Aristotle and the Voucher System

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that Aristotle would approve of a voucher system implemented on a national level, due to the lack of moral integrity in public schools. First I identify the problem of a lack of general consensus for a moral education in the United States public school system. Next I outline Aristotle's view of a liberal education. Then I demonstrate why Aristotle would support the voucher system, because it best promotes moral flourishing. Finally I show how why the voucher system does not violate the No Establishment clause, and how this system encourages tolerance of different religious groups.

In high school I was a member of the Red Ribbon Week planning committee—a week dedicated to promoting anti-drug awareness and help for substance-abusing students. I was on staff with some of the other school club leaders in the top ten percent and honors societies. "You know nearly everyone in the top-ten percent cheats," my friend Raymond told me some time later. He was taking more advanced courses than I was with them, and told me about some of their decisions in class. "Yeah, they're all taking eight AP courses, but they have a Facebook group where they share their answers on tests, so they can help each other get into Ivy Leagues." How could high-achieving students, placed on an anti-drug awareness committee, slide by the administration for cheating and do work for a cause they possibly did not even support? Aristotle would see this as the fatal flaw in public school education—a significant lack of moral and character education. A neo-Aristotelian would argue that the voucher system is worth implementing on a national level, due to the lack of moral integrity in public schools. Aristotle's approval of the voucher system is based on his view on moral education and his conception of the good.

The current state of public school education is illiberal and damaging to a proper moral education. According to author Paul Barnwell of the *Atlantic* magazine, "since 2002, standardized-test preparation and narrowly defined academic success has been the unstated, but de facto, purpose of their schooling experience."[1] According to Barnwell, a high-school teacher, rigorous test preparation is the purpose of a public school education. This rigorous test preparation is essentially contributing to an illiberal education—students are trained to write and complete a test, not develop their intellect or moral capabilities. Barnwell states, "According to the 2012 Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, 57 percent of teens stated that successful people do what they have to do to win, even if it involves cheating."[2] Students deprived of moral education are affected directly—the value of success replaces the value of morally good action. The cheating experience I illustrated earlier demonstrates how this culture of success is antithetical to an education

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[1] Barnwell, Paul. "Students' Broken Moral Compasses." *The Atlantic*, 25 July 2016. Accessed 5 May 2017.

[2] Ibid.

dedicated to human flourishing. These rigorous test standards are not going away soon. In this case, Aristotle would argue for a serious re-consideration about how education should be managed.

Aristotle argued that the state should facilitate a comprehensive moral education. He writes in Book VIII of the *Politics* that at first it is not clear "whether education is more concerned with intellectual or with moral excellence."[3] Aristotle is not confused about what end education should serve, namely that of moral education, but wants to illustrate that intellectual excellence closely follows and could mistakenly take the place of moral excellence. Moral excellence starts with a liberal education—which focuses on bettering oneself and edifying one's fellow students. In contrast, an illiberal education focuses on a technical skill, and directly serves a practical end in society. A moral education is primarily a liberal education, and focuses on imparting knowledge and formation to students to better themselves. "[T]o young children" Aristotle writes, "should be imparted only such kinds of knowledge as will be useful to them without making mechanics of them."[4] Here Aristotle is referring to the benefits of a liberal education over an illiberal education. A liberal education gives students the proper moral formation needed, while an illiberal education focuses on practical outputs.

Although Aristotle's social context is vastly different than ours, the problem of moral education is similar. Athens "included about 40,000 citizens, was considerably homogenous, [and] most people believed in the gods."[5] These 40,000 citizens were all men, as women and slaves were not counted as full citizens or worthy of a full education. Although there were political differences among the citizens, they were nearly homogenous in their Greek culture and religion. Education was strictly reserved for these citizens, especially the wealthy. However, by Aristotle's time in the 4th century BC, education was in need of serious reform. The "practical arts of literacy and arithmetic were pursued for economic advantage over fellow Athenians," and liberal arts such as "rhetoric [were] sought for utility in a career of political influence and honor."[6] Clearly, the social context of the *Politics*, although vastly different from our own, has the same problem of a declining moral education for its citizens. Athenians during Aristotle's time used their educational skills for career advancement, and not for the formation of themselves as good citizens. Given this context, Aristotle sets his sights on what an ideal education would look like for Athenians.

Aristotle argues for the moral reform of public education. He acknowledges the plurality in education during his time, that for "the character of public education, the existing practice is perplexing—should the useful in life or should excellence be the aim of our training?"[7] Aristotle acknowledges the divide during 4th century Athens over an illiberal education focused on practical ends, and a liberal education focused on the formation of a person. His work of Book VIII in the politics focuses on the providing an ideal liberal

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[3] Aristotle. *The Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print, 195.

[4] Ibid, 196.

[5] Gotz, Ignacio. "On Aristotle and Public Education." *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, vol. 22, 2003, 77.

[6] Curren, Randall. *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000. Print, 13-14.

[7] Aristotle, *Politics*, 195.

education for students, and saving practical ends for later in life. One objection is that Aristotle never mentions reform of private education, only public. The "democratization of Athens brought with it the introduction of group lessons as a more affordable alternative to traditional one-on-one instruction [in private schooling]," and by Aristotle's time public education provided by the state made more economic sense than the private schooling of a select group of individuals"[8] Thus, for Aristotle, private schools were not economically feasible during his time, and could not function to provide the liberal and moral education that he envisioned. It was not that Aristotle was completely against reforming private education; it was simply not economically feasible during his time period. However, there are significant differences between the American social context and Aristotle's social context.

Education is on a vastly wider scale for American society, and is seen as a right for all citizens. American society is "enormously large and complex," and not culturally homogenous like the Greeks.[9] When our society envisions a common end, that of making good citizens, it needs to take into account our massive plurality. The role of education in our society needs to take into account this plurality, alongside molding good citizens. In order to meet the "subsidiary needs of the people at large," it is necessary that "some forms [of education] will be public and some private"[10] Public education in American society undertakes the massive role of providing for all citizens—which includes tens of millions more than the 40,000 upper-class males of Greek society. The subsidiary needs of America—that of providing the best possible education to all citizens at a local level—requires a rethinking of the role of private schools, and their role alongside public education in providing proper formation of good citizens. In order to provide for the subsidiary needs of good citizenry, Aristotle would emphasize the importance of community.

An educational community must be small in size and focused on building the habits of its students. For a city or community to be focused on the good life, it must have a stable population. A "very populous city can rarely be well governed…since all cities which have a reputation for good government have a limit of population"[11]An educational community must not be so exceptionally large that it cannot meet the needs for its students. Another requirement for Aristotle is that a community focuses on the well being of its members. The "work of education" is that students "learn some things by habit and some by instruction."[12] The well being of students is tied to the habits and character instruction they receive in school. Habits of excellence in school, along with moral education, are best realized through this local community. In the present day, Aristotle would argue that the voucher system is necessary in order to allow these moral communities to flourish.

The voucher system is used to allow small moral communities to flourish alongside the public school system. One objection is that the voucher system will be used to usurp the public school system. Anti-voucher proponents argue that "[p]ublic schools are vested with our hopes for an educated citizenry [and] private schools simply do not have

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[8] Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, 12.

[9] Gotz, "On Aristotle and Public Education," 78.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Aristotle, *Politics*, 172.

[12] Ibid., 185.

the capacity to educate the majority of our children."[13] Those who are against the voucher system claim that it is a guise to overthrow the public school system for private and religious schools. However, from a pro-voucher perspective, the voucher system is more concerned with providing funding for small moral communities. Community involves not "the whole of society, but rather the members of one's own group"[14] Funding a nationwide voucher system is not directed against the public school system and "whole of society," but rather gives the chance for smaller communities to flourish and develop superior educational systems. These smaller communities provide the moral education that Aristotle is concerned with, along with meeting the rigorous test standards of state's educational requirements.

Aristotle would argue that funding religious and private schools through the voucher system gives more students the opportunity for better moral and academic formation. In addition to the moral education in religious schools, recent research shows how religious schools can likewise step up to the plate of high standards for academic excellence. A study by "William Evans and Robert Schab of the University of Maryland concluded that attending a Catholic high school raises the probability of finishing high school or entering a four-year college by 12 percentage points."[15] It is clear that religious schools such as Catholic high schools can provide academic excellence alongside moral formation. Even more so, these schools provide a small moral community for families to get involved with. "Community brings forth altruism," and "religious schools draw from parents as well as teachers increased attentiveness to children's educational progress."[16] Religious schools provide both a focus on moral and academic excellence. However, is there a strong enough need in American society for private and religious schools? Do public schools not provide enough moral and academic formation for students?

Private schools address the plurality of American society and allow proper moral formation. One objection is that public schools address American plurality better than private schools. There is a current consensus that only public schools can provide a "common national and civic identity," and provide the virtues necessary for a good citizenry.[17] The public school is seen as a melting pot for all Americans, and students learn to be good citizens through interacting with various others in a shared general American identity. Moral formation is left to these student interactions—public schools no longer seek to teach morality through fear of compromising plurality. However, contrary to this ideal, research from the University of Chicago shows that there is a greater commitment to plurality and moral formation in private schools. "Private education contribute[s] to stronger self-identities and self-esteem…research on tolerance shows that stronger self-esteem produced by a strong identity can be associated with a greater tolerance for others."[18] Private education

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[13] *School Vouchers vs. Public Education: A Citizen's Anti-Voucher Kit*. The National Committee for Public Education and Religious Liberty. 1999. Print, 9.

[14] Brandl, John. "Governance and Educational Equality." *Learning from School Choice*, edited by Paul E. Peterson and Bryan C. Hassel, The Brookings Institute, 1998, 71.

[15] Ibid, 73.

[16] Ibid., 74.

[17] Greene, Jay P. "Civic Values in Public and Private Schools." *Learning from School Choice*, edited by Paul E. Peterson and Byran C. Hassel, The Brookings Institute, 1998, 90.

[18] Ibid.

builds the identities of students to be strong Catholics, Jews, African-Americans or other ethnic minorities. In turn, this builds their civic virtue for tolerance and identities as good Americans. Moral formation is not left up to the interactions within public schools, and can be taught efficiently through teachers and parent participation in the educational community. However, there is disagreement to whether or not funding these private schools would harm church-state relationships.

In Aristotle's social context, the telos of education was for moral formation and not for advancing religious dogma. An objection is that the voucher system would be used to advance religious dogma. However, from a neo-Aristotelian standpoint, education is for the telos of moral formation. Greek cities "knew neither Church nor dogma and were generally tolerant of unbelief."[19] There was no church hierarchy or religious orthodoxy during Aristotle's time period. Although ethnically homogenous, no religious creed or single deity was held in common by all Greeks. In contrast, the "fundamental concern in fourth-century Greece was how to create political stability and social unity," in light of the "aftermath of the Peloponnesian War [which] brought down governments with regularity."[20] The philosophers and politicians during Aristotle's time period were more concerned about moral formation for a good citizenry among Athenians, and not the implantation of religious dogma or polytheistic values. The moral formation for Aristotle in education does not include dogma, and is instead for the excellence of a city. The "more excellent a city is, the happier it is," and this starts with the "excellence [of] an individual."[21] Thus, for Aristotle, moral formation makes excellent citizens, which makes an excellent city that is ultimately socially cohesive.

A main objection to a voucher system, however, is the claim that the use of a voucher system violates the No Establishment clause for separation of church and state in American society. While a valid objection, funding private and religious schools through the voucher system does not violate neutrality towards religion or the No Establishment Clause. During the 1960s, a number of Supreme Court decisions established neutrality towards religion in public schools. The American Association of School Administrators filed a report on the court decisions, stating, "that every school district [should] develop constructive policy which will guarantee freedom from the establishment of religion but equally will foster for religion."[22] The movement towards neutrality in religion, therefore, does allow the fostering of religion in public schools and not only promotion of the No Establishment clause. Ideally the teaching of morality is permissible, provided that it covers the plurality of belief systems within a school; however, in practice, this has not been the case. Dr. Thomas Hunt, Associate Professor of Social and Historical Foundations of Education at Virginia Tech, argues, "that public schools have emphasized, without ill intent, the "No Establishment" clause of the First Amendment at the expense of the "Free Exercise" clause."[23] The emphasis on religious neutrality since the 1960s has not allowed the free exercise of religion or moral education necessary for students. Public schools have

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[19] Curren, *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education*, 220.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Aristotle, *Politics*, 168.

[22] Hunt, Thomas C. "Public Schools and Moral Education: An American Dilemma." *Religious Education*, vol. 74, no. 4, 1979, 361.

[23] Ibid., 372.

stressed the No Establishment clause to address plurality to the expense of teaching moral education. Aristotle would argue against this, and approve of the voucher system as the suitable means to addressing this issue.

Aristotle would argue that the telos of religious and private schools is not religious indoctrination, but the moral formation of its students. One example of school system that emphasizes moral formation is the Jesuit school system, which educates for morally formed citizenry without Catholic religious indoctrination. In fact, they have even educated figures who are vehemently anti-Catholic, such as "Voltaire [and] Descartes in France," and "in the U.S. it would be ludicrous to maintain that Jesuit schools such as Fordham Prep and Brooklyn Prep in New York City do not foster in their students a strong commitment to the ideals of the U.S. Constitution"[24] The Jesuit school system produces good citizenry out of a pluralistic number of students, while maintaining its commitments to the U.S. Constitution. Aristotle would approve of a public policy to provide parents the choice to send students to a Jesuit school with vouchers, seeing that this school system has an upmost commitment to moral formation. For Aristotle, the "citizen should be molded to suit the form of government under which he lives," for a citizen is formed with a "character of democracy" and "always the better [his] character, the better the government."[25] Religious and private schools clearly create the character in students to serve not only their communities, but also the system of American democracy.

In conclusion, Aristotle would argue that there is a strong need for moral education not provided by public schools, and would approve the implementation of a national voucher system. The current state of public school education is focused on meeting test standards, and pushing the No Establishment clause to the point that moral education can no longer be taught. Although Aristotle's social context was vastly different, his concern for moral education is just as salient for ancient Athens as it is for our time. He would argue that the voucher system allows small moral communities to flourish, and that the telos for education is for moral and academic formation not for religious indoctrination. Moreover, funding private and religious schools cultivates the virtue of tolerance more than public schools, by building strong self-identities and self-esteem in students. Funding these schools does not violate Supreme Court decisions on religious neutrality, nor does it go against the No Establishment clause. The recent political movement for a national voucher system is something Aristotle would see as conducive towards providing a full education for American citizens. Without moral formation, education becomes a bureaucratic system to meet testing standards, a means to acquire success and power, and an experiment in unrestrained pluralism that ignores the need for small communities and habit-forming character development.

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[25] Aristotle, *Politics,* 195.

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