

Introducing Iamblichus: Philosophy and Theurgy

Iamblichus on the gods and the 'greater kinds' (*daimones* – angels – heroes – pure souls)

In the first place, therefore, you say, "*it must be granted that there are Gods.*" Thus to speak, however, is not right on this subject. For an innate knowledge of the Gods is coexistent with our very essence; and this knowledge is superior to all judgment and deliberate choice, and subsists prior to reason and demonstration. It is also counted from the beginning with its proper cause, and is consubsistent with the essential tendency of the soul to *The Good*. If, indeed, it be requisite to speak the truth, the contact with divinity is not knowledge. For knowledge is in a certain respect separated [from its object] by *otherness*. But prior to the knowledge, which as one thing knows another, is the uniform connexion with divinity, and which is suspended from the Gods, is spontaneous and inseparable from them. Hence, it is not proper to grant this, as if it might not be granted, nor to admit it as ambiguous (for it is always unically established in energy); nor are we worthy thus to explore it, as if we had sufficient authority to approve or reject it. For we are comprehended in it, or rather we are filled by it, and we possess that very thing which we are, [or by which our essence is characterized] in knowing the Gods.

I shall likewise say the same thing to you, concerning the more excellent genera that follow the Gods, I mean *dæmons*, heroes, and undefiled souls.⁵ For it is necessary to understand respecting these, that there is always in them one definite reason of essence, and to remove from them the indefiniteness and instability of the human condition. It is likewise requisite to separate from them that inclination to one side of an argument rather than another, arising from the equilibrium of a reasoning process. For a thing of this kind is foreign from the principles of reason and life, and rather tends to secondary natures, and to such things as pertain to the power and contrariety of generation. But it is necessary that the more excellent genera should be apprehended uniformly.

The connascent perception, therefore, of the perpetual attendance of the Gods, will be assimilated to them. Hence, as they have an existence which is always invariably the same, thus also the human soul is conjoined to them by knowledge, according to a sameness of subsistence; by no means pursuing through conjecture, or opinion, or a syllogistic process, all which originate in time, an essence which is above all these, but through the pure and blameless intellections which the soul received from eternity from the Gods, becoming united to them. You, however, seem to think, that there is the same knowledge of divine natures as of any thing else, and that one thing, rather than another,

may be granted from opposites, in the same manner as it is usual to do in dialectic discussions. There is, however, no similitude whatever between the two kinds of knowledge. For the knowledge of divine natures is different from that of other things, and is separated from all opposition. It likewise neither subsists in being now granted, or in becoming to be, but was from eternity, uniformly consubsistent with the soul.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.3

For the contrariety of action and passion is not inherent in any one of them [the gods and superior kinds of being or ‘greater kinds’]; but their energies are unrestrained, immutable, and without habitude to their opposites. Hence, neither must we admit in them motions of such a kind as arise from action and passion. For neither do we admit in the soul a self-motion, which consists of the mover and that which is moved; but we conceive that it is a certain simple essential motion, subsisting from itself,[†] and not possessing a habitude to another thing, and exempt from acting on, and suffering from, itself. Who, therefore, can endure that the peculiarities of the genera superior to the soul, should be distinguished according to active or passive motions?

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.4

The gods and the human soul: The ascent of the soul to the gods

And farther still, we preserve in the soul collectively the mystic and arcane image of the Gods, and through this we elevate the soul to the Gods, and when elevated conjoin it as much as possible with them..

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 7.4

... but there is another principle of the soul, which is superior to all nature and generation, and through which we are capable of being united to the Gods, of transcending the mundane order, and of participating eternal life, and the energy of the supercelestial Gods. Through this principle, therefore, we are able to liberate ourselves from fate. For when the more excellent parts of us energize, and the soul is elevated to natures better

[†] For αὐτὴν εἰς αὐτοῖς οὐσαν in this place, it is necessary to read αὐτὴν εἰς αὐτῆς οὐσαν.

than itself, then it is entirely separated from things which detain it in generation, departs from subordinate natures, exchanges the present for another life, ...

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 8.7

Others attribute the goal of the descent [of the human soul] to the demonstration of divine life. For this is the will of the gods: to show themselves as gods through the souls. For the gods come forth in the open and show themselves through the pure and immaculate lives of souls.

Iamblichus, *On the Soul (De Anima)*, 379.23-26

The Connected Cosmos (Universe)

It is requisite, therefore, to understand that the universe is one animal

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 4.12

For neither are the Gods detained in certain parts of the world, nor are terrene natures destitute of their providential attention. But the divinities are characterized by this, that they are not comprehended by any thing, and that they comprehend all things in themselves. But terrestrial natures possess their existence in the *pleromas*[†] of the Gods; and when they become adapted to divine participation, then prior to their own proper essence, they immediately possess the Gods, which [latently] preexisted in it.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.8

After the same manner, therefore, the whole world being partible, is divided about the one and impartible light of the Gods. But this light is everywhere one and the same whole, and is impartibly present with all things that are able to participate of it; through an all perfect power fills all things, and by a certain causal comprehension, incloses and terminates the whole of things in itself, and is every where united to itself, and conjoins ends to beginnings. This too, all heaven and the world imitating, revolve with a circular motion, are united to themselves, and lead the elements which are carried round in a circle. Hence the world causes all things to be in each other, and to tend to each other, makes the end of one thing to coalesce with the beginning of another, as, for instance, earth with heaven, and produces one connexion and concord of wholes with wholes.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.9

[†] *Viz.* In the plenitudes, or *total* perfections, of the Gods.

Being impelled, therefore, from another principle, *viz.* from the world and the mundane Gods, from the arrangement of the four elements in the world, and the association of the elements according to [appropriate] measures, and also from the orderly circulation of bodies about centres, we shall have an easy ascent to the truth of the piety respecting sacrifices. For if we are in the world, are contained as parts in the universe, are primarily produced by it, and perfected by the total powers that are in it, and if we consist of its elements, and receive from it a certain portion of life and nature; if this be the case, it is not proper to pass beyond the world and the mundane orders.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 5.20

Theurgy (god-work)

For, since it is requisite that terrestrial natures should by no means be destitute of divine communion, the earth also receives a certain divine portion from it, sufficient for the participation of the Gods. The theurgic art, therefore, perceiving this to be the case, and thus having discovered in common, appropriate receptacles, conformably to the peculiarity of each of the Gods, it frequently connects together stones, herbs, animals, aromatics, and other sacred, perfect, and deiform substances of the like kind; and afterwards, from all these, it produces an entire and pure receptacle.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 5.23

Neither do the invocations which implore the Gods to *incline* to us, conjoin the priests to them through passion; but procure for them the communion of an indissoluble connexion, through the friendship which binds all things together. Hence, it does not, as the name seems to imply, incline the intellect of the Gods to men; but, according to the decision of truth, renders the will of man adapted to the participation of the Gods, elevates it to them, and coharmonizes the former with the latter, through the most appropriate persuasion. On this account also, such names of the Gods as are adapted to sacred concerns, and other divine symbols, are able, as they are of an anagogic or elevating nature, to connect invocations with the Gods themselves.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 1.12

For these things, also, another reason may be assigned, and which is as follows: in all theurgical operations the priest sustains a twofold character; one, indeed, as man, and which preserves the order possessed by our nature in the universe; but the other, which is corroborated by divine signs, and through these is conjoined to more excellent natures, and is elevated to their order by an elegant circumduction, this is deservedly capable of being surrounded with the external form of the Gods. Conformably, therefore, to a difference of this kind, the priest very properly invokes, as more excellent natures, the powers derived from the universe, so far as he who invokes is a man; and again, he commands these powers, because through arcane symbols, he, in a certain respect, is invested with the sacred form of the Gods.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 4.2

This mode of solution, therefore, is far superior, which does not suppose that divine works are effected through contrariety, or differentiation, in the way in which generated natures are usually produced; but asserts that every such work is rightly accomplished through sameness, union, and consent. Hence, if we separate from each other that which invokes and that which is invoked, that which commands and that which is commanded, that which is more and that which is less excellent, we shall, in a certain respect, transfer the contrariety of generations to the unbegotten goods of the Gods. But if we despise all such things, as it is just we should, as of an earth-born nature, and ascribe that which is common and simple, as being more honourable, to the powers who transcend the variety which is in the realms of generation, the first hypothesis of these questions will be immediately subverted, so that no reasonable doubt concerning them will be left.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 4.3

For the works of the sacred ceremonies of religion have long since been defined by pure and intellectual laws. Subordinate natures, also, are liberated through a greater order and power; and when we abandon inferior natures, we are transferred into a more excellent allotment. This, however, is not effected contrary to any original sacred law, so as to cause the Gods to be changed, through a sacred operation being afterwards performed; but from the first divinity sent souls hither, in order that they might again return to him. Neither, therefore, is any mutation produced through a reascent of this kind, nor do the descents and ascents of souls oppose each other. For as generation and this universe are

suspended from an intellectual essence; thus, also, in the orderly distribution of souls, the liberation from generation accords with the care employed by them about generation.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 8.8

For if the essence and perfection of all good are comprehended in the Gods, and the first and ancient power of them is with us priests, and if by those who similarly adhere to more excellent natures, and genuinely obtain a union with them, the beginning and end of all good is earnestly pursued; if this be the case, here the contemplation of truth, and the possession of intellectual science are to be found. And a knowledge of the Gods is accompanied with a conversion to, and the knowledge of, ourselves.

Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries* 10.1