Workshop 3

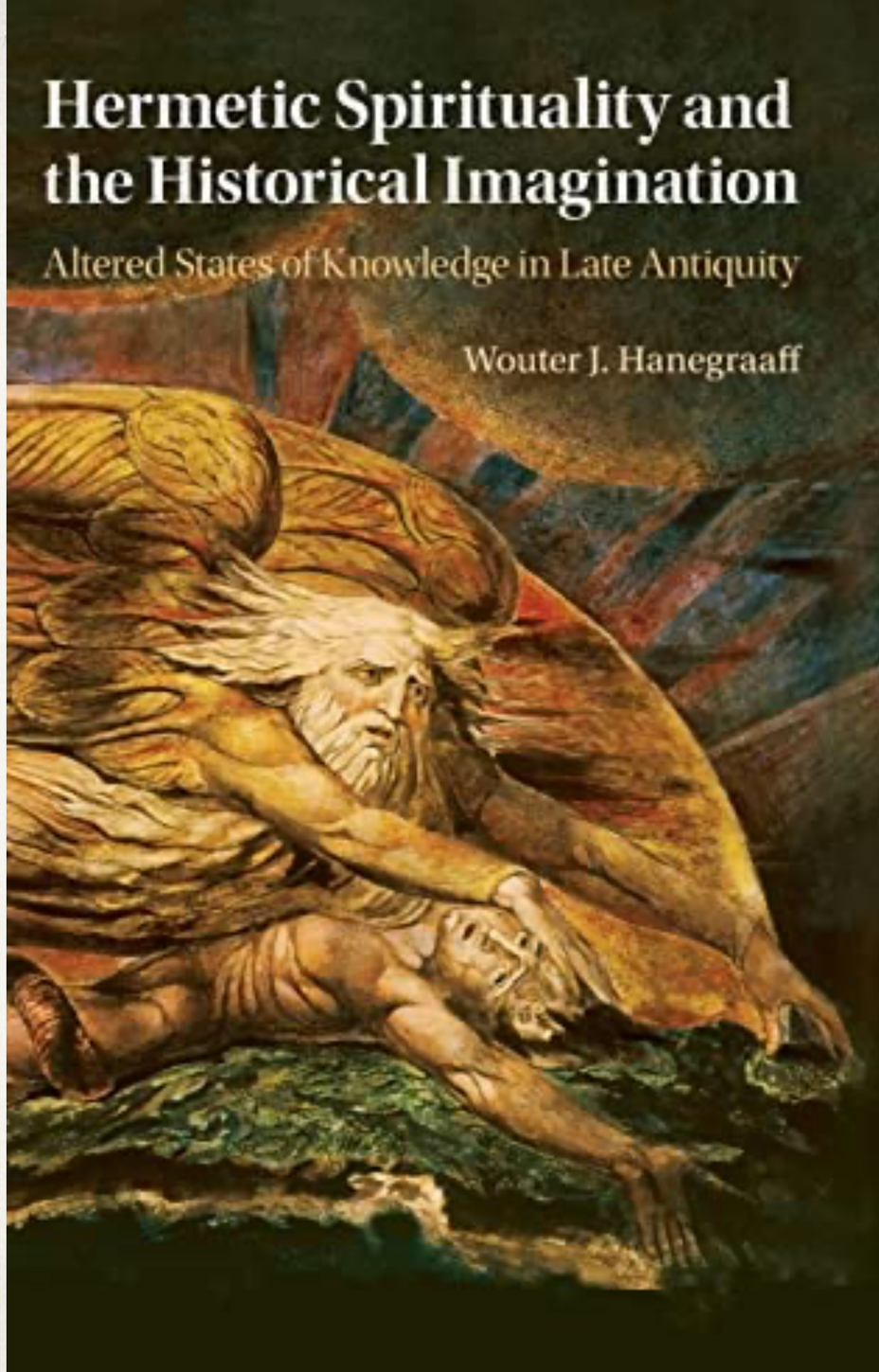
Hermeticism & Neoplatonism

- Different ways of knowing
- Esoteric Hermeneutics: The problem of translation and contextualisation

Human consciousness is not stable and reliable but fluid and susceptible to alteration, so that what we hold to be "true" must depend very much on how and where we are able (or unable) to direct our attention. Alterations of consciousness result in altered states of knowledge.

Wouter Hanegraaff

Prologue, Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity



- What does it mean to put something - anything - in words?
- What is involved in using language to describe an experience as ‘unspeakable’?
- Does it make a difference in this regard whether our words are spoken or written down?
- Can written sources like the *Hermetica* ever transmit to us what the authors wanted to say, or do they consist of nothing but empty signifiers at the mercy of our own discourse?
- Is it possible for linguistic meaning to get lost in translation?
- If so, what does it mean to practice the art of *hermeneia*, the interpretation of texts?
- What are its limits and its potentials?
- By forcing us to ask such questions, the Hermetic discourse of *gnosis* and *noesis* (direct noetic perception of ultimate reality) confronts us with the unavoidable *aporias* of human understanding.

Nothing less is at stake here than the paradox of translation across the threshold of language itself… a Greek word, *nous*, that happens to be so central to the Hermetica that we absolutely need to get it right.

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A word on words

Chaos

Theos

Nous

Logos

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Symbolic Perception

- **Literal Interpretation (what do I see)**: Obvious references or metaphors and historical / cultural context. Level of words.

- **Allegorical interpretation (what might this mean based on what I already know):** Correspondence between scripture and physical world. We know the object represents something else, regardless of whether this has an esoteric dimension or not.

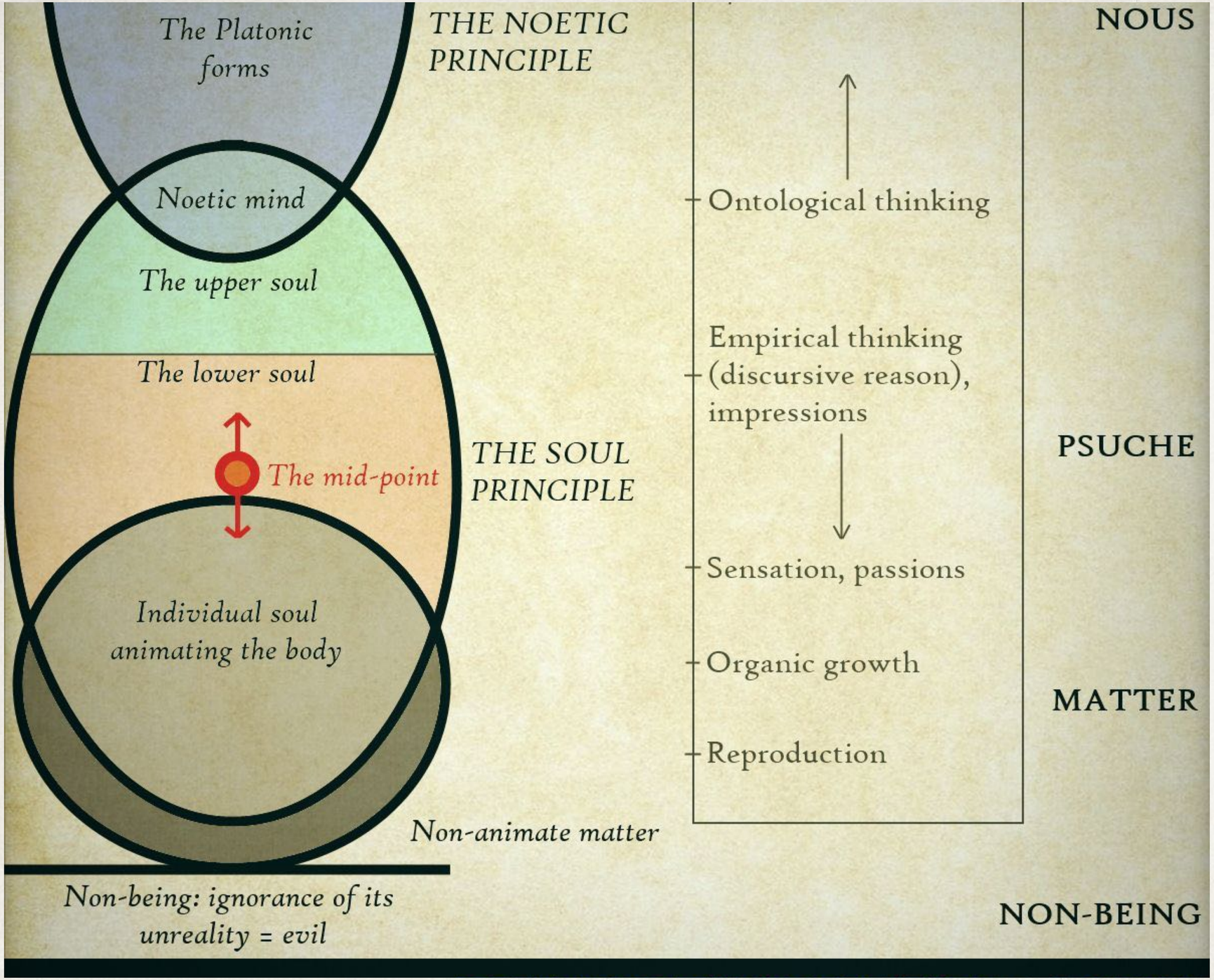
- **Moral / Tropological interpretation (What are the ethical implications and deeper significance of its meaning? What does this mean <u>to me</u>?):** Demands the participation of the observer: causes change on an intellectual level. **Engagement begins.**

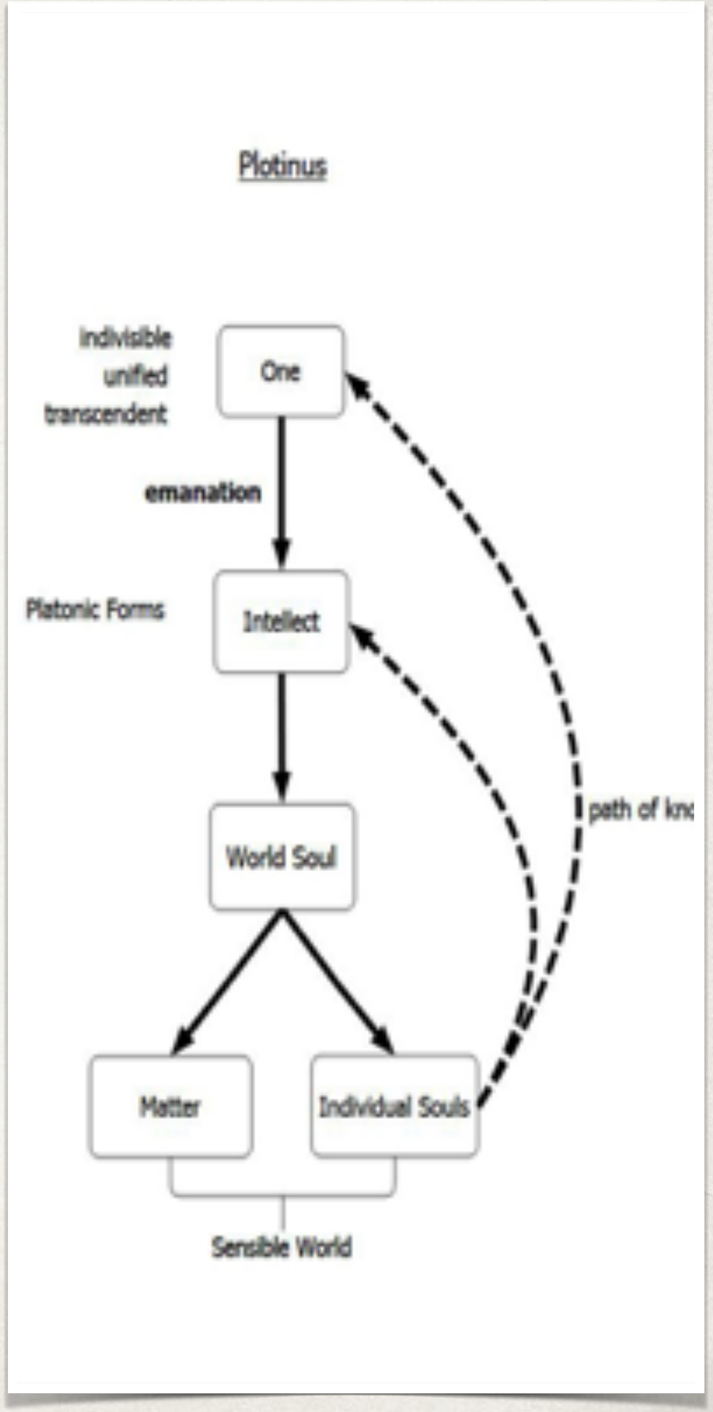
- **Anagogical interpretation (What does the interpretation mean in relation to the cosmos/my place in the cosmos as an individual and as a human beyond the physical plane?):** Identification of perception with the object that is perceived. Viewer internalizes the symbol and the perception of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm. **Change occurs… if this changes *us*, then it resembles initiation (an altered state of consciousness and knowing…)**

St Thomas Aquinas (1265-1274) Summa Theologica; Henri Corbin, Mysticism and Humour; Angela Voss, Symbolic Perception

Lost in the Light, Sasha Chaitow, 2022

Exclusive illustration for Auric Edition, Son of Prometheus, Theion 2022


The Platonic forms
THE NOETIC PRINCIPLE
NOUS
Noetic mind
The upper soul
The lower soul
The mid-point
THE SOUL PRINCIPLE
Individual soul animating the body
Non-animate matter
Non-being: ignorance of its unreality = evil
Ontological thinking
Empirical thinking (discursive reason), impressions
Sensation, passions
Organic growth
Reproduction
PSUCHE
MATTER
NON-BEING


Plotinus
indivisible
unified
transcendent
One
emanation
Platonic Forms
Intellect
World Soul
Matter
Individual Souls
Sensible World

Anagoge

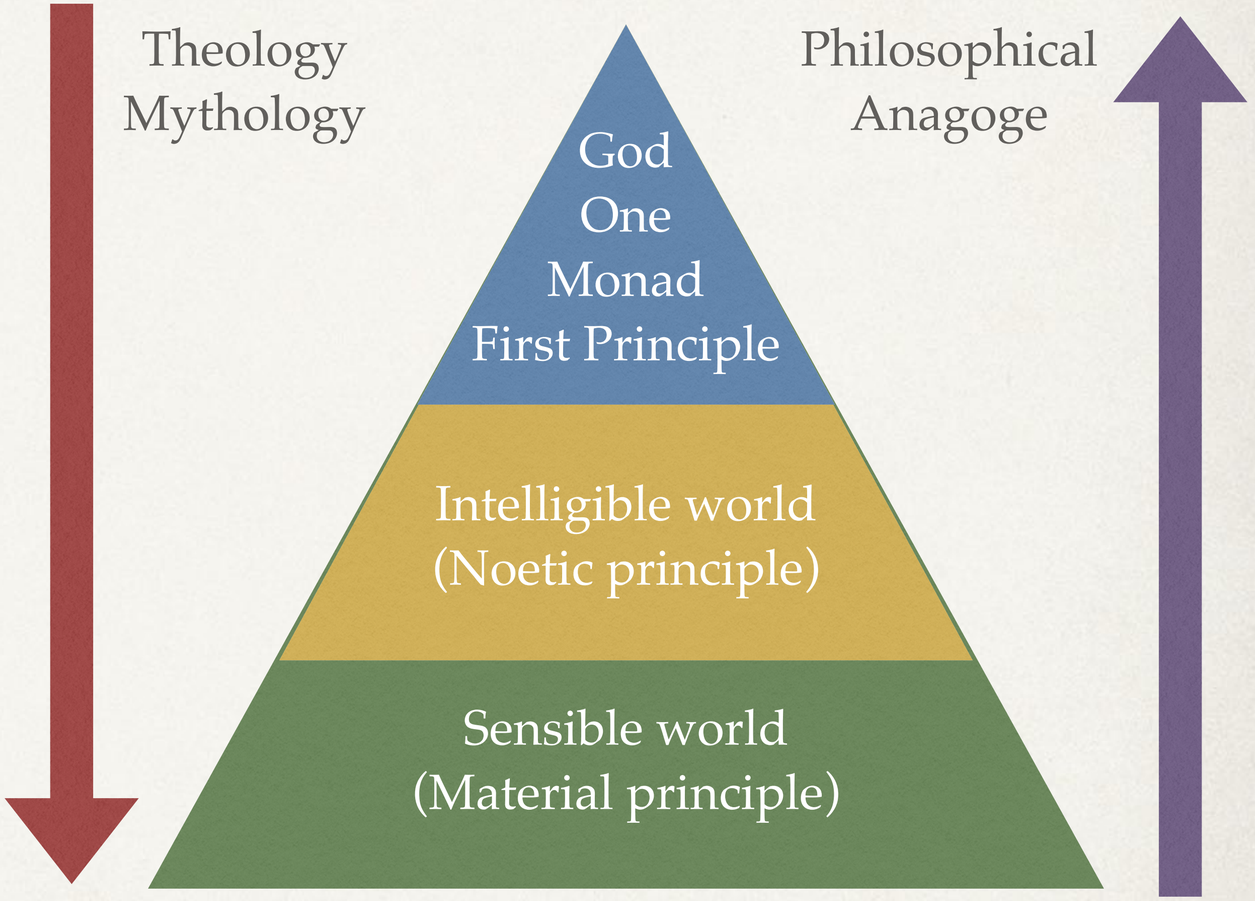
- **Anagoge/anagogical** is frequently translated as ‘spiritual, mystical’ or ‘ascent’, but in Greek it refers to **a form of refinement of syllogisms through dialectics, whereby one seeks the essence of a thing until it becomes self-evident.** Deriving from Plato, it remains a core philosophical method of reasoning.

- It is a philosophical method of beginning with the familiar (sensory world, image, matter) and moving towards the One (Abstract Principle / World of Ideals / Principles)

Anagoge vs dogma

- Why does Nature exist? Because it is pervaded by Soul. Why does Soul exist? What is its principle and point of origin? Is it self-engendered, or does it come from somewhere else?

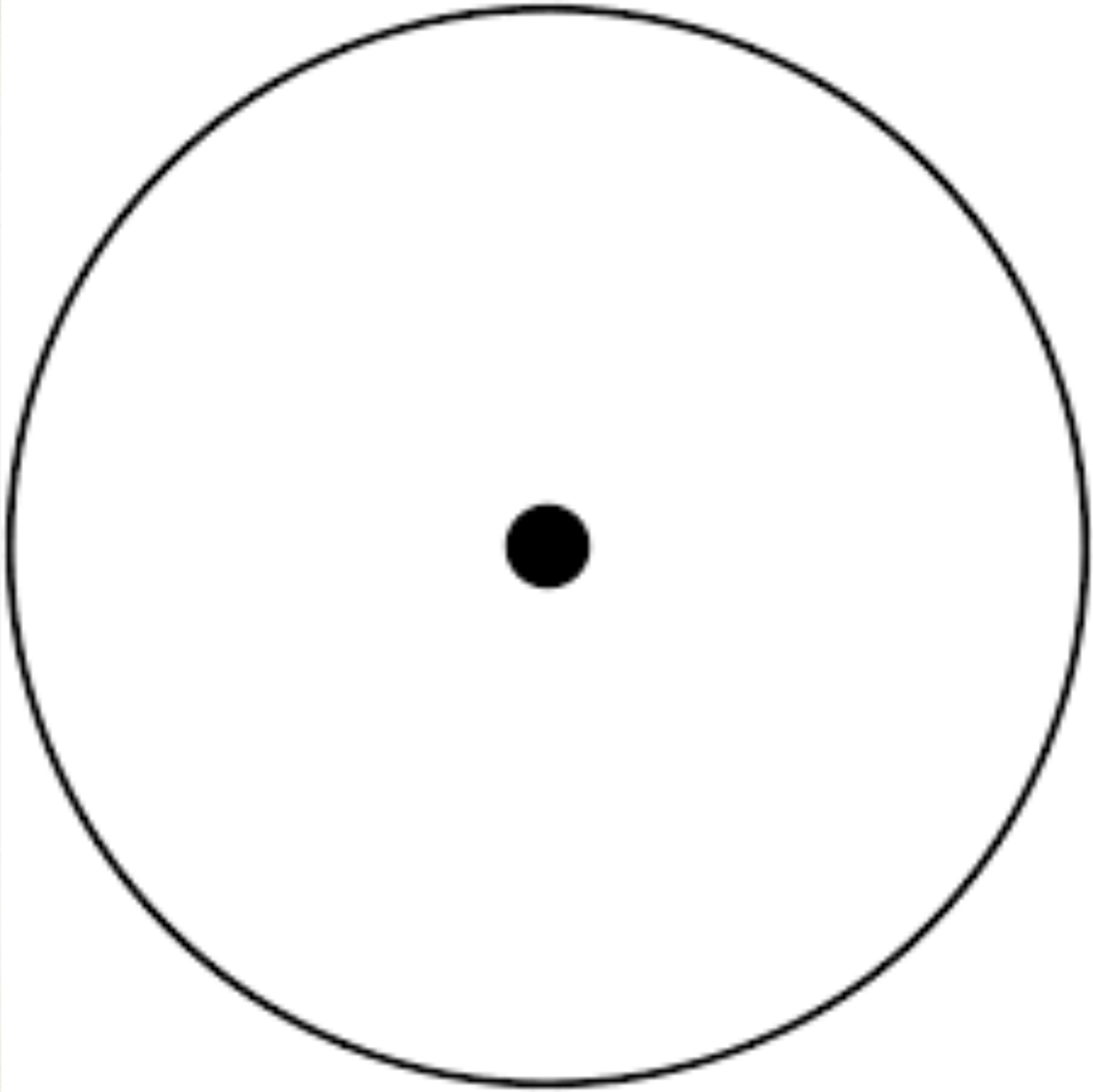
- This process of questioning continues until we reach a principle that does not presuppose a further cause other than itself.



Equally valid on an individual level; significant distinction when exploring ways of knowing.

Every entity is a monad

- Principle of unity: the One takes precedence over the Whole
- The Whole is more than a sum of its parts. It must be characrterised by an internal unity.
- The soul (ψυχή) is the reason (λόγος) for the structure of the material world.
- Therefore the cosmos is **ensouled**.



What is the principle of unity of Soul?

- Nous.
- Why is it Nous? (And not something else)
- Because Nous (=conscious intelligent design understood in different ways depending on the school of thought) can explain why there is visible order in the cosmos.
- Because Nous is independent of physicality.
- For Plotinus: The perceptible world; the archetype of the sensory world; the function of noesis that leads to true gnosis and to *episteme (to know with certainty)*.
- As a cosmos unto itself (and not a function), Nous encompasses all things knowable that are the prerequisites for thought.
- Nous is both self-aware, and capable of self-reflection. It is unity in multiplicity.
- Nous can know itself. It is a totality of organically connected knowable things that knows itself, and in knowing itself, it can know the knowable.

Criterion of Truth:

Externality is removed.

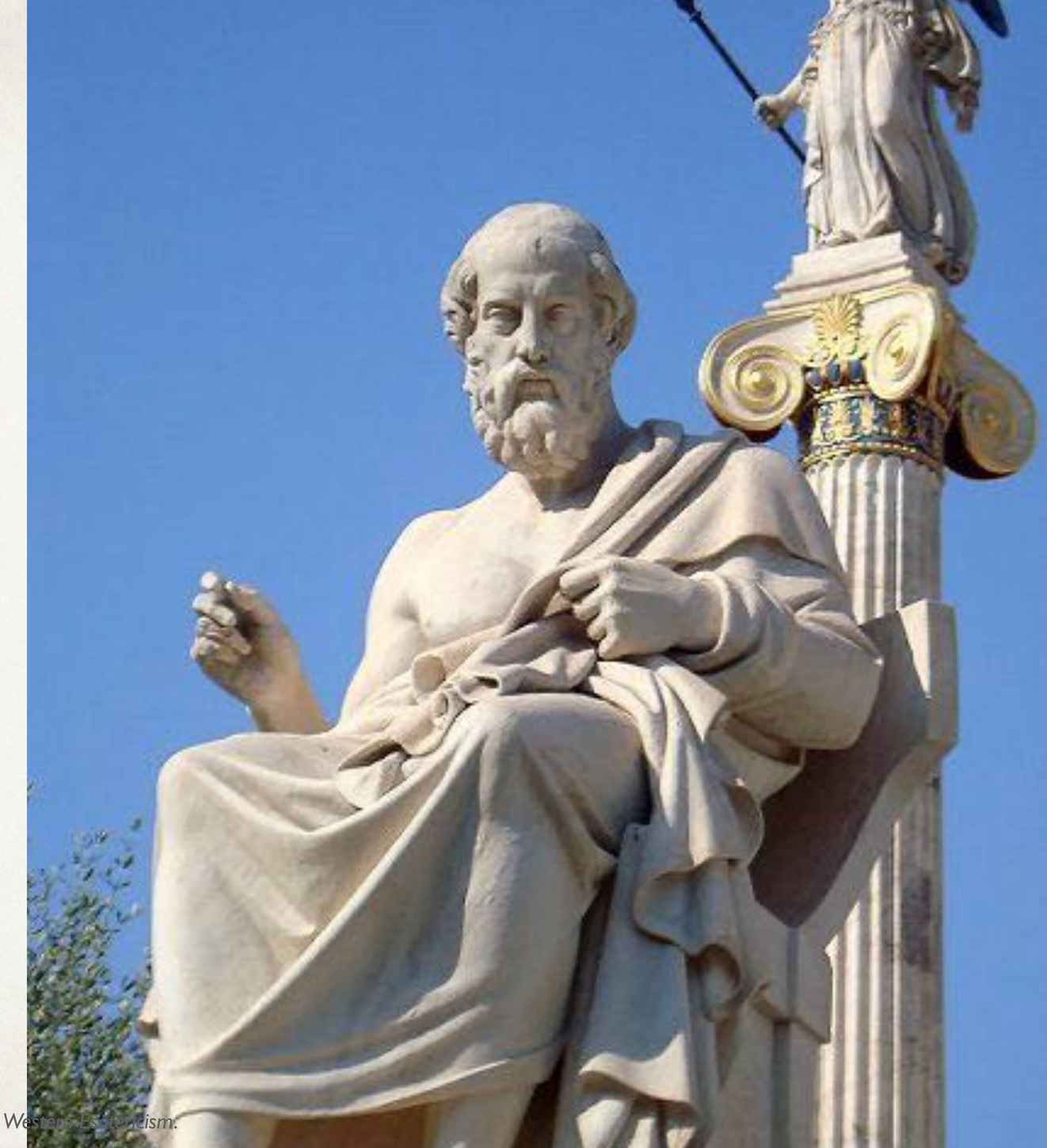
The Known is contained *within* Nous, and in knowing the Known, Nous knows itself.

Philosophical Hermetica II

- This "entity" is the imagining mind: "(Theos) is the mind's eye." (C.H. 13.17).
- "The Mind is of the very essence of Theos, if yet there be any essence of Theos.
- The Mind therefore is not divided from the essentiality of God, but united."
- Therefore the Logos is the Image of the Mind, and the Mind of God, and the Body of the Idea, and the Idea of the Soul." (C.H. 11.1; 3; 69)

Platonism

- Intelligible world of forms - invisible world of ideas together form ‘ultimate reality.’
- Both may be apprehended but require different cognitive states.
- Philosophical reason (noesis) vs. Ordinary modes of being and thought.
- *Noesis*: ‘an actual experience of ultimate reality’ = the Good.
- Νόησης νοήσεως - thinking about thinking (Aristotle, *Τα Μεταφυσικά*)



Adapted from: Gwenaëlle Aubry, “Plato, Plotinus, and Neoplatonism,” in Magee ed., *Handbook of Mysticism and Western Esoteric*