

NEOPLATONISM

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NEOPLATONISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Metaphysics, Theology

1. Core Definition

Neoplatonism is the modern designation for a philosophical tradition that began in the 3rd century CE, representing the last major system of classical Greek philosophy. Although based on the teachings of **Plato** (c. 428-348 BCE), Neoplatonism introduced a detailed and systematic cosmology largely formulated by its founder, **Plotinus** (c. 204-270 CE). The system seeks to reconcile the perceived division between the perfect, eternal reality (inherited from **Platonic Idealism**) and the fragmented, imperfect physical world.

The central tenet of Neoplatonism is the existence of a single, utterly simple, and transcendent source of all reality, referred to as **The One** (or the Good). All subsequent levels of existence proceed from The One through a non-diminishing process called emanation. The philosophy provides a comprehensive explanation for how the physical world--the objects and things of our sensory reality--is derived from and related to this perfect, non-material source. The core belief, as described in some interpretations, details an "entirely new world" (the realm of The One and the Forms) which fundamentally counter-balances the negatives and imperfections inherent in our temporal reality.

2. Historical Development and Key Figures

Neoplatonism arose during a period of intense cultural and intellectual syncretism in the Roman Empire. Its historical roots lie in the synthesis of Plato's metaphysics with elements drawn from Aristotle, Stoicism, and Pythagoreanism. While the system owes its foundational structure to **Plotinus**, the ideas were first taught by his obscure instructor, **Ammonius Saccas**, who left no written works. Plotinus, based in Rome, developed these concepts into a highly intellectualized system, documented posthumously by his student, **Porphyry**, in the collection known as the ***Enneads***.

Following Plotinus, Neoplatonism evolved into two primary branches. The later schools, particularly the Athenian school led by **Proclus** (c. 412-485 CE), moved beyond pure contemplation toward a greater emphasis on religion and ritual. This later phase incorporated concepts of **theurgy**--ritualistic actions intended to establish contact with the divine--to aid the soul's ascent. This shift resulted in a highly complex philosophical theology that sought to harmonize the principles of Neoplatonism with traditional Greek pagan religious practices.

Despite its origins in pagan philosophy, Neoplatonism became profoundly influential in shaping the intellectual landscape of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Its systematic approach to a

transcendent deity and a hierarchy of spiritual beings provided critical intellectual tools for major figures in both Christianity (such as **St. Augustine** and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite) and Islam (such as **Al-Farabi** and **Avicenna**), allowing them to articulate complex theological concepts.

3. The Triadic Hierarchy: The One, Nous, and Soul

The Neoplatonic cosmos is structured through a strict, descending sequence of three primary hypostases, or levels of being, which flow necessarily from the ultimate source. This structure accounts for the varying degrees of perfection and reality found in the universe.

The One (Hén): The highest hypostasis is The One, which is absolutely simple, unitary, and transcendent, existing beyond the categories of thought and language. It is the uncaused cause of all things and is identical to the Platonic concept of the Good. Because it is beyond definition, it can only be approached through **negative theology** (stating what it is not). The One's nature is so abundant that it necessarily overflows, initiating the cosmic descent.

Mind (Nous): The first emanation from The One is Nous, typically translated as Intellect or Divine Mind. Nous is characterized by perfect thought and contemplation; it is the realm where the **Platonic Forms** (Ideas) exist. In Nous, there is still perfect unity, but now combined with multiplicity, as the knower (Nous) is simultaneously the known (the Forms). This hypostasis serves as the immediate blueprint for the structure of the cosmos.

Soul (Psych?): The second emanation, the Soul, proceeds from Nous and acts as the intermediary between the eternal, intelligible realm and the temporal, sensible world. The Soul is capable of discursive thought, movement, and time. It is divided into the World Soul, which governs the entire physical cosmos, and individual souls, which are fragments of the World Soul enclosed in matter.

Below the Soul lies **Matter** (*hyl?*) and the sensible world, which, due to their furthest remove from the unity of The One, are characterized by fragmentation, imperfection, and non-being. This material realm is the endpoint of the emanation process and the realm where human experience takes place.

4. Doctrine of Emanation (Proodos)

The mechanism by which the universe proceeds from its divine source is known as **Emanation** (Greek: *Proodos*, meaning 'procession' or 'going forth'). This is a crucial distinction from the Judeo-Christian concept of creation *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). Emanation is understood not as an intentional act of will on the part of The One, but as a necessary and inevitable overflow of its infinite perfection and power.

Just as heat radiates from a fire or light shines from the sun without diminishing the source, the lower hypostases proceed from the higher ones. This process adheres to the principle that

everything generated must be ontologically inferior to its generator. Therefore, the subsequent levels are less unified, less powerful, and closer to non-being. This explains why the physical world appears imperfect and multiple compared to the perfect unity of The One.

5. Return to the One (Epistroph?)

If emanation is the descent of reality, **Epistroph?** (Greek: 'reversion' or 'return') is the upward path, representing the spiritual and philosophical goal of the individual soul. The fundamental aim of human existence, according to Neoplatonism, is to achieve **unification** with The One, effectively reversing the descent and realizing the soul's true, unified nature.

This return is achieved through an arduous process of purification (ethical living), intellectual contemplation (philosophical study and meditation on the Forms within Nous), and detachment from the material world. Plotinus taught that the final union with The One occurs in a moment of **ecstasy**--a state transcending all rational thought and individual self-consciousness. The later Neoplatonists, such as Iamblichus, incorporated **theurgy**, arguing that ritual practices were necessary because the human intellect alone was too weak to achieve the complete reversal and ascent.

6. Significance and Impact

Neoplatonism's significance lies in its powerful synthesis of classical Greek thought and its ability to provide a comprehensive philosophical grounding for religious mysticism. Its metaphysical structure deeply influenced the formulation of monotheistic theology. For example, the Christian concept of God's absolute transcendence and the idea of the Logos (the Divine Word, mirroring Nous) owes much to Neoplatonic formulations.

Furthermore, Neoplatonism ensured the preservation of classical philosophy during the transition from the ancient world to the medieval period. Its texts were translated and studied extensively in the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world, where they were integrated into philosophical theology, particularly the emphasis on mysticism and the hierarchy of celestial intelligences. During the Renaissance, the rediscovery and revitalization of Neoplatonic texts by figures like **Marsilio Ficino** had a dramatic impact on humanist thought, art (such as Botticelli's allegorical paintings), and the emerging scientific world view, particularly in emphasizing the dignity and divine potential of humanity.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Neoplatonism, especially in its later iterations, faced criticisms regarding its shift away from pure reason. Critics argue that the introduction of **theurgy** and increasingly elaborate cosmological hierarchies by philosophers like Proclus blurred the lines between rigorous philosophical inquiry

and religious superstition, fundamentally altering the rationalist trajectory set by Plotinus. The complexity required to fit all known pagan deities into the hypostatic framework often led to convoluted and overly systematic explanations.

A persistent philosophical challenge revolves around the doctrine of Emanation itself, specifically how **The One**--which is defined as perfect, static, and transcendent--can generate anything without inherently diminishing or changing its nature. This also raises the question of the source of evil and imperfection in the world. While Neoplatonism solves this by defining evil as a privation of the Good (a lack of being, rather than a positive force), the necessary existence of matter (the lowest hypostasis and closest state to non-being) remains a tension within the system.

Further Reading

[Neoplatonism - Wikipedia](#)

[Plotinus - Wikipedia](#)

[Enneads - Wikipedia](#)

[Metaphysics - Wikipedia](#)