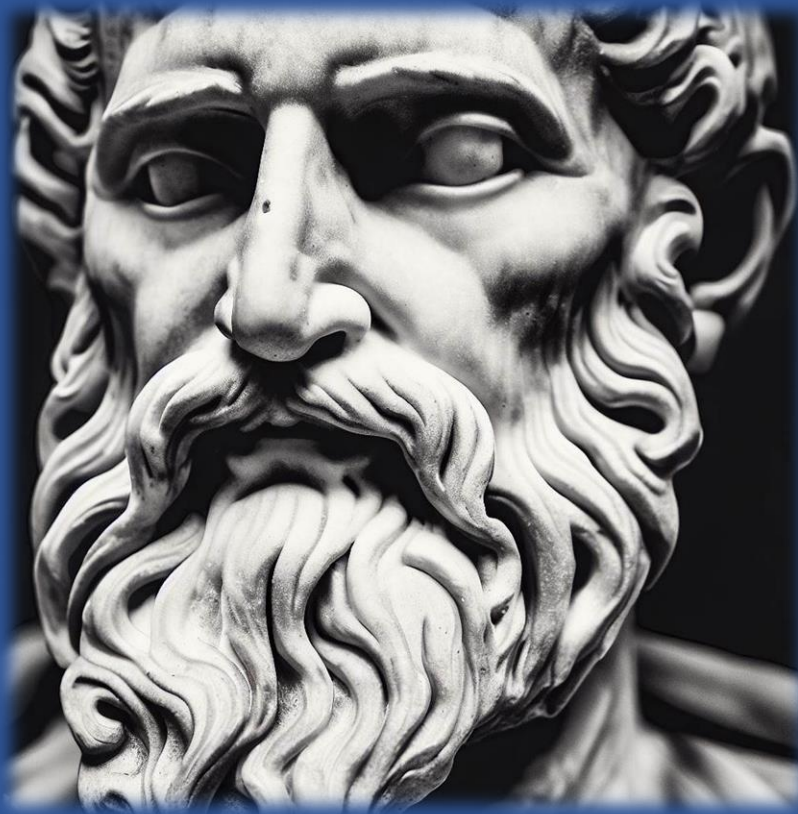– Winging it with Wisdom –
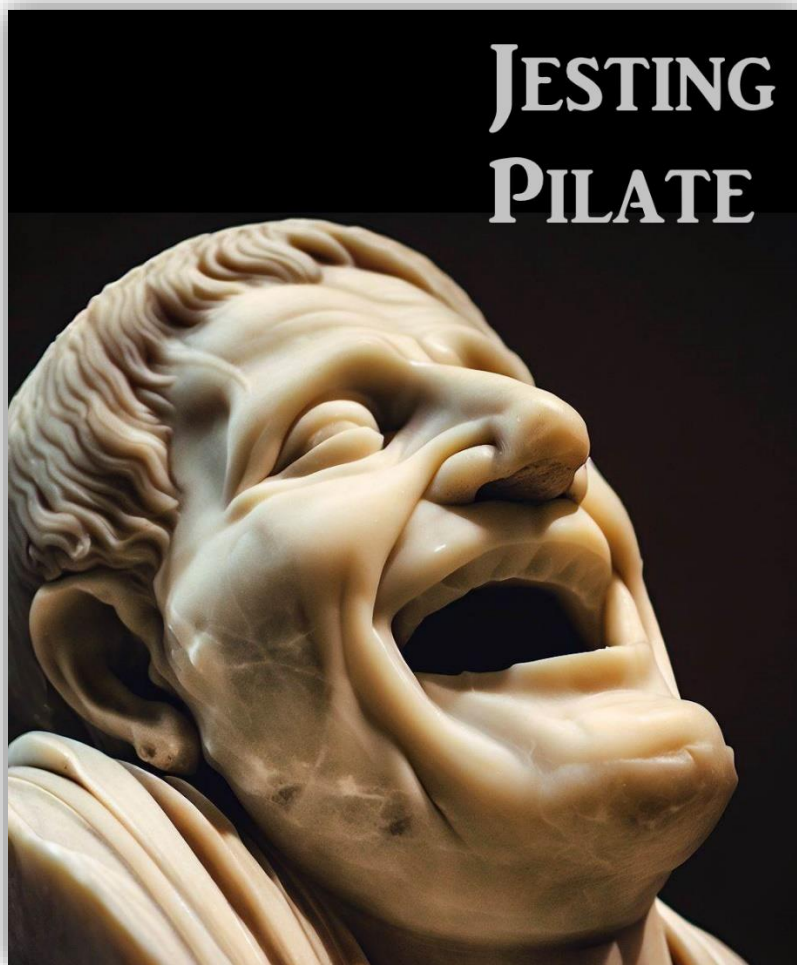
A Short Introduction to

Neo-Platonism

David Hartland Taylor

JESTING PILATE

*WHAT is truth? said jesting Pilate,
and would not stay for an answer.*
(Francis Bacon – 'Of Truth', 1625).

Jesting Pilate is an emanation **From the Quarries**

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INTRODUCTION

Neoplatonism is a philosophical system that emerged in the late Roman Empire, which aimed to synthesize the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato and his followers. This influential intellectual movement developed as a response to the challenges of Christianity and a changing world, and it played a crucial role in shaping Western philosophy, theology, and the arts for centuries to come.
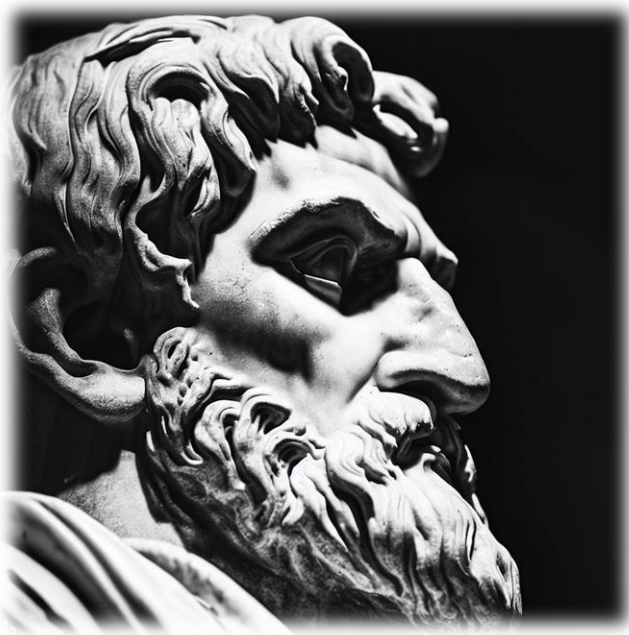
Neoplatonism emerged in the third century CE as an attempt to reconcile Platonic philosophy with the new intellectual and religious currents of the time, such as Christianity and the mystery religions. It is considered the last major school of pagan philosophy before the dominance of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Neoplatonism continued to evolve and adapt through the centuries, influencing the development of Medieval, Renaissance, and early modern philosophy in the Western tradition.

The primary centres of Neoplatonism were Alexandria, Athens, and Rome. Alexandria was a major intellectual hub in the Hellenistic world, home to the famous Library and the Platonic Academy. Athens, the birthplace of Plato, continued to be an important centre of learning, while Rome served as the heart of the empire and a meeting place for diverse cultures and ideas. Later, Neoplatonism spread to the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic world, and throughout medieval Europe, where it contributed to the evolution of Christian theology, Islamic philosophy, and Jewish thought.

Some of the most influential figures in Neoplatonism include Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus. Plotinus (204-270 CE) is considered the founder of Neoplatonism, having developed a systematic interpretation of Plato's teachings. His work, the Enneads, is the primary source of Neoplatonic thought. Porphyry (234-305 CE) was a student of Plotinus and a prolific writer, known for his commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, as well as his work on vegetarianism and ethics. Iamblichus (c. 245-325 CE) expanded upon Plotinus' ideas by incorporating elements of theurgy and ritual into Neoplatonic philosophy. Proclus (412-485 CE) was a major figure in the Athenian school, whose works synthesized earlier Neoplatonic thought and influenced future generations of philosophers.

Neoplatonism is characterized by its metaphysical focus on the One, an ultimate, transcendent, and unknowable reality from which all things emanate. The One is the source of all existence, including the divine Intellect (Nous), which is the realm of eternal Forms or Ideas, and the World Soul, which connects the intelligible world to the material world. The human soul is considered a divine spark, capable of ascending to union with the One through philosophical

contemplation and purification. Neoplatonism also places a strong emphasis on virtue and the moral life as essential components of spiritual development.

One of the strengths of Neoplatonic philosophy is its ability to synthesize diverse intellectual traditions, integrating Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic thought with elements of Eastern mysticism and Christianity. This synthesis allowed Neoplatonism to adapt and survive in a changing world, influencing a wide range of thinkers and disciplines. Additionally, the focus on the human soul's divine nature and its potential for union with the transcendent One inspired a sense of spiritual aspiration and self-improvement, which resonated with many throughout history.

Critics of Neoplatonism often point to its reliance on abstract metaphysical concepts, such as the One, Intellect, and World Soul, which can be difficult to comprehend and may seem disconnected from everyday experience. Moreover, the highly speculative nature of Neoplatonic thought, along with its complex hierarchical metaphysical system, can be seen as a weakness, since it can lead to obscurity and overcomplication. Another criticism is that Neoplatonism, in its effort to synthesize various philosophical and religious traditions, can sometimes appear syncretic, potentially diluting the original teachings of Plato and other thinkers.

SOME KEY CONCEPTS IN NEOPLATONIC PHILOSOPHY

1. **The One:** The ultimate, transcendent, and ineffable source of all reality in Neoplatonic philosophy, from which everything else emanates.

2. **Emanation:** The process by which all things flow forth from the One, representing a hierarchical descent from the highest to the lowest levels of being.

3. **Nous (Intellect):** The second principle in the Neoplatonic hierarchy, which contains the Platonic Forms or archetypes of all things and represents divine intelligence.

4. **World Soul:** The third principle in the hierarchy, responsible for animating the physical world and connecting the realm of Nous to the material realm.

5. **Matter:** The lowest level of reality in the Neoplatonic hierarchy, characterized by multiplicity and imperfection, and lacking the qualities of the higher principles.

6. **Return (anabasis):** The ascent of the soul back to its source (the One), achieved through purification and spiritual contemplation, and representing the ultimate goal of human life.

7. **Henosis:** The mystical union of the individual soul with the One, which constitutes the highest form of knowledge and the culmination of the soul's return.

8. **Hierarchy of Being:** The Neoplatonic structure of reality, consisting of a series of interrelated levels that descend from the One through Nous, World Soul, and ultimately to Matter.

9. **Beauty:** A key concept in Neoplatonism, representing a reflection of the divine order and harmony present in the higher principles, and serving as a catalyst for the soul's ascent.

10. **Platonic Forms:** The eternal, unchangeable, and immaterial archetypes of all things, which exist in the realm of Nous and are more real than their physical counterparts.

11. **Hypostasis:** A term referring to each of the three primary levels or principles of reality in Neoplatonism—The One, Nous (Intellect), and World Soul.

12. **Demiurge:** The creative principle or divine craftsman, often identified with the Nous or World Soul, responsible for fashioning the material world in accordance with the eternal Platonic Forms.

13. **Logos:** The organizing principle of the cosmos, often associated with the World Soul, which reflects the divine intelligence of the Nous and orders the material world.

14. **Psyche (Soul):** In Neoplatonism, the individual soul is considered a microcosm of the World Soul, participating in the divine intellect and capable of ascending back to its source.

15. **Negative Theology** (Apophatic Theology): A method of describing the divine, particularly the One, through negation—by stating what it is not—since it is considered beyond positive description or human comprehension.

16. **Theurgy:** Ritual practices aimed at invoking the presence of the divine, often through the use of symbols and sacred objects, in order to facilitate the soul's ascent and spiritual purification.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Platonism, Middle Platonism, and Neoplatonism are three major stages in the development of Platonic philosophy, each marked by distinct characteristics and historical contexts. Platonism represents the original teachings of Plato, while Middle Platonism is characterized by its syncretism and the introduction of intermediary principles. Neoplatonism, on the other hand, is a more systematic and developed version of Platonic thought, focusing on the emanation of reality from the One and the mystical ascent of the human soul.

1. **Platonism:** Platonism refers to the original philosophy of Plato (circa 428-348 BCE), the Athenian philosopher who founded the Academy. His philosophy centers around the theory of Forms or Ideas, which posits that the material world is only an imperfect reflection of an eternal and immutable realm of abstract entities. Key elements of Platonism include the exploration of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics. Works such as the "Republic," "Phaedo," "Symposium," and "Timaeus" are essential expressions of Plato's thought.

2. **Middle Platonism:** Middle Platonism emerged between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE and marks a transition between the original philosophy of Plato and the more systematic Neoplatonism. Middle Platonists sought to reconcile and synthesize Platonic ideas with those of other philosophical schools, such as Stoicism and Aristotelianism. They emphasized the transcendent nature of the supreme principle (the Good or the One) and the existence of intermediary beings, such as the World Soul and the Logos, that connect the material and the immaterial realms. Key figures of Middle Platonism include Philo of Alexandria, Plutarch, and Alcinous.

3. **Neoplatonism:** Neoplatonism developed in the 3rd century CE and represented a more systematic and unified interpretation of Platonic philosophy. It was heavily influenced by Middle Platonism, as well as by other philosophical and religious traditions. Neoplatonism focuses on the emanation of all reality from the One, a transcendent and ineffable principle. This emanation proceeds in a hierarchical manner through the divine Intellect (Nous), the World Soul, and the material world. Neoplatonism also emphasizes the human soul's ability to achieve union with the One through contemplation and purification. Major figures of Neoplatonism include Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus.

FEATURES OF DIFFERENT PLATONIC SYSTEMS

This table offers a comparison of the belief structures of Platonism, Middle Platonism, and Neoplatonism, highlighting key differences and similarities in their views on the structure of reality, the nature of Forms/Ideas, the One, the Intellect (Nous), the World Soul, the human soul, ethics, their relation to other philosophical traditions, and their stance on Gnosticism.

Philosophical Tradition	Platonism	Middle Platonism	Neoplatonism
Time Period	4th-3rd century BCE	1st century BCE - 3rd century CE	3rd - 6th century CE
Founder	Plato	Various philosophers	Plotinus
Reality Structure	Two Worlds	Two Worlds	Hierarchical (One, Nous, World Soul)
Forms/Ideas	Separate Realm	Immanent and Transcendent	Emanate from the Nous
The One	Not explicitly	Emerging concept	Central concept
Intellect (Nous)	Not explicitly	Emerging concept	Distinct level of reality
World Soul	Cosmic principle	Cosmic principle	Distinct level of reality
Human Soul	Immortal	Immortal	Divine spark, spiritual ascent
Ethics	Virtue, Justice	Virtue, Providence	Virtue, Contemplation, Theurgy
Relation to Other Philosophies	-	Synthesis of Platonism, Stoicism, Aristotelianism	Synthesis of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and other traditions

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEOPLATONIC THOUGHT

The development of Neoplatonism can be divided into two major phases: early and late Neoplatonism. Early Neoplatonism, originating in the 3rd century CE, is primarily associated with the teachings of Plotinus, who synthesized the works of Plato and other philosophical traditions to create a more systematic understanding of Platonic philosophy. His ideas centered around the emanation of reality from the ineffable One, the hierarchical structure of the universe, and the human soul's potential for union with the One. Plotinus' philosophy was further developed by his student Porphyry, who contributed to the establishment of Neoplatonism as a distinct philosophical school.

Late Neoplatonism, beginning around the 5th century CE, is marked by the incorporation of additional religious and mystical elements, such as theurgy (ritual practices to achieve divine union) and a greater emphasis on the role of intermediary beings. Iamblichus, a key figure in late Neoplatonism, expanded upon Plotinus' ideas and integrated theurgy into Neoplatonic thought, arguing that it was a necessary means for the soul to ascend to the divine realm. Later Neoplatonists, such as Proclus, Damascius, and Simplicius, further developed the philosophical system by engaging with other intellectual traditions, including Aristotelianism, Hermeticism, and the Pythagorean school. These late Neoplatonists sought to create a comprehensive and unified worldview that encompassed various aspects of the cosmos, the human soul, and the divine.

The Belief System of Early Neoplatonism

Early Neoplatonism refers to the development of Neoplatonic thought from the 3rd to the 4th centuries CE, with Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, and his successors, such as Porphyry and Iamblichus, as central figures. This period laid the foundation for Neoplatonic philosophy, which sought to synthesize and build upon the ideas of Plato and other ancient philosophical traditions.

1. **Hierarchical Structure of Reality:** Early Neoplatonists, beginning with Plotinus, posited a hierarchical structure of reality, with the One at the apex, followed by the Intellect (Nous), the World Soul, and the material world. This hierarchy represents a process of emanation, where the divine overflows from the One, giving rise to the