

NEOPLATONISM: AN INTRODUCTION



If you live in the Western world today or have been influenced by it, you may be more of a Neoplatonist than you realize. As the mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead stated, the general characterization of the Western philosophical tradition “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”¹

Neoplatonism is a relatively modern term that mid-nineteenth century scholars created to distinguish the ideas of later Greek and Roman Platonists from those of Plato himself. Plotinus (ca. 204 – 270 CE) is considered the first main proponent of Neoplatonism. His intent was to use Plato’s thought as an intellectual basis for a rational and humane life.²

Neoplatonists synthesized the approaches of Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and others, addressing the individual yearning for salvation from a philosophical viewpoint. Neoplatonism posits a single source (the One) from which all existence emanates and with which an individual soul can be mystically united. This philosophical school provided ways that the individual could ascend the ladder of being through *theoria* – contemplation of the Divine.

Many widely accepted Neoplatonic concepts have been perpetuated in the West by such diverse sources as Christianity, Sufism, Kabbalah, the art and philosophy of the Renaissance, the Cambridge Platonists, the American Transcendentalists, and others.



Plato (428 BCE – 348 BCE).

Neoplatonic approaches continue to be of tremendous importance in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, as well as the esoteric schools, including Rosicrucianism. Neoplatonism exerted a great influence on the Western esoteric tradition through the work of Marsilio Ficino, a devout Neoplatonist, translator, and humanist philosopher of the fifteenth century.

The following Rosicrucian tenets resonate with Neoplatonism:

- All of Creation is permeated by a Universal Soul.
- The ultimate goal of life is to achieve mystical union with the Divine (the One).
- Knowing oneself is essential to achieving this goal.
- This can be accomplished without an intermediary person.
- Mystical contemplation is a means to achieve union with the Divine.

- Contemplating the harmony and transcendental nature of the Beautiful and the Good elevates us in consciousness.
- After completing its spiritual evolution, the soul of each human being reintegrates with the Universal Soul in all purity and lives in the Divine Immanence in full consciousness.

Remarkable individuals such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Augustine of Hippo (Saint Augustine), Hypatia, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Avicenna, Paracelsus, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Raphael, Henry More, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Taylor, and Ralph Waldo Emerson have all been associated with Neoplatonism or Neoplatonic thought.

This issue of the Rosicrucian Digest introduces us to some of their lives and ideas, and the Neoplatonic tradition over the millennia.

As for the Rosicrucian conception of spirituality, it is based, on the one hand, upon the conviction that the Divine exists as an Absolute Intelligence having created the universe and everything therein; and, on the other hand, on the assurance that each human being possesses a soul which emanates from the Divine.

—From the Rosicrucian *Positio Fraternitatis Rosae Crucis* (2001)

ENDNOTES

¹ Alfred North Whitehead. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

² PBS, “Neoplatonism,” <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/gen gloss/neoplat-body.html>.

