

Overestimating Plato and Underestimating Isocrates

The Example of Thomas Jefferson

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In her article “Channeling Plato: Curriculum Differentiation in the American Comprehensive High Schools,” Rice provided a philosophical and historical account of curriculum differentiation and its ideological rationale, as well as a critique of the complicity of curriculum differentiation in the reproduction of inequality (Rice, 2012, p. 227). While the description and critique of curriculum differentiation are persuasive, I will argue that the account of its historical and philosophical origins rests on an error. It is an error that merits examination not only because it impedes our understanding of the role of comprehensive schooling in reproducing inequalities, but, much more importantly, because it is an error that is widespread in contemporary educational history and philosophy. In other words, I am primarily interested in Rice’s historical mistake because it is representative of a very common set of errors in contemporary accounts of both the history and the philosophy of education, and because those errors undermine our understanding of a number of contemporary questions of educational philosophy, policy, and practice.

I am concerned with three errors which are pervasive in contemporary educational scholarship within academic Educational Studies. The first error is to attribute implausible educational ideas and practices to Plato on the basis of a discredited Victorian caricature of his educational thought. It is a caricature that ceased to be credible decades ago as a result of renewed examination of the historical evidence by non-educationist historians and philosophers. The second error is to vastly exaggerate the historical influence Plato’s thought has had in

the history of education; in this article I am specifically concerned with claims that Thomas Jefferson's education thought is somehow influenced by "Platonism." The third error is to ignore (or to be unaware of) the far greater influence of Plato's friend and great rival, Isocrates, on both the whole of the history of education and on Jefferson specifically. It is not my intention (nor would it be possible in a short article) to provide a summary of Isocrates' educational thought; summaries of his educational ideas and practices can be found elsewhere (Muir, 2014; Muir, 2015). My intention is limited to reiterating that the history of educational thought is Isocratic rather than Platonic in origin and nature, and to arguing that Jefferson's educational thought is one example of this.

The Dominance of Isocrates in the History of Educational Thought and Practice

Rice's argument about the historical and philosophical origins of contemporary educational ideas and practices rests on an important, though initially counter-intuitive hermeneutical observation; namely, that educational theorists and policy makers can be profoundly influenced by authors they have never read or have never even heard of. It is certainly not a phenomenon without precedent in educational thought. For example, it is often observed that Dewey's educational ideas seem to be derived from the educational thought of Rousseau (e.g., Hirsch, 1987, p. xv), although Dewey himself was insistent that he had read none of Rousseau's educational writings (Kilpatrick, 1966, p. 5). Rice argues that Plato is a primary historical and philosophical source of curriculum differentiation, and of its role in the reproduction of various inequalities, even for educational thinkers who did not read his works. I will argue that the source of such ideas cannot be Plato, but rather Plato's educational rival, Isocrates. Isocrates opened his institution of higher learning long before Plato opened his Academy, attracted far more students than Plato ever did, and was much more widely known and respected than Plato. Since classical antiquity until the present day, Isocrates has always been by far the most influential educational thinker in history. I will suggest that Isocrates continues to be more influential than Plato, or anyone else in the history of education, precisely because educational scholars no longer read his works or even know that he existed, and consequently cannot recognize his ideas even as they conform to them.

For nearly a century, classical historians have argued that Isocrates is "the educator of Europe" (Newman, 1975, p. 358), "the father of modern liberal education" (Proussis, 1965, p. 74), and "one of the greatest educationalists of history" (Knowles, 1962, p. 60). As long ago as 1926,

in a book still regarded as “the basic work” on Roman education (Marrou, 1984, p. 201), Aubrey Gwynn argued that, in comparison to Plato or Aristotle, “the educational program of Isocrates demands closer attention: partly for its intrinsic interest, partly because of its immense and abiding influence on Greco-Roman education” (Gwynn, 1964, p. 46. cf. Burk, 1923; Bolgar, 1954, p. 28; Grube, 1965, pp. 38, 41, 45; Good & Teller, 1969, p. 29; Kennedy, 1980, p. 31; Colish, 1997, p. 5). The distinguished classicist historian of education, Henri-Irene Marrou, also argued, on the basis of a meticulous analysis of the original sources, that Isocrates’ theory of education overcame the opposing theory offered by Plato.

The importance of this fact must be emphasized from the beginning.

On the level of history Plato had been defeated: he had failed to impose his educational ideal on posterity. It was Isocrates who defeated him, and who became the educator first of Greece, and subsequently of the whole of the ancient world. (Marrou, 1948, I, p. 292; cf. p. 128. My translation)

Beginning in classical antiquity, our conceptions of most branches of philosophy have derived from Plato and the Socratics, but our conception of educational philosophy derived almost entirely from Isocrates (Muir, 2005).

The dominance of the educational thought and practices of Isocrates did not end in classical antiquity. The medieval period is an especially rich one in the history of educational thought and practice, though rarely studied in English-language scholarship (Colish, 1997, p. x; Actes, 1969; Riche, 1962). The educational ideas and practices of the medieval period also derived from Isocrates, and were transmitted through Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East (Muir, 1995). In his indispensable work, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, Curtius observes that “Despite sporadic theoretical opposition, Isocrates’ standpoint remained authoritative in practice for the whole of antiquity” (Curtius, 1953, p. 36-37). Or, in the words of medievalist David Knowles:

Great and permanent, even in this field, as was the influence of the two philosophers [Plato and Aristotle], the victory and the future lay with Isocrates. (Knowles, 1962, p. 61. cf. Grube, 1965, p. 38)

It was the Isocratic tradition that gave us liberal education and the seven liberal arts, including the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* (Muir, 2005). As Finley has confirmed, the Isocratic version of liberal education “passed from the ancient Greeks to the Byzantine world, from the Romans to the Latin West,” where it continued to dominate medieval education in Europe (Clarke, 1971, p. 2; Finley, 1975, p. 199; cf. Hadas, 1962, p. 172; Marrou, 1948, p. 128).

During the Renaissance of the 15th century, the European recovery of the Greek texts of Plato and Aristotle initiated a renewal of the classical debate in educational thought between the Socratic philosophers and the Isocratic rhetors (Breen, 1952, pp. 384-426; Curtius, 1953; Sidney, 1973, p. 20). Once again however, it was the Isocratic idea of education which emerged triumphant over the Socratic in practice, and it remained the more influential idea of education well into the 18th century. As Powell noted:

Although Plato is better known and more highly regarded today, Isocrates had a much greater influence than his rival during the Hellenistic and Roman periods and down into modern times, for until the eighteenth century education in most European schools was based on his principles. (Powell, 2002, p. 1. Cf. Wareh, 2014; Good & Teller, 1969, p. 30)

Generations of classical scholars and historians of educational thought have argued that Isocrates' educational ideas were—and still are—more influential in the history of educational thought and practice than those of any other classical thinker, from third century BC until well into the 18th century and the beginnings of contemporary state schooling.

The influence of Isocrates' educational ideas did not end in the 18th century. On the contrary, practical problems in contemporary (state) schooling, such as class inequality, gender inequality, the low and 'un-professional' status of teachers, some of the difficulties faced by non-traditional students, and the 'vocationalization' of schooling have been traced directly to the continuing influence of Isocrates (e.g., Finley, 1975; Hadas, 1962, pp. 62-63, p. 103; Power, 1962, p. 102; Welch, 1999, Ch. 2). There is, when we turn to a careful study of the history of education, no exaggeration in Marrou's conclusion that

Isocrates' ideas and the system of education which put them into practice reigned virtually unchallenged in Western Europe almost to our own generation [i.e., 1984]. (Marrou, 1984, p. 200. Cf. Finley, 1975, p. 208; Good and Teller, 1969, p. 29; Hadas, 1962, p. 103; Jaeger, 1947, Vol. 3, p. 46; Kimball, 1986, p. 11; Knowles, 1988, p. 55; Powell, 2002; Welch, 1999, Ch. 2).

Finally, the conclusions of the past four generations of classicist research into the history of education, as summarized by Moses Hadas, gives an indication of the pervasive influence of Isocrates.

It was the program of Isocrates which has shaped European education to this day, which has kept humanism alive, and which has given Western civilization such unity as it possesses. (Hadas, 1969, p. 129. Cf. Laistner, 1957b, p. 447)

The unequalled influence and profundity of the educational philosophy and practices of Isocrates, from classical antiquity until the present day, has been widely recognized and discussed by historical scholars for nearly a century. The ample historical evidence and philosophical evaluation readily available in the many works produced by these scholars has documented the centrality of Isocrates' educational thought in the whole history of the Liberal Arts, liberal education, humanism and the origins and the humanities, the origin and nature of state schooling, and much more. It is astonishing, then, that when we turn to the historical works of educationists and philosophers of education working in academic Education Departments we find that Isocrates is never discussed and rarely even mentioned at all.

Despite ample historical evidence of Isocrates' unequalled influence in the history of educational thought and practice, and despite the classical and historical scholarship of the past century which has demonstrated that influence, the impression given by educationist histories of education is that Isocrates never existed. To mention only a few major reference sources, histories of education, and encyclopedia articles by educationists and philosophers, such as those by Dewey (1913a), Ulich (1954), Butts (1955), Castle (1961), Beck (1964), Curtis and Boulton (1965), Nakosteen (1965), Baskin (1966), Boyd (1966), Price (1967), Garner and Cohen (1967), Hirst (1971), Bowen (1972), Kaminsky (1993), Noddings (1995), Rorty (1998), Palmer (2001), or Murphy (2006) provide no discussion of Isocrates' educational ideas and influence, and most do not even mention Isocrates at all (Muir, 2005). These texts are largely written by specialists in other subjects, and do not provide histories of educational philosophy derived from the historical record. On the contrary, these texts are derived from the assumption that the most influential philosophers must be the most influential philosophers of education; for example, the assumption that if Plato is the first or most influential philosopher, then he must be the first and most influential philosopher of education too. This assumption is false: philosophy of education has its own history and its own key thinkers, which sometimes overlap the history of philosophy generally but very often do not (Marrou, 1948, 1984; Kimball, 1986; Muir, 2004, 2005). A more adequate and evidence-based account of the history of educational ideas may help us to better understand the historical and philosophical sources of curriculum differentiation specifically, and the inadequacy of contemporary accounts of the history of educational thought generally.

**The Victorian Plato:
Latinate Misinterpretations and Victorian Mistranslations**

Over the past century or so, one of the most salient and calamitous features of the study of the history and philosophy of education is the large and rapid advances made by non-educationists in comparison with the simultaneous stultification of historical study within academic Departments of Education. It is within the Education Departments of our universities that we should expect the greatest interest and competence in the study of the history of educational philosophy, ideas, policy, and practice. Yet with the partial and inconsistent exception of historical study of state schooling, historical study and even elementary knowledge of the history of educational philosophy and ideas stagnated and then effectively stopped in the late 1800s. It has neither progressed nor even changed much since then within Educational Studies, and the result has been three or four generations of accounts of the history of education which are rendered all but useless by large numbers of elementary errors and even larger omissions (Muir, 2004, 2005). The almost total absence of study of Isocrates in the texts I described above is but one example. I turn now to one of the consequences of such errors and omissions, the survival of Victorian trivializations and literalist misrepresentations of Platonic educational thought which have been transmitted throughout contemporary educational thought by the twin Mephistopheles' of historical study, the popular textbook and "what everyone knows."

It is under the influence of such interpretations that Rice uses what she calls "The Myth of the Metals" as evidence that Plato was committed to some form of curriculum differentiation which discriminated against people on the basis of class (and perhaps sex as well). According to her, Plato proposes that each person contains within themselves either gold, silver, or bronze, and that each person is educated for a specific economic role and social status according to their metal (Rice, 2012, p. 233). There are three problems with her argument: (1) both the phrase and the concept "Myth of the Metals" are attributed to Plato, and neither appears in his text; (2) the discussion of metals in the soul of all persons is one part of a larger allegorical image within Plato's argument, and can neither be separated from the whole nor interpreted literally; and (3) the educational beliefs and practices attributed to Plato are contrary to the beliefs and practices for which we have direct historical evidence.

Plato's use of allegorical images to convey ideas that are most contrary to the prejudices of his time and place is (or used to be) well known (e.g., Brisson, 1982). The "myth" of the metals to which Rice refers is, in fact, one part of such an image which Plato calls The Noble Lie (Rep.

414b-c). There is no separate myth of metals and indeed no myth at all. Rice arbitrarily rips the metals discussion out of the image of the Noble Lie of which it is a part, interprets that now fragmented image literally as if it was a practical proposal, and then attributes that literal fragment to Plato as evidence that he favors curriculum differentiation. It is evidence of no such thing. Plato is arguing that rulers are more likely to rule in the common interest rather than in their own self-interest if they are habituated to believe the Noble Lie that all citizens are brothers and sisters—one family—born of the same mother Earth. The Greek phrase for Noble Lie (*gemmaion psuedos*) cannot be translated into “myth,” and certainly not into anything like “Myth of the Metals”: such phrases are not translations or interpretations, but rather attributions which impose upon Plato what “everyone knows” he meant rather than what he did say.

To be more specific, Plato’s discussion of metals in the soul is explicitly said to be a part of an allegorical image, not a literal fact and not a practical proposal for something that could actually be done or even tried (*Rep.* 414c, 415d). It is odd that we do not normally interpret images literally, and yet insist on doing so with the works of poor Plato: if I were to say that I laughed my head off last night, no one would interpret that image of a mouth wide open with laughter as if it were a literal humor-inflicted beheading. Yet Plato’s allegorical images are interpreted literally in just such a way. The Noble Lie (and the metals of the soul image within that) is not a literal proposal, and immediately after it is articulated it is rejected as preposterously impractical: the idea is rejected shortly after it is proposed, and replaced with the Three Waves before they too are rejected (*Rep.* 415d). Such a literally interpreted, fabricated fragment of an allegorical image is no evidence that Plato advocated any kind of curriculum differentiation.

The combination of literal interpretation and inaccurate Victorian translations still found in textbooks is no doubt another source of the belief that Plato’s educational ideas and practices differentiated among student according to sex, social class, or civil status. In his well known passage concerning the best life (*Apology* 38a), for example, Jowett’s 1871 translation attributes to Plato the opinion that the examined life is the best life for men. Plato, however, makes a clear distinction between *aner* (man/male) and *anthropos* (human being/member of the human species), and argues that the best life, the philosophical life, is for human beings. More generally, the historical records we do have concerning Plato’s educational practices make it very clear that he was well known—one might say notorious—in his day because he did *not* differentiate education according to the sex, social class, or civil status of his students.

This is not surprising in the light of Plato's obvious admiration for, and emulation of Socrates [e.g. Plato, *Ep.* 7]. Plato's dialogues represent Socrates conversing with and learning from men and women, rich and poor, slaves, *metics*, and citizens. This Socratic example was mimetically emulated by Plato when he opened his Academy, and did not charge fees to those wishing to attend as students. Far from merely reproducing the inequalities of his time, Plato admitted citizens, *metics* and foreigners, men and women, rich and poor students to his Academy, and educated them all the same (e.g. Diogenes Laertius 3.46). The once common belief that the Academy was intended to prepare the aristocracy to rule was an artifact of contemporary polemic rather than a description based on historical evidence (Schofield, 2000, 293). Furthermore, the undifferentiating educational practices of Socrates and Plato were sustained in the educational practices of Plato's followers, including neo-Platonists such as Plotinus. Plotinus defied both ridicule and the conventions of his day by educating foreigners and women equally with the free men (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 9). The Platonic tradition is not so much the historical source of curriculum differentiation as the source of an alternative to it.

Rice's account of Plato's supposed curriculum differentiation is also constructed on a foundation of old and implausible conventional opinions which are still widely assumed in Educational Studies. The conventions are too many to discuss here, but one is worth mentioning. While education is discussed in many of Plato's dialogues, the longest and most sustained discussions are found in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*. The *Republic* explicates philosophical education, while the *Laws* explicates political education, although in part as preparation for philosophical education. Any adequate articulation of Platonic educational thought must take account of the arguments of both texts, and especially the relation between them (see L'Arrivee, 2008). What is most unfortunate is that contemporary educationist accounts of Plato's understanding of the relationship between education and political customs are still based almost entirely on the (Victorian) *Republic*, and largely ignore the arguments of the *Laws* which are directly concerned with this relationship. This interpretive error is not limited to the works of Plato. To mention one example, educationist interpreters of Rousseau still misinterpret his *Emile* by treating its explicit allegory in which a boy is used as an image of the history of the human species as if it was a literal manual for the "child centered" education of a boy by expensive private tutors (e.g. some articles collected in Davis, 2014)—an error Rousseau himself corrected in his retrospective *Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire*—while ignoring both the second volume of that work, the *Julie*, and ignoring especially his writings directly concerned with political education, such as

the fourth chapter of his *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*. Educationist accounts of the entire history of educational philosophy, and of almost all the major thinkers that comprise it, have long needed to be re-discovered and then reconstructed from the ground up.

Rice's argument also rests on the presupposition of improbable but common conceptions of Plato's thought; specifically, that Plato's educational programme consists of preparing "philosopher kings" to rule an "ideal state", and that all this somehow derives from a Socrates who "knew only that he knew nothing," and who uses the "Socratic method" of conversational question and answer. None of this is actually found in Plato, but was attributed to him by Victorian and later interpreters and translators, such as Benjamin Jowett and Maurice Cornford, and then transmitted in simplistic form to several generations of student through textbooks which used those versions. For example, the "ideal state Plato" is an artifact of Benjamin Jowett's inaccurate translations, in which Plato's "city-in-speech" as an image of the soul [*Rep.* 368a] is transformed into a literal "ideal state" by mistranslation. Similarly, in Cornford's 1941 highly abridged translation (large parts of the text are simply deleted!), Plato's "philosopher and king" is transformed from an image of the soul in the third part of the eighth step in the eight-step argument of The Longer Road [*Rep.* 435d to 543c] into an isolated, one-step, literal political prescription. Thus the philosopher-king described by Socrates (*Rep.* 473d) is transformed from an image of the nature of justice—that is, a soul which unifies the virtues of reason, will, and desire with power—into a literal political proposal, despite Socrates' own repeated insistence that the very idea of such a ruler is paradoxical and therefore quite impossible (e.g., *Rep.* 471d-e). Even more fundamentally than this, the justice that Socrates discusses is not political justice. The entire discussion begins at *Rep.* 368a, where the interlocutors agree to use the city-in-speech as an image of the human soul: the discussion concerns justice in the human soul, not political justice primarily or directly. Consequently, when they do come to define justice, they define it as a unity of the virtues of each of the three parts of the soul, reason, will, and desire: justice is the unity of the virtues of wisdom, courage, and moderation/self-guidance (the term $\delta\upsilon\omicron\nu\tilde{\nu}\acute{\omicron}\acute{\gamma}\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ being untranslatable by any single English word) in the soul (*Rep.* 427e-432d).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Socrates never says that he knows nothing or even that he is ignorant. This caricature of Socrates derives from an English mistranslation of a Latin paraphrase of Plato's Greek text (Cicero, *Academia*, 1.1). On the contrary, in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates repeatedly states that he has knowledge of many things, and argues that he is ignorant only "of what is noble and good"

or “of the most important things” (Plato, *Apology* 21d). Even then, Plato does specify one exception to his ignorance of the most important things. That exception is his knowledge of the science of *eros*, the science of passionate longing for knowledge that is the source of philosophy especially, which he learned from the woman Diotima (*Symposium* 201d-212a). The philosophers, argues Socrates, are the most erotic of beings because they desire above all “to contemplate all Being and all time” (*Rep.* 475b-486a). Philosophy of education desperately needs to correct the still lingering Victorian caricature of a Latinate interpretation of Plato’s educational thought, and to recover Plato’s much more interesting arguments for the independence of education from political goals and agendas, and for the autonomy of education generally (e.g., Muir, 1999b).

A good place to begin such a re-interpretation is Plato’s image and argument of “The Longer Road,” including the images of the Line, the Cave, and the Ladder of Learning which describes an educational detour from the shorter road of the intellectual habits of political-theological life to the longer road of philosophical education (*Rep.* 449b, 543c). In the course of that ‘detour’—which occupies nearly half of the *Republic*—Plato is very clear that dialectic is a method of reasoning, not merely a mode of conversing and certainly nothing as trite as “question and answer.” The dialectic method is clearly outlined in Plato’s dialogue *Parmenides*, and consists of the use of the Law of Contradiction to evaluate the results of a series of hypothetical deductions from necessary opposites. To reduce the extensive educational preparation outlined in The Ladder of Learning and the sophisticated and powerful dialectical method to something as simplistic as “question and answer” or “the Socratic method” of the textbooks is to entirely miss the very nature of Platonic education.

Plato’s directly stated account of the proper curriculum bears no relation to the various curricula that are manufactured by inferring literal prescriptions from his allegorical images of the soul. Rice does not provide an account of Plato’s supposed advocacy of curriculum differentiation which is derived from anything Plato has written. On the contrary, Rice infers it from her own literal interpretation of a fragment of a mistranslation of Plato’s allegorical images, and from Plato’s supposed ideas about politics rather than his explicit statements about education itself. This has important consequences for her attempt to trace the subsequent evolution of curriculum differentiation in the history of American education.

Jefferson and Isocrates vs. Plato

After uncritically reiterating parts of the Victorian caricature of

Plato's educational ideas, Rice asserts, without argument or explanation, that these so-called Platonic ideas somehow influenced the educational thought of Thomas Jefferson, as expressed in his Bill 79: *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. Unfortunately, both Rice's interpretation of Jefferson and her attribution of a Platonic influence to him are not based on his texts, but rather on a textbook for undergraduates; in other words, it rests on her interpretation of a simplistic textbook interpretation of a primary text, three steps removed from Jefferson himself. If we turn directly to Jefferson's texts, however, we find a quite different and more instructive account of the sources of Jefferson's educational thought.

It is well established that Thomas Jefferson knew the texts of Plato very well, and detested them. In his letter to John Adams (July 5, 1814), unambiguously entitled "The Nonsense of Plato," Jefferson comically but clearly describes his apparently painful experience of reading Plato's *Republic*. In his view, the *Republic* contains nothing but "the whimsies, the puerilities, and the unintelligible jargon" of Plato's "foggy mind." In the same letter Jefferson explicitly rejects both Plato's political thought, and his educational ideas and proposals. Contrary to Rice's unexplained and textbook-mediated attribution of an "unconscious" Platonic influence on Jefferson's educational thought, Jefferson's own texts demonstrate a thorough knowledge and deliberate rejection of Plato's political and educational ideas. There is no evidence that Jefferson was influenced by Plato's educational ideas, especially not in matters of anything like curriculum differentiation.

In contrast to Jefferson's intense dislike of Plato and Platonism, his well known admiration of Isocrates is noteworthy. Jefferson's letter to Nicolas G. Dufief (March 20, 1814) and the Catalogue of the Library of the United States confirms that he owned at least three complete editions of the works of Isocrates, one of which was a French translation (Lehmann & Malone, 1985, 152). This is not surprising given Isocrates' leading role in articulating and inspiring republicanism and federalism (a federation of autonomous states under a unifying federal government) in political reforms in the United States, France, and Europe generally from the Enlightenment through the revolutionary period (Wareh, 2012; Barker, 1948, p. 23; Hay, 1966, p. 2, p. 5; Pangle, 1992, p. 81). More specifically, Jefferson directly follows the Isocratic tradition of education in the *Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*, in his "Plan for an Educational System" articulated in the letter to Peter Carr, September 7, 1814, and in a number of smaller educational essays and epistles. In these educational writings we find no mention of Plato, and no mention of Plato's educational thought. There is nothing of Plato's emphasis on

education in the arts (e.g., *Rep.* Bk. 10), mathematics as the science of divinity, hypothetical deduction (e.g., the *Parmenides*), dialectic as the copping-stone of learning, or the philosopher as “the contemplator of all being in all time” (*Rep.* 486a). On the contrary, Jefferson recommends not the study of philosophy but the much more limited and Isocratic study of “technical philosophy” comprised of “ideology, ethics, law, and political economy” (Letter to Carr, Sept. 7 1814, Sec. 2.3). It should be noted that during this time “ideology” means idea-ology, the study of the history of ideas, and is unrelated to the Marxist definition of the term originating almost a century later (contra Rice, 2012, 233). What we also find in Jefferson’s writings is explicit reiteration of Isocrates’ insistence that education is valuable not as preparation for seeking knowledge or the virtues of the theoretical life, but as practical preparation for responsible family life, economic activity, and rational citizenship. We also find emphasis on the primary intention of Isocratic education, mastery of rhetoric, to be acquired through study of followers of Isocrates such as Cicero and Quintilian. The same letter shows that it is certainly plausible, as Rice suggests, that Jefferson advocated limited curricular differentiation along socio-economic class lines (e.g., Sec. 2: General Schools), but it is not plausible that Plato is the historical antecedent of such advocacy. Jefferson’s educational thought is a part of the tradition of Isocrates, and it is to that tradition that we must look for antecedents of contemporary curriculum differentiation.

Isocrates and Curriculum Differentiation

In light of the unequalled magnitude of Isocrates’ influence on every aspect of educational thought, policy, and practice over the past two millennia, we ought to look to his works and legacy first whenever we are seeking the origins of our own ideas and practices. Isocrates’ educational ideas are found in all of his twenty-three extant works, but primarily in two works, *Against the Sophists* and the *Antidosis*, an imitation of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. In those works, Isocrates argues that education is valued as a means to attain the knowledge, skills, and moral dispositions required for citizenship and statesmanship. This requires a three-part differentiation of the curriculum, corresponding to discrimination based on sex, class, and natural talent. First, Isocrates believes that politics is the natural purview of men and, consequently, that there is no need for women to acquire an advanced education. In practice, his school admitted only men as students. Second, as he laments in the opening of the *Antidosis*, Isocrates became one of the wealthiest men in Athens because he charged his students very large fees, thereby excluding men

of modest or low financial means from his school. This, of course, has the effect of reproducing and reinforcing the tradition of limiting political power to the wealthy. Third, as the closing sections of his *Against the Sophists* state clearly, Isocrates believed that men were by nature divided into groups according to their natural capacity to desire justice according to the politeia (political doctrine) of the regime, and according to the natural capacity to use their intellect and rhetorical skills to contribute to political deliberation within the parameters of the prevailing politeia. Consequently, he sought to admit to his school only those (sons of) wealthy men who seemed to have such passion and natural talent, as clear a case of curricular differentiation as one could find and not unlike what Rice detects in contemporary schooling.

Conclusion

Rice is quite right to argue that knowledge of the historical origins of curriculum differentiation, and the contribution it makes to reproducing various inequalities, is an important subject. Knowledge of the historical and philosophical origins of this feature of education is important in its own right, and no doubt important to any practical attempts to ameliorate its effects. It is all the more important, then, that our knowledge of the history of educational ideas be as thorough and as evidence-based as possible. In contemporary Educational Studies this will require, more than anything else, catching up with historical scholarship non-educationists have produced over the past century or more and, with that, a recovery of the legacy of the educational ideas of Isocrates across two millennia and into our own classrooms and lecture halls. It will also require a renewed study of the educational ideas Plato actually articulates, rather than endless repetition of the frankly bizarre ideas Victorian Englishmen attributed to him and which still linger unchallenged in far too many survey texts, encyclopedias, and textbooks in the history and philosophy of education such as the ones I listed above. It will ultimately be necessary to entirely break away from reliance on the authority of such ephemeral second-hand sources, and return to the study of complete primary sources (and the languages in which they are written). Virtually the entire history of education—philosophy, ideas, policy, practice—is waiting to be discovered and articulated for the first time (Curren, 2000, p. ix), a thrilling prospect for the many of us who lament the decline of humanistic study of education over the past generation. This must also include study of the unexpected ways in which Plato's ideas provide a much needed alternative to the dominance of Isocrates' ideas in all contemporary educational philosophy,

policy, and practice. Without such renewed and diversified study of the great alternatives in the history of education, the Isocratic legacy will continue to prevail by a kind of default: if history has anything to teach us, about education or anything else, it is that those who are ignorant of history are condemned to repeat it.

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