

NEOPLATONISM, THEN
AND NOW

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OPENING WORDS

Earlier this year, I undertook a twelve-week philosophy course at Sydney Community College, in Rozelle. It was a fairly easy-going, yet exhaustive course that saw us cover everything from the pre-Socratic philosophers of ancient Greece, right up to the musings of Jürgen Habermas in the twentieth century. We covered Descartes and Spinoza, Hegel and the Hindus, amongst others - the span of time we examined stretched over more than 2,500 years. Not at all bad for a course that only lasted three months.

Needless to say, I found a lot to think about in this time, and in the months since - not least of all, which philosophical traditions I find myself most agreeing with. In the months since the course concluded, I have worked out that I am much more a rationalist than an empiricist, certainly much more a virtue ethicist than a consequentialist, and almost certainly a monist, rather than a dualist (that is to say, in a metaphysical sense, I find myself agreeing more with Spinoza than Descartes, and notably more with Hinduism than Christianity in its view of God and the universe). Though, I must admit, I'm still not certain whether my own personal philosophy fits in more with the analytic or continental tradition - I'll have to work that one out.

Seriously, though, I find philosophy fascinating - it is, after all, the study of and attempt to make sense of the general and fundamental problems of all existence, problems that every human being (provided they're bothered to think about it) has grappled with since time immemorial, and continues to do so today. And what better place to start off talking about philosophy than where it arguably all began - with the great thinkers and philosophers of the ancient Greek world. These were men (and, chances are, women, too) who spent their lives both thinking and passionately arguing about the most important factors of what we call real life, and who often came to many different conclusions. From Thales to Anaximander, Pittacus to Pythagoras, Heraclitus to Parmenides, and then to Socrates and his successors, Plato and Aristotle - using one's mind to think for oneself, and to argue passionately about it using logic and reason, was all the rage back then. God knows, we could learn

from them and use those same techniques today - I don't doubt it would solve a *lot* of problems.

As I mentioned before, this course gave me a lot to think about and to reflect upon, particularly in relation to the various competing philosophies of the ancient Greek world. Atomism, Pluralism, Pythagoreanism, Sophism, Cynicism, Peripateticism, Epicureanism, Stoicism - and that's not even all of them. It's a lot to think about, and even more to comprehend (if comprehension is possible).

Yet, there was one of these philosophies in particular that stood out to me, and has continued to do so, for various reasons - the philosophy of Neoplatonism, begun (for the most part) in the third century AD by the Greek philosophers Ammonius Saccas and his disciple, Plotinus. I have found this philosophy particularly interesting, not only because its teachings resonate with me on both a moral and spiritual level, but also because of the effect that it has had in the centuries since on Western spirituality, and in particular on the Judeo-Christian tradition that we in the West (and, increasingly, in the East) have taken for granted for so long.

Neoplatonism was, indeed, one of the leading Greek philosophies of the ancient world - but, just how much did it affect the course of history? And, does it still resonate today?

ADDRESS

"Neoplatonism" is actually a modern term which has been used to designate a tradition of philosophy that arose primarily in the third-century AD, and which persisted until shortly after the closing of the Platonic Academy in Athens in 529 AD by the-then Byzantine Roman emperor Justinian I. Neoplatonists were heavily influenced both by the great ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and by the ensuing Platonic tradition that thrived during the six centuries that separated the first of the Neoplatonists from Plato.

Collectively, the Neoplatonists constituted a continuous tradition of philosophers who began primarily with the philosopher Plotinus, and with his teacher Ammonius Saccas. As Neoplatonism is expansive in its scope, and since the followers of this philosophy varied greatly in their views and approaches in many ways, it is difficult to reduce the philosophy to a concise set of ideas that all Neoplatonic philosophers shared in common. Thus, the most concise definition of Neoplatonism casts it as an historical term, one which refers to the work of Plotinus, and to the many thinkers who developed, responded to, and criticised his ideas - much as Plotinus himself had done with the original teachings of Plato.

What is particularly important to note, however, is the impact and influence that the philosophy of Neoplatonism has had upon Western thought since its inception, and not least of all upon the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Middle Ages, Neoplatonic ideas were integrated into the philosophical and theological works of many of the most important mediaeval Jewish, Christian and Islamic thinkers. In Muslim lands, Neoplatonic texts were available in both Persian and Arabic translations, and notable thinkers such as al-Farabi, Avicenna and Moses Maimonides incorporated Neoplatonic elements into their own thinking. The philosophy also had an impact upon Italian Renaissance thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, as well as even earlier, in the Middle Ages, when Thomas Aquinas had direct access to works by a large number of Neoplatonist writers.

What's more, Neoplatonism has also extended into forms of culture beyond philosophy, and well into the modern era - to take just two examples, the work of modernist poets such as W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot contain many Neoplatonic themes and elements.

But, what of the actual teachings of the philosophy of Neoplatonism? And, how have they come to influence the ideas and thoughts of so many others over the past two millennia?

In essence, Neoplatonism is generally a metaphysical and epistemological philosophy. It is a form of "idealistic monism", one which combines elements of both polytheism and panentheism. Polytheism, let's not forget, is the belief in multiple gods or deities - and panentheism, a term which pretty much sums up my view of the divine, posits that God (or whichever name you choose to ascribe to the divine) interpenetrates every part of existence, but also timelessly extends beyond it. Neoplatonism is "idealistic" in the sense that it views reality (at least, as we can know it) as fundamentally mental, mentally constructed, or otherwise immaterial, and "monist" in the sense that a variety of existing things (perhaps even everything) can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance, and asserts the presence of a unifying substance or essence. This essential worldview of Neoplatonism was laid out in the philosophy's primary and classical document, the *Enneads* of the philosopher Plotinus. As a form of mysticism, it contains theoretical and practical parts, the first dealing with the high origin of the human soul and showing how it has departed from its first estate, and the second showing the way by which the soul may again return to the Eternal and Supreme. The system can be divided between the invisible world and the phenomenal world - the first of which contains the ultimate, transcendent reality from which emanates everything and everyone else.

Arguably the central characteristic feature of the Neoplatonic system is its view of what we might call "God" - in this case, the idea of "the One" beyond being. For Plotinus, the first principle of reality is an utterly simple, ineffable, and unknowable subsistence which is both the creative source and the teleological end of all existing things. The One is so simple that it cannot even be said to exist or to be a being - rather, the creative principal of all things is *beyond* being. It is, essentially, the cause of the rest of reality, which takes the form of two subsequent "hypostases", Demiurge and World-Soul. The Demiurge is the archetype of all existing things, the

highest sphere accessible to the human mind, while also being pure intellect itself - it is what manifests or organises the material world into perceivability. From this also comes the World-Soul, which is also immaterial - it stands between the Demiurge and the phenomenal world, permeated and illuminated by the former, but also in contact with the latter. It embraces innumerable individual souls - those belonging to you and I - and these can either allow themselves to be informed by the Demiurge, or turn aside from it and choose the phenomenal world and lose themselves in the realm of the senses and the finite.

All of that is, essentially, the metaphysical view of Neoplatonism, at least as laid out by the philosopher Plotinus.

But what of the practical philosophy? As Plotinus sees it, the individual soul must retrace its steps back to the One, along the same road by which it descended. In his view, this is accomplished by the practice of virtue, which aims at likeness to God, and leads up to God. He viewed God and the divine as reachable through "ecstasy" - that is, through the practice of virtue and philosophical contemplation. Although the Neoplatonists believed in the pre-existence and immortality of the soul, they also believed that human perfection and happiness were attainable in this world, without awaiting an afterlife - philosophical contemplation was what could be used to achieve those things. Nonetheless, they did believe in life after death, and in the principle of reincarnation, and that one's journey through the realms after death would be guided (at least in part) by one's thoughts and actions in this life - and, that a soul which has returned to the One achieves union with the cosmic universal soul, not descending again (at least, not in this world period).

Much of this outline of the spiritual view of Neoplatonist philosophy may very well sound familiar to those of us here in the so-called "Christian West" - one could be forgiven for thinking that Neoplatonism adopted a lot of its teachings from the Christian tradition, and from the Judeo-Christian scriptures in the book we call the Bible. In truth, however, it was actually much the other way around - much of what we today call "Biblical" or "Christian" ethics is not Biblical or Christian ethics at all, but was adopted from Greek philosophy, and in particular from Neoplatonism. Take the doctrine of the immortal soul, for example - it is found nowhere in the Bible. The Judeo-Christian scriptures teach us - most especially in the New Testament writings of Paul of Tarsus - that, upon death, one's body will lie in the earth until the end of the world, whereupon it will be resurrected for judgement. Nowhere in the Judeo-

Christian scriptures does there exist the notion of an incorporeal spirit that immediately flies off to the afterlife upon one's physical death - though, such an idea was taught by Greek philosophy, and it is from this tradition that the Christian church, in particular, has adopted this notion.

Certain central tenets of Neoplatonism served as a philosophical interim for the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo on his journey from dualistic Manichaeism to Christianity. As a Manichee, Augustine had held that evil has substantial being and that God is made of matter - when he became a Neoplatonist, he changed his views on these things. As a Neoplatonist, and later a Christian, Augustine believed that evil is a privation of good and that God is not material. When writing his treatise "On True Religion" several years after his 387 AD baptism, Augustine's Christianity was still tempered by Neoplatonism.

Many other early Christians, including Origen of Alexandria, were also influenced by Neoplatonism, especially in their identifying the Neoplatonic "One" with the God of the Bible.

Additionally, from the days of the Early Church until the present, the Orthodox Church has made positive selective use of ancient Greek philosophy, including - but not limited to - Neoplatonism. For example, the term "Logos" - which many Christians today associate with the figure of Jesus Christ in the Trinity - actually originated with the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, and meant reason or thought. Of course, in the Christian context, it became a name for the second person of the Trinity. In this way, the Christian tradition has, from very early on, adopted both the language and the concepts of ancient Greek philosophy, both Neoplatonist and otherwise.

The philosophy of Neoplatonism would continue to be highly influential in both Eastern and Western Europe into fairly recent history, particularly during the Renaissance. One notable thinker who followed and promoted the philosophy was the fifteenth-century Italian scholar, Catholic priest and Christian humanist Marsilio Ficino. During his lifetime, he translated philosophers such as Plotinus and Proclus - as well as the complete extant works of Plato - into Latin, and was in touch with every major academic thinker and writer of his day. His Florentine Academy, an attempt to revive Plato's famous school from centuries earlier, had enormous influence on the direction of the Italian Renaissance and the development of European philosophy in general. What's more, his close friend Giovanni Pico della Mirandola - who was the author of the famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, which has been called the "Manifesto of

the Renaissance" - was also a major figure in this movement.

Both were students of Jewish mystical Kabbalah, which was itself heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, and their writings were hugely influential in the emergence and popularisation of Christian esotericism, which regarded the Christian faith in a much more mystical and mysterious way than the hierarchies of the various churches would have liked.

Neoplatonic philosophy would go even further in terms of inspiring philosophers and thinkers of later years - renewed interest in it would contribute to the rational theology and philosophy of the so-called "Cambridge Platonists" of the seventeenth century, particularly Ralph Cudworth and Henry More.

This group of philosophers and theologians, though they identified as Christians of the Church of England, also drew heavily from the teachings of Neoplatonism. They believed that reason is the proper judge of disagreements, and strongly advocated open dialogue between different Christian traditions of their day, including the Puritans. Not surprisingly, the orthodox English Calvinists of the time found in the views of the Cambridge Platonists an insidious attack, bypassing as it did the basic theological issues of atonement and justification by faith. The Cambridge Platonists, by contrast, objected greatly to the anti-rationalism and dogmatism of the Calvinist Puritans - but, at the same time, they were also reacting against the reductive, materialist writings of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, which, while rationalist, they also felt were denying the idealistic part of the universe. To the Cambridge Platonists, religion and reason were in harmony, and reality was not known by physical sensation alone, but by the kind of philosophical reasoning to be found in the philosophy of Neoplatonism, and in Greek philosophy, in general.

As a philosophy, then, Neoplatonism has indeed been hugely influential throughout history - and I have concentrated only on its influence in the Western world. One can certainly debate just how much of it the historical Plato of Athens would have followed and agreed with - he was not, in the strictest sense, its founder, even though it was developed from his ideas and thus bears his name. Nonetheless, just as the teachings of Plato helped to lay the foundation for much of modern Western philosophy, the philosophy of Neoplatonism has in turn influenced much of Western (and Eastern) religion and mysticism.

And herein is what I find so interesting and invigorating about Neoplatonism - although it advocates a very mystical and spiritual view of reality, it does not disregard the use of

reason and rational thought. Indeed, it positively insists on it. In Neoplatonism, one simply *must* think for oneself, and try their very best to make sense of life and of everything that life - and death - entail. I haven't yet decided whether I would think of myself as a full-fledged Neoplatonist, yet I certainly have very strong leanings in that direction. And why not? After all, it - along with much of the rest of ancient Greek philosophy - has indeed influenced much of our society, right up until today, whether most people realise it or not.

Truly, I think Neoplatonism, along with most of Greek philosophy, still has much to teach us that much modern religion simply can't - not least of all when it comes to the problem of evil in this world. Neoplatonism, for example, recognises "evil" only as the absence of good, as the lack of form and idea in reality - evil, here, is understood as a parasite, having no existence of its own, an unavoidable outcome of the universe and all existence. This was what Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, taught, much in the same way that Plato himself did. In this sense, reality and existence can be seen as both a curse and a blessing...and, in order to understand it all, philosophy and wisdom are absolutely essential. What this wisdom consists of is, in fact, the ability to extract from life experiences the fact that they are a reflection of the fundamental ideas of reality and of the One - such as justice, beauty, and above all, goodness. Thus, for Plato, evil arises not so much from our actions in the world, as from the fact that these actions represent a turning away from our true nature. To overcome this plight, one must look into one's own soul - whatever one takes that to be.

In this way, the teachings of Plato - and, in particular, the philosophy of Neoplatonism - still resonate today. I don't yet know if I agree with all of the teachings of Neoplatonism - I probably don't - but I do feel that it has, for quite a while, informed my view of the cosmos...and probably will continue to do so, for a long time to come.