

THE IMPACT OF NEO-PLATONISM
ON WESTERN CIVILISATION¹

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Christian Neo-platonism scholars like Prof. A. H. Armstrong once held that Plotinus, the Master of what we moderns call Neo-platonism, was totally unaffected by oriental thought.² The weight of the evidence is heavily to the contrary. And I have heard that Prof. Armstrong himself is now responding to it though reluctantly. But since Plotinus and Neo-platonism in general have such a pervasive influence on western civilisation and culture, this reluctance on the part of a western scholar to acknowledge obvious cultural debts can be accepted as further evidence of human weakness, observable in India as well as in the west and elsewhere.

Our purpose in this paper is simply to look at Neo-platonism with Indian eyes, to see what is kindred to the "Oriental Spirit" in it, as well as to see how this has affected western civilisation. The treatment here is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but merely as an invitation to further research.

I. Neo-platonism - a quick survey

Neo-platonism is a modern word. Those who followed Plotinus (ca A.D. 205-270) or Proclus (d A.D. 485) would not have thought of such an expression.

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²On the dust-cover of the Loeb edition of Plotinus, translated by A. H. Armstrong, we read, "There is no real trace of oriental influence on his thought." This is not what he said in his article on "Plotinus and India" in the Classical Quarterly XXX (1936) London, reprinted in A. H. Armstrong, Plotinian and Christian Studies, Variorum Reprints, London, 1974.

It should not be forgotten that Proclus was a diadochos—the last Acharya of Plato's academy, and the last major official commentator on Plato's writings. Proclus' Elements of Theology breathe an atmosphere quite different from Plotinus' Enneads, but both trace their teachings back to Plato.

Neo-platonism is a dialectical synthesis of Pythagoreanism Platonism and their subsequent criticism by Aristotle and the Stoics. If Plotinus is somehow regarded as the founder of neo-platonism—and this can be questioned—he was not out to build a new school. More likely Plotinus sought to synthesize the manifold criticisms and counter-criticisms that had confused the Greek scene for generations.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) had already questioned Plato's key notions, as for example the world of ideas. Then with Alexander's return from India and his death in 323 B.C. there was in Hellenism what could be called creative chaos or turbulent ferment.

On the one hand, Aristotle's disciple Pyrrhon (ca 360–270 B.C.), who had accompanied Alexander to India, returned a master of the rhetorical art, reproducing the early Buddhist Madhyamika dialectic³ in its Greek form of Skepticism—a far cry in intention from that which it imitated.

A revival of Pythagoreanism (Pythagoras died in 497 B.C.) was a perennial phenomenon in Hellenism and at the time of Plotinus was the greatest rival, in the form of neo-Pythagoreanism, of Neo-platonism.

The Stoics or the people of the Porch, had reacted to all other worldly philosophical speculation, and had settled down to find their meaning and their god within the cosmos itself—not apart from it. They had seen the world, both Greek and Roman, going to pieces, and Zeno (335–263 B.C.) and Diogenes (fl 2nd century B.C.) sought to bring some tough discipline into the dissolute Graeco-Roman society.

To follow the classification of Prof. Plott⁴, the Axial Age of Philosophy was over. There is no more primordial creativity in religion or

³This dialectic was to be further developed in India by Nagarjuna in the first century of our era.

⁴John C. Plott, Global History of Philosophy Vol. III, Delhi, Motilal Banarsi Dass, 1979.

philosophy—only reactions and remodifications. Such is the age of Plotinus—an age of interiority, of seeking unity within, away from the maddening disunity without.

Professor Plott compares the Egyptian Greek Plotinus (ca A.D. 205-270) to the Indian Buddhist Vasubandhu (4th century AD) in an engaging study. We shall concentrate on Plotinus and his effort, and its later modification by Iamblichus and Proclus.

Plotinus takes over much of the synthesis worked out by Numenius (fl ca A.D. 175). Numenius had attempted a survey of the development of "doctrine" since Plato (long before Cardinal Newman in the 19th century tried the same with Christian doctrine). Numenius set down some norms for development faulting the Skeptics like Pyrrho and schismatics like Philo of Larissa. Numenius tried to give also a compendium of views of "famous nations which agree with Plato" among whom he included the "Brahmans."⁵

But Numenius does not bring in Nagarjuna's skepticism as Pyrrho understood its earlier version, but rather the vijnānavāda of the Indian Buddhists, the opposite of the Madhyamika doctrine. In Numenius we see not only the foundations of the new Platonism, but also the striking parallelism between neo-platonic and Indian thought. Numenius builds on the synthesis worked out by Poseidonius the Stoic (fl 51 B.C.), a man of the stature of an Aristotle, and the teacher of Cicero (died 43 B.C.).

Numenius reinstates the religious intent of philosophy which Plato had affirmed and Aristotle obscured. Focusing on Plato's "Second Letter," Numenius would begin with a doctrine of ultimate reality as Triad, a line followed by Plotinus and Proclus.

The first God of Numenius as well as Plotinus and Proclus, corresponds to the Sūnya of Mādhyamika Buddhism and the Nirguna Brahman of the Vedanta. One could also say that Plotinus' "One" is the same as Mahayana Buddhism's Dharmakaya or Tathata.

In Proclus' language, the One (to hen), the First (hē proté), the First Cause of All (aitia proté tōn ontōn), the one first principle (mia arché)⁶ is the self-constituted Good (agathon authupostatōn).

⁵Plott. op. cit. p. 127.

This total identity of Being and the Good in the One in Neo-platonism is what has always attracted me to it. If being and good are inseparable, then so are fact and value, is and ought, science and morality. It is the hiatus between these two which lies at the base of the contemporary malaise in the West as well as in the East.

Equally important to me is Proclus' affirmation of holism in proposition 66, which says:

Panta ta onta pros alléla é hola estin é meré
é tauta é hetera

"All the existents are to each other either whole or part or same or different."⁷

The following propositions make clear that for Proclus, each part derives its meaning from participation in the whole, and that the whole pre-exists the parts. This affirmation seems so important for our age of ecological crisis.

II. The Idea of Hierarchy in Neo-platonism

The Numenian-Pythagorean structure of the cosmos, based on Plato's "second letter"⁸ and coordinated with the Madhyamika views coming from India, was perfected by Plotinus.

Central to this structure was the perception that the Soul (psuche) of man as syngenous (of the same genus) with the World-Soul. But the world itself emerges at a certain stage in the hierarchy of being, third in rank after the One, or after to hen (Monas in Numenius) which is beyond all being and beyond all form and determination, and after the second entity, which is consciousness or nous (translated "Intellect" by Armstrong and "Intellectual Principle" by Mackenna).

The true being of the world-soul is in the levels above it, i.e. in nous and in the One. Similarly our own souls, which have also a threefold structure, are grounded in the superior levels of Being and nous.

⁶Proclus, the Elements of Theology, Prop 11, Eng Tr. E. R. Dodds, Second Edn. Oxford, 1963/71, pp. 12-13.

⁷This reminds one of the Madhyamika concept of tetralemma i.e. in all statements, there are four possibilities, (not two as in Aristotlian non-contradiction logic) i.e. affirmation, negation, both affirmation and negation, neither affirmation or negation.

The world-soul (tou pantos psuché) creates the world of differences; our soul has the same form (homoeides), but does not create the world. The world-soul looks to the nous as a whole, whereas our soul looks only to a part of the nous.⁹

But our souls have descended into the world of matter, caught in that formless nothing. Some have descended too far and are more deeply caught. Others retain greater capacity to rise, because they have not gone too far down (IV:3:12). And they keep going from body to body. This Plotinian doctrine of samsara and metempsychosis may be traced back to Pythagoras, but could also find confirmation in the Indian punarjanmavada which had become known in Alexandria by that time.

While Plotinus advances no doctrine of Karma to justify the difference in the plight of the individual souls, he states that these differences are according to a rational principle (kata logon gignesthai IV:3:16). Plotinus speaks of former faults which justify these differences (é oude adikon ek ton prosthen echon tén dikaiosín).

In any case all things are organized logically around a centre (kentron), the circle "receiving light from the centre, and from this another circle, light from light" (IV:3:17).

This dynamic hierarchy of circles is not an authority-structure, but an energy-structure. We should not press the circle analogy too far, for it is a spatial image. Nor should we think in terms of material objects in orbit around a centre, but more in terms of inter-penetrating energy fields.

The soul is not a body, according to Plotinus, nor in a body. It is not present like form in matter either (IV:3:20). There is no analogy, says Plotinus, to describe the relation of the soul to the body (IV:3:21). Not even Plato's famous charioteer and horses would do.

Hierarchy, a concept popularised by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, (in his works: The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesial Hierarchy), had nothing to do with layers or pyramids of authority, or

⁸Also based on Timaeus 39e.

⁹Enneads IV:3:6. Armstrong, pp. 48ff.

our being. To be centred in the nous is to be free and virtuous. Virtue or good is a mode of the nous as it is of being itself.

The unembodied is the free. The soul becomes free when it can move freely without constraint, through nous, towards the good. However it is not a mere shedding of the body. The soul has to move, away from entrapment in matter and in evil, towards the true Being, which is also perfectly One and perfectly Good.

Neo-platonism developed its own disciplines of liberation of the soul from the world of the manifold, and of Ascent towards the Good. It is not the speculation about the nature of reality that constituted the genius of Neo-platonism, but rather this discipline of Liberation and Ascent.

IV. Proclus and the Theurgic Revolution

Plotinus is still respectable in the West. Iamblichus and Proclus are not. Plotinus may have believed in praying to the Sun and in magic spells (IV:4:2 40ff). To modern scholars, it is easy to ignore cultic aspects and to treat him as a philosopher. Iamblichus (ca 250 - ca 330) the Syrian, and Proclus are after all too cult-minded and so less worthy of respect to the modern rational, anti-cultic mind.

Yet the Neo-platonism that affected Augustine and the Christian fathers did not come directly from Plotinus alone. The Plotinian discipline was too elitist and a Syrian Malcho (that is Porphyry's real name) armed with the Enneads was unable to prevail in paganism's fight against the Christian faith. With Iamblichus and Proclus, however, Neo-platonism combines with Neo-Pythagoreanism to become a most powerful rival movement for Christianity.

Once Neo-platonism takes on cultic elements, western scholars think, it becomes no longer philosophically respectable. The fact of the matter is that it is in this cultic or theurgic form that neo-platonism had its massive impact on western civilisation. It was the Athenian version of Neo-platonism as developed by Iamblichus and Proclus that Dionysius the Pseudo-areopagite christianized and bequeathed to the western monastic movement and to the medieval western church, and through these to western civilisation.

There are three channels (besides others, I am sure) through which neo-platonism penetrated the Western tradition. First, there was Augustine

of Hippo (354-430) the North African who through Cicero came first to Manicheism and then to neo-platonism. His theology has many more elements that could be traced to Numenius than to Plotinus. He probably knew Iamblichus also, but this is less likely. Augustine is the towering figure of western theological thought, generally unrecognized, thank God, in my own Eastern Christian tradition.

The second channel through which neo-platonism penetrated the west was through the terse and seminal writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (ca A.D. 500). Since he was identified with a first century disciple of St. Paul the Apostle, (i.e. Dionysius, the philosopher of Mt. Areopagus in Athens) his writings came to have high authority in both the Byzantine and the Latin churches. All the leading mediaeval Greek and western theologians wrote commentaries on Dionysius, whose works show the unmistakable influence of Proclus.

The third channel was the writings of Proclus himself. Both Johannes Philoponus of Alexandria and Procopius of Gaza wrote Christian refutations of Proclus. But Proclus' commentaries on Plato and other works were translated into Syriac, Armenian, Arabic and Georgian. The Middle Eastern civilisation paid a lot of attention to Proclus and used him to keep Plato alive. The Elements of Theology was translated into Latin from the Arabic in the 12th century, and was used by Albertus Magnus and Dante. In the European Renaissance, the works of Proclus played a major role. So did they in the development of Arab thought and Islamic philosophy.

The main contribution of Iamblichus and Proclus was to more explicitly integrate the element of worship with neo-platonism, fully within a pagan context. In place of Plotinus' theoria as way of salvation, theurgia or the ritual acts of worshipping the One were stressed as means of liberation.

Usually western scholars are full of scorn for anything that smacks of cult or ritual. Plotinus' magic and prayers to the Sun are bad enough. Here are these Asians bringing in cult and ritual into the realm of the rational! Scholars are often reading back post-enlightenment rationality even into the pre-Socratics!

If however Iamblichus and Proclus had not integrated theoria with theourgia neo-platonism would probably have collapsed completely. The parallels with the "mystery religions" of Egyptian and Iranian origin seem

so obvious. But if anyone assumes that Porphyry and Plotinus had nothing to do with cult and ritual, he would be sadly mistaken. Porphyry wrote On the Philosophy of the Oracles, earlier in his life, but that was before he knew Plotinus, and besides Porphyry is also very much an Asian, being Syrian. There need be little doubt that both Plotinus and Porphyry did practice some form of cult or worship, though they say little about it. The cult itself was a mystery, not to be talked or written about.

The Chaldean Oracles were the liturgical text-book of many a pagan in the fourth and fifth centuries, and possibly well before that. This mysterious work had a great impact on the Christian fathers as well. For Proclus particularly, who regarded Philosophy as a sort of High Priest of the Religions, the cultic-religious element was essential to true philosophy.¹¹ At this point Iamblichus and Proclus are more Vedic than Vedantic. Where Plotinus asked the human will to discipline itself out of its illusions and rise to the One by mind and will, the Asian Neo-platonists recommended cultic acts, or a theurgic liturgy with mantras and incantations.

Plotinus has his Triad of the One, the Nous, and the All-Soul--but says little about gods as such. Proclus brings in "divine intelligences" (theioi noes), as distinct from "ordinary intelligences" (hoi noes monon).¹² God is One, for Proclus too, and the One is identified also with the Good. His definition of God is "that beyond which nothing is and to which all adhere" (hou gar méden estin epekeina kai hou panta ephietai, Theos touto--proposition 113). And the Good is "that from which are all things and to which all things move" (aph' hou ta panta kai pros ho, touto de tagathon, ibid).

The numerous gods participate in this unity of the One and the Good; but every god is a self-complete henad (pas theos enas estin auto-telés), and is above being (hyperousios), above life (hyperzōos) and above nous (hypernous)--(see props 114 and 115). And every good (except

¹¹See Eusebius: Praeparatio Evangelica 1.V.c. VIII, IX Migne, Patrologia Graeca XXI: 333C. See also Mystery of the Egyptians probably by one of the disciples of Iamblichus.

¹²See Proclus, Elements of Theology Prop. 111.

the One) is participable (methektos), though ineffable (arrheton) and unknowable (agnoston) by secondary beings, but apprehendable by participation, unlike the One (propositions 116, 123).

The gods, finite in number, mediate the energies and operation of the One to the whole universe and leads the whole cosmos to divine perfection (prop 153), through the process of return or epistrohpe (prop 31) back to the source. This life of the universe, as a diastole-systole, an expiration-inspiration, as a procession-recession, is a circle without beginning or end, the end being assimilated to the beginning (ta tele pros ton heauton archas homoioutai prop 146). This dynamic life of the universe is what Dionysius later called the hierarchy.

Proclus affirms thus a sort of trinity in unity of the world process—immanence in the Cause (arche) as identity, procession from the Cause (pro-odos) as difference, and reversion (epistrophe) to the Cause as overcoming of difference by identity. Proclus cites Iamblichus as saying that the Cause of identity is the monad, the introducer of procession the diad, and the origin of reversion or recession the triad.¹³ The three are inseparable for Plotinus as for Proclus (see Prop 35).

But the epistrophe for us humans, according to Proclus, is through the gods, and hence the rationale for the theurgy.

But the theurgy or mantra one does not write about. It is not for the eyes of the uninitiated. This must be the reason why so little on the subject is available that is written.

It was this theurgic neo-platonism that the Pseudo-Areopagite then bequeathed to the mediaeval western Church and became its most decisive intellectual heritage,¹⁴ through John Scot Eriugena, Chalcidius, Boethius, John Philoponos, Albert the Great, Hugo of St. Victor, even Thomas Aquinas himself. Nicolas of Cusa, and Meister Eckhart were both inspired by neo-platonic writings.

¹³In Timaeus II:215.5. See E. R. Dodds, tr. Elements of Theology, pp. 220-221.

¹⁴See H. Koch. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite in Seinen Beziehungen zum Neuplatonismus und Mysterienwesen.

The Arabs and Jews also took to neo-platonism in a big way in the 12th century and subsequent centuries, quite often mistaking the works of Porphyry or Plotinus for those of Plato. Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sinai (Avicenna) are profoundly influenced by neo-platonism. Proclus' work de Causis was taken to be Aristotle's and avidly studied by Christians, Arabs and Jews.

Conclusion

The 19th century European Enlightenment brought a reaction against Plato and neo-platonism. If Western philosophy up to the European Enlightenment was a footnote to Plato and neo-Platonism, the so-called modern Philosophy of the West is a foiled attempt to break the ties with Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics and to start anew. In that new start, the influence of Plato and the Neo-Platonists is still traceable in Hegel, Kant, Descartes, Husserl, Bergson, Whitehead and many other so-called moderns.

We can no longer go back to the pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment philosophical innocence. But modern philosophy and Enlightenment thought are now at a stage where they need a little encouragement--mostly to confess their failure, so that we can begin again the perennial quest, but with some understanding of the way we have come.

That is the sense in which I stand committed to the International Society for Neo-platonic Studies.