The Institute of Ismaili Studies

"**Plato, Platonism, and Neo-platonism**"
Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia
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Neoplatonism was a philosophical movement that primarily belonged to the Hellenist Alexandrian and Syriac schools of thought. Its founder, Plotinus (ca. 205-270 CE), an Egyptian of Greek culture, was profoundly influenced by Plato's *Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, as well as being inspired by Aristotelian, Stoic, and neo-Pythagorean doctrines. Plotinus' own monumental corpus, the *Enneads*, was partly drafted in response to the objections raised by Aristotle against Plato's theory of ideas. Therein, Plotinus argued that the Platonic forms subsist in what Aristotle referred to as *Nous* (intellect). Giving a metaphysical primacy to abstract ideas, the realm of the intelligible was construed as being the ground of the ultimate reality, which was radically independent from sensible beings. This ontology led to a belief in the existence of absolute values rooted in eternity. Further elaborations of Plotinus's teachings were undertaken by his disciple, Porphyry of Tyre (ca. 232-305 CE), and were supplemented by the work of the latter's pupil, the Syrian Iamblichus (ca. 250-330 CE). However, Proclus (ca. 411-485 CE) introduced the most rigorous systematization of this tradition.

The impetus of Neoplatonism in philosophy confronted many challenges following the closing of the Athenian Academy (ca. 526 CE) by the Roman Emperor Justinian. The momentum of this tradition was renewed with the philosophers of the medieval Muslim civilization who imbued it with monotheistic directives. Following Socrates, in a critique of the Sophists, Platonists believed that

materiality, the Soul generates all sensible composite beings, while matter represents the last station in the hierarchy of existence as the unreal substratum of the phenomenal universe. Emanation, as a processional descent, was itself to be followed by an ascent that expressed the longing of the rational soul to return to its Source and a yearning to inhabit the realm of ideas. This reversible movement acted as the basis of the moral code of the Neoplatonist system, which advocated a dualist separation of mind and body, as well as affirmed the immortality of the soul.

Philosophers in medieval Islam came to know Plato through the Arabic translations of his *Laws, Sophist, Timaeus,* and *Republic*. His influence on the history of ideas in Islam is most felt in the domains of ethics and political philosophy, whereby his views offered possibilities for reconciling pagan philosophy with monotheistic religion in the quest for truth and the unveiling of the ultimate principles of reality. His *Republic* and *Laws* presented an appealing legislative model that inspired political thought in Islam, particularly the line in thinking that is attested in al-Farabi's (ca. 870-950 CE) treatise *al-Madina al-Fadila* (*The Virtuous City*), which gave prominence to the role played by philosophy in setting the legal arrangements and mores of the ideal Islamic polity. The *Corpus Platonicum* also impressed humanists like Ibn Miskawayh (ca. 940-1030 CE), who, in his *Tahdhib al-akhlaq* (*The Cultivation of Morals*) espoused the Platonic tripartite conception of the soul, along with its ethical-political ramifications. As for the Neoplatonist doctrines, these found their way into the intellectual history of Islam through Plato's dialogues, as well as being channeled via the tracts known as *Aristotle's Theology* and *Liber de Causis* (*Kitab al-Khayr al-Mahd*). Although both texts were erroneously attributed to Aristotle, the former reproduced fragments from Plotinus's *Enneads*, and the latter rested on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. This misguiding textual transmission led to imbuing Aristotelianism with Neoplatonist leitmotifs, which impacted the thinking of authorities such as al-Kindi (d. ca. 873 CE), Ikhwan al-Safa' (tenth century CE), al-Farabi (d. ca. 950 CE), and Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE), who in their turn influenced the onto-theological systems of al-Sijistani (d. 971 CE), al-Kirmani (d. 1020 CE), Suhrawardi (d. 1191 CE), Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240 CE), and Mulla Sadra (d. 1640 CE).

Primary Sources

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Further Reading

Krauss, Paul. "Plotin chez les arabes."