

Platonism is the general term for a philosophy deriving from the teachings of Plato (5th century BCE) whose work spans a variety of subjects. Frequently, this term refers to a particular philosophical view of reality, “Platonic Realism.” Across his philosophy, but most famously in his political masterwork, the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes between “reality” which we can sense, see, and touch; and true reality, or the world of ideas, which we can only understand through philosophical logic and intellectual understanding. To make this distinction, Plato introduces the theory of “Forms” (in Greek, *eidos*, which is where we get the words “ideal” and “idea.”) The forms are the ideal, perfect archetypes of all concepts and things, of which our human world contains only rough, imprecise copies. For instance, consider the geometric definition of a triangle: three sides, three angles that add up to 180 degrees. This definition holds for all triangles no matter what actual shape they have. It has these qualities, or else it is not a triangle. In this sense, this definition of the triangle is the platonic “form” of the triangle. It is what “A Triangle” is, and all triangles reflect some version of that form. This is distinct from “worldly” triangles we see around us in the world—isosceles triangles; equilateral triangles; or even less “real” for Plato, things that have sort of triangular shapes that we call triangles: a triangular slice of pizza, for instance, or a triangular toy. In *The Republic*, the highest “form” is “The Good.” Someone who understands The Good understands how different forms relate to one another, and how they are all defined. For Plato, this is the essence of True philosophical knowledge.

The Republic also describes the “beautiful city” where philosophers rule by virtue of their knowledge of The Good, which allows them to grasp the perfect understanding of justice and individual virtue. They rule over a population of a class of guardian warriors — men and women who live in communal housing with no private property and raise children in common — as well as a worker class of craftsmen and artisans. This city corresponds, in structure, to the rule of the rational part of the soul over the spirited, courageous part, which then rules over the appetites and needs of the body. Plato argued that unless your soul is in harmony, with your appetites and spirit ruled by rational logic (*logos*) you will never be happy.

Beginning in the 3rd century CE, “**Neoplatonism**” emerges as traditional Platonic thought becomes mixed with early Christian mysticism and theology. “The Good” becomes the source of all existence (also referred to as “The One”), not merely a true reflection of reality. Faithful meditation on virtue is further emphasized as a way to gain union with “The One;” an idea that translates powerfully into Christian thought. This idea has profound influence on the Western tradition of philosophy from Plato, through Marx, and ultimately Nietzsche (more on that next quarter) in addition to powerfully influencing Western Christian theology and philosophy.

Notably, St. Augustine (5th century CE) adopts many Platonic structures in his political writings, and Thomas More directly engages with Plato’s *Republic* in his work *Utopia*.

Aristotle’s political and ethical thought is often referred to (not without controversy) as the foundation for the Western traditions of ethics and political science. Aristotle was a student of Plato and adopts many of his assumptions. However, where Plato believed that reality could only be accessed through philosophical contemplation of the Good, Aristotle believed that observation of nature, combined with philosophical method, could lead to accurate knowledge of reality, as well as an understanding of its “best” forms. Aristotle’s works span an even greater range than Plato’s, including treatises on human virtue, politics, biology, physics, astronomy, rhetoric, and many other works, some of which are lost.

A Quick Summary of a Few Classical Philosophies

For Aristotle, everything *by nature* aims and moves towards some sort of excellence or good. Nothing by nature wants to be imperfect. Everything has a specific, definitive purpose or function that it will strive for, even if it strives in sadly mistaken ways. For humans, the highest end and purpose is to live a life of virtuous excellence and happiness. Happiness (the Greek word being *eudaimonia* which means being happy, virtuous, and generally awesome all in one) requires the presence of a well-ordered polity with good laws — not merely contemplation of the Good. To live well, one must not only have proper understanding of virtue (through intellectual training) but one must also have developed the right moral habits (through “habituation” of manners, morals, or physical responses). An excellent person does not only know what to do, but does it *excellently, effortlessly*, not only doing the right thing, in the right time, in the right way; but also *feeling* the right emotions, in the right degree, in the correct way. Thus the truly good life is only possible in a political community where there are good laws that allow the moral capacities of its citizens to reach their highest potential by rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. This means that not everyone will achieve excellence, and sometimes by no real fault of their own. Bad moral training because of poor institutions, luck, or upbringing, or insufficient capacity for intellectual virtue can lead one to deviate from their natural goal: for instance, Aristotle thinks women and some slaves are naturally unable to be as excellent as free men. For Aristotle, one could not attain excellence in solitude: to live outside of a human community was to be either a god or a beast, but never a man.

Aristotle’s scientific writings were also greatly influential. Just as in his ethical writings the physical world *by nature* has a natural purpose, in Aristotelian physics objects contain essential qualities that determine their potential range of motions. These qualities can be determined by the object’s elemental construction (earth, fire, air, water, and ‘aether,’ a divine substance), each element with a kind of intrinsic motion. For example, the element earth intrinsically wants to move towards the center of the globe—towards the heart of earth. An apple knocked off a tree thus ‘naturally’ falls towards the earth because it has the essential qualities of earthen ‘heaviness’ in it—an internal potential for motion activated when the apple is dislodged from the tree. For Aristotle, everything in motion must first be moved *by something*, thus the physical processes of the natural world can be explained in terms of ongoing sequences of cause and effect. To explain how this chain of motion got started, Aristotle posits a “prime mover”—an idea later adapted by Christian philosophers. Logically it also follows that if everything in motion must have been moved by contact with something else, then the whole of existence must be made up of physical matter; otherwise explaining the ongoing motion of the physical world is impossible. Therefore Aristotle concludes that “nature abhors a vacuum.” This physical scheme, along with the possibility or impossibility of vacuums, is directly modified and challenged in Renaissance and Early Modern scientific discourse by authors as diverse as Descartes, Pascal, Boyle, Hobbes, Leibniz, and Newton.

Aristotle’s works are enormously influential in Western thought. Aristotle’s works get taken up by a number of Christian theologians, who in the medieval period are referred to as the **Scholastics**. In this transformation, the thing that causes all creation to strive for some good is God, originally described by Aristotle as “the prime mover” or the “first cause.” His arguments about virtue are similarly adopted into this framework: God is the first mover and the ultimate goal of human happiness can only be achieved by living a life of Christian virtue, which we all desire and strive for by nature. Note that the Christian virtues differ somewhat from Greek virtues in definition: Aristotle had to be translated into a new framework for moral thought—something you see Humanist authors attempting in their writings.

Stoicism is a school of Greek thought founded by the philosopher Zeno of Athens in the early 3rd century BCE. The Stoics taught that harmful, painful emotions such as anger, grief, or desire resulted from errors in judgment about the true nature of reality, and that rational understanding of nature and the cosmos could lead to a tranquil, virtuous life. By this view, willing to live rationally would lead one to live virtuously, and in harmony with nature. A person of “moral and intellectual perfection” would not suffer the harmful effects of emotions, but lead a peaceful, happy, and excellent life. Stoicism is *not* the absence or suppression of emotion.

Roman Stoics, such as Seneca or Cicero (1st C, BCE), adapted this philosophy. They emphasized that one could make themselves immune to misfortune by living virtuously. Virtue, by this view, is the necessary and sufficient condition for a happy life. Both the Greek and Roman versions of Stoicism emphasize a person’s actions — or, how they lead their life — demonstrates their virtue and wisdom. (It’s not enough to simply understand what is rational or virtuous; you have to *live* that way, too.) It is this later, Roman version of Stoicism that we see most powerfully influencing authors like Bruni, Petrarch, or Machiavelli.

Epicureanism is a philosophical system based on the teachings of Epicurus, also founded around the 3rd century BCE. Epicurus taught that a life of pleasure was the highest human good. This, however, is not the same thing as hedonism, or the reckless pursuit of pleasure. Epicurus argued that the best form of pleasure was a kind of *lack of desire*: to feel neither great pleasure or great pain, but exist in a peaceful state free from worry. Think of the difference between contentment and elation—one is fleeting, the other is sustainable: a hedonist would try to pursue elation as much as possible, while an Epicurean would seek contentment as a state of being. Epicureanism teaches that pleasure came from living moderately, attending to the basic needs of the body and feeling emotions moderately was well — never in excess. This state of tranquility is called *ataraxia* (freedom from anxiety or worry) and *aponia* (freedom from pain, discomfort, or physical need.) Achieving these together could lead to the highest form of happiness. Unlike Stoicism, Epicureans avoided the active life of politics, which could lead to unhealthy desires for excessive glory or lead to reduced leisure. The emphasis on meeting bodily needs also caused this philosophy to sit in tension with Platonism and early Christian theology (both of which disparage bodily satisfaction) though later Christians and Humanists such as Erasmus begin to reconsider its importance.

Skepticism, in the west, originates in ancient Greece (from the Greek “*skepsis*” meaning “inquiry”) though strands of this tradition can also be found in ancient Chinese, Buddhist, and Islamic thought. Western skepticism is usually traced back to Pyrrho of Elis (360 BCE). Pyrrho, upon realizing that no simple ‘correct’ answer could be found between the many competing philosophical schools of his day, famously chose to accept that there was no possibility of a final conclusion for fundamental moral or ontological knowledge. Skepticism thus aims at “knowledgeable ignorance,” or the logical and systematic process of exposing the limits of one’s own understanding. In this way, Skepticism is opposed to any kind of dogmatic belief that refuses to question its own principles. Sceptics thus did not seek out certainty or truth—as Platonic or even Aristotelian philosophers might—but rather had as their goal “*ataraxia*.” A reflective, examined but calm life was said to be the result of acknowledging the impossibility of certainty. Sceptics made it their work to pit any dogmatic, certain philosophy against its opposite claims, while abstaining from any final conclusion. Theirs is a life in search of calmness and more knowledgeable ignorance.