

# How “Neo-Platonism” gave Plato a bad name

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Pictured from left to right in a detail from Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Zachariah in the Temple* are Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, and Demetrios Chalkondyles.

**By Karel Vereycken, November 2005**

After many years of laziness, I decided to study more closely a “black hole” in our epistemological clarity: *the great fog of Florentine neo-Platonism*.

As most of my friends, I was initially profoundly enchanted by the common idea of a renaissance revival of Plato translations and its offspring into republican humanism. However, a closer look behind the label to what passes for “neo-Platonism” gave me a far different picture.

That fog was never cleared to most of us because we somehow refused to assimilate Lyndon LaRouche’s epistemological rigor to challenge what we “learned” in school from the current art historian academic textbooks.

The intrinsic fantasy ridden, melancholic vision of “culture” as some sort of past “golden age” pops up regularly as the comfortable cushion for aging baby boomers and tweeners, dreaming to bring about something that in reality never existed.

Of course, the early fifteenth century’s rediscovery and love for Plato (**Bruni, Cusa, Piccolomini, Bessarion**, etc.) and their reworking of Archimedes and Euclid from the superior standpoint of Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* gave us the foundations of the golden Renaissance in science, technology, astronomy, statecraft and other many sciences culminating in the great ecumenical council of Ferrare-Florence of 1437-38 and the creation of Louis XIth’s nation state, France.

One can suspect that it was precisely because Plato’s heritage reemerged through that golden renaissance culminating in the concept of *Filioque* at the council of Florence, that the oligarchy immediately acted to pervert and eradicate any real comprehension of Plato’s accomplishments.

Already, since Socrates judicial murder and Plato’s death, official neo-Platonism became not only an ugly un-Platonic bad joke, and mutated into something far worse: a straight forward anti-Platonic countergang.

That revival was integral of the Venetian (Persian magi) political operations intended to eradicate the true Platonic heritage. As we will document here, and it might surprise only some of you, **Marsilio Ficino’s** so-called “Platonic academy” at Careggi(Florence) appears as a central instrument in this anti-platonic operation.

Hence, if we want to revive real Platonism today, no more fog can be tolerated on these crucial matters.

We are not the first in warning you about the dangers of neo-Platonism. Already the great Plato-loving **Saint Augustine**, in his “*On Christian Faith*” [II, 40] states that

*“Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it.”* Their teachings should be appropriated by the Christian: *“therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.”*

**Leibniz**, also strongly warns against the “neo-Platonists” demanding that Plato be studied in his original writings rather than through his commentators, however brilliant they might be *“non ex Plotino aut Marsilio Ficino, qui mira semper et mystica affectantes diceren tanti uiri*

*doctrinam corrupere.*” [Plato should be studied, but “Not from Plotinus nor Marsilio Ficino, who, by always striving to speak wonderfully and mystically, corrupt the doctrine of so great a man.”]

Today, many synarchists and neo-cons do evil things in the name of neo-Platonism. **Leo Strauss** for example says: “Let us beware of pursuing a Socratic goal with the means, and the temper, of Thrasymachus”. French synarchist **Alexander Kojeve** wrote a full book called “*Histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne*” based on his notes on the neo-Platonist school and showed great enthusiasm for **Julian l’Apostate**, the fascist roman emperor that tried to uproot Christianity and replace it with neo-Platonism. **Hannah Arendt** and **Heidegger** also claim to be experts in their evil interpretations of Plato.

### **Neo-Platonism before Ficino**

The doctrine of “Neo-Platonism” is in general identified with the “school of Alexandria” equally known as the “school of Athens” since it operated on two legs, an Egyptian one (Alexandria) and a Greek one (Athens).

The school is personified by four figures being **Plotinus, Porphyry, Jamblicus** and **Proclus**. After the relocation of Aristotle’s library to Alexandria around 300 BC, the Platonic Academy in Athens and the Neo-platonic school in Alexandria operated in parallel for eight centuries (from 300 BC to 529), until the closing of the Athens Academy by Justinian in 529. Meantime, a secondary centre had developed in Byzantium.

**1) Plotinus (205-270)** was born in a Christian, roman family and trained in Egypt, while mainly active in the latter part of his life in Rome. At age 28 he got interested in philosophy and followed for eleven years the teachings of **Ammonios Saccas (175-242)**, who established a “*Neo-Platonic School*” in Alexandria in 195 DC, also labeled the school of “*Eclectic Platonism*” since it aspired to unify of many different beliefs into one single one. Plotinus was maybe even more influenced by the teachings of another forerunner of Neo-Platonism, the Greek **Numenius of Apamea** (who lived in Syria around 150 after DC)

When Plotinus was thirty-nine the emperor **Gordianus III (255-244)** launched a war against Persia. Plotinus joined the expeditionary force. Gordianus was slain in Mesopotamia in 244, perhaps through the intrigues of his successor, Philip the Arabian, and Plotinus had to flee for his life. With great difficulty he eventually reached Antioch and thence proceeded directly to Rome. There he established a school for philosophy, gathered disciples and taught orally for ten years. In 253 A.D. he began to set his thoughts on paper, composing fifty-four treatises in the next sixteen years. About the time he began writing, he received as close friend the emperor **Gallienus (218-268)**. The emperor had become quite worried about the declining morals and culture of the Roman Empire. Since Gallienus saw neo-Platonism as something better fitted for the survival of the empire, he decided to make Plotinus his official philosopher and even gave him the mission to build a new city, *Platonopolis*, based on his teachings. The projects never came about.

Plotinus reportedly never wrote anything himself. His life and doctrine is uniquely known through the transcriptions of the orphans he adopted and tutored. One of them is Amelios Gentilianus, but what is known about his ideas doctrine was written up by Porphyry.

**2) Porphyry of Tyre (234-310)** was a student of the Greek rhetorician **Longinus (c.213-273)** in Athens. From 263 on, Porphyry will follow Plotinus in Rome and write up Plotinus *Enneads* (54 pieces, symbolically arranged in 6 groups of 6 times 9), completed in 301 i.e. written 31 years after Plotinus death. Porphyry also wrote *“Against the Christians”* and *“The life of Pythagoras”*. Porphyry thought that among the basic tenets of the **Pythagoreans**, a grouping that operated in secrecy, existed the beliefs that reality at its deepest level, is mathematical in nature; that philosophy can be used for spiritual purification; that the soul can rise to union with the divine; and that certain symbols have a mystical significance. Porphyry’s immediate follower was Iamblichus.

**3) Iamblichus of Chalcis (250-330)** got supported by another roman emperor, **Julian I’Apostate**, who was out to uproot Christianity and even thought of replacing it with “Neo-Platonism”. Julian I’Apostate is honored today in France by the pro-pagan “Nouvelle Droite” (New Right) and praised heavily by Russian expatriate and synarchist neo-hegelian **Alexandre Kojève**. Iamblichus also wrote *“On the Pythagorean life”*.

**4) Proclus (412-485)** gave a new impulse to the Neo-Platonist school during the fifth century in Greece “School of Athens”, where the Academy will be closed by Emperor Justinian in 529.

Oligarchs running empires have worked for centuries on developing synthetic belief structures or pseudo-religions capable of giving an answer to people’s “spiritual needs” while downbreeding their capacities to act as real citizens of a republic and transforming them into slaves of an imperial system.

Why did they get so interested with “neo-Platonism”?

## Doctrine

Starting from a purely textual and symbol-minded literal interpretation of Plato’s *Phedron*, Plotinus elaborates a mechanical philosophical system.

Plotinus teacher **Numenius** takes **Pythagoras** as his highest authority, while at the same time pretending to follow Plato. He calls the latter an Atticizing Moses. His chief divergence from Plato is the distinction between the first god and the demiurge. Numenius is the first one that establishes **three hypostasis**, i.e. rigorous hierarchical steps of the “procession” of the One towards the multiple.

In reality Numenius, and later Plotinus, suggest that there are three Gods. First, the supreme deity, second the creator of the world, and third the world itself. This is presented as a reflection of the Valentinian Gnostics and the Jewish-Alexandrian philosophers (including Philo and his theory of the Logos).

This theory brings then the conclusion that the creation is nothing but a terrible “fall”, a dispersion and loss of the divine. To escape from sin, the soul has to climb up again towards God, the One, going upwards through the same steps it went down with.

For Plotinus, God is an absolute. It is the original One, of which all and everything comes from and to which everything returns. Since Aristotle’s logic specifies that something can not be one thing and in the same time it’s opposite, and since God has a spiritual,

uncreated nature, everything which is created is NOT God, and therefore necessarily impure.

Plotinus here echoes the old Persian “mystery” religions of **Mazdeism** (1000 years BC) and **Zorastrism**. (emerged around 600 BC). In these beliefs, the idea that the body of man is nothing but pure evil is so strong that they forbid to burry the dead because they don't want to pollute the earth with the flesh of the human body! The physical remains of men are placed on “*towers of Silence*”, where the vultures eat what is offered. After a while, the bones are finally thrown into a central hole of the tower. Plotinus shared that hatred of the creation to the point that he refused to have his portrait done.

This eclectic mixture makes God both the beginning and the final idea, being simultaneously the productive essence described by Plato's *Timeus* and the immobile mover of Aristotle, who, for his perfection not be spoiled, has neither to create nor to know. This conciliation (concord) of Plato and Aristotle (which characterizes the neo-platonic) operates through the **dogma of three hypostasis**.

1) **THE ONE**: The highest hypostasis is **the ONE**, which contains all things in themselves. The one, or the good, is above every reality, inconceivable and infinite. Nevertheless the one gives life and unity to everything. Plotinus attacks Aristotle for conceiving the prime mover as capable of thinking by himself. Thinking (or not thinking) involves establishing a relationship between two things. Therefore claiming that the One is intelligent is some kind of blasphemy because a negation of its absolute oneness. God is before anything else a **pure Unity**, ineffable, and especially superior to any determination, to any thought, even to any essence. God is also simultaneously one and three-fold.

2) **THE INTELLECT**: By the second hypostasis, he is the *nous*, the thought of thought, that contemplating itself, discovers the platonic ideas, the intelligible model of the universe (*autozôon*). The “procession” or “production” (*proodos*) from the One to the multiple generates the second, lower hypostasis, the **INTELLECT** (*nous*), or Beauty. This is the One that exists, Being, Life, Mind. That procession is beyond time since the One and the Intellect coexist eternally.

3) **UNIVERSAL SOUL**: It is only by the third hypostasis that the One participates decisively to the multiplicity of the world by becoming the **soul of the world**, creative principle and demiurge. It contemplates the eternal beings of the intellect and generates dispersed images of it, which are the many physical things that exist on earth, each animated by a particular soul. Our world is nothing but the end phase of expression of the dispersion of the richness of the One.

For the orthodox Christians the three hypostasis are three principles incarnated into one single being, recognized by all the neo-Platonists: the ONE which is the father, the INTELLECT which is the son, and the SOUL which is the universal principle of life. In the Latin Catholic Church, the word hypostasis (from the Greek *upostasis*) was progressively replaced by the word “person”. The trinity involves one God with three persons: the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. As we will see, the real Christian Platonists fought for giving a humanist content to that trinity principle.

## Human nature

This “perfect” theory runs into big problems once it has to define human nature. To explain it, Plotinus does not hesitate to attribute man two souls, or one dual soul, one divine, and the other corrupted. One part of the individual human soul is part of the universal world soul, while the other part lives in the intellect, in direct filiation with the Good (the One) which is its father. But man, as a physical creation, is essentially evil.

Plotinus here omits the fact that in Plato’s original metaphor of the Phaedron, there are not two forces, but a third one: the charioteer guiding his two horses, one white horse being attracted to go higher, the other black and attracted by lower realities.

For Plotinus, man is even more problematic since most souls, by their narcissism, retire from the intellect only willing to take pleasure of themselves. Forgetting their creator, they fully suffer the torments of the world. That is the essential nature of mankind. Human existence reduced to such a violent conflict between the animal side and the spiritual side reduces human existence into permanent and painstaking melancholic suffering in the prison of his body. Melancholic (romantic) suffering becomes the fundamental emotion of human existence.

To milder the suffering, Plotinus copies the remedies of the stoics. Virtues and self-limitation can bring man towards unity with God, but man should realize that perfection is not of this world, since man remains part of the created. Creativity and perfection of the creation are seen as completely useless since comforting man in his evil state of creation.

Only the soul, being immortal, can reach perfection, but only after life on earth, once one gets rid of its created envelope. In his *interiorizing* approach, Plotinus abandons in fact any commitment to ameliorate the earthly conditions of mankind, while concentrating on the individual mystical will to “*penetrate the system, even the principle*”. Plotinus thinks that it is “*in ourselves*” that we have to learn to discover the spiritual world, since it is “*up to the Gods to come to us, and not to me to rise towards them*”. To this procession of the One towards the many responds the ascension towards the One, which operates by the work of “*the soul acting on the soul*”. This “*immanentism*” brings Plotinus to attack religious rituals which draw heavy focus on “*exteriority*”, in particular the Christian rites.

## **Beauty**

However, according to Plotinus, through the perception of beauty, the human soul can get an early glimpse of the One. He can travel back to the original unity by “conversion”. Using Plato’s metaphor of the winged souls that fly back to the One, Plotinus says the soul has to move upwards from one hypostasis to the other: go from the body to the intellect and from the intellect to the One. The soul wants to totally unite with God and therefore desires its own extinction, absorbed into the unity of the One, similar as the teachings of what Zen Buddhism calls “dying before dying”.

In Plotinus’ own words: « *Abandon the duality of seer and seen, and count both as one, so that he in its vision does not distinguish, nor even imagines a duality. He has changed, does no longer own himself, but belongs to the One, a centre joined with the centre. He will behold a solitary light suddenly revealing itself – not from some perceived object, but pure and self-contained. We must not enquire its origin, for there is no « origin.* » *The primal One does not come on cue, it is not like one who enters, but who is eternally present. Like one*

*who has entered the temple's inner sanctuary and left the images behind, the self is perfectly still and alone. This is liberation from the alien that besets us here ... »*

Hence, before arriving there, there are on earth some rare and unique moments, where man can see the original One. Such a moment of **mystical ecstasy** happens only very rarely in a human lifespan, maybe once or twice, although Porphyry reports that Plotinus had such illumination nearly once a year...

### **Radical dualism**

Plotinus and Porphyry married the radical agnostic dualism of Aristotle with a textual interpretation of Plato into a mystery religion. The systematic defense of a harmonic concord of Plato and Aristotle will be the key marker to identify the neo-Platonic disease. Plotinus in fact mangled together with Plato the doctrines of Aristotle, the Stoics, and the **Chaldeans** (Zoroastrians and Persian magi). While a “philosophical” version of this dualism appears later with Descartes, Kant and Hegel, the uglier, “religious” version will relive from the **Cathar** abomination to **Torquemada's** inquisition, leading into **Joseph de Maistre's** “catholic” synarchist “religion”. (For de Maistre, man is evil. Only two things can lead him to salvation: a strong authority of state and religion and the shedding of innocent blood, capable of buying back the sins of the sinners. God sacrificed the blood of his own innocent son Jesus for the redemption of not so innocent mankind.) The shedding of innocent blood was introduced by the Persian magi, the same magi that defended the bull slaughtering of the **Mithra cult**, (against the failed Zoroastrian reforms aimed at halting sacrifice).

### **Neo-Platonism fighting Christianity**

The absolute abstract One of the neo-Platonists ran obviously against Christianity and the Christian doctrine completely contradicted their follies.

After the Roman emperor Constantine had recognized the Church in A.D. 313, neo-Platonism would nourish many disputes about the true nature of the Christ, since for them he was NOT God himself. The Latin Church had always maintained that Christ was truly the Son, **and truly God**. “They worshipped Him with divine honors and they would never consent to separate Him, in idea or reality, from the Father, Whose Word, Reason, Mind, He was, and in Whose Heart He abode from eternity”.

The first ecumenical **Council of Nicaea** of 325 tried to settle the matter on the occasion of the heresy of Arius.

**Arius (250-336)** described the Son as a second, or inferior God, standing midway between the First Cause and creatures; as Himself made out of nothing, yet as making all things else; as existing before the worlds of the ages; and as arrayed in all divine perfections except the one which was their stay and foundation. God alone was without beginning, unoriginate; the Son was originated, and once had not existed. For all that has origin must begin to be.

The Council, opposing Arius, stated: “*We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, **of the substance** [ek tes ousias] of the Father, God of God, light of light,*

*true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance with the Father [ homoousion to patri], through whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and our salvation descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and cometh to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing (ex ouk onton); or who maintain that He is of another hypostasis or another substance [than the Father], or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, [them] the Catholic Church anathematizes.”*

So as you see here, against the evil pessimism implied by Plotinus pagan neo-Platonism, the church adopted, shortly after the Council of Nicaea of 325 the famous “Nicene creed” that would be so powerfully become the centerpiece of the union between the western and eastern church at the Council of Florence of 1438.

The Nicene Creed states explicitly: *“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father **and the Son**. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.”*

**Nestorius (381-451)** brought another variety of the same neo-platonic heresy, by denying that Mary could be the mother of God, since God was the One and origin of everything. He was refuted at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD.

Plotinus direct follower **Porphyry**, in his book *“Against the Christians”* attacks his former fellow student **Origen**, who became one of the early fathers of the Church: *“As an example of this absurdity take a man whom I met when I was young, and who was then greatly celebrated and still is, on account of the writings which he has left. I refer to Origen, who is highly honored by the teachers of these doctrines. For this man, having been a student of Ammonius, who had attained the greatest proficiency in philosophy of any in our day, derived much benefit from his teacher in the knowledge of the sciences; but as to the correct choice of life, he pursued a course opposite to his. For Ammonius, being a Christian, and brought up by Christian parents, when he gave himself to study and to philosophy straightway conformed to the life required by the laws. But Origen, having been educated as a Greek in Greek literature, went over to the barbarian recklessness. And carrying over the learning which he had obtained, he hawked it about, in his life conducting himself as a Christian and contrary to the laws, but in his opinions of material things and of the Deity being like a Greek, and mingling Grecian teachings with foreign fables...”*

### **The very special case of Plethon**

After the burning of the Alexandrian library ordered by Caliph Omar I in 642, only Byzantium became the last remaining stronghold of neo-Platonism.

**George Gemistos (1355-1452)**, was a follower of the radical neo-Platonist **Michael Psellos (1018-1080)**. Around 1410 Gemistos created a neo-Platonic academy in Mistra

Portrait of Gemistus Pletho, detail of a fresco by acquaintance Benozzo Gozzoli, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, Italy.

(near the site of ancient Sparta) and added “Plethon” to his name to make it resemble to Plato. He was also an admirer of **Pythagoras**, **Plato**, and the “*Chaldean Oracles*”, which he ascribed to **Zoroaster**.

Gemistos came for the first time to Florence when he was fifteen years old and became an authority in Mistra. So at the time of the Council the Emperor, **John VIII Palaeologos**, “*knew they were going to face some of the finest minds in the Roman Church on their own soil; he therefore wanted the best minds available in support of the Byzantine cause to accompany him. Consequently, the Emperor appointed George Gemistos as part of the delegation. Despite the fact that he was a secular philosopher — a rare creature at this time in the West — Gemistos was renowned both for his wisdom and his moral rectitude.*

*Among the clerical lights in the delegation were **John Bessarion**, Metropolitan of Nicaea, and **Mark Eugenikos**, Metropolitan of Ephesus. Both had been students of Gemistos in their youth. Another non-clerical member of the delegation was **George Scholarios**: both a future adversary of Gemistos and a future Patriarch of Constantinople as Gennadios II.”*



Initially, Gemistos was opposed to the unity of the western and eastern churches. Not assisting at every theological debate during the Council, he went in town to give lectures to intellectuals and nobles on the essence of Plato and Neo-platonic philosophy. Plethon also brought with him the text of the “*Chaldean Oracles*” attributed to Zoroaster.

While most of Plethon’s writing were burned, since he was suspected of heresy, a large number of Plethon’s autograph manuscripts ended up in the hands of his former student Cardinal Bessarion. On Bessarion’s death, he willed his personal library to the library of San Marco in Venice (where over 4000 Greeks resided). Among these books and manuscripts was Plethon’s *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato*. This *Summary* was a summary of the *Book of Laws*, which Plethon wrote inspired by Plato’s laws. The *Summary*, since it is short, can be presented here. It shows a mixture of polytheistic beliefs with neo-Platonist elements.

*“These are the principal doctrines that ought to be acknowledged by one who will be prudent.*

*[1] The first of these is one about the gods: that they are. One of the gods is Zeus, the supreme sovereign, both the greatest and the best that it is possible to be. He is set over this whole order and singular in highest divinity. He is himself being in its entirety and completely ungenerated; both father and highest creator of all the other gods. His eldest child, also motherless, and second god is Poseidon. Secondary matters have been entrusted by Zeus to him as master of all the things below; and, moreover, Poseidon is the origin and creator of the heavens here. He uses the other gods as coadjutors, as brothers,*

*all motherless supercelestials—these include both the Olympians and the Tartareans. He himself then begot from Hera, a goddess productive of the matter, other gods within the heavens, both the celestial offspring of the stars and then the chthonian offspring of the spirits who are close to us by nature. Who even in Helios, the eldest of his own children, he placed his trust as the master of the heavens here, and, moreover, Helios is the source of the mortal things in it. Nevertheless, he achieves this with Kronos, he who is one of the Tartarean Titans and their leader.*

*The Tartareans are different from the Olympian gods. The Olympians are the creators and rulers of the immortals in the heavens, but the Tartareans rule the mortals here; so that Kronos of the Tartareans, himself the leader of the Titans, rules over the mortal form altogether. Hera, appointed second after Poseidon among the Olympians, is the creator and ruler of the highest matter, itself indestructible. She did this for the things made with Poseidon himself. Poseidon himself rules the entire form of both the immortal and the mortal. He is the master in the universe. He himself has truly ordained the whole order. Since Zeus, alone in the singularity of his highest divinity, rules apart over the universe. Let this then be the first doctrine that one is to understand and believe.*

*[2] Next that these gods provide for us. On the one hand, they grasp hold of themselves immediately, on the other, they through themselves grasp those inferior, and all are entirely set right according to the laws of Zeus.*

*[3] Next that they are not responsible for any of the evils, neither to any other in the universe nor to us, however, they themselves are most responsible for the good things.*

*[4] And in addition to these things, that by an unalterable and inexorable destiny proceeding from Zeus, each effects its purpose in accordance with the best. These are the doctrines concerning the gods.*

*[5] Concerning the universe, first that this universe is eternal. Both the second ranking and the third ranking gods are in it. This universe was begotten by Zeus; it was neither begun in time nor will it come to an end.*

*[6] Next that from the many universes it was joined into a unity.*

*[7] Next that the best out of those possible has been made, precisely because it was made by the particularly best being. Once it had been made, it was such that nothing had been left out and anything added to it would be excessive.*

*[8] In addition to these things, that just as it was set down in this form so it shall always be preserved undisturbed. These then are the doctrines about the universe.*

*[9] Concerning we ourselves, first that our soul, being of like kind to the gods, is immortal and remains in this universe the whole time and is eternal.*

*[10] Next that the soul is sent down for the purpose of partaking in a mortal body here each time by the gods, at one time in one body, at another in another, on account of the harmony of the universe. That, even though we have a share in mortal things, one thing in us is from the immortals and this is our form. In this way, the universe itself is united to itself.*

[11] Next that the good is in us, naturally by our ties to the gods, and this is the fit end of life.

[12] In addition to all this, that our happiness is in our immortal part, put there by the gods who unite our kind, and that is the substance and most important part of man.

These then, twelve altogether, are the principal doctrines concerning the gods, this universe, and our nature. If one, motivated by prudence about considerations of what is necessary, will also really be prudent, then one ought to acknowledge and be mindful of these things.”

However, Plethon was a strong self-taught and independent mind and delivered to the Florentine humanists at the Council of Ferrara-Florence his treatise « *On the Difference Between Aristotle and Plato* ». Plethon also introduced the Geography of Strabo to the West (where it had hitherto been unknown) and led the way to the overthrow of Ptolemy's erroneous geographical theories. He thus greatly affected the Renaissance conception of the configuration of the Earth and so played an important, if indirect, role in the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, who cited Strabo among his principal authorities.

In Italy, Plethon's pupil **Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415)** was perhaps the first of Byzantine scholars, arriving in winter 1397, with texts of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and other classics. The Byzantine scholars translated texts from Greek to Latin and supervised translations by others. Finally, along with the texts of the philosophers, they brought texts of commentators, especially on Aristotle.

Gemistos other pupil was **John Bessarion (1403-1473)**, theologian, philosopher, philologist, humanist, and diplomat. After priestly ordination (1430) he went to Mistra to listen to Gemistos. Bessarion's two years in Mistra (1431–1433) had a decisive influence on his philosophical formation, since it was there where he became familiar with the whole Pythagorean, Platonic, and neo-Platonic tradition. Cardinal Bessarion regarded this tradition as one continuum of eternal wisdom, but where **Psellos** and **Bessarion** drew on this tradition to **confirm** Christianity, Gemistos employed it to build and spread a new religion based on neo-Platonism and **opposed** to the Christian religion. Despite great respect for his teacher Gemistos, Bessarion did not share his polytheistic, anti-Aristotelian, (and some say anti-reunion) tendencies. Demetrius Kydones, a translator of the works of St. Thomas Aquinas into Greek and the spiritual father of unionism developing in Greece would put the idea of ecumenicism into the mind of the young Bessarion through his pupils (**Manuel Chrysoloras** and **Manuel Kalekas**). In the further development of his attitude, Bessarion was also influenced by the writings of **John Vekkus**, the first pro-union Patriarch of Constantinople. In 1437, as Metropolitan of Nicaea, Bessarion took part in the Council in Ferrara and Florence (1438–1439), and as the representative of the Greek he signed the decree of the Florentine Union.

Nevertheless, Bessarion held to the principle: *“I honor and respect Aristotle, I love Plato”* (*colo et veneror Aristotelem, amo Platonem*) and he thought that Platonic thought would have the right of citizenship equal to Aristotelian thought in the Latin world only when it appeared in an irenic interpretation to Aristotelianism and as not in contradiction with Christianity, since only such an interpretation of Platonism could succeed at that time.

In Rome, Bessarion organized the first meetings of learned Greeks and Latins in his home. In this way he started the so-called **Academy of Bessarion** where discussions were held in Greek and Latin at the gatherings and critical versions of texts were developed. Bessarion's first lectures (1441–1444) were intended to be stylistic exercises in the newly learned Latin. Together with **Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457)**, Bessarion exposed the blatant fraud of the *Donation of Constantine*.

So as we can see here, Plato was already largely discussed before Ficino came around.

### **Marsilio Ficino**

According to Ficino, who was only five years old at the council of Florence in 1438 **Cosimo di Medici (1389-1464)** became so inspired by Gemisthos that he acquired a complete library of Greek manuscripts. He bought a copy of the Platonic Corpus (24 dialogues) from Gemistos, and a copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum* of **Hermes Trismegistus**, acquired in Macedonia by an Italian monk, Lionardo of Pistoia.

Cosimo also decided to initiate a project to translate from the Greek into Latin, the totality of Plato's works, allegedly "hardly known in the west".

This is somehow an overstatement since **Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444)**, who after having been papal secretary became chancellor of the Florentine republic from 1427 till 1444, had already translated many works of Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch and Demosthenes into Latin[1].

Cosimo seems to have cultivated some doubts concerning the capacities of the translator he had selected for the job, the young **Marsilio Ficino (1433-99)**, the son of his personal physician. When the latter offers in 1456 his first work, *The Platonic Institutions*, Cosimo asks him kindly not to publish this work and to learn first the Greek language... which Ficino learns then from Byzantine scholar **John Argyropoulos (1415-1487)**, an Aristotelian pupil of Bessarion.

But seeing his age advancing, Cosimo finally gave him the post. He allocates him an annual stipend, the required manuscripts and a villa at Careggi, close to Florence, where Ficino would organize his "Platonic Academy" with a handful of followers, among which **Angelo Poliziano (1454-94)**, **Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494)** and **Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498)**.

Ficino's "academy", taking up the ancient neo-platonic tradition of Plotinus and Porphyry (as Ficino states himself) would organize a ceremonial banquet "neglected since one thousand two hundred years" on November 7, thought to be simultaneously the birthday of Plato and the day of his death. After the dinner, the attendants would read Plato's *Symposium* and then each of them would comment one of the speeches. The comments are demonstrations, without any real dialogue and void of the essence of real platonic thinking: irony.

On top of that it is remarkable that most gatherings of Ficino's academy were attended by the ambassador of Venice in Florence, notably the powerful oligarch **Bernardo Bembo (1433-1519)**, father of "poet" cardinal **Pietro Bembo**, later special advisor to Pope Julius II.

It was this alliance of the ever more degenerated Medici family, the Venetians and the neo-

Platonists that took over the Roman Catholic Church

But before translating Plato, and at the specific demand of Cosimo, Ficino translates first (in 1462) the *Orphic Hymns*, the *Sayings of Zoroaster*, and the *Corpus Hermeticum* of **Hermes Trismegistus**[2] the Egyptian (between 100 and 300 after BC).

Hence, it is with a quote of the *Asclepius* [another writing of Trismegistus] that Pico opens his famous “*Oratio on Human Dignity*”.

It will be only in 1469 that Ficino will finish his translations of Plato after a nervous breakdown in 1468, described by his contemporaries as a crisis of “profound melancholy”.

In 1470, and with a title plagiarized from Proclus, Ficino writes his *Platonic Theology or on the immortality of the Soul*.” While completely taken in by esoteric neo-Platonism, he becomes a priest in 1473 and writes “*The Christian Religion*” without changing his convictions, since he starts then a whole new series of translations of the neo-Platonists of Alexandria: he translates the fifty four books of Plotinus “*Enneads*”, Porphyry and Proclus.

### **Ficino versus Prometheus**

Ficino, in his own writings, copies extensively Plotinus. Wrongly presented as an exponent of renaissance philosophy, Ficino, in a chapter of his “*Five Questions Concerning the Mind*” called “*The immortal soul is always miserable in its mortal body*” explicitly attacks the Promethean conception of man: “*Nothing indeed can be imagined more unreasonable than that man, who through reason is the most perfect of all animals, nay, of all things under heaven, most perfect, I say, with regard to that formal perfection that is bestowed upon us from the beginning, that man, also through reason, should be the least perfect of all with regard to that final perfection for the sake of which the first perfection is given. **This seems to be that of the most unfortunate Prometheus.** Instructed by the divine wisdom of Pallas, he gained possession of the heavenly fire, that is, reason. Because of this very possession, on the highest peak of the mountain, that is, at the very height of contemplation, he is rightly judged most miserable of all, for he is made wretched by the continual gnawing of the most ravenous of vultures, that is, by the torment of inquiry...*” (...)

“*What do the philosophers say to these things? Certainly the Magi, followers of Zoroaster and Hostanes, assert something similar. They say that, because of a certain old disease of the human mind, everything that is very unhealthy and difficult befalls us...*”

In 1489, he publishes a book combining astrology and health, “*The book on the three lives*”, and in 1492, before dying, he starts translating **Iamblichus**.

The Florentine Neo-Platonic Academy will serve as a “Delphic” operation: defend Plato to better destroy him; praise him in such terms that he becomes discredited. And especially destroying Plato’s influence by opposing religion to science, at a point where **Nicholas of Cusa** and his followers are succeeding to do exactly the opposite. Isn’t it remarkable that Cusa’s name doesn’t appear a single time in the works of Ficino or Pico della Mirandola, so overfed with all encompassing knowledge?

Ficino maintained epistolary relations with the elites of his epoch. In Venice, it was the *Aldine Academy*, the circle of printer **Alde Manuce**, which was the outpost of Ficino's operation. Alde Manuce was a school friend of Pico della Mirandola.

Also, according to Ficino's biographer in 1505, **Giovanni Corsi**, Ficino nearly dictated the Neo-Platonic themes of **Sandro Botticelli's** paintings, sensuous wedding between paganism and Christian thematic. His evil influence on Raphael, Michelangelo and Titian is equally well documented.

Ficino's "dissident" pupil, **Pico della Mirandola** will also come up with some dangerous kooky ideas. In his "*Oration on the dignity of Man*", besides starting with a quote of Trismegistus, Pico, willing to show that God gave man total freedom without necessity, says God "*took man as a creature of indeterminate nature and, assigning him a place in the middle of the world, addressed him thus: "Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire..."*

(...)"*Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are devine."*

(...) "*And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, on the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all. Who would not admire this our chameleon?"*

Pico admits that he took this from the Persian Magi: "*For this reason the Persian Euanthes, in describing the Chaldean theology, writes that man has no semblance that is inborn and his very own but many that are external and foreign to him; whence this saying of the Chaldeans: "Hanorsih tharah sharinas," that is, "Man is a being of varied manifold, and inconstant nature."*

No wonder they all fell for Savonarola's doomsday teachings and capitulated instantaneously when the French troops of Charles VIII enter into Florence in November 1494.

### **From peeping Tom to debauchery**

Another heritage of Ficino's hegemony over Platonism was the idea that "platonic" love was purely "ideal" (as based on Plato's ideas), and rejecting any physical engagements, or love that started "from the neck up". Ficino coined the term *amor platonicus*, referring to the affection between Socrates and his young male pupils, a love sometimes mistakenly called "chaste pederasty".

In Plato's *Symposium*, it is Diotima that defines love: 1. Love is the desire to possess the good (or the beautiful) forever. 2. This desire is not only the openly sexual kind (what is usually called « love »), but also the desire of riches, the artist's desire of beautiful works, or the philosopher's love of wisdom. 3. All lovers desire to create—either children, or such more intellectual things as art works and political systems. By being creative lovers achieve

some sort of immortality. 4. The beauty and offspring of the mind are more honorable than those of the body. The most admirable lovers are those who move from the love of the physical and individual to the love of the intellectual and general.

But for Ficino, things go different. His most influential work was precisely his *“Commentary on Plato’s Symposium”* written in 1469, composed as a series of speeches commenting Plato’s *Symposium* after a ritual commemoration of Plato’s birthday and day of death on Nov. 7., a book dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici.

In chapter II, 9, Ficino, from his dualist prison, defines his idea of beauty: *“For the rest, what do lovers look for, when they love each with a common love? They look for Beauty. Because love is the desire to take pleasure of Beauty. And Beauty is a splendour that ravishes the human soul. The beauty of the body is nothing else than this splendor manifest in the colors and the lines.”* But for Ficino it are *“the eyes alone that can take pleasure of the beauty of the body. And since Love is nothing else than the desire to take pleasure of Beauty, and since only the eyes can catch that Beauty, he who loves the body is fully rewarded by vision...”* ... *“Concerning the desire to touch...(..) it is an anger and a disorder unworthy for a free man...”*

The whole is a strange mixture of Plato’s elevation toward the essence, Aristotle’s notion of friendship, the erotic love of the troubadour tradition and a pseudo-Christian monastic sort of love for a disincarnated humanity.

But then the question arises how to reach the ONE? Ficino’s mad textual interpretation outlines quite literally that it is a progression by degrees: from the love of a beautiful body to the love of several beautiful bodies; from the beautiful forms to the beauty of the behavior and knowledge. Only at the end of this progression one reaches the beauty in itself (the ONE)...

This Venetian perversion, the erotic interpretation of Plato by Ficino will introduce a rotten apple into the basket of the Renaissance and lay the foundations for the romanticists and the subsequent cultural perversion spread by the oligarchy via its tool, the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

[1] Bruni refused however to translate Plato’s *“Republic”* because *“there are many things in these books that, to our ways, are loathsome”* (Manuel 105). One such problem is that of Plato’s abolition of the family within the ideal city—*“All these women shall be wives in common to all the men, and not one of them shall live privately with any man; the children too should be held in common so that no parent shall know which is his own offspring, and no child shall know his parent”* (Plato 119). This abolition of the family is made worse by a belief in the need for eugenics, in that *“the best men must have intercourse with the best women as frequently as possible, and the opposite is true of the very inferior”* (Plato 121). The prescription of eugenics pales, though, in comparison to the belief in the value of infanticide—*“the children of good parents they will take to a rearing pen in the care of nurses living apart in a certain section of the city; the children of inferior parents, or any child of the others born defective, they will hide, as is fitting, in a secret and unknown place”* (Plato 121-122). Obviously, then, Plato’s *Republic*, although in many ways a very Humanist work, also stands in opposition to a number of key Christian beliefs and tenets.

[2] Ficino made Trismegistus the first of all theologians: his teachings would have been transmitted successively to Orpheus, to Aglaopheme, to Pythagoras, to Philolaus and finally to Plato. Later, Ficino will place Zoroaster at the head of these *prisci theology* [first theologians]. At the end he attributes an identical role to Zoroaster and Mercury for the genesis of antique wisdom: Zoroaster taught it to the Persians while Hermes (Mercury) taught it to the Egyptians. Ficino underlined the prophetic character of Trismegistus writings. Trismegistus would have predicted "*the ruin of ancient religion, the birth of a new faith, the coming of Christ, the Last Judgment, the Resurrection, the glory of the elected and the punishment of the evil*". Ficino's translation of Trismegistus, printed as early as 1471, was the starting point of a real rebirth of philosophical hermeticism. Hence, it is with a quote of the *Asclepius* [another writing of Trismegistus] that Pico opens his famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* [Oratio on Human Dignity]; and it is through this process, that in 1488, the image of Trismegistus was engraved on the tiles of the cathedral of Sienna.