

The use of Da Vinci's Last Supper for Teaching Neoplatonic Biology

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Citation: Press JK (2026) The use of Da Vinci's Last Supper for Teaching Neoplatonic Biology. American J Sci Edu Re: AJSER-314.

Received Date: 13 March, 2026; Accepted Date: 20 March, 2026; Published Date: 26 March, 2026

Abstract

This article will show the Last Supper of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452- 1519) best illustrates modern biology's realization that the world is fundamentally alive. The Renaissance struggled to explain how life came out material and cohered as a whole. They did so on Neoplatonic terms, as taught by Marsilio Ficino (1433—1499). Michelangelo's 'Prisoner' series shows life wrestling out of matter. But it does not solve the problem. Da Vinci worked to solve this problem with his famous Vitruvian Man study. But, herein, he showed an incompatibility between Newtonian physics and subjective living man. The modern experiments of Michael Levin, (1969 – present), show that the structure of our world is neither unintelligent nor static. The Last Supper represents this fantastically, by showing zooming perspective, words on sound, and the centrality of light. It should be used to illustrate modern biological discoveries.

Keywords: Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Michael Levin, Anthrobots, Marsilio Ficino, Vitruvian Man, The Last Supper, Neoplatonism.

The art of Leonardo Da Vinci, (1452-1519) and Michelangelo Buonarroti Simoni (1475 – 1564) both illustrate the Neoplatonic system, its gaps and its connection to Christianity. Neoplatonism updated Platonic theology to show how The One, (Plato's 'The Good'), radiated down into the world via giving it an intelligent and intelligible frame, (the laws of physics), and then put soul into that frame. The Neoplatonic view thus set up a map of the world wherein our mundane material world had some connection with the spiritual world. In this view the fissures between levels had different degrees of gaps. The One became all by dividing itself into the mathematical laws of nature; this part seems very intuitive. The soul came to being by infusing the laws of nature; how soul emerges from the laws of the universe seems less intuitive. And, we all routinely accept that the material bubbles up from the laws of nature. But philosophers note that both the material emanating from the laws of physics and life's emanation from dead matter pose a mysteries. This article will show how Michelangelo and Da Vinci depicted and probed the questions raised by this Neoplatonic spiritual physics. Moreover, it will show how Da Vinci's work anticipated recent cutting-edge findings in the biological sciences.

Fifteenth century Greek refugees fleeing the Ottoman Empire brought Plato's texts to Italy and taught scholars the Greek language. Marsilio Ficino (1433—1499), a Florentine physician and Catholic priest, became the guiding star of renewed interest in ancient Greek texts. He translated Plato's entire corpus from Greek to Latin, making it available to all educated Europeans for the first time. As a Catholic priest, Ficino mapped Christianity onto the Neoplatonic system. Of course, he said Plato's 'The One' represented God. He equated the intelligent nature of the universe, its laws and structures, with Jesus, because Jesus is God manifested in the world. And, he equated our souls with Neoplatonic Soul. While not evil, (as twice-removed Emanations of The One / God), Neoplatonism and Christianity both describe the Material level as the least spiritual of realms.

Ficino became a dominant figure in the 15th century Medici court, (the court which led the Italian Renaissance). It was Cosimo Medici, (1389-1464) who commissioned Ficino to translate Plato's corpus. Cosimo also hired Ficino to tutor his grandson, Lorenzo de Medici, (1449-1492). Later, because he showed such artistic promise, Lorenzo had the thirteen-year-old Michelangelo, come live in his palace. Ficino came to dinners and taught at Lorenzo's home throughout his life. Scholars have portrayed Ficino's presence in Lorenzo's home, the lectures, disputations, and (on Plato's birthday) banquets as a 'Platonic academy.' Michelangelo attended these sessions. And, while he only lived with the Medici's for a few years, this education proved formative. As a Platonist, Ficino gave the arts unprecedented importance, arguing that via the sense of sight, men's' souls may approach heavenly beauty and be reminded of its divine origins. Ficino spoke of artists as somewhat driven mad by divine insight. Michelangelo's long aesthetic temperamental career shows he embodied Ficino's words. In fact, the works of Botticelli, (1445-1510), Da Vinci and others show that the wider Renaissance artistic world also imbibed versions of Ficino's Neoplatonic system.

Michelangelo's four statues, collectively called, 'The Prisoners,' illustrate the broad gap between the Neoplatonic views of the material and spiritual world. They each depict figures struggling to get out of the marble in which they are encased. Famously, Michelangelo said that prior to carving them out, he saw the figures in the marble waiting for freedom. We all struggle with the limits of the physical body, with its susceptibility to injury and illness. Death is the ultimate divide between the material and spiritual. Appropriately, Julius II (1443—1513) commissioned these statues for his grandiose, three-story, forty-stature tomb. We even see this wherein the chisel marks sit next to the polished stone. Herein a living person, Michelangelo, is trying to get the stone to come to life. Some of Michelangelo's Prisoner statues show a struggle between the physical and spiritual world, and alternately, others show soul's sensually relaxing into their physical material mortality, back into the One.

Michelangelo's deep faith and art mostly show him striving to pierce the limits of physical reality. Moving past physical limits towards what? Union with the One. Christ told his disciples, "If any man will follow me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow." Michelangelo took up the cross in the form of a chisel and monastically banged away at the question of life in the rock until he left this world.

Da Vinci's so-called Vitruvian Man, does not follow Michelangelo's 'The Prisoners' statues in focusing on how life and soul come out of the material. Da Vinci's Vitruvian man takes a wider and deeper look. This famous image shows a living man imposed upon grids. The title 'Vitruvian Man,' refers to the Roman author- architect, Vitruvius, (90 – 20 BC), who claimed that men's bodies have perfect ratios that we should incorporate into buildings. Da Vinci's accompanying text reads: "Vitruvius, the architect, says in his architectural work that the measurements of man are in nature distributed in this manner, that is 4 fingers make a palm. 4 palms make a foot, 6 palms make a [. . .]" Math works; We can dependably measure time and have mapped out the Table of Elements. The Vitruvian Man asks to what extent man himself reflects these regularities embedded in the universal fabric. Moving beyond this, the square behind the man, represents the earth and material limits; the circle behind him represents the infinite, the One. Overall, the drawing asks how man fits in the cosmos. This grid behind the man is Da Vinci's attempt to test this theory; and thereby to see if, ensouled man fits into the Neoplatonic level of 'Intelligence;' into the ordered laws of nature.

Da Vinci's experiment failed, and yet it also pointed the way towards success. Vitruvian claimed that the navel is the center of the body. He claimed that when a circle is drawn from the navel, it perfectly encompasses the man, with his arms and legs outstretched. Also, if a man stands with his arms out, perpendicular to the floor, and we make a square based on the widest and highest points, it will be a perfect square. Vitruvian argued that we too should strive to have perfect proportions in our lives. Strives towards ideals. But in the sketch, the circle and the square do not have the same center. Moreover, African, White and Asian men have different body ratios. So, life intrinsically jiggles. Moreover, the man depicted herein, does not seem overly happy about being stretched on a grid. His unhappiness points to the subjective ensouled nature of man's experience. This shows that men do not like the materialist position being tested herein. Such objectification portray us as machines. It robs us of free-will. Herein, we cannot but help but think of Christ crucified. He too had his limbs stretched on a perfect angle. And, his soul defying and transcending this physical world points back towards trying to press man into ideals of static geometric space. Man is not a passive reflection of abstract laws and mathematical formulas.

Recent biology has shown why Vitruvian and Da Vinci's thought experiments fell short. Michael Levin, (1969 – present), has described our reality as Platonic space. This description comes from anthrobot experiments. In the anthrobot experiments, Levin took cells from adult human lung epithelial cells and put them into water, they turn themselves inside out and develop cilia cells. In this state they repair neurons. These anthrobots have no evolutionary history. These cells spontaneously decide on new life paths and shapes, which the genome does not determine. We have herein life filling the opportunities, the Platonic space, that the physical world offers it. Levin also found that we can manipulate cell's desires via electricity. When you use electrical patterns on worm's backs,

the cells build eyes with no other instructions; Cells talk in the language of electricity. In another direction, Levin's Tufts University laboratory showed that molecules themselves are capable of learning. Going further yet, he has shown how sorting algorithm software employs strategies and show preferences which are not in the computer code. This means that even organized bits, (which are electrical pulses), manifest intelligence. Electric patterns think. Cells do not emerge from dead matter, but from always, already alive matter manifesting their potential. Rather than material and dead, the Vitruvian Man's grid is constructed by electricity, moves and is pervaded with soul.

On a human scale, Da Vinci's 1495 'The Last Supper,' best exemplifies how we, as ensouled beings, fit into the supposedly material world. Da Vinci's studies during the time he painted it show an obsession with waves in water and wind. The painting shows the moment when Jesus reveals that one of his followers will betray him. His words, of course, emanate in sound waves. The grouping of the apostles illustrates the sound waves emanating from Jesus words. On each side of him we see two clusters; two waves of apostles. Those closest to the source react directly, those farthest away react as if a rumor had been heard at a distance, indicating the dissipation of waves. 'In the beginning was the word.' In this Genesis quote we see meaning make all. And, 'The word became flesh.' In regards to gaps between levels of Neoplatonic thought, waves of air turning into words, which become meaning, closes the gaps well. Yet, the apostles hearing in sound waves, the nature of waves, means that probability and some randomness has crept into the words even before the apostles hear them. Though they hear the words in groups, mirroring the sound waves, the apostles' souls herein all react differently. Each apostle expression is distinct; the physical proximity or distance mediates the meaning. Herein we see again, very intimately, how consciousness comes from air turning into words, we see the very process by which intelligence becomes soul, we see the incarnation, we see flesh become the word. This speaks to modern biology findings featured herein: wherein meaning pervades all at different levels. The apostles all have different reactions to the meaning, yet all had and have meaning.

The room in which Da Vinci portrayed the Last Supper, plays with and extends real space. Reprints often cut off the top part, bearing coats of arms, which highlights the wall and so makes the room Jesus inhabits recede dramatically. The room itself has an accelerated perspective that challenges static notions of static space. You fall back into it as the laws of physics stretch. As such, the 'framing' already hints at the give and take of geometry and the subjective world. This is the very same inherent aliveness of everything that biologists found, which doomed Da Vinci's Vitruvian man experiment. Moreover, breaking with tradition, none of the apostles have halos; Jesus himself does not have a halo. Rather the light from the window indicates his divinity. Molecules have a limited amount of intelligence. This light, as with the sound waves the apostles hear, all undulate with purpose. When we see this painting we should think of universal vibrations. Yet, we must also, therein think of the Neoplatonic One, of unity; of the intelligence pervading all that modern biology is mapping. This painting has a cohesive meaning, that emanates from every part of it and comes to you on beams of meaningful light. The story coheres, in composition, but also in the cohesion of Jesus' story, radiating through time. Jesus sees into the future, (already a supernatural event), he sees his crucifixion. And rather than embody a

mechanist materialist determinism, he wrestles with choice. He thinks of souls, and his own body, but, he always does so in relation to the big picture, to the mission of universal redemption and unity with the father, to the One.

In the Last Supper, Judas's lie, his false face, could be said to represent the disjunction between the seen and the psychological world; he hides his psychic reality. We often see ourselves as disconnected from the world. It is dead, and we are material, and so connected by nothing and separated by a void. Yet, biology and the Last Supper tell another story. Biologists and Neoplatonists agree, we live in a universe pervaded with intelligence. Sometimes, as with Michelangelo's prisoners, we have to struggle to get beyond our perspective, to where we can see the spiritual reality and meaning that connects us to each other via our shared state of being conscious, and wrapped in collective meanings. Education can help us escape our prisons. Our knowing Da Vinci's masterpieces, connects us with others

across time. The apostles heard things differently, but they united in mission. We can think on these truths as we think on Jesus' crucifixion. And, even deeper yet, we can compare Da Vinci's putting the Vitruvian man on an abstract lifeless grid, to Jesus on the cross. We must also realize that Jesus' cross was alive, undulating, part of the universe. Just as we could not happily fit the Vitruvian man into a dead grid; we cannot fit ourselves into a dead world. Jesus' cross, shared more meaning for being imperfect, it became apropos to a story, to a hope, a dream that transcended time and death. We see hints of this in Michelangelo's prisoners; and a failure to realize this in Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. But the soundwaves and light in Da Vinci's Last Supper demonstrate and carry forth the ongoing biological findings while confirming the Renaissance's Neoplatonic truths. And, the fresco's iconic structure and meaning unite us across time.

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