

Sky & Psyche in Neoplatonism

CAROLE TAYLOR

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Agenda

Overview of Neoplatonism

Plotinus – 203-270 CE – founding principles of Neoplatonic cosmology

Iamblichus – 245-ca.325 CE – theurgy and the soul

Plotinus? From *School of Athens* by Raphael, 1509-1511. Picture Wiki Commons, public domain.

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Neoplatonism

A philosophical school of thought which flourished from about middle of 3rd century CE until closure of the Athenian Academy in 529 CE and by end of 6th century CE in Alexandria. Founded in the work of Plotinus (204-270 CE).

The term 'Neoplatonism' comes from 19th century German scholars. The Neoplatonists viewed themselves as Platonists – defenders, interpreters and refiners of Plato's work. ('Middle Platonists' – 1st century BCE until Plotinus).

Late classical form of Platonism – combined Plato's teachings with elements from Orphic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy.

During the first two centuries CE, new currents were introduced into Platonic thought from Graeco-Egyptian magic, Hermeticism and Jewish mysticism – these particularly influenced later Neoplatonic writings.

Syncretic – '...fusing Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistus into a single system.'

(Nicholas Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology, Vol I: The Ancient and Classical Worlds* (Continuum: London, 2008), p. 260.



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Neoplatonism – basic principles

The cosmos is ordered and contains different levels of existence.

At the heart of everything is '**The One**' – indefinable. Immanent and transcendent.

Emanationist concept: the Cosmos and everything in it emanates from the One and each level gives rise to the next in a hierarchy. A continual process.

- The One creates **Nous** – the divine mind or cosmic intellectual spirit. Absolute consciousness.
- From Nous comes **Soul (the World Soul – *Anima Mundi*)**.
- Out of Soul arises **Nature**.
- **Matter** occupies the lowest level – furthest from the One and so its most dilute expression.

Central concern: the ascension of the individual soul through the levels of reality to be reunited with **The One** (*henosis*).



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Neoplatonism – basic principles

Movement away from Plato's dualist structure of Being and Becoming towards a monist perspective → the cosmos as an ordered whole with hierarchical levels of reality from The One/the Good down to matter.

Human beings are a microcosm encompassing all the realms.

The world-soul or *anima mundi* is present in all things including the material and sensory realms (rocks, plants, animals etc).

Emphasis on personal salvation – in life as well as after death.

Soul provides the bridge between intellect (*Nous*, mindful consciousness) and the material world of the senses. It aspires upwards in the chain towards *Nous* and ultimately strives to return to The One, its divine origin.



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Neoplatonism – basic principles

In later mystical forms of Neoplatonism, this aspiration is envisaged as the **ascent of the soul through the planetary spheres** – an idea rooted in Orphic beliefs and in Plato.

However, for the Neoplatonists this ascent/union can be achieved **during life as well as after death** – a point of departure from Orphic and Platonic beliefs (implications for astrology. (Introduces a moral aspect and possibility to use astrology for improvement of the soul's condition – e.g. Ficino).

Sense perception is inferior to intellectual perception in its apprehension of knowledge/truth. However, **the material world is not devoid of soul or intelligence** – not a firm dualism between soul and matter (compare with Orphics and Gnostics). But – the physical universe is essentially an illusion.



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Plotinus (204/5-270 CE)

Probably born in Lycopolis, Egypt – may have been Egyptian, Hellenised Egyptian or Roman.

Studied in Alexandria, visited Mesopotamia and finally settled in Rome in 244. Studied Persian and Indian philosophy (according to Porphyry).

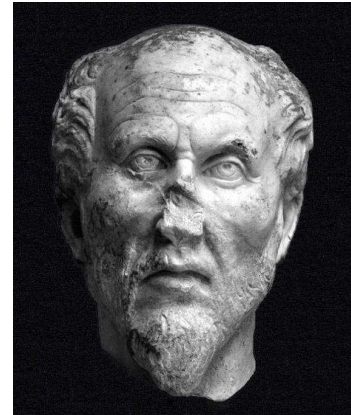
Regarded as the greatest Greek philosopher of late antiquity (Nicholas Campion, *The Dawn of Astrology Vol I*, p. 260).

A pupil of Ammonius Saccas who taught in the Platonic tradition (but left no written material).

The Enneads

- Six books of nine treatises each
- Compiled and edited by his student Porphyry from Plotinus' collection of notes and essays

A Platonist who sought to reconcile Aristotle with Plato and defend Plato's work against critics.



Head in white marble, thought to be Plotinus. Image – Wiki Commons, public domain.

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Plotinus' Cosmology

Centred around three elements:

- The One or the Good
- The Mind or the Intellect (Nous)
- The Soul (Psyche)

The One (God) produces the Mind (Nous) and the Mind produces the Soul.
The Soul generates nature and the material world.

An atemporal emanation rather than a temporal creation. The One is a self-generating source which overflows into all things.

Matter is not inherently evil because it is ultimately an emanation of the One (c.f. Gnosticism). Matter can be given an imprint of the archetypal Forms through both art and Nature.

HYPOSTASES: Developed later as the concept of the 'Great Chain of Being' – a cosmic hierarchy of ontological entities and containing all matter and life, which progresses from God through angels and daemonic beings to humans, animals, plants and minerals.

NEOPLATONIC 'HYPOSTASES' (levels of being) From Plotinus

THE ONE (EN)

The Absolute and Source
beyond all knowledge – but equally present
at every rung of existence.

THE DIVINE MIND (NOUS)

eternal and transcendent. Contains the
Forms.

ALL-SOUL (PSYCHE)

Creative power, both cosmic and individual.

LOWER SOUL (AESTHESIS)

E.g. imagination/image-making.

NATURE (PHYSIS)

The principle of life and growth.

BODY (SOMA)

MATTER (HYLE)

Material objects.

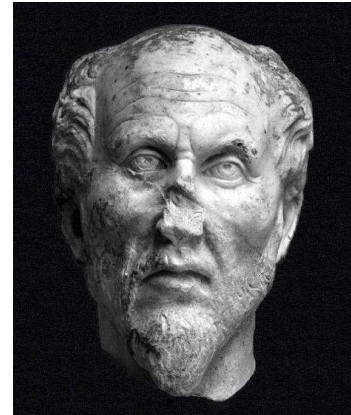
Emanation →

← contemplation

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Plotinus' cosmology: emanation, order and connection

'Thus each entity takes its origin from one Principle and, therefore, while executing its own function, works in with every other member of that All from which its distinct task has by no means cut it off; each performs its act, each receives something from the others, every one at its own moment bringing its touch of sweet or bitter. And there is nothing undesigned, nothing of chance, in all the process: all is one scheme of differentiation, starting from the Firsts and working itself out in a continuous progression of Kinds.'
(II.3,7)



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Plotinus' cosmology

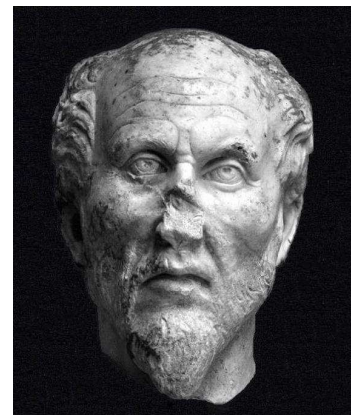
The purpose of philosophy is to awaken us to the reality which lies beyond the material world.

The goal of life is for the soul to ascend to the stars and reunite with the Divine/the One. This can be achieved through:

1. Intellectual disciplining of the Mind, fueled by love and enthusiasm. This can take us back to Nous (Mind).
2. Ecstasy and contemplation of the divine. Only mystical experience can bring gnosis = experiential knowledge of the divine.

'Try to raise the divine in yourselves to the divine in the all.'

(Plotinus' final words (according to an account by Eustochius – see Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints: The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool University Press, 2000), p.4 n.20.



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The One

'[God] may come, bringing his own cosmos, with all the gods that dwell in it – He who is the one God, and all the gods, where each is all, blending into a unity, distinct in powers but all one god, in virtue of that one divine power of many facets.'

Enneads, V. 8, 9

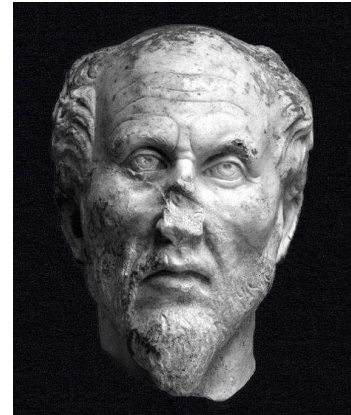


The One is Ineffable and Eternal – the supreme Good. Omnipresent and infinite.

- Derives from 'the Idea of the Good' in Plato's *Republic*
- The One is the cause of everything in the universe – everything emanates from it
- It was never created and cannot be destroyed
- We cannot know it. To know something means that it becomes divided – but the One is unity and cannot be divided
- We can therefore only understand it by knowing what it is not

'One must assume the Good to be that on which everything else depends and which itself depends on nothing; for so the statement is true that it is that "to which everything aspires".'

Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.7.1



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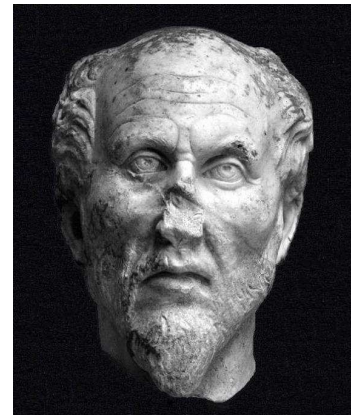
The One

'The One is the One and nothing else, and even to assert that it 'is' or that it is 'one' is false, since it is beyond being or essence. No name can apply to it, it eludes all definition, all knowledge, it can neither be perceived nor thought. It is not in movement, nor is it at rest. It is infinite, without limits, and since it has no parts, it is without structure and without form.'

(P. Henry, 'Introduction' to S. MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.xlv)

'Certainly this Absolute is none of the things of which it is the source- its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it – not existence, not essence, not life – since it is That which transcends all these. But possess yourself of it by the very elimination of Being and you hold a marvel. Thrusting forward to This, attaining, and resting in its content, seek to grasp it more and more – understanding it by that intuitive thrust alone, but knowing its greatness by the Beings that follow upon it and exist by its power.'

(Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.8)



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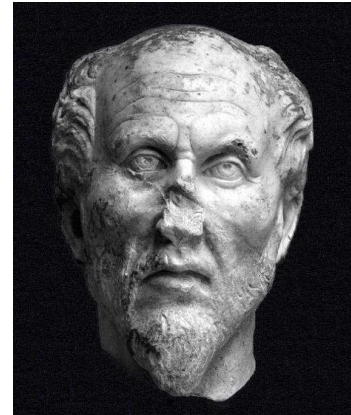
The Mind/Intellect (*Nous*)

Mind (*Nous*) emanates from the One – and is below the One.

Consciousness – intuitive thought/contemplation.

Plotinus equates the Mind with Platonic Forms or Ideas. The Forms therefore transcend matter (although can be found in matter as images/reflections).

The Mind in turn produces the Soul.



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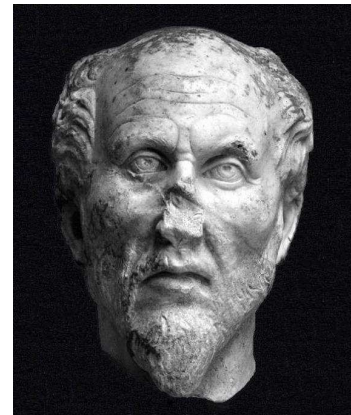
The Soul (*Psyche*)

Soul/*Psyche* is derived from Mind/*Nous* and is the bridge between the physical and non-physical realms.

Creates time and space – a contemplation of objects moving in succession.

The human soul has a divine origin. It consists of a higher and a lower part:

- The higher part is divine and unchangeable and separate from the lower part. It provides the lower part with life.
- The lower part is the seat of the personality and includes human passions and vices. Imagination/image-making is a function of the lower soul.
- The lower part of the soul descends into the body – the higher part remains in the realm of the divine



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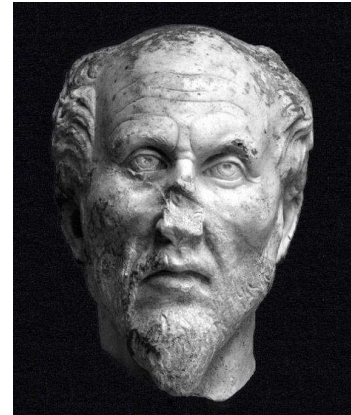
Plato's Tripartite Soul

Plotinus refers just once to Plato's concept of the tripartite soul:

'But if it is said that the human soul, since it is tripartite, will be dissolved because of its composition, we too shall say that pure souls when they are set free abandon what was plastered on to them at their birth, but the others remain with it for a very long time; but when the worse part is abandoned, even it does not perish, as long as that from which it has its origin exists. For nothing of real being perishes.'

Enneads, IV.,7.14.

Both parts of the soul are therefore immortal.



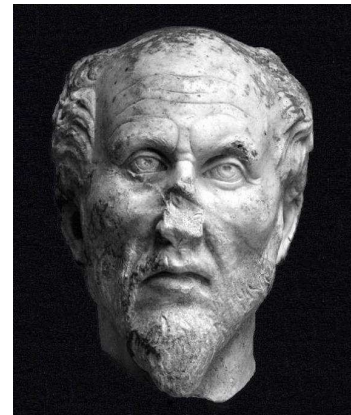
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The Soul (*Psyche*)

'And in the *Timaeus* the God who makes the world gives the "first principle of the soul," but the gods who are borne through the heavens "the terrible and inevitable passions," "angers" and desires and "pleasures and pains," and the "other kind of soul," from which come passions of this kind. These statements bind us to the stars, from which we get our souls, and subject us to necessity when we come down here; from them we get our moral characters, our characteristic actions, and our emotions, coming from a disposition which is liable to emotion. So what is left which is "we"? Surely, just that which we really are, we to whom nature gave power to master our passions.'

Enneads, VII.3.9.

The stars imprint only on the lower soul – the part of the soul which descends through the planetary spheres and is incarnated.



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The Soul (*Psyche*)

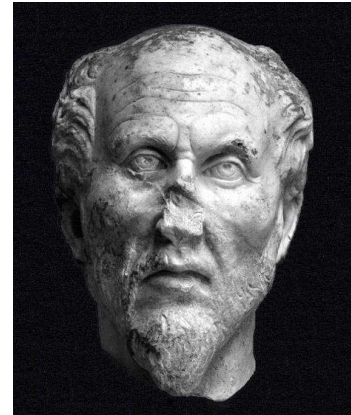
Human soul is 'all-soul particularised for the space of a mortal life of man'.

Soul is directed towards the Good by Intellect:

'Soulless things are directed towards soul, and soul to the Good through intellect. But soulless things too have something of it, because each particular thing is one somehow and is existent somehow. Soulless things, too, share in form; and as they share in unity, existence and form so they share in the Good.'

Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.7.2.

Thus matter is not inherently evil because it is an emanation of the world soul and is infused with it. 'Everything breathes together.'



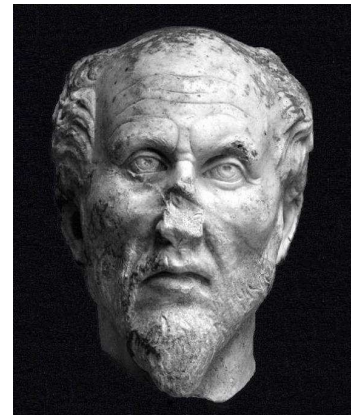
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The Soul is the most important part of us

Human beings are microcosms – contain matter, nature, soul and intellect.

'Now the human being is not simple, but there is in it a soul, and it also has a body...If this body is part of us, we are not entirely immortal...But the other part [the soul] is the most important and is the human being himself...The other nature [the soul] is all that is really real, that which neither comes to be nor is destroyed'.

[*'On the Immortality of the Soul'*, *Enneads* IV.7]



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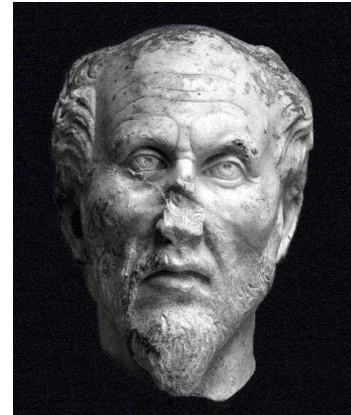
Reuniting With The One

'Our task, then, is to work for our liberation from this sphere ... There is another life, emancipated, whose quality is progression towards the higher realm, towards the good and divine, towards that Principle which no one possesses except by deliberate usage but so may appropriate, becoming, each personally, the higher, the beautiful, the Godlike, and living, remote, in and by it – **unless one choose to go bereaved of that higher Soul and therefore, to live fate-bound, no longer profiting merely by the significance of the sidereal system but becoming as it were a part sunken in it and dragged along with the whole thus adopted.**'

Enneads, II.3.9 (my emphasis)

'He placed on the soul the onus of moral responsibility to re-unite with the divine.'

John Dillon, *Plotinus at Work on Platonism*, p.201.



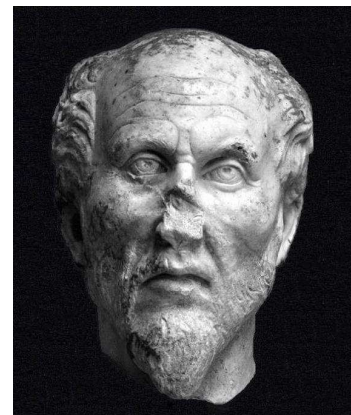
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Reuniting With The One

'Our awareness of that One is not by way of reasoned knowledge or of intellectual perception, as with other intelligible things, but by way of a presence superior to knowledge. The soul experiences its falling away from being one and is not altogether one when it has reasoned knowledge of anything; for reasoned knowledge is a rational process, and a rational process is many. The soul therefore goes past the One and falls into number and multiplicity. One must therefore run up above knowledge and in no way depart from being one, but one must depart from knowledge and things known, and from every other, even beautiful, object of vision.'

Enneads, VI.9.4.

The higher soul is with the divine – it is the lower soul which must make its return. A return to Nous/Intellect can be achieved through intellect (i.e. through logic/reason) – but a return to the One (which is by nature unknowable) can only be achieved in contemplation of the One leading to ecstatic/mystical/anagogic experience.



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Enneads II.3: *On whether the stars are causes*

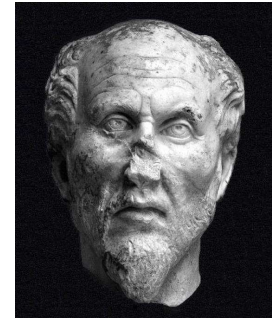
1. The planets have an influence – but they do not cause personality. Rejected the Ptolemaic model of horoscopic astrology.

Planets play an essential part in the ordering of the cosmos, and therefore may be read as 'signs' by the diviner in the same way as omens are read from a flight of birds. But not always reliable even as signs – some events may be signified, others not.

2. The stars/planets are divine beings and essentially good, therefore they cannot 'wish' to inflict harm to mankind. (c.f. Gnostic belief, where the planets are malign influences appealing to the lower soul).

3. The stars/planets may act upon the body and on the lower soul through sympathetic resonance; thus people who are focused on their passions/animal nature are subject to planetary influence. But the higher (rational) part of the soul is free of such influences because it resonates to the divine. (c.f. Aquinas – judicial and natural astrology).

Campion: contradiction inherent in all Platonic positions on astrology: soul's descent through planetary spheres suggests planetary influence in predetermining the character or mode of life – but the rational soul is not subject to the stars and can transcend fate.



'Like the birds of augury, the living beings of the heavens, having no lot or part with us, may serve incidentally to foreshow the future, but they have absolutely no main function in our regard.' (Ennead II.3).

(Campion, *History of Astrology Vol I*, pp. 260-261).

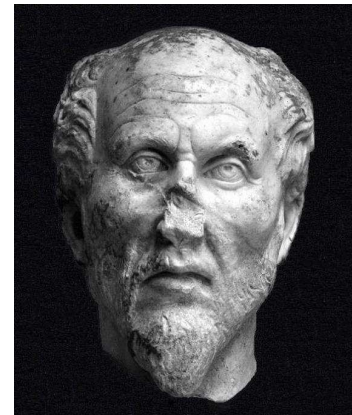
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Symbol and correspondence

'We may think of the stars as letters perpetually being inscribed on the heavens or inscribed once and for all and yet moving as they pursue the other tasks allotted to them: upon these main tasks will follow the quality of signifying, just as the one principle underlying any living unit enables us to reason from member to member...

All teems with symbol; the wise man is the man who in any one thing can read another, a process familiar to all of us in not a few examples of everyday experience.'

II.3,7



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Iamblichus, ca.245-ca.325 CE

Born in Chalcis, Syria (modern Qinnasrin). Studied under Porphyry, in Rome or Sicily. Later founded his own school near Antioch, Syria, ca.304 CE (a centre of Neoplatonism).

Along with Plotinus and Porphyry, one of the three major representatives of early Neoplatonism. Given the epithet 'divine' or 'most divine'.

Helped to transform Plotinian metaphysics into the system later embodied in the 5th century by the School of Athens.

Also wrote a biography of Pythagoras – *On the Pythagorean Way of Life* – and commentaries on Plato and Aristotle (now lost but quoted by Proclus).

Critical of Plotinus and Porphyry. **Advocated the use of ritual ('theurgy')** to achieve salvation and unity with the divine. *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum (On the Mysteries of the Egyptians)* – attributed to Iamblichus.



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Iamblichus

'Iamblichus engineered a revolution in elite Platonic circles by rejecting the standard view, espoused by Plotinus and Porphyry, that the divine should be accessed through reason and logic. Instead he looked to the popular traditions of magic current in religious Platonism, amongst followers of the Hermetic teachings, and argued that divine wisdom could be understood both through omens and through theurgy – literally god-work – meaning ritual and magic.'

❖ Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology, Vol I*, p.264.

His works were known to the Arabs and became known in the west when they were translated into Latin by Ficino in the late 15th century. Huge influence on Renaissance thinking – encouraged the notion that we can aspire to higher wisdom and control our own destiny.



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Iamblichus

A high point in the development of Neoplatonism after Plotinus. Iamblichus elaborated on the cosmological divisions argued by Plotinus.

Also introduced Pythagorean number symbolism.

Believed matter to also contain the divine – the divine is seeded in the material world as signs and tokens.

And in contrast to Plotinus (and Porphyry): advocated use of images and talismans to facilitate contact with the divine – made under astrologically propitious/appropriate moments, using planetary correspondences located in the material world.

Rejected rigid dogma of horoscopic astrology and espoused an astrology used in the service of theurgy to enact the ascent of the soul upwards through the planetary spheres.



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Iamblichus' cosmology

The One/Monad - the 'unspeakable principle'. Since it is supra-rational, it cannot be grasped through reason alone.

The One has two aspects – the first is **the Absolute** (entirely transcendent, incommunicable, indivisible) and **the other is causative** in its nature, bridging between the Absolute and creation. It is *Nous*, identified by Iamblichus with Plato's *Demiurge*.

Nous/Intellect is thus the first principle emanating from the One, after which comes Soul/*Psyche*.

From here are created a wealth of gods, angels, daemons and heroic beings, emanating down from the One and into the material world, where soul becomes embodied in human beings. It is possible to connect with the One through these demonic and divine intelligences as intermediaries.



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Iamblichus' cosmology

The material world is bound by chains of fate or necessity (the divine realm is not subject to fate).

However, since nature arose from the divine becoming corporeal, the material world contains elements of divinity and thus nature is drawn upwards toward the divine or the good.

The human soul is essentially divine, though humans are dominated by physical necessity. We lose touch with our deeper divine nature.

Love as a cosmic force, born of the One – '...connectedly contains all things, producing this bond through a certain ineffable communion' (*De Mysteriis*, V.10). The One emanated a material universe with human beings to contain and embody a soul – thus humans are connected to the process of creation.



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Iamblichus on soul

De mysteriis was a response to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* in which Porphyry critiques theurgy.

[Iamblichus' own title for the work: *The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions in Contains*].

Challenged Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul – **for Iamblichus, the soul descended fully.**

Because of this full descent, simple contemplation (Plotinus' 'inward turn') was not enough to achieve *henosis* – **theurgic ritual** was necessary to achieve the steps of upward ascent of the soul in a journey through the planetary spheres.



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Iamblichus on astrology

'Only divination, therefore, in uniting us with the gods, truly enables us to share in the life of the gods'.
On the Mysteries X.4.

And in X.5: knowledge of the gods leads to liberation from Necessity and Fate.

Theurgy involved imaginative engagement with *symbola/synthemata* (tokens/signatures) – expressions of the divine which are sown throughout the cosmos. Present in the human soul and in nature/material world. Cosmogonic (part of the creation of the world) and anagogic (the means by which the soul can find its way back to its divine origins).

Thus, divination (astrology) can liberate us from planetary fate.



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Iamblichus on astrology

It is not enough to study astrology as an intellectual exercise. Humans are inseparable from the supernatural element of daimons and souls in the cosmos – thus astrology is only useful if it is used in context of ritual acts in which the higher powers are actively invoked.

'In fact, it is no understatement to call him the major philosopher of magic in the entire Western tradition.'
Campion, *A History of Western Astrology* Vol. I, p.264.

Iamblichus was interested in the soul's liberation and salvation. Religious ritual could make humans '...who through generation are born to passion, pure and unchangeable'. (*On the Mysteries*, 1.12.42).



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Theurgy

'God work' – in contrast to theology or knowledge of god. Salvation is achieved through theurgy – the route to reconnection with the divine.

First outlined in the Chaldean Oracles (2nd century CE mystical text).

De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum written in response to Porphyry's repudiation of magic and the practice of theurgy. Porphyry took the classic Platonic view that the divine can be accessed through 'reason' or 'logic' (in the sense of contemplative mind) – Porphyry and Plotinus likewise espoused the philosophic route).

Highly influential on astrology – 'in effect, a theurgy of Neoplatonic astrology, a comprehensive rejection of what he saw as the stilted, precise, mistaken dogma of Hellenistic astrology.'

o Campion, *History of Astrology Vol. I*, p.264.



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Theurgy

Awakening to one's own divine nature. Involved ritual in which imagination is focused onto symbols and images.

Symbola/sunthemata (tokens, signs, passwords, signatures) – traces of the divine present at all levels of reality. Can be natural materials (stones, plants, incense etc), divine names, Pythagorean numerical constructs, etc. Exist also within human beings – thus the human soul resonates with them, and with the divine through them.

Rituals aimed at recovering the divine within us by tracing these divine 'signatures' through the layers of being. Material objects can therefore reveal the divine and can be used as magical talismans to bring about the soul's ascent.

The highest form of theurgy was the contemplation of sacred geometric shapes and ratios.

Iamblichus denies this is magic; differentiates *theurgia* from *goetia*.

Influenced later psychological techniques of 'active imagination' used in the service of personal transformation. Iamblichus influenced the natural magic of Ficino and the work of Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno. Jung was familiar with *De Mysteriis*.



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Plotinus versus Iamblichus

Crystal Addey – in 'Platonism and Neoplatonism in the Roman Empire': Foundation module notes by Nick Campion and Crystal Addey, 2018:

'However, we need to recognise that this is the orthodox view in academia at the moment (the view of Gregory Shaw and others). However, I have been trying to challenge this view somewhat, as has some of the work of Zeke Mazur and John Bussanich (both Neoplatonic scholars). If Porphyry thought that the ineffable could be accessed through philosophical contemplation (following Plotinus' view) and Iamblichus thought the ineffable/divine could be accessed through theurgy, what is theurgy if not a system of using symbols for inner contemplation to connect the 'divine in the soul' to the divine? Certainly their goals were the same and their methods were not as different as people say. Zeke Mazur has written about Plotinus' 'philosophical contemplation' as inner visualization using symbols.'



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Liz Greene on the diversity of Neoplatonism



Taken from Liz's powerpoint on Orphics and Neoplatonists in the course material:

Neoplatonism is not a monolithic belief-system. There is great diversity among the Neoplatonists. Some, like Plotinus, are highly intellectualised, while others, like Iamblichus, deify the imagination and are more focused on the possibility of altering planetary fate.

Neoplatonism has had a major impact on both Jewish and Christian theologies and theosophies, as well as on currents of astrology that are non-divinatory and non-deterministic, e.g. transformative, magical, and psychological. The Neoplatonic impact on astrology has largely been through the transmission of alchemical and magical texts, rather than through 'mainstream' Aristotelian-Ptolemaic astrology. Neoplatonism was also absorbed into the Jewish Kabbalah, which in turn influenced the adepts of the late 19th century 'occult revival' out of which Alan Leo's 'modern' astrology first emerged.

Neoplatonic presentations of the complexities and divisions of the soul reflect the first sophisticated psychology. The imaginal world is perceived as having its own reality, a *mundus imaginalis* which is both interior (psychological) and objectively 'real'.

Jung has often been called a Neoplatonist, although he has also been called a Stoic and a Gnostic as well.

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Brief bibliography/ reading

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