

After Plato

It is important to realise that although Plato and Aristotle have been major reference points in the mainstream philosophical traditions of Europe and the Middle-East, they are not the only ones. Older traditions, including Pythagorean mystical mathematics and Democritus' atomic theory, continued to exercise a spell. But there were other approaches to philosophy apart from Aristotle's that had a lasting effect.

Cynics

Another younger contemporary of Plato was the philosopher Diogenes (404-323 BCE) – one of a number of philosophers known as 'cynics' or 'dogs', because of their critical approach (and in the case of Diogenes an anarchic, savage humour) to the norms of civic life. He famously lived in a barrel in Athens, hugged frozen statues in winter and mocked Plato for his pomposity mercilessly. Legend has it that when Plato produced an oracular definition of the human being as 'a featherless biped', while everyone else was applauding, Diogenes plucked a chicken, and held it up saying, 'here is your human being, Plato'. He was reportedly sunning himself on a hillside in Athens when Alexander the Great came to see him. Alexander greeted him, and asked what he, the great king, could do for him. Diogenes' reply, 'get out of my light.' Plato described him as a Socrates gone mad. He is a prototype for punks and anarchists throughout the ages, who debunk the pretensions of the intellectual elite and challenge conventional norms of behaviour in the name of authenticity. Some have seen parallels between his counter-cultural testimony and the behaviour of some Jewish prophets, earlier and later, including John the Baptist and possibly even Jesus of Nazareth.

Pyrrho and the Sceptics

A very interesting and important character is Pyrrho of Elis (roughly 360-270 BCE), whose philosophy is directly influenced by an encounter with Indian sages and Persian magi, in the period of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire. The school he later founded in his home town of Elis, was known (among other names) as 'sceptical', because of its focus on a search for truth, and its rigour in critiquing the certainties of philosophical schools that made bold claims to truth. The point of evolved Scepticism according to the medical doctor, Sextus Empiricus (writing 500 years later) is to consider the different ways that we can be misled by our senses and our assumptions, to balance competing arguments against each other, and to recognise that there comes a point where the urge to enquiry becomes fruitless. Accordingly, we abandon pointless argument and we get on with normal life in peace.

Stoics and Epicureans

But the two competing philosophical schools that became dominant in the Eastern Mediterranean after the conquests of Alexander, and eventually in the Roman Empire (well into the third century of our era) were that of the Stoic philosophers (so called because they gathered at a covered walkway or 'stoa' in Athens) and the Epicureans, named after their founder Epicurus. In different ways they came to offer a complete philosophical package to

live by. Plato's and Aristotle's writings are, as we have seen, exploratory, trying to work out the relations between the natural world and the meaning of life, and suggesting a number of different ways of approaching the deeper questions. The Stoics and Epicureans take up the same scientific and philosophical questions, but put them together in a way that can guide people in how to live their lives.

They are important to the Christian tradition in particular because their cultural influence was at its height in the near East, both before Christ and in the century in which the New Testament was written. The Jewish writer Josephus even claims that the Pharisaic movement was influenced by Stoicism and that the Sadducees were influenced by Epicurus. This is a hard claim to nail down, but it is not implausible when you set some of the things each group cares about side by side – not least the questions of the resurrection of the body and of human freedom and responsibility. The book of Wisdom (dating probably to the 1st Century BCE), and probably written by a Jewish author in Alexandria, challenges people who deny the resurrection and who pursue pleasure as the ultimate good (both tenets associated with Epicurus) though without going into any great philosophical detail. The New Testament itself, particularly in its moral language (as seen in the letters of Paul, but not just there) often has strong Stoic resonances and occasionally, as in the description of the end of the world in 2 Peter, we glimpse something of Stoic cosmology.

Stoics

Like Plato and Aristotle, Stoic authors realised that in order to be able to say anything plausible about how to live your life, you have to have a plausible account of how the universe operates. Broadly they accept something like Aristotle's form-matter picture of how things change. They accept the standard cosmology of a geocentric universe, surrounded by concentric celestial spheres.

But unlike Aristotle and Plato, they identify the force that gives form to everything nature as material. Two of the elements, fire and wind, act on the passive elements of earth and water to shape new forms. They pick up on an idea of Heraclitus, that these two 'active elements' transmit a divine 'logos' or spirit – not the abstract 'word/account' of Aristotle's essences, or even the reasoning faculty in a human soul, but something that continually, actively shapes the material world. It is the divine spark, the instrument of God, shared by intelligent beings like ourselves, which makes us all part of what is ultimately a divine whole. A 'logos spermatikos' – a seminal word – transmits form in the biological realm. Biological nature, including reproductive processes are an expression of the beneficent intention of the divine mind ultimately governing the universe. This idea is the basis of later natural-law approaches to sexual ethics. But the 'logos spermatikos' also operates scattered across human souls, shaping thoughts and understanding.

With some similarity to Plato's belief, human souls separate from their bodies at death, and can be reincarnated in new bodies. But for Stoics this is easier to account for, because human souls are always a part of physical, material nature. They belong naturally to the fiery element in the heavens and simply return there after any necessary purgation. There is no puzzle about the mind-body connection, as there is for Platonists.

Again, in contrast to Aristotle, the Stoic universe is not eternal, but cyclic. When the stars eventually return to their original positions there is an 'ecpyrosis' – a cosmic bonfire in which everything melts and is consumed. The universe is re-formed, and then starts all over again, with the same history and the same cast.

The older generation of Stoics developed their thinking in the context of the newly globalised world opened up by Alexander's conquest. It is perhaps no accident, then, that there are overlaps with themes found in earlier near-Eastern writings like Genesis, second Isaiah and Ezekiel. Nor, perhaps, is it entirely an accident that Jews, and later Christians, who embraced the Hellenistic culture of which Stoicism was a part, found resonances with their own scriptures.

We do not have much complete text from the founder generation of Stoics: Zeno of Citium (on Cyprus) 333-261 BCE; Cleanthes of Assos 331-232 (today, on SW coast of Turkey); Chrysippus of Tarsus 282-206 (today SE Turkey). However, for later generations, contemporary with New Testament writers, and very influential on Roman society in the late Republic and early Empire, there is much more direct material. We have discourses of the slave-philosopher Epictetus (c 50-120 CE), essays on various philosophical topics by the Roman plutocrat Seneca (4B CE-65 CE) (who tutored Nero) as well as the later meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE).

From these we can see quite powerfully how a set of ideas about humanity's place in a fundamentally well-ordered and benign cosmos led to a philosophy that seeks peace of mind by working with the cosmos to do good. We recognise the limits of our power in external matters, but we have a 'god within', and if we listen to that god, we will have no fear of what may befall us – death, sickness or injustice – but will simply focus on the things that we can control, the free choice to do good and avoid evil, for our fellow citizens in the world. We recognise that we are all citizens of the world, parts of a whole that is greater and more complex than we can understand.

Nature (LS 43A)¹

Zeno says that the whole cosmos and the sky is the reality (ousia) of God (and similarly Chrysippus... and Posidonius...)... Sometimes they speak of 'nature' as what holds the universe together and sometimes as what makes things grow on the earth. And 'nature' which moves of itself. According to seminal patterns (logos) it fashions and sustains what it produces in regular periods of time, making them similar to the things from which they come. It is 'nature' too to aim for what is beneficial and for what is pleasant, as is clear from the way humans are made.

The hymn of Cleanthes (LS 54 I)

This hymn, with strong echoes of Heraclitan language, gives a flavour of how this early Stoic understands the relation between, the human, the cosmos, the divine and the good life.

¹ References are to the texts collected in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (CUP: Cambridge, 1987), volume one English, volume two Greek.

Notice the theme (found in St Paul) that the god of the universe brings good out of evil. (It is also interesting to put this hymn side by side with Isaiah 55):

Most noble immortal, many-named, all-powerful, eternal,
 Zeus, prince and author of nature, governing all things by law, hail!
 It is right and fitting for all mortals to acclaim you.
 For we have been born with the gift of your divine likeness
 alone among the mortal things that live and creep upon the earth.
 I shall sing to you and chant your praise forever
 You it is that this whole cosmos, obeys as it wheels about the earth,
 wherever you guide it, and by you it is gladly mastered.
 What an instrument you hold in your unconquerable hands!
 The fiery double-edged, ever-living thunderbolt.
 All the works of nature have gone forth at its blast,
 and with it you direct the universal Word (logos), which makes its way
 through all things mingling with the great and lesser lights...

Divine one, no work on the lower world comes into being without you,
 nothing in the divine, aethereal heaven, nothing in the seas,
 apart from the deeds evil men in their mindlessness do.
 Yet you know how to make the crooked straight,
 to bring order to chaos, loveless actions, you can embrace.
 So it is that you have brought all things into a single harmony, good and bad alike,
 so that there may be one ever living Word of all things.

All evil mortals flee this and neglect it. Unfortunates!
 They neither see nor listen to the universal law of God.
 If only they were intelligent and obeyed it, they would enjoy a noble life.
 But no, mindlessly they launch themselves each one at a different evil,
 Some with a pursuit of fame that brooks no correction
 Some bent on profit by any means,
 Some on luxury and the pleasures of the body
 ... but at times, they move towards a different goal,
 with a great eagerness for the opposite of these to come to pass.

But Zeus of the dark cloud, giver of all, Zeus of the glittering thunderbolt,
 Rescue humankind from their grievous ignorance.
 Father, scatter it from our souls, grant us to attain
 wisdom, that wisdom you rely on as you govern all things in justice.
 So may we be honoured by you and in turn give you the honour,
 singing your works without ceasing, as is fitting
 for one who is mortal. For there is no prize greater for
 mortals or for gods than in justice to sing forever the universal law.

Active and passive elements – the world as god.

First notice this passage from Nemesius (a fourth century Christian author):

The Stoics say that some of the elements are active and some are passive. The active ones are air and fire. The passive ones are earth and water.

Now read Cicero's (first century BCE, Rome) account of Stoic arguments for the primacy of fire as the active element in nature, and its role in a nature which is intrinsically divine:

Therefore everything that lives, whether an animal or produce of the earth, is alive because of the heat it contains. From this we should reason that the nature of heat includes a life-giving power that runs through the whole world. And we can see this more clearly when we analyse more closely the whole class of fiery objects that permeates all things. Therefore, all parts of the world (I will touch on the main ones) are sustained and rely on heat. This can be seen first in the natural world on earth...[a list of examples from the four regions of the universe]... From this we infer that since all the parts of the world are sustained by heat, the world as a whole is preserved by a similar and equal nature in its eternity. All the more so, because we should appreciate that this hot and fiery element is so diffused through the whole of nature, that the power of reproducing resides in it, and the cause of generation, by which all living things and the things whose offspring is held within the earth [plants] must be born and grow to maturity.

It is a nature that holds the whole world together and watches over it, and it is not without perception and reason. For necessarily, every nature which is not isolated or simple but joined and connected with something else must have some guiding principle within it, like the mind in humans and something similar in animals from which come their motivations towards things; some think as well that there is such a guiding principle in the roots of trees and things that grow from the ground... It follows of necessity that that in which lies the guiding principle of the whole of nature is the best of all things and most worthy of its power and dominion. For we see in the parts of the world (and there is nothing in all the world which is not a part of the whole) that there is awareness and reason. Therefore, in that part wherein lies the guiding principle of the world, these things must be present as well, and more intensely and in a higher degree. Therefore the world must be conscious, and that nature which holds all things in its embrace must excel in the perfection of its reason. And therefore the world is a god and all the forces of the world are contained in a divine nature.

Stoic optimism about the purpose of things (and a sceptical response)

An underlying, optimistic message about the way the world is ordered, where everything has its proper place and purpose, raises eyebrows in an age where we are realising that maybe we need to think of the other creatures in the world as not there simply for our benefit. Here is Porphyry on a claim by Chrysippus [LS 54P]:

But good heavens, is what Chrysippus says plausible? That the gods made us for the sake of ourselves and one another, and made the animals for our sakes. Horses to go to war with us, hounds to hunt with us, leopards and bears and lions to practise courage on. As for the pig (this is the most ingenious conceit) it has been brought into being for no other purpose than to be slaughtered, and the god mixed life in it like salt, making it easy for us to roast... Anyone who finds this remotely plausible or thinks it appropriate for a god to have any part of this should consider [the absurd conclusion to this theme] that Carneades pointed out. 'Everything that comes into being in nature, when it achieves the end for which it was produced and came into being, is benefited... by nature the pig has been born to be slaughtered and eaten; and when this happens to it, it achieves what it is made for, and therefore is benefited.'

The Beginning and End of the World: the everlasting cycle (LS 46A, C, F G; 52 C). The fate of the human soul [LS 53W]

Here are some passages that give more detail on how the divine fire shapes the world and how the world moves towards periodic conflagrations and begins all over again:

[46A] The Stoics present God as something intelligent, a fire operating like a craftsman's at the origin of the universe, and including within it all the seminal words according to which everything that is fated comes into being, and a spirit that runs through the whole world, and is named differently according to the different transformations of the material through which it runs.

[46C] The world comes into being when the essence of fire is transformed through air into the moist; then its denser part congeals and earth is produced, but the lighter part of it dries out and this becomes still more refined until it generates fire, then out of a mixture of all these things arise the plants and animals and all the other kinds of thing.

[46F] And when the conflagration happens throughout [the universe, Chrysippus] says that the universe is thoroughly alive and that it is an animal, but that as it is quenched again and congeals, it transforms into water and earth and what is corporeal. He says this in the first chapter of *On Providence*: "When the world is completely in the form of fire, at that moment it is its own soul and guiding principle; but when, after transforming into the moist and the residual soul within it, it has transformed into body and soul, so that it consists of these, at this point it has a different proper description."

[46G] Then too, according to predetermined periods of time, the whole world is consumed by fire, then once more it is reordered. The first fire is like a sort of seed, which contains the essential plans [logous] of all things along with the causes of the things that have come to be, the things that are coming to be and the things that shall be; the interweaving of these and the predetermined sequence are the knowledge and the truth and the law of things that exist, something ineluctable and inescapable. In this way everything is disposed in the world in a way that is maximally good, as in a city with the best of all laws.

[52C] The Stoics say that when the planets are restored to the same sign of the zodiac in latitude and longitude where each of them was in the beginning when the world was first

constituted, in a determinate period of time, it produces a conflagration and a destruction of the things that exist. And then once more the universe is restored from the very beginning in the same way. And as the stars move again in the same way, every single thing that happened in the earlier phase is accomplished without deviation. For there will be a Socrates and a Plato once again, and each human with the same friends and fellow-citizens; they will undergo the same things and achieve the same things and attempt the same things, and similarly every city and village and field will be restored as it was. This restoration of everything happens not just once but many times; in fact the same things are restored *ad infinitum* and without end. That is why the gods who are not subject to destruction having been aware of one phase know from this everything that will happen in subsequent phases. For there will be nothing alien to what happened before, but everything will be just as it was, without deviation in the tiniest detail.

[53W] They say that the soul comes to be and passes away. But it does not perish the moment it leaves the body, but continues to exist on its own for a certain time. In the case of the worthy until the moment where everything is dissolved in fire, in the case of the witless, for a certain time. What they mean by souls persisting is this, that we persist having become souls, separated from the body, and by reducing the essence of the soul, but the soulsof unreasoning animals perish with their bodies.

So how are we supposed to live in this, the best of all possible worlds?

This is the framework for a message about how we are to live our lives. We are part of a cosmos that evolves according to an optimal, reasoned plan, in which we have our proper place. The only thing we have control of is our own actions. The only things which have moral value – that can properly be said to be good or bad – are the actions produced by the human will. That is a powerful idea that is taken up by Immanuel Kant and influences 20th Century philosophers including Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Existentialists. What happens to us, whether pleasant or painful has no moral value, whether it is an earthquake or an act of human malice. Our task is to live as citizens of the world, doing good come what may and accepting as a gift of the universe whatever comes our way that is beyond our control. The ideal Stoic is imperturbable: if ‘the world fragments and collapses’ on a Stoic, ‘the ruins will strike them unafraid’. Whatever happens to us we always have our inner freedom that no-one can take away from us. This spirit is captured in the poem Invictus: ‘out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods there be for my unconquerable soul’. Listen to Epictetus, born into slavery, but eventually living as a philosopher in Rome, and to Marcus Aurelius, in his day the most powerful man in the Mediterranean world.

Epictetus²

[I.1.8-15] Therefore, as was fitting the gods have put under our control only that faculty which is the best of all and that which has mastery of the rest, the correct use of what the senses tell us. Nothing else is in our hands. Is this because they did not will it? I believe

² Epictetus, *Discourses*, (Loeb Classical Library, Moffatt - Oldfather transl.)

that if they had been able, they would have put those things in our hands as well, but they were quite unable to do that. For since we exist upon the earth and are bound up in such a body, with associates of a similar nature, how was it possible for us not to be hindered by these physical things in these respects?

What does Zeus say? “Epictetus, if I had been able, I would have made your little body and your little plot of land free and unhampered. As it is – you must realise – this is not yours, it is merely clay, ingeniously mixed. But because I could not do this, we have given you a part of ourselves, this power that stirs and recoils, that reaches out and refuses – in a word a power that makes use of what the senses bring before us. When you attend to this power and place all that you have in it, nothing can hold you back, you will never be hindered, you will not cry out, you will not reproach, you will flatter no no-one. So then, does this seem just a small thing?” “Please, far from it!” “Are you content with this?” “I pray the gods I may be!”

But look, even though it is in our power to attend to this one thing and to depend entirely on this one thing, we prefer to concern ourselves with many things and to bind ourselves with many things, the body, position, a brother, a friend, a child, a slave. Thus bound by many things we are weighed down by them and dragged down.

[1.4.18-21] (is progress achieved by reading more books?) Where then is progress? Any of you that can withdraw from external things, to focus on the quality of their will, to work on it, labour over it, to make it completely in harmony with nature, to make it lofty, free, unblocked, unhindered, faithful, modest; any that has learnt that the person who longs for or runs from what is not in their control can be neither faithful nor free, but must be changeable as those events, tossed to and fro along with them, and must subject themselves to others, to those who have power to provide or prevent those things. Finally if they rise in the morning and keep and guard these things, bathe as a faithful person, eat as a modest person, and similarly labour over each task that falls to them according to their precepts, like a runner, practising for his race, or a voice-trainer practising his speech. Such a one has made genuine progress and the one who has not made their journey haphazardly, that is the one who has made progress.

[1.6.1] It is easier to celebrate providence on the basis of each thing that happens in the world if one has these two things within oneself: a capacity to see each single thing in its wider context, and a sense of gratitude. Without the one, a person will miss the beneficial purpose of what has happened, the other, even if he sees it, will fail to give thanks.

Marcus Aurelius³

[III.8-11] Respect your power to form judgments. Everything rests on this, that no judgment in your governing faculty should ever arise that is not appropriate to nature and the constitution of a rational animal. This ensures that you are not precipitate, that you show fellowship towards humankind, and obedience to the gods.

Lay everything else aside, hold on to just these few things; and remind yourself that each person only lives in this present brief moment; everything else either belongs to life already lived or is yet unknown. The life each person lives is brief. The corner of the world in which they live is small. Even the fame that lives on is short-lived, handed on by a succession of little people who will very soon be dead and who hardly know themselves, let alone those long-dead...

Nothing is so conducive to greatness of mind as to be able to test each thing that falls to one in life methodically and truthfully, to see them in such a way as to recognise altogether what sort of universe this belongs in, how it should be dealt with, what its value is to the whole, what its value is for the human being, who is a citizen of the supreme city, of which other cities are like houses. What is it? What is it composed of? And how long was this thing made to be, this thing which presents itself to my senses in this moment? And which of the virtues should I deploy towards it, mildness, courage, truth, faithfulness, innocence, independence, and so on.

For this reason you have to say in each case, "this has come from God. This is due to the conjunction and the interweaving of fate, just this coincidence and chance; this is from one of your people, one of your family, from a neighbour, but one who does not know what is in accordance with nature for him. But I am not ignorant. Therefore I treat him according to the natural law of fellowship, with kindly disposition, and with justice; at the same time however, in the things of indeterminate value, I aim to strike the golden mean.

If you perform in the present moment with integrity following right reason, steadfastly, with kindness, not as an afterthought, but you preserve your own inner divinity constant and pure, as if it were already the moment to surrender it back. If you hold this fast, neither hanging back, nor running away, but content with the present activity that nature gives and a heroic truth in what you say and declare, you shall live well. And there is nothing that can stand in your way.

[12, 33] How does your guiding principle deploy itself? Everything lies in this. Everything else is either something we can choose or something we have no choice in, dead, smoke.

[12, 34] What spurs one to despise death is that even those who call pleasure good and pain bad despise it too, nevertheless.

³ Marcus Aurelius (Loeb Classical Library – Haines ed and transl.)

[12, 35] For one who finds the only good is what comes in due season, who in rendering actions according to right reason, is indifferent as to whether these are many or few, for whom it makes no difference whether they contemplate the world for a longer or a shorter time, for such a one death cannot inspire fear.

[12, 36] Human, you lived as a citizen in this great city. What difference if it was for five years or a hundred? Whether you lived according to its laws is the same fact in either case. Why is it so terrible if you are exiled from the city, not by a tyrant or by some unjust judge, but by the very Nature that brought you there. Like an official who has commissioned an actor, if he dismisses him from the stage. "But I haven't performed my five acts, only three..." You're not wrong. But in life, three acts is a whole play. The one who decides what is complete is the same one who was once responsible for knitting you together, and is now responsible for dissolving you; you have no responsibility for either of these. So go in good grace, for the one who dismisses you is gracious.

A Stoic-Pythagorean-Aristotelian-Platonic mash-up heavenly journey according to Cicero

('The dream of Scipio' from Cicero, *Republic* VI 10 ff)

This text does not give a purely Stoic narrative, but it shows traces of several different salvation narratives woven together, and gives an insight into philosophical narratives widely available in the century before Jesus in the Romano-Hellenistic world. The world appears to be eternal (Aristotle, unlike Plato and the Stoics), but subject to fires and floods (a nod to the Stoics). Fate and prophecy is important (Scipio learns his destiny) – very much a Stoic concern. The soul is immortal, self-moving and is made of fire (Stoic doctrine). Virtue and the pure will, that rise above external things are what allow people to return to the stars (a Stoic attitude to the essence of morality, very influential in 18th Century Europe). The symphony of the spheres and the numerology picks up on Platonic and Pythagorean themes. The meditation on the futility of human fame has parallels in the Hellenistic Jewish text of Ecclesiastes, and the picture of the fate of the just, restored as stars in the heavens seems to have a non-accidental resemblance to images found in the book of Daniel and the contemporary book of Wisdom. Note the variation on Aristotle's unmoved mover argument, favouring the 'self-mover', as the origin of everything. Note also the use of it to highlight the human soul as 'the god within' – developing an Aristotelian thought perhaps – but an idea found both in the language of the Upanishads and, perhaps more surprisingly, in Adam Smith.

The Scipio of the story is a descendant of Scipio Africanus, who defeated Hannibal. He describes his journey to Africa to meet king Masinissa during the third Carthaginian war. Masinissa had aided his ancestor against Hannibal and regales him with stories of him late into the night. Scipio describes the dream that followed:

"Africanus himself appeared, but more as I knew him from the family image of him than from himself; when I recognised him, I shuddered, but he said: 'You are present here in spirit, Scipio, don't be afraid. Commit to memory what I am about to say.

‘Do you see that city, which I forced into obedience to the Roman people, and which is renewing old hostilities and cannot be at peace?’ From a clear lofty height, bright and full of stars, he pointed down towards Karthage, ‘The place you have come to lay siege to – your first military command! In your term as consul, you shall overthrow it, and you will earn in your own right the title you have inherited from us. After you have levelled Karthage, celebrated the Triumph, been elected censor and travelled as governor to Egypt, Syria, Asia, Greece, you will once again be chosen as consul in your absence. You will wage a very great war and destroy Numantia. But as you are brought in by chariot into the Capitol, you will scandalise our republic, disturbed by the advice of another of my grandsons.

‘Here, Africanus, you will have to show your country the light of your spirit, of your intelligence, of your advice. But the pathway at that moment – as it were of the fates – is uncertain. For when you reach seven times eight summer and winter solstices, when those two numbers (which for different reasons are numbers of completeness) in nature’s circuit have brought you to that fateful age, the whole state, the senate, all good people will turn to you and your name, all the allies and all the Latins will look to you. You will be the only one – on you rests that salvation of the state. In short, it will fall to you as dictator to secure the republic – if you manage to escape the impious hands of your own household.’

At this point Laelius cried out, and the others groaned loudly. But Scipio smiled gently and said, “Hush, don’t wake me from my dream! Just listen to the rest:

‘Africanus, be alert to preserve the public good. All those who have preserved, aided or developed their country, have a sure and determinate place in heaven, where in happiness they enjoy eternal life. For that originating God, who rules the whole world and all that comes to pass in it, delights in nothing more than the councils and gatherings of humans brought into societies by law, which we call states. Those who govern and preserve them come from here and return here.’

“At this point, terrified, not so much by the fear of death as of the plot against me from my own family, I nevertheless asked whether he was truly alive, along with my father Paulus and others whom we believed without life. ‘Of course they live,’ he said. ‘They have flown out of the chains of their bodies as from a prison. But your life, as they say, is death. Do you not see your father Paulus approaching you?’ When I saw him, I broke down in tears, but he embraced me, and kissing me forbade me to weep.

“And when I had controlled my tears and could speak again, I said, ‘Father, most holy and best, if this is life, as I learn from Africanus, why am I delaying on earth? Why do I not hurry to join you?’

‘It does not work like that,’ he answered, ‘Unless that God frees you from the imprisonment of the body, whose temple is all that you behold, the way here cannot lie open to you. For human beings have been generated under this law, to watch over that globe that you see in the middle of this temple, which is called earth, and a spirit is given them from those everlasting fires that you call planets and stars, and which as solid spheres ensouled with divine minds complete their orbits with a wonderful speed.

‘For this reason, Scipio, you and all god-fearing people must preserve the spirit under the guard of the body, and you must not pass from human life without the express command of him from whom you received it. Rather, imitate your grandfather here and me, who fathered you. Practise justice and duty. These are important towards family and friends, but they are very great in the case of one’s country. That life is the highway to heaven, and into the company of those who have completed their lives and been released from their body. They dwell in this place that you can see, which you follow the Greeks in calling the milky sphere.’ This was shining all around amidst the fires with a brilliant brightness.

“As I looked from that vantage point, I could see everything else in its splendour and wonder. There were stars that we have never seen from here, and all of them have a vastness that we have never guessed. The smallest of them was the one furthest from the heavens, the shortest distance from the earth, that shone with another’s light. The spheres of the stars easily surpass the earth’s size. The earth itself in fact seemed so small that I felt sorry for our empire, it was just a dot on the surface.

“As I was looking at it more closely, Africanus said, “How much longer, may I ask are you going to keep your mind fixed on the ground? Cannot you see what temples you have entered? Everything is connected in nine circuits or rather spheres. The outermost is the heavenly sphere, which embraces all the rest. The most high God constrains and contains all the others. There are fixed the eternal courses of the wheeling stars; obedient to this are the seven spheres which turn about in a motion contrary to the heavens; one sphere belongs to the star which on earth they call Saturn; next is that favourable and saving radiance for the human race which is called Jupiter; then the red star a source of terror for the earth, whom you call Mars; then, below that, the sun holds the middle region, the general and leader and governor of the other lights, the mind and regulator of the world, of such vastness that it can reach all things and fill them with its light. From there as companions follow the courses of Venus and Mercury, and in the lowest sphere the moon comes and goes lit by the rays of the sun. Below that there is nothing but what is mortal and passing, apart from the souls given to the human race by the gift of the gods. Above the moon, everything is eternal. For that which is in the middle, the ninth, the earth does not move and is at the lowest point. All that is heavy moves towards it of its own accord.’

“I gazed on all this, dumbstruck, but as I recovered, I asked, ‘What is this great sweet sound that fills my ears?’ ‘This,’ he explained, ‘is the sound made by the impulse and motion of the spheres due to the intervals which are unequal and distinct and yet in proportion, and as high and low notes are brought into balance, this creates a variety of equal harmonies; such motions could not be driven in silence, and nature causes one of the sphere’s outer surfaces to produce a low sound and the other to produce a high note.

‘This is why the outermost movement of the heavens that carries the stars, whose rate of revolution is faster than the rest, moves to a high and piercing sound, while this lowest, lunar sphere moves with the lowest sound; for the earth, the ninth remains motionless, always fixed in the same place, containing the central region of the universe. Those eight circuits which contain the same value as the dyad [i.e. 1:2, the octave (probably)], create sounds at seven distinct intervals – seven being the number that seems to bind all things;

learned people mimic this on stringed instruments, and through their songs open their own way back to this place, along with all those others of outstanding intellect who have studied the human and the divine throughout their lives.

‘The ears of humans have been dulled to this sound through being filled with it; in fact none of your senses is weaker than [your hearing]. It is like the people who live at the place where the Nile plunges from the high mountains at the so-named Catadupa falls. Because of the volume of the sound they have no sense of hearing. But in this case, the sound of the whole universe as it revolves at the highest velocity is so great that human ears cannot grasp it. In the same way you are unable to look directly at the sun, and your own gaze and sense is overcome by its rays.’ I wondered at all these things, but then turned my eyes back to the earth as before.

“Then Africanus said, ‘I realise that you are gazing on the place and home of humans; if it seems small to you – as indeed it is – then always look here to the heavens and despise those human things. What glory can you gain by pursuing fame among humans? Look how they live on earth, in a few confined areas, and between these places, like spots, there lie huge deserted regions. Those who dwell on earth are not only so separated that nothing can be communicated from one group to another, but some of them live at an angle to you [on the globe] some perpendicular, and some even directly upside down. You can surely not hope to win any glory from them.

‘You can see the same earth is as if surrounded or encircled by different belts, of which the two furthest from each other, firm beneath the very poles of heaven on each side, are frozen in ice. The middle, and largest band, is burnt by the heat of the sun. Two zones are habitable, and the southern zone, where the people place their feet in the opposite direction to yours, means nothing to your people; but look at this other zone, that lies under the power of the north wind and where you dwell, see how small a part concerns you. All that land that you live in is compressed to the north and south, more extensive to east and west, but it is a little island, surrounded by the waters of that sea which you on earth call ‘Atlantic’ or ‘Great’ or ‘Ocean’. And you see how small that is in spite of its great name. Could it be that your name – or the name of any of our people could pass from these familiar lands we tend and cross over the Caucasus – see, there – or swim across the Ganges – there? Who in those other furthest regions of the rising or the setting sun, or in the furthest north or south, who will ever hear your name? When you cut these out, you see at once in what narrow confines your desire for glory longs to extend itself.

‘Then again, those who speak of us now, how long will they go on speaking of us? But just suppose that the offspring of future generations did have the wish to pass on the name of each of us from father to child, in spite of this there will be floods and fires over the lands (which must happen at their appointed time), and because of these not only can we not achieve eternal glory – we cannot even achieve long-lasting glory. And why should it matter that people who are born after you talk about you, when none of those who were born before you do? They were not fewer in number, and they were certainly better men, especially given that amongst those who may have heard our name, not one can remember an entire year.

'For humans in their common way measure the year by the return of the sun alone – a single star; however, it is when all the stars have returned to the same place from which they started, and after long passages of time have restored the same configuration of the heavens, it is this indeed that can be called the turning point of the year, and one that contains, I dare hardly say how many human ages. For as once the sun seemed to fail and go out when the soul of Romulus entered into these very temples, so, when the sun in the same quarter and at the same time of day once more fails, then when all the constellations and stars are returned to their beginnings, consider then that the year has come to its end; you should be aware that not yet a twentieth part of that year has been completed.

'So if you have no hope of returning to this place where lies all that matters for great, outstanding men, what value in the end is there in this human glory, which hardly extends to a tiny part of a single year? So if your will is to look to the heights and contemplate this dwelling, this everlasting home, if you have not surrendered yourself to popular fame or placed your hope for fortune in human rewards, virtue itself must be your motivation that draws you to true glory. Whatever others say of you is their affair, they'll say what they will in any case. But all fame is bound within those confined regions which you see. None has ever been enduring, and all is wiped out as generations die and posterity forgets.

"When he had said this, I said, 'Africanus, if as you say for those who have deserved well of their homeland, this is like a threshold opening the way to heaven, though I have followed in the footsteps of you and of my father since boyhood, and never fallen short of your esteem, yet now that you have revealed this prize, I shall strive all the more intently.' And he replied, 'Strive on, and realise that you are not mortal – it is only this body that is so; you are not that which this physical shape presents, for it is the mind of each person which is that person, not the physical shape which you can point your finger at. Know therefore that you are a god, if anything is a god, who is alive, who is aware, who remembers, who plans: who governs and regulates and moves that body of which it has the charge, just as that original God governs this world; and just as the world, partly mortal, is moved by the eternal God himself, so too an eternal soul moves the fragile body.

'For that which moves for ever is eternal; but whatever passes onto another a movement that has been stirred in it from another, once the motion is complete, must come to the end of its life. Therefore, only that which moves itself, because it is never separated from itself, never ceases to move; rather this is the fount and origin of movement in all the other things that move. An origin has no beginning; for all things arise from the origin, but the origin itself can arise from no other thing – if it were generated from something else, it would not be the origin. What has no origin has no ending either. For if the origin perishes, neither will it be born anew from something else, nor will it create anything else from itself, if indeed all things must arise from some origin. Thus it is that the origin of motion must be in that which moves of itself; and that can neither be born nor die; otherwise the whole heavens and all nature would necessarily collapse and come to a halt, and find no power sent from the origin to make them move.

'Since it is obvious that that which moves itself is eternal, who would deny that this same nature belongs by rights to souls? 'Inanimate' means that which is only moved by an

external force. Whatever has a soul is stirred by an internal movement that is its own. This is the true nature and power of the soul. And if it is one of all those things that are self-moving, then surely it is unborn and eternal. Practise this soul of yours in all that is most noble. The most noble concerns are for the welfare of one's homeland – a soul stirred and practised in these will fly more swiftly to this place, its true home. It will do so all the faster if while it is sealed in the body, it rises above external things, and withdraws itself from the body as far as possible, as it contemplates what lies in the outside world. The souls of those who have given themselves to bodily pleasures and have made themselves their servants, those who have been driven by the pleasures of bodily desires to violate the laws of gods and men, these, when they escape the body, hover around the earth, and do not return to this place, until they have been driven in torment for many ages.' He departed and sleep left me."