

Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization

Inspired by Arthur Herman's book, "The Cave and the Light," I use his thesis, as well as my own research, to trace the ideological battle between two of history's great titans throughout western history. When Pantheon.world first released their rankings of historical figures in 2015, Aristotle ranked #1 and Plato #2. This quote from a 1947 journal article sums them up nicely, "Aristotle is second to none in logic, psychology, biology, and natural science generally. His patient accumulation of data in almost every province of knowledge is probably unequalled. He does not, however, rise to the heights of Plato's vision in ethics, political science, or metaphysics, where Plato is at his best." And Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in 1830, "Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist. I do not think it is possible that any one born an Aristotelian can become a Platonist; and I am sure no born Platonist can ever change into an Aristotelian. They are two classes of men beside which it is next to impossible to conceive a third. The one considers reason a quality, or attribute; the other considers it a power."

Lastly, as Herman states in his book, "One path - Plato's path - sees the world through the eyes of the religious mystic as well as the artist. It finds its strength in the realm of contemplation and speculation and seeks to unleash the power of human beings' dreams and desires. The path of Aristotle, by contrast, observes reality through the sober eyes of science and reveals the power of logic and analysis as tools of human freedom. 'The fact is our starting point,' he said, and meant it."

Plato and his pupil, Aristotle, give birth to rival ideologies that will shape the rest of Western civilization.

Plato	Greece	-427	-347	Philosopher	Aristotle	Greece	-384	-321	Philosopher
Eudoxus of Cnidus	Turkey	-408	-355	Mathematician	Theophrastus	Greece	-371	-287	Philosopher
Dionysius II of Syracuse	Italy	-397	-343	Politician	Ptolemy I Soter	Unknown	-367	-282	Military Personnel
Pyrrho	Greece	-360	-270	Philosopher	Alexander the Great	Greece	-356	-323	Military Personnel
Zeno of Citium	Cyprus	-334	-262	Philosopher	Epicurus	Greece	-341	-269	Philosopher
Eratosthenes	Libya	-276	-194	Geographer	Strato of Lampsacus	Greece	-335	-269	Philosopher
Polybius	Greece	-203	-118	Historian	Euclid	Unknown	-325	-240	Mathematician
Philo of Larissa	Greece	-154	-84	Philosopher	Aristarchus of Samos	Greece	-310	-230	Astronomer
Posidonius	Syria	-135	-51	Philosopher	Archimedes	Italy	-287	-212	Mathematician
Antiochus of Ascalon	Greece	-125	-68	Philosopher	Cato the Elder	Italy	-234	-149	Writer
Sallust	Italy	-86	-35	Historian	Cicero	Italy	-106	-43	Politician

The end of the Roman Republic and the birth of Neoplatonism, which fuses with the growing religion of Christianity; Aristotle's works are lost to the West for centuries.

Philo of Alexandria	Egypt	-20	50	Philosopher	Horace	Italy	-65	-8	Writer
Seneca	Spain	-4	65	Philosopher	Strabo	Turkey	-64	23	Geographer
Plutarch	Greece	46	127	Philosopher	Ptolemy	Egypt	100	170	Astronomer
Epictetus	Turkey	50	135	Philosopher	Celsus	Greece	110	175	Philosopher
Marcus Aurelius	Italy	121	180	Politician	Galen	Turkey	129	215	Physician
Clement of Alexandria	Greece	150	215	Philosopher	Lucius Caecilius Lactantius	Egypt	250	325	Writer
Numenius of Apamea	Syria	150	200	Philosopher	Anicius Manlius Boethius	Italy	477	524	Philosopher
Origen	Egypt	185	254	Philosopher	Charlemagne	Belgium	742	814	Politician
Marcus Claudius Tacitus	Italy	200	276	Politician	Leo the Mathematician	Greece	790	869	Philosopher
Plotinus	Egypt	203	270	Philosopher	Johannes Scotus Eriugena	Ireland	800	877	Philosopher
Porphyry	Lebanon	234	305	Philosopher					
Eusebius of Caesarea	Israel	263	339	Philosopher					
Saint Jerome	Croatia	345	420	Religious Figure					
Augustine of Hippo	Algeria	354	430	Philosopher					
Hypatia of Alexandria	Egypt	370	415	Mathematician					
Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite	Unknown	475	525	Religious Figure					

Arab scholars translate Aristotle's works, giving philosophy and science new life, while Neoplatonism fades.

Abbot Suger	France	1081	1151	Architect
Bernard of Clairvaux	France	1090	1153	Religious Figure
Pope John XXII	Italy	1244	1334	Religious Figure
Meister Eckhart	Germany	1260	1328	Philosopher

Al-Kindī	Iraq	801	873	Philosopher
Al-Farabi	Kazakhstan	872	951	Philosopher
Pope Sylvester II	France	946	1003	Mathematician
Avicenna	Uzbekistan	980	1037	Philosopher
Anselm of Canterbury	Italy	1033	1109	Religious Figure
Peter Abelard	France	1079	1142	Philosopher
Gerard of Cremona	Italy	1114	1187	Writer
Averroes	Spain	1126	1198	Philosopher
Maimonides	Spain	1138	1204	Religious Figure
Albertus Magnus	Germany	1200	1280	Religious Figure
Roger Bacon	United Kingdom	1220	1292	Philosopher
Bonaventure	Italy	1221	1274	Philosopher
Thomas Aquinas	Italy	1225	1274	Philosopher
Dante Alighieri	Italy	1265	1321	Writer
John Duns Scotus	United Kingdom	1266	1308	Philosopher
William of Ockham	United Kingdom	1288	1347	Philosopher
Coluccio Salutati	Italy	1331	1406	Politician

The Renaissance: Plato inspires the arts, Aristotle inspires political theory.

Marsilio Ficino	Italy	1433	1499	Philosopher
Sandro Botticelli	Italy	1445	1510	Painter
Lorenzo de' Medici	Italy	1449	1492	Politician
Girolamo Savonarola	Italy	1452	1498	Religious Figure
Leonardo da Vinci	Italy	1452	1519	Inventor
Giovanni Pico della Mirandola	Italy	1463	1494	Philosopher
Erasmus of Rotterdam	Netherlands	1466	1536	Philosopher
John Colet	United Kingdom	1467	1519	Religious Figure
Nicolaus Copernicus	Poland	1473	1543	Astronomer
Michelangelo	Italy	1475	1564	Painter
Thomas More	United Kingdom	1478	1535	Philosopher
Martin Luther	Germany	1483	1546	Religious Figure

Leonardo Bruni	Italy	1370	1444	Historian
Filippo Brunelleschi	Italy	1377	1446	Architect
Donatello	Italy	1386	1466	Painter
Masaccio	Italy	1401	1427	Painter
Leone Battista Alberti	Italy	1404	1472	Architect
Niccolò Machiavelli	Italy	1469	1527	Philosopher
Raphael	Italy	1483	1520	Painter
Bartolomé de Las Casas	Spain	1484	1566	Writer

Platonic mathematical Forms supplant Aristotilean observed astronomy, while Aristotle's political views continue to hold sway.

Giordano Bruno	Italy	1548	1600	Astronomer
Galileo Galilei	Italy	1564	1642	Astronomer
Johannes Kepler	Germany	1571	1630	Astronomer
René Descartes	France	1596	1650	Philosopher
John Milton	United Kingdom	1608	1674	Writer
Henry More	United Kingdom	1614	1687	Philosopher
Blaise Pascal	France	1623	1662	Mathematician
Robert Boyle	Ireland	1627	1691	Chemist
Baruch Spinoza	Netherlands	1632	1677	Philosopher
Isaac Newton	United Kingdom	1642	1726	Physicist
Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz	Germany	1646	1716	Mathematician

Luis de Molina	Spain	1535	1600	Philosopher
Francisco Suarez	Spain	1548	1617	Philosopher
Francis Bacon	United Kingdom	1561	1626	Philosopher
William Harvey	United Kingdom	1578	1657	Physician
Hugo Grotius	Netherlands	1583	1645	Lawyer
Thomas Hobbes	United Kingdom	1588	1679	Philosopher
Moliere	France	1622	1673	Writer
John Locke	United Kingdom	1632	1704	Philosopher
Third Earl of Shaftesbury	United Kingdom	1671	1713	Politician
George Berkeley	Ireland	1685	1753	Philosopher
Baron de Montesquieu	France	1689	1755	Philosopher

Plato's Romanticism versus Aristotle's Enlightenment.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau	Switzerland	1712	1778	Philosopher	Voltaire	France	1694	1778	Writer
Denis Diderot	France	1713	1784	Writer	David Hume	United Kingdom	1711	1776	Philosopher
Immanuel Kant	Russia	1724	1804	Philosopher	Adam Smith	United Kingdom	1723	1790	Economist
Jean-Marie Roland de la Platiere	France	1734	1793	Economist	Edmund Burke	Ireland	1729	1797	Politician
Jacques-Louis David	France	1748	1825	Painter	John Adams	United States	1735	1826	Politician
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe	Germany	1749	1832	Writer	Thomas Jefferson	United States	1743	1794	Politician
William Blake	United Kingdom	1757	1827	Writer	Jeremy Bentham	United Kingdom	1748	1832	Philosopher
Maximilien Robespierre	France	1758	1794	Politician	James Madison	United States	1751	1836	Politician
Friedrich Schiller	Germany	1759	1805	Writer	Thomas Malthus	United Kingdom	1766	1834	Economist
François-René de Chateaubriand	France	1768	1848	Writer	Alexander von Humboldt	Germany	1769	1859	Geographer
Georg Friedrich Hegel	Germany	1770	1831	Philosopher	Auguste Comte	France	1798	1857	Philosopher
William Wordsworth	United Kingdom	1770	1850	Writer	Alexis de Tocqueville	France	1805	1859	Historian
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	United Kingdom	1772	1834	Writer	John Stuart Mill	United Kingdom	1806	1873	Economist
J. M. W. Turner	United Kingdom	1775	1851	Painter					
Arthur Schopenhauer	Poland	1788	1860	Philosopher					
Lord Byron	United Kingdom	1788	1824	Writer					
Percy Bysshe Shelley	United Kingdom	1792	1822	Writer					
Victor Hugo	France	1802	1885	Writer					

Idealism vs Realism: Plato's Republic vs Aristotle's Polis, Theoretical Physics, and Evolution.

Karl Marx	Germany	1818	1883	Economist	Charles Darwin	United Kingdom	1809	1882	Biologist
James Clerk Maxwell	United Kingdom	1831	1879	Physicist	Herbert Spencer	United Kingdom	1820	1903	Philosopher
Ludwig Boltzmann	Austria	1844	1906	Physicist	Ernst Mach	Czech Republic	1838	1916	Physicist
Georges Sorel	France	1847	1922	Philosopher	Charles Sanders Peirce	United States	1839	1914	Philosopher
Gottlob Frege	Germany	1848	1925	Mathematician	William James	United States	1842	1910	Psychologist
Max Planck	Germany	1858	1947	Physicist	Friedrich Nietzsche	Germany	1844	1900	Philosopher
Henri Bergson	France	1859	1941	Philosopher	Henri Poincaré	France	1854	1912	Mathematician
Herbert Croly	United States	1869	1930	Philosopher	Max Weber	Germany	1864	1920	Sociologist
Benito Mussolini	Italy	1883	1945	Politician	Bertrand Russell	United Kingdom	1872	1970	Mathematician
Niels Bohr	Denmark	1885	1962	Physicist	Albert Einstein	Germany	1879	1955	Physicist
Martin Heidegger	Germany	1889	1976	Philosopher	Ludwig Wittgenstein	Austria	1889	1951	Philosopher
Ayatollah Khomeini	Iran	1902	1989	Religious Figure	Friedrich Hayek	Austria	1899	1992	Economist
					Karl Popper	Austria	1902	1994	Philosopher
					Ayn Rand	Russia	1905	1982	Writer

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (so very Plato) and the mapping of the Human Genome (quintessential Aristotle) have made their dueling philosophies more vital than ever.