

# Theurgy as Demiurgy: Iamblichus' Solution to the Problem of Embodiment

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## Introduction

Plato left a number of unresolved dilemmas to his successors but none, arguably, had more existential significance than the question of the role of matter and the problem of the soul's embodiment. The question of the soul's status in the body was especially important for the Platonists of late antiquity (100-500 C.E.) because they lived in an era permeated by a profound pessimism about the cosmos and a disenchantment with the material world.<sup>1</sup> Every Platonist, consequently, was challenged to solve this problem. It was nothing less than a challenge to interpret the meaning of human existence, and the differences in their solutions determined, in large part, the differences in their Platonisms.

Plotinus, in his treatise on the descent of the soul,<sup>2</sup> refers to passages from the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* to show that Plato's description of embodiment was inconsistent. After summarizing Plato's positive and negative portrayals of embodiment Plotinus says:

He is obviously not saying the same thing everywhere, so that one can easily know what his intention is . . . .<sup>3</sup>

E. R. Dodds noted that Plotinus' attempt to explain Plato's view of embodiment demanded that he reconcile the pessimism of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, where embodiment is described as a fettering of the soul, with the optimism of the *Timaeus* where embodiment is seen as an act of cooperation with the Demiurge, perfecting the cosmos. After recounting the evils of embodiment Plotinus explains that it is nevertheless "eternally necessary by a law of nature"<sup>4</sup> for human souls to descend into bodies and the problems of generated life. Then, after interpreting this descent optimistically,

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1. See E. R. Dodds, *Pagan & Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), Chapter 1, "Man and the Material World," pp.1-27.

2. *Ennead* IV, 8.

3. Plotinus, *Ennead* IV, 8, 1, (27-28), tr. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

4. —, *Enn.*, IV, 8, 5, (11), tr. Armstrong.

*Dionysius, Vol. XII, Dec. 1988, pp. 37-59*

as a process of divine unfolding rooted in the One itself, Plotinus seems to retract his line of argument, for he asserts that the soul does not, in fact, descend completely but leaves something of itself in the intelligible world.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to remember that Plotinus begins this treatise with a personal confession.

Often, he says, I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; . . . .<sup>6</sup>

Plotinus' approach to the problem of embodiment in this early essay<sup>7</sup> (and in later essays as well) was influenced by experiences that transcend the dilemma altogether. Plotinus' question, then, was not so much how to understand the soul as embodied but to answer why the soul enters into the body at all. He continues:

Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body.<sup>8</sup>

Dodds pointed out that Plotinus' attempt to resolve the problem of embodiment in this early essay was unsuccessful, due perhaps to the dualistic influence Plotinus inherited from Numenius.<sup>9</sup> R. T. Wallis agrees and argues that Plotinus, even in his later essays, failed to solve the problem of embodiment and of reconciling the opposing streams of Platonic thought on this problem.<sup>10</sup> Wallis adds that Plotinus' view that the soul never descends into a body proved inadequate for anyone faced with the reality of embodied suffering, and in any case it failed to explain why a soul would "erroneously identify itself" with the body in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

5. —, *Enn.*, IV, 8, 8, (2-3), tr. Armstrong.

6. —, *Enn.*, IV, 8, 1, (1-6), tr. Armstrong.

7. 6th according to Porphyry's numeration.

8. —, *Enn.*, IV, 8, 1, (8-11), tr. Armstrong.

9. Dodds, *op. cit.*, p. 25. Dodds points out that in his early essays Plotinus interpreted the descent of the soul as a willful act, a *tolma*, but in his later essays ameliorated this by seeing the descent as a kind of biological necessity. This may have emancipated Plotinus from "Numenian influence," (p. 26) but not, it seems, from dualism, for in Plotinus' later essays evil is said to come to the soul from matter, a point also noted by Dodds.

10. R. T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. 77-78.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

Due to his own transcendent experiences, Plotinus would not, perhaps, have recognized the "problem" of embodiment as genuine since he *knew* that the soul never truly descends into a body. Wallis' criticisms in this regard seem valid, for Plotinus appears, finally, to resolve the problem of human embodiment and suffering by denying its reality. Nevertheless, in Chapter 6 of this early Ennead Plotinus introduced characteristics of embodiment that contribute to the soul's psychogenesis and perfection; these positive evaluations of embodiment were developed in surprising ways by Plotinus' successors, most notably by Iamblichus.

Iamblichus' emphasis on the performance of theurgic ritual in the Platonic school may be appreciated as a development of this optimistic strain of Plotinus' argument. With theurgy, however, Iamblichus presents a new and alternative solution to the problem of embodiment. J.N.P. Lowry has argued that Iamblichus' turn to theurgy to solve the dilemmas of human existence was more "philosophically" consistent than Plotinus' approach,<sup>12</sup> and it may have proven more existentially satisfying as well. Theurgy may be defined as the ritual manifestation of divine powers,<sup>13</sup> and with respect to the problems faced by the soul it may be seen as the "embodied" solution to what was, undeniably, an embodied problem, that of the soul's somatic confusion.

In theurgy Iamblichus developed a bridge between the psychological matter of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* and the cosmological matter of the *Timaeus*. Iamblichus succeeded in this because he was able to translate Neopythagorean principles for the mediation of opposite mathematical terms to the concrete opposition encountered by an eternal soul in a mortal body. Dodds noted that Iamblichus introduced the "law of mean terms" to the Platonists which allowed him to bridge the gap between the intransigent unity of the One and the dividedness of the Many.<sup>14</sup> By postulating a middle term, or, as it turns out, middle *terms*, Iamblichus

12. J. M. P. Lowry, *The Logical Principles of Proclus' ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΩΣΙΣ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΚΗ As Systematic Ground of the Cosmos* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1980) pp. 16-19.

13. The most comprehensive study of theurgy is Hans Lewy, *The Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, ed. by Michel Tardieu (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1978). See also, E. R. Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relation to Neoplatonism," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1941); rpt., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Appendix I (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951); Jean Trouillard, "La théurgie," *L'un et l'âme selon Proclus* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982), pp. 171-89; G. Shaw, "Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus," *Traditio* 41, 1985, pp. 1-28.

14. *Proclus, The Elements of Theology*, Text, translation, introduction and commentary by E. R. Dodds (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1963) pp. xxi-xxii.

established a continuity between irreconcilable extremes, a principle of mediation that became one of the most important elements in post-Iamblichian Platonism.<sup>15</sup> In the existential situation of embodied souls, Iamblichus' introduction of theurgic rituals provided a mediation between man's experience of matter as an oppressive weight, separating him from the divine, and his innate awareness of matter as the vehicle which joins him with the gods. Theurgy, then, was the dynamic and embodied expression of the mathematical mean, for in theurgic ritual an unbroken continuity was established between mortal and immortal realms, allowing embodied souls to enter divine energies through rites that were both divine and human.

I will attempt to explain Iamblichus' theurgic solution to the problem of embodiment in three parts. Firstly, I will examine Iamblichus' optimistic view of matter (following the cosmological view of the *Timaeus*); secondly, I will contrast this with his pessimistic view of matter (reflecting the position of the *Phaedo*); and thirdly, I will attempt to show how Iamblichus reconciled these opposing "matters" experientially by examining the role that theurgy played in providing a path from one material extreme to the other.

### I. Matter as Cosmic Instrument: The Optimism of the *Timaeus*

In his well-known apology for the practice of theurgy, entitled *De mysteriis (On the Mysteries; [DM])*,<sup>16</sup> Iamblichus replied to a series of questions put to one of his students by Porphyry, leader of the rival Platonic school in Rome. Iamblichus' Syrian school encouraged the use of material objects in theurgic ritual, and Porphyry questioned this, charging that theurgy was simply an attempt to manipulate the gods. Iamblichus responded to the charges of this esteemed philosopher by adopting the pseudonym of an Egyptian priest, Abammon. In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus explained to his fellow Platonist and former teacher how the disciplines of theurgy — including its material rites — in no way attempted to manipulate the gods. To the contrary, Iamblichus argued that theurgy habituated souls to the most spiritual of lives,

15. Dodds explains: ". . . two doubly disjunct terms A B and not-A not-B cannot be continuous but must be linked by an intermediate term, either A not-B or B not-A, which forms a 'triad' with them." *Ibid.*, p. xxii; cf. Lowry, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

16. The complete title given by Marsilio Ficino was *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*. The earliest manuscripts, however, do not include such references in their titles; see P. Thillet, "Jamblique et les mystères d'Égypte," *Revue des Études Grecques*, 81, 1968, pp. 172-174. The standard edition is E. des Places, *Jamblique: Les mystères d'Égypte* (Paris, 1966). It will be cited below as *DM*.

far surpassing the merely intellectual exercises of Porphyry's school.

In his discussion of matter in *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus initiated a new direction in the Platonic tradition by asserting that "matter" (ύλη)<sup>17</sup> originates from god. He says:

God produced matter out of the scission of materiality from substantiality, which the Demiurge, receiving as a living substance, fashioned into simple and impassible spheres and organized the last of this into generated and mortal bodies.<sup>18</sup>

For Iamblichus, the god who produced matter was not the ineffable One but the "monad from the One (μονὰς ἐκ τοῦ ἑνός)."<sup>19</sup> Iamblichus calls this monad: "first god and king (πρώτος θεός καὶ βασιλεύς);"<sup>20</sup> "god and principle of god (ἀρχὴ γὰρ οὗτος καὶ θεός θεῶν);"<sup>21</sup> "father of essence (οὐσιοπάτωρ);"<sup>22</sup> and "principle of intelligibles (τῶν νοητῶν ἀρχή)".<sup>23</sup>

Consistent with his pseudonymous identity, Iamblichus claimed that the metaphysical system of the theurgists was Egyptian. In Egyptian theology the presence of the One was understood to dominate all levels of manifestation, even material.<sup>24</sup> Iamblichus explains:

The doctrine of the Egyptians concerning principles, proceeding from on high as far as to the last of things, begins from one principle and descends to a multitude which is governed by this one; and everywhere an indefinite nature is under the dominion of a certain definite measure and under the supreme uniform cause of all things.<sup>25</sup>

17. Iamblichus' term for "matter" was coined by Aristotle who said that Plato's material principle in the *Timaeus*, called "space" (χώρα; 52b), "receptacle" (ὑποδοχή; 49b), "mother" (μήτηρ; 49b), and "nurse" (τιθηνή; 49b), was equivalent to the term ύλη (Aristotle, *Physics* 209b 11-13).

18. *DM* 265, 6-10. Text: "Υλην δὲ παρήγαγεν ὁ θεὸς ἀπὸ τῆς οὐσιότητος ὑποσχυσθεῖσης ὑλότητος, ἣν παραλαβὼν ὁ δημιουργὸς ξωτικὴν οὖσαν τὰς ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἀπαθείς σφαίρας ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἐδημιούργησε, τὸ δὲ ἔσχατον αὐτῆς εἰς τὰ γεννητὰ καὶ φθαρτὰ σώματα διεκόσμησεν.

19. *DM* 262, 4-5.

20. *DM* 261, 10.

21. *DM* 262, 4.

22. *DM* 262, 6.

23. *DM* 262, 7-8.

24. In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus says that his explanation of theurgy is based on the hieratic teachings of the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. It is significant that in his mathematical treatise, *De Communi Mathematica Scientia* (*On the General Science of Mathematics*; [DCMS]) he says that Pythagoras learned mathematics from the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans. (*DCMS*, 66,9-67,2.).

25. *DM* 264,14-265,6. Text: Καὶ οὕτως ἄνωθεν ἄχρι τῶν τελευταίων ἢ

For Iamblichus, matter was divinely created, and even its most mundane and sensible divisions were guided by the measures of a unifying principle. This latter point was crucial in distinguishing Iamblichus' view of matter from that of his Platonic predecessors. Plotinus left a breach between intelligible and sensible matter, making the latter carry the pejorative imagery of his Middle Platonic predecessors. Iamblichus, in contrast, asserted an unbroken continuity between divine and sensible matter.<sup>26</sup> This allowed him to view all aspects of manifestation — sensible or intelligible — as reducible to numerical principles; it was probably this "immanentist" Pythagorean metaphysics<sup>27</sup> that distinguished Iamblichus' view of matter from that of Plotinus. It is significant that Plotinus, unlike most Platonists of his time, showed little respect for Pythagoras or the teachings attributed to him.<sup>28</sup>

Festugière noted that Iamblichus' description of the origin of matter in *On the Mysteries* bears great similarity to that of the 1st century Neopythagorean, Moderatus of Gades.<sup>29</sup> In his description of first principles Moderatus says that the material principle, "quantity" (ποσότης), is derived from Unifying Reason (ἐνιαῖος λόγος) after having been separated from it and all formal qualities. Iamblichus' "materiality" (ὕλότης) is derived in the same manner from a Paternal Monad and then separated from substantiality (i.e., formal qualities).<sup>30</sup> The ποσότης of Moderatus and the ὕλη / ὕλότης of Iamblichus functioned as receptacles for the divine Forms in the same manner that the material principle functioned in Plato's *Timaeus*. These "receptacles" were void of any impression, and this formal nullity enabled them to receive and reveal the

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περὶ τῶν ἀρχῶν Αἰγυπτίους πραγματεία ἀφ' ἑνὸς ἄρχεται, καὶ πρόεισιν εἰς πλῆθος, τῶν πολλῶν αὐθις ὑφ' ἑνὸς διακυ βερνωμένων καὶ πανταχοῦ τῆς ἀορίστου φύσεως ἐπικρατουμένης ὑπὸ τινος ὀρισμένου μέτρου καὶ τῆς ἀνωτάτω ἐνιαίας πάντων αἰτίας.

26. Clemens Baumker characterized the difference by pointing out that the Plotinian cosmos is *diminished in value* in proportion to its degree of sensible expression while in the cosmos of Iamblichus sensible matter represents no subtraction of intelligible power because it derives directly from the intelligible principle, the *aoristas duas*. Clemens Baumker, *Das Problem der Materie in der griechischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Minerva GMBH, 1963; reprint of Münster, 1890), p. 419.

27. Cornelia de Vogel has pointed out the "immanentist" aspect of Pythagorean metaphysics. The connection to Iamblichus is my own; see, De Vogel, *Pythagoras and Early Pythagoreanism*, (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V., 1966) pp. 197-200.

28. See Armstrong, *Plotinus IV*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), f.n. # 1, pp. 398-399.

29. A. J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste IV* (Paris: Gabalda et Cie 1953), pp. 38-40.

30. *Ibid.* pp. 38-40.

Forms without distortion.<sup>31</sup> Iamblichus' view of matter was probably a standard element of Neopythagorean teachings as applied to Plato's *Timaeus*.

In his *Introduction to the Arithmetic of Nichomachus* Iamblichus again discusses the origin of matter in cosmogony. He says:

The God, *Demiourgos*, is not the creator of matter, but when he receives it, as eternal, he molds it into forms and organizes it according to numerical ratios.<sup>32</sup>

In this Neopythagorean treatise Iamblichus says that "form" and "matter" in the cosmos were analogous to the monad and dyad in numbers.<sup>33</sup> For Iamblichus, the entire cosmos was a series of oppositions held in harmonious tension by the "rhythmic weaving" (ῥυθμίξειν) of the Demiurge.<sup>34</sup> This integration of matter in a positive manner shows a marked difference from Plotinus' school, and it had profound consequences for Iamblichus' soteriology. In the Platonism of Iamblichus the soul's path to salvation changed from being an escape from the body and matter to the theurgic integration of somatic powers according to a divine and unifying pattern. After all, matter and all things somatic were not evil but expressions of a divine numerical principle, the indefinable Dyad.

In his treatise *On the General Principles of Mathematics* Iamblichus describes the material principle of number as a "completely fluid and pliant matter."<sup>35</sup> In this treatise Iamblichus says that the first principles, the One and Many, strictly speaking, do not exist, but in combination they bring forth differentiation and being. One may imagine this combination as the marriage of two ineffable extremes bound in mathematical and musical proportions. In their measured combinations they manifest different degrees of tension from which existence and intelligibility arise. Describing this Iamblichus says:

Now of the mathematical numbers let the two first and highest principles be set forth: the One (which one must call non-being on account of its being simple, the principle of beings, and not yet that sort of being of which it is principle), and the other is the principle of the Many which — of itself — is able to provide division. Because of this, as much as it is in our

31. *Timaeus* 50e-51a.

32. Iamblichus, *In Nich*, 79,5-8. Text: . . . ὁ δημιουργὸς θεὸς μὴ ὄν τῆς ὕλης γεννητικός, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὴν αἰδίων παραλαβών, εἶδει καὶ λόγους τοῖς κατ' ἀριθμὸν διαπλάττων καὶ κοσμοποιῶν.

33. *In Nichomachi Arithmeticon Introductionem (In Nich.)*, ed Pistelli (Teubner, 1975) 78, 11-14.

34. *In Nich*. 78,24; 73, 1-4.

35. See f.n. # 36.

power to say, we compare it to a completely fluid and pliant matter.<sup>36</sup>

Iamblichus describes the origin of evil in this unfolding of principles yet denies that it has a legitimate place in the hierarchy. He says:

Let it be thus for us. In the elements from which numbers arise neither beauty nor the good yet exist, but out of the combination of the One and the causal matter of the Many, number subsists. In these first existences [numbers], being and beauty appear, and in turn, from the elements of lines geometrical existence appears in which being and beauty are similarly found and in which there is nothing ugly or evil. But, in the last of things, in the fourth and fifth levels which are composed from the last elements, evil appears, not as a guiding principle, but from something falling out and not maintaining the natural order.<sup>37</sup>

Evil and all the evils of embodied existence occur only accidentally, from a “falling out” in the fourth and fifth grades of existence. Although Iamblichus gives no explanation of these levels, they apparently originated under Speusippus, and I follow Merlan and Tarrant in assigning the fourth and fifth spheres to “bodies” and “unordered masses” respectively.<sup>38</sup> Evil, for Iamblichus, cannot be identified with matter, nor does it derive from some de-

36. DCMS 15, 6-14. Text: Τῶν δὲ ἀριθμῶν τῶν μαθηματικῶν δύο τὰς πρωτίστας καὶ ἀνωτάτω ὑποθετέον ἀρχάς, τὸ ἓν (ὅπερ δὴ οὐδὲ ὄν πω δεῖ καλεῖν, διὰ τὸ ἀπλοῦν εἶναι καὶ διὰ τὸ ἀρχὴν μὲν ὑπάρχειν τῶν ὄντων, τὴν δὲ ἀρχὴν μηδέπω εἶναι τοιαύτην οἷα ἔχειν ὡς ἐστὶν ἀρχή), καὶ ἄλλην πάλιν ἀρχὴν τὴν τοῦ πλήθους, ἣν καὶ διαίρεσιν οἷόν τ' εἶναι καθ' αὐτὸ παρέχεσθαι καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ὑγρὰ τι παντάπασιν καὶ εὐπλαδεῖ ὕλη, προσηκόντως εἰς δύναμιν παραδεικνύντες, ἀποφαίνομεν ἂν ὁμοίαν εἶναι.

37. DCMS 18, 1-12. Text: Καὶ τοῦτο μὲν οὖν οὕτως ἡμῖν ἐχέτω. τὰ δὲ στοιχεῖα, ἐξ ὧν οἱ ἀριθμοί, οὐδέπω ὑπάρχει οὔτε καλὰ οὔτε ἀγαθὰ· ἐκ δὲ τῆς συνθέσεως τοῦ ἑνὸς καὶ τῆς τοῦ πλήθους αἰτίας ὕλης ὑφίσταται μὲν ὁ ἀριθμὸς, πρώτους δὲ ἐν τούτοις τὸ ὄν φαίνεται καὶ κάλλος, ἐφεξῆς ἐκ τῶν στοιχείων τῶν γραμμῶν τῆς γεωμετρικῆς οὐσίας φανείσης, ἐν ἧ ὡσαύτως τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ καλόν, ἐν οἷς [οὔτε] οὐδὲν οὔτε αἰσχρόν ἐστὶν οὔτε κακόν· ἐν τοῖς τετάρτοις καὶ πέμπτοις τοῖς συντιθεμένοις ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τῶν τελευταίων κακίαν γενέσθαι οὐ προηγουμένως, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ ἐκπίπτειν καὶ μὴ κατακρατεῖν τινα τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν.

38. L. Tarrant, “Speusippus’ Ontological Classification,” *Phronesis* XIX, 1974, pp. 130-145; see esp. the diagram on p. 144 which shows the respective interpretations of this passage by Merlan, Kramer and Tarrant; Philip Merlan, *Platonism to Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), pp. 110-124; H. J. Kramer, *Der Ursprung der Geistmetaphysik* (Amsterdam: Verlag P. Schippers, 1964), pp. 212-214.



viance in matter.<sup>39</sup> Evil arises when the soul falls out of the divine order, inclines toward the embodied life that it sustains, and then finds itself subject to the suffering of that life.<sup>40</sup>

Iamblichus is adamant that the material principle cannot be evil, and I believe his emphasis of this point suggests that Iamblichus was refuting a prevailing or competitive view among his peers. He says:

It would be far from true to suggest that the material principle is evil.<sup>41</sup> . . . It is not appropriate to contend that this [material principle] is evil or ugly.<sup>42</sup>

In the same treatise Iamblichus adds:

. . . if the One is praised on account of its independence and being the cause of beauty in numbers, how senseless it would be to say that the natural receptacle of such a thing is evil or ugly.<sup>43</sup>

In the *Theologoumena Arithmeticae* (*Theology of Numbers*; [TA]), attributed to Iamblichus, he says that the Dyad, as principle of matter, not only derives from the One but, in a sense, *is* the One.

According to one designation they [the Pythagoreans] call the monad matter and receptacle of all since it is the cause of the Dyad and of all receiving ratios . . .<sup>44</sup>

Iamblichus' Pythagorean teachings may have provided the basis for his "Egyptian" metaphysical schema in *On the Mysteries*. They certainly complement it, and the hieratic practices encouraged by Iamblichus would have been entirely consistent with a worldview that sees all aspects of the material world as expressions of the mathematical ratios of the Demiurge.

All references to matter thus far have been positive and form part of Iamblichus' *cosmological* view of matter in accord with the

39. Cf. Plotinus who describes matter as "evil in itself"; *Enn.* I,8,3 39-40. 40. See *DM* 21, 6-7; cf., "Letter to Macedonius on Fate," *Stob.* II, 173,5 – 174,27.

41. *DCMS* 16, 1-2. Text: ὥστε πολλοῦ δέον ἂν εἶη κακὸν προσαγορεύεσθαι αὐτό.

42. *DCMS* 15, 23-24. Text: κακὸν δὲ ἢ αἰσχροῦν τὸ τοιοῦτον οὐ προσήκον ἴσως ἐστὶ τιθέσθαι. . . .

43. *DCMS* 16, 2-6. Text: εἰ γὰρ δὴ καὶ τὴν τοῦ ἑνός τις φύσιν ἐπαινῶν τυγχάνοι δι' αὐτάρχειάν τε καὶ τὸ καλῶν τινων ἐν τοῖς ἀριθμοῖς αἴτον εἶναι, πῶς οὐκ ἄλογον ἂν εἶη λέγειν τὸ κακὸν ἢ τὸ αἰσχροῦν δεκτικὸν κατὰ φύσιν τοῦ τοιοῦτου πράγματος εἶναι;

44. *TA* 5, 12-15. Text: κατὰ δέ τι σημαίνόμενον καὶ ὕλην αὐτὴν καλοῦσι καὶ πανδοχέα γε, ὡς παρεκτικὴν οὐσαν καὶ δυάδος τῆς κυρίως ὕλης καὶ πάντων χωρητικὴν λόγων.

Platonic tradition. However, as a Platonist Iamblichus needed to account for the description of matter in the *Timaeus* as a discordant and chaotic mass prior to creation (*Tim.* 30a). Iamblichus' interpretation of this passage remains consistent with his optimistic presentation of matter; it is significant for theurgical Platonism as well, for it provides a clue to Iamblichus' understanding of theurgic activity. The *Timaeus* reads:

God desired that, so far as possible, all things should be good and nothing evil; wherefore, when He took over all that was visible, seeing that it was not in a state of rest but in a state of discordant and disorderly motion, He brought it into order out of disorder. . . .<sup>45</sup>

Iamblichus says that the passage should not be taken literally because it presents chaos and disorder as prior to the principle of order, the Demiurge. He argues:

[This] would be impious, not only about the cosmos, but about the Demiurge himself, utterly abolishing either his supremely good will or else his creative power.<sup>46</sup>

According to Iamblichus, Plato's description of the cosmos coming into being after chaos was simply a heuristic device to emphasize the dependence of our world on the Demiurge, the Nous, and the World Soul which give it order. In any case, corporeality could not be separated from its form-giving qualities. Such a separation, Iamblichus argues, is possible only in abstract discourse, not in the living world. He says:

Although the cosmos is eternally in being the exigencies of discourse separate the creation from the creator and bring into existence in a time sequence things which are established simultaneously.<sup>47</sup>

The cosmogonic act, therefore, does not take place in a chronological past but is always present *in illo tempore* and, for Iamblichus, it is always accessible by means of ritual. The chronology of the *Timaeus*, for Iamblichus, simply portrays the ontological grades of being simultaneously present in the corporeal world. In other words, at the moment the Demiurge exists, the entire corporeal world exists, and in every sense. Conversely, at any moment, potentially, the act of creation is taking place.

45. *Timaeus* 30a, tr. R. G. Bury.

46. J. Dillon, *Iamblichi Chalcedensis*, Frag. # 37, In. *Tim.* II, (Leiden: Brill, 1978) p. 141.

47. *Ibid.*, Frag. # 37, In. *Tim.* II, p. 140.

It is clear that Iamblichus followed Plato's optimistic and Pythagorean teachings with respect to matter, but the task remained to integrate this cosmologically positive view of matter with the negative experiences of the embodied soul. To solve this, I believe that Iamblichus turned to the model of demiurgy portrayed in these cosmogonic treatises to serve as the basis for his interpretation of theurgy. In both Plato's cosmogony and Iamblichus' theurgy matter plays an indispensable role. The soul could no more realize its salvation without embracing matter than the Demiurge could have created the cosmos without the formless receptacle that gives expression to the Ideas. The difference, however, is that while the embodied soul's embrace of matter is piecemeal, following the cycles of time and stages of embodiment, the act of the Demiurge on matter is simultaneous and complete, and it is precisely in this "difference" that Iamblichian theurgy must be understood. It was this difference that caused the soul to experience evil and ugliness, and Iamblichus was well aware of this.

## II. Matter as Cause or Context of Evil

In his treatise *On the General Science of Mathematics* Iamblichus says that evil does not occur until the fourth and fifth levels of reality, those of embodied and mortal life. The soul's experience of suffering and evil, therefore, comes about as the result of its being verged to the composite life that it sustains; and it is in this context that Iamblichus describes matter as evil. In response to Porphyry's questions about the superstitious use of statues and fetish objects in theurgy Iamblichus distinguished two kinds of images and two kinds of image-makers. Iamblichus condemned the work of the common sorcerer and idol maker as "artificial" (the product of human cunning); he contrasted this maker and his images with θεός, the creator of the images in heaven, the true icons. Condemning the artificial images Iamblichus says:

God is not their maker, but man. Nor are they produced out of uniform and intelligible essences, but from matter which has been acquired. *What good, therefore, can be generated from matter and from the corporeal powers around matter and in bodies?*<sup>48</sup>

This last remark would seem to contradict Iamblichus' description of matter in his mathematical writings and in the quoted passages

48. *DM* 168, 3-8. Text: Οὐ γὰρ θεὸς αὐτῶν ἐστὶ ποιητής, ἀλλ' ἄνθρωπος οὐδ' ἐκ τῶν ἐνοειδῶν καὶ νοητῶν οὐσιῶν παράγεται, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης τῆς λαμβανομένης. Τί οὖν ἀγαθὸν γένοιτο ἂν ὕλης βλαστάνον καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὕλην καὶ ἐν τοῖς σώμασιν ὑλικῶν καὶ σωματοειδῶν δυνάμεων;

from *On the Mysteries*. The context of Iamblichus' discourse has changed, for his description of matter here is clearly negative. In the same section of *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus describes matter dualistically as the pollution from which souls must be cleansed. He says:

The contamination from material things falls upon those who are held in a material body; and as many souls as are subject to defilement by matter should necessarily be purified.<sup>49</sup>

Iamblichus here enunciates the pessimistic and psychological view of matter typical to his Platonic predecessors, yet we have noted that he also held to the optimistic and cosmological view of matter. The basis for mediating these "matters" can be seen in *On the Mysteries* where Iamblichus explains that matter was not an obstacle or pollutant for all souls. For the World Soul and Celestial Souls (i.e., stars) matter and embodiment produce no injury or obstacle, "but to a particular soul the communion with the body is demeaning in both these respects."<sup>50</sup> What determines whether or not matter impedes the soul is the kind of body it inhabits and the perspective this allows. While human souls have partial perspectives, Iamblichus says the World Soul and Celestial Souls are "wholes," possessing universal perspectives, and this was a crucial difference.<sup>51</sup> Between the World Soul and human souls, however, was a vast number of intermediary beings, and what distinguished Iamblichus' solution to the problem of the soul's embodiment was the added importance he gave to these mediating agents in the salvation of the soul. Daimons, heroes, and celestial gods all were involved in the soul's transformation to divine status, and this apotheosis of the soul included an immortalization of its body.

In a theurgical context Iamblichus personified the impediments of particular souls as daimons, invisible entities that draw souls down into the material world and hold them there. Daimons were "the bonds of generation" (τῆς γενέσεως δεσμῶν) from which souls must be cleansed.<sup>52</sup> Describing their cosmic function Iamblichus says:

49. *DM* 204, 4-7. Text: Καὶ ὁ μολυσμὸς οὖν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐνύλων συμπίπτει τοῖς ἀπὸ σώματος ὕλικου κατεχομένοις, καὶ τὸ ἀπὸ τούτων ἀποκαθαίρεσθαι ἀναγκαῖον ἐκείνοις ὅσα δύναται ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης μαινεσθαι.

50. *DM* 200, 8-10. Text: . . . τῇ δὲ ἐνμέρει φρηγῆ κοινωνεῖν σώματι πρὸς ἀμφοτέρα ταῦτά ἐστιν ἀλυσιτελής.

51. Plotinus makes the same distinction; cf. *Ennead* IV 8 3 # 5.

52. *DM* 215, 15-216, 8.

One must assign to Daimons the jurisdiction over the generative powers, as well as the responsibility over nature and of binding souls to bodies.<sup>53</sup>

"Daimons," Iamblichus says, "lead souls down into Nature."<sup>54</sup> Therefore, to become free from the constraints of matter, one had to free himself from its daimonic powers. Yet, despite their evil affects on particular souls, Iamblichus says that daimons act according to the divine will.

They bring into manifest activity the invisible good of the gods . . . [they] reveal what is ineffable in the gods, shape what is formless into forms, and render what is beyond all measure into visible ratios.<sup>55</sup>

We are back, it seems, to the problem of reconciling what is good for the cosmos with what is bad for the individual soul. Yet Iamblichus has changed the parameters of the question. He has placed it within the context of a Pythagorean/"Egyptian" cosmos and has introduced daimons as the immediate agents of the soul's bondage or release. Iamblichus' solution to the problem of embodiment demanded that one properly understand the negative affects of daimons and learn how to respond to them in theurgic ritual. For Iamblichus, the soul's embodied problems were the symptoms of its poor relationships with daimons.

#### A. Matter as Index of the Soul

Hans Lewy noted in his seminal work on theurgy<sup>56</sup> that the Chaldean theurgists identified Hecate as queen of the daimons. This, he says, made her a favorite object of theurgic worship, and Lewy provides an invaluable interpretation of how this fearsome goddess was experienced by theurgists.

[Hecate], he says, encountered human souls in forms *always adequate to their internal condition*: for those sunk in the body she was necessity; for the erring, demonic temptation; for the renegade, a curse; for those who recalled their divine nature, a guide; and for those who returned home, grace.<sup>57</sup>

53. *DM* 67, 15-68, 1. Text: Δυνάμεις τε τοῖς μὲν δαίμοσι γονίμους, ἐπιστατικός τε τῆς φύσεως καὶ τοῦ συνδέσμου τῶν ψυχῶν εἰς τὰ σώματα ἀφοριστέον.

54. *DM* 79, 9-10. Text: δαίμονες δ' εἰς τὴν φύσιν καθέλκουσιν.

55. *DM* 16, 17-17, 4. Text: . . . καὶ ἐκφαίνουσαν εἰς ἔργον τὸ ἀφανὲς αὐτῶν ἀγαθόν . . . τό τε γὰρ ἄρρητον αὐτοῦ ῥῆτον καὶ τὸ ἀνείδεον ἐν εἶδει διαλάμπουσαν, καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα λόγον αὐτοῦ εἰς λόγους φανεροῦς προσάγουσαν.

56. *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*, op. cit.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

In this brief analysis Lewy provides the key for understanding Iamblichus' solution to the problem of embodiment. According to the theurgical Platonists Hecate did not possess a univocal meaning in a defined metaphysical system. Hecate's "reality" was determined by the level and mode of life of the individual soul that invoked her. Hecate was goddess of the material realm, and Iamblichus understood matter to function in the same manner. Matter, in other words, was an *index* of the soul's internal condition. Therefore, the theurgist did not concern himself with an abstract or theoretical notion of matter but with the soul's experience of matter.

Throughout *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus used the terms ὕλη, φύσις, σῶμα, and γένεσις nearly synonymously to define the "place" of the soul's extension. The corporeal world was the field in which the soul's faculties were developed and tested, and its use of power in this world determined its perception and evaluation of matter. Embodied life produced either bondage to fate or an opportunity to share in divine providence. For Iamblichus, providence (πρόνοια) and fate (εἰμαρμένη) were, like matter, functional terms describing the soul's experience of a uniform and divine law — salvific for those who obeyed and embodied it, oppressive to those who resisted it.

In his "Letter to Macedonius On Fate,"<sup>58</sup> Iamblichus says that fate rules only those souls who give themselves over to generated things, not souls who remain aligned with their higher principles. He explains:

To be brief, the movements of Fate around the world may be likened to immaterial and noetic activities and revolutions, and the order of Fate resembles this intelligible and pristine order. Secondary powers [encosmic gods] are joined with primary causes [supracosmic gods], and the multitude in generation — and thus all things under Fate — are joined with undivided essence and with Providence as a guiding principle. In accord with this same essence, then, Fate is interwoven with Providence and in reality *Fate is Providence*, is established from it and around it.<sup>59</sup>

58. *Stob.* II, 173, 26ff.

59. *Stob.* II, 173, 26-174, 8. Text: Καὶ γὰρ ἤδη τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν, αἱ μὲν κινήσεις αἱ περὶ τὸν κόσμον τῆς πεπωμένης πρὸς τὰς ἀύλους καὶ νοεράς ἐνεργείας καὶ περιφορὰς ἀφομοιοῦνται, ἡ δὲ τάξις αὐτῆς πρὸς τὴν νοητὴ καὶ ἀχραντιον ἀνταξίαν ἀπεικάσται ἡ δ' αἰτία τὰ δεύτερα τοῖς προηγουμένοις αἰτίοις συνήρηται καὶ τὸ ἐν γενέσει πλῆθος πρὸς τὴν ἀμέριστον οὐσίαν καὶ πάντα οὕτω τὰ τῆς εἰμαρμένης συνήπται πρὸς τὴν προηγουμένην προνοίαν. Κατ' οὕτην τὴν οὐσίαν ἄρα ἐπιπλέκται ἡ εἰμαρμένη τῇ προνοίᾳ καὶ τῷ εἶναι τὴν πρόνοιάν ἐστιν ἡ εἰμαρμένη καὶ ἀπ' αὐτῆς καὶ περὶ αὐτὴν ἠφέστηκε. Cf *TA* 42, 9: "Nature is good and is

In this description of fate Iamblichus adds that each soul, in the process of incarnation, is allotted particular portions taken from the cosmos and integrates them in its embodiment. This mosaic of cosmological elements was unique for each soul and made up its astrological portrait, its horoscope. It was within the context of this somatic testing ground that the soul was challenged to integrate its corporeal existence, its microcosm, into the divine pattern, the macrocosm, and thus to imitate the work of the Demiurge. Failing that, it became fixed in habits determined by the unfulfilled conditions of somatic life and bound to the law of fate that each soul fulfill its measures. The important point for Iamblichus was that through the proper care of the body and somatic life the soul could be freed from the bonds of generation and allowed to see the turnings of fate to be like the perfect revolutions of the stars.<sup>60</sup>

It should be clear that despite the pejorative language about matter and material daimons in *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus does not view embodiment negatively. The body was an integral part of a creative process initiated and completed by the gods. As Stanislas Breton puts it: "[the body was] the point of condensation" that expressed the function of the divine in its creation expansion.<sup>61</sup> How, then, did Iamblichus transform and turn the downward part of this cycle into a realization of the soul's apotheosis?

### III. Theurgy as Perfect Embodiment

Iamblichus articulated two positions concerning matter already well-known to his fellow Platonists, and in both "matter" (ὕλη) played the pivotal role.

- 1) Matter in origin is good, derives from the highest principles, and remains directed by them.
- 2) In the experience of the embodied soul matter and material attractions are the obstacle that prevent the soul from realizing its divinity.

Iamblichus believed that theurgy could liberate the soul bound to corporeal things, but to free a soul from somatic identification the theurgist first had to determine the appropriate measures for that soul to engage the powers bestowed upon it by the Demiurge,\* and then to accelerate its growth into those measures by means of theurgic rites. For Iamblichus, the descent into a body was a

the same as providence." φύσις δὲ ἀγαθή, ταῦτόν καὶ πρόνοια.

60. *Stob.* II, 173, 26-28.

61. Stanislas Breton, "Téléologie et ontogonie, Variations sur les 'Oracles Chaldaïques'," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 66, 1, 1978, p. 8.

\*I.e., the ratios of the soul described in *Tim.* 35b-36b; 43d-e.

cosmogonic law following divine will, yet this same impulse that led souls into bodies could be re-routed and transformed. Through specific ritual acts, theurgy harnessed the extrovertive magnetism of the generative daimons and made them complete the soul's divine measures. This established the soul in its immortal body.

Clearly, embodiment had an ambiguous status for theurgists depending on *how* they were embodied. Describing this, Breton says that the theurgical restoration of the embodied soul was based on homeopathic principles. He explains:

Matter and the body, consequently, are subject to a two-fold interpretation according to whether one descends or ascends the degrees of an ontological and divine hierarchy . . . [the negative gravitation of daimons] is equilibrated and compensated by an inverse pressure which makes of matter, in its 'very fury,' a homeopathic remedy to the degradation that it provokes. This is the profound meaning of theurgy which, relying on the continuity and connaturality of which we have spoken, discovers and exploits the quasi-sacramental virtues of little things as useless as stones.<sup>62</sup>

In a theurgic context even the densest aspects of matter could become medicines for a soul disoriented in its body. Following the standard Platonic principle that the ratios and elements of the soul were represented in the natural world, Iamblichian theurgy employed natural elements that preserved pure impressions of their divine sources in order to awaken their correspondences in human souls. Theurgic rites, then, may be compared to tuning an instrument by putting it into resonance with one already tuned. In theurgy the "tuned" instrument was the cosmos itself, the manifestation of the Demiurge. It was the task of the theurgist to diagnose the kind of affection or imbalance from which a soul suffered and to bring it into alliance with the lords of that affection through ritual theurgy. By finding alliances with the gods who ruled these areas of imbalance, the soul was translated from a condition of bondage to the daimons preserving these realms into a cooperative regent, working with the Demiurge and the daimons.

Iamblichus justified the use of material objects in theurgy because of their therapeutic affect and because, as a Platonist, he genuinely believed in the macro- microcosmic correspondence. In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus bases his apology for the ritual use of matter on three principles:

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62. Breton, "L'homme et l'âme humaine dans les *Oracles Chaldaïques*," *Diotima* 8, 1980, p. 22.



1. The gods illuminate matter and are present immaterially in material things.<sup>63</sup>
2. There exists a filial and beneficent bond between the gods who preside over life and the lives which they produce.<sup>64</sup>
3. The sacrificial order in theurgy is connected directly to the order of the gods.<sup>65</sup>

This meant that the gods were accessible to embodied souls and in their beneficence ordained that their presence in matter serve a salvific as well as a creative function. Finally, the theurgic rites that put souls into correspondence with the gods were determined in creation itself by those same gods and the Demiurge. Theurgists employed material objects that preserved the impression and power of the gods with whom the soul needed to be rectified. Following the Chaldean terminology, Iamblichus referred to these objects as *συνθήματα* ("tokens"). The *συνθήματα* functioned as receptacles for the god and allowed the soul bound to material daimons to be restored homeopathically to their ruling deity. Iamblichus justifies the use of these material *συνθήματα* as receptacles of the gods:

Since it was necessary that earthly things not be deprived of participation in the divine, the earth received from the Gods a certain divine portion capable of receiving them. The theurgic art, therefore, recognizing this principle in general, and having discovered the proper receptacles in particular, as being appropriate to each one of the Gods, often brings together stones, herbs, animals, aromatics, and other sacred, perfect, and deiform objects of similar kind. Then, from all these it produces a perfect and pure receptacle.<sup>66</sup>

63. *DM* 232 14-16. Text: ἑλλάμπει τοίνυν κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον καὶ τοῖς ἐσχάτοις τὰ πρῶτιστα, καὶ πάρεστιν ἀύλως τοῖς ἐνύλοις τὰ αἶλα.

64. *DM* 235, 3-5. Text: αἰεὶ μὲν γὰρ τοῖς ποιούσι τὰ ἑαυτῶν ἔργα διαφερόντως ἐστὶ κεχαρισμένα, τοῖς δὲ πρῶτως τινὰ παράγουσι καὶ πρῶτως ἐστὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα προσφιλή.

65. *DM* 217, 3-4. Text: Ἀρχὴ δὲ πασῶν ἀρίστη ἢ τῆς τῶν θεῶν τάξεως τὸν θεαμὸν τῶν θυσιῶν ἐχόμενον ἐπιδείκνυσιν.

66. *DM* 233, 8-16. Text: ἐπεὶ γὰρ ἔδει καὶ τὰ ἐν γῆ μηδαμῶς εἶναι ἄμοιρα τῆς θείας κοινωνίας, ἐδέξατό τινα ἀπ' αὐτῆς θεϊαν μοῖραν καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἱκανὴν οὖσαν χωρῆσαι τοὺς θεοὺς.

Ταῦτα τοίνυν κατιδοῦσα ἡ θεουργικὴ τέχνη, κοινῶς τε οὕτως κατ' οἰκειότητα ἐκάστω τῶν θεῶν τὰς προσφόρους ὑποδοχὰς ἀνευρίσκουσα, συμπλέκει πολλάκις λίθους βοτάνας ξῶφα ἀρώματα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα ἱερά καὶ τέλεια καὶ θεοειδῆ, κάπειτα ἀπὸ πάντων τούτων ὑποδοχὴν ὀλοτελῆ καὶ καθαρὰν ἀπεργάζεται.

He continues:

Therefore, whether [it is] certain animals or plants or any of the other things on earth governed by Superior Beings, they simultaneously share in their inspective care and procure for us an indivisible communion with the Gods.<sup>67</sup>

συνθήματα were not limited to dense matter but were also present in “incantations,” (ἐπωδαί)<sup>68</sup> “concoctions,” (συστάσεις)<sup>69</sup> and in the “ineffable names of the gods.”<sup>70</sup> Iamblichus also mentions certain melodies and rhythms which gave the soul direct contact with the gods.<sup>71</sup> In whatever context or expression the συνθήματα were divinizing because they bore the power and impression of a god and were able to awaken souls to the divinities which they symbolized. In theurgy, that which received the god and mediated its presence functioned as a sacred receptacle whatever its manner of expression. Iamblichus adds that there was even a kind of visionary “matter” that supported the appearances of the gods.

In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus explains this:

One must be convinced by secret teachings that a certain matter is given by the Gods by means of blessed visions, and this matter is somehow connatural with the Gods who give it. Therefore, the sacrifice with this sort of matter stirs the Gods up into manifestation, immediately invokes their appearance, receives them when they come forth, and reveals them perfectly.<sup>72</sup>

Iamblichus equated this visionary matter with “the pure and divine matter . . . generated from the Father and Demiurge of the universe.”<sup>73</sup> In Platonic terms, the visionary matter that served

67. *DM* 235, 5-9. Text: εἶτε οὖν ζῳά τινα εἶτε φυτὰ εἶτε ἄλλα τῶν ἐπὶ γῆς διακυβερνᾶται ἀπὸ τῶν κρειττόνων, ὁμοῦ τῆς ἐπιστασίας αὐτῶν μετείληχε καὶ τὴν κοινωνίαν ἡμῖν προξενεῖ πρὸς αὐτοῦ ἀδιαίρετον.

68. *DM* 133, 18.

69. *DM* 133, 18.

70. *DM* 157, 13-16. Text: Αἶ τε ἐπικλήσεις οὐκ ἐπιπνοίας τῆς διανοίας ἀνεγείρουσιν ἢ σωματικὰ πάθη ἐν τῷ δεχομένῳ ἄγνωστοι γάρ εἰσι παντελῶς καὶ ἀπόρρητοι, μόνῳ δὲ τῷ θεῷ γνωρίμῳς λέγονται ὃν ἐπικαλοῦνται.

71. *DM* 119, 6.

72. *DM* 234, 7-14. Text: πείθεσθαι δὲ χρὴ τοῖς ἀπορρήτοις λόγοις ὡς καὶ διὰ τῶν μακαρίων θεαμάτων ὕλη τις ἐκ θεῶν παραδίδοται· αὕτη δὲ που συμφυῆς ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἐκεῖνοις τοῖς διδοῦσιν· οὐκοῦν καὶ ἡ τῆς τοιαύτης ὕλης θυσία ἀνεγείρει τοὺς θεοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν ἔκφασιν, καὶ προσκαλεῖται εὐθέως πρὸς κατάληψιν, χωρεῖ τε αὐτοὺς παραγιγνομένους καὶ τελείως ἐπιδείκνυσι.

73. *DM* 232, 17-233, 2. Text: Μὴ δὴ τις θαυμαζέτω ἐὰν καὶ ὕλην τινα

theurgists as a "receptacle of the gods,"<sup>74</sup> was the functional equivalent of the "pure receptacle" of the *Timaeus* that received and revealed divine impressions from the Demiurge in cosmogony.<sup>75</sup> The comparison is significant, for Iamblichus understood theurgy to be nothing less than the soul's mimesis of the cosmogonic act. As the soul became increasingly purified by theurgy so that it received divine visions, its experience of matter became less like that of the *Phaedo* and more like the cosmological matter of the *Timaeus*.

For theurgists the entire world, however dense or sublime, was the receptacle and temple of the gods, communicating their will.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Iamblichus suggests that cosmogony itself was the ritual act of the Demiurge whose liturgical orders were known only to theurgists.<sup>77</sup> The soul's descent into a body, therefore, was an invitation to participate in this liturgy, and this is why Iamblichus states that theurgists, though still living in corporeal bodies, were able to be united with the gods.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. *Augoeides*: The Immortal Body

Theurgic apotheosis resulted in a *corporeal* unification with the gods, and it is important to see the role of the body in the path to theurgic perfection. Through the performance of appropriate rites the theurgist aligned the parts of his individual soul with the orders of the World Soul revealed in the heavens and the natural world. This coordination with the whole not only gave the theurgist a transformed perception of the world but a transformed "body" as well. In somatic terms the apotheosis of the theurgist was the result of his filling out the measures of his immortal *Augoeides*, the "starry body" strengthened in theurgic rites and visualized as a sphere.<sup>79</sup> The realization of this body effected the soul's immortalization; it was, in fact, the recovery of the soul's original etheric body bestowed by the Demiurge in creation.<sup>80</sup>

καθαράν καὶ θεῖαν εἶναι λέγομεν· ἀπὸ γὰρ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ δημιουργοῦ τῶν ὄλων καὶ αὐτῆς γενομένη, τὴν | τελειότητα ἑαυτῆς ἐπιτηδεῖαν κέκτηται πρὸς θεῶν ὑποδοχὴν.

74. *DM* 233, 1-2.

75. Des Places notes the Platonic parallels to Iamblichus' expression in the *Timaeus* 28c, 3-4; 37c, 7; 41a, 7; and *Statesman* 273b, 1; Des Places, op. cit., f.n. # 2, p. 76.

76. Proclus, *In Tim.*, 1:124 (16-19).

77. *DM* 65, 6-14.

78. *DM* 41, 4-11.

79. In his *Timaeus* commentary Iamblichus says that circular movement indicates that the vehicle of the soul has been assimilated to the Nous; Dillon, op. cit., *In Tim.* I, Frag. # 49. Iamblichus' descriptions of divine possession in *On the Mysteries* suggests a translation to a spheric or circular body, see *DM* 103-104; 113, 8-14.

80. See Dillon, op. cit., *In Tim.* IV Frags. # 84, # 85.

Like the spherical bodies of the World and Celestial Souls, for whom embodiment was simply adornment and revelation,<sup>81</sup> the spherical body gained through theurgic rituals established the soul's immortality without abolishing the mortality of its particular life. The attractions and repulsions of individual life were not repressed in a victory over the flesh but were contained in a coordinate whole, following the rhythms of the cosmos, the *flesh* of the Demiurge.

In his person the theurgist preserved the continuity between the whole and its parts, between the gods and man; he became a vital *mean* of cosmogony, precisely the Platonic definition of the soul according to Iamblichus.<sup>82</sup> This is why Iamblichus understood catharsis to be more than the soul's purification and escape from matter. Such accomplishments, he says, were merely "lesser goals" (σμικρὰ τέλη).<sup>83</sup> The greater goals of catharsis included the act of conjoining parts to wholes and of integrating the multiplicity of the generated world into its presiding unity. Iamblichus says:

Indeed, of catharsis, one must conceive its most useful aspects to be [1] withdrawal from alien things; [2] restoration of one's own essence; [3] perfection; [4] fulness; [5] independence; [6] ascent to the creative cause; [7] conjunction of parts with wholes; and [8] contribution from wholes to the parts of power, life, activity, and similar things.<sup>84</sup>

In a traditionally Platonic and Pythagorean manner, Iamblichus approached the problem of embodiment and suffering by viewing it within the dichotomy of the whole and parts. The embodied soul, particular with respect to its mortal life, had to recognize the divine principles that animated it and to integrate these in theurgic ritual. This integration did not effect the soul's escape from its material body. On the contrary, the divinized soul inhabited, even contained, its body in a cosmogonic way. Under theurgic guidance the soul followed a divinely ordained geometry that established it once again in its immortal body.

In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus argues that the experience of evil was rooted in man's incomplete perception and partial identifica-

81. *DM* 200, 7-8; 202, 13-203.9; 212.5.

82. *Stob.* I, 365,5-366,11. Iamblichus says this definition of soul was also that of Aristotle and Pythagoras.

83. *Stob.* I, 456,8.

84. *Stob.* I 455, 25-456, 4. Text: Καὶ μὴν τῆς γε καθάρσεως ἀφαίρεσις τῶν ἀλλοτριῶν, ἀπόδοσις τῆς οἰκείας οὐσίας, τελειότης, ἀποπλήρωσις, αὐτάρκεια, ἄνοδος ἐπὶ τὴν γεννησαμένην αἰτίαν, συναφή πρὸς τὰ ὅλα τῶν μερῶν, δοσις ὑπὸ τῶν ὕλων εἰς τὰ μεριστὰ δυνάμει καὶ ζωῆς καὶ ἐνεργείας καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα νοεῖσθω ὡς πάντων χρησιμώτατα.

tion, not yet sacrificed for the good of the whole.<sup>85</sup> The *partial* or *whole* experience of matter and embodiment correspond directly to the Platonic description of embodiment in the *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*, the former being the perspective of a particular soul — in a mortal body — and the latter, the view of matter from the whole, perpetual and perfect. For a Platonist, the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedo* defined the parameters in which the problem of embodiment was discussed, and Iamblichus' solution was that the blessedness of the embodiment of the World Soul was available to a particular soul only by imitating the activity of the Demiurge, and this was possible only through the performance of theurgic ritual. The meaning of theurgy in the history of Platonism becomes clear if it is seen as the *praxis* that allowed souls to move from embodiment as an isolated prison to embodiment as participation in the World Soul, with the soul's particularity reestablished in the unity of the whole.

By entering into the government of the cosmos and imitating the perfection of the gods the embodied soul was no longer passionately drawn to matter or repulsed by it (both of which reflect imbalance). In the realization of its spheric *Augoeides*, embodiment was transformed from the psychic chaos of suffering into a cosmos, an adornment of the divine. The "lapse of time" described in the *Timaeus* (30a) between material chaos and cosmos — though only a necessity of discourse when speaking of the World Soul — was, nevertheless, *an accurate description of the experience of the embodied soul on its path to demiurgy*. In theurgy, the soul gradually recreated the perfect measures of the cosmos out of its embodied experience. In his mortal aspect the theurgist was the recipient of this Beauty, while in his mediation of the gods he became its demiurge.

Throughout the life of the theurgist matter was the mirror that reflected the condition of his soul. It was, as Iamblichus says, an "index" (δείγμα *DM* 80, 15) of the soul's capacity to receive a divine presence. He says that in the "appearances" (φάσματα) of divine beings in theurgy their hierarchical status was indicated by their relation to, and command over, matter.<sup>86</sup> The soul's own relation to matter determined the kind of theurgy it was to practice, and though the material of the rites might change, the matter itself, matter as σύνθημα was not something reluctantly accepted; it was the *sine qua non* of the soul's divinization. In *On the Mysteries* Iamblichus portrays the soul's relationship to matter through Egyptian iconography. Explaining the hieroglyph of a young god

85. *DM* 186,11-187,3; cf. *Laws* 903c.

86. *DM* 80,15-81,4.

seated on a lotus, Iamblichus says the material principle, "mud" (ἰλύς), served as the "foundation" (πυθμῆν) to nourish the lotus until it developed a circular throne capable of receiving the god.<sup>87</sup> In the same way, each embodied soul, rooted in the "mud" of its embodiment and the waters of psychic change, was nourished by that very condition until capable of receiving and manifesting its god.

## V. Conclusion

Iamblichus' theurgical redefinition of Platonic principles radically changed Platonists' orientation to the problem of embodiment. While Plotinus had attempted to approach the problem discursively Iamblichus seems to have avoided the problem altogether. Plotinus, arguably, went as far as one could go with intelligible discourse; in any case, his solution to the problem of embodiment was not based on the premises of his arguments but on his own mystical experience. In contrast, Iamblichus felt that even the simplest questions concerning creation and embodiment were mysteries understood only by the gods, so he never attempted to solve the problem conceptually.<sup>88</sup>

For Iamblichus, the problem of embodiment could not be solved in a discursive mode because it simply was not a discursive problem. It had more "weight." It was an embodied problem with profound existential consequences; therefore it called for an embodied solution embracing the entirety of human experience. The theoretical parameters of Iamblichus' approach to the problem were identical with those of Plotinus: Plato's presentation of an optimistic, cosmological matter alongside a pessimistic, psychological one. Yet Iamblichus approached the problem hieratically, not conceptually. He demanded that the soul itself embody its solution in rituals where thought and action were simultaneous. Plotinus' explanations may have proven inadequate existentially, even logically, yet, like Iamblichus, his unorthodox conclusions were based on transcendent experiences. The two Platonists may simply have chosen different ways to explain this experience of transcendence. Nevertheless, due to Iamblichus' more profoundly optimistic view of the material world, he emphasized more the physical aspects of the soul's unification with the gods.

Although Iamblichus was a theurgist, he was also a Platonist, and his theurgical solution to the problem of embodiment should

87. *DM* 250, 13-252,11.

88. Dillon, *op. cit.*, *In Tim.* IV, Frag. # 88, Iamblichus says: "That everything takes its existence from the Gods, we firmly maintain, looking to their goodness and power, but *how* things proceed from them, we are not competent to comprehend."

be understood theoretically according to Platonic principles. From the theurgical perspective the matter of the *Phaedo*, with all its negative effects, was revealed progressively to be the matter of the *Timaeus*, but only by virtue of the theurgist himself becoming demiurgic, ritually enacting the "eternal measures" established by the Demiurge.<sup>89</sup> Perfection as soul was realized only when the theurgist assimilated himself to the entire world in the *act of creation*. This demanded that he purify his individual attractions, somatic or intellectual, and align them with their causal principles. Ordained to be the lowest of eternal entities, the human soul could add nothing to its stature. All superior realities were above it. Only when its "receptacles" were cleansed of their unnecessary accretions could the soul become a proper receptacle of the gods and — like the pure matter/receptacle of the *Timaeus* — transfer this order to the phenomenal world. Herein lies the profound appeal of theurgy and the significance of Iamblichus' insight, for in the theurgic act the soul's salvation was realized as world creation. The soul, as theurgist, became an *embodied Demiurge*.

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89. *DM* 65, 4.