Sparta, Athens, and the Surprising Roots of Common Schooling

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INTRODUCTION

When Plato and Aristotle advocated common schooling in antiquity, they referred regularly to Sparta. They may have been critical of some aspects of Spartan education, but each conceded that Sparta was the preeminent model of common education designed, administered, and preserved by a political community. When Plato has an Athenian Visitor discuss the outlines of a well-governed *polis* in *Laws* – and education is taken to be central to cultivating virtue among citizens and, hence creating a virtuous political regime – he sets the conversation among an Athenian, a Spartan and Cretan.[1] In *Politics,* when Aristotle warns against individualistic, private education and calls for common education, he singles out Sparta for credit: "One might well praise the Spartans for this: they most of all pay serious attention to their children, and do so in common."[2] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the same claim appears: "in the city of the Spartans alone, or among few others, does the lawgiver seem to have taken care for upbringing and exercises, while in most cities they have been utterly careless about such things, and each person lives the way he wants."[3] Indeed, there is a long tradition of admiration for Sparta's prioritization of education. For example, Plutarch says that Lycurgus, the quasi-mythical founder of Sparta, declared that education is "the greatest and noblest task of the law-giver."[4]

While Spartans were celebrated for creating the most impressive system of common education in Greece, they were simultaneously regarded as the least cultured, the least sophisticated, and the least educated of all Greeks. Aristotle described the Spartans as the "least literary of men [*bēkista philologoi*]."[5] (*Philologoi* could also be translated in this context as least fond of learning, the least fond of argument.[6]) The assessment by others was even more severe.

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Isocrates wrote that the Spartans "are so far behind in general culture (*paideia*) and study (*philosophia*) that they do not even learn their letters."[7] Additionally, in *Dissoi Logoi,* "Double Arguments," a document probably from the late fifth century B.C.E., the unknown author noted that, for Spartans, "it is fine for their children not to learn music and letters, while for the Ionians it is shameful not to have mastered all these things."[8]

Isocrates may have been overstating the case against the Spartans – the comment above appears in an anti-Spartan context. The comment in *Dissoi Logoi* may have been exaggerated because the explicit goal of that document was to provide examples of the kind of contrasts useful in debates. But even the admiring Plutarch would write (though much later, near the turn of the second century C.E.), that "of reading and writing, they [the Spartans] learned only enough to serve their turn; all the rest of their training was calculated to make them obey commands well, endure hardships, and conquer in battle."[9]

That Sparta's system of education was admired by advocates of common schooling is widely recognized. That Sparta did not have a flourishing culture of philosophy, literature and the arts as did Athens and other Greek *poleis* is likewise well established. In this paper, I explore the surprising tension between these facts. How did the *polis* with the foremost reputation for a brutish lack of sophistication also serve as the exemplar of common education in the Greek world? To answer this question, I first provide an overview of Spartan education. I next discuss why the Spartans held contempt for the kind of learning celebrated elsewhere in Greece, particularly in Athens. Finally, I conclude that one can reconcile the fact that the Spartans were simultaneously the best educated citizens of Greece, in one sense, and the least learned, in another, by distinguishing the Spartan and Athenian understanding of education. To put it in the words of the conference theme, the Spartans understood "education as formation," focused on cultivating patriotism, solidarity (*homonoia*), and, generally, preservation of Spartan character and the Spartan way of life. In Athens and elsewhere in Classical Greece, the concept of "education" had already begun to be more narrowly associated with instruction in the liberal arts.

COMMON EDUCATION IN SPARTA

What contributed to Sparta's reputation in education? Part of the answer surely has to do with how the Greeks marveled at the product of Spartan education (at least until Sparta's decline in the fourth century): fearsome, disciplined, citizen-soldiers who were the foundation of a powerful *polis*. The more important part of the answer is that the Spartan citizen-soldier emerged out of an elaborate, all-encompassing system of education for its youth. Both Xenophon and Plutarch say that Spartan education began even prior to birth; Spartans insisted that girls and women partake in education, particularly physical training, because it led them to produce hardier children.[10] Sparta regarded its young as the property of the state, rather than the property of each child's father.[11] By seven, the formal aspect of education began as the child entered what came to be called the *agōgē*. The child joined others in athletic training and musical education, in addition to being present at the communal meals.[12] By the age of twelve or so, the youths began to live together.[13] Life was harsh for the boys and youth. The food was simple and could be scarce – the boys learned to steal to supplement their meals. They were provided with a single cloak, rather than a tunic.[14] This austerity was believed to prepare them for enduring hardship on military expeditions, and to cultivate an indomitable character. Even upon marriage, the men returned to stay with their comrades in the evening, visiting their wives only at night "by stealth."[15] Only later in life, after the age of thirty, were the men permitted to live at home with their families.

Xenophon describes the Greek approach to education outside of Sparta as a private affair, delegated to those held in relatively low regard; probably with Athens foremost in mind, he writes that a parent assigns to his child a slave as *paidagogos,* an overseer who led the child to his lessons and would monitor and correct behavior as well. In contrast, the education of Spartan citizens was so highly valued that the government appointed a single person to oversee the education of all Spartan youth. The supervisor, the *Paidonomos*, was selected from among those of the highest social rank; he was part of "the same class as those who hold the major offices of the state."[16] Plutarch describes the hierarchy of command in the educational regime as follows:

> one of the noblest and best men of the city was appointed paedonomen [*Paidonomos*], or inspector of the boys, and under his direction the boys, in their several companies, put themselves under the command of the most prudent and warlike of the so-called Eirens. This was the name given to those who had been for two years out of the class of boys, and Melleirens, or *Would-be* Eirens, was the name for the oldest of the boys. This Eiren, then, a youth of twenty years, commands his subordinates in their mimic battles, and in doors makes them serve him at his meals. He commissions the larger ones to fetch wood, and the smaller ones potherbs.[17]

One boy was appointed leader of his troop.[18] Each member of the troop was therefore under the tutelage of Melleirens, who in turn were supervised by and accountable to the Eirens. Every person involved in the common education was under the authority of the *Paidonomos* who was responsible for the entire system of education, analogous to the modern Secretary or Minister of Education (if that modern position was more intimately and intensively involved in the daily process of education, a kind of involvement virtually impossible in a modern state with a large populace).

Xenophon describes the citizens who emerged from Spartan education as "obedient, respectful and self-controlled."[19] The aim of Spartan education was, according to Plutarch, as I mentioned above, "to make them obey commands well, endure hardships, and conquer in battle."[20] Plato has his characters in *Laws* describe the Spartans as excessively concerned with war in their educational and cultural aims.[21] Aristotle voices a similar concern.[22] But both Plato and Aristotle agree that Sparta's political community instituted a comprehensive educational program. Indeed, Spartan culture and Spartan education were essentially synonymous as all aspects of Spartan life were in harmony with its educational ideals and practices.

The Spartans were so deeply committed to their system of common education, and believed so strongly in its efficacy, that they outlawed any variation to it or any private supplemental education. Plato's Hippias reports that

he often travels to Sparta on public business, and that the Spartans love to hear him lecture about "the genealogies of heroes and men … the settlements (how cities were founded in ancient times), and in a word all ancient history."[23] Hippias commands great fees for his lectures and lessons throughout Greece, so much so that the sophist boasts, "I almost think I've made more money than any other two sophists you like put together."[24] Yet, despite the Spartans' admiration for some of his speeches, Hippias can sell no lessons there, neither those that might be performed for the benefit of all youth collectively nor those commissioned for an individual youth. In Sparta, Hippias notes, parents are forbidden to "give their sons any education contrary to established customs."[25]

That the "established customs" of Spartan education included physical training is clear. Less clear is the extent to which there was any common liberal arts education. Xenophon writes that, elsewhere in Greece, as "soon as children can understand what is said to them," parents "immediately send them to teachers to learn to read and write [*grammata*], to study the arts [*mousikē*], and to practice gymnastics."[26] In contrast, by implication, the Spartans do not send their children for such traditional lessons of *grammata* and *mousikē*. But were the Spartans actually illiterate as Isocrates and the anonymous author of *Dissoi Logoi* suggest? We ought to take a brief digression on this matter.

I have already suggested that Spartan illiteracy must have been somewhat overstated. Perhaps they merely did not teach literacy "immediately [*euthus*]," as Xenophon says. They may still have taught it, but it was not their priority. Spartans certainly would have, like all Greeks, learned music.[27] Plutarch says that Lycurgus brought Homer's epic poetry to Sparta.[28] Plato's Megillus, a Spartan, says that the Spartans know and respect Homer, though Megillus notes that Homer "portrays in each case a way of life that is not Laconian but rather sort of Ionian."[29]

The Spartans had a favorite poet, Tyrtaeus. His works carried precisely the kind of exhortations and encouragement ideal for cultivating courageous, devoted soldiers: "Come you young men, stand fast at one another's side and fight … do not be in love of life."[30] Tyrtaeus created an ideal for the young to live up to: "no man is good in war unless he can endure the sight of bloody

slaughter and, standing close, can lunge at the enemy. This is excellence [*aretē*], this is the best human prize and the fairest for a young man to win."[31] Since Spartan education was comprehensive, exposure to Tyrtaeus – whose poetry was chanted while Spartans marched on campaign – and to a lesser degree Homer, must be understood to have been part of its curriculum. More generally, therefore, *mousikē* was an important feature of Spartan education.[32]

In addition to the poetry of Tyrtaeus and Homer having a role in Spartan education, the Spartans, despite the charges of their unlearnedness and lack of sophistication, achieved a reputation for extremely witty, pithy quips and rebuttals. Plutarch collected such famed Spartan sayings and several appear much earlier in Herodotus. To give but one example, Herodotus related the concern at Thermopylae that the Persian army was so enormous that their archers' arrows would block the sun. The Spartan Dienekes replied that that was good news as they would be able to "fight them in the shade."[33] Plato's Socrates says that the Spartans do not typically seem impressively educated as they are often quiet and reserved; "but then, at a certain point in what's being said, he [a Spartan] throws out a brief and pithy utterance, one worthy of account, just like a terrific javelin thrower."[34] Plutarch writes that "the boys were also taught to use a discourse which combined pungency with grace, and condensed much observation into a few words."[35] This famed laconic speech along with extant records of writing indicate that literacy (rather than illiteracy) seems to have been widespread among citizens in classical Sparta.[36] Since the state exerted tremendous control over the entirety of a person's life, the art of using speech was likely part of common Spartan education.[37] Yet, to return to the main argument, even if Sparta included the teaching of music and letters, Spartan education did not feature schooling of the sort available in most other city-states in Greece.

ATHENIAN SCHOOLING AND SPARTAN EDUCATION

Schooling in grammar, music, and physical education was a feature of many Greek city-states since the sixth century. Herodotus mentions a school

in Chios that was probably in operation in the sixth century, as it already had a sizable student population by the 490s when tragedy struck and the roof collapsed.[38] Pausanias tells of another tragic roof collapse at a school in Astypalaea about a decade later.[39] But by the middle of the fifth century B.C.E., Athenians were recognized as the Greeks most enthusiastic about learning.

Indeed, the Athenian thirst for learning was so great that sophists were drawn to the city from all over the Greek world. Few fifth century sophists were from Athens, but all sophists seem to have at least visited on occasion to sell their lessons to a market of young men particularly eager to learn new ways to impress others with displays of intelligence or to best others in debate. The Athenian love of learning manifested itself in many great accomplishments not only in the liberal arts – where the contributions to tragedy, comedy, philosophy, history and poetry generally by Athenians, or people who spent significant time in Athens, greatly outweighed those of other city-states – but also in architecture, medicine, and engineering.

If these advances were the product – at least to some extent – of education, why did the Spartans, who were as competitive and desirous of impressive accomplishments as any Greek *polis*, not embrace the same kind of education as the rest of the Greeks? The Spartans were not unaware of the possibility of schooling their children to excel in the liberal arts like the Athenians. On the contrary, they actively disdained Athenians' love of learning, believing that Athenian education would undermine the purpose of Spartan education; namely, cultivating discipline, courage, solidarity and patriotism.

Thucydides provides some illuminating contrasts of Spartan and Athenian views of education. For the Spartan King Archidamas, Spartans "are educated with too little learning to despise the laws, and with too severe a self-control to disobey them, and are brought up not to be too knowing in useless matters—such as the knowledge which can give a specious criticism of an enemy's plans in theory, but fails to assail them with equal success in practice."[40] Thus, for the Spartans, schooling on the Athenian model leads to questioning law and authority, the precise things that good soldiers must avoid to devote their lives to a common cause, to their *polis*, and to their fellow citizens.

One ought to note that some Athenians felt the same way about Athenian schooling and culture as did the Spartans. After all, it was not the Spartans who executed Socrates, but the Athenians. They concluded that Socrates corrupted the youth by encouraging them to seek wisdom and virtue without deferring to tradition and elders. In Thucydides, Cleon, an Athenian democratic leader during the Peloponnesian War – and a fierce opponent of Sparta – sounds like a Spartan in a debate about the fate of the Mytileneans (who revolted against Athens). Cleon had called for the death of every adult male of Mytilene. The Athenians sided with him, but soon came to regret their decision and wanted to revisit their verdict before the massacre occurred. Cleon castigated the Athenians and blamed, in part, their education: the Athenians must recognize that "bad laws which are never changed are better for a city than good ones that have no authority; that *unlearned* loyalty is more serviceable than quick-witted insubordination."[41] Cleon associated the Athenian love of learning and love of argument with their weakness, their indecisiveness, and their willingness to challenge their leaders and their laws. Cleon hoped instead to find Athenians "who mistrust their own cleverness [and] are content to be less learned than the laws" for they are therefore "less able to pick holes in the speech of a good speaker."[42] The Athenian obsession with learning undermines their resolve and makes them "easy victims of newfangled arguments, unwilling to follow received conclusions; slaves to every new paradox, despisers of the commonplace."[43]

As we have seen, the aim of education in Sparta was to produce citizen-soldiers and patriots who possessed the virtues of courage and self-control. Clearly, the common education in Sparta was concerned with the formation of character and, consequently, the formation of the *polis*. As scholars such as Robbie McClintock point out, education has been increasingly associated with the learning of academic subjects in a formal institution – the school.[44] There is much lament among educational philosophers about this turn of events, and many are working to return to schools a concern about civic, intellectual, and moral virtues; in short, there is an implicit call in the scholarship to return to thinking about education as formation, rather than schooling. Among the many fascinating aspects of education in Sparta and Athens is that one can

see the roots not only of common schooling but the seeds of the narrower definition of education as schooling. The narrow conception of education is not a modern phenomenon, as many assume, but is rather present at the very dawn of educational theorizing.

EDUCATION AS FORMATION VS. EDUCATION AS SCHOOLING

The Athenians understood education to be the product of a variety of educational forces that contribute to citizens' formation: the city itself educates through its laws, culture, and religious practices; the poets, both ancient like Homer and Hesiod, and contemporary, like Sophocles and Euripides, were long described as teachers; and older citizens were expected to mentor the young as they grew to take their place among other citizens.[45] But the liberal arts were already coming to dominate the idea of what being "educated" entailed. In fifth century Athens, education was no longer associated with the traditional coming of age of a gentleman, a *kalos k'agathos,* but rather with what Aristophanes called the "new education," the study of speech, the embrace of scientific research, and the unflinching interrogation of the customs of one's elders.[46] Because Sparta had the utmost disdain for these aspects of the new education, Spartans were characterized as uneducated.

At the dawn of theorizing about education, therefore, the most sophisticated model of common education in the known world was premised on an understanding of education that was viewed as quaint and outmoded, even by the very philosophers who otherwise admired much of Sparta's educational ideals and practices. Sparta's system of common education is the root of the *practice* of common schooling in the west. However, at the root of the *theory* of common schooling, the Spartan understanding of education formation was already eclipsed. The formal institution of the school, which featured a curriculum of physical education, grammar, and music, came to be the foundation of proposals of common education, even as early as Plato.[47] For all of their disparagement of the sophists, Plato and Aristotle's embrace of the life of the mind placed them squarely amidst the "new education."

For Plato, of course, *homonoia* remained an important educational aim. So education was certainly not tantamount to schooling for him, even if schooling is central to the reforms of *Laws*; and, more generally, education in music and poetry is central to education both in *Republic* and *Laws*.[48] And even today, schooling that focuses almost exclusively on academic skills leads to formation of a certain sort. Nevertheless, as the explicit inculcation of character, habits and beliefs have become less central to schooling, today's schools more closely resemble an Athenian understanding of education rather than a Spartan one. Ultimately, the Spartan conception of education lost out to the Athenian, just as – and no doubt partly because – Spartan culture lost out to Athenian culture. The theatre became a center of culture instead of the mess hall, Homer was preserved and studied rather than Tyrtaeus, rhetorical skill became prized over laconism, and, generally, the "new education" permanently displaced the old. But before this educational and cultural eclipse, Sparta pointed the way to an understanding of education as the rulers' foremost responsibility because it was the key to the preservation and flourishing of the character of each individual and, therefore, the *polis* as a whole. This principle, rather than its specific educational aims and practices, is Sparta's legacy in educational thought.[49]

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1 Plato, *The Laws of Plato,* ed. Thomas L Pangle (University of Chicago Press, 1988). Crete, like Sparta, had a reputation for taking common education seriously; see note 12 below.

2 Aristotle, *Aristotle's Politics,* trans. Carnes Lord, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1337a31-32; cf. 1294b.

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 1080a24-29.

4 Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, in Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), XIV.1.

5 Aristotle, "Rhetoric," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1398b.

6 H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H.S. Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v.

7 Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* in *Isocrates II,* trans. and ed. T.L. Papillon (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), §208. See also William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 112-114. On the accounts of Spartan education by other Greeks in the classical period, see Jean Ducat, *Spartan Education:*

Youth and Society in the Classical Period, trans. Pamela-Jane Shaw, Emma Stafford, and Anton Powell (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 35-67.
8 *Dissoi Logoi* in John M. Dillon and Tania Gergel, *The Greek Sophists* (New York: Penguin, 2003), II.10.
9 Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 16.6.
10 Xenophon, *Politeia of the Spartans,* I.4 and Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XIV.2. The Spartan women's freedom, wit, and strength fascinated other Greeks, many of whom, with transparent misogyny, condemned Sparta's culture for the type of women it produced. On the criticism of Spartan women see, e.g., Aristotle, *Politics,* 1269b-1270a. Plato has the Athenian Stranger in *Laws* argue that Sparta ought to go even further with women's education, creating the groundwork for much greater political participation in society.
11 Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XV.8.
12 The Cretans were likewise noted for concern about communally forming citizens' character. While the Cretan system of education seems to have been less sophisticated than Sparta's, Crete featured some similar institutional examples of common rearing. The young went to the public meals where they served and observed their elders. Each mess hall or *Andreia* had an instructor for the youth, a *paidonomos*, who organized the children into troops, *agalai.* According to Strabo, Ephorus reported that "most of the Cretan institutions are Laconian, but the truth is that they were invented by the Cretans and only perfected by the Spartans." See Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo,* ed. H. L. Jones (London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924), X.4.17&20.
13 Ducat, *Spartan Education,* 125.
14 Xenophon, *Politeia of the Spartans,* II. 4; Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XVI.6.
15 Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XV.4.
16 Xenophon, "The Politeia of the Spartans," in *Aristotle and Xenophon on Democracy and Oligarchy*, ed. J. M. Moore (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), II.1-2; cf. Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 16.4.
17 Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* 17.1-3.
18 Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XVI.4-5.
19 Xenophon, *Politeia of the Spartans,* II.14.
20 Plutarch, *Lycurgus,* XVI.6.
21 Plato, *Laws,* 666e-667a.
22 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1333b.
23 Plato, *Greater Hippias*, in Plato, *Complete Works,* ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997): 285d-e.
24 Plato, *Greater Hippias,* 282e.
25 Plato, *Greater Hippias,* 284b.
26 Xenophon, *Politeia of the Spartans,* II.1.
27 Plutarch, Lycurgus, 21.1.
28 Plutarch, Lycurgus, 4.4.
29 Plato, *Laws,* 680b-d.
30 Tyrtaeus, fr. 10, in Douglas E Gerber, *Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1999).
31 Tyrtaeus, fr. 11; cf. Plato, *Laws*, 629a-b.

32 On the centrality of music in Spartan culture and education, see Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: The Ancien Régime in Classical Greece* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Press), 129-138.
33 Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Robert B. Strassler and trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York: Pantheon Books, 2007), 7.226.
34 Plato, *Protagoras* in *Plato, Protagoras and Meno*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 342d-e.
35 Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 18.4.
36 See Millender's authoritative evaluation of Spartan literacy: Ellen G Millender, "Spartan Literacy Revisited," *Classical Antiquity* 20, no. 1 (2001): 121-164.
37 See Ducat, *Spartan Education*, 125.
38 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6.27.2.
39 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1918), 6.9.6-7. On the evidence of these early fifth century Greek schools, see Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 57-60 and Frederick A. G. Beck, *Greek Education, 450-350 B.C.* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), 76-80. We learn of a later school because of a disaster that befell it as well. In 413, the Thracians attacked a school in Mycalessus shortly after the children arrived, massacring them all. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler and trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, 1996), 7.29.5.
40 Thucydides, 1.84.3.
41 Thucydides, 3.37.3; emphasis added.
42 Thucydides, 3.37.4.
43 Thucydides, 3.38.5. During the period of democratic and oligarchic revolutions during the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides describes how boldness was prized above prudent investigation and planning. Thucydides writes: "ability to see all sides of a question, incapacity to act on any" (3.82.4).
44 E.g., Robert McClintock, "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction," *Teachers College Record* 73 no. 2 (1971): 161-205.
45 On these educational forces, see Avi I. Mintz, *Plato: Images, Aims, and Practices of Education* (Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 5-14.
46 Aristophanes, *Clouds*, trans. Jeffrey Henderson, in *Aristophanes II* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1998).
47 E.g., Plato, *Laws,* 804c-d.
48 I discuss Plato's treatment of these educational forces in the *Apology* in Avi I. Mintz, "Why did Socrates Deny that he was a Teacher? Locating Socrates among the new educators and the traditional education in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 7 (2014): 735-747.
49 I gratefully acknowledge the criticism of Jacob Howland and Chris Higgins on earlier drafts of this article.