



# The Platonic Tradition: Plato's Contribution to Western Civilization

*Jerry Dell Ehrlich Ph.D.*

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## **The Platonic Tradition: Plato's Contribution to Western Civilization** Jerry Dell Ehrlich Ph.D.

The Platonic Tradition - Plato's Contribution to Western Civilization “And we should consider that God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one of us...and inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven” (Plato Timaeus 90a) 1 Such are the words of Plato in his Timaeus. The dialogues of Plato are the source of all of Western Spirituality, yet we hardly know him. He has been followed, studied, loved and adored by those who are aware of what he brought to humanity. Constantine Ritter, the great German Platonist who died in 1936, ended his condensed book on Plato with these words: “In this I tried briefly to characterize Plato’s meaning for all time. To me, he is a philosopher second to none; an artist of first rank; a man favored by God as few others have been; unforgettable for all time; releasing spiritual powers which have been a blessing to many and which will continue to be a blessing for all time.”2 Yet, for the great majority of humanity, including those trained in theology, have never met the man, Plato, and many of those who have met him have misread him, criticized him unfairly, and in some cases put him in hell, as did Dante in his Divine Comedy. His philosophy is in the very air we breathe and is the oxygen of our spiritual being, yet we do not even notice him. This was stated well by Alfred Edward Taylor in his Platonism and its Influence in these words: “If we sometimes underestimate our debt in these matters to Plato, it is only because Platonic ideas have become so completely part and parcel of our best tradition in morals and religion. His influence, like the pressure of the atmosphere, goes undetected because we never really get free from it.”3 The final introductory quotation I shall give in summary are the words of Alfred North Whitehead in his Process and Reality. “The safest general characterization of European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”4 Whoever you are, a philosopher or a spiritual minister, remember, honor to whom honor is due, you are a footnote to Plato, and in that you are indeed fortunate.

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