

For completion by the student:		
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Module code: AHAN7011 Module title: Cosmology, Magic and Divination	Student ID number: 1704167	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Dr Crystal Addey and Dr Dorian Greenbaum		
Assignment due date: June 4, 2018		
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Critical Review

Iamblichus: On the Mysteries

Word Count: 2008

Iamblichus of Chalcis, a pupil of both Porphyry and Plotinus, is widely credited to have written *On the Mysteries* during his life spanning 240-320 C.E. (Afonasin *et al.* 2012)(Van Dam 2010). This selection of books has gone by various titles throughout the centuries, though is understood to have originated nearest to the title of: *The Response of the Master Abamon to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo, with Solutions to the Problems Raised Therein* (Dillon 2004). The original title is essential to my inquiry, for the aim of this essay is not to critique Iamblichus' as if his writing exists for its own sake, but rather to understand it in the greater and more precise context of having been written in response to Porphyry at a specific time in history, which by its very nature, requests of the reader a more nuanced and diversified approach of understanding than if it had simply been written of its own accord. It requires of the reader an inquiry into what and whom is being responded to, and so in this case must expand to include the work of Porphyry and the relationship implicit in Iamblichus' response, as well as account for the concurrence of dominant power-structures; namely the rise of Christianity. It is through this lens, that I seek to understand the work of Iamblichus in the fullness of his contribution to philosophy, theurgy, and most of all, how his blending of the two has influenced the Greco-Roman world.

On the Mysteries is in one sense, a petitioning by Iamblichus for the recognition of divination as truth. However, before proceeding, I must first acknowledge that Iamblichus in his argument, is not held accountable to common rules of debate. Rather, the logic of his view is based upon the existence of miracles, therefore nullifying common parameters of 'reason'. One could see this as a gap in his petition, however he seems to remain unperturbed by the possibility of flaw within this rationale, and even criticizes Porphyry for not sharing his view of divination as exceptional beyond the confines of debate. He states directly in response to Porphyry: "you, however, seem to think that knowledge of divinity is of the same nature as a knowledge of anything else . . . But the cases are in no way similar. The knowledge of the gods is of a quite

different nature, and is far removed from all antithetical procedure . . .” (Clark *et al.* 2003, p.15). This tone of distaste (and at times even disgust) at what he regards as Porphyry’s ignorance is a consistent tone of voice throughout the entire series, and leaves me to wonder at the nature of their relationship, given that Porphyry was Iamblichus’ teacher (Afonasin *et al.* 2012). If one were to look superficially at the text, it would appear as if Iamblichus and Porphyry were philosophical adversaries with opposing views on divination and its role within society. John Dillon proposes in his own review of *On the Mysteries*, that the greatest difference between the two philosophers, and ultimately what compels Porphyry’s challenging of Iamblichus through the letter, could be summarized by Porphyry’s inimical trust in philosophy as a means of understanding the gods, while Iamblichus found philosophy to be an insufficient tool with which to alone meet and describe the divine, and only through it accompaniment with theurgy, “. . . or the performance of ritual acts by properly qualified persons . . .” could the divine begin to take real form within human understanding (Dillon 2004, p.349). There were indeed differences, subtle and not so, between both schools of thought. However, a brief examination into Porphyry’s writings would reveal that he was firm in his advocacy and dedication to divination, and quite reasonably refutes the possibility that his *Letter to Anebo* was simply a deconstructive attack.

Rather, this recognition of Porphyry as being more aligned with Iamblichus’ views on divination than Iamblichus’ offended tone would lead the reader to suspect, complicates the reading in that it leads to the question of what then Porphyry’s intention of writing this challenge was in the first place. Crystal Addey suggests in her book, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods*, that what appears as a disagreement is in actuality a dialectic strategy to draw Iamblichus into a more thorough and complete investigation of theurgy and the divinatory philosophy that it entails (Rosemary 2015). It could even be interpreted as a signal of respect that Porphyry entrusted Iamblichus with the task of articulating these books, and that inherent to his provocation of such remarks was an invitation on the basis of his belief that Iamblichus’ response would be of great value and contribution to the collective conversation on divination as a whole.

This dialectic strategy of seeking truth through arguing from the seemingly ‘other side’, was not a new device in the time of Porphyry, and can be understood clearly through the example of Cicero’s own exploration of divination over two hundred years earlier in his *De Divinatione*. I use Cicero as an example because of his direct approach to the notion of ‘skeptical philosophy’, of which his writing turns to in the later part of his life as a means of ensuring the neutrality of his argument. It was through his academic rather than solely spiritual pursuit of truth that he came to utilize both sides of a discourse, at times even sounding as if he supported a system of thought contrary to his own beliefs as a matter of allowing the reader to determine for themselves what they believe to be true, rather than attempting to indoctrinate the reader into his own personal opinion (Schofield 1986). He believed that this ‘pro and contra’ approach to presenting multiple schools of thought was the most rational device by which the integrity of the discussion could be held more deliberately “. . . as an argument between people, not the advocacy of a dogma” (Schofield 1986, p.63). I believe that Porphyry was working along a similar line of thought in his *Letter to Anebo*; and contrarily, Iamblichus was not, in what I perceive to be his unapologetically dogmatic response, where all answers could eventually be found in the miraculous (Dillon 2004).

Nonetheless, it is at this point that I must honor Iamblichus through the questioning of what exactly is meant by ‘rationale’, which is inherently entangled with a greater event that both Iamblichus and Porphyry were responding to indirectly: the rise of Christianity. Simultaneous with the writing of *Letter to Anebo* and *On the Mysteries* was the growing of the Roman Empire and consequently, the widespread persecution of polytheism and divinatory practices as a whole; something that would lead to their eventual decimation. While I believe it important not to fall into the common narrative of ‘blame everything on Christianity’, it remains of key importance to recognize that theurgy was in direct conflict with Christian doctrine and Monotheism, and therefore its practitioners were systematically pursued and targeted. This happened on both a physical and a philosophical level, in that the writings of divinatory philosophers such as Porphyry were deliberately erased and distorted so as to discredit their beliefs and prove the supremacy of a Christian God (Arthur 2015). It is therefore within reason to surmise that Porphyry and Iamblichus were not just speaking innocently of their own beliefs for

their own sake, but I suggest were rather speaking in defense of an entire culture of belief which had come to be imperiled by what would be a much greater system of power, and would ultimately lead to the end of divination as a common practice and system of belief. In light of this greater arc of history, a re-evaluation of Porphyry and Iamblichus' relationship more in the terms of collaborative partnership through the collective work that they created may be in order. Whether they were intentional about this partnership, or if it came about only in retrospect of its own historical significance, I cannot say.

This transition into Christian-thought permeates through the way people see the world today. Even as I write this, the lens through which I've learned to make sense of someone like Iamblichus is one cultivated by an education system entangled with Christianity. So that while I may believe in much of what he and Porphyry had to say, I also remain accompanied by a voice who finds their views impossible. It is a disbelief beyond Cicero's skepticism, but is rather the voice that has grown, in some capacity, as result of Christianity's 'victory' over theurgy. I live in the aftermath of that struggle, and so have been socialized to believe that while the notion of divination is alluring, it remains marked as irrational; so that while the word 'magic' grabs my attention, it remains synonymous with fantasy. That is all to say that rationale is learned behavior, and what constitutes truth is based upon the system of belief that one has been socialized to adhere to. In recognition of this bias, a more dexterous approach to critiquing Iamblichus would incorporate that fact that his relationship to rationality is different than that of other schools of philosophy, and more so, different than that of the modern scholars who review him. In his view, divine practice, invocation of the supernatural, or the reception of Oracles are not dichotomized against the 'rational', but rather extend beyond the limitation of rationality to a different measure of possibility, determined by the gods (Tieleman 2000). In the words of Crystal Addey, he conceived of divination ". . . as a supra-rational phenomenon, a state which represents the inclusion, culmination and transcendence of rationality rather than any lack thereof" (Addey 2014, p.239). One can now begin to see the philosophical gap implicit in his response to Porphyry—for they were both working within different systems of rationality. Porphyry

as subject to Greek schools of debate; Iamblichus as subject to the miraculous (Dillon 2004).

Laid out before Iamblichus was the task of meeting the gods in the most intimate terms available to humankind. The practice of theurgy constituted a means for 'man' to reach beyond himself to what was ultimately the truth of things, where humans reside in subordination to the divine. He believed that only through offering and humble requests do humans make contact with the divine, as can be seen in his reflection that:

The consciousness of our own nothingness, if one judges it in comparison with the gods, makes us naturally turn to supplications; and by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the level of the object of our supplication, and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it, and, starting from our own imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine.

(Clark *et al.* 2003, p.61)

To Iamblichus, this taking on the 'perfection of the divine' was the embodiment of a life lived in dedication to the gods and his locating of humanity's place within the cosmos. He believed it could only be attained through the practice of theurgy, and that divination was about more than attempting to know the future; it was about joining the gods in the ecstasy of their own language. His words imply that the act of divination was in a greater sense, the act of being filled with the divine, and through that sacred dialogue, becoming it. His philosophy reflects this belief and in this way extends beyond theory and into practice. Given the nuance of his beliefs within a greater historical and philosophical discourse, I propose that to truly understand him, one must examine the greater context by which he is situated, and recognize that what he was responding to in *On the Mysteries* plays a key role in the authorship of his response. To interpret the words of Iamblichus in any thorough form, is to also inquire upon Poryphry, the time and place they inhabited, and the relationships therein. Only from this place of relational critique can the true nature of Iamblichus' writings begin to be fully realized.

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