

"Turning the Soul": An Investigation of Georgios Gemistos Plethon's Teaching Methods and Educational Philosophy

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This paper explores Georgios Gemistos Plethon's (circa 1355–1452 ACE) teaching methods and educational philosophy. We refer to the Byzantine philosopher as Gemistos and not Plethon, because most of his teachings and works were written while he was known as Gemistos. This paper is divided into several sections. It begins with a brief biography of Gemistos and then follows with a discussion on the general contours of Byzantine education, specifically Outer and Inner Learning as well as fourteenth and fifteenth century Christian perceptions of ancient Greek learning. In section three this paper investigates Gemistos's teaching methods and how Plato's notion of "turning the soul" may have influenced Gemistos understanding of how students learned best. Section four explores Gemistos's educational philosophy, his views on Plato and Aristotle as well his religious beliefs and how these may have impacted his teaching. This paper concludes with a discussion of Gemistos's lasting impact on education and learning.

Introduction

Georgios Gemistos Plethon was born in Constantinople in 1355 ACE. Throughout most of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Constantinople witnessed a wave of invaders and conquerors. Just five years prior to Gemistos's birth a third of the population of the city was lost to the Black Death. It was a time when the people of Constantinople were unsure what lay ahead in their future. But it was also an intuitive time, which led some to look to the distant past for answers about their own world. Gemistos was influenced by the events of his time and his teachings would later influence other scholars in both the Latin West and Greek East.

Today Georgios Gemistos is considered an important historical figure in the transmission of Greek learning to the West. His writings influenced Thomas More's *Utopia* and his (re) introduction of Strabo's *Geographica* likely inspired Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World.¹ Gemistos is also remembered as a teacher and scholar who would teach Gennadios II, the first Patriarch of Constantinople after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman

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1. J. Duncan M. Derret, "Gemistus Plethon, the Essenes, and More's Utopia," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 27 (1965).

Turks in 1453.² Gemistos is credited for encouraging the teachings of classical Greek philosophy, particularly Plato and advocating a revival of the ancient Greek world. He later changed his name to Plethon, in honor of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. He was well versed in the writings of Homer, Zoroaster, Strabo, Aristotle, and Plato, and was even appointed by the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaiologos (1392-1448 ACE) to serve on the Greek delegation at the Council of Union in Ferrara and Florence in 1438/39.

While many scholars have examined Gemistos's life and philosophy, what he taught and how he taught is still a mystery. What little evidence we have on Gemistos's philosophy on education comes mostly from his writings. Plato's philosophy nevertheless seems to have influenced Gemistos's educational philosophy and teaching methods the most.

Byzantine Learning

The Byzantine Greeks had always been aware of the classical Greek past and they continued to study the works of the ancient Greeks. They knew most of the works of Plato and Aristotle. They even believed that one needed an understanding of ancient Greek philosophy to be considered "educated."

At the same time, some ancient Greek scholars were better received than others. Both the Catholic and Greek Churches had accepted much of Aristotle's teachings. Aristotle's philosophy fit well within the Christian world. It separated secular subjects from theology and fell within Outer learning. Outer learning consisted of logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, while inner learning dealt with Christian theology. It is evident that Gemistos kept these types of learning separated when teaching. He did this by teaching secular matters in secular terms---using his classical learning as a foundation. At the same time, when he discussed religious matters he used theology as a foundation for his teaching.

Byzantine education consisted of an educational system called *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). Students studied these subjects first before moving into inner or theological learning. These subjects helped explain things that existed within the universe. Theology however was the ultimate discipline, because it was revealed to mankind by Christianity's ultimate authorities: God, the Apostles, and the scriptures. Philosophy on the other hand, posed a problem for the Church. It was valuable to the Church because it helped train the mind, but at the same time it taught one to think deeply and question most subjects including

2. John Harris, "The Influence of Plethon's Idea of Fate on the Historian Laonnikos Chlkokondyles," in *Proceedings of the International Congress on Plethon and his Times*, ed. L. G. Benakis and Ch. P. Baloglou (Mystras, Greece, June 26-29, 2002). Athens, 2004.

theology. So, unlike most of the other subjects, some questions raised in philosophy were: Where does the universe originate? Where is the soul located? Or even, is there such a thing as a soul?

Aristotle's writings did not pose much of a problem to the Church. He was mainly concerned in explaining things in this world and maintained that disciplines should be studied independently. On the other hand, Plato differed. Plato assumed that the soul existed prior to birth, (which went against the Church's belief that the soul only appeared after birth) and that disciplines needed other disciplines to be understood. Theology for example needed ethics and physics, and arithmetic needed geometry and logic for one to gain a deeper understanding of a subject.

In the fifteenth century Aristotle was studied more than Plato. The complete works of Plato were not available to the West until 1423. But the Church was aware of most of Plato's teachings. The Catholic and Greek Churches had both made peace with Aristotelianism earlier, and Neo-Platonism, which was reconciled as Christian Neo-Platonism, incorporated those teachings from Plato that fit within the Church's theological traditions. However, Gemistos was not interested in reconciliation between Plato and the Church, he was interested instead in teaching Plato's philosophy in its purest form, even if it challenged the Church's beliefs.

Instructional Methods

State funded education existed in Constantinople for centuries. In 435 ACE Theodosius II founded the *Pandidakterion of Magnaura* an institution of higher learning that was funded by the empire. By the thirteenth century however imperial education was limited and most education fell onto private instruction or private teachers.³

For much of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, teachers in Byzantium were placed in high social regard. Only those teachers that had established a reputation as scholars and learned men were sought after by Byzantine elites to serve as tutors for their children. An understanding of the ancient Greeks was an essential credential to teach these students. It was believed that Greek learning provided the child with a solid understanding of the secular world. It was also seen as important to preparing Byzantine elites to serve as functionaries in the imperial bureaucracy. Within Constantinople Gemistos gained a reputation as a reputable teacher and scholar. As such, he was sought after by elite families to help prepare their children for life in the empire.

3. Robert Browning, *The Patriarchal School at Constantinople in the Twelfth Century*, *Byzantion* 33, no. 1 (1963).

Fabio Pagani recently examined Gemistos's personal annotations found within the margins of several manuscripts by Plato (*Parmanides*, *Protagoras*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and the *Republic*).⁴ Gemistos likely used these manuscripts when teaching. What Pagani found was that within these manuscripts, Gemistos had included his personal comments within the margins of the texts. They typically dealt with ancient Greek myths and ancient Greek religion, and provide one with a glimpse of how Gemistos likely taught and what Gemistos found to be important. Nonetheless, much of what we know about Gemistos's teachings come mostly from his writings.

Gemistos's teachings are ambiguous and we know that students studied under him in both Constantinople and Mistra. Whether it was in Constantinople or Mistra those that called him teacher (διδάσκαλος) received much of the same education as under any other teacher during this time. Education could be characterized as an intimate learning experience that occurred between teacher and student. Gemistos mentored a few students (between one to three) at a time. Most of his students began their education with him between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. We know that most of his students were males and part of upper Byzantine society.⁵ Although we have no record of any female students that Gemistos may have taught, it was not uncommon for women from elite Byzantine families to be taught by a teacher like Gemistos. The best-known example is the Byzantine princess and historian Anna Komemne (1083-1153 ACE) who was tutored by the Greek teacher Niketas Choniates.

During Gemistos's time the "school" was not associated with a physical building and space, as it is today. The teacher was essentially the school. Most of Gemistos's teachings occurred in his home, but extended outside his home at public lectures, the dinner table or even a stroll with a student.

Most Byzantine teachers used both religious and classical texts during their lessons (μαθήματα). Books were scarce and most pupils did not have personal copies of books. The teacher tended to have at his/her disposal several books (usually from their personal library) from which students read or used as instructional material during their lesson (μάθημα).

According to Steven Ruciman, Byzantine students are reported to have been able to recite by memory long passages from Homer and other classical Greek authors.⁶ These were typically pre-adolescent to adolescent children (between ten to fifteen years of age) who were also studying Greek grammar

4. Fabio Pagani, *Damnata Verba: Censure di Pletone in Alcuni Codici Platonici* (Damnata Verba: Pleton Censorships in Some Platonic Codes), *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 102, no. 1, (2009).

5. George Papacostas, *George Gemistos Plethon: A Study of his Philosophical Ideas and his Role as a Philosopher-Teacher* (New York, NY: New York University, 1968).

6. Steve Ruciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (London, UK: University Paperbacks, 1975).

and writing. Michael Psellos the eleventh century Byzantine scholar gives a vivid personal description of this type of learning. He says,

Let those who taught me early on affirm that I went through my lessons with little difficulty and that I understood them better than others. Learning came easy to me and I retained much of what I learned. I was able to read out loud my readings loudly and clearly, write with proper grammar, and recite the entire *Iliad* from memory.⁷

Much of this type of learning would be characterized today as "innate learning" or the memorization and recitation of information that could be easily forgotten by the learner over time. Although this was an accepted practice during Psellos's time, it was not without criticism. In his study on the teaching of Greek grammar during the late Byzantine Empire, Robert Robins finds that some detested this teaching approach.⁸ The most outspoken critic was Anna Komemne who felt that the teaching of grammar focused too heavily on structure and mechanics rather than content. Gemistos however likely strayed away from using this type of teaching method. Gemistos on the other hand believed that teachers needed to raise questions, and that inquiry needed to be explored from multiple intellectual dimensions for learning to occur.

In his defense of Plato, we find that like Plato, Gemistos found it important for teachers to communicate writings to their students orally and have students explain them in their own words.⁹ Gemistos wrote, "Plato, like the Pythagoreans before him, preferred not to write on such subjects but to communicate them orally to his students, because they would be wiser if they had the sciences in their souls rather than in books."¹⁰ It is unclear what Gemistos means by "soul," but one could infer that Gemistos likely discussed these early Greek writings with his students rather than had his students memorize and recite them by heart.

Plato's educational philosophy likely influenced Gemistos's teaching methods.¹¹ Gemistos believed that philosophy could not be communicated in writing and students needed time for philosophy to ferment in their minds before they could truly understand its meaning. As a teacher and pedagogue, Gemistos presented ancient Greek philosophy orally to his student(s) after

7. Μιχαήλ Ψελλού, "Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὴν μητέρα," in *Ta kata tēn prytaneian*, ed. University of Iowa (Athens, GR: Ek tou Typografeiou P. D. Sakellariou, 1903).

8. Robert Henry Robins, *The Byzantine Grammarians: Their Place in History* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993).

9. Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (1857-1866) (Paris, France: Imprimerie Catholique, 1911).

10. Ibid.

11. Catherine Holmes, and Judith Aring, ed. *Literacy, Education and Manuscript Transmission in Byzantium and Beyond* (Leiden, NL: Brill Academic Publishing, 2003).

which he engaged his student(s) in a philosophical discussion. During the discussion students would be encouraged to raise questions of their own and refer to the text and Gemistos for answers to those questions. At the same time Gemistos asked his student(s) several questions during their lesson. The questions were intended to draw out students' previous knowledge. Gemistos believed that the teacher did not necessarily need to fill his students with information, but to use what they already knew to expand their own knowledge and refine their thinking. Like Plato, Gemistos believed that knowledge or intellect (νοῦς) already existed in the child's soul (ψυχή) and it was the teacher's responsibility to draw out that knowledge. Plato described this process "Turning of the Soul." He asserts,

Education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that isn't in it as though they are putting sight into blind eyes.¹²

Plato also illustrated this in the *Meno* when Socrates' proved to his skeptic Meno that Meno's uneducated slave-boy was capable of doing geometric equations even though the boy had no formal education. Drawing on the boy's previous knowledge, Socrates asks the boy a series of questions on the length and size of squares. Socrates carefully crafts his questions so that they relate to the boy's life. In the end the boy solves the geometric problem, and Socrates proves his critic Meno wrong. Nikitas Siniossoglou describes this as Platonic and Socratic teaching (τάχα και Πλατωνική και Σωκρατική διδασκαλία) a teaching method that led to scientific knowledge (επιστήμη) and contemplation (θεωρία).¹³ Gemistos' understanding of how the child learned was in sharp contrast to his predecessor Avicenna (c.980-1037 ACE) and many later philosophers who believed that the child was born with no preexisting knowledge or as a "blank-slate" (*Tabula Rasa*) and that it was the teacher's responsibility to inundate the child with information. In this way and other ways, Gemistos's teaching was centered on the learner and considered the ways in which students learned, but at the same time maintained that the mind was older than the body and therefore it must have always known and learned.

12. Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1968).

13. Nikitas Siniossoglou, *Radical Platonism in Byzantium: Illumination and Utopia in Gemistos Plethon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Educational Philosophy

Philosophy to Gemistos was the source of all knowledge. For Gemistos Plato was the most important philosopher and Aristotle came next. In his *De Defferentiis* Gemistos compares in detail the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Gemistos was troubled with his world's preference of Aristotle over Plato. Gemistos asserts,

Our ancestors, both Hellenes and Romans, esteemed Plato much more highly than Aristotle. But most people today, especially in the west, who regard themselves as more knowledgeable than their predecessors, admire Aristotle more than Plato.¹⁴

Moreover, Gemistos believed that because western scholars were heavily influenced by Arabic interpretations of Plato and Aristotle, they did not truly understand ancient Greek philosophy. He argued that the main difference between Plato and Aristotle were their interpretations of God. On this topic Gemistos wrote,

First then, Plato's view is that God, the supreme sovereign, is the creator of every kind of intelligible and separate substance, and hence of our entire universe. Aristotle, on the other hand, never calls God the creator of anything whatever, but only the motive force of the universe.¹⁵

Gemistos taught his students the works of both Plato and Aristotle, but favored Plato's philosophy over Aristotle. For example, Gemistos was opposed to Aristotle's view of God and supported Plato's. God to Plato was an abstract intangible and impersonal entity. At the same time, God was the creator of all things that were seen or unseen. In other words, God was a beginning point from which all other sources of the intelligible existed. This contrasted with Aristotle and Christianity's view of God. Aristotle found God to be the prime mover of all things and the ultimate source of motion; Christianity found God to be the creator of all things in the universe. Gemistos argued that Christianity had simplified God by presenting Him in the form of the Holy Trinity. Gemistos believed Christianity did this to make God more personal and tangible to humankind. To Gemistos, however, God was far too complex for the average human to understand. God was not just merely above *Being* as Christianity had assumed Him to be, God was *Being* and the originator of originators.

Gemistos also agreed with Plato's theory of forms. Plato argued that forms transcended the empirical world of sensation. According to Plato, anything

14. George Chariander, *De Defferentiis* (Publisher Unknown, 1574).

15. Ibid.

one saw had a corresponding form, as did virtue. In other words, there was a form for a person, and for a house and for a plant, as there was a form for justice, prudence, temperance, and courage. At the same time forms could not be visualized because they were not objects of sensation. They were merely objects of understanding that were connected to one another. According to Plato for forms to be understood one needed training in mathematics and rhetoric and without this wisdom all other virtues would not be attainable.

Like Plato, Gemistos taught his students, arithmetic, logic, rhetoric, music as well as geography, and astronomy. Gemistos believed that these subjects provided students with a basic education. Gemistos believed that after students had a strong foundation in these subjects only then could they study philosophy. Gemistos avoided teaching Christian theology because he felt that this type of instruction should be left for monks to teach to students who sought a clerical vocation. At the same time Gemistos argued that theology should be subject to philosophical scrutiny.

Political philosophy was also of interest to Gemistos and this may have shaped his beliefs on education's role in society.¹⁶ Much of Gemistos's views on this topic could be found in two of Gemistos's political treatises: *Advice to the Despot Theodore Concerning the Affairs of the Peloponnese* (1416) and *Georgios Gemistos to Manuel Palaiologos Regarding the Affairs of the Peloponnese* (1418). Gemistos believed that monarchy was the best form of government. Monarchs however would need to be trained as philosophers. At the same time monarchs would seek the advice of other philosophers who would serve as advisers.

Like Plato's vision of a utopian city, Gemistos was also looking to create a city that operated in accordance with the needs of its people. Each member of the city would play a social role within the function and operation of the state. Gemistos found it important in maintaining an appropriate division of labor within his ideal city. For Gemistos, every city required workers to perform all necessary services---artisans, craftsmen, farmers and so forth. Every city also required soldiers to protect its borders and institutions. Finally, every city needed rulers and teachers whose responsibility was to educate society and govern the state. An educational system would thus be needed to train members of society. The rulers and teachers however would receive the highest education.

At the same time, Gemistos developed his own theological beliefs, which he may have taught to his students. C. M. Woodhouse notes one pagan prayer, *Prayer of One God* that Gemistos may have recited to his students prior to thier lesson. Part of the prayer follows,

16. Patrick N. Peritore, "The Political Thought of Gemistos Plethon: A Renaissance Byzantine Reformer," *Polity* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1977).

O God, creator of all supreme above all, most excellent, greatest king of all, most high, compassionate to all, alone most generous to man and most kind, how unsearchable and unfathomable and ineffable is the ocean of thy goodness, thy boundless mercy towards man O God, the cause of all good things, consent that I may progress to thy divine knowledge and to exercise of good counsel and good works in this life!¹⁷

The prayer seems religiously neutral. It could be Christian, Jewish, or generally monotheistic, but at the same it could even be pagan. When one compares Gemistos's prayer to a Hellenistic prayer called *Prayer of Hermes Trismegistus* one finds several similarities in the prayers:

O God the father of all.
 Holy are you God, who wishes to be know and is known by your people
 Holy are you, who by the word have constituted all things that exist
 O God, grant my request not to fail in the knowledge that befits us
 Give me the power to enlighten those that are ignorant ...
 Thus I believe and I bear witness; I advance to life and light
 Blessed are you father.

Like Gemistos's *Prayer of One God*, the above prayer is also religiously neutral. It does not mention any of the Greek Olympian God's and seems to have been voiced by followers of a monotheistic religion. At the same time, there are parallels between Gemistos's prayer and the Hellenistic prayer. Both acknowledge a supreme creator and both ask this higher deity for inspiration and guidance towards achieving knowledge. What is important however is that Gemistos avoided using a common Christian prayer with his students, but choose instead a prayer whose practice was not sanctioned by the Greek Church.

Vojtech Hladky's recent study on Gemistos has cast doubt on Gemistos's neo-paganism.¹⁸ However, most scholars agree that Gemistos practiced a type of neo-paganism that incorporated bits of ancient Greek philosophy and Zoroasterism. No one is certain however what this religion was. To the Church, paganism or what seemed to be pagan practices meant advocating religious and spiritual worship outside the realm of a Judeo-Christian or even Islamic tradition.

Skepticism by some scholars as to whether Gemistos believed in the Greek gods stems from Gemistos's use of language in his writings. For example, in some of Gemistos's writings he sounds more like he is merely describing Greek

17. Christopher Montague Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1986).

18. Vojtech Hladky, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium, Between Hellenism and Orthodoxy* (London, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014).

paganism, but not advocating its practice. It is possible that Gemistos wrote in this way as an aegis from being accused of practicing paganism, but Gemistos's *Laws (Nomoi)* makes it clear that Gemistos is interested in replacing Christianity with Greek philosophy and bringing back several of the Olympian gods for religious worship and spiritual inspiration. In one passage Gemistos states,

The first of the principled doctrines is about the gods. One of the Gods is Zeus, the supreme ruler, both the greatest and the best that is possible He is himself being in its entirety and completely ungenerated; both father and highest creator of all other gods. His eldest child is motherless, and the second god is Poseidon.¹⁹

Important to Gemistos were also the *Chaldean Oracles* and Julian the Apostates's (331-363 ACE) interpretation of the *Oracles*. These were parts of fragmentary texts from the second century ACE, which were primarily Hellenistic commentaries of an "oriental" mystery poem. Gemistos is thought to have used portions of the *Oracles* to devise his neo-pagan theology.²⁰ Greeks had been interested in the *Oracles* for several centuries. They were enigmatic and comprising cryptic and prophetic messages. Proclus Lycaeus (412-485 ACE) wrote a commentary of the *Oracles* of which Gemistos was familiar. Gemistos himself wrote a *Commentary* and *Brief Explanation* of the *Oracles* from which he gives his own interpretation of the *Oracles*.

Concluding Thoughts

Towards the later part of his life Gemistos moved to Mistra in the Peloponnese where he is thought to have opened a mystery school where he taught students ancient Greek philosophy. Most of his students came from Italy and other parts of Europe. In a diary entry from July 1447 Cyriaco Ancona (1391-1452 ACE) an Italian traveler mentions Gemistos after brief visit to Mistra. He says,

There we found Constantine Dragas, of the royal family of the Palaeologi, the gloriously reigning despot, and the reasons for my return visit his guest, that eminent personage, the most learned of the Greeks in our time, and, if I may say so ... a brilliant and highly influential philosopher in the Platonic tradition.²¹

19. Gemistos *Nomoi*: Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (1857-1866).

20. Dylan Burns, "The Chaldean Oracles of Zoroaster, Hekate's Couch, and Platonic Orientalism in Psellos and Plethon," *Aries* 6, no. 2 (2006).

21. Edward W. Bodnar, *Cyriac of Ancona: Later Travels* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

During Gemistos's time in Mistra, Mistra was a haven of security during the Byzantine Empire's troubled years. It was also a place where Byzantine rulers went when plague, siege, or political turmoil struck Constantinople. But most importantly, it was a natural haven for Roman Catholics, secular Greeks, and anyone interested in studying ancient Greek philosophy.

After Gemistos's death in 1454 Sisimundo Malatesta reinterred his remains from Mistra to Rimini in Italy with the words "Prince among the Philosophers of his Time" were engraved on his tomb. Gemistos was no doubt one of the great thinkers and teachers of his time. He is best remembered today for his expositions on Plato and Aristotle and for his attempts to revive classical Greek learning in Byzantium. Prior to Gemistos, western scholars had yet to make a concrete distinction between Plato and Aristotle. Gemistos helped the West become aware of the major differences of the two philosophers, but more importantly why Plato was more significant than Aristotle. As discussed in this paper, Plato was controversial because his philosophy challenged many of the Church's beliefs, but also because he argued for the intersection of studying disciplines.

Gemistos's teaching methods were also likely influenced by Plato's philosophy specifically Plato's notion "Turning the Soul" or how students learn best. Like Plato, Gemisto's understood that knowledge already existed in the student and that it merely needed to be drawn out by the teacher. Gemistos also likely incorporated a teaching strategy that used questioning and discussion rather than memorization and recitation that had been popularized by during Gemistos's time.

Gemistos today is remembered as a controversial historical figure that was perhaps misunderstood by his contemporaries. He differed from other scholars of his time in that he did not try to mask his beliefs, but instead challenged the intellectual conventions of his time by raising questions that ultimately forced his critics and skeptics to reevaluate their own beliefs and teachings. Gemistos expected his students to do the same---to raise more questions and not just look for answers. Finally, Gemistos understood that for his society to prosper it needed to look back to its past. In this way and other ways, Gemistos was no doubt one of the great thinkers and teachers of his time.

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