PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM

A talk by Peter Clark

This is such a wide subject that I will have to severely restrict it. I will confine myself to western thought, though I believe most of the mysticism in here derives from Egyptian, Chaldean, Persian and Indian sources, and restrict my cover of the actual philosophical/mystical details

I’ll start by defining what I mean by ‘mysticism’. My view is that while it has most often been religious it is not necessarily so in the standard sense of the term, though it does involve the supernatural. But it also has a noetic element to it, a gnosis, a true knowledge of our spiritual selves, gained by accessing this other, by revelation. I am going to be slightly broader than this and will include such topics as numerology.

I’ll begin with Pythagoras, though later mystics would claim antecedents in ancient Egypt and Persia. Indeed, it was said that Pythagoras studied with Zoroaster. It should be said that there is a great deal of confusion about what Pythagoras taught his followers (the Pythagoreans). We do know they were a mystic cult: early followers were sworn to vows of secrecy about its mysteries.

The early Pythagoreans left no written record. Though later followers did write on these beliefs, it seems they embellished them rather and such embellishments grew more extreme as time passed. In various forms this went on for many centuries.

Bertrand Russell suggests Pythagoras was offering a reformed Orphism. He wrote:

“This mystical element entered into Greek philosophy with Pythagoras, who was a reformer of Orphism as Orpheus was a reformer of the religion of Dionysus. From Pythagoras, Orphic elements entered into the philosophy of Plato, and from Plato into most later philosophy that was in any degree religious.”

Pythagoras taught the doctrine of metempsychosis, the cycle of re-incarnation or the wheel of rebirth. He included plants and animals in this cycle. He himself claimed to have been the reincarnation of many including Aethalides the son of the god Hermes.

There are parallels here with the Orphic tradition of the dual nature of man; the soul is divine but is held in bondage by the physical body. It is possible that Pythagoras also promoted the idea, central to ongoing esoteric beliefs, that man was once a purely divine being but, by a separating off from the eternal – the infinite becoming finite - fell into the physical world of space and time. Man’s purpose now is to return to this divine state. For the Pythagoreans the path to knowledge about the universe and the path to reunion with the divine were one and the same path.

Another doctrine usually attributed to Pythagoras is that all things are numbers. Later followers elaborated on this and you could claim that this was the beginning of the scientific use of mathematics, though its fruition was not until the renaissance. Kepler, for instance, was a devout Pythagorean and went on looking for the laws of planetary motion, the Pythagorean ‘harmony of the spheres’, despite initial failures.

Pythagoreans were numerological mystics. They greatly valued the number ten, as it is the sum of 1 to 4, and can be pictured as the triangle with one dot on the first row, two on the second, three on the third and four on the fourth, which they termed the tetractus. When Pythagoreans swore an oath, it was “by him who gave to our soul the tetractus.”

They also related solids to numbers, hence the squares and cubes of today’s arithmetic. Later Pythagoreans believed there were two worlds or dimensions, that of numbers, graspable only by reason, and the world in which we live, graspable by the senses, which was somehow formed by the former.

As far as we know, the first Pythagorean to write anything down was Philolaus, a contemporary of Socrates. But it is difficult to work out how much of what he wrote is attributable to Pythagoras rather than to himself, as he was a splendid thinker. He argued that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, but neither was the Sun. For him there was a central fire round which the Earth, Moon, Sun, five planets and the stars (distant fires) revolved. Unfortunately, these made up nine things whereas, for the Pythagoreans, ten was the magic number. So, they invented a counter-Earth, which was never visible to us as it was always on the other side.

Now to Plato, who was unquestionably influenced by the Pythagoreans. For example, the Pythagoreans believed that all circles in the real world were imperfect, but that there was, in the ideas of men, the concept of the perfect circle. This would seem to preview, at least in some respects, Plato’s idea of forms.

The conception of Pythagorean philosophy, taken for granted in later antiquity, is essentially the work of Plato and his immediate disciples. The two great Pythagorean themes in Plato’s work are the immortal destiny of the human soul and the role of mathematics as the key to unlocking the secrets of the cosmos. After Plato’s visit to the Pythagoreans of Magna Graecia, he becomes more Pythagorean. He transforms the Pythagorean magical, ritualistic notion of recollection – that we recollect what we have learned in our previous lives, as Pythagoras himself was reported to have done – into an epistemology of innate ideas and a priori knowledge.

It is Plato’s writings through which Pythagorean ideas become such a powerful influence on the thought of later centuries, not only in antiquity but again in the Renaissance and beyond. Of course, Plato introduces theories of his own, but he is working with themes that are, in their origin, unmistakeably Pythagorean.

Philolaus wrote:

“Nature in the world order was fitted together harmoniously from unlimited things and from limiting ones, both the world order as a whole and all things within it.”

And he goes on to argue that all we know of the reality of these two fundamental principles is that their eternal pre-existence is a necessary condition for the coming-to-be of everything else. But, as they are opposed to one another, they could be bound together in a cosmos only by a dialectical process leading to a harmonia, a numerical harmony.

Now, these ideas are familiar from Pre-Socratic texts, but the distinctive feature of Philolaus’ numbers are that they are arranged according to the ratios that correspond to the three basic musical consonances. A particularly Pythagorean idea. Aristotle comments that, in this scheme, cosmogony begins as the numbers are generated, when the Unlimited is breathed in by the limiting principle.

In Plato’s Philebus, the major ontological theme follows Philolaus and is that there are four kinds of being, or four "elements":

1. **The limitless**. Relative comparisons.

2. **The limited.** Definite measurement.

3. **The mixed.** The "world of becoming" that aims at being.

4. **The cause of such genuine mixture**, which limits the unlimited beings and orders nature. This, Socrates argues, is [reason](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reason) itself - not only human reason, but the greater reason of nature itself.

These ideas are treated further in Plato’s unwritten dialogues. Plato’s two doctrines were:

* **The One**: makes things definite and determinate.
* **The Indefinite Dyad**: lack of fixed form.

The realm of Plato’s forms and of totality of reality derive from their interaction.

There is some disagreement amongst scholars as to whether these principles reflect a monism or a dualism. Like the majority, I am firmly in favour of the former as, following Pythagoras, there is a higher meta-One that serves as the foundation for both principles.

The middle Platonic period followed a rejection of the scepticism of the New Academy in 90 BCE and lasted until the third century CE and the rise of Neo-Platonism.

Neo-Pythagoreanism emerged from middle Platonism in the first century CE. The main differences were that they attributed all the teachings to Pythagoras himself and introduced a more mystic element into these teachings.

The Neo-Pythagoreans’ original aim was to save the pagan world from moral and social ruin by the introduction of the religious element into philosophy and into conduct. As soon as the Christian religion came to be recognized as a factor in the intellectual and political life of the Roman Empire, however, philosophy, in the form of Neo-Pythagoreanism, made active campaign against the Christians, proclaimed its own system of spiritual regeneration, and set up in opposition to Christ and the Saints the heroes of philosophical tradition and legend, especially Pythagoras himself but also Apollonius of Tyana, the Greek equivalent of Jesus, who claimed to be a reincarnation of Pythagoras..

Neo-Pythagoreanism morphed into Neo-Platonism in the third century CE. The start of this movement is commonly regarded to have originated with Plotinus, an Alexandrian who, in 245, moved to Rome. The basic question for the Neo-Platonists was “How is it possible to explain the world’s emergence from a single divine principle of consciousness?”

One of the basic tenets of Neo-Platonism is that every activity in the world is, in some sense, double, insofar as it possesses both an inner and an outer aspect. For example, what kind of tree is the inner: what kind of fruit it bears is the outer. So, what is the primary activity of the inner activity of the One or First? The answer was the nous or absolute consciousness. As the Neo-Platonists would put it, having emerged from the First, consciousness turns back toward it in order to understand the pre-condition of its own existence. Becoming aware of this other entity the originary unity of consciousness breaks up into duality, and with it emerge the categories of identity and difference, of greater and smaller, of number of change and so on.

Soul falls out of the inner activity of consciousness in a similar way as consciousness fell out of the First and is the link that facilitates the manifestation of form in matter. Matter has no inner activity that can give rise to a further outward activity.

I have spent a long time on Pythagoras, Plato and their neo forms because I see all future mystical elements in philosophy to have their major roots there. However, there were parallel developments, two in particular should be mentioned, Hermeticism and Gnosticism, both of which influenced the neo philosophies.

The Corpus Hermeticum texts are now thought to have originated in the second century CE, though the ideas contained in them were from Egypt, India, Persia and Sumer at a much earlier date. They claim to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus. Hermes is the Greek name for the Egyptian god Thoth. Trismegistus means thrice greatest. These texts also have a strong Neo-Platonist feel to them. Salvation is to be achieved through gnosis. However, they have a greater magical content. For example, the Asclepius shows how material objects can be manipulated to draw a god down into a statue and thus ensoul it. And in the Magical Papyri is an enpneumatosis spell, literally filling with pneuma or spirit.

A later Hermetic text is the Emerald Tablet, believed to be an Arabic work of the sixth to eighth centuries, but later translated into Latin and then into English by amongst others Isaac Newton. Part of his translation is as follows.

‘That which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.

And as all things have been and arose from one by the mediation of one; so, all things have their birth from this one thing by adaptation.’

Very Platonic; viewing the individual human being as a little world (mikros kosmos) whose composition and structure correspond to that of the universe or great world (makros kosmos).

It should be noted, too, that these Hermetic texts led to Alchemy, the transformation of common metal into gold via the philosophers’ stone,, the central symbol of the mystical terminology of alchemy, symbolizing perfection at its finest, [enlightenment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enlightenment_(spiritual)), and heavenly bliss.

The Hermetic texts share much with the Gnostic ones, and copies of some of them were included in the Nag Hammadi gnostic library. The Gnostic texts themselves share elements with Platonism. [They](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism) present a distinction between the highest, unknowable God and the demiurgic "creator" of the material world. Several systems of Gnostic thought present the Demiurge as antagonistic to the will of the Supreme Being: his act of creation is fundamentally flawed, or else is formed with the malevolent intention of entrapping aspects of the divine in materiality. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, the demiurge is presented as the creator of the universe.

From the conversion of Constantine in 312 CE, the Romano-Greek philosophies began to be progressively interpreted in a way to accommodate Christianity. St Augustine of Hippo represents the shift from the gnostic and neo-Platonic ideas to Christian ones. In his youth he was drawn to [Manichaeism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism) (a form of Gnosticism founded by the Iranian prophet Mani) and later to Neo-Platonism. But at the age of 32, in 386, he converted to Christianity. Nevertheless, he kept some of the Pythagorean ideas. Though dropping the idea of reincarnation in favour of Christian immortality, the image of the body being a prison or tomb for the soul was retained.

On the other hand, he condemned what he called pagan practices; those aspects of ancient philosophy which could not easily be turned to support Christianity. He wrote, “That all superstition of pagans and heathens should be annihilated is what God wants, God commands, God proclaims.” And over the next few centuries this attitude led to the pagans being persecuted by the Christians. They burnt libraries, smashed temples and statues, banned the teaching of pagan philosophy and forced conversion to Christianity. In 370 CE the Christians, led by a lector named Peter, beat to death, scraped the skin off, tore the limbs off and then burned a female [Hellenistic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hellenistic_philosophy) [Neo-Platonist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism) philosopher, astronomer, and [mathematician](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathematician), called Hypatia, who lived in [Alexandria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria). Doesn’t all this sound familiar?

Ironically though, it was also a time of belief in miracles. A monk might talk personally with Christ or walk with John the Baptist. A world, too, of evil and demons, as well as good and angels. Complex angelologies and demonologies appeared.

So, by 400 CE Christianity’s impact on the Greco-Roman world had eclipsed that of the ancient philosophies.

The collapse of the Roman empire in 476 heralded the beginnings of the dark age. However, there was a lingering of the Roman system and some senators remained, including Boethius. His ‘The Consolation of Philosophy’, written around the year 524, has been described as the single most important and influential work in the West on Medieval and early Renaissance Christianity, as well as the last great Western work of the Classical Period.

He attempted to show that the basis of religion was philosophical, and he was influenced by Neo-Platonism. He was one of the last generation to study at what was still being called The Academy in Athens. In 529 CE, the Academy closed because of an edict by the Christian Emperor Justinian, who persecuted philosophers.

If you look at chronological lists of great philosophers, the next western name to appear after Boethius is that of Abelard, a French scholastic theologian at the turn of the eleventh century. Instead, there are Islamic philosophers. Islam preserved a great deal of Greco-Roman philosophy which was later to re-surface in the Renaissance.

Scholasticism emerged in the twelfth century and was heavily influenced by Aristotle. Its most famous exponent is probably Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the thirteenth century. In his writings he discusses Angels and divides them into nine choirs (groups). Ethereal beings had been a vital part of ancient beliefs and were adopted by the Christian faith, mainly through the Old Testament. But Neo-Platonists and Zoroastrians, for example, also included them in their writings. The Christian seven archangels took the place of the seven planetary daimons of the ancient Greeks, termed in the Corpus Hermeticum the seven governors of the world, which had woven the fabric of the material world into existence.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century there was a move away from Aristotelianism and back to Neo-Platonism. Meister Eckhart was part of a resurgence of mysticism in the late middle ages in the Rhineland. He taught that creation was an overflowing of love – an ebullience, in Neo-Platonic terms – from God. Nothing separates our souls from God and the birth of the hidden Word can take place in the depths of our souls.

The Renaissance saw a flowering of mysticism, in large part due to the emergence of Greek manuscripts emerging from the Islamic world because of territorial changes.

The roots of renaissance philosophy lay in Greece and Rome, particularly through Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, from Egypt, through the Corpus Hermeticum, from Persia, through the Chaldean Oracles and from the Jews, through the Kabbalah. For two centuries, a fragile balance between the mystical and the rational philosophies was maintained.

The central theme of Renaissance philosophy is the inner man, the immortal soul. Man is composed of a body (soma), soul (psyche) and spirit or intellect (nous) while ideas exist in the Divine Intellect (mens)

One of the leading philosophical lights of the Renaissance was a priest, Marsilio Ficino. He was tasked by Cosimo de Medici with translating the works of Plato into Latin and in setting up The New Platonic Academy. The former task was interrupted when a copy of The Corpus Hermeticum was brought to Florence and Ficino was asked by Cosimo de Medici to translate it.

Ficino did not distinguish between magic and religious practise: they both utilised spiritual forces. But to avoid being charged with heresy he condemned black magic. He devoted an entire work to talismans, the harnessing of the power of the planets for medical purposes, for example, by creating a talisman that resonated with that particular planet: such as copper for Venus.

He subscribed to the idea of a perennial philosophy, that there is a common core of mystical experiences to all religions, which he traces through Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato. This idea has persisted up to the present day in various guises.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was a younger associate of Ficino who introduced the Kabbalah into Ficino’s work. Mirandola’s ideas became a little too radical for the Catholic Church and he was briefly imprisoned. He was eventually pardoned but was allegedly assassinated by his secretary at the age of only 31.

Other luminaries of Renaissance philosophy included Cornelius Agrippa, influenced by magic, Paracelsus, influenced by alchemy, and Gordano Bruno, an Italian Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, poet, cosmological theorist, and Hermetic occultist, who, together with John Dee, the man who talked to angels, were the last of the great Renaissance magi. Bruno was not so lucky as Mirandola. He was burnt at the stake in 1600 by the Inquisition for heresy. He had written about magic in too approving terms

The rise of Protestantism also produced its mystics, the most prominent being Jacob Boehme, a Lutheran theologian whose life straddled the 16th and 17th centuries. His work was much appreciated by the German romantic philosophers, Schelling in particular. Boehme was a mystic who had visions which revealed to him the spiritual structure of the world, as well as the relationship between God and man, and good and evil.

He was banned from publishing for a time as his ideas were considered too radical by the church. He believed that God did not exist as a being, but only as will, until he manifested himself in Nature. He wrote, “God himself is in man”. And he believed that something divine and eternal reveals itself in the constitution of man, which is superior to the animal man, the reasoning man, man’s material body and man’s arguing intellect. It does not need to reason; it perceives and knows.

Boehme remains ambiguous on the question of the modality of evil: is it necessary to God’s self-unfolding, or is it rather an anarchic act that God permits in the interest of preserving the autonomy of finite freedom? If the former, Boehme becomes much more closely aligned to Gnosticism by identifying finitude with evil. Hermeticism opposes Gnosticism on this point: for the Hermeticist, finitude / material being / nature is not evil but ‘of God,’ the means of his individuation. Schelling remains faithful to the Hermetic tradition by sacrificing system for the sake of preserving the contingency of evil, and disidentifying finitude and evil. Hegel opts for the Gnostic approach of identifying finitude with evil, in the interest of maintaining the absolute rationality of the system.

Ultimately, the rejection of the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Renaissance thought gave way to a materialistic theory of knowledge, giving rise to the Enlightenment. But mysticism was by no means eclipsed. Born at the start of the Enlightenment, Emanuel Swedenborg, was a Swedish pluralistic-Christian theologian, scientist, philosopher and mystic, who, after experiencing a vision, was able thereafter to visit Heaven and Hell and talk to angels and demons. Later, a church was set up in his name.

But interest in mysticism was not confined to off-beat philosophers. At around the same period, Leibniz’s scattered remarks about mysticism sounded a consistent theme: there is something right in what the mystics say, but it is often badly or confusedly expressed. Bruno is the philosopher most often cited as being the source of Leibniz’s monadology, though some authors attribute Leibniz’s monadology to his contact with the Kabbalah. One formula would summarise Leibnizian mysticism rather well: a rational search for a mystical reality.

I have already mentioned the romantic movements’ predilection to look in some ways favourably on mysticism. Around the same time, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, a French visionary philosopher, was one of the leading exponents of illuminism, an 18th-century philosophical movement that attempted to refute the rationalistic philosophies prevalent in that period.

In the early 19th century, Schopenhauer subscribed quite openly to mysticism, writing that magic is grounded in the will and that all forms of magical transformation depend on the human will and not on ritual. He also claimed that philosophy should synthesise itself with magic, which amounted to “practical metaphysics.”

Later, Bergson wrote on mysticism. For Bergson, however, mystical experience is not simply a disequilibrium. Genuine mystical experience must result in action; it cannot remain simple contemplation of God. This association of creative emotions with mystical experience means that, for Bergson, dynamic religion is mystical.

In the late nineteenth century, William James took an interest in mysticism in religion. For him, there is such a thing as genuine mystical experience, providing a pointer to a reality that is more likely true not false. And, James concludes, "that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself". "One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness,"

Ficino’s idea of the perennial philosophy is still around. Aldous Huxley, in 1945, wrote a book called ‘The Perennial Philosophy’. And there are numerous organisations, still extant, which set out to promote such ideas. In 1875, Helena Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society, which draws on Neo-Platonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. My own organisation, The School of Philosophy and Economic Science, was founded in 1938 by Labour MP Andrew MacClaren, and was strongly influenced by Ouspensky and hence Gurdjieff, Russian and Armenian mystics respectively, at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. In 1945, Jorge Angel Livraga Rizzi, an Argentinian, founded the New Acropolis influenced by, among others, Boehme and Blavatsky.