

Neoplatonism Basics Relevant to the Study of Epicurus

Post by "Cassius" of August 24, 2023 at 8:57 AM

[Neoplatonism - Wikipedia](#)

Neoplatonism is a version of [Platonic philosophy](#) that emerged in the 3rd century AD against the background of [Hellenistic philosophy](#) and [religion](#).^{[1][note 1][note 2]} The term does not encapsulate a set of ideas as much as a series of thinkers. Among the common ideas it maintains is [monism](#), the doctrine that all of reality can be derived from a single principle, "the One".^[2]

Neoplatonism began with [Ammonius Saccas](#) and his student [Plotinus](#) (c. 204/5–271 AD) and stretched to the 6th century AD.^[3] After Plotinus there were three distinct periods in the history of neoplatonism: the work of his student [Porphyry](#) (3rd to early 4th century); that of [Iamblichus](#) (3rd to 4th century); and the period in the 5th and 6th centuries, when the Academies in [Alexandria](#) and [Athens](#) flourished.^[4]

Neoplatonism had an enduring influence on the subsequent history of Western philosophy and religion. In the [Middle Ages](#), neoplatonic ideas were studied and discussed by [Christian](#), [Jewish](#), and [Muslim](#) thinkers.^[5] In the Islamic cultural sphere, neoplatonic texts were available in Arabic and Persian translations, and notable philosophers such as [al-Farabi](#), [Solomon ibn Gabirol](#) (*Avicbron*), [Avicenna](#) (*Ibn Sina*), and [Moses Maimonides](#) incorporated neoplatonic elements into their own thinking.^[6]

Christian philosopher and theologian [Thomas Aquinas](#) (1225–1274) had direct access to the works of [Proclus](#), [Simplicius of Cilicia](#), and [Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite](#), and he knew about other Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Porphyry, through second hand sources.^[7] The German mystic [Meister Eckhart](#) (c. 1260 – c. 1328) was also influenced by neoplatonism, propagating a contemplative way of life which points to the Godhead beyond the nameable God. Neoplatonism also had a strong influence on the [perennial philosophy](#) of the [Italian Renaissance](#) thinkers [Marsilio Ficino](#) and [Pico della Mirandola](#), and continues through 19th-century [Universalism](#) and modern-day [spirituality](#) and [nondualism](#).

ALSO:

[Neoplatonism \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

The term “Neoplatonism” refers to a philosophical school of thought that first emerged and flourished in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, roughly from the time of the Roman Imperial Crisis to the Arab conquest, i.e., the middle of the 3rd to the middle of the 7th century. In consequence of the demise of ancient materialist or corporealist thought such as Epicureanism and Stoicism, Neoplatonism became the dominant philosophical ideology of the period, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe and the individual human being’s place in it. However, in contrast to labels such as “Stoic”, “Peripatetic” or “Platonic”, the designation “Neoplatonic” is of modern coinage and to some extent a misnomer. Late antique philosophers now counted among “the Neoplatonists” did not think of themselves as engaged in some sort of effort specifically to revive the spirit and the letter of Plato’s dialogues. To be sure, they did call themselves “Platonists” and held Plato’s views, which they understood as a positive system of philosophical doctrine, in higher esteem than the tenets of the pre-Socratics, Aristotle, or any other subsequent thinker. However, and more importantly, their signature project is more accurately described as a grand synthesis of an intellectual heritage that was by then exceedingly rich and profound. In effect, they absorbed, appropriated, and creatively harmonized almost the entire Hellenic tradition of philosophy, religion, and even literature—with the exceptions of Epicureanism, which they roundly rejected, and the thoroughgoing corporealism of the Stoics. The result of this effort was a grandiose and powerfully persuasive system of thought that reflected upon a millennium of intellectual culture and brought the scientific and moral theories of Plato, Aristotle, and the ethics of the Stoics into fruitful dialogue with literature, myth, and religious practice. In virtue of their inherent respect for the writings of many of their predecessors, the Neoplatonists together offered a kind of meta-discourse and reflection on the sum-total of ideas produced over centuries of sustained inquiry into the human condition.

As a natural consequence of their insistence on the undiminished relevance of the past, the Neoplatonists developed their characteristically speculative brand of philosophical enquiry in which empirical facts tended to serve as illustrations rather than heuristic starting points or test cases. Today, the Neoplatonic system may strike one as lofty, counterintuitive, and implausible, but to dismiss it out of hand is difficult, especially if one is prepared to take seriously a few fundamental assumptions that are at least not *obviously* wrong and may possibly be right.

The most fundamental of these assumptions, which the Neoplatonists shared with the majority of intellectuals of the ancient world, including most pre-Socratic thinkers as well as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and their followers, is that mindful consciousness (*nous*, often translated as thought, intelligence, or intellect) is in an important sense ontologically prior to the physical realm typically taken for ultimate reality (Mind over Matter). There existed a dispute between Plato and Aristotle over whether or not the objects of mindful consciousness (abstract concepts, Platonic or otherwise, numbers, geometrical properties, and so forth) are also ontologically prior, but the Neoplatonists regarded this fact as a matter of inconsequential detail. And so, following a venerable and abiding tradition of Mind over Matter, Neoplatonism inevitably turned out to be an idealist type of philosophy.

The second assumption, which the Neoplatonists shared with the Stoics and the Hermetists (an influential group of Egyptian religious thinkers that predate the rise of Neoplatonism), was that reality, in all its cognitive and physical manifestations, depended on a highest principle which is unitary and singular. Neoplatonic philosophy is a strict form of principle-monism that strives to understand everything on the basis of a single cause that they considered divine, and indiscriminately referred to as “the First”, “the One”, or “the Good”. Since it is reasonable to assume, as the Neoplatonists did, that any efficient cause is ontologically prior to, and hence more real, than its effect, then, in the hierarchy of being, the first principle, whatever it is, cannot be less “real” than the phenomena it is supposed to explain. Given the veracity of the first assumption (the ontological priority of intelligence and consciousness), it follows at once that the first principle must be a principle of consciousness. In consequence, the fundamental challenge all Neoplatonists struggled to meet was essentially the following: How are we to understand and describe the emergence of the universe, with all its diverse phenomena, as the effect of a singular principle of consciousness? In particular—and in this regard Neoplatonism shares certain concerns with modern cosmology—how is it possible to understand the emergence of the physical, material universe from a singularity that is in every sense unlike this universe? Their answer to this question was entirely new, and went far beyond any prior cosmic aetiology, including that of Plato’s *Timaeus*, in elegance and sophistication.

Post by “Eggplant Wizard” of January 9, 2024 at 11:01 AM

Anyone interested in a very interesting epitome (some might call it a catechism) of late Platonism should read Sallust's little book *On the Gods and the World*, here translated by England's indefatigable arch-neo-platonist Thomas Taylor: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sallust O...s and the World](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sallust_O...s_and_the_World)

Here we see the fully flowered Platonism developed from Iamblichus and the Chaldaean Oracles, which underpinned the polytheist state religion Emperor Julian attempted to forge. It attempts to synthesize the most rarefied doctrines of Plato and his successors with the diverse cults of Greco-Roman religion.

Post by “Cassius” of January 9, 2024 at 11:05 AM

Sounds very interesting - thank you EW!

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 9, 2024 at 2:12 PM

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.

Post by “Eggplant Wizard” of January 9, 2024 at 5:23 PM

I'm going to indulge in some wild and weird speculation here, so if it doesn't interest anyone else I understand. I imagine that if Epicureanism had persisted as a robust school into late antiquity it would have seen some very creative and controversial developments, in response to the new Platonism and other currents, that might be interesting to speculate about. For one thing, I imagine that, like with other schools, the Epicureans could well have branched into competing tendencies of interpretation, so that any response by one set of Epicureans might well be rejected as flawed or compromised by another set. Philodemus witnesses to some nascent divisions in the Epicurean movement though the differences don't seem to have hardened into rival factions.

Theurgy

Iamblichus aligned his Platonism with popular rites through his theurgic interpretation. Whereas Plotinus took a largely aloof attitude to popular cults and material piety, Iamblichus countered that, as fully embodied souls we must make use of material means to re-ascend to the gods. He said that the gods have sown *synthemata*- tokens or signatures- of their power throughout the world, so that various stones, plants, animals, sounds, etc. carry the influence radiating from specific deities. The gods did not descend to earth but by means of these tokens humans could ritually "participate" in the gods. Worship did not benefit the gods and accounts of gods' wrath or favor were interpreted as figures for the blessings or sufferings that man experienced based on the degree he aligned with the divine order. The gods did not actively order the cosmos; rather the cosmos was formed and ordered through the effortless overflowing of divinity. I believe this conception developed partly in response to Epicurean critiques of traditional

religion.

On the matter of theurgy I think some Epicureans would have seen an opening to assert and expand on their own piety, as certain parallels of the theurgic idea are already present, at least implicitly, in the Epicurean theology. Like the Platonic theurgists the Epicureans saw worship as a way to emulate the gods, which was of benefit only to the worshipper. Like the Platonic gods the [Epicurean gods](#) radiated influence through the cosmos that reached earth. I don't think it would be a radical leap to further interpret the *eidola* radiating from the gods' bodies as inhering not only in human minds but in particular materials which were therefore especially helpful in attuning a ritual to a particular gods' influence. What might such an Epicurean theurgy look like? I imagine something comparable to Tantric Buddhist deity yoga where meditators chant, employ ritual implements, sing hymns, and either visualize a deity sitting before them, contemplating their various attributes, or even visualize themselves as the deity situated in that deity's Pure Land. (To be clear I am not trying to suggest that Epicureanism and Buddhism are very similar).

This leads to one clear advantage I think the Epicureans could have had over the neoplatonists in the religious marketplace- while the Platonists were trying to present their philosophy as the inner truth of traditional religion, their conception of deity would have been quite foreign to the average polytheist of the Greco-Roman world. The Epicureans' gods, in their distance and non-interference, were also quite different but, crucially, they were anthropomorphic. You could actually picture them and this picture was held to have a reasonable semblance to the original. Confronted with a statue, say, of Venus, an Epicurean would say to a worshipper, "Yes, that's pretty much what she looks like," while a Platonist would have to say, "Well, it represents her attributes in terms communicable in this gross material plane, but really she's a sphere." *Huh?*

Epicureans, with their thorough materialist account of the universe, could remove the terror of the gods without elevating them into inhuman abstractions, and without positing a complicated hierarchy of gods and intermediate beings, with matter at the bottom. They did not have to engage in agonized theorizing about how matter is actually good since the idea of matter as some kind of prison or obscuration didn't arise for them to begin with.

Perennial Tradition

The Platonists liked to position themselves not just as followers of Plato but the exponents of a universal wisdom tradition, found not only in the Greeks but traceable to various wise "barbarian" peoples (Egypt, Babylon, India, sometimes the Jews were included here). As far as I can tell, Epicureans never claimed that Epicurus was following any tradition. Insofar as he had influences/ teachers he improved on them and his philosophical system was altogether new. However "tradition" was very much in vogue- to the point that simply saying, "it's new" was enough to discount any system for some people (one of the sharpest points made by anti-Christian polemicists like Porphyry was that Christianity was innovation). In this context I wonder if some Epicureans would have been tempted to position their school as also

embodying a primordial tradition. Saying Epicurus had a teacher from Egypt or India would probably be too implausible but the Epicurean doctrine of the gods as models for Epicurean living could position the teaching as a divine revelation. Moreover the conception of an infinite, eternal universe with infinite worlds could be made to support a doctrine of Epicurus-like sages appearing periodically throughout the universe and inspiring successors in other worlds by means of their god-like simulacra flying through space. Pretty far out but not any crazier than the doctrines Buddhism developed about infinite Buddhas pervading the universe.

Esoteric Hermeneutics and Poetics

Something the middle and late Platonists took up from the Stoics was the interpretation of traditional myths as veiled allegories of natural processes or higher philosophical truths. Plato himself made selective use of myths as teaching tools, but rejects many others and was suspicious of poets and rhetoricians for teaching untruths in sweet language. Reading myths as veiled philosophy allowed later Platonists to take a different approach which allowed them to read some high philosophical meaning in even some of the most unpromising material. Eventually you get Proclus make a full-on defense of Homer, reading Homer as a Neoplatonist in disguise. Proclus gives a remarkable theory of symbols- because everything in the universe has a single source, everything is somehow deeply connected, so that not only can things be represented by like symbols, but the more unlike its referent a given symbol is, the more powerful is their connection, so that good poets will draw correspondences between apparently very disparate things (such as, say, depicting the gods as vengeful adulterers, murderers, drunks, etc.)

Epicurus rejected Hesiod and Homer and was reportedly suspicious of figurative language in general. There's the bit in Diogenes Laertius about Epicurus saying that sages are best able to discuss poetry but don't write it themselves (or don't write it very actively, depending on how it's translated). I think it's safe to say that Epicurus would have thought Proclus' approach to be ridiculous or insane- in fact I'm not sure if Plato would have been keen on it.

But as every school of thought develops nuances or even contradictions as its adherents apply its principles in varying times and places, I think the Epicureans might have also developed some novel ways of using myth and poetry. When Lucretius used an epic poem to expound Epicureanism he was already overturning the understanding that poetry was unsuitable for imparting philosophy. The opening invocation of Venus as a supreme goddess, and the petition that she lull her lover Mars, are not of course in accordance with Epicurean theology and demand to be read allegorically. I think for one thing, at this stage, the myths had been discussed and interpreted by philosophers enough that the danger of an educated person credulously deriving dogmas from them was significantly lessened than maybe in Epicurus' day.

Could the Epicureans have found their own use of the highly creative hermeneutics like the Neoplatonists employed? The Stoics and Platonists for one thing are heavily invested in an analogical reading of the cosmos and the foundational principle for this is some sense of the

unity of all things. As far as I know Epicureanism rejected any unifying principle like Logos or the One, so on what foundation could an Epicurean poetics emerge that sees the interpenetration of all phenomena? Some possible candidates...

Matter. Epicurus rejects the possibility that all things could be made by combinations of a single type of atom, so there must be an incalculably large variety of atoms. Nonetheless everything shares in this material character and in an infinite eternal universe it's possible that every atom has existed in combination with every other one.

The void. The atoms are infinitely many but the void is fundamentally one. The void which allows for the differentiation of bodies also unites them. However different or far apart the bodies are, they move in the same void, which could be conceived as a single principle on which all existence rests.

Pleasure. Pleasures vary but are one in their foundation. Or, since the chief pleasure of the mind is the contemplation of nature all phenomena are joined in this pleasure.

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Whew, I wrote a lot. That's a long post. If I bored anyone, I'm sorry.

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.

Post by "Eggplant Wizard" of January 9, 2024 at 6:42 PM

Actually, in terms of Epicurean influence in Neoplatonism, I did notice one detail recently when I read Synesius' On Dreams (<https://tile.loc.gov/storage-servic.../2020715155.pdf>) where he talks

about *eidola* streaming off of bodies and entering minds during sleep.

Post by “Eikadistes” of January 10, 2024 at 12:42 AM

[Quote from Eggplant Wizard](#)

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Plotinus studied under Ammonius Saccas, whose name possibly suggests that he originated from the Shakya clan (from which Siddhartha Guatama originated seven centuries earlier). If he was not literally a member of the Shakya clan (modern-day Nepal), his biography indicates that he was subject to the philosophies of the Classical Period of India, between the Maurya and Gupta Empires (elsewhere called the "Golden Age of Hinduism"). According to Porphyry, "From [his twenty-eight year] that day [Plotinus] stayed continually with Ammonius and acquired so complete a training in philosophy that he became eager to make acquaintance with the Persian philosophical discipline and that prevailing among the Indians." From this, I expect that he would have at least some familiarity with the Upanishads and some exposure to either orthodox or heterodox Indian philosophies.

It is *still* somewhat speculative, but he was at the right place at the right time. The attestation might be fragmentary, but the consistency of the ideas, and the coherence between concepts like the *The One* (seemingly *Brahman*), *Henosis* (seemingly *Moksha*), the framing of evil as ignorance, the goal as *liberation* over ignorance and *enlightenment* over darkness through the light vis-a-vis truth vis-a-vis goodness ... it sounds alarmingly similar to the extent that I think that Ammonius Saccas and his followers did the same thing that Pyrrho did to earlier "gymnosophists". (As it seems to me, Pyrrho adopted the philosophy of Ajñāna (or his understanding and/or adaptation of Ajñāna and others) and re-branded it as Pyrrhonian Skepticism.)

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Thanks Nate. I'd forgotten about the case of Ammonius Saccas. Interestingly he was also the teacher of Origen, who proved a major influence in orthodox Christianity, particularly in the field of spirituality and hermeneutics, even if many of his theological speculations came to be proscribed (I think there are some who argue that Origen might have studied under a different Ammonius Saccas, but it seems unlikely to me that there would be two Platonic teachers named Ammonius Saccas teaching in Alexandria at the same time).

But yes, the possibility of Indian influence can't be ruled out. On the other hand, I think it's also possible to trace Plotinus' One, Henosis, etc. as logical developments of the Platonic tradition.

Some have also noted parallels between Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended self and the Zoroastrian *fravashi*. However, this concept was largely rejected by the later Neoplatonists.

Neoplatonists often did declare an Eastern pedigree for their ideas, as those civilizations were more ancient than the Greeks and the basic assumption was older= wiser. How profound these encounters and influences actually were is very hard to establish.