

Philosophy

The One and the Many in Neo-Platonic Theosophy

Notes for Class at the Theosophical Society in America

November 8, 2008

- I. Neo-Platonism: short definition and list of characteristics
1. The modern term for a school of religious and mystical philosophy that took shape in the 3rd century AD, founded by Plotinus and based on the teachings of Plato and earlier Platonists
 2. As a philosophy: a form of idealistic monism (theistic monism)
 3. As a religion: combines elements of Polytheism (Monistic-polytheism)
 4. As a mysticism: it contains theoretical and practical parts
 - a. Theoretical: dealing with the high origin of the human soul showing how it has departed from its first estate,
 - b. Practical: showing the way by which the soul may again return to the Eternal and Supreme.
 5. The system can be divided between the invisible world and the phenomenal world
 - a. Invisible: containing the transcendent One from which emanates an eternal, perfect, essence (*nous*), which, in turn, produces the world-soul
 - b. Phenomenal: the soul, as a moving essence, generates the corporeal or phenomenal world. Bodies rest on a substratum of matter.
- II. Celestial Hierarchy [Emanations according to Neo-Platonism]

Greek term	Translation / Modern term	Qualities	Comparison
<i>Monas</i>	The One	The primeval, infinite, unknowable, overflowing, unchanging Source of Being; God; the Good; transcendent and ineffable	Parabrahm; Ein-Soph;
<i>Henads</i>	Hypercosmic gods	Protect and envelop The One; identified with the traditional Greek gods (Proclus)	Elohim
<i>Demiurgos / Nous</i>	Craftsman / Intellect	First emanation; the archetype (<i>eidos</i>) of all existing things; creator deity; Zeus (Plotinus)	Brahm; Dhyani-buddhas
<i>Anima Mundi</i> (Latin)	World-Soul	Second emanation; "a single visible living entity containing all other living entities, which by their nature are all related" (Plato); permeated and illuminated by <i>nous</i> , but also in contact with matter	Brahman-Atman
	Cosmic gods	Lesser builders of the universe; part of the World-Soul	Dhyani-chohans

<i>Psychi</i>	Soul	Individual soul; part of the World-Soul. Partially descended into matter (Plotinus); fully descended into matter (Iamblichus)	Atman
<i>Soma</i>	Body	Formed and made by <i>nous</i> according to its <i>eidos</i>	Rupa
<i>Hyle</i>	Matter	Indeterminate, neutral; no qualities; capable of form; if destitute of form and idea, it is evil (Plotinus). Sensible matter entirely good; an expression of the One (Iamblichus)	Prakriti

III. Process of deliverance:

1. Along the same road by which it descended the soul must retrace its steps back to the supreme Good. It must first of all return to itself.
2. This is accomplished by the practice of virtue, which aims at likeness to God, and leads up to God. In the ethics of Plotinus all the older schemes of virtue are taken over and arranged in a graduated series.
 - a. The civil virtues: adorn the life, without elevating the soul.
 - b. The purifying virtues: the soul is freed from sensuality and led back to itself, and thence to the *nous*. By means of ascetic observances the human becomes once more a spiritual and enduring being, free from all sin.
 - c. Divine virtue: one must become "God" through ecstatic contemplation of the primeval Being, the One. Thought cannot attain to this, for thought reaches only to the *nous*, and is itself a kind of motion. It is only in a state of perfect passivity and repose that the soul can recognize and touch the primeval Being. Hence the soul must first pass through a spiritual curriculum. Beginning with the contemplation of corporeal things in their multiplicity and harmony, it then retires upon itself and withdraws into the depths of its own being, rising thence to the *nous*, the world of ideas.
 - d. The last stage is reached when, in the highest tension and concentration, beholding in silence and utter forgetfulness of all things, it is able as it were to lose itself. Then it may see God, the foundation of life, the source of being, the origin of all good, the root of the soul. In that moment it enjoys the highest indescribable bliss; it is as it were swallowed up of divinity, bathed in the light of eternity.

IV. Most important representatives:

1. Ammonius Saccas (Not to be confused with Ammonius of Alexandria the Christian). Teacher of Plotinus, Origen the Pagan and Cassius Longinus (teacher of Porphyry). Ammonius' fundamental doctrine was that Plato and Aristotle were in full agreement with each other. Was called a *theodidaktikus* (See HPB below)
2. Plotinus. Seen as the founder. Accentuated *theoria* over *theurgia*.
3. Porphyry. Plotinus' pupil
4. Iamblichus. Gave philosophical rationale for theurgy (*theia energeia*; divine action)
5. Proclus. Iamblichus' pupil
6. Gemistos Plethon. 15th Cent. Promotor. Conduit between Constantinople and Florence.

V. Addenda:

From Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (II, 342):

If we study the question with a dispassionate mind, we will soon perceive that the ethics of Gautama-Buddha, Plato, Apollonius, Jesus, Ammonius Sakkas, and his disciples, were all based on the same mystic philosophy. That all worshipped one God, whether they considered Him as the "Father" of humanity, who lives in man as man lives in Him, or as the Incomprehensible Creative Principle; all led God-like lives. Ammonius, speaking of his philosophy, taught that their school dated from the days of Hermes, who brought his wisdom from India.

From Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (I, 443-444):

That which is now termed the superstitious *verbiage* and gibberish of mere heathens and savages, composed many thousands of years ago, may be found to contain the master-key to all religious systems. The cautious sentence of St. Augustine, a favorite name in Max Muller's lectures, which says that "there is no false religion which does not contain some elements of truth," may yet be triumphantly proved correct; the more so as, far from being original with the Bishop of Hippo, it was borrowed by him from the works of Ammonius Saccas, the great Alexandrian teacher.

This "god-taught" philosopher, the *theodidaktos*, had repeated these same words to exhaustion, in his numerous works some 140 years before Augustine. Acknowledging Jesus as "an excellent man, and the friend of God," he always maintained that his design was not to abolish the intercourse with gods and demons (spirits), but simply to purify the ancient religions; that "the religion of the multitude went hand in hand with philosophy, and with her had shared the fate of being by degrees corrupted and obscured with mere human conceits, superstition, and lies: that it ought therefore to be brought back to its *original purity* by purging it of this dross and expounding it upon philosophical principles; and that the whole which Christ had in view was to reinstate and restore to its primitive integrity the wisdom of the ancients."*

It was Ammonius who first taught that every religion was based on one and the same truth; which is the wisdom found in the Books of Thoth (Hermes Trismegistus), from which books Pythagoras and Plato had learned all their philosophy. And the doctrines of the former he affirmed to have been identical with the earliest teachings of the Brahmans -- now embodied in the oldest *Vedas*. "The name Thoth," says Professor Wilder, "means a college or assembly,"** and "it is not improbable that the books were so named as being the collected oracles and doctrines of the sacerdotal fraternity of Memphis. Rabbi Wise had suggested a similar hypothesis in relation to the divine utterances recorded in the Hebrew Scripture. But the Indian writers assert, that during the reign of king Kansa, *Yadus* (*Judeans*?) or sacred tribe left India and migrated to the West, carrying the four *Vedas* with them. There was certainly a great resemblance between the philosophical doctrines and religious customs of the Egyptians and Eastern Buddhists; but whether the Hermetic books and the four *Vedas* were identical, is not now known."