

**COSMOLOGY, MAGIC AND DIVINATION:
MAGIC, THEURGY AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD
(WEEK 7 NOTES)**

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

What connections existed between magic and philosophy in the Graeco-Roman world? What cosmological frameworks and ideas did many philosophers and magicians share in the ancient world? Why do you think that they may have subscribed to such cosmological views? What was theurgy and can it be classified as a type of magic? Is it possible to distinguish between theurgy and magic? Was theurgy spiritual purification? What cosmological frameworks, worldview and concepts underlie theurgy? What were the central roles of divination within theurgy? Does theurgy challenge modern categories of the 'rational' and 'irrational' and, if so, how does it challenge them?

THEMES FOR THIS WEEK:

- Wise men and women (philosophers) and their connections with magical practices
- Apollonius of Tyana (Philostratus' *Life*)
- Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (*The Golden Ass*) and *Apology*
- Plotinus (Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus*)
- Sosipatra (Eunapius' *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists*)
- The emergence of theurgy in Late Neoplatonism: What was theurgy? Can it be classified as a type of magic? Was it spiritual purification and, if so, how did it work?
- Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* (*On the Mysteries*)
- Theurgy as spiritual purification and ritual practice
- The Cosmology, worldview and Metaphysics of theurgy: the animated cosmos, cosmic sympathy (*sympatheia*) and divine love (*theia philia*), will and providence, grades of being and reality
- The role of divination within theurgy

INTRODUCTION: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MAGIC AND PHILOSOPHY

Philosophers in the ancient world were often associated with magical and divinatory practices. Sometimes philosophers were accused of being 'magicians' (although magic does not seem to have been illegal in ancient Greece, charges could be brought against those who committed harm and murder using magical practices. In Rome, certain charges could be brought against alleged magicians). It is hardly surprising that philosophers were so often connected with magicians and magical practices. Both philosophers and magicians were concerned with the gods and other religious elements. For example, they were both often concerned with the use of divination. Both magical practitioners and philosophers focus on what is generally considered to be 'hidden' or 'secret.' The word *mystes*, which refers to an initiate of a mystery cult, is also used of a magical practitioner who has reached a certain level of initiation into the magical arts. Both magical practitioners and philosophers use the language and ideas of the mystery ceremonies to describe what they do. By the end of the 1st century B.C. Hellenistic magic seems to have become a fully formed system. Astrology, alchemy and ritual magic could be studied and learned. Much instruction was carried out in secret as part of an oral tradition. Philosophy was also learned in an initiatory manner, as part of an oral tradition. Both the philosopher and the magician often claimed superhuman

powers which were unavailable to the average person. The term *Thaumaturgos* means ‘miracle-worker’; this word was often connected with magical practitioners. This term could be applied to an archaic ‘shaman’ and philosopher such as Pythagoras and also to a travelling Neopythagorean philosopher such as Apollonius of Tyana. Moreover, both magical practitioners and philosophers share many ideas about the nature of reality and conceptual frameworks and ideas about how the cosmos works – they thus share similar worldviews (some of these ideas will be explored below).

WISE MEN AND WOMEN (PHILOSOPHERS) AND THEIR CONNECTIONS WITH MAGICAL PRACTICES

On the attached sheet (Week 7_Magic and Philosophy_Sources) you will find a selection of sources written by or about philosophers who were considered by many to be connected with magical practices or to have some kind of superhuman or divine powers. Below are some extra comments about these philosophers and the extracts about them on the attached sheet.

Apollonius of Tyana (1st century AD)

Apollonius of Tyana was a Neopythagorean holy man: a divinely-inspired sage, prophet and philosopher. He was accused of being a ‘magician.’ Philostratus wrote a philosophical biography about his life, which contains many fantastical elements – it can only be read as an approximate guide to the historical Apollonius. He was a reformer of traditional Graeco-Roman, pagan religion along Pythagorean lines. He followed a typically Pythagorean lifestyle: vegetarianism, periods of silence and meditation, walking around barefoot.

He travelled widely, visiting Asia Minor and India, among other places and advising cities (for example, Sparta). He lived in, and visited, many temples and reformed religious customs and cults.

“Apollonius may be the earliest Greek philosopher we can identify who claims that philosophical understanding ultimately requires divine inspiration, an inspiration to be attained by an ascetic life and, perhaps, by certain ritual practices” (Michael Frede in R. Sorabji (ed) *Aristotle and After*, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, London, Suppl. 68 (1997), 5).

Magical attacks on the philosopher Plotinus by the Alexandrian Olympius

It is in these terms that Plotinus tried to explain how one of his rivals, Olympius of Alexandria, should have failed to kill him by means of malign magic. Evidently Plotinus regularly suffered from painful spasmodic attacks, and came to interpret them as the result of Olympius using star-magic against him. Plotinus’ reason for thinking that he had been attacked by magic evidently lay in the character of the symptoms, which he describes in an allusion to Plato’s *Symposium* as “his body being forcibly agitated.” The symptoms are on a variety of counts ‘strange’: one suspects magic at work.

At the same time, Porphyry’s account of the fact that he did not die, but merely suffered cramps was evidently taken as proof that his soul had been able, through its purity or discipline, to deflect the attacks, and in fact redirect them against the enemy who had unleashed them in the first place. Thus the very real anguish which Plotinus had felt at one point rebounded on the magician. The message is this: a great philosopher like Plotinus can hurt hostile magicians, not by technical sorcery but by his wisdom. Plotinus believed in, though he did not fear, the power of magic over the body, but argues that the higher soul dissolves its power by ‘counter-charms.’ The word for a victim of astrology or magic is *neurospastos*, i.e. puppet.

The conjuration of Plotinus' personal daemon in a temple of Isis

According to Porphyry, Plotinus had some 'very special gifts' from the time of his birth. There was no opportunity to ask the apparition any questions or even to look at it any longer, for the friend who shared the experience strangled the birds that he held as a safeguard. The priest granted Plotinus a vision of his own familiar spirit, genius, his personal 'daemon.' The priest, who had expected an ordinary genius, was amazed that a deity of a higher order appeared. The attendant was needed to hold birds: sacrifice (strangulation of the birds) was probably conceived of as an instant peace offering, after which the spirit would leave without harming any of the participants. Socrates was the first to claim the guidance of a *daimonion* or divine assistant but the *oikeios daimon* is more at home in Egyptian astrology, where according to Iamblichus' *On the Mysteries* (*De Mysteriis* 9.5), he is the 'paradigm' assigned to us by the ruler of our star.

Sosipatra, the wise woman and philosopher

This is an extract from Eunapius' impressive portrait of Sosipatra who was roughly his contemporary (fourth century AD). She was a great philosophical teacher and psychic. The story of her early youth sounds like a fairy tale. Whether the old men mentioned are actually meant to be minor gods or major daemons is not clear. Homer's 'darkness of the West' (Western Ocean) – has always been regarded as consecrated to the heroic dead and supernatural powers: this statement links the old men very clearly with supernatural powers.

Apuleius' Apology

Apuleius was a Platonist philosopher, writing in the mid second century AD. This defence speech (apology) was written (in Latin) in approximately 158-9 AD. Apuleius' defence speech refutes various accusations of having practised magic.

In 158 AD, Apuleius of Madauros was tried before the Roman proconsul Claudius Maximus for having allegedly practised magic in order to bewitch and entice into marriage a widow named Pudentilla. The prosecution evidently made much of the fact that Pudentilla was older than Apuleius; the exact age-gap between them remains obscure. One might rather have expected the suspicion of erotic magic to have fallen upon the older woman who is able to entice the younger man into her affections. The outcome of the trial is unknown. But Apuleius defended himself with a speech whose rhetorical and stylistic brilliance has convinced most readers that he must have been acquitted.

The first allegation against Apuleius was that he had procured from some fishermen certain types of fish which he used to manufacture love-charms in order to make Pudentilla fall in love with him. He does not deny purchasing fish. But he claims that fish are not a raw material from which love charms are made. He argues that there is no association between fish and love magic at all. Secondly, as a philosopher following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Plato, Theophrastus and others, Apuleius has a scholarly interest in natural history, and he has composed books on the history and classification of fish, in both Greek and Latin, extracts from which he can have read in court. His interests are purely scientific and he claims to have been the first to translate from Greek into Latin the names of certain species. Thirdly, his scientific interest is not merely academic but has a practical end in view, the discovery of medicinal properties in fish that will be of benefit to humanity at large.

MAGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL WORLDVIEWS

Any magical operation presupposes that some sort of energy is available in the universe which can be used by the magical practitioner. Both magical practitioners and philosophers shared many conceptual ideas regarding the workings of the cosmos, including the following:

- *Sympatheia* = ‘cosmic’ or ‘universal’ sympathy
- *Daimones* / *Daemones*
- Effluences and Atoms
- The power of words and utterances

Sympatheia = ‘cosmic’ or ‘universal sympathy

The Greek term *Sympatheia* means ‘sympathy’; cosmic or universal sympathy: this is the notion that all phenomena, in the divine and material / physical realms alike, are linked together by ‘sympathetic’ powers or energies. This notion is based on the idea of a hierarchy with the divine (intelligible) realm at the summit and the sensible/physical world below. The energies of the gods are thought to pervade the sensible realm through the planets, fixed stars and earth.

The divine powers were thought to bind this closely-knit structure together - they are sometimes called ‘energies.’ These energies work through the sun, the planets and the stars; and they operate on all bodies, immortal, mortal, animate and inanimate. By establishing sets of sympathetic correspondences or ‘chains,’ they maintain affinities between different areas of the natural realm, so that each animal, plant, mineral or part of an animal or human body corresponds to a particular planet or god whom they can be used to influence, providing the right procedures and formulae are known.

Magical Methods: *sympatheia* and *daimones*

The *daimones*, semi-divine, supernatural beings often invoked in magical procedures, were thought to be personifications of these sympathetic energies - thus they may be good or bad. The understanding of cosmic sympathy (*sympatheia*) was often linked with astrology and daemonology. Magicians claimed to be able to manipulate divine powers, by exploiting the sympathetic links between material substances and the corresponding ‘energies,’ whether *daimones*, planets or gods.

Daimones

In Plato’s *Symposium*, the priestess Diotima comments on the roles of *daimones* – this passage has strong Pythagorean undertones:

[*Daimones*] form the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priests’ rites of sacrifice, rituals for special purposes (*teletai*), and incantation (*epodai*), indeed of magic as a whole, that is sorcery (*goeteia*). Plato, *Symposium*, 202e7-203a1.

Philosophers thought that *daimones* formed the intermediary link between gods and human beings – they allow men access to oracles, magical rites, incantations and bring these down from the gods. Pythagorean commentaries include the following statement regarding the nature of *daimones*: “The whole air is full of souls. We call them *daimones* and heroes, and it

is they who send dreams, signs and illnesses to men; and not only to men, but also to sheep and other domestic animals. It is towards these *daimones* that we direct purifications and apotropaic rites, all kinds of divination, the art of reading chance utterances, and so on.” This passage from the Pythagorean commentaries shows the Archaic (7th – 6th centuries B.C.) view of *daimones* as souls – this anticipates the views of later philosophers, such as Plutarch and Apuleius.

Effluences and Atoms

Next we turn to some ancient physical notions and explanations of magic. Empedocles developed a theory of effluences (*aporrhaoi*) which offered an explanation of the magnet. This theory accounted for sense perception, including colour, different sense-organs have different sizes of passages for effluences to enter, which is why we can't hear smells (Theophrastus, *De Sensu*, 7=31). This theory was taken over by Leucippus, who was the originator of the theory of atoms. Democritus of Abdera later reformulated this theory in properly atomic terms:

Images (*eidola*) of the same shape as the object continually pour off what one sees and enter the eye after mingling in air with *eidola* emanating from the eye itself
(Theophrastus, *De Sensu*, 68 A135 DK)

Democritus says that some *eidola* approach men, some of them beneficent, some maleficent; that is why he desired to encounter propitious images.
(Sextus Empiricus, *adv math*, 9.19)

This theory of perception was used to account for dreams, prophetic and other dreams, and the phenomenon of the evil eye:

Democritus says that these *eidola* are emanations emitted not altogether unconsciously or unintentionally by the malevolent, and are charged with wickedness and envy. According to him, these *eidola* with their burden of evil, adhering to their victims and in fact permanently lodged in them, confound and injure both their bodies and their minds.
Plutarch, *Quaest conv.*, 5.7, 682f-683a.

This discussion contains elements of Empedoclean and Leucippian theory of emanations. Empedocles and Democritus thought that marvels and magical phenomena were in principle subject to natural laws – they can be understood in terms of principles especially the tendency of like to gravitate towards like. They were originators of the theory of natural magic.

The Power of Words and Utterances

Magical practitioners often considered words and utterances to have special power. This helps to explain the use of incantations and invocations within ritual practices: words were often thought to have an effect whether the speaker understood their meaning or not. The so-called *voces magicae* or ‘unknowable’ names (strings of vowels and sometimes consonants used within ritual) were thought to have their own intrinsic power. The so-called Ephesian letters (*grammata*) are one example of such ‘unknowable names’ (*voces magicae*) – these mysterious letters or symbols were used in the making of amulets (as were other examples of *voces magicae* or ‘unknowable’ names. One strategy for making sense of them is the claim that they were not names or pictures or designs as others thought but words, indeed words

which tell a sort of story about natural theology. This is particularly associated with Androcydes to whom a book on Pythagorean symbols was later ascribed:

Androcydes...says that the famous so-called Ephesian letters are ordered as allegories: *askion* signifies 'darkness,' because darkness throws no shadow (*skia*); *kataskion* signifies 'light' since it casts shadow with its light (*kataugazei*); *lix* is an old word meaning 'the earth'; *tetrax* means the 'year,' because of the (four) seasons; *daemnameneus* means the Sun, which is overpowering (*damazon*); the *aisia* means the 'true voice.' The allegory intimates that divine things have been arranged in due order, for example, darkness in relation to light, sun to create the year, and the earth to make possible every sort of natural coming-being.

Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*, 5.8.45.2-3

Androcydes' interpretation makes use of allegory. For example, the significance 'year' for *tetrax* is tacitly grounded in the double claim that *tetrax* is 'really' *tetras* and that, since a year constitutes four seasons, the notion 'four' is a code for 'year.' Thus the *grammata* turn out to be a cryptic form of natural theology: their power is of a wholly intelligible kind. They are the remains of an ancient wisdom.

Magic and Philosophers

Sometimes philosophers claim that magic had a psychological effect on the mind or the soul. Celsus, the Platonist philosopher and opponent of Christianity in later 2nd century AD cites an otherwise unknown Egyptian musician named Dionysius for the view that:

...magical arts are effective with uneducated people and with men of depraved moral character, but that with people who have studied philosophy they are not able to have any effect, because they are careful to lead a healthy life.
(Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.41, trs: Chadwick, adapted).

The moral worthlessness of magic has been turned into an explanation of its possible limits, an explanation flattering to philosophers. This account clearly assumes that magic works primarily against the mind – the model of the love philtre clearly casting its shadow. Plotinus casually uses the image of 'minds swamped by illness or by magical arts' (*Enneads* 1.4.9ff. 1.91). He quite naturally therefore explained the effectiveness of magical incantation at a distance by appealing to a 'super-mind,' a mind that links all life together, the World Soul (4.9.3.4-9' 2.245). He evidently thought of it as in some sense a transmission network for magical utterance, and indeed other magical operations: 'a word spoken quietly acts on what is far off and makes something separated by an enormous distance listen.'

How is the good man affected by magic and drugs (*goeteia kai pharmaka*)? He is incapable of being affected in his soul by magic arts, and his rational part would not be affected, nor would he change his mind, but he would be affected in whatever part of the irrational in the All that is in him, or rather this part would be affected...Just as the irrational part of him is affected by incantations, so he himself by counter-charms and counter-incantations (*antadai kai antepadai*) will dissolve the powers ranged against him." (Plotinus, *Enneads*, 4.4.43.1-6, 7-9).

The philosopher's essential parts, what makes him a philosopher, his soul and his rational mind, are on this account impregnable to magic, which can only affect that which belongs to the lower man, the irrational.

THE EMERGENCE OF THEURGY IN LATER NEOPLATONISM

What was theurgy?

Theurgy (*theourgia*), which literally means, “god-working,” was a type of ritual which was widely respected and extensively used by the later Neoplatonist philosophers, such as Iamblichus and Proclus (used from the fourth century AD onwards). According to ancient tradition, the elder Julian (father of the composer of the *Chaldaean Oracles*) invented the term “theurgy” and developed the practices it described; in support of these traditional views is the fact that the terms “theurgy” and “theurgist” are not found in any extant literature earlier than the *Chaldaean Oracles*. The *Chaldaean Oracles* are a collection of mystical oracles (which only survive in small fragments) which seem to be addressed to the theurgic ritual practitioner and are co-extensive with theurgy (see below for a discussion of the *Chaldaean Oracles*).

Iamblichus and Proclus also refer to theurgy with the term *hieratike*, which is thought to encompass theurgy but also refers in a wider sense to any traditional cultic system which aims at direct communication with the divine, such as the religious practices of the Egyptians.¹ However, both Iamblichus and Proclus thought that theurgy was a continuation of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern religious practices, and so it is doubtful that they would have distinguished between the two in any significant way.

This account of theurgy is intended as a preliminary guide: theurgy remains notoriously difficult to define, partly because it is based on a worldview unfamiliar and largely divergent from modern, Western cosmological worldviews. Even in Late Antiquity, though, different sources give us different views of the nature of theurgy.² This account of theurgy is primarily based on the evidence of Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*, with some input from Proclus' writings, particularly his treatise *On the Sacred Art*, and the fragments of the *Chaldaean Oracles*.

Emma Clarke defines theurgy as “religious ritual demonstrating supernatural power, [which] both symbolised and encapsulated the extraordinary miracle of the soul's conversion back to its divine cause.”³ As a preliminary working definition, I would define theurgy as follows: theurgic ritual aimed to use *symbola* (symbols) to reawaken the soul's inherent, causal connection, through divine *philia* (divine love) and *sympatheia* (cosmic sympathy), with the gods, thus allowing the soul to attain *anagoge*, the ascent of the soul to the divine, intelligible realm. Iamblichus maintains that the highest purpose of theurgy was ascent to the One, the supreme principle or deity of Neoplatonism which was thought to be beyond Being itself. Iamblichus includes a caveat, however, that this occurs only at a very late stage and to

¹ Cf. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries (De mysteriis)*, 1.11 (37.4-6); 1.15 (46.5-6; 48.4); 1.21 (65.2); 3.31 (176.3-6; 178.13.); 4.1 (181.8); 4.2 (184.10); 4.3 (185.1); 4.18 (225.3); 5.20 (228.6); 5.21 (230.2); 5.22 (230.12); 7.5 (258.8); 8.4 (267.7); 8.5 (268.7); 8.8 (271.12); 9.6 (281.1); 10.5 (291.3; 291.10); 10.6 (292.13-14); Proclus *In Remp. (Commentary on Plato's Republic)*, I.37.11ff (Kroll).

² Gregory Shaw (1985) “Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” *Traditio* 41: 2-3; Sarah Iles Johnston (1990) *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 76.

³ Emma Clarke (2003), *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, xxvii.

a few individuals.⁴ Theurgy included divination as one of its most essential elements. Proclus' description of theurgy highlights the central role of divination within it:

...through the power of theurgy, which is greater than all human wisdom and knowledge, embracing the blessings of divination, the purifying powers of initiation, and in a word all the operations of divine possession.⁵

Theurgic ritual involved invoking the epiphany of a deity, either within the soul of a human being for divination purposes or as an external vision: epiphanies of the goddess Hekate are attested in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and in Marinus' *Life of Proclus*.⁶ Theurgic ritual also involved the construction, consecration and animation of telestic statues which were thought to become animated by the deity and bestow oracles during the course of the ritual (this practice was called *telestika*).⁷

Theurgy as spiritual purification and ritual practice

The central purpose of theurgy is divinisation, the ascent of the human to the divine, intelligible realm and the manifestation of this ascent and the divine vision produced by it, in the form of divination.⁸ The principle underlying the ritual means of *anagoge* (ascent to the divine) was "like attracts like" (a principle based on the concept of *sympatheia*, discussed below).⁹ Thus, the theurgist had to make his or her soul as similar as possible to the upper, divine realms, by imitating the purity and eternal nature of the gods:

Let this, then, be our general explanation of the unsullied mode of divine worship: it confers upon all other beings an intimate attachment to the classes superior to us, because in fact it brings the pure to the pure and the impassive to the impassive.¹⁰

Thus, intellectual purification through philosophy and moral virtue were considered to be *essential* prerequisites for theurgic ritual: Iamblichus maintains that the theurgist *had* to be a philosopher.¹¹ For this reason, Polymnia Athanassiadi defines theurgy as "the often

⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* (*De mysteriis*) 5.22 (230.12-231.2).

⁵ Proclus, *Platonic Theology*, 1.25 (Saffrey and Westerink), trs. E.R. Dodds (1951), with my own slight emendations.

⁶ Divine epiphanies: Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Book 2. Proclus' visions of Hekate: Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, Chapter 28. Epiphanies of Hekate in the *Chaldaean Oracles*: Sarah Iles Johnston (1990) *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 111-33.

⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 5.23 (233.9-13); E.R. Dodds (1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 291-5; Hans Lewy (1956; repr: 1978) *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the later Roman Empire*, 3rd edn: 1978, ed: M. Tardieu, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 495-6; Excursus X; Sarah Iles Johnston (1990) *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press) 87-8, 131-2. For Maximus of Ephesus' telestic ritual in which he "animates" a statue of Hekate, see: Eunapius, *Lives of the Sophists and Philosophers*, 457.

⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.12 (42.11-13); 2.6 (81.9-11); 2.7 (114.8-10); 3.25 (159.3); 3.31 (179.4-8); 5.26 (238.12-240.8); 8.8 (271.9-13; 272.7-9); 10.4 (289.3-5; 290.10-292.3); 10.6 (292.7-14).

⁹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 5.20 (227.13-228.2).

¹⁰ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.11 (38.8-10).

¹¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 2.11 (98.6-10); 3.13 (131.4-132.2); 5.20 (228.5-10). On the essential prerequisite of the extensive study of philosophy both prior to and in tandem with theurgy, see: Crystal Addey (2007) "Oracles, Dreams and Astrology in Iamblichus' *De mysteriis*," in P. Curry and A. Voss (eds.) (2007), *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing,

involuntary manifestation of an inner state of sanctity deriving from a combination of goodness and knowledge in which the former element prevails.”¹²

The Cosmology, worldview and metaphysics of theurgy

To understand these ideas further, one must consider the philosophical conceptions and worldview which lay at the foundation of theurgy; Iamblichus explains the workings of theurgy using the principles of divine *philia* (divine love), *sympatheia* (cosmic sympathy) and *symbola* (symbols). This worldview is based on the idea of an animated cosmos, encompassing the idea that everything in the cosmos is connected. These connections were thought to operate within the framework of a hierarchical schema, based on the metaphysical system of Neoplatonism. Gregory Shaw points out that Iamblichus’ system of theurgy is based upon Plato’s taxonomy of the cosmos and society, which reflects “the cosmological conviction that the meaning of life is rooted in an encompassing cosmic order in which man, society and the gods all participate,” which J.Z. Smith has discussed as exemplifying a “locative” view of the cosmos.¹³ This “locative” worldview, which was a predominant feature of ancient Mediterranean religions, is based on five key principles: firstly, that there is a cosmic order that permeates every level of reality; secondly, this cosmic order is the divine society of the gods; thirdly, the structure and dynamics of this society can be discerned in the movements and patterned juxtapositions of the heavenly bodies; fourthly, human society should be a microcosm of the divine society and, finally, the chief responsibility of priests is to attune human order to the divine order.¹⁴

The process by which the cosmic, divine order permeates every lower level of reality can be described as *sympatheia*. Thus, theurgic ritual is dependent upon cosmic sympathy, *sympatheia*, which was a key element in the *Chaldaean Oracles* and in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus, Proclus and Porphyry. However according to Iamblichus, theurgy is *primarily* dependent upon *theia philia*, a divine friendship or love, which causes *sympatheia*.¹⁵ Iamblichus considered the community of the gods as an ineffable and supracosmic process which enabled *sympatheia* to arise: “one single bond of friendship, embracing the totality of

38-40; Sarah Iles Johnston (1990) *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press 87; Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press 85. On the extensive philosophical training in Iamblichus’ school which emphasised study of the divine (seen as necessary training before engaging in theurgic praxis) cf. John Dillon (1973), *Iamblichi Chalcidensis In Platonis Dialogos Commentarium Fragmenta*, Leiden: Brill, 14-17; (1987) 868-9; Gregory Shaw (1998) “Divination in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus,” in R.M. Berchman (ed.) (1998), *Mediators of the Divine: Horizons of Prophecy, Divination, Dreams and Theurgy in Mediterranean Antiquity*, South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism No. 163, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 229; Edward Watts (2006) *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 80; 87-9. The extensive philosophical training preceding theurgic training in Proclus’ case: Marinus, *Life of Proclus*, Chapters 18-19. On contemplation and a spiritual turning towards the gods as essential to theurgy in the *Chaldaean Oracles*, cf. Fragments 1, 2, 110, 112, 116, 163, trs. Ruth Majerjik (1989) (1989), *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion Vol. 5, Leiden: Brill.

¹² Polymnia Athanassiadi (1993) “Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus,” *JRS* 83: 116.

¹³ Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 9-10; J.Z. Smith (1978) *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Leiden: Brill, 132, citing C. Loew (1967), *Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy*, New York: Harcourt, 5, 13.

¹⁴ Smith (1978) 132, citing Loew (1967) 5, 13.

¹⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.12 (41.4-11; 42.5-7); 4.3 (184.14-185.3); 4.9 (192.14-193.1); 5.7-8; 5.9 (209.9-14). Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Propositions 121 and 122.

beings, effecting this bond through an ineffable process of communion”.¹⁶ Thus *theia philia* is “supracosmic sympathy”: it enables the phenomenon of *sympatheia* to arise or, in other words, *sympatheia* reflects the principle of *theia philia* (divine love) at a lower ontological level.¹⁷ We will return to the significance of this point below, in connection with the possible differences between theurgy and so-called “magical” practices.

sympatheia is based on the idea that certain chains of noetic (originating from the realm of *nous*, the intelligible world) “Forms” and *symbola* emanate from the gods through all subsequent ontological grades of reality, permeating every strand of the cosmos, including the physical world.¹⁸ Thus *sympatheia* encompasses the idea that truth is expressed in different levels of reality in the way most appropriate to that level.¹⁹ This notion is ultimately based on the idea of Platonic Forms which, literally, “inform” all physical phenomena. As Gregory Shaw points out, theurgic ritual and, by implication, the notion of *sympatheia* as a key component of theurgy, is dependent on the Platonic theory of Recollection (as originally expressed in Plato’s *Meno*), by which all human beings have prior knowledge of the Forms, and so can perceive them by observing physical phenomena which are inherently “imprinted” with these Forms; humans thus use objects in the material world as “memory prods” to remind the soul of Platonic Forms.²⁰ The use of *sympatheia* within theurgy is described by Proclus who states that:

...priests – observing how all things are in all from the sympathy that all visible things have for one another and for the invisible powers – have also framed their priestly knowledge. For they were amazed to see the last in the first and the very first in the last; in heaven they saw earthly things acting causally and in a heavenly manner, in the earth heavenly things in an earthly manner.²¹

Proclus elaborates on this idea by postulating that there are “chains” (*seira* or *taxeis*) of things emanating from the gods that are similar in their nature: these are the *symbola*.

For example, the heliotrope (sunflower) is similar to the sun, since it opens and moves in accordance with light from the sun: thus the heliotrope is a *symbolon* of the sun god. Proclus asserts that all things are full of gods, and each “chain” increases in number as it proceeds to its final terms, or its lowest expressions.²² Theurgists used the *symbola*, which are the physical and verbal expressions of these divine, sympathetic “chains” in order to gain direct and practical understanding and wisdom of the divine world and the nature of the metaphysical universe, including the relationship between the divine and mortal worlds. By using *symbola* in this way, theurgy invokes the sympathetic connections between all grades of reality in a way that allows access to the cause of the connections - the gods.

What exactly is a *symbolon* within a theurgic context? For Later Neoplatonist philosophers, particularly Iamblichus and Proclus, a divine *symbolon* is a direct and ineffable

¹⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 5.10 (211.12-14).

¹⁷ I owe the phrase “supracosmic sympathy” to Emma Clarke (2003) 239, n.299. Cf. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 5.9 (209.9-14).

¹⁸ Cf. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 3.16 (138.1-5); 5.10 (210.11-211.1). This philosophical concept is expressed in Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 97. Cf. also Propositions 123, 125 and 128.

¹⁹ Cf. Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Proposition 103.

²⁰ Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 24.

²¹ Proclus, *On the Sacred Art* 148.5-1, trs. Copenhaver (1988).

²² Proclus, *On the Sacred Art*. On the heliotrope: 148.11, 148.15-18; chains proceeding to their final members: 150.1-4.

link with divine truth, operating on the level of a talisman.²³ In using the word “talisman” in this sense, I follow Peter Struck, who comments:

Talisman has an etymology in the perfect passive participle of the Greek term *telein*, meaning “to complete, to consecrate.” In medieval Greek, Turkish and Arabic, the root evolves into words designating amulets that were consecrated through a ritual and became animated with numinous power. Though a noun form equivalent to “talisman” is not found in classical Greek, the way in which we use this term in English, to designate a token with some form of efficacious link to what it is supposed to represent, appropriately captures the new directions in which the Greek term “symbol” began to develop in the hands of the Neoplatonists.²⁴

“Symbols” are the main elements of theurgic ritual (within this context, the term *symbola* is used interchangeably with the term *synthēmata*, literally “tokens”). A *symbolon* could be a physical object such as a plant, gem, bone, stone, herb or type of incense or another material object, linked with a specific deity through *sympatheia*; it could also be a verbal utterance, a musical composition, a ritual or a text. One common type of verbal utterances considered to be *symbola* by Iamblichus and later Neoplatonist philosophers were the “unknowable, ineffable names” which are also often called “barbarian names”. These are strange, non-Greek words which do not have any obvious meaning. They were written down or uttered within ritual contexts, as well as being inscribed upon cult statues and other ritual paraphernalia. Iamblichus maintains that they are the secret names of the gods and therefore operate on a supra-rational, divine level of reality; thus, they have been given to humans by the gods.²⁵ This accords with the fact that where scholars have been able to decipher extant “barbarian names” in ancient texts, they seem to be names of divinities in Near Eastern or Egyptian languages.

Speaking of “theurgic procedures”, Iamblichus asserts that some of these rituals “...as symbols are consecrated from all eternity to the higher beings...”²⁶ A fragment of the *Chaldaean Oracles* alludes to the *symbola* in the following manner:

For the Paternal Intellect has sown symbols throughout the cosmos, (the Intellect) which thinks the intelligibles. And (these intelligibles) are called inexpressible beauties.²⁷

Iamblichus states that the *symbola* “activate” the divine element of the human soul, since the theurgist, by means of the ineffable *symbola*, invests himself with the hieratic role of the gods.²⁸ Thus, the *symbola*, were thought to “spark” a kind of recognition of their divine cause in the soul of the ritual practitioner which enabled him to ascend to the divine realm. The *symbola*, and *synthēmata* were mixed into the material of telestic statues used by the

²³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.21 (65.5-11); 2.11 (96.15-97.2); 7.1-2 (250.1-14).

²⁴ Peter Struck (2004) *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 204.

²⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 7.4 (254.11-255.11; 256.4-13); 7.5 (257.3-14); 1.15 (47.3-9; 48.4-8); 8.5 (267.11-268.3). Cf. also Emma Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell (2003), Iamblichus: *On the Mysteries (De mysteriis)*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 59, n.86.

²⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* I.11 (37.7-8).

²⁷ *Chaldaean Oracles*, Fragment 108 (=Procl. In *Crat.* 20.31-21.2), trs. Ruth Majerjik (1989) (1989), *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation and Commentary*, Studies in Greek and Roman Religion Vol. 5, Leiden: Brill, 91.

²⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 4.2 (184.1-10); 6.6 (247.1-5); Cf. Shaw (1995) 50, 162.

theurgists, inscribed or placed within statues, worn by the theurgist, spoken by him or otherwise handled by him during theurgic rituals.²⁹

Theurgy and Magic

It remains to question exactly what differences there are between theurgical practices, such as those just described, and magical practices. However, this is almost impossible to do given that anthropologists, classicists, historians and other scholars have long debated the meaning of the term “magic,” and the general consensus seems to be the impossibility of agreeing on a definition of “magic” which is universally applicable across all cultures and times. However, we can compare theurgy with *goeteia*, the Greek word used to describe a range of practices, such as making curses and amulets, using *pharmaka* (drugs, poisons or herbs) and raising the dead, which are commonly associated with notions of “magic” and sorcery. Some scholars have disputed the claim that there is any kind of substantial difference between theurgy and *goeteia*.³⁰ For instance, the Classicist E.R. Dodds referred to theurgy as “magic applied to a religious purpose” and observed that an uninitiated individual would not have spotted any visible difference between the practices of the theurgist and the magician.³¹ However, Iamblichus is adamant that there are substantial differences between theurgy and *goeteia*.

One of the main differences between theurgy and *goeteia* seems to be the inner disposition and motivation of the ritual practitioner, for “theurgy” focused on an intellectual or spiritual turning upwards, the turning of the soul towards the divine realm. The ultimate goal of the theurgist was *anagoge*, the raising of the soul to the “intellectual fire” of the noetic realm while the body is still alive; the repeated practice of *anagoge* was thought to purify the soul for its eventual release from Fate. According to Iamblichus, the theurgist *had* to be a philosopher:

Effective union certainly never takes place without knowledge, but nevertheless it is not identical with it. Thus, divine purity does not come about through right knowledge...but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge.³²

The theurgist had to have the required metaphysical and intellectual knowledge to be able to assemble the required *symbola* for specific rituals dedicated to various deities, and he must understand the metaphysical structure and workings of the universe. However, Iamblichus also emphasises the fact that theurgy goes beyond human knowledge and intellection; the efficacy of the theurgic ritual depended upon the gods. To refine this point, the receptivity of the practitioner seems to be another major distinction between the theurgist and the *gōēs* (practitioner of *goeteia*, a magician). *epitedeiotēs* (“suitability” or “receptivity”) is the term used by Iamblichus to describe the necessary state of moral and intellectual purification necessary for the theurgist to act as a receptacle for the gods: in order to attune his soul to the *symbola* of the gods, the theurgist had to have a high level of receptivity, attained through his intellectual purification and moral virtue. It is this point which Iamblichus highlights in his

²⁹ E.R. Dodds (1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press., 292-293; Johnston (1990) 87.

³⁰ For a recent example cf. the conclusions of John Dillon (2007), “Iamblichus’ Defence of Theurgy: Some Reflections,” *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 1.1: 40.

³¹ E.R. Dodds (1951) *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press., 283; 291; 294.

³² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 2.11 (98.6-10).

response to Porphyry's question about ritual practitioners who stand on "magical" characters which they inscribe on the ground, a reference to the practices of the *gōēs*:

For there are some who overlook the whole procedure of effective contemplation, both in regard to the one who makes an invocation and the one who enjoys the vision; and they disdain the order of the sacred observance, its holiness and long-protracted endurance of toils, and, rejecting the customs, prayers and other rituals, they believe the simple standing on the characters to be sufficient, and when they have done this for a mere hour, they believe that they have caused some spirit to enter. And yet how could anything noble or perfect result from this? Or how can the eternal and truly existing essence of the gods be united with ephemeral acts in sacred procedures? Hence, because of these things, such rash men go wholly astray, and are not worthy to be counted among diviners.³³

Iamblichus maintains that the *gōēs* is inferior to the theurgist because of his lack of receptivity which is engendered by his lack of preparation: the *gōēs* overlooks contemplation and the lengthy ritual practices necessary to perform effective theurgic ritual.

Another major distinction between the theurgist and the *gōēs* was that the theurgist believed that the gods willingly endowed man with his theurgic abilities: this ranged from the ability to invoke the gods to the knowledge of the correct *symbola* or *synthēmata* to use in specific rituals. It is often asserted that the primary distinction between theurgy and *goeteia* is that the *gōēs* attempts to "constrain" or "bind" the gods so that they do his bidding, whereas the theurgist "invokes" the gods.³⁴ Indeed Iamblichus maintained that the human soul was ultimately immortal and thus "participates" in divinity. Therefore, by invoking the gods the theurgist is also (at least partially) invoking his own divine essence. Shaw further refines this notion of invocation by suggesting that the invocations of the theurgist do not "invoke" the gods or call them down, rather they "evoke" the divine *synthēmata* lying in the human soul which link the human being with divinity.³⁵

Shaw gives a fascinating and illuminating explanation of the difference between theurgy and *goeteia*: *synthēmata* and *symbola* are vertically connected to their divine causes. Since Proclus tells us that each god has a specific cosmic function so its *synthēmata* bore the god's identification in its respective realm of expression (referred to by Shaw as its "horizontal" realm), each *synthēma* or *symbolon* is vertically rooted in its causal power, yet each had a horizontal identity in its respective order in the cosmos.³⁶ Shaw asserts that the horizontal sympathy (*sympatheia*) that the soul shares with a symbol became the foundation through which its vertical (i.e. divine) power was received. However, any ritual that stopped at the horizontal level of *sympatheia* and did not "preserve the analogy with divine creation" was not theurgy but *goeteia*.³⁷ In other words, any ritual practitioner who used the sympathy inherent in the soul and natural objects without relating this sympathy to its divine cause and origin is practising *goeteia* rather than theurgy.

³³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.13 (131.4-132.2).

³⁴ This definition was first coined to describe the distinction between religion and magic by James Frazer (1922), *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 65-68.

³⁵ Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 177.

³⁶ Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 166ff.

³⁷ Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 169.

THE ROLE OF DIVINATION WITHIN THEURGY

Inspired divination forms an important part of theurgic ritual. Iamblichus concludes Book 3 with a comment on the nature of the true mantic art as a cause of both oracles and theurgic operations:

*This, then, is one kind of mantic, which is undefiled and sacerdotal, and truly divine...But it is itself entirely removed from all, supernatural and eternally pre-existent, neither admitting any comparison nor pre-eminence among many; it is free from all this, and takes precedence over all according to its uniform self...For in such a fashion arises, at the same time, both infallible truth in oracles, and perfect virtue in souls. With both of these, ascent to the intelligible fire is granted to theurgists, a process which indeed must be proposed as the goal of all foreknowledge and of every theurgic operation...[my italics]*³⁸

According to Iamblichus then, the highest level of inspired divination is intrinsically linked with theurgy, forming an essential element of theurgic ritual. Inspired divination is the level of vision and insight ideally attained or realised by the theurgist when performing theurgic ritual.³⁹ Iamblichus asserts that the two prerequisites for noetic ascent are the infallible truth of oracles and the soul with perfect virtue. His description of ascent is couched in Chaldaean terminology: “intelligible fire” is the typical description of the noetic realm within the *Chaldaean Oracles*. This ascent allows the theurgist to become divinised by enabling the theurgist to ascend to the noetic realm. Thus, the role of inspired divination within theurgy is soteriological (in other words, focused on providing a means of ‘saving’ the soul): it is “a stage on the way to mystical union.”⁴⁰ The goal of inspired divination and theurgy was divinisation: the theurgist attempted to ascend to the noetic realm, in order to achieve union with the divine and to fully awaken to his or her own divinity.

Supra-rationality, Divination and Theurgy

According to Iamblichus, this level of divine *mantike* (inspired divination) allows the theurgist to conjoin himself to the gods and to see all things within the cosmos from a divine perspective by participating in the “intellections of the gods.”⁴¹ Iamblichus maintains that contact with divinity, the goal of theurgic ritual, is beyond knowledge and involves a superior and more perfect level of insight:

For an innate knowledge about the gods is coexistent with our nature, and is superior to all judgment and choice, reasoning and proof. This knowledge is united from the outset with its own cause, and exists in tandem with the essential striving of the soul towards the Good. Indeed, to tell the truth, the contact we have with the divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is separated (from its object) by some degree of otherness. But prior to that

³⁸ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.31(178.13-14; 178.15-179.3; 179.4-8).

³⁹ Proclus’ definition of theurgy highlights the role of divination within it: *Theology of Plato*, 1.25 (Saffrey and Westerink). Cf. Gregory Shaw (1995) *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 231-2; 236.

⁴⁰ Polymnia Athanassiadi (1993), “Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Testimony of Iamblichus,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 120.

⁴¹ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 10.4 (289.3-5).

knowledge, which knows another as being itself other, there is the unitary connection with the gods that is natural [and indivisible].⁴²

Knowledge, as defined by Iamblichus here, has an inherently dualistic quality: it knows the object of knowledge as being other than itself. Thus, knowledge operates within the framework of a clearly defined subject-object relationship. Contact with divinity, however, is not to be viewed as “knowledge,” but as a level of insight which is superior to all reasoning and proof; therefore it can be termed “supra-rational.” Iamblichus claims that this level of insight is superior since it is united from the outset with its own cause. This union with its cause, whereby the theurgist’s insight reverts upon itself to achieve a direct understanding of its own divine cause, completely dissolves the subject-object relationship inherent in human knowledge. Its unity seems to be a significant characteristic of this level of vision; Iamblichus later refers to it as a “uniform mode of cognition”.⁴³ According to Iamblichus’ classification of divination, the nature of inspired divination itself would seem to indicate its supra-rational nature. As we have seen, Iamblichus clearly asserts that the principle of inspired divination is divine and eternal.⁴⁴ Since the primary cause and principle of divination is the divine, and elsewhere Iamblichus claims that what is intellectual is the same as what is divine,⁴⁵ then divination must transcend rationality since it is a direct manifestation of divinity and therefore, pure Intellect.

⁴² Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, I.3 (7.11-8.5). Cf. also Damascius, *Dub. Et. Sol.* I.151.18ff = Fragment 2A, in Dillon (1973) 208-9.

⁴³ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, I.3 (9.7). Cf. also *DM* I.3 (9.8-10).

⁴⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.1 (100.8-9; 100.13-101.3).

⁴⁵ Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.3 (106.9-10); 1.15 (48.4-8).

WEEK 7: BIBLIOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES
MAGIC, THEURGY AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

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