

History of Philosophy

18 Middle and Neo-Platonism

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Abstract:

This text examines the transition from **Middle Platonism** to **Neo-Platonism**, highlighting how these philosophical stages bridged classical Greek thought and early Christian theology. **Middle Platonism** integrated **Stoic** concepts of divine law and **Pythagorean** ideas of a hierarchical reality to move away from dualism toward **monism**. Central to this shift is the **Great Chain of Being**, a model where existence flows from a singular divine source through a series of **emanations**. This framework introduced the **Logos** as an intermediary force, allowing for a god that is simultaneously distant and present within the world. These developments eventually culminated in **Neo-Platonism**, which provided the linguistic and conceptual tools, such as **hypostasis**, used by the early church to define the **Trinity**. Ultimately, the source illustrates how these pagan philosophies established the intellectual foundation for Western medieval thought and Christian doctrine.

Briefing Document:

The Evolution of Platonism: From Middle Platonism to Neo-Platonism

Executive Summary

The transition from Middle Platonism to Neo-Platonism marks a pivotal shift in Western philosophical thought, moving from classical dualism toward a sophisticated monism. Middle Platonism (1st–2nd century A.D.) synthesized Platonic forms with Stoic "Logos" and Neo-Pythagorean "emanation" to create a hierarchy of being that bridged the gap between a transcendent God and the material world. This era introduced the "Great Chain of Being," a concept that dominated medieval thought for a millennium.

Crucially, these philosophical developments provided the conceptual scaffolding for early Christian theology. The pagan formulation of a "divine trinity"—consisting of a First God (*Proto-Theos*), a Second God (*Deuteros-Theos* or *Logos*), and a World Soul—served as a precursor to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Neo-Platonism, emerging in the 3rd century through Plotinus, further refined these ideas into a comprehensive system of "emanation" (outflowing from the divine) and "epistrophe" (the return to the divine), establishing a worldview that influenced everything from medieval mysticism to 19th-century European philosophy.

Middle Platonism (1st–2nd Century A.D.)

Middle Platonism emerged as an amalgam of three distinct intellectual streams. It sought to resolve the tensions inherent in classical Greek thought regarding the relationship between the divine and the physical world.

The Synthesis of Three Schools

1. **Platonism:** Provided the foundational theory of forms and the distinction between the intelligible and sensible worlds.
2. **Stoicism:** Contributed the concept of the **Logos**, interpreted as the divine law or reason that orders the natural world.
3. **Neo-Pythagoreanism:** Introduced the concept of **emanation**, facilitating a move from dualism toward monism.

The Shift Toward Monism

Earlier interpretations of Plato and various Gnostic sects were strictly dualistic, viewing matter as a primal, uncreated chaos or the source of evil. Middle Platonism pushed toward a monistic direction—one inclusive reality from which all variety is derived and to which it eventually returns.

The Great Chain of Being

Middle Platonism conceived of a hierarchy of being with no vacancies, governed by the "principle of plenitude."

- **Structure:** A continuous ladder from God (perfection) down to non-being, filled with intermediary powers and beings.

- **Significance:** This model, popularized in modern scholarship by A.O. Lovejoy, became the governing conceptual model for the Middle Ages, influencing church structure, society, and literature.

God, Logos, and the Problem of Evil

Middle Platonism attempted to balance the **transcendence** of God (qualitatively beyond Earth) with His **immanence** (presence within the world).

The Role of the Logos

The Stoic doctrine of the Logos was adapted to bridge the gap between the divine and the earthly:

- **Logoi Spermatikoi:** These "seeds of the logos" are equateable with the immanent forms. By virtue of these seeds, the divine is present in every natural thing and process.
- **The Mind of God:** In Middle Platonism, the Platonic forms are re-envisioned as ideas or "reasons" within the mind of God. Consequently, God acts not only as the formal and final cause but also as the **efficient cause** of nature.

The Privation Theory of Evil

By moving away from dualism, Middle Platonism redefined evil. Rather than being a separate substance or "matter," evil is viewed as a **privation of good**.

- Evil is a failure to achieve the actuality of an inherent capacity or form.
- It represents a lower stage in the hierarchy of being—a lack of the perfection appropriate to a specific creature's existence.

Categorizing Worldviews: The Origin of the Trinity

The interplay between Middle Platonism and early Christian thought resulted in distinct definitions of the relationship between God and the universe.

Three Competing Worldviews

Worldview	Concept of Creation	Relationship to Matter/God
Dualism (Gnosticism)	<i>Ex materia</i>	Things are formed out of eternal, pre-existing matter.
Pantheism (Neo-Platonism)	<i>Ex deo</i>	Nature is an "outflowing" of the very substance of God.
Theism (Christianity)	<i>Ex nihilo</i>	Creation is brought forth "out of nothing," distinct from God.

Pre-Christian Trinitarianism

Pagan Middle Platonists formulated a distinction of beings within the Godhead long before the Christian debates of the 4th and 5th centuries:

1. **Proto-Theos:** The First God.
2. **Deuteros-Theos:** The Second God, identified as the Logos.
3. **World Soul:** Occasionally added as a third element.

This pagan framework provided the early church with the philosophical vocabulary (such as *hypostasis* and *ousia*) necessary to formulate Christian orthodoxy.

Neo-Platonism and Plotinus (3rd Century A.D.)

Neo-Platonism represents a further development of Middle Platonist themes, emerging largely from Alexandria.

Historical Origins

- **Ammonius Saccas:** A teacher in Alexandria who was once a Christian but later departed from the faith. He taught both Porphyry and potentially Origen.
- **Plotinus:** The most significant Neo-Platonic figure. He authored the *Enneads* (The Nines), which systematized Neo-Platonic thought.
- **Nature of the School:** Neo-Platonism can be viewed as a continuation of Middle Platonism filtered through the Alexandrian school; some scholars describe it as a "Christian heresy" or a reversion to pre-Christian paganism.

The Hierarchy of Hypostases

Plotinus identified three primary *hypostases* (essences or realities) that make up the divine hierarchy:

1. **The One:**

- The pinnacle of the hierarchy; absolute unity and identity.
- **Indefinable:** To define is to limit; since The One is all-inclusive, it cannot be distinguished from anything else.
- **The Via Negativa:** God can only be known by what He is *not* (e.g., "immortal," "not multiple").
- **Beyond Being:** Plotinus argued The One is "beyond being" and "beyond thought," as thinking implies a distinction between subject and object.

2. **Nous (Intelligence/Reason):**

- The first emanation from The One.
- The realm of the forms and ideals. This is where the divine being is viewed as altogether wise, good, and beautiful.

3. **World Soul:**

- The dynamic, life-giving force that orders and guides the finite world.
- Acts as the efficient cause of nature.

Mechanics of Reality: Emanation and Epistrophe

Neo-Platonism explains the relationship between the One and the Many through a dual movement of being.

- **Emanation (Outflowing):** The downward movement where reality flows out from The One. Unlike a "gradual emptying," it is an overflowing of being, similar to light from the sun or water from a fountain.

- **Epistrophe (Return/Conversion):** The parallel movement of "turning back" toward The One. This is the "eternal return" or the mystical longing of the soul to reunite with its source.

Integration of Causes

Plotinus integrated Aristotelian and Platonic causes into this system:

- **The One:** Acts as the Material Cause (all things are of the divine substance) and Final Cause (the goal of the return).
- **Nous:** Acts as the Formal Cause (the realm of ideas).
- **World Soul:** Acts as the Efficient Cause (the agent of the process).

Legacy and Influence

The influence of Neo-Platonism was vast, dominating medieval philosophy until the 12th century. It resurfaced during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and 19th-century Romanticism. Its terminology remains embedded in Western thought; for instance, the Trinitarian formula of "three *hypostases* in one *ousia*" (three persons in one being) is directly derived from Neo-Platonic philosophical language.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Middle and Neo-Platonism

This study guide provides a comprehensive synthesis of the development of Middle and Neo-Platonism as outlined in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores the transition from dualism to monism, the integration of Stoic and Pythagorean concepts, and the profound influence these philosophical movements had on early Christian theology and Western thought.

Conceptual Overview

The Emergence of Middle Platonism

Middle Platonism represents the philosophical landscape of the first two centuries A.D. It is characterized as an "amalgam" of traditional Platonism with two other major streams of thought:

1. **Stoicism:** Specifically the Stoic emphasis on the *Logos* as the divine law that orders the natural world.
2. **Neo-Pythagoreanism:** Particularly the concept of **emanation**, which provided a mechanism for deriving variety from a single source.

From Dualism to Monism

Historically, Greek thought struggled with dualism—the idea of two irreconcilable realities, such as matter (primal chaos) and form (mind/reason). Middle Platonism decisively pushed philosophy toward **monism**: the belief in one inclusive reality from which all variety is derived and to which it eventually returns.

In this framework, the universe is viewed as a **Hierarchy of Being** (The Great Chain of Being). This hierarchy is governed by the **Principle of Plenitude**, asserting that there are no "vacancies" in existence; every possible degree of perfection, from God down to non-being, is occupied by some level of reality.

The Mechanism of Emanation and Epistrophe

Neo-Platonism, emerging in the 3rd century through figures like Plotinus and his work *The Enneads*, refined these ideas into a dynamic system of two movements:

- **Emanation:** An "outflowing" of being from the source, like water from a fountain or light from the sun.
- **Epistrophe:** A "turning back" or conversion, where the emanated beings return to the source.

The Nature of the Godhead

Middle and Neo-Platonism introduced a "divine trinity" of beings (hypostases) long before the Christian formulation:

1. **The One (Proto-Theos):** Absolute unity, beyond definition, thought, or even "being" in the traditional sense.

2. **Nous (Deuteros-Theos/Intelligence):** The divine mind containing the eternal forms/ideas.
 3. **World Soul:** The dynamic, life-giving force that permeates and orders the physical world.
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Quiz: Short-Answer Questions

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the source context.

1. How did Middle Platonism utilize the Stoic concept of the *Logos*?
 2. What is the "Principle of Plenitude" in the context of the hierarchy of being?
 3. How does the theory of emanation differ from the concept of creation *ex nihilo*?
 4. Why did Middle Platonists view evil as a "privation of good"?
 5. What was the significance of *logoi spermatikoi* in maintaining divine immanence?
 6. Describe the characteristics of "The One" according to Plotinus.
 7. What role did Ammonius Saccas play in the development of Neo-Platonism?
 8. How does the "via negativa" function in describing the divine?
 9. In what way did pagan Middle Platonism provide a "conceptual tool" for the early Christian church?
 10. Distinguish between the formal and efficient causes within the Neo-Platonic hierarchy.
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Answer Key

1. **Middle Platonism adopted the Stoic *Logos* as a divine, rational principle that orders and permeates the natural world. This allowed philosophers**

to bridge the gap between a transcendent God and the physical universe by viewing the *Logos* as an immanent law-governed force.

2. The Principle of Plenitude suggests that the hierarchy of being is entirely full, with no gaps or vacancies between levels of perfection. Every possible degree of being is occupied by an existing thing, creating a continuous "Great Chain of Being" from the divine to non-being.
3. Emanation describes an outflowing "out of the substance of God" (*ex deo*), suggesting the world is made of the same "stuff" as the divine. In contrast, creation *ex nihilo* posits that God created the world "out of nothing," establishing a clear ontological distinction between the Creator and the creation.
4. By moving toward monism, philosophers argued that evil is not an independent, eternal substance or power. Instead, evil is seen as a lack or "privation" of the perfection or form that ought to be present in a particular stage of the hierarchy.
5. *Logoi spermatikoi*, or "seeds of the logos," are equated with the forms that enter the physical world. They ensure divine immanence by acting as the rational, formative principles present within every particular natural thing and earthly process.
6. "The One" is defined by absolute unity and identity, placed beyond all definition and predication because to define it would be to limit it. Plotinus argued it is beyond thought and even "being" itself, as it is the all-inclusive source that cannot be distinguished from anything else.
7. Ammonius Saccas was a Middle Platonist in Alexandria who had ties to the Christian catechetical school and may have taught Origen. He is credited with originating the teachings that his students, Porphyry and Plotinus, later developed into the formal system of Neo-Platonism.
8. The "via negativa," or negative way, is a method of describing the divine by stating what it is *not* rather than what it is. Because the ultimate source is beyond human language, it is described using terms like "immortal" or "invisible" to emphasize its transcendence over finite categories.

9. **Pagan Middle Platonism formulated a distinction of beings within the Godhead (such as Proto-Theos and Deuteros-Theos) to solve the problem of the One and the Many. This pre-existing philosophical structure provided the vocabulary and conceptual framework that the early church used to debate and define the doctrine of the Trinity.**
10. **In the Neo-Platonic system, the *Nous* (Intelligence) serves as the formal cause because it contains the eternal ideas or forms. The World Soul serves as the efficient cause, acting as the dynamic, life-giving force that orders and conserves the physical realm.**

Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. Compare and contrast the three worldviews of Dualism, Pantheism, and Theism as described by Dr. Holmes, specifically focusing on their accounts of the origin of matter.
2. Analyze the relationship between Middle Platonism and the development of early Christian theology. How did pagan philosophical motivations inadvertently serve the needs of the early Church?
3. Explain the Neo-Platonic movement of "Emanation" and "Epistrophe." How does this cycle attempt to reconcile the Eliatic problem of the One and the Many?
4. Discuss the philosophical necessity of the "hierarchy of being." How does this model attempt to preserve both the transcendence and the immanence of the divine?
5. Evaluate Plotinus's description of "The One." Why must the source of all things be beyond thought and definition, and what are the implications of this for human knowledge?

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Apiron	A term used by Anaximander meaning "the unlimited" or "the indefinable"; it correlates to the Neo-Platonic concept of The One.
Deuteros-Theos	The "Second God" in Middle Platonism, often equated with the <i>Logos</i> or divine reason.
Dualism	A worldview positing two ultimate, often irreconcilable realities, such as matter (chaos/evil) and mind (form/good).
Emanation	An "outflowing" (<i>ex deo</i>) of being from the divine source into a hierarchy of lesser perfections.
Epistrophe	Translated as "conversion" or "turning back"; the movement of return from the multiplicity of creation to the unity of the One.
Ex Nihilo	"Out of nothing"; the theistic view that God created the universe without using pre-existing matter or his own substance.
Hypostasis	A term used by Plotinus and later the Church to describe a distinct "being" or "person" within the divine Godhead.
Logoi Spermatikoi	"Seeds of the logos"; the imminent rational forms present in all particular things.
Monism	The philosophical position that there is only one inclusive ultimate reality from which all things are derived.
Nous	Intelligence or Divine Reason; the second hypostasis in Neo-Platonism that contains the eternal forms.
Ousia	A Greek term for "essence" or "being"; in Trinitarian theology, it refers to the shared nature of the three hypostases.
Principle of Plenitude	The idea that the universe is "filled up" and contains every possible degree of being without any vacancies.
Proto-Theos	The "First God" or the absolute source in the Middle Platonist hierarchy.

Via Negativa

The "negative way" of theology/philosophy, which describes the divine by what it is not (e.g., infinite, unchanging).

World Soul

The third hypostasis in the Neo-Platonic hierarchy; the dynamic, energizing force that guides the physical world.