

REASON, WISDOM, AND HUMAN FLOURISHING - ARISTOTLE AND CROSS-TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION

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Abstract: This paper examines Aristotle's educational philosophy through the interconnected concepts of reason, wisdom, and eudaimonia, or human flourishing. It contends that Aristotle viewed education not only as the acquisition of information, but also as a process of nurturing virtue, reasonable judgment, and intellectual superiority. The paper shows how interdisciplinary learning helps to a more comprehensive understanding of reality and human aims by examining Aristotle's taxonomy of knowledge and his concept of practical wisdom. The study also looks at connections between Aristotelian philosophy and other intellectual traditions, particularly the quest of wisdom as a guiding principle for education and human growth. In the context of current education, which is frequently marked by disciplinary fragmentation and examination-oriented learning, Aristotle's integrated perspective provides useful insights into holistic education, knowledge unification, and the cultivation of human flourishing.

Keywords: Aristotle; Educational philosophy; Eudaimonia; Wisdom; Reason; Interdisciplinary education

1 INTRODUCTION

Subjects in Chinese primary and secondary education are frequently split and taught at various levels of difficulty. For example, a single mathematical idea, such as decimals, is taught repeatedly across numerous grades, gradually growing in complexity. This segmented strategy is mostly used for tests, with the goal of assessing students' mastery of specific subject at various ages rather than building true interest or passion for a particular field of study. In contrast, the concept of liberal education is not frequently pushed in China, and many students and instructors are even unfamiliar with it. Based on these contemporary observations, this paper returns to ancient Greece, specifically to the era of Aristotle, to examine how his philosophical system embodies a cross-disciplinary pursuit of knowledge and truth. It further explores how this integrated vision of learning is reflected in Aristotle's educational thought, and what insights or interpretations it might offer for modern society today.

2 THE OVERALL STRUCTURE OF ARISTOTLE'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Aristotle's philosophy of education is oriented toward the highest good, with eudaimonia regarded as the fundamental purpose of human life. The term Eudaimonia, derived from the Ancient Greek *eu* meaning "good" and *daimon* meaning "spirit," originally denotes a good spirit, and in Aristotle's conception, it refers to a state of human flourishing achieved through the full realization of one's rational and moral capacities. Unlike contemporary understandings often associate happiness with pleasure or mere pleasure or emotional satisfaction, Aristotle conceives of *eudaimonia* as a complete and enduring fulfillment, realized through the cultivation of virtue and the exercise of reason. Contemporary scholar Jennifer Frey suggests that thinking about happiness is fundamentally a question of how we should live and what kind of person we aspire to become. Such reflection requires a serious engagement with the concept of "the good," particularly with respect to human excellence. She further emphasizes that to comprehend human excellence, one must understand what it means to be a human being — that is, to develop a soul-picture of human nature, an inner conception that enables an individual to shape the course of their own life. Moreover, she states that a virtuous person consciously regulates their actions in accordance with the goals they earnestly seek to achieve [1]. It is precisely on this foundation that Aristotle situates education: as a process aimed at cultivating rationality, perfecting the soul, and achieving excellence in virtue. In this view, education goes much beyond simply acquiring knowledge; it allows people to build a cohesive perspective of life's ultimate goals and achieve genuine flourishing. In this regard, Aristotle's conception of education stands in stark contrast to modern perspectives that often regard schooling primarily as a pathway to higher social status or greater financial gain. True education, according to Aristotle, is the inner cultivation of character and intellect that leads individuals to the full realization of their desires.

Aristotle's life experience vividly exemplifies this philosophy. He grew up during a period of political turbulence and intellectual anxiety on the eve of the Hellenistic era. This was a time of transition from Classical Greece to the Hellenistic period, marked by frequent wars between city-states, the decline of Athenian dominance, and the rise of Macedonia. The resulting social instability intensified people's concern over the value of knowledge, reason, and ethical practice—what can be described as intellectual anxiety. Diverse philosophical currents coexisted during this era: the Sophists employed rhetoric to persuade and appeared highly knowledgeable, while Plato's Academy emphasized the

pursuit of forms and metaphysical inquiry [2]. Even in this challenging environment, Aristotle displayed remarkable intellectual curiosity and a broad range of interests. At sixteen, he profited from the resale of military medical supplies and utilized the funds to attend Plato's Academy. His goal for entering was more than just practical; he wanted to develop strong persuasive abilities through philosophical training in order to solve the pressing practical challenges of his time, which was strongly tied to the dominant sophistic emphasis on rhetoric. Yet his studies at the Academy ultimately led him beyond utilitarian aims toward a lifelong pursuit of true knowledge and wisdom. And after leaving the Macedonian court, where he had tutored the young Alexander (later Alexander the Great), Aristotle returned to Athens and established his own school, which is called the Lyceum. His thought was not confined to any single philosophical tradition but exhibited an open and integrative intellectual spirit, reflecting the principle that a truly accomplished scholar has no allegiance to any one school or faction. Recent scholarship has likewise emphasized Aristotle's remarkable intellectual breadth, noting that his investigations ranged from ethics and politics to biology, logic, and metaphysics, reflecting an unusually integrated conception of knowledge [3]. Aristotle considered education as a process of realizing the logical form of existence, a long-term development aimed at soul perfection and true satisfaction. Education, in his opinion, was much more than a tool for learning knowledge, gaining exam-based success, or abstract concepts; it was a technique of moral and intellectual formation that guided people to reach their entire human potential [4].

Aristotle's life experiences and the historical circumstances in which he lived molded not just his philosophical theory, but also had a significant impact on his educational philosophy. His educational method focuses on the integration of theory and practice, as well as the systematic structuring of disciplines. Aristotle classified knowledge into three types: theoretical (*theoria*), practical (*praxis*), and productive (*poiesis*). Theoretical knowledge aims at truth, practical knowledge concerns action and ethics, and productive knowledge relates to creation and craft. From an educational perspective, he advocated that students should integrate these three types of knowledge through observation, practice, discussion, and reflection, thereby cultivating practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Practical wisdom is not merely the application of knowledge but also a form of holistic judgment in life, serving as a key capability for achieving *eudaimonia* (excellence). As a result, educational approaches should not be limited to abstract learning; rather, they should encourage students' abilities to understand, apply, and test knowledge in real-world circumstances, bridging theory and practice. At the same time, Aristotle's system of knowledge emphasizes the integration of disciplines, opposing isolated or fragmented approaches to learning. He regarded logic as the foundation of all disciplines, a tool for organizing and testing knowledge; ethics and politics are oriented toward practical life, exploring virtue, justice, and civic institutions to demonstrate the real-world significance of knowledge; and metaphysics further reflects on existence, essence, and ultimate causes, representing the highest discipline in the pursuit of wisdom. Scholars discussing whether Plato's Academy may be considered the first true academic community note that Greek schools were characterized by the interconnection of different fields of knowledge [2]. Aristotle inherited and further developed this feature, presenting an educational vision structured around the unity of knowledge arising from diverse disciplines. He believed that true education should guide students to grasp the shared rational structures underlying various forms of knowledge, enabling them to understand the order and purpose of the world. As a result, Aristotle's educational philosophy does not treat knowledge as isolated fragments, but rather seeks an integrated, unified, and hierarchically organized network of knowledge — a vision that stands in stark contrast to the fragmented disciplinary approach prevalent in contemporary Chinese education and provides valuable insights for modern educational practice.

3 EUDAIMONIA, EDUCATION, AND THE ROLE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

In the previous section, the concepts of *eudaimonia* (the highest good) and happiness were introduced. This section further clarifies their relationship by examining how *eudaimonia*, properly understood, shapes the role of happiness within education.

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, explains that the same person may give different accounts of happiness: when he is sick, he says health is happiness; when he is poor, he says wealth is happiness; and those who recognize their own ignorance may envy those who speak at length about things they themselves cannot comprehend. Additionally, some argue that beyond the many individual goods, there exists *Eudaimonia* itself, which is the source of all goodness. Goods can be divided into two types: instrumental goods and *Eudaimonia* itself. More specifically, all things and actions have a purpose; if there are many purposes, then their goodness contributes to *Eudaimonia*. For example, the purpose of waging war is victory, the purpose of shipbuilding is to build ships, the purpose of economic activity is wealth, and the purpose of studying is knowledge. However, these purposes are fragmented, and many actions are themselves means to achieve a higher purpose. *Eudaimonia* can thus be regarded as the ultimate end. For example, some people exercise to gain a healthy body as a first purpose. If one attains a healthy body, one can live a fulfilling life, and the actions maintained to live well are considered a higher purpose contributing to *Eudaimonia*. Therefore, all actions have ends, and many ends serve higher ends. If ends are not equally ranked — some are merely instrumental, such as money, tools, reputation, or skills, while others are intrinsically valuable, such as health, knowledge, and virtue — people will follow a chain of ends to discover the most fundamental, complete, and ultimately worthy goal—*Eudaimonia*. The concept of *Eudaimonia* is too abstract to be understood simply as an accumulation of various specific goods, such as health, beauty, victory, or wealth. Happiness and *Eudaimonia* are final, self-sufficient, and worthy of choice. More specifically, they include the soul executing intellectual activity in line with virtue on a constant and complete basis. *Eudaimonia* is not an emotion, luck, or pleasure, but a way of life. Virtues that society values, such as justice, courage, temperance, and

knowledge, are expressions of the soul in a state of Eudaimonia. This practice cannot be stimulated by fleeting moods or temporary sensations, but must be sustained throughout a lifetime. Eudaimonia must accord with virtue because virtue allows one to act well consistently, not occasionally. Virtue and reason are inseparable, and human Eudaimonia lies in the full exercise of reason. Through reason, one can choose to live a life worthy of choice, rather than a life governed by immediate desires or emotions. Thus, Eudaimonia consists in living well in accordance with reason and virtue.

Knowledge and learning in the framework of life are considered instrumental goods: they are not pursued for their own sake, but because they help achieve a higher and ultimate good—happiness or eudaimonia. Nevertheless, they are crucial and indispensable, as proper learning of such instrumental goods aids the practice of wisdom. In a complex reality, one must integrate information, exercise rational judgment in various situations, and even attain excellence in a particular discipline to remedy specific deficiencies in the world. Therefore, learning as effectively as possible to acquire extensive knowledge is essential for a life in which reason and virtue combine to pursue the highest good and happiness.

If the highest good of a person is a sustained, comprehensive, rational way of life, the task of education cannot be limited to teaching isolated skills or fragmented knowledge. Education must help students understand the causes and order of things. Similarly, Frey emphasizes that “true education should help students comprehend the causal relationships and order of the world to achieve complete rational understanding, thereby influencing their life choices rather than merely imparting skills or partial knowledge” [1]. The current educational model tends to encourage students to pursue short-term gains or subjective experiences, lacking an understanding of life’s ultimate goals. Interdisciplinary education enables dialogue across philosophy, psychology, economics, and other fields, helping students better grasp the causal structure of the world and the hierarchy of values. However, this approach is not without challenges. Critics contend that interdisciplinary education may sacrifice depth for breadth, leaving students with a superficial awareness of various fields rather than true intellectual mastery. Others argue that integrating numerous perspectives can be a considerable cognitive strain, particularly for pupils who have not yet mastered the ability to navigate many techniques. Furthermore, exposure to diverse frameworks of value may promote relativism rather than clarity, making it more difficult for students to make consistent judgments. These concerns are substantial, but they do not undermine the value of interdisciplinary education when properly structured. Rather than replacing disciplinary rigor, interdisciplinary learning should build upon it, ensuring that students first develop sufficient grounding in individual fields. When guided carefully, the comparison of different perspectives does not lead to confusion but to a more refined understanding of their limits and complementarities. Contemporary Neo-Aristotelian scholars similarly argue that education should cultivate flourishing through the integration of intellectual, moral, and practical capacities rather than through narrow specialization [5]. In this approach, multidisciplinary education can foster rational judgment, encourage virtue practice, and combine knowledge and skills as instrumental goods aimed at the ultimate good. When properly executed, it does not dilute intellectual progress but rather drives it toward achieving eudaimonia. Recent studies of Aristotelian moral development likewise suggest that education should cultivate both personal virtue and responsible participation in society, reinforcing the broader educational significance of human flourishing [6].

4 WISDOM, REASON, AND THE PURSUIT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

The concepts of wisdom and reason are equally central in Aristotle’s philosophical system. Aristotle regards wisdom (*sophia*) as knowledge of the first principles and ultimate causes, forming a core aspect of metaphysical inquiry. Specifically, wisdom differs from mere sensory experience or technical skill: it is not concerned with particular phenomena or practical operations, but with why things are the way they are and the universal principles and necessities behind them. Aristotle emphasizes that wisdom does not only grasp regularities, but also understands why these regularities hold. It focuses on the essence, principles, and final causes of things. For example: What is a thing composed of? What is its essence? What drives its generation or change? What is its purpose or ultimate end? Humans naturally desire to understand the origins and principles of things, and this awareness of ignorance motivates the pursuit of wisdom. The Pythagoreans considered numbers not merely as tools of measurement, but as manifestations of cosmic rationality; Platonic metaphysics viewed the universe as structured by reason (*nous*) or wisdom (*sophia*) according to the order of Forms; and medieval symbolic numerology interpreted numbers as signs of cosmic order and wisdom. Clearly, wisdom requires careful reflection—it is a state in which reason attains holistic insight. Put simply, reason is the means to achieve wisdom. Aristotle holds that reason is the defining human capacity, central to cognition, deliberation, and judgment, and it is the key instrument for understanding the first principles of the universe and attaining wisdom. Therefore, the pursuit of wisdom necessarily involves rational engagement. Aristotle further develops these themes in his *Metaphysics*, where wisdom is described as knowledge of first causes and principles, distinguishing philosophical inquiry from technical expertise and ordinary experience [7].

The biblical Deuterocanonical Wisdom of Solomon, written during the Hellenistic period, places a comparable emphasis on the quest of wisdom in a framework influenced by both Greek philosophy and Jewish ethical tradition. The book portrays wisdom as the highest good, surpassing wealth, power, and life, and as a guiding force toward truth and moral goodness. It depicts wisdom as a principle that orders all things well and contributes to the construction of the universe, implying that reality is comprehensible and rationally structured. It, well like *Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasizes that the pursuit of wisdom necessitates the use of reason and is critical to the satisfaction of human life. In this way, wisdom is understood not only as knowledge of order and truth, but as something that must be actively

realized in human conduct. This parallel reinforces the idea that the connection between reason, wisdom, and human flourishing extends beyond a single philosophical tradition. This understanding is consistent with the portrayal of wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon, where wisdom functions as both a principle of cosmic order and a guide for moral life [8].

Ultimately, the educational objectives discussed above should serve the highest good and human flourishing, and more fundamentally, education should serve wisdom itself. Through interdisciplinary learning, education enables students to perceive how “wisdom” manifests in the orderly functioning of the universe across different fields. Mathematics, for instance, is not merely a technical tool but reflects the Pythagorean conception of numbers as inherently linked to cosmic order; its principles of proportion, harmony, and structure symbolize the rationalization of the universe, with reason both uncovering laws and appreciating the beauty of order. The humanities, by exploring questions of goodness and value through philosophy, ethics, history, and literature, enable humans to transform abstract wisdom into practical action, thereby pursuing moral excellence and happiness. In this way, different disciplines constitute diverse paths toward wisdom and the highest good, while interdisciplinary thinking cultivates the ability to perceive knowledge as a unified means of exploring the cosmos and human well-being, rather than as isolated subject matter.

5 CONCLUSION

Aristotle's educational theory placed eudaimonia, or human flourishing, at the heart of education. Rather than regarding education as just the acquisition of knowledge or a means of social progress, Aristotle sees it as a process of developing reason, virtue, and wisdom. This study argues that Aristotle's emphasis on knowledge unity serves as a strong foundation for multidisciplinary education. Interdisciplinary learning assists students in developing a greater grasp of reality, exercising logical judgment, and pursuing meaningful human flourishing by linking different fields of inquiry. In the context of modern education, when knowledge is frequently fragmented and learning is frequently exam-oriented, Aristotle's educational philosophy continues to provide essential insights about the aim of education and the development of well-rounded persons.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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