

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION OF SOCRATES AND PLATO: EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS METHODS AND VALUES FOR CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

[A FILOSOFIA DA EDUCAÇÃO DE SÓCRATES E PLATÃO: FUNDAMENTOS EPISTEMOLÓGICOS, MÉTODOS E VALORES PARA A EDUCAÇÃO CONTEMPORÂNEA]

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**ABSTRACT:** Ancient Greek educational philosophy, particularly the thought of Socrates and Plato, laid the foundations of the Western educational tradition and continues to exert a profound influence on contemporary educational thinking. This article provides a systematic analysis of the philosophy of education of Socrates and Plato, focusing on three core dimensions: conceptions of knowledge and cognition; the aims and nature of education; and educational methods and the role of the teacher. On this basis, the paper identifies both the similarities and the differences between the two philosophers, while clarifying the theoretical value and practical significance of Socratic, Platonic educational thought for current educational reform, especially in the context of education oriented toward competency development, critical thinking, and civic virtues. The findings indicate that Socratic educational philosophy emphasizes dialogue, reflection, and self-knowledge, whereas Plato develops a systematic model of education closely linked to political and moral ideals. The combination of these two traditions provides an important foundation for constructing a humanistic, liberal, and sustainable educational philosophy in the twenty-first century.

**KEYWORDS:** philosophy of education; Socrates; Plato; dialogue; liberal education; knowledge

**RESUMO:** A filosofia educativa da Grécia Antiga, em particular o pensamento de Sócrates e de Platão, estabeleceu os fundamentos da tradição educativa ocidental e continua a exercer profunda influência no pensamento educativo contemporâneo. Este artigo fornece uma análise sistemática da filosofia da educação de Sócrates e Platão com foco em três dimensões centrais: concepções de conhecimento e cognição, os objetivos e a natureza da educação, os métodos educacionais e o papel do professor. Com base nisso, o artigo identifica tanto as semelhanças quanto as diferenças entre os dois filósofos enquanto esclarece o valor teórico e a relevância prática do pensamento educativo socrático e platônico para a reforma educacional atual, particularmente no contexto de uma educação orientada para o desenvolvimento de competências, pensamento crítico e virtudes cívicas. Os resultados indicam que a filosofia educacional socrática enfatiza o diálogo, a reflexão e o autoconhecimento, enquanto o pensamento educacional de Platão desenvolve um modelo sistemático de educação intrinsecamente ligado a ideais políticos e morais. A combinação dessas duas tradições fornece uma base importante para a construção de uma filosofia educacional humanista, liberal e sustentável no século XXI.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Filosofia da educação; Sócrates; Platão; diálogo; educação liberal; conhecimento

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been regarded as one of the central issues of philosophy, as it is closely connected to the most fundamental questions concerning human beings and society. Every educational theory, regardless of historical period, contains certain philosophical assumptions about human nature, human cognitive capacities, and the ultimate goals of social life (O’hear, 2012). When asking who human beings are, how knowledge is formed and acquired, or how society should be organized so that individuals can develop in a comprehensive and harmonious manner, philosophy cannot be separated from education as a decisive sphere of practice. Education, therefore, is not merely an activity of knowledge transmission or skill training, but a fundamental means of shaping personality, orienting values, and sustaining social order. From the very beginning of Western philosophy, ancient Greek thinkers recognized the crucial role of education for both individuals and communities. In the context of the flourishing political, cultural, and civic life of the Greek city-states, education was regarded as a prerequisite for cultivating rational, moral individuals capable of participating in public life. It is no coincidence that educational issues frequently appeared in philosophical debates concerning virtue, justice, the state, and the good life. Within this intellectual tradition, the ideas of Socrates and Plato emerged as two major milestones, laying the foundations for a tradition of educational philosophy that has persisted for centuries (Tountas, 2009).

Socrates is often considered to have brought about a fundamental turning point in the history of philosophy by shifting the focus of inquiry from explaining the natural world to examining human beings, moral life, and the meaning of knowledge. Unlike the pre-Socratic philosophers, who were primarily concerned with the principles of the cosmos, Socrates concentrated on the question of how human beings ought to live in order to become virtuous persons. His entire philosophical activity was closely associated with educational practice in the public sphere, conducted through dialogue, questioning, and refutation. For Socrates, education was not the transmission of ready-made knowledge from teacher to student, but a process of intellectual awakening through which individuals became aware of their own ignorance and gradually approached truth through rational reflection (Ausland, 2006). The distinctive feature of Socratic educational philosophy lies in its deep moral orientation. Knowledge and virtue are not separated but are intimately connected in human life. According to Socrates, a person can act rightly only when they truly understand the good, and such understanding cannot be attained through rote learning or passive reception. Consequently, the Socratic method of dialogue serves not merely to test knowledge, but to cultivate critical thinking, intellectual honesty, and reflective self-examination, qualities that constitute the core of an educated person.

Plato, as Socrates’ most outstanding student, not only recorded his teacher’s ideas but also developed them into a comprehensive philosophical

system. Whereas Socrates primarily functioned as an educator through dialogical practice, Plato placed education at the center of a structured philosophical, political theory. In his works, especially *The Republic*, Plato articulated a coherent conception of the relationship between knowledge, education, and social order. For him, education was not only concerned with personal perfection but also played a decisive role in establishing and maintaining a just state. Unlike Socrates, Plato strongly emphasized the systematic and directive nature of education. He argued that human beings are not born equal in cognitive capacity, and therefore education must be organized into different stages and levels, corresponding to individuals' natural abilities. Through education, society could identify, select, and train the most capable individuals to assume leadership roles. In Plato's thought, education is simultaneously intellectually liberating and morally disciplinary, guiding the human soul toward the good and toward truth (Williams, 2010).

In the contemporary educational context, the world is facing profound challenges such as a crisis of values, the instrumentalization of education, and the decline of critical thinking among learners. Education is increasingly dominated by short-term efficiency criteria, market-oriented skills, and competitive pressures, while humanistic and moral aims risk being marginalized. In this situation, revisiting the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato is not merely of historical interest but possesses clear contemporary relevance. Socratic thought offers modern education a model of learning grounded in dialogue, reflection, and active learner participation, while Plato's educational system raises fundamental questions about the role of education in shaping citizenship and maintaining social order. Examining and comparing these two traditions helps to clarify the deep philosophical foundations of education and contributes to reorienting educational aims and methods in the contemporary context.

On this basis, the present article analyzes the core elements of the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato, elucidates their relationship of inheritance and development, and identifies important theoretical implications for current educational reform oriented toward humanistic, liberal, and sustainable development (Danvers, 2021).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato have been widely examined throughout the history of Western philosophy. Classical works by Aristotle, Cicero, and later Augustine all acknowledged the profound influence of these two philosophers on ancient educational thought. In modern scholarship, Socrates is frequently regarded as a symbol of dialogical education and critical thinking, while Plato is considered the founder of a systematic and institutional theory of education. Studies on Socrates commonly focus on the "Socratic method," emphasizing the role of questioning, refutation, and self-awareness in the learning process. From this perspective, education is not the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, but a process that enables learners to recognize their own ignorance and gradually approach truth through dialogue.

Research on Plato primarily centers on works such as *The Republic*, *The Laws*, and *Meno*, in which education is closely linked to politics and ethics. Many scholars have noted that Plato's educational model is elitist in nature, aiming to train a class of morally and intellectually qualified leaders to guide society. However, some studies tend to treat Socrates and Plato as two separate and independent systems, without sufficiently clarifying the relationship of continuity and development between their educational ideas. This article adopts an integrative approach, viewing Socratic educational philosophy as a methodological foundation and Plato as the thinker who systematized and expanded that foundation into a comprehensive educational theory.

This study employs dialectical materialism and historical materialism as its principal methodological framework in order to analyze the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato in a systematic and comprehensive manner. These methods make it possible to approach philosophical ideas not merely as abstract doctrines, but as intellectual products closely connected to specific historical and social conditions and to the dynamic development of human thought.

Dialectical materialism is used to examine the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato in terms of their totality, dynamism, and internal contradictions. From this perspective, concepts of education, knowledge, and human beings are not treated as static or immutable, but as categories that evolve through the interaction of opposing elements. The analysis of the relationships between knowledge and morality, the individual and the community, and intellectual freedom and social discipline in Socratic, Platonic educational thought is conducted within a dialectical framework, thereby clarifying both the unity and the differences between the two systems. This approach also helps to reveal the process through which educational thought developed from Socrates to Plato, marking a transition from dialogical educational practice to a more structured and systematic model. Historical materialism is employed to situate the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato within the concrete historical and social context of ancient Greece. Educational ideas are not analyzed as purely individual intellectual products, but as reflections of the economic, political, cultural, and social conditions of the Greek city-states, particularly Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Through this method, the article elucidates the connections between their educational ideas and contemporary social transformations, such as the development of Athenian democracy, the crisis of traditional values, and the need to educate rational and moral citizens.

The combination of dialectical materialism and historical materialism enables the article to move beyond mere description of educational ideas and to analyze the formative dynamics, internal logic, and historical, practical significance of Socratic, Platonic educational thought. On this basis, the article objectively assesses their role and significance in the development of Western educational philosophy and draws theoretical implications relevant to contemporary educational reform.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### **3.1. Conceptions of Knowledge and Cognition**

In Socrates' philosophy, knowledge is not understood as the mere accumulation of external information or technical skills, but is intimately connected with moral life and the inner perfection of the human being. Socrates maintained that the deepest essence of knowledge lies in understanding the good, and that only when individuals truly comprehend the good can they act rightly (LaBarge, 2005). This view leads to the well-known thesis that knowledge and virtue are internally unified: moral error results from cognitive deficiency. From this perspective, cognition is not a passive reception of ready-made truths, but a process of self-discovery through dialogue and self-examination. Socrates frequently employed questioning to expose contradictions in his interlocutors' thinking, thereby enabling them to recognize the limits of their own understanding. The admission of "not knowing" becomes the starting point of genuine knowledge. Thus, in Socratic philosophy, knowledge is internal and emergent, uncovered through reason rather than imposed from without.

Plato inherited this basic conception but developed it into a more profound metaphysical theory of knowledge. According to Plato, genuine knowledge cannot arise from the sensible world, which is constantly changing and unstable and provides only vague perceptions. In contrast, the world of Forms consists of immutable, perfect, and universal entities. Knowledge, therefore, is the cognition of these Forms, especially the Form of the Good, the Beautiful, and the Just. Accordingly, Plato understood education as a process of "recollection" (anamnesis), through which the human soul gradually recalls universal truths it had contemplated before entering the body. Cognition is thus not simply learning something new, but a progressive elevation from sensory perception to rational understanding and finally to philosophical knowledge. This conception provides a crucial theoretical foundation for Plato's educational philosophy, in which education guides the human soul toward ultimate truth (Smith, 2000).

### **3.2. The Aims of Education**

Based on his conception of knowledge as inseparable from morality, Socrates defined the fundamental aim of education as enabling individuals to live a reflective, responsible, and morally oriented life. Education is not intended to train individuals to adapt mechanically to society, but to help them become persons capable of evaluating their actions rationally and ethically. A life that is "unexamined," according to Socrates, is not worth living, and education is the path by which individuals escape such a condition. In Socratic philosophy, the aim of education is deeply personal, focusing on character formation and moral autonomy (Demirci, 2012). Education does not serve immediate practical interests, nor is it confined to occupational skills. Instead, it seeks to cultivate individuals capable of dialogue with themselves and others, of questioning, reflecting, and taking responsibility for their choices within the community.

Plato extended the aim of education beyond the individual, situating it within the framework of social order and political ideals. For Plato,

education not only perfects individuals but also constructs a just society, in which each person fulfills a role appropriate to their nature and abilities. The ultimate aim of Platonic education is to cultivate individuals capable of governing society with wisdom and virtue, particularly the class of “philosopher-kings.” Unlike Socrates, Plato emphasized stratification and direction in education. He argued that not all individuals are capable of attaining the highest level of knowledge; therefore, education must be organized into stages, ranging from physical training and music for children to mathematics, dialectics, and philosophy for the most capable. Through education, society can identify and nurture exceptional individuals while maintaining harmony and stability (Kotsonis, 2020).

### *3.3. Educational Methods and the Role of the Teacher*

In Socratic educational practice, method occupies a central position. Socrates famously compared himself to a “midwife of the soul,” who does not give birth to knowledge but assists others in giving birth to their own insights. The teacher, in this view, does not possess absolute truth nor impose knowledge upon learners, but facilitates and guides the process of thinking through dialogue and questioning. The Socratic method emphasizes equality in dialogue and regards learners as active subjects of cognition. Through continuous questioning and critical examination, learners develop logical thinking, identify contradictions, and refine their understanding. The teacher’s role is therefore more orientational than controlling, aiming to foster independent thinking and intellectual freedom.

Plato, while maintaining the importance of dialogue, placed greater emphasis on organization, curriculum, and discipline. In Platonic educational philosophy, the teacher is not merely a dialogical partner but a guide who leads the learner’s soul along a carefully designed path aligned with the objectives and structure of the educational system. Education does not occur spontaneously but follows clear principles and stages to ensure effectiveness and direction. Thus, while Socrates emphasizes openness, flexibility, and dialogue in education, Plato adds an institutional and systematic dimension. These differences reflect two complementary approaches: one focusing on the liberation of individual thought, the other emphasizing the role of education in shaping individuals and society according to ideal values (Georgiadis et al., 2021).

## **4. RESEARCH RESULTS**

The analysis demonstrates that the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato exhibit both fundamental unity and significant differences in terms of approach, degree of systematization, and social orientation. Their unity is evident in the shared conception of education as a process directed toward truth and the good, with morality occupying a central place inseparable from knowledge. Both philosophers strongly criticized the reduction of education to the mere transmission of practical skills or utilitarian knowledge, emphasizing instead the formation of rational

individuals capable of reflection and social responsibility.

A key finding of the study is the difference in educational emphasis between Socrates and Plato. Socrates focused primarily on educational method, especially dialogue and questioning, whereas Plato sought to construct a structured educational model closely tied to political order and social ideals. This difference is not exclusionary but reflects two developmental levels of educational thought: from situational and personal educational practice in Socrates to systematic and institutional educational theory in Plato. In Socrates' thought, education is fundamentally an open-ended process without a fixed endpoint. Through dialogue, learners are placed in a state of methodical doubt, compelled to re-examine beliefs previously taken for granted. The outcome of this process is not necessarily the attainment of complete truth, but the development of critical thinking and continuous self-reflection. Education thus becomes a lifelong activity inseparable from moral life and self-perfection. This represents Socrates' distinctive contribution to educational philosophy, laying the foundation for liberal education and dialogical learning.

By contrast, Plato retained the spirit of Socratic dialogue while addressing its lack of systematization by constructing a comprehensive educational theory. In Plato's philosophy, education is not merely an interaction between teacher and student but a social institution essential to maintaining order and justice. Education is organized into clearly defined stages corresponding to different levels of cognitive development and ability, ensuring that individuals assume roles appropriate to their capacities. This reflects a shift from education as personal practice to education as a mechanism of social organization. Another significant finding is the clarification of the relationship of inheritance and development between the two philosophies. Plato did not simply replicate Socratic ideas but elevated dialogical education into a theoretical framework integrated with doctrines of knowledge, the soul, and the state. While Socrates asked how individuals ought to live, Plato expanded the question to how society should be organized to enable a good life. Education thus becomes a bridge between individual morality and political order.

The study also reveals the enduring value of Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy for contemporary education, particularly in an era dominated by utilitarian and market-oriented pressures. Against the tendency to view education primarily as workforce training or economic productivity enhancement, their thought reasserts education's fundamental role in forming moral subjects and responsible citizens. Re-centering ethics in education is one of the most important contributions of classical educational philosophy to modern educational thinking. Another notable finding concerns the role of critical thinking. In Socrates, critical thinking is cultivated through dialogue and questioning, preventing passive acceptance of beliefs. In Plato, critical thinking is elevated to dialectical reasoning, enabling individuals to distinguish apparent truth from genuine truth. The integration of these approaches offers a strong theoretical foundation for fostering critical thinking in contemporary education, especially amid information overload and value pluralism. The findings also highlight the significance of civic education in Socratic, Platonic philosophy. Through public dialogue, Socrates fostered civic consciousness and social responsibility, while Plato

designed an educational system aimed at preparing citizens for political participation and governance. These ideas suggest an approach to civic education that goes beyond legal or political instruction to encompass moral character, judgment, and responsibility. Although Plato's educational philosophy is elitist and potentially controversial in egalitarian modern societies, its core principles regarding the alignment of education, ability, and social responsibility retain heuristic value. When applied flexibly and humanely, ability-based differentiation in education may enhance quality while avoiding superficial egalitarianism (Ramsey, 2009).

Finally, the study affirms that applying Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy to contemporary education should be critical and selective rather than mechanical. Modern education can learn from Socrates the spirit of dialogue, intellectual freedom, and reflection, and from Plato the value of systematic vision and social orientation. Their synthesis can help overcome the limitations of skill-centered and short-term efficiency-driven education, contributing to the development of a holistic, sustainable, and human-centered educational system.

### **LINKING SOCRATIC, PLATONIC EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY TO CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION IN VIETNAM**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato are not merely of historical significance, but also possess important referential value for contemporary educational contexts, including that of Vietnam. In the process of comprehensive and fundamental educational reform, Vietnam is confronted with the dual challenge of enhancing the quality of human resources while simultaneously ensuring the holistic development of individuals in terms of knowledge, morality, and social responsibility. Within this context, a selective and critical application of Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy can offer valuable theoretical insights.

First, Socratic educational thought holds particular significance for the development of critical thinking and learner autonomy in Vietnamese education. In practice, one of the long-standing limitations of Vietnam's education system has been its emphasis on knowledge transmission, memorization, and information reproduction, while insufficient attention has been paid to learners' capacity for questioning, critical reflection, and independent judgment. The Socratic method of dialogue, prioritizing questions over ready-made answers and recognizing learners as active subjects of cognition, suggests an approach to learner-centered education in its philosophical sense, rather than as a mere methodological slogan. Applying the Socratic spirit in Vietnamese education does not imply rejecting scientific knowledge or standardized curricula, but rather enriching teaching and learning with dimensions of reflection and dialogue. In the context of the current general education curriculum, which emphasizes competency-based education and learner development, Socratic educational philosophy can deepen the cultivation of competencies such as self-directed learning, problem-solving, and communication and collaboration. Education, from this perspective, is not limited to teaching learners what to do, but also

enables them to understand why they should act in certain ways and what moral responsibilities accompany their actions.

At the same time, Plato's educational philosophy offers important insights for constructing a systematic vision and social orientation for education in Vietnam. Under the conditions of a socialist-oriented market economy, Vietnamese education is under considerable pressure to respond to labor market demands. This pressure risks narrowing educational objectives to short-term vocational skill training. Plato's thought, which places education at the center of social order and civic formation, reminds us that education should not serve economic growth alone, but also fulfill the mission of cultivating individuals with leadership capacity, civic responsibility, and a long-term vision oriented toward the common good. Plato's conception of the alignment between education, ability, and social roles also provides Vietnam with a more flexible approach to educational differentiation. In reality, Vietnamese education continues to experience tension between ensuring equal access and improving educational quality. Plato's philosophy suggests that educational equity does not necessarily mean uniformity, but rather the creation of conditions that allow individuals to fully develop their capacities and contribute appropriately to society. When applied humanely and in accordance with contemporary conditions, this principle may enhance the effectiveness of policies on educational streaming, vocational education, and talent development.

Another significant point of connection concerns moral and value education. Both Socrates and Plato regard morality as an inseparable foundation of education. In the current Vietnamese context, where moral education faces challenges arising from globalization, digital transformation, and increasing materialism, returning to an educational conception grounded in the pursuit of the good and social responsibility is particularly meaningful. Socrates' emphasis on the examined life and Plato's orientation toward the highest good may contribute to enriching moral education beyond formalistic or purely normative approaches. Furthermore, Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy offers valuable reference points for higher education in Vietnam. As universities face mounting pressure from rankings, research output, and labor market relevance, there is a growing risk that liberal education and philosophical reflection may be marginalized. The Socratic spirit of dialogue, critical inquiry, and truth-seeking, combined with Plato's holistic educational vision, suggests the need for Vietnamese higher education to strike a balance between professional training and the cultivation of intellectual foundations, ethical awareness, and social responsibility.

From a methodological standpoint, applying Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy to the Vietnamese context must be undertaken in a critical and selective manner. It is neither possible nor desirable to mechanically replicate ancient educational models in a modern society. However, core principles such as dialogical learning, the centrality of moral development, and the intrinsic connection between education and social development remain highly relevant. The integration of Socratic openness with Platonic systematic vision may contribute to shaping an educational philosophy in Vietnam that is both humanistic and modern, aligned with the goals of sustainable development.

In summary, linking the educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato to contemporary education in Vietnam highlights the enduring relevance of classical philosophical thought in illuminating and guiding current educational reform. The insights offered by these two philosophers not only enrich the theoretical foundations of Vietnamese education but also reaffirm that education, in any era, must ultimately aim at the holistic development of human beings endowed with intellectual capacity, moral integrity, and social responsibility.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The educational philosophies of Socrates and Plato are not merely historical legacies but enduring sources of inspiration for contemporary education. Socrates laid the foundation for dialogical and reflective education, while Plato constructed a comprehensive educational theory closely linked to moral and political ideals. The combination of Socratic openness and Platonic systematization yields an educational model that is both humanistic and sustainable. In the context of current educational reform, critically and selectively applying Socratic, Platonic educational philosophy can help redefine educational aims toward the holistic development of individuals endowed with independent thinking capacities and social responsibility.

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