

Essay Assignment 1: Education, Character, and Social Formation

Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Republic*, Books I–V

Length: 5–7 pages

Format: MLA

Primary texts: Plato, *Euthyphro* and *Republic*, Books I–V

Audience: First-Year Philosophy

DUE: Uploaded to Canvas by midnight September 26, 2026

Central Question

Who—or what—has taught you to be the person you are?

Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Republic* ask us to think carefully about how human beings acquire their ideas about what is good, right, admirable, shameful, beautiful, just, and worth pursuing. For Plato, education is not simply the transfer of information. It is also the formation of **character**: the shaping of a person's desires, habits, emotions, judgments, and understanding of the good.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters someone who is confident that he understands piety but struggles to explain what piety actually is. In the *Republic*, Socrates and his interlocutors develop a much broader account of how individuals and communities are formed. They consider the stories children hear, the examples they encounter, music and poetry, bodily training, political institutions, family structures, and eventually the philosophical education of those who are to govern.

These arguments raise an important question for us: **How much of who we are is something we have consciously chosen, and how much has been formed by the people, institutions, stories, practices, and communities around us?**

For this essay, you will use Plato's arguments to examine your own social formation.

The Assignment

Write an essay in which you **use Plato's *Euthyphro* and *Republic*, Books I–V, to analyze how your own character and understanding of the good have been socially formed.**

Your essay should not simply tell the story of your childhood or describe the people who influenced you. Instead, use your experience as a **case study for a philosophical argument.**

Your essay should address the following larger question:

To what extent are our ideas about what is good, right, admirable, or worth pursuing products of our education and social environment—and to what extent can philosophical reflection allow us to question or revise that formation?

You do not need to agree with Plato. In fact, one possible conclusion is that Plato's account of education is incomplete, overly controlling, or problematic. What matters is that you **use Plato's arguments to think philosophically about your own experience.**

Part I: Plato on Education and Character

Begin by explaining what Plato means by education and character formation.

You should discuss **at least two** of the following:

- Socrates' examination of Euthyphro's confidence about piety
- Euthyphro's assumption that he already knows what is right
- The relationship between knowledge and virtue
- The stories and examples through which children are educated in *Republic* II–III
- Plato's concern with poetry, music, and imitation
- The relationship between physical training and education
- The formation of courage, moderation, and justice
- The relationship between individual character and the political community
- Plato's claim that education shapes what people love and desire
- The education of the guardians
- The relationship between education and political leadership
- The philosophical education of the rulers in *Republic* V

Your discussion must include **at least four direct quotations from Plato**, drawn from at least **two different books/dialogues**.

Do not use quotations merely as decoration. After each important quotation, synthesize and explain what Plato means and how the quotation supports your interpretation.

For example, rather than writing:

Plato says that "education" is important.

write something like:

Plato's account of education suggests that people are shaped before they are capable of consciously evaluating the beliefs they have inherited. When Socrates and Adeimantus begin discussing education, Socrates asks, "Shall we not begin education in music earlier than in gymnastics?" (Plato 376e). The question is important because Plato is not primarily talking about

memorizing information. He is asking how the stories, sounds, images, and practices surrounding children gradually form their emotional responses and ultimately their character.

Part II: Your Own Social Formation

Now turn Plato's questions toward yourself.

Think about the different forces that have contributed to the person you have become.

These might include:

- parents or family members
- siblings
- friends
- teachers
- religious communities
- schools
- neighborhoods
- socioeconomic circumstances
- race, class, gender, or cultural expectations
- sports or other activities
- popular culture
- books and literature
- music
- television or film
- social media
- political communities
- workplaces
- communities of faith or nonbelief
- experiences of success or failure
- experiences of inclusion or exclusion
- people you admired
- people you rejected as role models
- rules or expectations that you learned as a child
- experiences that caused you to question what you had previously believed

Choose **two or three particularly significant influences** and analyze them philosophically.

For each influence, ask:

1. **What did I learn from this person, institution, practice, or community?**
2. **Did I consciously choose to learn it, or did I absorb it?**
3. **What did this influence teach me about what is good, bad, admirable, shameful, successful, or desirable?**

4. **Did it shape my behavior, my desires, my emotions, or my understanding of myself?**
5. **Do I still accept the values I learned from this influence?**
6. **Have I ever discovered that something I regarded as obviously true was actually an assumption I had inherited?**
7. **How might Plato interpret this influence on my character?**

The goal is not to decide whether your upbringing was "good" or "bad." The goal is to become more aware of **how formation happens**.

Part III: The Philosophical Problem

Your essay should ultimately move beyond autobiography and address a philosophical problem.

Plato assumes that education can—and should—shape people toward particular forms of character. But this raises an important question:

Who gets to decide what counts as a good character?

For Plato, education is not neutral. The stories people hear, the examples they imitate, the practices they participate in, and the political structures in which they live all help determine what they come to regard as normal and desirable.

Consider this claim from the *Republic*:

"And the beginning is the most important part of any work, especially in the case of a young and tender thing; for that is the time at which the character is being formed and the impression more easily taken" (Plato 377a).

What are the implications of this idea?

You might ask:

- If our character is formed by our environment, are we responsible for beliefs we did not choose?
- Can someone genuinely question the values they were raised with?
- Is education liberating, controlling, or both?
- Can education form good character without imposing someone's conception of the good?
- Does Socrates' questioning represent a different kind of education from the education described in the *Republic*?
- Is philosophical questioning itself a form of character formation?
- What happens when different communities teach contradictory ideas about what is good?
- Can we ever completely escape the influence of our social formation?

Required Use of Plato

Your essay must meet all of the following requirements:

1. Use both texts

You must discuss:

- *Euthyphro*
- *Republic*, Books I–V

2. Use direct textual evidence

Include **at least six direct quotations from Plato**, including:

- at least **two quotations from *Euthyphro***
- at least **four quotations from *Republic*, Books I–V**
- quotations from at least **three different books of the *Republic***

At least two of your quotations should be **substantial enough to require interpretation**, rather than merely short phrases.

3. Analyze the quotations

After each important quotation, explain:

What is Plato saying here, and why does it matter for my argument?

Do not allow quotations to speak for themselves.

4. Develop an argument

Your essay must have a **thesis**.

Your thesis should make a claim about the relationship between:

education → social formation → character → philosophical reflection

A thesis should not simply say:

"Plato talks about education, and education has influenced my life."

Instead, aim for a claim such as:

Although much of what I regard as good and desirable was formed through influences I did not consciously choose, Plato's Socratic method suggests that education can become something more than social conditioning when we begin critically examining the assumptions that formed us.

You should develop your own thesis rather than simply copying this example.

Suggested Structure

You may organize the essay differently, but the following structure may be useful, **but please do not use section headers. Use transition sentences to connect sections.**

Introduction

- Introduce the problem of social formation.
- Introduce Plato's concern with education and character.
- Present your thesis.

Section I: Plato and the Formation of Character

Explain Plato's understanding of education using *Euthyphro* and *Republic*.

Section II: How I Was Formed

Analyze two or three significant influences on your own character and values.

Section III: Questioning My Formation

Identify at least one belief, value, assumption, or conception of the good that you have reconsidered.

Use Socrates' questioning of Euthyphro as a model for thinking about the possibility of examining beliefs that once seemed obvious.

Section IV: Education and the Good Life

Return to Plato and ask whether his conception of education helps explain your experience.

What would Plato think education should accomplish?

Would you agree with him?

Conclusion

Return to the central question:

Who—or what—has taught you to be the person you are?

Then consider the more difficult question:

Who are you becoming, and who gets to participate in forming that person?

MLA Requirements

Your essay should follow standard **MLA format**.

Include:

- 12-point readable font
- double spacing
- 1-inch margins
- your name
- instructor's name
- course
- date
- centered title
- page numbers
- MLA in-text citations
- Works Cited page

Because Plato's works are organized according to **Stephanus numbers**, you should include the Stephanus number whenever possible. If your assigned edition provides page numbers, include those according to your instructor's preferred MLA practice.

For example:

"The beginning is the most important part of any work" (Plato 377a).

Or, if your assigned edition requires page numbers:

"The beginning is the most important part of any work" (Plato 377a; 54).

Use the translation assigned for this course. Do not mix translations without identifying them.

Important: Quotation and Analysis

A useful rule for this essay is:

Quote → Explain → Connect → Reflect

For example:

QUOTE:

Plato argues that "the beginning is the most important part of any work" (377a).

EXPLAIN:

Plato means that the earliest stages of education have an unusually powerful influence on character.

CONNECT:

This helps explain why Plato is concerned with children's stories, music, and models of behavior rather than simply teaching them philosophical propositions.

REFLECT:

In my own education, stories about success and failure taught me something similar about what kinds of lives were considered valuable.

The important part of the essay is the **thinking between the quotation and your personal experience**.

Questions to Consider While Writing

You do not need to answer all of these.

About Plato

- Why does Plato think education is so important to character?
- Why does Plato worry about the stories children hear?
- Why does Plato care about poetry and imitation?
- What does Plato think people should learn to love?
- Why does Plato think the education of rulers is particularly important?
- What is the relationship between knowledge and virtue?
- Is Socrates himself an educator?
- How is Socrates' approach to education different from simply telling people what to believe?

About Yourself

- What did your family teach you about success?
- What did your school teach you about intelligence?
- What did your friends teach you about belonging?

- What did popular culture teach you about beauty, masculinity, femininity, wealth, or happiness?
- What did you learn to admire?
- What did you learn to fear?
- What did you learn to be ashamed of?
- What did you learn to desire?
- Which of your values feel most deeply "your own"?
- How do you know that they are your own?
- Have you ever changed your mind about something fundamental?
- What caused that change?
- Who or what had the authority to teach you what was true?

Evaluation

Criterion	Excellent	Developing	Beginning
Thesis & Argument	Makes a clear, original philosophical claim and develops it throughout the essay	Has a central idea but argument is uneven	Primarily summarizes or describes
Understanding Plato	Accurately and thoughtfully interprets Plato's arguments	Generally accurate but sometimes superficial	Significant misunderstanding or excessive summary
Textual Evidence	Uses 6+ well-chosen direct quotations and analyzes them effectively	Uses quotations but analysis is limited or uneven	Insufficient or poorly integrated textual evidence
Social Formation	Uses personal experience as evidence for sophisticated philosophical reflection	Makes meaningful connections but remains partly descriptive	Primarily autobiographical
Philosophical Reflection	Questions assumptions and considers multiple possibilities	Some critical reflection	Little examination of assumptions
Organization	Clear, coherent progression from Plato → experience → philosophical analysis	Generally organized	Difficult to follow
MLA & Writing	Consistent MLA formatting, citation, and polished prose	Minor errors	Frequent errors that interfere with readability

Final Reminder

This is **not primarily an autobiography**.

Your experiences are the material you will use to do philosophy.

The central movement of the essay should be:

What happened to me → What did I learn from it → How did it shape my character → What does Plato help me see about that formation → Can I critically examine what I was taught?

The ultimate goal is to practice what Socrates does throughout Plato's dialogues: **to examine things that we normally take for granted.**