The Meaning of Theurgy: A Minimalistic Approach to Theurgy and Previous Understandings of the Term in the Study of Late Antique Religion

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Contents

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List of Abbreviations

ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*.
CO	Majercik, Ruth. *The Chaldean Oracles*: Text, Translation, and Commentary. Leiden, Brill: 1989.
CDH	Dillon, John, Emma Clarke, John Hershbell. (trans.) *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*. Atlanta, Society for Biblical Literature: 2003. (Note: when CDH is used, I am referring either to a direct word/phrase in this English translation, or I am emphasizing a feature of the commentary.)
DOC	Kroll, Wilhelm. *De Oraculis Chaldaicis*. Breslau, 1894. Reprint Hildesheim: George Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1962.
DM	Dillon, John, Emma Clarke, John Hershbell. (trans.) *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries*. Atlanta, Society for Biblical Literature: 2003.
Lewy	Lewy, Hans. *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*. Paris, Institut d'Études Augustiniennes: 2011.
PGM	Betz, Hans Dieter (ed.). *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*. 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

1. Introduction

> Everyone must therefore give great care and great attention to the beginning of any undertaking, to see whether the foundation is right or not. If that has been considered with proper care, everything else will follow.
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> -Plato, Cratylus 436d.

1.1 Motivation

Understanding the meaning and origins of theurgy has great value for our understanding of the relationship between philosophy and religion in late antiquity as well as for our ability to catalog and interpret connections between the various Neoplatonic philosophers. The term theurgy and the activities and philosophies with which it was intertwined had great impact on both the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, and eventually, through the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 6th century), the Christian tradition. Additionally, the term has taken on a meta-discursive (etic) meaning and become a term to describe features of religious practice in domains as broad as Tibetan Buddhism and Judaism. With so much intellectual baggage, it would be a worthwhile exercise to take the opportunity to unpack the term and determine exactly what its original contents entailed.

There is no explicit definition of the concept of theurgy (of the form "theurgy is defined as…") in any late antique source, and the history of the term is difficult to substantiate. Relatively recent writings on theurgy have called for or promised in the course of their text to define the term. In my view, such attempts are unsatisfactory either because they ignore the ideological problems of their comparative approaches, or they assert historical narratives for which very little evidence actually exists. Accordingly, this dissertation is motivated by this gap in current scholarly research that I have perceived concerning the definition of the late antique concept of theurgy.

1.2 Problem

There are two main problems that this dissertation seeks to answer. One is methodological and concerns how one should attempt to interpret or translate terms which are not clearly defined by one's sources. The other is more specific and concerns the interpretation of the disparate phrases that mention theurgy in Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis* –

the oldest textual source that offers a continuous discourse incorporating the term 'theurgy' and cognates. Based on my reading of previous scholarship on theurgy, I have concluded that, while there are valuable and possibly accurate insights in its readings on the surrounding topics of Neoplatonism and the meaning of specific texts, it has not, for the most part, approached the problems of defining theurgy with sufficient systematicity. Instead, theurgy has been defined usually in relation to various other Neoplatonic writers (most notably Proclus), or it has been employed as a tool of constructing a reading of theurgy to satisfy the ideological claims made by the tradition which is engaged in studying it.

This dissertation approaches the problem of defining theurgy from a different angle and seeks to create a minimalistic definition of this phenomenon as it may be extracted solely from its oldest source; i.e., the Neoplatonic text *De Mysteriis*. The goal is to develop a schema of definition, which may in the future be compared with either other minimalistic schema extracted from other Neoplatonic scholars or with minimalistic understandings of ritual practices in other traditions with which theurgy has uncritically been compared.

1.3 Method

The method employed in this dissertation is a minimalistic one. It is derived from the ideas of a number of thinkers of a, broadly speaking, structuralist bend. These include Lucien Febvre (1878-1956), Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962), and Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992). This dissertation is based on Febvre's basic assumption that language is an adequate means of investigating cultural history. This insight correlates more or less with what I read from the founder of the history of ideas, Arthur O. Lovejoy, namely that complex ideas in the history of philosophy may be reduced to minimal units of meaning. Febvre and Lovejoy never provided a clear method for their approach, and so these works are qualified through the lens of a systematic method, which I develop based on inspiration from Algirdas Greimas. Greimas introduced and showcased a method whereby one could dissolve complex elements of continuous text into minimal units of meaning. Thus Greimas provides the impetus to develop a linguistically driven tool to operationalize Lovejoy's approach.

Following Greimas, I develop a method of dissecting statements of continuous discourse into their minimal propositional components. Once I have developed a list of these minimal units, I compare them to one another, to determine what further deductions may be derived from the immanent textual data. This method of comparing and deducing information

from the minimal textual units will finally lead me to offer a definition of theurgy, warts and all, as it is presented in *De Mysteriis*.

1.4 Empirical data

There are a number of important texts which include the term theurgy, but I begin this investigation on the statements made about theurgy and its corresponding cognates in the late antique philosophical letter known as *De Mysteriis*, a 4th century letter now widely accepted to have been authored by Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 240-325). I have chosen this text because it offers the earliest continuous use of the term theurgy. Earlier candidates like Nicomachus of Gerasa or the *Chaldean Oracles* are too problematic historically, as I shall detail later. The letter is written in response to a previous letter from the philosopher Porphyry, a student of Plotinus. *De Mysteriis* has been translated and interpreted numerous times, and there is no need to retranslate the work. My main data set is comprised of the statements that Iamblichus directly makes in using the term theurgy or its cognates. Following the basic principle of using key words in context, I argue that this is the only reasonable means we have as researchers of reconstructing the definition without calling in the aid of over-interpretation, reliance on questionable historical sources, or contemporary scholarly meta-narratives.

1.5 Procedure

Following this introduction, I provide a review of scholarship on theurgy in order to establish how scholarship arrived at the position it is currently in, and why it might have passed over such basic questions as the definition of its terms in early stages. In chapter 3, I outline the structuralist foundations of my method which may be found in the history of the annales school and especially in the theories of Lovejoy and Greimas, which serve as the basis for the method I have developed to establish the minimal textual units of theurgy in *De Mysteriis*. In chapter 4, I provide background and context to the text that is the main object of study, *De Mysteriis*. In chapter 5, I apply the method outlined in chapter 3 to my object of study in order to extract the salient units of meaning and interpret these minimal units in the last section. In chapter 6, I explore the problems of using theurgy in a non-historically grounded sense. Chapter 7 lays out my conclusion and provides what I believe is the bare minimal statement we can make about the operation of theurgy in *De Mysteriis*. I also touch upon the perspectives of this dissertation for future scholarship.

2. Review of Scholarship on Theurgy

2.1 The Need for a Review of Scholarship

In a survey of the works that have sought to confront the concepts of Neoplatonism in general, or the theories of individual Neoplatonists in particular, it is striking how often scholars use the term theurgy without providing a clear or even agreed-upon definition. It seems that the scholars and researchers who set out to understand these objects of study tend to do so with a vague conception of theurgy in mind, perhaps one garnered from a close reading of the philosophers in question, perhaps from one of the numerous dictionaries or encyclopedias that provide some kind of hint at a definition,[1] or perhaps from social sources beyond the textual, especially the unwritten word-of-mouth traditions of scholarly interpretation. At any rate, these same scholars have continually given voice to a need to account for theurgy in some sense, and they occasionally express the hope that their work will arrive at that definition as a matter of course.[2] This dissertation begins from the

[1] Fernández-Fernández, *La teúrgia de los Oráculos caldeos: cuestiones de léxico y de contexto histórico* (Granada:University of Granada, 2011), 1, reviews a number of encyclopedia entries, which I repeat here. The recent entry of *El Diccionario de la Real Academia* (2001): "A type of magic of late antique pagans, by means of which they pretended to have communication with their gods and to work wonders." Fernández-Fernández notes that this definition repeats the 1884 edition. The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie François* (Paris: 1765) is vaguer because it makes no mention of the "late antique pagans," and simply notes that "theurgy is the art by which *one* (emphasis mine, NAM) is believed to maintain commerce with beneficial deities." *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (Edinburgh: 1823), vol. 12, p. 348 mentions the Chaldeans as the main practitioners of theurgy. To Fernández-Fernández's encyclopedic ruminations, I will add that the Danish dictionary, *Den Store Dansk*, offers a slightly more precise phrasing, mentioning the Neoplatonists and contrasting theurgy with theology as equivalent means: **Theurgy** (from gr. *theourgia* "to work on the divine", from *theos* 'God' and *-ergos* "work on something or with something"). Late Antique term for rituals, spells and prayers that were intended to achieve union with God. In later Neoplatonism (Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus) theology was regarded as the theoretical and theurgy as the practical means to God-realization. (*Den Store Dansk*, s.v. "teurgi," last accessed August 19, 2014, http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Livsstil%2c_sport_og_fritid/Filosofi/Oldtidens_filosofi/teurgi, I have translated the Spanish, French and Danish entries mentioned in this footnote.)

[2] Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy, and Freelance Divination" *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 115 conspicuously states that a definition of theurgy is one of the goals of her work: "Before attempting to define the new discipline of 'theurgy' (a task to which the whole of this paper in a sense is devoted)." The classification she eventually places theurgy in is something like a grace-inspired divination (121). Lutz Bergman, a decade later, still implies that there is disagreement on how to understand theurgy: "It is difficult to say

assumption that the multiple meanings of theurgy expressed in the writings of secondary scholarship are sufficient evidence of a number of divergent schools and opinions arising in this field of scholarship. In this section I shall demonstrate how previous definitions of theurgy depend upon connections between various textual traditions which ultimately ignore the possibility of "invented traditions."[3] As the purpose of this dissertation is to attempt a definition of theurgy, these varying definitions of theurgy in existing scholarship serve as the backbones for the study of therugy in this dissertation. Therefore, a survey of the history of research is provided to in order to highlight what has been achieved, and what gaps in scholarship this project hopes to fill. It will give academic context and rationale to the goal of this project.

2.2 The Study of Neoplatonism and Theurgy in the 19th Century

One of the first problems in this account is the question of where to mark the temporal and cultural boundaries for the academic study of theurgy. References to theurgy appear consistently in works from the 14th to the 21st century, but not all these works appeal solely to academic methods. Various practitioners of theosophy and magic (or magick) have sought in the historical references to theurgy sufficient evidence of an authentic tradition of ritualized illumination to inform their own beliefs and practices.[4] By utilizing theurgy as a term, and in

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unequivocably what "theurgy" is…Is "theurgy" a system, a religious-magical way of thinking, or even a particular form of experience or consciousness?" See Bergemann, "Fire Walk With Me" in *Aesthetics and Theurgy in Byzantium* edited by Sergei Mariev and Marie-Wiebke Stock (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 143. Crystal Addey in her recent book, *Theurgy and Divination in Neoplatonism* (Ashgate, 2014), 24 also points to the difficulties of definition: "Theurgy remains notoriously difficult to define…"

[3] The concept of "invented tradition" was first developed by Eric Hobspawm and Terence Ranger for their edited volume, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). The term was meant to cover the invention of especially political and authoritative traditions in a predominantly European context. The term has since been developed in the field of religious studies to refer to a variety of phenomena including forgery, the "discovery" of lost texts, and the general attribution of modern traditions to much more ancient backgrounds. See in this context the essays in Olav Hammer and James R. Lewis (eds.), *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). The term has also been picked up in studies on theurgy, most recently and notably by Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler in her book, *Theurgy in Late Antiuqity: The Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013).

[4] Much of this history is reviewed in Fernández-Fernández's dissertation, *La teúrgia de los Oráculos caldeos: cuestiones de léxico y de contexto histórico*, 3-16. To repeat some highlights: the 16th century writers and self-proclaimed magicians Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Giordano Bruno connected the practices of 12th century medieval grimoires, like

the process, building connections between various late antiquity texts, scholars and practitioners of theurgizing religions alike have argued for, assumed, or accepted a 'tradition of theurgy.'

In more mainstream philological/clerical sources, theurgy was bound up in general discussions of "pagan" religious practice, alongside such chestnuts as the Eleusinian and Samothracian mysteries, Pythagoreanism,[5] magic, etc.[6] In these early works, theurgy was more or less considered synonymous with the rest of these practices and philosophies, and given the overall tenor of the Enlightenment and counter-Reformation, this terminology was for the most part pejorative, in line with the theory that ritual should be considered inferior to mental introspection. It is probably safe to say that the mainstream attitude of designating theurgy and ritual as an inferior methodology of cognition had a heavy influence on the mainstream (and largely Christian) academic world that began to confront the concerns of theurgy head on.

This general dismissal of the value of Neoplatonism changes with Thomas Taylor, an early 19th century religious Platonist,[7] who famously translated the Plato's complete works,[8]

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the *Ars Almadel*, *Ars notoria*, *Ars Paulina*, and *Ars Revelationum*, to theurgy. In the 17th century, the bibliophile Gabriel Naudé defends as one of the major procedures of theurgy the use of "various letters, syllables, and combinations." This special concern with combinatorics, as Fernández-Fernández notes, easily connects theurgy to Jewish mysticism. The 18th century French Freemason and reformer Martinès de Pasqually, though he never explicitly uses the term theurgy offers definitions of "operative magic" which correlate, according to his 19th century interpreters to the concepts present in Iamblichus and the *Chaldean Oracles*. De Pasqually's disciple, Paul-Henri Dietrich Baron de Holbach, made the claim that Christian sacramentalism was "puerile and ridiculous ceremony" based on "true theurgy" (*Le christianisme*, 123-124, cited in Fernández-Fernández, *La teúrgia*, 8).

[5] Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1829) calls Abaris and Pythagoras "two great theurgists." (cited in Fernández-Fernández, *La teúrgia*, 10).

[6] For example, Christian August Lobeck in his *Aglaophamus* (Königsberg, 1829), set out to explain the Orphic, Eleusinian, and Samothracian mysteries. In the course of his explanation, he devotes chapter 14 of his work to issues related to the *Chaldean Oracles*, including theurgy.

[7] According to the granddaughter of Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), "Pagan" Taylor sacrificed lambs and poured libations to Jupiter, much to the irritation of his landlord. Axon, who commits this story to print, evaluates it as "no more than good natured jest," but the story may nonetheless provide a good characterization of Taylor. See, William E. Axon, *Thomas Taylor: The Platonist: A Biographical and Bibliographical Sketch* (London: 1890), 9-10. Axon attributes this story to the granddaughter of Thomas Lovell Peacock, an apparent error and possibly an amalgamation of Peacock and Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803-1849). For more on the friendship between Thomas Love Peacock and Thomas Taylor, see Carl Van Doren, *The Life of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1911), 129-130.

[8] Taylor published the first complete English translation of the works of Plato in 1804 in which he incorporated the prior work of Floyer Sydenham (1710-1787). Taylor's edition

and quite a few of the Neoplatonists' texts into English. Taylor received heavy criticism for his unpopular contention that the Neoplatonists were accurate interpreters of Plato and for his general mystical ways and rumors of his ritualistic practices. Additionally, mainstream authorities considered his translations to be rather poor.[9]

Whatever the quality of his interpretations, Taylor's Neoplatonist readings of Plato had a profound influence on the arts, especially on the Romantic poets. William Blake read Plato via Taylor, as did Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley[10] and William Butler Yeats.[11] The American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, read Taylor's translations of the "Oracles of Zoroaster" (the Chaldean Oracles) and makes mention of them in his journals.[12] The Theosophical Society played a large role in the proliferation of Taylor's writings and through this they had an impact on Yeats, Pound, and Eliot.[13]

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made Plato available for the first time to a non-academic audience. See, Pat Rogers, "Introduction: The Eighteenth Century" in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1994), 182. For a full bibliography of Taylor's works, see Axon, *Thomas Taylor: The Platonist*, 10-14.

[9] An anonymous reviewer offers the following critique: "the man is an ass…he knows nothing of the religion [of which] he profess[es] himself a votary…and…he knows less than nothing of the language about which he is continually writing" (Axon, *Thomas Taylor*, 1-2.). Kroll, *DOC*, 1 notes Lobeck's anger over Taylor's "*stultitiam*" (stupidity). It is unclear to me whether the objects of this attack are Taylor's translations, his efforts to concoct a neo-pagan religion, or some mixture of both. Axon, for his part, defends Taylor posthumously against his critics, saying that while he may have had errors in "unessential details" Taylor as an "enthusiast" was well-equipped to "reproduce[e] the spirit of the Pythagorean philosophers with whom he dwelt" (14).

[10] Edward Larissey, "Blake and Platonism" in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 1994, 186; Angela Elliot "The Twentieth Century" in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, 272.

[11] As is noted in the previous footnote, Yeats had Taylor's translation in his library, but he would have also been exposed to the *Chaldean Oracles* through his involvement alongside the likes of Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen, and Brahm Stoker in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. A "translation" of the *Oracles* by William Wynn Westcott (under the penname Sapere Aude) forms part of the group's curriculum. This version of the *Oracles* constitutes the majority of the mystical declarations of the hierophant to the candidate in the psycho-drama of initiation into the "Theoricus" grade of the Order. See Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn* 6th ed. (Llewellyn, 1989), 170ff. The text in the speeches of the "kabiri" has been rearranged from Westcott's adaptation. Reasons for this arrangement are unknown and probably depend on mystical reasoning. It is certainly no more intelligible.

[12] Emerson, *Journals VI* 491, 499-500; *VII* 389 (p. 195 in the original). In a footnote (Emerson, *Journals* vol. VII n. 334), the editor of the seventh volume notes that Emerson seems to be following the English translations from a volume of mystical texts entitled *Phenix* (1835, 158 and 166), rather than Taylor's translation. He further notes that the Greek is likely from Taylor, however, as Greek transcriptions were rare.

[13] Elliot, "The Twentieth Century," 272.

The exception to most of these mystical enthusiasts was Wilhelm Kroll, who wrote a relatively sober[14] interpretation of the *Chaldean Oracles*. Kroll collected the Oracles from fragments present in the Neoplatonist writers, but did not offer his grounds for identifying these writings as oracles.[15] He also, characteristically for his time, connected theurgy to a number of other traditions, especially those he designated Platonic and Orphic. Kroll's influence has largely been felt in his imposed ordering of the *Chaldean Oracles*. For a time, individual fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* were cited by the page numbers of Kroll's study. Edouard Des Places would improve on this later on by assigning a unique number to each oracle. But the order of the oracles was more or less set, and aside from adding a few that Kroll allegedly missed, Des Places retained Kroll's order.[16]

The 19th century's scholarship on theurgy can be thought of as a stage of translating and preparing the ground for the academic study of Neoplatonism and theurgy. In the early 20th century, scholars inspired by this work constructed grand narratives in order to understand the place of theurgy in its wider contexts. As will become clear in the next sub-section, scholars of the early 20th century were finding or strengthening connections between theurgy and other textual traditions or explaining the development of theurgy as a general move away from rationalism in response to socio-political stresses and changes.

2.3 The Study of Related Themes in the Early 20th Century

The early 20th century witnessed a number of academic investigations on the topic of magic and its relationship to science, partially inspired by the anthropological research of Sir James George Frazer and Marcel Mauss. This was the era of collection and included Thorndyke's extremely important, encyclopedic efforts, which culminated in *The History of*

[14] Whatever may be said about Kroll's seeming lack of mystical enthusiasm for his subject matter he does seem to have written quite a bit about the topics that would later fall under Dillon's category of the "Underworld of Platonism" (Dillon, *Middle Platonists* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996], 384-396). Kroll's motivations for his project are, unlike Taylor's relatively obvious intentions, indiscernible.

[15] Hans Lewy would later clarify Kroll's system for identifying texts belonging to the so-called *Chaldean Oracles* in the writings of the Neoplatonists (Lewy, 443-449).

[16] Kroll arranged the oracles roughly into the categories of philosophy and theology. Polymnia Athanassiadi has recently critiqued this approach ("The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy," in P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999), 158-159; repeated in Athanassiadi, "Byzantine Commentators on the Chaldaean Oracles: Psellos and Plethon," in Katerina Ierodiakonou (ed.) *Byzantine Philosophy and Its Ancient Sources* (Oxford, 2002), 238-239.

Magic and Experimental Science, as well as the massive undertaking on the part of Joseph Bidez and Franz Cumont to collect and collate all extant Greek magical texts. This latter project had a vast scope, including all references to magical traditions in classical texts all the way to late Byzantine references to magic, astrology, and alchemy. Bidez and Cumont's labors culminated in their major work *Les Mages Hellenisés: Zoroastre Ostanes et Hystaspe d'apres la Tradition Grecque* (1938).

In his other writings, Cumont had postulated that the late-antique variety of Mithraism was directly influenced by Zoroastrianism, and this thesis had a powerful influence on his interpretation of the Neoplatonic references to theurgy, Zoroaster, and the Chaldeans. For Cumont, the Neoplatonists were direct transmitters of ancient Iranian Persian traditions of magic, which went all the way back to the semi-mythical inventors of magic, Zoroaster, Hystaspes, and Ostanes. This view may have informed Cumont's claim that the *Chaldean Oracles* were the "Bible of the Neoplatonists."[17] This assertion concerning the *Chaldean Oracles* influenced many later scholars, as will be seen in this chapter.

Bidez, for his part, focused on the life and influences of Julian the Apostate, the Roman emperor famously credited with the attempt to return the Romans to pagan worship. According to Bidez, Julian found the impetus for his pagan religion in theurgy and the teachings of Iamblichus. Bidez wrote two erudite and important works, a biography of the Emperor Julian (*La vie de L'Empereur Julien* [1930]) and a work on Porphyry (*Vie de Porphyre: Le philosophe néoplatonicien* [1913]).[18] More important for our purposes is a small article he wrote entitled "Le Philosophe Jamblique et son Ecole." which seems at least partially inspired by an interest in identifying the philosophical milieu which influenced Julian's particular brand of revised Hellenism.

In 1901, Thomas Whittaker sought to write a general overview for English readers of the whole of Neoplatonism. In this work he heavily downplayed Iamblichus's involvement with theurgy and claimed that Iamblichus himself was not the author of the *De Mysteriis*, a work that since its earliest translations has been tied to theurgy. For Whittaker, the author was

[17] Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (Chicago: The Open Publishing Company, 1911), 279.

[18] One of the main contentions of this work, that Porphyry wrote his more spiritual writings while in a naïve state prior to his meeting with the alleged rationalist Neoplatonist Plotinus, has been heavily questioned in subsequent literature; see especially Andrew Smith, "Porphyrian studies since 1913," 731-732.

merely a member of Iamblichus's school.[19] Whittaker also thought that the later descriptions of Iamblichus performing miracles were little more than school gossip and could not be taken as an actual tradition surrounding the philosopher himself.

Samson Eitrem, a sometime collaborator with Bidez and Cumont, had the fortune to purchase a number of ancient Egyptian papyri from the Egyptian antiquities market. In 1942, he published an article, "La theurgie chez les Néo-platoniciens et dans les papyrus magiques," which sought to identify common features in the vague descriptions of ritual present in the Neoplatonists and in the Egyptian "magical" papyri. Eitrem thereby suggested a different origin for theurgy: namely Egypt. Eitrem's assumes that the rites of the magical papyri are authentically Egyptian and therefore seeks to connect a number of ritual practices described in the biographies or texts of Neoplatonists with various pieces of ritual practice as related in the papyri. This leads to the surprising suggestion that Plotinus was the inventor of theurgy. This work seems to have been the forbearer for a number of later attempts to compare Egyptian religion and magic to theurgy. It is most important for our purposes to note that for Eitrem, Neoplatonism was a more or less unified tradition, and he freely constructs his definition of theurgy from a mosaic of figures, from biographical details about Plotinus, to Iamblichus to Damascius.

In the same year that Eitrem published his valuable contributions, Willy Theiler published a work examining the apparent points of contact between the theology of the *Chaldean Oracles*, (as present in Kroll's translation and commentary), and the theology as he could discern it in the fourth century ex-pagan-turned-bishop, Synesius of Cyrene. Theiler's research inaugurated a new phase of scholarship in which investigators sought commonalities of the Neoplatonic/Chaldean oracular tradition with Christian or fringe-Christian traditions. Theiler and his followers' method is typically to identify certain phrases, usually tripartite divisions as unequivocally "Chaldean" and then to argue that Synesius, Augustine, Marius Victorinus, or Gregory Nazianzus[20] were familiar with the *Oracle*s as a whole. The results

[19] Whittaker, *The Neoplatonists* (1918), 104.; Whittaker's work as an introduction to Neoplatonism has since been surpassed by R.T. Harris, *Neoplatonism* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995 [first edition Duckworth, 1972]) and Paulina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Acumen, 2008).

[20] Synesius: Theiler, *Die Chaldaïschen Orakel Und Die Hymnen Des Synesios* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1942); Bregman, *Synesius of Cyrene: Philosopher-Bishop* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982).
Marius Victorinus: Pierre Hadot, *Porphyre et Victorinus* Paris, 1966.

have been, in my opinion, unconvincing, since not one of these authors has managed to explain how the terminology they select from the *Oracles* is a necessary marker of belonging to the Chaldean community or awareness of the *Oracles* as we know them.[21] Theiler additionally assumes the existence of the *Chaldean Oracles* as an authentic tradition, and his collection of references that mention these oracles, while exhaustive, is not definitive.

This period of the study of theurgy is marked by a confident reifying of the collection of the oracles, a growing historical consensus about certain facts, including the existence of the Julians, and the expanding search for traditions to which one could compare the textual hints of a Neoplatonic ritual tradition. In this midst of this confident march, there stands out one work, which sought to problematize some of the sources that were being used in these various projects. L. G. Westerink in a 1942 article entitled "Proclus, Procopius, Psellus" raised some doubts, against Bidez, about the degree to which the texts Byzantine polymath and reluctant monk, Michael Psellus (1017/8-1078), who had freely been used as a source for evidence about the Neoplatonic tradition and its Chaldean component especially, could have authentically transmitted the teachings of Proclus, including the latter's writings on the Chaldean theology. Westerink noted among other things that Psellus seems to get stories mixed up, he cites quotations in strange contexts (specifically a quotation from Porphyry's *Sententiae* is raised out of context in support of a particular demonological point), he includes a citation from Plotinus as an authentic *Chaldean Oracle*,[22] and finally he cites an oracle as a separate fragment not realizing that it is a partial repetition of a preceding oracle.[23] Westerink

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Gregory Nazianzus: Majercik, "A Reminiscence of the 'Chaldean Oracles' at Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 29.2: ΟΙΟΝ ΚΡΑΤΗΡ ΤΙΣ ΥΠΕΡΕΡΡΓΗ" *Vigiliae Christianae* 52.3 (1998): 286-292.

[21] For example, ῥοιζος (whirring, whistling or rustling) has been called a "Chaldean term" by Van Liefferinge (following des Places), "La Théurgie, outil de restructuration dans le *De Mysteriis* de Jamblique" *Kernos* 7 (1994): 214. but LSJ indicates that this word appears in Homer, Pindar, the Septuagint, Plutarch and others (LSJ s. v. ῥοιζαῖος, 9th ed. p. 1574). Why should scholars consider a term which exists in such varied sources as belonging solely to one tradition and serving as evidence of dependency on that tradition?

[22] Conversely, some scholars have seen this as evidence that Plotinus knew a bit of the Chaldean Oracles and utilized them a little, absorbing some of their "poetic" vocabulary, while pointedly ignoring the majority of their doctrines. John Dillon defends this view as plausible: "Plotinus and the Chaldaean Oracles" in Gersh and Kannengeiser (eds.), *Platonism in Late Antiquity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 131-140. I am unaware of any other work that has argued this.

[23] So much for Psellos. For his successor George Gemistos Plethon, see Dannenfeldt, "The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles in the Renaissance," *Studies in the Renaissance* 4 (1957): 7-30; especially p. 11 where Dannenfeldt paraphrases Georges Scholarius Gennadius's critique of Plethon: "You know of them [the oracles] only the little which other writers have reported."

goes on to claim that one of Psellus's major sources for the *Oracles* is a document by Procopius, a contemporary of Proclus, thereby distancing him further from direct access to Proclus. Despite the invalidations raised by Westerink, Psellus's authority is still invoked as a valid source of *Oracles*.[24]

In 1947, Eric Robertson Dodds wrote the first English academic article with theurgy in the title.[25] Dodds drew heavily on the previous research of Cumont, Bidez, Eitrem, and Kroll and deployed a narrative derived from his teacher Gilbert Murray about the degree to which logic and reason had declined in late antiquity.[26] This led to Dodds' essential position that the recourse to theurgy/magic (the terms are equated) was the consequence of a widespread culturally and politically motivated anxiety among late antique Hellenists. Dodds, retracing much of the same ground covered by Eitrem, argued against the possibility that Plotinus could be a theurgist ("The creator of theurgy was a magician, not a Neoplatonist. And the creator of Neoplatonism was neither a magician nor--*pace* certain modern writers—a theurgist. Plotinus is never described by his successors as a θεουργός [theurgist], nor does he use the term θεουργία [theurgy] or its cognates in his writings.")[27] Dodds's purpose was to distinguish Plotinus, whom he saw as a rationalist, from the disdainful charge of being a theurgist. In so doing, he notably sets out criteria for theurgy which places emphasis on the terminology employed by the writer in question. Plotinus, according to Dodds, was not a theurgist, because he did not use the term theurgy or its cognates. It is worth attending to this methodological distinction, which is considerably different from that of Eitrem, who presumed that any mention of something that sounded like effective ritual practice was more or less akin to theurgy. It is also worth noting that Dodds supported the idea that Porphyry was a theurgist, and though he makes no mention of Bidez, his story of Porphyry regressing into obsession with the *Chaldean Oracles* following the death of Plotinus is both a repeat of Bidez's developmental model in which Plotinus is imagined as a salvific rationalist who saved Porphyry from his superstitious interests, and an elegant allegory supporting Dodds's

[24] Most notably by Polymnia Athanassiadi, "Julian the Theurgist," 195. Note her dismissal of the "agnostic minds" of modern scholars (p. 193).
[25] Dodds, "Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism" *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947): 57-69. Reprinted as "Appendix 2: Theurgy" in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 283-311.
[26] This view was also present in Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* vol. 2, p. 40: "the powers of an enlightened understanding were betrayed and corrupted by the influence of a superstitious prejudice." (cited in Fernández-Fernández, *La teúrgia de los Oráculos caldeos*, 9).
[27] Dodds, "Appendix II: Theurgy" in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 285.

own macro-narrative regarding the death of philosophy in late antiquity: With the death of Plotinus (=rationalist reason) Porphyry falls into superstitious nonsense.

1956 saw the posthumous publication of Hans Lewy's *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*. This work was the first major monograph-length work to address the themes of the *Chaldean Oracles* and theurgy and remains to this day, alongside Dodds, a useful prolegomenon for any contemporary researcher. Lewy, like Dodds, drew heavily on Eitrem, Kroll, Hopfner, Cumont and Bidez, and supported the general hypothesis that the oracles, as present in the late antique Neoplatonists, were evidence of an authentic Iranian religious tradition that had survived amongst the Platonists. Thus, according to Lewy, theurgy was a survival of a real religious tradition. For evidence of this, Lewy pointed to specific terminology in the writings of Proclus, such as appearances of the god Aeon, a god tied, according to research of the time, to Iranian Manichaean/Zoroastrian traditions. In developing his particular model of what the oracles were, Lewy included into Kroll's original collection of the *Chaldean Oracles*, a number of "Porphyryian" oracles derived from a lost work by Porphyry called Περι τῆς ἐκ λογίων φιλοφοφίας (*Philosophy from Oracles)*. *Philosophy from Oracles* is lost and preserved only in fragmentary pieces in Eusebius of Caesarea's (260/5 – c. 340) *Praeparatio Evangelicae* (*Preparation for the Gospel*). Lewy claimed that Porphyry's lost and fragmentary work, which had typically been thought of as being a work on the relationship between philosophy and a wide variety of oracular traditions, in fact contained fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* themselves. In his 1947 article, Dodds, who otherwise agreed with most of Lewy's points, noted that Porphyry did not quote the *Chaldean Oracles* in *Philosophy from Oracles*, and he never used the term theurgy in the work.[28] Dodds critiqued especially Lewy's inclusion of Porphyryian Oracles (derived from a text commonly known as the *Tübingen Theosophia*) in his 1961 review of *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy*.[29] In spite of this relatively minor problem, Lewy's comprehensive work remains an influential and extremely valuable work of scholarship. It would be difficult to point to a work as important to the study of theurgy as this work, which continues to appear in footnotes in encyclopedia entries on theurgy.

Because he could include so much evidence into his reading of the *CO* and Neoplatonic texts, Lewy had a wealth of data from which to construct his conception of theurgy. To sum up a rather lengthy argument, Lewy claimed that all the references to

[28] Dodds, "Appendix II: Theurgy," 287.
[29] Dodds, "New Light on the Chaldean Oracles" 1961, appended to the 2nd edition of Lewy, 694-695.

theurgy in the *CO*, the writings of Iamblichus, Julian the Apostate, and Proclus, among others, all pointed to one theurgic sacrament. Lewy's insistence that all these writers and texts were talking about the same procedure allowed him to smooth over any differences he encountered and to harmonize all the references into a description of a basic ritual practice, which he claimed to be modeled on a funerary rite.

The history of the study of theurgy is full of uneven jumps. Lewy's ideas about a central Chaldean/theurgic sacrament would go mostly unquestioned. Meanwhile, scholars were still concerned with the apparent problem of the relationship between Neoplatonism as a philosophical discipline and theurgy as an apparent magical practice. In 1965, Zintzen addressed the relationship between magic and mysticism in Neoplatonism. Zintzen, contra Dodds, returned to Eitrem's hypotheses about Plotinus as a magician. Most importantly however was the degree of attention that Zintzen paid to Iamblichus's *DM*. Ultimately he is, like many of his predecessors, dismissive of the work, but unlike Dodds and Lewy who use bits and pieces of *DM* in a kind of mosaic of quotations, along with Proclus, Damascius, and others to reconstruct a general view of theurgy, Zintzen, whether he was aware of it or not, seems to have tried to understand the actual mechanics of *DM*. He concludes that *DM* evinces Iamblichus's attempt to find a way to achieve the same goals espoused by Plotinus ("union with god") but through much easier means. He notes especially the seeming importance of the terms συνθηματα and συμβολα in theurgy.

Before closing this section of the history of theurgy in the early half of the 20th century, it is important to make mention of one more scholar, Jean Trouillard, whose work was influential for the impetus it gave especially to theurgy studies. Trouillard started his research in Neoplatonism with Plotinus in the 1950s, and by the 1970s he had moved on to Proclus. Influenced by the French Catholic tradition of Plotinian studies, going back to the theologian Maurice Blondel, Trouillard's engagement with the Neoplatonic tradition was part of a very personal religious quest. Several major works, on Plotinus[30] and Proclus[31] respectively revealed to Trouillard and his followers a fundamental gap between these two thinkers. For Plotinus, the highest principles of Being were wholly separated from the ordinary experiences of humans. For Proclus, the divine was immanent in the world and the world had a "will to transfiguration" to return to the divine. Whereas for Dodds Plotinus was a rational mystic, for Trouillard Proclus was a super-rationalist and the Neoplatonic

[30] Trouillard, *La procession plotinienne* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1955); *La purification plotinienne* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1955).
[31] Trouillard, *L'un et l'Âme selon Proclos* (Les Belles Lettres, 1972).

conception of procession and reversion necessarily "saved" the material from an uncomfortable dualism.[32]

In the early 20th Century, the grand narrative of the death of philosophy in late antique Neoplatonism, espoused by Murray, Dodds, and Festugiere was thus suffering from its own decline, and Jean Trouillard's name would become the passe-partout for the study of what had once been condemned as irrational and fantastic.

2.4 The Latter Half of the 20th Century: The Golden Age of Theurgy Studies

The latter half of the 20th century, beginning around the 1970s marks the acme of research on theurgy and Iamblichus. The fragmentary bits collected and known as *The Chaldaean Oracles* (or at least the Des Places edition) were translated into English.[33] Prominent scholars like Andrew Smith, John Finamore, Greg Shaw, and Polymnia Athanassiadi began to publish articles and books on the subject of theurgy and Iamblichus. This stage in research can be marked by a feeling of confidence and maturity of the field. A commonality of all the above mentioned authors is that, thanks to the aegis of Trouillard, which was occasionally invoked, they did not feel the need to apologize for their research or attack theurgy as a wrong-headed project in its own right. They did, however, often make subtle defenses of theurgy to the effect that it was the action of the gods, not humans acting on god, and therefore not equivalent to vulgar magic.

One of the main goals of late 20th century research on theurgy was to describe the philosophy and ritual of the theurgists in such a way as to exemplify them as a coherent response to the external pressures of Christianity and the internal pressures of Plotinian Neoplatonism. In so doing, however, these scholars often consider Neoplatonism and theurgy under the lens of philosophy and so a certain degree of systematicity and wholeness is presumed. Moreover, in order to arrive at a coherent picture of theurgy, these scholars often presume a consistent tradition throughout all the Neoplatonist scholars, which permits them to utilize as wide a collection of texts and examples as possible in their reconstruction of Neoplatonic philosophy.

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[32] For this overview of Trouillard's work, I am indebted to the essay of Wayne Hankey in *Levinas and the Greek Heritage by Jean-Marc Narbonne Followed by One Hundred Years of Neoplatonism in France: A Brief Philosophical History by Wayne Hankey*, 97-248, esp. 193-194 (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006).

[33] Ruth, Majercik. *The Chaldean Oracles*: Text, Translation, and Commentary (Leiden, Brill: 1989).

Andrew Smith's monograph, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* actually dealt with Iamblichus as much as it dealt with Porphyry, and in his description of Iamblichean theurgy, Smith drew upon evidence from later accounts such as that of Proclus and Damascius. He also drew upon a proposed division between a higher theurgy (more akin to Plotinus) and a lower theurgy (more like vulgar magic), which he also found in the analyses of Eitrem, Lewy, and which L. J. Rosan detected in Proclus. Smith cautiously suggested that the division holds true in Iamblichus but that it is governed by an ontological distinction based on the ability of the theurgist.[34] Smith offered a very close reading of Iamblichus, and even notes some places where Iamblichus' thought seems to wonder, or where the production of a given idea seems to suggest itself to Iamblichus as he is writing, [35] I also appreciate his awareness that the problems of defining theurgy are of pivotal importance.[36] It seems to me there is room for a definition of theurgy developed from the use of Iamblichus's own statements about what theurgy is and is not, without recourse to later Platonic thought or assumptions about the relationship between ritual and philosophy in late antiquity to fill in the gaps.

In the 1980s, Greg Shaw defended his dissertation on Iamblichus's theory of the embodied soul hot on the heels of the publication of John F. Finamore's *Iamblichus and the Vehicle of the Soul*. Both works focused on Iamblichean concept of the soul as a real contribution to solving certain fundamental problems of Plotinian philosophy, especially the notion of the ontological gap between the soul and God. Shaw argued especially in the revised and published version of his thesis, that Iamblichus' theory is a legitimate interpretation of Plato, and, he further argued that theurgy was in some sense an egalitarian practice in contrast to the elitist metaphysics of Plotinus.

Shaw's method of defining theurgy is to recognize the specific problems with which Iamblichus has to deal and then to understand how Iamblichus arrived at his answer through theurgy.[37] It is a kind of glimpse of the tool of what theurgy is. Although Shaw, along with Smith and Finamore have all done much to further our understanding of Iamblichus, I think he assumes too much continuity in the Iamblichean corpus, and I accept Tanaseanu-Döbler's critique of his bringing to bear on his understanding of theurgy elements of Iamblichus' philosophy that do not explicitly label themselves as theurgy, thus muddling the picture a bit.

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[34] Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, 99.
[35] Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, 95.
[36] Smith, *Porphyry's Place*, 81.
[37] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 16.

From 1992 to the present day Polymnia Athanassiadi has published widely on theurgic matters. Athanassiadi's work is predominantly concerned with clarifying the historical relationships between various groups, such as Christians and non-Christians, as well as the interpersonal relationships of philosophers to one another. She claims, for example, that Porphyry's "attack" on Iamblichus in the *Letter to Anebo* has been overstressed and that Porphyry, like any good balanced scholar, simply desired to have a few points clarified.[38] Athanassiadi is important as well for a number of related hypotheses that she presents, develops, and repeats in a series of prominent articles.[39] Athanassiadi denounces what she views as unjustified skepticism of the Byzantine sources (Psellus and the Suda) and accepts the historical existence of Julian the Theurgist and Julian the Chaldaean. She furthermore, on the basis of epigraphical evidence places them in an ancestral priesthood that had its cult-centre at the Temple of Bel in Apamea. According to her, the Julians received in ecstatic visions the Chaldaean Oracles, which were stored at one point in time under the Temple. The popularity of the cult-site and its oracles further supports, for Athanassiadi, the claim that oblique references to "oracles" in the late-antique world have as their direct referent the Apamean Oracles. Furthermore, Athanassiadi believes in the authenticity of the *Chaldean Oracles* as they were preserved by Psellos and Plethon and defends, against Kroll and Westerink, the notion that the Psellus's version of the oracles are hopelessly corrupt or inventions of Psellus himself. For Athanassiadi it is possible to reconstruct the authentic *Chaldaean Oracles* simply by editing out the imported Plethonic and Christian elements.[40]

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[38] Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy, and Freelance Divination," *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993): 117-118.

[39] Athanassiadi, "Apamea and the Chaldaean Oracles: A Holy City and a Holy Book" in Andrew Smith (ed.), *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honour of Peter Brown*. Classical Press of Wales, 2005, 117-141; ead, "Julian the Theurgist: Man or Myth?" in Seng and Tardieu (eds.), *Die Chaldaischen Orakel* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2010), 193-208.

[40] Athanassiadi also makes the claim which I do not engage with directly here that Iamblichus's natural environment is the mystical dimension of Islam (Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy, and Freelance Divination," 130. The anachronism of this, carried through as well in her assumption that the *Chaldaean Oracles* were received in the same manner as the mystical poetry of an illiterate Turkish Sufi welder and spontaneous poet (ead. "Apamea: A Holy City and a Holy Book," 126-127, is a strange turn indeed. In 2001, Athanassiadi published an article exclusively about this welder, Ismail Emre (ead., "Ismail Emre: 1900-1970" *Turcica* 33 (2001) (no mention of Iamblichus or the *Chaldean Oracles* here,) and it seems she is making a conscious effort to join two very different fields of scholarship on the dubious grounds that all of this is coming out of the culturally defined "middle east."

In the late 90s, Carine Van Liefferinge and Sarah Iles Johnston made an interesting attempt to disengage the topic of theurgy from the *Chaldean Oracles*. Although she maintained some of the general points on the appearance of theurgy in Iamblichus as stemming from vaguely-defined "oriental" elements,[41] Van Liefferinge's main point in her article is to argue that Iamblichus develops an almost exclusively Hellenistic notion of theurgy (whatever its original oriental elements which are effectively lost). Iamblishus therefore uses theurgy as a concept to defend predominantly Greek practices, especially Greek divination. She thus points both originality of Iamblichus's ideas, thereby obviating the need for a pre-Iamblichean tradition of theurgy, while at the same time giving lip-service to the notion of the Julians. This claim by Van Liefferinge, present also in Saffrey and Johnston (see below), represents the tipping point in theurgy studies; the Hellenistic features of theurgy are noted and it becomes clear that there is no need for an ancient transmitted tradition of foreign or alien wisdom, but the evidence (Proclus, Marinus, and the Byzantines) that supports this tradition is considered just too compelling to fully jettison, and so it continues to find purchase, though it rarely has consequences for the interpretation of theurgy.

Sarah Iles Johnston in some of her writings continues this decoupling of the *Chaldean Oracles* and the oriental traditions. In her *Hecate Soteira* (1990), she traces the evolution of the goddess Hecate from dark Thessalian goddess of necromancy and witchcraft to the salvific mediatrix (analogous to the savior-mediator Christ) between the theurgist and the higher realm of the ideas.[42] Hecate, according to Johnston, is to be identified with "power" "*dynamis*" in the Neoplatonic trinity of *nous-dynamis-psyche*. In the course of her argument, Johnston endorses Saffrey's position that the Oracles were probably not written by the Julians, though she notably "acquiesce[s] with the opinion of late antiquity and most modern scholars (including Saffrey)" to the Julians as authors.[43] This seems to be the case of normally skeptical scholar having to submit to the tradition of a scholarly majority.

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[41] One of these elements of orientalism is the fact that Iamblichus was born in Chalcis and thus had oriental origins (Van Liefferinge, "Outil," 207). However, it seems likely that the forces of Hellenism had sufficiently flattened the cultures of Chalcis into an element of Greek culture. After all, Iamblichus was able (according to his biographer Eunapius) to move freely from place to place in the Greek world and did not seem to experience any handicap due to his ethnic heritage. The Hellenistic world was fairly homogenized and its overarching culture was Greek with some oriental elements that had become so Hellenized as to lose touch with their original cultural humus.

[42] Johnston, *Hekate Soteira*, (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 146-148.

[43] Johsnton, *Hekate Soteira*, 2 n. 4.

The late 20th century consisted of a powerful upsurge in the study of theurgy, which finally began to achieve credibility and leave the shadow of Augustinian-Plotinianism. Figures like Iamblichus and Proclus who were once thought too irrational to study received monograph length studies in which the overall rationalism of their position was defended. It is in this period of stability of the subject of study that scholars begin voicing skepticism and questioning the now-too-well-founded assumptions about the nature, definition and tradition of theurgy. This move toward skepticism can be found even more loudly in the research conducted in the 21st century.

2.5 The 21st century of Theurgy Studies: Raising Questions

As of the current millennium, it seemed theurgy studies were starting to plateau, to reach a comfortable equilibrium, mainly based around the work of a few dominant scholars. Few attempts were made to disrupt the foundations upon which this new field had been created, and scholars seem complacent with confidently repeating the views of Kroll, Lewy, Dodds, Athanassiadi and Shaw. New translations of the Neoplatonists became available. Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis* received its first English translation since Taylor.[44] Scholarship, on the one hand focused on additions to a "known" corpus, "The Chaldaean Oracles"[45] and on the other hand continued to make comparisons between the theurgic practices of the neoplatonists and the rituals of the Gnostics and the Hermeticists.[46] The problems with these connections is the traditions to which Neoplatonism is being connected, either that of the "Gnostics" or the "Hermeticists," are still hazy in themselves. Much of the early work that justified the connection in the first place preceded the discipline-shattering work of Michael

[44] Clark, Dillon, Hershbell (eds. and trans.), *On the Mysteries* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

[45] Since Lewy and Dodds's arguments over the Porphyryian fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles*, Ruth Majercik has found echoes of "Chaldean Oracles" in Christian Church Fathers like Gregory of Nazianzus. See Majerick, "A Reminiscence of the 'Chaldean Oracles' at Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 29.2: ΟΙΟΝ ΚΡΑΤΗΡ ΤΙΣ ΥΠΕΡΕΡΡΓΗ." *Vigiliae Christianae* 52.3 (1998): 286-292.

[46] Gnostics and Theurgists: see especially the works of John Turner, listed in bibliography. Gnostics and Hermeticists: Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 134, in his Egyptian Hermes, calls Iamblichus a hermeticist. This can be at least partially questioned however, when it is seen that one of Iamblichus' main aims in *De Mysteriis* is to explain, contra Porphyry, how there are good daemons. *Corpus Hermeticum* II.14 trans. Copenhaver contradicts this notion stating, "Except god alone, none of the other beings called gods nor any human nor any demon can be good in any degree."

Williams, who in his *Rethinking Gnosticism: Argument for the Dismantling of a Dubious Category* called attention to the loose use of the term. I am not aware of any work that draws connections between theurgy and Gnosticism and accounts for Williams's arguments. Hermeticism has not yet received its equivalent, but until it does, scholars of theurgy, hermeticism and gnosticism are stuck explaining unknowns with unknowns. Moreover, as I hope I have already stressed, the evidence is fragmentary on all sides, which makes any attempt at explanation analogous to placing three mirrors in alignment with one another. Such an approach can produce fascinating, entrancing even, corridors of infinite semiosis, but answers are not to be had in such speculations. Additionally, in their attempts to draw parallels between the Gnostics, Hermeticists, and "theurgists" scholars have undermined their own claims for the primacy of "Chaldaean" terminology, for which they rely mostly on Lewy's work. In order to identify the trajectory of an idea and its associated verbal referent, one must make the claim that a given set of terminology is identical to a given origin. Thus, Chaldaean terminology originates from the *Chaldaean Oracles*. However, if similar ideas exist in various traditions in antiquity, it is apparent that the ideas extend beyond the boundaries of ethnic groups. This practice of drawing connections, while in accordance with the scholarly spirit, has not lead to only unverifiable speculations about the relations among late antique philosophers, fringe Judeo-Christians (Gnostics) and whatever general category should contain the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The connections are usually made on the basis of general comparisons such as notions of "ascent." The problem with such a point of comparison is that notions of ascent seem common throughout all religious cultures. Finally, although claims of interaction have been made, no one has been able to determine what exactly was the nature of such interactions and analysis has been left aside in favor of simple juxtaposition of texts.

The year 2013 witnessed a watershed moment in theurgy studies. Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler published a major work that sought to question some of these assumptions.[47] For her, it was important to take into account the diachronic nature of the sources used to understand the development of theurgy. Whereas earlier scholars like Kroll, Theiler, and Dodds had accepted all evidence of theurgy from any time period as discussing the same phenomena, and later scholars had begun to accept any reference to "ritual" in antiquity as evidence of theurgy,[48] Taneaseanu-Döbler began to call attention to the way in which understandings of

[47] Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity: Invention of a Ritual Tradition* (Göttingen/Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).
[48] cf. Janowitz, *Icons of Power* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

"theurgy," and "Chaldean," and the understanding of the intersection between these, in her view, imagined categories could themselves be understood as "artificial," "concocted of previous elements" and therefore difficult to isolate separately from the Neoplatonic tradition.[49] She asks a number of questions that seem to have the intent of arresting a discipline that took off a bit too quickly for its own good. Perhaps most importantly, she draws a distinction between theurgy at the object level (i.e. theurgy as it appears in a given corpus of texts) and theurgy at the meta-level.[50] She points out that meta-level use of the term, while understandable and potentially valuable in its own domain, has the potential of muddying the waters when scholars used to such applications try to turn back to an object-level discourse. Such muddlings include, in Tanaseanu-Dobler's eyes, the inclusion of the so-called *Mithras Liturgy*, Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*, and the Hermetic writings within the scope of theurgy, texts which she excludes on the basis of their not explicitly using the word theurgy.

In order to reestablish the field of theurgy on firm footing, Tanaseanu-Döbler cuts through this overgrowth of muddlings by asking several foundational questions, each of which, as the table below seeks to explain, questions some of the major assumptions taken up by the previous generations of scholars.

Tanaseanu-Döbler's Questions (11; 13)	**Questioned Assumptions**
What rituals are theurgic?	Directly questions the assumption that any mention of ritual in Neoplatonism is evidence of theurgy.
Where do [theurgic rituals] come from?	Questions the narrative of transmission of theurgy from Chaldaean and Egyptian sources
What parallels can be found?	Questions the assumption of connections to magic (in the Greek Magical Papyri), Hermeticism, and Gnosticism.

[49] Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, 12

[50] I.e. theurgy as a third-order term in scholarship, used to describe all manner of phenomena in the ancient and modern world. Tanaseanu-Döbler explicitly mentions three examples of scholarly use of the term theurgy at the meta-level: Jewish Studies, medieval magic, western esotericism, and even modern art studies. See her citations in *Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, 15 nn. 30-33.

How are these rituals interpreted?	Recognizes the ability of interpretation to contribute to the growth and development of the tradition
What goals can be ascribed to these rituals?	Offers the potential for reevaluation of theurgy on the grounds of its intended ends.

Tanaseanu-Döbler's work is fundamental for the present attempt to account for theurgy. It is, in my view, self-evident that reappraisal of many of the imagined identities between theurgy and other traditions is necessary if the field is to progress on any kind of methodical grounds. Tanaseanu-Döbler's influence will be intensely felt throughout this project.

In sum, the late 21st century marks a new development in the field of theurgy. Scholars have through a number of departmental struggles overcome a variety of hurdles to the study of theurgy. Tanaseanu-Döbler's work marks the late maturity of the field of theurgy. This is a stage not entirely different from similar stages that have been reached by other disciplines in religious studies. The task of collection is probably more or less complete by now. Archaeological research is probably not going to be very forthcoming. Now it is time to start to map out how to read these texts and under what critical lenses. Now is the era of theurgy's linguistic turn.

2.6 Summary and Points of Departure

The study of theurgy, like many sub-fields in religious studies, can be broadly divided into four stages: discovery, collection and construction, establishment and interpretation, and deconstruction. However, while other fields might have gone through the deconstruction stage during the 20th century, theurgy is only now beginning its journey into the critical, deconstructive stage. This stage is characterized by the deep study of these texts and their relationship to other traditions.

Why is this stage important and how does this dissertation hope to contribute to it? The grand narrative constructed around theurgy in the 20th century by scholars such as Lewy, Dodds, Athanassiadi, and Shaw among others helped students understand the possible connections between theurgy and other traditions, and to imagine the place this concept has with other philosophical terms. According to this narrative, theurgy constitutes a ritual

practice that is both a reasonable outcome of Platonist metaphysics and a coherent tradition possibly going back to the first century AD or even in some understandings much earlier.

However, as pointed out by scholars in the latest stage of research, there is a need for a careful investigation of these connections. Furthermore, I argue that there is a need for a clear definition of theurgy, one that recognizes the hazards of utilizing non-chronological interpretations of sources, and which can be arrived at from the main primary texts of late antiquity which deal with theurgy. The next chapter outlines a method of analyzing the meagre data that is available into a useful form in order to demonstrate what a minimalistic definition of theurgy might look like, so as to have a baseline to evaluate non-minimalistic elaborations.

3. Methodological Reflections on Words, The History of Ideas, and Problems of Earlier Attempts to Define Theurgy

…there is nothing more human (that is, less mineral, vegetal, animal,
and even angelical) than grammar.
-Borges, "An Investigation of the Word"

If a sign is not necessary, then it is meaningless.
Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 3.328

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone,
'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'
'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'
'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'
Lewis Carrol, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter 6

3.1 Introduction

The last chapter clarified some of the problematic arguments that have been made in the search for origins of theurgy. I have tried to demonstrate to what degree the various source texts of *De Mysteriis*, such as they can be determined, raise unresolvable problems of circularity. This dissertation suggests that one way to emerge from this circularity is to consider the text of *De Mysteriis* at a far more microscopic level than has been considered in the past by those scholars who confidently know where theurgy came from, but who are unable to produce the necessary texts to prove their point, and who typically must rely on sources that are either too late, enigmatically referenced, lost, or some combination of all three.[51]

[51] Case in point: In several works on Iamblichus Dillon concludes on the basis of Damascius's (late sixth century) citation from the 28th book of Iamblichus on the *Chaldean Oracles*, that Iamblichus was intimately familiar with the text and would have used it in his lecture hall (Dillon, *Iamblichus: The Platonic Commentaries*, 2nd ed. [The Prometheus Trust, 2009], 15; cf. *DA* 7.). The passage from Damascius that Dillon is citing (*Dub et Sol.* 86 Ruelle) refers explicitly to the "ΚΗ βιβλίῳ τῆς χαλδαικῆς τελειοτάτης θεολογίας," i.e. the 28th book of the perfected Chaldean theology. To equate this reference to a reference to the Chaldean Oracles requires more evidence than the sources can provide.

The current chapter defends the need for a new technique and outlines its parameters. In sum, the method takes the form of an intense study of word meanings to understand how the author of *De Mysteriis*, like Humpty Dumpty in the above quote, positions himself as a master over the words he uses, and how he, like the befuddling wall-recliner, can force his words to mean whatever he wants them to mean.

In the first part of this chapter I open with a broad meditation on the history of ideas, how language may reflect such a history, and explore the theories of one of the fundamental figures lurking in the background of this dissertation, Algirdas Greimas. I conclude that a study of terminology is imperative to understanding the history of ideas of past peoples and ideological systems, which are, in the majority, accessible to modern interpretation exclusively through their textual remains. Next I consider some of the specific issues that arise when trying to explore the terminology of *De Mysteriis*. Earlier lexicographic studies of the history of ideas relied upon access to dictionaries. Although the text this dissertation explores is not a dictionary, nor contains a text of a lexicographic nature, I will nonetheless attempt a reading that produces data useful for the purposes of such analysis. The section following this defense will outline the hermeneutical parameters for reverse engineering assertions Iamblichus makes into properties and qualities, such as will be useful for reconstructing a definition of theurgy.

3.2 The History of Ideas, the History of Words, and the Value of a Greimassean Approach to the Study of Theurgy

In the background of this discussion is an assumption, once prominent in the French *Annales* school, that words and their histories can reveal something about the culture and mentality of the people who used them. One of the first to make this argument was Lucien Febvre (1878-1956).The development of method was pointedly marked in the inclusion of a section of the journal he established devoted to the subject entitled '*Les mots et les choses*' ("Words and Things"). Febvre and the *Annalistes*'s work neatly correlates to similar ideas developed in German scholarship, particularly around the ideas of Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) and his core method of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history).

Febvre's word studies and Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* were both attempts to delve into the heart of historical concerns through the medium of textual evidence. With this goal in mind, the techniques concentrated specifically on ideas related to economic, political, and social developments, as the selection of word choices demonstrates. For example Febvre

wrote essays on such themes as "boundaries" and "civilization." These themes seem particularly tied to the concerns of his mature years, which saw the rise and diminishment of National Socialism.

In the following decades, the *Annalistes* and their students, including the likes of Levi-Strauss, Goldmann, Barthes, Lacan, Bourdieu, and Greimas, received more and more influence from Saussurean linguistics and began to consider the structure of entire languages to be of far greater importance than mere word histories or *Begriffsgeschichte*. At the forefront of this shift was Algirdas J. Greimas (1917-1992). Greimas observed that the historians who claimed to be making use of linguistic techniques in order to prove their points about developments in history, possessed only a superficial understanding of what linguistics could understand about a given cultural epoch's *mentalité*. In an article from 1958, he sounded the death knell of *Begriffsgeschichte* and the birth cry of structuralism:

> Within the broad field that is constituted by the vocabulary of a period, it [historical linguistics] selects significant words which function as witnesses to their times [*mots-témoins*]. These are usually neologisms, the emergence of which marks innovations in history. But only the historian of language decides whether they are representative or not. In every case, we are dealing with a subjective determination of individual facts and an atomization of the historical context; this conception leaves to the fore the typical fact, which is merely a remnant of 19th century epistemological approaches and probably derives ultimately from the quest for the 'characteristic' of which the Romantics were so fond. By contrast, Saussurean linguistics opposes a sociological attitude and a description of lexical units to this atomism of facts and psychologism of authors: language is a global system of signs, which pervades a culture and gives it expression. It is not merely a repertoire of words, which can be taken in isolation as particular witnesses to a history that otherwise unfolds in a region beyond language; *it is rather itself, as a symbolic system, the site where history takes place*. It forms an autonomous social space, which goes beyond individuals and imposes models of feeling and patterns of action upon them. Words, organized in structured ensembles—'vocabularies' are interactively defined and constitute an objective and necessary plane of language, in which the historian can discover structures of mentalities and models of collective sensibility (not 'characteristic' and 'typical' attitudes). This is the level on which social roles are distributed and social frameworks for models of feeling and mentality norms arise. Saussurean linguistics, therefore, does not reflect

> back the historian's own image of history, but suggests certain methods together with a unified and coherent plan for describing cultural history. [52]

For the Annales school, neologisms were akin to the reproductive-organs of plants for the Linnaean botanist. They constituted the main features of culture available for exploration by the researcher. While in the case of botany, stamens and pistils are effective means of identification, Greimas ruthlessly critiqued this attitude with respect to cultural history and claimed that the neologisms were meaningless without an understanding of the entirety of the system to which they belonged. Hence, attention should be paid to system, not just the presence or absence of a given word at a given time. Greimas developed his concept of structure, which it is important to define for present purposes, from Louis Hjelmslev's (1899-1965) notion as present in *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*. Hjemslev thought that

> …for every process there is a corresponding system, by which the process can be analyzed and descried by means of a limited number of premises. It must be assumed that any process can be analyzed into a limited number of elements recurring in various combinations. Then, on the basis of this analysis, it should be possible to order these elements into classes according to their possibilities of combination. And it should be further possible to set up a general and exhaustive calculus of the possible combinations. A history so established should rise above the level of mere primitive description to that of a systematic, exact, and generalizing science, in the theory of which all events (possible combinations of elements) are foreseen and the conditions for their realization established.[53]

In his critique of the linguistic approach to history, Greimas never seems to doubt the possibility that language can reveal something about the historical mindset of a given time or place. Indeed, he seems to even strengthen the position of linguists and notes that language is the "site where history takes place." For Greimas, it was especially irritating that the historians who used linguistic techniques only used the data garnered through linguistic analysis to support what they already knew, as opposed to making use of linguistics (when

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[52] Greimas, "Histoire et Linguistique" [Review of B. Quemada, *Introduction à l'étude du Vocabulaire médical* (1600-1710) (Paris, Les Belles-Lettres: 1955)] *Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 13.1 (Jan.-Mar. 1958), 111-112. English translation in Peter Schöttler, "Historians and Discourse Analysis" *History Workshop* 27 (1989), 40-41. Emphasis is mine.

[53] Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 8-9, quoted in Schliefer, "Introduction" to Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, trans. By Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 1983), xvi.

properly applied in a Saussurean mode, of course) as a mode of discovery. Thus, with a fair amount of disciplinary bias, Greimas thought linguistics could establish the foundations that the humanities, and especially disciplines like socio-cultural history so desperately required.

These insights are well worth recalling while considering the present problems of how to define theurgy. For Greimas, the predominant problem in the older methods was their superficial understanding of definition. Definition was, for the *Annalistes* usually available only through lexicographic or etymological inquiry In other words, the objects of these investigations were the entries available in encyclopedias and dictionaries or on presupposed knowledge and familiarity. It is no accident that Febvre dealt with relatively recent word evolutions, for which archival and dictionary materials existed.[54] Greimas suggested an innovative way to arrive at definitions when access to presupposed knowledge or "stored semantic universes" was unavailable.[55] For Greimas, Saussurean linguistics provided much in terms of raw data, for one could analyze any discourse event, and understand thereby the individual lexemes of the event in their own microcontexts. What Greimas sees as a strength of the Saussurean method may be useful in overcoming the glaring limitations of the data that has survived to present day.

There is another domain important to the understanding of historical and especially philosophical conceptions. This is the history of ideas as imagined by its American founder, Arthur Lovejoy (1873 – 1962). Lovejoy's innovative move, outlined in the introductory chapter of his *Great Chain of Being*, was to think of ideas and concepts as material components, and, in a paradigm borrowed from chemistry, to break down the ideas of philosophers into their atomistic contents, what he called the "unit-ideas."[56] Lovejoy, thus, like Hjemslev and Greimas, was interested in the systems. This is telling in his preanalysis meditations on the history of ideas, in which he reflects that ideas, like jokes, seem to be items which are characterized more by their combination than by their identity. Thus, if one breaks down complex ideas into their contents, one finds that there are a limited number of ideas which occur in varying combination over and over again.[57] Lovejoy, unfortunately never provided a clear means for how to extract "unit-ideas" nor does he have a definition of

[54] Consider, for example, the almost Borgesian description of encyclopedia and dictionary entries in Febvre, "Frontière: the Word and the Concept," in *A New Kind of History*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca, 208-218. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975).
[55] Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 98 – 102.
[56] Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 3-4.
[57] Ibid., 4.

"unit idea" that would permit one to know when to stop the analysis.[58] His own selection of "the great chain of being" as a triune composite of unit ideas seems far from elemental, and so I limit my use of Lovejoy to the metaphoric formulation that ideas are complexes made up of components.

3.3 How Big is an Idea? – Insights from Bateson and Couliano

Lovejoy provides an interesting theory but no clear method of determining when a given analysis has reached a unit-idea. A useful solution to this problem may be found in the statement from Gregory Bateson that "the elementary unit of information is *a difference which makes a difference*."[59] Abstracting from this statement, I conceive of Lovejoy's unit-ideas as the bare minimal units of information that an imagined author must believe in order to espouse the propositional statements extracted from the text. Such minimal unites of information are, according to the Batesonian notion, the "difference [that] makes a difference."

Let the history of philosophy (and this applies equally well to the history of religion and theology as well) be thought of as a series of branching decision points. Then an informative unit-idea is the information sufficient to mark a commitment to one or another path. So, when Carl Knight says that God is not a unit-idea, but is in fact a complex made up of, among other unit-ideas, notions of "good[ness]," "omnipotence," and "omnipresence,"[60] these features may be marked as qualities which contribute to the complex-idea of god. It is easy to imagine that other cultures and cultural products that have a decidedly different conception of God, with limited power (no omnipotence) or who is in fact evil (as did the Gnostics). If a unit-idea is not informative, if it does not mark a commitment between two choices and cannot do so without supplementary information, then it is, for all intents and

[58] In fact, his presentation of various notions of "unit-ideas" is, as he notes, heterogeneous and includes such diverse features as what I would call mental propensities (p. 7), methods of solving problems (p. 10), mystical pathos (pp. 10-11), and philosophical semantics (p. 14). In three out of four, the "ideas" in question seem to be qualities of behavior rather than conceptual thought. The last category seems to make a return to the concerns of Greimas.
[59] Bateson, "Form Substance, and Difference" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 459.
[60] The example of qualities of "God" as unit-ideas is taken from Carl Knight, "The Unit-Ideas Unleashed: A Reinterpretation and Reassessment of Lovejovian Methodology in the History of Ideas" *Journal for the Philosophy of History* 6 (2012): 201.

purposes, an empty sign. It is unnecessary, and as Wittgenstein notes, the unnecessary is needless.

This notion of a complex of unit-ideas upon which variations can be performed leads to another useful insight partially borrowed from Ioan Couliano and his book, *The Tree of Gnosis*. Couliano's attempts in his book to map the semantic variables and decisions leading to the creation of complex heretical Christian ideas across multiple time spaces, with minimal input. As Couliano imagines it, the history of Western dualistic tendencies along with the orthodoxies with which they contend can best be imagined as a "system," that is an ideal, a temporal object that manifests different aspects of itself in a non-linear fashion.[61] According to Couliano, the collection of all the conclusions reached by the various debaters on the subject of Western Dualism fit into a neat morphological tree of binary oppositions, the first decision of which concerns the first principles:

> one principle or two principles. Either the Evil derives from Good and then Good is not so good and Evil is not so evil or else Evil and Good are separated, Evil is genuinely evil, and Good is genuinely good.

Following this, Couliano says, the game changed for the Gnostics, and they brought to bear their interpretation on The Book of Genesis, a text which affords a number of different interpretations. Couliano's view on the game of Genesis provides purchase for the interpreter to map the entirety of the Western Dualistic (read: Gnostic) system as a series of consequences of a multiple choice test of interpretation. With this understanding of Gnosticism/Western Dualism as a broad based series of acceptances or rejections of propositional statements, Couliano sets the stage for a procedure whereby one could map any religious or philosophical tradition according to its propositional statements. Thus, I attempt in this dissertation to treat Iamblichus's understanding of theurgy in the same way as Couliano treats Gnosticism, as a game or an algorithm, the rules of which are written in the course of "play" by its single participant, Iamblichus himself. These rules are tantamount to a limited number of generative statements which output a particular web of significance within which it entangles itself. In noting the argumentative movements of the sole player, it should be possible to work backwards and arrive at the fundamental rules that Iamblichus has in mind in the construction of his concept of theurgy.

Before clarifying how I hope to work from the immanent level of the text to the fundamental propositions underlying Iamblichus's conception of theurgy, it seems

[61] Couliano, *Tree of Gnosis* (HarperCollins, 1992), 18.

appropriate now to reflect on the methodological problems of previous attempts, both to highlight the methodological obstacles which inhibit a definition of theurgy, and to further shore up my decision to concentrate exclusively on the corpus of *De Mysteriis*.

3.4 Two Previous Definitions of Theurgy and their Flaws:

Having briefly surveyed some reflections on how to define the goal of this project, it is time to analyze some of the attempts to define theurgy. I have chosen for my analysis two texts. The first is from Hans Lewy's *Chaldean Oracles and Theurgy* which is something of a prolegomenon to the study of theurgy. The second is the encyclopedia entry on theurgy from *The New Pauly Online* by Sarah Iles Johnston, a noted expert in the field. I have chosen these two, because of their importance. Lewy represents the start of the academic study of theurgy, and Johnston's article, as a tertiary source, should be representative of the major views in the field of theurgy. I am interested specifically in examining what is said about theurgy and how the evidence for data about theurgy is chosen.

Hans Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* 3rd edition 2011 (first edition 1978)

> [From the Introduction:] With [theurgy] one is accustomed to associate a magical science which, in the twilight of the Greek genius, took possession of philosophy and defrauded it of its fruits…Iamblichus…was the first systematizer of the occult sciences: it was he who adopted the doctrines of the Chaldaean Oracles and incorporated them into his *mysteriosophy*[62] to which he gave the name 'Theurgy'."

Present in these introductory comments is a pattern that will persist throughout the various explanations of theurgy, namely, there will always be some kind of hedge that allows the author to avoid the simple statement: "theurgy is x." In the above case, Lewy avoids this formulation by saying that "one is accustomed to associate [with theurgy] a magical science." With this kind of hedging there is no clear statement about whether this association is right or

[62] This term never appears in Iamblichus. It is first attested in the title of G. K. Horst's *Mysteriosophie: Oder über die Veredlung des Protestantischen Gottesdienstes durch die Verbindung eines einfach erhabenen inneren Acts des Cultus mit der Predigt* (1817). The term next appears in the third appendix to volume one of Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 354. Then it appears again in W. R. Inge's *Christian Mysticism* (1899). In the context of Lewy's quote, the term seems to be a way of discussing Iamblichus's doctrine while distinguishing it from philosophy proper.

wrong. The assertion makes a statement about what one asserts theurgy to be, rather than what it is. Furthermore, rather than a definition of what Iamblichus took theurgy to be, Lewy makes an equation between a modern meta-term, "occult sciences," and theurgy. "Occult sciences" is a particularly problematic meta-term because it could include any number of different so-called occult traditions (e.g. Tarot, Vedic Astrology, palmistry, alchemy, etc.) which do not fit with Iamblichus's conception of theurgy. Moreover, the use of such a term may even confuse notions or understandings of what Iambichus was trying to say by associating it with ideas which he himself would have distanced himself from. Iamblichus, as has already been stated, after all, explicitly differentiates himself from "magic" (goetia).

A later passage discusses what Greimas would call the isotopy between theurgy and theology.

> The noun [theurgia] is coined after the pattern of θεολόγος [theology]: as the theologians are οἱ τὰ θεῖα λέγοντες [the ones who say the divine things], so the theurgists οἱ τὰ θεῖα ἐργαζόμενοι [the ones who work the divine things]. Also Iamblichus understood the noun in this way…Psellus quotes another etymological explanation of θεουργός [theurgist] which he borrowed from Proclus; cf. *de omnifaria doctrina*, Migne, P. G. CXXII 55, 721 D: ὁ θεουργὸς...θεοὺς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐργάζεται [the theurgist makes the humans into divine beings], similarly Ibid., C. 52, 721 A: τὸ δέ δύνασθαι θεοποιεῖν ἄνθρωπον καὶ τῆς ὕλης ἐξάγειν καὶ τῶν παθῶν ἀπαλλαττειν, ὥστε δύνασθαι καὶ αὐτὸν θεουργεῖν (i.e. θεὸν ἐργάζεσθαι) ἕτερον [...and the ability to divinize a human being and to lead him out of matter and to separate him from everything, so that he can theurgize another].[63]

The first sentence of this section, again, does not define what theurgy is, but explains how the term is etymologically formed. It does create an opposition between theurgy and theology, which is useful to the structuralist enterprise and will reappear in my own analysis, but as the beginning of the next chapter demonstrates, the actual nature of this opposition is less static than Lewy implies. The next sentence gives a relatively uninformative statement about the distinctions between theurgists and theologians, thereby again avoiding the formal definition of theurgy. The third sentence follows up on this, and, because Lewy uses the word "also," the reader is presumably supposed to associate what follows: a statement about Iamblichus's understanding of the noun (theurgy?) "in this way" (what way?). Moreover, and perhaps most problematically, Lewy imputes a view to Iamblichus without the expected textual support to

[63] Lewy, 461. Bracketed translations are mine.

back up his assertion. His citation of *De Mysteriis* takes the form of a simple list of references to phrases like "ἡ τῶν θείων ἔργων," "τέχνη τὰ θεῖα ἔργα," "ἡ τῶν ἔργων τῶν ἀρρήτων...τελεισουργία." leaves it to his reader to establish equivalencies between these formulations and theurgy proper. Although Lewy cites these sources to indicate that theurgy is thought of primarily in its mode of acting and therefore is in opposition to theology which is primarily a mode of explaining or talking he does not take the necessary step to explain the use of paraphrastic expressions. If theurgy is nothing more than "the art of divine works," why is a new term needed?

Lewy's interpretation takes it for granted that theurgy is the same as "theia erga," [divine works], that the distinct terminology "theurgic union," which in its very formulation seems to mark the goal of theurgy is the same as theurgy proper; thus, the consequence of theurgy, and its attributes, are confused for the actions leading to that consequence. The interpretation further assumes that theurgy is the same as "hieratic" arts, without explaining the synonymity. Once the identification is made, it aggregates to itself a whole mishmash of vaguely understood concepts. In order to clarify this complexity, I propose that a study of theurgy should concentrate first on only the instances of theurgy as they arise. Association of theurgy with other practices, for example "the hieratic art" should be treated as a provisional identification. This has further consequences when one recalls that *DM* is not exactly a philosophical treatise, but rather a collection of micro-treatises arranged in a somewhat coherent fashion. As such, it is possible that the identifications between theurgy and these other phrases are not absolute, but conditional, and that conditionality deserves to be considered.

A more recent definition of theurgy, from Sarah Iles Johnston and published in *Der Neue Pauly*,[64] indicates that the Lewyan reading of theurgy has stuck and been developed. Johnston, like Lewy, relies heavily on the *Chaldean Oracles* for evidence about theurgy. To her credit she cites the Byzantine sources much less. Thus, her explanation of the term theurgy offers more in the way of definition than Lewy's but it is still problematic. In the first paragraph, Johnston asserts that theurgy is an actual religious movement, one of many options available at the late antique marketplace of ideas. So, then, like Mithraism and the rituals practiced at Eleusis, Theurgie constitutes a cultic practice, distinct from others, a religion in its own right. The chief evidence Johnston uses to support this claim is that

[64] *Brill's New Pauly*, s.v. "Theurgy" last accessed January 21, 2016, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.ezproxy.library.tamu.edu/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/theurgy-e1211230.

theurgy had boundaries determining who was clearly in or out. Thus in order to be considered a member of the religion of Theurgie, one would have to be initiated, even as the emperor Julian was initiated by Maximus of Tyre, a theurgist in the lineage of Iamblichus.

The problem with this interpretation is that there is no clear evidence supporting the notion of an initiation on the part of the emperor Julian into a Theurgic religion. The idea has however received some credence on the part of academics. The most recent work I know of which has systematically considered all the evidence is that of Van Liefferinge.[65] Johnston cites van Liefferinge as a support for the claim of a "chaldaizing theurgy" into which Julian was initiated, but van Liefferinge herself actually seems to have a much more skeptical attitude towards the evidence. In the end she is forced to conclude:

> Une lecture plus attentive de ces témoignages permet donc de conclure que le seul texte que l'on considère généralement comme le récit d'une initiation de Julien à la théurgie (c'est-à-dire le récit de Grégoire de Naziance) fait figure isolée par rapport aux autres témoignages. En effet, que ce soit chez Julien lui-même, ou chez Libanios, ou même chez Eunape que l'on sait pourtant friand de récits fantastiques, il n'est jamais question que d'un apprentissage à la philosophie qui aurait été à la base de sa conversion. Celle-ci est présentée par Julien et Libanios comme une initiation. Elle fut nécessairement secrète puisque les Néoplatoniciens agissaient en secret depuis longtemps, comme le confirme encore Eunape qui attribue cette activité clandestine au règne de Constantin, lequel avait détruit des temples et construit des églises chrétiennes.[66]

In other words, Julian presented his progress in philosophy as an "initiation," but in this respect, he is no different from Plato who also expresses philosophical development as initiation.[67] It would be rash to conclude that the reference to such initiations must necessarily be equivalent to an actual movement into a secret cult of theurgists. I think of theurgy as a development out of Platonic religio-philosophical speculation, a sort of graduate level curriculum in philosophical circles, not as an independent religious tradition.

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[65] Other scholars that consider the evidence include: A. Reszler, Le mythe de Julien, in Cadmos, 17-18, 1982, p. 128, 130; J. Bidez, *L'empereur Julien, Lettres* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres: 1972[3]), introduction, 31-32; and J. et J.-Ch. Balty, "Julien et Apamée. Aspects de la restauration de l'hellénisme et de la politique antichrétienne de l'empereur," in *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne*, 1 (1974), 269.

[66] Van Liefferinge, *La Théurgie: Des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus* (1999), 175. Page number refers to the e-book edition.

[67] e.g. Plato, *Phaedo* 69C.

If theurgy cannot be classified as an independent religion, then what is it? The remainder of Johnston's short entry does not contain the proper elements of definition. Like Lewy, she uses her sources, including the *Chaldean Oracles* (which she treats as a complete and coherent text), and the PGM (especially the so-called Mithras Liturgy), as all equally representative of theurgy.[68]

One of Johnston's comments in particular comes quite close to an analytical definition, and this would be ideal for placing theurgy into some kind of context. She says:

> Theurgie bore many resemblances to mainstream Greek and Roman religions insofar as it included purifications, initiations, and various 'magical' rites such as the invocation of gods by their secret names and the manipulation of natural materials such as plants and stones (e.g. Or. Ch. frs. 132, 133, 150) But it also developed special rituals designed to bring about an encounter (sýstasis) between a theurgist and a god.[69]

With these statements, Johnston attributes to theurgy a number of specific rituals, but again, her examples are based on interpretation of *Chaldean Oracles*, which, it should be recalled, is a highly fragmentary collection of enigmatic texts, the exact provenance of whose pieces is unknown (there is, at best, a myth of transmission), and which only mentions the word theurgy once.[70] In her definition of theurgy, Johnston quotes several key passages from *DM*, but her citations do not support her claims.

The key problem with Johnston and Lewy's treatments is that they do not offer a clear support for the statements they make. We are forced to rely on their interpretation of the texts, which are often influenced on the readings of other texts, which they imagine as part of a tradition of theurgy, which in turn is usually imagined as a general term that includes numerous other categories such as Hermetic writings and the PGM. This may be called the "meta-level" use of the term theurgy, insofar as it absorbs under the heading of theurgy numerous practices which are not explicitly named such. Tanaseanu-Döbler has observed that this "meta-level use of the term [theurgy] for the study of late antique theurgy has its pitfalls. It may result in the blurring of these two levels and thus in the assumption that what the scholar describes as theurgy out there as such."[71] With this comment, I think Tanaseanu-

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[68] Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 15 gently critiques this tendency to label the *Mithras Liturgy* a theurgic text.
[69] *Brill's New Pauly*, s.v. "Theurgy."
[70] *CO* frg. 153 Majercik.
[71] Tanasenau-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 15-16.

Döbler has marked a new stage in the study of theurgy. From now on, scholars will have to justify what they include as sufficient and reasonable evidence of theurgy, and there will be room to critique and review the logical jumps on the basis of assumed awareness of what the term meant or more developed understandings as present in later sources.

My own attempt to avoid such facile moves is based in a Lovejovian and Greimassian inspired method of investigating the concept of theurgy as it is expressed in its semantic units (theurgy and its cognates). Lovejoy provides the theoretical notion of a philosophical tradition expressed through minimal units, and Greimas provides the linguistic method of accessing these units in the language of a given text. This method has no need of confronting, at least at the outset, any notion of a Barthesian death of the author, for I do not assume any psychological reality to the author of *De Mysteriis*. Instead, I treat the text like a computer program, a container of logical statements. If those statements coalesce, they may be labeled as coherent. If not, they cannot.

The basic method is to take a given topic of investigation (in this case theurgy) and extract all the attributions given to the semantic units that express that concept ("theurgy" and its cognates) within a given corpus (in this case *DM*). At the end of each extraction, the expressions must be reduced until they easily and pointedly reveal isotopic relationships, and these relationships are compared to determine the extent to which (if any) coherent meanings are preserved. The chief advantage of this is that I thereby avoid the trap (pointed out by Tanaseanu-Döbler above) of imagining a theurgy that exists beyond the textual sources.

This technique, like any methodology, carries a number of flaws and limitations. One of the gravest is that in extracting and reducing attributive information, there may be attributive information which is incomprehensible to any further interpretation. Another important problem is that the attributive data must be reduced on the basis of assumed knowledge. To some degree this reintroduces problems of over-interpretation of the sources. This, in turn, can lead to the blending of conceptual categories and result in the same muddle, which the method attempts to avoid. In spite of the flaws, this method is a useful means of progressing, not least because its focus only on the term theurgy and cognates in a limited corpus results in a restriction of investigation to only the data that can be extracted solely on the basis of statements that are explicitly dealing with theurgy. Second, by mapping out in a systematic fashion all the stages of extraction and reduction (interpretation), I am exposing for critique the exact steps I take from the language-events of *DM* to the final evaluation of the meaning of theurgy. This has as an added benefit the fact that future scholars will be able

to critique each step of my process and argue for alternative interpretations or reductions on the basis of their own knowledge.

In the remainder of this chapter I lay out in more detail my Greimas-inspired method, which I have developed in order to avoid the tendency in definitions of theurgy to draw on sources other than those which directly mention the term theurgy, such as passages from the *Chaldean Oracles*, or Proclus' *On the Hieratic Art*.

3.5 A Translation Tool Kit

With the exception of one important instance, the various immanent statements made about theurgy present in *DM* are not expressed in the form of a one-to-one definitional construction. This lack is due in large part to the limitations of the responsorial structure of *DM*, i.e. the text can only answer to what it is directly asked or what it infers from the points raised in the letter to which it responds. Unfortunately for contemporary interpreters of the text, Porphyry neglected to ask perhaps the most basic question of all, "What do you, Anebo, think theurgy is?" which would have provided the grounds for Iamblichus to give a clear definition. Instead, as a consequence of the topics raised by the *Letter to Anebo*, *DM* presents a series of defenses of certain ritual procedures, including theurgy, without ever providing a clear definition of theurgy. However, in the same way that one can, perhaps without ever having seen or personally experienced a car, one can get an idea of what a "car" is by seeing examples of the use of the word "car" in print, and especially by seeing it associated with the attributed ideas of transportation and mechanical force, I argue it is possible to get an idea of what "theurgy" is by exploring the uses of the term.

In order to clarify these uses, I propose to translate the immanent sentences in the text of *DM* into their individual micro components. By translating the immanent text into succinct statements I intend to place emphasis on the limited possible informational bits which Iamblichus actually reveals in his use of the term theurgy.

Information is encoded into the structure of an algebraic statement. Each of these statements takes at its beginning an identifier, allowing for the reader/interpreter to note what kind of information the algebraic statement provides. These modifiers—like other features of Greimas' method have been created on a survey of the overall text. Thus, I discern in *DM* three basic kinds of informative statements that can be extracted from the immanent text.

It is possible, for example, to label the immanent statements about theurgy as statements predominantly about theurgy and its associated experiences, as an operation, or information about the philosophical worldviews that support theurgic practices. Algebraically, I symbolize this distinction, thus:

T(E)	Immanent text contains references to experience allegedly undergone by theurgist.
T(PRAX)	Immanent text contains content about theurgy as a ritual practice [i.e. specific references to named or unnamed rites or actions].
T(WV)	Immanent text contains content about theurgy as a support for a particular worldview (for example, a particular understanding of metaphysics). The content, therefore, offers a glimpse of the underlying beliefs considered prerequisite for theurgy, but which in and of themselves offer no explicit statement about rites or actions.

The next component of minimal units to consider is the kind of information that is provided in the immanent text. In most cases, this will be some kind of verbal expression which can be translated into a statement about what theurgy includes. I call these inclusions attributes. Attributes may then take a series of one or more arguments with one of a series of words, which are marked as attributes by their being entirely in capital letters. These include:

RITUAL (RIT)	This attribute is used when the immanent text contains a description of a ritual. In the context of a given minimal unit, I place in brackets after the attribute label **RITUAL** a description of the ritual's effects.
PROCS (PROCS)	This attribute is used when the information regarding the actions of theurgists or of theurgy in general is less specific than circumstances where the attribute **RITUAL** would be appropriate. With **PROCESS** I mark statements where

Iamblichus describes a feature which is thought to be a general method, valid for all theurgic operations. Thus, **PROCESS** is used when Iamblichus explicitly marks a global use of the idea. Information attributed to **PROCESS** should necessarily impact statements which relate to minimal units marked with **RITUAL.**

AGENCY (AGNT) This attribute has an entirely different justification from the preceding attributes. Secondary scholarship as been especially attentive to the way in which various uses of theurgy (in Iamblichus and other authors), plays with the idea of agency. Therefore, I attempt to map, with this attribute the immanent textual moments when Iamblichus makes a statement about who is actually performing the theurgic act. The **AGNT** attribute can take three arguments: human, divine, or undefined.

The last algebraic symbol to consider is the use of the logical negation, symbolized here with the non-traditional but intuitive **NOT**. This symbol makes a number of appearances in *DM* because there are a number of circumstances where the only information about theurgy that is given is information about what theurgy is not. The majority of these statements will be handled under the heading of "via negativa," because they provide data insofar as they say what theurgy is not.

Summary

This chapter has been an extended explanation of the theoretical insights which undergird my proposed method of textual analysis of specialized vocabulary in philosophical texts. This method consists of the translation of an input text (what I have been calling the immanent text) into a form which usefully displays the minimal units of information as present in the immanent text. In this way, non-propositional statements are reformulated into semi-propositional symbolic expressions, in order to provide a clearer access to the underlying ideas.

It is conceivable that such a method---with appropriate modifications according to the parameters of the questions being asked---could be used to analyze the terminology of other philosophical texts. It is further conceivable that such a method, could with profit be developed into an actual computational algorithm and applied to texts for the purposes of "big data" analyses. However, the next chapter utilizes only analog methods in order to mine out the bare minimum data which Iamblichus presents regarding the concept of theurgy.

4. Introducing *De Mysteriis*: Rediscovery, Context, Internal Structure, Sources, and Purpose

4.1 Why is *De Mysteriis* the best text to consider for a minimalist interpretation of theurgy?

In order to answer the questions posed in this dissertation, the natural starting point, as I briefly mentioned before, is the earliest, complete work that contains the most references to theurgy and its cognates. The work that fulfills these criteria is *De Mysteriis* (hereafter *DM).* This has not always been realized. Hans Lewy, E. R. Dodds, and other early investigators of theurgy, immediately connected the concept to what they thought was the earliest mention of the term in the *Chaldean Oracles* and thus looked to the *Oracles* for evidence of pre-Iamblichean theurgy.[72] This has in turn led to projects like Friedrich Cremer's *Die Chaldäischen Orakel und Jamblich De mysteriis* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1969) to find evidence of the *Chaldean Oracles* in *De Mysteriis*. Later on in this chapter, I will address the question of whether Iamblichus actually used the *Chaldean Oracles* in *De Mysteriis*. For now, however, I wish to address the question of which text is the best for investigating the concept of theurgy.

There are actually three candidates for the earliest appearances of theurgy: The *Chaldean Oracles*, *De Mysteriis,* and a passage in Nicomachus of Gerasa (*Excerpta de Musica,* Jan). Before progressing further into the historiographic problems surrounding these texts and their authors, it would be helpful to review what the texts actually say on the subject of theurgy. The *Chaldean Oracles* has one mention of theurgists, which appears in fr. 153 (Majercik): "For the theurgists do not fall in the herd which is subject to Destiny." The fragments of the *Chaldean Oracles* are preserved in various Neoplatonic and Byzantine writers, especially Proclus, Damascius, and Psellus. This particular fragment is from John Lydus's (6th century) antiquophilic work on the months of the year (*De Mensis*).

The reference in Nicomachus is more descriptive:

> Indeed, the tones of the seven spheres, each of which by nature produces a particular sound, are the sources of the nomenclature of the vowels. These are

[72] It was paramount for Dodds' understanding of history that the origins of theurgy be external to ordinary Neoplatonism. Recall his polemical statement "The creator of theurgy was a magician, not a Neoplatonist" (Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 285).

> described as unspeakable (*arrhēta*) in themselves and in all their combinations by wise men, since the tone in this context performs a role analogous to that of the monad in number, the point in geometry, and the letter in grammar. However, when they are combined with the materiality of the consonants, just as soul is combined with body, and harmony with strings) the one producing a creature (*zoon*), the other notes and melodies), they have potencies which are efficacious and perfective of divine things. [Thus whenever the *theourgoi* are conducting such acts as worship they make invocations symbolically with hissing, clucking, and inarticulate and discordant sounds].[73]

It is striking that both the *Chaldean Oracles* and Nicomachus make use of the agential plural nominative, theurgists. At no point in either writings is there any other cognate, so right away problems arise in using these sources for information about "theurgy." But these problems are only compounded when attention is paid to the problems of determining their origins and their dates of composition.

The Chaldean Oracles are, based on later sources like the *Suda* and Proclus which describe the activities of their authors (a father son duo, named Julian the Theurgist and Julian the Chaldean), dated to the second half of the second century CE. According to the *Suda,* one of these Julianii was said to have taken part in a celebrated rain miracle while serving with Marcus Aurelius in a battle against the Marcomans (174 CE). Other later reports mention one of the Julians under the reign of Trajan becoming involved in a wizard's dual to split a rock and then cure a plague.[74]

There are many problems with the accounts of the Julianii. Garth Fowden's research on the celebrated rain miracle under the reign of Marcus Aurelius, indicates, on the basis of numismatic evidence that the rain miracle was initially attributed to a certain Arnouphis and to a god known as Hermes of the Air. According to Fowden, the earliest records of the rain miracle do not mention any Julianii. Fowden concludes that there is ultimately no evidence for the Julianii, which calls into question the reliability of the later narratives provided in the *Suda* and Proclus.[75]

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[73] *Excerpta de musica* p. 277 Jan. Translation is from Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 184. Square brackets are Shaw's.
[74] Sozomen, *HE* 1.18.7.; Anastasius the Sinaite, *Quaestiones et Responsiones PG* 89.252 ab. See comments by Fowden, "Pagan Versions of the Rain Miracle of AD 172" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 36.1 (1987): 91.
[75] Fowden, "Pagan Versions of the Rain Miracle of AD 172" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 36.1 (1987): 94. Most interesting of all is Fowden's suggestion that Arnouphis *is*

Meanwhile, historical evidence for Nicomachus of Gerasa does not fare much better. Many scholars have pointed out that the text in the *Excerpta de Musica* is corrupt at exactly the point where theurgists are mentioned. Hence the bracket around this passage. Lewy claimed that the text's mention of theurgy was an interpolation based on the fact that Nicomachus could not have known about theurgy, since he preceded the dates of the Julians. This claim has been countered by Dodds who noted that the *terminus ante quem* for Nicomachus is established by the fact that Apuleius translated one of his books into Latin. Assuming that Apuleius was born around 123 or 124, it is possible that Nicomachus was productive around 150 or 160 CE, making him roughly contemporary with the Julianii. Even so, many scholars have continued to note the corrupt nature of the text, and therefore it receives even less credibility than the *Chaldean Oracles*.[76]

At the least, it must be accepted that the dating of these texts is questionable. With respect to their form, *The Chaldean Oracles,* as a conglomeration of excerpts collected by later scholars do not seem the most reliable sources upon which to hang a convoluted theory of religious development. The unverifiable circumstances of transmission as well as the lack of cross references make it difficult for me to believe that the *Oracles* have survived as witnesses for second century beliefs.[77] Beyond the problems of dating, there is the basic problem that both of these texts offer but one instance of theurgy, and that they mostly comment on what the theurgists do. Thus, the limited nature of the data is not useful for the present method which requires a certain number of instances with which to work. Of the three candidates for earliest appearance of the term theurgy: Nicomachus of Gerasa, *The Chaldean Oracles*, and *DM,* the last text, *DM*, offers the greatest number of instances and has the great advantage of being a continuous text, whereas the preceding two candidates are chronologically problematic as well as being limited to but one instance of the term each.

Julian, and that the development of the myth of the Julians came about as a dropping of the name Arnouphis in favor of "a certain Chaldean" who then became assimilated to the concept of Julian the Theurgist.

[76] The only exception to this that I know of is Janowitz, *Icons of Power* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 6. Note that she mistakenly attributes to Dodds what is actually Lewy's point. Dodds supports her own point.

[77] It may be worth noting in this regard that George Gemistos Plethon (1355-1452), one of the most ardent followers of the doctrine of the oracles changed both their authorship and, as far as modern scholarship can tell, some of its content. Ruth Majercik, the recent English translator of the *Oracles,* notes that it is almost impossible to reconstruct the original meaning of the *Oracles* themselves and at best what can be done is a "reconstruction of Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Oracles*" (Majercik, "Chaldean Triads in Neoplatonic Exegesis: Some Reconsiderations" *Classical Quarterly* 51.1 [2001]: 265).

The remainder of this chapter is roughly divided into two main sections. In the first section I offer a basic introduction to the context of the letter, its authorship, the biographical information about the author, and its structure. In all this I am in agreement with the main commentators on the text. In the second section, I address the question of Iamblichus's sources, specifically with the intent of interrogating the notion of whether theurgy pre-existed Iamblichus My conclusion is that it is a viable possibility that Iamblichus's definition of the term theurgy is actually the first, and this justifies the intense and focused observation of the text as being the earliest text to address the concept of theurgy. Before moving on to these more complex matters, however, it is important to repeat here some basic matters of importance to the interpretation of the text, namely issues concerning who wrote the letter and when; to whom is the letter addressed; how is it constructed; what sources does it draw on; and what is its overall purpose.

4.2 The Nature of the Text and the Problems of Authorship

DM is the conventional name for a long, and originally untitled Greek letter. The usual contextual details about this letter including its date (and until relatively recently its authorship) have been a puzzle for scholarship. In its content, it purports to be a point by point response[78] to the questions and concerns of a previous letter,[79] and for this reason it has been classified under the genre "questions and answers."[80] Some scholars have referred to the letter as a defense or apologia for the practice of theurgy.[81] However, to make this claim is to ignore the occasional nature of the letter. As Andrew Smith has so perspicuously noted, the letter is not a "systematic treatise," but an "attempted answer…to a number of serious problems which a philosopher encounters when considering religious phenomena."[82]

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[78] *DM* 1.2.7.8-9: "…and we will deal in similar fashion with all other types of questions, in due order."
[79] *DM* 1.1.2.5-7: "…and…assuming that the letter sent to my student Anebo may be addressed equally well to me, it is reasonable for me to grant you a true reply to your enquiries…."
[80] See the comments by H.-D. Saffrey, "Plan des Livres I et II du 'De Mysteriis' de Jamblique," in E. de Strycker (ed.), *Zetesis: Alum Amicorum* (Antwerp: De Nederlansche Boekhandel, 1973), 282.
[81] Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 7; 41; 129.
[82] Andrew Smith, "Further Thoughts on Iamblichus as the first philosopher of religion," in Andrew Smith (ed.), *Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus* (Ashgate, 2011), XXV: 298

As previously noted, the main content of the letter is a reply to questions and issues raised in a previous letter. This previous letter, addressed to an otherwise unknown Egyptian named Anebo, and written by the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre (234-305)[83] is unfortunately lost, but survives in fragments in Augustine, Eusebius, and *DM* itself. *DM* responds to a series of about eighty questions and statements on various matters, including the nature and description of divine beings, divinatory techniques, possible contradictions in priestly sacrificial practices, "Egyptian" theology and its relationship to Platonic metaphysics, and finally concerns about the effectiveness of astrology and its use in divining the nature of one's personal demon. These questions and statements are represented in the text as the authentic statements of Porphyry, and many treatments of the texts seem to treat Iamblichus as a reliable witness to Porphyry's original statements. I would like to assume for the sake of argument that due to the relatively unreliable nature of citation in antiquity, Iamblichus's use of Porphyry's statements should be thought of as mere points for discussion, and it seems to me dangerous to base any interpretation on the presumption that they carry the verbatim words of Porphyry. This especially is especially relevant to qualifying any attempt to recover Porphyry's vocabulary, which heavily influences my interpretation of whether Porphyry himself had a conception of theurgy.

The issues addressed in *DM* are bookended by an unctuous introduction that offers to correct a number of false conceptions about philosophical views and various non-Greek traditions, and a final exhortation to maintain true conceptions of the gods as well as a prayer for harmony and friendship.

De Mysteriis acquired its conventional name in the course of manuscript transmission. Only one exemplar of *De Mysteriis* (lost) traveled at some unknown time from the eastern Byzantine empire into Italy. It became the source for two hyperarchetypes, one now housed in the Vallicelliana Library in Rome, the other in the National Library of St. Mark's in Venice. The Vallicelliana manuscript (Vallicellianus F20) was presented by Cosimo de Medici to Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) in the fifteenth century, as part of Medici's project of translating a number of mystical manuscripts on Egyptian wisdom. Ficino began work on a

[83] Porphyry's dates are supplied by a personal aside in his *Life of Plotinus,* in which Porphyry reveals that he is 68 at the time of writing the text (*VP* 23). The writing of *Life of Plotinus* is dated to 301, so counting 68 years backwards provides 233/4. His death is based on the *Suda* which says he lived up to the time of Diocletian (i.e. no later than 305). See, Smith, "Porphyrian Studies Since 1913," in Smith (ed.), *Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus* (Ashgate, 2011), XIV: 721.

Latin paraphrase of the work in 1488 and completed his work in 1489.[84] The work was published eight years later. The other codex (Marciana Graeca 244) was donated to the Venetian library by the great Renaissance humanist and Latin Patriarch of Constantinople, Basilius Bessarion (1403-1472). Both manuscript archetypes bear a scholion, which dates from the Byzantine period and names the text *The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo and Solutions to the Problems which it Contains*. This title presents as the author of the work a certain "Master Abamon" who is, for reasons explained below, commonly thought to be Iamblichus's pseudonym for the purpose of further giving the text the feeling of an authentic Egyptian response to Porphyry's concerns, which were addressed, after all, to an Egyptian.

Perhaps influenced by the promise in *DM*'s introduction to offer a response on the basis of various eastern traditions (Egyptian, Chaldaean, and Assyrian),[85] or perhaps influenced by the overall "Egyptian" quality of the other texts he was translating around the same time, Ficino chose to give his Latin summary the title, *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum et Assyriorum* (Lat. *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians*), from which the shortened title *De Mysteriis* has been derived. Ficino's name stuck and has since been applied to the original text, and so the text commonly referred to in modern scholarly literature as *De Mysteriis*. There have been recent calls in modern scholarship for a return to the more descriptive Byzantine title, *The Reply of the Master Abamon to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo*,[86] however, because the majority of useful scholarship that comments on the text refers to it as *De Mysteriis*, I have retained Ficino's title.

The Byzantine scholia identify the author as Abamon and the addressee as Porphyry. The actual body of *DM*, aside from a brief mention of "my student Anebo,"[87] makes no mention of who is speaking and whom is addressed. Current scholarship unanimously

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[84] Maude Vanhaelen, "Marsilio Ficino and the Irrational," 442, explains that the motivation for translating this mystical body of literature stemmed from the philological need to understand the concept of the daemon in Plotinus's *Enneads*.

[85] *DM* 1.1.4.10-12: "Some [questions], in fact, require us to address them on the basis of the traditions of the sages of Chaldaea; others will derive their solution from the teachings of the prophets of Egypt." *DM* 1.2.5.7-8: "We therefore propose both to transmit to you truthfully our opinion <concerning> the ancestral doctrines of the Assyrians…" I've added the editorial comment in square bracket for clarity.

[86] John Dillon, review of *Jamblique: Réponse à Porphyre (De mysteriis*), ed. and trans. Henri Dominique Saffrey and Alain-Philippe Segonds. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2013.11.41, http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2013/2013-11-41.html.

[87] *DM* 1.1.2.6

attributes authorship of *DM* to Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 240-325). This identification finds support in claims made by Proclus of Athens (411-485), an influential Neoplatonic philosopher.[88] A later testimony from the Byzantine monk and philosopher Michael Psellus (1017-1078) inserted by 15th century scribes into the first page/margins of the two source manuscripts offers further confirmation. It states:

> It should be noted that the philosopher Proclus, in the course of his commentary on the *Enneads* of the great Plotinus, says that the author of the response to the letter of Porphyry here set out is actually the divinely-inspired Iamblichus, and that it is by reason of suitability to the subject-matter that he adopts the persona of an Egyptian, Abamon.[89]

Beyond these extra-textual witnesses, the early modern philologist, Karl Rasche has performed a stylistic analysis of the text and has concluded that the stylistic features of the text are consistent with Iamblichus's other, authenticated writings.[90] All this evidence has encouraged scholars to support the claim that Iamblichus is the author of *De Mysteriis*.[91]

For the purposes of this dissertation, I see no reason to dispute the scholarly consensus concerning Iamblichus's authorship,[92] and in the course of referring to the author of *DM*, I freely name him. Still, mention should be made of two discrepancies, which become apparent when *DM* is compared to Iamblichus' other writings: Iamblichus is known for other works, mainly his biography of Pythagoras, known by its Latin title, *De Vita Pythagorica* (*On the Pythagorean Way of Life*). *De Vita Pythagorica* is a biographical narrative about the manner in which followers of Pythagoras conducted their lives. It is part of a much larger work by Iamblichus called *Compendium of the Pythagorean Doctrines*. This compendium consisted of nine or ten books, of which only four survive: an *Exhortation to Philosophy*, a text on *The General Science of Mathematics*, and finally a commentary on Nicomachus of

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[88] Proclus, *In Tim.* 386.9-13; CDH xxvii mistakenly confuse these two references. Psellus cites the *Enneads* commentary, not the *Timaeus* commentary.
[89] CDH 3, n. 1.
[90] Rasche, *De Iamblicho libri qui inscribitur De mysterris auctore.* (Münster, 1911).
[91] For more on the history of scholarship on the authorship of *DM*, see Martin Sicherl, "Michael Psellos und Iamblichos De Mysteriis," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 53.1 (1960): 8-19, esp. 8-10.
[92] Others have argued for alternative views on the author of *DM*. Some authors have claimed that Abamon is not a pseudonym at all but rather the name of an actual Egyptian priest. For this opinion, see Philippe Derchain, "Pseudo-Jamblique ou Abammôn? Quelques observations sur l'egyptianisme du De Mysteriis," *Chronique d'Égypte* 38.76 (1963): 220-226.

Gerasa's *Introduction to Arithmetic*. There are suggestions of additional works on physics, ethics, music, geometry and astronomy which were probably lost or never completed.[93]

There are two notable aberrations between *DM*, and the rest of the Iamblichean corpus. On the one hand, in spite of the seeming importance of the Pythagorean teachings and persona for Iamblichus, *DM* mentions Pythagoras only once.[94] At the same time, there is no direct reference to theurgy in the *Compendium*, Iamblichus' works on Pythagoras. This seeming lack of connection has not prevented scholars from linking the Pythagorean and theurgizing elements in Iamblichus's writings.[95] However, for my own enterprise, which focuses attention to the importance of the word theurgy, I will exclude from consideration the value of the Pythagorean elements.

Similarly, I ignore for the purposes of analysis, the fragments of Iamblichus' letters and commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima* as preserved by the Byzanine compiler John Stobaeus (ca. 5th century CE). *De Anima* especially has been used to support the connections between Iamblichus' theory of soul as well as his generally positive attitude towards the potential of matter in the quest for salvation from embodiment,[96] however, the actual fragments of *De Anima* never make explicit mention of theurgy, and so they do not come into consideration in this dissertation.

Psellus cited Proclus for identifying *De Mysteriis* as Iamblichus' response to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*. This identification bears on my ability to establish the purpose of *De Mysteriis*, which is why it attracts my attention. The identification is supported by the fact that many of the fragments of Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* preserved in Christian writers like

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[93] Dillon, "Iamblichus of Chalcis," *ANRW* 36.2. Part 2, *Principat*, Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1987), 876.

[94] This appears in the introduction, where Iamblichus names the various Hellenistic Greek thinkers who have made an appeal to the wisdom of the Egyptians. *DM* 1.1.2.8-3.4: "For it would not be right for Pythagoras and Plato and Democritus and Eudoxus and many other of the Hellenes of old to have been granted suitable instruction by the scribes of their time, but for you, in our time, who have the same purpose as they, to fail of guidance at the hands of those who are accounted public teachers now."

[95] Most notably Gregory Shaw, "The Geometry of Grace: A Pythagorean Approach to Theurgy," in *The Divine Iamblichus: Philosopher and Man of the Gods*, (eds.) H. J. Blumenthal and E. Gillian Clarke (Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 116-137. This move has been critiqued by Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiqutiy*, 110-111.

[96] See the comments of Finamore and Dillon in *Iamblichus:* De Anima, trans. and ed. by John Dillon and John F. Finamore (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2002),16, 172, 176, 206, 226, 258, 260, 273.

Augustine and Eusebius also correspond to passages in *De Mysteriis*.[97] The Christian authors in question preserved Porphyry's comments as part of their project of collecting statements by pagan authors denigrating their own pagan tradition to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. Thus, there is reasonable confidence to suppose that both *De Mysteriis* and the Christian authors preserve a version of the same original letter from Porphyry. It is generally held that Eusebius preserves the verbatim words of *Letter to Anebo* but jumbles them around, while Iamblichus preserves the order, but reframes many of the statements according to the needs of his own text.[98]

4.3 Iamblichus' Biography

Having settled on Iamblichus as the author of *DM* it would now be useful to consider what has been said about the life of Iamblichus. This is especially necessary because Iamblichus' biographical data has been thought to have implications for his age at the writing of *DM* and elements of his life story (especially his alleged performance of various miracles) have had a great influence on how he has been read.

Iamblichus is now commonly thought to have lived between 240 and 325 CE.[99] Eunapius, a fourth century sophist and author of an important historiographical work, the *Lives of the Philosophers*, says nothing of Iamblichus' childhood or upbringing beyond the simple statement that he was the child of a rich family and that his birthplace was Chalcis, a city in Coele Syria.

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[97] Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* has been partially preserved in fragments in *Praeparatio Evangelica* (Lat. *Preparation for the Gospel*) by the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (265-340) and in *De Civitate Dei* (Lat. *City of God*) by the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430).

[98] This is the main argument present throughout the editorial comments of Saffrey and Segonds, *Lettre à Anébon* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012). See especially the note on page 8.

[99] These date matters are well covered by Dillon, "Iamblichus" ANRW, 865. To summarize, Iamblichus's birthdate had previously been established as 265, based on the scholarly convention of assuming a floruit age of 40 and a statement in the *Suda* that says he flourished during the reign of Constantine (306-337 CE). Joseph Bidez pushed back the date to 250 on epistolary evidence, and Alan Cameron pushed the date back to 240. According to Cameron, "The Date of Iamblichus' Birth," *Hermes* 96.3 (1968): 374-376, Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* 9, indicates that a son of Iamblichus married Amphicleia, one of Plotinus' female students. Iamblichus must have been much older in order to have had a son of marriageable age, and therefore, 240 seems a reasonable birth year.

The first biographical detail provided by Eunapius is that Iamblichus began his education under a certain Anatolius, who according to Eunapius, "rank[ed] next after Porphyry" (*Vit. Sophist.* 457). Porphyry (ca. 234 – 305) was an important Neoplatonic philosopher and the student of Plotinus. Eunapius does not say where Iamblichus became a student of Anatolius. Zeller thought that the above statement about Anatolius's secondary position with respect to Porphyry, was an indication that he was second in command of the school, and that this referred to Porphyry's school in Rome. Thus under this interpretation, Iamblichus would have first become a student in Rome. Dillon has argued that Anatolius is identical with the former chair of the peripatetic school in Alexandria[100] who later became bishop of Laodicea.[101] Dillon has further argued that this Anatolius dwelt for a time in Caesarea and that at some time in the 270s, Iamblichus journeyed to Caesarea and studied under Anatolius.[102]

Eunapius does not offer an extensive description as to why Iamblichus left Anatolius. Dillon suggests that the cause may have been Anatolius's elevation to the episcopate.[103] After completing or abandoning his studies with Anatolius, Iamblichus moved to Rome where he studied with Porphyry, who seems to have been still associated with the school of Plotinus.

The relationship between Porphyry and Iamblichus has been a point of some disagreement among scholars. [104] Dillon underlines the hostility in twenty-five out of thirty-

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[100] For a description of the practice of endowed chairs of philosophy and rhetoric in late antiquity see Edward Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2013), 33-34. See also the work cited there, H. I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'Éducation dans l'Antiquité* (Paris, 1956).

[101] Dillon, "Iamblichus," 867. *Contra* Zeller 1856 who distinguished between a pagan and Christian Anatolius. Cf. Des Places in the commentary to his translation, *Jamblique: Les Mystères D'Égypte* (Les Belles Lettres, 2012), 5 n. 4. For an intellectual portrait of Anatolius, see Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 23-25.

[102] Arthur P. Urbano, *The Philosophical Life* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 90, says that Iamblichus studied under Anatolius and then Porphyry ca. 260, 10 years earlier than Dillon's account. As a consequence of this he posits that Porphyry and Iamblichus met before Porphyry's nervous breakdown and retirement in Sicily (p. 91). Since he cites Dillon's ANRW article, for this information, I attribute this to a simple slip of the pen.

[103] "Iamblichus," 867; Urbano, *Philosophical Life*, 89.

[104] For more, see Paulina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Acumen, 2008), 23, who notes that the answer to this question is "a matter of taste." Dillon, *Iamblichos Chalcidensis In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, Brill 1973, 13, is characteristically more certain in his conclusion that Iamblichus was "a man of mature views and years when he came into contact with Porphyry, and not a young and reverent disciple." Equally confident, Johnson,

two mentions of Porphyry in the preserved fragments of Iamblichus' lost and untitled commentary on Plato's dialogue, *Timaeus*[105] To take but one fragment, Fr. 34 in Dillon's numbering, stands out as particularly harsh. Iamblichus "attacks" Porphyry's theory, and "condemn[s] it as being un-Plotinian."[106] However, I would like observe that owing to the mode of their presentation, namely in a commentarial form by Proclus (411-485), it is conceivable that the fragments as preserved by Proclus have had their differences exaggerated. In Proclus's commentary, Porphyry tends to take an "ethical" interpretation of the *Timaeus*, and Iamblichus the "physical." Such a generalizable stance may be evidence of Proclus's buffing their position into a useful dichotomy for his own presentation. Moreover, Proclus certainly plays favorites, always referring to Iamblichus as "the divine."[107] I take it as at least a possibility that the hostility in the preserved comments is more due to Proclus's need to present Iamblichus as superior in all ways. This possible reading is further supported by recent reevaluations of the relationship between Porphyry and Iamblichus in *DM*. Andrew Smith, Polymnia Athanassiadi, and most recently Crystal Addey[108] have all argued that Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* is not a hostile attack, but rather an attempt to dialectically engage with the question about the value of ritual to the Neoplatonist system of philosophy.

4.4 The Problem of Determining the Date of *De Mysteriis*

Determining when *De Mysteriis* was written would be useful in order to understand Iamblichus' intellectual development and the place of the work in his oeuvre, as well as the potential of external contemporary sources to play a role in the text. Since it was written in response to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*, a good starting point would seem to be sometime

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Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre, CUP 2013, 21, states without equivocation that Iamblichus, along with Theodore of Asine, was a student of Porphyry.

[105] Dillon, "Iamblichus," 868. Less convincing is Dillon's statement that Iamblichus's Περὶ ἀγαλμάτων "no doubt…had a good deal to say in confutation of the work of Porphyry of the same name." Iamblichus's text is lost, and Dillon's only evidence of "confutation" is that the two texts share the same name.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Iamb., *In Tim.* Fr. 51 in Dillon, *Iamblichus the Platonic Commentaries* (The Prometheus Trust, 2009): "But the divine Iamblichus makes the more significant remark [than Porphyry]." Bracketed text is Dillon's.

[108] Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus." *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993): 117-18; Smith, "Porphyry: Scope for Reassessment," in Smith (ed.), *Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus* (Ashgate, 2011), XV: 12-13; Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism* (Ashgate, 2014), 135-136.

after Porphyry's *Letter*. Bidez, and after him Italian classicist-cum-cardinal Angelo R. Sodano (1927-), made the case that Porphyry wrote the *Letter to Anebo* during the five years he was in Rome (262-267) prior to a suicidal nervous breakdown in 268.[109] It has been suggested by Dillon that Iamblichus wrote his response to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* relatively quickly (if thirteen years later can be considered quickly) in the form of a letter, now known as *De Mysteriis*

Dillon proposes for *De Mysteriis* a publication date of about 280, a claim he bases on several unconfirmable postulates. 1) Iamblichus would have responded to Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* quite quickly; 2) Iamblichus's grandiose use of pseudonymity in his own letter is a sign of immaturity; 3) the Chaldean element in *De Mysteriis* is not very well developed, and therefore the letter is relatively early. Point 2 is difficult to determine as there is no statement in the letter about hastiness, and we have no external evidence about when Porphyry's letter left his hands and how long Iamblichus took to respond. Point 2 regarding the use of a pseudonym as a sign of immaturity seems problematic for its psychologizing of the author, as well as for the fact that we have no historical evidence that points to pseudonymity being considered childish. Furthermore, Dillon's own dates indicate that Iamblichus would have been around 40 at the time of the publication of the letter, and thus mature by most standards. Finally, the notion that the Chaldean element is not present in *DM* could be more easily explained by simply allowing that Iamblichus does not know the *Chaldean Oracles* as we have them, and so, there is no evidence of his having used them in the text.

On the basis of his argument, Dillon concludes that this was Iamblichus's "first public indication of his position in defense of theurgy."[110] Other scholars including Athanassiadi and Barnes have pushed for a date of 300, at which point Iamblichus would have been about 60, Porphyry 64 (five years before his death around 305), and, on that reading, *De Mysteriis* would be a manifestation of Iamblichus's most mature thought. More recently, Tanaseanu-Döbler, following Mark Edwards, has proposed that *DM* could have been written long after *The Letter to Anebo*.[111]

None of the evidence is conclusive. I think it must be concluded as impossible to determine with any certainty the date of either the *Letter to Anebo* nor the *De Mysteriis*. At minimum it may be said that the one followed the other and that Iamblichus probably knew

[109] Johnson, *Religion and Identity in Porphyry of Tyre* (CUP, 2013), 18-19, citing Sodano *Porfiro: Lettera ad Anebo* Naples: L'arte tipographica, 1958, xxxiii-xxxv.
[110] Dillon, *Iamblichus the Platonic Commentaries*, 13, 18.
[111] Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, 97.

of Porphyry when he wrote his response. This is not to say however that Iamblichus was a member of Porphyry's school. He could have merely written the letter before the two had formal face-to-face interaction.

The chief consequences of these uncertainties is that it is impossible to reconstruct with any certainty a timeline of Iamblichus's interactions and travels and therefore to know with certainty whom he was interacting with and what pivotal experiences he had had. The end result of all this is that all evidence for Iamblichus's philosophical dependencies must come from evidence inside Iamblichus's own writings. In the following section, I will address the main currents of thought on this subject.

4.4 Concerns of *De Mysteriis* and *Letter to Anebo*

Much has been made of the alleged tone in both Porphyry's letter and *De Mysteriis* as a response. The conclusion commonly reached is that Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* was meant to be a general attack on both Hellenistic and barbarian ritualism, and the response, *De Mysteriis*, was intended to be a general polemic or hostile defense of the same.[112] Bound up into these statements is the oft-made claim that *De Mysteriis* is an open letter.[113] Accordingly, the purpose of this statement would be to stress that while the implicitly stated addressee of the author may be Porphyry, Iamblichus intended the intellectuals of his time to read the letter as a kind of general defense of ritual practices, a catechism of late antique beliefs. Scholars who support this claim pay attention to Iamblichus's deployment of the pseudonym Abammon. By making the speaker irrelevant, it is thought, Iamblichus meant to make his statements as general as possible. However, I take it that Iamblichus's use of Abammon and his assertion of the relative unimportance of the speaker is not necessarily only a statement about the intended audience, but could also be conceptualized as a statement about the timeless nature of the knowledge about to be disseminated in the letter. Iamblichus, in effect, says that his letter is in complete agreement with all the hoary wisdom of the Egyptians, the source of all ancient profundities. This strategy does not at all necessitate that Porphyry be considered a stand in for a larger audience. One can assert the authority of timeless wisdom while still intending that wisdom to be read primarily by one reader. Indeed, diminishing the

[112] For examples of scholars calling *De Mysteriis* a "defense of theurgy" see CDH xxvi; Pearson, "Theurgic Tendencies," 255. But Watts, *City and School*, 88 n. 42, is less definitive, calling it "something of a defense of theurgy."
[113] Cremer, *Die Chaldäischen Orakel und Jamblich De mysteriii*, 1

importance of the author was a common rhetorical strategy of the time to establish traditional authority.[114]

My opinion is that while *De Mysteriis* was intended and delivered to Porphyry, Iamblichus retained copies and distributed them among his followers, and thus the tradition of the authorship eventually made its way into the school of Proclus. While admittedly the "absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence," the lack of reference to *De Mysteriis* up to the time of Proclus leads me to suspect that *De Mysteriis* was not as "open" a letter as Porphyry's letter, which was, as mentioned above, quoted by Christian authors. It is easy to suppose that the majority of intellectuals were unaware that a response had been written. It seems more likely, given the available sources, that *De Mysteriis* had been preserved in limited circles to the time of Proclus, though it is still surprising that no citations of this letter from the "divine" Iamblichus exist in any extant Neoplatonic writer's oeuvre. At any rate, it is apparent that even though the text was preserved, the knowledge that Iamblichus was the author had been forgotten, requiring the corrective efforts of Proclus as mentioned in the above passage from Psellus. This has been a bit convoluted, but suffice to say that I support the less recognized notion that the *De Mysteriis* was in its original form a private letter, but was possibly read in very small Neoplatonic circles. If it was read in Neoplatonic circles, it does not seem to have achieved canonical status in those circles. At any rate, no references to the views of *De Mysteriis* survive in the various late antique Neoplatonic writings.

Corollary to the argument that Iamblichus's response was a private letter, I shall further assert that his letter should not be taken merely as a defense of theurgy.[115] As will soon be demonstrated, although the rhetorical framing of its conclusion focuses more on theurgy and divination, its introduction is much more open and purports to deal with philosophical and theological matters as well. This being the case, it seems reasonable at least to attempt to read the letter according to its own proposed methodology, making a division between theurgic, philosophic, and theological matters. All of this is just to say that theurgy is a concern in the letter to be certain, but it is not the *only* concern. Iamblichus's alleged "defense of theurgy" is a defense of a particular intellectual horizon, of which theurgy is but one part.

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[114] CDH 7 n. 7 cite a speech from Demosthenes that uses this same technique. Argument is repeated in Clarke, *Iamblichus'* De Mysteriis: *A Manifesto of the Miraculous* (Ashgate, 2001), 15 n. 37.

[115] Contra Pearson, "Theurgic Tendencies" 255.

4.5 Theurgy in *DM* – Questioning the Possible Sources and Influences

The time has come to consider some of the sources that have been used by *DM*. This has important implications for my exclusive concentration on the use of the term theurgy in *DM*. I wish to here defend here my claim that Iamblichus uses the term theurgy seemingly for the first time. I have already described the apparent difficulties in considering Nicomachus of Gerasa or the *Chaldean Oracles* to be early sources. Now, I wish to consider whether the sources Iamblichus himself provide any clear indication that he has borrowed the terminology of theurgy from elsewhere. This has obvious consequences for the project of understanding theurgy. If Iamblichus could be said to be an accurate transmitter of an Egyptian or Assyrian theurgic tradition, as he seems to be claiming in his introduction to *DM*, there would be reasonable ground to suppose that, for example, references to Egyptians exhorting us to ascend to the One through hieratic theurgy is an indication that such theurgic principles are in fact Egyptian. This would furthermore indicate that any attempt to limit the evidence to *DM* alone would be in essence a deliberate self-blinding to and willful ignorance of clear parallels.

In the remainder of this section, I will consider the instances in *DM* where Iamblichus directly cites or names authors or traditions. I do this in order to make two observations. 1) in the case of Porphyry, whose *Letter to Anebo* exists fragmentarily in other authors (Eusebius and Augustine), there is some evidence to suggest that Iamblichus has changed the wording and has freely interpreted the intent of his interlocutor. 2) In the case of the various traditions surrounding the traditions of Egyptian or Assyrian religious theology and practice, there is insufficient data to prove any transmission of a concept of theurgy. It may be that Iamblichus has access to texts, principles, and cultures which are no longer extant today, but the evidence of Porphyry would seem to just as easily indicate that Iamblichus is engaged in a great project of reinterpretation, and so, it is wrong to accept at face value his declarations of adherence to ancient wisdom traditions. This further establishes the need for a technique or method which can analyze Iamblichus' statements concerning theurgy on their own terms, without engaging in speculative and artful comparison.

4.5.1 How *De Mysteriis* uses Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*

DM makes many explicit and implied references toward its main textual interlocutor, Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*. The explicit references can take the form of a second person

assertion "you say," "you ask," "you confuse"[116] or they may take the form of third person impersonal "next it [viz. the letter or argument] adds,"[117] or they may utilize a more complex mode of reference such as the passive participle with a genitive agent.[118] Implied references utilize no such signaling. As stated above, *Letter to Anebo* has not survived in its entirety. It is partially preserved in a Latin summary in Augustine's *City of God*, in several direct citations in Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelicae*, and in identified citations in *De Mysteriis*.[119] On the basis of a comparison of these witnesses, Sodano (1927-) reconstructed, translated, and published an edition of the text in 1958.[120] This reconstruction has since been questioned in its accuracy.[121] While questions of order are important, I am chiefly interested in this section with how Iamblichus treats the words of Porphyry. Therefore, assuming that Porphyry's original wording is preserved in Eusebius, what can be said about Iamblichus's treatment of Porphyry's letter? To address this, I will present a comparison of the first major passage from Eusebius, along with the relevant excerpts from *De Mysteriis*. I am mainly interested in presenting how the version of Porphyry's *Letter* preserved in *De Mysteriis* adds and subtracts to the text, such as it is preserved in Eusebius, as well as how *De Mysteriis* reframes the context of the Porphyrian *Vorlage*. By observing this, it will be possible to see in part Iamblichus's attitude towards the text, especially his willingness to change terminology and reformulate phrasing.

Eusebius V. 10, 10 =p.244.5-10 Mras (Segonds and Saffrey Fr. 13)[122]	Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*

[116] E.g. *DM* 1.3: φῂς (fr. 2 Segonds and Saffrey 3); *DM* 1.4 ἐπιζητεῖς (fr. 4 Segonds and Saffrey 4); *DM* 1.4: συμφύρεις (fr. 7 Segonds and Saffrey 5)
[117] E.g. *DM* 1.4: Πρόσκειται δὲ (fr. 5 Segonds and Saffrey 4); *DM* 1.4: προστίθεται (fr. 6 Segonds and Saffrey 5)
[118] E.g. DM 1.8: ὑπὸ σοῦ…προσιέμεθα...
[119] There are additional minor Christian sources, which witness to a general interest on the part of Christian writers with the arguments of the *Letter to Anebo* but since they do not add any details not found in the writings of Eusebius, Augustine, and in *De Mysteriis*, they shall not be dealt with here. Cf. Aaron Johnson's dismissal of the value of this evidence in "Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo* among the Christians: Augustine and Eusebius" *Studia Patristica Vol. LXIII: Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 2011*" ed. Markus Vinzent (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 188-189.
[120] *Lettera ad Anebo* (Naples, 1958).
[121] Johnson, "Porphyry's *Letter*," 188.
[122] I have used the edition of Segonds and Saffrey, *Porphyre: Lettre à Anébon l'Égyptien* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012), 8-9 for the passages from Eusebius, and that of Clark, Dillon and Hershbell for Iamblichus.

Saying these things, He (Porphyry) presents this difficulty to the Egyptian (Anebo), saying, "If some are not subject to passion, while others are subject to passion,	You separate the essences of the superior gods according to the difference between that which is subject to passion and that which is not subject to passion… (DM 1.10. 33.10-12)
in honor of which it is said they erect phalluses and pronounce obscenities,	Turning to your questions in more detail, however, we declare that "the erection of phallic images" is a symbol of generative power, and we consider that this is directed towards the fecundating of the world… (DM 1.11.38.10)…And as for the "obscene utterances" my view is that… (DM 1.11.39.3ff)
then the following would be vain: the invocations of the gods,	"But invocations," the objection goes, "are addressed to the gods as if they were subject to external influence, so that it is not only daemons that are thus subject, but also the gods." (DM 1.12.40.12-13)
the summonings,[123]	But not even in the case of the "summonings" "προσκλήσεις" is it through the experiencing of passion that they link the priests to the gods; it is rather in virtue of the divine love which holds together all things that they provide a union of indissoluble involvement---not as the

[123] I have modified the translation here. Segonds and Saffrey 2012 p. 9, translate προσκλήσεις "*les demandes de secours*" a choice that I am unable to justify. All examples in LSJ point to the basic meaning "court summons."

	name seems immediately to imply, inclining the mind of the gods to humans,[125] but rather, as the truth of things itself desires to teach us, disposing the human mind to participation in the gods… (DM 1.12.42.5-10)
the rites to appease the anger [of the gods],	Again, the questions of the "propitiations of wrath" will become clear, if we take the trouble to comprehend the true nature of the "wrath" of the gods. (DM 1.13.43.1-2)
the expiatory sacrifices,	As for the "expiatory rites" their purpose is to heal the evil present in the terrestrial realm, and to ensure that no deviation or passion manifests itself in us." (DM 1.13.43.12-14)
and above all the pretended constraints exercised upon the gods[124]	Furthermore, the so-called "necessities of the gods" are just that: necessities of the gods, and come about in accordance with the nature of the gods. (DM 1.14.44.8-9)

[124] There is some disagreement between the translations of Segonds and Saffrey and CDH on how to render αἱ λεγόμεναι θεῶν ἀνάγκαι. Segonds and Saffrey, 2012 p. 9, translate the phrase "les prétendues contraintes exercées sur les dieux." CDH's translation of this phrase is perhaps more literal, but also more mysterious: "the so-called necessities of the gods" (CDH p. 55). Embedded in Segonds and Saffrey's translation is a reasonable interpretation that these "necessities" are the means by which the gods are coerced. Perhaps the term is simply synonymous with the other phrases that Porphyry utilizes to refer to rituals meant to persuade the gods one way or another, or perhaps it denotes a specific variety of rites. The corresponding footnote in CDH (p. 55 n. 80) bluntly states: "The meaning of θεῶν ἀνάγκαι is 'necessities put upon the gods' by spells and suchlike. 'Abamon' deliberately gives the phrase another meaning, that of 'necessities emanating from the gods,' in what follows."

[125] Iamblichus folk-etymologizes προσκλήσεις (invocations, summons to court) to προσκλίνουσι (incline towards.)

for that which is not subject to passion, cannot
be seduced by violence or force.

> So, for all these reasons, there results the contrary of your conclusions; the consequence is that the divine is exempt from external bewitchment or affection or constraint, if in truth the powers inherent in theurgy are real, and such as we have demonstrated them to be. (DM 1.14.45.3-6)

A first reading of the Eusebian citation reveals the relative straightforwardness of Porphyry's original main point: assuming that the gods are not subject to manipulation, it follows that the various ritualistic methods to manipulate them should not work. Unfortunately for both his persuasiveness and his modern readers' ability to understand what he means, Porphyry has weakened his own position with a joke that Iamblichus will later exploit to the fullest.

Porphyry embeds within his basic argument a brief allowance for some "other" spiritual beings, who, he asserts, are vulnerable to manipulation by phallic rites and obscenities. The Eusebian passage gives no clear terms for either of these classes of entities, neither calling them gods nor daemons, preferring the Greek correlative construction οἱ μὲν…οἱ δὲ… equivalent to the use of the English indefinite pronouns some…others. Evidently, whatever their classification, Porphyry seems to consider these "others" inferior, and the main focus of his attention is on the beings ("some") that are not subject to passion. It can be assumed that the distastefulness of phallic rites and the obscenities is meant as a reflection of the distastefulness of the entities being manipulated, and they should therefore be thought of as "lower" in some sense and therefore not gods. Given that the rest of the discussion is clearly about gods (note the repetition of the word "gods" in "the invocations of the gods" and "the necessities of the gods,") I assume that Porphyry's point about phallic rites, and the gods to whom they pay honor, is not meant as an independent argument, but is instead merely a side-note. This interpretation is supported by the following argument: In the Eusebian version, which is to say the verbatim version, Porphyry says that "they erect phalluses" where one would expect, if he is attributing the view to the Egyptians, "you erect

phalluses." I take this as further evidence that Porphyry is not seriously raising this as a complaint against his Egyptian addressee (Anebo), to whom, if he was making a direct accusation, he would have implemented a more forward use of the second person, rather he is making a general unattributed attack. Essentially he is saying that, if there are gods that are coercible by rituals, then they are akin to those gods which are apparently coerced by phallic rites. However, since beings that are coerced in such a ridiculous manner are not deserving of the title of "god," such beings do not exist. The main entities that are in question here are the gods and not the lesser, inferior entities which are imagined to be manipulated by phallic rites, and which are put forward as the undesirable outcome of a reductio ad absurdam.

In his response, the author of *DM* chooses to ignore the relationship between the individual rhetorical points and treats the facets of Porphyry's original statement as particular nodes of contention around which he builds his own theological and philosophical position, and this has, I would argue, consequences for the development of the concept of theurgy. In Eusebius's framing metatext, Porphyry's concern is named a single difficulty; in *DM*, the plural is preferred. Iamblichus refers to "questions" surrounding individual points in *DM* 1.11, where it is clear that Porphyry meant all of these points as examples of one and the same phenomenon, namely the absurdity and vanity of coercing the gods. Again in *DM* 1.13 Iamblichus refers to the "questions" surrounding the issue of propitiatory sacrifice, even further subdividing one of the exempla, which originally was put forward only as part of a list of vain rituals. Iamblichus's method is both deconstructive and constructive. On the one hand, he deconstructs Porphyry's general argument into its individual constituents, and even deconstructs those elements further when it suits him. On the other hand, his response seems to use only the specific topoi of Porphyry's letter. Admittedly he introduces entities not considered by Porphyry. Famously he introduces and describes the category of "heroes" in relation to gods and daemons, but even this category is in some sense predicated out of Porphyry's original distinction. It seems then that in its efforts to be a response, Iamblichus never quite makes a leap of originality. He seems perfectly capable of taking Porphyry's questions, and responding to them with the bare minimum of force, and only slightly transforming or redirecting the arguments as they come at him. This is, as shall become increasingly apparent, a common theme throughout *DM*, which despite its claim to ancient and hoary traditions, more often than not simply takes a contrapuntal stance toward Porphyry's points.

Moreover, as argued above, in the Eusebian version, Porphyry's aside about phallically directed gods is meant as a throwaway comment, a suggestion too absurd to be

taken seriously, while for Iamblichus, a defense of the phallic rites is perfectly reasonable. Iamblichus, however, has caught the gist of Porphyry's point, and so to avoid the "absurd" possibility that these rites coerce immaterial gods, he postulates two different, safe objects of phallic rituals. On the one hand he suggests that the rites are meant to either coerce or mimetically represent the generative faculty of nature. On the other hand, he allows that the use of phalli and obscenities permits humans to achieve a more virtuous condition by allowing them to experience their negative faculties in a controlled and tempered manner**.** It is worth observing that Iamblichus' strategy in answering the question in both ways does not privilege one answer over another. Iamblichus is more interested in riposting Porphyry's argument, than in offering a cohesive theory.

Beyond his dissecting of Porphyry's statement into statements and his subsequent assigning of equal interrogative force to each of the extracted elements, Iamblichus also rewords the individual pieces of Porphyry's original letter. So, in the above example, Iamblichus transforms Porphyry's brief mention of the "invocations of the god" into a complete statement thusly: "'But invocations,' the objection goes, 'are addressed to the gods as if they were subject to external influence, so that it is not only daemons that are thus subject, but also the gods."[126] It could be argued that Iamblichus's rewording captures the spirit of Porphyry's original intentions, but given the lack of clear signaling, I am wary of imputing too much accuracy to Iamblichus's version. In the absence of a rule-governed system of citation, Iamblichus is free to respond to the gist of an argument, which is to say, he first interprets Porphyry's letter and then responds to his interpretation. The main implication to be drawn from this is that despite the fact that in modern translations of *DM* statements of Porphyry are set off from the main body of the text by quotes, it should be recognized that the quotations are often times approximate and generally can only be taken as minimal indications of topoi of interest. These topoi, when translated into the body of *DM* are consequently subject to Iamblichus's interpretation. Thus, it seems to be a mistake to attempt to read Iamblichus's extrapolations from Porphyry as an indication of Porphyry's original intent. Iamblichus's unravelling of the ordinary hierarchical organization of topoi, permits him to treat Porphyry's examples as grist for a theological mill.

These observations about *DM*'s contrapuntal method with respect to Porphyry have important consequences for one of the most debated questions in scholarship on Porphyry and Iamblichus, a question that is also important for any attempt to understand the

[126] *DM* 1.12.40.12-13.

background context for the concept of theurgy, namely: did Porphyry have a theory of theurgy? Some scholars, following in part on hints in Augustine[127] and possibly Eunapius,[128] have argued that Porphyry had a primitive conception of theurgy at one or another point in time in his life. One of the first classical philologists to seriously consider Porphyry's philosophy, Joseph Bidez (1867-1945), made the influential claim that Porphyry began his life as a very superstitious man, and thus one can find in his earlier writings (especially *De Regressu Animae*) evidence of a fascination with magic, oracles, and something approximating theurgy. While a student of Plotinus, however these naïve tendencies were tempered. Following up on Bidez, Andrew Smith in 1974 continued the claim that Porphyry had a conception of theurgy, all the while admitting that he never uses the term.[129]

Given the fact that the evidence is nearly always mediated through some other writer who has an ideological position to support one way or another,[130] I doubt any certain statements about Porphyry's use of the term theurgy.[131] However, it strikes me as quite probable that Porphyry lacked a clear conception of theurgy, and therefore his letter is less a well-structured "attack on theurgy"[132] but rather the putting forward of a number of arguments about the incompatibility of ritual and theories of divination with Neoplatonism, a challenge which the author of *DM* takes up but to which he brings little to no new information to support his argument, preferring instead to simply rearrange, reorganize, retranslate, or blatantly deny key elements of Porphyry's background assumptions. In

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[127] *De Civ. D.* 10.9 (trans. Wiesen, p. 287): "In fact Porphyry too puts forward a sort of purification, as it were, of the soul through the practice of theurgy, though with hesitation and a shamefaced sort of argument. He asserts, however, that this art cannot provide for any man a path back to God." Augustine read Porphyry in the Latin translation of Marius Victorinus and at a considerably late date. It is conceivable that either Victorinus or he attributes to Porphyry terminology that was au currant at their time, but not present in the actual text.
[128] *VS* 457 (trans. Wright, p. 361): "As for philosophy, I cannot describe in words his [Porphyry's] genius for discourse, or for moral philosophy. As for natural philosophy and the art of divination [θεουργὸν], let that be left to sacred rites and mysteries." Note, Eunapius, who claims to be taught by students of Iamblichus, and who in his biography of Iamblichus records various miracles attributed to Iamblichus, and who relates the account of the female theurgist, Sosipatra, taught directly by mysterious Chaldean wise men, might be exaggerating or even inventing Porphyry's connection to theurgy. No extant source directly attributable to Porphyry ever makes use of the term theurgy.
[129] *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study in Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 59-61. Smith heavily relies on the testimonia of Augustine in the fragments of *De Regressu Animae*.
[130] See fn. 125 and 126.
[131] In agreement with Van Liefferinge, "Outil," who notes "Rien ne prouve avec certitude qu'ils [theurgy and its cognates] aient été utilisés par Porphyre lui-meme."
[132] E.g. des Places, *Jamblique: Les Mystères d'Égypte* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012), 8.

positioning itself in contrast with Porphyry's points, *DM* is actively engaged in the construction of its theology, especially the concept of theurgy. In the next section, I will expand my boundaries slightly further and consider the Iamblichus' possible reliance on other sources.

4.5.2 Questioning Claims of Oriental Sources for Theurgy: Egypt

Because the invented title of *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, et Assyriorum* is, when it is not shortened to *De Mysteriis* is simply shortened to *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum,*(On the Mysteries of the Egyptians) there has been a tendency to emphasize the Egyptian elements of the text. This emphasis has in turn led some commentators to suggest that theurgy and hermetic (Egyptian) practices are essentially the same. If they are right, we should be able to consider Egyptian evidence while looking for evidence of theurgy in late antiquity. There are, however, problems with positing a connection between Egypt and Iamblichus.

It is difficult to determine what connection, if any, Iamblichus had with Egyptian practices, and scholars are divided on the issue. Early researchers like Philippe Derchain argued that the author of *DM* was actually an Egyptian priest.[133] As consensus grew that Iamblichus was the author, and as attitudes towards Iamblichus shifted from insane cult leader to rational philosopher, there was a subsequent backlash against the assumption that he had anything to do with Egyptian thought. Nowadays, there are at least two scholars that I know of who have made the argument for elements of authentic Egyptian culture in *DM*.

It is my intent in this section to examine the evidence that is cited as evidence of Iamblichus' knowledge and familiarity with Egypt and Chaldea and question the grounds on which connections are drawn between *DM* and other cultural traditions. I also intend to point to the mostly Grecian features, and argue that if Iamblichus has an understanding of Egypt, it is predominantly available to him through Grecian sources. Therefore, there is no need to posit an assumed authentic pre-Iamblichean theurgic tradition, which Iamblichus then subsequently discovers in ancient Egyptian texts.

Since the method posited in this dissertation is a textual method, I will shortly examine the evidence for Iamblichus' use of Egyptian sources. Several times in *DM*, Iamblichus explicitly states that he is drawing on Egyptian sources. At least once, he mentions Porphyry having

[133] Derchain, "Pseudo-Jamblique ou Abammon? Quelques observations sur l'égytpianisme du *De mysteriis*," *Chronique d'Égypte* 38 (1963): 220-226.

used an Egyptian source, Chaeremon, but in that instance he says Chaeremon is not a valid source for Egyptian culture. Several times in the letter he utilizes names of gods from Egyptian culture, but his interpretation of these features seems to reveal little more than an awareness of certain names. Names that it must be admitted were available in Greco-Roman sources.[134]

A number of authors have sought to make a series of identifications in order to explicate references to actual Egyptian gods in the hierarchies described in *DM* 8.5-6. The most recent and most compelling argument has been made by Dennis Clark in an article entitled "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *DM*,"[135] but most of the conclusions are "tentative," as even the Clark himself notes.[136] In the end, Clark seems unable to identify the actual texts which *DM* utilized in the construction of its theological bricolage.

DM 8.5-6 seeks to refute the statement made by Porphyry that the Egyptians are almost wholly materialists. In answer to this, the author of *DM* criticizes Porphyry for having only a partial understanding of his sources, and for relying on the unreliable theologian-mediator Chaeremon. He also provides three different lists of periphrastically named gods, which have proven to be an interest arresting riddle for scholars of the *DM*. The passages in question are as follows:

> List 1 (*DM* 8.2 CDH 307-309):
> Prior to the true beings and to the universal principles there is the one god, prior cause even of the first god and king, remaining unmoved in the singularity of his own unity. For no object of intellection is linked to him, nor anything else. He is established as a paradigm for the self-fathering, self-generating and only-fathered God who is true Good; for it is something greater and primary, and fount of all things, and basic root of all the first objects of intellection, which are the forms. From this One there has

[134] Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 138.
[135] Clark, "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*" *International Journal for the Platonic Tradition*2 (2008): 164-205.
[136] Hedging language in Clark's article: "Though it is certainly impossible to know ether Iamblichus had access to any texts… (p. 176); "…nevertheless the similarity is striking, if only coincidental." (p. 194); "Again there is no specific evidence in *de Mysteriis* that Iamblichus…but this confluence of Hellenistic and Egyptian beliefs was apparently a continuing presence in the late Roman spiritual milieu out of which the Hermetic texts arose." (p. 194); "Though there is of course no direct evidence that Iamblichus or for that matter Porphyry was aware of this concept…still the parallel between the Egyptian and Neoplatonic theologies is most striking…" (p. 195);

autonomously shone forth the self-sufficient god, for which reason he is termed "father of himself" and "principle of himself"; for he is first principle and god of gods, a monad springing from the One, pre-essential and first principle of essence. For from him springs essentiality and essence, for which reason he is termed "father of essence"; he himself is pre-essential being, the first principle of the intelligible realm, for which reason he is termed "principle of intellection." These, then, are the most senior principles of all, which Hermes ranks as prior to the aetherial and empyrean gods, and to the celestial ones…"

List 2 (*DM* 8.262.11-264.3 CDH 309-313):
Following another system of ordering, he gives the first rank to Kmeph, the leader of the celestial gods, whom he declares to be an intellect thinking himself, and turning his thoughts toward himself; but prior to him he places the indivisible One and what he calls the "first product," which he also calls Ikton. It is in him that there resides the primal intelligising element and the primal object of intellection, which, it must be specified is worshipped by means of silence alone. In addition to these, other rulers have been set over the creation of the visible realm. For the demiurgic intellect, who is master of truth and wisdom, when he comes to create and brings into the light the invisible power of the hidden reason-principles, is called Amoun in the Egyptian tongue, when he infallibly and expertly brings to perfection each thing in accordance with truth he is termed Ptah (the Greeks translate Ptah as Hephaistos, concentrating only on his technical ability), when he is productive of goods he is called Osiris, and he acquires other epithets in accordance with other powers and activities.

List 3 (*DM* 8.3.264.4-265.8 CDH 313-315):
There is also among them another system of rule over all the elements in the realm of generation and the powers resident in them, four masculine entities and four feminine, which they assign to the sun; and another authority over the whole of nature subject to generation, which they grant to the moon. Then, distinguishing the heaven into parts, dividing it into either two sections or four or twelve or thirty-six, or the double of that, or in whatever other way, they assign to these sections authorities greater or lesser in number, and again they place above them one deity which holds sway over them. And thus it is that the doctrine of the Egyptians on first principles, starting from the highest level and proceeding to the lowers, begins from unity, and proceeds to multiplicity,

> the many being in turn governed by a unity, and at all levels the indeterminate nature being dominated by a certain definite measure and by the supreme causal principle which unifies all things. As for matter, God derived it from substantiality, when he had abstracted materiality from it; this matter, which is endowed with life, the Demiurge took in hand and from it fashioned the simple and impassible (heavenly) spheres, while its lowest residue he crafted into bodies which are subject to generation and corruption.

List 1 is decidedly the least explicitly Egyptian. There is in fact no clear reference to anything remotely Egyptian in this passage until the statement that these views are attributable to Hermes. Clark argues the "elliptically mentioned" deities of this first list, on the basis of the vagueness of their reference, may be proof of a shared knowledge [between Porphyry and Iamblichus] of a now-lost Hermetic text.[137] It seems to me that Clark is unnecessarily multiplying his assumptions. Although assuming the existence of non-extant texts is an interesting intellectual exercise, when it comes to the careful minimalistic examination of a tradition, and specifically of a term in that tradition, such imaginary texts hold little value.

Lists 2 and 3 furnish more evidence of actual knowledge of names of Egyptian divine beings. In list 2 Ptah and Osiris are familiar and important gods. Kmeph and Ikton deserve some further attention. According to Clark, these names are Greek translations or corruptions of the Egyptian gods, Kematef and Heka. As list 2 asserts, the latter is the higher deity and will be considered first. Clark argues that the epithets attributed to Heka more or less correspond to descriptions of the god in indigenous Egyptian sources like the Coffin Texts (Hieroglyphic funerary writings that predate the so-called *Book of the Dead*). For example, Heka is described in list 2 as "the indivisible One," and "the first product." Heka is said to encompass "the intelligising element" and "the primal object of intellection." This "primal object of intellection" is further said to be "worshipped by means of silence alone." From each of these points, Clark attempts to establish connections to elements drawn out from implied meanings in the various Coffin Texts that describe Heka's importance. However, he slips a little in his interpretation, for the text of *DM*, contrary to his translation, does not call

[137] Dennis Clark, "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*" *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008): 170-171; the same strategy of referring to the probable existence of a "lost Hermetic work" appears on page 172.

identify "the first intelligising element" with Heka, but only says that it belongs to him.[138] Even allowing for this slip, the connections drawn by Clark are, as he admits repeatedly,[139] not entirely convincing. In Coffin Text, Spell 261, entitled "To Become the God Heka," the god's attributes are named as follows:

> O noble ones who are before the Lord of the universe ("the All"), behold I have come before you. Respect me in accordance with what you know. I am he whom the Unique Lord made before two things ("duality") had yet come into being in this land by his sending forth his unique eye when he was alone, by the going forth from his mouth…when he put Hu ("Logos") upon his mouth.
>
> I am indeed the son of him who gave birth to the universe ("the All"), who was born before his mother yet existed. I am the protection of that which the Unique Lord has ordained. I am he who caused the Ennead to life… I have seated myself, O bulls of heaven, in this my great dignity as Lord of *ka*s, heir of Re-Atum.
>
> I have come that I might take my seat and that I might receive my dignity, for to me belonged the universe before you gods had yet come into being. Descend you who have come in the end. I am Heka.[140]

Clark claims the paradoxical statement "I am he…who was born before his mother yet existed," apparently emphasizing the self-generative nature of Heka, can serve as a basis for philosophical expressions like self-existent (αὐθυποστατος), a term which appears in Emperor Julian's *On the Sun the King* and in later writings of Proclus and Damascius. In order to draw the necessary connection between *DM* and these later texts, Clark argues that

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[138] The Greek text here is clear on this point: ἐν ᾧ δὴ τὸ πρῶτόν ἐστι νοοῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον νοητόν (*DM* 8.3.263.4-5)

[139] Hedging language in Clark's article: "Though it is certainly impossible to know ether Iamblichus had access to any texts… (p. 176); "…nevertheless the similarity is striking, if only coincidental." (p. 194); "Again there is no specific evidence in *de Mysteriis* that Iamblichus…but this confluence of Hellenistic and Egyptian beliefs was apparently a continuing presence in the late Roman spiritual milieu out of which the Hermetic texts arose." (p. 194); "Though there is of course no direct evidence that Iamblichus or for that matter Porphyry was aware of this concept…still the parallel between the Egyptian and Neoplatonic theologies is most striking…" (p. 195);

[140] Cited in Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian* (University of Chciago, 1993), 17.

Julian and the others knew and carried on an authentic Iamblichean term,[141] but once again, the evidence is highly conjectural. Clark supports his claim that *DM* is referring to Egyptian gods by using later texts, which Clark himself has associated with Iamblichus through the rather questionable notion of "tradition."

Returning to the list of epithets attributed to Heka in *DM*, Clark incorrectly says that Heka is to be "worshipped in silence" whereas the Greek text states that the "primal object of intellection" is the object of the silent worship. This appears to be a simple case of mistranslation. Clark sees great importance in this silence, and notes that in the above aretalogy from the Coffin Text that Heka came into existence before the unnamed Unique Lord who created him, "put Hu ("Logos") on his mouth." Clark takes this to be a reference to the invention of divine speech, and suggests that Heka was conceived in silence, and should therefore be worshipped in silence. Unfortunately for this argument, the evidence that Clark cites later on completely negates the importance of this silence. In a footnote, Clark quotes N. Shupak, who says:

The Egyptian believer displays his faith and his devotion in quiet and calm behavior during the divine service. The instructions repeatedly call for silence while offering sacrifices in the temple…or while engaged in activities in the necropolis, whose epithet is 'the place of the quiet.' The gods—Amon, Osiris and Sobek-Re—are 'lords of silence…'."[142]

If silence is such a prominent feature of Egyptian religion including variously named gods, it seems a poor means to test or prove the authenticity of *DM*'s conception of Heka.

This will likely not be the last word on the possible connection between Egyptian religion and Iamblichean theurgy, but I hope I have at least pointed to the problems involved in such a project. I would argue in response, that the purpose of Iamblichus's discussion of Egyptian theology is not to indicate any real familiarity, but rather to demonstrate that in disparate theologies, the Egyptians do not commit the intellectual crime of which Porphyry accuses them: they do not lack a conception of super-natural deities.[143] The consequence of drawing such a comparison is that we might find, as argued by Fowden,[144] that hermeticism and theurgy are in essence identical, and that theurgy is essentially Egyptian religion repackaged. However, my minimalistic method makes such an interpretation impossible.

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[141] Clark, 183.
[142] Quote in Clark, 17-18 n. 27.
[143] Again, this reading of Porphyry's intention is based off of the presentation of his argument as present in *De Mysteriis* itself, and so we might be in problematic territory asserting this is the view of Porphyry. At any rate, this is the view of Porphyry as asserted in *De Mysteriis*.
[144] Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton University Press, 1986), 134-141.

4.5.3 Questioning Claims of Oriental Sources for Theurgy: Chaldea/Assyria

Aside from the Egyptian elements, scholars have also pointed to the Chaldean elements in Iamblichus' work and especially to the possible connection to the *Chaldean Oracles*. As I said before, evidence for this connection however is considerably late. It includes a mention in Proclus's biography of a commentary on the Chaldean Oracles, supposedly written by Iamblichus and used by Proclus in his commentarial efforts.[145] Additionally, there is a reference from Pseudo-Julian to a work on one of the Julianii (i.e. one of the authors of the *Chaldean Oracles*) written by Iamblichus.[146] This is interpreted to be a reference to Iamblichus's lost commentary on the *CO*.

This evidence is quickly dispensed with under the strict parameters of method suggested by this dissertation. There is no clear way to link Iamblichus to the *Chaldean Oracles* on the basis of *DM* alone. Iamblichus never directly cites the *Chaldean Oracles*; The closest he comes to anything like a citation is his several occasions the traditions of the Assyrians and Chaldean prophets.[147] He also on one occasion, he defends an allegedly Assyrian form of prayer in contrast to an Egyptian.[148] But none of this conclusively points to a familiarity with the text known as the *Chaldean Oracles*. Nor have any scholars been able to demonstrate that Iamblichus' knowledge of Chaldean religion is comparable to any known Mesopotamian practice.[149] In light of the absence of hard evidence for either a conclusive Egyptian or Assyrian background to *De Mysteriis,* an approach that has no need to assume such connections seems warranted.

4.6 Inconclusive Contexts and the Need for a New Method

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[145] Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 26.
[146] Julian, *Letters* no. 2: To Priscus. The content of this letter and its possible reference to the *Chaldean Oracles* is complicated. Bidez claimed that the letter requested that Priscus should send to Julian the writings of "his" (i.e. Julian's) namesake. Wright interprets this to refer to "his" (i.e.) Iamblichus's namesake.
[147] Traditions of the Assyrians: *DM* 1.2.5.7
Chaldean Sages: *DM* 1.1.4.10
"from the mouths of the Chaldean prophets": *DM* 3.31.176.2
[148] *DM* 6.7.249.
[149] Unlike in the case of Iamblichus' alleged Egyptian elements, I am unaware of an article that even attempts this.

The first part of this second section constituted an interrogation of assumptions that have been prevalent in academic studies of Iamblichus. The goal has been to test the soundness of the argument that Iamblichus is an authentic representative of either Chaldean or Egyptian philosophy. If it could be provable he was, there would be sufficient grounds to simply state, along with Augustine, that "theurgy" is the survival of what elsewhere has been called Egyptian or Chaldean magic. As a consequence, it would be permissible to look for theurgy in the actual barbarian traditions of the late antique world. A fitting conclusion, really, when it is recalled that the very concept of "magic" originates from the Greek understanding of the Assyrian ethnic priest class, the magi. Despite the attractiveness of this neat picture of historical development, I, in agreement with the editors of the English translation of *DM*, cannot justify the confidence some scholars have had and continue to have in Iamblichus as a representative of late antique oriental traditions. It seems to me that such interpretations heavily depend upon credulous trust in Iamblichus to tell us his sources, and I have not seen any evidence that conclusively connects his ideas to authentic Egyptian or Chaldean ideas. By the same token, I argue that it is impossible to derive importance from his lip service to various deities or authoritative writers, the names of which are sufficiently common to be found in the writings of prominent Hellenistic thinkers, including Plutarch and Porphyry himself. Moreover, the investigation of the thematic elements of oriental religious traditions concluded that such features are not sufficiently marked to be a used as a trace to determine authentic transmission of oriental philosophy and or religion. It seems as though in late antiquity, many prominent thinkers were considering god to be mind or intellect in some respect. The skeletal theology which existed was common, and it seems reasonable to speak of a "religion of late antiquity," as a common structure. The "skin" elements that are stretched over this structure are largely cosmetic, and these names are not sufficiently particular to the culture in question to guarantee that the transference of other elements is entirely wholesale. I further challenge the claim that Iamblichus is an authentic transmitter of Egyptian and Chaldean religion, because I believe the assumption that underlies the claim is partially based off modern intellectual horizons, such as the notion that Platonism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, and Theurgic traditions are all part and parcel of the same common structure, an occult "underworld" which has its roots in the East.[150] Such an assumption already primes modern readers to see the features of Egyptian religion more prominently than

[150] For the notion of a Platonic underworld, which gives birth to the various occult traditions of Late Antiquity, see John Dillon, *Middle Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 384-396.

the more prosaic features of Plotinian and Hellenistic philosophy which are, as I hope I have demonstrated, far more prominent. Finally, it should be noted that the implications of seeking these allusions has not been very helpful for understanding how theurgy operates as a minimal unit of significance in *DM*, the first text which uses the term more than once, and which therefore permits scholars to actually interrogate its meaning without resorting to eisegesis.

I know there will be those scholars, especially those who accept the hypotheses of Peter Kingsley or Algis Uzdavinys, who will remain unconvinced by my minimalistic approach to the evidence. Between such scholars and me there is something of an impasse because they assume what I refuse. My approach is to take a much more skeptical approach to religious sources, and to anticipate that such sources are not always truthful about their declarations of transmitting past traditions but are, rather, engaged in the constant project of inventing traditions. Given such an impasse, it is unlikely that one side can logically trump the other, and in lieu of offering such a resolution, I will conclude that the question remains open.

Assuming then that the matter remains open, I will proceed with my minimalistic approach and the remainder of this dissertation will be an attempt to extract the meaning of theurgy as best as one can with evidence only from *DM*, without referring to external Egyptian traditions; and without referring to later remembered traditions of Iamblichean thought as present in Proclus and Psellus and other later Neoplatonists.

5. A Minimalist Analysis and Interpretation of Appearances of Theurgy in *De Mysteriis*

> A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.
>
> —Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy"[151]

5.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to construct a minimalist schema of the meaning of theurgy. I begin with the assumption that the meaning of theurgy should be derivable solely from sentences that include instances of the term and thus some kind of extractable data (however meagre). Thus, in my analysis I pass over any mention of ritual practice or vocabulary of ritual which utilizes language other than theurgy and its cognates.[152] Many of the statements where theurgy appears need to be transformed in order to extract their minimal units of meaning. As the quote from Derrida which serves as an epigraph to this chapter notes, texts hide the rules of their games. In light of this difficulty, I attempt to derive Greimassian algebraic statements in order to provide a standardized means of presenting information about what theurgy is according to what the immanent text predicates of it. These Greimassian algebraic statements simultaneously summarize the main data extracted from the immanent text concerning theurgy, and code this data into categories useful for further analysis. In order to organize the data as I analyze it, I have chosen to divide the statements where theurgy appears into three main categories. I name these categories via positive statements, via negative statements, and theurgy as multiplicity statements. "Via positiva" statements are those passages where Iamblichus explicitly or implicitly reveals some kind of information about the background beliefs or practice of theurgy. I name "via negativa" statements those passages where Iamblichus implicitly or explicitly reveals what theurgy is not. Finally,

[151]Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981) 63.

[152] In other words, I do not choose to include terms like ἱερατκή, τελεστική as elements of theurgy. Cf. Tanaseanu-Döbler, *Therugy in Late Antiquity* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 14-15.

"theurgy as multiplicity" are those statements where Iamblchus reveals that the nature of theurgy is complex or multifaceted. There is necessarily some overlap between this last category and the first category, since technically speaking positing that theurgy is complex is a positivistic statement; nonetheless, the nature of the theurgy as complex phenomena statements inclines me to treat them as a separate category.

In the last part of this chapter, having arrived at some simple statements about what theurgy is (identities), what it consists of (attributes), and its relation to other traditions (relations), I attempt a synthesis of these statements.

The various arguments made by Iamblichus are convoluted, and he seems to be especially guilty of "hiding the rules of his game"; therefore, I spend a great deal of time fleshing out his argument in order to make as much sense of it as I can on a charitable reading. Because I have to backtrack, there is some repetition. I beg my reader's indulgence.

5.2 A Note on Notation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the analysis conducted in this chapter will include a reduction of the immanent source text into minimal units of meaning. In order to distinguish the minimal units as I read them from the immanent text of *DM*, I have placed the minimal units in bold typeface and labeled them with **MU (Minimal Unit)** and an ordinal marker (e.g. **MU-1, MU-2,** etc.) In the previous chapter, I outlined several categories that statements of theurgy may be placed in, and provided each of these categories with a specific symbol. To repeat: data concerning visions or changes of state undergone by the theurgist will be marked with the identifier **T(E)** for experience. I will label informational statements extracted from the immanent text containing data about religious ritual practices **T(PRAX)** for praxis, and I will mark statements that indicate the worldview the supports theurgic practice with **T(WV)** for worldview. **T(PRAX)** as a category may be further divided into two sub-categories **RIT** and **PROCS**. **RIT** indicates that the information provided by the minimal unit identifies specific ritual techniques, that is, religiously motivated procedures with beginning, middle and end. By contrast, **PROCS** is meant to identify ritual processes that, based on the grammar and words of the passages within which they are identified, seem to be characteristic of all rituals. Because processes mark a more general level, what is attributed of processes should, theoretically, accurately describe features of rituals. Additionally, because one of Iamblichus' major thematic elements when discussing theurgy is the problem of agency, I will mark the agent of rituals and activities with **AGNT**. The **AGNT** symbol can be

further modified with either human or god(s). Thus, **AGNT(god[s])** or **AGNT(human[s])**. Some minimal unit ideas are not present in the text at all, but are actually hermeneutical ideas which are necessary in order to interpret the text. I label these assumptions, and they take the symbol **ASSUM.** Finally, and this is especially important for the interpretation of the via negativa statements in *DM* All these statements are summarized in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Minimal Unit Translation Key

Symbol	Meaning
MU	Minimal unit
T(E)	Minimal unit describes an experience which theurgists are supposed to have as a consequence of their involvement in theurgy.
T(PRAX)	Minimal Unit describes some aspect of religious practice
T(PRAX) RIT	Religious practice mentioned in Minimal Unit describes a specific ritual technique, or an attribute of a specific ritual.
T(PRAX) PROCS	Religious practice mentioned describes a general process of ritual, characteristic of all rituals in general
T(WV)	Minimal Unit provides information about the metaphysical worldview which supports and allows for theurgy to work.
T(COMP)	Minimal Unit makes comparison between theurgy and some other recognized practice in late antique religion. T(COMP) will take as its first argument a statement about the religion or practice which is being compared. The second argument will describe the nature of the comparison.

AGNT	Marks the agency of action in a given minimal unit. Can take as argument either human(s) or god(s).
ASSUM	Marks a minimal unit which is not expressed in the text, but which serves as a necessary hermeneutical assumption.
NOT	Marks a minimal unit which is intended to express what theurgy is not. Occasionally NOT statements can be negated to form descriptive statements of what theurgy is.

5.3 Excluded Statements

This chapter aims to, as comprehensively as possible, deal with all statements containing theurgy or one of its cognates in *DM*. However, before addressing the statements where the text can be mined to extract informative content about theurgy, there are a number of statements that I will exclude from the analysis. My rationale is that these immanent textual events do not provide the same level of information about theurgy as the other immanent text instances of theurgy. The excluded statements tend to offer either non-descriptive information or only evaluative information about theurgy, i.e. they make the general claim that theurgy is "good." For example, at DM 10.2.287.8, Iamblichus defends against the claim that theurgy is vagabondry and charlatanry. To this, Iamblichus responds that truth and the gods are the same thing, so a science concerned with the gods, like true theology and theurgy, cannot be accused of falsehood.[153] It may be seen from a statement like this that Iamblichus is not providing any detailed information about theurgy that could be compared to descriptions of other religious practices in late antiquity. Instead, the statement is merely a polemical uniting of theurgy with notions like "truth" or reality. Whether he means to do this consciously or not, Iamblichus elsewhere makes similar comparisons between truth and theurgy. For example, he mentions that there are certain people who because they "love to contemplate theurgic truth" would disagree with Porphyry's claims.[154]

[153] *DM* 10.2.287.3-8. All translations unless otherwise noted are taken from CDH, I retain the British spellings throughout.
[154] *DM* 5.21.228.11-12. (Note: the full context of this particular sentence is actually significant because theurgy is contrasted to a different practice. This will be addressed below.

Here again, truth and theurgy are thematically united, but the actual information that this association provides, the "difference that makes a difference" is essentially nil.

Other statements containing the term theurgy and its cognates that I have not considered relevant to constructing a picture of theurgy are those statements that I call "framing statements." In such statements, Iamblichus claims that he is going to, or has already addressed theurgy in the text, however, due to the fact that he seldom signals his passage into theurgic discourse, it is difficult to make any sense of these statements, or to even take them seriously. An example will help elucidate my point.

The very first appearances of theurgy in *DM* appear in a tautological expression. After having praised Porphyry for asking priests about theological matters, and explaining the complexity of the questions and their varied sources, "Abamon" lays out his methodology for approaching the various intertwined subjects of Porphyry's letter.

> "We will provide in an appropriate manner, explanations proper to each, dealing in a theological mode (θεολογικῶς) with theological questions (τὰ θεολογικὰ) and in theurgical terms (θεουργικῶς) with those concerning theurgy (τὰ θεουργικά), while philosophical issues (τὰ φιλόσοφα) we will join with you in examining in philosophical terms (φιλοσόφως)."[155]

It is unclear from the passage what a theurgical method is, and what theurgical content constitutes. Moreover, throughout *DM*, Iamblichus does not offer a categorization of Porphyry's questions, such as would be expected from the tenor of this passage, which makes it nearly impossible to evaluate to what degree Iamblichus followed his own plan. Little can be gleaned except the assertion that theurgy, philosophy, and theology, all possess their own unique modes of discourse, and that each domain is best explained in its own terms. Such a closing off of the domains to comparative language, would seem to exclude the possibility that one mode of discourse could speak to the problems of another.

However, there is a moment when Iamblichus does mark a shift of discourse from philosophical to theurgic, the distinction he makes between the two modes is difficult to follow. The argument is complicated, and the full passage needs to be considered in its entirety to understand all the argumentative moves Iamblichus is making, and thus to better understand what he intends with his words:

I mention this case only in order to support my previous comments on the relatively empty nature of Iamblichus's propositional statements that theurgy is truth.)

[155] *DM* 1.7.2.3-5.

> Your next remarks, in which you express the view that ignorance and deception about these matters contribute to impiety and impurity, and in which you exhort us toward true traditional teaching, admit of no dispute, but may be agreed on alike by all. For who would not agree that knowledge which alights upon being is most appropriate to the gods, whereas ignorance which declines towards non-being falls very far from the divine cause of true forms. But since it has not been stated with sufficient accuracy, I will add to what is lacking, and because [this suggestion] makes a defense philosophically and logically rather than in accord with the effective skill of the priests, I think it necessary to say something more on the theurgic level (θεουργικώτερον) concerning them.[156]

Iamblichus' use of the comparative adverbial θεουργικώτερον, which may also be translated "more theurgically" serves as an indication that he thinks of the theurgic mode of discourse as graduated in some sense. That is, it is possible to speak of something in a more theurgic or a less theurgic manner. This contradicts Iamblichus's original statement where he posited that there were specific domains and specific questions and it was necessary and possible to answer philosophical things philosophically and theurgical matters theurgically.

In the first part of this passage, Iamblichus paraphrases a series of remarks made by Porphyry into a general categorical topic "ignorance and deception about these matters contribute to impiety and impurity." "These matters" refers back to the main topic of the preceding section of *DM* which was predominantly concerned with the possibility of divine beings (gods and daemons) appearing in a misleading way. Thus, the statement made by Porphyry concerns the etiology of bad religion. Iamblichus agrees with the form of this statement, because he believes he understands better than most what ancestral doctrines really are, and so he is not at all put off by the veiled attack in Porphyry's words that he might be guilty of inventing a religious tradition. In the next part of the passage, Iamblichus takes on a slightly more hostile attitude and tells Porphyry that the manner in which he voices this concern about misleading advertisement of gods and daemons stems from a philosophical and logical perspective, and in order to offer more to this view, he will add "something more on the theurgic level" concerning "ignorance" of the gods. There follows a highly clustered series of statements about theurgy, all of which are directed towards the main argument that theurgists are not actually responsible in either their ratiocinations or their actions for what happens in the sacred rites.

[156] *DM* 2.11.95.12-96.8.

Andrew Smith in his comments on this passage points to this nebulous description of method and draws the conclusion that for Iamblichus, the theurgical mode of explanation is a form of logical argument, and therefore constitutes something of a "reduced form of philosophical or theological explanation."[157] Smith's reasoning for identifying this is considerably different from mine. In the main he seems to be arguing against Dodds and previous scholars who have made the claim that the *DM* is a "manifesto of irrationalism" and his intent seems to be to prove that when *DM* discusses theurgy it does so in a discursive and argumentative manner, not relying on rhetorical tropes of "assertion or authority."[158] He argues that the theoretical layout here reveals that theurgical and theological discourses are still discourses, and still partake of an attempt at argumentation, and on the whole *DM* provides at least a semi-logical response to the concerns raised by Porphyry's letter. Usefully for my purposes, Smith provides an analysis of all the passages where distinctions of method are drawn in *DM* considers what might be the prototypical content of the categories of philosophy, theology, and theurgy. As Smith puts it, "Philosophy…seems to me to include the highest levels of reality in its scope…Iamblichus regarded the traditional gods and divinities as the subject of theology and the neoplatonic hypostases as the domain of philosophy at its highest level."[159]

Thus, Iamblichus accepts philosophical terminology, when it is applied in a certain manner. This is significant, because it is an indication that Iamblichus' initial statements about the necessity of three partitioned off discourses do not hold true throughout the entirety of the text. This is all the more apparent at the end of *DM* where Iamblichus states, as though putting a capstone on his work, "Thus, to the best of our ability, have we responded to the problems you have raised about divine prophecy and theurgy."[160] Such a statement would seem to imply that Iamblichus has categorized the entirety of Porphyry's questions as concerned with "divine prophecy," "theurgy," or both, with the understanding that theurgy and divine prophecy are more or less the same.

On the basis of these two framing statements, I am inclined to doubt whether Iamblichus really has any control over his text as a whole. His posits and then seems to ignore his introductory method, and his closing capstone on the entirety of his treatise

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[157] Smith, "Iamblichus' Views on the Relationship of Philosophy to Religion in *De Mysteriis*," in Andrew Smith, *Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus* (Ashgate, 2011), 74.
[158] Smith, "Iamblichus' Views on the Relationship of Philosophy to Religion in *De Mysteriis*," in Andrew Smith, *Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus* (Ashgate, 2011), 75.
[159] Ibid., 77.
[160] *DM* 10.8.293.11-12.

suggests that he had very different aims at the end of writing it than at the beginning. Noticing this seeming shift in attitude, I suggest that *DM* should be recognized as much more of a work in progress, as a series of individual micro-treatises about theurgy that at the end are supposed to add up to an overall perspective. But how successful is Iamblichus in this project? The remainder of this chapter catalogues and transforms the immanent textual expressions of theurgy into minimal units of meaning precisely in order to determine to what degree Iamblichus offers a coherent picture of theurgy. In the following pages, I will explore the remaining positivistic and negativistic statements about theurgy which Iamblichus makes in *DM*. This will provide some data to test Iamblichus' consistency.

5.4 *Via Positiva* Statements about Theurgy

Turning from the initial discussion on Iamblichus' uses of the term theurgy to mark a mode of discourse to what he predicates and denies of theurgy, the first category of passages to consider are those which concern either directly or indirectly what theurgy is or what theurgy does. I call these statements "via positive" because they offer actual posited information about what theurgy is. In the next section I address the "via negative" statements, that is, the statements that provide hints of definition of what theurgy is by saying what it is not. In accordance with the method of this dissertation, it will be necessary to transform and translate the immanent text in order to extract these definitions. This discussion and analysis follows the order of the immanent text statements as they appear.

DM 1.9

With all these guidelines in mind, the first instance to consider appears in book 1 and is part of a paraphrase of a question made by Porphyry. The passage reads:

> I propose, therefore, to assume that you are not asking the question, "Why, seeing that the gods dwell solely in the heavens, do theurgists invoke terrestrial and subterranean beings?" because your initial hypothesis here is unsound, to the effect that the gods go about only in the heavens….I prefer to take it that you are asking this: "how comes it that some divinities are termed 'aquatic' and 'aerial,' different ones being allotted to different locations, and circumscribed within distinct types of bodily substance,

whereas in fact they possess a potency which is unlimited and undivided and uncircumscribed."[161]

In this passage, Iamblichus posits a question, which he assumes Porphyry is *not* asking. And he next proposes to revise this unasked question in order to respond to that sentiment. As has been mentioned before it is difficult to assume that any of these statements are authentically Porphyrian, but which one of these statements, the unasked or the revised question does Iamblichus accede to? I will posit here that both questions, the one Iamblichus explicitly presumes Porphyry is not asking, "Why, seeing that the gods dwell solely in the heavens, do theurgists invoke terrestrial and subterranean beings?" and the rewritten question, "how comes it that some divinities are termed 'aquatic' and 'aerial,' different ones being allotted to different locations, and circumscribed within distinct types of bodily substance, whereas in fact they possess a potency which is unlimited and undivided and uncircumscribed" together offer an approximation Iamblichus's own views on theurgy.

It is especially noteworthy that Iamblichus does not attack the notion that theurgists invoke terrestrial and subterranean beings; instead he focuses his critique on the claim "seeing that the gods dwell solely in the heavens." Because he attacks the one point, but not the other, it seems to me that Iamblichus implicitly accepts the statement that theurgists *do* in fact, invoke terrestrial and subterranean beings. This claim is further supported by the fact that in the rewritten question these same beings are explicitly referred to as being termed "aquatic" and "aerial." From these two pieces of information, it seems plausible to offer as a reading that Iamblichus accepts that theurgists actually do in fact invoke beings that are said to be localized.

The remainder of the passage where this appears delves into metaphysical distinctions with Iamblichus essentially explaining that these beings are not themselves localized, but rather the unlocalized gods are refracted by matter into various domains, and so they "shine their light" on certain domains with preference. It may be said in relative terms that the gods belong to one domain or another, but in an absolute sense there is no such thing as essential terrestrial and subterranean beings.

To sum up the analysis of this passage, in Iamblichus' attacks on the metaphysical foundations which he attributes to Porphyry in this passage, he at no point denies that theurgists do perform rituals directed at apparently localized deities. It is unclear from this particular presentation whether these rituals are process that are performed all the time, if

[161] *DM* 1.9.29.13-30.4.

every theurgic rite contains a reference to a localized, elemental deity. In the absence of more specificity I read this passage as a statement of a specific rite. Finally, assuming that theurgists are in fact humans, the code for agency may also be settled. Thus the minimal unit, which in prose may read:

Theurgists sometimes invoke beings which are thought to be tied to the earth in some sense.

Following the schema that introduced this chapter, this may be translated into the first coded minimal unit that provides information about what theurgists actually do:

MU-1 T(PRAX) RIT (directed at localized beings); AGNT (humans)

DM 1.12

Later in book 1, Iamblichus addresses for the first time the recurring problem of agency in ritual. Porphyry's original statement to which Iamblichus responds in this passage is phrased thusly: "But invocations…are addressed to the gods as if they were subject to external influence, so that it is not only daemons that are thus subject but also the gods."[162] In his attack on this point, Iamblichus states that "the illumination that comes about as a result of invocations is self-revelatory and self-willed, and is far removed from being drawn down by force, but rather proceeds to manifestation by reason of divine energy and perfection."[163] In other words, the gods will their own manifestation, but paradoxically this results from "the invocations" which are never denied as being human performed acts. After this answer, Iamblichus elaborates further and states:

> It is by virtue of such will then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon theurgists, summoning up them to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, even while still in the body, to detach themselves from their bodies, and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.[164]

It is significant in this passage that the theurgists are not made the agents of the activities they experience. The main subject of this paragraph is "the gods" who act on the theurgists and who "accustom" the theurgists to separating their souls from their bodies, even while in the bodies. Therefore, in order to translate this statement into a statement about what theurgists

[162] *DM* 1.12.40.12-13.
[163] *DM* 1.12.39.14-15.
[164] *DM* 1.12.41.3-8.

experience, it is necessary to retranslate Iamblichus's statements so that the theurgists are the main subjects. This does not seem to me to be an overly violent move on the text, however I will retain a note in the algebraic formulation to clarify the agency.

Thus, from this statement, it may be said that **theurgists rise and unite with the gods** and **theurgists practice a kind of soul-separation which does not lead to the complete dissolution of the link between soul and body (i.e. death)**. In algebraic form these would be:

MU-2 T(E) Union with gods; AGNT (the gods)

MU-3 T(E) Light shed on theurgists; AGNT (the gods)

MU-4 T(E) Soul separation while alive; AGNT (humans)

DM 2.8

The next appearance which offers information concerning theurgy, appears in book two as part of a response to Porphyry's question regarding the distinguishing characteristics of the manifestations of gods, daemons, archangels, and heroes. Iamblichus only refers to the theurgists twice in this passage and curiously only in reference to two levels of these beings. Because the references are so similar and appear in the same context, they deserve to be treated simultaneously. The first passage reads:

"The advent of angels leaves the temperature of the air endurable, so that it is actually possible for theurgists to engage with it."[165]

The other passage reads:

"In the case of heroes, certain parts of the earth are moved and noises echo around; but the air as a whole does not become too fine or unsuitable for the theurgists, so that it is possible for them to tolerate it."[166]

These passages appear as part of a discussion about the characteristics of the various gods as part of an answer to the question how to determine whether one is seeing a god, a daemon, a hero, etc. in their manifestations. It thus presupposes a worldview where it is possible for these things to visually manifest, and given the description of theurgists interacting (whether tolerating or engaging) along with the description especially of heroes causing the earth to move, suggests that these are not, in Iamblichus's worldview, visionary

[165] *DM* 2.8.86.12-13
[166] *DM* 2.8.87.3-5.

experiences but real manifestations in the presence of the theurgists. Moreover, the very catalogue of the various beings and their characteristics which makes up the principle content of *DM* 2.3-2.9, further suggests that this book is meant to be a manual for the practical identification of divine beings.

Focusing on the actual passages with the appearances of the term theurgy, it may be seen that they share in common the same general structure, with a description about dangers produced by the manifestation in question, which nonetheless does not harm the theurgists in any way. In fact, theurgists are, according to this passage able to engage and interact with forces that would ordinarily be harmful.

These two passages may be reduced in their content to the general notion that **theurgists are benefitted by manifestations from divine beings, whereas ordinary people are harmed.**

This idea is clearly descriptive of an experience anticipated as an outcome of a ritual practice—the nature of that ritual is never described, and so this passage cannot generate a minimal unit on the topic of praxis. At minimum, what these two passages state is:

MU-5 T(E) [Beneficial irradiation from divine spirits]

***DM* 2.10**

Later in this same book, Iamblichus addresses Porphyry's statement regarding the possibility of misleading appearances in divine apparitions. The idea here is that it is possible for evil, or lesser gods to masquerade as good or superior gods. Iamblichus claims that such misleading appearances occur as a result of the improper execution of theurgic technique. He writes:

> When, then, does that which you call "deceitful," that is misleading self-advertisement actually happen? When some error occurs in the theurgic technique, and the images in the divine vision are not such as they should be, but others of a different kind are encountered, then inferior kinds, taking on the appearance of more venerable orders, pretend to be that which they assume, and thereupon deliver boastful speeches while claiming more than their actual power.[167]

Iamblichus reveals in this passage that proper technique of theurgy is necessary in order to achieve not only good results, but also to avoid daemonic deception. This stands in marked

[167] *DM* 2.10.91.6-11.

contrast to the view expressed above in DM 1.12[168] and elsewhere that theurgy operates either through divine agency or automatically. Here, at least, it is relatively clear that theurgic technique plays an important role. Thus, the extractable information from this passage is as follows:

Theurgists have agency over the performance of theurgy

Theurgic operations work through proper performance

Furthermore, Iamblichus' statements earlier suggests that proper technique is a determining factor in all ritual success. Therefore, it seems appropriate to treat this statement as the first minimal unit offering information about ritual process.

These statements may be algebraicized into:

MU-6 T(PRAX) PROCS (Proper performance of ritual); AGNT(human)

A little later on in this same passage, Iamblichus problematizes this idea, saying "[the gods] reveal at the outset their own being to those who contemplate them; hence, they shown in particular theurgists the fire in a direct vision of divinity."[169] Here, all thought of theurgy as properly performed technique is dismissed, and Iamblichus returns to a rhetorical presentation of theurgic truth as actuality. Iamblichus has essentially allowed that practitioners of theurgy or theurgy-esque activities can be deceived if they perform the rituals improperly, but then he declares that the gods would never allow such a thing to occur, especially not to those humans known as "theurgists."

This discussion produces the following two statements:

Theurgists experience a vision of pure fire at some point in their lives or practices,

and

contemplation is a prerequisite for proper theurgic practice,

which yields these minimal units

MU-7 T(E) Vision of Pure Fire; AGNT (gods)

MU-8 T(PRAX) PROCS (contemplation); AGNT(humans)

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[168] *DM* 1.12.39.14-15: "the illumination that comes about as a result of invocations is self-revelatory and self-willed, and is far removed from being drawn down by force, but rather proceeds to manifestation by reason of divine energy and perfection."

[169] *DM* 2.10.92.14-93.2. This translation is slightly modified from CDH. I have chosen to translate τοῖς θεουργοῖς literally as "the theurgists," whereas the English translators have preferred the circumlocution "performers of the sacramental rites." With all due respect, I would argue that CDH's choice emphasizes and reinforces their identification of theurgists with general practitioners of priestly acts throughout, and make an unnecessary blurring between the concepts of theurgy and hieratic actions.

***DM* 2.11**

The next instance to consider appears as part of an extended digression on a point raised by Porphyry on the basic theme that "ignorance," "deception," and impious novelty are improper in the practice of true religion.[170] The author of *DM* admits this to be the case but states that the argument as it stands is incomplete because it addresses matters only from a philosophical and logical perspective. Moreover, he attacks the conclusion that Porphyry draws from the premise, namely that sacrifice and offerings to the gods are invalid. If sacrifice were invalid, Iamblichus says, then the only means open to union with the gods would be theoretical contemplation.[171] He writes:

> For, let it be so that ignorance and deception are faulty and impious, this is not why the appropriate offerings to the gods and the divine works are false, for pure thought does not unite the theurgists to the gods. Then what hinders those who do philosophy in a theoretical mode from having theurgic union with the gods? But such a thing is not true [i.e. theoretical philosophers do not have theurgic union]. Rather, the accomplishment of actions both secret and beyond all conception and the power of the unutterable symbols contemplated only by the gods establishes theurgic union.[172]

This passage is rather esoteric. The main topic of the passage is not "theurgy" per se, but "theurgic union." Thus, in order to arrive at a useful statement about theurgy it is necessary to rearrange the wording and apply a reasonable assumption.

The basic assumption required is: **that which is ancillary to theurgic union is the same as theurgy.** In other words, **theurgy establishes theurgic union**. In minimal units this could be expressed:

ASSUM-1 Theurgy results in theurgic union.

Accepting **ASSUM-1**, it may be inferred that **predications of what triggers theurgic union may also be predicated of theurgy.** Or, algebraically:

ASSUM-2 If x -> theurgic union, then x = theurgy.

Thus, from the original passage, it is possible to extract the following statement:

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[170] *DM* 2.11.95.12 – 96.2.
[171] *DM* 2.11.96.11-13.
[172] *DM* 2.22.96.9-97.2 (translation and explanatory brackets mine).

"…**the accomplishment of actions both secret and beyond all conception and the power of the unutterable symbols contemplated only by the gods establishes theurgic union.**"

and convert it into two statements:

1) **the accomplishment of actions both secret and beyond all conception results in theurgic union**
2) **the power of the unutterable symbols contemplated only by the gods results in theurgic union**

It was posited above that **what leads to theurgic union is theurgy (ASSUM-2)**, so these two statements may be further translated:

1) **Theurgy = performance by means of actions both secret and beyond all conception**

2) **Theurgy = the power of unutterable symbols contemplated only by the gods**

In order to make these expressions useful for a more general analysis, it is necessary to further refine these statements into algebraic purity. As for the first, the identity on both sides of the equals sign clearly indicates that theurgy is here related to some kind of action or operation. Therefore, the statement may be reworded:

The general performance of theurgy has as an attribute actions both secret and beyond all conception

This statement may in turn be reduced to:

MU-9 T(PRAX) PROCS (Actions ["secret" +"beyond conception"])

The second, phrase, **Theurgy = the power of unutterable symbols contemplated only by the gods,** does not quite make sense on its own. Given that theurgy is an activity, one would expect that a similar idea of activity would be present on the opposite side of the equals sign, as there was in the first extracted phrase where theurgy was equivalent to "accomplishment." It may be that this short line bears witness to one of the confusions of Iamblichus' own philosophy, which seems to resist this kind of formal redescription. Who or what is/are the agent of this activity? Is it the humans using the symbols? Is it the symbols themselves? Is it the gods who contemplate the symbols? The passage makes it very difficult to determine this. The minimum that can be said is:

The general performance of theurgy is the activity of unutterable symbols, which are contemplated by the gods.

Thus,

The general performance of theurgy has as a feature the use of unutterable symbols, which are contemplated by the gods.

This statement may in turn be reduced to:

> **MU-10 T(PRAX) PROCS {(use of unutterable symbols [contemplated by gods])}**

***DM* 3**

Book 3 of *DM* is predominantly occupied with the topic of divination. Theurgy especially arises in the midst of a discussion concerning what differentiates theurgists from what appears to be another class of ritualists, namely, the image-makers. However, this discussion, because it is concerned with defining theurgy by emphasizing what it is not (what I call, the via negativa), will be dealt with in the next section. In the meantime, however, there are two closely joined instances of the term theurgy which appear at the end of book 3 in positivistic statements which can be translated into propositional arguments about what theurgy is.

The passages in question are *DM* 3.31.179.7 and 3.31.179.8. After having differentiated the theurgists practices and personality from that of false demon worshippers, Iamblichus declares in a heated climax:

> This, then, is one kind of mantic, which is undefiled and sacerdotal, and truly divine; and "this does not need," as you [Porphyry] say, "either myself or anyone else as umpire…" 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. And it is proper for you and everyone who is a genuine lover of the gods to surrender himself to it wholly. 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 every theurgic operation.[173]

The "this" of the first sentence comes quite out of nowhere. In the preceding lines, Iamblichus discusses the manner in which evil daemons flee from theurgists. Here it seems that the "this" refers to the process wherein these seemingly miraculous events happen,

[173] *DM* 3.31.178.13-179.8.

namely theurgy itself. If so, the "this" in the statement "[t]his them is one kind of mantic…" may be taken as a statement about theurgy. Therefore: **Theurgy is a kind of mantic [divination].** This is one of the few bits of data relating theurgy to another known practice. This statement may be reformulated into standardized language as:

When theurgy is compared with divination, theurgy is revealed to be a hypotaxis of divination

In code, this would be:

MU-11 T(COMP) Divination; hypotactic

The remainder of this passage confuses matters further. After having stated that theurgy is a type of divination, Iamblichus goes on to state that this particular type of divination leads to "truth in oracles" and "perfect virtue."[174] These two qualities in turn result in "ascent to the intelligible fire," which seems in some sense reserved for the theurgists, insofar as it is "granted" to them (and presumably not many others). From this one can derive the minimal unit:

The theurgists experience ascent to intelligible fire

Moreover, given that this experience is explicitly said to be "granted" to the theurgists, it seems reasonable to attribute agency over this experience to the gods. Thus:

The gods grant the theurgists the experience of ascent to intelligible fire

Or:

MU-12 T(E) ascent to intelligible fire; AGNT (the gods)

This passage contains another minimal unit. The passage ends with a declaration that the aforementioned "ascent to the intelligible fire" is the "goal of all foreknowledge and every theurgic operation."[175] The "and" that joins "foreknowledge" and "theurgic operation" is a translation of the Greek δὲ, which is much weaker than the other possible variants of "and" such as "καὶ" and "τε... καὶ." Therefore, it seems reasonable translate this δὲ with more of a conjunctive connotation, rather than the disjunctive. In other words, the two items which are joined on either side of the δὲ are not to be thought of as independent means for attaining "ascent to the intelligible fire," but rather they should be treated as a periphrastic of the same idea; so, theurgic operation and foreknowledge (προγνώσεως) are here meant to be treated as equivalents. While it is true that this passage appears only a few lines later, it seems valuable to retain both this minimal unit and the preceding one, even though they contradict. Indeed,

[174] *DM* 3.31.179.5-6.
[175] *DM* 3.31.179.7-8.

the contradiction is valuable in itself for the present analysis. Thus, the last minimal unit in this passage is:

MU-13 T(COMP) Divination; Identical

***DM* 4**

Book 4, which is predominantly concerned with the nature of evil, and how humans can command the gods, contains only one instance of theurgy. The instance appears in connection with the topic of how humans may order the gods to perform whatever kinds of wishes they might so desire. Iamblichus offers two independent solutions for this. His first explanation, though it does not contain any instance of the term theurgy, seems worth delving into for the potential contrast it provides to his second explanation. In his first explanation, he invents a category of divine beings, which he repetitively describes as being "devoid of reason and judgement"[176] and as having "no reason or principle judgement of their own."[177] Such beings are addressed as superiors, he says, in order "to attract, from the world surrounding us, those beings which contribute to the whole, to concern themselves with what inheres in individual things."[178] So it seems safe to say that in this first explanation, Iamblichus imagines a universe wherein some humans make invocations to superior beings who then seem to send an inferior version of themselves to then be ordered around. Again, this section makes no mention of the term theurgy, so it is not useful for the present project.

After the first explanation suggesting that invocations are addressed to what can only be called "idiot spirits" Iamblichus explicitly notes that he is shifting into a new explanation, stating, "[t]here is another explanation that one might give of this." It is here in this second explanation that he mentions theurgy, and so this is the main object for the present concern:

> There is another explanation that one might give of this, and that is the following: the whole of theurgy presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it is performed by men, and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but on the other, it controls divine symbols, and in virtue of them is raised up to union with the higher powers, and directs itself harmoniously in accordance with their dispensation, which enables it quite properly to assume the mantle of the gods. It is in virtue of this distinction then, that the art both naturally invokes the powers from the universe as superiors,

[176] *DM* 4.1.182.2.
[177] *DM* 4.2.183.3.
[178] *DM* 4.2.183.7.

inasmuch as the invoker is a man, and yet on the other hand gives them orders since it invests itself, by virtue of the ineffable symbols, with the hieratic role of the gods.[179]

The wording of this passage is somewhat unusual. Elsewhere it seems Iamblichus fairly standardly uses theurgists when he is referring to the actions of people performing theurgy. In this passage, however, he distinctively states that "the art," which based on the rest of the context of the paragraph must refer to theurgy itself, "invokes the powers from the universe as superiors…and…gives them orders…since it invests itself…with the hieratic role of the gods."[180]

In spite of the literal statements of the text, I would argue that it is necessary to translate this phrase into a statement about what humans do, and this is especially supported by the phrase in the second line of this excerpt that "[theurgy] is performed by men." Once again, Iamblichus plays with the notion of agency in this passage, blurring the distinctions, and making it difficult to determine just who or what exactly is performing theurgy. This is further apparent in the very statements he makes about theurgy in this passage, namely that it operates on both human and divine levels. It is also worth noting that Iamblichus declares that the "whole of theurgy" consists of the various attributes considered here. I therefore take it that this should be thought of as a general feature of theurgy as a whole, i.e. a process.

The information considered in this passage from book 4 may be condensed into:

Theurgy generally consists of humans ordering divine beings because the humans are in some sense divinized in the very performance of theurgy.

This statement may be further subdivided into two separate statements:

Theurgy consists of humans ordering divine beings

And

Theurgy divinizes humans in the very performance of theurgy

These may be respectively reduced to:

MU-14 T(PRAX) PROCS (humans order gods); AGNT (human)

MU-15 T(E) humans become gods; AGNT (blurred)

DM 5.14

Book 5 of *DM* contains three important instances of theurgy. It should be recalled that the main content of book 5 concerns several problems with the issue of sacrifice. At the

[179] *DM* 4.2.184.1-10.
[180] *DM* 4.2.184.7-10.

outset, Iamblichus reasserts Porphyry's claim about the impropriety of priests sacrificing animals to the gods when the priests themselves must abstain from eating meat.[181] Much as in book 4, Iamblichus attacks several implicit assumptions here. For example, he notes that the reason why the priests have to abstain from meat is because it purifies them, not because it prevents them from desacralizing the gods (an apparent impossibility).[182] For Iamblichus, the abstention of meat in order to purify the self and detoxify the priestly body has no bearing whatsoever on whether it is right to sacrifice to the gods. This is only one of the possible explanations, however. As in the case above with book 4, Iamblichus offers a variety of explanations. The explanation relevant for the consideration of the meaning of theurgy arises in 5.14, where Iamblichus argues that there are certain classes of divine beings: material and immaterial gods.[183] The distinction, he is careful to stress, is not on what the gods themselves are made out of but rather it is a matter of what they focus on. Thus, "material" gods are those gods which are predominantly concerned with physical entities in the world. Moreover, it is necessary, if one wishes to sacrifice to the immaterial gods, to begin by sacrificing to the material gods. Such material gods demand "a material mode of worship." This material mode of worship is further clarified in the passage to include "dead bodies deprived of life, the slaughter of animals, and the consumption of their bodies, and every sort of change and destruction, and in general processes of dissolution." Iamblichus stresses that these items are appealing to the material gods not because of any posited likeness between the material gods and these dead or decaying substances, but again because these are the sort of things that they watch over. Elsewhere he also notes that the material gods are occasionally pleased by preservation of certain material items as well, which explains the existence of certain food taboos in some cultures.

While explaining the necessity of worshipping material gods, Iamblichus uses the term theurgy:

> According to the art of the priests, one must begin the sacrificial process from the material gods; for by no other route is ascent possible to the immaterial gods…If then, one wishes to worship such gods with theurgic rites [lit. "theurgically], it is in accordance with their nature and with the sphere of authority which they have been

[181] *DM* 5.1.199.10-13.
[182] *DM* 5.3.201.1-9.
[183] Incidentally, this explanatory strategy, positing a distinction in kinds of divine beings, is quite similar to his approach in *DM* 4.1.182.2 and *DM* 4.2.183.3.

allotted that one should render them worship, that is to say, material worship, even as they are material.[184]

This passage treats theurgy as a mode of worship and explicitly states that one can worship in a theurgic manner. It does not specify, nor is there any evidence in any other passage of *DM* to suggest that Iamblichus envisioned non-theurgic modes of worship, such as this passage would seem to imply. However, since the present goal is to derive the minimum amount of meaning out of each passage, it seems reasonable on my reading to note the adverbial power of "theurgically" here. In the above passage, Iamblichus explicitly states that theurgy must begin with the worship of material gods.

Or, in algebraic form:

MU-16 T(PRAX) PROCS (necessary to begin with worship of material gods).

Additionally, the fact that this worship of the material gods is referred to as a theurgic mode of worship provides the further minimal unit:

MU-17 T(PRAX) RIT (worship of material gods)

DM 5.18-19

In *DM* 5.18, Iamblichus makes a tripartite anthropological division between "the great mass of men," "a certain few individuals" and those "who conduct themselves in the middle area between nature and pure mind" and assigns to each of these classes a particular mode of worship. It is helpful to repeat in full what he says:

> Those who are governed by universal nature and who themselves make use of the powers of nature, practise a mode of worship which is suited to nature and to those bodies which are moved by natural causes, paying due attention to particular localities and climatic conditions and matter and powers of matter, and bodies and the dispositions and qualities attendant on bodies, and motions and changes proper to things subject to generation, and to what depends upon these both in the other departments of worship and in the area of sacrifices.[185]

According to Iamblichus, naturalistic humans, who correspond to what he earlier called "the great mass of men," practice a mode of worship that is especially concerned with "localities" and "matter." The various features of this, for lack of a better word, "naturalistic" worship,

[184] *DM* 5.14.217.8-218.2.
[185] *DM* 5.18.224.6-13.

are named its "departments of worship and sacrifice." This mode of referring to the "departments of worship" is worth keeping in mind while reading the next section:

> Those, on the other hand, who conduct their lives in accordance with intellect alone and the life according to intellect, and who have been freed from the bonds of nature, practise and intellectual and incorporeal rule of sacred procedure in respect of all the departments of theurgy.[186]

This passage provides the reference to theurgy, which makes all the surrounding passages valuable for the search for the minimal meaning of theurgy. Here, the phrase "departments of theurgy" refers to the domain of "sacred procedure" as practiced by the anthropological class "who conduct their lives in accordance with intellect alone." The last section, describing the practices of those who are neither pure intellect nor governed by nature is also worth reviewing:

> Those median between these pursue their work in accordance with the differences manifested within the median area and the different ways of worship proper to that, either participating in both modes of worship, or withdrawing themselves from the former type, or accepting them as a basis for proceeding towards the more noble type (for without these the superior type could not be attained to), or employing the sacred rites in some other such suitable way.

This last passage makes no mention of theurgy, but indirectly refers to the practices of both types, and reiterates the claim already seen in **MU-15** that access to higher immaterial gods through immaterial worship is dependent on the worshipper having first performed material and less noble worship.

All of this sounds like theurgy is on a spectrum of worship, but it seems particularly telling that the term theurgy is only used to refer to the higher kind of immaterial worship. The use of the near similar formulation "departments of worship and sacrifices" in relation to the formula "departments of theurgy" strongly suggests some relation between these two. Either these two terms are in a balanced relationship because they are so close, or Iamblichus means to deliberately contrast them.

From the minimal perspective, it seems that all that can be said is **that the highest class of human beings performs theurgy**, and that **other practices are related to theurgy in a somewhat unclear way.**

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[186] *DM* 5.18.225.1-4.

MU-18 T(PRAX) PROCS (Theurgy labels highest level); AGNT (humans "freed from the bonds of nature")

MU-19 T(COMP) departments of worship; unclear relation

***DM* 5.20**

DM 5.20 begins with a signal that the following explanation in some sense is meant to correlate with what has gone before, on a different basis. Iamblichus writes, "If we take our start, however, from another angle…we will find ourselves with a ready mode of access to the true principles on which the performance of sacred rites should be based."[187] This section contains a cursory explanation of how the universe is composed of elements and the ordered revolution of everything about the center. There next follows a suggestion, phrased in a somewhat hypothetical mode:

> Let us posit, then, that for each part of the cosmos there is on the one hand this body that we can see, and on the other hand the various particular incorporeal forces associated with bodies. Now the rule of cult obviously assigns like to like…However when one makes contact in a hyperscosmic mode with the gods of theurgy (which is an exceedingly rare occurrence, such an individual will be one who has transcended the bounds of bodies and matter in the service of the gods, and who is united to the gods through hypercosmic power.[188]

I interpret this passage to mean that there is an ordinary mode of operating with theurgy, whereby the various material entities correspond and correlate with their spiritual counterparts. It seems that even material cult and worship still activates the incorporeal forces which coexist alongside the material forces. And yet, there is a different mode of this (heavily contrasted with the word "however,") which one attains through "service of the gods" and this results in a hypercosmic union with the "gods of theurgy." This formulation "gods of theurgy" does not appear at any point in any other of Iamblichus' writings, and so it is impossible to determine just what he means by this term. Does he mean there is a level of gods that surpasses the usual level of gods, and so is theurgy here simply meant in a superlative sense? Under such a reading, the gods of theurgy would be gods considerably beyond the ordinary level. Or, does the modifying force of theurgy here relate more to the

[187] *DM* 5.20.227.1-5.
[188] *DM* 5.20.227.11-228.5.

fact that these gods are the ones that are being specifically contacted through the theurgic rite? In other words, are the gods here labeled theurgic based on the fact that they are being contacted in a certain manner?

Further passages seem to prevent at least one reading, namely, that theurgy marks a level of development that is superior to ordinary ritual. This interpretation is precluded by the statements which closely follow on the present passages wherein Iamblichus notes that:

> One should not therefore take a feature that manifests itself in the case of a particular individual, as the result of great effort and long preparation, at the consummation of the hieratic art, and present it as something common to all men, but not even as something immediately available to those beginning theurgy, nor yet those who have reached a middling degree of proficiency in it; for even these latter endow their performance of cult with some degree of corporeal influence.[189]

Despite the fact that Iamblichus has signaled the start of a new argument at the beginning of *DM* 5.20, the description of development of different domains of ritual practice seems to recall the preceding argument in *DM* 5.19. Here, however, there is no indication that theurgy is reserved terminology for the highest form of ritual. Instead, it seems the domain has expanded to at least refer to the beginning and intermediate level of practice. It is probably safe to assume that Iamblichus would continue to call the highest level of practice theurgy as well.

From all this, two minimal units may be generated:

1)Theurgy as a term is applicable to the practices being performed by beginners, intermediates, and advanced practitioners.

2) The gods in some sense are labeled theurgic (though whether because of the practices aimed at them or because of their level is unclear.)

These two ideas may be reduced in turn to

MU-20 T(PRAX) PROCS ("theurgy" names three levels of developmental practices)

MU-21 T(WV) specific entity (Theurgic gods)

***DM* 5.21**

The next major pericope in book 5 contains two instances of theurgy, which are only separated by a line. Both deal with an issue of the structure of religious ritual. In this section,

[189] *DM* 5.20.228.5-10.

Iamblichus is responding to an implied question from Porphyry regarding whether ritual should be simple or complex: "must the mode of ceremony be simple, consisting of a few essentials, or must it be multiform and panharmonic, and composed, so to speak, out of everything contained in the world?"[190] From the passage it seems that this question is not a repetition of a point made by Porphyry, but is rather an example of Iamblichus discoursing with himself. It is conceivable however, that this the kind of question is meant to fill in the gaps between one of Porphyry's questions, or to supply an otherwise missing component. At any rate, based on the information supplied in Iamblichus' answer, it seems that Iamblichus interpreted this as a question about whether a practitioner should have more of a monotheistic focus or whether he or she should try to incorporate all possible deities into one's performance of cult. This interpretation is especially borne out in Iamblichus' rapid transition to the notion, which he attributes to the "theurgists [who] know these things exactly through having made trial of them in practice," that "any elements omitted, even minor ones, can subvert the whole performance of cult."[191] This insight leads him to the conclusion that all the gods must receive some measure of cult, "each one without exception, according to the rank which they have been allotted. He who leaves any without its share of honour subverts the whole, and wrenches asunder the unity of the total system."[192]

Regarding his use of theurgy in this micro-argument, Iamblichus attributes all the views he prefers to the theurgists, and emphasizes that they understand this due to their particular knowledge, which he characterizes as empirical. At the start of 5.21, he says that the fact that "one should not connect the gods up with the cult pertaining to them in any partial or incomplete way" is a view "recognized by all those who love to contemplate theurgic truth."[193] Likewise in the next appearance of theurgy, Iamblichus stresses that "only the theurgists know these things through having made trial of them in practice." These statements clarify something of the worldview of the theurgists as well as the nature of their practice:

Theurgists know that complex cult is necessary.

This is both a statement about how actual theurgic practice is performed, as well as a statement about the philosophical worldview that is necessary for such practice to make sense. Thus it may be formulated into two, closely related, minimal units.

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[190] *DM* 5.21.229.6-9.
[191] *DM* 5.21.230.1-3.
[192] *DM* 5.21.230.8-11.
[193] *DM* 5.21.228.11-12.

MU-22 T(WV) requires complex cult
MU-23 T(PRAX) PROCS (complex cult)

***DM* 5.23**

DM 5.23 smoothly but definitely transitions into another subconcern, which seems again to be raised by Iamblichus himself. Iamblichus writes "There is no harm, at this point, in adding certain further points in order to clarify our understanding of these matters"[194] a phrasing which would seem to indicate that the following statements are not indirect response to Porphyry, but are intended rather to be points that Iamblichus himself simply felt inspired to address. The issue in question seems to have to do with the potentially astonishing statement about the nature of matter. As Iamblichus writes, "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."[195] All of this sets the stage for his next statement where he describes a particular practice in theurgy:

> 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 from all these composes an integrated and pure receptacle.[196]

In this passage the actions of the theurgists are attributed to a personified "theurgic art." The bare minimum one can say about theurgy in this passage is that it **constructs a receptacle from multiple material substances**. It is worth noting the vagueness of Iamblichus' statement that this happens "in many cases." He seems to want to avoid a commitment to one particular point of view about whether theurgy should employ material or not. This may be because of his statement about the non-use of matter in a particular theurgic rite in book 8 (see below).

In the meantime, however, this section may be concluded with the simple minimal unit:

MU-24 T(PRAX) RIT (use of matter to create receptacle for gods)

[194] *DM* 5.23.232.8-9.
[195] *DM* 5.23.232.12-13.
[196] *DM* 5.23.233.9-13.

DM 8

Books 6 and 7 contain no appearances of the term theurgy. The next appearance of theurgy appears in book 8 in the midst of a discussion about the Egyptian concept of the first cause. It seems that Iamblichus wants to defend Egyptian religion against the possible critique that it possesses no notion of a higher metaphysics beyond a pantheon of wrathful and jealous deities. It is apparent again from Iamblichus' arguments and the kinds of information he provides that Porphyry's question focused on the notion that traditional Egyptian religion would seem to confine the individual soul below the realm of fate.[197]

In opposition to this view, Iamblichus develops an argument that eventually arrives at the notion that there is a monotheistic god at the top of the Egyptian hierarchy. He first notes that there are a multiplicity of views regarding Egyptian religion.[198] Next he offers a slightly more detailed description of some of these views, apparently with the intent of demonstrating their similarity and especially their adherence to a belief that includes the notion of a god superior to fate, who can then act as a savior by assisting his followers to overcome their own subjection to fate.

Theurgy appears in a passage where Iamblichus summarizes and synthesizes the views of the Egyptians:

> The Egyptians do not maintain that all things are within the realm of nature, but they distinguish the life of the soul and that of the intellect from nature, not only at the level of the universe but also in our case. Postulating intellect and reason as higher principles subsisting on their own, they declare that all things generated were created by their means. They set up a creator god as forefather of all generated things, and they recognize both a vital power prior to the heavens and one in the heavens. Above the cosmos they postulate a pure intellect, a single indivisible one in the cosmos as a whole, and another again, divided about the heavenly spheres. And this is not for them merely a matter of theorizing, but they recommend that we ascend through the practice of sacred theurgy [lit. "hieratic theurgy"] to the regions that are higher, more universal, and superior to fate, towards the god who I the creator, without calling in

[197] This view does not become totally apparent until *DM* 8.4.265.9-267.10 and especially *DM* 8.6.268.12-13, where Iamblichus repeats Porphyry's claim that "the majority of the Egyptians make what is in our power depend upon the movement of the stars." There the reader learns that Porphyry's difficulty with Egyptian philosophy revolved around the apparent focus in the "Hermetic" treatises on astrological themes.
[198] *DM* 8.1.260.9-12.

> the aid of matter or bringing to bear anything other than the observation of the critical time [kairos] for action.[199]

Iamblichus's description of Egyptian "hieratic theurgy" in this text seems to contradict his statements about the necessity for complex cult in the periscopes in book 5. Here complexity is eschewed because it clashes with the nature of the simple creator god who stands above all. It could be argued, in accordance with **MU-17, 18, and 19** that the Egyptian theurgy discussed in this passage represents a very high level, reached only after years of material theurgy, but if this is so, how is the contradiction with the previous passage resolved? There Iamblichus emphasized the consistent necessity for complex and polytheistic cult. He even says that if one fails to honor all the gods, it is not simply a matter of performing poorly; one subverts the whole operation.

This discrepancy is one of the core conflicts which will be discussed at the end of this chapter in more detail. For now, it is important to note that

Egyptian theurgy consists of an anti-material observation of the critical time for action.

MU-25 T(PRAX) RIT (Kairotic anti-materialistic method)

***DM* 9**

Book 9 principally concerns the notion of the personal daemon, an entity important to the Platonic tradition, seemingly going back all the way to Plato.[200] Iamblichus has this to say about the personal daemon:

> When a soul has selected a daemon as its guide, then straightaway it stands over it as the fulfiller of the various levels of life of the soul, and as the soul descends into the body it binds it to the body, and it supervises the composite living being arising from it, and personally regulates the particulars of the life of the soul; and all our reasonings we pursue thanks to the first principles which it communicates to us, and we perform such actions as it puts into our minds; and it continues to direct men's lives up to the point at which, through sacred theurgy, we establish a god as the overseer and leader of our soul...[201]

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[199] *DM* 8.6.266.8-267.10.
[200] Plato, *Laws* 5.732c.
[201] *DM* 9.6.280.8-281.1

To the best of my knowledge, this declaration from *DM* that one can exchange by means of a ritual one's daemon for a god is the first time such a declaration has ever been made either in philosophical or even Greco-Roman magical texts. Magical texts, like the Greek Magical Papyri, indeed include the summoning up of a variety of daemons, or even of *paredroi* (assistants, corresponding more or less to the medieval concept of "familiar spirits"),[202] but no text has the concept of replacing the being to which one is bound before one is even born. This thus appears to be a unique way in which spiritual transformation (an otherwise almost universal concept in various world religions) is imagined--not as an ontological transformation of the self (as in baptism or *abhiseka*, or circumcision) but as the changing of one's warden. It seems that he transformation of the being in charge of one's existence carries with it a subsequent transformation of one's self; thus, in exchanging the daemon for a god, the theurgist would effectively be promoting himself or herself to a higher level. Instead of being under the gaze of middle management, the theurgist is now under the wings of upper management, and so he or she himself would effectively be middle management. In other words, theurgy would be a transformation of the human soul into a superior kind of soul. Shaw says as much when he writes:

> …the graduation to a god as overseer indicated that the soul was no longer identified with a "particular" self. When the soul became resonant with the ratios of the World Soul, it began to live for the whole world, and since daimons had jurisdiction over parts, not wholes, the soul then received a god for its leader.[203]

Shaw's description of the soul becoming resonant with the ratios of the World Soul, is in accordance with the rest of his theory which draws heavily on a Pythagoreanized reading of Iamblichus. For my purposes, it is sufficient to note with him that something about the core nature of the self has changed in the supersession of the god over the daemon.

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[202] For examples, see *PGM* I. 1-42; I. 42-195. PGM IV. 154-285 seems close in form, as it establishes an attachment to Helios and the rite specifically says that the magician is "armed by having this magical soul" (l. 210). At the end of the rite the magician addresses Helios as "Lord, god of gods, master, daimon," (l. 218) and the instructions say that the magician has become "as lord of a godlike nature" (l. 220). Helios is thus addressed as both god and daimon, so it may mark an intermediary idea which is further developed in Iamblichus. At any rate, the similarity is not necessarily an indication of dependence.

[203] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 219. A little before this, Shaw claims "The daimon was not left behind but was, as it were, digested and incorporated by the theurgist." "Digested" is an eye-catching translation for the ideas expressed by the words ὑποττάτει and συντελεῖν. I think the easier translation is the daemon becomes subordinate and serves the theurgist who receives a god as overseer.

The final line of *DM* 9.6.280.8-281.1 may be reformulated into the following prose sentence:

We (humans in general?) use sacred theurgy to establish a god as the overseer and leader of our soul in place of the standard daemon.

However, this formulation raises the question: is this supposed to be a specific one-time ritual, or is theurgy here imagined as a more general development? Duration is a theme in the passage. The reader is told that the interaction with the personal daemon will last up until a certain point when the theurgist replaces the daemon with a god. But again, is this a one-time event, a final initiation, or is it more of a long term process, akin to the subtle formation of the soul through education? Neither this text, nor any other has any clues to this problem, so the translation must reflect both possibilities:

MU-26 T(PRAX) RIT (establish god in place of daemon) AGNT (human)

MU-26b T(PRAX) PROCS (establish god in place of daemon) AGNT(human)

These minimal units reveal that theurgy either contains a specific ritual for the replacement of the daemon with the god, or it makes reference to a general model of development whereby the same is accomplished. This passage offers no further description of what specific technique will replace the personal daemon with the god. For example, we do not learn anything about whether the ritual is material or immaterial.

There is however more information concerning the establishment of the link with the personal daemon. This topic begins with a question (it is unclear whether this is authentically Porphyrian or a topic that Iamblichus has raised for his own purposes): "Why is it [the personal daemon] called in a common invocation by all?"[204] Iamblichus in his reply makes a generalizing statement about the order of invoking divine beings according to the principles of theurgy. He writes:

> For it is always the case, in the theurgic hierarchy, that secondary entities are summoned through the intermediacy of their superiors; and in the case of daemons, then, the single common leader of the cosmocrators in the realm of generation sends down to the individual recipients their personal daemons.[205]

[204] CDH 341 n. 482 makes the claim that the question present in the text, which raises this as a topic of discussion "Διὰ τί κοινῇ κλήσει καλεῖται ὑπὸ πάντων;" should be attributed to Porphyry. The Greek text does not make it clear that this is authentically Porphyry's words, and so this must remain a speculation. However, if Porphyry really is the source of this question, this might be read as a reference to Porphyry's familiarity with this specific rite, which could further be evinced from his description of something similar in VP 10.

[205] *DM* 9.9.284.2-5.

Iamblichus further reveals in this passage that as a consequence of this invocation, each personal daemon appears to the individual to whom it is assigned and "reveals the mode of worship proper to him, and his name, and imparts the particular manner in which he should be summoned."[206] Additionally, Iamblichus explicitly states that in the theurgic order of things (taxei) secondary entities are "always" summoned after their superiors. Such a statement seems quite normative, and it thus offers two particularly stressed minimal units of information about theurgy:

When invoking, theurgy always moves from higher entities to lower entities.

MU-27 T(PRAX) PROCS (invocation proceeds from higher to lower entities)

and

Lower entities are invoked by the intermediacy of higher beings.

MU-28 T(PRAX) PROCS (higher beings are used to invoke lower)

To these two units, two additional, more specific minimal units may be added, based on the information from the question either asked by Porphyry or rhetorically stated by Iamblichus without further modification or comment): "Why is it [the personal daemon] called in a common invocation by all?" Because Iamblichus does not modify or alter this question, but only offers an explanation of how the ritual is possible, it is reasonable to see this as statement pregnant with Iamblichus's understanding of theurgy, which may be reworded thusly:

The personal daemon is first contacted in a collective rite or by means of a common invocation of the god who assigns personal daemons.

Hence:

Theurgy accepts in its metaphysical framework the existence of a being called the personal daemon. This is one of the few times that such a being is named, so it seems important to add:

MU-27 T(WV) specific entity (personal daemon)

The statement that the personal daemon is called in a common invocation by all could be interpreted one of two ways. Either, the ritual is a group ritual, or it is a ritual with a common formula that is used by everyone. Porphyry seems to be expressing some familiarity with this particular ritual, probably because he wrote about it or something very similar in *Life of Plotinus* 10. Given that no clear details are provided about this particular ritual, the

[206] *DM* 9.9.284.5-7.

interpretation of the overall framework depends on the interpretation of the term "common." I would argue that this can be interpreted in one of two ways. Either:

Theurgy includes a ritual for a group summoning of the personal daemon for all members of the group

In which case:

MU-28 T(PRAX) RIT (Group Ritual for Contacting Pers. Daemon)

Or,

Theurgy includes a standardized ritual (i.e. common in the sense of non-personalized)

In which case:

MU-28b T(PRAX) RIT (Standardized ritual for contacting Pers. Daemon)

When distilled to their bare essence, these passages do not offer much of a descriptive account, but even so, some conclusions can be drawn. First, it is possible to see a variety of the purposes and goals of theurgy. Theurgic rites may be used to worship material gods; the theurgic order of practice informs the method that is used to contact one's personal daemon as part of a group or standardized ritual, and there is an entirely separate rite which transfers control of the human to the providence of a god greater than the personal daemon. In addition, certain elements of theurgy depend strongly on a particular cosmological worldview, a worldview that includes the notion of individualized spirits, and which allows for the worship of materially directed gods. Moreover, theurgy is dependent, says one of the fragments of *DM*, on the power of symbols and unutterable words. This statement must be checked against the statements just explored which emphasized the verbal features of specifically theurgic rites, including the invocation of the common daemon. Since Porphyry can comment on the nature of the invocation directed to the personal daemon, it seems he is aware of its purpose, though an outsider. But such synthesis is properly speaking the domain of the second part of this chapter. I turn now to other thematic complexes which might contain information about theurgy.

5.5 *Via Negativa* Statements Concerning Theurgy

Declarations of what theurgy is and does are few and far between. So, in order to develop a better picture of the evidence, it is necessary to consider other formulations concerning the topic of theurgy. One of the more promising of the thematic complexes in *DM* consists of those instances where the concept of theurgy, its consequences, its processes, its

results, or some combination of all four are contrasted with other traditions. Such contrasts are useful because they allow for a clearer picture of what theurgy is, by explicitly stating what it is not.

DM 3

Book 3 contains an extensive dialogue differentiating theurgy from what it is not. Porphyry, in his address to Iamblichus raises a number of paradigmatic case studies of ritual practices and ideas as plausible examples for his general argument that ritual in general runs into problems. Iamblichus in turn responds to these concerns either by demonstrating that Porphyry's understanding of the ritual practice in question is wrong, or by demonstrating how good ritual practice (i.e. theurgy) is sufficiently different in either its theoretical formulations or its actual practice. By observing the manner in which Iamblichus differentiates theurgy from these ritual practices, one can get a sense of the main features of theurgy that motivate this differentiation, and thus gain an idea of the boundaries of the concept.

In three connected arguments, Iamblichus makes statements that differentiate theurgy from other practices and views. These arguments are linked not only in their content but also in the very phrasing of the main claim that the views and practices which Porphyry describes are radically different from the theurgic practices that Iamblichus has in mind. Below, I have listed the lines and underlined the words that grammatically mark this differentiation.

> 1) "These statements are thus unworthy both of thought about the gods, and are alien to what is accomplished in theurgy"[207]
>
> 2) "So then theurgic activity is something different, and the successful accomplishment of divine works is granted only by the gods."[208]
>
> 3) "These views seem to me to display an appalling disregard both for all theology and for theurgic activity."[209]

In each of these examples, *DM*'s view of theurgy and its practices are distinguished from some other views. Because these statements come at the end of Iamblichus' arguments, it will be necessary to consider some of the previous passages in order to more clearly see the kind of oppositions that are at work here, and thereby to determine the meaning of what theurgy is from the description of what views are unacceptable to creating it. To begin:

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[207] *DM* 3.19.146.14-15.
[208] *DM* 3.20.149.10-12.
[209] *DM* 3.22.152.9-10.

> ad 1) These statements are thus unworthy both of thought about the gods, and are alien to what is accomplished in theurgy (3.19.146.14-15).

This line distinguishes theurgy as something special and unfamiliar to Porphyry's models by alienating it from certain views and propositions that Porphyry has proposed. The main view that Porphyry has raised is the notion that "it is through being drawn down to us by the necessities of our invocation that the superior being accomplishes these things."[210] "These things" seem to be a reference to the overall topic of this book, namely divination, but given that this is probably an authentic Porphyrian statement, and it is impossible to determine what lines may have preceded it, it is uncertain what these things are. For present purposes, the most important thing to note is that this line serves as the impetus for a number of different sub-arguments, which are all presented by Iamblichus as being related, and which he conclusively attacks with the statement that began this section. It is now necessary to consider these sub-arguments. They are as follows:

> 1)It is…not…that it is through the theurgic adept being affected that the things happening are seen in those prophesying.[211]
>
> 2) The causality of the superior beings is not even like some intermediate instrument.[212]
>
> 3) nor (can it be said) that the one invoking acts through the one prophesying.[213]
>
> 4) [nor is it the case that] the god is spontaneously present to some whether by reason of the cycle of creation or through some other causes.[214]

All of these are, in Iamblichus' eyes, wrong representations of causality because they misattribute causal efficacy to inferior beings, and therefore place lesser beings in a position of authority over their superiors. Against this proposed view, Iamblichus invokes a standard form of argument that appears elsewhere in the *DM*[215] that the gods cannot be the result of any other origin, and must be considered the root cause of everything.[216] The chief consequence of this view is that divine manifestation is outside of the control of human beings. Thus, it may be said that, for Iamblichus, theurgy, to which these views are directly

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[210] *DM* 3.18.145.5-6.
[211] *DM* 3.18.145.14-146.1.
[212] *DM* 3.19.146.5.
[213] *DM* 3.19.146.6.
[214] *DM* 3.19.146.11-12.
[215] For example, an analogous argument appears at *DM* 1.4.13.8-14.3 where Iamblichus notes that the metaphysical classes of essences, activities, and motions, have a particular causal arrangement, with essences being the only things that generate activities and motion.
[216] *DM* 3.19.146.12-14.

opposed by the explicit statement that they are "alien to what is accomplished in theurgy" must be clearly opposed to this kind of view of causality.

The analysis of this section results in the following formulation of theurgy:

Theurgy depends on a causal understanding of the universe where higher things control lower things.

MU-29 T(WV) (higher principles control lower principles)

Furthermore, this minimal unit, though in the immanent text it is phrased in terms of worldview, carries implications for practice. Therefore, it seems reasonable to further translate this minimal unit into an expression of praxis:

MU-30 [IMP] T(PRAX) PROCS (higher principles always control lower principles)

Further meaning can be extracted from the second complex of views against which Iamblichus positions himself:

> ad 2) "So then theurgic activity is something <u>different</u>, and the successful accomplishment of divine works is granted only by the gods."[217]

This statement seems like a near parallel for the preceding sentence, the background arguments of which I interpreted into **MU-29** and **MU-30,** yet it comes several paragraphs later, and the views to which it is meant to reply and are slightly different. The views in concern represent models in which the human is capable of perceiving the god with its ordinary human soul. According to Iamblichus, Porphyry posits two main inducements for human beings seeing gods. "The [human] soul both speaks and imagines these things [divine visions], and that they are conditions of it which have been produced by small sparks."[218] It is once again impossible to see what Porphyry might have originally intended by this phrase "small sparks" (μικρῶν αἰθυγμάτων). The word "spark" αἴθυγμα has only a few appearances in the Greek corpus, but it seems to correlate well enough with the English understanding of a spark or glimmer, that is a chance appearance.[219] This holds well enough for understanding Iamblichus' response, because he reads in Porphyry's statement a claim about the chance nature of the appearances. For Iamblichus there is no such thing as luck; everything must

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[217] *DM* 3.20.149.10-12.

[218] *DM* 3.20.148.1-3.

[219] Iamblichus himself will later (*DM* 3.21.151.1-7) provide a brief doxographical note about "some" unnamed philosophers believing that "small sparks" "rouse up" or become divine forms. He critiques this view for its metaphysical problems: material things cannot become divine things. In the following paragraph he critiques the Stoic view that the gods are made up of elements and that everything will dissolve in a vast conflagration. It could be possible that this spark theory is also Stoic in origin.

have a cause, and the cause must match with its effect. This is his explanation for how divine visions must necessarily come from divine sources, which disallows the possibility that the chance glimmers of the mind or soul could have any kind of real effect. Thus, he writes, "If we seem actually able to act by participating in, and being enlightened by the gods, it is to this extent alone that we have the benefit of the divine energy."[220]

It is apparent from this argument that **theurgy depends on a worldview in which divine visions are not produced by the actions of the soul** and instead, it seems **theurgic activity depends on divine action**. These two closely related statements may be translated into

> **MU-31 T(WV) NOT chance sparks in soul cause of divine visions**
>
> **MU-32 T(WV) gods cause divine visions**
>
> Ad 3) "These views seem to me to display an appalling disregard both for all theology and for theurgic activity."[221]

This line refers to what might be a combination of the first two views that Iamblichus critiqued. In the first case, Iamblichus rejects the notion that the theurgists are responsible for the visions. In the second case, he rejects chance (here embodied in the tiny sparks in the soul) as a possible source of the visions. The third case rejects a possibility that divination comes about as a result of a mixture of the substance of the soul with exterior divine inspiration. Iamblichus formulates Porphyry's stance in the following terms:

> You say, then, that 'the soul generates an imaginative power of the future through such movements,' or that 'the soul, by means of its inherent powers, shapes the products derived from matter into daemons, especially when the matter is taken from living beings.'[222]

Previously, Iamblichus connected the concept of divine visions and prognosticating the future. Now it seems that the creation of daemons by the soul from matter is also connected to the future. The only way I can make sense of all this is that for Iamblichus the creation of daemons, the prognostication of the future, and the visions of the gods, are all comparable phenomena and therefore the cause(s) of all these must be the same thing. CDH in their commentary argue that the creation of daemons referenced here is meant to imply the "art of making images" εἰδωλοποιητικὴ τέχνη,[223] which Iamblichus will discuss later. At minimum,

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[220] *DM* 3.20.149.4-6.
[221] *DM* 3.22.152.9-10.
[222] *DM* 3.22.152.6-9.
[223] CDH 175 n. 225.

however, what can be taken from all this discussion is Iamblichus' stable position, holding to the claim that divine things have divine causes. This is ultimately his answer for the variety of perspectives which Porphyry has raised for discussion. All of Porphyry's attempts try to shake the belief in actual divine visions or effective activity by positing that they are the results of non-divine activity, either due to the soul or random chance. Iamblichus obstinately refuses to allow for any such possibility.

Thus the actual informative content that Iamblichus provides on theurgy and why it is effective is minimal. In each of these three arguments, Iamblichus maintains the argumentation based on a metaphysics of priority, captured best in **MU-29**. Beings that are primary in the divine hierarchy cannot be created by beings that are secondary to them. Since matter and soul are secondary to daemons, it is impossible for the former to create the latter. The creation of daemons is also problematic, since the creation of daemons necessitates their perishing, and the finitude conflicts with their eternal nature. In addition, even if they were controllable by sympathetic influences, this would mean they are under the control of nature, and therefore are not external enough to the actions of the universe to serve as purveyors of oracles.

The next major contrast between theurgy and other ritual practices concerns the complex case of the image makers. Iamblichus introduces this issue by restating Porphyry's claim:

> But as for the claim that you advance, quite seriously, that "there are generators of effective images," it would astonish me if any of the divine theurgists, who contemplate the true forms of the gods, would approve it.[224]

Thus begins a short but dense argument about why theurgists do not approve of image-making, which sets up the contrast that theurgists are not image-makers. Following the method of via negative, if one could determine what the image-makers do or believe, then one would have good grounds for saying what precisely the theurgists object to, and thus these features could be defined as not theurgic. But what or who are the image-makers and what is image making has been an issue of some debate among scholars. The Greek word for image here εἰδωλα, from whence comes the English word "idol," seems to refer to the creation of cultic statues. Some evidence in both pre and post Iamblichean sources suggest that effective idol creation was a common practice in late antiquity.[225] However, problems

[224] *DM* 3.28.167.8-11.

[225] David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 145-197 has pointed to the use of cult statues in institutionalized oracular religious

arise when it comes to the question of whether Neoplatonists performed this practice. Formally, the art of generating effective images bears some resemblance to the telestic practices praised by Proclus and Julian the Apostate. Based on this passage which dismisses the value of image making, Polymnia Athanassiadi concluded that Proclus and Julian had misinterpreted Iamblichus, who clearly had negative feelings towards this practice.[226] More recently, Crystal Addey has pointed out that later passages in Iamblichus suggest a practice remarkably similar to image making, which might have been the source for Julian and Proclus's interpretations of Iamblichus. Addey marks a decisive shift in vocabulary between Iamblichus' statements about "bad" image makers and his declaration later on that the theurgic art often consists in the construction material "receptacles" and "statues" for the gods.[227] Addey concludes that the distinction between these two practices has to do with proper knowledge and haste. The image makers hastily construct their images from a disjointed ensemble of elements, while the theurgists carefully craft their statues.[228] This would make the difference between image making and agalma making a difference of expertise. Such a distinction is, however, not that satisfactory for present purposes. It amounts to little more than saying that there is a good form of image-making and a bad form of image-making, and Iamblichus is the one who decides what is good and bad. Is there any evidence in the text to suggest specific features of image making that would be condemned and thus features that would be incompatible with theurgy?

Statements made by Iamblichus differentiating theurgy from image-making may be roughly divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are passages where Iamblichus lambasts image-making for their devotion to unreal and inferior things. *DM* provides a

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festivals in Egypt. Much of our evidence for this is literary, though Frankfurter points especially to the archaeological evidence for talking statues. Statues of gods in Egypt have been found with bronze tubes leading to secret rooms. So it seems a degree of subterfuge was taking place. A papyrus fragment dating from 6 CE attests to a Roman period practice of requesting oracular advice from statues via letters to the gods (see: Carl Wesseley, *Papyriorum Scriptae Graecae Specimina Isagogica* [Leipzig, 1900], 26). Uzdavinys, *Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (Sophia Perennis, 2010), 84-87, also notes similarities of practice, but he blends the Egyptian and Neoplatonic terms and categories and thus occludes the historical linkages.

[226] Athanassiadi, "Dreams, Theurgy, and Freelance Divination," 122-123.

[227] *DM* 5.23.233.9-13: "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."

[228] Addey, *Theurgy and Divination*, 254.

number of Iamblichus' editorial descriptions of image makers, saying they "exchange images for true reality" and they "descend from things superior to things inferior."[229] The text also provides evaluative descriptions of the process of image-making itself. Thus, image-making can be classified as a kind of "shadow painting"; it is falsely attributed to the demiurge; it does not preserve analogy with the divine creation. In image making "we are faced with genuine phantoms of the truth, and things that seem to be good, but never are"; "things are introduced furtively as they are borne along, but possess nothing true, complete or distinct"; the art of image making is negatively characterized as a "human skill" and "artistry," which is, "weaker and of less importance than the humans giving existence to it."[230] In its mode of production, image making is, according to Iamblichus, wrong because the images are made by human beings, not by gods; they are made with material, as opposed to simple and intelligible essences; they are "lifeless images, infused only by an outward appearance of life, held together externally by a contrived and many-shaped harmony," they are "a jumble of motley and incompatible qualities. "Simplicity…uniformity and the composition of the whole does not dominate in" the images, and they are "wholly ephemeral."[231]

In general, these critiques match fairly well with what Iamblichus critiqued about other forms of divination in the preceding via negative passages. Here as there, the main critique seems to be that the images created in image-making are not "real" and way they are created proves this. Once again, Iamblichus falls back on a model of ontological/metaphysical reality to support his claims. All in all, it seems that this is an elaboration on **MU-29**.

However, there are some slightly more descriptive passages which need to be considered as well. In the same passage, Iamblichus, apparently repeating the words of

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[229] Cf. the above discussion which reiterates that the incorrect procedure of divination is based around a wrong understanding of metaphysics.

[230] This is a confusing statement. Its position seems to indicate that it is predicated of the actual technique of image making, while in its content it would be more suited to refer to the actual images themselves.

[231] All of these quotes are taken from DM 3.28. It is conceivable that the criticism that Iamblichus levels against image-making goes back to the Platonic differentiation between actuality and image. This distinction appears numerous times in Plato's writings, especially in the Sophist, Gorgias, Republic, and Cratylus. Having investigated these passages, M.-L. Desclos, ("Idoles, icônes et phatasmes dans les dialogues de Platon," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 3 (2000): 301-327) concludes, in opposition to the common interpretation that mimesis is always a fraudulent and illusory, that Plato's conception of images and image makers was more complicated. Plato, according to Desclos, had a theory of good image making, which is basically and problematically defined by the image being an accurate and truthful copy of something.

Porphyry, offers a glimpse into how the images might actually be constructed. Image makers make images "with the aid of stars in their revolutions," with "celestial physical motions," and with "some portion of matter."[232] In addition to being a factor in the construction of image making, the movements of celestial bodies, according to Porphyry (as reported by Iamblichus), also seem to be employed by the image makers to know whether or not their technique will be effective:

> "these [image makers] … observe the movement of the celestial bodies, and they tell, from the ranging of a given star with another or others around the heavens, whether the divination will be true or false, and whether the rites performed will be of no purpose, or have annunciatory power."[233]

At this point it sounds like image making is the formation of effective material objects (made from material components) that draw down emanations from the stars (here doubly signified by "with the aid of stars in their revolutions" and "celestial physical motions.").

Other arguments offer further points of differentiation for reflection by concentrating on the features of image-making that are specifically abhorrent to Iamblichus's understanding. For example, although they are said to utilize astral emanations, Iamblichus pronounces that the image makers in actuality only utilize the "the last [emanation] from the natural and visible realm." The justification for this declaration, if there is any beyond a need to redefine the innocuous as malicious, is unclear. What can potentially be said, however, is that the claim to use stars is in-and-of-itself not problematic. So, if the image-makers were able to utilize astral powers, they would not for this reason be guilty of any crime. In fact, were they guilty of a crime, their condemnation would be transferable to the Demiurge, an unthinkable notion for Iamblichus, who, like Plotinus and other anti-Gnostics, would not tolerate the notion that the creative god is evil.

> For god fashions (lit. demiurgizes) all things, not by celestial physical motions, nor by some portion of matter, nor by powers divided in this way, instead it is by his conceptions, his volitions, and his immaterial forms, and by means of the eternal soul, whether mundane or supramundane, that he fashions the universe, but it is said that the maker of images makes them with the aid of stars in their revolutions.[234]

Taking a few steps back, it appears that Iamblichus has used a minimal level of creativity in addressing the concerns raised by Porphyry's letter concerning the image makers. All of the

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[232] *DM* 3.28.
[233] *DM* 3.30.173.7-10.
[234] *DM* 3.28.168.14-169.3.

observations about the image-makers could be easily derived from little more than their name (specific propositions derived from the term "image" and its basic connotations of inferiority from Platonic philosophy), and from the only information that Porphyry gave about the image-makers, namely that the technique derives in part from the use of the stars. Such lack of creativity points in my opinion again to the theme that Iamblichus's views on theurgy, and also his views on what does not constitute theurgy are based in a kind of occasion-based encounter (dialogic) with the writings of Porphyry.

At minimum this passage concerning theurgy from this passage are that theurgy is not image making.

MU-33 T(COMP) Theurgy is NOT image making

MU-34 T(WV) efficacy of theurgy does not depend on lowest level of astral emanations.

It would be desirable to go further than this, for as shall be seen at the end of this chapter, this is one of the passages which carries the heaviest significance when it comes to seeing a contradiction in the theurgic technique. It will later be apparent that various aspects of image making, which are here condemned, are partially accepted as part of the theurgic art (especially the astral features), and so it becomes increasingly clear that we are once again the immanent description of theurgy provided by Iamblichus precludes the kind of categorical description, which scholarship seeks. Instead, what is relevant is that theurgy is similar enough to cases like image-making and other "technical" forms of divination, but it is also different enough (at least to Iamblichus) to constitute something entirely different.

This close-but-far construction constitutes, in my eyes, a theoretical break in which the motivating impetus to construct a different category comes from Porphyry's initial denigrating appraisal of image making. Iamblichus's critique of image-making and distinction of the practice from theurgy is just distinct enough to create, in the negative space between the ideas a different category. Thus, the distinction is not terribly original, and it very much comes across as a kind of empty one-upmanship. Whereas the image-makers utilize a lower emanation of astral energy, space is made for theurgists to use higher emanations of astral energy.[235]

The art of image-making is thus, according to Iamblichus in direct contrast to theurgy. Part of the problem seems to have been its incorrect understanding of astral phenomena,

[235] The same more or less empty distinction is repeated in Iamblichus's differentiation between theurgists and those who "associate with [evil] daemons," with whom the former are "obviously in conflict" (*DM* 3.31.178.3-5).

which, as shown above, does not necessarily preclude the use of the stars and astrology in other contexts. Six books later, the relationship between astrology and theurgy is readdressed as part of a defense of astrology in light of a critique made by Porphyry. Porphyry bases his critique of astrology on the multiple conflicting methods of generating horoscopes, as well as on the confusions in identifying the being known as the personal daemon. Iamblichus discourses at some length on the topic of the personal daemon, and reveals that there are "two approaches to the personal daemon, the one theurgic, the other technical; following the former procedure, one summons the daemon down from the higher causal principles, while according to the latter, one resorts to the visible cycles of the generated realm."[236] The similarity of this phrasing to the previous passage where visible cycles were denied efficacy must give the reader pause. Here the same procedures of astrology are now explicitly defended as plausible, though they are clearly not given the same prominence as the theurgic technique. Nevertheless, there is an opposition between the theurgic mode of identifying the personal daemon and the astrological mode (signified in the following passage by the phrase the "casting of nativities"), and the theurgic mode is clearly the preferred method. Later, in the passage, Iamblichus applies pressure to a different point in Porphyry's argument when he writes, "What is there, then, to prevent this daemon from being difficult to discover by means of the casting of nativities, but that sacred divination or theurgy offer great facilities for its identification?"[237] The main point of this passage is not so much to condemn astrology as to note that if Porphyry finds its use difficult or inconvenient this in no way rules out that theurgy can offer a valuable means of discovering the personal daemon. In other words, this passage could be read as both a statement of opposition to the nature of Porphyry's comparison in the first place, as well as an advertisement of theurgy as a useful solution to the conundrum posed Porphyry's difficulty of using astrological means to divine the personal daemon.

In terms of minimal units this passage may be reduced to:

Theurgy offers a means of personal daemon identification that is more effective than astrological means.

Or:

MU-35 T(COMP) Astrology; superior

[236] *DM* 9.1.273.2-6.
[237] *DM* 9.5.279.10-12.

5.6 Complicating the Evidence for Theurgy: Multiple Parts and Kinds of Theurgy

Theurgy as the previous sections demonstrated is a vague concept. The examples considered in this section only aggravate this vagueness. There are a number of passages in *DM* which offer the informational datum that theurgy is complicated and made up of multiple procedures. These passages lead to a hazy understanding of theurgy as a multivalent concept, which further allows for the intellectual gymnastics already seen in the previous section. One key example of this occurs in book 5 where the author of *DM* writes:

> Those, on the other hand, who conduct their lives in accordance with intellect alone and the life according to intellect, and who have been freed from the bonds of nature, practise an intellectual and incorporeal rule of sacred procedure in respect of all the departments of theurgy.[238]

Before discussing the meaning of these departments, some summary of the immediate context is necessary. This passage appears as part of the extended argument in book 5 on the correctness of sacrifice and especially material sacrifice. Prior to this passage, Iamblichus counters the claim made by Porphyry that there is an incongruity to sacred ritual, because, on the one hand, priests are supposed to keep themselves pure by not eating animals, but on the other hand, they sacrifice animals, which are material, and by definition impure. Moreover, ritual practices seem wrong to Porphyry because they are an attempt to control the gods. The ritual attempt to coerce the gods contradicts the axiom, according to Porphyry who presents the axiom, that material elements cannot influence immaterial beings, as broadly accepted. Iamblichus argues against these views in several different ways. He claims that the priestly requirement of vegetarianism is not meant to prevent the priests from polluting the gods, but rather has to do with the priestly need to maintain personal purity. Having dismissed this half of the argument, he next has to explain why sacrifice is of any value to the gods at all. He argues this point on both sides, trying to demonstrate the necessity of sacrifice from the perspective of humans, as well as from the particular attentions of the gods. On the human side of things, different types of humans have different relationships to matter, some being more enmeshed in matter than others. If intellectual sacrifice were the only available means of interaction with the gods, materialistic humans would be unfairly condemned to never have their mode of sacrifice noticed by the gods. On the divine side of things, the gods themselves are associated with matter in particular ways and this corresponds to their

[238] *DM* 5.18.225.1-4.

enjoyment of different kinds of sacrifice. It is worth noting at this point that in his description of the more materialistic modes of sacrifice, Iamblichus limits himself to terminology around the term θυσία (sacrifice). It is only when he refers to immaterial rites that he makes reference to theurgy. A minimalistic interpretation of the passage has to account for this use of theurgy on the one side and absence on the other. It seems in this case at least that Iamblichus wants to use theurgy in a context where it is explicitly clear that the sacrifice is good. Thus, he wants to connect the idea of theurgy to good ritual practice and cement that notion firmly in mind.

The other important datum from this passage is the statement that those who practice theurgy practice it through "various departments." This would seem to indicate a division, not just between a material and intellectual mode of sacrifice, also within the intellectual mode, which is itself apparently made up of multiple parts (techniques?). What these parts are is never explicitly stated. The term "departments" μέρη never again appears in the text with this meaning, and there is no way to identify certain theurgic practices as associated with particular disciplines. As it stands in the text, this reference to departments seems, on a minimalistic reading, to act solely as a rhetorical device for describing theurgy as a complicated phenomenon, about which one can provide multiple, conflicting reports, because it is multivalent.

This anthropological mode of division of the manner of the theurgic process just explored is repeated and elaborated upon a few lines later where the author of *DM* writes:

> One should not therefore take a feature that manifests itself in the case of a particular individual, as the result of great effort and long preparation, at the consummation of the hieratic art, and present it as something common to all men, but not even as something immediately available to those beginning theurgy, nor yet those who have reached a middling degree of proficiency in it; for even these latter endow their performance of cult with some degree of corporeal influence.[239]

This passage specifically notes that Porphyry is wrong to take one example of a spiritual practice and apply it to the entirety of a given tradition. In this case Porphyry's error was to assume that all theurgy is solely immaterial. Instead, Iamblichus argues, there are many circumstances where the use of material components is important in theurgy. For Iamblichus, it is important to accentuate the developmental model which differentiates the different kinds of performances from one another. As ever, the distinction is a subtle one, and the reader is

[239] *DM* 5.20.228.5-10.

given no clear understanding of what is meant by the endowment of cult "with some degree of corporeal influence." Iamblichus declares that immaterial sacrifice is achieved at the culmination of the hieratic art. There will be occasion later to consider the relationship between hieratic practices and theurgy, but for now the key idea here is that the particular performances of theurgists depend upon their degree of proficiency, on a scale that reaches from more corporeal to incorporeal practices. The presence of such a scale in Iamblichus's theory allows, in some sense, for theurgy to be a broad-spectrum practice, with a variety of different procedures and techniques legitimately receiving the title of theurgy. This spectrum model also allows for Iamblichus to explain away failures, abnormalities, or even disreputable features as a consequence of inexperience.

This discussion allows for the minimal unit:

MU-36 T(WV) Theurgy has different practices for each level of anthropological development; (cf. MU-16 and the discussion leading up to it).

The spectrum of development seen in the previous passage is to some degree challenged by another background model of theurgy, which is present in book 4. The text in question reads:

> The whole of theurgy presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it is performed by men, and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but on the other, it controls divine symbols and in virtue of them is raised up to union with the higher powers, and directs itself harmoniously in accordance with their dispensation, which enables it quite properly to assume the mantle of the gods.[240]

Here reference is once again made to a kind of broad category of theurgy, labeled in this instance "the whole of theurgy." The use of terminology of "whole" recalls the kind of separation of theurgy into parts as seen above. There are, however, two key differences in the presentation of the technique here, which distinguishes it from previous descriptions. There is a clear division into two levels, and the division is not made on the basis of the cumulative experience and development of the practitioner but is instead a feature of the actual practice itself. Thus, according to this passage theurgy operates on two levels, both the human and the divine, and when the human is in proper accordance with the divine, the theurgist in some sense becomes the divine. This may be related to another passage where the theurgist is said "through the power of arcane symbols… [to exist] above them [highly spiritual powers]."[241]

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[240] *DM* 4.2.184.1-2.

[241] *DM* 6.6.246.12-14.

Such a transformation, seems to be a necessary and somewhat instantaneous consequence of the proper performance of theurgy, and as such it opposes or is at least in tension with the model of theurgy which demands that the theurgist be a realized being who has gone through multiple practices and perhaps even incarnations. The minimal unit which encompasses this discussion may be formulated thus:

MU-37 T(WV) Theurgy simultaneously is performed by humans but has divine power

MU-38 T(PRAX) (PROCS) humans become gods in the immediate practice of theurgy

There is thus an opposition between a model of developing technique and instantaneous enlightenment.

Another pericope worth discussing in the context of the subject of the departments or parts of theurgy, occurs in book 8, the book that is concerned especially with a defense of "Egyptian" theology. In this particular passage, Iamblichus is on the defense against the claim that Egyptian theology is inherently and unescapably fatalistic, governed exclusively by astrological principles. In response to this he claims that certain Egyptian texts (attributed to Hermes and Bitys) assert that human beings possess two souls. One soul is derived from the primary intelligible, the highest god, the other is present from the celestial circuits. Thus, because the self has two distinct parts and origins, it is in a sense governed by two different forms of fate. One keeps it checked under astrological influences, and the other provides a mode of liberation. It is with reference to the soul from the primary intelligible, that Iamblichus says, "That part of theurgy that is involved with ascent to the ungenerated achieves its end through such a level of life as this."[242] This passage again declares that there are multiple parts to theurgy, reaffirming the views already explored in the previous pericopes. It also makes mention of levels and kinds of life, referring to the deterministic anthropological model. However, it also states that part of theurgy is concerned with the "ascent to the ungenerated." Reading against the grain of the text again, it may be noted that this schema of the efficacy of theurgy is quite different from the others. The postulation of two kinds of soul, offers a kind of disjointed dualism of method, and is, dare I say, much more “gnostic” in its understanding of a soul from a higher realm being trapped in the world of a soul of a lower realm. Regardless, the picture does not correlate well with the kind of model of theurgy as seen in the passages that suggest more of a continuum of method, where

[242] *DM* 8.6.269.8-9.

the development of one's connections with the materialistic gods impacts one's ability to ascend to the immaterial. Instead, the model of theurgy presented here represents more of an ontological break.

MU-39 T(WV) Theurgy operates through dualism of the soul

The last statement worth considering in this regard is the statement made by Iamblichus that

> 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[243]

In order to interpret this passage, it is worth recalling that the main circumstances within which it appears is part of an argument against a claim. In this case, the claim seems to have been largely an afterthought from Iamblichus that arose in connection with Porphyry's question regarding the necessity that the highest part of the hieratic art is to ascend to the One. Iamblichus broadly agrees that this is the purpose, and this is where he suggests the kairotic mode of theurgy, but in the course of answering this question, Iamblichus alights upon the notion that matter itself possesses a dignified existence because it participates in its betters. The above quote is then presented and it is clear that its purpose in the argument is to further explain the dignity of matter. Content-wise, this passage is specific enough to provide tantalizing glimpses of theurgic practice, elements which have the clear potential to recall the classical model of coercive magic as outlined in Frazer, repeated in Mauss, and familiar to any student of anthropology or comparative religion. Johnston has connected this passage to numerous passages in Proclus regarding the creation of sacred statues (agalma), which are then used for oracular purposes. It may be that this passage, or the practice which it describes serves as the paradigm for Proclus's ruminations. Indeed, in the following paragraph, Iamblichus specifically mentions that this theory of perfectible matter has as a consequence the possibility of "construct[ing] dwellings for the gods, [and] consecrate[ing] statues."[244] However, the concept of "receptacle" seems even more complicated than this, because Iamblichus includes in this discussion the sacrifice of matter that is specifically manifested by the gods, as well as the preservation of some forms of matter and the sacrifice of others.[245]

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[243] *DM* 5.23.233.9-13.
[244] *DM* 5.23.234.3-4.
[245] Sacrifice of matter generated by gods: "We must, after all, give credit to the secret discourses when they tell us how a sort of matter is imparted by the gods in the course of blessed visions…so the sacrifice of such material rouses up the gods to manifestation" (*DM* 5.23.234.7-10). Preservation: of other forms of matter: "Some among such things, when

At any rate the most that can be said it seems to me, is that theurgy "often" makes use of such material receptacles for the gods and therefore provides only tantalizing hints of what actions are prototypical to theurgy, but it remains imprecise enough that it cannot rule out non-receptacle based actions. In fact, it ultimately seems to demand them, especially when brought alongside previous lines of ideas, such as the kairotic ascent to the One, or the descriptions of multiple kinds of theurgy allotted to different anthropological levels, as already discussed.

So again, theurgy appears as a complex and multivalent phenomenon, and it seems like almost any number of traditions, with the exception of disreputable image-making, is fair fodder for Iamblichus's development of theurgic technique.

MU-40 T(PRAX) RIT (use of material receptacles)

5.7 Complicating the Evidence for Theurgy: The Concept of 'Theurgic Gods'

Another theme to consider is present in the instances of theurgy that point to a specific class of deities, which the author of *DM* calls "theurgic gods." This theme only appears explicitly once, but the importance of the concept as well as the trouble it brings to our attempt to construct a definition of theurgy makes it indispensable for consideration. The passage in question appears in book 5, where Iamblichus writes:

> Let us posit, then, that for each part of the cosmos there is on the one hand this body that we can see, and on the other hand the various particular incorporeal forces associated with bodies. Now the rule of cult, obviously, assigns like to like, and extends this principle from the highest to the lowest levels, incorporeal entities to incorporeal, and bodies to bodies, apportioning to each what is conformable to its own nature. However, when one makes contact in a hypercosmic mode with the **gods of theurgy** (which is an exceedingly rare occurrence), such an individual will be one who has transcended the bounds of bodies and matter in the service of the gods, and who is united to the gods through hypercosmic power. One should not therefore take a feature that manifests itself in the case of a particular individual, as the result of great effort and long preparation, at the consummation of the hieratic art, and present it as something common to all men, but not even as something immediately available to

preserved and kept intact, serve to increase the kinship of those who preserve them with the gods" (*DM* 5.24.235.7-10).

> those beginning theurgy, nor yet those who have reached a middling degree of proficiency in it; for even these latter endow their performance of cult with some degree of corporeal influence.[246]

This passage has two significant goals. The first, as signaled by the final lines, is to establish that those who would evaluate theurgic practices (such as Porphyry) should not judge the theurgic technique and its success or failure on the basis of people who have not achieved a degree of proficiency, indeed, the passage suggests, those who unite with theurgic gods hypercosmically are to some degree specialists on an advanced level, having passed the middle stage. The second goal of the passage is less obvious from this excerpt, and must be sought in the wider context in which this passage appears. This passage comes towards the end of a much longer argument, and in order to understand the weight of its force, it is necessary to review briefly the entirety of the argument of Book 5.

Book 5 begins with a paraphrase of a series of questions from *The Letter to Anebo*. All of the questions concern sacrifice and the ability of the gods to enjoy the consequences of sacrifice. Porphyry finds a contradiction in the performance of sacrifice by priests who otherwise are required to maintain vegetarianism. Porphyry's rather reasonable response is to state that if in the case of a lower class of beings (priests), purity from dead bodies is expected, it should naturally follow a fortiori that an ontologically superior class of beings (gods) should be even more pure, and hence their acceptance of sacrifices, which are necessarily made from dead bodies, seems paradoxical.

DM's initial response (5.2) is to argue that Porphyry's basis for an analogy comparing gods and humans, or in this case, priests, is completely wrong. The ontological superiority, which Porphyry noted at the basis of his own argument, is, in his interlocutor's eyes, insufficiently expressed. The gods are, in fact, so superior that their relationship to matter is something altogether different, and the author of *DM* characterizes this analogously as a relationship of parts to wholes. As the whole encompasses the part, but the part does not encompass the whole, so the gods encompass matter, but matter does not influence/change the gods. This relation of part to whole creates a unidirectional flow of theiosis. Matter may become like the gods, but the gods necessarily cannot become material nor be influenced by material concerns.

[246] *DM* 5.20 *ad fin.* Emphasis mine. Parentheses are in CDH.

The distinction between the ontologically superior gods and the ontologically inferior humans is blurrier than this redescription has so far expressed. The class of ontologically inferior beings includes the particular (human) soul. Unlike the superior divine soul of the universe, the individual soul is subject to corruption, and this explains how human souls find themselves trapped in matter. The soul's being trapped in matter is the necessary background for the story of the soul's salvation through proper ritual action, including divination and theurgy.

To hammer the point home, *DM* sketches a taxonomy of skill levels: beginner, proficient, and adept. This taxonomy may be a trace of a sociologically organized hierarchy, such as that present in a school like Iamblichus's, but given the fact that our evidence for a physical school is scanty, it is preferable to read this passage as merely a rhetorical attempt to defend the practice of theurgy by describing a system in which the evidence required to accurately judge theurgy's effectiveness is available only to those at the highest levels of performance. The rhetorical strategy, as previously discussed, is simply to make a statement that real results in theurgy are only available to a select few, thereby making the evaluation of theurgic practice difficult if not impossible to outsiders. This rhetorical strategy asks for a suspension of judgment from the accuser until a satisfactory verification may be achieved.

The second purpose is to stress that direct union with the highest levels of reality is only available to someone who has worshipped for a long time the various gods that govern the various parts of the body and cosmos. This in turn has the consequence that long-term devotion to some kind of materialistic cult was a necessary prerequisite for theurgic practice. It is conceivable, though it cannot be proven on the basis of *DM* alone that Iamblichus intends by this devotion (θεραπεία) the traditional sacrificial rites of all religions known to him. As noted above in chapter 2, many scholars have interpreted Plotinus as offering something of an anti-ritualist shortcut to the gods via contemplation. Iamblichus, however seems to be insisting that access to the highest levels of reality (represented in the phrase the theurgic gods) is available only to one who has performed the preliminaries.

But who are these "theurgic gods"? Unfortunately, the text does not say and comparison with other references is not possible, because this is the only mention of theurgic gods in the whole work. He neither gives us a list of names of Olympian deities (Apollo, Zeus, etc.), nor does he make mention of planetary deities (Mercury, Mars, Venus, etc.) nor does he describe the characteristics of the theurgic gods. It is not even clear whether the "gods" mentioned in the lines following the original reference to theurgic gods are the same

thing, or whether these two (gods and theurgic gods) should be recognized as different classes of divinities.

Elsewhere in *DM*, Iamblichus takes pains to articulate hierarchies of differently classed entities and occasionally entities at different levels possess the same base-identifier and are only distinguished by the statements Iamblichus makes regarding their powers or place in the universe and the adjectives used to modify them. An illustrative example of this is present in Iamblichus's ruminations about the archons in Book 2. There in the midst of his explanation of all the varying classes of divine beings, Iamblichus distinguishes two levels of divine beings that have the same name but operate over different levels of existence: the sublunary archons and the hylic archons. The terminology distinguishing them---"sublunary" and "hylic"---are adjectives provided by later scholars for clarification. Iamblichus refers to them both as archons and uses relative clauses to distinguish them, [247] which, unlike the adjectival usage on the part of later scholars, implies a much more fluid relationship between the two classes. The use of relative clauses indicates that these archons are defined by their activities, not their essence.

If the above interpretation is reasonable, it seems likely that the distinction between "gods" and "theurgic gods" may be similarly fluid. As in the above case of archons in which the distinction is also partially governed by the degree to which the archons are "taken" by the inquiring observer, one could interpret the text to mean that the "theurgic gods" are gods that are particularly tied to theurgy in some sense or at some specific time. This gives the meaning of "theurgic" a more provisional tone and potentially suggests that "theurgic" has less to do with a specific character or nature and more to do with what the theurgists obtain from their relationship with the deities in question. The gods are not defined in an absolute sense, as they would be if Iamblichus defined them as something separate from everything else. Instead, theurgic is a provisional term, which is predicated of the gods when they are perceived to be in a particular relationship with human beings. That is, when the theurgists unite with the gods, the gods in question become theurgic gods.

The provisional interpretation of "theurgic" suggested here fits in with later explicit statements, which Iamblichus makes in reference to entities at the highest level of reality. In 5.22, for example he employs the standard language of "the One." Since the One is

[247] In the text Iamblichus writes "[the appearances] of archons, if you take these to be rulers of the cosmos, who administer the sublunary elements, are varied, but structured in an orderly manner; and, if they preside over matter, they are more varied and more imperfect than archangels…" (*DM* 2.3.71.)

undoubtedly a singular deity, and is undoubtedly the god most representative of the highest level of reality, and since theurgy permits contact with the One, it stands to reason that theurgists unite with the One at the end of their education/training. This is of course in direct contradiction to a strict interpretation of the “theurgic gods” passage which, given the plurality of the key-word "gods," would demand that the theurgist unite with multiple deities at the highest level of their spiritual development.

The conclusion to be drawn from this passage is the same conclusion to be drawn from so many other attempts to interpret *DM*'s descriptions of theurgy into a workable system. We are left with an inexorable lacuna. One could, if one were so inclined, simply dissolve the gaps, which, in the case of the contradiction between a final union with "theurgic gods" and with the "One" would suggest that there is some kind of union of concept between "theurgic gods" and the "One," but this concession seems too facile, and if it becomes allowable to identify plurals as singulars, one no longer exegizes but eisegizes.

5.8 Summary: The Minimal Interpretation of Theurgy

The minimal units extracted in this chapter may be organized in several different ways. One possible table (Table 2) follows the order of positive and negative statements of theurgy, and thus visually allows the reader to capture at a glance all the minimal units of meaning that posit elements of theurgy or exclude elements thought to be irrelevant to theurgy. As can clearly be seen from the table, the number of statements in which Iamblichus provides information about theurgy considerably outweighs the few statements where he says what theurgy is not. The information provided by the positive statements is diverse. However, because of the sheer number of positive statements, they will need to be subject to further subcategorization before any clear meaning can be derived. In contrast, the negative statements are so few, that they provide a clear image about what theurgy is not. Theurgy, according to the negative minimal units is not due to the soul generating sparks, theurgy, unlike image making, does not derive its powers from the lowest emanations of astral effluences, and theurgy is superior to astrology.

Table 2 sorts the algebraic statements according to the semantic identifiers that I have affixed to them: Experience [**T(E)**], Praxis [**T(PRAX)**], Worldview [**T(WV)**], and comparison [**T(COMP)**]. This organization allows for a more complex engagement with the minimal units by collecting in one place Iamblichus’ comments on a variety of themes. The experiences which Iamblichus attributes to the practice of theurgy include such experiences

as visions of divine fire, transformation into a divine being, union with god, and the reception of beneficial irradiation from manifestations of divine beings. The minimal units that offer comparison of theurgy to other religious beliefs reveal that Iamblichus considers theurgy superior to astrology, and that theurgy may be a kind of divination, but this relationship is not exactly clear. The minimal units related to worldview offer direct mention of some of the various spiritual entities named in *DM*, for example "theurgic gods" and "the personal daemon," as well as a fairly consistent series of statements about the nature of fiery visions. However, even greater resolution is required in order to understand the data.

Table 3 provides this resolution by examining in close detail the religious practices of theurgy as described in *DM*. I have divided in this table the statements that I have determined are one time ritual events (labeled throughout with the topic marker **RIT)**, and those which the text suggests are general features of all rituals (labeled with **PROCS**). Given the generalness of the **PROCS** statements, it is reasonable to begin the interpretation of ritual there.

The main feature of the process statements concerning ritual in *DM* reveal four basic themes: the function of ritual is hidden even from the practitioner, which supports the blurred conceptions of agency present throughout *DM*, the complexity of ritual, the structure of ritual always proceeds from higher to lower beings, and the need to begin with worship of material beings. Right away two major contradictions arise, as has already been emphasized in the extraction part of this chapter. The notion that humans have no agency and that the function of the rites is wholly hidden from view to some degree is in tension with the other statements where Iamblichus emphasizes the effectiveness of ritual on its proper performance. Another contradiction may be seen between the developmental model wherein one is supposed to begin one's rituals (all rituals?) with worship of the material beings, while, on the other hand, in one's invocations one is supposed to always proceed from the higher to the lower.

Meanwhile, some of Iamblichus' specific statements about ritual (minimal units marked with **RIT**) support some of his statements about process, some contradict some of his statements, and some neither support nor contradict. **MU-1,-17, -24, and -40** all seem to support a notion of the possible worship of material, localized (focused on specific kinds of matter) beings. **MU-25** on the other hand, which references the kairotic ascent to the One, is explicitly anti-materialistic. **MU-26, -28(b)** seem to point to an entirely different mode of ritual, one focused around the development of a relationship with a particular entity, i.e. the personal daemon.

The evidence supplied by analysis concerning the religious practices of theurgy, seems to point to three different models of ritual theurgy. These models may be called the personal daemon progression model, the material-immaterial model, and the instant attainment model. The personal daemon progression model is the model of attainment governed by discussions of the contacting of a being known as the personal daemon and that being's subsequent replacement with a god. The material-immaterial model is the model of attainment governed by statements that imply the whole of theurgy is concerned with the progression of the individual human from a mode of worship aimed at material deities to a mode of worship aimed at immaterial deities. Finally, the instant-attainment model is suggested by those passages where the practice theurgy is strongly implied to automatically and instantaneously result in the divinization of the human being. The specific minimal units that support each of these models seem to exist in relative isolation to one another. For example, the information provided about the personal daemon progression model (**MU-26, -27,** and **-28**) make no mention of features of material or immaterial worship, nor is there any mention in any of the surrounding passage to these of instant attainment to divine status. Meanwhile the instant-attainment model (at the core of which lies **MU-38**), makes no mention of the personal daemon, nor of material or immaterial theurgies. In the instant-attainment model one simply becomes a god by virtue of interacting with symbols and this gives one the authority to perform theurgy. Finally, the material and immaterial ritual (at the core of which sits **MU-16 and -17**) is supported by statements of complexity, proper performance, and ordinal (from higher to lower) invocation techniques. These statements do not seem to fit with either the personal daemon model nor with the instant attainment model. I have summed up these observations in Table 4.

Because these models of attainment do not seem to support one another in their core elements, and because there exist no statements in *DM* connecting the three disparate models together, it may be postulated that they are, in fact, separate models. They are all labeled theurgy in more or less the same manner, but the actual systems they reference or allude to, seem to be quite distant from one another. There does not seem to be any textual connection in *DM* that could link these various disparate models together.

Two different conclusions may be drawn from this observation. One possibility is to conclude that theurgy is understood to be a generalizable practice which encompasses a variety of techniques that, despite their seeming opposition, are all thought to be reflections of the same system, and thus properly called theurgy. This would be to imagine theurgy as an ideal type which has varying refractions of itself that, while they all differ, are nonetheless

thought to participate in the ideal type in some sense. The alternative conclusion, and the one I favor, is that the varying descriptions of theurgy provided by Iamblichus do not come from one system. In other words, Iamblichus does not have an idea of theurgy in his mind from which he plucks whatever information necessary in order to argue with Porphyry. Instead, Iamblichus generates from Porphyry's arguments plausible, in Iamblichus' eyes at least, answers and affixes to these answers the terminology of "theurgy." On such a reading, theurgy is revealed to be little more than an empty signifier of superiority. This picture of Iamblichus suggests that he is making up theurgy as he goes along and this occasional generation of theurgy accounts for the dysfunction of Iamblichus' statements as I have identified them.

The occasional generative account of theurgy in *DM* has further implications for the history of theurgy. Descriptions of theurgy made by later Neoplatonists, such as Proclus and Marinus do not have such a variety of techniques. It therefore seems that the term has stabilized by that point. Interest in personal daemon directed theurgy has died out,[248] and theurgy appears to be much more akin to conventional magic or prayer.[249]

If the growth of the concept of theurgy can be compared to the development of any idea, product, or yes, even dissertation, Iamblichus' *DM* seems to represent a brainstorming stage. Multiple contradicting vague or even incoherent possibilities are presented as solutions for Porphyry's serious concerns about the value of ritual in the Neoplatonic system. Later, it will be the task of future Neoplatonists to clarify Iamblichus' brainstorming session and to mold the clay of his thought into the bricks of a system.

[248] Unless Edwards is right to say that "mastering generation" is a "reference to the natal daemon" (cf. Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 22 Edwards and n. 237.)
[249] Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 17, 28, 29.

Via Positiva	***Via Negativa***
MU-1 T(PRAX) RIT (aimed local beings); AGNT (humans)	**MU-31 T(WV) NOT chance sparks in soul cause of divine visions**
MU-2 T(E) Union with gods; AGNT (the gods)	**MU-33 T(COMP) is NOT image making**
MU-3 T(E) Light shed on theurgists; AGNT (the gods)	**MU-34 T(WV) efficacy of theurgy does NOT depend on lowest level of astral emanations. [IMP from MU-33]**
MU-4 T(E) Soul separation while alive; AGNT (humans)	**MU-35 T(COMP) Astrology; superior**
MU-5 T(E) [beneficial irradiation from divine spirits]	
MU-6 T(PRAX) PROCS (Proper performance of ritual); AGNT(human)	
MU-7 T(E) Vision of Pure Fire; AGNT (gods)	
MU-8 T(PRAX) PROCS (contemplation); AGNT(humans)	
MU-9 T(PRAX) PROCS (Actions ["secret" + "beyond conception"])	
MU-10 T(PRAX) PROCS (use of unutterable symbols [contemplated by gods])	
MU-11 T(COMP) divination; hypotactic	
MU-12 T(E) ascent to intelligible fire; AGNT (the gods)	
MU-13 T(COMP) divination; identical	
MU-14 T(PRAX) PROCS (humans order gods); AGNT (human)	
MU-15 T(E) humans become gods; AGNT (blurred)	
MU-16 T(PRAX) PROCS (necessary to begin with worship of material gods).	
MU-17 T(PRAX) RIT(worship of material gods)	
MU-18 T(PRAX) PROCS (theurgy labels highest level of religious practice); AGNT (humans "freed from the bonds of nature")	
MU-19 T(COMP) departments of worship; unclear relation	
MU-20 T(PRAX) PROCS ("theurgy" labels three levels of religious practices)	
MU-21 T(WV) specific entity (theurgic gods)	
MU-22 T(WV) requires complex cult	
MU-23 T(PRAX) PROCS (complex cult)	
MU-24 T(PRAX) RIT (use of matter to create receptacle for gods)	
MU-25 T(PRAX) RIT (kairotic anti-materialistic ritual union with One)	
MU-26 T(PRAX) RIT (establish god in place of daemon); AGNT (human)	

Via Positiva	***Via Negativa***
MU-26b T(PRAX) PROCS (establish god in place of daemon); AGNT(human)	
MU-27 T(WV) specific entity (personal daemon)	
MU-28 T(PRAX) RIT (group ritual for contacting pers. daemon)	
MU-28b T(PRAX) RIT (standardized ritual for contacting pers. daemon)	
MU-29 T(WV) (higher principles control lower principles)	
MU-30 [IMP] T(PRAX) PROCS (higher principles always control lower principles)	
MU-32 T(WV) gods cause divine visions	
MU-36 T(WV) theurgy has different practices for each level of anthropological development	
MU-37 T(WV) theurgy simultaneously is performed by humans but has divine power	
MU-38 T(PRAX) (PROCS) humans become gods in the immediate practice of theurgy	
MU-39 T(WV) Theurgy operates through dualism of the soul	
MU-40 T(PRAX) RIT (use of material receptacles)	

Table 2: Via Positiva and Via Negativa MUs

T(E)	T(PRAX)	T(COMP	T(WV)
MU-2 T(E) Union with gods; AGNT (the gods)	MU-1 T(PRAX) RIT (aimed local beings); AGNT (humans)	MU-11 T(COMP) divination; hypotactic	MU-21 T(WV) specific entity (theurgic gods)
MU-3 T(E) Light shed on theurgists; AGNT (the gods)	MU-6 T(PRAX) PROCS (Proper performance of ritual); AGNT(human)	MU-13 T(COMP) divination; identical	MU-22 T(WV) requires complex cult
MU-4 T(E) Soul separation while alive; AGNT (humans)	MU-8 T(PRAX) PROCS (contemplation); AGNT(humans)	MU-19 T(COMP) departments of worship; unclear relation	MU-31 T(WV) NOT chance sparks in soul cause of divine visions
MU-5 T(E) [beneficial irradiation from divine spirits]	MU-9 T(PRAX) PROCS (Actions ["secret" + "beyond conception"])	MU-33 T(COMP) is NOT image making	MU-34 T(WV) efficacy of theurgy does NOT depend on lowest level of astral emanations. [IMP from MU-33]
MU-7 T(E) Vision of Pure Fire; AGNT (gods)	MU-10 T(PRAX) PROCS (use of unutterable symbols [contemplated by gods])	MU-35 T(COMP) Astrology; superior	MU-27 T(WV) specific entity (personal daemon)
MU-12 T(E) ascent to intelligible fire; AGNT (the gods)	MU-14 T(PRAX) PROCS (humans order gods); AGNT (human)		MU-29 T(WV) (higher principles control lower principles)
MU-15 T(E) humans become gods; AGNT (blurred)	MU-16 T(PRAX) PROCS (necessary to begin with worship of material gods).		MU-32 T(WV) gods cause divine visions
	MU-17 T(PRAX) RIT(worship of material gods)		MU-36 T(WV) theurgy has different practices for each level of anthropological development
	MU-18 T(PRAX) PROCS (theurgy labels highest level of religious practice); AGNT (humans “freed from the bonds of nature”)		MU-37 T(WV) theurgy simultaneously is performed by humans but has divine power
	MU-20 T(PRAX) PROCS (“theurgy” labels three levels of religious practices)		MU-39 T(WV) Theurgy operates through dualism of the soul
	MU-23 T(PRAX) PROCS (complex cult)		
	MU-24 T(PRAX) RIT (use of matter to create receptacle for gods)		
	MU-25 T(PRAX) RIT (kairotic anti-materialistic ritual union with One)		

T(E)	T(PRAX)	T(COMP	T(WV)
	MU-26 T(PRAX) RIT (establish god in place of daemon); AGNT (human)		
	MU-26b T(PRAX) PROCS (establish god in place of daemon); AGNT(human)		
	MU-28 T(PRAX) RIT (group ritual for contacting pers. daemon)		
	MU-28b T(PRAX) RIT (standardized ritual for contacting pers. daemon)		
	MU-30 [IMP] T(PRAX) PROCS (higher principles always control lower principles)		
	MU-38 T(PRAX) (PROCS) humans become gods in the immediate practice of theurgy		
	MU-40 T(PRAX) RIT (use of material receptacles)		

Table 3: MUs Divided Thematically

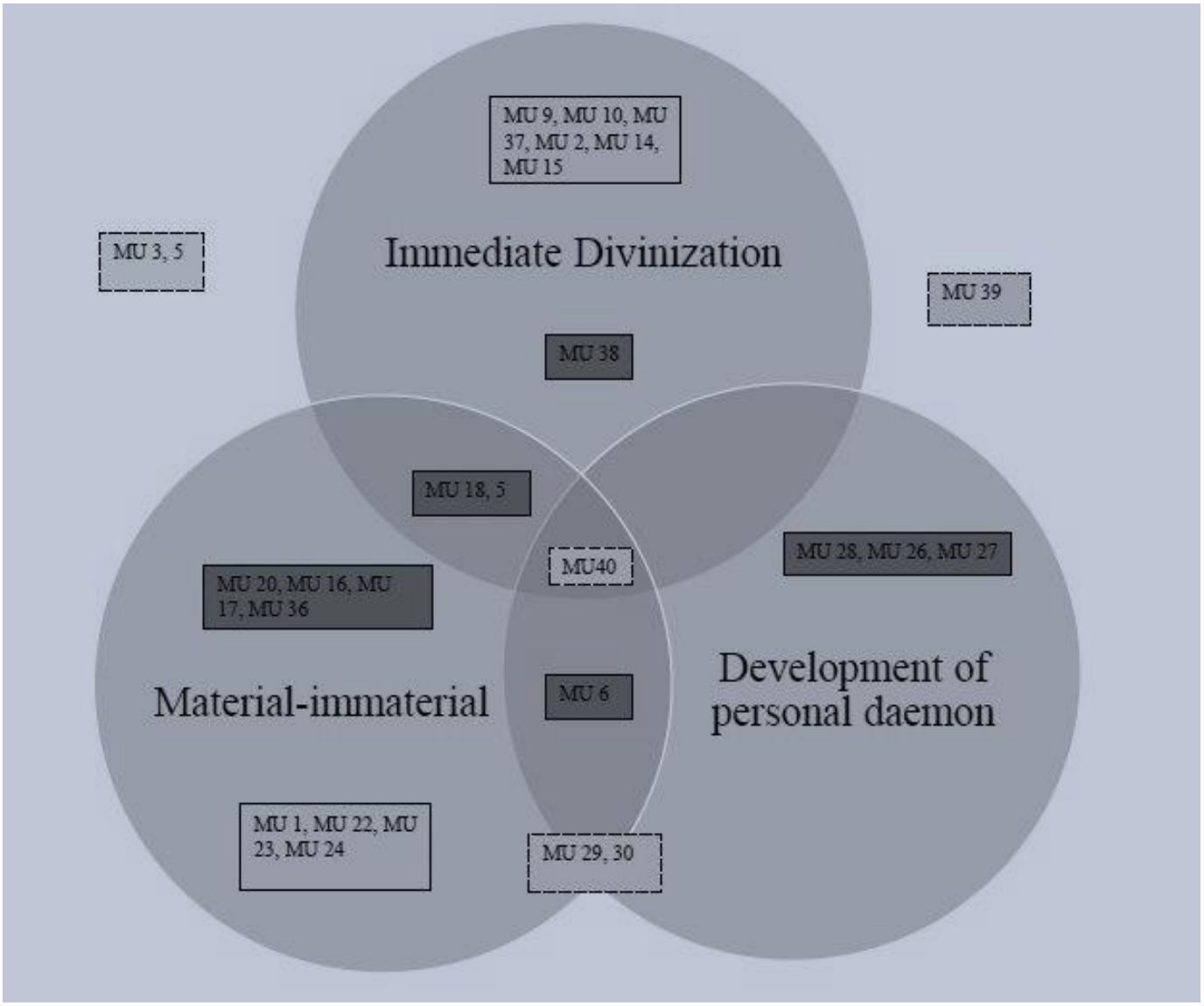

Table 4: Three Modalities of Theurgy

6. Theurgy and its Relationship to Judaism, Gnosticism, and Other Religious Traditions

The conclusion reached in the preceding chapter was that the minimal definition of theurgy as extracted by means of a close reading of *De Mysteriis* is insufficient to support a single stable notion of theurgy within the writings of Iamblichus. In the current chapter I wish to take the minimalistic model of theurgy and compare what can be derived from it to the statements made concerning an alleged interaction between theurgy and several religious traditions, namely Judaism (specifically Merkabah [sometimes spelled Merkavah] mysticism), Gnosticism (specifically of the so-called Sethian variety), and surprisingly enough Tibetan Buddhism. The justification for this investigation is due to a confusion I see in the use of theurgy as an etic term to define features of religious traditions. It has been commonplace to take what little can be understood about theurgy in the Neoplatonist texts and compare these understandings with later or foreign traditions, which in turn potentially leads to a backflow of information from the later traditions back to theurgy. This is what I think has happened in theurgy studies, which has resulted in so much confusion over the term.

For each religious tradition, prominent scholarship that suggests a similarity between theurgy and one of the other traditions will be discussed, and its merits debated. In the end, I offer what to my mind is a more proper etic use of the term.

6.1 Use of "Theurgy" in Studies of Judaism

It is far beyond the scope of this dissertation to offer a complete outline of the history of Jewish mysticism, which has been done adequately elsewhere.[250] However, due to the fact that some readers may be unfamiliar with the terminology and basics, and because the field is vast and labyrinthine, a summary seems to be in order before delving into the problems of theurgy's relationship with this convoluted subject.

Judaism is now known to have had several different phases of development. These are variously demarcated, but the principle markers are Ancient Israelite Religion, First Temple Judaism, Second Temple Judaism, Medieval Judaism, and Modern Judaism. Jewish mystical

[250] Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken 1961) is still the classical text for beginners.

traditions have been discerned in some form or another in nearly every time period. Determining the date of composition for early Jewish mystical treatises is difficult, due to the tendency of their authors and editors to pseudepigraphally attribute their authorship to much earlier authors, usually figures of semi-mythical provenance. Thus, identifying the cultural background of these treatises, is usually a challenge. The earliest identifiable mystical tradition, variously designated *Merkabah Maaseh* ("work of the chariot") or *Hekhaloth* ("palaces"), has been dated to a range as wide as the first century CE to the tenth century, and its influences are felt on much older traditions of Jewish mysticism. The names used to describe these subtraditions of Judaism and genres of mystical writings, which will arise again in the course of this discussion, come from the nature of the visions described in their relevant texts. The Merkabah texts focus on the description and encounter with the chariot of God as described in the first chapter of Ezekiel. The Hekhaloth literature imagines the spiritual universe as a series of interconnected "palaces" formed of various substances (e.g. crystal, fire) and guarded by fierce angelic entities that demand of the humans who attempt to journey in these spaces various passwords and names. These palaces are speculative elaborations of the visions of the Biblical patriarch Enoch. The themes of these two "genres" of mystical literature are not exclusive, and at some point they were blended, with the descriptions of the Merkabah, the throne-chariot of God, beginning to include "chambers" and "palaces."[251]

There is a longstanding tradition of interest on the part of Jewish scholars in the concept of theurgy. Gershom Scholem in his *Major Trends of Jewish Mysticism* uses the term theurgy several times to describe what he seems to think of as various tendencies in all religious traditions. Peter Schäfer uses the term, but with some hesitation. Moshe Idel uses the term without any qualms and even has a model of what he thinks "theurgy" is, which is, as shall be shown, very different from the Iamblichean model presented in the previous chapter. Yehuda Liebes does not really use the term "theurgy" but in an article he argues that the twelfth century Kabbalistic text the *Zohar* presents evidence of conceptual dialogue with Iamblichean theurgy.

In order to explore the similarities and differences in these uses of theurgy and to compare them to the outline of theurgy arrived at in the previous chapter, it will be necessary to delve into the various instances of the term in these examples of secondary scholarship of Judaism. I begin with Scholem.

[251] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 46.

In *Major Trends,* Scholem uses the term theurgy in a fashion that seems to make it more or less synonymous with magic and contrasts this with mysticism. The distinction between mysticism on the one hand and magic/theurgy on the other hand, seems to come down to the classic model of magic as coercive religion and mysticism as exploratory religion. Scholem admits that the mystical practices of Judaism can take on more theurgic features, however, and the moments where he describes this are telling. For example, in reference to the journeys of ascent to God that feature prominently in Merkabah mysticism, there are occasionally uses of talismanic *hitma,* which function as defensive magical objects against the threatening forces that confront the mystic in his ascent.[252] Additional examples of magical features, here referred to as having theurgic effects, include the wearing of a robe with the name of God sewn into it and the summoning of an angelic spirit, the *Sar Ha Torah,* an angelic being that is especially associated in Jewish magical texts and folklore with the memorization of Torah verses.[253]

The descriptions offered by Scholem of "theurgic" elements in late antique and Jewish medieval traditions, indicates a vague background assumption that theurgy and magic are more or less the same. Yet there is a notable exception where Scholem offers a more precise notion of what he means by theurgy, which is present in his description of a new trend in Merkabah mysticism. Scholem writes:

> In this context it is well to remember that the chief peculiarity of this form of mysticism, its emphasis on God's might and magnificence, opens the door to the transformation of mysticism into theurgy; there the master of the secret "names" himself takes on the exercise of power in the way described in the various magical and theurgical procedures of which this literature is full. The language of the theurgist conforms to that of the Merkabah mystic. Both are dominated by the attributes of power and sublimity, not love or tenderness.[254]

Power and might are here cited as the key features of the theurgic discourse, but more especially it seems that for Scholem the main differentiating feature that marks something as theurgic is the use of language and divine names. Thus, theurgy in Scholem's view is indistinguishable from a coercive rite that is especially governed by the practitioner's

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[252] Scholem, *Major Trends,* 50-52.

[253] This example is from the *Sepher Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), a 3rd- 6th century work, which offers the foundational description of the Sephiroth, the ten aspects of God, so important to the later Kabbalistic tradition (Scholem, *Major Trends,* 75, 77).

[254] Scholem, *Major Trends,* 56 -57.

knowledge of the real names of the beings and powers which he (the practitioner is always envisioned as a male) seeks to command. Moreover, there is, in Scholem's analysis, a tendency to contrast the powerful use of names in these more "theurgic" elements of Judaism with developments in other forms of Judaism mysticism which emphasize the requirements to moral purity as a prerequisite. Thus, Scholem characterizes the early forms of Jewish mysticism as primitive magic, which would later evolve into a more enlightened and ethical form.

Elsewhere, Scholem cites some texts from the Jewish tradition that he claims have especially strong "theurgical" elements. These include *The Sword of Moses*,[255] *The Havdalah of Rabbi Akiba*,[256] and *Shimmushe Tehilim*.[257] Scholem does not explicitly say what he considers to be the theurgic elements of these texts. On survey, it seems that they all utilize the language and worldview of rabbinical Judaism, but they have a significant inclination towards a use of this worldview for effective purposes, such as benefitting health, memory, and other such mundane matters. It seems safe to say that this focus on practical benefits is what Scholem considers to be the "theurgical" element.

So, we have a view of what Scholem considers to be theurgy. How does this measure up to what we saw in the preceding chapter about theurgy as present in the principle source text, *De Mysteriis*? I would argue that there are some significant differences, and I would further argue that the elements that Scholem counts as "theurgic" would confuse Iamblichus or be discounted as poor examples. For example, while Iamblichean theurgy, like the other subtraditions that partake of the Platonic worldview, typically characterizes the experience of theurgists as an "ascent", there is no key description of the stages of this ascent as are present in the Hekhaloth/Merkabah tradition. Moreover, as we saw in the preceding chapter ontological transformation in theurgy is imagined not specifically as the transformation of the individual, but as a "changing of the guard" that watches over the human synthesis of soul and body. Lacking here are descriptions of stages of ascent with fearsome guardians. The closest we come to the *hitma* of Merkabah mysticism, is the doctrine of the *characteres* from

[255] The *Sword of Moses* opens with a cosmological explanation of various angels and at what times of day they praise God. There follows a long series of magical names and then a series of recipes describing the use of the names.
[256] The *Havdalah* may or may not be based on the traditional Jewish ceremony that serves to mark the end of Shabbat and contains adjurations to a variety of angels, Metatron, as well as a palindromic recitation of the entirety of the Hebrew alphabet.
[257] Scholem 78.

DM[258] which serve as some kind of tool of both true and false diviners (the distinction being whether one stands on the characters or whether one contemplates them with light shining on them).[259] At no point is any statement made that can confirm that the *characteres* are utilized as passwords for overcoming fearsome daemonic or angelic opponents. The *characteres* of *DM* seem to operate rather as some kind of means of contact with the divine, a bridge between the mundane and the supernal, similar to that offered by the oracular shrines of the gods, which receive and transmit to the purified priesthood the abundance of their essence, but available to those who are not present directly in the shrine. *Characteres* are thus not analogous to passwords in the Jewish mystical tradition, but are instead a non-localized and easily transportable means of creating a sacred space.

Scholem considers the use of language to control divine entities to be especially theurgic, and in the salient passage where he emphasizes the boundary between mysticism and theurgy he notes that the main point of differentiation seems to lie in the ability of the theurgist to coopt the divine powers by means of language alone as opposed to "love and tenderness."[260] It is a curious statement to be sure, and I sense an echo of the cliché that magic is mechanical and bad and true religion is related to features like love and affection. In any event, Iamblichus would almost certainly disagree with this notion. While language and the use of seemingly nonsensical words are indeed stressed at certain points in *DM*, the notion of virtue and friendship with the gods, is perhaps even more important. In several salient passages, Iamblichus weighs the possibility that people can mechanistically coopt the powers of the gods, but then summarily dismisses it.[261] It is thus evident that he thinks such misuses of the powers available to theurgy are not proper theurgy. As for the issue of control, Iamblichean theurgy goes to great lengths to explain that the use of names and language, while an important feature of theurgy, is in some way necessarily connected to the degree of commonality and affection that the gods feel for the theurgist insofar as he strives to make himself akin to them. Speaking the language of the gods in a manner comprehensible to them, but not comprehensible to humans, is both symbolic of the manner in which the theurgist plugs himself into the cosmic circuit and also has effective consequences. One of the main points of *DM*, in fact, as was seen in the preceding analysis is the extent to which ritual that does not partake of such an affiliation with the gods is characterized as ineffective,

[258] *DM* 3.13.
[259] ibid.
[260] See above, n. 5.
[261] *DM* 4.10.

dangerous, and outside the purview of the theurgist. Thus, Scholem's distinction between mechanistic and affectional means of religious participation does not correlate well with Iamblichean theurgy, which while allowing for an automatic procedure to the material elements of theurgy, marks the distinction between theurgy and goetia with almost the same fervor as Scholem marks between mysticism and magic/theurgy. In a word, Iamblichus would probably place his understanding of theurgy closer to what Scholem calls mysticism.

Scholem uses theurgy in a manner that is synonymous with magic (though he never clearly defines both categories). The preceding has been an attempt to characterize on the basis of Scholem's usage a model for what theurgy/magic is, in comparison to mysticism. It seems safe to conclude, as has Peter Schäfer, that magic (and by extension theurgy) for Scholem is characterized by the attitude of control. The mystic is content to observe heavenly realms and passively receive apocalyptic knowledge; the magician/theurgist seeks to order, control, or otherwise manipulate divine or infernal realms and processes. The two categories undergo some blending in the texts when mystical experiences demand that one control or dominate forces opposed to one's attainment of knowledge.

Scholem in his use of the term never defines nor explains the use of theurgy in Neoplatonic circles.[262] This situation changes in the early 90s. At this point, the term "magic" as an anthropological category had been subjected to such degradation that it seemed desirable to find an altogether new technical term. Philip Alexander, aware of these problems suggested that Schäfer abandon the term magic and substitute it with theurgy. Schäfer objects "precisely because of his [Alexander's] main argument in favour of this suggestion, namely that it was used in ancient times already in Chaldean and Neoplatonic circles."[263] Schäfer is, to the best of my knowledge, the only scholar in Judaism who has raised this crucial problem of the meta-use of the term theurgy.[264]

Scholem for his part, I conjecture, would not have been terribly bothered by the problems raised by Schäfer, because he (Scholem) held the theory that the origins of Jewish mysticism were to be found in the interaction between rabbinical or proto-rabbinical Judaism and those traditions which broadly speaking come under the umbrella of pagan gnosis,

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[262] Moreover, there is no direct reference in *Major Trends* to Iamblichus with the exception of a single note to Iamblichus's *De Vita Pythagorica* (Scholem 48, 360).
[263] Peter Schäfer, "Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism" in: Peter Schäfer and Hans Kippenberg (eds.) *Envisioning Magic* (Leiden, Brill: 1997), 25.
[264] Even so, he himself slips and repeats Scholem's basic usage, asserting that the phrase "command over the Merkavah" in *Hekhalot Rabbati* is clear evidence of "a theurgical tinge." (Ibid., 40)

including Neoplatonism. Thus, the term theurgy serves, for Scholem not only as a marker of a specific difference in operation between mysticism and magic, but also as an ideological tool of separation of true rabbinical Jewish tendencies from the socio-cultural matrix of Hellenistic religion which simultaneously gave birth to these speculations, but was at various points cast off in the formation of the true Jewish religion. Thus, when Scholem writes that a certain text exhibits more theurgic tendencies, one can speculate that what he has in mind is a devolution from authentic religiosity to a more primitive religious view. Thus, when Scholem uses the term theurgy, it may indeed be with the intent of marking an invasion into authentic Judaism from non-Jewish traditions and practices.

Scholem's spiritual successor, Moshe Idel, has no such excuse. Idel is (in)famous for postulating that Jewish mysticism, far from originating in foreign practices, is in fact more or less an authentically pure Jewish tradition which evolved independently from contact with foreign ideas. It is not my place here to debate the merits of this position, but only to note that if Idel wishes to maintain this view, it is striking to me 1) how much he favors the use of the Greek term theurgy to explain the mystical ideas he exegizes (why not use a Hebrew term?) and 2) how isolated his definition of theurgy is from everyone else's definition. Idel consciously defines theurgy as "operations intended to influence the Divinity, mostly in its own inner state or dynamics, but sometimes also in its relationship to man."[265] This statement may be further qualified by statements made by Idel elsewhere to the effect that the main kind of operation he has in mind is the performance of classical Jewish mitzvoth (commandments).

To the first point one could easily raise the counter argument that Idel is part of a wider scholarly discourse that has accepted theurgy as a meta-term for describing phenomena. If so, I would expect Idel to use theurgy in a sense as defined by a standard reference dictionary. Even so, I am not convinced that such a move would be helpful or more articulate than merely using some Hebrew term and defining it for a wider audience. My second point adds a further wrinkle to this objection. If Idel were using theurgy because it is a useful term for its meta connotations familiar to the wider scholarly community, why does he define it in such an idiosyncratic way, so specific to the Jewish tradition?

The answer might be found, on the one hand, in Idel's focus on later medieval Jewish traditions of Hasidism, which are part of a larger ideological complex wherein theurgy thanks to Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494) and other Italian *magi* has become intertwined with

[265] Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 157.

Kabbalah and Hermeticism. This development, it should be noted, is late. Pico's religion cannot be assumed as a straightforward continuation of Iamblichean Neoplatonism, and so the connections drawn by Pico and the other renaissance intellectuals should be thought of as a new religious tradition. In other words, Idel takes 15th century notions of theurgy which are tied into Zoharic kabbalah and uses this terminology to explain late antique (in his words "ancient") Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. It is as if we used post-Revolutionary French notions of the Republic to explain how Ancient Roman government operated.
On the other hand, Idel's thinking can also be explained by scholarly contact with figures like Birger Pearson and others, who continued Scholem's researches into the Gnostic-Jewish connection, and who utilized the language of theurgy. I will address these figures and their ideas about theurgy in the next section. At this point, however, it is necessary to address one more scholar of Judaism, one who I think exemplifies the kind of problems of backflow I addressed in the introduction to this chapter.

Unlike Idel, who gives no historical justification for his use of the term theurgy, Yehuda Liebes has argued for a real meeting of minds between the traditions of Judaism and Iamblichean theurgy. He finds this meeting in posited similarities in *De Mysteriis* and the *Zohar*, and as he himself notes in his abstract, this is the first attempt to actually try to build this connection on a careful examination of textual similarities, as opposed to merely general themes.[266] The similarities he focuses on are in my view rather questionable, and I think he overinterprets both texts in order to draw the connections he wants.[267]

Moreover, these tentative connections lead to some rather overblown conclusions such as Abammon is really Abraham, in spite of the fact that Abammon is a legitimate Egyptian name in its own right, and he makes the rather far-fetched conclusion that Iamblichus was either the source of the Zoharic passage or that they are witnesses to the same tradition. Certainly the second would seem the safer bet, but Liebes prefers the former. He ends with noting that the biographical account of the revered R. Shimeon bar Yohai partakes of the same paradigm as Iamblichus, which I take him to accept as evidence in support of the Zohar's authors being intimately familiar with *De Mysteriis*.

While I cannot completely disprove the proposition, I think it is worth taking a step back at this point and reexamining Liebes's intellectual movements as an indication of a

[266] Liebes, "Zohar and Iamblichus" *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6.18 (2007), 95.
[267] For example, a passing reference to "children of the East" in *Zohar* 1:99b is immediately connected to "the Chaldeans" (Liebes, "Zohar and Iamblichus," 95-96).

bigger issue. First, with the survey of Scholem, it was seen that theurgy was a negative feature of some Jewish traditions, but a marker of historical contact. Then, in Idel, theurgy serves as a positive term, absent the historical importance of the term. Now we see the principle text of theurgy being connected with arguably the principle text of Jewish mysticism and the result of this connection is the creation of tenuous historical implications. This is what I refer to as the backflow effect. The initial use of the complicated and tradition specific term of theurgy by the founder of the field of Jewish mysticism gave a seal of approval to make a connection, which eventually resulted in inspiring a historical conclusion for which there is little evidence. This historical conclusion in turn has implications for how one studies Iamblichus, and could, if given room to breathe, allow for explanations of theurgy that derive ultimately from interpretations of Jewish mysticism.

6.2 Use of "Theurgy" in Studies of Gnosticism

Gnosticism, variously designated with scare quotes or not, has been one of the powerhouses of research for the last 60 years or so. The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library in 1945, provided researchers of early Christianity with a whole new collection of material to translate, interpret, and test various theories on. Among the multitude of voices that have arisen from these investigations, a number of prominent researchers have pointed out connections between Gnosticism and Neoplatonism in general, and Gnosticism and theurgy in particular.

To this latter category may be assigned an essay by Birger Pearson, entitled "Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus's Conception of Theurgy."[268] In the course of his article, Pearson compares select passages from *DM* to three Sethian[269] Gnostic texts: *The Gospel of the Egyptians* (*NHC* III, 2; IV, 2); *The Three Steles of Seth* (*NHC* VII, 5); and

[268] Printed in Wallis (ed.), *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (State University of New York Press, Albany: 1992), 253-275.

[269] Sethian describes one of two major types of Gnosticism, the other being Valentinian. The term is used to describe a particular sub-collection of texts in the Nag Hammadi Library designated by Hans-Martin Schenke. Schenke found a pattern of recurring themes in twelve of the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library. These themes included: focus on the spiritual seed of Seth, references to a maternal Barbelo Aeon, and inclusion of a rite of five seals. See Hans-Martin Schenke, "Das sethianische System nach Nag-Hammadi-Handschriften," in *Studia Coptica* (Berlin: Akademie, 1974), 165–72; idem, "The Phenomenon and Significance of Gnostic Sethianism," in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Proceedings of the International Conference on Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 588–616.

Marsanes (*NHC* X, 1). Pearson's conclusions concerning the similarity of these two textual traditions are, as he himself admits, meagre. Even so, his attempt in connecting theurgy to Gnosticism is significant and deserves attention.

For example, having spent several pages describing one of the prayers in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which is especially noteworthy for its long drawn out vocalic invocations, Pearson cites *DM* 7.4.256.8-15, where Iamblichus explains why there is nothing untoward about using Egyptian or Assyrian language in invocations:

> We think it is necessary to offer our communication to the gods in a language related to them…. Those who first learned the names of the gods, connecting them with their own proper tongue, handed them down to us, that we might preserve inviolate, in a language peculiar and proper to these (names), the sacred law of traditions.[270]

Pearson has taken this passage out of context. It is worth recalling that this passage is a response to the concern raised by Porphyry concerning the seeming absurdity of the gods requiring invocations in *Egyptian* or *Assyrian*. This seems absurd, as Porphyry says, "Are we to conclude from this requirement that the gods themselves possess a particular ethnicity?" Thus, Iamblichus' reply is not about a special language devoted only to gods; instead it is a defense of the use of non-Greek languages in ritual.

It is possible that Iamblichean invocations are not of the same pattern as the Gnostics with their vowel chantings, but rather were coherent statements in Assyrian/Syriac or Egyptian.[271] The notion that Iamblichus's justification for the liturgical use of foreign languages has to be equivalent to the various Gnostic or magical uses of *voces magicae* stems again from a presumed equivalence between magic, theurgy, and the other elements of the "underworld" of Platonism.

At any rate, comparing Gnostic texts to Iamblichean texts does not serve to help us better understand Iamblichus, and in fact, only leads to confusion. As I hope I have demonstrated sufficiently, we are not prepared for such comparisons until we have arrived at

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[270] Trans. is Pearson's (p. 258).

[271] This, by the way, is another reason why I doubt the dating (and thus the validity) of a citation attributed to Nicomachus of Gerasa (60 – 120 CE), concerning the theurgists. Nicomachus (apud Proclus) says that the theurgists used "hissing, clucking, and inarticulate and discordant sounds" to imitate the planets (citation available in Lewy p. 250). Lewy says that the Nicomachus passage is probably better attributed to Proclus because it includes the word theurgy, the emergence of which must date at the earliest to 150 CE (according to the *Suda*'s entry on Julian the Theurgist.) A discussion of this fragment of Nicomachus is available in Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, Leiden 1978, 295.

a clear understanding of the text. To preemptively leap into juxtaposition results in using an extremely fragmentary ritual texts that describe an alluring ritual tradition, to explain the mysteries of *DM*, a (as far as we know) complete and intact text with unclear referents. Furthermore, to take the unclear texts of theurgy and use them as explanatory tools for the ritual texts of Gnosticism also seems unhelpful. It is methodologically unsound to take a theoretical text (like *DM*) and supplement its arguments with a practical manual like the Gnostic texts in order to explain the one with the other, without being able to first demonstrate points of contact that mark the two traditions as similar enough to one another. To my mind the various attempts to prove these points of contact have not been successful. Here I follow especially the insights of John Finamore who pointed out in his article, "Iamblichus, the Sethians, and *Marsanes*," the metaphysical breaks between Iamblichus and at least one of the major Sethian texts.[272] To be sure, it is probably very likely that Iamblichus was aware of the existence of Gnostics,[273] but his awareness of them is not a necessary indication of a shared tradition, nor of the possibility of using the theories of the one to explain the other and vice-versa. As Finamore argues, the battle lines between the Neoplatonists and the Gnostics had already been drawn in Plotinus's school, and it is unlikely that either school learned much from the other.[274]

Most importantly for the current discussion, John Turner uses the term "Sethian theurgy" to describe certain features of the Sethian text, *Marsanes*. In his introduction to the critical edition of the text. He writes that the ritual features of *Marsanes* are of a "theurgical sort" insofar as they:

> [focus] on the nature of the soul both individual and cosmic, on the nature of the astral powers that affect the soul, and the means by which the Sethian adept might

[272] Finamore, "Iamblichus, the Sethians, and *Marsanes*" in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism*, edited by Ruth Majerick and John Turner, 225-228 (Society for Biblical Literature, 2000).
[273] It is a common scholarly conceit that Plotinus had Sethian Gnostics in his teaching circle. This assumption is based on the similarities of names between the texts mentioned in Porph. *VP* 16 trans. Armstrong: "There were in his time many Christians and others, and sectarians who had abandoned the old philosophy, men of the schools of Adelphius and Aculinus, who possessed a great many treatises of Alexander the Libyan and Philocomus and Deostratus and Lydus, and produced revelations by Zoroaster and Zostrianus and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messus and other people of the kind…Plotinus hence often attacked their position in his lectures, and wrote the treatise to which we have given the title 'Against the Gnostics'". The passage goes on to state that Plotinus's disciples, Amelius and Porphyry himself, wrote refutations of these works. Amelius wrote against *Zostrionus* and Porphyry wrote against Zoroaster. Iamblichus himself mentions the Gnostics in *De Anima* (apud Stob. I.49 [trans. Finamore and Dillon, 49]) in a doxographical list of causes of the soul's descent.
[274] Finamore, "Iamblichus," 255.

> manipulate these powers to his or her advantage by utilizing the appropriate nomenclature for these realities…*Marsanes* now offers a Sethian Gnostic physics and psychology based on astrology, theurgical technique, and a theory of language.[275]

From this passage, I take it that Turner has a schema in mind wherein theurgy is particularly characterized by the manipulation of language and the use of astral influences.

As seen in the preceding section, however, with the exception of the mention of a kairotic technique, Iamblichus generally has a poor view on astrological methods. Moreover, the use of the manipulation of alphabetical signs is not, for Iamblichus, at least, especially theurgic. At least, there are no direct mentions of alphabetical characters and vowel signs in association with theurgy in *DM*. There is however, a different text which might support the notion of associating these two practices to theurgy. This is actually from the first century Pythagorean writer Nicomachus of Gerasa, who in his manual of harmony writes:

> And the tones of the seven spheres, each of which by nature produces a particular sound, are the sources of the nomenclature of the vowels. These are described as unpronounceable in themselves and in all their combinations by wise men since the tone in this context performs a role analogous to that of the monad in number, the point in geometry, and the letter in grammar. However, when they are combined with the materiality of the consonants just as soul is combined with body and harmony with strings—the one producing a creature, the other notes and melodies---they have potencies which are efficacious and perfective of divine things. Thus whenever the theurgists are conducting such acts of worship they make invocation symbolically with hissing, clucking, and inarticulate and discordant sounds.[276]

The last line, with its reference to "the theurgists" is the most important, and there is a debate over its authenticity, with some thinking it is a later interpolation. If it is later, it is conceivable that we are actually witnessing a Proclan concept of theurgy. This is further supported by a statement made concerning Proclus's learning how to generate animal sounds. True, Iamblichus mentions unutterable symbols as an important feature of theurgy, but it is not clear that these symbols should be spoken. In truth it is not clear at all what these symbols (symbola and synthemata) actually are.

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[275] John Turner, "Introduction" in W.-P. Funk, P.-H. Poirier, J. D. Turner, *Marsanès (NH X,1)* (Leuven-Paris: Éditions Peeters, 2000), 231ff.

[276] Nichomachus of Gerasa (*Musici Scriptores Graeci*, p. 276, 8ff. Jan. Translation in Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 294-295.

It could be argued that the text from Nicomachus is early, and Iamblichus indeed has in mind just this kind of idea of theurgy in his writings. However, my method in this dissertation has been to treat Iamblichus as the core definer of theurgy, and to treat his statements as the clearest (though still not very clear) explanation of the technique of theurgy. It can be concluded on these grounds that whatever connection there may be in the metaphysics and practice of the Sethian gnostics to the Middle or Neoplatonists, it does not seem to have touched or been touched by Iamblichus' theories.

Instead, I think what we are witnessing is an expanded definition of theurgy derived from the amassed association of ideas with which theurgy has been associated. In short, these are the problems faced in treating the variety of Platonizing traditions in late antiquity as part of the same tradition. In seeing them as elements in the same "bucket" they may be blended and mixed, but they tend to become a flavorless mass upon which any amount of imposed meanings may be projected.

6.3 Use of "Theurgy" in Studies of Tibetan Buddhism

The previous section dealt with historical traditions which may have had intercultural connections with Iamblichean theurgy of the fourth century to some degree or another, though which are, as I have tried to show, sufficiently different to not be identical. However, though it is not part of those texts and traditions identified with the underworld of Platonism, there is another tradition which is commonly associated with theurgy, namely Tibetan Buddhism.[277] This section is, like the others, incited by a piece of secondary scholarship. This one is by Lutz Bergemann and entertainingly entitled "'Fire Walk With Me': An Attempt at An Interpretation of Theurgy and its Aesthetics" and appeared in a conference volume with the title *Aesthetics and Theurgy in Byzantium*. In his article, Bergemann raises many of the same questions which I raised in the beginning of this dissertation, namely asking whether theurgy should be properly thought of as a religion, a system, or as a particular state of consciousness. Bergemann prefers the latter interpretation, and goes on to outline a theory in which certain mystical states are generalizable enough as to participate in the category of theurgic experiences. He goes considerably beyond this however, and addresses the point that

[277] Addey, *Divination and Theurgy*, 25 also notes this growing tendency. She cites Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*; and two recent articles by John Dillon: "The Platonic Philosopher in Prayer" and Dillon's contribution to the *Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* vol. 1: "Iamblichus of Chalcis and his School"

certain features of very distant religious traditions, such as the practices of Tibetan Buddhism and its pre-Buddhist Bön background, share familiar features with the expressions of theurgy as present in the Neoplatonic writings.

The idea of a historical connection between the Tibetan/Mongolian religious traditions and Platonism, which is then revived in Neoplatonism is not unique to Bergemann, but originates in the writings of Walter Burkert and is especially prominent in the scholarship of Peter Kingsley, a scholar of complex reputation.[278] Kingsley is the strong proponent of the view that Eastern and Western philosophy had definite historical contact, and his meditative object for this story is the tale of Abaris meeting Pythagoras as it appears in Herodotus IV 36.[279] In Kingsley's account, repeated in his *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* as well as in his more recent work, *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*, Abaris is a shamanic Mongolian and the golden arrow which he gifts to Pythagoras is the Phurba, the three bladed dart, prevalent in Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist ritual.

In spite of the fact that Kingsley's theory relies heavily on a questionable interpretation of evidence, respected scholars do not summarily dismiss Kingsley's hypothesis. Both Kevin Corrigan and Greg Shaw[280] in their reviews of the work, praised the

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[278] The history and impact of the ideas of Kingsley and Burkert are one of the more interesting background ideas in studies on theurgy. The theme comes up again and again in different forms, and so it might be worth reviewing here. Erwin Rohde was the first to hypothesize that the concept of a purified soul was a foreign interpolation into Greek thought and sought the origin of this in the religious traditions of Asia Minor. Dodds (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, 139 f.) accepted the form of the argument, but rejected the point of origin, and postulated instead that the Greeks were in contact with Scythian shamans, building his argument on Karl Meuli ("Scythia"), who found evidence for the contact in several key arguments: 1) shamanistic behavior among the Greeks appears only after Black Sea colonization, 2) the earliest recorded shamans (Abaris and Aristeas) are Scythian, and 3) there are a number of key symbolic similarities between Greek and Scythian shamans, including the importance of the arrow (cf. Dodds p. 161). Michael Puett, *To Become a God*, 86, positions himself against this claim and agrees with Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, 47, that there is no evidence "for shamanistic influence on Archaic Greece."

[279] Iamblichus also tells of this meeting in his *Life of Pythagoras* chapter 19 (Taylor, 233-234).

[280] Shaw himself drew tentative connections between theurgy and tantric Buddhism in *Theurgy and the Soul*. On p. 203 n. 14 he cites with only slight qualification the argument from Eliade that Indian yoga received influence from the "great Western mysteriosophic current." He notes, as a parallel to his own explorations about different classed theurgists, that Buddhist tantra has four main castes of practitioners, each of which has its own place in a graded hierarchy of teachings and practices. To my mind, this is a rather slight point of similarity, and one could probably find evidence of such hierarchies in many different world traditions.

work highly, but even these scholars hesitate to use the evaluative language one would expect in a review, and, as though caught up in Kingsley's own language, they are forced to refer to Kingsley's view as "vatic" (that is oracular), and to discuss his uses of examples as "holographic" (whatever that means).[281] At any rate, what is not discussed is the value of the evidence, which seems so fragmentary that there is no clear way to determine its validity. The traditional interpretation has been to argue for a mythic meeting of Pythagoras and Abaris, and to speculate on what the thematic "lesson" of such a myth might be. By contrast, Kingsley imbues the myth with a realism that asserts an actual historical contact.

There is much more to Kingsley's argument including a description of the transference of the golden arrow of Abaris to the Iroquois of North America, and thus the tradition continues on in both Iroquois ritual and the American constitution, but it is not my place to discuss that here. Instead, what I wish to explore are the specific elements which Bergemann uses in order to substantiate this account of a shared tradition between Neoplatonic theurgy and Tibetan Buddhism.

Bergemann begins his comparison from the notion that reincarnation in the Greek world was an altogether wholly foreign idea, and so when Pythagoras declares that he has reincarnated through multiple forms, this is a clear sign of his commitment to Buddhistic principles. Having established the connection, Bergemann goes on to read through the lens of Buddhistic tradition several key features of theurgy.

Much of Bergemann's hypothesis hangs on the validity of a mystical experience attributed to the German physicist Ernst Mach, which he takes, following Schmitz to be characteristic of universal mystical experience and thus of the same kind of mystical experience espoused in Parmenides's poem, and thus in the tradition that runs back to Pythagoras, Abaris, and the Tibetans. The main feature of this mystical experience is said to be a "widening" of experience following an initial and focused contraction.[282]

In the midst of the *CO*, Bergemann identifies several synthemata/symbols, which he considers to be ritual tools or processes for instigating this contraction and widening experience. The first is the "triple barbed strength" of *CO* frg. 2, which corresponds to the contraction stage. This particular *CO* is present in the work of Damascius. Majercik, in her commentary provides the relatively straightforward interpretation: This reference to triple

[281] Corrigan, "Review of Peter Kingsley *A Story Waiting to Pierce You: Mongolia, Tibet and the Destiny of the Western World*" *Philosophy East and West* 62.2 (2012): 281-286. Jonathan Ratcliffe provides a a more critical review in *Eras* 16.2 (2015): 124-127.
[282] Bergemann, "Fire Walk With Me," 174.

barbed strength is normally thought to be a reference to the three-part hierarchy of certain First God.[283] Bergemann, however, interprets it as a reference to a specific object, namely the phurba/Abarisian arrow, which he supports with reference to Homer's *Iliad*, where "triple-barbed" is twice used to describe arrows.

The second symbol is the "strophalos" (magic wheel) vaguely mentioned in *CO* frg. 206. The strophalos is not mentioned in any other known text, but we have an account in Psellus that the magic wheel consisted of a golden object with a sapphire in its center, suspended from a cord, and whirled about the head in the manner of a bull-roarer. According to Majercik, "by swinging this wheel, the theurgist would imitate the motion of the heavenly spheres and thus 'sympathetically' attract the celestial Iynges (which would then function as 'messengers' between the theurgists and the gods."[284] Majercik follows Psellus on this point, and there is no other extant mention of the theurgic strophalos. Bergemann problematically reinterprets the function of the strophalos to fit his model the second stage of induced mystical experience: expansion. The strophalos, by being whirled about the body demonstrably marks an expansion of the field of influence. Bergemann's interpretation reimagines the function of the strophalos from invocatory to purificatory in order to fit with Kingsley's assumptions about the auditory nature of Parmenides' chariot and the universalistic conception of all mystical experiences possessing the same auditory and procedural features.[285]

The third symbol Bergemann considers is the *Chaldean Oracles* themselves. On the basis that mantras are important in Tibetan Buddhism, which is again, imagined as either the Ur-religion, or the religion with the closest conception of reality of mystical experience, Bergemann finds in the *Chaldean Oracles* evidence for the mantra in the vowel sounds of the oracular verses.[286] Here again, however, it seems in part, that Bergemann has mistaken his subjective experience of the oracles for a universal and intentional feature. He notes the

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[283] Majercik, *CO*, 141.
[284] Majercik, *CO*, 29-30.
[285] Kingsley, *Reality* (Golden Sufi Center, 2013), 36, claims with the appearance of great authority that "The standard Greek texts that discuss the practice of incubation consistently describe what happens when you start to enter another state of consciousness. Everything begins spinning, moving in a circle; and you hear a piping, hissing sound just like the hissing of a snake." Kingsley's idiosyncratic citation method makes it difficult to determine which texts he has in mind. At any rate, it seems that the vertigo feeling described here is also influencing Bergemann's perception of the spinning of the strophalos.
[286] Bergemann, "Fire," 184.

esoteric features of the text "for example indetermination, ambiguities…paradoxical structures,"[287] which for him point to the need to consider the text as more than simply "a text with ontological-theological content."[288] I deeply sympathize with Bergemann that the text of the *CO* is confusing and paradoxical, and I agree that the text probably has a koan-like function, but it is a far jump from this to claiming that the *CO* are a holdover of mantra which is a necessary component of a religious tradition that underlies everything.

Given all the problems with the history of the *Chaldean Oracles* it is, I suppose, possible that the story Bergemann gives of the meaning of various features of theurgy could be true. However, it seems to me that Bergemann doesn't start from the evidence or from clues surrounding the evidence to arrive at his interpretation, but rather begins with a complete picture of universal human experience to which he then attaches his interpretations of tiny bits of mysterious and unexplainable features of a tradition. It all seems like a rather backwards way to go about interpreting historical phenomena, every bit as confused as the attempt to interpret Native American religion with reference to Christianity, or Buddhism with respect to other esoteric traditions, a la Theosophy.

Much as in the case of the Gnostics, the link between Tibetan Buddhism and theurgy is not the actual points which Bergemann argues, the phurba, the mantra, and the doctrine of reincarnation. It is in fact the assumed common phenomenological experience which Bergemann posits is the core doctrine and goal of the theurgic texts and which he perceives as an apparently universally accessible human experience (most notably in the alleged experience of the German physicist Max Erfach). This is what in turn leads Bergemann to the classical "quest" of the origins of religion and human experience. He is not however able to provide the ancient evidence that would be necessary to support such a connection, and we are forced to presume that Tibetan practices and beliefs as they are currently known, or as they are known from the oldest available texts and traditions, are equivalent to ancient practices as they can be discerned in ancient sources. Such a problem of sources seems to me insurmountable for the historian.

6.4 Theurgy as a Meta-Discursive Term

In its history as a concept, theurgy has been perceived as a useful term of meta-discourse, in much the same way as other terms from other religious traditions, e.g. *shaman*,

[287] Bergemann, "Fire," 183.
[288] Bergemann, "Fire," 184.

mana, *magic*, *numen*,[289] have been imbued with power to describe general thematic features of religious traditions. As regards shaman, mana, magic, and numen, scholars have debated the utility of these terms, and the confusions which they introduce, but theurgy has with rare exceptions,[290] been given pride of place as a third order term to describe the various means of achieving mystical experience in various world religions.

As seen in this chapter, there are a variety of rationales for using the term theurgy as an etic marker of identification, which reveal in turn a variety of background assumptions of what the term theurgy means. For Scholem, theurgy is more or less equivalent to coercive magic (and thus to the primitive and foreign matrices within which rabbinic Judaism finds its origins), and it is certainly "lesser" than the pure mysticism of the practitioners of *Maaseh Merkabah*. For the scholars of Gnosticism, theurgy was more commonly associated with the specific practice of letter manipulation. For Bergemann, a scholar who associates theurgy with Tibetan Buddhism, it seems anecdotal evidence and assumed universal experience precedes the attempt to find historical connections.

At any rate, all of these approaches carry the potential to cause understandings from the two fields of comparison to merge or shift. Thus the *Chaldean Oracles* are imagined as a mantra, or the Gnostic baptism is considered a theurgic ritual. In the case of Judaism, there is even the potential for the comparison to result in an entirely new reading of the text. I wish to invoke a theoretical third-order concept to critique a move in scholarly movements which I call "backflowing." Backflowing occurs when a vague or not well understood concept is compared to traditions that are more well defined (at least within their own scholarly idioms), and as a consequence they have the potential to lead to or reinforce questionable historical connections.

The seductiveness of these positions is that they provide us with a greater degree of connection between theurgy and other religious traditions in the ancient world. However, their promise is their peril. None of these authors can deliver a definition of theurgy grounded in the sources, and so as a consequence, the meaning of theurgy becomes confused, as it is used to explain different phenomena. Because there is no fixed meaning to the term, it cannot stand resiliently when used as an interpretive tool. If the interpretive enterprise consists of

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[289] Mana: Gerald J. Schnepp, "The Concept of Mana" *Primitive Man* 5.4 (1932): 53-61. Shaman: Lars Kirkhusmo Pharo, "A Methodology for a Deconstruction and Reconstruction of the Concepts 'Shaman' and 'Shamanism.'" *Numen* 58 (2011): 6-70.
[290] Peter Schäfer, "Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism" in: Peter Schäfer and Hans Kippenberg (eds.) *Envisioning Magic* (Leiden, Brill: 1997), 25.

juxtaposing elements in the hope that one can learn something about the one from the other, theurgy offers no stability, and the term molds itself and conforms to whatever comparative element it is brought into contact with. It offers no substantive information to their interpretation. In order for theurgy to become a meaningful signifier, there is a need for an agreed upon, standard definition based on the source material from which the term originates. The previous chapters have attempted to model such a definition on the basis of Iamblichus' *DM*. This model would have precluded the comparisons made throughout this chapter, and forced the scholars who used the term to arrive at a more specific and descriptive term in their analyses of their respective objects.

7. Conclusions

This dissertation began with the ambitious question: "What is theurgy?" and sought to answer it through a method that extracted the bare minimum meaning of the term from the immanent texts where it appears.

I have focused my analysis on what I argue is the main source for understanding theurgy in late antiquity, Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis*. *De Mysteriis* uses the word theurgy more than once (specifically 46 times), and it is the earliest of the texts which offer an extended corpus of usage. I have subjected this text to an analysis of my own design in order to probe the issue of whether or not theurgy reveals any kind of continuity in its usage. To restate my research question: What is the meaning of the term 'theurgy' including cognates in the oeuvre of Iamblichus, and what religious phenomenon does it signify?

Recent trends in the study of Neoplatonism and theurgy have started to highlight the problematic nature of inventing a tradition of theurgy. At the forefront of this new approach is the research of Tanaseanu-Döbler. This wave of theurgy studies recognizes and seeks to discern the layers that have contributed to the construction and stabilization of the term theurgy. I build on Tanaseanu-Döbler's use of the term invented tradition and my contribution to this stage of the investigation of theurgy furthers her examination.

I offer a minimalistic approach to the primary sources in order to avoid gratuitous connections. In my method chapter, I have found support for this minimalistic approach in the writings of historians inspired by linguistics and structuralism such as Algirdas Greimas. Using Greimas I have developed a method with which to analyze *DM* into its minimal units. This is done, I argue, in order to strip away as much interpolation as possible and to leave only the most explicit assertions and viable inferences. Combining all the minimal units related to theurgy together presents theurgy in all its nakedness, thereby allowing me to witness to the manner in which these assertions dialectically clash to create a nebulous concept. Such a concept is quite unlike ordinary definitions and in some degree constitutes a much more accurate and messy picture of the problems inherent in generating meaning from text.

The lack of a cohesive definition provided by my method is probably unsatisfying to some scholars. I cannot find in Iamblichus' statements about theurgy sufficient evidence to link his concept to Greco-Roman, Egyptian or Assyrian religions such as these are known from other textual traditions. The minimal data provided about the practices, experiences, and

philosophical underpinnings of theurgy are simply too vague to coalesce with any of these religious traditions, except in the most general of ways. Moreover, Iamblichus' use of hedging language to the effect that theurgists "often" do this or "sometimes" do that, strikes me as an effort to keep the concept of theurgy deliberately open and dynamic, able to encompass whatever he may later require. The only moments when Iamblichus offers a hardline position on theurgy are those moments when he defends it as a reasonable or pious activity. A complete picture of the system is thus precluded by Iamblichus' vague hints and mentions of what theurgists "often" do.

However, the minimalistic approach does offer some positive reading of the evidence. I propose three distinct systems of spiritual attainment in *DM*, which I have labeled theurgy as immaterial-material mode of worship, theurgy as attainment of and surpassing of personal daemon, and theurgy as instant attainment. These distinct models further indicate that the information Iamblichus actually provides about theurgy do not add up to one coherent idea of theurgy. Instead, they add up to three, and there may be even more models than this investigation has extricated.

Rather than attempting to connect theurgy to an actual tradition of religious practice, it seems more worthwhile to consider theurgy as a particular kind of strategy for answering some of the specific claims of Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo*. One strategy Iamblichus uses is to distance theurgy from the specific claims made by Porphyry concerning disreputable practices. He can say for example, that such-and-such mode of worship proposed by Porphyry is wrong, and in so doing he creates the possibility for a correct mode of worship. In this way, he contributes to the creation of a category of religious practice, whose characteristic is antithetical to that of the practice raised by Porphyry. Another strategy Iamblichus uses is to critique Porphyry's understanding of a particular practice. Again, this approach results in a fine distinction between a practice recognized by Porphyry as invalid, and this results in the construction of a new category, theurgy. Finally, Iamblichus can make vague mention of specific esoteric knowledge or expertise which contributes to the proper performance of theurgy.

In the penultimate chapter of this dissertation, I considered the use of theurgy as an etic term in other scholarly interpretations of religious traditions. I have marked in these attempts a tendency to utilize mystery to explain mystery. In the study of Judaism, I have highlighted how theurgy is roughly used to replace or offer a rhetorical synonym for magic or ritual. Similarly, in Gnosticism, scholars have utilized an unsubstantiated definition of theurgy in order to explain the rites and rituals of the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library.

More recently there appears to be a growing trend to compare theurgy with trends in Buddhist traditions. Bergemann, for example, both affirms and denies historical relationships between Buddhist and theurgic traditions. He relies heavily on a somewhat outdated notion of phenomenological comparison, which never manages to explain or substantiate the reasons for the comparison. The problem with such attempts is that if they are not used self-consciously, scholars run the risk of "backflowing" understandings about Jewish, Gnostic, or Buddhist traditions into scholarly imaginations about theurgy. In the case of all of these fields of scholarship (Judaism, Gnosticism, and Buddhism), I believe that using my minimalistic schema would have made these comparisons and constructions of historical continuity impossible. It would have revealed the tenuousness of the meta-use of the term theurgy. Moreover, it would have eliminated the kind of common sense argumentation which has thus far undergirded the usage of theurgy to describe allegedly similar phenomena. It is this common use of theurgy that this dissertation has sought to question. I believe that in the case of Judaism, Buddhism, and Gnosticism, theurgy was used because of its looseness and the connotations which the term gathered in the renaissance and early modern period.

This dissertation has barely scratched the surface of a linguistic approach to the problems of theurgy in late antiquity. The focus on a Greimassian approach, I hope, will inspire others to pursue other linguistic and semantic theoretical approaches to the topic of theurgy. As I have argued, such approaches have the benefit of allowing us to check many of the historical narratives provided by our sources against a deep structure that may lurk within the interstices of language itself. As I see it there are several further avenues of investigation to pursue. We can reevaluate Iamblichus's descriptions of theurgy according to other linguistically driven methods, or we can apply the method developed in this dissertation to other Neoplatonic writers on theurgy. How would Iamblichus's picture of theurgy compare, for example, to a minimalistic picture of theurgy in Proclus or Pseudo-Dionysius? In the case of the latter, would we have better evidence for a semantic shift in the term which supports Rorem and Luibhed's translation of the term with less "pagan" notes?

More broadly, I hope to have contributed to religious studies and studies of ancient texts in general by offering a new, albeit experimental, method. This method allows scholars to examine texts containing terms which are not clearly defined by the text itself. It offers a logical and philosophical reductive method that limits the more free-flowing interpretive tendencies connatural with the ordinary reading of texts. When encountering large corpuses of complicated and convoluted texts, which is often the case in philosophy, it seems useful to have a variety of methods, to be able to offer a spectrum of interpretation from the most

minimalistic to the most interconnected and synoptic narratives. Dealing with large texts this method allows for a systematic representation of the inherent arguments. Aside from being systematic, it also offers a means of visualizing the representation of meaning.

What then, on a minimalistic reading of the evidence, is theurgy? At the conclusion of this dissertation, we see that in *De Mysteriis*, theurgy remains a mysterious object. That is, although Iamblichus uses theurgy with some minimal consistency, by and large his uses of the term are meant to solve the individual concerns of his interlocutor. Broken down into minimal units of meaning, the concept of theurgy is revealed to be at best pluriform, and at worst contradictory. Such multiplicity of meaning should give the interpreter pause in accepting any of Iamblichus's more group-building rhetoric concerning the propriety or not of theurgy. It seems, at the end of the day, that theurgy is a rather idiosyncratic idea for Iamblichus. It tends to mean whatever Iamblichus intends it to mean. Such an admission has further implications on our ability to determine the passage of this concept into other domains of scholarship.

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