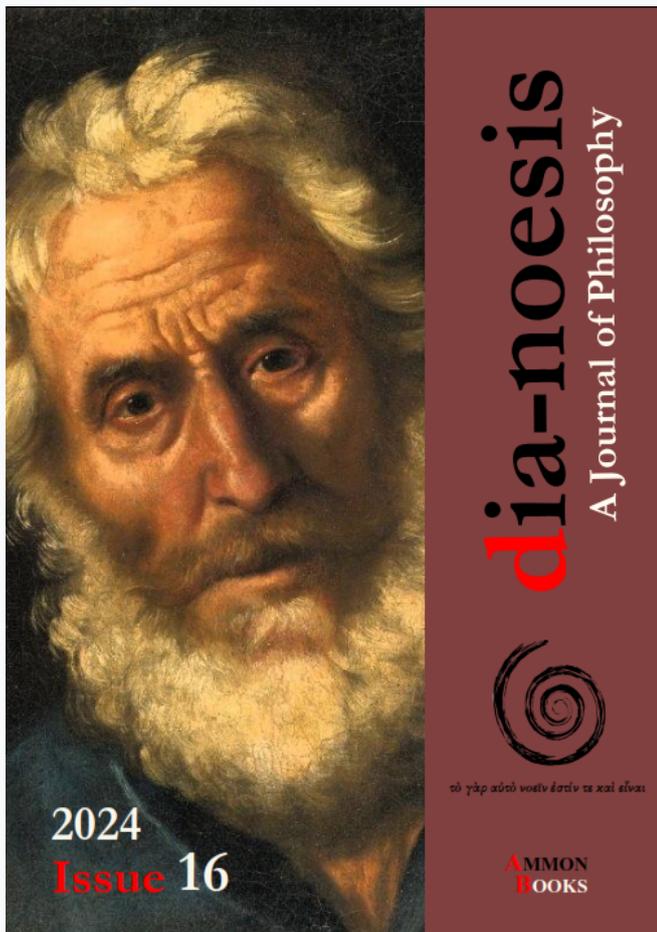


## Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy

Vol 16 (2024)

Philosophy in Late Antiquity Middle Platonism, Neopythagoreanism, and Neoplatonism



### Can Theurgy Save the World?

John Dillon

doi: [10.12681/dia.39530](https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.39530)

#### To cite this article:

Dillon, J. (2024). Can Theurgy Save the World? Some Thoughts on the 'Divinisation' of Matter in the Philosophy of Iamblichus. *Dia-Noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dia.39530>

## Can Theurgy Save the World?

### Some Thoughts on the ‘Divinisation’ of Matter in the Philosophy of Iamblichus

John Dillon,  
*Professor, Trinity College, Dublin*  
dillonj@tcd.ie

#### **Abstract**

The occasion for this paper has been the reading over a projected new edition of Proclus’ treatise *On the Hieratic Art*, which is a commendation of theurgy. The premise behind theurgy, as I take it, is that the physical world has in fact been sown by the gods with a great variety of *symbola*, or ‘clues’, which, if put together correctly and respectfully, can draw down the power of gods or daemons, and achieve many practical advantages. What I wish to argue here is that an increased respect for the way the world is put together should prove the basis for a properly ‘ecological’ approach to our environment, and that would equate to a modern version of theurgy. I argue that the ‘theurgic’ attitude to Matter, largely adopted by Iamblichus, is in stark contrast to that adopted by Platonism in general, and indeed by the Christian tradition following on from it, into the ‘scientific’ mind-set of the modern world.

**Keywords:** Theurgy, Iamblichus, Proclus, Divinisation, Matter, Platonism, World

I have been provoked to these reflections by the circumstance of being asked by my esteemed colleague Eleni Pachoumi to check through her recent, and as yet unpublished, edition of Proclus' treatise *On the Hieratic Art*. Reading through this little treatise of Proclus – or at least its surviving remains – stimulates me to return to a theme which I addressed some time ago, in relation to Iamblichus, namely, the 'divinization' of matter in the theurgic tradition. My title, of course, is deliberately provocative, but behind it is the conviction that our current problems with our relation to our environment at least partly stem from a contemptuously utilitarian attitude to our physical surroundings, arising ultimately from a Platonist, and also Christian, estimation of the physical world. Such an attitude, while rather gloomy, at least, in its original form, in the ancient or mediaeval world, was not harmful to the environment, but, as – largely unconsciously, I think – inherited by the modern, scientific or utilitarian, approach to the world's natural resources, it can become very dangerous indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Now I should clarify that I do not regard modern scientists and entrepreneurs as having a consciously *contemptuous* attitude to the environment, but, in regarding the physical world as simply a source for extracting from its depths a vast range of useful minerals, and from its surface an endlessly increasing amount of timber and other produce, animal or vegetable, at great cost to both forest and arable land, I see them as unconsciously inheriting the Christian, and to an extent also Platonist, view of the world as a sort of cess-pit of matter, in which we are condemned to spend a while, before passing on, to heaven or to hell, ideally having turned our backs on its superficial lures and attractions, in favour of a spiritual reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Having made these rather negative remarks about the Christian attitude to the physical world, I had occasion, recently, to attend the funeral of a neighbour, at which two very positive-minded hymns were sung, which I should have borne in mind: first, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, and then *O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder*. Both these well-known hymns actually express a much more positive appreciation of Nature and its products than I was allowing for!

I do not, of course, wish to deny or dismiss the spiritual reality, but I wish to argue here that our aspiring to it need not necessarily involve a rejection or demeaning (if only by reckless exploitation) of our physical surroundings – and it is here, I think, that the *theurgic*, or *hieratic*, attitude to matter and the physical world can be seen to take on a certain relevance.<sup>2</sup>

Let us, by way of introduction, consider the first surviving fragment of Proclus' treatise:

“Just as lovers proceed methodically from the beautiful things perceived through the senses and attain the one principle of all good and intelligible things, in the same way the leaders of the hieratic art (proceeding) from the *sympathy* (which exists) in all apparent things to one other and to the invisible powers, having understood that all things are included in all things, established the hieratic science, because they were amazed to see the last in the first, and the first in the last; in heaven the earthly in a causal and heavenly manner; and in the earth heavenly things in an earthly manner. Otherwise, how do the *heliotropes* move together with the sun, and the *selenotropes* with the moon, going around as far as possible with the (heavenly) luminaries (i.e., sun and the moon) of the cosmos? Hence all things pray according to their own order, and recite hymns to the leaders of all the chains either intellectually, or logically, or naturally, or sensibly. For indeed the *heliotrope* is also moving toward that to which it easily opens and, if anyone was able to hear it striking the air during its turning around, he would have been aware of it presenting to the king

---

<sup>2</sup> In fact, I have recently come across a most interesting book, *The Patterning Instinct*, by a thinker called Jeremy Lent, who, among many other stimulating insights, flags the philosopher René Descartes as one chief villain in this plot. At pp. 235-8, he identifies Descartes' rigid division between mind and body, downgrading animals to the level of machines, and portraying the realm of nature as something merely to be exploited by human beings for their own purposes, as granting a licence for the reckless exploitation of natural resources that we have experienced in the modern era.

through this sound the hymn that a plant can sing.”  
(trans. Pachoumi)

I must say I find this a fine statement of the theurgic view of the material world. Proclus actually compares our intelligent, ‘theurgic’ contemplation of physical reality to the philosophical lover’s ascent from the contemplation of beautiful bodies to the ‘great sea’ of Beauty in Diotima’s Ladder of Ascent in Plato’s *Symposium*, and I think that that is a very well-taken comparison. What I would like to do in the rest of this paper is to examine the rather distinctive view of the status of Matter taken up by the Neoplatonic philosopher Iamblichus, particularly in his treatise *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*<sup>3</sup>, as it contrasts interestingly with the ‘standard’ view of Matter in the Platonic tradition as a whole, and seems to me to provide a much more promising basis for a properly respectful approach to then physical world, such as might help to save us from the extinction towards which we are currently headed.

One may start, perhaps, from a brief overview of the position of Iamblichus’ predecessor Plotinus on matter, since it takes us some way from earlier Platonist (particularly Middle Platonist) dualism, and demonising of matter, to at least the suggestion of a more positive view. Plotinus, in fact, takes up a firmly monist position, according to which matter, like every other level of existence, is ultimately generated by the first principle, the One. This does not, certainly, prevent him from taking up on occasion a strongly adversative attitude to matter – as, for instance, in his treatise *On Matter*, II 4 [12], chs. 6-16, though even here he is concerned to present it as, above all, privation (*sterêsis*) and negativity. The main thing, nonetheless, is that, in Plotinus’ system – again, despite some rhetoric on occasion (e.g V 1. 1) about ‘daring’ (*tolma*) and ‘falls’ – there is no question but that the physical world is a necessary development, and thus essentially *good*, and there is no

---

<sup>3</sup> This title, of course, is that given to the treatise by the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino,

who first translated it into Latin. Its real title is simply *The Reply of the Philosopher Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo*, which is very clumsy, and in need of explaining!

adverse force in the universe striving for chaos and disorder. The imperfections of the physical world are irreducibly bound up with its three-dimensionality, its ‘solidity’: things just get in each other’s way, and cut across each other, on this level of existence, in a way that they do not in the intelligible realm.<sup>4</sup> Matter, however, is here far from being ‘divinized’, or in any way exalted.

When we turn, on the other hand, to the world of the Greco-Roman (or, for that matter, Egyptian or Jewish) magicians, things are far otherwise. Here we find a very different attitude to matter and material substances, of a sort that has been acutely discerned to be akin rather to a ‘scientific’ view of the world than to a religious or philosophical one.<sup>5</sup> The objective in magical circles is not to deplore one’s presence in the physical world, nor yet to escape from it, but rather to make use of its resources for one’s practical purposes. The properties of material substances are to be catalogued and studied, and then to be applied, in various notionally effective combinations, to achieve a variety of practical outcomes, benign and otherwise. Let me adduce an example or two, just from magical texts which I happen to have had a hand in translating (as part of the team carrying out the Chicago translation of the Greek Magical Papyri, under the leadership of Hans-Dieter Betz, back in the late 1970s). The first is a formula for ‘remembering what is said’ – something that I would happily avail of these days! – apparently, though, in connection with the seeking of a revelation from Apollo (*PGM* II 17-21):

“*In order to remember what is said.* Use the following compound. Take the plant wormwood, a sun opal, a ‘breathing stone’ (sc. a magnet), the heart of a hoopoe. Grind all these together, add a sufficiency of honey, and

---

<sup>4</sup> There is a nice passage on this topic in the last chapter of his large treatise *On Providence* (*Enn.* III 2-3), III 3, 7, where he presents the physical world as resembling a vast and tangled bush, springing from a single root, but with branches, and even twigs, getting in each other’s way and causing trouble to each other.

<sup>5</sup> See on this the useful discussion of Georg Luck: *Arcana Mundi*, Baltimore/London 1985, in his first chapter, ‘Magic’.

anoint your lips with the mixture, having first incensed your mouth. with a grain of frankincense gum.”

We may note here the use of a set of substances comprising animal, vegetable and mineral classes, that is to say: hoopoe, wormwood, opal and magnet (i.e., magnetic lodestone), put together to generate what one might term a ‘power compound’, with the purpose here of constraining a god, through harnessing the force of cosmic sympathy. Each of these components has various powers attached to it by itself: the hoopoe is a sacred bird in Egypt, wormwood has curative and stimulative powers (among other things, it stimulates the imagination!), the opal was thought to increase mental capacity, and the magnet likewise; in combination they would be expected to set up a compelling chain reaction.

Again, we have a spell to gain control of one’s shadow (*PGM* III 612-32) – though exactly what the advantage of this might be is left unstated!:

“If you make an offering of wheaten meal and ripe mulberries and unsoftened sesame and uncooked *thrion* and throw into this a beet, you will gain control of your own shadow, so that it will serve you. Go, at the sixth hour of the day, towards the rising sun, to a deserted place, girt about with a new male palm-fibre basket, and on your head a scarlet cord as a headband, behind your right ear the feather of a falcon, behind your left ear that of an ibis. Having reached the place, prostrate yourself, stretch out your hands, and utter the following formula: “Cause now my shadow to serve me, because I know your sacred names and your signs and your symbols, and who you are at each hour, and what your name is.”

The spell goes on to prescribe the recitation of an address to the Sun, given earlier (III 494-536), in which all his names, signs and symbols for each hour of the day are listed, with the purpose of gaining power over him. This will induce the Sun to cause your shadow to serve you.

Here we have the combination of the right material objects, joined together in the right way,<sup>6</sup> with the correct magical formula, to bring about an advantageous change in the physical world. It is out of this magical milieu, rather than from any part of the Platonist tradition itself, that arises the much more positive evaluation of matter characteristic of theurgy.

What we find when we turn to the philosopher Iamblichus of Chalcis, then, I would suggest, is an attitude to matter characteristic of the magical – or what one might charitably term the ‘scientific’ – tradition, but with a significant degree of distancing from that tradition in respect of its attitude to the gods, and to divine and daemonic intervention in the physical world. What Iamblichus would particularly disavow, as indeed he does explicitly in the *De Mysteriis* (IV 1-4), in response to the gibes of Porphyry,<sup>7</sup> is the suggestion that the theurgist is in any way concerned to *compel* the gods to do his will. He is simply, by virtue of his expertise with the manipulation of matter and his knowledge of the appropriate formulae, enabling the gods to exercise their benevolent power, as they are perfectly happy to do. He is not constraining them; he is merely facilitating them:

“The gods and the classes of being superior to us, through a wish for the good, and with an ungrudging fulfillment of benefits, bestow with benevolence towards the saints (*hoi hagioi*)<sup>8</sup> what is fitting to them, exhibiting compassion towards the labours of priestly men, and

---

<sup>6</sup> How exactly one was intended to wear the palm-fibre basket is not made clear: presumably round one’s middle. That, together with a large feather protruding from behind either ear, should have produced a comical effect sufficient to attract the notice of the Sun himself.

<sup>7</sup> Porphyry’s gibe on this occasion is as follows (181, 2-3): “A thing that very much troubles me is this: how does it come about that we invoke the gods as our superiors, but then give them orders as if they were our inferiors?”

<sup>8</sup> A nice characterization of the practitioners of theurgy, probably deliberately mirroring the normal contemporary Christian characterization of their holy men.

embracing their own offspring, nurselings and pupils” (181, 6-9).

As I say, these theurgical procedures rely on the premise that, from the divine perspective, matter is not something to be despised or shunned; it is rather an integral part of the universe, to be availed of by the gods and other higher beings, when properly organized and presented to them by an expert, for the providential ordering of the physical world.

To illustrate this position, let us consider a passage from *De Myst.* V 23: 233, where Iamblichus is concerned with the theory and practice of sacrifice. In this connection, he addresses the question of the status of matter (*hylê*):

“And let there be no astonishment if in this connection we speak of a pure and divine form of matter; for matter also issues from the Father and Creator of all<sup>9</sup> and thus gains its perfection, which is suitable to the reception of gods (*epitêdeia pros theôn hypodokhên*). And at the same time nothing hinders the superior beings from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor yet, by consequence, is matter excluded from participation in its betters, so that such of it as is perfect and pure and of good type is not unfitted to receive the gods; for since it was proper not even for terrestrial things to be utterly deprived of participation in the divine, earth also has received from such participation a share in divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods. Observing this, and discovering in general, in accordance with the properties of each of the gods, the receptacles adapted to them, the theurgic art in many cases links together stones, plants, animals, aromatic substances, and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all these composes an integrated and pure receptacle (*hypodokhên holotelê kai katharan apergazetai*).”

---

<sup>9</sup> This thoroughly Platonic pair of epithets, *patêr* and *dêmiourgos* (Tim. 28c; 41a) refers in Plato to the Demiurge, who by the Neoplatonic period would not be understood as a supreme deity, but Iamblichus, in his persona as the Egyptian high-priest Abammon, chooses to take them as referring to such a deity here.<sup>9</sup>

I think that we can conclude from such a passage as this that these *symbola* have been sown by the gods in matter eternally, and that it is part of the divine dispensation, consistent with the operations of fate and providence, that certain privileged persons, the priests of old and the theurgists of Iamblichus' own day, should be able to ferret them out and make proper use of them. Their presence is therefore not to be regarded as inconsistent with an eternally ordered universe.

He continues, with a glance in the direction of those philosophers (such as Porphyry) who professed a generally low view of matter (234):

“One must not, after all, reject all matter, but only that which is alien (*allogria*) to the gods,<sup>10</sup> while selecting for use that which is akin to them, as being capable of harmonizing with the construction of dwellings for the gods, the consecration of statues,<sup>11</sup> and indeed in the performance of sacrificial rites in general. For there is no other way in which the terrestrial realm or the men who dwell here could enjoy participation in the existence that is the lot of the higher beings, if some such foundation be not laid down in advance. We must, after all, give credit to the secret discourses (*aporrhêtoi logoi*)<sup>12</sup> when they tell us how a sort of matter is imparted by the gods in the course of blessed visions (*makaria theamata*);<sup>13</sup> this is presumably of like nature with those who bestow it. So, the sacrifice of such

---

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that Iamblichus here recognises that not all matter is amenable to the purposes of the gods, but it is not quite clear what exactly he has in mind. Perhaps just mud and rubbish. I doubt that he intends any seriously dualist implications.

<sup>11</sup> This is of course a recognised theurgical practice, sometimes gaining a tangible response from the statue. The Emperor Julian's spiritual master, Maximus of Ephesus, the pupil of a pupil of Iamblichus, was especially adept at this; cf. Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 474-5.

<sup>12</sup> Presumably those secret books of Hermes, mentioned at the beginning of Book VIII, to which I will turn in a moment.

<sup>13</sup> There are numerous examples of this sort of phenomenon in the magical papyri, but a good example occurs at *PGM* I 1-42, right at the outset of the collection, where, as part of the conjuration of a *paredros daimon*, a falcon brings to the officiant an oblong stone which is plainly of supernatural origin.

material rouses up the gods to manifestation (*ekphansis*), summons them to reception, welcomes them when they appear, and ensures their perfect representation.”

This last remark presumably means that the use of proper material provides the gods with a suitable medium in which to manifest their characteristic natures. The whole passage constitutes a strong assertion of the positive view of matter characteristic of the magical tradition on which Iamblichus is basing himself.

Iamblichus is, however, after all, not a magician but a Platonic philosopher, and we may expect to see in him some attempt to subsume this higher valuation of matter into his general philosophical system. This we in fact find later in the *De Mysteriis* (VIII 3), where he is, in his persona of Abammon, purporting to present the philosophical principles of the Egyptians, as recounted in ‘the books of Hermes’. As it turns out, the Egyptians profess a set of principles closely resembling those of Pythagoras:<sup>14</sup>

“And thus, it is that the doctrine of the Egyptians on first principles, starting from the highest level and proceeding to the lowest, begins from unity (*hen*), and proceeds to multiplicity (*plêthos*), the many being in turn governed by a unity, and at all levels the indeterminate nature (*hê aoristos physis*) being dominated by a certain definite measure (*hôrismenon metron*) and by the supreme causal principle that unifies all things (*heniaia pantôn aitia*). As for matter, God<sup>15</sup> derived it from substantiality (*ousiotês*), when he had abstracted from it materiality (*hylotês*)<sup>16</sup>; this

---

<sup>14</sup> Hardly surprising, Iamblichus would say: that is where he got them from!

<sup>15</sup> These titles, ‘God’ and ‘Demiurge’ just below, if we relate this passage with what has been revealed just above (VIII 2:262), seem to refer, not to the first principle, the One, but rather to a secondary, demiurgic deity, characterized as ‘self-father’ (*autopatôr*) and ‘father of essence’ (*ousiopatôr*).

<sup>16</sup> Both these terms, we may note, are to be found in surviving treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (8. 3; 12. 22), though there is nothing precisely corresponding to the doctrine set out here.

matter, which is endowed with life, the Demiurge took in hand and from it fashioned the simple and impassible (sc. heavenly) spheres, while its lowest element (*eskhaton*) he crafted into bodies which are subject to generation and corruption.”

Here matter is put more properly in its place, from a Platonist point of view, as the lowest manifestation of a plurifying and generative force that makes its appearance as the highest level of the universe as the Indefinite Dyad, or Multiplicity, deriving directly from the One – as indeed it does in Plotinus’ system.<sup>17</sup> Even here, though, we may note a higher grade of matter, used by the Demiurge for the crafting of the heavenly bodies, which are eternal and unchanging. What the precise relationship between *ousiotês* and *hylotês* may be is not quite clear from the rather tortuous syntax of Iamblichus’ prose here, but he seems to envisage this archetype of matter as being somehow ‘split off’ (*hyposkhistheisê*) from substantiality, thus establishing its exalted origins.

At any rate, we can see matter here being treated of in a philosophic context, and, albeit consigned to a lowly status, yet with the reminder that it is the offshoot of a force that pervades the universe from its highest level.<sup>18</sup> We can observe the realm of matter being portrayed in its normal Platonist mode, though with a distinctly ‘monistic’ and positive emphasis, in various passages of his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (e.g., Frs. 9; 46 Dillon), where the chief characteristic of matter is the introduction of diversity and ‘otherness’ (*heterotês*); but even here the continuity of the universe, in its various levels, is emphasized, and the incidental nature of evil, as the result of instances of ‘falling away’ from natural norms. There is nothing really wrong with matter as such; it is simply a manifestation, at the lowest level, of the Indefinite Dyad, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. e.g., Enn. V 1, 5; VI 6, 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, one can also adduce from the *De Mysteriis* itself numerous passages where matter is referred to in what one might term its ‘normal’ Platonist role; e.g. I 10:36, where there is reference to the soul “becoming enmeshed in the indefiniteness and otherness of matter (*to aoriston kai tèn heterotêta tês hylês*); or I 11:39, where he speaks of “the absence of beauty which is characteristic of matter.”

principle of Otherness, which is an essential element in the composition of the universe.

The connection of matter with nature, and both of them with the realm of fate (*heimarmenê*) is stressed also in a fragment of Iamblichus' *Letter to Sopater on Fate* (Letter 12 Dillon-Polleichtner)<sup>19</sup>:

“That life, therefore, which relates to body and the rational principle which is concerned with generation (*logos genesiourgos*), the forms-in-matter (*enula eidê*) and matter itself, and the creation that is put together out of these elements, and that motion which produces change in all of these, and that Nature which administers in an orderly way all things which come into being, and the beginnings and ends and creations of Nature, and the combinations of these with each other and their progressions from beginning to end – all these go to make up the essence of Fate.”

What I have sought to argue, then, in this brief paper, is that an important consequence of Iamblichus' preoccupation with theurgy is that he is driven to take over from the magical and alchemical tradition a positive view of the material world that has a certain resemblance to that of at least the more positive aspects of the modern scientific tradition. According to such a tradition, in the hands of the properly trained and disciplined expert, material objects can be made to serve as instruments of divine beneficence, and these objects have intrinsic power, even independent of the expertise of the practitioner. This does not involve a denial that the material world is a messy and impermanent place, and should ultimately be transcended by the human soul, but it does assert that it has certain positive features, and these should be duly respected.

There is a fine defence of the theurgic position to be found at the end of Book II of the *De Mysteriis* – as so often, in response to a gibe of Porphyry's (II 11: 96-7), and we might end with that:

---

<sup>19</sup> Sopater was his chief pupil, and probably patron, in his school in Apamea.

“Granted, then, that ignorance and deception are faulty and impious, it does not follow on this that the offerings made to the gods and divine works are invalid, for it is not pure thought that unites theurgists to the gods. Indeed, what then would hinder those who are merely theoretical philosophers from enjoying a theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficiency would be intellectual, and dependent upon us. But neither assumption is true. For even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols (*synthêmata*) themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognises the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought.”

In a word, then, the gods themselves have sown *symbola* or *synthêmata* in the material world, as instruments of their providence, and it therefor behooves all of us, theurgists or not, to accord matter a proper respect. And that in turn might help to save us from extinction.

### Illustrative Passages

1. “Just as lovers proceed methodically from the beautiful things perceived through the senses and attain the one principle of all good and intelligible things, in the same way the leaders of the hieratic art (proceeding) from the *sympathy* (which exists) in all apparent things to one other and to the invisible powers, having understood that all things are included in all things, established the hieratic science, because they were amazed to see the last in the first, and the first in the last; in heaven the earthly in a causal and heavenly manner; and in the earth heavenly things in an earthly manner. Otherwise, how do the *heliotropes* move

together with the sun, and the *selenotropes* with the moon, going around as far as possible with the (heavenly) luminaries (i.e., sun and the moon) of the cosmos? Hence all things pray according to their own order, and recite hymns to the leaders of all the chains either intellectually, or logically, or naturally, or sensibly. For indeed the *heliotrope* is also moving toward that to which it easily opens and, if anyone was able to hear it striking the air during its turning around, he would have been aware of it presenting to the king through this sound the hymn that a plant can sing.” (Proclus, *On the Hieratic Art*, Fr. 1, trans. Pachoumi)

2.“*In order to remember what is said.* Use the following compound. Take the plant wormwood, a sun opal, a ‘breathing stone’ (sc. a magnet), the heart of a hoopoe. Grind all these together, add a sufficiency of honey, and anoint your lips with the mixture, having first incensed your mouth. with a grain of frankincense gum.” (*Greek Magical Papyri*, II 17-21)

3.“If you make an offering of wheaten meal and ripe mulberries and unsoftened sesame and uncooked *thrion* and throw into this a beet, you will gain control of your own shadow, so that it will serve you. Go, at the sixth hour of the day, towards the rising sun, to a deserted place, girt about with a new male palm-fibre basket, and on your head a scarlet cord as a headband, behind your right ear the feather of a falcon, behind your left ear that of an ibis. Having reached the place, prostrate yourself, stretch out your hands, and utter the following formula: “Cause now my shadow to serve me, because I know your sacred names and your signs and your symbols, and who you are at each hour, and what your name is” *PGM* III 612-32).

4.“The gods and the classes of being superior to us, through a wish for the good, and with an ungrudging fulfillment of benefits, bestow with benevolence towards

the saints (*hoi hagioi*)<sup>20</sup> what is fitting to them, exhibiting compassion towards the labours of priestly men, and embracing their own offspring, nurselings and pupils” (*De Myst.* IV p. 181, 6-9).

5. “And let there be no astonishment if in this connection we speak of a pure and divine form of matter; for matter also issues from the Father and Creator of all<sup>21</sup> and thus gains its perfection, which is suitable to the reception of gods (*epitêdeia pros theôn hypodokhên*). And at the same time nothing hinders the superior beings from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor yet, by consequence, is matter excluded from participation in its betters, so that such of it as is perfect and pure and of good type is not unfitted to receive the gods; for since it was proper not even for terrestrial things to be utterly deprived of participation in the divine, earth also has received from such participation a share in divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods. Observing this, and discovering in general, in accordance with the properties of each of the gods, the receptacles adapted to them, the theurgic art in many cases links together stones, plants, animals, aromatic substances, and other such things that are sacred, perfect and godlike, and then from all these composes an integrated and pure receptacle (*hypodokhên holotelê kai katharan apergazetai*)” *De Myst.* V 23, p. 233).

---

<sup>20</sup> A nice characterization of the practitioners of theurgy, probably deliberately mirroring the normal contemporary Christian characterization of their holy men.

<sup>21</sup> This thoroughly Platonic pair of epithets, *patêr* and *dêmiourgos* (*Tim.* 28c; 41a) refers in Plato to the Demiurge, who by the Neoplatonic period would not be understood as a supreme deity, but Iamblichus, in his persona as the Egyptian high-priest Abammon, chooses to take them as referring to such a deity here.<sup>21</sup>

6. “One must not, after all, reject all matter, but only that which is alien (*allotria*) to the gods,<sup>22</sup> while selecting for use that which is akin to them, as being capable of harmonizing with the construction of dwellings for the gods, the consecration of statues,<sup>23</sup> and indeed in the performance of sacrificial rites in general. For there is no other way in which the terrestrial realm or the men who dwell here could enjoy participation in the existence that is the lot of the higher beings, if some such foundation be not laid down in advance. We must, after all, give credit to the secret discourses (*aporrhêtoi logoi*)<sup>24</sup> when they tell us how a sort of matter is imparted by the gods in the course of blessed visions (*makaria theamata*);<sup>25</sup> this is presumably of like nature with those who bestow it. So, the sacrifice of such material rouses up the gods to manifestation (*ekphansis*), summons them to reception, welcomes them when they appear, and ensures their perfect representation” (*De Myst.* V 23: 234).

7. “And thus it is that the doctrine of the Egyptians on first principles, starting from the highest level and proceeding to the lowest, begins from unity (*hen*), and proceeds to multiplicity (*plêthos*), the many being in turn governed by a unity, and at all levels the indeterminate nature (*hê aoristos physis*) being

---

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that Iamblichus here recognises that not all matter is amenable to the purposes of the gods, but it is not quite clear what exactly he has in mind. Perhaps just mud and rubbish. I doubt that he intends any seriously dualist implications.

<sup>23</sup> This is of course a recognised theurgical practice, sometimes gaining a tangible response from the statue. The Emperor Julian’s spiritual master, Maximus of Ephesus, the pupil of a pupil of Iamblichus, was especially adept at this; cf. Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 474-5.

<sup>24</sup> Presumably those secret books of Hermes, mentioned at the beginning of Book VIII, to which I will turn in a moment.

<sup>25</sup> There are numerous examples of this sort of phenomenon in the magical papyri, but a good example occurs at *PGM* I 1-42, right at the outset of the collection, where, as part of the conjuration of a *paredros daimon*, a falcon brings to the officiant an oblong stone which is plainly of supernatural origin.

dominated by a certain definite measure (*hôrismenon metron*) and by the supreme causal principle that unifies all things (*heniaia pantôn aitia*). As for matter, God<sup>26</sup> derived it from substantiality (*ousiotês*), when he had abstracted from it materiality (*hylotês*)<sup>27</sup>; this matter, which is endowed with life, the Demiurge took in hand and from it fashioned the simple and impassible (sc. heavenly) spheres, while its lowest element (*eskhaton*) he crafted into bodies which are subject to generation and corruption” (*De Myst.* VIII 3: 265).

8. “That life, therefore, which relates to body and the rational principle which is concerned with generation (*logos genesiourgos*), the forms-in-matter (*enula eidê*) and matter itself, and the creation that is put together out of these elements, and that motion which produces change in all of these, and that Nature which administers in an orderly way all things which come into being, and the beginnings and ends and creations of Nature, and the combinations of these with each other and their progressions from beginning to end – all these go to make up the essence of Fate.” (Iambl. *Letter to Sopater on Fate* (Letter 12, Dillon-Polleichner).



---

<sup>26</sup> These titles, ‘God’ and ‘Demiurge’ just below, if we relate this passage with what has been revealed just above (VIII 2:262), seem to refer, not to the first principle, the One, but rather to a secondary, demiurgic deity, characterized as ‘self-father’ (*autopatôr*) and ‘father of essence’ (*ousiopatôr*).

<sup>27</sup> Both these terms, we may note, are to be found in surviving treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (8. 3; 12. 22), though there is nothing precisely corresponding to the doctrine set out here.

