

## Post-Plato

We recognize Plato as a major influence in Western philosophical and theological thought but that is mainly because so many of the later philosophers picked up on his ideas and tried to integrate or replace them. But what about them during or just after his lifetime? Was it just a fluke that his works and thought were preserved and persevered? Did he have any immediate influence? Well, I guess the answer had better be yes, or else this chapter will be really short.

## The Academia

The short answer is that even within his lifetime Plato was considered one of the most influential and celebrated teachers in Greece. The Academia (or Academy) of Athens was opened by Plato in about 387 BC and lasted until it was closed down by the Emperor Justinian in 529 AD (for strictly political purposes). This 800 year *unbroken* existence speaks volumes for the ideas implanted there by its founder. History on the other hand, may not be as kind to the students.

The school's influence in a secular sense was carried over about mid-way through its existence and into the 300's (AD) to the non-secular theologies of Philo of Alexandria (Jewish, ~20 BC – 50 AD ) as well as Christian theologians and apologists who rise up at this time due to the legitimization of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine.

While it was mainly focused on the correct instruction of political leaders, it managed to keep intact, alive and fresh the ideas of its founder for countless generations. An extremely good reference, as references go.

## The Minor Prophets

While only Plato seemed best able to present and expound on the whole of Socrates' thought, producing a balanced notion of discipline and virtue, he was not the only one who was able to glean something from it. Even then, as we can see from the later dialogs, Plato eventually mainly focused on the leadership aspect. But Socrates and Plato were not the only players on the field. Many other people follow the thinking of a particular individual, presenting what they believe the main point or focus to be. Sometimes they are right, and sometimes they are wrong. Other times they are just lunatics.

## Cynics

From the Greek for '*dog-like*', the Cynics took up Socrates' call for austerity, and pretty much little else. One should reject traditional desires (power, fame, etc.) and be free of possessions. Antisthenes (445-365 BC) identified self-denial as virtue; Diogenes (412-325 BC) felt Antisthenes did not take it far enough and took it farther by living in a tub, which might account for the lunatic title given him. The term as we use it today only took on that meaning later in history.

## Cyrenaics

Named for their port of origin, these folks while often confused name-wise, were actually the counterparts of the Cynics. Aristippus (435-356 BC) identified more with the instant and short-

term pleasure side of Socratic thought, and pretty much little else. One can only guess the reason these guys are not still around as well as their Cynic counterparts.

## Aristotle

Plato really had no real use for what we might call the 'hard sciences'. To him knowledge only had use in terms of 'right action'. Oddly enough then, that one of his star pupils became known as the father of modern science and the hierarchical classification of everything upon which we rely so heavily. We really do not want to spend much time here, because we will be spending a lot of time on him later. Suffice it to say, his reaction against and rejection of his master Plato, produced a singularly large volume of work. Together, Plato and Aristotle form what we basically consider to be Hellenistic Philosophy (with all apologies to everyone else we have looked at), and the backbone of Christian theological language.

He, for the West and because we tend to gloss over the details sometimes, begins that idea that every generation produces a genius who seems to step outside the boundaries of traditional thought to guide the world. But one (at least this one) wonders why philosophers hold up both Plato and Aristotle, but scientific thinkers only hold up Aristotle. But I cause us to wander.

## Stoics

An early fusion of Plato and Aristotle, these guys get their name from the *stoa* or columns in the downtown market from near which they spouted their philosophy. Zeno of Citium (334-262 BC) is considered their main founder and their 'school', lasted even into Rome (Seneca, Marcus Aurelius). The Stoic doctrine is divided into three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. Stoicism is essentially a system of ethics (like Plato) which is guided by logic (Aristotelian) and has physics (observable phenomena) as its foundation.

What they taught was that life should be lived in accordance with nature and controlled by virtue. Their teaching on morality though, is stern; it is an ascetic system, teaching self-denial, restraint and denial of worldly pleasures as well as a perfect indifference (*apatheia*: apathy) to everything external, for nothing external could be either good or evil. Hence to the Stoics both pain and pleasure, poverty and riches, sickness and health, were supposed to be equally unimportant.

This group will influence later Christian asceticism. We might also think of them as Taoists of the West, but that would be another chapter.

## Eclecticism

As the name implies, an attempt from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC at a synthesis of Stoicism, Platonism, Neo-Pythagoreans, the various Platonic sects, and a smattering of others thrown in for good measure. Basically they tried, from all the existing philosophical beliefs, to select the doctrines that seemed to them most reasonable, and out of these constructed a new system. To their credit though, they tried to balance the logical search for pure truth, the attainment of practical virtue and happiness, and the idea that pure truth was impossible to discover. Eclecticism was the original cafeteria-style belief system, seeking to reach by selection from the various systems, to the best possible degree of probability, with the full knowledge of the despair of attaining to

what is absolutely true. That is to say, they knew they would not reach perfect knowledge but they also knew that fact should not keep them from trying.

## **Neo-Platonism**

Sure, okay, not really immediately after his life, but in terms of our timeline fairly close, this is the much later (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) 'rediscovery' of Plato founded by Plotinus (204-270 AD), an attempt to integrate Socratic/Platonic thought into newer systems. Alexandria in Egypt had replaced Athens as the center of learning and the new-found sense of peace led back to the pursuit of higher knowledge, truth, virtue and the state, in light of modern thinking. Naturally then, they were drawn to the writings of Plato for their ethical sense. We will be covering these thinkers later but they bear mention here, within this context.

## **Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine**

These Christian theologian/philosophers pick up the neo-Platonic movement and carry it into the 4<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. They struggle with some of the notions of Plato, trying to reconcile them with Christian Orthodoxy but for the most part they create a smooth integration of Greek ideas into Christian thinking.

## **Alkindus, Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes**

These Islamic theologian/philosophers pick up platonic ideas around the 11<sup>th</sup> century and produce an Islamic philosophic-theological synthesis similar to their Christian counterparts. These re-thinkings will be re-introduced into the West later in the late Middle Ages where they will have an influence.

## **Putting It Together**

Socrates and Plato had a great influence in Western philosophy on the immediate and the long term thinking of the philosophers which followed them, even to this day. Their thinking on morality gave a language and a basis for discussing the larger human situation which seems to make the most sense to the largest number of people. While most of their 'scientific' thinking has subsequently been dismissed, it has been hard to shake their moral discussions, or the thinking that within each of us lays a certain amount of knowledge which we can use to act correctly or at least discover how to act correctly and the responsibility to do so, as well as a certain amount of self-denial which is necessary to accomplish it.

Our modern notions of law, of morality, of the 'greater good', of asceticism, even some aspects of God all have their inception here, in Plato. Whether it has been embraced or rejected, consciously or subconsciously integrated, the vestiges of Platonic thought are solidly woven into the modern Western mindset.

## **Thought Exercise**

Would you consider the thinkers of this period, even Plato, to be *a posteriori* or *a priori* thinkers?

