

An Analysis of the Neo-Platonism of Alexandria's Hypatia

Soeurng Seam¹

Phrakhrubhavanabodhikun² and Jaras Leeka³

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Khon Kaen Campus

Corresponding Author; Email: jerrynewlife2022@gmail.com

Abstract

The objectives of this research are: 1) to study the concept of Platonism; 2) to study the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria; 3) to analyze the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria. It is documentary research. The data were collected from the relevant sources: primary, secondary, and related documents. The collected data were interpreted by the descriptive analysis based on the inductive method.

The research results were as follows: Platonism is the term that called referring to the believers and followers of Plato. Even though Plato's teachings were interpreted, commented on, or criticized, the base teachings were conserved. 1) Metaphysics: the Ideas or Forms which are universal, plentifully, perceived reasoning, objective truth, spaceless, and timeless. 2) Ethics: the four virtues, Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice. 3) Epistemology: the four levels, image, belief, reasoning, and perfect intelligence. Neo-Platonism was introduced in the nineteenth century to distinguish it from Platonism. Plotinus was known to be the founder. He criticized Plato and believed some ideas could have been better expressed. He made his interpretations and commentaries on the original works of Aristotle on the sensible world' world' and Plato's spiritual ideas. 1) Metaphysics: three emanations from the One: Nous, World-Soul, and Material World.

* Received: 31 May 2022; Revised: 24 June 2022; Accepted: 29 June 2022

- 2) Ethics: practicing the four virtues, wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, ignoring the sensibility and focusing on learning philosophy and science, and uniting with the one.
- 3) Epistemology: through philosophical reflection, spirituality, meditation, and virtue to reach the divine intellect and contemplate the beauty of the noetic archetype.

Analyzing the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia

Hypatia was influential in philosophy, politics, and society and treated as a celebrity and beyond human beings. As a Neo-Platonist, Hypatia was considered as a Pagan. Her death was a martyr which later became the symbol for feminism and the Egyptian woman philosopher. Hypatia must teach Neo-Platonic philosophy to her students due to she was a Neo-Platonist. The main teaching of Neo-Platonism was based on Plotinus's teachings. 1) Metaphysics: her belief must be more closely to the former Neo-Platonists' reinterpretation based on the one and the emanations. 2) Ethics: to ignore the sensibility and focusing on learning philosophy and science, and to unite with the one. 3) Epistemology: Beside focusing on higher education, Hypatia taught oracles and rituals to her students and also taught secret rites and mysteries.

Keywords: Platonism; Neo-Platonism; Hypatia

Introduction

Hypatia is one of the most essential figure women philosophers of all time. From the past up to now, her personal story, as well as her philosophy, has been interested by many writers from many fields, including mathematicians, historians and, of course, philosophers. However, women philosophers seemed to be excluded from the history of philosophy. The philosophy world was dominated by men for thousands of years. Even though Plato stated that women and men were capable of leading the ideal city-state, he was thinking far ahead of his time. Through the voice of Socrates, Plato argued that talented and intelligent women should be chosen to work alongside men as Guardians (Rebecca Buxton, Lisa Whiting, 2020: 7). By many reasons, women themselves, societal pressures, religion, inequality education, and men's domination,

women cannot fulfill Plato's prediction. Another main reason is the historians who seemed biased in including women philosophers in the history of philosophy. To see this, you only have to look at some of the recent books published on the topic. In *Philosophy : 100 Essential Thinkers*, only two women feature, with Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone de Beauvoir taking the seats of honor. In *The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Turing*, no women made the cut. Each chapter in that particular book was written by a contemporary philosopher, all of whom are also men. At the time of writing, a newly published book by A. C. Grayling, boldly titled *The History of Philosophy*, includes no sections on women philosophers. The book does include a three-and-a-half-page review of 'Feminist Philosophy' in which only one woman philosopher – Martha Nussbaum is mentioned by name (Rebecca Buxton, Lisa Whiting, 2020 : 7)

A similar thing happened here in my philosophy class. While we, our lecturer and students, were seriously discussing female monks' situation in Thailand, the idea popped up in my mind: how about female philosophers. Then I started asking my lecturers, one by one, about women philosophers, ; the answers were that no women philosophers they known. This bothers me to do more research about it. After a little research on YouTube and Google, I found plenty of women philosophers from the past to the present. This reason makes me try to do something about it. I found that many of them have a very amazing philosophy and very interesting life story. They argued with their contemporary men philosophers equally and were respected by those men philosophers as one of them as well. However, I choose Hypatia. She is a good one to start for me because she is well-known in her philosophy, character, and tragic death.

Hypatia's life was very remarkable. She devoted her life to all kinds of knowledge passed to her directly by her father, Theon. She had a rare beauty of face, features and bodily grace, combined with superior strength and vitality, Hypatia took up her father's work. Her voice was flute-like, and always used well within its compass, so as never rasp or tire the organs (Elbert Hubbard, 2015 : 7). The knowledge from her father alone is not enough that was the reason she made her decision to start her journey to Athen, which in that time was the hub of the universe. It was the meeting place of the East and the

West. Travel, public speaking, and meeting people of note form a strong trinity of good things. The active mind is the young mind, and it is more than the dream of a poet which declares that Hypatia was always young and always beautiful, and that even Father Time was so in love with her that he refused to take a toll from her, as he passed with his hourglass and scythe(Elbert Hubbard, 2015 : 12). Because of her intelligence and her power of knowledge, she was always invited to council with the governor closely. This made some groups of Christian mobs who was disadvantaged from her advice very unhappy. Later she was murdered by them. Her death was a tragedy. A religious mob set upon Hypatia as she was going in her carriage from her lecture-hall to her home. She was dragged to a near-by church with the intent of making her publicly recant, but the embers became a blaze, and the blaze became a conflagration, and the leaders lost control. The woman's clothes were torn from her back, her hair torn from her head, her body beaten to a pulp, dismembered, and then to hide all traces of the crime and distribute the guilt so no one person could be blamed, a funeral- pyre quickly consumed the remains of what but an hour before had been a human being. Daylight came, and the sun's rays could not locate the guilty ones (Elbert Hubbard, 2015 : 31)

Hypatia was considered as the first unique and outstanding women philosophers in the history of philosophy. She was the first woman to be qualified to lecture in public since, by that time, men only were qualified by educational and social status. However, Hypatia proved that she also can do what those men did. Her teachings, influenced by Neo-Platonism, were very compromise and allowed all kinds of students from different backgrounds of beliefs to study together. She had learned from her father and their Neo-platonic predecessors. In a culture such as ours, which values innovation for its own sake, this can be considered a failing, but her goal was to teach her students to live well, not to change doctrine for the sake of novelty. We know some of the philosophy of Hypatia's most prominent disciple, Synesius of Cyrene, who later converted to Christianity and became Bishop of Ptolemais (Bruce J. MacLennan, 2013 : 46). Like most ancient philosophers, Hypatia taught a way of life, not an academic subject to be studied but not practiced. This does not mean that they did not investigate and debate abstruse topics, but these intellectual pursuits were a means to an end :

living well. This is the approach to Hypatia's philosophy that I take in this book : a way of life. Therefore, its focus is on spiritual practices and exercises directed toward your spiritual transformation and well-being (Bruce J. MacLennan, 2013 : 20)

Hypatia's life and philosophy are really interesting to me. Her life style, intelligence, and teaching in philosophy are as good as men. Since a lot of research about men philosophers was already done, this time, I decided to do this research about "Analyzing the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria" to give some space and credit to women philosophers.

The objective of the study

- 1) To study the concept of Platonism.
- 2) To study the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria.
- 3) To analyze the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria.

Scope of the Study

This research aims to analytically study of the concept of Platonism and Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria. This research is documentary research which is divided into two scopes of the study as follows:

1) Scope of Text:

a) Primary sources: Neoplatonism by Paulina Remes, A History of Women Philosophers by Mary Ellen Waithe, The Wisdom of Hypatia by Bruce J. MacLennan, and “Greek Philosophy : The Sources of Western Wisdom” by Phra Brahmapundit (Prayoon Dhammaditto)

b) Secondary sources: thesis, dissertations, texts and academic papers, and websites.

2) Scope of subject-matter/Contents

This research is to study these three contents as follows:

- 1) The concept of Platonism.
- 2) The Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria.
- 3) The analyzing the Neo-Platonism of Hypatia of Alexandria.

Research Methodology

This is documentary research in line with the qualitative one emphasizing documents. Its methodology can be divided into three stages as the follows:

1) The data collected from relevant sources: A History of Women Philosophers by Mary Ellen Waithe, The Wisdom of Hypatia by Bruce J. MacLennan , and “Greek Philosophy: The Sources of Western Wisdom” by Phra Brahmapundit (Prayoon Dhammaditto) texts, books, research works, dissertations, academic papers, and other sources and related documents.

2) The data analysis: the collected data were analyzed in favor of a descriptive analysis based on the inductive method.

3) The research finds in the form of a final copy are reported to the concerned agencies with the conclusions and suggestions.

The research result

The concept of Platonism

Platonism is the term that called referring to the believers and followers of Plato. Even though Plato's teachings were interpreted, commented on, or criticized, the base teachings were conserved. It is the combination of negativities, especially: anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-nominalism, anti-relativism, and anti-skepticism. By this definition, Plato himself was considered as a Platonist

Metaphysics of Platonism was undoubtedly based on the core philosophical teaching of Plato. That is the Ideas or Form. According to Plato, the Ideas are universal, plentifully, perceived reasoning, objective truth, spaceless, and timeless. Everything is the copies of the Ideas.

All of Plato's philosophy is based on the theory of Ideas. Ethic of Platonism relying on this core teaching. The goodness should be conducted by reason and knowledge. In Plato's philosophy, the highest goodness is the Idea of the Good. He stated that good people should follow the four virtues, Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice. Justice is the result of the above three virtues. It is considered as the most important of all. Perfect intelligence is the true knowledge because it can reach the highest truth.

True learning is not about learning new things but the process of recovery of the universal things or the Ideas.

Platonist do not believe that knowledge derives from sensibility. The reasoning is the way to get to the highest knowledge. He proposed how the mind works to recognize things by the four levels, image, belief, reasoning, and perfect intelligence.

Neo-Platonism

The term Neo-Platonism was not introduced until the nineteenth century, and philosophers at that time likely considered their beliefs to be simply an interpretation of the teachings of Plato, making them by all accounts Platonists. However, Plotinus was known to criticize Plato and believed some of the ideas could have been better expressed. He attempted his own interpretations and commentaries on the original works. The combination of Aristotle's work on the sensible world' and Plato's spiritual ideas formed a whole new movement, now commonly known as Neo-Platonism.

Neo-Platonism was initiated in Alexandria. The exchange of culture between Greek and eastern happened here. Neo-Platonism is the last Greek philosophy school that existed after the two big schools, Stoicism and Epicureanism, not least than 500 years ago. During this five centuries, Skepticism damaged the trust of in the real way philosophers find the truth. Neo-Platonism existed during the lowest point of Greek Metaphysic and Epistemology because Skepticism taught that it is impossible to only seek out the truth by reason. Neo-Platonism solved this problem by proposing new ways to find the truth. That is the way applying the mysterious experience in religion, Gnosticism.

The main teaching of Neo-Platonism is based on the teaching of Plotinus. Metaphysics of Neo-Platonism deriving from the Idea of Plato, but was called the One or the Good by Plotinus. His important theory is the Emanation. There are three emanations from the One: Nous, World-Soul and Material World.

In Ethic, Plotinus claimed that body is the prison of human soul. The higher soul needs freedom from the body to be with the one. There are three levels of soul upgrading: to purify itself by practicing the four virtues, wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, to ignore the sensibility and focus on learning philosophy and science, and on uniting with the one.

Plotinus's epistemology is through philosophical reflection, spirituality, meditation, and virtue to reach the divine intellect and contemplate the beauty of the noetic archetype. The supreme goal of human life is to be united to the God who is above all things. To achieve this salvation is to follow the process of mysticism.

Neo-Platonism of Hypatia

Hypatia is a Neo-Platonist philosopher. Her family was wealthy enough to provide her the best education, especially her father, Theon. She was a prominent philosopher due to there were a lot students from the west and the east come to learn from her in Alexandria. The very important city in Egypt consisting of the biggest library in the world and the hub of western and eastern cultures.

Hypatia was influential in philosophy, politics, and society. Philosophers in that time were treated as celebrities and beyond human beings. Philosophers became famous within the political circle due to their reasoned, political advices. As a Neo-Platonist, Hypatia was considered as a Pagan. Since Christianity was the main religion in that time, what she taught and advised was a risk for Christianity. Even though what she taught was not anti-Christian and there was no discrimination between Pagan and Christianity. Her students were from both pagan and Christian backgrounds. Never the less it led to her terrible death by Christian mob at last. Her death was a martyr which later became the symbol for feminist. Her name was symbolized in many projects to memorize her as "the Egyptian woman philosopher".

Hypatia did not proposed any of her own philosophy which is normal for philosophers in that time to rather teach and comment on the former theories. All her texts were not survived, too. What we can refer to her teaching was by her students' letters, and the records of her daily life and belief. This means that Hypatia must teach Neo-Platonic philosophy to her students due to she was a Neo-Platonist. The main teaching of Neo-Platonism was based on Plotinus's teachings which already mentioned above. However, I will try to analyze how she taught Neo-Platonist to her students by her own intellect.

According to the quotes from her students referring to the main teaching of Plato and his followers, this can conclude that Hypatia's metaphysical philosophy was never far from the core teaching of Plato. Since Neo-Platonism originated and became popular in Alexandria, her belief must be more closely to the reinterpretation by former Neo-Platonists based on the one and the emanations.

In ethics, we can also analyze her daily life. Hypatia was still single until her death. She lived her life according to the way of life of a Platonist. A Platonist lives life by reason. Hypatia look beyond her matter body which is not according to her sex. She would follow Plotinus, who claimed that the body is the prison of the human soul. The higher soul needs freedom from the body so it can be with the one. The ways to practice are to ignore the sensibility and focusing on learning philosophy and science, and to unite with the one. The goal of a follower of Plato was to live in assimilation to god in so far as possible.

We seem to have more information about her epistemology because we have more records about how she taught. As we know that Neo-Platonist added a mystic way to seek the truth besides reasoning. Beside focusing on higher education, Hypatia also taught oracles and rituals to her students, too. Hypatia also taught secret rites and mysteries.

Suggestion

As I stated in the significance of this research that women philosophers were forgotten by philosophical society. They were treated significantly less important even though there were actually women philosophers in the history of philosophy. There is only one woman philosopher was list in the book of 100 famous philosophers. Hundreds of women philosophers, according to Mary Ellen Waithe, tried so hard to collect all their information. She has proved that a lot of women philosophers worthy of study. This research is just a small to bring women philosophers alive again in philosophy course. I do not ask for the equality to man philosophers, but they should be in at least one content in philosophy class because there are no contents at all above them in my two years classes of Philosophy here.

Next Research Suggestion

There are plenty of women philosophers to study more, especially in this region where women are treated as less important. More researches about them are needed badly because woman plays an important role in developing society as well as philosophical fields. Here are my suggestions for the next research:

- 1) The reasons women philosophers were forgotten.
- 2) The ideas of women philosophers on the soul.
- 3) The philosophy of Anne Conway

Bibliography

Rebecca Buxton, Lisa Whiting, Philosophy Queen: (Unbound (2020)

Elbert Hubbard, Hypatia: (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2015)

Bruce J. MacLennan, Wisdom of Hypatia (Llewellyn Publications 2013)