

*On the Mysteries of the Egyptians: Iamblichus' theory of theurgy*

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The philosopher Porphyry, a disciple of Plotinus, wrote a letter to Anebo, probably a disciple of Iamblichus, challenging the theurgic philosophy. The main text of *On the Mysteries* is a response to these questions, apparently written by Iamblichus himself.<sup>1</sup> Porphyry's letter strikes a skeptical tone, but he also shares a common interpretive horizon with his interlocutors, writing, "In the first place, therefore, it is granted that there are Gods."<sup>2</sup> His concern is basically pietistic; given that pagan religion is true, how is theurgy to be understood as facilitating virtue? In response to Porphyry's letter, Iamblichus develops an elaborate description and defense of theurgy as a practice conducive to piety.

Regarding Porphyry's overarching request for an account of the theurgist's concept of the nature of the gods, Iamblichus rebukes him for even suggesting that there could be doubt about their existence. "In the first place, therefore, you say, '*it must be granted that there are Gods.*' Thus to speak, however, is not right on this subject. For an innate knowledge of the Gods is coexistent with our very essence; and this knowledge is superior to all judgment and deliberate choice, and subsists prior to reason and demonstration. It is also counted from the beginning with its proper cause, and is consubsistent with the essential tendency of the soul to *The Good*. [...]. Hence it is not proper to grant this, as if it might not be granted, nor to admit it as ambiguous (for

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<sup>1</sup> "Iamblichus, writing under the assumed guise of the Egyptian prophet 'Abamon,' is now widely accepted as being the author of the *De mysteriis*."

Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, "Introduction," Iamblichus, *Iamblichus: De mysteriis* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 12.

it is always unically established in energy); nor are we worthy thus to explore it, as if we had sufficient authority to approve or reject it.”<sup>3</sup>

Here, Iamblichus advances a faith-hermeneutic which presupposes that human beings are normatively situated within a horizon of belief in the polytheistic gods. “Whenever something is interpreted as something,” Martin Heidegger writes, “the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having [*Vorhabe*], fore-sight [*Vorsicht*], and fore-conception [*Vorgriff*]. An interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.”<sup>4</sup> However, does the fore-having of platonic polytheism provide an adequate hermeneutical basis for human self-understanding? Heidegger argues for the inadequacy of any metaphysical hermeneutic which founds human self-understanding in a being or beings ontologically transcending human historical existence as being-in-the-world. He writes, “Meaning is an *existentiale* [ontological structure] of Dasein [human existence], not a property attaching to entities, lying ‘behind’ them, or floating somewhere as an ‘intermediate domain.’”—Here Heidegger may be directly referring to the neoplatonic concept of the daemonic realm mediating between the One and the world.—“*Hence only Dasein can be meaningful or meaningless.* That is to say, its own Being and the entities disclosed with its Being can be appropriated in understanding, or can remain relegated to non-understanding.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, human existence is its own ground of self-understanding; we understand our existing in and through a hermeneutical circle founded upon ourselves. Conceptually separating that ground from us by projecting it into a transcendental

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 191-2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 193.

reality behind or above the world, thereby “doing metaphysics,” is a false maneuver that simply complicates and confuses the epistemological issues involved.

Therefore, what is lacking in Iamblichus’ faith-hermeneutic is a self-understanding of the historical, social and cultural basis for his pagan faith. Iamblichus simply describes his cultural assumptions, falsely naturalizing his social location. Anything outside of his own tradition is simply barbarism and can be dismissed as such. However, normatively immediate polytheistic belief cannot be assumed even within Iamblichus’ context. Christian “atheists,” epicureans and some stoic materialists did not share Iamblichus’ belief in the gods, nor were these all marginal positions. It must be remembered that Christians firmly controlled the imperial court through much of the late empire. Iamblichus’ dodge, his refusal to acknowledge a problem, is a symptom of social impotence. It reveals the decadence of neoplatonism, that is to say its static reification of “Tradition” when the original relevance of its ideas are exhausted in the wider culture.

The conservative character of neoplatonism can be further discerned in the loss of the original platonic dialogs’ sense of irony. Plato’s dialogs are speculative exercises in composition, serving the pedagogical purpose of teaching rhetoric to students by providing examples in various modes of argument and debate. They explore how philosophy can be conducted in the midst of different theoretical positions while debating diverse questions and issues. Although identifiable “platonic” themes and ideas are developed in the course of the texts—the theory of forms, for example—the intent is not to fix these ideas as the immutable truth as much as to contribute to a larger context of philosophical discussion. Aristotle, who spent a number of years in residence at Plato’s academy in Athens, had no reservations in criticizing Plato’s positions and developing his own variations. *The Republic*, in particular, should not be read as a set of political proposals, but as a deliberately fictional allegory, like Aesop’s fables. This is especially clear at the conclusion

of book IX, where a character remarks on, “the city whose establishment we have described, the city whose home is the ideal, for I think that it can be found nowhere on earth,” to which the character of Socrates replies, “perhaps there is a pattern of it laid up in heaven for him who wishes to contemplate it and so beholding to constitute himself its citizen. But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being. The politics of this city only will be his and of none other.”<sup>6</sup>

The loss of Plato’s irony for his readers passed through incremental historical stages, the reification of platonic doctrine increasing parallel with the larger decline in the influence of pagan wisdom in the empire. By the time of Plotinus Plato’s doctrine of the forms is not speculative, but the foundational truth of civilized piety. However, he is still prepared to “do philosophy,” by working through arguments for his positions in contrast with alternatives. However, by Iamblichus’ generation platonism is no longer open to a crisis of foundations; he has stopped examining and interrogating his received concepts and instead simply manipulates them to achieve the most harmonious “solution” to problems. Skepticism has become simply equivalent to impiety. What is ideologically erased in the conservatism of neoplatonism is the emergence of *logos* as distinct from *mythos*, of the self-conscious rational critique of the immediacy of ethnic ideology which was the historically innovative achievement of Socrates and the Athenian philosophers of his era. The loss of the “socratic” moment of philosophy in neoplatonism reinforces its conservative character. It no longer tolerates the openness of the doubt of *aporia* except as a reinforcement of faith in the ineffability of the absolute One.

Returning to my examination of *On the Mysteries*—Iamblichus, as discussed above, posits a daemonic, spiritual order or hierarchy of emanations as a mean mediating the extremes of the

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 819.

absolutely transcendent One and its primary emanation the Logos or Demiurge, established at the summit of being, with embodied souls at the base. These are “the beginning and end in the divine genera.”<sup>7</sup> Iamblichus writes, “In souls, however, which rule over bodies, [...] essential good [the Logos] is not present, nor the cause of good, which is prior to essence [the One]; but to these a certain participation and habit, proceeding from essential good, accedes.”<sup>8</sup> This essential, yet only implicit, trace of the Good within the soul is preeminently energized by way of the theurgic or religious ritual interaction with the daemonic realm of disembodied spirits.

The daemonic order facilitates the contact and noetic communion of souls with the originative One: “But it reasonably follows, according to the continuity of alliance, that the medium which begins from the most excellent natures, should proceed to such as are less excellent; but that the medium which primarily produces a contact with the last of things, should also in a certain respect communicate with the natures that transcend it.”<sup>9</sup> As a result daemons facilitate the spiritual cultivation of the embodied souls in accord with the overarching governance of the divine. “Hence, the essence of daemons is effective, and perfective of mundane natures, and gives completion to the superintendence of generated individuals.”<sup>10</sup>

The role of the daemonic order in the “completion” of determinate individuals is preeminently mediated for the theurgist by their own peculiar (or particular) daemon. That is to say, each human being possesses a unique daemon which is, “distributed to us from the total orders

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<sup>7</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 50.

in the universe,”<sup>11</sup> and which therefore “is established in the paradigm before the soul descends into generation; and when the soul has received him as its leader, the daemon immediately presides over the soul, gives completion to its lives, and binds it to body when it descends. He likewise governs the common animal of the soul, directs its peculiar life, and imparts to us the principles of all our thoughts and reasonings. We also perform such things as he suggests to our intellect, and he continues to govern us till, through sacerdotal theurgy, we obtain a God for the inspective guardian and leader of the soul. For then the daemon either yields or delivers his government to a more excellent nature, or is subjected to him, as contributing to his guardianship, or in some other way is ministrant to him as to his lord.”<sup>12</sup>

The theurgist becomes conscious of the presence of their divine guardian daemon by the mediation of the daemon’s own activity, and through the development of a ritual relationship to the peculiar daemon they further their spiritual advancement. “Hence, when the peculiar daemon is present with each of us, he then unfolds the worship which is proper to be paid to him and his name, and likewise delivers the proper mode of invoking him.”<sup>13</sup> The procedure of invoking the personal guardian daemon would become central to the modern revival of theurgy within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the writings of Aleister Crowley, under the description of the “knowledge and conversation of the holy guardian angel.” I will therefore revisit this topic below, as it offers an opportunity to track and assess the preservation, and also the transformation, of a specific doctrine of classical magical theology under the cultural conditions of modern life.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 146-7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 148.

The daemonic, spiritualistic realm of mediation establishes embodied souls as “from eternity consubsistent”<sup>14</sup> with the One, though simultaneously formally distinct from it as an effect is from a cause. This causal interweaving of the One with the cosmos as the final cause of all determinate being leads Iamblichus to posit the universe as an aesthetic activity of divine creation, or *demiurgy*. “Intellect, therefore, which is the leader and king of all beings, and which is the demiurgic art of the universe, is always present with the Gods.”<sup>15</sup> Plotinus has the soul contemplate the divine as its highest activity, but Iamblichus has the soul participate in the demiurgy of the gods through the rites and rituals of the pagan temple cult, which instantiate and sustain the cosmic governance of the gods by serving as the location of spiritual epiphanies which mediate the world with the heavenly order. In this context, the theurgist serves as a god upon the earth, activating and wielding divine energies. Simultaneously, through contact with the spiritual energies invoked by their magical rituals the theurgist’s soul is purified and oriented towards the gods, even while remaining in possession of their human body.

Gregory Shaw writes: “Plato’s Demiurge gave to each soul a spark of himself, Iamblichus understood this to mean that each soul had the responsibility to perform its own demiurgy, that is to say, its own theurgy. The task for every soul was to partake in divine mimesis [emanation] by creating a cosmos out of the initial chaos of its embodiment.”<sup>16</sup> In other words theurgy is demiurgy; it is the establishment of the divine order and governance of the world by the gods, that is to say, by human beings who have magically activated the divinity of their souls.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 15.