

Alessandro Boga

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THE AMBIGUITY AND POWER OF "EDUCATION IN GENERAL"

In this passage Plato points out how "education in general makes good men, and that good men act nobly", speaking about concepts on which someone has to trust in order to achieve nobility and to look like "a good man" in front of his society. In this way Plato provides us several philosophical concepts on which to reflect. In my essay, firstly, I shall talk about "education in general", explaining what it means for me and arguing how influences and how important it is in the life of a person, as we can see throughout history and also in literature; secondly I will try to define what Plato means for good, and as a consequence what is bad according to this point of view; then I will argue whether I agree with Plato and eventually I shall conclude with the role and the importance of education nowadays.

For me "education in general" is an education that includes everything, both scientific and humanistic concepts, which provides several values on which the individual mindset is based. It was thought in order to give to the average-man a full and a critic view to the world, which indeed is strictly linked to what the individual had learnt during his early life. This kind of education was defined in the ancient time: the Greek first came up with this idea, thinking about something through which a student turns into a citizen and as a citizen this kind of education gives him the skills to work and carries out his duties. However, such an education includes also what we learn and read not only at school, where we can be a lot of influenced by a teacher we particularly like, but also at home. After what I have said, it is clear how powerful education is for us, and how it influenced us: for example, we can have some political, ethical, historical ideas, as well as some musical liking, because of our parents, and since we live with them, at the end we are more likely to have these kind of ideas or liking, too. Besides, we are citizen of a state in which we have some rights and we are free to give our opinion or our point of view; since we grow up in such a society at last we got used to them and we consider them as something God-given, although they are the result of blood and fights, and maybe not everyone knows it. Such an education was used by totalitarianism during the last two centuries, because through it they could share their ideas and in this way control people, namely they could shape the mind of their citizens as they wished. It witnessed how powerful "general education" is. In a totalitarian society people could not think on their own, since they were constantly controlled, only in a few cases people started to understand what actually was going on. This topic, namely how dictatorship shaped the minds of their citizens, had been argued by several writers, among them we have the British writer George Orwell, whose aim was to criticize and run down the totalitarianism of his time. In particular, in his masterpiece, "1984", he spoke about a future in which the world had been divided into three huge states, and the main character, whose name is Winston Smith, lived in the one which controlled every citizen in every single action he does, from the morning to the evening, from the birth to the death, through a big eye named "big brother". Nonetheless, at a certain point Winston understood what was actually going on but at the end he was arrested, imprisoned for a long time, mentally tortured, and at the end he became part of that society and loves the big brother too. In this novel Orwell showed the way through which totalitarianism controlled people, and thus the power of education: in a society where everyone gets used not to have free of speech, free of opinion, as well as not to have any rights, Winston stands out. The same thing could be notice in "The process" by Frank Kafka. Here the main character, whose name is Josef K., at the very first page is arrested for a guilt he does not even know and at the end he is executed. In his novel, Kafka shows how a mechanical society destroys the life of the main character, and in society in which everyone is used to it, nobody understands how K.'s process is nonsense, paradoxal and grotesque. However, in Kafka's work, we have others themes alongside it which are more important, so I would say that George Orwell's example is far away more suitable. Historical speaking, during the bloodiest

totalitarianisms of the 20th century, few people understood what was the real situation and tried to work it out, with the help of foreigner troops eventually. This could be seen during Fascism in Italy, when a group of people called “partisans”, secretly fought against Mussolini’s dictatorship. They did understand the mistakes of their time, though many citizens got used to that totalitarian society, and this happened due to the education they had received.

However, we can say that the totalitarianisms were “bad” with hindsight, namely we know what happened after, and such a way to rule nowadays is considered “bad”, because it is in contrast to what we define “good”. In his quote Plato speaks about “good men”, and so he obviously means that there are “bad men”, but it is not clear what he means for “good” or “bad”, namely what are the ideas and the concepts which are “good” and in which a man had to trust in order to be “good”. This concept is very subjective, and a lot of time and words could be spent on this topic but I try to sum up. In my opinion, what is good and what is bad depend on the individual mindset, and as a consequence on education people have received. For me, a good thing is something that lot of people think good, and “a lot of people” is to say a huge number of people, for example in a society, almost its entire population and if we speak about something that concerns the world, almost the entire population of the world. One could argue that during the totalitarianisms of the 20th century they had a very weird idea of what was good, but for a society like that that thing was good, and consequently it was noble to do. Nowadays, we know what happened and so we can say that it was bad, but for that time and that society these were the right ideas. On the contrary bad is what a lot of people think bad. So these two concepts depend on the historical context and its society, which provides very different education: for example, if nowadays we think that the women had the right to vote, in the previous century one could argue that the women must not vote, because in that period they were not literary enough to make up their mind to what is the best thing for the society of that time. In Orwell and Kafka’s novels Winston Smith and Josef K. are in contrast to the ideas of their society, and they don’t embody the concepts which are shared: consequentially they are bad. Only with hindsight or reading the text from an external point of view we can understand what is the meaning of the novels and nowadays we know what is good, but for that kind of society Winston Smith and Josef K. are bad, and the other citizens are “good men”.

So, I would say that I agree with Plato: “education in general makes good men” and so education is related with good and evil throughout history. Nevertheless as I have pointed out during my essays, it depends on the historical context and it is a consequence on both the kind of the education it is provided and on the kind of society of that time: during Fascism and Nazism “good education” did “good men”, because it shaped the students’ minds so that they were good for that time and that place. As I have written previously, good is something subjective and a good thing is something a lot of people consider good. In the totalitarian society, a citizen was taught to have ideas, which could be hate, rages and that some people are better than others, but in that kind of society a man who thought this was “good”, because almost his society consider this idea good.

Eventually, all I have written before lead us to the role and the importance of “good education” nowadays. The kind of education Plato spoke about many years ago has definitely kept its importance, indeed it is provided us during our first years mainly by school and family and it influenced us throughout our life. As I said before if our parents have a particular idea about politic or a certain event, as well as any musical liking we are more liking to have the same idea or liking. In our society we are educated to some concepts we consider, because of past events, good, and so we can say that “good education makes good man”. However, human mind has the peculiarity of being critical, and this feature is very important. Indeed nowadays, beyond the education we receive at school or at home, we are told a lot of information and concepts by the media and we have to rely on our ability of being critical, in order to learn only what, according to us, is the best for our mentally development, which reflect our actions. After such a “good education” we will act “nobly”, Plato said.

In conclusion, I sum up the ideas on which this essay is based. "Education in general" is based on scientific and humanistic concepts that our society consider "good", but this depends on the historical context and to its kind of situation, because the concepts of "good" and "bad" are subjective. Nowadays we can more easily define what is good and what is bad only with hindsight or from an external point of view. Then I argue that in every time "education in general makes good man", indeed also in the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, the kind of education which was provided, based on concepts that according to them were "good", but currently we know that are wrong, made "good men". Eventually, I have told about the role of "education in general" in these days.