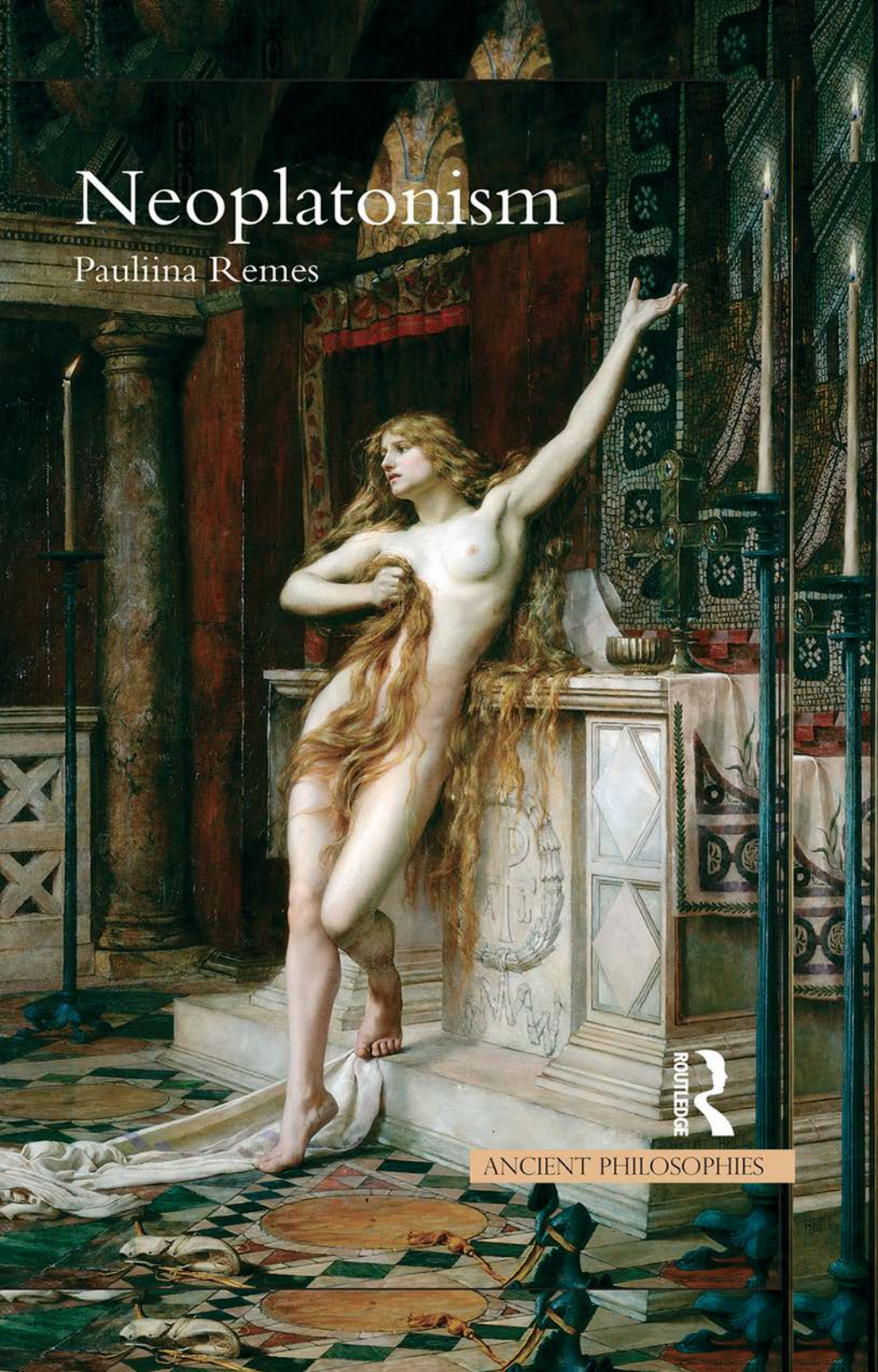
Neoplatonism

Pauliina Remes



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Preface

In school in the 1970s I learned that the world does not consist only of human beings, trees, cars, colours or even the materials these are composed of; rather, everything is made of tiny, invisible atoms that function according to their own laws. What we perceive and identify in our everyday life emerges from these basic elements that we cannot perceive in ways only the experts know and understand. By the 1970s, atoms were no longer considered indivisible (*atomoi*), and their more subtle internal structure had been described. Since then, even smaller entities have become the subjects of mainstream physics; these subatomic particles are even further removed from the direct empirical gaze of the perceiver, and from the direct sight of the physicists. Scientists introduce such theoretical entities as quarks and strings to explain the elementary constituents of matter and radiation. For their part, these explicate the true elemental structures of the universe. Importantly for our purposes, the establishment of these new entities has not meant a replacement of, say, an atomic level of explanation, but the opening of a new level of reality and its study. Reality seems to be constituted of a hierarchy of levels, only one of which we are directly aware of.

In late antiquity the philosophical movement called Neoplatonism flourished in cultural centres of the Mediterranean such as Alexandria, Rome and Athens. This school of thought, which prospered from

the third century well into the sixth century CE and beyond, shares certain important features with contemporary physics. Like physics, it concentrates on revealing the order of the universe, working on the assumption that although this order is not directly perceivable, a correct combination of gathering information through perception and theorizing about it will reveal its basic nature to human reason. Again like physics, Neoplatonism postulates levels of being on which different entities and different characteristics appear, all of them explanatory of this very same world we see and live in. Some of these levels and entities are more speculative than others. As in physics, these levels are hierarchically ordered, each level functioning as an explanatory level proper for certain phenomena, having a complex relation to the levels and entities above and below. In both theories, the subtleties of the cross-level relations are as, or even more, problematic than the study of the levels themselves and the entities they consist of. In sum, what is shared by Neoplatonists and some modern physicists is a speculative effort and readiness to postulate theoretical entities that form a layered reality inaccessible to perception.

For the comparison to illuminate rather than distort, however, we should also note the paramount differences. Unlike most contemporary physics, Neoplatonism treats matter as inert and without any properties of its own, claiming that what is basic and most truly existing is pure order, not qualities of matter nor even the realization of order in matter. The Neoplatonic explanations of phenomena do not seek constitutive, simple elements of which things are composed, but share the general Platonic tendency of appealing to intelligible principles. This has been called Platonic "top-downism" as opposed to the "bottom-upism" of many theories currently in fashion (Gerson 2005b: 259–60). Undoubtedly, too, the levels and the entities postulated are completely different in the two theories. It is also likely that Neoplatonists went much further than most modern physics in their methodology, in which the justification for the theory is not sought in how well the empirical studies and their results fit the theory, but in matters *internal* to the theory: its completeness, consistency and rational plausibility. Although the starting-points for the study are the experiences and perceptions of the enquirer,

ultimately the theoretical considerations outweigh comparisons with experience. It is important in this context to recall that at the time of Neoplatonism, systematic empirical science had not yet been developed. In their speculative spirit and readiness to postulate theoretical entities, however, many modern physicists are Platonist in spirit, some of them manifestly so.

Thus we might claim that present-day physics and Neoplatonic metaphysics both start from perceptible reality and share the tendency to postulate further layers of reality foreign to the common man, but that they are poles apart in choosing their direction. Where physics proceeds "downwards" by penetrating the subtleties of material or physical structures of the universe, Neoplatonists separated themselves from what they considered matter's limitations, and sought a purely intelligible order. For intuitions nestled in contemporary science, this move may seem fatal, but to grasp and appreciate some of the basic Neoplatonic insights it is enough to allow the possiblity of a multilayered reality penetrable to reason.

Before looking at the details of this philosophical position, however, a thought experiment might help to make the reader more sympathetic to the Neoplatonic preference of order and formation over matter. Try to think of matter: not mud, soil, clay or pebbles, but just matter. The inclination to organize it in your mind in some way or other – as brown, earth-like, coarse or whatever – is fair enough, otherwise it seems difficult to think or imagine it at all. For the Neoplatonists, this is a conclusive sign: pure matter cannot function as a starting-point for any enquiry because it resists intellectual attempts to grasp it. What is grasped in trying to think of matter is actually some intelligible organization or another, imposed on it by intelligence. This, rather than matter in and of itself, must therefore serve as the nucleus for the theory.

The somewhat bizarre but fascinating and highly influential philosophical school of thought called Neoplatonism, although pagan, had an emphatic interest in spiritual matters. As the centuries reveal, Neoplatonism existed side by side and, to an extent, in dialogue with the growing Christian religion. Despite the religious and spiritual context, Neoplatonism was focally a continuation of ancient

philosophy: a dialectic with Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic heritage. The emphasis of this book will be on the philosophical system and motivation of Neoplatonism (Chapters 2–6). I shall also strive to explicate the ways in which Neoplatonism differs from standard Platonism, as well as its place within ancient thought in general (Chapter 1). Its principal influences in Western thought are also briefly visited (Chapter 7). Chapter 1 begins by elaborating on the question of whether there is a particularly Neoplatonic way of doing philosophy, and if and how it can be separated from its forerunners and intellectual origins, especially Platonism.

Despite its status as the first systematic interpretation of Plato's philosophy as a whole, Neoplatonism has not always been at the centre of interest in history of philosophy. In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century English-speaking world, intellectual historians' and classicists' appreciation of Neoplatonism has often preceded the philosophical interest. For an Aristotelian or analytic philosopher, as for anyone opposed to extravagant metaphysics, some of the Neoplatonic tenets are undeniably hard to swallow, but this should not be allowed to cast its shadow on the movement as a whole. Historically, this position is neither long-lived nor global: Neoplatonism long infiltrated the Western history of ideas, and in continental philosophy it has always enjoyed respect and interest. Undoubtedly, it provides interesting philosophical arguments and insights as well as a philosophical structure, the unity and systematicity of which can only be admired. Its influences on our thought are surprisingly deep. And indeed, times are changing. In the twentieth century, scholars started to redeem Neoplatonism. This involved accepting it as a branch of Greek philosophy rather than pure spiritualism of some foreign, Eastern kind. The recent decades have witnessed an upsurge of English (as well as French, German and Italian) editions, translations and studies of Neoplatonism. The relative novelty of this philosophical interest implies that the whole subject area is evolving. Research results especially on later Neoplatonism are far from conclusive yet, and in general our picture of the philosophical purport of this school of thought is evolving. Although this applies particularly to the details of the doctrines, and

has therefore no direct bearing on a basic outline of the theory such as the one provided in this book, the reader is best advised to keep this dynamic situation in mind.

Another difficulty pertains to the number of philosophers and theories under scrutiny. In order to be able to give a picture of the movement as a whole, and its central and recurring features, I have decided to organize the book thematically rather than chronologically. My aim has been to explicate the shared philosophical tendencies, worries and preferred solutions, and then enrich this overview with the notable differences and disagreements between the members of the school. Inevitably some chronological clarity is thereby lost, and I can only hope that this deficiency is remedied by the unified, argumentative understanding of this particular branch of philosophy towards which I have striven.

The reader new to ancient philosophy is advised to use the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* list of abbreviations to identify a given ancient text. In cases where no abbreviation has been available, the reference is abbreviated according to the abbreviation system of the *Liddell–Scott Greek–English Lexicon* (new editions), or not abbreviated at all.

Acknowledgements

Before plunging into history and argument, I need to record some debts. The writing of this book was made possible by a postdoctoral fellowship at the Academy of Finland, although the final phases took place when my lecturership in Uppsala University had already begun. I thank Steven Gerrard, the publisher at Acumen, for his cooperation, understanding and patience especially during the revision of the manuscript. I received most perceptive and constructive suggestions for improvement from the anonymous readers, for which I am deeply grateful. Further help was provided by Holger Thesleff, who read the entire manuscript, as well as Miira Tuominen, who commented on Chapters 5 and 6. The core of the book was formed for a course on Neoplatonism I taught in the philosophy department at the University of Helsinki in the autumn of 2005, during which I received useful questions and comments from my students. Invaluable copy-editing was provided by Kate Williams. I wish also to thank Lotta Nelimarkka for her work on some of this material, particular its aesthetic side, both in the last chapter as well as her suggestion for the cover illustration. Finally, I humbly note my family's tolerance when I withdrew to some study or another both in the countryside and at home in Helsinki. Many, many thanks, Jukka and Eemeli.

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Helsinki

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 eternality 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 starts 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