

IAMBlichUS' PATH TO THE INEFFABLE¹

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ABSTRACT. Iamblichus of Chalcis postulated theurgy on metaphysical grounds as the only means of communion with the supreme principle of everything that exists. Iamblichus sets this principle as a completely transcendent reality, unattainable by reason, and, at the same time, differs from Plotinus, who postulated absolute withdrawal from everything and conceived union with the One as an escape in solitude to the solitary. Iamblichus conceives matter as an instrument for the soul's ascent to that principle and explicitly proposes a mysticism of solidarity with the cosmos and with other souls.

KEYWORDS: metaphysics, theurgy, soul, Late Platonism, Plotinus, mysticism

Unlike Plotinus, who postulated the abandoning of all concrete things and conceived union with the One as a flight from one alone to the Alone, Iamblichus, by opting for theurgy as the path of ascent towards the absolutely transcendent being, explicitly proposes a mysticism of solidarity with the cosmos and with other souls.

It seemed that the assimilation with god recommended by Plato in the *Theaetetus*,¹ had found its methodology in Plotinian *epistrophe*.² Thus ascending the path of purification and seeking after virtues were established: first the natural virtues, then the ethical ones, then the political and cathartic virtues and finally the

¹ The earlier version of the paper has been presented at the seminar "Iamblichos. His Sources and Influence", held in Athens, Greece from the 8th to 10th of March, 2009.

¹ Plato, *Theaet.*, 176 b 1.

² Plot., I, 2, 4; V, 3, 6.

theoretic or contemplative ones.³ But, we must remember, the ultimate objective of this ascent was not simply purity and virtue for its own sake, but rather one's own deification. Of course, one will make the effort to be pure and virtuous; "but nonetheless", says Plotinus, "the aim is not to be without error, but to be god".⁴ To become one with the One, it was necessary to make oneself aware of one's own origin and free oneself from the material world; the soul should remember its own lineage and be aware of the present vileness of concrete things to which it is attached, and which it considers as something honorable, due to its alienation.⁵ The first step was to detach oneself from everything: Ἀφελε πάντα, "abandon all". In this respect Plotinus said:

This is the soul's true end, to touch that light and see it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing. It must see that light by which it is enlightened: for we do not see the sun by another light than his own. How then can this happen? Abandon everything! (Plot. V, 3, 17, 34-39, trans. A. H. Armstrong)

When we look at this in another—but equivalent—way, the path of ascent toward the One must be undertaken in such a way that, having detached oneself from everything and attained solitude, one arrived in the presence of the One, who is also alone; it was thus, in Plotinus' exact expression, a "flight of one alone toward the Alone (φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον)".⁶

Porphry, referring to Plotinus, tells us:

So to this god-like man above all, who often raised himself in thought, according to the ways Plato teaches in the Banquet, to the First and Transcendent God, that God appeared who has neither shape nor any intelligible form, but is throned above intellect and all the intelligible. I, Porphyry, who am now in my sixty-eighth year, declare that once I drew near and was united to him. To Plotinus "the goal ever near was shown": for his end and goal was to be united to, to approach the God who is over all things. Four times while I was with him he attained that goal, in an unspeakable actuality and not in potency only.⁷

³ To these virtues, Porphyry was to add those called paradigmatic, because he was interested in emphasizing the intellectual nature of the ascent to the One; Iamblichus, on the other hand, was to add the theurgic virtues. Cf. Plot., I, 2; Porph., *Sent.*, 32; the aretological itinerary is described in the *Life of Proclus*, written by Marinus of Neapolis. On Neoplatonic ethics, see Staab 2002, 155–182 and Baltzly 2004, 297–321.

⁴ Plot., I, 2, 6, 3.

⁵ Plot. V, 1, 1. See also I, 3, 1.

⁶ Plot., VI, 9, 11.

⁷ Porph., *V. Plot.*, 23. Something similar to this is the experience of St. Paul, which he describes, referring to himself: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth); such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth); [...] he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." (2 Cor, 12, 2–4).

Thus the union with the One, who is over all things, seems to have occurred, in thought, after an intellectual effort that followed the stages traced by Plato in the *Symposium*.

Although Iamblichus was clearly a figure of great importance within the school of Platonism inaugurated by Plotinus,⁸ nevertheless, he reacted against what he considered an exaggeration of their intellectual pretensions, especially those of Porphyry. He proposed theurgy, the action of the gods during the ritual acts, as the means for the human being to achieve the desired assimilation with the divine.⁹

We may come to realize that the Iamblichus' position regarding union with the One by means of theurgy is founded upon metaphysical reasons.¹⁰ The One maintains its transcendence; divinity conserves its absolute supremacy over the intellectual, since the intellect itself subordinates itself to the divine; humanity, conserving its place in the hierarchy, without intellectual pride, can find a path of ascent towards the One, even via matter, which the gods and other superior genera utilize voluntarily to manifest their power and to assist human beings. Iamblichus says:

And let there be no astonishment if in this connection we speak of a pure and divine form of matter; for matter also issues from the father and creator of all, and thus gains its perfection, which is suitable to the reception of gods. And, at the same time, nothing hinders the superior beings from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor yet, by consequence, is matter excluded from participation in its betters, so that such of it as is perfect and pure and a good type is not unfitted to receive the gods; for since it was proper not even for terrestrial things to be utterly deprived of participation in the divine, earth also has received from it a share in

⁸ The work of Nasemann (1991) has brought Iamblichus definitively back to the philosophical line inaugurated by Plotinus, setting in relief even the linguistic links between both thinkers and pointing out the innovations made by Iamblichus. On the other hand, Shaw (1995) has correctly situated the doctrines of Iamblichus on theurgy as authentically platonic developments.

⁹ Iambl., fr. 165 Dalsgaard Larsen. The phrase, long attributed to Olympiodorus, must, according to Sheppard (1982, 212, n. 4), be recognized as this by Damascius. Note that among the above-mentioned Platonists who preferred philosophy, there is no one after Porphyry, and even if he is mentioned before Plotinus. Among the hieratics, on the other hand, the chronological order is progressive and Iamblichus is mentioned in the first place. But this is not a clear-cut division among Platonists: the hieratics also did philosophy and the philosophers also practiced rites, as we can see from Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*, but the passage does point to a divergence of paths for uniting with the One. However, with the advantage of hindsight, the differences between them (Iamblichus, on the one hand, Plotinus and Porphyry on the other) seem less significant than they were thought to be; some recent scholars have even considered Plotinus' posture to have derived from ritual practices and to be quite compatible with the theurgic model offered by Iamblichus; cf. Mazur 2003 and 2004. Discussion with Beierwaltes over matter and the Gnostic origin of Plotinian thought cf. in Mazur 2008.

¹⁰ Stäcker 1995.

divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods (trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon and J. Hershbell).¹¹

This is important if we consider the context in which Iamblichus appears; for beside him are the Gnostics, Manichaeism, currents of thought that contemplated an excised reality, where matter was seen as a principle of evil, from which one had to set oneself apart—doctrines from whose influence Plotinus himself, although combating them, could not completely escape, for he likewise came to speak of matter as “evil itself”.¹²

Now, for Iamblichus, theurgy attains three fundamental results, ordered progressively: purification, liberation from destiny, and union with the gods.¹³ But theurgy

¹¹ Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 23.

¹² Plot., I, 8, 3: καθ' αὐτὸ κακόν. According to Jonas (2000, 187 f.), Iamblichus text *Myst.*, VIII, 6, in which Iamblichus points out that the human being has two souls, one belonging to the intelligible world, another originated in the revolution of the heavens, is a Gnostic trait, and it clearly shows the foundation that supports the mythological fantasy of this doctrine about the “planetarian” soul: the division between man and nature, which implies the rejection of the physical universe in light of pessimism; in the most profound sense, man does not belong to this world. Nonetheless, for Iamblichus, nature is not separated from the human being, but the human soul is rather double in its nature (Steel 1978), and the world may also be a receptacle apt for the actions of superior beings, and there exists even a “pure and divine” matter (Iambl. *Myst.*, V, 23); furthermore, the soul becomes incarnated in a body not only due to its need to expiate for past sins in previous lives, but also to accomplish a divine plan, for the gods can send it to come back to them (Iambl., *Myst.*, VIII, 8). This similarities with the Gnostics may be verified, but not in the sense pointed out by Jonas: as Edwards (1997, 203) states, these similarities may be explained not through direct historical influence, but by the fact that those who share the same age and the same society may have the same beliefs, and because thinkers, moved by different interests and with different methods, may come to the same results. On the other hand, Pearson shows how some of the ritual practices of the Gnostics could be understood in the terms in which Iamblichus explains the theurgy, stating clearly that the Gnostic rituals and those of the theurgy are not the same, not according to their content, nor to their mythological background. Pearson also shows that some Gnostic texts, such as *Steles of Seth* or *Marsanes*, present traits compatible in their cosmology with the Platonic optimism, and therefore, close to Iamblichus and his vision of the world and the matter; likewise, according to Pearson, Iamblichus should not be thought of as a Gnostic, but, although he must have dissented with the Gnostic visions referred to the deviation of the soul, he considered this visions as worthy of being mentioned; moreover, Iamblichus could not have shared Plotinus' criticism towards the ritual activity of the Gnostics.

¹³ These three results are formulated in different ways; in Iambl., *Myst.*, I, 12 we read: “the ascent achieved by means of invocations facilitates for the priests the purification of their passions, liberation from the burden of generation, and union with the divine principle”; in Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 26, the prayer “establishes links of friendship between us and the gods, and secures for us the triple advantage which we gain from the gods through theurgy, the first leading to illumination, the second to the common achievement of projects, and the third to the perfect fulfilment (of the soul) through fire”; in Iambl., *Myst.* X, 7 the expression is as follows: “nor do theurgists bother the divine intellect with small things, but with those that

must have an order that depends on the concrete situation of human beings, on their degree of attachment (or discordance) with the material, and also on the divinity to which worship is offered, so that worship is progressive in accordance with the degree of aptitude that men gradually acquire in tuning in, so to speak, to the beneficent action of the Gods.¹⁴

But little by little, after a long journey, union with the One can be consummated by means of an ascent whose every step must be taken in turn, and this takes time. Union with the One does not exempt one from union with all the previous higher orders, rather, it demands it.¹⁵ To put it colloquially, Iamblichus would not subscribe to the notion that, “one who is on good terms with God can afford to laugh at his angels”. For him, before reaching union with the One, a process and method must be followed that gradually attains union with each of the orders:

But come now, you say, is it not the highest purpose of the hieratic art to ascend to the One, which is supreme master of the whole multiplicity (of divinities), and in concert with that, at the same time, to pay court to all the other essences and principles? Indeed it is, I would reply; but that does not come about except at a very late stage and to very few individuals, and one must be satisfied if it occurs even in the twilight of one’s life.¹⁶

Thus, as opposed to the “abandon everything”, ἀφελε πάντα, and the “flight of one alone towards the Alone”, φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον, of Plotinus, Iamblichus, even before uniting with the supreme principle, converts the whole universe into an instrument for his return to the One. The superiority of the gods does not prevent them from acting on the inferior levels of reality nor in terrestrial places,¹⁷ and human beings, not only can, but must take advantage of those lower levels in order to rise to the higher ones, because, “in accordance with the art of the priests it is necessary to begin sacred works on the basis of material ones, since otherwise the ascent to the immaterial gods could not take place”.¹⁸

Iamblichus’ position — one in which the ascent of each soul presupposes union with the rest, since on the path to the Other there must be reconciliation with the cosmos, with all the entities that soul finds on its way,¹⁹ and likewise with the other souls —, opens, it seems to me, the possibility of a ‘religiosity’ (so to call it) that rejects all sorts of alienation, which can have even social or political consequences, and which may perhaps have its principal motivation in the Pythagorean roots of its thought.²⁰ In fact in *On the Pythagorean way of life*, Pythagoras assumed that the rule

have to do with purification, liberation and salvation of the soul” (trans. E. Clarke, J. Dillon, J. Hershbell).

¹⁴ Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 14–20.

¹⁵ Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 15; V, 21.

¹⁶ Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 22.

¹⁷ Iambl., *Myst.*, I, 8.

¹⁸ Iambl., *Myst.*, V, 14.

¹⁹ See Shaw 1985 and 1988.

²⁰ See, for instance, O’Meara 1993.

of the gods is the most efficient in establishing justice, and from such rule he laid out the form of government, the laws, justice and the just things.²¹

An example of the communitarian appearance of the theurgy, although in a certain sense negative, since it does not have to do with the ascent towards god, appears in the *Master Abamon's Reply*, when it is stated that an excessive guilt cannot be expiated by the soul alone that committed it. Iamblichus says:

But why, indeed, shouldn't what is just for each sole individual be reckoned very differently by the gods in each case, when taken with reference to the whole system of the relationships of souls? For if the community of a common nature between souls in bodies and without bodies produces the same degree of involvement with the life of the cosmos and a common rank, it follows necessarily that the same exaction of justice should be demanded from all of them, and especially when the magnitude of the injustices committed previously by a given soul exceeds the punishment, proportional to the crimes, which can be exacted from a single soul.²²

In other words, the communion of nature causes a commensurate link to exist in the life of the cosmos and a common order, and thus a soul that has infringed the order causes a corresponding penalty to be exactable, and not only upon himself; or, to put it in more colloquial terms, we are all in the same boat.

There is another text where this unity proclaimed by Iamblichus appears also to a certain extent negatively, though not quite so clearly. This is the twentieth chapter of his *Protreptikos*, when he cites the anonymous sophist of the fifth century BC. There mention is made of how tyranny is imposed: the ambition of the ruler himself is only the apparent cause of tyranny; it is the general lawlessness and the inclination of all to evildoing that provide the conditions for its coming about. The anonymous text says:

Some men think, but not rightly, that a tyrant originates from another cause, and that men are deprived of their liberty not by themselves, but that they are forcibly deprived of it by the tyrant, but this reasoning is invalid. For whoever thinks that a king or tyrant arises from anything but anarchy and greed is foolish. For when all are engaged in evil pursuits then a ruler must arise (trans. Th. Johnson).²³

One gathers from the text that the tyrant's subjects are also guilty of losing their liberty, and that the tyrant arises when all are inclined to wickedness. The tyranny is, then, another face of anarchy, and all the rest of the people, out of their common inclination towards wrongdoing, are united as the cause of his emergence. The concrete subject of the relation between tyranny and anarchy is, of course, also dealt with in the Platonic dialogues;²⁴ but what is suggested here in political terms — although, as I have already said, by a negative path — is the union that likewise should take place on other planes; it should take place, let us say, as in the first example, on

²¹ Iambl., *VP*, 174.

²² Iambl., *Myst.*, IV, 5.

²³ Iambl., *Protr.*, XX.

²⁴ Plato, *Rep.* VIII, 555b–570e. The mixed constitution of the *Laws* aims precisely at delineating at the same time the vices of monarchy and democracy.

the eschatological plane of the salvation of souls; a plane that, in turn brings together ethics, cosmology and ontology. In other words, the path of ascent traced by Iamblichus cannot be characterized as an escapist mysticism, but as a mysticism that cannot find fulfillment unless the links with the cosmos and other souls are adequately reconstructed.

It seems to me that what Iamblichus states elsewhere also points to this. According to Damascius' testimony, "Iamblichus affirms that the ascent to the One is not accessible for anyone unless he coordinates himself with all, and together with all returns to the common principle of all things".²⁵ In that same sense, in the *Master Abamon's Reply*, IV, 3, on distinguishing human from divine actions, Iamblichus mentions a union, provided by the gods, with ontological implications, which is necessary if the action undertaken in the rite is to be regarded as divine. Iamblichus states: "For if the communion of concordant friendship, and a certain indissoluble connection of union, is the bonds of sacerdotal operations, in order that these operations may be truly divine, and may transcend every common action known to men, no human work will be adapted to them". In the rite, he continues, the activity of the divine fire "acts through all those who communicate it and those who at the same time can partake in it".²⁶ That same "harmonic friendship in the intellect", that *philía homonoeticá*, significantly reappears at the end of the *Master Abamon's Reply*, when Iamblichus bids Porphyry farewell, as if he knew that he cannot attain union with the divinity, the ultimate end of theurgy, unless the two of them are united with each other. The passage in question is the following:

It remains, therefore, at the end of this discourse, for me to pray to the gods to grant both to me and to you the unalterable preservation of true thoughts, to implant in us the truth of eternal things forever, and to grant to us a participation in the more perfect conceptions of the gods in which the most blessed end of good things is placed before us, along with the sanction of the harmonious friendship between us.²⁷

In relation to this passage in particular, Damascius preserves another text that seems conclusive in my interest to signal the way of communion or solidarity that Iamblichus traces towards the One:

Why is it upon the mixed life that the Cause bestows itself? Because as being all things it has an affinity with that which is all-embracing. For that which is simple is not capable of receiving the power of the Cause, which ineffably, transcending unity, embraces all things. For this reason the divine Iamblichus declares that it is impossible to partake as an individual of the universal orders, but only in communion with the divine choir of those who, with minds united, experience a common uplift. Also the Athenians offered prayers only for their city, to

²⁵ Damascius, *Princ.*, 38 (Westerink–Combès, I, p. 119, 18–22).

²⁶ Iambl., *Myst.*, IV, 3.

²⁷ Iambl., *Myst.*, X, 8.

Athenea Guardian of the city (*Polias*), so that she would supervise the common, not truly in private for each one.²⁸

It seems clear here that, in Iamblichus' thought, the theurgy is also an ascent towards the one cannot be individual, but must be collective; it is shown too the idea of the "chorus", that ascends intellectually in a harmonic way (ιμονοητικ«w) and a political reference, the city that prays for the common good, which goes beyond a simple metaphor.

Although it is true that such divine choir, rigorously speaking, refers to superior beings and not to human beings, nevertheless I do not believe that Proclus and Libanius refer by chance to the teachers of philosophy as a "divine choir", to which Iamblichus certainly belongs.²⁹

Anyhow, Iamblichus considers himself a part of a guild that is also hierarchically arranged; he states, firstly, that Porphyry is right in addressing the priests in order to clarify his doubts, and that Porphyry may think that who answers is either Anebon, to whom he addressed the Letter, or Abamon, Anebon's teacher, or any other priest.³⁰ Abamon answers as a member of a group by saying "we" and refers to the doctrines with which he will answer as "ours";³¹ also, further on, Abamon-Iamblichus refers to the priest college as an entity that constitutes not only a unit but that is different from the rest of the mortals, when he says:

And it follows, according to this reasoning, that not even we priests would have learned anything from the gods, and that you are wrong to interrogate us as if we had some special degree of knowledge, if in fact we differ in no way from other mortals.³²

Wherefore there is a collegiate aspect of those who teach correctly the matters that Porphyry inquires about. It seems to me thus that the theurgy does not have a popular or populist nature, but one that is communitarian to those who practice it. In any case, the difference to which the scarce testimonies point between the mysticism of Plotinus, that has been called "solitary", and the communitarian way, theurgical, to join the One, can be appreciated by regarding this aspect in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*,³³ and Iamblichus' *On the Pythagorean way of life*, not to mention Eunapius' controversial *Life of the Sophists*, where Iamblichus appears next to his disciples after having carried out the sacrifices of a solar festivity,³⁴ while Porphyry depicts Plotinus as not wanting to join Amelius to visit the temples.³⁵ Perhaps, as in other cases, the difference between Plotinus and Iamblichus may be only apparent, and perchance

²⁸ Damascius, *In Philebum*, 227; cf. Iambl. *In Phlb.*, fr. 6 Dillon, whose translation I use. I thank Adrien Lecerf for calling my attention to this passage.

²⁹ Procl., *Theol. Plat.*, I, 1 (p. 6–7 Saffrey-Westerink).

³⁰ Iambl., *Myst.*, I, 1.

³¹ Iambl., *Myst.*, I, 2.

³² Iambl., *Myst.*, I, 8.

³³ Corrigan 1996.

³⁴ Eunapius, *VS*, 459.

³⁵ Porph., *Plot.*, 10.

being joined to the One is to Plotinus embracing everything and everybody simultaneously.

I shall finish by saying that, in some way, that same idea concerning a sort of mysticism that implies a union with the community is, or so it seems to me, at the heart of a phrase not of Iamblichus, but of St. John, when he says: “he who loves not his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen”.³⁶

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³⁶ 1 Jn 4, 20.

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