Character, knowledge and skills in ancient Greek education: Lessons for today's policy makers

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Abstract

The efforts to alleviate poverty by increasing social budgets have failed everywhere in the world and now the question is what else can be done to support those that are left behind. In this paper we search for illumination in the approaches to education that Athens and Sparta adopted in the peak of their power. Our findings indicate that both city-states confronted their challenges successfully because they managed to mold into the character of their citizens "ethos" compatible with the integrity of their institutions. On this ground, and given that "knowledge" and "skills" as engines of economic growth are in the interest of the individuals to accumulate, we conclude that an alternative policy to check the trend towards extreme individualism is to place priority on the character of citizens and pursue it through appropriate restructuring of educational curricula in the direction suggested by ancient Athens.

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1. Introduction

If one asked parents today why they would send their children to school, the answer would be standard. They would send them to get an education that would enable them initially to enter a university, which with some luck might help them eventually to earn a comfortable and financially rewarding life. The answer that one would not get is that they would send them to school to develop respect for the laws and sensitiveness for the prerequisites of living in a cohesive social environment. This situation was not always the case. In earlier times parents demanded and educational programs assigned more emphasis on the efforts to influence the "character" of students and less on transferring to them "knowledge" and "skills". Why has this shift taken place is not hard to explain. As economies become more open, in order to raise living standards they are forced to rely on an ever-increasing extent on the production and application of new "knowledge" and "skills". In turn this increases the demand for scientists, engineers and other highly trained professionals and induces educational programs to adjust accordingly by reallocating teaching efforts toward the latter and away from emphasis on the character of students. As a result, education systems across the world deliver today graduates who are more self-centered and more individualistic than in previous times.

Is this trend necessarily bad? Not really, because it all depends on the implications. More specifically, in countries with well functioning institutions for keeping law and order, caring in instances of unexpected personal misfortunes, and distributing the fruits of creativity and risk-taking in a socially sustainable manner, the appropriate education system may well be one that strengthens the individualistic instincts of students by placing dominant emphasis on their "knowledge" and 'skills". This is so because such human inclinations go hand in hand with entrepreneurship in the benevolent meaning of the term. On the contrary, in countries where institutions are weak or non-existent the same education system might prove to be a disaster, because strengthening the individualistic instincts of students might undermine economic growth and social cohesion by leading to low moral standards and generalized corruption. In the light of these considerations the recommendation that comes to mind is that governments in the latter countries should strive to design and enforce educational systems that balance the emphasis between the "character" of students, on the one hand, and their "knowledge" and "skills",

on the other, so as to conform to the nature and the functioning of their institutions.[1] But this is easier said than done, because there are no general guidelines for setting up such curricula. So their problem is how to stem the trend towards extreme individualism, which feeds corruption and erodes the feeling of belonging among citizens.

To mitigate these undesirable effects, the response of governments in these countries in recent decades has been to increase the percentage of public expenditures in gross national product that go for the provision of services and other income supports to those left behind. Yet numerous studies have shown that the effectiveness of social budgets in alleviating poverty varies inversely with the level of corruption and social policies fail worse in places where they are needed most (see e.g. Mauro, 1995; Bardhan, 1997). Thus, the prospects for counterbalancing successfully the onerous effects of increasing individualism have faded and now in countries like Greece the question is what else can be done. Unfortunately there are neither easy nor obvious answers and this is that motivated us to search for illumination in the analyses of ancient Greek philosophers and the approaches to education that Athens and Sparta adopted in the peak of their power in dealing with exactly the same problem. Our findings indicate that, while the challenges they faced led them to organize vastly differently, both city-states confronted them effectively, because to a large extent they managed to mold into the character of their citizens "ethos" compatible with the integrity of their institutions. On this ground, and given that "knowledge" and "skills" as engines of economic growth are in the interest of the individuals to accumulate, we conclude that for governments everywhere in the world an alternative policy to check the trend towards extreme individualism is to place top priority on the character of their citizens and pursue it through appropriate restructuring of educational curricula in the direction suggested by ancient Athens.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 starts off with a brief account of the challenges that Athens and Sparta faced in classical times. In our view, the social, political and economic arrangements each city-state put in place were deliberately designed to maximize the likelihood of confronting their challenges successfully. Drawing on this conceptualization, Section 3 goes on to describe the institutions to which each city-state entrusted the efficient operation of the chosen arrangements. The purpose for doing so is to identify the differences in their institutions, since it is these dif-

ferences that determined the differences in the moral norms that they adopted. Section 4 explains the structure and objectives of education in each city-state and confirms the preponderant role it assigned to character education relative to knowledge and skills. In Section 5 we conduct a comparative assessment of the two educational systems and draw some hints relevant to the above dilemma, and, finally, in Section 6 we provide a summary of the main findings and a synopsis of our conclusions.

2. The challenges that ancient Athens and Sparta faced

The size of city-states in ancient Greece was small. Generally, they covered an area not exceeding the limits of a contemporary municipality. But Athens and Sparta stretched over exceptionally large areas. In particular, as mentioned by Glotz (1928, 34), when Sparta added to Laconia the region of Messinea in the middle of the 7th century BC it became the first power in Greece, because it controlled a land of 8.400 square kilometers, whereas when Athens added to its territory the island of Salamis and the district of Oropos in the 6th century BC, it extended over an area of 2.650 square kilometers.

Turning to the population, a simple average of the estimates mentioned by Amemiya (2007, 36) points to a size for Athens in 430 BC of about 300000 inhabitants, whereas from the estimates quoted by Andreades (1928, 65, ft.2) the population in Sparta during the same period was about 250000. As for its composition, the same sources indicate that while in Athens lived 180000 citizens, 50000 resident alien (*metics*) and 70000 private slaves, Sparta was inhabited by 15000 citizens (*Homoioi)*, 80000 non-citizens neighbors (*Perioikoi)* and 155000 public slaves (*Helots)*.[2]

By implication, while Athens was at a disadvantage relative to Sparta with respect to the availability of land per capita, the latter was at a disadvantage relative to the former in terms of security, because, due to the limited number of citizens in her population, it faced constantly serious threats mainly from domestic sources. Actually the disadvantage of Athens was even more significant because, as documented by Fleck, Hansen (2006), the fertility of soil in Sparta was far superior to that of Athens and more grain could be produced there with less effort and investment.

3. Differences in the institutions of the two city-states

Thinking rationally, each city-state might be expected to adopt an organiza-

tion to alleviate the factors in which each were disadvantaged. In the case of Athens this was the size and fertility of land. As the latter could not produce enough grain to feed the population, the city-state of Athens opted for an organization, which on the one hand provided incentives to farmers to increase the productivity of their farms, and on the other facilitated the necessary imports from grain producing areas of the Aegean and beyond. On the contrary, since it was rich in grain producing lands and slave labor, Sparta elected to adopt an organization that generated incentives to achieve military strength. In turn these choices led to the establishment of vastly different political and economic institutions.[3]

3.1 Institutions in Athens

Three bodies governed the city-state of Athens. These were: the Assembly (*Eklesia tou Demou*), the Council (*Boule*), and the 10 Generals (*Statigoi*). The Assembly was the supreme decision-making body with executive, legislative, judicial and auditing powers. The citizens who participated in the Assembly were in charge of all city-state authorities. That is why ancient Athens has been acclaimed as the inventor of democracy. However, ancient Athenians had gone through a lot of hardships to trust that direct democracy was sufficient to safeguard their liberties from would-be tyrants. That is why for them the ultimate guarantee for good governance was the dispersion of political and economic power as widely as possible. To this effect the city-state institutions were supplemented with the following additional arrangements. Citizens got elected to the various positions of responsibility by lottery and served only for a limited tenure in order to diminish the level of corruption. There existed private property rights, so that farmers had all the incentives to work and invest in their farms. Taxes were moderate and democratically approved. All who deviated from expected behavior became subject to public uproar and denigration, whereas those who failed to observe the law and were found guilty by courts were liable for stiff penalties. Market driven production and distribution of goods and services secured enough surpluses of mining and manufacturing goods to exchange for the required imports of grain. Last, but not least, Athenians maintained a strong naval fleet to keep open and safe the routes to grain producing areas.

3.2 Institutions in Sparta

In Sparta the government was in the hands of few. At the top was the senate (*Gerousia)*. This body had mostly consultative and judiciary powers and participated in the determination of the subjects that were introduced in the popular assembly (*Apella)*. The *Apella* was made up of all citizens above 30 years of age and was presided over by five Ephors, who were elected for one year. Therefore, the real rulers of Sparta were the Ephors and that is why Aristotle (*Politics*, 1270b, 10-30) argued that the way Sparta was governed seemed to be an oligarchy.

After annexing Messinea, which rendered it self-sufficient in grain, what Sparta needed most was a strong military to keep the slaves (*Helots)* peaceful, to defend from external threats, and perhaps to extend its hegemony beyond its borders. For this purpose, it adopted the following institutions: Through a series of laws it suppressed the natural urging of human beings to amass wealth in the form of fixed and personal property assets. As a result, citizens lost their economic independence and were attached for their survival to the city-state. To mold the minds of citizens so as to think only about their obligations to the city, it instituted living in communes, which performed many functions ranging from the provision of food and shelter, to the bestowing of honors for heroism in wars, and to the passing of judgment for questionable behavior. By prohibiting the holding of gold and silver coins, Sparta adopted barter in economic transactions, and, finally, to insulate the city-state from bad influences from abroad it closed its borders to foreign trade and imposed a regime of isolation and self-sufficiency (see Bitros and Karayiannis, 2010).

3.3 Summary

In classical times Athens was short of fertile land, whereas Sparta was short in security. To meet these challenges the two city-states adopted sharply different institutions. Athens was governed by direct democracy. Courts enforced the laws and the city-state ordinances; and goods and services were produced and distributed through markets. During this period direct democracy did not function perfectly. But institutions managed to keep extreme individualism under control.

On the contrary, in Sparta the political power was concentrated in the hands of

a few citizens. Government was conducted as if domestic and foreign enemies threatened its survival and thus had to live under a permanent state of siege. The economy functioned essentially on a barter basis and was closed to outside influences; and citizens had no private lives since they were constantly in the service of the city-state.

4. Structure and objectives of education in the two city-states

To safeguard the integrity of their institutions, i.e. their functioning without much corruption and high transaction costs, Athens and Sparta put in place formal and informal mechanisms for imposing sanctions in cases of transgressions. But both were well aware that ultimately the effectiveness of institutions depends on the moral norms embraced by citizens and enforced through pressure by the general public. Thus, as their institutions were vastly different, so were their moral norms and this explains why they adopted different approaches to education.

4.1 Education in Athens

In as much as Athenians believed in the strength of their institutions, they were weary of the adverse influences that unfettered individualism might exert on their integrity. So in addition to the mechanisms for the dispersion of economic and political power they had adopted a lifelong system of *paideia* (education), which comprised two processes of education: one that addressed the "ethos" of citizens, by which they meant the bonds that tied Athenians to the objectives and institutions of their city-state (Plato, *Republic*, 423 E- 424 A; *Laws*, 643 D-E, *Protagoras*, 425 C-326 A), and another that concerned the "knowledge" and "skills" that each ought to possess in order to face the demands of day-to-day life (Isocrates, *Areopagiticus,* 44-5).[4] That is why our use of the term education here should be interpreted to imply all efforts by the city-state itself, the parents, and the instructors and trainers in preparing young Athenians to become worthy citizens.[5] Below we explain briefly the structure and the objectives of the educational system in Athens.

4.1.1 Structure

Education in ancient Athens was voluntary. It was offered to male children born to Athenian families (free-born) and families of metics and consisted of four

stages. In the first stage, which lasted until the age of seven, the responsibility for the education of children laid with their parents and it was conducted by the mother with help of nurses, women pedagogues, who were not necessarily slaves, or the father's mistress. From the age of seven and until the age of fourteen children were sent to schools where they were instructed by private tutors (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, I1, 1-2; Plato, *Protagoras*, 312B, Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a 1-5) and/or learned a craft. This was the second stage. In the third stage, young Athenians from well to do families pursued higher levels of learning. This lasted until they reached the stage of *ephebia* at the age of eighteen, during which children were trained in martial arts for one year and immediately after they served two years of military service. According to Aristotle (*Athenian Constitution*, XLII, 3), all living expenses for students and instructors during *ephebia* were paid for by the city-state.

Of the four stages, the one that was considered most crucial from a social point of view was the second, because presumably it concerned the education of children during their most formative years. This we know from the particular arrangements that Athens had enacted to regulate the operation of private schools. These arrangements are best described in the following excerpts from Aeschines (*Against Timarchus,* 8-11):

> "Now it is my desire, in addressing you on this occasion, to follow in my speech the same order which the lawgiver followed in his laws. For you shall hear first a review of the laws that have been laid down to govern the orderly conduct of your children, then the laws concerning the lads, and next those concerning the other ages in succession, including not only private citizens, but the public men as well. For so, I think, my argument will most easily be followed. And at the same time I wish, fellow citizens, first to describe to you in detail the laws of the state, and then in contrast with the laws to examine the character and habits of Timarchus. For you will find that the life he has lived has been contrary to all the laws.
> In the first place, consider the case of the teachers. Although the very livelihood of these men, to whom we necessarily entrust our own children, depends on their good character, while the opposite conduct on their part would mean poverty, yet it is plain that the lawgiver distrusts them; for he expressly prescribes, first, at what time of day the free-born boy is to go to the school-room; next, how many other boys may go there with him, and when he is to go home.
> He forbids the teacher to open the schoolroom, or the gymnastic trainer the

> wrestling school, before sunrise, and he commands them to close the doors before sunset; for he is exceeding suspicious of their being alone with a boy, or in the dark with him. He prescribes what children are to be admitted as, pupils, and their age at admission. He provides for a public official who shall superintend them, and for the oversight of slave-attendants of schoolboys. He regulates the festivals of the Muses in the schoolrooms, and of Hermes in the wrestling-schools. Finally, he regulates the companionships that the boys may form at school, and their cyclic dances.
> He prescribes, namely, that the choregus, a man who is going to spend his own money for your entertainment, shall be a man of more than forty years of age when he performs this service, in order that he may have reached the most temperate time of life before he comes into contact with your children.
> These laws, then, shall be read to you, to prove that the lawgiver believed that it is the boy who has been well brought up that will be a useful citizen when he becomes a man. But when a boy's natural disposition is subjected at the very outset to vicious training, the product of such wrong nurture will be, as he believed, a citizen like this man Timarchus. Read these laws to the jury".

From these details we have a fairly good idea how schools operated and how substantively the city-state intervened to make sure that young Athenians got an education that prepared them to become worthy of citizenship.

4.1.2 Objectives

The education of children in the city-state of Athens pursued four objectives. In particular, it aimed at: infusing into their character ethical norms and good manners; transferring to them the knowledge that had accumulated up to that time as well as stirring up their curiosity and interest to push into new frontiers; and teaching them skills to practice a craft. To achieve these objectives, the content of education was designed along the following lines.

Ethical norms

Pedagogues instructed and through persuasions and admonitions induced young Athenians to become virtuous by embracing certain ethical values, on the one hand, and repentant in cases of violations, on the other. In particular, acting in a positive way, they honed children to develop respect for:

- The gods, the laws and the rulers (Sophocles, *Antigoni*, 365-370, 660-675; Is-

ocrates, *Areopagiticus*, 41; Plato, *Laws* 659 D-E, 797 B);

- The elders and caring for their parents (Isocrates, *Areopagiticus,* 49), and
- The rights of others. Since the life in Athens was based on voluntary transactions, this implied that all involuntary ones, which according to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131a, 1-5) included: "… theft, adultery, poisoning, pandering, enticing slaves away from their masters, assassination, and false witness, or violent, as assault, imprisonment, murder, rape, mutilation, slander, and contumelious treatments," were unethical and ought to be avoided.

The prospect for children who lived by these ethical norms was *honor*, because as Thucydides (II, 44,4) explained:

> "…the love of honor alone is untouched by age, and when one comes to the ineffectual period of life it is not gain as some say, that gives the greatest satisfaction, but honor".

One's honor and fame was so important for Athenians that they had erected statues for modesty and fame (Pausanias, *Attica,* 17.1). At the same time, however, pedagogues knew that children would face plenty of temptations in their lives to deviate from expected social behavior. So to deter such inclinations, they molded into their character the feeling of *aidos* (Lowry, 1987, 170) to remind them of the losses in social esteem and reputation that awaited in cases of actions not befitting the citizens of the city-state of Athens. In short, as Thucydides (IV, 18, V, 16,43) maintained, choosing honor over aidos the citizens of Athens tried very hard to inherit to their descendants what was most valuable, i.e. their good fame.

Young Athenians were instructed also to be industrious, because *labor was the source of private property and accumulation of wealth*. Certain philosophers considered working as vulgar occupation. But the majority of citizens did not distinguish between noble and menial undertakings. Two examples in point are: first, that the Athenians were the first Greeks who worshiped the goddess "industrious Athena" ("Athena Ergane") (Pausanias, *Attica*, 24.3), and second, that they regarded as fruitful work even that of mercenaries (Thucidides. I, 31, IV, 52). In addition, some influential men such as the Sophists and Isocrates (*Areopagiticus*, 24, 44) stressed that the

labor of free citizens must be regarded an honorable activity. Pericles (Thucydides, II, 40,1), in particular, argued that the Athenians employ wealth:

> "…rather as an opportunity for action than as a subject of boasting; and with us it is not a shame for a man to acknowledge poverty, but the greater shame is for him not to do his best to avoid it".

In addition, pupils were influenced to develop a *high degree of altruism*. Raw models in this regard were the rich citizens who offered loans without interest to poor (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus,* XI, 9-11; Isocrates, *Areopagiticus*, 31-5; *To Demonicus*, 28; Aristotle, *Politics,* 1263a, 30-5; 1263b, 5-15) and financed voluntarily large public expenses (*liturgies)* (Thucydides, VI, 31). With respect to the latter it should be noted that Athenians applauded this type of giving and bestowed special honors to those who demonstrated altruism by contributing to public expenditures voluntarily over and above the taxes they paid (Bitros and Karayiannis, 2006).

Last, but not least, ideal ethos required every citizen to love Athens, be proud of its accomplishments, stand up for its laws, and be ready to sacrifice his life for its defense against foreign aggressors. That they were committed to these principles we know because citizens "freely sacrificed to the city the fairest offering it was in their power to give (meaning their lives)" (Thucydides, II, 43, 1-2, brackets added).

Good manners and honorable ways of living

The second objective of education was to mold into the character of children standards for good manners and ways of living (Isocrates, *To Demonicus,* 4). Good manners and honorable ways of living characterized youngsters who demonstrated *prudence* (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 915-920), *shame* in the face of social admonitions (Euripides, *Heracleidae*, 200-202), and pursued *glory* through deeds approved by society (Euripides, *Andromache*, 317-325). On the contrary, Athenians scolded those youngsters who gambled, visited whores, etc. (Isocrates, *Areopagiticus,* 47-48).

In achieving this objective, the education of children was aided significantly by the views that prevailed among the general public. Athenians were well aware that the accumulation of wealth together with pleasure and social reputation are among the main motives of any human undertaking (e.g. Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 217). To tame this

powerful instinct and exploit it to the benefit of all citizens, they encouraged the economic and social advancement of all males (free citizens, metics and slaves) through industriousness and entrepreneurship (see Bitros and Karayiannis, 2006; 2008). But they knew also well that such activities might render the distribution of wealth too unequal and thus erode social cohesion. For this reason, to keep the effects of animal spirits in check, they stressed that: a) the supreme purpose in life was virtue, not the accumulation of wealth for its own sake (e.g. Isocrates, *To Demonicus*, 6-7); b) consumption was considered acceptable if it consisted only of the necessary goods for a noble and non-luxurious life; c) wealth was well spent if it financed various public expenses ("*liturgies*"), and d) wealth was well spent if it were used to offer loans without interest to friends and to fellow citizens (see e.g. Isocrates, *To Demonicus*,27-8). To enforce these standards, they relied on character education, on the one hand, and social mechanisms of incentives and disincentives, on the other. In particular, Athenians were very critical of those rich citizens and metics who did not undertake with willingness public expenses commensurate with the amount of their wealth and showed no respect to rich and idle people who spent their wealth and property in luxury consumption (Demosthenes, *Against Aphobus II*, 22; *Against Stephanus I*, 66), whereas they esteemed rich citizens who employed their resources for productive and trade activities and then "shared" their wealth with the rest of citizens through the voluntary undertaking of public expenses. However, despite all social pressure to the opposite, from Aristophanes (*Ecclesiazusae*, 265-273) we learn that there existed even particular dressing and hair styling for the rich and from Braund (1994) that conspicuous consumption was quite widespread.

Knowledge and skills

In the early years of their schooling children were taught reading and writing, arithmetic, using numbers based on the letters of the Greek alphabet, elements of geometry, music, and gymnastics. This was the elementary phase and for children who aspired to a career in politics or other public office it was followed by another one of higher learning in schools where they were taught mainly rhetoric, philosophy, and geometry.[6] Moreover, they were educated in poetry, which, according to tragedians, improved their ethos, virtue, socialization, etc., (Plato, *Protagoras*, 325 E- 326 A; Plutarch, *Theseus*, 16).

Children who could not afford the fees of the schools, but also children from

well to do families who indulged in gymnastics, philosophy and other educational pursues, learned various vocations to keep busy (Isocrates, *Areopagiticus,* 44-5, 55). Usually young Athenians, whose families were farmers, handicraftsmen, merchants, etc., were inclined to continue the vocations of their parents (Plato, *Protagoras*, 328 A; Legras, 2002 p. 95). But many became apprentices under the supervision of appropriate masters to learn medicine, in the famous tradition of Hippocrates, sculpture, architecture, navigation, and various other occupations specialized in the sector of handicrafts, export-import trade, etc. (Plato, *Protagoras*, 328, A; *Laws,* 643C; Aeschines, *Against Timarchus*, 40).

Lucian of Samosata (2nd century A.D.) in his *Anacharsis* (20-1) described as follows the Athenian system of education as saying by Solon:

> "But our first, our engrossing preoccupation is to make our citizens noble of spirit and strong of body. So they will in peace time make the most of themselves and their political unity, while in war they will bring their city through safe with its freedom and well-being unimpaired. Their early breeding we leave to their mothers, nurses, and tutors, who are to rear them in the elements of a liberal education. But as soon as they attain to a knowledge of good and evil, when reverence and shame and fear and ambition spring up in them, when their bodies begin to set and strengthen and be equal to toil, then we take them over, and appoint them both a course of mental instruction and discipline, and one of bodily endurance. We are not satisfied with mere spontaneous development either for body or soul; we think that the addition of systematic teaching will improve the gifted and reform the inferior. We conform our practice to that of the farmer, who shelters and fences his plants while they are yet small and tender, to protect them from the winds, but, as soon as the shoot has gathered substance, prunes it and lets the winds beat upon it and knock it about, and makes it thereby the more fruitful.
> We first kindle their minds with music and arithmetic, teach them to write and to read with expression. Then, as they get on, we versify, for the better impressing their memories, the sayings of wise men, the deeds of old time, or moral tales. And as they hear of worship won and works that live in song, they yearn ever more, and are fired to emulation, that they too may be sung and marveled at by them that come after, and have their Hesiod and their Homer".

In conclusion, Athenians were brought up in a lifelong system of *paideia,* which stressed ethos, based on virtue and justice, not for their own sake but for their consequences to Athenians themselves and to the city. To be virtuous meant to live ethically by giving measured priority to wealth, to have respect for the other citizens, to be industrious, altruist and live in honor. On the other hand, to be just meant to up-

hold and stand up for the laws of the city and to avoid committing involuntary transactions in the Aristotelian sense. From them we are led to surmise that the rule of law that prevailed in ancient Athens was to a high degree the outcome of the character education of citizens when they were young and the pressure they felt from society to maintain their ethos throughout their lives.

4.2 Education in Sparta

Up to the age of seven children born to Spartan citizens stayed home. But after this age males followed the system of *agoge* (education), which was operated by the city-state itself. In the presentation below we explain briefly the structure and the objectives of this educational system.

4.2.1 Structure

After male newborns were recognized by the city-state as well built and sturdy, they received the first rudimentary character education in their family environment. During this period, Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 16. 2-4) informs us that:

> "On the same principle, the women used to bathe their newborn babes not with water, but with wine, thus making a sort of test of their constitutions. For it is said that epileptic and sickly infants are thrown into convulsions by the strong wine and loose their senses, while the healthy ones are rather tempered by it, like steel, and given a firm habit of body.
>
> Their nurses, too, exercised great care and skill; they reared infants without swaddling-bands, and thus left their limbs and figures free to develop; besides, they taught them to be contented and happy, not dainty about their food, nor fearful of the dark, nor afraid to be left alone, nor given to contemptible peevishness and whimpering. This is the reason why foreigners sometimes bought Spartan nurses for their children. Amycla, for instance, the nurse of the Athenian Alcibiades, is said to have been a Spartan.
>
> And yet Alcibiades, as Plato says, had for a tutor, set over him by Pericles, one Zopyrus, who was just a common slave. But Lycurgus would not put the sons of Spartans in charge of purchased or hired tutors, nor was it lawful for every father to rear or train his son as he pleased, but as soon as they were seven years old, Lycurgus ordered them all to be taken by the state and enrolled in companies, where they were put under the same discipline and nurture, and so became accustomed to share one another's sports and studies.

Thus from their eighth year of age young Spartans left home and started to live and train in groups with youngsters of similar age. In the following passages Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 16. 5-

7) describes how these groups were organized and what learning activities were involved:

> "The boy who excelled in judgment and was most courageous in fighting was made captain of his company; on him the rest all kept their eyes, obeying his orders, and submitting to his punishments, so that their boyish training was a practice of obedience. Besides, the elderly men used to watch their sports, and by ever and anon egging them on to mimic battles and disputes, learned accurately how each one of them was naturally disposed when it was a question of boldness and aggressiveness in their struggles.
> Of reading and writing, they 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. Therefore, as they grew in age, their bodily exercise was increased; their heads were close-clipped, and they were accustomed to going bare-foot, and to playing for the most part without clothes. When they were twelve years old, they no longer had tunics to wear, received one cloak a year, had hard, dry flesh, and knew little of baths and ointments; only on certain days of the year, and few at that, did they indulge in such amenities.
> They slept together, in troops and companies, on pallet-beds which they collected for themselves, breaking off with their hands—no knives allowed—the tops of the rushes which grew along the river Eurotas. In the wintertime, they added to the stuff of these pallets the so-called "lycophon," or thistle-down**,** which was thought to have warmth in it."

The training, which increased in difficulty with age, continued until they were twenty. From that age on and until they became thirty they ate and slept in dormitories, remaining always ready to be called into the military, whereas at the same time they were encouraged to get married and bear children so as to maintain the number of citizens and the available manpower for the army. However, from Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 24.1) we know that:

> **"**The training of the Spartans lasted into the years of full maturity. No man was allowed to live as he pleased, but in their city, as in a military encampment, they always had a prescribed regimen and employment in public service, considering that they belonged entirely to their country and not to themselves, watching over the boys, if no other duty was laid upon them, and either teaching them some useful thing, or learning it themselves from their elders."

Briefly then this is how the process of agoge was organized in Sparta and its objectives should be obvious.

4.2.2 Objectives

In particular, the system of agoge was designed to endow the dominant male

segment of citizens with moral norms, good and honorable ways of living, and knowledge and skills compatible with a collectivist mind set, which considered it natural that nothing else in life mattered aside from the survival of Sparta and its institutions. That this was the ultimate objective we know from Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 25. 3-5):

> "In a word, he trained his fellow-citizens to have neither the wish nor the ability to live for themselves; but like bees they were to make themselves always integral parts of the whole community, clustering together about their leader, almost beside themselves with enthusiasm and noble ambition, and to belong wholly to their country. This idea can be traced also in some of their utterances.
> For instance, Paedaretus, when he failed to be chosen among the three hundred best men, went away with a very glad countenance, as if rejoicing that the city had three hundred better men than himself. And again, Polycratidas, one of an embassy to the generals of the Persian king, on being asked by them whether the embassy was there in a private or a public capacity, replied: "If we succeed, in a public capacity; if we fail, in a private."
> Again, Argileonis, the mother of Brasidas, when some Amphipolitans who had come to Sparta paid her a visit, asked them if Brasidas had died nobly and in a manner worthy of Sparta. Then they greatly extolled the man and said that Sparta had not such another, to which she answered: "Say not so, Strangers; Brasidas was noble and brave, but Sparta has many better men than he."

So the task now is to identify the intermediate objectives that were pursued through this system of education and training. To them we turn immediately below.

Ethical norms

Young Spartan were raised and trained to be part of a group, in which all had to obey orders, bear punishments without objections or arguments, sleep in open air, walk barefooted, withstand hunger, etc. As a result, their selfish and individualistic impulses vanished and each of them lived to serve the best interests of his group, and hence of Sparta. In this framework, behaving ethically required:

- To obey the laws, the rulers and the elders (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,* 2.10-11, 8.1, 10.7).
- To value bravery and kindheartedness (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,* 9. 1-5, 10. 1-2,4).
- To aim for glory and feel sorry when blamed and proud when praised (Plu-

tarch, *Lysander*, 2), and

- To detest wealth but be resourceful in survival.

Resourcefulness was considered particularly important and that is why a good part of the *agoge* of young Spartans involved the finding of food. In particular, those in training were expected to resort to all shorts of machinations to secure their food, because by doing so it was believed that they would become fierce fighters. So stealing of food was not only permitted but it was also encouraged,[7] since it was under the protection of Artemis, goddess of hunting, and those who distinguished themselves in these activities were honored by inscribing their names in some of the altars (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 2.6-8; Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, II, 6-7, 17-8; Powell, 1988, pp. 223-6). Thus *paideia* in Athens and *agoge* in Sparta differed fundamentally, since in Athens stealing was prohibited and punished by stiff penalties, whereas in Sparta was honored as an accomplishment blessed by gods.

Another striking difference was the killing of slaves as part of their training, an institution called *Krypteia*. Sparta wished to control the number of slaves through it, because over time their population increased at a dangerously fast rate. In doing so they aimed on the one hand at the hardening of the character and the preparedness of young Spartans for war, and on the other to forestall any attempt on the part of slaves to revolt (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 28). More specifically, hidden at night and armed with knifes the trainees trapped and murdered slaves and in particular those that were most vocal in protesting for their treatment. Thucidides (IV, 80) reports that in the Peloponnesian War vanished 2000 slaves who had been liberated earlier in recognition of their bravery, without anybody knowing how each of them disappeared. It is no wander therefore that Plato criticized this practice by saying that "such an institution could render Spartans brave but not just". To be more precise, Plato, an admirer of the Spartan society, so much detested the institution of *Krypteia* that he developed a critical attitude not only regarding the constitution of Sparta but also Lycurgus himself (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 28).

Still another difference lied in the regime regarding work. In Sparta working for income purposes was illegal. Here is how Xenophon describes it in his *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* (VII, 1-3):

> "Nor does this exhaust the list of the customs established by Lycurgus at Sparta that are contrary to those of the other Greeks. In other states, I suppose, all men make as much money as they can. One is a farmer, another is a ship-owner, another is a merchant, and others live by different handicrafts. But at Sparta Lycurgus forbade freeborn citizens to have anything to do with business affairs. He insisted on regarding as their own concern only those activities that make for civic freedom. Indeed, how should wealth be a serious object there, when he insisted on equal contributions to the food supply and on the same standard of living for all, and thus cut off the attraction of money for indulgence's sake?"

From this it follows that, after their military service ended at age 30, male Spartan citizens looked forward to long carriers in various government posts without pay. But since they had been trained in stealing their food while in the army, their integrity in safeguarding the efficient operation of Spartan institutions was questionable and that is why the stories about graft and corruption abound (Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians,* XIV, 2-4; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1270b, 10-20).

Good manners and honorable ways of living

Above it was mentioned that between the ages of eight and thirty male citizens of Sparta lived in dormitories. For those who had finished agoge and remained in a state of preparedness for military service Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 25.1-2) writes:

> **"**Those who were under thirty years of age did not go into the market-place at all, but had their household wants supplied at the hands of their kinsfolk and lovers. And it was disreputable for the elderly men to be continually seen loitering there, instead of spending the greater part of the day in the places of exercise that are called "leschai." For if they gathered in these, they spent their time suitably with one another, making no allusions to the problems of money-making or of exchange.
>
> Nay, they were chiefly occupied there in praising some noble action or censuring some base one, with jesting and laughter which made the path to instruction and correction easy and natural. For not even Lycurgus himself was immoderately severe; indeed, Sosibius tells us that he actually dedicated a little statue of Laughter, and introduced seasonable jesting into their drinking parties and like diversions, to sweeten, as it were, their hardships and meagre fare."

This communal way of growing up did not allow young Spartan opportunities to escape the watchful eyes of their elders and their comrades, so group behavior prevailed and competition kept them in line with the established ethical norms. Good were all manners

that enhanced cohesion in the group and in the city-state and blessed ways of living were those that gave top priority to the glory of Sparta. On the contrary, manners and ways of living that emanated from self-serving activities were scorned and punished by all means.

Knowledge and skills

Under the system of agoge young Spartans learned how to read and write but generally their intellectual development was not a priority, because the emphasis was to prepare them physically to withstand the hardships of fighting in the city-state's wars. Actually they did not have any need to accumulate practicable knowledge and skills beyond those required to fight victoriously. The reasons are explained wonderfully in the following passages from Plutarch (*Lycurgus*, 24. 2-4):

> "For one of the noble and blessed privileges which Lycurgus provided for his fellow-citizens, was abundance of leisure, since he forbade their engaging in any mechanical art whatsoever, and as for money-making, with its laborious efforts to amass wealth, there was no need of it at all, since wealth awakened no envy and brought no honor.
> Besides, the Helots tilled their ground for them, and paid them the produce mentioned above. Therefore it was that one of them who was sojourning at Athens when the courts were in session, and learned that a certain Athenian had been fined for idleness and was going home in great distress of mind and attended on his way by sympathetic and sorrowing friends, begged the bystanders to show him the man who had been fined for living like a freeman.
> So servile a thing did they regard the devotion to the mechanical arts and to money-making. And law-suits, of course, vanished from among them with their gold and silver coinage, for they knew neither greed nor want, but equality in well-being was established there, and easy living based on simple wants. Choral dances and feasts and festivals and hunting and bodily exercise and social converse occupied their whole time, when they were not on a military expedition."

From this it is clear that the mother of all progress, that is the natural urge of human beings to accumulate wealth through hard work and market tested applications of scientific knowledge and skills, was absent in Sparta but present in Athens. Adding to this that through its institutions Athens managed to check the disruptive effects of extreme individualism proved the correct combination of forces that made for its eternal glory.

To summarize, in Sparta citizens did not have private lives. They sacrificed themselves for the well being of their city-state. Hence the moral norms they were

trained to follow, both while serving in the army and later on, were compatible with the institutions that had been set up to advance the military objectives of Sparta. As in Athens, these moral norms required them to have love and pride for their country, to support its constitution, and be ready to spill their blood for its victory in wars. These were sufficient to make Sparta the top military power in the period under consideration without much else. Absolute disregard in the production, diffusion and application of scientific knowledge as a means to human progress; absolute enmity to the accumulation of practical skills other than those required for becoming a fierce fighter; no respect for human life, no work ethic and no altruism by contributing willfully to common causes from one's riches.

5. Assessment and hints for today

The city-states of Athens and Sparta faced different challenges. Athens was short in fertile land relative to its population, whereas Sparta was short of security from domestic and neighboring threats. To confront them, they chose different types of political and economic organization. Athens adopted direct democracy, which recognized the sovereignty of its citizens under the rule of law. This implied acceptance of property rights, which led to a full-fledged open market economy not very much different than the market economies of today. On the other hand, Sparta adopted oligarchy, in which the needs of citizens were looked after by the city-state in the framework of a closed command-based economy and their only obligation was to obey the rulers of the city-state and fight effectively its domestic and foreign enemies. Given these fundamental institutional differences, the two city-states aimed at different types of citizens and to secure them they put in place two systems of education that were vastly different. From this finding follows:

> **Proposition 1**. In order for any country to have any chance in achieving its national aspirations, the structure and objectives of its educational system should deliver citizens with traits that conform optimally to the institutions that characterize and drive its organization.

It should be noted that this proposition is necessary but not sufficient, because if the institutions in a country are at odds with its national objectives, wrong choices and design of institutions cannot be overcome by education.

In the case of Athens and Sparta we know that both attained their national objectives by reaching unparallel peaks of power and glory. This in turn implies that their educational systems delivered citizens with characteristics that conformed optimally to the efficient operation of their institutions. But from the differences in the objectives that their educational systems pursued, which were identified above, it turns out that, whereas in Athens the educational system combined character education with knowledge and skills, in Sparta it stressed only character education. Therefore, drawing on these findings we conclude:

> **Proposition 2**. No system of education can deliver citizens with conformable characteristics to a country's institutions without some emphasis on character education (e.g. Athens and Sparta).

Certainly the validity of this proposition derives from the particular cases of ancient Athens and Sparta. So one may question its generality. However, judging for example from the experiences of the Soviet system in the twentieth century, and not only, our view is that it holds quite generally.

Let us turn now to the structure of the two educational systems. Their striking difference was that the city-state of Sparta forced all male citizens to live during their youth and adult lives in a communal mode for the purpose of building tight psychological and ideological bonds among them and thus securing for life their blind allegiance. This structure was very important, because if the city-state had allowed them to return home after daily training, most likely it would have failed to achieve its objectives, because young Spartans would have been corrupted by the material luxuries their families enjoyed. Thus, from this arrangement and those that Athens had imposed on the functioning of private schools, we conclude:

> **Proposition 3**. Irrespective of the mix between character education, on the one hand, and knowledge and skills, on the other, which is pursued by an educational system, the rules that define its structure and the monitoring for their application determine the degree of its effectiveness in delivering citizens with the expected discipline and mindset.

Put negatively, what this proposition asserts is that, an educational system may pursue the right combination of objectives and still fail, because of structural and other im-

plementation defects.

The above propositions represent our assessment of the reasons that explain the success of the educational systems in ancient Athens and Sparta. So the question now is what hints can we draw that would policy makers today in streamlining the educational systems in their countries? One hint, and very important at that, is that in adapting either of these two educational systems, policy makers should not fudge with respect to the core principles on which those systems stood. To highlight this point consider what happened in the former socialist republics of Eastern Europe and Russia. As Sparta did centuries ago, these countries isolated themselves from the outside world, placed education under state control, and gave overwhelming emphasis on character education with the objective to create citizens that would put the interest of community above their own. But students remained with their families and material considerations prevented them from acquiring the expected communist mindset. In our view this failure, i.e. the failure to split children from their families during the years of their education, contributed heavily to the break down that occurred in these countries in the early 1990s.

If adapting the Spartan model of education was very difficult in the first half of the twentieth century, it has become completely obsolete since then, since in view of the rapid globalization that has taken place in communications, trade and tourism, no country can shut out all influences from abroad any more. For example, consider the cases of North Korea, Burma and Iran, which are in our times the most reclusive and isolated countries in the world. Even though their governments have managed so far to shut firmly their borders, its only a matter of time until they open up, because their people cannot be prevented from knowing how materiel progress improves the lives of people in their regions and across the world. Consequently, with the Spartan model of education out of the way, if any helpful hints may be derived, these should be sought in the Athenian model of education. So let us turn in this direction.

In Athens young Athenians were brought up in a family and school environment where they learned how valuable it was for the survival and the glory of their city to conduct themselves in accordance with the precepts of virtue and justice. They were expected to respect themselves as individuals by demonstrating responsibility in their private affairs and by being ready to sacrifice for the city-state the most valuable

thing they had, their own lives. But their upbringing did not stop there. As Athenians had discovered the power of knowledge in strengthening the morals of citizens, on the one hand, and empowering them to meet day-today material needs, on the other, they used education to transfer to young Athenians knowledge in the arts and sciences of the day and skills to practice crafts. So their model of education was one in which the moral aspects of knowledge and skills took precedent in the formation of character over their role as means for generating utility and wealth. In other words, education in classical Athens transferred knowledge and skills to young Athenians not so much to earn higher incomes and amass more wealth, but to become better citizens. The following proposition purports to stress this hint:

> **Proposition 4.** Aside from enabling individuals to earn higher utility, in the form of income and other psychological satisfactions, knowledge and skills carry moral obligations, because those who possess them are expected to be more virtuous and just citizens.

How important is this proposition may be demonstrated by comparing its implications to those from the theory of human capital that permeates all conceptualizations of the process of economic growth.

A. Smith (1776, pp. 781-4, 788, 796), J. S. Mill (1848, pp. 856-7, 948-9), A. Marshall (1890, pp. 175-7), Mincer (1958), Schultz (1963), Becker (1964) and numerous other more contemporary authors have explained why education is important for economic growth and development. For an example, here is a famous passage from Marshall (1890, p. 176):

> "There is no extravagance more prejudicial to growth of national wealth than that wasteful negligence which allows genius that happens to be born of lowly parentage to expend itself in lowly work. No change would conduce so much to a rapid increase of material wealth as an improvement in our schools, and especially those of the middle grades, provided it be combined with an extensive system of scholarships, which will enable the clever son of a working man to rise gradually from school to school till he has the best theoretical and practical education which the age can give."

That knowledge and skills can do wonders in elevating countries out of poverty, Athenians new already from classical times. But at the same time they knew that by

amassing wealth individuals tend to become arrogant, power hungry and quite destructive of social cohesion. To tame these instincts and exploit them for the benefit of their city-state, they were very inventive. As we have shown in Bitros and Karayiannis (2006; 2008), they had adopted policies even to encourage entrepreneurship on the part of slaves. But at the same time they employed education in conjunction with various social pressures to keep extreme individualism in check. That is why in addition to the advantages of having knowledge and skills as means of creating wealth, they stressed the moral obligations that these attributes generated for the individuals. Unfortunately, by absolving those who have knowledge and skills from their social obligations, the theory of human capital has contributed to the adoption across the world of educational systems that deliver scientists, engineers and practitioners who are more individuals than citizens. As expected by the above economists this shift in emphasis away from character education and towards knowledge and skills has certainly resulted in higher growth rates. But at the same time it has given rise to less cohesive societies, particularly in those countries where the institutions are weak to compensate for the rise in the selfish and individualistic instincts of their constituencies. Thus, what the Athenian model of education hints to is that there is a delicate balance between character education, on the one hand, and knowledge and skills, on the other, which cannot be ignored in designing educational system for economic growth with social cohesion.

In sum, education in ancient Athens was more balance in terms in terms of its emphasis on character, knowledge and skills than contemporary educational systems in developed and less developed market economies. This balance, which characterized the quest of the ancient Athenian society for "*metron*", i.e. moderation, in all its manifestations served it exceptionally well in achieving a cohesive social environment with unparallel levels of wealth relative to Sparta. On this basis then, contemporary models of education should be adapted along its objectives and structure.

6. Summary of findings and conclusions

According to Isocrates (*Areopagiticus*, 43) the main objective of education in classical Greece was:

"To mold the psychic and intellectual powers of children to such an extent

that they may become useful to themselves and to their fellowmen."

Other towering ancient Greeks held similar views.[8] For example, consider the views expounded by Euripides. In one of his tragedies (*The Suppliants*, 910-5) he recommends that juveniles and youth must be taught how to behave so that they may retain these habits until their old ages, whereas in another (*Iphigenia in Aulis*, 560-565) he argues that:

> "The training that come of education conduces greatly to virtue; for not only is modesty wisdom, but it has also the rare grace of seeing by its better judgment what is right; whereby a glory, ever young, is shed over life by reputation."[9]

Pursuant to these views Athens put in place a system of education that aspired to deliver citizens who were characterized by virtue and justice and had adequate knowledge and skills to meet their day-to-day material needs. On the contrary, Sparta adopted a system of education in which knowledge and skills beyond fighting wars were considered superfluous.

Even though both models of education served well the purposes for which they had been adopted, it is only the Athenian one that holds useful hints for policy makers today. In particular, according to this model there is a delicate balance between character education, on the one hand, and knowledge and skills, on the other, which cannot be ignored in designing educational system for economic growth with social cohesion. This hint is particularly useful in countries where the institutions are weak and cannot control the animal instincts of individual, because then the development of extreme individualism may tear society apart.

To be sure, striking the right balance between character education and knowledge and skills it is easier said than done. However, this is where the Athenian model of education is at its best. Because, by stressing: a) the principle of moderation in the choices involved, and b) the moral aspects of knowledge and skills, the state is entitled to keeping a close eye on the private providers of educational services and to intervening at any time on behalf of the public interest.

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Endnotes

[1] Wilson (1979; 1996) has suggested that one issue of education in recent times is to teach pupils to recognize and put into action truths which are in themselves tolerably obvious and universally accepted, namely that other people should do the same thing to the rest in similar situations. Thus, if an education system follows the principles of a rational procedural morality, one is necessarily committed to a democratic society (White, 1980). On extending this thesis Althof and Berkowitz (2006) have argued that any democratic society must concern itself with the socialization of its citizens. Thus the role of schools in fostering the development of moral citizens in democratic societies necessarily focuses on teaching citizenship, skills and disposition.

[2] Aside from these three classes there existed also the class of "*Hepohomoioi*" or "under-citizens", which consisted of Spartans who had lost their citizenship. But we have information neither on how large it was nor on its place in the structure of Spartan society. Quite likely their class expanded when the inheritance of property to third parties was allowed after the Peloponnesian Wars.

[3] For an extended analysis see Bitros and Karayiannis (2010).

[4] Laurie rightly noticed that "in Athens the morality of the individual was a civic or political morality, the elements of personality and a free ethics existed even before Socrates, and were powerfully expressed in literature. The Athenian education was in this as in other respects a reflex of the Athenian life" (1894, p. 419). And the Athenian State "while leaving the education of the citizens by the parents free, prescribed certain general rules… But the main controlling force seems to have been the force of public opinion" (Ibid., p. 420).

[5] As Ober clearly argues "education (formal and informal) encourages individuals to internalize group norms with respect to making and keeping commitments. Meanwhile, behavioral norms and sanctions, triggered by easily observed misbehavior, serve to control the tendency of individuals to free-ride on other cooperative behavior or to take more than their share from common-pool resources" (2008, pp. 87-8).

[6] See Plato (*Laws*, 654 A-B, 672 E, *Republic*, 401 D-E, 526-7, 530-1; *Protagoras*,318 D-E); pseudo-Demosthenes (*Erotic Essay,* 37, 40, 44).

[7] To be sure, the context in which Spartan children were trained to steal makes a lot of difference. For if they were trained to steal only from enemies and only in times of war, stealing might be considered a praiseworthy capability. But all indications are that Spartan children were trained to steal from friends and foes alike as a way of expected and commendable social behavior. The only qualification being that they were encouraged to do so not in order to accumulate wealth, of which there was no use, but to survive physically.

[8] Actually similar views were expressed until the time of Plutarch (1st century A.D.) who suggested (*The Education of Children*, 3.A) that education determines the character and the behavior of an individual and corrects his deficiencies mainly during childhood. Actually in comparison to wealth, glory, beauty, health and bodily robustness, which he found to be inferior features of human beings, he considered education as the "only good that is immortal and divine".

[9] In view of these quotations it is not amazing that nearly 15 centuries later Pope Benedict XIV in the following imaginary discussion with Voltaire somewhere in the grateful memory of mankind arrived in the same conclusion:

Voltaire: I still think that philosophers can dispense with morality.

Pope Benedict XIV: How naïve you are. Are children capable of philosophy? Can children reason? Society is based upon morality, morality is based upon character, character is formed in

childhood and youth long before reason can be a guide. We must infuse morality into the individual when he is young and malleable; then it may be strong enough to withstand his individualistic impulses, even his individualistic reasoning. I am afraid you began to think too soon. The intellect is constitutional individualist, and when it is uncontrolled by morality it can tear society to pieces." Durant, Durant, (1967, 791).