

Theological Transitions: How Ancient Greek Religion Shaped Neoplatonic Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper explores the influence of Ancient Greek religion on Neoplatonism, a major philosophical system that emerged in the third century CE. By examining the theological and metaphysical transitions from Greek polytheism to Neoplatonic monism, this study highlights how Neoplatonism adapted and transformed religious concepts from Greek mythology, cosmology, and ritual practice. The paper argues that Neoplatonism represents a synthesis of Greek religious traditions and philosophical abstraction, reflecting both continuity and innovation in the understanding of the divine, the cosmos, and human spirituality.

Keyword: Neoplatonism, Ancient Greek Religion

1. Introduction

Neoplatonism, founded by Plotinus in the third century CE, represents a significant shift in philosophical and theological thought, characterized by a move from the anthropomorphic deities of Ancient Greek religion to a more abstract and monistic conception of the divine. This philosophical system integrates elements of Greek religious beliefs with Platonic philosophy to create a new vision of the divine and its relation to the world. Understanding the impact of Ancient Greek religion on Neoplatonism provides insight into how religious traditions can evolve and influence philosophical thought.

2. Historical Context of Ancient Greek Religion

Ancient Greek religion was polytheistic and deeply embedded in the social and cultural fabric of Greek life. It featured a pantheon of gods and goddesses, each with distinct attributes and domains. Greek religious practices included rituals, sacrifices, and festivals designed to appease and honor the gods, while myths conveyed moral lessons and explanations of natural phenomena.

Key elements of Greek religion include:

- a. **Anthropomorphic Deities:** Ancient Greek religion was characterized by a pantheon of anthropomorphic deities, meaning that the gods were imagined in human form with human-like attributes and emotions. Greek gods were depicted with human physical forms, complete with a range of emotions, behaviors, and experiences. They experienced love, jealousy, anger, and other emotions akin to human feelings, which made them relatable and accessible to worshippers. For example, Zeus, the king of the gods, was known for his powerful but often flawed nature, while Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was deeply involved in matters of romance and beauty. Each deity had a distinct personality and a set of myths that explained their behaviors and interactions with other gods and humans. These myths often reflected the gods' strengths, weaknesses, and their influence over various aspects of life and nature. The stories of gods like Athena, who embodies wisdom and warfare, and Dionysus, who represents wine and festivity, illustrate the diverse domains and characteristics attributed to the deities. Greek gods were believed to interact directly with humans, influencing their lives through interventions in personal affairs, as well as through broader events. This interaction was a key component of Greek religious practice and myth, as seen in stories such as those of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where gods frequently intervene in human affairs (Zelinová & Škvrnda, 2023; Kindt, 2020a; Kindt, 2020b; McInerney, 2020; Aston, 2017; Osborne, 2010).
- b. **Cosmology:** The cosmology of Ancient Greek religion provides a framework for understanding the structure and origins of the universe. It involves a series of mythological narratives and deities that explain the creation and organization of the cosmos. Chaos was the primordial void from which everything originated. It is depicted as the initial state of existence, from which the first deities emerged. Chaos represents the formless, primordial state before the creation of the ordered cosmos. Gaia, or Earth, was one of the first deities to emerge from Chaos. She personified the Earth itself and was considered the mother of all life. Her role in cosmology includes giving birth to other primordial beings and deities, such as Uranus (the Sky) and the Titans. Uranus was the personification of the sky and was paired with Gaia. Together, they produced the Titans and other important deities. The myth of the castration of Uranus by his son Cronus symbolizes the separation of the sky from the Earth and the subsequent order of the cosmos. The struggle between the

Titans, the older generation of gods, and the Olympian gods led by Zeus is a central mythological event that establishes the current order of the universe. The victory of the Olympians over the Titans represents the establishment of a new divine hierarchy and the ordering of the cosmos (Bartninkas, 2023; McMullin, 2023; Boutsikas, 2020; Corcilius, 2020; Vassallo, 2020; Eugene, 2018; Wright, 2013; Kyriakakis, 2012; Couprie, 2011; Kahn, 1960; Martin, 1940).

- c. **Theurgy:** Theurgy refers to ritual practices intended to invoke divine powers and achieve mystical experiences. The practice of theurgy was integral to certain religious traditions within ancient Greece, especially during the later periods when philosophical and religious ideas began to merge. Theurgy involved a variety of rituals and ceremonies designed to connect with the divine realm. These practices often included offerings, prayers, and specific rites performed in sacred spaces or during particular times. The aim was to gain favor from the gods, seek their guidance, or achieve spiritual elevation. Theurgical practices were believed to facilitate direct encounters with the divine. Practitioners sought to experience a form of mystical union or communion with the divine, transcending ordinary human consciousness. This aspect of theurgy emphasizes the pursuit of personal, transformative experiences through ritual. Theurgy became especially prominent in the context of Neoplatonism, where it was integrated into philosophical thought. Neoplatonists like Iamblichus emphasized the importance of theurgical rituals as a means to attain higher knowledge and spiritual ascent, connecting religious practices with philosophical inquiry. The use of sacred symbols, such as amulets and inscriptions, was common in theurgical practices. These symbols were believed to possess divine power and were used to invoke the presence of deities or to influence spiritual forces (Kringebotten, 2024; Newman, 2023; Shaw, 2022; Uždavinys & Finamore, 2014; Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013; Dodds, 1947).

3. The Emergence of Neoplatonism

Neoplatonism developed as a philosophical response to both Platonic thought and contemporary religious practices. Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, sought to reconcile Platonic ideas with religious and mystical traditions. Central to Neoplatonism is the concept of the One, a transcendent and ineffable source of all existence, which contrasts with the polytheistic and anthropomorphic gods of Greek religion.

Key elements of Neoplatonism include:

- a. **The Oneis** the central concept in Neoplatonism and represents the ultimate, undivided source of all existence. It transcends both material reality and abstract concepts, serving as the foundational principle of the entire metaphysical system. The One is beyond all categories of being and non-being. It is an ineffable, absolute reality that cannot be fully grasped or described by human language or thought. It exists beyond the limitations of the physical world and the realm of conceptual thought. The One is characterized by absolute unity and simplicity. It is the ultimate source from which everything emanates but is itself undivided and indivisible. This unity implies that the One is the source of all diversity without itself being divided or affected by the processes of emanation. Everything in existence derives from The One. It is the ultimate cause and reason for the existence of all things, including the material universe and the abstract realm of ideas. The One is the root of all being and existence, making it central to the Neoplatonic understanding of reality (Giardina, 2022; Blazevic-Bastow, 2021; Cary, 2021; Griffin, 2021; Tresnie, 2021; Greig, 2020).
- b. **The Emanations** describe the process by which The One manifests itself into successive levels of reality. This process involves a hierarchical structure where each level of reality emanates from the one above it, creating a chain of being that extends from the most transcendent to the most material.
- The Nous (Divine Mind): The first emanation from The One is the Nous, often translated as the Divine Mind or Intellect. The Nous represents the principle of thought and divine intelligence, which contemplates the nature of The One and generates the forms or archetypal ideas. The Nous contains within itself the blueprint for all creation, including the cosmos and the realm of forms.
 - The World Soul: The next level of emanation is the World Soul, which is the principle of life and animation in the universe. The World Soul bridges the gap between the intellectual realm of the Nous and the material world. It is responsible for imparting order and vitality to the cosmos, infusing it with life and coherence. The World Soul encompasses the entire universe and ensures that the cosmos operates in a harmonious and purposeful manner.
 - Individual Souls: From the World Soul, individual souls emanate, each possessing a part of the divine essence and capable of achieving a return to the higher realms through spiritual practice and philosophical contemplation. These individual souls inhabit physical bodies and participate in the material world, striving to ascend back towards the divine source (Chistyakov, 2022; Gelmi, 2021; Sammon, 2021; Schultz, 2018; Ciucu, 2007; Mukhopadhyaya, 2002; Perl, 1994).

- c. **The concept of Hierarchical Cosmos** is a key feature of Neoplatonism, reflecting a structured and ordered view of the universe. This hierarchy illustrates the flow of emanation from the highest to the lowest levels of reality:
- Hierarchical Structure: The cosmos is organized into a hierarchy, with The One at the top, followed by the Nous, the World Soul, and the material world. Each level of the hierarchy emanates from the one above it, maintaining a structured order that reflects the principles of unity and organization.
 - Cosmic Order: The hierarchical cosmos emphasizes the idea that the universe operates according to a rational and purposeful order. The higher levels of reality (such as The One and the Nous) impart structure and coherence to the lower levels (such as the World Soul and the material world). This hierarchical organization ensures that the cosmos functions harmoniously and aligns with divine principles.
 - Spiritual Ascent: The hierarchical structure also serves as a framework for understanding spiritual ascent. Human souls, as part of the lower levels of reality, are on a journey to return to their divine source. This ascent involves transcending the material world and the lower aspects of the self to achieve union with the higher levels of reality. The process of spiritual ascent is guided by philosophical contemplation, theurgy, and ethical living (Cary, 2021; Tresnie, 2021; Epsen, 2020; Casas, 2018; Riggs, 2009; Hadot & Chase, 2004; Perl, 1994).

4. Influence of Greek Religion on Neoplatonism

The transition from Greek religious thought to Neoplatonic philosophy involved several key influences:

- a. **Adaptation of Divine Hierarchies:** Neoplatonism's reinterpretation of divine hierarchy reflects a shift from the polytheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of Greek religion to a more abstract and unified vision of divinity. Unlike the polytheistic pantheon of Greek religion, Neoplatonism proposes a unified conception of divinity with The One at its core. This shift represents a move from a multiplicity of gods with distinct roles to a single, all-encompassing principle that underpins all reality. The Neoplatonic system abstracts divinity beyond the human-like qualities and roles of Greek gods. The One, as an abstract and transcendent principle, contrasts sharply with the personal and anthropomorphic nature of Greek deities. Neoplatonism integrates philosophical concepts with mystical traditions, reflecting a synthesis of intellectual and spiritual approaches to understanding the divine. This integration provides a framework for achieving spiritual ascent and union with the divine source, diverging from the ritualistic and mythological focus of Greek religion (Casas, 2018; Lankila, 2016; Herrmann, 2007; Rangos, 2000; Perl, 1994).
- b. **Integration of Theurgical Practices:** The Neoplatonists incorporated aspects of Greek theurgy into their philosophical system. Plotinus and later Neoplatonists like Iamblichus emphasized the importance of ritual and mystical practices as a means of achieving union with the divine. This integration highlights the influence of Greek religious practices on Neoplatonic thought. Theurgy, meaning "divine work" or "ritual work," refers to a set of ritual practices aimed at invoking and engaging with the divine. In Greek religion, theurgy involved a variety of ceremonies, prayers, and rituals designed to connect with gods and seek their favor. Theurgical rituals often involved invoking deities through specific prayers and offerings. These acts were intended to establish a direct connection with the divine and elicit divine presence or intervention. The goal of theurgy was not only to appease or honor the gods but also to achieve mystical experiences and spiritual transformation. Rituals were believed to facilitate direct encounters with the divine and elevate the soul towards higher spiritual realms. The use of sacred symbols, such as amulets, inscriptions, and ritual tools, was common in theurgical practices. These symbols were believed to possess divine power and were used to invoke or communicate with divine beings.

Neoplatonism, with its emphasis on the abstract and transcendent nature of the divine, integrated theurgical practices to achieve spiritual ascent and union with the divine (Kringebotten, 2024; Newman, 2023; Shaw, 2022; Uzdavynys & Finamore, 2014; Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013; Dodds, 1947).

Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, initially approached philosophy from a rational perspective, focusing on the nature of The One, the Nous, and the World Soul. While Plotinus did not emphasize theurgy, his ideas laid the groundwork for later Neoplatonists who integrated theurgical practices into their philosophical system. Plotinus's writings reflect a philosophical orientation towards the divine but do not extensively address ritual practices (van den Berg, 2024; Newman, 2023; Goulding, 2022; Finamore, 2021; Corrigan, 2020; Barksdale, 2019; Mazur, 2003; Van Den Berg, 2001; Finamore, 1999; Armstrong, 1955).

Iamblichus, a prominent Neoplatonist philosopher, was instrumental in integrating theurgy into Neoplatonism. He emphasized the importance of ritual and mystical practices as essential means for achieving spiritual ascent and union with the divine. For Iamblichus, theurgy was not merely an adjunct to philosophy but a central component of his philosophical system. Iamblichus argued that philosophical contemplation alone was insufficient for achieving divine union. Instead, he believed that theurgical rituals

were necessary to elevate the soul and facilitate a direct connection with the divine realms. Rituals, according to Iamblichus, provided a structured and effective means for engaging with the divine and accessing higher levels of reality. Iamblichus introduced the concept of divine mediation through intermediaries such as gods, angels, and daemons. These intermediaries were believed to assist in the theurgical process by bridging the gap between the material and divine realms. By invoking these intermediaries, practitioners could achieve a closer connection to the divine source. Theurgical practices, for Iamblichus, were not only about achieving divine favor but also about undergoing a mystical transformation. Rituals were designed to purify the soul, align it with divine principles, and facilitate its ascent towards the One. This process of transformation reflected the integration of Greek religious practices with Neoplatonic metaphysical concepts (Kringebotten, 2024; Shaw, 2024; Shaw, 2022; Stang, 2022; Finamore, 2021; Alt, 2020; Finamore, 2013; Dillon, 2007; Finamore, 1999; Athanassiadi, 1993; Armstrong, 1987; Shaw, 1985; Shaw, 1971).

Proclus, a later Neoplatonist, further developed the integration of philosophy and theurgy. He emphasized the hierarchical nature of the cosmos and the role of ritual practices in maintaining cosmic order and achieving spiritual goals. Proclus's writings reflect a synthesis of Neoplatonic philosophy and theurgical practices, underscoring the significance of ritual in the pursuit of divine knowledge. Proclus viewed theurgy as a form of philosophical practice that complemented intellectual contemplation. Rituals were seen as a means to engage with the divine in a way that transcended rational thought, providing a holistic approach to understanding and experiencing the divine. Proclus's work highlighted the role of theurgy in maintaining cosmic harmony and order. Ritual practices were believed to align the practitioner with the divine order of the universe, ensuring that both individual and cosmic levels of reality were in harmony (Kringebotten, 2024; van den Berg, 2024; Newman, 2023; Goulding, 2022; Stang, 2022; Pachoumi, 2021; Lauritzen, 2020; Spanu, 2020).

The integration of Greek theurgy into Neoplatonism demonstrates how religious and philosophical traditions can influence and enrich each other. Theurgical practices provided Neoplatonists with a framework for achieving mystical experiences and divine union, complementing their abstract metaphysical concepts with practical and ritualistic elements. The incorporation of theurgy allowed Neoplatonists to expand their metaphysical ideas into practical and experiential realms. Rituals and mystical practices became essential tools for exploring and experiencing the divine, enriching the theoretical aspects of Neoplatonism with direct, transformative experiences. The integration of theurgy into Neoplatonism represents a synthesis of philosophical thought and religious practice. By blending intellectual inquiry with ritual and mystical experiences, Neoplatonists created a comprehensive system that addressed both the theoretical and experiential aspects of the divine. The influence of Greek theurgy on Neoplatonism has had a lasting impact on subsequent religious and philosophical traditions. The fusion of philosophical and mystical practices in Neoplatonism paved the way for later developments in Christian mysticism, Renaissance thought, and other spiritual traditions that seek to bridge the gap between the material and divine realms (Gillis, 2014; Robb, 2021; Zarrabi-Zadehi, 2020; Moffitt, 2005).

- c. **Mythological Symbolism:** Neoplatonism, with its profound philosophical and metaphysical insights, reinterpreted Greek myths to align with its framework of spiritual ascent and divine unity. This reinterpretation transformed traditional mythological themes into allegories of spiritual and philosophical journeys, illustrating complex Neoplatonic concepts related to the soul's ascent towards the One, the ultimate source of all existence.
- **Mythological Themes of Descent and Ascent:** Greek mythology often features themes of descent into the underworld and ascent to the heavens, reflecting the duality of existence and the journey between different realms. Neoplatonists reinterpreted these themes to represent the soul's spiritual journey and the process of returning to the divine source. In Greek mythology, descent into the underworld is a common motif, symbolizing a journey into the realm of the dead or a confrontation with darkness. For example, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, where Orpheus descends to the underworld to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, represents a journey into the depths of existence and the challenges of confronting mortality and the divine. In the Neoplatonic framework, descent into the underworld is reinterpreted as a metaphor for the soul's journey into the material world, which is seen as a lower and imperfect realm compared to the higher, divine realities. This descent represents the soul's entanglement with the physical and temporal aspects of existence, which must be overcome to achieve spiritual ascent. The ascent to the heavens, featured in myths such as the ascent of Heracles to Mount Olympus or the flight of Phaethon, symbolizes the soul's elevation towards the divine. These ascents often involve overcoming significant challenges and embody the quest for divine knowledge and immortality (Layne, 2017).

- Neoplatonists reinterpreted these ascents as symbolic of the soul's return journey to the One. The ascent represents the soul's quest to transcend the material world and achieve union with the divine source. In this context, the ascent is a process of spiritual purification and enlightenment, reflecting the Neoplatonic emphasis on returning to the divine unity.
- **Reimagining Mythological Symbols:** Neoplatonists used Greek mythological symbols to illustrate their philosophical and mystical concepts, providing a deeper understanding of the soul's journey and spiritual ascent.
 - a. In Greek mythology, Prometheus defies Zeus by stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity, symbolizing the quest for knowledge and enlightenment. Neoplatonists reinterpreted Prometheus's act as a symbol of the soul's quest for divine wisdom and the challenge of bridging the gap between the divine and material realms. Prometheus's gift of fire represents the intellectual and spiritual illumination necessary for the soul's ascent. The myth highlights the tension between divine transcendence and the soul's striving for higher knowledge (Tu, 2024; Mouzala, 2022; Adamson, 2015; Johnson, 1962; Raggio, 1958).
 - b. The story of Psyche and Eros involves Psyche's trials and eventual union with Eros, the god of love, after undergoing a series of arduous tasks. Neoplatonists saw this myth as an allegory of the soul's purification and ascent towards divine love. Psyche's trials symbolize the soul's struggles and purification process, while her union with Eros represents the ultimate goal of divine union. The journey of Psyche reflects the Neoplatonic view of the soul's spiritual ascent and its return to the divine source (van den Berg, 2022; Vasilakis, 2021; Mahapatra&Grego, R., Mahapatra& Grego, 2021; van den Berg, 2021; Bertozzi, 2020; Vasilakis, 2014; Opsomer, 2006; Apuleius& Kenney, 1990; Edwards, 1992).
 - c. Greek myths often involve chthonic (underworld) deities, such as Hades and Persephone, who govern the realm of the dead and the cycles of life and death. Neoplatonic Interpretation: In the Neoplatonic context, chthonic gods are reinterpreted as symbols of the lower aspects of existence and the process of spiritual purification. The underworld represents the material and imperfect realm from which the soul must emerge through spiritual practices and philosophical contemplation to reach the divine (Pejovic, 2024; Prinsloo, 2023; McPeters, 2022; Markovich, 2021; Deacy, 2015; Curry, 2006).
- *Philosophical Concepts and Spiritual Journeys:* Neoplatonists employed these reimagined myths to illustrate key philosophical concepts related to the soul's journey and spiritual ascent:
 - a. **The Soul's Ascent:** The Neoplatonic framework emphasizes the soul's ascent from the material world to the divine realm. Myths of ascent, such as the flight of Phaethon or the heroic journeys of figures like Heracles, are seen as allegories for the soul's quest to transcend the lower, material realm and achieve union with the One.
 - b. **Spiritual Purification:** Myths involving trials and challenges, such as those faced by Psyche or Orpheus, symbolize the process of spiritual purification necessary for achieving divine union. The soul must undergo trials, overcome obstacles, and purify itself from the constraints of the material world to reach the higher spiritual realms.
 - c. **Divine Unity:** Neoplatonists used mythological symbols to express the idea of divine unity and the interconnectedness of all aspects of reality. The hierarchical structure of the cosmos, as represented in the myths of gods and their interactions, reflects the Neoplatonic view of a unified and ordered universe emanating from the One (Averintsev & Maslov, 2021; Domaradzki, 2021; Fletcher, 2021; Davidson, 2020; Kutash, 2020; Siorvanes, 2017; Tarrant, 2012; Struck, 2010; Bonfiglioli & Marmo, 2007; Uždavinys, 2003; Eco, 1985).
- d. **Cosmological Concepts:** The Neoplatonic cosmology drew on Greek ideas about the cosmos but transformed them. Neoplatonism represents a shift from mythological explanations involving personal gods and narratives to a more abstract and systematic metaphysical framework. This shift emphasizes the philosophical exploration of reality and the divine, moving beyond the traditional mythological accounts of creation. The Neoplatonic cosmology emphasizes unity and order, with The One serving as the ultimate source of all existence. This focus on a unified principle contrasts with the more fragmented and diverse portrayals of divine beings in Greek mythology. Neoplatonism integrates philosophical concepts with religious and mystical practices, creating a comprehensive system that addresses both the theoretical and experiential aspects of the divine. The reinterpretation of Greek cosmogony reflects this integration, combining abstract metaphysical ideas with elements of traditional religious thought (Motta, 2023; Cary, 2021; Tresnie, 2021; Vassallo, 2020; Wright, 2013; Uždavinys, 2003; Mohr, 1985).

5. Conclusions

The theological transition from Ancient Greek religion to Neoplatonism illustrates the dynamic interplay between religious and philosophical thought. Neoplatonism, with its emphasis on abstract divinity and hierarchical cosmology, represents a significant evolution of Greek religious ideas. By adapting and reinterpreting traditional religious concepts, Neoplatonism not only preserves elements of Greek religion but also transforms them into a new philosophical paradigm. This synthesis highlights the ongoing relevance of ancient religious and philosophical traditions in shaping subsequent intellectual developments.

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