

From Plato's Academy to Snellman College

**The Intellectual-Historical Background of
Snellman College**

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Introduction

In this article, I present some general features of the higher education pedagogy being developed at Snellman College. My aim is to demonstrate how the philosophical thinking and the philosophical conception of the human being found in Waldorf-Steiner education relate to the tradition of Western philosophy, and to identify points of contact with academic philosophy of education.

Differences in the philosophical foundations of sciences typically appear between the natural sciences and the humanities. In such cases, the differing nature of research objects is regarded as a justification for adopting distinct philosophical approaches. Since university level education includes studies in both, natural sciences and humanities, it is to be expected that divergent philosophical views on science will also be found.

On the basis of the distinctive teaching and research methods employed at Snellman College, a philosophical conception of the human being characteristic of Steiner education emerges; the human being—as a physical, biological, conscious, and spiritual entity. Questions such as 'what is the essence of the human being?' are fundamental questions within philosophical anthropology. This article seeks to illuminate the background and historical development of these particular characteristics.

Purpose of the College and the Educational Mission

The purpose of Snellman College is to promote the human and professional development of its students, based on a broad conception of education (or *Bildung*), which includes philosophical, scientific, artistic, and socio-practical studies. The College emphasizes a phenomenological approach, which seeks to take into account both the physical and spiritual dimensions of the human being and the world. Supporting the educational mission, the College is committed to an active pursuit of broad national and international collaboration and dialogue with other institutions of teacher education.

Snellman College is a national institution the mission of which is to provide general education studies developed on the basis of Waldorf-Steiner pedagogy. Its aim is to awaken the individual's capacities—on all modes of human being—and to provide means for the lifelong and balanced development of these abilities.

The general studies program is designed as a path to lifelong learning, aimed at supporting independent thinking, personal well-being, endur-

ance in working life, the development of social skills, and artistic creativity. It also serves as a foundation for further studies at Snellman College. A central and distinctive mission of the college is to provide teacher education in Waldorf-Steiner pedagogy.

The Role of General or Fundamental Studies at Snellman College

Now, retired, I look back with deep gratitude on my years of service as the Head of General Studies at Snellman College. Although my formal training as an economist may not have entirely aligned with the demands of the position, I remain thankful for the opportunity of having been able to support young adults in their formative years—those who, in the words of J. V. Snellman, “sought their education” within our institution.

Founded on the principles of Steiner pedagogy, Snellman College was granted the status of liberal adult education institution (*Vapaan sivistystyön oppilaitos*) in 1991. Its primary mandate was the training of Steiner educators in Finland, preparing class and art teachers for Steiner schools, as well as early childhood educators for Steiner kindergartens. Over the years, the college has also offered a variety of other programs, including visual arts, speech and drama, eurythmy, biodynamic agriculture, and ecological stewardship. Additionally, numerous short courses have been made available to students and the broader public, covering topics such as leadership development, nutrition, music and arboriculture.

Among the many educational courses at Snellman College, there is one program that stands apart from all other higher education pathways in Finland: the one year long foundational studies known as General Studies—*studium generalia* or *studium fundamentale*. These are mandatory for all full time students and represent an educational tradition that traces its lineage back to ancient times.¹ This tradition of perennial general education persisted through the theological Middle Ages and into the early modern period, before being largely eclipsed by the rise of specialized academic disciplines and the scientific ethos of modern universities.

While contemporary universities in Finland may host *studium generalia*-type public lectures, these events primarily serve to popularize recent academic research and are aimed at fostering public engagement with science. Though laudable, such initiatives differ fundamentally from the original concept of perennial General Studies. Their purpose is communi-

1 At present, the General Studies are arranged differently, but they still form a fundamental background in all vocational studies at Snellman College.

cative and representational—to make the latest academic work accessible and known to the public in a simplified form. By contrast, the aim of perennial General Studies is developmental and formative: to cultivate the inner life of the student and to ground all further learning in a holistic understanding of the human being and the world.

Snellman College began operating in 1980 with a strong emphasis on General, or Foundational studies. One of its founding members, Professor Reijo Wilenius—a philosopher and long-time faculty member—typically began the studies for the first year students with a lecture series titled *From Plato's Academy to Snellman College*. In this series, Wilenius traced the evolution of the General Studies concept throughout the history of higher education. His lectures provided not only an intellectual basis for the foundation year studies but also a philosophical orientation that underscored the college's mission.

Following Professor Wilenius's tenure, I continued to deliver this introductory course for nearly two decades. Drawing on my own research, I expanded and deepened the course under the title; *Intellectual-Historical Foundations of Snellman College*. Through this course, I sought to offer students a coherent picture of the Western intellectual tradition—one that affirms the dignity of the human being, the value of culture, and the formative role of education in shaping both individual and societal development.

General Studies at Snellman College represent an enduring educational ideal, distinct from the instrumental and career-focused models prevalent in contemporary higher education. Rooted in the tradition of the concept of *universitas*, these studies affirm that education is not merely a preparation for the labor market but a lifelong journey toward self-consciousness, cultural understanding, and ethical insight. It is my hope that, even in today's fragmented educational landscape, the spirit of perennial learning continues to inspire students and educators alike.

The Educational Ideal of Antiquity – Paideia

Historical evidence shows that today's academic sciences emerged through a long process of differentiation and specialization, evolving from the philosophical traditions that originated in ancient Greece and developing into the system of specialised sciences. The classical Socratic ideal of free independent thought has long been upheld as a model for the modern researcher, and ancient Greek philosophy itself is often regarded as the foundation of Western culture. However, what has gradually faded

from view is the deeper understanding of how the ancient philosophers themselves conceived of reality—and of man's relationship to it.

In ancient Greece, the effort to understand the nature of man did not aim solely at acquiring knowledge about what is a human being. It also sought to actualize what was considered dignified and valued human characteristics within the individual. Beyond merely grasping reality, the goal was to shape human character according to ideals considered both noble and beneficial for man. This was the essence of ancient Greek upbringing and education—*paideia*.

For centuries, *paideia* had been regarded as the ideal of higher education with Plato's Academy often cited as the origin of the Western university system. What Greek culture introduced, through the rise of philosophy, was the figure of the free and independently thinking individual. Even though the ideals of *paideia* are now generally referenced only in ceremonial academic speeches, the capacity for independent and free thought remains a deeply respected quality within the scientific community.

In antiquity, this autonomy of thought was described through the concept of *autarky* (*autos* = self, *arkein* = to suffice, to be enough, to be sovereign). The autarkic individual is self-sufficient—free in thought and inner life. Aristotle notes that the wise person is free in his mind. Such freedom pertains not only to the act of cognition but also to the sphere of human values and ethical life. As Aristotle put it: "Behave as though you were a law unto yourself."

Today, the philosophies of both Plato and Aristotle are understood to have been shaped by earlier poetphilosophers and their interpretations of reality. The most recent research extends even further, identifying direct connections in the thought of Plato and Aristotle to Persian Zoroastrianism, to the dualistic teachings of Manichaeism from the same regions, as well as to Chaldean and Egyptian initiation traditions. Their philosophies can be seen as reinterpretations and commentaries on the worldviews of these earlier cultures—now expressed through the new, independent mode of thinking that emerged in Greece: a thinking that stood on its own, apart from myth and tradition.

In Plato's thought, a kind of longing for the divine—similar to that of mythical cultures—still persisted. The true essence of the human being was believed to originate in the divine, in a pre-existent reality to which Plato's gaze was directed. Humanity's task, however, was to come to know the material world in its entirety and to penetrate it with conscious spirit—through thought.

Aristotle, by contrast, emphasized the necessity of uniting the human

soul and spirit more closely with the world of the senses. In this way, he advanced the philosophical path initiated by Plato—but in a fundamentally different direction: toward the future, toward our present. Aristotle constructed a conceptual, thinking relationship with the world of the senses. Humanity was to make the sensory world its home, its familiar domain, because only in this world could the human being evolve into true individuality—into a subject individuality, a clear awareness of the self, the “I”.

This movement toward an inner independence is only possible when the human being begins to experience himself as standing outside of nature—as an detached observer. One must emancipate from nature, become a separate perceiver and thinker. In earlier ancient cultures, human beings still lived experientially within nature—participating in it—and the events of the outer world were mirrored within their inner life. It is precisely this departure from the participatory consciousness of myth-bound cultures that Aristotle accomplished: a break from the older mode of being embedded in nature’s rhythms and occurrences, toward a thinking that stands apart and reflects upon that which is experienced “outside”.

The foundations of Early Academy

The 19th century in the Western world was marked by a widespread idealization of ancient Greek culture. It was commonly believed that Greek philosophy had emerged independently—produced by thinkers without precedent or inherited tradition. To some extent, this notion holds true. However, modern historians increasingly acknowledge that the Greeks had close ties with other Mediterranean cultures, particularly with Egypt and its millennia-old mystery school traditions. The Egyptians, with their long cultural heritage, considered the Greeks to be mere apprentices—young novices without traditions of their own.

It is well known that Pythagoras studied under the priests of Sais in Egypt for over a decade. He modeled his philosophical school on Egyptian prototypes, including the practice of keeping certain teachings secret, in line with the customs of the mystery traditions. The curriculum of the Pythagorean school was divided into three levels.² The first level was open to all, and its participants were called *akousmatikoi*, or “listeners.” Their role was to listen and absorb. Instruction at this level consisted primarily of spiritual cosmologies, characteristic of ancient temple schools.

² Raimo Lehti: Matematiikan ja sen opetuksen asema kulttuurissamme, article in Tieteessä tapahtuu-magazine, vol 18, 3/2000

This booklet reflects on the unique role of General Studies (*studium generalia* or *studium fundamentale*) within the curriculum of Snellman College, a Waldorf-Steiner oriented higher education institution in Helsinki, Finland. Tracing the historical and philosophical roots of these general studies, the author situates Snellman College in the broader continuum of perennial *universitas* thinking and highlights the college's distinct educational mission, which diverges from both university and vocational training models in contemporary Finland.

