

Extending the Golden Chain: Iamblichus' Ancestors

Jenny Messenger
University of St Andrews

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which the Neoplatonic philosophers, and particularly Iamblichus (c.240 – c.325 A.D.), positioned themselves in relation to their predecessors, a 'golden' or 'unbroken' chain of philosopher-sages extending back to the very birth of philosophy. I argue that this concept is crucial for understanding how the Neoplatonists thought about their own origins, and the origins of philosophy.

The philosophers or wise men within this chain, including Pythagoras, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus, often received the epithet 'godlike', were skilled hierophants and interpreters of divine signs and symbols, and had learned sacred and revelatory knowledge from the Egyptians. As a metaphor, the chain therefore has a dual role. Dillon (1981) has argued that the intellectual link between teacher and pupil is vital in maintaining the 'golden chain' of Platonism, in a sequence supported by personal rather than institutional relationships. Building on this, Uždavinys (2004) has claimed that the chain stretches both vertically, mirroring Neoplatonic metaphysics in terms of an emanation from the divine to mankind, and horizontally or historically, as a transmission from master to student. The conception of an unbroken chain is therefore closely associated with the idea of continuity within reality, and *sympatheia*, which links everything in existence.

In his *De Mysteriis*, the response to a set of questions posed by Porphyry (c. 234 - c. 305 A.D.), Iamblichus draws on a range of traditions and sources, such as the Chaldean Oracles and the Hermetic Corpus, in addition to the works of Plotinus and Plato, to present a fully worked-out exposition of reality, and most importantly, an explanation of how the divine and the human can interact via ritual. At the beginning of the work, Iamblichus makes reference to other ancient Greeks - Pythagoras, Plato, Democritus and Eudoxus - who have received instruction from the sacred scribes of Egypt. They are Iamblichus' philosophical ancestors within the tradition of Greek philosophy, and what little we know of his life suggests that he was part of the historical teaching chain. Yet Iamblichus also positions himself firmly in the role of priest by assuming the role of 'Abamon', an Egyptian sage with access to special knowledge of the gods. Notably, he urges Porphyry to imagine he is any one of a number of Egyptian prophets, or even to forget who is speaking altogether. In this way, Iamblichus attempts to take on a kind of universality that is synonymous with the universal truths he will relate during the course of the *De Mysteriis*. I therefore argue that Iamblichus, in taking on the role of philosopher-priest, demonstrates two vital functions of the unbroken chain as a theory of origins: firstly, via his connection to the first principles, or divine truths, in his priestly capacity, and secondly, via the historical dissemination of knowledge in his response to Porphyry. Both these methods of transmission are crucial to understanding how Neoplatonists conceived of the coming-to-be of their philosophical predecessors.

* * *

Aristotle on the Starting-Point of Motion

Bryan C. Reece
University of Toronto

Abstract

Some have been tempted to think that, at least in contexts of locomotion, it is always appropriate to understand Aristotle's phrase 'starting-point of motion' (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως) and related formulae as 'efficient cause.' The problem arises when we recognize that even just in these contexts Aristotle calls several categorically different things starting-points of motion: substances, capacities, decisions, goals, skills, God, nature, a point at rest, the heart, and even the up, the right, and the front. This 'too many movers problem' seems twofold. First, there appears to be a multiplicity of starting-points of motion for one motion, and second, these starting-points of one motion are of diverse Aristotelian categories. These thus look like competing causal explanations of the same thing, and so we must seek an explanation of how they might be related to one another.

I suggest a principled way to determine when we should understand a starting-point of motion as an efficient cause of motion in contexts of locomotive activity. We should employ the following two-step procedure: First, we should look to the examples that Aristotle uses when distinguishing the efficient-causal starting-point from the other sorts of starting-point, and second to how he appeals to these very examples in elucidating the nature of locomotion. The resulting interpretation is that for Aristotle, the efficient-causal starting-points of locomotive activity are substances *qua* self-movers actualizing particular potentialities.

One might object that Aristotle sometimes appears to claim that potentialities or their actualizations, rather than the substances whose potentialities or actualizations they are, are the efficient-causal starting-points of locomotive activities. For example, Aristotle apparently thinks of the sculptor's skill as an efficient-causal starting-point of sculpting (*Phys.* 2. 3, 195a3–8). This might seem incompatible with the claim that the sculptor herself is the efficient-causal starting-point. The right thing to say is that 'the sculptor's skill' is elliptical for 'the sculptor *qua* actively exercising her skill.' The problem with this quick reply is that Aristotle seems to refer to skill as 'the highest cause' (τὸ αἴτιον τὸ ἀκρότατον) (*Phys.* 2. 3, 195b22). One might be tempted to think that this indicates that Aristotle privileges the skill over the sculptor as the real efficient-causal starting-point, interpreting 'τὸ αἴτιον τὸ ἀκρότατον' as something like 'that cause than which nothing counts more as a cause,' which would block the attempt to say that the reference to the skill is an elliptical description of the sculptor *qua* exercising her skill. A better interpretation of 'τὸ αἴτιον τὸ ἀκρότατον' derives from the ancient Greek commentators. Themistius and Philoponus understand 'ἀκρότατον' as 'most proximate,' and Alexander, Philoponus, and Simplicius think that 'proximate' can apply to starting-points other than the efficient-causal starting-point. If this is right, then the sculptor's skill could be the most proximate formal-causal starting-point of the sculpture, that which gives the most informative characterization of the nature of the effect, and of the efficient-causal starting-point's relationship to the effect. This view is suggested by Philoponus's remarks (*In Phys.* 253.32–35), which have received too little attention in this connection.

* * *

Back to the origin of ethics: Archelaus on *to dikaion*

Tommaso Longo
University of Milan

Abstract

The reflection upon the “origins” is by no means at the heart of several philosophical theories. In this paper, I will analyse and assess Archelaus’ claim that “the just and the ignoble are such not by nature, but by convention (καὶ τὸ δίκαιον εἶναι καὶ τὸ αἰσχρὸν οὐ φύσει ἀλλὰ νόμῳ)” (D.L., II 16 25-26; cf. also SUID. *s.v.* *Arch.*), by putting it into the context of Archelaus’ view about the relation between *physis* and *nomos*. In several respects, Archelaus is by no means a *protos eures* in the sequel of philosophy teacher-disciple *diadochai*. Ancient authors, indeed, attribute to him also a primacy for having transferred the physical inquiries from Ionia into Athens *for first* (D.L. II 16 = 60 DK A1 partly; cf. also Hip., *Ref.* I 10). Despite these explicit acknowledgments, the figure of Archelaus has been often dismissed or in some cases even ignored by scholars. Thus, it worth approaching concisely the *Quellenforschung*, by reconstructing whether and to what extent (1) Archelaus introduces actually elements of novelty and originality in his view about the origin of ethical concepts, (1b) by taking into consideration also the status of the sources, whether it is a quotation or an indirect testimony as well as the philosophical position of the author and his aim, whether polemical or apologetic. Therefore, I will reconstruct (2) what Archelaus really meant by committing himself into such a statement and, in general, into endorsing the *physis/nomos* theory of the origin of ethics. (2b) This theory has to be put into a reliable reconstruction of Archelaus’ *dimere philosophia*, (2c) with some references to his influence over posterior philosophical movements. As we shall see, (3) Archelaus has the merit of having proposed a philosophical theory of the origins and the development of the universe, in which ethical and physical concepts find a theoretical explanation by an adequate taxonomy of reality with no immediate axiological implications. In this overall reconstruction, Archelaus’ claim assumes a peculiar meaning, which has to be carefully differentiated from the later interpretations of the *physis/nomos* oxymoron. Unfortunately, little scholarly work has clarified the role or conception of the *physis/nomos* relation in Archelaus’ philosophy. How does Archelaus think that the origin of justice relates to *physis*? If we analyse carefully the textual evidence it will emerge that both positive and negative ethical concepts come to be instantiated by the introduction of the laws over the natural condition. If so, the origin of the *nomoi*, as I will show up, does not imply necessarily an evolution or an improvement in respect to the previous natural condition, but only a change of the explanatory framework. Likewise, how does Archelaus’ view about the origins of *to dikaion* impact on other theories of the origins of moral and political values proposed by the Sophists (such as forms of ethical and political relativism concerning the genesis and the development of moral, political and juridical concepts)?

* * *

Beginning or Beginnings? Plutarch on Platonic Cosmogony and Cosmic Cycles

Bram Demulder
University of Leuven

Abstract

In the first extant ‘monograph’ on Platonic cosmology Plutarch of Chaeronea sets out his interpretation of Plato’s account on the demiurgic generation of the world soul (*Timaeus* 35A-36B). In this treatise, aptly entitled *On the generation of soul in the Timaeus*, Plutarch attempts to combine a literal reading of Timaeus’ cosmogonical account with a defence of Plato’s consistency throughout the dialogues. One of the most compelling challenges of this endeavour is the integration of Plato’s *Statesman* myth. On Plutarch’s own interpretative terms, one would expect the cyclic cosmology of the *Statesman*, according to which ‘the god himself sometimes accompanies [the universe] [...], while at other times he lets it go’ (269C; tr. Rowe), to be incompatible with the linear orientation of Timaeus’ cosmology. Does the cosmos have a single beginning, as Plutarch’s interpretation of the *Timaeus* suggests, or does the *Statesman* myth, which suggests a cycle of beginnings and destructions, take precedence after all?

By combining three approaches, this paper offers a detailed analysis of how Plutarch deals with this issue. (1) First discussing *On the generation of the soul* itself, I argue that Plutarch’s interpretation of the *Statesman* myth serves his theodicy by minimising the responsibility of the demiurge for the reversal of the cosmos. Moreover, Plutarch interprets the myth in a way which yields a more optimistic view of the current state of the cosmos, thus changing its function. Both strategies bring the *Statesman* myth closer to the *Timaeus*, but the treatise ultimately leaves the tension between the two cosmological accounts unresolved. (2) Therefore, I turn to the occurrences of cosmic cycles in the rest of Plutarch’s oeuvre, esp. to the criticism of the Stoics’ cyclic cosmology of *ekpyrôseis* and *diakosmêseis* in the Stoic polemics and to the apparent defence of such a cosmology in passages of the Delphic dialogues. I conclude that Plutarch’s problem with (Stoic) cyclic cosmology is not the cyclic aspect *per se*, but the immanentism and physicalism which underlies it: it is the incompleteness which makes a one-sided cyclic cosmology wrong overall. (3) Finally, in order to broaden the view, Plutarch’s interpretation is briefly confronted with other Middle- Platonic interpretations of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman* (by Numenius, Atticus and Alcinous) and with later criticism of Plutarch’s approach (by Proclus).

The conclusion emerging from these three approaches involves a reassessment of Plutarch’s view on the cosmic beginning(s). Whether we speak of the beginning or the beginnings of the cosmos, turns out to be a matter of perspective. The paper concludes with a short discussion of what Plutarch’s thoughts on the subject have to offer for current scholarly debates on Platonic cosmogony and the interpretation of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman*.

* * *

Keep calm and carry on: Sextus Empiricus on the origins of Pyrrhonism

Máté Veres
Central European University

Abstract

In the first book of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH), Sextus Empiricus offers a general account of Pyrrhonian scepticism as a kind of philosophy. On a familiar reading, the Sextan project of reconciling the position described with the aspiration to offer a *philosophical* choice faces several difficulties. Most importantly, as various objections go, becoming a mature Pyrrhonian sceptic makes one unmotivated or even unable to genuinely engage in the kind of truth-oriented inquiry that is specific to any philosophy worthy of the name.

In this paper, I develop a strategy to preempt any such charge in the following way. First, I offer a close reading of Sextan passages – especially his discussion of the "principles" (ἀρχαί, PH I. 12) and the "goal" (τέλος, PH I. 25–30) of Pyrrhonism – which hint at the personal journey of an inquirer transforming into a mature Pyrrhonian. Second, I show that on this reading, Pyrrhonian need not lose their original motivation to inquire, rather they are in fact Pyrrhonian by virtue of continuing the search they have originally engaged in.

This narrative is significant for a number of reasons. First, it highlights several steps involved in the journey towards the recognition of equipollence. Second, it alludes in various ways to the motivation as well as the character of inquirers, thereby providing explanation for their respective decisions in the face of equipollence. Third, in aligning the achievement of a sceptical disposition with the experience the painter Apelles is said to have undergone, it brings out key features of the notions of tranquility and suspension of judgement involved in such a disposition. Finally, it simultaneously offers an account of the emergence of the first generation of sceptics as a philosophical community.

The story offered by Sextus describes the interplay of two principles of scepticism, the "originative" (αἰτιώδης) and the "constitutive" (συστάσεως) ἀρχή, and in outline goes as follows. People of an inquisitive nature set out to investigate conflicts of appearances in the hope of coming to a specific kind of decision (ἐπικρίνειν), but came to recognise the equipollence of opposing arguments instead. Different inquirers responded differently to this recognition: while some have settled for a less than satisfactory answer, others – the sceptics – have persevered in their inquiry and are unwilling to assent rashly to any view.

With this background, I shall provide a comparative analysis of the analogy between the case of Apelles and that of the Pyrrhonian. I will argue that the similarity holds not with regard to the experience of each and every individual suspension, but rather with regard to the acquisition of a genuinely sceptical disposition. The Apelles analogy is meant to describe the moment when the first counterexample is discovered to the universal claim that there can be no tranquility without getting it right, and does not support a reading on which sceptics come to reject the project of philosophical inquiry. I end by pointing to textual clues about why a Pyrrhonian would not rule out eventual discovery.

* * *

'Cosmogonies' in *Metamorphoses*

Claudio Barone
University of Palermo

Abstract

Ovid starts his masterpiece promising to tell stories that are to do with metamorphoses from the beginning of the world (*ab origine mundi*, *met.* 1, 3) to his own times. In order to fulfil this promise, the poet opens the *Metamorphoses* with the first and most ancient metamorphosis ever known, that is the change leading from chaos to cosmos. While previous scholars have tried to discover relationships between Ovid and earlier authors, paying their attention mostly to poetic literature, I want to extend the investigation to philosophy. Despite appearances, the purpose of my paper is not to prove that Ovid wanted to give his work a serious scientific value, but only to illustrate the way he managed to use vocabulary and imagery drawn from philosophy to describe phenomena that human beings have never seen and will never look at.

As the opening scene of the *Metamorphoses* is about how was the world before being precisely a 'world', the poet goes back to the time when sea, land and sky were one indistinct thing called *Chaos* (1, 7). The first part of my paper therefore aims to trace those who gave this name to the concept, and thus to discover those whom Ovid had probably read to write this literary piece. Between the poetic image of $\chi\acute{\alpha}\omicron\varsigma$ in Hesiod's *Theogony* and the Lucretian representation of chaos as mass of matter (*coniectus materiai*, *d.r.n.* 5, 416), a rich philosophical tradition dealing with this question stands out. As a result, by reading through the fragmentary corpus of Pre-Socratics, Plato and Aristotle, it comes to light that this philosophical literature constituted a relevant lexical and thematic source exploited by Ovid not only in order to depict the chaotic state of the universe, but also to describe the origin of the world and the birth of the mankind, themes which the second and third sections of my paper will focus on.

Nevertheless, although inspired by Pre-Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic and Lucretian imageries, Ovid's intention was not to describe the events following unconditionally and without originality his literary models; on the contrary, he made use of them in order to create something new, manipulating and varying what they had already written, at the same time maintaining the evocative echoes of their cosmogonical theories.

* * *

The origin of psychic illness according to Plato's *Timaeus*

Natalie Enright
University of Leeds

Abstract

It is often assumed that sickness of the soul was thought, by Plato, to originate from immorality. Across the Platonic corpus, a healthy, and thus moral, soul is described as being comprised of the spirited and appetitive parts in subordination to Reason. Overindulging the irrational desires of Spirit or Appetite allows them to become strong enough to challenge the dominance of Reason, thus disrupting the harmonious co-existence of the whole soul. A soul in this condition must be thought of as unhealthy and immoral. If illnesses of the soul originate from immoral behaviour, then it follows that the condition of the body is likely to have little effect on the health of the soul. Indeed, Plato asserts at *Republic* 407b that physical 'sickness is no obstacle whatever' to practicing virtue. It is surprising, then, to read the following passage:

'the diseases of the soul that result from bodily condition come about in the following way... [When the humors] wander up and down the body without finding a vent to the outside and remain pent up inside, they mix the vapour that they give up with the motion of the soul and...so they produce all sorts of diseases of the soul. As they [humors] move to the three regions of the soul, each of them produces a multitude of varieties of bad temper (*δυσκολίας*) and melancholy (*δυσθυμίας*) in the region it attacks.'

(*Timaeus* 86b-87a7. Tr. Zeyl, D.)

Plato seems to be suggesting that, in fact, the physical, bodily humors are the origin of illnesses of the soul. Not only is this incompatible with the notion that psychic disease results from immorality, but it directly contradicts his cross-corpus insistence that soul and body are distinct. So how is it that the humors can 'produce all sorts of diseases of the soul'? In an attempt to understand what Plato envisaged as the true origin of psychic illnesses, I will present two potential solutions to these difficulties.

First, I will examine the construction of bone marrow as described in *Timaeus*. It is possible that the marrow could have been thought of as a bridging substance between soul and body, allowing the humors to mingle with the soul without degrading the soul to the corporeal realm. There are, however, problems with this explanation, since there remains a barrier between the corporeal and insubstantial realms.

Second, I will perform a close analysis of the quoted passage, to show that it may be seen as entirely compatible with Plato's theories elsewhere in his corpus. I will look at the precise language used by Plato for the terms ambiguously translated as 'mix' (*συμμείξαντες*) and 'produce' (*ἐμποιοῦσι*) and suggest a better alternative translation. Then, through a comparison with the analogy at *Republic* 609e-610a of the effect of bad food on the body, I will show that the humors are not actually directly affecting the soul, but rather that their presence provides occasion for the soul to develop its own diseases. Therefore, the humors 'induce' rather than 'produce' psychic disease.

* * *

The power of Semen. Aristotle and Some Galen's fallacies

Andrey Darovskikh
Central European University

Abstract

Generation is a process that, allows limiting (at least from one side) the scope of any kind of being, which comes-to-be and passes-away; and makes relevant any plausible philosophical account of that being. The problem of living beings' generation in ancient physics and biology hinges largely on the attempts to trace the *arche*, which leads to the notion of semen as the source of a new life. It thus might be stated that to describe the process of a living being' generation in antiquity simply meant to answer the question: what is the nature of the semen?

The focus of the present paper is the problem of the power of semen and the conflict between Galen and Aristotle's understanding of this power within the discourse of ancient philosophy and medicine. By the power here I mean a range of notions that all serve to help to answer questions about the generation of species, heredity, offspring's resemblance to parents etc. To answer the question about the semen's power is thus to clarify the following issues: 1) In which manner is the offspring present in the semen? 2) What is the corporeal origin of the semen? 3) What is the role of parents in supplying the semen? The problem of semen had a long tradition in antique thought, and the most fecund period was that period containing the "debates" between Aristotle and Hippocrates. Since then, the Aristotelian model of demarcating functions of male and female in conception, and attributing the term semen only to male was widely accepted and had been dominant for some five centuries. Galen of Pergamon, in second century AD, at the outset of his treatise *Peri Spermatos* inquires: is it accurate to reckon the power of semen either as two principles (the material and the active) as Hippocrates supposed or only as efficient principle as Aristotle suggested? Though modern terminology allows us to speak about the semen only for male seminal fluid, in antiquity the term "semen" according to some authors (Hippocrates, Galen) could have been correctly applied to both male and female fluids.

In the focus of the paper is the question: why did Galen suggest to return to two-semina model and refute Aristotle' theory which have been dominating for almost five centuries. My provisional answer is – because of a different philosophical reasoning and erroneous understanding of some aspects of Aristotle's embryological model by Galen.

First I argue that Galen's understanding of form/matter relationship, and his view on matter which is an underling principle conditioned his understanding of physical change, what allowed him to speak about conception only as quantitative mixture between equal substrata. Importance of matter and the conviction that equal material contribution of genders is a must in embryogenesis resulted in Galen's assertion that females supply not only semen but also *katamhnia*, which is the source of germ's nutriment in the course of gestation.

Second, Galen's view on teleology and his limited understanding of formal/final – efficient causes and their relationship forced him claim the inadequacy of Aristotle's biology and necessitated Galen to introduce emendations in definitions of seminal faculties of genders and reproductive fluids.

* * *