



Fundamentals of Neoplatonism

Faris Razak

Let's take an easy and simple look at Neoplatonism and the philosophy's of Plotinus. I've been on countless philosophical encyclopedias over the internet, but many of them are inscribed in a way that it becomes very hard to understand Neoplatonism due to the way they are written. With this introduction I want to make a simple AND easy to follow article which will introduce the basics of Neoplatonic teachings, and a few of the ideas of the major philosopher Plotinus.

Background of Neoplatonism

So what is this Neoplatonism? But what does it have to do with Plato? And what does it have to do with other religions?

Well we all know Plato, one of the most famous and beloved philosophers of all time. He is also one of the most studied ones too. After his death in 347 BCE, many other philosophers have spent their time studying and interpreting his work to the teeth. One of the most well known to have done this is Plotinus. Born in 240 AD, he is one of the most influential people to have interpreted the works of Plato. He introduced three principles, The 'One', The 'Divine Mind' (aka the Nous, or intellect) and the Soul. His era of Platonic teachings were so different from others before that they were dubbed Neoplatonism. These teachings not only had a small following on their own, but they also inspired many Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Gnostic philosophers.

The texts of Neoplatonism were also translated into many different languages including Persian, Arabic, and Latin. But unlike many of the major religions it influenced, Plotinus's teachings themselves did not gain a mainstream following, and thus they are not recognized much by the majority today. However some would consider the likes of Carl Jung and modern Canadian mathematician and biologist professor Brian Carey Goodwin to be modern day followers.

So now that we know a little bit about the background of it all, let's see what the fundamentals are. The teachings in Neoplatonism is full of metaphysical babble, which is why it can be hard for some to wrap their heads around it. The metaphysics are like an intricate mythology, but with more of a philosophical feel and approach rather than one with deities and strange gods. So let's start with the basics of Plotinus's contribution to philosophy.

The One

The foundational belief in the teachings of Neoplatonism is that everything in existence came from the 'One'.

The One (aka the Monad, the Divine, Logos, or the Absolute) is an indescribable force that one can't push any attributes onto. It is the simplest 'thing' and everything in the universe stems from it. The Absolute is the purest, and the cleanest. The farther one gets from it, the less perfect one becomes. It is not God or anything much like him.

In most religions, God watches over people and for one reason or another cares about what people do, in a way he becomes very delicate. The Monad on the other hand is not personal, but is the foundation for entirety. It is an existence all of itself and it is everything. But the more we speak of it, the more difficult it begins to even describe, but think of it as a pure light substance above all and everything. The One does what is called emanating, or flowing through and spreading out.

The Nous

It emanates the 'Nous', aka the intellect, or the Mind, and many would identify the Nous as the Demiurge. It's also all of intellectuality in itself and that humans at their most highest of minds and imaginations can think through it. The Mind is also credited with organizing and shaping the material world. Because of that, many have identified it as the Demiurge or 'the fashioner'. However, the Gnostics also believe in the existence in the Demiurge. But they view him in a far more negative way. They believe that he is an ignorant being who claims to be a god and has fashioned the world in pure ignorance from the Divine. They link all of the flaws of the material world to the Demiurge as well. The Neoplatonist's on the other hand don't antagonize him. Plotinus has even criticized the Gnostics for their negative view on the Demiurge in one of his writings. I will stop making comparisons between Gnosticism and Neoplatonism here, as I believe this deserves an entire article for itself.

The World-Soul and The Physical World

Now from the Nous emanates the world-soul, which lies between the Nous and the physical world, and it is the link between the two. This world contains the souls of all the living things, from humans to plants. However, the functionality is different from most other teachings. Instead of being literally inside the body like many claim, Neoplatonism says that the soul is only projecting itself onto our body. Giving it life. Like how a flashlight flashes its light onto objects to brighten them. This way humans don't have direct contact with their souls while within the physical world. But through the world-souls emanation, the material world is animated.

The physical world is the lowest and farthest from the Monad, which is why it is the least perfect. This material world is flawed, cold, dark, and within it contains evils of all kind. However despite all of these faults, followers of Neoplatonism don't condemn or completely dislike this place. They also acknowledge the beauty and harmony that exists all around, amidst the darkness. After all, even this world and everything in it came from the One, therefore there is still virtuous that we can find, despite the flaws near as well.

Man's Nature

Man's nature is composed of two elements: spirit and body. As I said above that within the physical realm we don't have access to our spirit, but Plotinus believes our intellect is what can guide us back to the Divine. This according to him is the goal of the philosopher. Plato believed that man can access the higher forms through mind and reason. With the power of imagination, one can rise to the world-soul through his highest imaginations, and become a reflection of the forms. And through intellect and self-discipline one can ascend back to the 'One'.

Here is a recap/TLDR version of the metaphysical mythos:

All comes from, and is, the Absolute. It emanates the Mind, which is a reflection of the Absolute, and is the fashioner of the physical world. Between the Mind and the physical realm is the world-soul, where all of the souls of all beings are. The spirits are projected onto our bodies. Giving us life. Then, the farthest from the One and the most flawed of existence is the physical world. Despite its flaws it is still beautiful. As it's also the product of the Absolute.

© Faris Razak, 2015. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.

The original version of this text appeared at < www.neoplatonicthought.com/ >. Permission has been granted by the author for this text to be included on the Sophia Project.