward, one that will last through life.” (Republic, 403d)

2.5 Method and Process

For Plato, education must begin in early childhood and proceed not through coercion but through playful and free activity suitable for free human beings. The purpose of education is not merely to cultivate the intellect but to harmonize all aspects of the human being—body, soul, and reason. Thus, both physical and spiritual training must be integrated into a balanced unity.

Accordingly, music (mousikē) and physical training (gymnastikē) form the indispensable components of paideia from early childhood onward. In Republic IV, Plato clearly emphasizes the function of music and physical education in forming the integrity of the individual. Music cultivates harmony and moderation within the soul, while physical training fosters balance and the virtue of courage. In this way, the individual achieves harmonia—a consonance between body and soul—and attains a temperate (sōphrosynē), courageous, and free character (Republic, 410b–412a):

“Musical training is the most potent instrument, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul... Physical training, on the other hand, nourishes courage and makes the guardians brave.” (Republic, 410c–412a)

2.6 Education and Life: The Primacy of Direct Experience

Education, for Plato, is not a purely theoretical activity; it requires practice and the integration of knowledge into one’s way of life. The aim is not merely intellectual competence but the cultivation of a whole and unified human being. Knowledge that remains at the level of theory may suffice in mechanical matters, yet it remains shallow in addressing deeper existential concerns. The relationship between knowledge and personal experience thus becomes crucial. As we know from experiences such as death, loss, and love, possessing conceptual knowledge about an event is not the same as living through it. Even Irvin Yalom, a psychotherapist who specialized in death anxiety, acknowledged that he only truly understood death and his patients’ experiences after the loss of his life partner (Yalom, 2022).

The primacy of firsthand experience is also fundamental to Plato's conception of paideia. In both the allegory of the cave and the analogy of the road to Larissa, he distinguishes between "knowing the way" and "having walked the way oneself." These examples illustrate the difference between orthē doxa (true opinion) and epistēmē (knowledge).

The primacy of firsthand experience is also of fundamental importance to Plato's understanding of paideia. Both the allegory of the cave and the analogy of the road to Larissa address the difference between knowing a road and seeing a road for oneself. In both analogies, a distinction is made between right opinion (ortha doksa) and episteme. While this distinction is addressed in greater detail in the allegory of the cave, fundamentally, a distinction is made between true knowledge at the level of episteme and knowledge based on second-hand experience. Accordingly, direct experience, seeing for oneself, has an ontological priority in knowledge.

The Larissa road analogy explains this distinction by highlighting the difference between episteme and orthodoxy: True knowledge, in terms of its foundation, does not rely on direct familiarity with the object; it is knowledge acquired indirectly. To put it more clearly, it is the opinions we acquire from others through individual examples that someone has taught us, saying, "Look, this is a virtuous act; this is a courageous behavior; this is beautiful." According to Plato, someone who has not walked the Larissa road directly also knows the road because they have a correct opinion on the subject. In terms of the goal of acting correctly, correct opinion is as good a guide as episteme and is useful in terms of its results. However, there is a difference in the level of knowledge between knowing science at a theoretical level and using it only for application. For Plato, even mathematics, the most precise science, does not yet have the status of episteme at the level known to mathematicians; because mathematicians work without knowing the mathematical objects themselves or their relationship to ideas.

These correct opinions, when linked by a cause-and-effect relationship (aitias logismos), are transformed into knowledge based on cause. This knowledge of cause, if it rises to the level of first principles, is when knowledge gains the status of episteme. The person who possesses episteme can account for this knowledge down to its ultimate foundation, down to the first principles, and therefore their knowledge does not depend on any unknown element or content (Plato, Menon, 72b-c).

Thus, the difference between mentally knowing the path and actually walking it corresponds to the difference between intellectual knowledge and spiritual insight. As the character Morpheus says in The Matrix: "There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. I

can only show you the door; you're the one who has to walk through it." The essential task is to walk the path oneself—to encounter reality firsthand. For Plato, this happens through anamnesis, the inner recollection by which the soul gives birth to knowledge (Temizkan, 2016).

The allegory of the cave also concretizes this idea: humans only realize the difference between the real and its shadow, which exists only in relation to it, by experiencing the real. Just as we say, "Ah, it was a dream!" when we wake up from a dream, when a person sees the truth directly, they realize that they have been substituting the image in the mirror for the reality. Here, too, the first-hand experience of the object is the mind's direct visual experience. No matter how much we know intellectually, if we do not have a direct view of the object, that mental experience is incomplete because it is based on the experience of others or does not rely on such a direct visual experience. Therefore, unless we walk the path out of the cave ourselves and see the sun itself, that is, the Idea of the Good (agathon), unless we bear witness to the truth ourselves, we will remain incomplete, we will not be whole.

2.7 Liberation from False Ideals

One of the guiding forces of everyday life is the constant reproduction of false idealizations. Human communities have always established certain norms/standards/idealizations that define what is "acceptable" in each period. However, many of these ideals can become judgments that destabilize life rather than give it meaning. In the Platonic sense, paidea aims for the individual to break free from false idealizations and desire true ideals, making them the principles and standards of life.

In this context, education should enable people to free themselves from idolatry—that is, from false values and beliefs that have penetrated deep into the soul—and to approach the true value of life. Turning toward genuine ideals makes it possible to evaluate life based on internal criteria rather than external expectations. Thus, individuals can judge themselves and others based on the "true values of life" grounded in the reality of existence. However, the purpose of education is not limited to individual transformation. Paideia is also the process of ridding society of false ideals. This indirect result is in complete harmony with Plato's understanding of the individual-society. In this way, both the individual and society strive to live based on beauty itself, rather than on individual things considered beautiful, as far as possible; they evaluate the existing norms and ideals of life in light of beauty itself, goodness itself, justice itself, etc., and weigh them in the light of ideas.

2.8 The Unity of Microcosm and Macrocosm

In Platonic thought, there is a continuity and correspondence between the different levels of being and becoming. A unity exists between the individual soul and the soul of the community or state. For Plato, even the best and most virtuous individuals are inevitably affected by the moral character of the society they inhabit; the individual bears within himself the reflection of the surrounding order.

Hence, there is a continuity among the sociological, political, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of existence. A genuinely good and just life is possible only when harmony is established both within the soul and in human relationships. One cannot isolate or reduce one dimension to another without distorting the whole.

Thus, the educational process begins with the soul's attainment of inner harmony, proceeds to ethical balance in interpersonal relations, and culminates in justice within the social order. The order within the soul and the order within the polis are manifestations of the same ontological principle. The aim of paideia is to make this principle visible, uniting individual consciousness and social structure into a coherent whole.

3. From Plato to the Present: Educational Implications

Although Plato's understanding of paideia was articulated over two thousand years ago, it sheds surprising clarity on the educational and cultural crises of our time. Today, as knowledge rapidly multiplies through technological tools, it loses its meaning; learning has become data consumption rather than inquiry and self-transformation. Plato's emphasis on knowledge reminds us of the philosophical roots of critical thinking in response to this situation. Anamnesis teaches that knowledge is not an external object but an internal process of recollection of the soul. This perspective requires education to focus not on superficial knowledge and the transfer of information, but on ways of thinking; it requires centering inquiry, deepening, and self-knowledge activities. Thus, resistance to "ready-made knowledge" should be considered the first and most fundamental condition of contemporary paideia.

Accordingly, the value of human interaction emphasized by Plato strongly criticizes the speed and efficiency-oriented educational approach of the digital age. The teacher-student relationship is not merely a transfer of knowledge, but a contact between souls, a mutual transformation process. The transformation of knowledge into truth is only possible through dialogue and the act of thinking together. This encounter, which is increasingly rare in today's education systems, must regain its meaning in an age where algorithmic learning has replaced

human learning. Despite the tools offered by technology, education must preserve its existence as an action born from the ethical bond between humans.

Plato's educational philosophy also envisions a holistic model of humanity. The harmony between soul, mind, and body reminds us that education must encompass not only cognitive but also aesthetic and ethical dimensions. Music, play, and physical activities serve to shape character by developing the individual's sense of moderation, rhythm, and harmony. It should not be forgotten that modern education, by measuring cognitive achievement while neglecting the emotional, artistic, and physical domains, has led to the fragmentation of the human being. Therefore, Plato's paideia serves as a warning for today's educational policies: The purpose of education is not to raise "successful individuals," but to raise harmonious, balanced, and virtuous people.

Plato's "cave" metaphor reminds us that education is not only a conceptual process, but also an experiential and existential one. True knowledge is not content acquired from outside; it is a journey undertaken by the individual themselves. This perspective can lend philosophical depth to approaches in contemporary education such as experiential learning, project work, and practical applications. The student's encounter with the world, nature, society, and their own inner voice invites them to live knowledge. In this sense, learning is a process of self-transformation, an anamnesis.

Finally, Plato's idea of the unity of the individual and society brings to light the ethical and democratic dimensions of education. A just society is only possible with the existence of individuals who have achieved harmony within themselves; however, the reverse is also true. Today's educational institutions must carry the mission of developing not only professional competence but also civic awareness, ethical responsibility, and social sensitivity. Plato's paideia understands education as the foundation of both individual virtue and public justice. This understanding invites us to rethink education in the contemporary world as a human project: an effort to reconnect with the truth of humanity beyond knowledge, technology, and politics.

4. Conclusion

Plato's understanding of paideia reminds us that humans are not merely beings who acquire knowledge, but subjects who seek truth and transform themselves. In today's world, education is often confined to the limits of performance, competition, and measurable outcomes, while the Platonic perspective re-positions education as a matter of existence. Learning is the

individual finding harmony within themselves, purging themselves of false ideals, and showing the courage to strive for goodness. Therefore, paideia is a constant call for renewal, both for individual consciousness and for social order.

Today's educational institutions must reinterpret this philosophical legacy left by Plato as a contemporary praxis. Principles such as critical thinking, human relations, holistic development, experiential learning, and ethical responsibility are not only ideals of the past but also the cornerstones of the future vision of education. The unchanging question that spans from Plato's cave to today's digital world is this: What educates humans? The answer lies not in piles of knowledge and information, but in the will to pursue truth with love. Paideia, as the philosophical name for this pursuit, deserves to be remembered anew in every age.

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