

# The Soul as Limit: Iamblichus' Doctrine of the Soul and the Beginning of Wisdom<sup>1</sup>

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An examination of the two-sided impulse of Hellenic reason — its tireless curiosity and striving towards the divine nous at its best and “untrustworthy” and impious skepticism at its worst — is well suited to the thought of Iamblichus. In a discussion concerning the divine names in *De Mysteriis*, for example, Iamblichus is critical of a problematic ‘Greek’ spirit that lessens the power of the names of the gods and prayers. He writes:

... [the divine names] are endlessly altered (γίγνομαι) according to the inventiveness (καινοτομία) and illegality (παρανομία) of the Hellenes. For the Hellenes are experimental (νεωτεροποιός) by nature, and eagerly propelled in all directions, having no proper ballast in them; and they preserve nothing which they have received from anyone else, but even this they promptly abandon and change it all according to their unreliable linguistic innovation (ἀστατος εὐρεσιλογία).<sup>2</sup>

The charge of “illegality” here concerns a lawless impulse in the soul itself, a capriciousness that emerges in the soul’s reasoning activity (συλλογισμός) and through which the soul can be bewitched by its own false projections. Such an understanding of the divine names reveals an inversion of the proper relationship of the soul to the gods which exaggerates the soul’s ontological status and obstructs its reception of the divine. For Iamblichus, it is necessary to limit this impulse by grounding rational activity in the stable, unchanging gnosis (γνώσις) given by the gods; the unity of divine knowledge precedes the striving, dialectical reasoning of the soul.

This notion is first expressed poetically in *De Mysteriis*. Iamblichus writes under the guise of an Egyptian priest, thereby

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2 Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* [259], 5-10. See also Edward Butler, “Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2, 1 (2008): 1-20.

associating the work with the stability of the ancient religious life of Egypt and grounding its philosophical movement in an ethereal 'pre-history' that traces its origin directly to the gods. These associations reveal an underlying philosophical assertion that the sciences, although divisible in thought, are ultimately unified through their identification with a single source: "knowledge (γνῶσις) is united (συνήνωται) from the outset with its own cause (αἰτίαν)."<sup>3</sup> The gods are not accessible to humans through a discursive mode of reasoning but must rather be grasped with a uniform mode of cognition (καθάρειος γνῶσις). The ceaseless motion of syllogistic reasoning (συλλογισμός)<sup>4</sup> must be unified by a higher, given content.

While cloaked in religious language and images, however, such a position does not lead Iamblichus into religious superstition nor take Platonism into the "fog" of irrationality and mysticism as E.R. Dodds notably asserted.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Iamblichus is seeking to refine rational inquiry by checking the soul's impulse to overreach its powers and distort its object, as well as to establish the *source* of knowledge as something external to the soul. The problem of the 'Greeks' is not that they are too rational or not religious enough, but that this frenetic mode of reasoning can become too self-referential and lead to an exaggerated view of the innate powers of the soul *qua* soul and to the attribution of divine activities to the human being.

Iamblichus' criticism is ultimately, however, a loosely veiled critique of a failure within the Platonic tradition to clearly distinguish and preserve the 'parts' of both the soul and the broader procession of essences. There is a problem of ambiguity or willful distortion which emerges from a failure

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3 *De Mysteriis* [8], 1.

4 *De Mysteriis* [8].

5 E.R. Dodds writes, in *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 286, that with the death of Plotinus "... the fog began to close in ... and later Neoplatonism is in many respects a retrogression to the spineless syncretism from which he had tried to escape." See also E.R. Dodds, "The Parmenides of Plato and the Origin of the Neoplatonic 'One'," *The Classical Quarterly* 22 (1928): 129–142.

to preserve necessary oppositions, follow the implications of such oppositions and instead blend distinct realities in thought. This results in a confused psychology and, by extension, an inadequate account of the relation of the soul to the other ontological classes and, ultimately, a defective soteriology.

The correction of this tendency begins with a clear delineation of the life of the soul which, in turn, reveals the logic by which a systematic theology (ἐπιστημονική θεολογία) can be developed and the tension between the activity of thought and the unity of the divine knowing may be both maintained and reconciled. In this way, Iamblichus' psychology forms the ground for a philosophical theology that attempts to properly orient the spheres of religion and philosophy to the whole and, therein, maintain a tension that in its proper manifestation is the means by which the whole is ordered and sustained.

#### I. PROBLEMS IN THE TRADITION

Iamblichus understands the tendency within the Platonic tradition to exaggerate the powers that properly belong to the soul as first emerging from a tension present in the structure of the soul itself. In the *Timaeus*, Plato defines the soul as an intermediate being which results from the 'difficult (δύσμεκτον)' blending of corporeal and intelligible elements.<sup>6</sup> The very structure of the soul reveals an interplay of opposing 'lives' — its being is a unity of opposition. However, the life of the composite is also sustained through participation in an unchanging principle<sup>7</sup> outside of the soul. The fundamental opposition between its corporeal and intelligible elements leads to opposing interpretive perspectives and, according

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6 Plato, *Timaeus* 35a. This tension also plays out in other dialogues; the chariot in the *Phaedrus*, for example, serves as an image of the dual constitution of the soul. See also Kevin Corrigan, *Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil and the Question of Substance: Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander of Aphrodisias* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 3, footnote 8; 10–15.

7 *Timaeus* 37d4: "Now it was the Living Thing's nature (ζώου φύσις) to be eternal (αἰώνιος), but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully (παντελῶς) upon anything that is begotten (γεννητός)."

to Jean-Marc Narbonne, a “double vision”<sup>8</sup> that characterizes the tradition generally<sup>9</sup>, requiring one to “express simultaneously both the immanence and the transcendence which constitute the relationship between the higher and the lower orders of being.”<sup>10</sup>

It is with respect to the difficulty of representing this opposition faithfully that Iamblichus finds fault with some in the Platonic tradition. In the section of his *Commentary on De Anima* that examines the history of various doctrines of the soul, Iamblichus moves through positions that, in one way or another, exaggerate one aspect of the soul and thereby blend necessary distinctions. This is exemplified in the section that deals with the notion of the soul as an incorporeal substance where he is critical of a view he attributes to Porphyry and Plotinus. He writes:

There are those who contend that all of this substance (οὐσία) [the soul] is homogenous (ὁμοιομερής) and is one and the same so that the whole is present (ἀποφαίνω) in any part of it; they place even in the particular soul (ψυχὴ) the intelligible world (νοητὸν κόσμον), gods and demons, the Good and all the classes which are superior to the soul; and they assert that all is in all in like manner though in each in a way appropriate to its essence ... According to this opinion, the soul is in no way different from the Intellect (νοῦς), the gods and the higher classes, at least when its total substance (ὅλοξ οὐσία) is considered.<sup>11</sup>

Iamblichus’ criticism here is that if the soul is homogenous<sup>12</sup>, so that in each of the parts the whole is present, then it does not

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8 Jean-Marc Narbonne, “A Doctrinal Evolution in Plotinus? The Weakness of the Soul in its Relation to Evil,” *Dionysius* 25 (2007), 84.

9 A. J. Festugière also examines this double tendency in the broader Greco-Roman tradition in *La révélation d’Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. II, “Le Dieu cosmique” x–xiii; 92–94; vol. III, “Les doctrines de l’âme,” 63–96.

10 Carlos Steel, *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus* (Brussels: Paleis der Academiën, 1978), 31.

11 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [365], 8–12, 17–19.

12 Much of the interpretation of Iamblichus’ criticism concerning the homogeneity of the soul hinges on what the phrase ‘τὴν τοιαύτην οὐσίαν’ refers to. Festugière (A.J. Festugière, *La Révélation*, iii, 184, nn.1 and 2) places excessive interpretive weight on this phrase, understanding it as referring to the soul as hypostasis, or the total soul that contains all souls. For Festugière, Iamblichus understands the principle as relating to ‘the soul as hypostasis,’ or is in agreement with Plotinus’ notion of total soul. If this were the case, then Plotinus’ distinction between the All-Soul and particular souls is sufficient

differ essentially from the higher ontological classes.<sup>13</sup> If there is an ontological blending at this level, then all incorporeal beings can be placed ‘within’ the soul *insofar* as they are ἀσώματοι.<sup>14</sup> This is exemplified in Plotinus’ understanding of the three hypostases which — while they are clearly distinguishable when the soul is in generation — are blended when the soul is considered in its pure essence.<sup>15</sup> This leads to an emphasis on the unity of the soul over and against its divided, encosmic aspect.

A more specific result of this problem is furnished by Plotinus’ account of the intellect of the soul. Plotinus argues that there is a perpetually active, *noetic* part of the particular soul which remains above generation: “the secession (ἀφεστίξω) is not of the soul entire; something of it holds its ground (οὐκ ἐληλυθός), that in it which recoils from separate existence (ὁ οὐ πέφυκε μερίζεσθαι).”<sup>16</sup> The descended soul maintains a “vision (ὁράσθαι)”<sup>17</sup> of its original unity even after descent. Plotinus continues: “The bodies are separate, and the ideal form (ἀληθινὴ οὐσία) which enters them is correspondingly sundered while, still, it is present as one whole in each of its severed parts, since amid that multiplicity in which complete individuality has entailed complete partition, there is a permanent identity (ψυχὴ δὲ ἐκεῖ ἀδιάκριτος καὶ

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to deal with the problem raised by Iamblichus. However, this is not how Iamblichus understands the principle and subsequent interpretation has shown Festugière’s translation to lead to philosophical difficulties (Steel, *Changing Self*, 25, ff.10).

13 See Dillon’s examination of Iamblichus’ critique of Plotinus in this regard (John Dillon, commentary in *Iamblichus, De Mysteriis* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 90).

14 Steel notes that one could argue that there is still a distinction possible insofar as the way in which the totality is present can be distinct. However, he argues that this notion was understood and used by Iamblichus, and therefore it is unlikely that he is misapplying it (Steel, *Changing Self*, 25–26).

15 There are many examples of Plotinus at least implying that the soul, considered in its pure essence, has the whole present within. See, for example, *Enneads* V.1.10; V.1.11.

16 *Enneads* IV.1.1, 10.

17 *Enneads* IV.1.1, 15.

ἀμέριστος)."<sup>18</sup> Since the intellect of the soul cannot be completely sundered by the souls' embodiment, the substantial identity of the soul is located in the intellect rather than the composite whole.

It is in this context that Iamblichus attempts to form a more systematically rigorous psychology. In keeping with what he views as the full implications of Plato's account of soul in the *Timaeus*, he asserts that soul is a mean (μεσότης) and a conjunction (σύνδεσις) in beings (οὐσία) and lives (ζωαί).<sup>19</sup> While Plotinus seems to affirm the intermediate place of the soul<sup>20</sup>, he again overemphasizes its intelligible life by placing the λόγοι within it. For Iamblichus, the soul is intermediate not insofar as it is an *intellectual* mediator between incorporeal and corporeal lives, but insofar as it is a true unity of these opposing elements, a composite of divine and encosmic natures. The soul's unity is given and emerges as a temporal development, one which is graciously given and interwoven with the entirety of generated and intelligible being.

Iamblichus begins to develop his own position through an interpretation of the image of the mixing bowl in the *Timaeus*.<sup>21</sup> In opposition to Porphyry, who held that the mixing bowl was an image of the soul's internal composition<sup>22</sup>, Iamblichus understands it as representing the degree to which each essence participates in a higher essence (οὐσία) and the 'nearness' of each class in the ontology to the source of being.<sup>23</sup> The determination of the rank of soul in this procession is a result of its ontological distance from this source and is therefore given from outside.

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18 *Enneads* IV.2.1.

19 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [365], 1.

20 *Enneads* IV.1.1, 15.

21 *Timaeus* 41d.

22 Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, 3.245.19–246.2; 3.247.16–25. See J.F. Finamore, *Iamblichus and the Theory of the Vehicle of the Soul* (USA: Oxford University Press), 1985, 11–19, for a detailed account of both Iamblichus and Porphyry's readings of the myth.

23 Steel writes, "The similarity between gods, demons and heroes is that they all partake of the essential Good via the invisible gods. Their difference is their proximity to that good" (*Changing Self*, 46).

Since each essence is defined according to its relation to the whole, then an understanding of the soul in itself only emerges in correlation with the entire hierarchy of being. Souls cannot be thought separately from this whole and, as a result, each is defined first through a sort of negation with respect to absolute Being. He therefore outlines the position which he will “try to base [the] whole treatise on”<sup>24</sup> and which he claims to found on the authority of Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato and the ancients<sup>25</sup>, namely, that the soul is a distinct level of being that must be absolutely separated (χωρίζειν) into its own ὑπόστασις, not simply from Intellect, but also “from all the superior classes of being.”<sup>26</sup>

This definition does not, however, provide any positive definition of the nature of the soul insofar as it only has a formal existence in relation to absolute being and no determinate being in itself; it is limited but there is no account of what ‘it’ is. It is purely a participation and, more than that, an inferior one. Thus, Iamblichus writes in this context that the soul is nothing and its essence is defined by limit<sup>27</sup> and, since limit implies that which limits, that its essence cannot be understood apart from the whole.<sup>28</sup> In order to know the actual substance of the soul, therefore, it is necessary to move from an examination of its essence to one concerning its activities.

## II. ACTIVITIES REVEAL ESSENCE

To begin an examination of the activities of the soul, Iamblichus returns to the authority of Plato, writing: “Plato does not think that the powers (δύναμις) exist in the soul as separate from it, but says that they are naturally conjoined (σύμφυτος) with the soul and coexist with it in a single form (ιδέα).”<sup>29</sup> Being conjoined in this way means that the activities of the soul reveal its substance. However,

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24 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [366], 9.

25 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [366], 10.

26 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [366], 1.

27 *De Mysteriis* [22], 9; *De Mysteriis* [32], 8.

28 *De Mysteriis* [22], 9.

29 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [367], 7–10.

he is keen to reaffirm that both the lower and higher activities of the soul must be accounted for and is again critical of Plotinus, writing that “Plotinus removes from the soul the irrational powers (ἄλογος δύναμις): those of perception, imagination, memory and discursive reasoning (λογισμός). He includes only pure reason (καθαρός λογισμός) in the pure essence (καθαράς οὐσίας) of the soul.”<sup>30</sup> For Iamblichus, the higher and lower life of the soul must be treated *equally* in order to know the substance of the composite.

It is also necessary, however, to maintain the difference between both aspects. Though the distinct powers of the two parts of soul exist in a single form, they are manifested differently; the unity of the composite must be affirmed without a corresponding blending of its distinct activities and lives. Given the divided nature of the soul, these distinct lives operate in two ways: “the soul lives a double life, one in itself and one in conjunction with the body, [and] they [δυνάμεις] are present in the soul in one way but in the common animal (κοινόν ζῷον) in another.”<sup>31</sup> In the embodied soul, the higher activities “of divine possession, of immaterial intellection (ἀλλέω νόησις) and, in a word, those by which we are joined to the gods”<sup>32</sup> are attributed to the composite while the corporeal activities of sensation (αἴσθησις) and imagination are not. Furthermore, in the soul’s relation to the body and its administration of it, the soul exercises the powers of the body as their cause, but relates to it in “encompassing the body as an instrument or vehicle (ὄχημα), but possess[ing] movements proper

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30 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [369], 16–19.

31 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [368], 2–5. This is in distinction to the Stoic and later Peripatetic account in which the powers are present to soul by “being shared in or being mingled with the whole living being.” Iamblichus writes, for example (*De Anima* [368], 8): “ὁ ἐν τῷ μετέχουσθαι ἢ ἐν τῷ κεκράσθαι τῷ ὅλῳ ζῷῳ.” Amelius, on the other hand, held that soul was one in both essence and number, thereby making the soul universal and applying definition only through its ‘relation’ to the various cosmic bodies. Thus, there was not a real participation in the Iamblichean sense, but a soul as a prior, stable unity ‘relating’ to the divine. The capacity of the soul to receive the divine occurs through the body because this is where it encounters it. Iamblichus asserts that Plotinus shares this position by separating the soul from its irrational lives entirely.

32 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [371], 20.



to itself" (i.e. those which join it to the gods).<sup>33</sup> The acts of the bodily powers of the soul, then, are not linked to the body in their essence, but communicate with it by conversion (ἐπιστροφή)<sup>34</sup>, an activity that is brought about for the soul from outside.

In this back and forth — between an affirmation of the unity of the composite soul against those who would overemphasize its intellectual aspect and the reiteration of its divided character against those who would subsume its fundamental division into a false unity — a dialectic emerges. It is in this dialectic that the fundamental reality of the soul itself is revealed: the soul is fully descended into generation and its intellect can neither be separated from its lower life nor be preserved from this descent; its very essence is division. Priscianus' description is helpful here:

... the particular soul embraces both characteristics *equally*, both permanency and change, so that also in this way its intermediate position is again preserved; for higher beings are stable, mortal ones are completely changeable. The particular soul, however, which as middle is divided and multiplied together with the mundane beings, does not only remain permanent, but also changes because it lives through so many divisible lives. And not only its habits, but also changes in its substance (οὐσία) ... Change is inherent in its essence (οὐσία).<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the very substance of the embodied soul is descended and bound in the dividedness of generation. The composite soul projects its irrational, lower lives into generation and becomes entwined in matter. Even the intellect of the soul does not remain unchanged and is sundered by the mingling of the soul's lower activities with generation. This, in turn, manifests an interrelation between the two lives of the soul in which each life is marked by, and participates in, the life of the other. Its higher aspect participates in the dividedness of the lower and the lower receives from the higher.

All of this serves to affirm the truly intermediate nature of the soul's life in all aspects of its embodied existence. Pseudo-Simplicius outlines the full implication of this intermediate existence:

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33 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [371], 16–18.

34 Iamblichus, *De Anima* [373], 22.

35 Priscianus, *Metaphrasis* 31.27–32.19.

Thus ... [the soul] is a mean not only between the divisible and indivisible, or what remains and what proceeds, or the intellective and the irrational, but also between the ungenerated and the generated. It is ungenerated in accordance with its permanent, intellectual, and indivisible aspect, while it is generated in accordance with its procession, divisibility, and association with the irrational. It possesses neither its ungenerated aspect purely, as an intellectual entity does, since it is not indivisible or permanent, nor its generated aspect as the lowest entities do, since these never completely exist. But in its association with generation, it sometimes in some way abandons itself as it were, and does not simply remain but simultaneously both remains what it is and becomes; it never leaves what is ungenerated but is always joined to it and holds permanence within it and as it were flows onward replenishing what is lost. The generated aspect of it, however, also never proceeds without the stable and ungenerated, while the ungenerated aspect of it is sometimes removed from all association with generation in the life separated from body. Therefore the soul is both immortal and permanent, always having its immortality and permanency inferior to the intellectual life. But it does not preserve its permanence pure. For because of its declension outside, as a whole it simultaneously both remains and proceeds, and it has neither completely without the other.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the composite soul simultaneously shares in both aspects of its dual nature; it is never destroyed completely insofar as it is ungenerated, and never fully actual, insofar as it is generated. It is also never fully rational or irrational. In its activities in generation, it simultaneously remains and proceeds, sharing equally in permanence and change. Furthermore, since the soul is a unity of these two simultaneous activities, it is the *entire* soul that proceeds and remains, thereby admitting these opposing qualities to all parts equally — the soul simultaneously abides (μένειν) and proceeds (μεταβάλλειν).<sup>37</sup>

In this way, Iamblichus takes the division at the heart of the Timaeus' psychology to its farthest extreme. He begins with the notion of a fully descended soul that, in its enmattered state, is completely "alienated (ἀλλοτριωθὲν)" from both itself and the divine. The soul is "nothing" and defined by the "principle of divine limit (τῷ θείῳ πέρατι ἀφορίζεται)." It is a humble vision of both the rational powers of the soul and its ontological

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36 Pseudo-Simplicius, *In De Anima* 89.33–90.25.

37 Pseudo-Simplicius, *In De Anima* 6.10.

place in the broader procession of essences. Nonetheless, within a broader account of the interconnected procession of essences, this nothingness is also a radical capacity to receive the effulgence of the divine. The formlessness of the soul is, from another perspective, a means of receiving form — not simply for the intellect of the soul, but for the whole soul. In confirming the absolute poverty of the soul and limiting its tendency to overreach its own rational powers, Iamblichus is also asserting a reciprocal capacity to receive from the divine and be raised higher than the angels<sup>38</sup> and “exchange one life for another.”<sup>39</sup>

The dual consciousness which emerges from this internal dialectic — its “declension outside” and return to itself — also reveals the soul to and for itself. Through this state of constant movement and change its unity is never lost: indeed, through this very change the soul finds a beginning *within* itself.<sup>40</sup> By virtue of this self-negation and self-othering activity, it is completely emptied and realizes its emptiness and, yet, becomes conscious of a persistence of life within which it possesses reality. Thus, the soul’s procession out of itself is a self-alienation and reversion through which its underlying unity becomes manifest, not in spite of its change, but precisely as the nexus of these opposing activities. The soul is a “dynamic identity.”<sup>41</sup>

In this way, the limiting and negation of soul is also the means of its coming to know itself. The practical humility of such a realization and the position of complete dependence that we find ourselves in is, in one sense, a very great distance from the ecstasy found in Plotinus’ work. However, the very nothingness that the soul finds as its essence also allows it to ascend the procession of essences — to “be all things” — and is therefore a radical freedom to fully participate in the goodness of the divine. Iamblichus writes that soul:

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38 *De Mysteriis* [69], 10.

39 *De Mysteriis* [270], 6–14.

40 Pseudo-Simplicius, *In De Anima* 89.33–90.25.

41 Steel, *Changing Self*, 66.

... joins with whatever it will, and withdraws from whatever it will, becoming like all things and, by difference, remaining separate from them. It selects principles (λόγος) akin both to things really existent (συγγενείς τοῖς οὐσί) and to those coming into being (γίγνομαι), allying itself to the gods' harmonies of essences and of potentialities different from those by which daemons and heroes are linked to them.<sup>42</sup>

### III. THEURGY IN *DE MYSTERIIS*

The logic of the psychology found in Iamblichus' *Commentary on De Anima* serves as the foundation for the account of theurgy in *De Mysteriis*. His preservation of the essential tension of the soul and emphasis on its intermediate character means that the whole is both present and absent at each moment of the ascent. In the same way that the higher is present to the lower without being contained in the lower, the gods are able to interact with the lower classes without being corrupted by generation. As a result, the good of the body — and generated nature more broadly — is affirmed as the first point of contact and reception of the divine. Iamblichus writes that:

One must not... reject all matter (ὅλη), but only that which is alien to the gods, while selecting for use that which is akin to them, as being capable of harmonising with the construction of dwellings for the gods, the consecration of statues and indeed for the performance of sacrificial rites in general. For there is no other way in which the terrestrial realm or the men who dwell here could enjoy participation (λήψις) in the existence [of the gods].<sup>43</sup>

Since the lower is not in absolute opposition to the higher, "the gods are [not] confined to certain parts of the cosmos, nor is the earthly realm devoid of them."<sup>44</sup> Like objects that have been warmed by the sun retain heat, so too a divine πλήρωμα is present in created things. Those invoking the gods have access to their power *in nature*, making use of correspondences (οἰκείωσις) present there. Thus, Iamblichus states that "earthly things, possessing their being in virtue of the totalities (πληρώματα) of the gods, whenever they come to be ready for participation in the divine... find the gods

42 *De Mysteriis* [69], 2–6.

43 *De Mysteriis* [234], 1–6.

44 *De Mysteriis* [28], 10.

pre-existing in it prior to their own proper essence (οὐσία)."<sup>45</sup>

Theurgy is the intermediate operation through which the soul can make use of these correspondences. Like the soul, it presents a "double aspect (διττόν ἐστι πρόσχημα)"<sup>46</sup> because its material rites are also invested with the noetic activity of the gods. This allows theurgy to serve as the bridge that unites the soul and the divine. Its dual nature also makes it the appropriate means for the divided soul's purification: insofar as it is material, human souls are able to participate in the rites immediately and therein purify the lower part of the soul; insofar as it is invested with the power of the gods through the divine symbols in nature, the higher part of the soul is invested with the divine life. Iamblichus writes:

On the one hand, it is performed by men, and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but on the other, it controls divine symbols (σύνθημα) ... It is in virtue of this distinction, then, that the art both naturally invokes the powers (δυνάμεις) from the universe as superiors (κρείσσων), inasmuch as the invoker is man, and yet on the other hand gives them orders, since it invests (περιβάλλω) itself, by virtue of the ineffable symbols (ἀπόρητον σύμβολον), with the hieratic role (πρόσχημα) of the gods.<sup>47</sup>

Through theurgy, the soul is transformed. Edward Butler comments that theurgy "appropriately invokes the powers from the totality as superiors insofar as the operator is a human, but on the other hand commands them, since through the ineffable symbols [*aporrêton symbolôn*] he is in a certain respect invested with the hieratic aspect of the Gods [*to hieratikon tôn theôn proschêma*]."<sup>48</sup> The soul is simultaneously able to receive and project, become purified and demiurgic; its divided existence therein unified. Thus, theurgy and the soul relate through a sort of "cooperative demiurgy"<sup>49</sup> in which theurgy provides the means of receiving the divine life that the soul requires in order to reconstitute itself,

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45 *De Mysteriis* [29], 1–4.

46 *De Mysteriis* [184], 1.

47 *De Mysteriis* [184], 1–10.

48 Butler, *Offering to the Gods*, 8.

49 Gregory MacIsaac, "The Nous of the Partial Soul," *Dionysius* XXIX (2011): 29–60.

while the participating soul simultaneously becomes demiurgic through these rites and serves as a vehicle for the restitution of the entire cosmic procession. It is god-work (θεουργία) rather than god-talk (θεόλογος), combining the praxis appropriate to the embodied soul with the givenness of the divine intellect.

#### V. CONCLUSION

We have seen that Iamblichus' psychology and account of theurgy operate by a similar logic. They both serve as intermediates that combine opposing realities by virtue of their composite makeup. Due to this likeness, theurgy is the appropriate means of the soul's self-constitution and ascent. However, an understanding of Iamblichus' psychology, account of theurgy and relation of the two also rests on a strict delineation of the ontological classes and knowledge of the relation of the whole. The limiting of the soul and corresponding dependency means that a full account of the soul is not possible without a clear understanding of the ontological whole. In the same way that the tension of the soul requires a balanced approach of perspective in order to truly know the composite<sup>50</sup>, so positive knowledge about the ontology requires a balanced theoretical approach. Iamblichus writes that, if you take the various ontological classes as a given unity, then "the whole structure of scientific theology is thrown into confusion." On the other hand, "if... they form distinct genera, and there is no single essential definition common to all of them... this eliminates the possibility of there being any characteristic attributes of them as a whole [and] one is not going to discover what one is seeking."<sup>51</sup> If an emphasis is placed on the unity of being, then there can be no affirmative knowledge about the substance of distinct classes;

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50 Iamblichus writes (*De Mysteriis* [7], 5–8): "We will provide, in an appropriate manner, explanations proper to each, dealing in a theological (θεολογικός) mode with theological questions and in theurgical (θεουργός) terms with those concerning theurgy, while philosophical issues we will join with you in examining in philosophical terms."

51 *De Mysteriis* [14], 10–15.

if there is an emphasis on division, then there is no strand binding the classes together by which the soul can find καθαρείος γνῶσις.

In the approach of the sciences, then, it is necessary to reflect this division in the way in which the object is examined. There are varied modes of knowledge that parallel the distinct natures of the objects, “on the basis of which both you and those like you can be led intellectually to the essence of true being (ὄντα γνῶσται).”<sup>52</sup> Philosophy and theology — the former which moves between premises and the latter which accepts its premises as given — must be unified in a systematic theology that is able to engage with both the lower and higher realities of encosmic life. The awakening consciousness and intellectual purification that comes through philosophy is not, in itself, able to unify the soul’s divided activities in generation. The soul is a composite, a formal unity of simultaneously opposing motions, the one receiving the freedom of a higher life and the other binding itself in fate. Although its parts can be divided for thought, they are a living unity: it is the salvation of the whole soul that Iamblichus seeks.

We therefore return to Iamblichus’ criticism of the ‘ceaselessly inventive’ Greeks. Their error is, on the most basic level, the same hubris identified by so many thinkers and poets in the tradition. For Iamblichus, however, this hubris begins with a refusal to follow the division of the embodied soul to its final conclusion: the soul is completely dependent on higher realities and is, in itself, nothing. This creates a dependency that is absolute on all levels but which, if accepted, also gives rise to the humility necessary for the reception of the divine through the higher ontological classes. Thus, Iamblichus is not a religious mystic who undermines philosophical thought in Platonism but, rather, a philosopher in the Platonic tradition who seeks to bring systematic clarity to a problematic impulse in the tradition, an impulse that blends important ontological distinctions and results in ambiguity concerning the appropriate means for the intellectual ascent of the soul and its salvation.

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52 *De Mysteriis* [7], 10.