

Neoplatonism

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
1. Introduction	1
2. The first principles and the metaphysical hierarchy	35
3. Nature and the sensible universe	77
4. Human being and the self	101
5. Epistemology and philosophical psychology	137
6. Ethics and politics	177
7. The Neoplatonic legacy	199
<i>Glossary of terms</i>	209
<i>Guide to further reading</i>	214
<i>References</i>	227
<i>Index of passages</i>	235
<i>Index</i>	240

ONE

Introduction

What is Neoplatonism?

“Neoplatonism” refers to a school of thought that began in approximately 245 CE, when a man called Plotinus moved from the intellectual centre of the Eastern Mediterranean, Alexandria, Egypt, to settle in the capital of the Roman Empire, where he began teaching his interpretation of Plato’s philosophy, gaining many disciples and followers. Out of the association of people in Rome and the collection of the written treatises of Plotinus and his pupil Porphyry emerged a school of philosophy that displays enough originality to be considered as a new phase of Platonism: a school of thought of its own. At the time of the closure of the Academy in Athens in 529 CE by the Christian emperor Justinian, the Neoplatonic manner of philosophizing had spread to Syria, Asia Minor and Alexandria, as well as to Athens, the birthplace of philosophy and Platonism.

Neoplatonism long coexisted with Christianity in an empire that had featured Christianity as the official religion from the first Christian emperor Constantine (emperor 306–337 CE) onwards. At the beginning of the movement, that is, in the third century, the debate between the Neoplatonists and Christians, as well as Gnostics, was intense but peaceful. The last Neoplatonic – and pagan – heads of the Academy in the sixth century, however, had difficulties with

Christian rulers of the empire, facing, among other things, a ban on teaching philosophy in public. In Alexandria, things had been worse before that: it has been suggested that the Alexandrian Neoplatonists constantly had to adapt their teaching to take into account the Christian leaders of their city (Wallis [1972] 1995: 142). The severity of the problems is evident from the killing of the female Neoplatonist mathematician and philosopher Hypatia, who was struck down by a Christian mob in 415 CE.

There is a clear-cut end to the school only in an institutional sense, in the closure of one of its main centres, the Neoplatonic school of Athens. Evidently, however, the Neoplatonic way of thinking continued in many contexts, both pagan and Christian. In its final phases, it deeply influenced those Christians who had theoretical, theological or philosophical interests. Indeed, in many places the Neoplatonic approach was the only one available to a student committed to theoretical studies. Through Christian intellectuals, it left its footprint in the Western history of ideas. Moreover, Judaic and especially Arabic philosophizing bear its deep marks, as does, for instance, Renaissance art. Chapter 7 gives a guide to its central influences in Western thought. The movement itself delivered us such thinkers as the aforementioned pupil of Plotinus, Porphyry, as well as Iamblichus, Proclus and Simplicius, to mention but a few; they will shortly be introduced in more detail.

The term “Neoplatonism” implies that this school of thought was committed to Plato’s teachings but in some novel manner distinct from not just Plato himself but from the preceding Platonisms prevalent in the more than five hundred years between Plato and Plotinus. The applicability of the term, however, has been contested. First, it stems from nineteenth-century German scholarship, and bears no relation to the self-understanding of Plotinus and his followers, who, no doubt, understood themselves as simply the spiritual and philosophical pupils of Plato. This is entirely in line with the common philosophical allegiance and commitment to the authority of the founder figure in ancient philosophy. Proving the founder of the school right was considered a much more venerable task than gaining personal originality (Sedley 1989). Secondly, it has been argued that the term

“Neoplatonism” creates an artificial gap between the Neoplatonists and what it has been customary to call Middle-Platonism, although the continuity between some of the Middle-Platonists and Plotinus is evident, and the later Platonists do not see a decisive difference between them (Frede 1987). Plotinus does seem more systematic than many of his Platonic predecessors, but the fact that his entire work has been preserved to posterity, unlike that of many other philosophers, may distort the picture in his favour.

The originality of Plotinus is an issue of extensive debate and involves the difficult task of separating particularly Neoplatonic inventions from what is common to Platonism in general. Platonist commitments shared by Plato, the Middle-Platonists and Neoplatonists alike are, at least, the following three general ideas: (i) the understanding of metaphysics as a hierarchy of intelligible and sensible layers of which the higher is the explanatory, as well as the better and more powerful (for the two levels in Plato, see e.g. Thesleff 1999); (ii) the already mentioned top-down explanatory approach, in which the orientation of investigation is predominantly vertical, not horizontal; (iii) a commitment to the psychological as an irreducible explanatory category, and the connected dogma of the immortality and eternity of the soul. Further, all or most Platonists share the idea of cosmic unity and its explanatory role in everything, including personal happiness (see Gerson 2005b). Yet Plotinus especially is not a mere exegete; he does reinvent and reinterpret Platonism in several crucial ways and occasionally, at least implicitly, criticizes his teacher of a half millennium earlier. He considered Plato’s views as hitting the truth but saw them as obscurely expressed, which left him plenty of room for their interpretation. Even though his self-imposed task is that of an interpreter, the systematicity and idiosyncrasy with which this task is undertaken create a new form of thought.

The time span between the two has evident doctrinal implications: Plotinus’ view of Plato is – and this is vitally important – both post-Aristotelian and post-Stoic. That is, he is well informed of the criticisms of Plato’s teachings, as well as of the developments and steps made by intervening Peripatetic and Hellenistic philosophers. In general, the Neoplatonists were eager to merge Plato’s and Aristotle’s

philosophy into a whole, preserving Plato's metaphysical and spiritual intuitions while combining these with the valuable work on the sensible world by Aristotle, as well as with the latter's laudable clarity and precision. Yet Plotinus' distance from his great master not only makes him someone capable of standing on the shoulders of several giants all the way from Plato to nearer his own time, but also means that Plotinus' understanding of Plato is of a particular sort: an interpretation that has its own lengthy intellectual history and distinctive motivations. Before glancing at the closer predecessors of the Neoplatonists, it must be added that the movement had its foundation in a particular social environment and cultural climate. If the democratic city-state was both the origin and target of Plato's philosophical evaluation of reality, human nature and social life, Neoplatonism had its home in the multicultural Roman Empire with a wealth of spiritual movements and religious as well as philosophical syncretism. As has often been pointed out, the inward-turned, spiritual attention of many of the popular movements of this time may be the result of the diminished possibilities of political action within the dictatorship of the Roman emperor and his imperial court. For all these reasons we should expect the Neoplatonists to deliver us not a merely detailed, corrected or updated version of Plato, but something unprecedented: Plato might well have thought they had missed some of the core ideas of his own thinking.

As has already been indicated, it is difficult to distinguish Neoplatonism from various other forms of Platonism, starting with Plato's successors in the Academy. Plato's immediate successor, Speusippus (c.400–339 BCE), developed certain Pythagorean ideas and indications in Plato's dialogues towards a metaphysics where levels of being are derived from a first principle, One. Thus, despite Speusippus' views not being widely adopted before the Neopythagoreans of the first and second centuries CE, one of the central ideas guiding Plotinus' thought was already formulated before the Hellenistic, not to mention Roman, era (Dillon 2003: 30–88). In the third and second centuries BCE, Plato's Academy went through two philosophical phases that have been called sceptical, the main proponents of which were Arcesilaus (head of the Academy

268–241 BCE) and Carneades (head 155–137 BCE). Ancient scepticism is a wider phenomenon, and it differed in many ways from later forms of sceptical thinking. The scope of its doubt may not have been as radical and extensive, especially in the form scepticism took in the Academy. Significantly, however, it produced a host of arguments against different dogmatic positions. Plotinus was a system-builder who may have found some of the arguments thus originated useful, but whose take on Plato and philosophy was of a more dogmatic nature.

In this respect Neoplatonism is intellectually more indebted to the period of so-called Middle Platonism, starting around 130 BCE (the birth of one of the heads of the Academy, Antiochus of Ascalon) and lasting up to and including the late-second century CE. With its return to a more dogmatic reading of Plato and its temporal vicinity to Plotinus, this period is vital, yet especially challenging. In the case of Middle Platonism we do not have extant sources even to the extent that we have them from the periods before and after. Another problem relates to the way of doing philosophy common in this period. Although to call it and other philosophy done then “eclectic” is pejorative (Dillon & Long 1988: introduction), the fact remains that this period saw no great novelty in terms of whole new systems of thought. Rather, philosophers tried out different combinations of doctrines stemming especially from Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, as well as the Pythagoreans. The Platonist idea of incorporeality seems to have resonated. In this spirit, the Middle-Platonists combine Plato’s ideas about the intelligible realm with the Aristotelian doctrine of a perfect intellect, *nous*, separate from the individual human intellects, rendering Platonic forms as contents of the supreme Intellect (Gatti 1996).

Of the individual intellectuals preceding Plotinus, one particular person should be recalled. Porphyry reveals that Plotinus was accused by some Greek intellectuals of having merely appropriated the thought of Numenius (fl. 150–215 CE), and that one of Plotinus’ students defended him by composing a treatise on the doctrinal differences in the thinking of the two (Porph. *Plot.* 17). Numenius was a Syrian Platonist from Apamea. His thought

showed Neopythagorean leanings, and Plotinus seems to have shared with him, among other things, a layered understanding of metaphysics, the distinction between the irrational and rational soul, as well as the doctrine of matter as evil (see Frede 1987). The relationship between Numenius and Neoplatonism, however, is complicated. The similarities of thought are accompanied by certain evident differences. For example, like many Middle Platonists, Numenius was a dualist, or close to a dualist, concerning good and evil. He was committed to two principles, good and evil, whereas the Neoplatonists tended towards monism of goodness, and towards a secondary or derivative role of matter and evil. It is also good to note in this context that in Platonism goodness is not to be conflated with the Christian conception. In antiquity, goodness (*agathon*) is closely associated with beauty (*kalon*), both to be understood through such notions as order and intelligible structure, as well as virtue (*aretē*), paradigmatic examples of which are courage and self-discipline (*sōphrosynē*).

Another prominent figure is Plotinus' teacher, a man called Ammonius Saccas who had founded his own school in Alexandria around 200 CE. Unfortunately, Ammonius did not write philosophical works, and thus it is difficult to estimate what, exactly, Plotinus learned from him. The influence seems to have been profound; later in his life Plotinus, when lecturing, ceased to teach on noticing a pupil of Ammonius entering the audience, commenting that enthusiasm for teaching wanes when someone already knows what one is about to say (Porph. *Plot.* 14). Later Neoplatonists claimed that Ammonius was originally a Christian philosopher and had reverted to paganism, and that he was motivated by amalgamating Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines. He held, for instance, that reality can be divided into three connected levels. In the hierarchy God is the supreme reality, followed by celestial realities. On the next level can be found something akin to Aristotle's fifth element, namely ethereal realities, as well as demons, and the lowest level consists of human beings and animals (Reale 1991: 461–70). We can see here more than just seeds for Plotinus' hierarchy of hypostases (to be explicated in Chapter 2).

What, if anything, then, is novel in this way of philosophizing? What makes this movement something we can identify and separate from other approaches to philosophy, and, more challengingly, from other ways of interpreting Plato? A combination of five characteristics mark the movement and are worth noting:

- (i) There is a commitment to a first principle, One (*hen*), above the Aristotelian intellect (*nous*), from which everything is derived, accompanied by a careful analysis of the technicalities of this hierarchical derivation, also called procession (in secondary literature often “emanation”). While the derivative entities are accessible to intellection and reason, the first principle is, ultimately, ineffable.
- (ii) There is a proliferation of metaphysical layers and entities. Plato can be interpreted as postulating (in a more or less crude simplification) two aspects or levels of reality: one that is material, perceptible, temporal and changing, and another that is immaterial, intelligible, eternal and permanent. The latter is understood as the true reality that explains the former, while the former is actually only an imitation of the latter. The Neoplatonists take this layered understanding of reality to be correct, but following Middle-Platonic authors and Plotinus they postulate yet further levels between the two, or, perhaps better, within the higher or the intelligible. In general, Neoplatonism is marked by metaphysical complexity, and there is a tendency to further differentiate ontology and to postulate new entities to solve further philosophical dilemmas. Where there is reduction, it appears as a striving to reduce everything, ultimately, to the first principle, but the steps through which this kind of reduction happens are numerous.
- (iii) As in most Platonism, the metaphysically prior is always more powerful, better and more simple or unified than the metaphysically lower. Taken together with the above tendency to a hierarchical metaphysical system, this creates, in ways that will be explicated in Chapter 2, not only a graded reality, but a hierarchy that reaches from what is absolutely one to the varied

manifold of the perceptible universe. This hierarchy displays an increasing intensity of unity and goodness the higher one gets in the hierarchy, and conversely an increasing variety, complexity and deficiency towards the lower levels of the ladder of reality.

- (iv) The central layers of reality postulated are simultaneously metaphysically real and essentially connected to – or, as in Plotinus, internal to – the human soul. Neoplatonists are metaphysical realists to the extent that reality really does exist independently of any one human mind thinking it. Yet in a particular manner (to be examined in later chapters), reality also resides in the mind. Following the epistemic realistic assumptions that were strong in ancient philosophy, the Neoplatonists emphasize the points of contact between cognition and what really exists. The complexity of thinking must coincide with the complexity of being. Reality is thereby essentially minded or intelligible, that is, both intelligibly organized and penetrable to reason, as well as in some sense essentially thought. Neoplatonists incorporate in this their idea of hierarchy, differentiating not only levels of metaphysics but levels of human experience and thought. A human being, and especially his or her experience and cognition, forms a layered hierarchy, the main lines of which correspond to the central features of the hierarchy existing in the universe. The details of this dogma, its different variants and the partial departures from and challenges posed to it by the later Neoplatonists will be discussed later in this book, especially in Chapters 4 and 5.
- (v) Non-intellectual life and striving is understood as the desire for wholeness, perfection or completeness, and continuation. Because what is most unified, perfect and eternal can be found at the top of the hierarchy, the horizontal striving of living beings becomes identified with vertical striving (Dillon & Gerson 2004: xi–xxii). The striving we see in nature for continuity of life and existence, as well as the efforts towards unified agency and different kinds of perfection particular to human beings, are all manifestations of a more universal striving of

the generated and lower layer towards its source and origin, and ultimately towards the absolute unity at the top of the hierarchy. Cosmic creation and its entities thereby also convey psychological notions. For example, creation is contemplative (Gatti 1982) in that the created always turns to contemplate its origin. This return or reversal towards the first principle is essential to and distinctive of Neoplatonic thinking.

In addition to these unifying doctrinal factors, it must be stressed that Neoplatonism is predominately spiritual in nature. There are, however, differences as to how central a role spirituality played for different members of the school, and the exact nature of this spirituality must be established. Neoplatonism belongs to the branch of philosophy that has been called “philosophy as a way of life”. This is the particular way of understanding the role of philosophy common in antiquity. Alongside doctrines and philosophical systems there existed an ideal and an aim to live one’s life philosophically. Philosophy was seen as something that has direct consequences on the chosen way of life (Hadot 2002). Especially within Platonism and Hellenistic schools (e.g. Nussbaum 1994), central priority was given to a therapy of the soul. Philosophical work coincided with the effort of healing the soul from excessive desires and emotions. It equipped the person with well worked out reasons to act, and the means of seeking true happiness. Neoplatonism shares this understanding of philosophy and its role in life. Within it, a central method of the therapy of the soul was a turn towards the inner: an inwardly directed contemplation. Importantly, this activity is not necessarily understood as opposite or hostile to the use of reason, but as a kind of intellectual intensification. The role of reason in the therapy of the soul was seen as focal, especially by Plotinus, although, as we shall see, the highest spiritual experiences were located outside conceptual and rational grasp. These experiences became fundamental in later, especially fourth-century, Iamblichean Neoplatonism. Furthermore, the inwardly directed contemplation that ultimately ended in non-conceptual experiences of unity and blessedness was not understood as primarily unworldly. On the contrary, contemplative work and

the higher experiences it might lead to were understood as bringing about practical wisdom, happiness and even social reform.

Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism, in particular, is marked by what the present-day reader may assess as extra-philosophical activities, especially the growing importance of a practice called theurgy. In its original Neoplatonic meaning, theurgy refers to the process of making the human being worthy of or a likeness of a god, and thus belongs to the lengthy tradition of “becoming godlike” within ancient philosophy (for the traditional forms of this, see Sedley 1999). Thus it can, in principle, involve any kind of human practice believed to make us more godlike. Usually, and especially in Classical as well as Hellenistic philosophy, it combined some kind of habituation of the wants and passions of the body to the concentration on and use of what was considered the most divine aspect of human nature, namely reason. In Neoplatonism, the methods used in divinization combined religious practices into philosophical study and contemplation. Since the summit of the metaphysical hierarchy is beyond conceptualization and intellection, it became customary to invoke other practices to reach it. Prayer and ritual magic came to be practised alongside philosophy, and were, in fact, considered the only paths to the highest levels of existence and experience. Theurgy renders Neoplatonism a fascinating target for studies in religion, mysticism, religious practices and meditative experiences. In this book, we shall acquaint ourselves mainly with the philosophical motivation and foundation of theurgy (Chapter 5).

Sources, curriculum and method of exegesis

A student entering a Neoplatonic school somewhere around the fourth century CE was advised to start philosophy by moral purification, for which it was deemed appropriate to acquaint oneself with the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* (or Epictetus’ *Manual* or *Handbook*; see below). After achieving a sufficient level of moral self-control, the next step was a study of Aristotle. Aristotle’s works were considered both as a good introduction to philosophical matters and

as authoritative about nature, about the sensible realm. It is known that in the school gathered around Plotinus, not only Plato's dialogues but also, for instance, the commentaries on Aristotle's works by Alexander of Aphrodisias served as essential reading. Porphyry says further that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* can be found concentrated in Plotinus' writings (Porph. *Plot.* 14). In fact, the founder of the school and his followers had inherited an ambivalent relationship to Aristotle. On the one hand, many Middle-Platonists entertained a belief in the harmony of Plato and Aristotle. By the third century CE, much of Platonism had therefore, as we have seen, acquired an Aristotelian flavour. On the other hand, such Platonists as Atticus (c.150–200 CE) and Nicostratus (also active in the second century CE), working in the Roman imperial age, and preceding Plotinus, were openly hostile to Aristotle. Plotinus' stance is different. His reading of Aristotle is careful rather than dismissive, but its ultimate aim is to show that the Peripatetic position is internally inconsistent or problematic, and then proceed to complement or replace it with Platonic alternatives (Chiaradonna 2005).

From Plotinus' student Porphyry onwards, the idea of agreement between Plato and Aristotle took firmer hold. The main lines of Aristotelianism were understood as compatible with Plato and both were considered to be expressive of the same truth, which resulted in many commentaries of Aristotle's works being written, designed, among other things, to indicate this compatibility. As Simplicius expresses the matter in the sixth century CE:

With regard to what is said by [Aristotle] against Plato, the good exegete must, I believe, not convict the philosophers of discordance by looking only at the letter [of what they say]; but taking into consideration the spirit, he must track down the harmony which reigns between them on the majority of points. (Simpl., *Commentary on the Categories*, 7,28–32
[= Sorabji 2005b: 2(a)1, trans. Chase])

This means, further, that eventually Aristotelianism became Platonized, since most of the philosophers commenting on Aristotle

had a Neoplatonic education or background. We shall see later how they deal with cases where the uniformity of Plato and Aristotle was difficult to establish (see further Blumenthal 1990; Gerson 2005a; Karamanolis 2005).

As necessary starting-points for anyone willing to become a philosopher, the Neoplatonists chose ethical considerations from Aristotle's philosophy that had to do especially with self-discipline. Since, however, logical terminology and education gave precision and clarity to all philosophical undertakings, and since Aristotle also used logical terminology in writing on ethical issues, logic was chosen as the best place to start one's studies (Anonymous, *Prolegomena*, ch. 26, lines 16–58, [Westerink] [= Sorabji 2005b: 2(a)11]). According to a no longer viable view, Aristotelianism would have had a stronger hold in the Alexandrian school than in the Athenian school, but it is unlikely that the emphasis could have been very different because there was some exchange of the two schools' personnel, as well as family ties between them. Research has also shown that the Alexandrian commentators were (Neo)Platonic in spirit, and the extent to which commentaries of Aristotle include Neoplatonic dogmas depends, rather, on the context, that is, on the topic that is commented on (e.g. Sheppard 1987).

Once the student reached a certain level of clarity in his thinking and argumentation, he was introduced to the divine Plato (Marinus *Procl.* 13). Plato's works were read in a certain order. The Neoplatonists did not adhere to the idea that Plato's writings would display a chronological development, and thus they did not, for instance, consider some of the dialogues as "early", "Socratic" or "mature". Rather, they formed their own curriculum, which consisted of the following books (in the order they appear here): *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus* and *Parmenides* (Festugière 1969; O'Meara 2003: 61–8).

The first of these, *Alcibiades I* – since the nineteenth century sometimes considered inauthentic – was deemed to be especially appropriate as a propaedeutic to Platonism. This dialogue concerns the question of the proper kind of care for the self, and the

accompanying question of self-knowledge: what is that self which I should care for? The dialogue introduces philosophy as a form of care for the (true) self and argues for the centrality of this question for political activity and the kind of life the person wants to live. Recognition of the true self is, as we shall see in Chapter 4, central for Neoplatonic enquiry. At the other end of the curriculum, advanced courses focused on the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*. These dialogues deal with major questions about metaphysics and cosmology, and the *Timaeus* designates the place of human beings in the metaphysical and cosmological order of things. While *Timaeus* was more “physical”, *Parmenides* delivered central argumentation for theology. The Neoplatonists understood the famous second deduction of the second part of the *Parmenides* (142b ff.) to establish a One separate from being, the dialogue thus forming a central source for the Neoplatonic philosophy of the first principle.

Assessing how much the Neoplatonists read or took influences from the other philosophical schools of antiquity is a matter of ongoing research. We have already seen that Neoplatonic intellectual sympathies are not with Scepticism; rather, the Sceptics pose an intellectual challenge and act in the role of a useful antagonist. Plotinus, for example, seems to develop some of his main theses as an answer to Sceptical arguments (Wallis 1987). It also seems that he learned a great deal from Sextus’ discussion of self-intellection, and that his analysis of the structure of intellect’s activity is indebted to it (Crystal 2002). The Neoplatonists very rarely refer to the Epicureans, whose materialism is as remote to their understanding of the ultimate truth about the universe as the hedonistic outlook is to Neoplatonist understanding of what happiness consists of.

The relationship to the other leading materialists, the Stoics, is more complicated. Plotinus lived in a time when Stoicism had become a part of the general schooling of an educated male citizen, so the Stoic philosophical vocabulary had spread to intellectual communication and writing, making it difficult to separate doctrinal influences and similarities from more superficial terminological connections and loans. Although the founder of the school, Plotinus, rarely mentions the Stoics, it is safe to say that he felt quite free to exploit their ideas

and revise them so as to fit into his non-materialistic philosophy. Porphyry testifies that concealed Stoic doctrines abound in Plotinus' works (*Plot.* 14). Despite its materialism, Stoicism is in many ways closer to Platonism than Epicureanism. As we shall see, the understanding in the two theories of what makes a good and happy human life are not that far from one another, and both movements, of course, regarded themselves as adherents of Socrates. The Stoic conception of the physical universe permeated by internal "sympathy" had an influence on the way the Neoplatonists regarded nature and the hypostasis Soul as responsible for the temporal and living unity of the cosmos. It is interesting to note the acceptance into the Neoplatonic curriculum of a work of Stoic origin that lacked treatises on moral conduct and action. To fill this gap, the later Neoplatonists used a rather late Roman Stoic, Epictetus (c.55–138 CE), who was active in Rome a hundred years before Plotinus' arrival. Epictetus' philosophy has a very practical flavour, and his understanding of human nature displays the same late ancient features as those of the Neoplatonists. This produced, in the sixth century, a still extant Neoplatonic commentary on Epictetus' *Manual* or *Handbook* (in Greek *Encheiridion*) by Simplicius.

To sum up the relation to other leading philosophical schools of antiquity, we can note that Neoplatonism is Platonism in so far as the reading of Plato's central dogmas, works and the interpretative work on them was considered to be the main task of the Neoplatonic philosopher. Yet it is also true that Stoicism and Aristotelianism heavily influenced the Neoplatonists, and without the Sceptics the arguments would perhaps have been much less carefully discussed. Some of the proponents of the school came rather close to Aristotelianism, especially in its late ancient form, in which, for instance, the thinking of particular human beings was no longer considered enough to explain rationality, and much use was made of a higher "active intellect", a kind of divine and universal intellect, activated each time when a particular mind understands something (cf. Alex. Aphr. *De an.* 88,23–24). This kind of late Peripatetic tendency to "top-downism" was well suited to Neoplatonic thought; indeed, it may have influenced Plotinus' outlook. In the later phases of the movement, the

proponents of the school commented eagerly on Aristotle, perhaps partly because most of Aristotelianism contained less controversial issues than Plato's dialogues with respect to the deepening controversy between pagan philosophers and the Christians.

Alongside such argumentative and dialectical partners as the Peripatetics and the Stoics, Neoplatonism had other predecessors, some of them more religious or spiritual. By the time of Plato, Pythagoreanism had a certain appeal within the Academy. The centrality of mathematics, numbers and abstract thinking, a belief in transcendent first principles as well as a predominantly spiritual approach to the human soul and its destiny were features shared by both schools (Hare [1982] 1999: 117–19). The first centuries CE saw a rise of a Neopythagorean school of thought, also present in Alexandria. Neopythagoreanism juxtaposed the materialism of Hellenistic philosophy with the immaterial or incorporeal, underlined the spiritual and immortal nature of the soul as opposed to the body, and endorsed ascetic practices and prayer as important aspects of a philosopher's life. For the Neopythagoreans, the reality consisted of a hierarchy starting from a God proceeding to the Monad and Dyad, and finally to numbers. Taken metaphysically, the number sequence that runs in both increasing and decreasing order already resembles Plotinus' ideas about progression and regression (Trapp 2007: 357). One of Plotinus' strongest influences, the above-mentioned Numenius from the second century CE, presents a fusion of Platonic and Pythagorean thinking that must have influenced Plotinus deeply. The Pythagorean heritage and its proper understanding seems even to have been an issue of competition: the rhetorician Longinus, Plotinus' contemporary rival and opponent, defended Plotinus' role as the first one to explain the doctrines of Pythagoras and Plato with accuracy (Porph. *Plot.* 20.71–6). The significance of Pythagoreanism for later Neoplatonism is detectable in, among other things, Iamblichus' work on the life, or better, the ways of life, propagated by Pythagoras (see Clark 1989).

There remains one central source of Neoplatonism, albeit not of a philosophical nature: the Chaldean Oracles. This is a group of fragmentary texts from the second century CE, the main part of

which is a Hellenistic commentary on a mystery poem that was believed to have originated in Babylon (Greek Chaldea). In the surviving form the hexameter verses were attributed to a man called Julian, and believed to be uttered in or after a trance not unlike the ones that archaic oracles of Greece experienced and in which they prophesied. These texts display a cosmological and soteriological system accompanied with moral and ritual rules, held in antiquity to be divine revelation. In content, the oracles seem to testify to the syncretism practised in Alexandria, combining Platonic elements to other, especially “Chaldean”, wisdom. The central features resemble Neoplatonism in, among other things, postulating a metaphysical hierarchy of entities over and above the sensible realm (such as Father, Intellect, Hecate and World-Soul), as well as in directing people towards a contemplative life separated from the bodily and worldly worries. The influences between Platonic philosophy and the oracles have been discussed, and it is possible that a search for influence in a single direction is futile (see Majercik 1989; Athanassiadi 1999). Porphyry commented on the Chaldean Oracles, and Iamblichus accepted them as a central, if not main, source of divine revelation.

The question of the lines of influence between Neoplatonism and the two prominent spiritual movements popular in the Roman Empire simultaneous with it, namely Christianity and Gnosticism, is a vexed one. All these systems of thought display similarities to the extent that the adherents of these spiritual movements believe in the existence of one first principle or God, and in the need of the embodied human soul to rise from its present state closer to this principle: that is, in its salvation. All have an interest in the existence of souls after death, in evil, prayer and mystical experiences. The shared tendencies betray their common background in the Eastern Mediterranean culture with its spiritual syncretism, and the differing approaches must, at least, have positioned themselves in relation to one another, in the context of competing ways of thinking contemporary to them. There are, in any case, deep differences as well. The ineffable and austere simple One acting out of the necessity of its nature of Neoplatonism is not to be equated with the anthropomorphic God of Christian faith. Unlike its Christian counterpart,

Platonic salvation or ascent is not primarily a personal or individual matter. The ideal is understood to be, rather, an immersion in perfect intelligibility or goodness. The means for the human soul to escape its earthly condition are also divergent in the two. Despite the spiritual and mystic tendencies in Neoplatonism, its commitment to philosophical argumentation necessarily distinguishes it from the other two competing worldviews.

Plotinus' stance towards Gnosticism is known particularly from his treatise against the Gnostics, in which he, for instance, scorns the idea that some people are chosen or nearer to God than others, regardless of their attempts at living a virtuous life, as well as the Gnostic claims to cure diseases by magic (*Enneads* II.9.9 & 14). His pupil Porphyry's written work against Christians has survived in substantial fragments (see Berchman 2005), and thus we know that Porphyry was familiar with texts from both the Old and New Testaments. He objected, among other things, to the obscurity of some of Jesus' sayings, which, from a purely philosophical point of view, seemed to him nonsense, but he also presented theological counter-arguments. As will be seen in the exposition of the individual members of the school, later Neoplatonists both openly clashed with the Christianized culture they lived in and sought compromises with it. In the end, they were absorbed into Christian civilization. Neoplatonic influences on Christian theology will be revisited in Chapter 7.

In this context, something must be said of the way in which the Neoplatonists expressed themselves and interpreted their sources. We have already seen that Neoplatonists wrote extensive commentaries, especially on the works of Plato and Aristotle. The later Neoplatonists were not content with the casual way in which Plotinus used Plato, and strove for careful exegesis and interpretation of all the dialogues. For this purpose, they had at their disposal the genre of literary commentary. The commentaries in question are exegetic, but in a peculiar manner. Aristotle's works in particular were sometimes openly and manifestly appropriated into the Neoplatonic setting. This happened, for instance, by concentrating on themes that Aristotle had merely mentioned more or less in passing, which left the commentator with

the liberty of reading between the lines (see Hadot 1968b; Hoffmann 2000). Despite the philosophical inventiveness that shines through the exegetical form, the commentary genre also proposes a challenge for philosophical work and originality, as well as for later scholarly work. It led into centrality of interpretation and incorporation of the classic philosophical texts into the Neoplatonic way of thinking. This means that it is sometimes difficult to extrapolate the commentator's own view from the one propounded in the commented text. Since the school had also adopted strictly non-philosophical texts as authoritative about the universe and the good life, there emerged a rising demand to combine myths, oracles and philosophy into a unified system. In this process, Greek pagan divinities in particular were absorbed into Neoplatonism and thereby "depersonalized", that is, stripped of many of their particular characteristics crucial for their ordinary religious role. The reader therefore encounters a challenge of concepts and entities that are largely missing from the Platonic and Aristotelian corpus.

Neoplatonic exegesis displays two characteristics the reader should be aware of. First, careful reading of Plato's dialogues was conducted according to a belief that a single dialogue expressed one central theme or *skopos*. The introductory portions were seen as heavy with allegorical significance. This led to fairly peculiar interpretations of the settings of the dialogue, which were taken to express or prefigure one or another heavy metaphysical doctrine expounded later in the dialogue (Procl. *Commentary on the Parmenides*, col 658,33–659,15 [= Sorabji 2005b: 2(b)2]). Secondly, because myths function in a way different from, for instance, metaphysical treatises, and allow themselves to be connected to different metaphysical items and theories, further principles of textual exegesis were required. Myths were seen to have many roles. On the one hand, they were understood as concealing truths that the uninitiated should not see; on the other they were seen as nourishing human imaginative powers and helping to create conviction to arguments. Immediately after Plotinus' time, for his pupil Porphyry, a single myth could still convey different allegorical meanings. Porphyry's pupil Iamblichus, however, taught that different sciences approach the same subject

matter from different points of view that can be organized in a hierarchical manner, according to, for example, the relationship between archetype and image. Similarly, the meanings expressed by myths could be organized under a primary meaning that depended on the main theme of the dialogue in question. Although there are personal differences in Neoplatonic exegesis (see Wallis 1972: 136; Sorabji 2005b: 52–4), these principles seem to recur.

Life and works of the prominent members of the school

Plotinus (204/5–270 CE)

The likelihood is that Plotinus was born in Lycopolis, Egypt, in 204 or 205 CE. What is known of his life and school derives mostly from his biography, *The Life of Plotinus (Vita Plotini)*; see Brisson *et al.* 1982). It was written by his pupil Porphyry, and thus concentrates on his philosophically active life and the period when Porphyry accompanied Plotinus. We learn, among other things, that after studying philosophy for ten years with Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, Plotinus took part in the military expedition of Gordian III to Persia, thus travelling extensively in the East. Fantastic, but not altogether ungrounded, speculations have been made of his possible encounters with and influences from Indian wise men. Porphyry relates that Plotinus was, indeed, motivated to travel to Persia and India for this reason, and it has been suggested that Plotinus' role in the expedition was that of a philosopher rather than, for example, that of a soldier (Rawson 1989: 233–57). Nothing, however, is conveyed of the intellectual success or results of this voyage, nor of any encounters with the local wise men.

At about forty years of age, Plotinus arrived in Rome, apparently with a developed approach to philosophy already in mind. On his arrival he attracted the attention of intellectuals and began teaching philosophy without delay. He was hosted by a woman called Gemina, whose household provided a home for Plotinus as well as a place of unofficial lecturing. The lectures were founded on Ammonius'

teachings, which Plotinus exhibited in the particular manner of his interpretation. The attending audience consisted of both men and women, politicians and learned men, such as doctors. Even one of the emperors, Gallienus (co-emperor with Valerian 253–60, sole emperor 260–68 CE), and his wife, Salonina, venerated him (*Plot.* 12.1–2).

It took another ten years, however, for Plotinus to begin writing down his ideas. Somewhat astonishingly, the resulting works are preserved for us in full, organized by Porphyry in six groups of nine treatises, the *Enneads* (from the Greek word *ennea*, meaning nine). Porphyry took liberties both in arranging the treatises and in dividing some of them into two. The extant arrangement starts from perhaps easier ethical treatments, proceeding in *Enneads* II and III to discussions pertaining mostly to natural philosophy and cosmology. Philosophical psychology is discussed in IV, epistemological issues and intellection mostly in V. The last groups of treatises deal with the higher levels of the hierarchy of being, namely numbers, being in general, as well as the One beyond being. It should be noted that this order reflects Porphyry's adoption of the Aristotelian division of philosophy into ethics, physics and metaphysics, which Plotinus may not have shared in all details. Furthermore, it emphasizes the role of the One as the ultimate end of human life. Fortunately, Porphyry also delivers the reader the original chronological sequence in which Plotinus wrote the treatises, which reveals, among other things, that for Plotinus the identification with Intellect or *nous* (rather than the One) may have been the *telos* of the sage's life (cf. Hadot 1966; Strange 2007).

Much has been made of Porphyry's remarks on the method and style of Plotinus' writing. On the negative side, we learn that Plotinus proceeded somewhat unsystematically, inspired by meetings with his students. The normal procedure for these gatherings was for Plotinus to read and comment on a commentator of Platonic and Aristotelian texts, and for the students to interrupt the teacher in order to pose questions, and for the teacher to answer them. Plotinus' writing seems at least partly to reflect this procedure. Because of bad eyesight, he could not bear to revise anything he had once written

down, and thus the structure and unity of his writings was further compromised. On a much more positive note, Porphyry observed that Plotinus had no need to revise his texts; he formed an orderly conception of the whole in his mind, to then be written down in a single, sustained effort. He was capable of doing this even when someone interrupted him. While discussing other things, we are told, he maintained his train of thought. The latter report is likely to be influenced by the *topos* of a sage in ancient literature: a sage is above everyone else both with respect to cognitive capacities and to virtuousness. Suitably for a particularly Neoplatonic sage, Plotinus was capable of simultaneous hierarchical levels of cognition. He died in Campania in 270, having withdrawn from society with a severe illness.

The teachings and writings of Plotinus form the backbone of Neoplatonic philosophy. For his followers, he was a wise man, a divine teacher. His interpretations of Platonism did not, however, enjoy exclusive acceptance or praise, but also became a point of departure for later members of the school. As we shall see, his followers often thought that Plotinus' metaphysics lacked clarity, and therefore postulated further differentiations within the intelligible, going against many of the founder's dogmas. The status of the human soul in the universe and the methods of its ascent to divinity differ considerably (in ways explicated in Chapters 5 and 6 on psychology and ethics) in Plotinus and the later Neoplatonists.

Amelius (c.246–290/300 CE)

Although one of the leading figures of Plotinus' school in Rome, Amelius has not enjoyed much recognition in the history of philosophy. Apparently of Etruscan origin, Amelius studied with Plotinus almost the entire time that Plotinus' school in Rome existed. Plotinus entrusted him with several philosophical tasks, and we may consider him as the second in charge of Plotinus' school (especially taking into consideration how brief Porphyry's stay in Rome actually was). None of the works of Amelius have survived, but we know

from, among other things, Plotinus' biography by Porphyry that he was a prolific writer, composing *scholia* (explanatory comments) on Plotinus' lectures, a defence of Plotinus' originality in relation to Numenius, and several commentaries on Plato's works. He also took part in the school's polemics against the Gnostics by composing a lengthy answer to a revelatory text by Zostrien (*Plot.* 3.38–48, 7.1–6, 10.33–38.)

Doctrinally, just like Plotinus, Amelius was close to the Middle-Platonic Numenius, and presents an important link between Numenius and later Neoplatonists. Before studying with Plotinus, Amelius is reported to have been a student of a Lysimachus, probably the Stoic philosopher, and hence Amelius is likely to have been one origin of Stoic influences in Plotinus' school. The main lines of his metaphysics followed the three-level hierarchy of Plotinus' One, Intellect and Soul. Apparently, he was not merely explicating Plotinus' philosophical system but had also interests and originality that went beyond Plotinus' thought. He seems to have been more interested in religion, religious practices and the Chaldean Oracles than Plotinus. Furthermore, he anticipated the later division of hypostases, especially the One and the Intellect, into three sub-aspects or phases.

After Plotinus' death, Amelius moved to Apamea, Syria. Judged by the fact that he is called in the sources an Apamean citizen, he probably lived there for a long time, but it is there that we lose track of the details of his personal history.

Porphyry (234–305 CE)

Originally named Malchus ("king"), Porphyry was probably born in Tyre, Phoenicia (presently Lebanon). Before attending Plotinus' lectures in Rome he had studied with the middle-Platonist Longinus in Athens, and must therefore have been familiar with many central tenets of Platonism. After his arrival in Rome in 263 CE, Porphyry adopted Plotinus' interpretation. He was highly active in Plotinus' school, but suffered a period of depression, and spent, advised by Plotinus and reported by himself in his biography of Plotinus, a

lengthy period in Sicily recuperating. He was away when Plotinus died in Italy, and started editing his teacher's writings posthumously. Whether or not he took over the leadership of the gatherings in Rome is uncertain. In general, we know little of how he spent the decades after Plotinus' death, apart from his noticeable philosophical activity and the fact that he married a woman called Marcella.

Porphyry was a productive author. Over sixty works have been attributed to him, most of which only survive by name. His extant works, besides the edition of *Enneads* by Plotinus and the biography of Plotinus, are: *Life of Pythagoras*, *Letter to Marcella*, *On Abstinence from Eating Food from Animals*, *Launching Points to the Intelligible* (also known as *Sentences*, in Latin *Sententiae*), *Introduction* (or, in Greek, *Eisagōgē* used commonly as the first introduction to philosophy and logic in the Middle Ages), *On the Cave of the Nymphs* and commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and Ptolemy's *Harmonics*. Fragments of his polemic *Against the Christians* have survived.

The content of Porphyry's work show a thinker following rather closely the system of thought established by Plotinus, and we may conjecture that his questions to and discussions with his teacher had their effect on Plotinus' thought. It was customary for the followers to refer to Plotinus and Porphyry sometimes as a pair. Porphyry's work also features topics to which Plotinus had not been paying much attention. For example, his works on (Aristotelian) logic are unprecedented in Plotinus, and the emphatic interest in religion and its relationship with philosophy, too, seems to be original to Porphyry. It has been suggested that the anonymous *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* could be attributed to Porphyry (Hadot 1968a). If this speculation holds, then Porphyry would also have interpreted the highest metaphysical entities differently from his teacher. We shall revisit this discussion in Chapter 2.

Iamblichus (c.240–325 CE)

Whether or not Iamblichus can be taken as a student of Porphyry is a matter of taste. He did study with Porphyry either in Rome or in

Sicily, but since he was probably only about four years younger than Porphyry, the relationship between the two may not have been that of a mentor and a devotee. This is perhaps reflected in Iamblichus' at times sharp philosophical critique of Porphyry's positions. Very little is known of his life with certainty; much of what we do know stems from his biography in Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*, written later in the fourth century. The reliability of Eunapius' testimony is not without doubt, if for nothing else than because he was born twenty years after the death of Iamblichus. Iamblichus seems to have been of aristocratic or well-to-do origin, with a native city of Chalcis in Syria. After travelling in Italy and studying with Porphyry, among other people, he founded his own school in Apamea, not far from Antioch. He soon became a widely respected figure in the area. It is likely that for instance Dexippus, the author of the extant commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, was one of the school's adherents.

It is probably to Iamblichus that we owe the Neoplatonic curriculum as presented earlier in this introduction. In addition to the formal exegesis of Aristotle and Plato, Pythagorean philosophy and the above-mentioned Chaldean Oracles formed an important backbone of Iamblichus' teaching. Of his own works, unfortunately, mostly fragments remain. Extant are four books of a compendium of Pythagorean philosophy, and *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians* (*De Mysteriis*, originally entitled *Reply of Abammon to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo*). Further, fragments have been preserved of his many commentaries on Plato's and Aristotle's works as well as of the treatises *On the Soul*, *On Chaldean Theology* and *On the Gods*.

The extant works and fragments are sufficient to reconstruct the main lines of Iamblichus' thought. As we shall see in Chapter 2, he is the central figure in the developments where the solving of obscurities and problems of Plotinus' thought leads into postulation of yet further metaphysical levels. In particular, the problem of participation inherited from Plato – namely, how a transcendent entity can simultaneously be a cause and an explanation for the sensible and remain itself unaffected by these relationships – is solved by Iamblichus by making a distinction between an “austere” and unaf-

fectured level of the One and the lower levels, as well as a more flexible level related to the lower entities. His division of the noetic realm into a triad of a pure intellect, intellect involved in the generation and formation of lower levels of being, and the intellect as reflected in the lower level of being, was to serve as an example for the later Athenian Neoplatonism in its application of a triadic form to each hypostasis. As we shall see, Iamblichus is also the first of the later Neoplatonists firmly to oppose Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul. The originality of his thinking is not in doubt.

According to later reputation, besides philosophical education, magical practices were common in Iamblichus' school, and there are even reports of magical acts or miracles performed by the head of the gatherings. In part, these stories belong to hagiographical tendencies and can be attested in many biographies of the time, but undoubtedly magic had a more prominent role in this branch of the Neoplatonic school than it had in others. There is direct evidence for this from Iamblichus himself. In *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*, he defends theurgy, responding to the criticism of Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*. Iamblichus emphasizes there that theoretical activity alone is not sufficient to free and salvage the soul from its worldly and bodily situation, but acts such as rituals are needed.

Despite numerous students such as Sopatros, Aedesius, or Theodore of Asine (275/280–360 CE, formerly a pupil of Porphyry), the school did not continue to function in Apamea. Because of political disorder, its students spread around, and Aedesius continued Neoplatonic education by founding a school in Pergamum.

Hypatia (370–415 CE)

The first recognizably Neoplatonic philosopher teaching in Alexandria, Hypatia, taught mathematics, astronomy and philosophy with her father Theon of Alexandria. She edited her father's works as well as writing treatises of her own. We know next to nothing of the content of her philosophical teaching, but something has survived of her mathematical works. Extant is her father's *Commentary on the*

Almagest (an astronomical work) revised by Hypatia. Some sources maintain that she was philosophically inferior to the men within the Neoplatonic school, and that her contribution was, rather, within mathematical sciences. Others testify to her surpassing mental capacities in many areas. Her pupils included Synesius of Cyrene (370–413 CE), who later became a Christian bishop of Ptolemais. Hypatia's lectures were widely popular and she even influenced important town officials in Alexandria, which led to her murder by a Christian mob. Her terrible death in a church at the hands of fanatic believers makes her a martyr of (pagan) wisdom. One cannot escape the feeling that her gender played a role in the difficulties of accepting her as a politically and philosophically important figure.

Plutarch of Athens (c.350–431/2 CE)

Plutarch of Athens was one of the heads of the Neoplatonic school in Athens, and perhaps its founder. He should not be confused with the more famous Plutarch of Chaeronea who lived in the second century CE, a biographer and Platonist whom the Neoplatonists did not, however, consider a true Platonic. The Neoplatonic Plutarch seems to have been cautious towards theurgy, which had gained an important role within Neoplatonism. He may have propounded some kind of secularization within the school. He wrote commentaries at least on Plato's *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*, and many fragments of his commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* (in Latin, *De anima*) are preserved in John Philoponus and Simplicius. His students included, for instance, Hierocles, who taught philosophy in Alexandria some twenty years after the death of Hypatia, and wrote, among other things, a work *On Providence*.

Syrianus (fifth century)

In addition to succeeding as the head of the Academy after the death of Plutarch of Athens in 431/2, Syrianus is mainly known for being

the teacher of Proclus and the author of the extant *Commentary on Metaphysics*. Because his pupil's surviving works are numerous, history has given the successor a more prominent place in the history of philosophy than Syrianus himself. It may well emerge that many of Proclus' expounded doctrines originated in Syrianus, if not in the teacher of both, Plutarch, or even Iamblichus.

Proclus (c.410/12–485 CE)

The great systematizer of Neoplatonism, Proclus was born probably in Byzantium (Constantinople), the son of a barrister; he was thus from a well-to-do family. Like his father, Proclus first studied law, but turned to philosophy and mathematics in Alexandria. At the age of nineteen he moved to Athens, and soon became a close disciple of the head of the Academy, Syrianus. In Athens, Proclus studied Aristotle, Plato and theurgic Neoplatonism. He succeeded Syrianus as the head of the Academy in Athens around 356 CE, at the mere age of twenty-five. According to Marinus' biography of his teacher, Proclus was unmarried, immensely industrious and quick-tempered but easily soothed (Marin. *Procl.* 16, 22). He lived to the mature age of seventy-five, which points to an exceptionally long philosophically active period.

Proclus' interests were wide, and extended from mathematics – particularly geometry – to aesthetics as well as magical and theurgic practices. His thought is especially accessible in the extant *Elements of Theology*, which provides a systematic account of Neoplatonic metaphysics in a form imitating Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, that is, in 211 propositions each followed by a short explanatory section. Of his immense life work the following also survive: *Platonic Theology*, *Elements of Physics*, *Opuscula*, *On Providence*, *On Fate* and *On Evil*. We also have commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus*, *Republic*, *Parmenides* and *Alcibiades* as well as scientific works such as a commentary on the first book of Euclid's *Elements*.

Like his teacher Syrianus, Proclus abandoned certain of Plotinus' tenets, and favoured Iamblichean proliferation of the supra-sensible

realm. Mostly his value has been attached to his systematization and clarification of both Plotinus' and Iamblichus' heritage. One particular dogma, that of Henads (to be explicated in Chapter 2), has been attributed to him, although here, too, he may take Iamblichus' views to their logical conclusion. In a passage, his biographer Marinus attributes to him only one original dogma: that of an intermediate soul in between the eternal intellect and discursive soul. In other respects, his work has been suggested to have consisted of systematization and filling in gaps left by previous Neoplatonists. This picture of his role within the movement may be changing as the philosophy of the later Neoplatonists receives growing philosophical attention. Yet even though Proclus is rather careful in mentioning his intellectual debts to his predecessors, there will always be difficulty in separating his views from those of his predecessors, of whose philosophical positions little evidence remains, and that mainly in Proclus' own writings. Be that as it may, in his own time he became a deeply respected and widely influential figure who was, among other things, consulted by (even Christian) politicians, and usually referred to by his followers as "the great Proclus". The list of his extant works is long, which testifies to the fact that he was influential well beyond Neoplatonic late antiquity.

Proclus was succeeded in Athens by Marinus of Samaria, who wrote his biography. Marinus was not a young man when he took over the leadership of the school, and was probably rather soon succeeded by Isidore of Alexandria.

Ammonius (440–521/517 CE)

Born in Alexandria, Ammonius studied philosophy in Athens with Proclus. Returning home, he succeeded his father, Hermias, as the head of the school of Alexandria, where he cultivated the tradition of commenting on Aristotle's works. Faithful to both Proclus' and Hypatia's heritage, he seems to have, further, worked on both geometry and astronomy. The school's difficulties with the Christians continued during his period, and Ammonius is reputed to have made a

deal with the bishop of Alexandria. What the content of the deal was and whether it was entirely honourable on the part of Ammonius is unclear (for an approving interpretation, see Sorabji 2004: 21–3), but it may have kept the school in existence in times that were less than favourable to philosophy.

Of Ammonius' lecture notes, probably only his teaching on Aristotle's *De interpretatione* is edited to a final form by Ammonius himself. Apart from the *Prooemium* (preface or introduction), his commentary on Porphyry's *Introduction* may also be authentic. All the other works attributed to him are either not extant or survive edited by his pupils. The students may remain anonymous or the texts are edited by Philoponus or Asclepius, and hence the works bear either no name or the name of the editor. The surviving works include commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Metaphysics 1–7*, *On Generation and Corruption* and *On the Soul*, as well as on Nicomachus' *Introduction to Arithmetic*.

Ammonius' significant work on Aristotle established the tradition of Aristotelian commentary in Alexandria. Doctrinally, Ammonius seems to have followed his teacher Proclus. Proving Aristotle's and Plato's fundamental harmony or agreement was a major motivation of his work. Many significant later figures were his pupils: Simplicius, Philoponus, Asclepius, Damascius and Olympiodorus.

Damascius (c.460–540 CE)

The Syrian Damascius studied both in Alexandria, with Ammonius, and in Athens, with the by then elderly Proclus. Originally more interested in rhetoric, Damascius started to study philosophy under the guidance of Marinus around 492. Damascius is known not through his works, but as the person who reorganized the Neoplatonic school after Proclus' death. Marinus was more prone to theurgy than rigorous philosophical study, but was probably already ill when he succeeded Proclus. In c.515 CE Damascius succeeded another of his teachers, Marinus' successor Isidore, as head of the school. It was Damascius' task to re-establish the study of Plato, Aristotle and the

Chaldean Oracles as the main occupation of the school. Internal difficulties aside, Damascius also witnessed the period when Christian faith finally took over even the intellectual education in Athens, and the school was closed around 529. He was the head of the school at the time of its closure, and together with six other philosophers decided to seek refuge with the Persian king Chosroes. The success of their time in Persia is uncertain, but we know that the treaty that was soon made between Rome and Persia included a promise that the philosophers could return in peace. Very little is known of the activities of these philosophers after their return to the eastern Roman Empire. It has recently been convincingly argued that the Neoplatonic group moved to a city called Harrân, inside the borders of the Byzantine Empire but near to the Persian border. That way the pagan philosophers would have remained under the watchful eye of the king who had negotiated the terms of their return. In the Arabic world, this city was known for its Platonic philosophizing well into the tenth or even eleventh century, and thus it is possible that Athenian Platonism continued in Harrân for another 500 years (Tardieu 1986; I. Hadot 1990).

Of Damascius' extant works, *On Principles* is of interest. Further extant are commentaries on Plato's *Parmenides* and *Philebus*. Several commentaries on Plato and Aristotle have been lost, but fortunately, for example, his writings on *Time, Space, and Number* are cited, at some length, by Simplicius in his commentary on Aristotle's *Physics*. Finally, a considerable fragment of Damascius' biography of his teacher Isidore has been preserved by Photius.

Simplicius (c.490/500–560 CE)

A disciple of both Ammonius and Damascius, Simplicius of Cilicia is one of the seven philosophers who had to flee Athens. Again, very little is known of his personal history after that date, except that, based on the details he mentions in his works, all of Simplicius' extant works seem to date from the period following the exile from Athens. We may perhaps imagine him toiling away in Harrân with other

Neoplatonic philosophers returning from Persian exile. Wherever he worked, it is evident that he had for his use a high-quality library.

Simplicius is known as a celebrated commentator on Aristotle. His surviving works are commentaries on Aristotle's *On the Heavens*, *On the Soul* (although the attribution of this work to him has sometimes been doubted), *Physics* and *Categories*, as well as a commentary on the Stoic Epictetus' *Handbook*. As an author he is scholarly, with a concentration on arguments and details of different philosophical positions, without much tendency to mysticism or religion. He is most valuable as a source because of his frequent references to Greek philosophers before him, not solely to Platonists and Peripatetics but also to Presocratic and Stoic authors. His commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* preserves and integrates 800 years of philosophical commentaries on Aristotle's original work. He is also known for his "pagan" attack on the contemporary Christian author, John Philoponus. He was widely read and influential in both Byzantine and Arab worlds.

Olympiodorus (c.500–570 CE)

The best-known leader of the Alexandrian school after Ammonius, Olympiodorus inherited the growing problem of the status of philosophy in a Christian city. On the one hand, the emperor Justinian saw it as his task to eradicate philosophy from both public and private realms; on the other hand, no high-level theology was possible without education that relied almost exclusively on ancient philosophy (Wildberg 2007). If anything, this situation was likely to make philosophers cautious. In Olympiodorus, this is visible, for instance, in his emphasizing that the names of the pagan divinities do not stand for competing divinities or different substances but merely aspects of the power deriving from the first principle. For him, ancient wisdom does not enjoy an exclusive or even best possible way to truth but presents, rather, a cultural heritage of which the intellectuals should be aware.

The extant works of Olympiodorus are *Prolegomena to Aristotle's Logic* and commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and *Meteorology*,

Plato's *Alcibiades I*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedo* as well as a *Life of Plato* (which is an introduction to the lectures on Plato's *Alcibiades*).

Of Olympiodorus' pupils not much is known for certain. They may have been either pagans or Christians; in any case their commentaries survive under such names as David and Elias. Also, the Christian philosopher Stephanus of Alexandria – the last-known thinker of the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria, active in the seventh century CE – seems to have shared the overall pedagogical method of Olympiodorus.

The last phases of the Alexandrian School: John Philoponus

John Philoponus ("lover of toil") (490–570 CE) is not, properly speaking, a Neoplatonist, but plays a role in the last phases of the Alexandrian school. His intellectual background was in Neoplatonism; he studied in the Alexandrian school under Ammonius' leadership. Two things separate him from other members of the school: first, he was a committed Christian; secondly, he broke away from the exegetical tradition rampant in the school. His writings contain open criticism of the long-prevalent Aristotelian Neoplatonism, repudiating, among other things, the doctrine of the eternity of the world. Philoponus' extant works are many, and contain commentaries of Aristotle's *Physics*, *On the Soul*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, as well as *Metereology*. He also wrote treatises against both Aristotle and Proclus on the topic of the eternity of the world. The theological works include a treatise *On the Creation of the World* as well as a not extant work *On the Trinity*. As the titles indicate, his interests were, on the one hand, in natural sciences, and on the other, in religious or theological issues.

With Olympiodorus, Stephanus and Philoponus, the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria approaches its end. The intellectual rigour of the movement must have waned as the current philosophical paradigm became both outlawed and perhaps also exhausted, and another, Christian era began, with the possible exception of Harrân's

long-lived Platonic centre. Further intellectual changes in Alexandria resulted from the Arab conquest of Egypt in 642 CE. In any case, the change in the history of ideas was not sudden, nor absolute. Well before, as well as at the time of, the turn of the paradigm, themes and approaches from Neoplatonism had been incorporated into the new ways of thinking.