

NeoPlatonism Basics Relevant to the Study of Epicurus

Post by “Eggplant Wizard” of January 9, 2024 at 5:43 PM

[Quote from Nate](#)

One thing that left an impression on me in recent research was the similarity (and coherence) between *Pythagoreanism* and *neo-Pythagoreanism*, *Platonism* and *neo-Platonism*, *Gnosticism*, *Heterodox Christianity*, *Orthodox Christianity*, and the emerging schools of *Hindu Vedanta*. The similarities are *not simply parallels* between compatible traditions. Rather, there are **direct historical links** between each tradition that lead me to believe that it is educationally helpful to group these *Idealisms* into a single branch that considers numbers and logic to be more real than food and water. For example, the first neo-Platonists were either Indian "gymnosophists" themselves, or they were the direct students of Indian gurus. It seems to me that Vedanta is directly responsible for the resurgence of Platonism as a competitor against Christianity and Mithraism in the 2nd-4th-centuries.

It was standard for religious movements to construct lineages for themselves extending to various historical or legendary figures- Pythagoras, Zoroaster, Hermes-Thoth, Moses, etc. Even today various Masonic, Rosicrucian, and new agey groups announce such lineages to anyone who will believe them. Iamblichus (himself an Arab writing in Greek) castigates the Greeks for chasing after novelties while various wise foreigners (Babylonians, Egyptians, Indians, etc.) retain the primordial teaching inviolate, albeit colored by local traditions.

The problem with Pythagoreanism is that all our sources for it come from people writing centuries after Pythagoras. What exactly Pythagoras was about is very murky. It is very possible that Plato was inheritor to a Pythagorean tradition but our only real source for that claim is the Platonists themselves. Once we do get writers identifying as Pythagoreans we are looking at post-Plato thinking that sounds a lot like Platonism.

The philosophical hermeticist texts have a lot of Platonizing language but I've seen it persuasively argued that they also contain genuine Egyptian stuff.

The origins of gnosticism are also very murky. There is some borrowing of Platonist cosmology for sure and also some stuff that seems more to do with Jewish apocalyptic literature. I don't know if their peculiar brand of mythologizing has any parallels among the Platonists though. The thinkers usually identified with the Platonist tradition all reject the notion that the Demiurge is evil or that the material world, however imperfect, is evil (even if Plato provides some ammunition for such a position).

I believe Paul had some definite affinity with the gnostics. Far from consigned to the underworld, he sees Satan as "archon of the power of the air" and Christ as our liberator from "forces of evil in the heavenly places." I don't know if that means Paul was one of the gnostics or if he and the gnostics had some common inheritance that is later phased out in orthodox Christianity.

I'd be interested to see the evidence for a *direct* link from Vedanta to neoplatonism. I am skeptical but all ears.

I think it's true though that all of these western currents had a lot of affinity for each other, a lot of convergence in terms of their basic worldview, so that differences were easy to paper over for later synthesizers. For a variety of reasons Epicureanism could not be integrated and was snubbed from the party of western esotericism.