

# **Carl Sagan's Cosmos Episode Seven "Backbone of the Night" - Good Summary of Problems with Plato**

**Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2023 at 6:57 PM**

If you have not seen this episode of Cosmos, this one - Episode Seven - has a great deal of good material that is supportive of the general Epicurean position and very critical of Pythagorean and Platonic idealism. It has been a long time since I watched it and if someone watches it again it would be good if we could make note of some time stamps in the thread below. I seem to remember that Sagan talks approvingly of Democritus but may largely skip over Epicurus, but this is from distant memory.

What i did take the time to verify as that at about the 39:00 Minute mark Sagan begins to take Plato apart. However if you have the time I suggest you start watching more like the 20 minute mark, where he really begins to focus on Greece:

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[Carl Sagan Cosmos Episode 7 - The Backbone of Night - Greek subtitles, ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΙ ΥΠΟΤΙΤΛΟΙ](#)

Cosmos: A Personal Voyage is a thirteen-part television series written by Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, and Steven Soter, with Sagan as presenter. It was...

odysee.com

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<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2850-carl-sagan-s-cosmos-episode-seven-backbone-of-the-night-good-summary-of-problems/>

## Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2023 at 7:16 PM

Time stamps:

25:00 - Anaximander and evolution (positive)

26:27 - Empedocles discovers air; discussion of "water thief" (positive)

28:36 - Democritus and atoms (positive)

33:30 - Anaxagorus advances in astronomy but was persecuted (positive)

34:13 - Pythagorus "The mystics were beginning to win" - continuity between him and Christianity. Mathematical harmony underlies all of nature - "music of the spheres" - "cosmos means 'ordered.'" Pythagorus said laws of nature deduced by PURE THOUGHT - they were mathematicians and thoroughgoing mystics- the dodecahedron - ordinary people to be kept ignorant of the dodecahedron - they suppressed knowledge of the square root of two as "irrational" Pythagoreans ignored "experiment" (highly negative)

39:07 Plato -- Followed in steps of Pythagorus and extended them - ideas are more real than the natural world - advised ignoring astronomy in favor of thinking - taught contempt for the real world - he and his followers extinguished the light of science and experiment. Unease with the world of the senses and dominated and stifled western philosophy.

40:44 - Pythagorus and Plato "provided an intellectually respectable justification for a corrupt social order."

41:13 - "Plato and Aristotle were comfortable in a slave society. They offered justifications for oppression. They served tyrants. They taught the alienation of the body from the mind - a natural enough idea I suppose in a slave society. They separated thought from matter. They divorced the earth from the heavens. Divisions which were to dominate western thinking for more than 20 centuries. The Pythagoreans had won. ... The books of the theonian scientists are entirely lost. Their views were suppressed, ridiculed and forgotten by the Platonists and by the Christians who adopted much of the science of Plato.

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## Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2023 at 7:25 PM

A perfect place here for Nate's new graphic, since this gives the context of who Epicurus was really rebelling against:



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## Post by "Todd" of January 24, 2023 at 8:47 PM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

40:44 - Pythagorus and Plato "provided an intellectually respectable justification for a corrupt social order." - led to a slave economy -

The part about leading to a slave economy is not historically correct, and it's not what Carl Sagan says in the video either.

The slave economy existed long before Plato. I'm not sure about the situation at the time of Pythagoras. Slavery may not have been as widespread then, but was likely still considered the normal way of things.

Carl Sagan says the mercantile tradition of the Ionians led to a slave economy (an unsubstantiated claim, IMO), and that Athens had a vast slave population at the time of Plato and Aristotle (true).

### [Quote from Wikipedia](#)

By 600 BC, [chattel slavery](#) had spread in Greece. By the 5th century BC, slaves made up one-third of the total population in some city-states. Between 40-80% of the population of [Classical Athens](#) were slaves.

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## Post by "Cassius" of January 24, 2023 at 9:21 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2850-carl-sagan-s-cosmos-episode-seven-backbone-of-the-night-good-summary-of-problems/>

Thanks for pointing that out Todd I meant to delete that sentence fragment and will do so now.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2023 at 8:15 AM**

[Carl Sagan's "Cosmos" episode "The Backbone of the Night"](#) praising atomism and attacking the mysticism / idealism of Pythagorus, Plato, and even Aristotle first aired in 1980, before many of the current readers of this forum were even born. Carl Sagan died in 1996, and this presentation isn't nearly as well known today as it once was. Even though the video does not mention Epicurus, it's my view that the issues discussed in the part of this video reviewing Greek philosophic issues are highly relevant to our discussions here at EpicureanFriends.

For anyone who has time to review at least the part from about the 25 minute mark to the 45 minute mark, I would very much appreciate hearing your comments - on any aspect you care to comment about. That goes equally for those who know nothing about Carl Sagan to those who watched every episode of Cosmos when it first aired.

My bet is that very few of us have watched this argument since you've started studying Epicurus, and it would be very helpful to know what your reaction is to it now.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2023 at 8:29 AM**

One more thing as we solicit comments on this video. I am thinking that this presentation by Sagan is so clear and so basic that it ought to be part of a background "reading list" for anyone beginning the study of Epicurus in general or Epicurean physics in particular. The linking of these issues to problems with Pythagorus, Plato, Aristotle, and Christianity is just priceless. I can't recall whether he mentions "Stoics" but they are clearly implicated negatively too.

It's really frustrating that Sagan does not mention Epicurus by name, and mentioned that Epicurus fought back against the same idealist gang that Sagan is criticizing. But again the implications are clear once you scratch the surface of the subject.

No doubt there are other videos and materials which make this same point, but this is the best I am aware of. Anyone who reviews this and thinks "I've seen \_\_\_\_\_ make the very same point in another video....." - Please post a link or info where we can try to find it and add to a "basics" list.

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## Post by “Todd” of January 25, 2023 at 9:40 AM

I think it's a great video to understand what Epicurus was opposing.

Part of what makes it valuable is that Carl Sagan has (I think) a pretty good popular reputation as a scientist. To hear his scathing criticism of Plato lends credence to our strong anti-Platonic views...makes it seem a bit less crazy, maybe, to be railing against Plato all the time.

The video itself is a bit dated. Might be cool if we could use the audio with our own images...but I assume there would be copyright issues with that.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 25, 2023 at 9:44 AM

Exactly what I was thinking as to Sagan, Todd. Arguments from "authority" aren't the best way to present things, but I'm willing to use any reasonable argument in the appropriate circumstances. Newer people who aren't familiar with Epicurus or pro-Epicureans will recognize the name of Carl Sagan with some respect. It seems to me that the name "Carl Sagan" has a huge amount of "street cred" that we can find very useful with those who are science-oriented. Sort of similar to using "Thomas Jefferson" with those who are more "history" or "tradition" oriented.

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## Post by “Todd” of January 25, 2023 at 10:29 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

Sort of similar to using "Thomas Jefferson" with those who are more "history" or "tradition" oriented.

Great minds think alike. 😊

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## Post by “Don” of January 25, 2023 at 11:35 PM

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/2850-carl-sagan-s-cosmos-episode-seven-backbone-of-the-night-good-summary-of-problems/>

Oh, man! That video takes me back. I was a huge fan of Sagan in high school. I even remembering wearing a turtleneck or two in his honor 😄 Weren't we talking about taking on distinctive clothing of one's sect in another thread?

Sagan definitely doesn't pull any punches on Plato! Bravo! It lays out the "case against" Plato and his "ideas are better than the natural world" fallacy.

I often forget that Samos was part of Ionia, and that Aristarchus (c. 310 - c. 230 BCE) was actually born on Samos after Epicurus (341-270 BC) around the time Epicurus was teaching at Mytilene. Aristarchus was a student of Strato of Lampsacus, who was the third head of the Peripatetic School in Greece. And Lampsacus is, of course, familiar to Epicureans! [Per Wikipedia](#) , Strato might have known Epicurus during his period of teaching in Lampsacus between 310 and 306 BCE. The ideas of natural science and observation of nature were swirling all around Ionia before and during Epicurus's time there during his upbringing and early teaching career.

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 26, 2023 at 6:45 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Sagan definitely doesn't pull any punches on Plato! Bravo! It lays out the "case against" Plato and his "ideas are better than the natural world" fallacy.

I am reminded of what Todd wrote yesterday about having this to validate what we talk about regularly. It's almost as if Carl Sagan had read many of the passages in Norman DeWitt making almost exactly the same point about Plato.

It's interesting that it seems kind of jarring: First we have this "obscure" teacher from Canada making these points about Plato that almost no one ever mentions in common conversation about Epicurus. A few of us end up almost alone considering this to be significant, while the rest of the world ignores it in favor of dwelling on the subtleties of "absence of pain." Then we find this "god of modern science," who is known for his astronomy more than anything associated with philosophy, coming from out of nowhere making exactly the same points made by DeWitt, and it becomes easier to see as if for the first time how much of Epicurus is a direct rejection of Platonic idealism.

And we shouldn't forget either that the Epicureans point out for us also, in the passage of Diogenes of Oinoanda about the flux, that Aristotle too is guilty of much the same fundamental error as Plato. And here comes Carl Sagan to second the indictment against Aristotle, a point that even fewer people today are willing to make!

Where there is smoke there is fire. And where we have found two significant figures making the same point, we will find others in history too making the same points, if we look long enough.

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### **Post by “Don” of January 26, 2023 at 7:00 AM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

it becomes easier to see as if for the first time how much of Epicurus is a direct rejection of Platonic idealism

It's like - oh, I don't know - like coming out of a cave and seeing the light for the first time 😊

I found it so great seeing Sagan talk the talk against Plato while being in a cave! Well played, Carl. Well played.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of May 22, 2024 at 7:53 AM**

I see that episode can currently be viewed at the link below. If you want to skip the good but extensive lead-in you can start around the 11 minute mark:

<https://www.bitchute.com/video/pCw0CqiqxKBI/>