

Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance: Platonic Building Blocks

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To suggest that history repeats itself is a misnomer. Societies and nations develop as such not due to predestined sequence, but because we learn from history; history serves as the building blocks of the future. As A. Daniel Frankforter wrote, “when the pioneers of the twelfth-century renaissance began their various building projects, they had no choice but to recycle old stones,” and new civilizations build on old events in similar ways.¹ Nowhere is this clearer than in analyzing Plato’s influence during the Italian Renaissance. Plato’s dialogues changed the face of education, government, and religion in Italy, and, to borrow Frankforter’s metaphor, they became the building blocks that raised Italy out of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. This essay will explore the events surrounding the rediscovery of Plato’s dialogues centuries after his death, and how they laid the subtle yet paramount foundation for educational, political, and religious growth in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Each of these topics could easily generate separate dissertations; the goal of this particular thesis is to give readers a brief introduction to Plato’s influence on the Renaissance.

Plato would likely not be the first name to come to mind when contemplating the Italian Renaissance. Instead, we might think of names such as Medici, Da Vinci, or Machiavelli. Not all scholars embrace the assertion that Plato had a significant influence during this period. Between the years of 500 CE and 1400 CE, Western Europe was almost entirely devoid of Plato’s voice,

¹ A. Daniel Frankforter, *The Medieval Millennium: An Introduction*(New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 200.

partly because his works had fallen out of favor, but also because few scholars in the West were skilled in Ancient Greek. To fully understand the significant religious, political, and educational changes initiated at the start of the Italian Renaissance, and to appreciate the extent of Plato's influence once his works were rediscovered, we must first turn to the Dark Ages.

A. Daniel Frankforter acknowledged that "the twelfth century renaissance began with an enthusiasm for Plato, but Aristotle soon drove his old teacher from the stage and won the reputation of being the ultimate authority in virtually every field of knowledge."² Heavily dominated by Aristotelian philosophy, Europe between the fifth and fifteenth centuries favored a much more individualistic society (think common good theories in *Republic*) than Plato advocated during his own time.³ The limited access Italians had to Plato's dialogues also diminished his distinction as an overall leader in philosophic study. Polish historian Tadeusz Zieliński gave more credit for the Italian Renaissance to Marcus Tullius Cicero, arguing that the "Renaissance was above all things a revival of Cicero, and only after him and through him of the rest of Classical antiquity."⁴ Once Plato's works were discovered, found in forgotten libraries and lost chests, his dialogues in particular were utilized as a tool to inculcate philosophy, logic, ethics, and rhetoric in a variety of capacities from mathematics to politics throughout the Renaissance. Plato founded the first institute for higher education in the Western world, the Academy, and therefore understood the value of a liberal arts education. The rediscovery of his dialogues, most notably the *Republic*, centuries after his death laid a subtle yet paramount

² Ibid, 201.

³ Aristotle favored a smaller Church controlled government wherein financial prosperity remained in the hands of the nobility, which was contrary to Plato's ideals that any man belonging to any socioeconomic group could advance on the grounds of his own determination to do so.

⁴ Tadeusz Zieliński, *Cicero: In Changing the Centuries* (Berlin: Leipzig B. G. Teubner Publishing, 1908), 9.

foundation for religious, educational, and political growth in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Historians like Paul Oskar Kristeller have penned volumes chronicling the activities of the more significant philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. Kristeller named eight philosophers on his list, but Plato's name was only included in the appendix.⁵ Although it is natural that Plato would not make a list of contemporary Renaissance philosophers, to marginalize Plato is to arguably trivialize Platonism and the very foundation of the Italian Renaissance. Mark Twain made the argument, "There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible, we simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages."⁶ Whether modern scholars find themselves advocating or repudiating Plato's influence on the Renaissance, his pedagogical philosophy influenced the development of humanism, and cannot be ignored nor denied.⁷ In fact, John H. Hallowell proposes that "one of the essential ingredients of what we call Western civilization has certainly been a body of thought which is known as Platonism."⁸ On those grounds, this thesis will examine not only Plato's philosophic influence during the Renaissance, but also his political and academic effect as well.

⁵ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (California: Stanford University Press, 1964), 1.

⁶ Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain, a Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1912), 83.

⁷ Humanism is an ambiguous term describing the Italian Renaissance's resurrection of classical philosophy. In philosophy humanism refers to a perspective affirming notions of "human nature." Humanist derives from the 15th-century term *umanista* describing a teacher of classical Greek and Latin literature and the ethical philosophy behind it.

⁸ John H. Hallowell, "Plato and his Critics," *The Journal of Politics* 27.2 (1965): 273.

To study the humanities during the Classical period, the Renaissance, or even at present, involves exploring poetry, rhetoric, history, moral philosophy, and grammar. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the city of Rome subsidized public libraries, including one specializing in Greek and another in Latin texts. This was a long time coming as Kristeller acknowledged: “there was no continuity of Greek instruction anywhere in the West; Greek books were almost non-existent in Western libraries.”⁹ Latin was the language of the Church and was the universal language of the time, much like English is presently. As universities began popping up across Europe it quickly became commonplace for different schools to specialize in varying areas of study. Bertrand Lançon points out that “Athens was home to philosophic study; Alexandria was home to medicine; Beirut for law; Constantinople and Milan for rhetoric.”¹⁰ The predominant method of learning in medieval Europe was scholasticism: a system of theology and philosophy based on Aristotelian logic and the writings of early church leaders, with a strong emphasis on tradition and dogma. Also known for developing the “Socratic Method,” the intention of scholasticism was to prepare students for careers in theology, medicine, and law. During this time, texts were naturally in Latin and almost always biblical in nature.

Scholasticism had two methods of teaching: “lectio” which means “reading” and is best representative of Aristotle’s scholastic style and “disputatio” which means “disputation or discussion” and is reminiscent of Plato’s teaching style at the Academy. Scholasticism was not entirely antithetical to humanism. While both are significant in understanding the differences between medieval and Renaissance educational reform, a critical explanation of only lectio best

⁹ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (California: Stanford University Press, 1964), 157.

¹⁰ Bertrand Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149.

serves the function of this essay. Lectio was the straightforward reading of a text by a teacher elucidating key aspects of learning, but wherein no questions were allowed from students. It was not an uncommon expectation in theological study for students to simply “accept” what details were being presented without question for fear such questioning reflected wavering beliefs. This method of teaching best demonstrates the differences between the didactic styles of Plato (representative of Renaissance educational reform) versus Aristotle (representative of medieval educational practices). Both men valued absolute truth, though Aristotle had a greater regard for materialism, a method of learning that favored empiricism and study of the physical world. Despite having once been a student of Plato, Aristotle’s systematic and detached style of philosophy differed greatly from that of his teacher. Plato on the other hand, was much more utopian in his views of politics and education, often relegating Aristotle’s physical world to a sort of metaphysical second class.

Despite being a man of the Renaissance, Aristotle dreamed in black and white. Plato dreamed in color. Italy at the turn of the fifteenth century was nothing if not vibrant. Artists from across Europe were flocking to Italy bringing with them their aestheticism and an unstoppable change in mentality. More scholars began to embrace Plato’s “nontraditional” type of thinking. By the latter half of the fifteenth century, Italian citizens became disgruntled with the spoon-fed scholasticism of the medieval period and hungered for something more substantial. The emergence of Plato’s dialogues provided that escape.

Why had it taken so long for scholars to catch on to Plato’s method of thought? The roughly nine hundred years of Platonic silence were partly the result of language barriers and, to a lesser degree, Plato’s then radical postulation of metempsychosis (the transmigration of

souls) as outlined in the *Republic*. The concept that after our physical death our souls spend an indefinite amount of time in a “form land” before assuming a new body contradicted the widely espoused Christian doctrine of the time. This left Plato branded somewhat of a religious radical. Despite the proliferation of both literary texts and the gradual rise of literacy levels generated by widening availability of the printing press, medieval Europe scarcely utilized the Greek in which Plato’s dialogues were written. The rapidly diminishing use of Greek in eighth and ninth century Rome left scholars dependent on Latin authors such as Cicero and Aurelius Augustinus (or St. Augustine, as he was more commonly known) who were able to translate and provide summaries of Plato’s dialogues. These texts were incomplete, however, and more of a synopsis of the original works; nevertheless, these summaries not only added to the abated influence of Plato’s dialogues across Italy, they also diminished assertions from scholars such as Zieliński who attempted to dismiss Plato’s significance by arguing that both Cicero and Augustine were heavily influenced by Plato. As a teacher of grammar and rhetoric, Augustine’s love of Platonism led him to leave his post in Carthage to establish a school in Rome. Augustine was thus the first scholar to denounce the prominent Aristotelian philosophy in favor of Platonic philosophy, but this was not enough to ensure Plato’s popularity throughout the medieval period.

The Byzantine Empire is credited with preserving the ancient manuscript copies of Plato’s dialogues in their original language. Known by future generations as the “librarians of medieval Europe,” Byzantine scholars collected a vast assortment of literature from the different civilizations that the empire came into contact with at various time periods, including hundreds of texts from Greece. Their specific intention was not to preserve those cultures, but

that is exactly what they did. Plato might not have had significant favor at the start of the Italian Renaissance, but his dialogues were nestled safely in the Byzantine vaults. At the height of its rule, the Byzantine Empire encompassed all shore land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, including Greece and Italy. As noted by scholar Jonathan Harris, unlike the rest of medieval Europe, “in Byzantium, the literary language was not Latin but Greek, and therefore classical Greek literature continued to be studied and read throughout the medieval period.”¹¹

Despite continued use of the Greek language throughout the Byzantine Empire, Plato was at the bottom of the educational curriculum. He ranked even lower in the Italian universities which were dominated by Aristotelian thought. Aristotelian philosophy focused more on the individual’s happiness and success within the nation. This philosophical practice also focused heavily on ethics and politics in more of a church controlled context, despite the fact that Aristotle had not been a Christian. As outlined in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*, Aristotle believed ethics and politics were one and the same: “ethics” were a methodical analysis of how people should best live, which he used as the foundation of law-making; “politics” were essentially “the philosophy of human affairs.”¹² In a time period dominated by church authority, this school of thought was enthusiastically embraced by the Roman Catholic Church as church leaders and philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, who first rehabilitated Aristotle in the thirteenth century, were able to combine Aristotle’s teachings with church doctrine.

¹¹ Jonathan Harris, “Plato, Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance,” accessed August 18, 2012, <http://digirep.rhul.ac.uk/file/dbac19c8-da38-5f27-88b0-d37d92fbfd58/3/HTR.pdf>.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 98; Robert C. Bartlett, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 74.

Richard Hooker has overturned the misconception that Plato's dialogues were "rediscovered" during the Italian Renaissance. Like many scholars, Hooker proposed that "Platonism never really faded out of the Western tradition nor was the Italian Renaissance a rediscovery of Plato; rather, the Italian Renaissance forged new philosophies from Plato and the Platonic tradition in antiquity and the Middle Ages."¹³ Of course the word "renaissance" means "rebirth," and with a renewed interest in classical antiquity, Platonism became the subject of a fervent revitalization, especially in Florence. Humanists of the time, such as Francesco Petrarch, stepped away from the long continued theme of Aristotelianism and grabbed hold of Platonism without really understanding the foundation of Plato's philosophies. How could they since no one in Italy had full access to Plato's dialogues until the latter portion of the fifteenth century? Plato's ideas were a stark contrast to medieval Aristotelian thought and were enthusiastically embraced by those desperate for change in education, politics, and philosophy. Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino found Platonism by way of Augustine, whose writings were shaped by Plato. Many Florentines shared Ficino's view that "Aristotelian scholasticism degenerated into a series of anti-religious philosophies, and envisioned [Platonism] as a safeguard against this tendency."¹⁴

It is impossible to look at education in Italy without acknowledging its direct relationship to the economic and political situation of the entire country, especially Florence. Unlike Pisa, Genoa, and Venice, Florence was "land locked," nestled at the base of the Apennines mountains, and cut off from most of the major trade routes at the center of Italy's

¹³ Richard Hooker, "The Platonic Tradition," last modified 1997, <http://hermetic.com/texts/neoplatonism.html>.

¹⁴ C. B. Schmitt, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Farmington Hills: Gale Publishing, 2003), 710.

mercantile revolution (such as Venice).¹⁵ What Florence lacked in maritime shipping, however, they made up for in the creation of international banking and artisanal culture, which made Florence a hot spot for creativity within Italy and Europe as a whole. The far-reaching financial resources of only a few Florentine families like the Medici gave them immense political ascendancy in the city; they built enormous gilded mansions, homes on the countryside, and contributed to the construction of grand cathedrals, commencing the physical as well as intellectual rebirth of the city. Scholars such as historian and biographer William Roscoe paint a picture of the Medici family being entirely responsible for financially backing the Renaissance.¹⁶ The rise of notorious sculptors, painters, and architects who gravitated to Florence brought with them a prodigious economic boom for the area. Florence became one of the wealthiest cities in Italy and in Europe which allowed the Medici family to finance what would become the Renaissance's educational and philosophical ascendancy.

Cosimo de' Medici was the most successful of the Medici clan. As politics in Italy evolved from papal cities to individual city-states, Cosimo spent millions of dollars developing the physical face of Florence, taking a particular interest in developing the new Platonic Academy. As with most things in Renaissance Florence, the Medici family took a significant interest in the dialogues, pushing reproduction and implementation of Plato's philosophies in Italy's political affairs and educational structure. Gemistrus Pletho, a Greek scholar who taught Neo-platonic theory throughout Florence, was patronized by the Medici family. The renowned

¹⁵ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 33.

¹⁶ William Roscoe, *The Life of Lorenzo de' Medici: Called the Magnificent*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Bronson & Chauncey, 1803), 34.

scholar Marsilio Ficino first brought the dialogues to Cosimo's attention. He was so impressed by them that he decided to fund the new Florentine Academy, patronizing Ficino's translations of many of Plato's works into Italian and Latin. Alongside Ficino, Pletho took the concept of the sixteenth century Academy one step further by creating informal reading groups reminiscent of those established by Plato himself. These informal reading groups gave Pletho the opportunity to lecture on the differences between Plato and Aristotle, who was rapidly losing favor among the newly energized Florentine scholars, religious leaders, and politicians. Pletho's orations eventually led him to be titled the "second Plato," legitimizing not only his contributions to the time but also reestablishing Plato's philosophical significance. Ficino produced a number of his own commentaries based on the dialogues and, partnered with Cosimo, was the face of the Florentine Academy. According to Liana Cheney, "Ficino's most important and systematic work was *Theologia platonica* ("Platonic Theology"), in which he outlines Neo-Platonism and synthesizes it with other philosophical systems, in particular, Christianity."¹⁷ In conjunction with Italian philosophers like Pletho, the Byzantine scholar and Florentine delegate John Argyropoulos gave public morning lectures in city squares and private evening classes to prominent Florentines, including Lorenzo the Magnificent, son of Cosimo de' Medici. Emulating Plato during his private lessons, Argyropoulos's oratory style was immensely popular, so much so that many students left rhetoric (Aristotelian) for metaphysical thought (Platonism). Florentine scholars did not entirely abandon rhetoric, for it was still an essential aspect of Humanist pedagogy.

¹⁷ Liana Cheney, "Italian Renaissance Art," accessed August 21, 2012, http://faculty.uml.edu/CulturalStudies/Italian_Renaissance/index.html.

The role of government in education was a large theme in Platonic philosophy. John H. Hallowell refutes claims made by Karl Popper, who maintains Plato was a totalitarian in favor of despotism. Hallowell contends “that education is considered by Plato to be one of the most important functions of statecraft.”¹⁸ Hallowell goes on to say “that the common good [of society] is a harmonious relationship among all those parts of which society is composed; it is a kind of unity, moreover, that can only be perpetuated by education.”¹⁹ From this perspective, one could argue Plato was a utilitarian.²⁰ Harris agrees with Hallowell that the *Republic* and *Laws* outline a reasonable rationalization for a less direct form of government, but one that emphasizes education and an ability to “discern how to achieve the absolute highest good of the state.”²¹ Even in modern times, many European nations cover the financial cost of post-secondary education for students who qualify for their specific program of interest. Just as Plato did fifteen hundred years ago, many governments recognize the value and benefit to the State in supporting citizens who choose to have supplementary education.

Plato’s ideal state was a republic with three types of citizens: artisans, auxiliaries, and philosophers. He believed educators had a high moral responsibility to their students, not to simply fill a student’s empty brain with a predetermined curriculum for fear of moral corruption. If the Academy existed today, it would undoubtedly be considered a charter school, and Plato would likely think very little of programs like “No Child Left Behind” and the

¹⁸ John H. Hallowell, “Plato and his Critics,” *The Journal of Politics* 27.2 (1965): 273.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Utilitarianism is “the doctrine that an action is right insofar as it promotes happiness, and that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the guiding principle of conduct,” as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

²¹ Jonathan Harris, “Plato, Byzantium and the Italian Renaissance,” 6.

various other forms of standardized learning and testing utilized in the United States.²² He also believed people were naturally inclined to specific fields of work or vocation, but that their ability was not genetically determined. For instance, some individuals were innately predisposed to the law, medicine, field work, or sculpting, but such talents could surface from any social or economic class; the poor farmer's son could very well grow up to become a gifted surgeon. "No man should bring children into the world, who is unwilling to persevere to the end in their nature and education," Plato wrote in the *Republic*, even if that meant children being taken away from their parents as toddlers to be educated free from familiar distractions.²³ An individual's disposition or propensity to learn was determined by their appetite, spirit, and reason. Plato argued that elementary education should be provided for adolescents less than eighteen years of age, followed by military training and then post-secondary education for those that qualified. These ideas formed the cornerstone of Plato's Academy. Plato also saw no reason to separate the education or occupation of female students from their male counterparts, including military training. In the latter portion of the *Republic* he wrote, "If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things."²⁴

The Italian Renaissance would have happened with or without Plato, but it would not have happened the way it did without the utilization of Plato's dialogues. He certainly did not write a blueprint on how to achieve the change he sought during his own time, but he assisted

²² Signed into law by President Bush in 2002, "No Child Left Behind" sets performance guidelines for all schools and also stipulates what must be included in accountability reports to parents. It mandates annual student testing, stipulates so-called cookie-cutter curriculums, includes guidelines for underperforming schools, and requires states to train all teachers and assistants to be "highly qualified."

²³ Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2007), 98.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 105.

in guiding Italy from the Dark Ages and through its rebirth. He supplied new ideas and ways of thinking that helped the emerging “little guy” of early modern Europe (the mercantile and humanist educated elites) force the hand of an autocratic ruling power. To truly appreciate the changes taking place in Italy, the scholars and historians have to acknowledge Plato’s presence. Plato’s dialogues served as the foundational building blocks for the change Italy needed. With the end of the medieval ages went the end of Aristotelianism and a one-dimensional way of thinking. Plato offered a different way of thinking about culture, specifically where education, religion, and government were concerned.

As Frederick Harbison said, “education is the key that unlocks the door to modernization.”²⁵ Building upon that idea, education unlocks the door to everything. Many of Plato’s dialogues were written as he watched his own native land crumble around him; this is a feeling shared by the scholars of medieval Europe when, following the fall of Rome in 410 CE, education was almost entirely abandoned because time spent surviving was hard enough. As the “empire crumbled and Christianity became ascendant, as cities decayed, trade declined;” the ancient system of education fell apart, schools closed, libraries and academies shut their doors, professional grammarians and teachers of rhetoric found themselves out of work, scribes were no longer given manuscripts to copy.²⁶ Although centuries apart, this disposition carried through to the Middle Ages where Aristotelianism thrived, promoting the success of the few via the hands of the many.

²⁵ Frederick Harbison and Charles A. Myers, *Education, Manpower, and Economic Growth: Strategies for Human Resource Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 181.

²⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, “An Ancient Poem was Rediscovered,” *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2011.

The Aristotelianism of the Middle Ages reserved education, professional training, and personal betterment for the wealthy alone. It kept government and political rule in the hands of the Roman Catholic Church. Although Platonism was not necessarily diametrically opposed to Aristotelianism, it did represent a different way of seeing the world. Renaissance scholars interpreted Plato in different ways, although it is clear he was not used a fascist or totalitarian mouthpiece, neither was he seen as a diehard radical. Aristotle saw the world in black and white. He was not a small-minded man, simply one who favored a small world, a world in which things were perpetual, predictable. Plato saw the world in vibrant colors, a world where men maintained social and political positions based on their ability and drive, where education was open to all who qualified, regardless of financial ability or social standing, and where the government of a nation ensured the betterment of its entire population.