

Chapter 3. Late Antiquity: Neoplatonism

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3.1. Rome

The Latins arrived in Italy around 1000 BCE. Rome was founded in 753 BCE, with a king, two consuls, a senate of 100 elders, and a popular assembly called the *comitia curiata*.

Rome became a republic in 509. It was sacked by the Gauls in 390, and occupied for several months. During the third and second centuries it grew stronger, and Roman literature began. Then came many wars, the conquest of Gaul (51 BCE) and Alexandria (48 BCE), and Caesar became an absolute dictator (45 BCE). In 31 BCE, the Roman Empire was established under Augustus. Rome was sacked by Alarid in 410.

Sources

[Langer, 1956; pp. 68, 85, 101]

3.2. Highlights of Neoplatonism

The most noted Neoplatonists were Plotinus (204-270) and Porphyry (232-304) in Rome, Iamblichus of Chalcis (260-330) in Syria, and Proclus of Xanthus (d. 485) in Athens.

The first and most important extant Neoplatonist writings we have are Porphyry's edition of Plotinus' treatises. The key doctrine of Plotinian mysticism, the One, seems to derive from Philo the Jew, who had sought a synthesis of Old Testament and Platonic teachings, via Albinus. The mystical journey, according to Plotinus, is the return to the One. This is the first of three hypostases: the One, the Intelligence, and the Soul.

Sources

Here we follow [O'Brien, 1975] and the Foreword by Ian Mueller in [Morrow, 1992].

We will now summarize the lives and works of the most important individuals, from the perspective of Ficino's roots:

- Plotinus (Rome, 205-270 CE),
- Iamblichus (Syria, 250-326),
- Proclus (Athens, 409-487), and
- Dionysius (Alexandria, fl. ca 500)

Their positions on cosmology have already been summarized in Section 1.3.

Plotinus.

Plotinus studied for about two decades with Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, then moved to Rome at the age of forty in 244. Although there are no writings of Plotinus, his teachings in Rome were recorded by Porphyry. As noted above, he taught a tripartite cosmology of three primal hypostases (transcendent sources):

- * the One, in which everything derives and returns, beyond all multiplicity (combining the Good of Plato and the One of Philo)
 - * the Intelligence, or intelligible realm, emanating from the One, containing the ideas and intelligences, models for things, and
 - * the Soul, emanated from the Intelligence, containing the world-soul, individual souls, reason, nature, matter, and so on.
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Another important element in Plotinus, perhaps derived from the Stoics, is the Ego, or self. And from Plato, he took the teaching on the value of contemplation as a technique for ascending to the higher realms, the soul's mystical return to the One.

Sources

Ten of the Enneads, selected and translated, with introductions and notes, are found in [O'Brien, 1964/1975], and also in [Gregory, 1991].

Porphyry

Pupil, friend, and literary executor of Plotinus, Porphyry is best known for his redaction of the lecture notes of Plotinus into six groups of nine, the Enneads. But he was also a significant philosopher on his own. Most of his writings have been lost, 13 survived. These concern Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plotinus, Ptolemy, and other themes.

Sources

[Guthrie, 1988]

Iamblichus

A pupil of Porphyry and of Anatolius, Bishop of Laodicea, Iamblichus of Chalcis was a revolutionary in the Neoplatonic tradition. Most of his writings are lost, and his contribution has been reconstructed from fragments, from reports of Proclus, and one extant treatise, *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*. One of his innovations was to replace contemplation, the spiritual practice of Plotinus, with theurgy, the ritual magic of the Chaldean Oracles.

Sources

[Dodds, 1992; p. xix]

Proclus

A pupil of Syrianus, Proclus was an excellent mathematician as well as philosopher. His program was to harmonize Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Iamblichus. He organized all this into a systematic and rational account at the end of the line of pagan Neoplatonists. Sitting in Plato's chair at the Academy in Athens, he wrapped the system for posterity in his early work, *The Elements of Theology*, and a later work, *Platonic Theology*, and threw it like a football into the end zone of the Middle Ages.

Sources

[Dodds, 1992; p. xviii]

Dionysius the Areopagite

Dionysius was a doctor on the Areopagus, a hill in Athens, an early disciple of Saint Paul, and eventually, the patron saint of Paris, St. Denis. Some centuries later, a generation after Proclus, an unknown philosopher took his name as a pseudonym. Sometimes identified as "pseudo-Dionysius", this person created a body of writings, the pseudo-Dionysian corpus, in which Proclus is dressed as a Christian. For example, the henads of Proclus became choruses of angels. This ultimate synthesis saved Neoplatonism from oblivion, achieving an enormous popularity throughout the Middle Ages.

Sources

[Dodds, 1992; p. xxvi]

3.3. Julianus, Theurgy, and the Chaldean Oracles

The *Chaldean Oracles* (CO) were written by Julianus the Theurgist around 170 CE, but were long thought to be derived from an original by Zoroaster, based on divine revelation. It is a work of theurgy, that is, ways of calling upon gods (god-working) by means of magical rituals and incantations. Like the *Corpus Hermeticum* (CH), the CO was a basic text for the Neoplatonists. In about 24 pages in the English translation [Stanley, 1989], a scheme of beings is described, having some similarity to the Hebrew Kabbalah. Further, an analysis of the human soul into three parts is given. Hecate is an important figure in the CO, and the word *jinx* is introduced.

Julianus the Theurgist, Chaldean philosopher and magician, created the term theurgy (god-working), and wrote the Chaldean Oracles, in Rome around 200 CE. Iamblichus and Proclus gave them praise, and commentaries were written by most Neoplatonists from Porphyry to Pico. Theurgy aims to provide a shortcut to mystical union with God, for those impatient with the intellectual approach and contemplation of Plotinus. The Chaldean Rites, magical rituals producing visible apparitions of Hecate, the Iynges (angels) and so on -- although not described in the Chaldean Oracles, comprise the main practice of theurgy.

Sources

[Fowden, 1987; pp. 126-131], [Julianus, 1989; pp. vii-xxxvii], [Lewy, ????]

Refs

3.4. Cosmographics

- *** Plato according to Aristotle
- *** Plotinus according to Porphyry
- *** Iamblichus
- *** Proclus
- *** Denys

3.5. Complex Dynamical Systems

We may think of a dynamical system as a black box, like a TV set, with control knobs on the front, and a computer graphic animation playing on the screen. Or, perhaps, as a wind-up toy or robot, dancing on a tabletop, with control knobs on its back. A complex dynamical system is a collection of these which are connected. That is, the hands of one robot manipulate the controls of another. In the "connectionist paradigm", the network of connections, rather than the cleverness of the individual robots, is responsible for the intelligence of the consortium, as in a school of fish, flock of birds, or colony of ants or bees. A neural net, in the language of complex dynamical systems theory, is a complex dynamical system in which the connected subsystems, called nodes or neurons, are very simple, but the strengths of the connections have adjusted in a learning process so that the entire complex exhibits a desired behavior.

A main theme of this book is that world cultural history (or prehistory) may be regarded as a complex dynamical system. Under the sway of this idea, William Irwin Thompson speaks of cultures as ecosystems, called "cultural ecologies". In this paradigm, major cultural transformations, or bifurcations, may be caused simply by changes in the strengths of the connections between subsystems, as in a neural net, with catastrophic changes in behavior, that is, culture.

For example, consider a complex of three subsystems: astrology, magic, and medicine. In texts on the history of ancient Greece, Egypt, or Mesopotamia, one finds chapters called "Astrology and Magic", (for example, see [Garin, 1966/1978; p. 145]), magic and astrology

Garin, Eugenio, *Science and Civic Life in the Italian Renaissance*, Peter Munz, tr. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1966/1978.

) or “Astrology and Medicine”, or “Magic and Medicine”. Apparently, in ancient cultures, these three clusters of ideas were interconnected as a complex. This way of thinking is typical of “dynamical literacy”, that is, the paradigm of complex dynamical systems theory. In this book we will try to track changes in the strengths of interconnections such as these, and to observe the concomitant changes in the history of ideas.

Sources

XGE, WIT, ervin laszlo, riane eisler, GERG/World Futures
