

A History of Philosophy

18 Middle and Neo-Platonism

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Now, this afternoon, I want to talk about Middle Platonism and make a beginning in talking about Neo-Platonism. Middle Platonism is not represented at all in our anthology and is not discussed by Stumpf. I'm daring to introduce it, however, because, as we'll see in a couple of days, it's crucially important in understanding the development of Christian thought, the development of theological positions and controversies, and the relationship between Christianity and the later Neo-Platonism.

You can think of Middle Platonism as representing the first two centuries A.D., the first two centuries. And think of it as an amalgam of Platonism with two other streams of thought at that time. Stoicism, particularly with its emphasis on the logos, logos in the sense of the divine law that orders the natural world.

Also, Neo-Pythagoreanism, and that in view of its concept of emanation. And we want to see what this is and how it all comes together. Well, let's start with this.

At that juncture in history, there were strong tendencies towards dualism of one sort or another. We've seen dualistic interpretations of Plato, in which matter is presumably some primal, uncreated chaos into which form comes. A dualistic interpretation of Plato, with implications for the problem of evil.

There is a much more definite kind of dualism in various kinds of Gnosticism of that time. Various kinds of Gnosticism, which explicitly regarded matter as evil, or at least the source of evil. Mind or reason as good.

And there are some comments about dualism and reactions to it in that piece that's on reserve about the divine logos and the goodness of creation that I mentioned last time. But in addition to Platonism and Gnosticism, in Stoicism, there is, of course, what, back in Heraclitus, we called a double aspect theory. Where the Stoics viewed nature as a process of change, and some of them likened the basic stuff to fiery vapor, like Heraclitus.

But the other side is, of course, the logos. The orderedness, the law-governed nature of things. And so, various tendencies towards dualism.

Now, what middle Platonism does, decisively, for the future of Platonism, is to push from dualism in a monistic direction. Not two ultimate realities, or two irreconcilable aspects to reality, but one inclusive reality from which variety is derived and to which it returns. Moving from dualism to monism.

How did they do it? They did it by means of the Neo-Pythagorean emphasis on emanations. Now, Neo-Pythagoreanism itself developed with Platonic ingredients and Stoic ingredients. And in some writers, there is virtually no distinction made between certain Neo-Pythagoreans and Middle Platonists.

In fact, I think of one whose name is Albinus, who by some writers is called a Neo-Pythagorean and others a Middle Platonist. The similarity is there. But what the Pythagoreans did was to conceive of a hierarchy of beings with varying degrees of being and perfection, from God all the way down to the other extreme, non-being.

A hierarchy with all sorts of intermediary beings. In fact, even between, shall we say, the human realm and the divine realm, intermediary beings. Various kinds of powers with various degrees of perfection and imperfection.

This notion of a hierarchy of being becomes, in fact, the conceptual model that governs the Middle Ages. This is where it comes from, that hierarchical notion. This found expression in the structure of the church and of society, as well as in philosophy, literature, and so on and so forth.

And has carried over into some Christian thinking to this day. It's a hierarchy of being in which there are no gaps. And so we talk of the principle of plenitude.

The hierarchy is filled up. There are no places to let. There are no vacancies.

Every possible degree of being is taken by something that exists. Now, that notion has a long history. And you may be interested sometime in looking up a book by A. O. Lovejoy.

It's an older book, about 60 years old, 70 years old now. A. O. Lovejoy wrote a book called *The Great Chain of Being*. *The Great Chain of Being*.

And particularly those of you in history and literature who want to have some sense of where this notion comes from that plays such a role in Western thought may want to take note of that book for some time to read. A. O. Lovejoy's *Great Chain of Being*. Well, this hierarchy of things is an arrangement that enables them to preserve the transcendence of God.

That is to say, God is transcendent in the sense that he is qualitatively far beyond this earth and earthly creatures. Humans included. But at the same time, it preserves the transcendence; it facilitates the imminence of God.

You know, and keeping both these things in balance is one of the issues that arose in Greek thought. Plato's God is so transcendent, out of touch with earthly beings.

Aristotle's God, beyond the outer perimeter of the universe, and in terms of efficient causation, is unable to do anything among earthly beings.

But they were trying to preserve the imminence by virtue of the logos doctrine taken over from the Stoics. Now, remember that doctrine. For the Stoics, the logos was divine reason.

Probably impersonal. But some rational, unchanging principle that embraces and permeates everything in existence. So that there are seeds of the logos, logoi spermatikoi.

Seeds of the logos in every particular thing. Now, if that's the case, then you see there are these seeds of the logos running all the way down. Everywhere.

It is by virtue of the logos that the divine being is imminent in every natural thing and every earthly process. Imminent in so far as these logoi spermatikoi are equated with the imminent forms, and you expected me to say of the Aristotelian tradition. Now I'm going to say of the later Platonic tradition because there are hints at it in the Timaeus.

You see the forms that brought physical things into the receptacle. So that it's by virtue of the forms becoming logoi spermatikoi, seeds of the divine logos that you have the imminence as well as the transcendence. Consequently, evil can now be seen as dependent on one stage in the whole hierarchy of being.

That is to say, down here, a dog simply doesn't have the degree of perfection that is appropriate to the human being. Nor does the human being have the degree of perfection appropriate to higher beings. But by the same token, among human beings, there are some who do not live in accordance with that logos.

According to the Stoic ethic, we are to live. Human beings who do not, putting it in Platonic language, conform to the form of their human existence. They don't achieve the actuality of that inherent capacity.

And evil then is a privation, a privation of good. It's a privation of the intended good, of the form in actualization. So you can see the way in which breaking with dualism, a monism is now involved.

What you have in fact may sound like pantheism. Because if the logos is divine, if the logos, that is to say, is the highest emanation from the divine being, if the logos is divine and permeates all things, then it sounds at least as if the divine is in everything, and insofar as matter has no separate existence, the divine becomes everything. It's a kind of pantheism.

Which was another problem later on that had to be wrestled with. Middle Platonism, because of the Stoic influence, Neo-Platonism was pretty pantheistic. When Christianity assimilated Middle Platonism, as many Christians did, they found they had to make distinctions between God and creation that were not inherent in this emanation theory.

And the distinction that finally was made was that instead of emanation, creation ex nihilo is the way to conceive the distinction. What is emanation? Well, the word itself means an outflowing. An outflowing of being.

Analogies used are of water streaming from a fountain, light streaming from the sun, you see. So if the natural world is an emanation of the divine being, it's of the very stuff of which the divine being is. Nature comes ex deo, out of the divine being, rather than ex nihilo.

So what begins to take shape on the horizon now, and it's on the horizon still, is a distinction between dualism, dualism as in the Gnostics, pantheism as in the Neoplatonists, and theism as in Christian thought. Dualism, where things are formed out of eternal matter, ex materia. Pantheism with things formed ex deo, out of the very substance of God.

And theism with creation ex nihilo, out of nothing at all. Giving rise to three very different worldviews. And in a real way, the history of the first five, six centuries of Christian thought is the history of trying to make those distinctions clearly.

Now, one or two other notes about this Middle Platonism. I was saying that it enabled them to affirm both the transcendence and the imminence of God. That is to say, God, by virtue of the logos, is an imminent formative principle within all things.

But by the same token, notice that if the forms are seeds of the logos, and the logos is the emanating reason of God, then the ultimate status of the forms is as reasons in the mind of God. You see? They are the eternal ideas in the mind of God. Now, that's hinted at in the Timaeus.

The Demiurge, who, with the forms in mind, you remember, wanted everything to be as good as possible. And in the Middle Platonism, the forms then become ideas in the mind of God, so that God now is not just the formal cause, and the final cause for the sake of which nature exists, but also the efficient cause, because it's through the operation of the logoi spermatikoi that nature comes into being, formed. Now, the logos, then, is divine.

So, you have God, you have the logos as the highest emanation, known as, let me get the exact wording of it, a God known as Proto-Theos, the first God, and the logos known as Deuteros-Theos, the second God. So that here in these pagan Middle

Platonists, there is emerging a distinction of beings within the divine God-head. You see? In fact, there were one or two of them who added to the divine logos the world soul, giving us Proto-Theos, Deuteros-Theos, and number three.

This is a pre-Christian conception of divine trinity in a purely pagan context. Okay? And it's this formulation of it which provided a conceptual tool for the early church in beginning to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity. And we'll see more of that later on.

Oh, it should be said that the motivation behind the spread of Middle Platonism was thoroughly pagan. In fact, the Roman Emperor Justinian in the 3rd century attempted to popularize Middle Platonism in order to save pagan religion because it made room for the pagan gods as other intermediary beings. You see? In addition to God, Proto-Theos, Logos, you have all sorts of other intermediary beings superior to human beings.

These are the pagan deities. So you've got all the room for pagan religion to be a popularized allegorical way of talking about these intermediary beings. In fact, the pagans weren't the only ones.

We'll be reading next week about Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher, who it's often said was a Platonist. Yes, he was a Middle Platonist. And he, too, conceived of Logos, World Soul, in precisely these Middle Platonist terms.

So the influence of it is significant. This developing thing is a fascinating story. I had a professor in graduate school who, one time in a seminar, declared that, I forget the context, I think he was talking about ethics and the necessity of having some grounding for objective moral values, and said that it was this which forced him to conclude there is some sort of personal deity.

And somebody asked him, what sort of a personal deity? Whereupon he said, well, some kind of a Trinitarian being. And the wise guy, chip-on-shoulder graduate student in the class, and there were always one or two of them at least, why on earth that? To which his reply was, well, they worked through the problem of the one and the many in the Godhead once in the ancient years; we don't have to go through all that again. Reference? Precisely this debate.

If you want to overcome the gap between Plato's good objective value, personified as God, and this world of time and space, how are you going to do it? And the middle Platonists saw that this could be done most effectively in having deuteros theos that eminentizes the good within nature. This was picked up by the early church in the debate on the Trinity, as we'll see. Isn't it? And so the philosophical basis for some sort of Trinitarian view emerged before the Christian debate on the Trinity, which is very interesting.

Well, you'll see something more of that in that article on the Divine Logos, which is on reserve. Now, the thing that we want to see is that it's this development that fed into the later emergence in the third century of Neoplatonism. And there is an interesting story.

A story that we'll pick up on again after we're through with Neoplatonism, because of the individual who plays the role in this. The personalities usually cited in terms of the beginnings of Neoplatonism are Ammonius Saccas, Porphyry, and Plotinus. Plotinus, by any account, is the most important name to remember because he wrote a series of treatises known as the *Enneads*, literally six sets of nine essays called the *Nines* in the way they've been preserved.

The *Enneads*, the *Nines*. Six *Enneads*. Purporting to report on Porphyry's teaching, though usually taken to be largely his own.

But Porphyry's teaching originated in Ammonius Saccas, who in the second century in Alexandria was a middle Platonist who was also a member of the Christian catechetical school in Alexandria. You may recall from some other context that in the second and third centuries, Alexandria had a Christian academy of sorts devoted to educating not only church people but others as well, pagans, who came for instruction. Instruction in theology.

Instruction in philosophy. Instruction in other things. Alexandria was one of the seats of learning in antiquity.

Clement of Alexandria, early church father, was an earnest advocate of what they then thought of as the liberal arts in that classic tradition. And this school was where it was practiced. Ammonius Saccas was part of it.

It seems, and you get conflicting reports in the secondary literature, that Ammonius Saccas was at one time a student, perhaps a student at the same time as Origen. Perhaps also a teacher in that school. In any case, at one time, a Christian.

And Ammonius Saccas later departed from Alexandria and from the Christian faith and continued his teaching, which became the Neoplatonism of Porphyry and Plotinus. So in that sense, Neoplatonism was a continuation of Middle Platonism as it had been filtered through the Alexandrian school and been Christianized in the process. If you like, Neoplatonism was a Christian heresy.

It was a departure from Christianity. But in some ways, it was a reversion to pre-Christian Middle Platonism. Do you get the picture? Okay.

And the importance of Neoplatonism is not just in its origin. Its origin is a fascinating thing. We'll come back to the Alexandrian school when we're through with Neoplatonism.

But the importance of Neoplatonism is that it provided the philosophical framework that dominated medieval thought until the 11th and 12th centuries. Continued to be a powerful influence after the Reformation, both in the Renaissance and during the Enlightenment. Went through another resurgence in 19th-century Europe.

Okay. So the history of Platonism and history continuing really into the 20th century. Tremendously influential.

When you read of Platonism in later history, sometimes it's Plato, sometimes it's Neoplatonism. Okay. And you always have to read the context to see which it is.

Sometimes it's Plato, sometimes it's Neoplatonism. And the figures influenced by it are innumerable. If you read John Milton, you don't read long in his theology before you discover that he's talking Neoplatonist language.

It seems to be Neoplatonic in his kind of Christianity. So, very important to watch. Now, what about the Neoplatonic philosophy? How does it look? And immediately, you can begin to see echoes of that old middle Platonism.

Because the Neoplatonists also thought of a hierarchy of being with emanations and with a divine trinity. Okay. The top of the hierarchy, the one, I'd better put it higher up.

The one. Okay. Top of the hierarchy.

And below the one on the hierarchy, there is a noose. If you like, intelligence. Logos.

Below intelligence, world soul. There it is, explicitly. Okay.

You see, those are three ingredients already in Plato's *Timaeus*. How did they get to be a hierarchy with emanations? Because of Middle Platonism. It's Middle Platonism that brought the doctrine of emanation into Neoplatonism.

And from the world soul, finite souls. And the souls descend into bodies. And so towards the bottom of the hierarchy.

This downward movement is emanation. But we mustn't let that give us the impression that the downward movement means that there is a gradual emptying out of the divine being. Far from it.

What you have is a parallel movement known as epistrophe. Return. Epistrophe, a Greek term translated as conversion, a turning back.

So emanation is an outflowing, epistrophe is a turning back. That Neoplatonic language is very evident in the language of certain kinds of mysticism to this day. The myth of the eternal return.

Phrases of that sort, you see, are Neoplatonic. And inasmuch as everything flows out from and returns to the one, obviously this is a form of monism. A form of pantheism because the one is the divine being.

So if you see this in the light of the history that goes back to the Eliatics, you remember? Parmenides, the one. Heraclitus yet everything is changing. The pluralists many, many different kinds of things.

How within the context of the one are you going to explain change and plurality without saying as the Eliatics did that they're both sheer illusion. The same story in Plato. You've got the world of change, you've got the world of eternal unchanging form.

What's the relationship? However, can you describe what it is to participate? Plato couldn't. You see? What's the connection? The answer? Emanation, epistrophe. And so this is the form of Platonism which was transmitted through the Middle Ages to modern times.

Neoplatonism, with its doctrine of emanation drawn from the Neopythagorean tradition through the Middle Platonism. Now, let me pause there for a question. This outward movement makes it seem that the one is the efficient cause that's forever pushing birds out of the nest.

Okay? Yet at the same time, epistrophe makes it apparent that the one is also the final cause towards which everything is moving. In other words, God is for the Neoplatonists material cause because everything is of the divine out of the divine being. Efficient cause.

Formal cause because of the logos. Final cause. And explicitly so, Plotinus cites Aristotle along those lines.

Okay? So if the term epistrophe is a little bit amorphous and vague, you can catch anticipations of it in Plato's Love for God. Love for the good. Okay? In Aristotle's emphasis on wonder, the souls of the stars move by wonder.

Okay? The notion of final causation. Yeah, all of that is being packed into this eternal return. Okay? So it's this movement that maintains the balance.

Now, what we have to do, therefore, is to trace out what Plotinus has to say about the one, the nous, the world soul, finite souls and bodies, the problem of evil, etc. And you can anticipate what that is going to be like by recognizing here the divided line. Plato's divided line.

You see? Superimpose it. Because here in the upper half, you have what is eternal. Universal.

Here you have what is temporal. Particular. Changing.

And if you want to raise the epistemological questions, then you have to raise them in terms of a Platonic kind of epistemology. How can there be innate knowledge? Well, by virtue of the fact that the finite soul is a seed of the world soul, itself an emanation from the all-intelligent nous. Hence, the possibility of innate knowledge.

Hence, the importance of dialectic. You're getting it out in the open. So this is a revised version of Platonism.

All right, these three hypostases are what Plotinus calls them. Hypostases. Are any of you familiar enough with the theological formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity to recognize the word hypostasis? You see, because in the Chalcedonian formulation of the Trinity, later on in the 5th century, we're told there are three hypostases.

Singular hypostasis. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To call them three hypostases is the language of Neoplatonism.

Three hypostases in one ousia. What's ousia? Being. Essence.

Three hypostases with one essence. It's the language of Neoplatonism. Hypostasis gets translated in process of translation in the Latin versions persona.

Hence, the English person. But the Latin persona was more of a role, a mask that the actor wore to identify his role, who he was. You see.

But in translation, it's become three persons in one being. The language of the creed is hypostasis and ousia. So in a very real sense, the Trinitarian formulation made use of vocabulary, to some extent, ideas.

Drawn from Middle Platonism, the vocabulary was later influenced by Neoplatonism. You said that the status of the forms is hypo... Yes. Does that mean that from the world soul? Yes.

In a certain sense. The one is perfect unity. Aristotle stressed perfect actuality.

Plotinus stresses perfect unity. Influence of Parmenides. Why unity? Because unity and identity are one and the same thing.

You only have identity if you have unity. You see. If you are a multiple schizophrenic with six different personalities.

You see. If there is an I and a thou within you in some sense, then you don't have unity, absolute unity. So in stressing the one, what Plotinus is trying to say is that this is the most real kind of being, the most complete kind of being, the perfection of being, of beauty itself, and is beyond anything in particular that we can say about it.

Beyond definition. Now, why beyond definition? Because to define something is to mark it off from something else. But if the one is the all-inclusive one, there isn't something else to define it from.

Do you get it? And so you have to think of the one as beyond anything we can predicate of God. In addition, all of the predicates we might come up with, all of the attributes, are attributes we draw from our knowledge of finite things and apply them to God. They are distinguishing marks of things applied to God.

But God isn't distinguished from anything else. God is the all-inclusive one. So in that sense, God is beyond all predication.

Moreover, God is beyond all thought. His own thought. In the sense that if God thought about things, there would be things distinct from God for God to think.

And God would not be the one. Moreover, if God thought just his own thoughts, God would be both object and subject of thought. And there would be a distinction within God and he wouldn't be absolutely one.

Get it? So in that sense, God is beyond our thought and is beyond thinking. Now, how then can you ask questions about the one? I'm not putting you down for asking questions, but... How? Barry, you were about to ask something. Weren't you waving your hand? No, it wasn't Barry, it was... Yeah, Chris.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, asking this of the Christian trinity or of Neoplatonism.

Yeah. In talking... Yeah, well, let me respond with regards to the trinity first and then move back to where we were. As far as the trinity, the way ousia is used, it refers to the essential nature of God with the essential attributes.

So we speak of the three persons as sharing all the same attributes. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all omniscient, omnipotent, eternal, etc., etc., etc. So essence refers to essential attributes.

The same nature. But what can ousia, being, mean in Neoplatonism? And there you have the interesting, very interesting question because all you can say is that being itself, being qua being, remember, Chris, the Aristotelian phrase, being qua being, is one, it's an all-inclusive concept, so you can't mark it off from any other concept. In that sense, being is indefinable.

It is known immediately, you see, known immediately in the sense that you recognize being, even though you can't describe it, define it. What is it that all being has in common? Is! You see, to say anything more is to delineate being from being. Now, that's not a very helpful answer, but it's as Neoplatonic as I can get.

In fact, you find some cases where Plotinus says, actually, the one is beyond being. The one is beyond being. Because so often we use the word being to distinguish a being from another being, or being from becoming.

You see? And he doesn't want to do any of that, if being is all-inclusive, beyond being. And inasmuch as we ascribe certain attributes to God, there are times when he says being is beyond God, beyond goodness, though we're trying to distinguish one thing from another. So beyond all mental distinction.

You remember back in Anaximander? You remember Anaximander? Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes? Remember? Back in Anaximander, the basic nature of being was labeled as apiron. What does apiron mean? The unlimited? The indefinable? You see? It sounds like that's feeding into the notion of the one. The apiron.

The undefinable. Known only, therefore, by the via negativa. What's the via negativa? The negative way.

Yeah, the negative way. You use negative terms in speaking. God is not finite.

The one is not multiple. It's not this, it's not that, it's not the other. It's beyond anything we can say.

Of course, you can't help but notice how traditional Christian vocabulary about God includes a lot of via negativa. Immortal, invisible. Immortal, invisible.

Want me to sing? Okay, that's about as far as we can go, then, on the one. Wait a minute, what's the time? We've got another three or four minutes. What about the nous? Reason, intelligence.

The intelligible principle. Well, you see, this is, as it were, the mind flowing out from God. From the one.

Now, in this emanation, reason, thought, you can speak as if the divine being is thinking. Thinking its own thoughts, like Aristotle's unmoved mover. Thinking on its own thoughts.

Because the forms are in the mind of the logos. In the mind of the nous. Divine intelligence.

This is the highest definable emanation of the divine being. It's here that we are able to speak of the divine being as altogether wise. Altogether good.

Altogether beautiful. Because this is the realm of ideals. The forms.

Differentiated. In the mind of God. In the world soul, this is the dynamic, life-giving, energizing force that permeates finite things, orders them, conserves them, and guides them.

If you like to speak more precisely, the efficient cause in the divine being, the efficient cause of nature is the world soul. The formal cause is the nous. The final cause and the material cause are both one.

Because the world soul is the dynamic agent in the process. This comes closest to efficient cause. So I take it that the role of nous and world soul is much easier to get a handle on.

We've met those in Plato and others. It's the nature of the one that's the teaser that you have to ponder for a while.