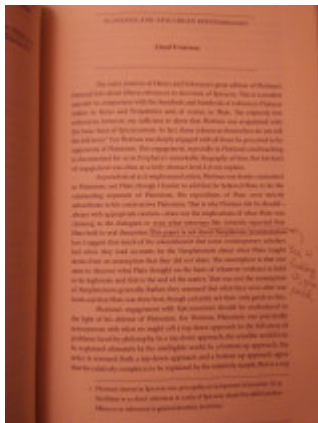


Plotinus and Epicurean Epistemology by Lloyd P. Gerson

Post by "Eikadistes" of October 15, 2022 at 12:43 PM

I am currently reading *Epicurus: His Continuing Influence and Contemporary Relevance* edited by Dane R. Gordon and David B. Suits. It contains a collection of essays that address a variety of Epicurean topics. Most of the essays have been informative and enjoyable. However, as I read (rather, as I **trudged** through) Lloyd Gerson's essay "Plotinus and Epicurean Epistemology", I was reminded that Idealistic philosophy is not only incapable of providing us with tools we can use to improve our lives, but that a celebrated translator, *himself*, is (as I concluded) unable to present the obfuscating philosophy in a digestible format. Lloyd Gerson specializes in metaphysics and Neo-platonism, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, best known for his translation of Plotinus' *Enneads*. I have included a picture below that summarizes my response to the 12-page essay:



Quote

"But in a top down approach, the relatively simple is identified with the intelligible, whereas in a bottom up approach the relatively simple is identified with the sensible. The top down approach identifies the relatively simple with the intelligible principles, soul, intellect, and the intelligible Forms, and ultimately, the One; the bottom up approach identifies the relatively simple with elements of some sort of the intelligible as in some way epiphenomenal or supervenient on the sensible. [...] That is, the confirming or 'witnessing' evidence adduced by Epicurus is unable to turn belief into true belief that is not merely accidentally true because there is nothing added to the original presentation that entails the truth of the belief. There is no belief that o , which added to the belief that p , entails q . [...] The second presupposition is that knowledge is

essentially or primarily occurrent and self-reflexive. That is, 's knows p' if and only if 's knows that s knows p'. In the latter formulation, 's' must, of course, stand for the identical subject in both places if there is to be genuine self-reflexivity. [...] The former [possessing knowledge] is the dispositional state; the latter [having knowledge] is the occurrent state. In the occurrent state, one is in a mental state, namely, identity with the object of knowledge, and simultaneously aware that one is in that state. [...] All one could conceivably have is one putative state of knowing, call it 'A' and another putative state of being aware that the entity is in state 'A'. Call the second state 'B'. But 'A' and 'B' cannot be states of the identical subject. The easiest case is to make 'A' a switch in the 'on' position. Then 'B' must be another switch in, say, the 'on' position. But the subjects of each switch obviously cannot be identical. The first switch cannot both be in the 'on' and 'off' positions nor can it be 'twice' in the 'on' position. So, in addition to the problem about how there could be self-reflexivity in the material entity, there could be no infallibility either because there is no way to guarantee that 'B' will always correctly monitor the state 'A'. Thus, to put it simply, the fact that B 'reports' that 'A' is in the 'on' position does not entail that 'A' is truly in that position." (Plotinus and Epicurean Epistemology, 69-75)

By ZEUS that was a frustrating read. (Neo-)Platonists require the invention of an utterly abstract lexicon to even *begin* to explain their ideas. I can see how Christian churches were so willing to adopt this disconnected mysticism to justify their supernatural propositions.

What is the *point* of this philosophy? Has it *ever* helped *anyone* do *anything*?

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2022 at 1:02 PM

Fascinating stuff Nate thank you!!!

Post by “Don” of October 15, 2022 at 3:12 PM

For anyone interested:

<https://worldcat.org/en/title/859253192>

Post by “Cassius” of October 15, 2022 at 4:43 PM

Quote

That is, the confirming or 'witnessing' evidence adduced by Epicurus is unable to turn belief into true belief that is not merely accidentally true because there is nothing added to the original presentation that entails the truth of the belief. There is no belief that o , which added to the belief that p , entails q . [...]

Pardon me for being obvious if this is already clear from the context (I haven't had time to study the links) but this phrasing is strikingly similar to that which I remember from DeLacey's appendix to "On Methods of Inference" and his discussion of the difference between Epicurus and the Platonic /Aristotelian line.

This goes to the heart of the issue of Epicurus' criticism of certain types of logic divorced from sensory evidence and seems to be of major importance in understanding Epicurean reasoning, even if we find the subject dry today.

I surely hope that someone someday will have the time and the talent to really dive into this and bring out Epicurus' viewpoint into full view.

Right now we're left with this vague concern that someone Epicurus was anti scientific in being critical of any variation of the term "logic," and it would be a huge advance if we could bring his position out from the shadows.

IMHO we have a huge issue today and we are overbroad if we treat all calls to "science" and "logic" as being unchallengeable, if we don't recognize that true science and true logic have to be validated by the senses in order to be worth following.

Even writing that sentence can cause eyebrows to raise but I am convinced this issue is one of Epicurus' most important points. How else did he see the wisdom in challenging and overturning Plato and Aristotle if he didn't see limitations of their claims in these areas?

Post by “Martin” of October 16, 2022 at 4:01 AM

Logic does not need to be and cannot be validated by the senses. The theorems of logic are true. However, without premises based on observations, no conclusions on the world can be obtained from logic alone.

The truth Plato and probably most ancient philosophers had in mind concerning the world does not exist or is unavailable. What we can get from observations are tentative facts by using logic as a tool.

Post by “Don” of October 16, 2022 at 8:43 AM

[Martin](#) 's post is spot on. I especially like:

[Quote from Martin](#)

The truth Plato and probably most ancient philosophers had in mind concerning the world does not exist or is unavailable.

The only edit I would suggest (and I could just be misinterpreting what he wrote) is when he writes:

[Quote from Martin](#)

What we can get from observations are tentative facts by using logic as a tool.

I would suggest: *What we can get from observations are tentative facts which can be expanded on and refined by using logic as a tool.*

Which seems to me about what Cassius is getting at.

When [Cassius](#) uses what I interpret as "[scare quotes](#)" around

[Quote from Cassius](#)

"science" and "logic"

Or modifies science and logic as

[Quote from Cassius](#)

true science and true logic .

is superfluous and sets up the wrong dichotomy. The divisions aren't "true" science or "science." There's science and theoretical science (like string theory) which may or may not be verified in the future but is currently untestable. There's science and pseudoscience (like

creation science or flat-earthers) which is just making stuff up or wildly misinterpreting actual findings and ignoring data that don't support your position. Then there's science and just misinformation and propaganda that twist scientific findings out of all proportion for political or nefarious end.

We don't follow science. Scientific discovery arrived at through the scientific method can be either accepted or rejected based on the validity of the research, the soundness of observations, the credentials of the researcher, etc. Science backed up by research, observation, etc. is just science.

For example, I had the opportunity this week to view Saturn and Titan as well as Jupiter and its 4 Galilean moons through telescopes set up for an astronomy event. I find it breathtaking to literally see those celestial bodies for myself. BUT I need science to help me understand what I'm seeing, what I'm observing. Epicurus himself advocated understanding the natural world as contributing "more than anything else to the tranquillity and happiness of life."

Same with logic. You have to define your terms before you can talk about "logic" or "true" logic. Epicurus engaged in formal logical arguments. You just have to know what logic is being used, if sound propositions are being used, etc.

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of May 31, 2023 at 5:01 AM

I have been heavily involved in catholic circles, it's an on going struggle for me. Neo Platonism is the singular most impactful philosophy on all the big theistic religions whether they want to admit it or not. Islam, Christians and Judaism.

One of the most insightful clues into the nature of these religions is the quote "Plato did more for Christianity than Jesus or Paul did"

The enneads are almost unreadable and when you do read them you realize you are reading a religious manuscript, Plotinus believed he could curse people with literal magic.

He believed that we are material beings were some of the lowest creatures in the emanation of the universe and the Good was a completely apophatic being (you can't even call it a being to be honest but for the sake of clarity) Plotinus is famous for when asked if they could make his sculpture "I am already entombed in this body, why must I have a stone image too"

What's funny is, all these religions influenced by Plotinus are secretly psychological hedonists, the "mystical experiences" (which I must admit I have experienced but I don't believe they are non physical but rather a physical phenomena). Are ultimately pleasurable, it's a preferable

state of being that lasts a few seconds. The problem is, every major religion can produce these and even just not religious activities have been shown to produce them. We musn't add religious dogma to strange phenomena that happen to us, we must look at it succulently.

Anyway that's probably my yearly ramble, hope all are doing well!

Post by “Cassius” of May 31, 2023 at 7:32 AM

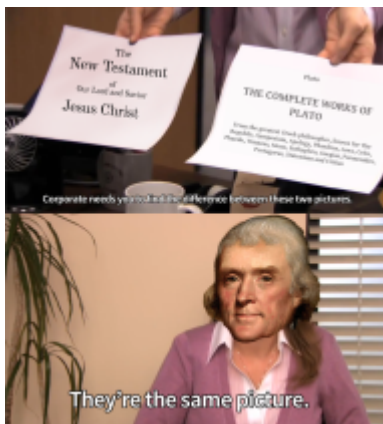
I am completely unread in Plotinus so this is interesting to me - thanks.

But one thing I can say is that I hope it won't be another year before you ramble here again!

Post by “Eikadistes” of May 31, 2023 at 10:49 AM

[Quote from Eoghan Gardiner](#)

Neo Platonism is the singular most impactful philosophy on all the big theistic religions whether they want to admit it or not.



Post by “Cassius” of May 31, 2023 at 11:49 AM

Not having read this thread in a while, doing so now is a good refresher.

This thread is still in "General Discussion" but we'll probably move it to a Canonics section to help reduce the nature of the disagreement to a form that is graspable. Possibly we need a full thread on Neoplatonism, if we don't have one already. And part of that would be to have an understanding of why it is referred to "Neo" as opposed to simply Platonism - seems for our Epicurean purposes they are hard to distinguish.

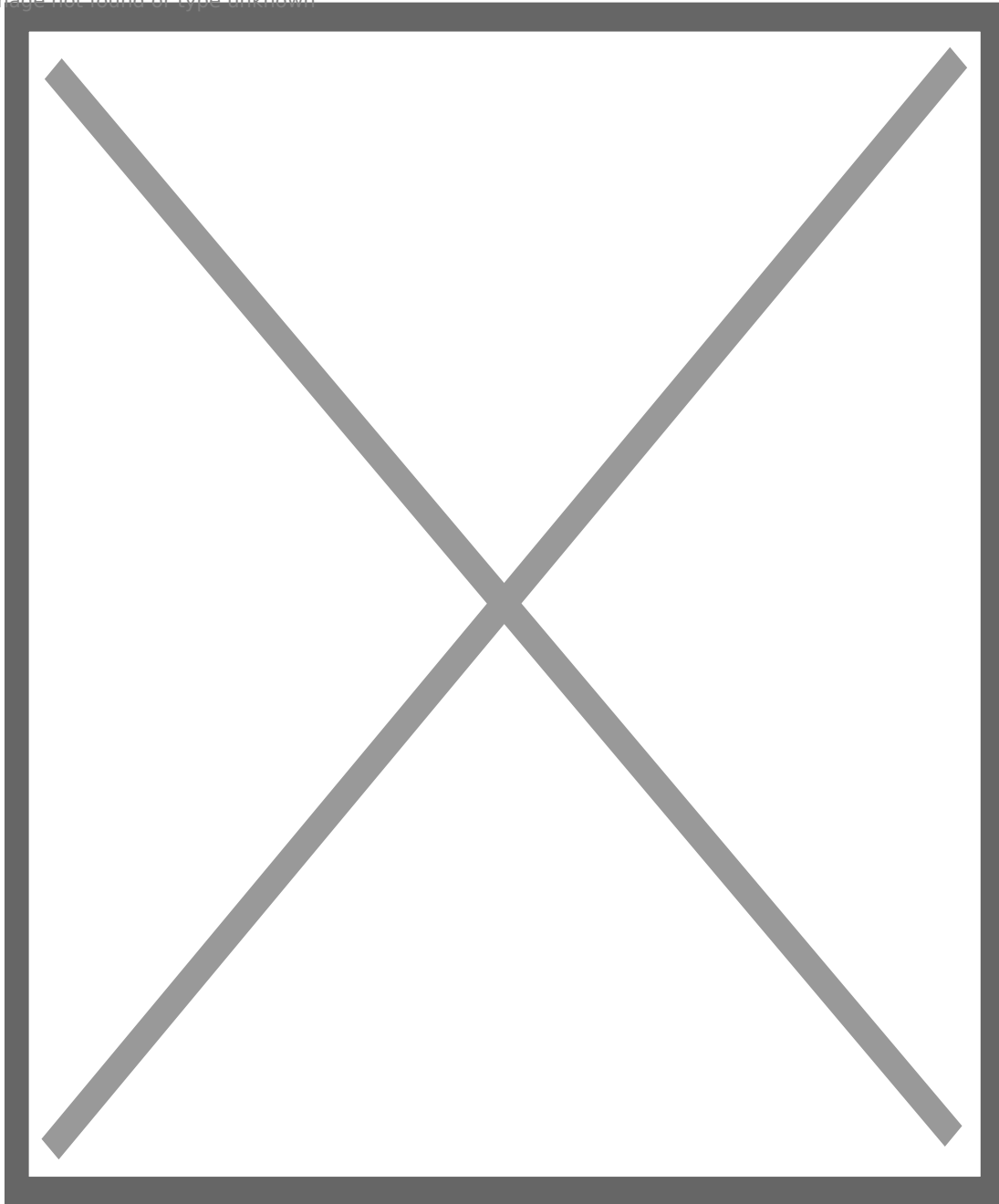
Plotinus's Relation to Plato[\[edit\]](#)

See also: [Allegorical interpretations of Plato](#)

For several centuries after the [Protestant Reformation](#), neoplatonism was condemned as a decadent and 'oriental' distortion of Platonism. In a 1929 essay, [E. R. Dodds](#) showed that key conceptions of neoplatonism could be traced from their origin in Plato's dialogues, through his immediate followers (e.g., [Speusippus](#)) and the neopythagoreans, to Plotinus and the neoplatonists. Thus Plotinus' philosophy was, he argued, 'not the starting-point of neoplatonism but its intellectual culmination.'[\[30\]](#) Further research reinforced this view and by 1954 Merlan could say 'The present tendency is toward bridging rather than widening the gap separating Platonism from neoplatonism.'[\[31\]](#)

Since the 1950s, the [Tübingen School](#) of Plato interpretation has argued that the so-called 'unwritten doctrines' of Plato debated by Aristotle and the [Old Academy](#) strongly resemble Plotinus's metaphysics. In this case, the neoplatonic reading of Plato would be, at least in this central area, historically justified. This implies that neoplatonism is less of an innovation than it appears without the recognition of Plato's unwritten doctrines. Advocates of the Tübingen School emphasize this advantage of their interpretation. They see Plotinus as advancing a tradition of thought begun by Plato himself. Plotinus's metaphysics, at least in broad outline, was therefore already familiar to the first generation of Plato's students. This confirms Plotinus' own view, for he considered himself not the inventor of a system but the faithful interpreter of Plato's doctrines.[\[32\]](#)

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[Plotinus - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org)
en.wikipedia.org

Post by “Eoghan Gardiner” of June 11, 2023 at 1:10 PM

<https://youtu.be/wA5Vnoa2GuY> The link between Christianity and Neoplatonism

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2707-plotinus-and-epicurean-epistemology-by-lloyd-p-gerson/>