

Comparing the Educational Philosophies of Confucius and Plato

Comparando as filosofias educacionais de Confúcio e Platão

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts a comprehensive analysis of the educational philosophy of Confucius, the ancient Chinese philosopher, and Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher. shaping educational thought through distinct but sometimes intersecting perspectives. The study explores their perspectives on the purpose of education, teaching methods, the role of teachers, and the ideal learner model, placing these ideas in their socio-cultural context. Through a comparison of these philosophies, the paper highlights key differences and similarities, and assesses their implications for modern education. The results show that, despite coming from different cultures, both Confucius and Plato emphasize the role of education in the moral and intellectual development of human beings, but with different focuses and approaches.

KEYWORDS: Confucius, Plato, philosophy of education, ethics, wisdom, teaching methods.

RESUMO

Este artigo realiza uma análise abrangente da filosofia educacional de Confúcio, o antigo filósofo chinês, e Platão, o antigo filósofo grego, moldando o pensamento educacional por meio de perspectivas distintas,

mas às vezes interseccionais. O estudo explora suas perspectivas sobre o propósito da educação, os métodos de ensino, o papel dos professores e o modelo de aluno ideal, situando essas ideias em seu contexto sociocultural. Por meio de uma comparação entre essas filosofias, o artigo destaca as principais diferenças e semelhanças e avalia suas implicações para a educação moderna. Os resultados mostram que, apesar de virem de culturas diferentes, tanto Confúcio quanto Platão enfatizam o papel da educação no desenvolvimento moral e intelectual dos seres humanos, mas com focos e abordagens distintas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Confúcio, Platão, filosofia da educação, ética, sabedoria, métodos de ensino.

1. Introduction

Education has long been seen as the foundation for personal and social development. In the history of philosophy, Confucius (551–479 BC) of China and Plato (427–347 BC) of ancient Greece were two typical thinkers, offering insightful views on the role and method of education. Although they live in different cultural and historical contexts, they both believe that education plays a central role in shaping the ideal person and society. However, their approach was markedly different, reflecting the values and social structures of their time (Pham, 2025).

Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, emphasized education as a means to cultivate moral character and maintain social order through principles such as humanity (仁), ceremony (礼), and filial piety (孝). For him, education not only imparts knowledge but also trains people to live in harmony with the community, become a "prince", a person with high moral qualities and social responsibility. In the *Treatise*, he said: "Children who are not thoughtful are clogged, children who do not study are clogged" (learning without thinking is wasteful, thinking without learning is dangerous), emphasizing the combination of learning and reflection. He believed that education should be for all, with the famous saying "Friendship without class" (education without distinction of class), in order to create a harmonious society through the proper performance of each individual in his or her role (Bui, 2025).

In contrast, Plato, a student of Socrates and teacher of Aristotle, saw education as a tool for discovering truth and building an ideal state. In the *Republic*, he used the "Parable of the Cave" to describe education as the journey that leads the soul from ignorance to knowledge, the perception of Ideal Forms. Plato's goal was to train philosophers-kings who had superior intellect and reason to lead the state fairly. Unlike Confucius, Plato proposed a stratified system of education, in which individuals were trained according to their innate abilities, from laborers to guards to philosophers (Pham, 2025).

In terms of teaching methods, Confucius uses a flexible, personalized approach according to the needs of each student. He encourages learning through dialogue, questioning, and reflection, often answering differently depending on the questioner. He emphasized learning from classical texts such as the *Poetry*

and Scriptures, but asked students to put their knowledge into practice and train themselves throughout their lives. Plato, meanwhile, advocated the dialectical method, a form of logical dialogue that seeks to discover truth through debate and criticism (Pham, 2025). He proposed a systematic education program, from physical and musical for children to mathematics, geometry, and philosophy for the elite, in order to develop both physically, intellectually, and spiritually.

Regarding the role of the teacher, Confucius saw the teacher as a moral model, living according to humanity, ceremony, and righteousness, and guiding students through dialogue. He sees the teacher-student relationship as respect and mutual learning. Plato, on the other hand, saw the teacher as a "midwife" of knowledge, helping students generate ideas through questions that stimulate critical thinking. However, Plato requires the teacher to have extensive knowledge to lead his students to the ideal truth.

Confucius' ideal learner model is the "prince", one who constantly learns, practices morality, and lives responsibly to the community. He believed that anyone could become a prince through effort. In contrast, Plato describes the philosopher as an idealistic learner, thirsty for knowledge, and capable of perceiving Forms to lead the state. However, Plato argued that only a few people have the innate capacity to reach the highest level of knowledge (Bui, 2025).

These philosophies beg the question: How can they inspire modern education? Confucius' views on universal and moral education can help build comprehensive educational programs that emphasize character and life skills. Plato's dialectical method encourages critical thinking, which is consistent with the development of analytical and creative skills. Combining the two can create a balanced education system that both fosters morality and promotes wisdom.

This article compares the educational philosophy of Confucius and Plato through four aspects: educational purpose, teaching methods, the role of teachers, and the ideal learner model. By analyzing similarities and differences, the article clarifies the value of the two philosophies in shaping educational practices today, opening up the direction of research on how to apply them in the modern context.

2. Historical and cultural context

2.1. Confucius and the context of ancient China

Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn Period, a tumultuous period of Chinese history, when the Zhou dynasty weakened and vassal states fell into constant conflict (Zhao, 2008). This was a time when the traditional social order was threatened, and moral values and etiquette were gradually fading away in the face of power struggles and wars. In this context, Confucius, as a thinker and educator, sought to restore social stability through education. He believed that education was the key to re-establishing order,

not only by imparting knowledge but also by cultivating moral character, thereby creating individuals who could contribute to building a harmonious society (Zhao, 2013).

Confucius' educational philosophy revolves around the development of "princes", ideal human models with moral qualities such as humanity (compassion), courtesy (code of conduct), and righteousness (integrity) (Tsai, 1999). These values are not only the foundation for personal growth but also a tool to maintain the stability of the community. Confucius believed that an ideal society could only be achieved when each individual, from the leader to the common people, properly performed his or her role according to moral principles. Therefore, education, according to him, must be aimed at training both the soul and the intellect, helping people live in harmony with each other and with society.

Confucius was not only a philosopher but also a practical educator. He opened a private school, a pioneering initiative at the time, and trained thousands of students from all walks of life (Tan, 2020). His view of "Righteousness without Class" (education without distinction of class) expresses a vision of progress, emphasizing that anyone can access education for self-development. Confucius encouraged lifelong learning, considering learning not only as a process of acquiring knowledge but also as self-training and personality improvement. He emphasized learning from classical texts such as the Poetry and Scriptures, but at the same time asked students to reflect on and apply knowledge to real life. His teaching methods are flexible, based on dialogue and personalized instruction, tailored to the needs and personalities of each student.

The Spring and Autumn context, with its instability and moral deterioration, shaped Confucius' educational philosophy (You, 2018). He sees in education a solution to restore traditional values, while creating a generation of ethical and responsible leaders. His philosophy not only reflected the needs of the times but also laid the foundations for Confucianism, which profoundly influenced East Asian culture and education for millennia. Confucius's view of education as a tool for personal and social development remains intact, especially in emphasizing the role of ethics and continuous learning.

2.2. Plato and the Ancient Greek Context

Plato lived during the ancient Greek period, when Athens was a vibrant center of philosophical, political, and cultural thought (Shahidipak, 2022). This was a time when Athenian democracy was facing many challenges, including the Peloponnesian War and political instability following the death of Socrates, Plato's teacher. Deeply influenced by Socrates' thought, Plato founded the Academy, one of the first educational institutions in the West, to train generations of leaders capable of philosophical and rational thinking (Aziz, 2023). The philosophical foundation of Western higher education: A critical review of theory and practice. International Journal of Educational Research Review, 8(2), 208-219.. His educational philosophy was influenced by the theory of "Forms", in which he held that the physical world

was only a shadow of an ideal, eternal reality. Education, according to Plato, is the process of leading the human soul from the illusory material world to the realization of absolute truth.

In his work *The Republic*, Plato outlines an ideal educational system for a just state where individuals are trained according to their social roles: workers learn practical skills, guards are trained in physical fitness and loyalty, while the philosopher-king is trained in philosophy and reason to lead (Turan, 2011). Unlike Confucius, Plato proposed a stratified system of education, in which learning content is designed based on the innate abilities of each individual (Hu, 2022). He believed that only a few people were capable of reaching the highest level of knowledge, sufficient to understand the Forms and lead the state fairly.

Plato emphasized the role of reason in education. He said that the goal of education is not only to impart knowledge but also to develop the ability to think logically and abstractly, helping people to be aware of the nature of reality. His educational program includes subjects such as mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy, designed to develop both physically, intellectually, and spiritually. The dialectical method, logical and critical dialogue, is the main tool for leading students to the truth. Plato sees education as a journey of liberation, as described in the "Parable of the Cave," where man overcomes the darkness of ignorance to reach the light of knowledge (Kien and Dung, 2025).

The ancient Greek context, with the development of philosophical thinking and the need to build a stable society, shaped Plato's philosophy of education. He sought to solve Athens' problems by training a class of leaders who were intellectual and moral, based on reason rather than emotion or power. Plato's Academy is not only a place to spread philosophy but also a model for modern educational institutions, emphasizing the role of critical thinking and knowledge in building an ideal society.

2.3. Context Comparison

Although Confucius and Plato both lived during periods of social unrest, their cultural and historical contexts shaped distinct educational philosophies (Heng, 2013). China's Spring and Autumn Period, with the weakening of the Zhou Dynasty and conflicts between vassal states, prompted Confucius to focus on restoring social order through morality and ritual. His philosophy emphasizes universal education, which aims to create a harmonious society where each individual performs his or her role. The view of "Friendship without Kindness" reflects a vision of progress, expanding education for all classes, with a focus on character development and social responsibility.

In contrast, Plato operates in the context of Athens, where philosophical thinking and reason are flourishing. Political instability and the death of Socrates led Plato towards building an ideal state through stratified education (Williams, 2010). He believed that only those with superior intellectual capacity could lead, and that education should serve the goals of the state rather than the individual. While Confucius

emphasized morality and collective harmony, Plato focused on reason and justice, reflecting the values of ancient Greek culture.

Differences in cultural contexts have led to unique approaches to education. Confucius prioritized moral training and lifelong learning to maintain social order, while Plato emphasized philosophical and rational thinking to build a just state. However, they both agree that education is an important tool for improving society, even though their goals and methods differ. These differences laid the foundation for their educational philosophies, which profoundly influenced educational thought in East Asia and the West.

3. Comparative analysis of educational philosophies

3.1. Purpose of education

Confucius considered education as the core means of developing moral character, helping individuals become "princes", ideal human models with the qualities of compassion (humanity), integrity (righteousness), and knowing how to behave according to etiquette (ceremony). For him, education is not only about imparting knowledge but also about training oneself to live in harmony with the community. In the Treatise, he emphasized: "Children who are not carefree are clogged in hammocks, and children who do not study are clogged" (learning without thinking is wasteful, thinking without learning is dangerous). This quote reflects the view that education must combine learning and reflection in order to achieve holistic development in both intellect and morality (Dung, 2025).

The purpose of Confucius' education was not only to the individual but also to maintain social order (Tan, 2017). He believes that a harmonious society can only be achieved when each person performs his or her role correctly, from the leader to the commoner. Education, therefore, is a tool for building an ideal society where moral values such as humanity, ceremony, and filial piety are upheld. Confucius emphasized that education must be universal, expressed through the view of "Humanism without class" (education without distinction of class), allowing everyone, regardless of background, to have the opportunity to learn and improve themselves. He encourages lifelong learning, seeing learning as a continuous journey to cultivate character and contribute to the community.

Confucius' educational philosophy reflects the context of the Spring and Autumn period, when the social order was threatened by conflict and moral degradation. He believes that education can restore traditional values, creating a generation of leaders and ethical citizens. By emphasizing personal ethics and social responsibility, Confucius' education was not only aimed at improving the individual but also towards the stability and harmony of the whole society. This view laid the foundations for Confucianism, which profoundly influenced East Asian culture and education for millennia, particularly in emphasizing the role of ethics in education.

Plato saw education as a journey that leads the soul from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge (Hinchliffe, 2006). In *The Republic*, he uses the "Parable of the Cave" to illustrate that education is the process of liberating people from the illusions of the material world, helping them to perceive Forms, ideal and eternal entities. The supreme purpose of education, according to Plato, was to train philosophers-kings who had superior intellect and reason to lead a just state. He believed that only those who understood the absolute truth could make the right decisions for society.

Unlike Confucius, Plato emphasized that education served the interests of the state rather than the individual. He proposed a stratified system of education, in which individuals were trained based on innate competence: workers learned practical skills, guards were trained in physical fitness and loyalty, and philosopher-kings studied philosophy and advanced sciences. Plato argued that not everyone is capable of reaching the highest level of knowledge, and that education must be designed to suit each person's social role. In this system, reason plays a central role, as Plato believed that only reason can help people overcome emotions and illusions to reach justice.

Plato's educational philosophy reflects the ancient Greek context, where philosophical thinking and reason flourished. He sought to solve the political and social problems of Athens through the training of an intelligent leadership class. Education, according to Plato, is not only the imparting of knowledge but also the process of developing the ability to think abstractly and logically, helping people to perceive the nature of reality. This view laid the foundations for Western education, especially in emphasizing the role of reason and critical thinking.

Both Confucius and Plato saw education as a tool for improving society, but their goals and approaches differed markedly. Confucius focused on cultivating personal morality and maintaining social harmony, emphasizing values such as humanity, ceremony, and filial piety. His education was universal, open to everyone regardless of background, with the goal of creating men who were responsible for the community. In contrast, Plato emphasized reason and the construction of an ideal state, with a stratified education aimed at training philosophers-kings to lead society. He argues that only a few people have access to high-level knowledge, reflecting an elitist viewpoint.

This difference stems from their cultural values. Confucius' Confucianism emphasized collectivism and morality, while Plato's philosophy emphasized individual reason and justice. However, they both agree that education is a means to shape people and society. While Confucius aimed at the holistic development of the individual in the service of the community, Plato focused on training an elite class of leadership to ensure justice. These perspectives not only reflect their cultural context but also bring value to modern education, with Confucius inspiring moral education and Plato encouraging critical thinking.

3.2. Teaching methods

Confucius was a practical educator, applying a flexible, personalized teaching method according to the needs and personalities of each student. He encourages learning through dialogue, questioning, and reflection, allowing students to explore knowledge on their own. In the Treatise, he often answers his students' questions flexibly, for example, when asked about the cause, he gives different answers depending on the questioner. This shows the sensitivity in adapting teaching methods to suit each individual, helping students understand more deeply.

Confucius' method emphasizes learning from practice and life experience. He encouraged his students to study classical texts such as the Psalms and Scriptures, but asked them to apply their knowledge to real life. He emphasized self-study and self-training, with the famous saying: "Ngo ten thousand children are willing to study" (when I am fifteen years old, I am determined to study). This perspective emphasizes that learning is a lifelong journey that requires perseverance and self-discipline. Confucius not only imparts knowledge but also guides students to develop their personalities, encouraging them to live by moral values such as merit, ceremony, and righteousness.

Confucius's educational context, with private schools open to all classes, shaped his teaching methods. He believes that education must be personalized to meet the diverse needs of students, thereby helping them become princes. His method of dialogue not only helps to impart knowledge but also stimulates thinking and social responsibility. This perspective has had a profound impact on East Asian education, particularly in its emphasis on the role of continuous learning and practical application.

Plato advocated the dialectical method, a form of logical dialogue that seeks to discover truth through debate and criticism. In works such as Meno and Phaedo, he describes how Socrates used questions to lead his students to deeper understanding, encouraging them to explore knowledge on their own rather than just taking in information. This method not only imparts knowledge but also develops the ability to think logically and abstractly, helping students to be aware of the nature of reality.

In the Republic, Plato proposed a systematic educational program, with clear stages of learning. Children begin with physical and musical education to develop body and soul, then move on to sciences such as mathematics, geometry, and astronomy, and finally philosophy for those who are capable. He believed that education must be carefully designed for holistic development, from physical to intellectual and spiritual. Plato's dialectical method is the main tool for leading students to Ideal Forms, helping them to overcome the illusion of the material world.

Plato's educational method reflects the ancient Greek context where philosophical thinking and reason were upheld (STONEHOUSE et all., 2011). He sought to train a class of leaders who were able to think critically and make decisions based on truth. His systematic education program laid the foundations for Western education, especially in its emphasis on logical and scientific thinking. The dialectical method is

not only a teaching tool but also a way to develop wisdom and reason, helping students become philosophers with leadership abilities.

Both Confucius and Plato used dialogue as a teaching tool, but their approaches were markedly different. Confucius focused on personalizing education, encouraging students to reflect and apply knowledge to practice. His methods are flexible, based on individual needs, and emphasize ethics and social responsibility. In contrast, Plato uses the dialectical method to lead his students to abstract truth, with a well-structured curriculum of learning, from physical to philosophical. He focused on the development of reason in the service of the state, rather than the holistic development of the individual.

This difference reflects their educational purpose. Confucius aimed to train princes who were moral and responsible to the community, while Plato focused on training philosophers-kings who had the reason to lead the state. While Confucius emphasized universal and practical education, Plato emphasized stratified and theoretical education. However, they both agree that dialogue is an effective means of stimulating thinking and imparting knowledge. These approaches bring value to modern education, with Confucius inspiring moral education and Plato encouraging critical thinking.

3.3. The role of the teacher

In Confucius' philosophy, the teacher is not only a transmitter of knowledge but also a moral role model, living according to the principles of cause, ceremony, and righteousness. He believes that a teacher must be an example for students to follow, showing the qualities of a prince. Confucius saw himself as a guide, helping students discover their potential through dialogue and encouraging self-study. He uses a personalized teaching approach, answering students' questions based on their personalities and needs, creating a friendly and respectful learning environment.

The teacher-student relationship, according to Confucius, is based on mutual respect and learning. He does not impose knowledge but encourages students to reflect and apply knowledge to life. This perspective reflects the Confucian philosophy, where the teacher plays a central role in shaping the student's personality and social responsibility. Confucius emphasized that teachers must be patient, humble, and responsible in leading students to become ethical individuals and contribute to society.

The educational context of Confucius, with private schools open to all classes, shaped the role of the teacher as a well-rounded guide. He not only taught knowledge but also how to live, encouraging students to learn for life and live by moral values. This role has had a profound impact on East Asian education, particularly in emphasizing the teacher-student relationship and the role of ethics in teaching.

Plato saw the teacher as a "midwife" of knowledge, helping students generate ideas from within through the Socratic method. In works such as *Meno* and *Phaedo*, he describes how teachers use questions to stimulate critical thinking, leading students to a deeper understanding of truth. Plato believed that the

teacher must have extensive knowledge and superior reason, especially when it came to training philosophers-kings who would lead the state based on justice and knowledge.

Unlike Confucius, Plato emphasized the role of the teacher in leading students to ideal Forms, transcending the illusion of the material world. He sees the teacher as a philosopher, capable of directing students through logical and critical dialogues. This role requires the teacher not only to have knowledge but also abstract thinking skills to help students perceive the nature of reality.

The ancient Greek context, with the development of philosophy and reason, shaped the role of the teacher in Plato's philosophy. He saw the teacher as an important factor in building an ideal state, through the training of individuals with leadership abilities. This role has influenced Western education, particularly in its emphasis on critical thinking and the role of the teacher as a guide of knowledge.

Both Confucius and Plato saw the teacher as a central factor in education, but their roles were different (Shim, 2008). Confucius emphasized the moral aspect, seeing the teacher as a model for students to follow, with the teacher-student relationship based on mutual respect and learning. In contrast, Plato focuses on the role of the teacher as a guide to truth, using the dialectical method to stimulate critical thinking. While Confucius emphasized morality and personalized guidance, Plato emphasized reason and abstract knowledge.

This difference reflects their philosophical focus. Confucius' Confucianism emphasized humanity and social responsibility, while Plato's philosophy emphasized reason and justice. However, both agree that the teacher plays an important role in shaping the student, whether to become a prince or a philosopher. These views bring value to modern education, with Confucius inspiring the moral role of the teacher and Plato encouraging the role of intellectual leadership.

3.4. Ideal Learner Role Model

Confucius' ideal learner model is the "prince", an individual who is constantly studying, practicing morality, and living according to the principles of humanity, ceremony, and righteousness. The prince not only has knowledge but also knows how to apply knowledge to life, showing compassion and responsibility to the community. Confucius emphasized that learning is a lifelong journey that requires perseverance and self-discipline. He believed that anyone, regardless of background, could become a prince through the effort of learning and self-improvement.

This perspective reflects the Confucian philosophy, where education aims to develop the whole person both morally and intellectually. The prince is a universal role model, not limited by class or innate ability, but based on personal effort and commitment. Confucius encouraged students to reflect, apply knowledge to practice, and live in harmony with the community, thereby contributing to social stability.

For Plato, the ideal learner is the philosopher, the one who thirsts for knowledge and is capable of perceiving the Ideal Forms (Smith, 2019). In the Republic, he described philosophers-kings as people of superior intellect, trained through a rigorous education in mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and philosophy. Plato believed that not everyone could become a philosopher, since only a few people had the innate capacity to reach the highest level of knowledge, sufficient to lead the state.

The philosopher, according to Plato, is a relentless search for truth, transcending the illusion of the material world to perceive eternal reality. This paradigm reflects Plato's elitist view, where education is designed to serve the state and is reserved only for those capable of leadership. This view has influenced Western education, especially in its emphasis on philosophical and rational thinking.

Both Confucius and Plato emphasized personal growth through learning, but their ideal learner models differed. Confucius' son is a universal role model, for everyone regardless of background, with a focus on ethics and social responsibility. Plato's philosopher, by contrast, was an elitist model, reserved only for those with special intellectual capacity, with the goal of leading the state. While Confucius emphasized lifelong learning and holistic development, Plato focused on training reason to reach truth.

This difference reflects their educational perspective: Confucius emphasized universal education and the humanities, while Plato emphasized stratified education and reason. However, they both agree that the ideal learner must have a thirst for knowledge and a commitment to self-development. These role models bring value to modern education, with the prince inspiring moral education and the philosopher encouraging critical thinking.

4. Implications for modern education

The educational philosophy of Confucius and Plato, although born millennia ago, still has profound implications for modern education. Confucius' views on universal education and moral development can inspire modern educational systems to promote holistic education, emphasizing both intellect and character. Meanwhile, Plato's dialectical approach and emphasis on critical thinking can be applied in modern educational programs that develop analytical and creative skills. The combination of these two philosophies can yield a balanced approach: education should not only focus on imparting knowledge, but also on fostering ethics, critical thinking, and social responsibility. For example, modern educational programs can learn from Confucius in formulating subjects on ethics and life skills, and apply Plato's Socratic method to encourage students to think independently.

5. Conclusion

A comparison of the educational philosophy of Confucius and Plato shows that both thinkers saw education as a tool for personal and social improvement, but with different goals and methods. Confucius emphasized morality, social harmony, and universal education, while Plato focused on reason, truth, and

stratified education. These differences reflect their cultural and social contexts, but also highlight shared values about the role education plays in shaping people. In the context of modern education, both philosophies offer valuable lessons. The combination of Confucius' moral education and Plato's critical thinking can help build a comprehensive education system that meets the needs of modern society. This study not only sheds light on the contributions of Confucius and Plato, but also opens up further research directions on how to apply these philosophies in diverse educational contexts.

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