

# AN OVERVIEW OF PLATONISM

Ash-Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri

## Author's Note

This article is a first in a series of papers written to understand the ancient Greek, Egyptian, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and other philosophies, and religions. These papers are very useful for the readers of history and religion, who will have an opportunity to understand the distinction between ancient world philosophies and religions and Islamic teachings.

**Citation format:** Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri, "An Overview of Platonism", CIFIA Global Journal, Vol 1, July 2020

## Abstract

This article provides an overview of Platonism. We discuss how Platonism developed and evolved over a period of centuries, the philosophers who helped in its formation and, what were their beliefs. We intend to provide the readers with key insights into the evolution of pre-Islamic Greek philosophy that continued to play a part in forming theological perspectives of many philosophers. We further discuss the role of prominent Muslim theologians/Sufi Shuyookh such as Al-Ghazali, who paved the distinction between teachings of Islam and ancient philosophies, clarifying that Islamic theology is distinctly different from that of ancient Greek philosophies.

*Keywords* - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Neoplatonism, Al-Ghazali

Philosophy and mathematics are known to have been practiced by ancient Greek philosophers. The evolution of the philosophy of ancient Greeks can be divided into 5 eras, namely,

- (i) Pre-Socrates era
- (ii) The era of Socrates
- (iii) Platonism (post Socrates era)
- (iv) Middle Platonism
- (v) Neoplatonism

## The evolution of the philosophy of ancient Greeks

### (i) Pre-Socrates era

The pre-Socrates era philosophers include (i) Thales of Miletos (624 - 546) BC, (ii) Anaximander (610 - 546) BC, (iii) Anaximenes (585 - 525) BC, (iv) Heraclitus (535 - 475) BC, (v) Pythagoras (570 - 490) BC, (vi) Parmenides of

Elea (515 - 450) BC, (vii) Anaxagoras (500 - 428) BC, (viii) Empedocles (490 - 430) BC, (ix) Zeno of Elea (490 - 430) BC, (x) Protagoras (490 - 420) BC, etc.

These scholars asserted that everything should be based on logical reasoning. A stance, that was distinctively different from their predecessors. Their approach to philosophy was to raise many questions and provide answers by the means of logical reasoning. Their questions ranged from the origins of the cosmos to understanding the presence of widespread variation and complexity in it. It was their contention that everything in the universe could be explained mathematically.

### (ii) The era of Socrates

*Socrates* (470-399 BC) is considered to be among the pioneers of Western philosophy. While his original works have not survived, his claim to fame comes through the teachings of his students, mainly Plato.

*Plato* (428-347 BC) was one of the students of Socrates who is reported to have written 35 dialogues and 13 letters. However, till 1453 CE, his only work known in the West was 'Timaeus', when the Roman empire's capital Constantinople was annexed by Sultan Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire.

*Aristotle* (384–322 BC) was the student of Plato. He wrote on many subjects such as, physics, biology, zoology, metaphysics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, poetry, theatre, music, rhetoric, psychology, linguistics, economics, politics, etc.

His writings have influenced all types of knowledge in the West. His writings also influenced many Muslim scholars in the Middle ages who revered him as their teacher.

### (iii) Platonism

Any philosophy that derives its ultimate inspiration from Plato is known as Platonism. Platonism was based on the interpretation of 'dialogues' written by Plato. Platonism hovered around the ethical, religious, and political beliefs that eternal realities, which were referred to as 'forms' by Plato, remain unchanged from the changing things witnessed by physical eyes. These realities are the causes of existence of everything in the Cosmos. This fact distinguishes Platonism with other philosophies of contemporary and pre-Socrates era which were later developed as 'Relativism', Sophism, etc.

### (iv) Middle Platonism

Middle Platonism begins with *Antiochus of Ascalon* (130-168 BC) of Athens and ends with Plotinus (205-270 CE) of Egypt, who is considered the founder of Neoplatonism.

The Middle Platonic philosophers inherited the exegetical and speculative problems of the Academy of Philosophers established by Plato in Athens which was continued by his successors for centuries. Many problems were raised about the interpretation of Plato's unwritten doctrines that were claimed to have been taught by him privately to some of his students, like Aristotle. These debates were inspired by Pythagorean philosophy involving the first pair of principles, the 'One and the Dyad', meaning, 'limit and limitless' or 'same as the other', and how to understand this doctrine as regards to creation given in Plato's written dialogue '*Timaeus*'. It was emphasized that Plato's unique contribution to philosophy was the introduction of the Indeterminate Dyad as a primary principle equal in importance to the 'One'. With 'Dyad' that Plato was able to solve the metaphysical problem of "how the many could be One, and the 'One', many." It is the operation of One on Dyad that generates the Platonic realms of being (Consciousness, Soul, Nature, Matter).

### (v) Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism was based on the interpretation of Plato's philosophy by famous Egyptian philosopher *Plotinus* (204 – 270 CE), who wrote 75 philosophical treatises before his death in Rome in 270 CE. Most of his writings relates to the causes of existence of things in this Cosmos.

Plotinus philosophy was later developed by a number of Plotinus's contemporaries and followers, including, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, etc.

*Plotinus* (205–270) CE was an Egyptian philosopher who is the founder of Neoplatonism. He was a pupil of the Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius Saccas (3<sup>rd</sup> century), who reportedly did not publish anything, as his teachings were verbal to his students. Around 245 CE, at the age of 40, Plotinus moved from Alexandria to Rome and founded a school of philosophy. In the beginning, he taught his students orally. However, on persuasion of his student, Porphyry, he agreed to his seminars being written down. After Plotinus' death, Porphyry edited and published these writings, having arranged them in a collection of six books consisting of nine essays each.

Plotinus was also influenced by the teachings of ancient classical works of Greek, Persian, Indian and Egyptian philosophers; therefore, his metaphysical writings influenced many Christians, Jewish, Muslim and Gnostic metaphysicians and mystics for many centuries.

As per Plotinus's philosophy, there is a Supreme, transcendent 'One' which does not have division, distinction or multiplicity and is beyond the categories of 'being or non-being'. The conception of 'being' is derived from human perception and it is an attribute of such objects. However, the 'infinite, transcendent One' is beyond all objects and beyond the concepts which can be derived from such objects. The 'One' can neither be an existing thing nor the sum of all existing things. He believed that eternal realities, which were referred to as 'forms' by Plato, remain unchanged from the changing things witnessed by physical eyes.

A brief biography of the major contemporaries of Neoplatonism are provided below.

#### (a) Porphyry

Porphyry (233 – 309 CE) was a Neoplatonist philosopher of Tyre, Lebanon, who wrote on astrology, religion, philosophy and musical theory. He also wrote the biography of his teacher Plotinus. He is well known in the history of Mathematics for his contributions. He was also influenced by Pythagoras. He wrote a commentary on 'Euclid's Elements'. Euclid's Elements consists of 13 books attributed to the ancient Greek mathematician 'Euclid' of Egypt.

Porphyry was the defender of paganism and was against Christianity. He wrote 15 books against Christianity together titled 'Adversus Christianos' (against the Christians).

#### (b) Iamblichus

Iamblichus (245-325 CE) was a Syrian Neoplatonist who was the pioneer of the direction taken by the later Neoplatonic philosophy that formed the basis of Western Philosophy and religions. He is known for his compilation on Pythagorean philosophy.

As per Iamblichus, the realm of divinities stretched from the original 'One' down to material beings, descended into matter and became superhuman beings (Godmen) influencing the events in the world and possessing the knowledge of the future.

#### (c) Proclus

Proclus (412-485 CE) was one among the last Greek Neoplatonist philosopher, born in Athens, who transmitted platonic philosophy from ancient times to the middle ages. He wrote commentaries on Aristotle, Plato and Euclid, who lived in 300 BC in Egypt, and is known as the father of Geometry. He also wrote exegetical works on the traditions of religions. He tried to create harmony of ancient religious mythologies of Homer (oldest known Greek poet), Hesiod (750-650 BC), Orphism, and Chaldean Oracles (ancient Egyptian / Greek philosophical and spiritual texts used by Neoplatonist Philosophers)

to integrate them into the philosophical traditions of Pythagoras and Plato. He had a lasting influence on the later philosophers.

Proclus believed in '*Henads*', the gods that are the first manifestation of 'the One'. He identified them with traditional Greek gods. As per Proclus, *Apollo* was a *Henad*, the god of the sun, of rational thinking, order and logic; whereas, *Dionysus* was a *Henad*, the god of wine and dance, of irrationality and chaos who appeals to emotions and instincts of humans.

The *Henads* serve both, to protect the 'One' from any hint of multiplicity, and also to draw up the rest of the universe towards the 'One', by being a connecting, intermediate stage between absolute unity and determinate multiplicity.

A large number of Neoplatonists considered the perfection of happiness can be achieved through contemplation in this world itself, rather than in the world afterlife.

### Renaissance of Neoplatonism

Philosophers like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499 CE), Medici (1449-1492 CE), and Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510 CE) are famous names in the renaissance of Neoplatonism. British Philosopher, Thomas Taylor (1758-1835 CE) wrote extensively and translated the entire Platonic Corpus into English.

The basic theory of Neoplatonism is, there is 'One', from whom everything has emanated rather than created. There is nothing in this world which did not originate from the 'One'. They say the first emanation is 'Nous', (the intellect of the 'soul') which functions to contemplate the realm of 'Nous', and in turn, is also connected to the lower realm of 'nature'.

The Christian followers of Neoplatonism identified the 'One' as God. The belief system of 'Gnosticism' is also related with Neoplatonism. There are two types of Gnostics; one of whom consider the Creator of the Cosmos and the Cosmos itself as evil. They say this evil has been named as 'Demiurge' (divine craftsman) by Plato in 'Timaeus'.

The Neoplatonists ideas also influenced the Jewish Kabbalists, but they modified Neoplatonism as per their own monotheistic beliefs.

Neoplatonist ideas also influenced some Muslim thinkers like al-Farabi, and through him, Avicenna (Ibn Sina).

From late antiquity to modern times, Neoplatonism proved to be adaptable by a variety of philosophers as the entire ideal world of Platonic forms and ideas emerges effortlessly in the course of Consciousness' effort to understand itself. In the realm of Consciousness (of the 'One'), the activity belongs to the 'One' and constitutes itself as a multiplicity within that unity. The activity of thought with its objects, conceptualized all ideas and forms of this Cosmos. This inner active life of Consciousness produces further outer effect known as Soul. According to Neoplatonic theory, the matter exists, but not as a separate ontological principle distinct from the 'One' with traces and effects of its own, rather, it is a fringe phenomenon of the life of the soul, a by-product of the activity of higher realms of 'Being'. As such, the matter is '*non thing*', an entirely immaterial and formless non-entity.

The above doctrine gave birth to controversies among later Neoplatonists, because matter is surely a thing with specific dimensions.

There is another important aspect to be considered. In the above Platonic concept, the human existence is a striking representation of the cosmos as a whole, a microcosm in which all levels of Being (Unity, Consciousness, Soul, Nature, Matter) are combined into one organic individual. The Neoplatonists took this to be a clear indication that the human beings, just like the entire cosmic edifice, came from above. A human being is therefore, in the first instance, not a social or political being, but a *divine being*, and life's purpose was seen not so much in the exercise of the traditional virtues that give meaning and quality to people's social interactions with each other, but in seeking '*to bring back the god in them, as Plotinus advised*

*his followers on the very moment of his death*' (Ref - Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 2).

## Muslim Philosophy

Falsafa (فلسفه) (philosophy) was a movement between 8-12 centuries CE, in which Christians, Jewish, Muslims, and even pagan authors participated.

The philosophy movement among Muslims was the result of translations of the Greek philosophical works into Arabic, mostly by Al-Kindi, (801-873 CE), an Arab (Iraqi) philosopher who translated most of these works into Arabic during the Abbasid Caliphate. Thus, Al-Kindi is known as the father of Arabic philosophy. The translation work continued till 10th Century CE which resulted in the development of Arabic philosophy to an extent that some of the Arab philosophers became heirs to the understanding of Aristotelian works in Neoplatonic terms.

There were three major reasons for the Neoplatonic influence in the early Muslim philosophers.

(i) Neoplatonic works were available to Muslim scholars in Greek, as Muslims took over major Greek centers of civilization, like Egypt, Syria, Etc. All these were then translated into Arabic.

(ii) Plotinus and other Neoplatonists lived only a few centuries before the rise of Islam, many of whom were Egyptian/Syrian/Lebanese/Greeks.

(iii) Neoplatonism had some similarities with Islamic Sufism, particularly with regard to the 'One', the original source of this Cosmos. It resulted in acceptance of Neoplatonic doctrines by some Muslim philosophers.

*Al-Farabi*, a Persian Philosopher, (d. 950 CE) is known to have developed a systematic philosophy that challenged key convictions of Muslim theologians. He challenged them on their belief of the creation of this world in time and about the information revealed to the Prophets. Under the influence of Aristotle and Plato, he believed that the world has no beginning and it is timeless. The celestial spheres are living and moving from eternity. He contended that the



Prophets teach the same philosophy developed by the philosophers, however they use the method of symbolization to make these teachings understandable by general people.

*Avicenna (Ibn Sina)* (980-1037 CE), a Persian philosopher, continued on al-Farabi's footsteps and developed his own metaphysics and *Prophetology* by offering explanations on how Prophets receive their knowledge and how they perform miracles, etc.

### Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1056-1111 CE), was a Persian theologian and jurist belonging to Ahle Sunnah wa Al-Jam'a. He lived at a time when Muslim theologians were facing challenges from Arab philosophers who were influenced by Aristotelian/Platonian teachings on one hand, and deviations of Ismaili theology known as 'Batiniya' on the other. He wrote a book titled '*Incoherence of the Philosophers*' (*Tahafut al-Falasifa* - تحافت الفلاسفة) which is regarded as a landmark in the history of Muslim philosophy.

Al-Ghazali's approach to resolving apparent contradictions between reason and revelation was accepted by almost all later Muslim theologians. This book also marked a turning point in Islamic philosophy in its vehement rejections of Aristotle and Plato. The book took aim at the *falasafa* (فلاسفة), a loosely defined group of Muslim philosophers from the 8th through the 11th centuries (most notable Avicenna and Al-Farabi). The following are important points of Al-Ghazali's arguments against the '*falasafa*'.

(i) The ultimate source of the *falasafa*'s knowledge about God's nature, the human soul, and the heavenly spheres are the revelations given to early prophets like Abraham (Ibrahim - عليه السلام) and Moses (Musa - عليه السلام). It has been a common contention among scholars that the Muslim theology is heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Al-Ghazali argued that it is the Greek philosophers who found inspiration for many of their theories from earlier Islamic Prophets.

(ii) Al-Ghazali's response to the *falasafa* (فلاسفة) was complex. He described that their way of knowing things by demonstrative proof (*burhan*) was not superior to the theological knowledge drawn from revelations and rational interpretation of the revelations. A thing you cannot understand by your logic need not be wrong. The incoherent logic of the *falasafa* (فلاسفة) group became the cause of some Muslims to neglect day to day practices and religious law (Sharia).

(iii) Al-Ghazali identified 20 contentions of *falasafa* (فلاسفة) and proved convincingly that the epistemological standards of demonstration (*Burhan* - بُرْهَان), (evidences), the *falasafa* have set for themselves, are not established by reason – which is the hall mark of the teaching of *falasafa*. These positions are supported by a dialectical argument of ideas and opinions. He contended that *falasafa*'s (فلاسفة) practices are '*Taqlid*', as they repeat these teachings from the founders of their movements without ever critically examining them.

(iv) Al-Ghazali described that from the 20 contentions of *falasafa* (فلاسفة), sixteen are related with metaphysics (ilahiyyat - إلهيات) and four related with natural sciences (tabi'at - طبيعات). The foremost of them is the arguments of Al-Farabi and Avicenna about the pre-eternity of the world. Al-Ghazali challenged that, this contention cannot be demonstratively proved.

(v) In his book '*Incoherence*', Al-Ghazali described that the positions taken by the *falasafa* group are wrong. However, most of them come under *bidd'a*. But three of them are problematic as far as Sharia is concerned. These are (a) the world has no beginning and was not created in time, (b) God's knowledge is limited to the classes of 'beings' in the Cosmos and does not extend to the individuals and their circumstances, (c) after death, the souls of human beings will never return to their bodies.

(vi) In the end of his book, Al-Ghazali, as a Jurist, added his Fatwa that anyone who teaches these three things, is an unbeliever and an apostate.

## Conclusion

It is evident that Prophets Abraham (Ibrahim - عليه السلام) lived around 2000 BC and Moses (Musa - عليه السلام) lived around 1000 BC. Both were given divine scriptures and both taught Monotheism to their followers. The Quran testifies to this fact. These teachings were passed on to their following generations. Over a period, these teachings were adapted into different religious, philosophical and socio-cultural traditions. The 'One', and the human soul, described in Aristotelian and Platonian philosophical discourses points to that.

## Bibliography

1. Beyer, Catherine. "Understanding Neoplatonism, the Mystical Interpretation of Plato." Learn Religions, Feb. 11, 2020, learnreligions.com/neoplatonism-95836.
2. Helmig, Christoph and Steel, Carlos, "Proclus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/proclus/>.
3. Edward Moore, St. Elias School of Orthodox Theology, US.
4. *The Chaldean Oracles*, tr. G.R.S. Mead (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, no date).
5. Plato, *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett 1997).
6. Tripolitis, A., *The Doctrine of the Soul in the Thought of Plotinus and Origen* (New York: Libra 1978).
7. Brandwood, L., 1990, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Dancy, R., 2004, *Plato's Introduction of Forms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Kahn, C., 1996, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. 1979, 'Understanding and Knowledge in Plato's Philosophy,' *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 15/16: 53–69.
11. 1992, 'Plato's Metaphysical Epistemology,' in R. Kraut (ed.) 1992, 277–310.
12. Griffel, Frank, "al-Ghazali", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/al-ghazali/>.
13. 1933, *Algazels's Metaphysics: A Medieval Translation*, J.T. Muckle (ed.), Toronto: St. Michael's College.
14. 2000a, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers / Tahâfut al-falâsifa, a Parallel English-Arabic Text*, M. E. Marmura (ed. and trans.), 2nd. ed., Provo (Utah): Brigham Young University Press.
15. 1965, "Ghazâlî and Demonstrative Science," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3: 183–204. Reprinted in Marmura 2005, pp. 231–60.
16. 2010, *Maslaha and the Purpose of the Law: Islamic Discourse on Legal Change from the 4th/10th to 8th/14th century*, Leiden: Brill.
17. Shihadeh, A., 2011, "New Light on the Reception of al-Ghazâlî's Doctrines of the Philosophers (Maqâsid al-Falâsifa)," in *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*. P. Adamson (ed.), London/Turin: Warburg Institute/Nino Aragno, pp. 77–92.



Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is an Islamic scholar, researcher, historian, educator and theologian. He has written over 200 books on various Islamic subjects. He is the writer of Tafseer-e-Asedi, the first comprehensive and complete translation and explanation of the Quran. He has also written guides for the 6 major Ahadith books. He has also developed content for over 100 courses at CIF International Academy. He is the director of CIFIA Global Research Center and managing editor of CIFIA Global Journal.