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Debate on Educating the Youth in the Athenian Assembly

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Debate on Educating the Youth in the Athenian Assembly

Krikor Norsigian

Dear members of the Athenian Assembly, upon all of our shoulders we carry the burden of rebuilding Athens. We have gathered here to discuss what the future of Athens will look like, and we must look forward to ensure the greatness of our city. Today we will discuss an important topic: education. The education of our youth is the foundation of Athens's future. I will be blunt with you my friends: we are imperfect. Look around you my fellow citizens, are our walls not broken? Is the earth not scorched and smeared in blood? What has caused the invaders to destroy us? In order to set the building blocks of the future, we have to look back and see where our fathers and countrymen have made mistakes. We must understand why we were beaten and remember our history lest it repeat itself. No, I will not pretend there is nothing wrong with our state; however, look not to education for the problems. It is not the system of education in our fair city that must be changed, but the leadership. It is the leadership that hath brought the city to the ground. This debate is for another time; however, my friends, let us instead see why we have the best education for our great state and why any changes would be futile.

Look around our assembly. Many of us have been educated here in Athens, others might not have any education at all. For those of you who do not know, education in Athens is split into three main parts, which most citizens attended at some point in their lives (Joyal, 51). As citizens, you know that the current education system in Athens is very broad, but also has a "formal" education. The first course being physical training, which includes wrestling, running, and throwing as well as other competitive activities. The goal of this training, however, was not like Sparta's "training up the youth for war" (Kennel). Though, in Athens "the aim was not to produce athletes, or soldiers like in Sparta, but young men who were graceful, fit, and attractive, and it was hoped they would develop habits of fitness that they took with them their whole lives" (Ancient Athens, 1). The second course is music, in which students learn to sing, dance, play the flute and memorize poetry. "Developing a sound inner rhythm and harmony, thus producing citizens useful in both word and deed" was the intention of the course (Joyal, 49). The final subject is letters where our students learn to read, write, and study literature, which includes memorizing Homer or other famous poets (Beck, 81). Athenian education focuses on different aspects of growing the soul and the person, in order to create well rounded citizens.

The common theme in all of these core subjects is not the subjects themselves, but how the student will reach a higher plane of thought and become a better person from having a broad curriculum. Each subject teaches the student directly and indirectly. We try to cultivate the soul, therefore we should not define education as a period of time or paper certificate, but as preparation for different ways of life. The idea of putting education in a box with thick boundaries would be anti-Athenian. The way we view education now is correct; something that is porous and broadly defined. We Athenians are a people who believe in having education in all aspects of our lives in order to have a well-rounded self; "the education provided culture... directed towards character training and citizenship" (Beck, 72). The education we seek does not need to come directly from school, but rather life itself. It is important to have a mix of people who are educated in the letters and poetry, but it is equally important to have people who know the ways of the farm and other ways of life. This diversity in our city is what separates us from the Spartans, who only care for war. It has allowed us to dominate them for so long and elevates us to a higher state of mind. Why else do we have such intellectuals like Socrates? But one

2 Krikor Norsigian

should not try and produce one type of person. Just like a band should have more than one instrument, there should be many different people to create a beautiful harmony. The purpose of our education system is not to pump out soldiers like Sparta or have an extremely uniform community. We are a diverse population, and it is important to have different types of people in our great state. Education in Athens is to create good citizens and to do this we use methods in and outside of the classroom. This allows us to have a very broad definition of education. (Joyal, 31).

It is the fact that we have no required regulated education, yet still a strong sense of learning in all aspects of life that makes this city great. In Athens, we have many different classes of people that come from different backgrounds and then unite together in this great assembly and run the state (Carnes, Ober). In the words of the poet Simonides, “A city teaches a man” (Joyal, 32). In the democracy which we currently have, it is important to have people from different backgrounds and educations to come together to solve problems. Imagine a future where all children receive the same education and then come together and solve problems. If everyone is taught the same thing, then it follows that they will all think the same. What is the point of a democracy when all the children think the same? Perhaps in the future, people will need a general education to get a job. However, in today’s society, we have no need for everyone to be formally educated, for we are all educated in some way. The farmer must learn to farm and the baker must learn to bake in the form of apprenticeship. As Socrates says, “Quantity and quality are therefore more easily produced when a man specializes on a single job for which he is naturally fitted, and neglects all others” (Plato, 57). Why would a man not practice the craft that he is naturally fitted for rather than perform many different tasks? Why should we force people who wish to be farmers or bakers to be formally educated?

Personally, I believe that people should be able to do whatever they want. My father was a farmer and a landowner, someone who turned our small farm into a thriving orchard. He was able to achieve this feat with no formal education other than a what he learned from his father about farming. He was able to send me to school with the money he earned. My brother, who had no interest in school, decided instead to be a blacksmith – a profession which he now loves and is very prosperous. Thinking that everyone should be publicly educated and learn the same things is like imagining that all of the world’s fruit is able to be cultivated the same way. If you planted all the fruit of the Earth together, they would not grow in harmony. Rather, each plant has its own, different, needs and will die even under careful watch and cultivation of the farmer. For what nurtures one kills the other. My brother and I are different seeds that could not grow in the same conditions.

Many of the people in the assembly might argue for public schooling for the poor who wish to be educated but cannot attend school for financial reasons. However, if a family could not afford to send their child to school, then they would need that child to work at home. Some families, even though they could afford it, choose not to send their children to school in order to learn a craft like blacksmithing or baking (Beck, 81). Making public schools free would only benefit people who could already afford school to go to school. Those who need their children to work would not be able to send them, free or not.

For a long while I was a successful land-owner. However, after the Spartans came and cut our trees down and burned our fields, I have not had a harvest in many years. The Spartans camped outside our walls year round, in our farms for nine years! And now after being taxed highly to pay for the navy we are steeped heavily in debt. This is the case with many of other landowners; none of us have escaped the crippling taxes and the Spartans’ fire (Martin,1). There

Debate on Educating the Youth in the Athenian Assembly 3

is simply put no more money left to fund any projects. Right now we all need a chance to recover. To bring harvest in to pay our debts. Otherwise, we will be unable to paid off our debt and lose our land.

Skeptics might be inclined to ask: if our education is fine, then why have we lost to Sparta? What can we do to ensure that our children can succeed where we ourselves have failed? Now can we look back at history and ask what went wrong? Why has Sparta beaten us? Was it our education system? No. The Spartan education system is not better than ours. They only believe in fighting, while we believe in conditioning the whole body with a broad sense of education. We are the greatest naval power of all time, and the Spartans' possess the greatest land army ever. Henceforth the two states in a vacuum must be equal. If we follow this conclusion we have to look at our leadership. The leadership is the reason why we lost the War, not because of our citizens.

In conclusion, my fellow Athenians let us not put gates around our minds, ebb the flow of creativity, and believe that a formal education in our schools is the only type of education. We need to see the value of all education and be able to learn from the farmer, the blacksmith, and the well learned scholar. For each person is not better or smarter than the other, just different.

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