

Living Neoplatonism¹

Bruce MacLennan
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I. Motivation

The title of my talk, “Living Neoplatonism,” is intentionally ambiguous, for it can refer, first, to *Neoplatonism as a living philosophy* rather than as a historical artifact embodied in the writings of Plotinus, Proclus, and the rest. And second, it can refer to the practice of *living Neoplatonically* as a modern way of life. But why Neoplatonism, as opposed to some other philosophy? From my perspective as a scientist I will explain why I think Neoplatonism is especially suited to provide a spiritual complement to the contemporary scientific worldview, which is otherwise materialistic in orientation and ill-equipped to deal with many peoples’ spiritual concerns.

II. Evolutionary Jungian Psychology

The interconnections between science and Neoplatonism are deep and rich, both historically and today, but I think the best place to begin is with the Forms, which are central to both. Their importance in the Platonic tradition goes without saying. In contemporary science the Forms are most apparent in mathematical theories of nature. Physics has long been heavily mathematical, and the well-known physicist John Archibald Wheeler, with his slogan “it from bit,” has argued that the reality of the physical world consists in information, the formal relations among measurements; it is unnecessary to postulate a “stuff” that the measurements are about.² Other scientific disciplines have become increasingly mathematical, and in particular complex systems theory provides many examples of common principles of self-organization throughout nature — the emergence of *form*. We can see the common roots of both the Platonic Forms and mathematical science in ancient Pythagorean mathematics, where, according to tradition, natural phenomena were first reduced to formal structures.

What can we say about mathematical forms from a contemporary perspective? In his 1998 book, *Platonism and Anti-Platonism in Mathematics*, Mark Balaguer argues that there are two defensible philosophies of mathematics, and that there is no fact of the matter by which one can choose between them. It is necessarily a non-rational metaphysical choice. One of these he calls *full-blooded Platonism*, by which he means that all consistent mathematical systems are true, and therefore that the objects whose existence they imply can be taken to exist in a Platonic sense. For example, Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries are both true, and in the latter parallel lines intersect, but not in the former. So also, Cantor’s infinities exist, if they are axiomatized consistently. The other defensible philosophy is called *fictionalism*, but in practice, there is not much difference between the two views.

What about the non-mathematical Forms: Truth, Beauty, and Justice; the gods and henads; humans and horses? What of the Ineffable One? The Platonic Ideas are best understood as Jungian archetypes, a view expressed by Jung himself, who borrowed the term “archetype” from Neoplatonists. The archetypes are unconscious forms that, when activated, manifest in consciousness by governing human perception, motivation, and behavior. Since they are common to all people, they are said to reside in the *collective unconscious*, which Jung also calls the *objective psyche*. They are objective in the usual

1 Read June 23, 2011 at the ninth annual conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, Atlanta, GA.

2 Wheeler, J. A. (1992), Recent Thinking about the Nature of the Physical World: It from Bit. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 655: 349–364. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb17083.x

scientific sense: they are *empirical*, *stable*, and *public*.

My claim is that Jungian psychology establishes a link between Neoplatonism and contemporary science, but some critics treat Jungian psychology as a pseudo-science, and Jung is often viewed as a mystic, but here is the critical point: he was a *scientific mystic*. His theories were grounded in observations of his patients, in phenomenological investigations of his own psyche, and in his patients' and colleagues' phenomenological investigations of their own psyches. Further, Jung stressed that there is nothing supernatural about the archetypes. He said that they are akin to instincts in that they are species-specific patterns of perception, motivation, and behavior. Although (like the instincts) they cannot be observed directly (because they are unconscious), their manifestations in perception, motivation, and behavior are observable by introspection and behavioral observation. Furthermore, like the instincts, they are realized through an organism's neurophysiology in conformity with the laws of nature.

Because of its essentially empirical approach to psychospiritual phenomena, Jungian psychology is largely compatible with contemporary science, as is a contemporary Neoplatonism understood from a Jungian perspective.

Nowadays we seek improved understanding of animal behavior through *neuroethology*. Ethology seeks to understand animal behavior in terms of a species' adaptation, through evolution, to the environment (or succession of environments) in which it evolved. *Neuroethology* seeks a deeper understanding by investigating the neurophysiological mechanisms of evolutionary adaptive behaviors.

Once it is understood that, like the instincts, the archetypes are rooted in human neurophysiology, it becomes possible to apply evolutionary biology and neuroethology to the archetypes. This is the project of *evolutionary Jungian psychology*, which combines the methods of evolutionary psychology and Jungian psychology. Evolutionary psychology seeks to understand human behavior through comparative study of the evolved adaptations of other species, especially those closely related to us. Thus, *Homo sapiens* is brought into a unified theoretical framework with all other animal species. Jungian psychology complements the largely external, behavioral approach of evolutionary psychology (which is necessary for comparison with non-human animals) with an internal, phenomenological investigation of the same phenomena.

The neural structures that define the archetypal Forms develop in accord with the human genome, which governs the development of the human body in interaction with its environment, both before birth and after. Therefore, the archetypal Forms are rooted in the human genome, the human genetic code, which can be represented as a numeral, about 600 million bits long, or about 200 million digits; just 75 megabytes. Since we all share this genome, the archetypal Forms are transpersonal and unchanging, so far as human experience is concerned.

To bring this talk back to Neoplatonism, evolutionary Jungian psychology is the linchpin connecting the archetypal Ideas — at least as experienced by us — to contemporary scientific understanding of the origins and nature of these experiences.

III. Implications for Neoplatonism

My title, "Living Neoplatonism," alludes to Neoplatonism as a living philosophy, that is, as a philosophy that continues to grow and evolve, both as a result of its own internal development and as a consequence of its interactions with the larger worlds of knowledge and culture. While Neoplatonism can contribute to the progress of science, I believe it can also benefit from recent developments in science; the dialogue is mutually informative. Some of the revisions I propose may seem to strike at the

heart of the Platonic tradition, but I do not think this is so. To me, Neoplatonic *practice* is the living heart of the philosophy, and the various *dogmata* are useful as verbal medicines to promote living philosophically. As we now have new medicines to treat our bodies, so Neoplatonists should be willing to develop new *dogmata* to care for their souls.

For example, a perennial problem in Platonic philosophy is whether all universals correspond to Platonic Forms or only certain, privileged ones. We may grant that there are Forms of the good, truth, beauty, and justice, but many are reluctant to admit Forms for disease, murder, mud, or even less appealing ideas. I believe that evolutionary Jungian psychology provides a solution to this problem. First, we may acknowledge the existence of all consistent mathematical objects in accord with full-blooded Platonism. Second are the Jungian archetypes, which act as autonomous personalities and correspond to familiar mythological figures. Finally, certain numbers and geometrical forms are archetypal, a consequence, as I've argued elsewhere, of neurodynamical processes common to all people. Indeed, any physiological process with a psychological aspect will have a corresponding archetypal Form. Aside from abstract mathematical objects, all the archetypal Forms have the common characteristic that they are psychodynamically potent; they generate and channel vital energy.

If one ascends above the level of the Cosmic Soul, through the realm of eternal Being in the Cosmic Nous, one approaches the Inexpressible One, which unifies everything, being and non-being, unity and plurality, existence and non-existence. Such a paradoxical reality is beyond verbal expression, and so The One is ineffable. On the other hand, as Proclus wrote, "everything, when it enters the unspeakable depths of its own nature, will find there the symbol of the Universal Father." So also, according to Jung, if you descend deeper into the collective unconscious, below the level of distinct archetypes, you will approach the *Self* with a capital "S." This Archetypal Self is the psychological correspondent of the human genome, and therefore reflects "the phylogenetic destiny of the human species," which each of us fulfills as it becomes individualized in each of our lives. Like the Inexpressible One, Jung stressed that the Archetypal Self is paradoxical, even contradictory, and therefore it is beyond rational comprehension; it can be understood only by means of symbols.

The archetypes are not represented in the genome in a direct or one-to-one way, but govern the development of the fetus in a complex way to create the neurophysiological systems that subserve archetypal responses. They are "all in all, but each in its own way," which is Proclus' description of the henads' undifferentiated existence in The One. Likewise the genome corresponds to Proclus' *eidos eidôn* or Form of Forms, which Syrianus says reside in *to autozôon*, the "animal itself" or "abstract animal," which reminds us of the genome.

But Jung also observed that if you went deeper yet, the psychological would pass over into the physiological, and ultimately into the physical; he said, the deep layers of the psyche "become increasingly collective until they are universalized and extinguished in the body's materiality, i.e., in chemical substances. ... Hence, 'at bottom' the psyche is simply 'world'."³ This deep layer, where the psychological and the physical merge, he called the *Unus Mundus*. Analogously, corresponding to the archetypes are neurodynamical processes taking place in interconnected neural subsystems. But below these are common neurophysiological laws, and deeper yet are the laws of the universe, whatever they may turn out to be and regardless of whether we can ever know them.

So if all the laws of the universe can be assembled into one comprehensive, complete, and eternal cosmic law, then we will have something like a scientific correspondent to The One. We cannot assume that such a law could be expressed mathematically or understood by humans. To assume its existence is merely to assume that the cosmos is orderly. However, there is a critical difference between such a

3 Jung, CW 9 i, ¶291.

complete law and the “grand unified theories” sought by physicists, for the law that I am proposing as a correspondent to The One must comprehend all phenomena in the universe, psychical as well as physical. So far, science has made very little progress in explaining consciousness in any serious way; generally, consciousness is explained *away*. Until science can explain in detail why some physical structures are conscious and some are not (if indeed that is the case), and until it can explain in detail the relation between the phenomenology of consciousness and the structure and dynamics of those physical systems, science will be radically incomplete. This is an area in which Neoplatonism may contribute to science, but I don’t think simple dualistic explanations will do; most of them have been tried and found wanting. (Some of my other research attempts to integrate the physical and the psychical from the perspective of double-aspect monism.)

There is hardly any idea more Platonic than the identification of the highest principle with the Good. Nevertheless, I think it is problematic to apply such a suggestive term to the Inexpressible One. We are well advised to follow Plotinus and add “so to speak” — *hoion* — to these suggestive expressions.⁴ Certainly The One, as represented in the human genome, is good in the sense that it encodes our species’ adaptation to its historical environment, which has enabled our survival to date. Furthermore, the psychical correspondent of the genome — the Archetypal Self — is *good* in that it is a transcendent paradigm and goal. As our phylogenetic destiny, it is Providential. Similar considerations can be applied to the laws of nature as a whole, for they lead to self-organization and evolution: the progressive creation of order and form. But these senses of “the good” are remote from ordinary usage. When we call The One “good,” we run the risk of slipping into anthropomorphic notions of the highest principle that are far removed from the Inexpressible One of Neoplatonism.

If we understand the archetypal Forms to be rooted in the human genome, then we must refine our understanding of the relation of individual humans to the Forms, for the human genome is an abstraction. Although it is a well-defined scientific concept, it cannot be expressed as a single genetic sequence or corresponding number. Rather, each individual has their own *genotype*, which does correspond to a particular number. Identical twins aside, each person has their own unique genotype, although the variation across the population is very small. This implies that each person may have a God-image, an embodiment of the Ineffable One, that is different from every other person’s, albeit minutely. Likewise the archetypal Forms — the gods — present a slightly different face to each of us, and may treat us differently. This does not invalidate the concept of the genome or of the archetypal realm, but we must understand it as an abstraction from a population of genotypes rather than as an independent essence.

Contemporary biology defines species in terms of populations rather than in terms of essences, and so we understand the evolution of species in terms of changing populations. At any given time, a small subset of the possible genotypes are participated by living, interbreeding individuals, and these define the species’ genome at that time. As individuals are born and die, the set of participated genotypes changes and with it the species’ genome. In the case of *Homo sapiens*, as we are born and die, and the population of participated genotypes changes, so also the human genome changes, and with it the archetypal Forms. So in contrast to Platonic tradition, the archetypal Forms are not eternal, they evolve in tandem with our species. Of course, they change very slowly — at evolutionary timescales — and phenomenologically they are unchanging.

This incursion of Becoming into the realm of ideal Being may strike you as a fundamental betrayal of Platonism, but it offers some intriguing possibilities. The gods evolve, essentially by treating each of us a little differently. As we thrive or not as embodied beings in the contemporary world, we cast our votes for the future evolution of the gods, each of us contributing in a minute but essential way. So in

4 Plotinus, 7.8.13.50.

answer to the question of why the Forms proceed into embodiment, we may answer that it is to enable their own evolution. Therefore, from this perspective, matter and the realm of Being are not unfortunate degenerations of ideal Being, but rather means to its perfection, its entelechy, the *omega point*, if such exists.

Nevertheless, evolution is slow. E. O. Wilson estimates that it takes about 100 generations for noticeable genetic change, which coincidentally is about one astrological age, approximately 2200 years. We may indeed perceive changes in the archetypes as we have passed from the Age of Aries to the Age of Pisces, beginning about 2000 years ago, and now slouch toward the Age of Aquarius. Despite this evolution, we are genetically nearly identical to the first modern humans, who emerged 150 to 200 thousand years ago. For at least 95% of this time our ancestors were hunter-gatherers; this is *Homo sapiens'* environment of evolutionary adaptedness, the environment to which our genome is adapted. The phylogenetic destiny we are fulfilling is continuous with theirs. Their gods are also our gods, but we must reconcile the demands of these gods with our post-industrial civilization. Theurgy is the key, but more on that later.

Evolutionary Jungian psychology also illuminates the nature of daimons and their place in Neoplatonism, which I think is quite important. Jung's key insight was that a daimon is an unconscious *complex*. Popularly, psychological complexes are supposed to be pathological, but in fact they are normal and necessary components of the personal unconscious, for a complex adapts a transpersonal archetype to an individual person's life and environment. Complexes form through the associative processes of similarity and contiguity as an archetype is activated repeatedly or in emotionally charged situations. Thus they incorporate layers of personal material around an archetypal core. They are in the lineage of a god, its *seira*.

Jung stressed that complexes can behave as autonomous personalities, which is why they are experienced as daimons. When a complex is activated by a conditioned or unconditioned releasing stimulus it elaborates the perceptual-motivational-behavioral structure of the archetype it serves in an individualized way. An activated complex governs a person's perception, motivation, and behavior, and may be experienced consciously as *possession*. The change in personality is often apparent to other people. We may wonder, "What *got into* him?" The answer is: a daimon.

IV. Implications for Science

I will turn now to some of the implications for contemporary science of this interpretation of Neoplatonism.

It is well established that certain numbers and geometrical forms are archetypal, perhaps because they are the psychical correlates of neurodynamical processes. In any case, certain mathematical objects are psychologically potent and full of life. They are qualities as well as quantities, and I think this is part of the reason scientists prefer certain mathematical formulations of their ideas over others; they have more inherent meaning and significance. Scientists should be aware of this qualitative aspect. First, because the archetypal character of some ideas may bias us toward them (for better or worse). Second, because it will help us understand the unconscious wellsprings of scientific hypotheses. And third, because an archetypally formulated scientific theory, when confirmed empirically, will be a richer, more significant, more artistic theory, a contemporary Pythagorean philosophy of nature, better able to capture the imagination of lay people as well as scientists.

This will be a step toward a truly comprehensive scientific understanding of nature, uniting the physical and the phenomenological, which is regularly neglected. Wolfgang Pauli, one of the founders of

quantum mechanics and also an analysis of Jung, called for “a future description of nature that uniformly comprises physis and psyche.” Accomplishing this would require investigating “the archetypal *background of scientific terms and concepts*.” He also proposed that in the future the only acceptable science would be “the one that recognizes both sides of reality — the quantitative and the qualitative, the physical and the psychical — as compatible with each other, and can embrace them simultaneously.”

When modern science first emerged in the seventeenth century, it adopted a number of ideas from Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism, in particular, the idea that nature obeys mathematical laws. Unfortunately, these ideas were imported into a mechanical philosophy, which understood the natural world as a machine obeying mechanical forces, rather than as a living organism with a soul, as in Neoplatonism. Mathematical relations were abstract, perhaps revealing the ingenuity of God, but not spiritually meaningful in themselves. Thus nature was a soulless resource with no spiritual value, only a pragmatic, monetary utility.

Perhaps in the future, by attuning ourselves to the archetypal character of our relation to the rest of nature, we may re-attune ourselves to these other values. Perhaps, as individual souls within the World Soul we may experience more directly our connection to all of Nature, and treat her with more respect.

V. Individuation & Theosis

The central focus and original purpose of Jungian psychology is not an intellectual understanding of the archetypes; rather it is *therapeia* for the psyche: cure and care of the soul. Fundamental to this is *individuation*, the lifelong process of psychological integration, thereby consciously fulfilling one’s individual destiny. This is accomplished by consciously engaging with the archetypes and individual complexes — that is, with the deities and daimons — and ultimately by seeking to know the Archetypal Self in the only way possible, by conscious identification. In this way, the conscious ego seeks to assimilate itself to the God Image, which constitutes *theôsis* or deification.

Individuation is especially imperative in the second half of life, for the human life cycle has two principal phases: procession and return. The first half of life focuses on procession from The One — the genome — into embodiment; this is the phase in which we become distinct physical beings with well differentiated egos, and focus on embodied activities, such as career and family. The second half of life should turn back toward its source, The One, shifting its focus away from embodiment toward the archetypal realm. By situating it within the destiny of humankind, an individual’s life acquires transpersonal meaning and significance. As Hierocles says, “One must become a man first, then a god.”⁵ How can Neoplatonic practices promote individuation?

VI. Practice

Thanks to the work of Pierre Hadot and others, it is now widely recognized that ancient philosophy was a way of life, and not merely an intellectual exercise. Therefore I would like to say a few words about the *practice* of Neoplatonism in a contemporary context, about Neoplatonism as a valuable *living* philosophy. This value resides, I think, more in the practices of Neoplatonism than in its doctrines, important though these are. These practices are the means by which we align our conscious choices and actions with the forces of the cosmos. From the perspective of evolutionary Jungian psychology, we are fulfilling our role in the phylogenetic destiny of humankind. Therefore let me now turn to theurgy and its contemporary practice.

5 Proem 4.

Modern psychologists as well as ancient philosophers acknowledge the importance of dreams, but also the reveries that arise from the liminal states at the borders of sleep. Synesius wrote, “Before all else we ought to seek to know the sacred speech of dreams, for it comes from us, is within us, and is the special possession of the soul of every one of us.” Dreams may reveal the developmental processes at work in one’s unconscious mind, so one can engage in them more consciously, and dreams can inspire scientific discoveries. Many of you know the story of how the structure of the benzene ring was revealed to the chemist August Kekulé in a reverie. Aside from recording and reflecting on our spontaneous dreams, they may be elicited through the ancient practice of *incubation*, but I there is not time to discuss it here.

We know from Neoplatonic theurgical practices, as well as from analogous practices in Tibetan Buddhism and other traditions, the importance of signs and symbols — of *sunthêmata* and *sumbola* — for connecting with the archetypal and daimonic realms. Jung also stressed the importance of symbols to the *transcendent function*, which mediates between the conscious and unconscious minds. Some of these symbols are inherent in the archetypal Forms; they are the *innate releasing mechanisms* or *unconditioned sign stimuli* of our phylogenetic behavioral adaptations. Others — perhaps most — are cultural or even personal; they are mediated by complexes, that is, by the daimons born of socially-conditioned individual development. The former reside in the collective unconscious, the latter in the personal unconscious. Both may appear in dreams and reveries, but can also be used in more active theurgical practices.

One such practice is *sustasis*, that is, a meeting or liaison, with a deity or daimon. Stated in these terms, it sounds like a superstitious, atavistic practice, but it facilitates conscious, proactive interaction with the archetypes and complexes, which are otherwise unconscious until they manifest on their own conditions. The *sustasis* is based on two facts: first, that most archetypes and complexes behave as autonomous personalities, and, second, that archetypes and complexes can be activated by appropriate use of symbols. By these means one can consciously, actively negotiate with an archetype or complex, that is, with a deity or daimon.

But why, in this day and age, would we wish to do so? Jungian psychologists stress that the repression of archetypal intent results in neurosis and even psychosis. The more they are repressed, the more primitive their expression when they finally erupt: possession in a negative sense. On the other hand, we cannot “act out” paleolithic behavioral patterns in the modern world. But by conscious negotiation with these unconscious forces, we can satisfy their needs in a manner appropriate to contemporary society. They represent aspects of the phylogenetic destiny of humankind and manifestations of the life force, which can be recruited as familiar spirits — *paredroi* — to facilitate conscious participation in Providence. Thus the *sustasis* is a practical method of living more consciously in accord with our human nature and negotiating unconscious impediments. In Jungian psychology it is known as *active imagination*.

One application of the *sustasis*, which is especially valuable for scientists and other creative people, is a liaison with a source of inspiration and strength, a Muse or Hero. In Jungian terms, this is the *Anima* in a man and the *Animus* in a woman. These terms refer to the contrasexual archetype and the complexes it engenders, which develop as a complement to a person’s conscious sexual psychology. Therefore it holds talents and abilities that are poorly developed in our conscious personalities. The Anima or Animus is the archetype that is closest to consciousness, and therefore it can function as a psychopomp, or soul-guide, to the archetypal realms. Traditionally many men have invoked their Anima as Muse to inspire them with nonrational insights, which are essential to scientific and technical innovation; and as women move into traditionally male occupations, such as science and technology, they may be aided by the strength and fortitude granted by their Animus as Hero.

VII. Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe that the living heart — the *soul*, if you will — of Neoplatonism is its contemplative and theurgical practices, which enable us to live more consciously in conformity with divine Providence, and to consciously fulfill the phylogenetic destiny of humankind. Understanding these practices scientifically does not diminish their effectiveness; quite the contrary, it provides a basis for improving them. This understanding may require us to revise some fundamental Neoplatonic doctrines, but we should not shy away from this because doctrines are a means to an end, and practice is primary. In this way Neoplatonism will continue as a *living* spiritual tradition.