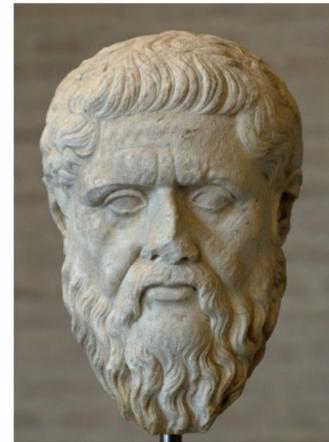




The Academies

The word *academy* is derived from Plato's Academy that he founded in the suburbs of Athens c.387 BC, which itself derived its name from the land upon which it was established. This land was a large walled garden and grove of olive and plane trees that had been given to the citizens of Athens by the hero Academos for a public garden and gymnasium. Plato's Academy was established in a small garden within this area, bought for him by his friends, and the great philosopher presided over it until his death in 347 BC. His successors carried on the Academy, which became very famous, and it remained in use until A.D. 526, when it was finally closed down by emperor Justinian.



The Academy was one of the many philosophical schools that flourished in classical times, each under the leadership of a renowned and venerated teacher. The essence of philosophy, which its name declares (i.e. from Greek *philos*, 'love,' and *sophía*, 'wisdom'), is the love of wisdom: hence a philosopher is a lover of wisdom.

The word was first coined by Pythagoras two centuries earlier, who observed that there were basically three classes of people everywhere: (1) the vast majority whose main object is to gain as many material goods as possible, (2) those whose main goal is to achieve fame, and (3) those who do not care much for wealth or fame but who desire to gain an understanding of the drama of life. Pythagoras named the first class, the lovers of gain; the second class, the lovers of honour; and the third class the lovers of wisdom (i.e. philosophers). He included himself in this third group, remarking that it would not be appropriate to call himself wise, for only God is wise, but as a lover of wisdom he was a seeker after it—a seeker of truth.

The choice of this word, *philosophy*, is not as simplistic as it might sound. Pythagoras was an initiate of the Orphic Mysteries, which taught that the Supreme Being is Love and that, as a result, all creation is essentially an act of love, all forms of life are evolving expressions of that love, and the role of human souls in particular is to discover, see and know that love. What we can discover of that love is the truth, and this truth is the divine wisdom that creates and sustains all. To discover such love, we ourselves have to be lovers. That which we can discover or see is the face of truth, represented by Sophia. The other aspect of truth, which we cannot see as such, except via Sophia, is signified by Logos.

However, divine Love, in its wisdom, created and continues to create all that exists; thus what there is to know about love is vast, complex and existing in many forms, on many levels and with many facets. Philosophy, therefore, is all-embracing, searching out truths from the lowest material level right up to the highest metaphysical or spiritual level. For this reason there have been many schools of philosophy and philosophical thought, ranging from the spiritual and theistic to the agnostic and materialistic. Pythagoras' school was of the former, as was Plato's, and so the study of spiritual forms (archetypes) and their mathematics (the abstract but universal language of geometry and number) was of prime concern, as also were morals. The liberal arts and sciences, associated with the Muses, were another important part of the agenda.

In Greece the philosophical schools or academies belonged to the second and third levels of what was basically a three-tiered society, echoing the observation made by Plato, that mankind has three main levels of development, rising from brutish man to intellectual man to intuitive or spiritual man. The first is more concerned with his belly, the second with his head, and the third with his heart, the seat of love. The truest philosopher belongs to the third level and equates to the third or highest class of person as defined by Pythagoras. The intelligence of the heart is the truest lover of the wisdom of the heart, which wisdom is love.

The important truth that the Greeks (and other societies) recognised is that all three levels are important and none can be ignored or left out, but they can be purified, refined and transmuted. For man is a three-fold being, echoing the Holy Trinity, and needs all three. We cannot, for instance, live without a belly, or without a head, or without a heart. But in terms of consciousness, we wake up to their values one at a time, with each higher level

capable of purifying and refining the lower level—but only the third level can transmute the others and set them alight with love. The spiritual laws governing this three-fold expression of truth in human evolution and society can perhaps be more easily seen and understood in the Wheel of Life Archetype, also known as a Mandala, Wheel of Fortune or Medicine Wheel.

Plato was the famous pupil of Socrates and, like Socrates, an initiate of the Pythagorean and Orphic tradition, which was Hermetic in origin. It was due to Plato that the thoughts and words of Socrates were recorded and made known.

The name 'Plato' is actually a pseudonym. The real name of this 4th century BC Greek philosopher was Aristocles, son of Ariston, who took the name Plato as his pseudonym. Like Pythagoras, he was known as the son of Apollo, and this could be the meaning of the pseudonym 'Plato'. Apollo was the son of Leto or Lato, the goddess of night or darkness, and so Apollo, the god of day or light, was also known as Latoius, meaning 'son of Lato'. 'Plato' may be a derivative of *ap-Latoius*, 'from Apollo', or even *ap-Lato*, 'from Lato'.

The main philosophical thrust from classical times right through to the culmination of the European Renaissance was derived primarily from Plato. But he, Aristocles Plato, was not the only Plato in history, but the first one to be known by that name. The 'Second Plato' was the 15th century Italian scholar Marsilio Ficino.

Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), a scholar, physician and priest, was commissioned by the great Cosimo de' Medici to translate into Latin the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Hermetic wisdom supposedly recorded by Hermes Trismegistus, and the dialogues of Plato, together with the Neoplatonic writings of Porphyry, Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite and Plotinus. The translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was ready in 1464 and published in 1471 under the title of *Pimander*. The translations of Plato's dialogues, completed c.1468 were published as the *Platonic Theology* in 1474.



Ficino's small country house near the Medici villa at Careggi, outside Florence, which he had received from Cosimo, became the city's foremost philosophical centre, and from there his influence spread throughout Europe. Ficino called his villa 'The Academy' in memory of Plato, and it provided a sense of spiritual community as well as a forum for the discussion of religious and philosophical subjects. He became known as 'the new Plato', and each year he and his friends celebrated Plato's birthday with a solemn banquet.

Ficino's understanding, as that of others (including St. Augustine), was that a divine theology or wisdom tradition, based on love, began simultaneously with Zoroaster among the Persians and with Hermes Trismegistus among the Egyptians, and that this wisdom tradition led in an unbroken chain to Plato via Orpheus and Pythagoras. It is this wisdom which is reputed to underlie the Hebrew, Orphic and Christian teachings, all of which developed from the blended Hermetic and Magian origin. Ficino was able to reconcile Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy with Christian theology by demonstrating that this wisdom tradition was associated with Christianity via links with Moses and the Zoroastrian Magi.

Ficino regarded both philosophy and religion as being manifestations of a spiritual life, each needing the other in order to attain the *summum bonum* or greatest good. According to the Neoplatonic philosophy which he founded, based upon the Platonic-Hermetic wisdom, love is the sustaining principle of the universe, and the attainment of the highest good is dependant not upon the Church but upon an impulse universal to mankind. The soul is not only immortal, but all souls by an inner urge naturally seek truth and goodness, this goodness being the nature of God, the All-Good.

Ficino, the 'new' or 'Second Plato', was the primary founder of Renaissance Neoplatonism and of the second Platonic Academy. The next in line of these great initiates was the 16th/17th century philosopher-poet Francis Bacon, who was known as the 'Third Plato' and who likewise founded an 'Academy', taught that God is love, was acclaimed as having acquired most of his knowledge direct from God, and laid the foundations for the next great leap in human consciousness and development, which will occur, as Bacon prophesied, once the dark materialistic age is passed, which he prayed would not be too severe.

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