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PHILOSOPHY DURING THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

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Background to Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy

I. Epicureanism

II. Stoicism

III. Skepticism

IV. Neoplatonism

Concluding Remarks

CHRONOLOGY—ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

585 BC Thales predicts an eclipse

547 Anaximander dies

530 Pythagoras migrates to Italy

525 Anaximenes dies

500 Heraclitus in mid-life

470 Xenophanes dies; Democritus born

469 Socrates born

450 Parmenides and Zeno visit Athens

Empedocles in mid-life

From Sir Anthony Kenny, *Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006),
316.

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- 444 Protagoras writes a constitution
 - 427 Plato born
 - 399 Socrates executed
 - 387 Plato's Academy founded
 - 384 Aristotle born
 - 347 Plato dies
 - 336 Alexander king of Macedon
 - 322 Aristotle dies
 - 313 Zeno of Citium comes to Athens
 - 306 Epicurus founds the Garden



273 Arcesilaus becomes head of the Academy
263 Cleanthes becomes head of the Stoa
232 Chrysippus succeeds as head of the Stoa
155 Carneades heads the Academy and visits Rome
106 Cicero born
55 Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*
44 Julius Caesar assassinated
30 Augustus becomes Emperor
AD 52 St Paul preaches in Athens
65 Suicide of Seneca
161 Marcus Aurelius becomes Emperor
205 Plotinus born
387 St Augustine baptized

Note: Many of these dates, particularly in earlier centuries, are conjectural and approximate.

Epicureans and Stoics in Acts 17

¹⁶ And while Paul was waiting for them in Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him when he observed that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ Therefore, he was arguing in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearers and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be present. ¹⁸ And certain people both of the Epicurean and the Stoic philosophers were conversing with him, and some were saying, “What might this foolish babbler wish to say?” but others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange gods,” because he was announcing good news about Jesus and Anastasis. ¹⁹ And after having taken hold of him they led [Paul] to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is that is being spoken by you?” ²⁰ For you are bringing certain astonishing things into our hearing. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.”

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- ▶ ²¹ Now all the Athenians and foreigners staying there were spending their time in nothing other than (trying) to say something or to hear something new. ²² And after he stood in the middle of the Areopagus, Paul said, “In every way I see that you are very religious. ²³ For while I was going through [Athens] and looking carefully at your objects of worship, I came upon even an altar on which had been written, ‘to an unknown God.’ Therefore, that which you, being ignorant of it, worship, this I proclaim to you.”

²⁴ “The God who has made the cosmos and everything that is in it, this one, since he is the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made by human hands, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as if he needed something, since he himself gives to all life and breath and indeed all things. ²⁶ And he made from one person every nation of humankind on the whole face of the earth, having determined fixed times and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ in order that they might seek God, if perhaps indeed they might grope for and find him, though he is not far away from each one of us. ²⁸ For by him we live and do what we do and exist, as some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are his offspring.’”



²⁹ “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to suppose that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image made by human skill and thought. ³⁰ So although God had formerly disregarded the times of ignorance, now he instructs all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has set a day on which he is going to judge the world in righteousness, by a man whom he has appointed, having offered proof to everyone by raising him from the dead.” ³² Now when they heard “resurrection from the dead,” some began to scoff but others said, “We would like to hear you concerning this matter again!”

³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ Now some people, having joined him, believed, among whom were also Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

NOTE: Christian philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams takes an unfair jab at Paul: “the Paul of Acts does not pursue his mission to the Athenians, for the simple reason that he was not a philosopher.”* This is mistaken on several fronts.

(a) The trip to Athens was an unplanned, transitional stop, as Paul had been escorted there after trouble in Berea; he was hoping Silas and Timothy would rejoin him there.

(b) Paul may not have wanted to stay around to see if the Council at Athens would vote in favor of this deity Jesus, whom Paul was presenting.

*Marilyn McCord Adams, “Philosophy and the Bible: The Areopagus Speech,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 146.



(c) Luke clearly portrays Paul as a Christian Socrates, as we have seen.

(d) N.T. Wright observes that Paul would have been considered a Jewish philosopher (and not a “religious” personality) in the first century Mediterranean world.

(e) The highly-regarded philosopher Antony Flew observed how Paul had a first-rate philosophical mind.

(f) He also grew up in the heart of Stoicism—Tarsus. Paul was quite familiar with the philosophical world of his day.

BACKGROUND TO THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN PHILOSOPHICAL ERA

A. The time after Plato/Aristotle—particularly from the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC) to the end of the Roman Republic in 31 BC—is considered the Hellenistic (Greek) period. So Epicurus would be the first philosopher of this period.

B. Although the Roman Empire conquered the Greeks and their city states, the influence of Hellenism was the stronger cultural force. Evans points out with the Greek city-states, citizens could contemplate what the good life looked like and had a sense that they could shape life within these city-states.

However, with coming of the Roman Empire, this sense of citizens shaping civic/political and cultural life vanished. The Roman period would last through the fifth century AD—when Rome was sacked by barbarians (AD 410) and when the last Roman emperor—Romulus Augustus—was deposed (AD 476).

C. Stephen Evans, *History of Western Philosophy*, 94.

C. The four dominant schools of philosophy during this time were:

- ▶ Epicureanism
- ▶ Stoicism
- ▶ Skepticism
- ▶ Neoplatonism

D. These viewpoints—especially Stoicism and Epicureanism—were primarily moral philosophies. They focused on the individual, secondarily on society. This particular era was one of political instability; consequently, people were concerned about how they as individuals should get along. So moral philosophy was quite relevant.

II. EPICURUS (v. 435 BC)/EPICUREANISM

A. BACKGROUND:

1. A common caricature of Epicureanism is a hedonistic approach to life—a quotation by Aristippus of Cyrene [b. 435 BC]: “Let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.”

This Roman “carpe diem” (“seize the day”) mosaic found on a floor on the house of Polybius (Pompeii). It depicts a skeleton with two jugs of wine, emphasizing this theme.



2. The philosopher Epicurus was born on the island of Samos (cf. Acts 20:15—Paul traveled there and then to Miletus!). He traveled and eventually taught in Athens from about 306-290 BC. He had many pupils, but few were interested in expanding or modifying his ideas. Therefore, the teaching of Epicurus continued to be taught in “the garden” area outside his home—and this place of teaching was passed on to his followers for centuries.

3. He is noted for two major beliefs:

- (a) an ethic of pleasure in pursuit of the good life;
- (b) the world is comprised of atoms.

Benjamin Wiker makes the connection between ancient and modern-day hedonism. He argues that Epicurus has offered something of a philosophical justification for the hedonistic strain in Darwinism today. See his *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).



B. METAPHYSICS

1. Epicurus believed that the gods existed (a matter of universal consent) and were content and blissful in their realm. The problem with humans is that they try to explore the nature of the gods and try to figure out what they look like, how they live. This makes the lot of humans worse since we get into all kinds of trouble and live in fear because of this pursuit.

2. Lucretius (*On the Nature of Things* [94-54 BC]) was a follower of Epicurus (341-270 BC).

3. Epicurus taught that matter was eternal, uncreated, and not endowed with any divine purpose.

4. He (along with Epictetus) adopted—but also attempted to systematize—Democritean materialism and atomism: eternal and indestructible material atoms move through the void like billiard balls. (The void/empty space is necessary for atoms to move about.) Everything, including the soul and the gods, is made of indivisible particles known as atoms, which were always in motion.



5. Yet Epicurus/Epicureans rejected Democritus's mechanistic determinism. *Soul atoms*—atoms that comprised human mental states—are light and smooth and leave the body more easily. Objects were formed when atoms collided and stayed together. But these collisions, however, were not uniform but random.



Democritus' determinism took away moral responsibility and seemed to conflict with the human capacity to deliberate. Although most atoms are determined, he said, some swerve inexplicably (a quirk). Free will occurs within this arena of atomic quirkiness.

NOTE: (a) it's hard to explain any kind of free will if the "swerve" isn't up to human beings; (b) it's hard to see any connection between materialistic atomism and the ethic of pursuing pleasure.

C. EPISTEMOLOGY

1. The only epistemology is empiricism. All propositions must be derived from and confirmed by the senses.
2. We live by appearances—even if they seem to be contradictory. That is, our judgments/interpretations cause distortions—mirages on the road or a stick's "bending" in the water.
3. This is why we need other senses to confirm sense experience. For example, hearing or touching corrects what appears to us in our seeing; we touch a stick to make sure it isn't bending in the water.
4. These appearances are "truthful" in that they are like a film of atoms that are shed with new experiences that arise. The film is about appearances, not about reality itself.

D. ETHICS

1. The purpose of philosophy and the highest goal in life was pleasure, which is the “absence of pain in the body and trouble in the soul” (Diogenes Laertius *Vit.* 10.131).

2. However, this is a pleasure of moderation. Epicurus also taught the importance of foregoing immediate pleasures for more long-term pleasures in the future.

We could compare this to utilitarian John Stuart Mill's who advocated the pursuit of long-term pleasures—as opposed to his utilitarian predecessor Jeremy Bentham, who advocated the immediacy (propinquity) of pleasure. We could distinguish between qualitative vs. quantitative pleasure.



3. Epicurus was very concerned about ethics and he promoted the appropriateness of pleasure, but not in the extreme. The life of pleasure must be marked by wisdom and justice. The goal of Epicureanism was to live a happy life and maximize pleasure and friendship, which were the ideal values.

This involved withdrawing from civic activities. (Why would you want to be a political leader, if it involves a series of headaches and troubles?)

And given the ethic of pursuing the absence of pain and promoting pleasure, there is no strong reason for a person to go into a battle and fight valiantly. Indeed, Epicurus's first followers avoided politics and other rigorously-demanding vocations.

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- ▶ 4. When you die, that's it—"over and out." It is painless extinction. There is no need to fear death since you won't exist any more and you won't experience any pain. You won't miss your loved ones. The soul is not immortal.

5. Epicurus sought to remove the fear of death, which ruins the human pursuit of happiness. He taught that the soul does not survive death but that the atoms of a person's soul disintegrate at death. There was no place in this system for bodily resurrection or even future spiritual existence.

6. The Epicureans held to a kind of deism: the gods, made of immortal matter, existed in a place of supreme pleasure but did not interfere in human affairs. *This (non-interference) belief would release an adherent from both fear of the supernatural now and judgment in the afterlife.*



7. This belief, in turn, provided the grounds for “functional atheism”: there may be gods and goddesses, but they are irrelevant to our existence, and therefore belief in their existence was of no significance. This is another similarity with modern culture. Many who believe vaguely in some sort of god do not live in light of that belief. Epicurus taught that moderation was important for happiness. His first followers avoided politics and ate simple fare.

► Moralistic therapeutic deism: the cultural ideology of our day.

II. STOICISM

A. BACKGROUND

1. The term *stoicheia* is mentioned in the New Testament. It can refer to physical “elements” (2 Pet. 3:10, 12). It can refer to “elemental spirits” or “elementary principles” (Col. 2:8, 20): “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.... If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations.”

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- ▶ These elemental spirits are syncretistic and legalistic ideas in Colosse (see Col. 2:16, 21), connected to demonic spirits. This is similar to what is mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:1—legalistic “doctrines of demons.” However, the Old Testament law could even get twisted into a similar legalism (Gal. 4:3, 9, 10: “we were in bondage to the elemental things”).

2. STOICISM began in Greece. Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium (334-262 BC),* who would philosophize on a “porch [*stoa*].” Epictetus (60-110 AD), formerly a Roman slave, and Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD) were Stoics. Cicero of Rome was influenced by Stoicism.

Stoicism also sprang up in Tarsus—the apostle Paul’s home city of Tarsus and an intellectual center of his day that had surpassed even Athens. *Tarsus was the “second” Stoic city—after Zeno’s native city of Citium.*

Other Stoic philosophers such as Antipater, Athenodorus (Cordylian), and Archedemus were born in Tarsus. And the Stoic poet Aratus, whom Paul cited at Athens (17:28) was born near Tarsus in Soli.

At Athens, Paul demonstrated his philosophical skills, revealing both the strengths and weaknesses of Stoicism and Epicureanism.

*This is a different Zeno from Zeno the Eleatic (southern Italy), who took views similar to Parmenides.

- ▶ Chrysippus (3rd century BC) attempted to systematize Stoicism since there were different Stoic views early on. He is credited with making Stoicism a dominant philosophical school. There are questions about how faithfully he represents Zeno, since Zeno was not a systematic, rigorous thinker. He was succeeded by Cleanthes.
- ▶ In the third “generation” of Stoicism, when Chrysippus attempted to organize Stoic thought, he wrote this down in 705 scrolls (none of which survived). This included developing a system of logic that rivaled Aristotle’s. (It was a kind of logic based on the relations of propositions rather than the relations of terms.)*
- ▶ When Stoicism came into the Roman bloodstream, it took on the practical ethical component, largely inspired by the character of Socrates (rather than Platonism), who was concerned about ethics.

*Aristotelian: “categorical syllogistic”; Stoic: “hypothetical syllogistic,” anticipating Gottlob Frege’s logical system. For further details, see Susanne Bobzien, “Ancient Logic,” SEP <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ancient/>.

B. METAPHYSICS

1. Unlike Epicureanism, in which God/the gods were too distant, Stoicism presents the other extreme: God is so close to the creation that he is embedded within it—a pantheistic version of God. (Some have suggested a “panentheistic” Stoic God: God is like the soul of the world, which is likened to God’s body. This is debatable.) This view anticipates the pantheism of Benedict Spinoza in his *Deus sive Natura*—God or Nature.

Stoicism also stands in contrast to Plato as well, who maintained that ultimate reality is not physical but immaterial and transcendent.*

2. Though Stoicism emphasizes reason, teleology, and "God," its own strict corporealism is a key feature of its metaphysic. Even though “God” is the ordering principle and rationality behind the universe and even though “God” is both the substance and the agency of all that exists. But Stoics want to maintain that this impersonal God is transcendent.

*David Sedley with Peter Adamson, “Stoicism,” *History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps* podcast (<https://historyofphilosophy.net/>).



3. Stoic theology identified God with providence and even offered proofs for God's existence—particularly the argument from design. The world has a rationality to it.

4. According to some (not all) Stoics, God was also identified with Fire, which brought the universe into being/order, and the world would also end in a conflagration—as part of the cycle of existence.

C.S. Lewis on Pantheism

‘The Pantheist’s God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at His glance.... It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s alive.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity.

Lewis (continued)

An “impersonal God”—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter.’

C. ETHICS

1. When we think of “stoical,” we think of one who is unperturbed or content regardless of one’s circumstances. True virtue is an attitude of the will. Knowledge that our circumstances are beyond our control brings “freedom.” Paul uses a Stoic term in Philippians 4: “I have learned to be *content* (*autarkēs*) in any and every circumstances”—though this contentment was the result of being in Christ.

2. The Stoics believed that everything, including their souls, were part of the Divine Logos (Divine Reason). When faced with suffering, the Stoic military hero Cato saw suicide as a rational option. He said that “only the wise man is free,” and that it was better to die—a “rational departure”—than accept Caesar’s pardon. One can always choose to die than to compromise with a tyrant.



3. There is a kind of determinism that goes along with Stoicism. One can do nothing since everything is determined by God and one's own being is part of God. If all happens according to God's purposes, then how can I truly choose to live in conformity to those purposes? And if I am to love, how can I truly be unperturbed when a loved one dies?

4. Humans have a divine spark within themselves, and at death, this spark returns to the divine reason. For Stoics, reason was the primary path to understanding "God," as well as other areas of life. They would not have looked for evidence of the existence of the divine Logos because one discovered the Logos and its attributes through human reason; God was not discovered through nature or other realities.

5. The problem of evil was an issue for the Stoics. How to account for it? Some claimed that evil did not really exist. Rather, there are unavoidable but negative consequences of divine providence. For example, Chrysippus (3rd century BC) held that bedbugs were useful so that humans would rise early in the morning. Mice were useful to remind us to keep things tidy.*

Since the divine Reason was infused into everything, *all events that occurred, including illness, natural disasters, and war, were part of a goal-oriented rational process. Thus, all events were determined.* This not only removed any sense of free will, but it also led to the denial of evil, since all things were rationally worked out by the divine Logos.

*Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 108.





6. In contrast to Epicureans, Stoics lived by an austere moral code. In Paul's day, the contemporary Stoic philosopher Epictetus (as recorded by Arrian) taught his students that it was worthless to study logic or cosmology for their own sakes. What is crucial is applying formal logic and cosmological premises to the improvement of their own moral will and life (*Epic. Diss.* 1.4.1-17).

7. Epictetus taught that being calm and severe was the best course for humanity. Like other Stoics Epictetus taught that the only good that people could do was the control of their own moral choices. Absolutely everything else was outside of human control, and therefore, these things were morally indifferent.



Seneca the Stoic put it this way:

“[The stalwart/contented man] maintains his poise and assimilates all that falls to his lot to his own complexion, for he is more potent than the world without. I do not maintain that he is insensible to externals, but that he overcomes them; unperturbed and serene, he rises to meet every sally [i.e., force]. All adversity he regards as an exercise.”



7. To desire things such as wealth or reputation was
“irrational and the cause of all human misery.”
Happiness could be found only in the studied
discernment of impulses to desire or avoid things
and rejection of these desires of anything under
one's control.

C. Forbes, “Epictetus” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Edited by Evans, Craig A and Stanley, E. Porter (Downers, Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.



8. Soon after Zeno's death, so-called "Middle Stoicism" emerged, which accommodated elements of Platonic and Aristotelian ideas.

9. Later, well-known Stoics, such as Epictetus (see below), and Seneca, a contemporary of Paul (and tutor of Nero) presented Stoicism more as a way of life than a system of philosophy.

D. EPISTEMOLOGY:

1. Stoics claimed to be empiricists. They believed they could achieve certain *knowledge* through sense perception.

2. There was also the realm of *opinion* as well as the intermediate state of “*comprehension*”—though not rising to the level of knowledge.

3. There are questions arise with Stoic epistemology, however. How can we be confident that what we are sensing is real? How do we deal with conflicting sense experiences or appearances? We may be confident that we are seeing what is veridical. We are convinced of what we experience, but this is challenged when another's perception differs from your own.

EXCURSUS: A NOTE ON CICERO (106-43 BC)

- ▶ Cicero achieved the status of a nobleman—a *novus homo* (“new man”)—by ascending to the top of the political ladder without traditional Roman family pedigree or military achievements to help get him there.
- ▶ Cicero’s views are difficult to pin down. He seems to follow the tradition of the New Academy—that is, the more skeptical bent. He presents views, can offer criticisms of them, but in the end leaves it to the reader to make a judgment, which is inevitably fallible. He leaves it to the readers to engage with various views and draw their own conclusions.
- ▶ He writes a series of dialogues in which he includes himself (e.g., *On Ends* [*De Finibus*])—in which he talks about the goals we should be pursuing in quest of the life. The Epicureans say it’s pleasure; the Stoics say it’s virtue; for Antiochus of Ascalon (135-68 BC), it’s virtue plus some worldly goods included.

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- ▶ Cicero makes the case for Stoicism but then critiques it, likewise with Epicureanism, and then with Antiochus. He emphasizes that each view has important things to say. He writes, “What of it if I do not perform the task of a translator, but preserve the views of those whom I consider sound, while contributing my own judgment and order of composition?”
 - ▶ In *On the Nature of the Gods*, he favors the Stoic view over the Epicurian.
 - ▶ He admires the Greek culture, and he acknowledges his debt to the Greeks: “we are indebted to them for philosophy and for all higher learning. But there are things that they do that we should not” (*On Ends*). He seems to be saying that what Epicurianism had to offer isn’t really what fits with Rome’s concerns.

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- ▶ Cicero is writing from the perspective of a Roman, and he is attempting to do Greek philosophy in a Latin-speaking context; he believes that writing philosophy in Latin is better in Greek. For example, if you took Epicurus's view (of private morality), this would go against the Roman view of bravery, political and legislative endeavors, and so on.

III. SKEPTICISM

A. Skepticism has several representatives: Pyrrho of Elis (c. 350-270 BC),* Carneades of Cyrene (214/12-129/8 BC), and Ciseleaus were skeptics and led the Platonic Academy after Plato. (Of course, Plato was not a skeptic; however, the Skeptics were called the “Academics.”) They followed Socrates’ example of challenging confident claims to knowledge—that, they claimed, is the true spirit of Plato.

Others were Aenessidaemus (100-40 BC)—a leader of Platonic Pyrrhonism—and Sextus Empiricus (c. AD 250), who argued against the possibility of arguing anything syllogistically, was a leading Skeptic.**

*Pyrrhonean skepticism maintained that for whatever could be said in favor of one position, an equally strong case could be made for the other; so we should simply suspend judgment.

***Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 1:444.



The Skeptics viewed themselves as seekers and inquirers more than doubters or skeptics. They suspended judgment rather than insisting on dogmatic beliefs.

They generally doubted knowledge via sensations. They did raise questions about how different creatures—including human beings—sense the world around them. Is the world really like what each of these creatures perceives it to be? (Cf. Thomas Nagel: “What is it like to be a bat?”)

B. Philosophy came to prominence in the Roman Empire beginning with an event in 155 BC—an event that symbolized the transition from Hellenistic schools to Rome.* Athens was subject to a fine of 500 talents for sacking the city of Oropos. Athens sent three schools of philosophy to Rome:

the Stoa (Diogenes of Babylon),

the (New) Academy (the Skeptics), and

the Peripatetics (who came out of Aristotle's Lyceum or at least identified with it even if they didn't study there [e.g., Demetrius of Phaleron, Strato of Lampsachus]; they traveled around and expounded on Aristotle's teaching; initially, they walked about and held discussions in the Lyceum's *cloister* [*peripatos*]).

Epicureans didn't come since they were a-political.

*This section is taken from "Stoics," *History of Philosophy without Any Gaps*
,<https://historyofphilosophy.net/transcript/stoics-sedley>



Carneades of Cyrene, head of the New Academy (“skeptic”), argued in defense of “justice” one day, and the crowd leaves satisfied. The next day he came back and argued against “justice.” The crowd leaves confused! His view called for suspension of judgment rather than dogmatism on either side.

The skeptic Carneades won the “shock” award, but the Stoic Diogenes of Babylon made a good showing as well. Stoicism would enter into the Roman bloodstream as a result of this event (e.g., Cicero, Seneca, Cato, Marcus Aurelius).



C. The Skeptics acknowledged that things really do appear to us as what they do. But we can't have any knowledge of things in themselves. (This resembles Immanuel Kant's noumenal vs. phenomenal distinction). We only know how things affect us. We make mistakes regarding sense data, and we have no criterion to distinguish true interpretations from false ones.

Take the example of the stick “bent” in the water—the eye tells us one thing, and touch tells us another. There is no way to tell which is right. Some sensations, like tinitis (the continual ringing in the ears), do not come from external, empirical sources.

The Skeptics concluded that one could not come to a sure axiom that is not based on other premises which can be absolutely justified. No objective knowledge of anything can be arrived at.



D. Whereas the Stoics tried to argue to God from reason, the Skeptics tried to show that this was not possible. Stoics thought that all things were corporeal-including God, who does not change. The Skeptics reasoned that God, if corporeal, must change. The Stoics argued that God was good, but the Skeptics opposed this idea on the basis of the problem of evil.

A couple of problems with this skeptical approach are:

- ▶ *(a) all arguments against a criterion for knowledge actually presuppose knowledge; the recognition of error and mistaken judgment assume truth.*
- ▶ *(b) We all assume that our minds are reliable and not systematically deceiving us. We take for granted that they are generally truthful rather than erroneous*

EXCURSUS: MIDDLE PLATONISM

1. Middle Platonism began with Antiochus of Ascalon (130-68 BC), who rejected the skepticism of the Academy. Others would say Eudorus of Alexandria, who propounded Pythagoreanism (1st century BC), actually established Middle Platonism—or perhaps Philo of Larissa. This period ended with Plotinus (AD 204-270).

PLATONISM	MIDDLE PLATONISM	NEOPLATONISM
Begins with the Academy in Athens established by Plato; takes a <u>skeptical</u> turn (the New Academy)	Begins in the 2 nd or 1 st century BC (Antiochus or Eudorus)	Begins with Plotinus (AD 204-270)



Middle Platonism assimilated beliefs of the Stoic and Peripatetic (Aristotelian) schools, but Middle Platonism is complex. Traditionally, Middle Platonism has been represented this way: it consisted in the “abandonment of skepticism and return to a dogmatic understanding of Plato’s teachings, in other words the conviction that Plato held *dogmata*, positive doctrines about the Divine, the cosmos and the soul. Middle Platonism is taken to begin with this turning to dogma and to end with Plotinus.”*

*Marco Zambon, “Middle Platonism,” *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Mary Louise Gill and Pierre Pellegrin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 561.

But the reality is more complex than this. You have various voices and emphases (i.e., different “Platonisms”):

- ▶ The philosopher Plutarch, who sought to incorporate Aristotelianism into Platonism, came out of the Academy who believed (a) the freedom of the will and (b) the immortality of the soul. (Since Aristotle was more systematic and coherent in structure than Plato, Plutarch sought to systematize and complete Plato’s teachings.
- ▶ There is the Pythagorizing emphasis of Eudorus.
- ▶ We also have the Stoicizing version of Antiochus.

IV. NEOPLATONISM

PLOTINUS (AD 204-269) would exert an immense influence on Augustine and would hold sway till the twelfth century, when more of Aristotle's views were being circulated.

Plotinus (from Alexandria, Egypt) was something of a mystic, who experienced ecstatic union with God four times in six years, according to his student Porphyry.*

He believed in absolute ideas and a reality on which ideas depend (like “the Good” in Plato).

*Copleston, *History of Philosophy*, 1:464.

A. THE NEOPLATONIC HIERARCHY

- ▶ THE ONE
- ▶ THE INTELLECT (*NOUS*)
- ▶ THE (WORLD) SOUL
- ▶ THE HUMAN SOUL
- ▶ MATERIAL WORLD
- ▶ THE OUTER WORLD OF NON-BEING

1. The ONE

a. Plotinus held that the highest absolute reality was the One.

b. He differed with Plato in that he thought the One (God) was utterly transcendent and ineffable, that there are no attributes or characteristics that can describe. He is beyond all thought and being.

c. The One transcended even the Good of Plato; the One transcends all being and all particular objects. This One is not a monistic oneness (of Parmenides, for example) or a pantheism.

d. The One exists simply and without division—and is ineffable/indescribable.

e. The One is not to be associated with the material world, which is “beneath” the dignity of the One.

f. The world proceeds from God by necessity, the less perfect from the more perfect.

Plotinus proposed the metaphor of emanation—like an overflow of rays of light.

The One did not create the world by his own free will since “creation is an activity and we are not justified in ascribing activity to God and so impairing his unchangeability.”

Copleston, History of Philosophy 1:466.

g. What does this hierarchy look like?

- ▶ The first three in the hierarchy are central—the *Plotinian Triad*—and they reflect three distinct philosophical influences.

The One reflects the influence of Plato.

The Mind/Intellect (Nous) reflects the influence of Aristotle.

The Soul reflects the influence of Stoicism.

- ▶ Anthony Kenny: “With some qualification it can be said that the One is a Platonic God, Intellect...is an Aristotelian God, and Soul is a Stoic God. ”

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- ▶ Unlike the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, this Plotinian triad, with its emanationism, flowing down from the One that is beyond being, lacks a metaphysical integrity or unity.

h. The ONE is the first hypostasis (or fundamental) from which everything else flows. In Plotinus, we have a *henology* as opposed to *ontology*. The ONE (*henos*) is above Being.

i. As you move away from the One, you move toward multiplicity and inferiority. There is a succession of superiority as one moves toward the Nous. *To have your origin from is to be inferior to*

j. The One is not a Being but is prior to all being; we can't say what the One is like, only what it is not like—"apophatic theology"—which has been part of the Christian tradition. "The One is a descendent of the *Parmenides*, and the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*."*

k. The One isn't a number, but is simple and undivided and utterly unique. It is the most real thing of all, even though not technically "Being." It is *beyond being* and *unknowable* and *ineffable* (indescribable), and we cannot predicate anything about it. To ascribe qualities to the One would undermine "the One's sublime simplicity."*

2. INTELLECT (*NOUS*):

a. The first emanation from the One is to Thought or Mind (*Nous*), which apprehends the One and itself. *

b. *Multiplicity appears here first.* Unlike the One, the Intellect is not simple. Complexity depends on that which is completely simple.

c. *Nous* knows all things together, having neither past nor future but seeing all in an eternal present.** This Intellect engages in pure contemplation—like Aristotle's *thought thinking thought*. The Intellect's essential element is *desire* to know and has that desire satisfied. The Intellect is “always desiring and always attaining its desire” (Plotinus, *Enneads* 3.8.11, 23-24).

*Copleston, *History of Philosophy* 1:468.

**Kenny, *Ancient Philosophy*, 311.



Kenny: “It contemplates all of the Platonic ideas”; these Ideas aren’t external entities: “the actuality of intellect and the actuality of intellect’s object is one and the same. So the life of the Ideas is none other than the activity of Intellect. Intellect is the intelligible universe, containing forms not only of universals but also of individuals.”

Plotinus speaks of the Intellect as apostatizing from the One. The same is true about the Soul.

**Kenny, Ancient Philosophy, 313.*

3. (WORLD) SOUL

- a. The Soul resembles Stoicism's "immanent" God that directs the universe; it undergirds and orders the physical "body" of the universe.
- b. Unlike Stoicism's corporeal God, the Soul of Plotinus is incorporeal, and this immanent principle directs the development or unfolding of the world.
- c. Unlike the Intellect, the World-Soul is temporal. The Soul further "revolted" or "fell away" from the Intellect, arrogantly desiring independence.



d. Plotinus took the view that Aristotle held that form individuates matter. According to Plotinus, if we remove form (soul) from matter (body), we only have a single soul; thus soul exists prior to body. The soul doesn't exist in dependence on the body.



NOTE: On body and soul, Aristotle held that the soul is the form of the body (matter). And there are two interpretations of Aristotle on form and matter:

VIEW #1: Matter individuates form.

VIEW #2: Form individuates matter (which Plotinus favored).*

*Kenny, *Ancient Philosophy*, 314.

4. HUMAN SOULS

Humans participate in two “worlds”—with a higher element, which reflects the World Soul, and a lower element, which participates in the physical world. Humans straddle both worlds.

5. MATERIAL WORLD

Unlike the Gnostics, Plotinus did not disdain matter (but see below).

6. OUTER DARKNESS OF NON-BEING

Evil enters in when humans fix their desire on it (e.g., sensual, bodily desires), preventing humans from ascending upward to God. This leads to a loss of goodness and beauty. Humans forget that they are in their essence embodied intellects.

B. THE DIVIDED LINE: ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

A common interpretation of Plato on the divided (in the *Republic*), in which you take a line, divide it in two, and then divide each segment in two again.

Late ancient Neoplatonists said the line has two sides—one epistemological and one ontological. They correspond to each other: objects to knowledge of these objects.

Top: Objects of intellect (Forms) and the intellect;

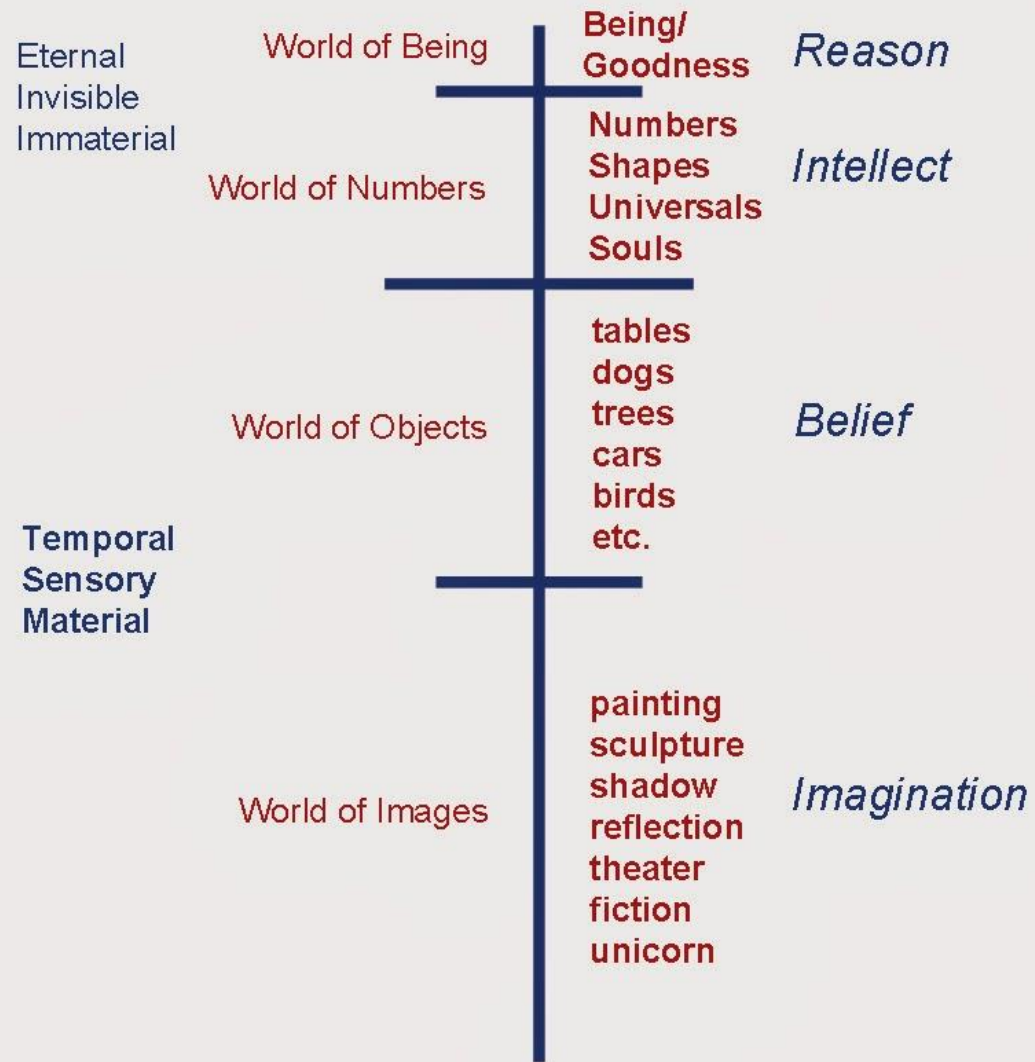
Second: Objects of discursive reasoning/understanding (e.g., mathematics) and discursive reasoning/understanding.

Third: Objects of imagination and sensation (physical objects) and belief and images themselves.

Fourth: Objects of conjecture/opinion (shadows) and conjecture/opinion.

The Divided Line

A Picture of Plato's Ontology





Moderns read Plato's divided line dualistically (influenced by thinkers like Descartes): there is a *radical break* between the upper levels and the lower levels. They cannot meet.

For ancient Neoplatonists, with their view of emanation from the One, they saw Plato's line as a continuum, procession, or emanation. The line is *not broken* but proceeds from the One through the Intellect through discursive reason (in the rational Soul), and then down to the physical world. The Soul acts as an intermediary between realms.

Dennis Robichaud, "Plato in the Renaissance," Philosophy without Any Gaps,
<https://historyofphilosophy.net/transcript/plato-renaissance-robichaud>