The Traditions of Thought Between Progress and Reaction.

Cicero: An Interpreter and a Latin Creator of the Aristotelian Platonic Tradition of Thought

Giuseppe Boscarino
The Italic School, Sortino, Italy

Farrington’s interpretation of the philosophies of Plato and Cicero as reactionary philosophies is discussed. In the light of our interpretative category, such as that of Traditions of Thought, understood as complex rational, historical constructions, within which metaphysical and epistemological principles are mediated with socio-economic-political-cultural conflicts, all denominated as ideologies, instead it is believed that scientific theories are not actually progressive or regressive, but rather the ideologies, when they interpret the concepts of scientific fact, scientific theory and, more strongly, that of philosophy, within general conceptions of the world. In the light of our interpretative category, they thus appear more than regressive philosophers instead of regressive ideologues, if we consider that the philosopher moves within the narrower fields of the so-called metaphysics and epistemology. Cicero also appears to be the great Latin creator of a way of understanding philosophy and its history with the dominant triad Socrates-Plato-Aristotele in it. All this must be considered within my broader historical-philosophical-epistemological elaboration, enclosed in my published books and papers, cited in references.

Keywords: traditions of thought, philosophies, ideologies, Plato and Cicero

Plato and Cicero, Reactionary Philosophers?

I think it is, in its general lines, very convincing, and therefore shareable, even with the due, in my opinion, corrections and clarifications, the interpretation of the historian of ancient science, Farrington, of the philosophy of Plato and Cicero as philosophies, not autogenous, but reactionary to a tradition of thought tendentially secular, rationalistic and egalitarian, such as that he calls the Ionian naturalistic tradition in contrast to the Pythagorean, mystical, animistic and elitist one, which has its coryphaeus in Plato’s Socrates.

In Farrington it is absent a sophisticated epistemological awareness and this is the reason he exchanges empiricism and Ionic naturalism with the complex scientific-rationalistic construction developed over the centuries by the tradition of thought started by Pythagoras, in my opinion, but then continued by thinkers, such as Parmenides, Democritus and Archimedes, true interpreters and continuers of the Pythagorean tradition, on the contrary tampered with and bent to reactionary needs by Plato and then by Cicero, as I will try to demonstrate, in my paper, in the Latin tradition.

Shareable, I said, is Farrington’s interpretation of Plato’s and Cicero’s philosophy as essentially reactionary philosophies.

Giuseppe Boscarino, Professor, Cultural Association S. Notarrigo, The Italic School, Sortino, Italy.
Farrington writes on Plato.

Plato does not represent the Greek thought in the maturity of a responsible manhood and the fullness of intellectual power. Plato was assuredly a man of very great mental ability and rich spiritual gifts, but not at the same high level as the great men of the fifth century, Aeschylus, Hippocrates, Thucydides. In the Greek philosophy, he represents a political reaction against the Ionian culture, in defense of an ideal of city-state based on slavery, divided into classes, chauvinistic which was already an anachronism.

While his Ionian predecessors had purified everything they owed to the civilizations of the Near East from all the features of superstition and priestlyism, Plato derived from the Chaldeans the faith in the divinity of the stars and from Egypt a model of spiritual oppression. He led a struggle as long as his life against all that was most alive in Greek culture, the poetry of Homer, the natural philosophy of Ionia, the drama of Athens.

Plato expressed his aversion through the “representation” of Socrates’ character, and it is impossible to say how invented is in the figure of Socrates as presented to us by Plato.

The Socrates of the Dialogues is Plato’s not Socrates’ contribution to thought; in his portrait there is something that affects the very roots of philosophy as conceived by the Ions. It was the custom of the Delphic clergy, center of oligarchic reaction in the Greek world, occasionally to issue judgments on the ideal type of man and citizen.

Socrates, Plato’s Socrates, was also a model of this type; he is immediately represented to us as the “man” chosen by the oracle of Apollo because he was the wisest in Greece; and this guarantee of the wisdom of Socrates, legitimate because approved by the divine Apollo through the mouth of the priestess who feeds on laurel, is an insult to the thought of the previous two centuries. It is the denial of what was the originality of Greek thought, that is, having been an effort of human intelligence to interpret nature directly without the help of revelation. Ultimately Plato pushes us back to the oracles or to the “ancient tradition”. (Ours is a paraphrase in English of the text of Ferington by reading the Italian text) (Farington, 1976).

And then on Cicero.

It is clear, therefore, that before Cicero wrote, there was a deep-rooted and widespread tradition of Epicurean philosophy in Rome, not only linked to Greek works but also to works of many Latin writers. Therefore, we can say, more precisely, that Cicero endeavored to introduce in Rome not philosophy, but a philosophy to oppose Epicureanism.

What Kind of Reaction? To What? Only They, Reactionary Philosophers?

I try to demonstrate throughout the first part of my book Traditions of Thought. The Italic Philosophical Tradition of Science and Reality the essentially reactionary nature of the philosophy of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

In the meantime, in my opinion, in this regard, I precise in what the so-called Socratic revolution consists:

It consists in the renunciation of the second Socrates, as opposed to sofói, physiologists and sofistès, to understand sensitive reality, to build natural theories and histories, which explain its apparent disorder or chaos, in having elaborated a new idea of sofìa, which I call philosophy, interested in the problems of the soul, seen as “reality detached from the body, in turn a part of a reality, believed to be the real one, the property of which is to be immutable, eternal, a place of happiness”. (Boscarino, 2017, pp. 160-161)

And yet in another part I write on Plato and Aristotle:
By declaring themselves champions of the tradition and traditional religion, these represent the political-cultural reaction to the Pythagorean-Democritean tradition. Understanding the political and social danger of a conception of the universe in an atheistic and rationalistic key (We read in the Metaphysics of Aristotle “by ancient thinkers, who lived in very remote ages, it was handed down to posterity in mystical forms that these celestial bodies are of the gods and that the divinity contains in itself the whole nature. And the other things have been added in later times always in mythical form to arouse persuasion in the masses and to induce them to respect the laws and common utilities”, XII. 107 4B), their role was to express only a mere reaction, in the attempt, which then succeeded winning, but for reasons external to the theory, to build an alternative tradition.

Having been their contribution absolutely null in this field both from the point of view of observations and from the point of view of the construction of mathematical theories, they more than represent an alternative science-philosophy, with their own logical-mathematical theories, represent the anti-science, non-theory, the simple political-cultural reaction. (Boscarino, 2017, p. 215)

The reactionary nature of Plato’s philosophy is expressed quite well by the passages I quote from Plutarch and which I still believe to report, since they are absolutely interesting:

The initiators of mechanics, science followed today and known to all, were Eudoxus and Archite, who communicated a great fascination to geometry through the elegance of its procedures. They gave to the problems that did not offer the possibility of solution with a merely logical and verbal procedure, the support of visual and mechanical schemes. For example, in the solution of the problem of two proportional average straight lines necessary for the composition of a figure, both scientists resorted to mechanical means, using the proportional means that certain instruments derive from curved lines and segments. Plato was outraged by this way of proceeding and argued with the two mathematicians, as if they destroyed and corrupted what was good in geometry; in this way it abandoned abstract concepts to descend into the sensitive world, and it also used objects that largely required gross manual labor. Mechanics was thus separated and detached from geometry; for a long time philosophy ignored it and it became one of the military arts. (See Plutarch. Parallel Lives. Marcellus, our translation from the Greek text)

And more:

Plato therefore reproached Eudoxus and Archite and Menechmo, who in doubling the solid tried to use tools and mechanisms to build, seeming to him that irrational was their effort to find, as they could, two averages proportional; because, he said, in this way they destroyed and corrupted what is the good of geometry, leading it back to look for sensitive objects, and no longer looking upwards, to capture the eternal and incorporeal images, with which the god being always is god. (Plutarch, Quest.conv. VIII, 2,1)

Where Farrington, in my opinion, is wrong it is first of all in not having understood that it is the rationalism of the Pythagoreans, interpreted by Democritus, continued by Archimedes what lies at the origins of ancient science, rediscovered and developed later by Galilei and Newton, in the modern age rather than the empiricism of the Ionians, instead continued by Aristotle, against which modern science was built.

It is not for nothing that I take as a paradigm of my interpretation the classification of Diogenes Laertius (see Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, 1), where the Ionic tradition, in which Aristotle is placed, contrasts with the Italic tradition, in which Pythagoras, Democritus and Epicurus are placed (see Boscarino & Notarrigo, 1997; Boscarino, Notarrigo, & Pagano, 1989).

I write that Plato contrasted mathematics and Pythagorean and Italian physics with a mystical mathematics and an animistic physics, founded on common sense, even if cloaked with mathematical references, combined with an astral theology, founded on the cult of the stars as gods.

Here is what Plato writes in his Laws:
Athenian (Plato): And the soul that administers and rules and is inherent in everything that moves from every side, is it not necessary to say that it also administers and rules the sky?

Clin.: Sure.

Aten.: One soul or more souls? More than one I will answer for you. Let’s not put less than two of them, the one that does good and the one that can do bad.

Clin.: You said very right.

Aten.: So be it. The soul leads all things of heaven, earth, sea, moves them with the motions that are proper to it, and which have names: <wanting>, <examining> ... (Laws. X, 896e)

In another passage he writes:

Aten.: So on all the stars and the moon, the years, the months and the seasons, what other speech will we say if not this same, and that is that, since a soul or many souls appeared to be causes of all these things, good souls for each virtue, will we call also these divinities whether they are hidden in bodies, as living beings, and thus give order to the whole sky, or in some other place and way? Is there anyone who by agreeing on these things will still dare claim that all things are not full of gods?

Clin: There can be no one so mad, guest. (ib., 899b)

Pythagoras’ reading in a mystical, animistic and theistic key belongs to Plato.

**Cicero, a Latin Interpreter and a Creator of the Platonic-Aristotelian Reaction and Tradition of Thought**

Cicero, as a true propagandist, creates a series of commonplaces, of clichés, such as to make him a true interpreter of what I call the Platonic-Aristotelian Tradition of Thought (PAT), and its true creator in the Latin literary and cultural tradition.

Cicero harshly opposes Epicureanism and makes the theme of the existence of the soul as a reality separate from the body the fundamental discriminant between the two traditions, as it is clear by reading his book *Tusculanae Disputationes*.

In fact, he writes here:

If of all beings the soul is the only one to give itself the movement, it is clear that it cannot be born, but it is eternal.

Even uniting all the forces, the plebeian philosophers—this seems to me the right name to define those who depart from Plato, Socrates and their school—not only will they never be able to give such a refined explanation, but they will not even understand, of this reasoning the subtlety of the conclusion. (Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 1996, p. 114) (our translations from Latin text)

In doing this he creates a series, I said, of clichés, which will then be the commonplace of the PAT, against which the first part of the book *Traditions of Thought* ... was built.

First of all, Plato is elevated to an undisputed authority in the history of philosophy, to which one must uncritically submit, within a sacred ipse dixit, and with him it is built the trilogy Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, considered the highest expression of Greek philosophy and science, not true catastrophe point in the evolution of these, as we try instead to demonstrate in my cited book.

Cicero can thus write:

Even if Plato did not bring any proof - you see how much consideration I hold him! - its only authority would be enough to bend me; but he has produced so many arguments to suggest that he wants to persuade others, while he is already firmly convinced. (ib., p. 108)

The universe is seen in a finalistic and theistic key, the result of an ordering mind.
We see the multitude of animals, some destined for our nourishment, others for the cultivation of fields, others for transport, others still to dress us; and man himself, with the task, one might say, of contemplating heaven and honoring the gods, and all fields and seas at the service of human interests; so when we admire these and other innumerable wonders, can we perhaps doubt that there is someone to govern them, that is, a creator, if they had an origin, as Plato believes, or, if they have always existed, as Aristotle thinks, a governor of such a great building and enterprise? This is the case for the human spirit: even if you do not see, how you do not see divinity, however, how you recognize divinity by its works, so it is by memory, by the invention, by the speed of movement and by the beauty of each of its qualities you must recognize the divine nature of the spirit. (ib., pp. 128-130)

Just as Plato had already laid a veil of silence on Democritus, ordering a real conspiracy of silence, so Cicero spreads a veil of silence on Lucrezio, and clearly says he does not want to talk about Democritus, even though he considers him a great man.

Cicero writes in fact:

Of Democritus in fact, a man without a doubt of considerable value, but who reduces the soul to a sort of fortuitous encounter of smooth and round particles, I don’t want to talk; for these philosophers, in fact, there is no reality that a multitude of atoms cannot produce. (ib., p. 80)

Instead, Farrington writes about Cicero’s silence on Lucretius:

That the author of the Tusculanae presents himself as the founder of philosophical literature in Rome ten years after Lucrezio's death is, also for Cicero, a remarkable act of presumption. When he wrote the words: “Philosophy has remained, up to now, neglected, and Latin literature has shed no light on it,” he could justify himself, for not having quoted Lucretius, only with the excuse that he referred only to prose.

But, before the judgment of history, he cannot be acquitted of the charge of having deliberately suppressed the greatest name in the history of Roman philosophy. If he had been sincere in condemning others for their lack of style here, without a doubt, he would have had an excellent opportunity to honor the great exception. (Farrington, 1976, p. 226)

In building the undisputed trilogy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, Cicero elaborates a series of historiographic clichés that are part of the so-called Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of thought which is discussed and criticized in the first part of the book Traditions of Thought...

Socrates is seen as the one who brought philosophy from heaven to earth, from the theme of nature to the theme of man and the city.

A line of continuity of thought Pythagoras-Plato was built, making the latter the continuer and interpreter of the truest Pythagoreanism, the former the initiator of what I call the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of thought (PAT).

In fact Cicero writes:

The ancient philosophers up to Socrates, who had listened to the lessons of Archelaus, disciple of Anaxagoras, dealt with numbers and movements, the origin and dissolution of things, and studied the quantities, the distances with great commitment, the motions of the stars and all celestial phenomena. Socrates was the first to bring philosophy down from heaven, to place it in the cities, to introduce it into houses and to force it to deal with life and customs, good and evil. (Cicero, Tusculanae Disputationes, 1996, pp. 452-454)

And more:

Plato—reportedly—to know the Pythagoreans came to Italy and learned all the Pythagorean doctrine; and he was the first, not only to share Pythagoras’ opinion on the eternity of the soul, but also to give a rational demonstration of it. (ib., pp. 97-99)
Cicero, like Plato, interprets the Delphic saying “know yourself” in an animistic key, so “know yourself” is equivalent to knowing the soul, as interpreting knowing as a remember, knowledge not as progress, but as regression, a return to an uncontaminated reality of the soul, which, devoid of the body, tomb of the soul, contemplates the true world of the essences or ideas of sensitive things.

Here is what Cicero writes about the two things:

When therefore the god says: “know yourself”, he means “know your soul”, because the body is nothing but a kind of vase, almost a container made to contain the soul; if your soul does something, you do it. ... (ib., p. 112)

The soul has memory, an infinite memory of an unlimited number of things. For Plato, this memory is explained only by the memory of a previous life. In the dialogue entitled Menone, in fact, Socrates asks a young boy some questions of geometry on the size of the square. His answers are those of a boy, however the questions are so easy that he, answering each one on end, reaches the same conclusions he would have reached if he had studied geometry. According to Socrates, this shows that learning is nothing more than remembering. (ib., p. 116)

The contemplative nature of philosophy, as a theory, pure observation, unrelated to technical action, to the cause of human material progress, to its link with practice, as its genesis attributed by Cicero to Pythagoras are the pillars of the PAT

Cicero writes, in fact:

According to the tradition reported by Pontic Eraclis, disciple of Plato, a man of extraordinary culture, Pythagoras had gone to Flumie where he had discussed with great doctrine and eloquence some questions with Leonte, prince of the Flasis; Leonte then, admired for his ingenuity and his eloquence, asked him which art above all he professed and was told that he did not know any particular art, but was a philosopher. Leonte, amazed at the novelty of the name, asked who ever the philosophers were and what difference between them and the others. ...(ib., pp. 450-453)

Pythagoras replies:

... as people leave from a city to go to a crowded fair, so we, ( )arrived in this life after starting from a different life and nature, find ourselves serving some glory, others money; there are some, but they are rare, that without holding everything else in any way, they dedicate themselves with passion to the study of nature, and these—said Pythagoras—are called lovers of wisdom, that is, philosophers; and as at the fair the noblest behavior is that of the disinterested observer, so in life the investigation and knowledge of nature are activities far superior to all the others. (ib., p. 453)

In contrast to the Epicurean tradition, in which the stylistic ornament of the philosophical discourse is underestimated, is despised, Cicero builds a bridge between the rhetorical-isocratic and the Socratic-Aristotelian tradition, both united by the conception that the main goal of philosophy is the knowledge of the soul and that eloquence, the beautiful speech must accompany the beautiful thinking.

For Cicero, Plato and the other Socrats are read by everyone, even by those who do not agree with them, while Epicurus and his disciples are read only by those who share their ideas.

Aristotle then shares with Isocrates that philosophy, the well thinking, must share with eloquence, the well speaking.

Aristotle, a man endowed with extraordinary ingenuity, culture, eloquence, impressed by the fame of the rhetorician Isocrates, also began to teach young people the art of saying by coupling wisdom with eloquence, so also I would like, without abandoning my ancient passion for eloquence, cultivate this higher and richer art too. In fact, I have always considered the perfect model of philosophy the one capable of treating the most complex topics with rich and elegant language; and I have practiced this with such ardor that I have even dared to organize a school like the Greek ones. (ib., p. 62)
Over the centuries, the Socratic-Platonic conception of philosophy as preparation for death, described by Cicero and made his own, has been opposed Spinoza’s conception of philosophy, of epicurean origin, as meditatio vitae, non meditatio mortis.

Cicero can well write about it:

The whole life of the philosophers in fact, says Plato again, is a “commentatio mortis”. In fact, what else do we do when we try to move the soul away from pleasure, that is, from the body, from the property, which is in support and service of the body, from politics, from any other commitment, what else do we do—I say—if not to recall the soul to itself, forcing it to be alone, and above all to detach it from the body? But separating the soul from the body is nothing more than this: learning to die. Therefore, listen to me, let’s get ready for this, and get away from the body; that is, let’s get used to dying. In this way, on the one hand we will live, already during our stay on earth, a life similar to that which we will have in heaven, on the other, when, freed from these bonds, we will reach up there, the race of the soul will be less delayed. In fact, the souls which have always undergone the shackles of the body, even when they have got rid of it, walk slowly, like those who have spent many years in chains. When we get up there, then we will finally live. (ib., p. 134)

Today many things are known about Archimedes’ work, unknown over the centuries. Archimedes makes few quotes of the mathematicians of his time and of those before him. He quotes neither Plato nor Aristotle, while he quotes, in his famous letter to Eratostene, Democritus together with Eudoxus, supreme mathematician.

Yet in tradition it is labeled as a platonic. Irony of fate!

Cicero helped to create Archimedes’ cliché as a platonic, as can be seen from his following passage:

When Archimedes constrained the movements of the moon, sun and five planets in a sphere, he obtained the same result as the one who, in Timaeus builds the universe, the god of Plato: a single revolution capable of governing movements of the all different from each other in slowness and speed. If it is impossible for this to happen in this world without the intervention of God, Archimedes could not have imitated the same movements even in his sphere without divine intelligence. (Cicero, Tusculanae Disputationes, 1996, p. 122; on Plato and Archimedes see Boscarino, The mystery of Archimedes, 2017)

We could still continue on the Ciceronian places, the expression of the PAT, but that’s enough, instead I want to conclude with some reflections on what I call traditions of thought, on their progressive or regressive nature in the history of thought.

**Conclusion**

The traditions of thought are complex rational constructions, ideal lines, which live for a long time, now on the surface now in depth, according to historical conditions, composed of metaphysical principles, historiographic orientations, set of theories, operating in the various fields of knowledge or in the same field, united by epistemological options, methodological strategies, control techniques, observation and experimentation, dynamized by political, ethical choices, social class interests, religious faiths, which constitute together with metaphysical principles, historiographic orientations and epistemological options, the ideological nucleus, or the progressive or regressive motor element of the set of theories, static in themselves, as organized structures of knowledge, neither verifiable nor falsifiable, having outside them the dynamic element of conservation, of progress or reaction, of truth and falsehood (Boscarino, 2017).

*Cicero and Plato are not philosophers*, in the sense of constructors of theories (both have not made any original contribution in the various fields of knowledge, building theories, either in what they now call the so-called astronomy, physics, chemistry, in biology, mathematics, etc.) but philosophers in the sense, to have
developed their own factual meaning to be known and explained (the scientific fact, worthy of knowledge, is what can be framed within the two postulates of existence, soul and God), but above all, regressive, reactionary ideologues, whose main aim was to wrap theories and dynamize them within metaphysical principles, class interests and religious conceptions, well determined, that is, bent on the political interest of the conservation and stratification of class privilege.

Farrington is shareable from this point of view.

It is its ideological core that makes a tradition of thought regressive or progressive.

The finalistic and theistic principle blocks the search for causes, satisfied by the knowledge of the end and of the creator andordinator.

The Aristotelian empirical option blocks the search for ever new principles, stopping at the knowledge of the immediate, the phenomenal, the data, as well as the Platonic methaphysical idealism, with its unchanging realities, while the rationalistic, Pythagorean-Democritean option, for which the real is reason and number, that is legality, always goes in search of new links, beyond appearances, splits or contradictions, interstices, symptoms.

The deterministic and legalistic principle, that is, of links, believed to be inherent to nature, always seeks new causes, more general, or more particular laws, does not stop at the idol of chance or miracle, refuge of ignorance and superstition, but increases knowledge and extends the field of rationality.

The Platonic conception of knowledge, as memory, is circular, not progressive, leads to the dream of the primitive, the golden age, the old or the ancient, to the cult of tradition, does not lead to the new, to the construction of new moral realities and political, etc.

Then progressive, it is the Pythagorean-Democratiean tradition of thought for its metaphysical principles and its epistemological options, as well as for its ideal choices of an ethical, political or religious nature, secular, against any class religion and source of superstition, humanitarian, cosmopolitan and egalitarian, beyond the class privileges, of blood, race, nation or state.

Neo-positivists and Popperians, either with the criterion of verifiability, or with the criterion of falsifiability, have seen the progressive or regressive element of science inside the theories, while it is their ideological core, expression of class interests, organized religious faiths and political castes, what energizes them, makes them move forward or backward, revolutionizes or preserves them, turning them into a tradition of progressive or regressive thought.

Acknowledgments

The author is very grateful to Prof. Armando Anzaldo for his assistance and advice about the English translation.

References

Boscarno, G. (2017). Le forme e i mutamenti della scienza. Tradizioni di pensiero, ideologie e conflitto sociale (The forms and the changes of science. Traditions of though ideologies and social conflict). Roma: Aracne.

Boscarno, G. (2016). Tradizioni di pensiero. La tradizione filosofica italica della scienza e della realtà (Traditions of science, the tradition of Italic though of science and reality). Roma: Aracne.

Boscarno, G. (2017). The mystery of Archimedes. The tradition of Italic thought of science. Roma: Aracne.

Boscarno, G. (2014). The Italic school in astronomy: From Pythagoras to Archimedes. Journal of Physical Science and Application, 4(6), 385-392.
Boscarino, G. (2000). Quantum mechanics: The real and the possible. In C. Garola and A. Rossi (Eds.), *The foundations of quantum mechanics* (pp. 73-81). Singapore: World Scientific.

Boscarino, G. (2019). Aristotle and Democritus: The ways of ontological research. In *Advances in mathematics research* (Vol. 25). N.Y.: Nova Science Publishers.

Boscarino, G. (2018). An interpretation of Plato’s ideas and criticism of Parmenides according to Peano’ ideography. *Athens Journal of Humanities and Arts*, 5(1), 13-28.

Boscarino, G., & Notarrigo, S. (1997). *Quantum mechanics: Science or philosophy?* Laboratory Edition, (Sortino) Italy.

Boscarino, G., Notarrigo, S., & Pagano, A. (1989). *Rethinking Peano and his school*. Mondotre quaderni, Sortino, Italy.

Cicerone, M. T. (1996). *Tusculanae Disputationes*. Milano: BUR.

Farington, B. (1976). *Scienza e politica nel mondo antico. Lavoro manuale e lavoro intellettuale nell’antica Grecia*. Milano: Feltrinelli.