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Plato and the Philosophical Foundations of Culture and Technology

We take up this story of our Western philosophy of culture, technology, and education with Socrates (469 - 399 B.C.E.), Plato (427 - 347 B.C.E.), and Aristotle (384 - 322 B.C.E.). These three generations of teachers are often said to have "invented philosophy as a discipline,"[1] and to have "created knowledge as an object and as the chief purpose and the proper content of all educational systems." [2] Over the span of their lifetimes, the oral tradition gave way to the technology of the alphabet, and Greek culture and education made the transition from oral to literate forms of communication and instruction. Socrates did not write. He was suspicious of the written word and conducted his philosophy in oral conversations.[3] His pupil, Plato, wrote dialogues. While earlier generations set forth their views in the form of brief prose pieces (Parmenides), histories (Herodotus), in collections of aphorisms (Heraclitus), or used the dialogue format as plays for entertainment (Aristophanes, Euripides), Plato was the first philosopher to "adapt sustained oral teaching into continuous written discourse." [4] He had a crucial role "as the thinker in whose text the full results of literacy, conceptual and linguistic, were first fully displayed." [5] Plato's student, Aristotle, is credited with lectures and prose treatises in which the author speaks directly to the reader. [6] In adopting the treatise form, Aristotle introduced the style characterized by standardized vocabulary and the categories conducive to abstract thought, thereby completing the transition from the oral to the literate modality. As the student of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle, Plato was the point of interaction between two different phases of language. Rachel Kitzinger has noted,

Plato, by juxtaposing the intimacy of the oral world with the permanence of a philosophical written text, bears witness to the rich interaction that persisted in classical literature and thought between the oral tradition and the relatively young phenomenon of writing. [7]

We must anticipate that the Platonic texts both exhibit and reflect this revolutionary, intermediate phase between orality and literacy. This interface between oral and written modes of thought is considered to be a significant part of the foundation of Western culture itself. [8]

Read On: Ancient Models, Contemporary Paradigms

Read Back: Greek Education and the Transition from Oral to Written Culture

[1] Richard Kraut, "Introduction to the Study of Plato," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), p. 2.

[2] Procope S. Costas, "Review of Preface to Plato, by Eric A. Havelock," *Classical Journal* 60 (1964), p. 79.

[3] We learn of Socrates' teachings only through references in ancient comedies, and through the writings of his students, Xenophon and Plato.

[4] Eric A. Havelock, *Preface To Plato* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 56; idem, "The Orality of Socrates and the Literacy of Plato," *New Essays on Socrates*, ed., Eugene Kelly (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1984).

[5] Kevin Robb, ed., *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy* (Monist Library of Philosophy: La Salle, Illinois, 1983), p. 3.

[6] Although we are told that Aristotle, Plato's student, also wrote dialogues, none have survived. See Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* XIII xix 4. For further discussion, see John M. Cooper's Introduction and Notes in John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, eds., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), p. xviii.

[7] Kitzinger, "Alphabets and Writing," p. 415.

[8] Tony Lentz, *Orality and Literacy in Hellenic Greece* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 178.