

ARISTOTLE
THE POLITICS

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PENGUIN BOOKS

VIII i

(1337011-1337032)

EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC CONCERN.

This chapter addresses itself to the first two of the three questions asked at the end of Book VII: (a) Should we have some system of education? And (b) should responsibility for education be public or private? The first hardly needs answering, and the second too is soon disposed of. The rearing and education of the children of citizens should indeed be a matter of public concern, since they are the future citizens, the future rulers of the state, and one needs to learn to be a citizen, just as a craftsman needs to be trained in his particular skill. Moreover, the education of the potential citizen will depend largely on the type of state and on the kind of life which it is desired to lead; Aristotle himself has in mind especially the intellectual, artistic, cultivated life which the Greeks called scholē, usually translated 'leisure'. No citizen, therefore, 'belongs to himself': he is part of the state, and is not entitled to be educated privately in private tastes and standards. All these remarks Aristotle makes very swiftly, and naturally does not pause over certain questions a modern critic may wish to ask: (i) Is the doctrine totalitarian, allowing nothing to private discretion? (ii) Does it allow for anything approaching a 'mixed' society? (iii) Is there to be no debate about the ends of education?

It is not until the second chapter that Aristotle turns to the actual subject-matter of education; and a great deal of the rest of this final book is concerned with no more than music and singing. But we do not know how much of the book is lost; it certainly now appears to be unfinished, as the thirteenth-century translator William of Moerbeke saw.

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1337a11 No one would dispute the fact that it is a lawgiver's prime duty to arrange for the education of the young. In states where this is not done the quality of the constitution suffers. Education must be related to the particular constitution in each case, for it is the special character¹ appropriate to each constitution that set it up at the start and commonly maintains it, e.g. the democratic character preserves a democracy, the oligarchic an oligarchy. And in all circumstances the better character is a cause of a better constitution. And just as there must also be preparatory training for all skills and capacities, and a process of preliminary habituation to the work of each profession, it is obvious that there must also be training for the activities of virtue. But since there is but one aim for the entire state, it follows that education must be one and the same for all, and that the responsibility for it must be a public one, not the private affair which it now is, each man looking after his own children and teaching them privately whatever private curriculum he thinks they ought to study. In matters that belong to the public, training for them must be the public's concern. And it is not right either that any of the citizens should think that he belongs just to himself; he must regard all citizens as belonging to the state, for each is a *part* of the state; and the responsibility for each part naturally has regard to the responsibility for the whole. In this respect the Lacedaemonians will earn our approval: the greatest possible attention is given to youth in Sparta, and all on a public basis.

1. I.e. of the persons living under the constitution in question.

VIII ii

(1337a33-1337b23)

CONTROVERSY ABOUT THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

In this chapter Aristotle first describes briefly the variety of assumptions about the purpose of education that prevailed in his day. One view, then as now, is that education should be utilitarian; and so in the second paragraph he indicates how far free men should engage in 'useful' activities. If his requirements seem unrealistic, we should remind ourselves that he is thinking of the education of a 'free' man, who will in due course become a citizen and 'statesman', living among a non-citizen population of artisans and slaves. We may find Aristotle's views prejudiced and objectionable, but unrealistic they are not: they reflect views common among the ancient Greeks, and certain economic features of Greek states. Interestingly, he believes that even 'liberal' activities can, if pursued too zealously, do harm similar to that done by mechanical and menial work. He has something of the feeling for the gentleman-amateur which is still detectable in our own society, particularly (as is sometimes claimed) in the higher grades of the British civil service.

1337a33 It is clear then that there should be laws laid down about education, and that education itself must be made a public concern. But we must not forget the question of what that education is to be, and how one ought to be educated. For in modern times there are opposing views about the tasks to be set, for there are no generally accepted assumptions about what the young should learn, either for virtue or for the best life; nor yet is it clear whether their education ought to be conducted with more concern for the intellect than for the character of the soul. The problem has been complicated by the education we see actually given; and it is by no means certain whether

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training should be directed at things useful in life, or at those conducive to virtue, or at exceptional accomplishments. (All these answers have been judged correct by somebody.) And there is no agreement as to what in fact does tend towards virtue. For a start, men do not all prize the same virtue, so naturally they differ also about the training for it.

1337b4 Then as to useful things: there are obviously certain essentials which the young must learn; but it is clear (a) that they must not learn *all* useful tasks, since we distinguish those that are proper for a free man and those that are not, and (b) that they must take part only in those useful occupations which will not turn the participant into a mechanic. We must reckon a task or skill or study as mechanical if it renders the body or intellect of free men unserviceable for the uses and activities of virtue. We therefore call mechanical those skills which have a deleterious effect on the body's condition, and all work that is paid for. For these make the mind pre-occupied,¹ and unable to rise above lowly things. Even in some branches of knowledge worthy of free men, while there is a point up to which it does not demean a free man to go in for them, too great a concentration on them, too much mastering of detail – this is liable to lead to the same damaging effects that we have been speaking of. In this connection the purpose for which the action or the study is undertaken makes a big difference. It is not unworthy of a free man to do something for oneself or for one's friends or on account of virtue; but he that does the same action on others' account may often be regarded as doing something typical of a hireling or slave. The established subjects studied nowadays, as we have already noted,² have a double tendency.

1. *Ascholon*, 'without leisure'.

2. In the first paragraph.

VIII iii

(1337b23–1338b8)

LEISURE DISTINGUISHED FROM PLAY;
EDUCATION IN MUSIC (1)

The chief aim of a gentleman's, that is, a citizen's education is to enable him to employ his intellectual and artistic faculties to the full, to live a life of 'virtue and of leisure'. The following chapter is one of the best sources for understanding what Aristotle meant by *scholē*; and his discussion of *mousikē*, 'music', makes it clear that the good life should have a high cultural and artistic content. Rather abruptly, the final paragraph then resumes a theme broached in VII xv, and asserts the necessity of gymnastic, physical training, to which Chapter iv is then devoted, the treatment of music being resumed at greater length in VIII v. On the meaning of the term *mousikē*, see the introduction to that chapter.

1337b23 Roughly four things are generally taught to children, (a) reading and writing, (b) physical training, (c) music, and (d), not always included, drawing. Reading and writing and drawing are included as useful in daily life in a variety of ways, gymnastic as promoting courage. But about music there could be an immediate doubt. Most men nowadays take part in music for the sake of the pleasure it gives; but originally it was included in education on the ground that our own nature itself, as has often been said,¹ wants to be able not merely to work properly but also to be at leisure in the right way. And leisure is the single fundamental principle of the whole business, so let us discuss it again.

1337b33 If we need both work and leisure, but the latter is preferable to the former and is its end, we must ask

1. Cf. II ix *ad fin.*, VII xiv–xv. . . . our own nature itself: literally, 'Nature herself', apparently quasi-personified.