

PLOTINUS VS. IAMBlichUS:
IN DEFENSE OF THEURGIC PRAXIS OVER MYSTICAL UNION

by

John Powell Barksdale IV

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Designation of
Honors in Philosophy

Florida Atlantic University

Boca Raton, Florida

November 2019

PLOTINUS VS. IAMBlichUS:
IN DEFENSE OF THEURGIC PRAXIS OVER MYSTICAL UNION

by

John Powell Barksdale IV

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Marina Banchetti, Department of Philosophy, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Department of Philosophy and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in Philosophy Designation.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Marina Banchetti, Ph D.
Thesis Advisor

Clevis Headley, Ph D.
Thesis Committee

Adam Bradford, Ph D.
Chair, Philosophy Department

Michael J. Horswell, Ph D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of
Arts and Letters

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude and appreciation to my thesis advisor, Dr. Marina Banchetti for her continued support of my work over the past year. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my dear friend and fellow student W. M. Coombs for all his help with editing and workshopping my ideas.

ABSTRACT

Author: John Powell Barksdale IV
Title: Plotinus vs. Iamblichus: In Defense of Theurgic Praxis
Institution: Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Marina Banchetti
Degree: Honors in Philosophy Designation
Semester: Fall 2019

In the Neoplatonic tradition, two figures stand in stark contrast to each other, Plotinus and Iamblichus. Plotinus's cosmology lends itself to his philosophical goal of unification with the platonic One. In doing so he requires the philosopher to remove themselves from common life and eschew matter as the source of evil and become contemplative and solitary. To become one with the One and in doing so, to become god. This lofty goal is, I argue undermined by its very solitude and austerity, it lacks human compassion and communal consideration. Iamblichus on the other hand, meets these goals with his philosophy of theurgy, and his assertion on the position of the soul in the cosmos as mediator enables the theurgic praxis to benefit world.

DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this manuscript to my teacher Christopher Murphy, through who's guidance I first learned of all that the ancient philosophers had to offer. Plato writes "*...we may admit no poetry into our city save hymns to the gods and praises of good men...*" And give praise to a good man is what I hope I have done here.

I also dedicate this work to my parents Rosa and John Barksdale who have been patient with me in my pursuit of To Agathon

PLOTINUS VS. IAMBlichUS:
IN DEFENSE OF THEURGIC PRAXIS OVER MYSTICAL UNION

I. Introduction	1
II. Plotinus	3
1. The Hypostasis	3
2. The One	4
3. Nous.....	4
4. The All.....	5
5. The Soul and Matter	6
6. Virtue and Practice	9
7. Beauty.....	12
8. Gnosis and Henosis	14
III. Iamblichus	17
1. The First Principles.....	18
2. The Gods	21
3. Archangels and Angels.....	23
4. Daemons and Heroes	24
5. The Soul.....	27
6. On The Methods of Theurgy	29
7. Prayer.....	30

8. Offerings	32
9. Invocation	33
10. Divination	36
11. The Personal Daemon.....	38
IV. Conclusion.....	40
Bibliography	43

I. Introduction

When considering Neoplatonic philosophy, we are faced with two giants that stand in some sense in opposition to each-other. These are Plotinus, who espoused a philosophy of contemplation that lead to mystical unification with the platonic Good, and Iamblichus who upheld a union of philosophy and ritual meant to elevate the soul through theurgy and eventually divinize it.. One may consider the main contributions of these two philosophers to be starkly opposed. Plotinus eschewed the material that would be necessary for the ritual and religiosity with which Iamblichus worked. Similarly, Iamblichus would have regarded Plotinus's views of the gods as being atheistic in nature.

In this work I intend to accomplish two things. First, I aim to compare the philosophical and cosmological writings of Iamblichus and Plotinus to make their differences clear. Second, I will assess which of these systems may hold more merit and relevance for our current time. I argue that, ultimately, Iamblichus's philosophy of theurgy, with its religiosity and ritual practice, has not only outlasted the more austere and meditative aspects of the philosophy of Plotinus, but that the implications found in Iamblichus's work are entirely more applicable and useful in our modern context. I will argue that theurgy as a philosophical system has more relevant moral and ethical implications; its praxis suggests that humans have an ethical obligation to serve as caretakers to the world and agents in its total ascent toward the Good.

To accomplish these tasks, I will begin with an overview of the philosophy of Plotinus, including his first principles and philosophical goals, then move on to a comparison with Iamblichus's first principles and methodologies, and close with my arguments in favor of Iamblichus's system of theurgy.¹

¹ The primary pieces of writing I will be sourcing for my work will be Plotinus's *Enneads* translated by Stephen MacKenna and B.S. Page and Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis* translated by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillion, and Jackson P. Hershbell. I will also sparingly reference Iamblichus's *De Anima* translated by John F. Finamore and John M. Dillon and Gregory Shaw's "Theurgy and the Soul"

II. Plotinus

The Hypostasis

Plotinus' *Enneads* relate a system of philosophy that represents an extension of the work of Plato. Plotinus sees his work as a natural exposition of concepts that manifest in the Platonic Dialogues. Throughout his writing Plotinus argued for the existence of three main (and some secondary) *hypostases*. This concept is central to the *Enneads*. A hypostasis can be understood as a first principle; the things from which our world is generated. The language used can often be metaphorical and varied depending on whether logic or morality is being addressed. For example, Plotinus will use the term "The One" to refer to the Monad, the highest hypostasis when speaking logically, and "The Good" to refer to the same hypostasis if speaking morally.

These three initial hypostasis are as follows; The One, Nous², and The Soul. Each has a function of *emanation*, where the creative power of the first flows out of it by nature of its perfection and generates the second etc. Exposition on these first principles is necessary as they were intimately tied to the goals of Plotinus's teachings. Beginning with The One each shall be considered.

² Nous has been translated by MacKenna as "Divine Mind" and by Armstrong as "Intellect" I will be using the Greek term "Nous" to refer to this hypostasis as it encompasses each of these.

The One

Plotinus's first hypostasis is called The Good or The One. It is also called The Father or sometimes just "He". The One is the author of reality and is, therefore, also called God. Its existence is necessary for the existence of any other being, form or concept. It is simple, self-contained, unmoving, unified and at once the source of all things. The unity of The One is necessary because, as Plotinus argues, without unity things cease to be. He writes, "Deprived of unity a thing ceases to be what it is called..."³. It is clear that it is not just a name that is lost when unity is lacking, but the very reality of the thing, thus no thing can exist without the presence of the first hypostasis.

Plotinus describes the Good by saying that "What He is, He is not because He could not be otherwise but because being so is best."⁴ The Good is "...the constitution of all things, the wellspring and first cause of all Act: whatsoever in other entities is the nature of Good"⁵. It is made clear then that The Good is the source of being, as well as the source of the moral action of all things toward the Good. The appellation 'the Good' is fitting because it is at once the source of virtue as well as its apex.

Nous

From the emanation of The One comes the Nous, which Plotinus has also called Divine Mind, The Intellectual Principle and The Dyad. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to it

³ *Ennead* 6.9.1

⁴ *Ennead* 6,8,10

⁵ *Ennead* 1,7,1

as Nous. Plotinus uses Aristotle's logic to define the existence of the Nous, when he writes that "Everything moving has necessarily an object toward which it advances."⁶ This means that The One cannot move and only acts by way of its existence implying its emanation, whereas the Nous is a product of the unfailing self-intention of The One. Furthermore, "...all that is fully achieved engenders, therefore the eternally achieved engenders eternally an eternal perfect being. At the same time, the offspring is always minor.... The greatest, later than divine unity [The One] must be Divine Mind."⁷

The All

It must be said that the All is called a hypostasis by MacKenna but not by others who study Plotinus and, most notably, not even by Plotinus himself. Plotinus identifies his three principle hypostases as the One which via emanation engenders Divine Mind, engenders the All-Soul, or the higher part of soul, which then engenders Matter and thus creates its complement. The All, which may be called a secondary hypostasis, exists in two parts and is at the same time unified. They are The Authentic All, a metaphysical principle and The Visible Universe, which rests upon the prior. These distinctions are made clearer in the tractate "Nature, Contemplation and the One" in which Plotinus speaks on the visible aspect of the All, its lower manifestation as Nature, the visible world and further still the cosmos. In this tractate Plotinus even identifies the All-soul as the mother of Nature⁸. Nature is a Soul, the offspring of the All-Soul, but unlike the All-Soul or the partible souls, it does not have

⁶ *Ennead* 5,1,6

⁷ *Ennead* 5,1,6

⁸ *Ennead* 3,8,4

tendency upward toward Nous, or downward toward Matter. As Nature it is to be a space for the inhabitation of the world. In its higher manifestation, it is to be a place in which Soul can be. The All is metaphorically the mother of Soul, and its father is the Nous.

The Soul and Matter

Plotinus is perhaps most concerned with what is to be considered the lowest first principle proper, the Soul. The Soul as seen in the tractate ‘The Three Initial Hypostases’ as the author of all life, and to bestow life is its function, as Plotinus says: “let every soul recall then that at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things...itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion...”⁹ The term “the soul” is used because Plotinus reasons that all souls are one. Unity is a necessity of any first principle, but the soul must be a median between the world of multiplicity and the unity of the higher principles. The united essence of the soul is in all bodies, though due to embodiment it is still able to generate a different experience for each. Plotinus does not differentiate between different ‘classes’ of souls for humans versus non-human animals receiving soul or vegetable matter and so on. Rather, if it is alive it receives soul to the degree that it can; humans being able to receive soul more fully than plants, for example. I will however be focusing on soul, as it moves from human experience to the divine as this is the basis for Plotinus’s work.

There are two parts of the soul that Plotinus is referring to, although throughout his work it may be difficult to distinguish which he is referring to at all times. The soul that is

⁹ *Ennead* 5,1,1

unified, what may be called the *authentic soul* is the All-Soul, this is the soul that is contemplating its “father” and this is the “vision” that we must all mount to according to Plotinus, because in this recalling of the higher soul, from our perspective in the partible world, would mean that we distance ourselves from “admiring the pursuit of the external”¹⁰. This pursuit is what “...has brought the souls to forget the father, God...”¹¹. This forgetting is the cause of the second or lower soul, also called *the complement* due to it being coupled-soul with body. As the second primary hypostasis the cosmic soul emanates, its action is to create. In its creation of all life, the soul also generates Matter. Matter creates a problem for the soul as it distracts it and draws it away from its divine parents. When the soul should be contemplating the hypostasis of the intellect, instead it becomes drawn down into Matter. In the tractate ‘The Soul’s Descent Into Body’ Plotinus draws heavily on Plato’s concepts from the *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo*. The winged soul that Plato describes in the *Phaedrus* is the Celestial Soul, and the failing of the wings in the *Phaedrus* the cause for the soul’s embodiment. Plotinus agrees with Plato’s assessment of the embodiment of the soul. Where in the *Phaedo* Plato calls the body a tomb, similarly Plotinus states, “Everywhere we hear of it as in bitter and miserable duration in body, a victim to troubles and desires and fears and all forms of evil, the body is prison or its tomb, the cosmos its cave or cavern.”¹²

This disdain for embodiment was a product of his conception of Matter as a sort of anti-hypostasis, and Plotinus goes to great lengths to speak on Matter as a metaphysical principle of Evil, due to its distance from the hypostasis and its function to embody the

¹⁰ *Ennead* 5,1,1

¹¹ *Ennead* 5,1,1

¹² *Ennead* 4,8,3

forms. It must be remarked that Matter has two kinds, a divine matter, and a lower matter. The existence of these two seems contradictory at first and needs elaboration. Divine Mind is engendered by the One. As was stated, the Soul as a unified principle is engendered by Divine Mind. Since within Divine Mind there exists all the Ideas which through the creative power of the Soul are engendered down into this the partible world, encapsulated by nature, then there must be, just as there is the divine soul and the complement, a divine mirror of matter in the Divine Mind, just as there is matter which the soul and the forms embody down below. It is almost heretical in the context of his own system for Plotinus to suggest that there may be a divine form of Matter, but if he did not concede this point then there would be absence in the Divine Mind and since what is divine must be whole and perfect there can be no absence.

Plotinus maintains that Matter, both as a metaphysical concept and as a reality in the partible world, is the cause of evil in the cosmos. It is described as chaotic to the order of the higher hypostasis¹³ and “unnecessary to the primal”. Yet The Divine Matter has a life defined and intellectual¹⁴ nevertheless; it is indefinite, even in the realm of the divine. This indefinite nature is actually compounded in matter as it reaches the partible world. In the Nous, was close to higher spheres and less indefinite. The Matter in the Nous seems to hold a middle ground, at once existing in the higher authentic existence while also being the source for the matter of the partible world, which is alien to the hypostasis and to the Ideas and thus an anti-hypostasis, that is, the unauthentic or non-existent. As it approaches

¹³ *Ennead* 2,4,,6

¹⁴ *Ennead* 2,4,6

the partible world, Matter then becomes more and more indefinite until it is but an image of an indefinite thing, an impure reflection of the indefinite, a shadow of darkness.

Given that Matter is evil for Plotinus, how does it affect the soul, which is in close proximity by embodiment to it? Plotinus writes that the soul falls from its divine origin; as it gives life, its principle task must be to give life into somewhere, thus the only thing that requires the ordering that life can provide is that which is in this partible world, devoid of life, order and light. This is Matter. The soul embodied brings divinity to that evil which is so far from the divine. While this is to the better of Matter one may say, it is doubtlessly to the detriment of the soul. The Soul becomes enamored with Matter and lost in its embodiment. Because the Ideas are able to manifest via the soul they enter into the partible world as shadows from the higher realm. Though the soul as complement is beset with Matter and finds itself in a sorry state, it can yet recall some of the Ideas. This is why we are able to have virtues at all down below, though they often manifest as something less than pure virtue. And what else is a less pure virtue than a vice? The soul's involvement of Matter is the source of our vices, corrupting the manifestations of the Ideas into this lower realm and confusing our souls into engaging in lust, cowardice, intemperance, injustice and the like.

Virtue and Practice

Given that vice and all evil are engendered by Matter and its alien nature from The One, how might we in the world below rectify our situations and regain the rightful divine nature of our souls? Plotinus has a method for our liberation from vice and Matter, it rests on a few concepts to be presently elucidated.

Like Plato, Plotinus relies on the practice of virtue to guide and liberate our souls. He writes: “Since Evil is here ‘haunting this world by necessary law’ and it is the Soul’s design to escape from Evil, we must escape hence...”¹⁵ We must as Plato says in *Theaetetus*, “...make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible and a man becomes like God when he is just and pious...”¹⁶ When Plotinus addresses virtue he speaks of two kinds; firstly the Civic virtues, which are Prudence, Fortitude, Sophrosone¹⁷, and Rectitude. But these alone will not turn the soul toward itself. If we are to become like the God, we must first use civic virtue to order and measure ourselves, as opposed to the unmeasured and chaotic vice. For in this measure there is measure like that of the *Nous*. True virtues are purifications of the soul’s evil it has taken up when it engaged in congress with matter. So Plotinus writes that the soul “would be good if it threw off the body’s moods and devoted its self to its own Act—the state of Intellection and Wisdom—never allowed the passions of the body to effect it—the virtue of Sophrosyne—knew no fear at the parting from body—the virtue of Fortitude—and if reason and the Intellectual-Principle ruled—in which the state of Righteousness. Such a disposition in the soul, become thus intellective and immune to passion, it would not be wrong to call likeness to God.”¹⁸ These are virtues manifesting in a soul as purifications from vice, and which turn the soul toward *Nous*, which is its proper action. By enacting these purificatory virtues the soul becomes less entrenched in matter and more like its divine parentage.

¹⁵ *Ennead* 1,2,1

¹⁶ Plato, *Theaetetus*. Levet translation 176b

¹⁷ Sophrosone is defined by J. A. K. Thomson as a temperate character possessing soundness of thought and mind

¹⁸ *Ennead* 1,2,3

Plotinus's second method to move the soul away from evil rests on Dialectic; the process of pronouncing the final truth upon the nature and relation of things.¹⁹ In the third tractate of the first *Ennead*, Plotinus illustrates three types of people that may attain virtue and engage in dialectic, though it is unclear if Plotinus means to say that only these types of people can achieve this. These are the Musician, the Lover and the Philosopher. Each of these is more apt to the life of contemplative-wisdom than the last. The musician needs to be led away from music and shown how all the harmony he makes is only relative to the harmony of the Ideas. The lover who the musician may become, needs to be shown that the beauty they are after in this world is but a shadow of true beauty of the Good. Finally, the philosopher, whose soul is said to already have wings (Plotinus references the *Phaedrus*) needs not to be disengaged with the world, but only needs to be instructed, the philosopher will be willing to move toward the soul and away from material things. Dialectic is essentially all disciplines and topics encompassed in philosophy, its business is coming to truth and discerning the truth by a means of division until a conceptual heart of the matter is reached. This heart is a Platonic form. And a form is in itself a unity which the philosopher can then contemplate. Dialectic is not to be thought of as a tool, and Plotinus distinguishes it from logic and the natural sciences. Dialectic is the function of the soul that leads it to knowledge of unified things: the forms. As an example, the lover in Socrates is led to the form of beauty in the *Symposium* through the dialectical means of the Priestess Diotima. It is with knowledge of that unity that the soul can turn to bridge the gap between the Civic and Purificatory virtues. In this way, Dialectic can be thought of as what allows us to reach

¹⁹ *Ennead* 1,3,6

true transcendental knowledge and enables us to turn towards the Purificatory Virtues that will aid our souls.

Beauty

Special attention is paid to the subject of beauty in the *Enneads*. Plotinus sees beauty as something that can lift the soul quickly toward truth, or utterly drag it into the mire. There are two tractates in which Plotinus addresses beauty, these are: ‘On Beauty’ and ‘On the Intelligible Beauty’. In the former, Plotinus begins addressing beauty in bodies, and argues against the Stoic doctrine of good proportion being the source of beauty in bodies, for if proportion were the only way something could be beautiful then the parts of a thing must also be beautiful and that means that things that are more singular, such as sunlight, lightning, virtues, actions and, of course, the higher forms and principles cannot be beautiful because they are not as complex.²⁰ Beauty is not something that originates in bodies, as is by now obvious for Plotinus, but in The Maker, that is, in The Good. Just as the soul knows virtue so too does it know beauty when it sees it and welcomes it, shrinking away from the ugly. Because the soul looks toward its source so too can it recognize that which comes from that same source, and it is the unity of this source that makes it beautiful. The *form* of beauty makes a body beautiful, not the mass and matter of the body, but that in-forming principle that unifies the parts. And the soul, as Plotinus says, looks at this and the sight delights in it. This is how the beauties of bodies are, and similarly the beauties of sense,

²⁰ *Ennead* 1,6,1

but Plotinus is not so interested in them as he is concerned with the beauties that lead the soul higher:

As it is not for those to speak of the graceful forms of the material world who have never seen them or known their grace—men born blind, let us suppose—in the same way those must be silent who upon the beauty of noble conduct and learning and all that order who have never cared for such things...²¹

These people who have seen the beauty in virtue and justice and morality will achieve in them the same delight that comes by way of seeing physical forms of beauty. These are called by Plotinus *true lovers*; those who are enamored by good character, virtue, and moral living, which are called the *invisible beauties*. This feeling of love, this *Dionysian exaltation* brought on by witnessing the noble actions, courageousness, morality and virtue in persons is sought by the soul because it is like the soul's true nature. The opposite, the ugliness in the soul is vice that drags the soul down into objects of sense and matter and mires the soul in the lower, outer, and dark that is *Matter*. Plotinus offers this tractate on beauty to illustrate a way that the soul can use the things of this world— objects of sense and lust and turn from them as much as is possible and instead see beauty in courage, temperance, wisdom and justice, good character and kind actions. After this understanding comes the next step: turning inward.

Plotinus assures us that true beauty must be followed upward from virtue to the splendor of The Good itself and says that this beatific vision is the greatest test of our soul and says that those who fail to attain it fail utterly. It is from here, again, that Plotinus urges the methods of contemplation and this time a solid self-analysis saying that if you look within yourself and don't find yourself yet beautiful you must scour and purify yourself so

²¹ *Ennead*, 1,6,4

that you are a fitting receptacle for the beauty of The Good. He uses the metaphor of carving a sculpture, straightening the crooked and smoothing what is rough and urges us to never stop working on our statue, that is never stop refining our character until "...there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine..."²² Once this self-mastery in the light of virtue is attained the person is ready for the next steps up toward The Good, to behold visions more beautiful and become godlike even more upon seeing them.

In 'On the Intellectual Beauty' Plotinus begins describing the realm of The Intellect in a surprising way — he states that the primary principle of beauty is Nous. It is by this beauty that the purified soul apprehends the Gods. Plotinus seems to be describing a vision of the intelligible world that he has attained. Plotinus calls the beauty of the Gods overwhelming and says that the Nous is so active in them that it is visible. They continually contemplate the things of higher heaven toward which they turn. The existence of the gods in heaven is one of Truth, for they see real being, not things of this world which are coming to be. They are complete in themselves, each of them being part and whole at once, in need of nothing and ceaselessly contemplating that from whence they came. The Gods abide in the Intellect and are never weary, and they perceive their own infinity.

Gnosis and Henosis

This vision is the one that Plotinus' system has us striving for after we are purified. Through our contemplation we seek to become like the Gods - eternal, wise, and beautiful. Here

²² *Ennead*, 1,6,9

Plotinus stresses that if we are going to aspire to be Platonists we should not, for example, think we can seek wisdom in logic, but know that wisdom is a Form and the Forms are realities and substances and are not abstractions. So, to be in the reality of the Gods we must not delve into what may be considered wise or beautiful in the world below but always seek the higher manifestation of philosophy and virtue. The work of such purification may be difficult but the end result of that work is knowledge of the Forms, the Gods, true knowledge of reality, *Gnosis*.

Further beyond this, the ultimate goal for Plotinus is *henosis*, or unification with the One. Of this Plotinus speaks very little admitting that, "...the Supreme is not to be made a common story, the holy things may not be uncovered to the stranger to any that has not himself attained to see."²³ And that it "was not a vision compassed but a unity apprehended"²⁴ This statement is important, it underscores the nature of *henosis* as much as can be spoken of; it is a unity apprehended, only after its occurrence, during its occurrence it is unity *attained*. Plotinus implies that the attainment of the sight of the One is also a unification with it. Filled with god, we "belong no longer to the order of the beautiful" and that we gone beyond the virtues, gone beyond the intellect and gone beyond all but that which we cannot go beyond. Unification with the One is the end goal of all virtue, contemplation, dialectic and philosophy.

Ultimately Plotinus's system is a form of Platonism taken to its austere conclusion. Plotinus advocates that philosophers make themselves alone to this world in their

²³ *Ennead*, 6,9,10

²⁴ *Ennead*, 6,9,10

aspiration toward the One. This implies an individualism to the Plotinian system of mysticism that may be ultimately insurmountable for a person. Plotinus's philosophy is highly complex, and it would take a great deal of study to fully grasp it, and much more time to apply its methods of dialectic and *theoria* to reach a mystical state of unification. But where Plotinus system falls short in the most egregious way, in my estimation, is in its individualism. Certainly it could be argued that one moves beyond that point in realizing the oneness of soul at the level of Nous, but there is never any motion to unify the rest of the world— save for perhaps coming down from the henostic state to write a book to attempt to point to this mystery. If indeed the soul is in a sorry state being in the world as Plotinus insists, then his system lacks an aspect of compassionate action towards helping others also escape this sorry state. I will argue that it is this compassion that Iamblichus introduces via theurgic practice and philosophy.

III. Iamblichus

The scant bit of information that we have on Iamblichus's life was for the most part compiled by Euanpus in his "lives of the philosophers and sophists". Although the date of his birth is uncertain, recent scholars have placed it at about 240 C.E.²⁵ We know that Iamblichus was born in Chalcis to a wealthy family (the name Iamblichus being a family name meaning literally *he is king*), which afforded him the means to study philosophy. Begin born into a priestly caste, Iamblichus was in a unique position when he began studying Plato. Iamblichus was making an attempt to merge Platonic mysticism with the Chaldean ritual work that he had grown up with — this philosophical system is what is called Theurgy, literally meaning *god-work*.

Theurgy as expounded on in Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* was his central contribution to Neoplatonism. Theurgy can be defined as using ritual, prayer, and sacrifices or offerings to draw the theurgist's soul and by extension the world closer to the divine. Iamblichus argued that through Theurgy not only are our souls able to reach salvation from the apparent suffering in this the partible world by realizing the embodiment of the divine, but we also deliver the rest of the world and realize our place as humans in the Platonic cosmos.

²⁵ Clarke, xix

With this in mind, Iamblichus has a system of cosmology that is much more complex than the tripartite system of Plotinus. Iamblichus's first principles were linked so that the lowest emanation of one was the highest emanation of the one below it, like a chain. For example, in Iamblichus' system, the One-being is the highest principle in the intelligible realm and the Demiurge is the lowest god in the intelligible realm, but the highest in the celestial realm. The metaphor of a chain is fitting because in order for theurgy to function in the way that Iamblichus espouses we must live in a sort of spiritual ecosystem in which there are no gaps. As he says in *De Mysteriis*:

These classes of being, then, bring to completion as intermediaries the common bond that connects gods with souls and causes their linkage to be indissoluble. They bind together a single continuity from top to bottom and render the communion of all things indivisible.²⁶

This continuity was necessary because, human souls exist in the partible world and thus are extremely limited while the One is all-powerful. The method of expressing that power is not by self-action for that would be opposing to the nature of the one, rather by its generation of other perfected beings. These are the Gods, the angels, the daimons, the heroes, and lowest, human souls which are the furthest from the One.

The First Principles

When Iamblichus writes on his first principles he does so utilizing the gods of the Egyptian pantheon, sticking to his guise of 'Abammon the priest' used in the writing *De Mysteriis*.²⁷

We assume then that in the description that Iamblichus gives in book eight is of what Clarke

²⁶ *De Mysteriis*. 1.5 17-18

²⁷ While some sources suggest that Iamblichus postulates a "One Beyond Being" these are referred to by Clarke *et al.* as 'pushing the text' *De Mysteriis*, 307 footnote 401

et al. call the One-Being. This One is called “the one god, prior cause even of the first god and king²⁸ remaining unmoved in the singularity of his own unity. For no object of intellection is linked to him or anything else.”²⁹ As such the one is called “a paradigm for the self-fathering self-generated and only fathered God”. Iamblichus’s One, like Plotinus’s One, is the most primary cause of all things and importantly the root cause of the “objects of intellection”, that is, the forms. For this reason, the One-being is considered the monad or highest point of the intellectual realm and is causally efficient, unlike the elusive One Beyond Being. The One-being is related to a supposed Egyptian deity Ikton³⁰ and to the Egyptian serpent deity Kmeph, who Clarke references as the Greek cosmic serpent³¹ eating its own tail in a motion of turning on itself. Regardless of these slight confusions within the text we have an image of a self-fathering unified One, referred to by two names of God and most strikingly of all, a method of worship to this the One, supreme deity in the Neoplatonic cosmology. The praxis for worship Iamblichus gives is silence. At first glance this seems odd, why would Iamblichus in his defense of Theurgy give a decidedly non-theurgic method of worship? Although Iamblichus never addresses this point in the text, it seems that to worship the highest most singular god, one must make one’s self singular and silent, in imitation of that highest deity who has no attributes, save its unity. In contrast, for Plotinus worship does not equal ascension and if we want to reach the one we must first move through the intellect and to the height thereof. For Iamblichus there is worship of the One

²⁸ the demiurge

²⁹ *De Mysteriis*, 307 261-2

³⁰ Ikton presents a difficulty given that according to Clarke *et. al.* there is no god referred to as Ikton in the Egyptian canon at all, the best that can be done at this point by scholars is to assume that Iamblichus is actually referring to sun god *Ihy*

³¹ *De Mysteriis*, 309 footnote 407

and therefore a kind of movement of the Theurgist closer to it, but not really a union in the same way that Plotinus suggests.

Despite this difference concerning union with the One both Iamblichus and Plotinus agree on the nature of the One, being singular, unified, self-fathering, etc. It is beyond this point that they become radically different. The next first principle in Iamblichus's cosmology is called in *De Mysteriis*, "...the demiurgic intellect...called Amoun in the Egyptian tongue"³² This god Amoun is identified by the Greeks as Zeus, who in the Neoplatonic scheme is called the *demiurgos ton halon*, the creator of the whole world, or rather of *wholes* — implying not just this world but the cosmos. This "Amoun-Zeus" is responsible for the work of creation and the divine mind that is capable of looking to the forms and applying them to the world to generate creation. In *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus refers to the *Phaedrus* when he calls the Intellect "leader and king of the realm of being and the art which creates the universe..."³³ This God is simultaneously identified as Ptah and Osiris because "he acquires other epithets in accordance with other powers and activities"³⁴. This God is the lowest being of the realm of intellect, the last first principle and thus the monad of the celestial realm also called the realm of Being, where exists the cosmos proper. Amoun-Zeus is a being that would be known to both the Egyptians and Greeks, as the highest god in their respective cosmologies — this is important because with this god can begin theurgy proper, one may perform the rites and offerings to this demiurgic power and so, via theurgy one may rise to meet it.

³² *De Mysteriis* 312, 264

³³ *De Mysteriis* 29, 22-3

³⁴ *De Mysteriis* 313 265

For Plotinus, this god did not exist, nor did any conception of the gods in the very religious way that Iamblichus saw them, so for this reason and others, theurgy was not possible in Plotinus's view. For Plotinus, this demiurge would have simply been Nous, the divine mind, yet not personified as a god as per Iamblichus.

The Gods

Iamblichus states at the outset of the first book of *De Mysteriis* that The Gods are the cornerstone of his system of theurgy; there must be Divine beings if one is to do their work. Plotinus did in-fact mention the Greek gods in his *Enneads* but these references were only metaphors or otherwise devices useful for the discussion of concepts, but for Iamblichus the gods were quite real, and necessary, cosmologically as were the entirety of the chain of beings descending from the One. When arguing against Porphyry who states that he “concedes the existence of the gods”³⁵ in *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus writes

...the contact we have with the divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all is separated from its object by some degree of otherness. But prior to that knowledge...there is the unitary connection with the gods that is natural and indivisible.³⁶

Iamblichus here argues that in-fact the essence of the gods divine power envelops us in our reality. Thus, we are in contact with the gods, we are filled with their divine presence and so we possess our very essence by the knowledge that there are gods. This “knowledge” of the gods is less of a learning and more of an innate idea.

³⁵ *De Mysteriis* 11, 7-8

³⁶ *De Mysteriis* 13 8-9

For Iamblichus, ascent is made possible by ritual praxis and one can, given the right circumstances, make contact with the gods via not only their omnipresent *dunamis* but in a very real way by their manifestation. Such manifestations are possibly the height of theurgic practice and are brought about not by the theurgist calling down the god but by the God bringing the theurgist up to them via divine will. Of this act Iamblichus writes: “It is by virtue of such will then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon Theurgists, summoning up their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them...”³⁷ This benevolence is the nature of the gods and its existence in the whole world makes the practice of Theurgy and connection to the One possible. It is the role of the gods to manifest the goodness of the One, and to make possible the human connection to it.

In contrast with this view, Plotinus saw the only real god as the One, although the Nous and the ideas were certainly divine, while Iamblichus states that the power of the gods permeates through our reality and allows us to know the divine via contact with them. Recalling a key difference between the two thinkers, Plotinus insists that each hypostasis must be reached via inward contemplation and outward askesis one by one, first the complement is subdued by the authentic soul. Next the authentic soul can contemplate its existence in the Nous. Then, once realized deep in meditative contemplation the soul can ascend toward henosis. For Plotinus, the soul is so divine that it has no need for the assistance of intermediaries such as the gods— in-fact Plotinus wrote multiple times that the goal of his philosophy is to *become god* via dialectical contemplation leading to ascension of the soul. Here we can see the fundamental split between the two philosophers in regards

³⁷ *De Mysteriis* 51, 41-2

to the nature of the One and its actions: Iamblichus uses the Gods and the rest of the chain of being to disseminate the power of the first principle, Plotinus establishes the concept of the outpouring of the One into the Nous as the manifestation of that same power.

The Archangels and Angels

Falling just below the gods in rank are the archangels and angels. Both of these divine beings are intimately connected with the gods, and often attend to the gods as their entourage³⁸ when they are evoked by the theurgist. Iamblichus speaks at length on archangels and angles in the second book of *De Mysteriis*, which is wholly devoted to the signs of manifestation of various intermediary beings to the theurgist. In this respect the manifestations of angels are constantly juxtaposed to that of the gods, as they are both very divine and in close proximity. The purpose of effecting these manifestations is the purification of the soul, as well as the ‘gifts’ they bestow upon the theurgist. Iamblichus explains that the manifestation of the gods will purify the soul of the theurgist completely while the manifestation of archangels will be anagogic, that is, they will move the soul upward toward the union with the gods. The angles are said to liberate the soul from the bonds of matter³⁹. The archangels will give to the theurgist good health and intellect and increasing vital power, but not in the wholly complete way that the gods do. The angels confer separate and partial goods; this is indicating that the angles can provide miracles for the theurgist

³⁸ *De Mysteriis* 101, 84

³⁹ *De Mysteriis* 95, 79

while archangels can do so but in a more holistic and complete way. Archangels are described as manifesting with a body of divine fire that is not suitable to human breathing, while angels leave the space temperate enough to be engaged with⁴⁰. Iamblichus writes that the soul of the theurgist receives from the archangels, "...a pure settled state, intellectual contemplation and stable power..." and "in the case of the angels, they obtain a rational wisdom, truth, pure virtue, a firm knowledge and a proportional order"⁴¹. While the purpose of these manifestations of intermediary beings will be addressed further later on it is sufficient to explain that the including of these beings by Iamblichus in the hierarchy is to further disseminate the power of the gods. The Angels act as messengers for the gods, just as the gods act as agents of the power of the One. Plotinus apparently did not at all recognize the existence of Archangels or Angels so no real commentary can be made in regard to his thoughts on the matter.

Daemons and Heroes

Iamblichus put a great deal of importance on daemons in his cosmology. The role of daemons is to act as an intermediary spirits that move the power of the gods into the material world. Iamblichus writes "By 'daemons' I mean the generative and creative powers of the gods in the furthest extremity of their emanations and in its last stages of division." And

⁴⁰ *De Mysteriis* 103-5, 86-7

⁴¹ *De Mysteriis* 105, 88

further their nature, “That of daemons is fit for finishing up and completing encosmic natures and it exercises oversight on each thing coming into existence...”⁴² So the cosmological function of the daemons was to act as the principle that was responsible for the actual creation of matter. The primary concern of daemons is this creative act, and this is why Iamblichus says in book two that the daemons confer upon the theurgist who evokes them goods of the body. The theurgist when having evoked the daemons is disposed to actions in accord with the nature of daemons, such as a desire for the realm of generation; a longing for nature and the fulfillment of the works of necessity⁴³.

There is a classification of daemons distinguished in three ways attributed to those who are sublunar⁴⁴. Namely, those of aerial daemons who are concerned with purification. Those of punitive or *kathodaimons* who are said to be near to the earth, they are concerned with punishment, often classed as leading the soul down into matter. And those who are closest to the sphere of the moon, they are concerned with the salvation of humans and are in-fact a distinct class of being known as heroes.⁴⁵ Heroes are considered closest to human souls but they are “produced according to principles of life among the gods”⁴⁶. These beings’ activities are more restricted than daemons as they are tasked with the organization and salvation of human souls, whereas daemons are more far reaching in the cosmos as they are tasked with uniting souls into bodies and putting soul into matter. Heroes are tasked with the purification of souls from matter. Heroes may be considered as

⁴² *De Mysteriis* 83, 67

⁴³ *De Mysteriis* 105, 88

⁴⁴ ‘Sublunar; refers to those daemons who are on the earth, in the sky under the earth, that the Theurgist may interact with easily due to close proximity, as opposed to say the Angels who are not within the sphere of the earth

⁴⁵ *De Mysteriis* 97, 80 see footnote 131

⁴⁶ *De Mysteriis* 83, 67

performing their own kind of theurgy, purifying human souls and in this way being helpful both to theurgists and to humankind as a whole.

The role of daemons in the second book of *De Mysteriis* can be described as difficult, or even as an impediment to the soul of the theurgist, who is trying to gain knowledge of the gods and do the work of the gods. However, it bears mentioning that daemons, while they could present a problem to the theurgist in the case of *kathodaimons*⁴⁷, are not an aberration or evil in totality. They are, according to Iamblichus, a necessary part of the cosmos. And the theurgist needs to work in the material world it is evident that they may play an important role. Without the activity of daemons there would be no inspiration for humans to work on the material world, nor indeed would there be any material world at all.

In *Enneads* three, book five Plotinus writes about daemons, or what he calls “celestials” and acknowledges that they are “...a step toward ourselves and stand between the divine and the human.”⁴⁸ This intermediary position is in accord with Iamblichus somewhat, although it is difficult to parse. However, what Plotinus is referring to when he says “Tutelary Spirit”⁴⁹ or *auto-daimon*⁵⁰ is more akin to the personal daemon that Iamblichus refers to in book nine of *De Mysteriis* which will be addressed later on. It will be sufficient to say here that the celestials of Plotinus are daemons, and act as intermediary spirits, but that daemons for Plotinus only play the tutelary role as opposed to a more cosmological one of generation of the material world. The heroes of Iamblichus are not recognized by

⁴⁷ Evil-spirits

⁴⁸ *Ennead* 3, 6

⁴⁹ *Ennead* 3, 4 “Our Tutelary Spirit”

⁵⁰ This term is confusing, as Plotinus never use it again, the translation to literally self-spirit may be referring to the agatho-daemon or guardian spirit that Plato refers to in the apology, ultimately this will be compared to the personal daemon of Iamblichus.

Plotinus by name; if there was such a role it would be subsumed in the Plotinian system by the tutelary spirit.

The Soul

The soul is for Iamblichus fully descended in matter. We are divine beings, the lowest of divine beings, but nevertheless divine. And just as we are in the world of generation we are responsible for the continued preservation of our world, and the cosmos. This is due to the nature of theurgy itself, and how we engage in it. Our souls are inclined toward the bodies we govern if we direct our activity or energy (*energia*) in that way. Shaw postulates a useful phrase to describe Iamblichus's method here: *energia* reveals *ousia*

⁵¹. That is to say that our activities reveal our being. In the case of daemons their activity is to weave the energy into matter, which would in turn allow us humans to work on the material world. The task of the theurgist then is to use matter to draw themselves up toward the gods, to use our powers in a cosmogenic function. The soul's function for Iamblichus was to participate in the sustaining of the cosmos, this was why our souls are divine *ones*, and yet are here in the world of generation. The human soul not engaging in its theurgic task is filled with *heterotes* — difference, far from the sameness of the gods, and the One. Iamblichus's doctrine is such that the soul has two essences, the activated one in the body and the pure unmoved one. These are not separate, as Plotinus would suggest, but bound together. This brings Iamblichus even more into a need for theurgy because our souls cannot be liberated in any way that is not causing us to revert anagogically to the divine, and

⁵¹ Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 133

since we are in the material world we must on some level utilize the things of this world to achieve salvation, so matter cannot be a source of evil.

Furthermore, in his treatise on the soul, *De Anima*, Iamblichus expounds on the reason our souls are here embodied:

For the soul that descends for the salvation, purification, and perfection of this realm is immaculate in its descent. The soul on the other hand that directs itself about bodies for the exercises and correction of its own character is not entirely free of passions and was not sent away free in it self. The soul that comes here for punishment and judgment seems to be somehow dragged and forced.⁵²

The former soul returned to incarnation in order to aid in salvation of the world. This is clearly the soul of the theurgist or what is hoped to be accomplished by theurgy in the soul. It is the theurgist then in soul and body who takes up the task of not only their own salvation, but through compassion, the salvation of the whole world of generation.

And should the theurgist perfect their practice they may ascend towards a spiritual evolution. Iamblichus illustrates this evolution as such: “And though the soul has to a lesser degree the eternity and unchanging life and full actuality, by means of the gods’ good will and the illumination bestowed by their light, it often goes higher and is elevated to a greater rank even to that of the angelic order.”⁵³ This single line illustrates one of the most profound concepts in Iamblichus’s doctrine: not only can the soul lift itself up to the gods, and even do seemingly miraculous things such as divination and divine possession, but moreover the theurgist is engaging in their own spiritual evolution, and changing their soul through the light of the divine into something more divine.

⁵² *De Anima* 380, 29

⁵³ *De Mysteriis* II.2 (60-70)

Plotinus saw the soul as being able to move up toward gnosis and henosis, something that Iamblichus did not see as possible, or even as the role of what the human soul is trying to accomplish. Only the most pure and advanced theurgists would be able to ascend to the level of becoming part of the angelic order, as the above passage suggests. The common human soul engaged in theurgy is simply trying to bring the light of the gods into the world so that the world may become better. The soul for Plotinus is engaged in a practice to better itself and raise itself up to the level of the gods, on an individual level, whereas the essence of the soul for Iamblichus is to act as a bridge between the world and the gods, to via god-work unify and bring the world closer to the gods and their goodness. To this point we shall consider the actions taken by the theurgist to reach that end and consider the methodology of theurgic praxis, recalling that for Plotinus none of these actions, save perhaps prayer, are ever considered in the *Enneads*.

On The Methods of Theurgy

Topics of theurgy itself are broken down to a few key components in *De Mysteriis*. These are prayer and worship, offerings to the Gods, evocations, and divination. These are the only theurgic rituals that Iamblichus speaks on, although we may postulate that there are more types of rituals that could be considered theurgic that he simply does not reference.

Prayer

We will begin with looking at what Iamblichus has had to say on prayer and worship. Piety was important for Iamblichus, this may have been in no small part due to the fact that he was trying to criticize what he had deemed as an impious shift in Greek thought.⁵⁴ That being said Iamblichus is advocating for theurgic prayer, which he lays out as:

I declare, then that the first degree of prayer is the introductory, which leads to contact and acquaintance with the divine; the second is conjunctive, producing union of sympathetic minds and calling forth benefactions sent down by the gods even before we express our requests, while achieving whole courses of action even before we think of them; the most perfect, finally, has as its mark ineffable unification, which establishes all authority in the gods and provides that our souls rest completely in them.⁵⁵

Our prayer according to Iamblichus the theurgist first, gains links and friendships with the divine, then what he calls the triple advantage this is: “illumination...the common achievement of projects” and finally “perfect fulfillment of the soul through fire”. Clarke points out that this fire is the Chaldean immaterial fire of the divine. Iamblichus states that no sacred act can take place without the supplications contained in prayers. The practice of prayer in some sense may have been the most quintessentially theurgic act (along with offerings perhaps). Indeed, in this beautiful passage Iamblichus further elaborates on the common effects of theurgic prayer:

Extended practice of prayer nurtures our intellect, enlarges very greatly our soul’s receptivity to the gods, reveals to men the life of the gods, accustoms their eyes to the brightness of the divine light, and gradually brings to perfection the capacity of our faculties for contact with the gods, until it leads us up to the highest level of consciousness also, it elevates gently the dispositions of our minds, and communicates to us those of the gods, simulates persuasion and communion and indissoluble friendship, augments divine love, kindles the divine element in the soul, scours

⁵⁴ *De Mysteriis*, xxix

⁵⁵ V.26 (238)

away all contrary tendencies within it, casts out from the aetherial and luminous vehicle surrounding the soul everything that tends to generation brings to perfection good hope and faith concerning the light... it renders those who employs prayers, if we may so express it, the familiar consorts of the gods.⁵⁶

In this way we may see the effects of prayer, and the nature of its importance to theurgy, for one must suppose that in its position our souls must be re-accustomed to the light of the gods. Similarly, we may see that this type of prayer creates a unique kind of catharsis, that is a purification from vice, the *scouring away of contrary tendency*. Ultimately it is prayer that is necessary for the theurgist, who in their goal of unification with the divine current and engagement of demiurgic activity wishes to be elevated from their vice and even from the constraints of the body, *accustoming the eyes, elevating the mind*. In this way prayer becomes a theurgic ritual microcosm, completing the work that theurgy espouses is the goal of human incarnation all on its own.

Plotinus references prayer in the first tractate of the fifth *Ennead* when he explains how The Intellect comes into being. He writes “In venturing an answer, we first invoke God Himself, not in loud word but in that way of prayer which is always within our power, leaning in soul toward Him by aspiration alone towards the alone.”⁵⁷ In this passage Plotinus calls that stillness, both in mind of contemplation and of body in virtue the aspiration of the alone toward the alone. This ‘prayer’ therefore is not anything like that which Iamblichus is referring to in theurgic practice. Rather, Plotinus’s prayer is one of stillness and silence which would for Iamblichus only apply to the One.

⁵⁶ *De Mysteriis* V.26 (239-40)

⁵⁷ *Ennead* 5,1,6

Offerings

Following closely to prayer is something that Iamblichus wrote quite extensively on and requiring a lot of consideration: the nature of sacrifice and offerings to the Gods. In the process of speaking on offerings the question that Porphyry asks is a good one: “Why, if the gods do not have bodies that would accept our offerings do we make physical even living offerings to the gods?” To answer this Iamblichus states that sacrifices create an affinity or friendship with the gods, and binds us, as their creations, to them. He goes on to say that in this way of sympathetic offering, the things offered, called *sunthemata* (tokens) have received purely the intention of the creator. And it is through this sympathetic intermediary offering that we forge a relationship with the divine principle offered to. The very cause of the efficacy of sacrifice is given to the encosmic divine, these being the gods closest to humans, whom we may say are embodied in the planets. These are linked to the demiurge, and it is in from this cause of generation that sacrifices provide benefit to all beings in the realm of generation. Iamblichus says that this sacrifice generates “one single bond of friendship (with the gods) embracing the totality of beings, effecting this bond through the ineffable process of communion.”⁵⁸ This special type of providing offerings may through sympathy benefit all of the realm of generation. In this way Iamblichus notes that souls “bring nature to completion”, as “all things are similarly nourished by their causes”.⁵⁹

The superior classes of beings are impassive, that is without passion, so they cannot desire our offerings. However, in what may be one of the most blatant expositions of an

⁵⁸ *De Mysteriis* V.10 (211)

⁵⁹ *De Mysteriis* V.10 (214)

actual theurgic ritual, Iamblichus describes making offerings into a ritual fire. This fire consumes all the offerings and so Iamblichus argues that the daimons and gods cannot take pleasure in the physical offerings themselves. Yet "...it is pleasing to them that matter is eliminated by fire..."⁶⁰ and so they render us also impassive — free of passions, and also assimilating what is in us to the gods. The function of sacrifice is not to make ourselves more like the god we are offering to, and also to show our piety toward them. As Iamblichus writes: "... the fire of our realm, imitating the activity of the divine fire, destroys all that is material in the sacrifices, purifies and renders them suitable, through purification of their nature, for consorting with the gods, and by the same procedures liberated us from the bonds of generation and makes us like to the gods..."⁶¹

Invocation

In his defending of invocation Iamblichus touched on two pivotal points for a Neoplatonist, these are fate, and the problem of *evil*. And so, in our overview of Iamblichus's defense of invocation these points too will be covered.

The argument against invocation is such: "How can we come to invoke the gods as our superiors and yet give them orders as if they were our inferiors?"⁶² To this question Iamblichus affirms the obvious the gods are far superior to us. In answering this question Iamblichus presents the doctrine of the double aspect of theurgy and of the soul. Theurgy is performed by humans to preserve our rank in the universe, yet in its control of divine

⁶⁰ *De Mysteriis* V.11 (215)

⁶¹ *De Mysteriis* V.12 (216)

⁶² *De Mysteriis* IV.1 (181)

symbols it raises the practitioner up to union with the gods, enabling us to assume the mantle of the gods. In this way the invoker of the gods is both a human yet becomes by virtue of the hieratic ritual and ineffable symbols akin to one of the gods.

As the gods are superior to us and will benefit the theurgist, take pity on the priests and their families and students. Iamblichus writes:

The role of the median classes of beings (presumed heroes and daimons and angels) is to preside over the process of judgment. They advise s to what is to be done, and from what one should abstain; they co-operate with just actions, while they hinder unjust ones, and in the case of many who attempt unjustly to appropriate what does not belong to them, or injure someone improperly, or even to kill them, they cause then to suffer the sort of things that they were planning to inflict on others.⁶³

Here Iamblichus, prior to his answering this first question on invocation, explains the nature of fate in the generative world or what would be called Ananke⁶⁴. The above seems to occur to everyone, but Iamblichus seems to make the same argument in slightly different terms to illustrate that even in the case of a theurgist who is assumed to be doing the work of the gods, that should they commit a terrible act then “the harm resulting from that wicked act will appropriately recoil upon him.”⁶⁵

The next question posed against Iamblichus on invocation is “why the entities summoned require the officiator to be just, while they themselves put up with being bidden to commit injustice?”⁶⁶ Iamblichus first takes issue with the term “behave justly” and points out that justice is different for humans than it is for the gods. Here Iamblichus is making a philosophical point rather than a theurgic one: humans only look at our short lives and in this way we must account for being just, whilst The Gods take into consideration the whole

⁶³ *De Mysteriis* IV.1 (182)

⁶⁴ Ananke defined as the necessity and inevitability of fate

⁶⁵ *De Mysteriis* IV.1 (182)

⁶⁶ *De Mysteriis* IV.4 (186)

life of our soul and all its pervious lives. Thus, Iamblichus says that if someone invokes a God or higher class of being to send punishment upon someone they would not do so outside of the realm of what is just, instead they take into account our previous offenses. Iamblichus says, “it is only in failing to appreciate this that men consider themselves to but unjustly subjected to the misfortunes they suffer.”⁶⁷ This too illustrates the role of fate in the Iamblichean system. In a typically Platonic response to the question, Iamblichus reminds us that the gods are incapable of doing any evil; they by their very essence are good, and therefore cannot commit any injustice.

From this point in speaking on injustice Iamblichus goes on to speak on the nature of evil, which must recall the chain of the cosmos that was presented before. Iamblichus postulates that evil daimons can masquerade as gods to the untrained — which is most likely why he was so exhaustive in his descriptions of the manifestations of the unseen world in book two. He further references oracles when he says that

if we observe falsehood being uttered in them, we refer to another kind of cause, namely that of daimons....unjust and base deeds are committed by daimons of evil nature. And that which is entirely consistent and harmonious with itself and always identical with itself benefits the superior beings while what is contradictory and unharmonious and never in the same state is most proper to daemonic condition...⁶⁸

These passages illustrate how evil comes into the world, how evil may be worked in the world and the very nature of the daimons. For although the nature of daimons themselves is simply to cause generation and inspire humans to work in the material world, they themselves are not the cause of evil per-se. They may end up acting out evil things due to their natures, but it is sorcery and injustice of men that bring disharmony into the world, and this

⁶⁷ *De Mysteriis* IV.4 (187)

⁶⁸ *De Mysteriis* IV.7 (191)

is why often times Iamblichus will pit sorcerers against theurgists, as the goal of a sorcerer is to simply manipulate the cosmos to achieve a certain end. The goal of the theurgist, on the other hand, is to benefit the world, through anagogic activity act in accord with the will of the gods.

Divination

On divination Iamblichus writes “Divination is accomplished by divine acts and signs, and consists of divine visions and scientific insights.”⁶⁹ He postulates that all information concerning our bodies, souls, and all things in the universe is foreknowledge set down by the gods. Should the theurgist be able to access this *pleroma*, the totality of existence, then the future could be divined. Divination is said to occur upon awakening, in a hypnogogic state when the person hears a voice of the spirits guiding them, a reference to Socrates’s hearing a voice of his *agathodaimon* in the *Phaedrus*. In sleep, Iamblichus postulates that we are freed from our bodies, and it is in this way and for this reason that divination in sleep is possible at all. This type of divination unites the soul by intellectual activity to the universals from which it had been separate⁷⁰.

Iamblichus also writes on divine possession occurring again in hypnogogic states, or in complete wakefulness. He further clarifies concerning possession as such:

For they have subjugated their entire vehicle to the gods who inspire them, either they exchange their human life for the divine, or they direct their own life toward the god; they neither act according to sensation nor are they awake in the manner of those who have their sense aroused...⁷¹

⁶⁹ *De Mysteriis* III.1 (101)

⁷⁰ *De Mysteriis* III.3 (107)

⁷¹ *De Mysteriis* III.4 (109-10)

Iamblichus goes on to give qualification to those possessed: they don't have any knowledge of themselves nor do they recall any part of the possession after, they cannot feel nor are they harmed by fire because the god possessing them has a body made of a divine fire. During divine possession, the possessed are often times suspended aloft in the air. This last bit would be recalled by the students of Iamblichus who, according to Eunapius, claim to have seen him levitate and turn a golden hue with blond hair while praying to Helios.⁷²

Ecstatic states, as were common for oracles of the gods, are also addressed. The madness that can come from a very divinely possessed person can, Iamblichus claims, banish normal, conscious movement and then send forth words from a "frenzied mouth". Upon such possession Iamblichus writes that a rushing sound is heard by the mantic: this is the sound of the universe caused by planetary revolutions⁷³. The process of possession of the oracles required fasting and purification prior to the possession, then isolation from human affairs, and then ritual purification before receiving the god. Thus the oracle makes his soul like a sanctuary fitting the light of the divine. For Iamblichus, the divinatory power of the gods is unbound by any thing in the generated world, and if the theurgist can successfully make themselves an aperture for this light it will fill all things that are able to share in it.⁷⁴

⁷² *De Mysteriis*, III.5 (112)

⁷³ *De Mysteriis*, III.9 (119)

⁷⁴ *De Mysteriis* III.12 (129)

The Personal Daemon

The final concept to address in the Iamblichean scheme is that of the *personal daemon*. The personal daemon is that guardian spirit that according to Iamblichus is “imparted to us from the whole cosmos and the variety of life within it and from every sort of body through all of which the soul descends into generation.”⁷⁵ Here, Iamblichus speaks on the generation of the personal daemon as a spirit allotted to our souls by their movement through the celestial sphere, an allusion to the Demiurge of the *Timaeus* launching souls into bodily experience. Our souls from the demiurge move down through the spheres and are adorned with garments⁷⁶, writes, these “garments” amalgamate into the Personal Daemon. As the soul descends into body the Daemon binds the soul to the body and supervises the composite being arising from it. This composite is what we think of as ourselves, existing here in this world.

The role of the Daemon is to be a guide for our soul for the duration of our lives. Iamblichus writes that “...it continues to direct men’s lives up to the point at which through sacred theurgy, we establish a god as the overseer and leader of our soul; for then it withdraws in deference to the superior principle...”⁷⁷ This statement reveals the role of the Daemon for the theurgist as well as for the layman. The first part, “it continues to direct men’s lives up” meaning that regardless of whether one is practicing theurgy or not the Daemon is doing its job, but should one be engaged in the sacred rites, the Daemon becomes more active until its role is replaced by that of a god— and this is ultimately the

⁷⁵ *De Mysteriis* IX.6 (280)

⁷⁶ Clarke footnote 471

⁷⁷ *De Mysteriis* IX.6 (281)

goal of theurgy, for how better to do the work of the gods than with the gods guiding our souls?

When Plotinus speaks on what he calls the tutelary spirit, he referring to the same type of being as Iamblichus; a spirit who by its existence guides our lives to that which is good. However, for Plotinus this spirit is not wholly outside of us — it is in-fact our soul, the higher part of our soul that resides with the Nous, directing our lives toward that which is higher. Thus Plotinus writes that if one lives by the senses their Spirit is that of a rational being, and if we live by reason our Spirit is still higher⁷⁸ There is no action needed to address or call the spirit forth—save virtuous living—as the Spirit is with us regardless of our actions to draw it near, as it is our higher soul.

⁷⁸ *Ennead* 4.6.3

IV. Conclusion

The extrapolation of these philosophies led to very different conclusions. For Plotinus, the Soul apart from the complement is a divine thing, and its goal is to unite with the One and depart as much as possible from the complements' grasp. This is in and of itself not a bad goal, but Plotinus's method leads one to a life cut off from society in a sense. While Plotinus does not scorn the civic virtues and thus one must conclude is still considering the civic life, his goals of ultimate unification lead one down an austere and selfish road to henosis, as it arguably takes no consideration for the rest of the world, one's family or community. And further, Plotinus's system would require one to live a life of asceticism and solitude that is seldom seen due to its difficulty.

Iamblichus's philosophy of theurgy stands in contrast to this isolating and harsh asceticism. The religiosity of theurgy enables a sense of community, where there are temples to make offerings and as such a community of worshippers. And this sense of community building must be essential for the theurgist as to be a theurgist implies taking an active role in the functions of the soul, which for Iamblichus was that of a mediator between the gods and the rest of the world (be that the material world and even the world in which the daemons live). In taking this active role theurgists lift not just themselves but the whole of the world up to the light of the gods.

The ethical considerations of Plotinus's system fall short because they are ultimately self-centered as they are aimed at leading the soul to experience oneness in isolation. Of course, it may be argued that such an experience probably leaves the mystic more compassionate and more attentive to others than they were previously, but nevertheless the objective remains a state of non-return, and as such an ultimate disavowal of the world of our everyday lives.

Iamblichean theurgy, on the other hand, requires a different set of ethical considerations. I have already mentioned above the positive sense of community engendered by the Iamblichean system. As another example, consider if we were to take seriously Iamblichus' teachings on daemons. We would have to think twice about dumping toxic waste into a spring, lest we arouse of ire of the daemons therein.

Of course, some would argue that such a stance involves embracing a regressive animism, to which I would say that our world is in ecological trouble and may benefit from the ethics of a philosophy that would mandate we consider the natural world and each-other with a respect, regardless of some feeling that it involves 'superstition' or the like. Theurgic philosophy imbues our world with life, purpose and consciousness. Such implications would mean that humans as much as we can should shoulder some responsibility given the nature and position of our souls in the cosmos. And further that our ignorance and failures to consider our actions both to the spiritual ecosystem and toward each-other are not only destructive but in-fact grossly impious — amounting to what Iamblichus may consider a grave offense to the Gods. In concluding all of this it will suffice to say that the

such that the practice of theurgy would ennoble humanity toward a more virtuous and harmonious life, and if we are at all seeking to help the world we should pay close attention to the implications of Iamblichus.

Bibliography

- Aristotle, James Alexander Kerr Thomson, Hugh Tredennick, and Jonathan Barnes. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. London: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Iamblichus, John F. Finamore, and John M. Dillon. *Iamblichus De Anima: Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010.
- Iamblichus, Iamblichus. *De Mysteriis*. Translated by Emma M Dillon, John P Hershbell, and Jackson undefined undefined. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.
- Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997.
- Plotinus. *The Six Enneads*. Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins. Translated by B S Page and Stephan MacKenna. 26th ed. Vol. 17. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, n.d.
- Plotinus, and Arthur Hilary Armstrong. *Plotinus: in 7 Vol.* Vol. 5. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Shaw, Gregory, John Milbank, and Aaron Riches. *Theurgy and the Soul: the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014.