

Hypatia's Philosophy

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Let me begin by thanking Lou Katsos and East Mediterranean Business Culture Alliance for inviting me to participate in this panel and for giving me an opportunity to discuss one of my favorite ancient philosophers. This panel is entitled “Hypatia of Alexandria — Martyr for Philosophy,” and that she surely was, but I would like to focus on her philosophy and what it means for us today.

To do this, we need to understand how philosophy was understood in the ancient world, for as the late Pierre Hadot showed in many of his works, ancient philosophy was not so much an academic discipline as a way of life. The ancient philosopher was one who desired and sought wisdom, and wisdom was fundamentally knowing how to live well. Ancient philosophy certainly involved discussion and debate about the nature of knowledge, the cosmos, humankind, and the gods, but the purpose of this inquiry was to discover how to live better. To this end, ancient philosophers also taught spiritual practices to help their students to live a philosophical life. This practical aspect is often forgotten when we discuss ancient philosophy.

As we know, Hypatia was a trusted advisor of Orestes, the Prefect of Alexandria, and in fact her perceived influence over him probably contributed to the Patriarch Cyril's hatred of her, and to her murder. But Hypatia was also an inspiring teacher who transformed her students' lives. Her disciples referred to her as “the most holy and revered philosopher,” and “the blessed lady,” and “our divine guide”; they spoke of her “divine spirit” and “oracular utterances.” They remembered her as the hierophant of “ineffable mysteries” that she revealed.

What was she teaching, which was so treasured by her disciples? One ancient historian said she taught the philosophy “of Plato and Plotinus,” that is, the philosophy we now call Neoplatonism or Late Platonism. A philosophy born in Athens, nurtured in Alexandria, and returning to Athens to mature, it is the final flowering of Pagan philosophy and spiritual practice. Although it has never died, it survived underground after the emperor Justinian closed the Pagan schools in 529.

We do not have any philosophical writings from Hypatia, and it is likely that her instruction was entirely oral, as was not uncommon among ancient philosophers and befits spiritual guidance. Later philosophers do not attribute any philosophical innovations to her, and so it is likely she taught the accepted Neoplatonism of her time, the end of the fourth century, which she understood to be true and not needing revision. Scholars think this philosophy was similar to the Neoplatonism in the writings of Porphyry and Iamblichus, who lived a century before her, and found in the writings of her student Synesius of Cyrene and Hierocles of Alexandria, who were younger contemporaries of hers. We also have many texts from Proclus, head of the Athenian

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Academy, who was born in the year she was murdered. We can interpolate between the writings of all these philosophers to make an educated guess about her philosophy.

I do this in my 2013 book, *The Wisdom of Hypatia: Ancient Spiritual Practices for a More Meaningful Life*, in which I present Neoplatonism as a beneficial way of life for people today. Since its goal is to teach Neoplatonism as a practical philosophy of life, one might ask why I structured it around Hypatia, from whom we have no philosophical writings, rather than some other Neoplatonist from whom we have many texts. Why didn't I write *The Wisdom of Plotinus*, or *The Wisdom of Iamblichus*, or *The Wisdom of Proclus*? There are several reasons. First, Hypatia is an inspiring example of a teacher and spiritual guide. Although she was a prominent Pagan at a time when the Roman empire was officially Christian, she was a confidant and advisor to Orestes, who was Christian, and she had Christian and Jewish students in addition to her Pagan students. In part this was because she was teaching a philosophy that is largely compatible with these faiths, but also because she was tolerant of other religions and eager to teach her philosophy to whoever was willing to learn. In her time, as in ours, many people had become dissatisfied with traditional religions and were seeking alternatives, such as Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Gnosticism, which could be a better source of meaning and spiritual fulfillment in their lives. Her teaching transcended the religious conflicts that tore her world apart. Finally, Hypatia was a female philosopher and therefore stands out in the history of ancient philosophy. Although there were more women among ancient philosophers than we usually read about, she stands out among all philosophers for her honesty and courage.

In my book I teach three ancient Hellenistic philosophies as valuable ways of life for people today. I present them as "three degrees of wisdom," or progressively more advanced systems of spiritual practice, culminating in Neoplatonism. The first degree of wisdom is Epicureanism, which teaches us to live in tranquility through moderating our desires rather than indulging them. Moderating our desires leads to self-sufficiency and freedom. The second degree of wisdom is Stoicism, as taught by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. This way of life strives for serenity, autonomy, and an expanded consciousness. We achieve genuine freedom by understanding what is in our control and by doing what is right, and we achieve serenity by accepting what is not in our control. Stoicism helps us live a life of action and engagement in society. It was a popular philosophy in Hypatia's time, and is becoming so in our time, and it is good preparation for the third degree of wisdom, Neoplatonism, which has more advanced spiritual practices intended to bring us into contact with divinity and to teach us to live a more godlike life.

Of course Hypatia would have taught the most characteristic doctrine of Platonism, the existence of the Platonic Forms or Ideas as the eternal causes and principles of order in this material world of change and transient existence. Among the Forms is also where her Platonic predecessors placed the eternal gods, who govern mortal existence. Of course philosophers tended to view the gods more abstractly than they were viewed in popular religion, more as eternal powers or forces creating and governing material reality. Neoplatonists also understood the totality of Platonic Ideas as a cosmic Nous or mind in which the Ideas were in an eternal state of mutual contemplation. Between the eternal, changeless Nous and our world of flux and change, the Neoplatonists perceived a World Soul bringing the eternal Ideas into manifestation in matter, space, and time. Ultimately, behind and within everything, Neoplatonists understood

there to be an Ineffable One, not so much a highest god as a first principle of which the gods and other Ideas are manifestations. Plato called it “The Good.”

Nowadays many people doubt the existence of Platonic Forms, although there are solid philosophical arguments that mathematical objects and other abstract objects are in fact genuine Platonic Forms, which is why mathematics was so important for ancient Platonists as an introduction to the Forms. Nevertheless, few of our contemporaries accept the literal existence of the ancient gods, but I believe that there is a way to understand them and their role in our lives that is compatible with a scientific worldview.

Evolutionary psychologists have identified a number of innate patterns of behavior or instincts characteristic of *Homo sapiens*. They include the Mother, the Father, the Hero, and the Trickster. These universal psychological structures have not changed much over the last several hundred thousand years, and on a human timescale they are effectively eternal. They are what the psychologist Carl Jung called the archetypes of the collective unconscious. These archetypes lie dormant in the unconscious until they are activated by something in our conscious awareness, and then they intervene to regulate our memory, motivations, emotions, and perceptions to fulfill some biological function. Because these unconscious psychological structures act as autonomous subpersonalities, they have been recognized, experienced, and conceived as gods in the various ancient pantheons. When an archetype is active in our psyche, we may indeed feel inspired — or even possessed — by a god, but this feeling of being more than human is a signal that we are — for better or worse — fulfilling some archaic purpose that transcends the individual. In fact I think that many of the Platonic Ideas are understood best as the unconscious images in our individual psyches of these ancient and universal archetypal patterns of behavior.

This brings me to the spiritual practices of the Neoplatonists, which I discuss in the last three chapters of *The Wisdom of Hypatia*. Common to all forms of Neoplatonism were spiritual practices directed toward union with the divine or, as Plato said, becoming a god so far as possible for humans. For example, Plotinus taught contemplative exercises for eventually uniting with The Ineffable One. Other Neoplatonists, such as Iamblichus, recognizing that the divine permeates all of existence, used rituals in which material symbols, prayers, and hymns were used to connect with a particular deity. In this way they might be inspired and empowered by the gods, so as to better accomplish their purposes in the world. These practices are called *theurgy* or divine-action.

We don't know if Hypatia practiced theurgy, but there are suggestions she learned it from her father Theon, and her students drop hints about initiations and mysteries. In any case, it was considered an essential Neoplatonic practice from Iamblichus' time on, and so it would be surprising if Hypatia did not know theurgy, even if her practice was more contemplative.

Jung and other analytical psychologists have developed a modern version of theurgy called *active imagination*, a practice in which symbols and other visualizations are used to activate archetypal personalities and to bring them into conscious awareness. In this way we can interact directly with these universal forces in order to gain insights into our own souls and to avoid being unconsciously “possessed,” for these archaic forces are not always well-adapted to

contemporary life. Analytical psychologists argue that an unwillingness and inability to engage wisely with these unconscious archetypes is the cause of many of the psychological, social, and political problems in the modern world. Moreover, the ultimate goal of theurgy is psychological integration and union with the god image in our psyches, essentially Neoplatonic *henôsis* or union with The One. The Neoplatonic spiritual practices that I teach in my book are based on ancient techniques but informed by analytical psychology.

So, to sum up, we do not know exactly what philosophy Hypatia practiced and taught, but we can be sure it was some form of Neoplatonism, which teaches that there are universal and eternal Ideas, including divinities, and that we should seek union with divinity. For by returning to this eternal and universal source of meaning in human life, we can better embody that meaning in our individual lives. As one who accomplished this in difficult times, Hypatia is an inspiring teacher and example for us today. Thank you for your attention.