

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists
Weekly Introduction
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The practice and philosophy of astronomy and astrology was decisively shaped by the cosmology developed by Plato and Aristotle in the third and fourth centuries BCE adapted by Hermeticism from the first century BCE and expressed finally in late Roman Neoplatonism up to the sixth century CE. These philosophies, emphasising the direct relationship between the stars and the individual, whether body, mind or soul (the latter two understood as one – as psyche), continued to have a decisive impact on European thought. This seminar will examine the relationship between such ideas and the modern 'western mystery tradition', which provides an ideological context for much modern astrology, astral theology and New Age cosmology. Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy is not only essential to an understanding of western thought, it is essential to a grasp of the entire range of material in the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. It is important from now on to understand what is meant by the term 'Platonic', Aristotelian' and 'Neoplatonic'. All three terms will occur to a greater or lesser extent throughout most modules.

To risk oversimplifying, Plato and Aristotle accepted the world view, which eventually triumphed in modern science, in which events in the universe are regulated by an order which may be understood mathematically. Both also believed that the cosmos is a single, integrated functioning system, and hence that humanity is linked to the stars, an idea which modern science generally finds unpalatable. The significant difference between them was this: Plato believed that consciousness was primary, that matter emerged out of 'mind', and that true knowledge could only be obtained in the realm of consciousness, whereas Aristotle believed that the material world was more important and could be a valuable source of knowledge. Although we can sharply differentiate their philosophies, the similarities (especially the model of a cosmos in which planets orbited the earth in successions of spheres, like the layers of an onion) were such that their two philosophical approaches were combined to form a basis for the astral religions of the 2nd century BCE onwards, especially the Hermetic teachings. Neoplatonism is the term given to the influential philosophers of the third to fifth centuries CE whose teachings mixed Plato with Aristotle and Pythagoras, and who emphasised the need for the soul to return to the stars. The term theurgy (god-work, that is, the approach to the divine using ritual and magic) is associated with Neoplatonism, especially Iamblichus, as opposed to theology, or 'god-study'. One of the prime concerns which emerged out of this tradition, was the need to find ways for the soul to return to the stars.

Weekly Forum Question

What would you consider Plato's most important single contribution to cosmology, astronomy or astrology, whether in his own day, or later?

Note on this week's reading

The most effective way of approaching this week's reading is to read chapter 10 from *The Dawn of Astrology*. My own lecture notes then include references under different headings, which can be used as a guide for locating relevant sections in the source material. For the suggested primary readings extracts from Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic* are the most important: these are the foundational texts for much of western cosmology, astronomy and astrology. The extract from Aristotle on the Prime Mover is also important. The other readings, including background material on Greek philosophy, can then be used should you decide to write on any matter which requires a deeper knowledge of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. If you do work further in this area, then JSTOR will be very valuable especially, for example, on discussions on Plato's theory of soul.

Tutor's Lecture Notes

Nick Campion: 'Plato'.

Nick Campion: 'Plato Cosmology diagram'.

Nick Campion: 'Aristotle'.

Nick Campion: 'Aristotle Cosmology diagram'.

Nick Campion: 'The Neoplatonists'.

Source Reading: Greek Philosophy

Campion, Nicholas, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology*, Vol. 1, London: Continuum 2008, chap 10.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2 Vols, Vol. 1 trans. Hugh Tredennick, Vol. 2 trans. Hugh Tredennick and G.Cyril Armstrong, Cambridge Mass., London, 1933, Book 12, Chapter 6-9 (1071b-1075a),

On-line: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.12.xii.html> (translated W. D. Ross) (This passage sets out Aristotle's doctrine of the 'Prime Mover'. The material is very complex and contains only part of what is relevant to Aristotle's impact on astrology. We would prefer to get an idea of the general tone rather than attempt to understand it in detail, which is very difficult until it has been discussed).

Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R.G.Bury, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1931.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>

(The *Timaeus* contains Plato's account of the creation and structure of the cosmos. The most important passages are probably chapters 27 to 42. These are preceded by the Atlantis myth and followed by supplementary material which expands on the essential discussion. Some of the passages in chapters 27 to 42 are rather obscure but this section is important for its account of the structure of the cosmos in musical harmonies and the

distinction between two states of existence, Being (eternal, perfect and unchanging) and Becoming (temporal, imperfect and changeable)).

Plato, *Republic*, 2 Vols., trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1937, Book 10.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html>

(Book 10 of the *Republic* contains the Myth of Er, the account of the soul's origination in the stars and descent to earth through the planetary spheres at birth).

Plato *Epinomis*

<http://www.ac-nice.fr/philo/textes/Plato-Works/29-Epinomis.htm>

The *Epinomis* contains some of Plato's most explicit discussions about the sky. Some scholars disagree that it was by him, arguing that one of his students, Philip of Opus, was the likely author.

Reading: Secondary Sources

Campion, Nicholas, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology*, Vol. 1, chap 9, London: Continuum, 2008.
PDF

Cornford, F.M., *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus*, London: Routledge 2001 [1937], pp. 105-119.

Hussey, Edward, *The Presocratics*, London: Duckworth 1983, chap 4 (pp. 60-77).
(Pythagoras)

Kirk, G.S, J.E., Raven, M.Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, Chap. 1, pp. 7-74.

Wallis, R.T., *Neoplatonism*, London: Duckworth, 1995, chap. 1 (PP. 1-14).

Other Suggested Reading

Dillon, John, *The Middle Platonists: A Study of Platonism, 80 BC to AD 220* (London: Duckworth, 1977).

Dodds, E.R., 'Theurgy and Its Relationship to Neoplatonism', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 37, Parts 1 and 2. (1947), pp. 55-69.
JSTOR

Guthrie, W.K.C., *The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle* (London: Harper & Row, 1975)

Kingsley, Peter, 'From Pythagoras to the Turba philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 57 (1994), pp. 1-13

Kingsley, Peter, 'Notes on Air: Four Questions of Meaning in Empedocles and Anaxagoras', *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1995), pp. 26-29

Nilsson, Martin P., 'The Origin of Belief Among the Greeks in the Divinity of the Heavenly Bodies', *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1940), pp. 1-8

Primary sources in Greek philosophy

There are many features of classical philosophy that are not relevant to the MA. Therefore, please resist the temptation to follow areas that may be a distraction. However, these are the main on-line texts, some of which are also listed above.

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 2 Vols, Vol. 1 trans. Hugh Tredennick, Vol. 2 trans. Hugh Tredennick and G.Cyril Armstrong, Cambridge Mass., London, 1933.
On-line: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.12.xii.html> (translated W. D. Ross)

Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, trans. W.K.C.Guthrie, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1921.
On line: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/heavens.html>

Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric, including 'Works and Days' and 'Theogonis'*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Cambridge Mass., London, 1917.
On line - Theogony: <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Hesiod/theogony.html>

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries and Life of Pythagoras*, trans. Thomas Taylor (Frome: Prometheus Trust, 1999).
http://www.theurgia.org/taylor_on_the_mysteries.html

Plato, *Republic*, 2 Vols., trans. Paul Shorey, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1937, Book 10.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html>

Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R.G.Bury, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1931.
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/timaeus.html>

Plotinus, 'On Heaven', 'On the Movement of Heaven', 'On Whether the Stars are Causes', *Ennead II*, 1 - 2, Vol. 2, trans., A.H.Armstrong (Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press 1929).
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads>

