

Good morning. Since 20 minutes is not a lot of time, I thought it would be most productive if I gave you the conclusions of my argument now, and then showed you how I arrived at them. I've got three main, interrelated arguments and observations I want to make:

- 1) Porphyry of Tyre did not have a conception of theurgy.
- 2) All textual evidence suggesting Porphyry of Tyre's involvement in theurgy is late and secondary.
- 3) Therefore, Statements about Porphyry's putative involvement with theurgy as present in these late, secondary sources, although putative, could perhaps be used to map the progress of theurgy into mainstream awareness in Late Antiquity.

In order to arrive at these conclusions I start from a diachronous, minimalistic perspective and I apply an inductive reading (or rather semi-inductive reading) strategy to my sources. Before I go any further, I need to explain what I mean by these terms

By diachronous I mean to evoke Ferdinand de Saussure, the linguist and arguable inventor of structuralism, who made a distinction in his study of language between synchrony and diachrony. Synchrony roughly refers to a perspective wherein one chooses one particular time and seeks to explain the meaning of a given element of language for that time. Diachrony refers to a recognition of development over time.

In the field of religious studies, which is my home turf, the terms maximalism and minimalism are used in the study of, for example, Judeo Christian texts to describe particular hermeneutic attitudes towards the use of biblical and parabiblical scriptures, especially in light of archaeological evidence. Biblical maximalists tend to prefer the textual evidence and argue that the absence of archaeological evidence for certain issues like the existence of a Davidic kingdom is not a sufficient impediment to the evidence provided in the texts. Biblical minimalists, in contrast, tend to read the biblical texts as fictitious works, imaginative constructions of a desired reality, or semi-historical myths to explain the emergence of a people whose actual origins may be undesirable or otherwise embarrassing.

Taking my cue from this terminology, it seems to me that the majority of work on the topic of theurgy in late antiquity is maximalist in nature. Scholars have sought to curate, translate, and catalogue as many different texts and testimonia from as

many different times and contexts as possible, and their readings of these often seem to presume that these writings are windows into historical realities all referencing the same phenomenon constant across time and space. This latter synchronic tendency has resulted in a generalized notion of theurgy which in turn has started to appear as an etic term, applied not only to religio-philosophical practices of people subscribing to Neoplatonist perspectives but also to traditions far outside the purview of historical Neoplatonism, appearing for example in discussions of Buddhism. There is nothing wrong per se with such a method, and I appreciate very much the work that has been done by these scholars, but in the interests of trying to progress scholarship on Neoplatonic theurgy further, I think maximalist readings should be balanced with minimalistic accounts of this evidence. By the way if you want a good example of this kind of approach to theurgy applied broadly, I highly recommend the work of Ilinca Tanaseanu Dobler.

What advantages might there be to the use of a minimalistic method? In my view there are some problems in reading statements of the Neoplatonists about theurgy with the kind of received wisdom of scholarship. We tend to repeat the views of Lewy, Dodds, et al. in our understandings of specific terms like theurgy. How do we know that we are using the proper definitions of theurgy? Frankly, we don't, and many scholars have pointed out that one of the more vexing problems that

continually arises in scholarship is that there is no conclusive definition of the term theurgy, and in the absence of such a basic requirement it is odd to claim we can say anything about theurgy. In addition to this basic lack, we are also perhaps hampered by the fact that this term has had a fruitful existence outside of late antiquity. It appears in a variety of contexts including the western esoteric tradition, but even more surprisingly perhaps, it appears in modern scholarship where it has become a generalized term for what I would call “good magic”.

Starting from received definitions and presumed understandings of theurgy as “good magic” can cloud our ability to read the texts themselves because we may find ourselves importing understandings of theurgy that are more appropriately relegated to Ficino or Blavatsky than to Iamblichus. For his part, I would argue Iamblichus says actually a little bit more than just theurgy is good magic, and in his efforts to distinguish theurgy from other seemingly contemporary practices such as those of an enigmatic group he calls the image makers, Iamblichus is involved in an enterprise of creating or inventing a religious practice, a religious tradition, called theurgy.

So, that’s my starting ground, which again, owes a lot to Tanaseanu Dobler and Van Liefferinge. But I want to try to push their perspectives just a fraction of an

inch further. If we read texts where theurgy is mentioned inductively, then we can derive slightly more information about this tradition and even the history of this tradition than we have allowed ourselves in the past.

I attempted such a method in my dissertation, and applied it to *De Mysteriis* or *The Reply of the Master Abammon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo* attributed to Iamblichus of Chalcis. I started from the understanding that the term theurgy itself is significant. It should not, under the parameters of this method, be read as a synonym for other more well-known terms. It's a weird term. We don't know the exact origins where it came from. There are myths commonly perpetuated about where it came from, a couple of fellows from Chaldea who share the same name, the Julians, are commonly cited as responsible for this term, but there are even more problems with them than there are with Porphyry.

So, what if we treated theurgy as a term for which we don't immediately know the referent? What if we read the only text written by someone sympathetic to theurgy who uses the term continuously and tried to understand what the author meant by this term?

It would be like reading say a magazine devoted to sports racing and knowing every word in the text except for the term racecar. Initially your understanding would be full of gaps, how could you understand what the non-understood word means? How would you go about doing this? Go back to gradeschool reading advice: use context to understand the meaning of the term that's unknown to you. So, you collect all the sentences and paragraphs where "racecar" appears, and then try to extract the information you can receive from each instantiation. Perhaps you could then get a vague series of predicates to impute on the conceptual blackbox of "racecar". You may get the conception that this is an object that people put themselves inside and it goes very fast, and it seems to serve some kind of purpose in a competition where multiple "racecars" are being driven around a course together. Eventually by adding up all of these predicates associated with the term racecar, you should be able to discern even if darkly some notion of what a racecar is.

What if we applied the same kind of inductive reading to statements related to theurgy? What if we read those statements without immediately assuming that we knew what it was and instead tried to get at some ground level positivistic statements that could be extracted from the text?

On my reading of *De Mysteriis* I derived 43 or so predicative statements, what I called minimal units, which gave me some kind of information about what theurgy was and is. That's what I called in my dissertation a minimalistic reading of Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*.

So what if we applied a similar method to Porphyry? What if we tried to understand what Porphyry had to say about theurgy solely on the basis of Porphyry's use of the term? Maybe we could get at some kind of pre-Iamblichean understanding of theurgy. Maybe.

But right away if you try to apply this to Porphyry you run into some problems. Most notably, in no extant text written by Porphyry himself do we find any mention of the word theurgy. It doesn't appear in the *Sententia*. It doesn't appear in the *Life of Plotinus*. It doesn't appear in *On Abstinence from Animals*. It doesn't appear in the *Introduction to Platonic Philosophy*. The term is largely absent from the corpus of Porphyry's writings of which we are fairly certain. Of course, Porphyry talks about a number of things that perhaps have some kind of relationship to theurgy: for example various classes of Gods and daemons, the vehicle of the soul, and other matters such as were also a concern for Iamblichus, but as previous scholars have noted, Porphyry never uses the term theurgy.

The term theurgy does appear in a number of fragments from lost works attributed to Porphyry, Letter to Anebo and On the Return of the Soul, as cited by Iamblichus, Augustine, but there is no way of knowing for certain whether the passages or epitomes presented by these authors accurately represent Porphyry's own position. In the absence of original texts, we cannot rely on these fragments except to determine the basic content of Porphyry's statements. We perhaps can get the *ipsissima vox* but there is no way of extracting the *ipsissima verba*, as Segonds and Saffrey note in their introduction to their reconstruction of Porphyry's letter.

Moreover, in the fragments of Letter to Anebo preserved by an author other than Augustine and Iamblichus, namely Eusebius, the term theurgy doesn't appear at all.

Though trite, it should be recalled that the ancient Greeks do not use quotation marks, and so there are no determinative punctuation marks to determine when an author is giving the original words of an author. Paraphrase and epitome was a well-known practice in antiquity and in cases where we do have texts with citations from those texts we get some idea of the degree of flexibility our authors felt. A

comparison between the excerpts of Eusebius and Iamblichus, such as Segonds and Saffrey again provide in the Bude edition of Letter to Anebo reveals a high tolerance on Iamblichus's part for manipulating Porphyry's words.

On its own this may seem like I'm being too skeptical. Evidence from Eusebius notwithstanding, we still have two apparently separate authors in time and religious temperament both seemingly agreeing that Porphyry had a conception of theurgy, shouldn't that be enough to confirm some involvement? But when we take a few steps back and look at the broader picture of Porphyry's writings it strikes me as peculiar that all of the statements in which authors attribute to some kind of notion of theurgy or awareness of texts associated with theurgy are all without exception secondary and late.

The texts where Porphyry's involvement in theurgy is mentioned are:

- 1) De Regressu Animae (as cited in Augustine's City of God)
- 2) Letter to Anebo as cited in Iamblichus, De Mysteriis

To these we can add as well:

- 3) An enigmatic biographical account in Eunapius, Lives of the Philosophers
- 4) A bibliographical account in Suda (ca. 950)

The different books of Augustine's City of God have different publication dates. We know Augustine started the work around 413. Books 6-10 where Augustine has the most to say about Porphyry's involvement in theurgy was available according to Orosius by 417.

De Mysteriis is much more difficult to date. Suggestions have been made that it was written before Porphyry's death in 304, but Edwards has suggested that the text may have even been written after Porphyry's death.

Praeparatio Evangelica was begun sometime around 313 according to Aaron Johnson.

Eunapius's Lives of the Philosophers was written ca. 399. (See T. M. Bauchich, "The Date of Eunapius' *Vitae sophistarum*," *GRBS* 25 (1984): 183-92; R. Goulet, "Sur la chronologie de la vie et des oeuvres d'Eunape de Sardes," *JHS* 100 (1980): 60-72, at 60-64.)

These dates all take on a greater significance when we recall Porphyry died sometime around 305. Thus, if Edwards is right, then all of the texts definitively asserting Porphyry's involvement in theurgy postdate his death.

When we arrange the texts chronologically (SLIDE) an interesting pattern can be observed:

Sometime after 304 – De Mysteriis (?)

313 – Praeparatio Evangelica

399 – Eunapius's Lives of the Philosophers

417 – Books 6-10 of Augustine's City of God

950 – Suda says Porphyry wrote about Julian (author of the Chaldean Oracles)

Arguably this could be read as some evidence of an attempt, external to Porphyry himself to associate the Tyrian with theurgy and theurgic matters, and perhaps this attempt has less to do with the public Porphyry and more to do with his representation by others. In the quotes of Letter to Anebo preserved by Eusebius, whose style of citation seems to imply a more verbatim presentation of Porphyry's words, there is no reference whatsoever to theurgy, while Iamblichus hints very strongly at Porphyry's use of the term theurgy in his own citations from that text. Eunapius presents an enigmatic claim. Augustine overemphasizes Porphyry's involvement, finally, by the time we get to the Suda, written probably after theurgy had become a more commonplace attitude and the notion of an actual text of the Chaldean Oracles has been confirmed by Proclus and his biographer Marinus, we find a reference (again, vague) connecting Porphyry to some Julian possibly the author of the Oracles.

It is striking, and probably not without significance, that all those sources that definitively tie Porphyry to theurgy were written long after his death. Such sources include the testimonies of the Byzantines to a text on the Julians, hints from Eunapius as explored above, the declarations of Augustine, and possibly the responses of Iamblichus. All of this stands in stark contrast to the philosophical perspective that can be glimpsed in the more complete writings of Porphyry where we are more confident that we possess his actual words. It is further worthy of note that in these more complete texts, there are no clear mentions of any of the later conceptual entities which have become part and parcel of the theurgic tradition: No Julians (an especially telling absence), no Chaldean tradition superior to all others, and no “theurgy”. At best, there may be mentions of salvific rituals, rituals that are always interpreted as *symbolic* of some kind of proper, virtuous behavior, and these rituals may be a part of a number of different traditions, not just the “Chaldean.”

It seems then that Porphyry did not have the notion of theurgy which has been attributed to him. Why then have others in this tradition attributed such a worldview to him? I propose the following scenario: Iamblichus, responding to *Letter to Anebo* expands upon minute references to an extremely generalized notion of ritual, and in so doing **invents the term theurgy and imbues it with a meaning derived in part from an effort to navigate Porphyry’s concerns about the**

propriety of philosophers engaging in barbarous ritual practices. Along the way, Iamblichus arrives at some finely nuanced distinctions of the practice that mark it as separate from other traditional cult. Iamblichus's conceptions later become widespread and well-known, due to the popularity of his school. Eunapius, having been educated in this school, writing at least sixty years after the death of Porphyry, makes strong hints about Porphyry's alleged involvement with theurgy as a way of appropriating the views of an admittedly important philosopher into the ranks of the theurgists, a kind of post-mortem re-baptism. At this point, Eunapius probably had at hand Iamblichus's *Response* and most likely accepted the rhetorical redefinitions of Iamblichus. In his extremely brief account of Porphyry's possible theurgic leanings, Eunapius's brief words are delightfully ambiguous, but they notably gloss over Porphyry's negative views of ritual, which both Iamblichus and Augustine attest to, and this may be an indication of Eunapius's willingness to read and bend the evidence in the best light for the tradition that was important to him. Eunapius was not so extreme as to outright put words into Porphyry's mouth, and he, in the end, leaves the attribution to Porphyry nebulous. Iamblichus first, and then Augustine much later (at least after 410), probably in a cultural context dominated by Iamblichean understandings of Platonism, augmented the views of Porphyry. Augustine's emphasis on Porphyry as the main proponent of what he saw as demonically inspired Platonism (as opposed to Iamblichus, the more guilty

culprit) may have come about as a result of the importance of Porphyry as an opponent of Christianity in his *Against the Christians*, and his (Augustine's) wish to draw a strong distinction between himself and the Plotinian/Porphyrian writings which were so important in his own conversion process (Cite Confessions).

I believe we can see in the development of a tradition of stronger and stronger ties of Porphyry to theurgy, the growth and development of an invented tradition of theurgy. I suspect that the hyper interest of Iamblichus in theurgy as well as the apparent attempt of Iamblichus to define ritual as theurgy, as present in his writings in the *Reply* (which will be the focus of a later publication), had a strong influence on Eunapius, who identifies himself as one of the students of the students of Iamblichus. Moreover, with the rise of Christianity, Augustine could easily cite Iamblichus's letter and its reply in the same breath with Porphyry's much more general work on ritual, which ultimately led to the conflation of views and the development of the notion that Porphyry had a theory of theurgy, that he wrote a commentary on theurgic works, etc, a view which is, as I have shown, insufficiently supported by any of the extant works from Porphyry's own hand. Under such influence, Eunapius was willing to at least partially suggest that Porphyry had some unknown relationship to theurgy. That he was not willing to go further, may be an indication that when Porphyry's works were still in circulation;

he was not able to suggest more than a hint of Porphyry's involvement because the majority of the evidence, on this point, opposed him.