

# The Quarrel Between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the Ochema-Pneuma and the Purification of the Soul

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# The Quarrel Between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the *Ochema-Pneuma* and the Purification of the Soul

Julio Cesar Moreira

Ἐνθούσ ὁ Σῦρος πολυμαθῆς ὁ Φοῖνιξ  
(David, *Porph. Isag. Proem.* 92)

At a time when traditional cults and rituals were about to be suppressed, Iamblichus, in a debate with Porphyry, managed to articulate a philosophical foundation for such mysteries. As Iamblichus often emphasized, this undertaking is beyond adequacy of verbal discourse,<sup>1</sup> nonetheless, he does express it, as far as possible, in a *sui generis* encounter of the philosophical *lógos* from the Platonic tradition with these archaic practices.

*De Mysteriis* is undoubtedly for us Iamblichus' most relevant work of those that have survived to the present day.<sup>2</sup> Epistolary in nature, it is essentially a series of responses to a set of problems (ἀπορίαι) proposed by Porphyry on the nature of the gods and the appropriate modes of worshipping them. In it, under the pseudonym of Abammon, Iamblichus writes with the authority of an Egyptian priest and thereby proceeds to clarify the doubts and difficulties formulated by Porphyry in his *Letter to Anebo*.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have predominantly characterized this philosophical dialogue as a hostile disagreement between a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *de Myst.* I.2.6,6-7,3.; also about ἔμφυτος γνῶσις; *de Myst.* I.3.8,3-9; 9,8-12; 10,4-7.

<sup>2</sup> As is well known, “*De Mysteriis*” is an abbreviation of the title coined by Marsilio Ficino in 1497: *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum*. The original title of the work is: “Master Abammon's reply to Porphyry's letter to Anebo, and the solutions to the difficulties contained therein” (Ἀβάμμωνος διδασκάλου πρὸς τὴν Πορφυρίου πρὸς Ἄνεβῶ ἐπιστολὴν ἀπόκρισις καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀπορημάτων λύσεις).

<sup>3</sup> Anebo's identity is unknown, supposedly he would be an Egyptian priest, pupil of Iamblichus. On this matter see: Clarke; Dillon; Hershbell (2004) XXVII-XXXVII; Shaw (1995) 7-8; Clarke (2001) 8-9.

skeptical Porphyry and an apologetic Iamblichus.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the mood between them, there were certainly philosophical differences that led them to divergent paths. This paper traces the presupposed philosophical background of this quarrel – which itself is not explicit in *De Mysteriis* – by gathering, analyzing and reconstructing, from their remaining works and preserved fragments, the thoughts of each author about the purification and ascent of the soul.

### Porphyry's standpoint on the efficacy of rituals

The background of Porphyry's critique on the efficacy of traditional cults is well expressed, above all, in his work *On Abstinence from Animal Food*. There, one can apprehend an important part of his opposition to Iamblichus' Theurgy. For Porphyry, as we argue here, pure "theoretical" practices are the facilitators for the ascension of the soul back to the One, and therefore the true philosopher must discard all material worship, since the commitment to materiality can only prevent any real relationship with the gods.

In the second half of Book 2 of *Abst.* (chs. 33-61), Porphyry discusses the true philosopher. As a priest of the true God, what sacrifices should he make? (*Abst.* 2.49) Porphyry's answer unfolds through a range of initiatory and mysterious traditions such as the Pythagorean poems, Orphic poems, Chaldean Oracles, and Hermetic treatises. He argues:

To the god who rules over all, as a wise man said,<sup>5</sup> we shall offer nothing perceived by the senses, either by burning or in words. For there is nothing material which is not at once impure to the immaterial. So not even logos expressed in speech is appropriate for him, nor yet internal logos when it has been contaminated by the passion of the soul. But we shall worship him in pure silence and with pure thoughts about him.<sup>6</sup> (*Abst.* 2.34.2)

For the intelligible gods, in turn, hymns and prayers should be offered (*Abst.* 2.34.2-4). Offerings of crops and other inanimate foods are

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<sup>4</sup> Clarke (2001) 7; Clarke; Dillon; Hershbell (2003) XXII; Shaw (1995) 13-15. With a different opinion, Athanassiadi [(1993) 119; (1995) 245] claims that Iamblichus is a patient and caring replier.

<sup>5</sup> According to Gillian Clark (2014) 152 n.291: "The 'wise man' is Apollonius of Tyana, *On Sacrifices (Preparation for the Gospel* 4.13), which has evidently influenced 2.34.2".

<sup>6</sup> All translations from *Abst.* are by Gillian Clark.

welcome to the visible deities, but animal sacrifice only attend to the evil daemons, who disguise themselves as gods (*Abst.* 2.36-43). Even if animals are to be sacrificed for protection against the attacks of evil daemons, to eat them (as was traditionally done),<sup>7</sup> will only attract these daemons to themselves and contaminate the body and soul (*Abst.* 2.44-54). It is worth noting this certain awe of Porphyry in regard to evil daemons. In *Abst.* lies the clarification of what his concept of evil daemons are. Porphyry explains that “the concept of daemons is confused and leads to serious misrepresentation” (*Abst.* 2.37.4-38.4) and that there is the common sense that a certain multitude of invisible gods who receive the general name of daemons,

...all of them can do harm if they are angered by being neglected and not receiving the accustomed worship, and on the other hand that they can do good to those who make them well-disposed by prayer and supplication and sacrifices and all that goes with them. (*Abst.* 2.37.5)

He exposes, however, his own concept on the difference between good and evil daemons.

All the souls which, having issued from the universal soul, administer large parts of the regions below the moon, resting on their *pneuma* but controlling it by reason, should be regarded as good *daimones* (...) It is impossible for these *daimones* both to provide benefits and also to cause harm to the same beings. (*Abst.* 2.38.2)

But the souls which do not control the *pneuma* adjacent to them, but are mostly controlled by it, are for that very reason too much carried away, when the angers and appetites of the *pneuma* lead to impulse. These souls are also *daimones*, but may reasonably be called maleficent. (*Abst.* 2.38.4)

Porphyry proceeds (*Abst.* 2.39-53) to explain how evil daemons shape their own *pneuma* and how they corrupt themselves by the passions through it; he also details the various modes of concealment and deception that evil daemons engender.<sup>8</sup> The rational control of the *pneuma* is, therefore, the determinant factor that distinguishes the good

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Abst.* 2.54-7; cf. also *De philosophia ex oraculis* fr. 317. All references from Porphyry's fragments are Smith's.

<sup>8</sup> About hassles caused by evil daemons see also: *De philosophia ex oraculis* fr. 326; 346,8-28.

from the evil daemon. It is thus necessary to better understand the Porphyrian concept about this *pneuma* that a soul possesses, since it is a fundamental and determinant concept for the philosophical debate regarding the effectiveness of Theurgy found in *De Mysteriis*.

The theory of the pneumatic vehicle of the soul (or the *ochema-pneuma*, as it is commonly called) is gathered from several works by Porphyry.<sup>9</sup> According to the philosopher, the soul in its descent through the celestial spheres is enwrapped by a vehicle (ὄχημα) initially ethereal, subtle and pure, a nature that is identified with the concept of *pneuma*,<sup>10</sup> which keeps on changing and becoming denser as the faculties and functions are added to it and that the soul gathers from every celestial sphere until it becomes humid and heavy enough to come into contact with generation and to establish itself in the body. Thus, the condensation of the *ochema* coincides with the formation of the irrational component of the soul to the point where the two concepts are roughly interrelated. This theory of Porphyry is strongly determined by the doctrine of his master Plotinus that the soul does not descend entirely, but partly remains in contemplation of the intelligible.<sup>11</sup> As is known, this doctrine of Plotinus will be harshly criticized by Iamblichus.<sup>12</sup> However, it does indeed appear to characterize the Porphyrian theory of the *ochema-pneuma* by defining the boundaries between the rational or higher soul, thus considered pure intelligible essence, and the lower or irrational soul. Such a distinction encompasses both generation and immortality: the rational soul is created directly from the Demiurge, the lower soul and its vehicle originates in the celestial spheres; the rational soul is eternal, and the irrational soul and its *ochema-pneuma* dissolve into the cosmos.

The *post-mortem* destiny of the *ochema* and lower soul, and therefore of individuality, depends, in reality, on the way of life that the soul has led. If the *ochema* is impure and contaminated with aggregates

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. *De Antro Nympharum* 10-11; *Sententiae* 29; *Ad Gaurum XI* 49, 18; *Abst. II* 38-39. Proclus' reports on this subject can also be found in his *Comm. Remp.* and *Comm. Tim.*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ad Gaurum XI* 49, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Enn.* 4.8.8. About this doctrine in Plotinus see: Blumenthal (1971); idem (1987) 560; Steel (1978) esp. 34-38. See also Porphyry *Abst.* 1, 41-2, and Clark (2013) notes *in loco*.

<sup>12</sup> Iamblichus, *De An.* I.337,13-380,29.

derived from bodily passions, it will be dense, and will cause the soul to reincarnate again in the earthly world. The purified *ochema*, in its turn, enables the return of the immortal soul to the One, and in this ascent it also returns to its origins, dissolving again into the ether of the celestial spheres, thus releasing the immortal soul into definitive union with the One.

The *ochema-pneuma* is, therefore, a semi-corporeal reality established between the rational soul and the material body, with a mediating function between these two distinct realities. In addition, it comes to encompass all the lower faculties of the soul, as well as to acquire and contain certain faculties and functions of its own, among them, one that is most meaningful for this current research, the *phantasia*, that is, the imaginative faculty of the human being that mediates the perception between interiority and exteriority, and which is acquired in the solar sphere.<sup>13</sup> It is by means of this correlation of the pneumatic vehicle with *phantasia* that Porphyry explains the phenomenon of oracular visions. In this context, *phantasia* not only assumes a divinatory connotation but also develops a soteriological function, by mediating the interaction between the irrational soul with a higher reality, i.e. the daemon, in the case of Porphyry, which, as seen, also has its own pneumatic vehicle (*Abst.* II 38). The daemon, having the ability to shape its own *pneuma*, presents a representation of itself to the medium's (δοκεύς) *phantasia*.<sup>14</sup> Here, an important distinction between good and bad daemons can be found, since we are told that one of the things that evil daemons do is precisely to conceal their own representation by impersonating other deities. Besides, the difference in dealing with good or evil daemons is the difference between Theurgy and witchcraft (γοητεία).<sup>15</sup> The relationship with a beneficent daemon determines a kind of assimilation of man with the divine, and assists him/her in his/her liberation of the harmful influences of passions and matter. However, in Porphyry's view, Theurgy is limited, since it only operates in that intermediary zone between soul and matter, i.e., the pneumatic vehicle of the soul, assisting in the purification of the lower soul only.<sup>16</sup> This purification of the *ochema-pneuma* is, therefore, solely the removal of one obstacle to the ascension of the immortal soul, but still not the final step. In this

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Proclus, *In Tim.* I 147; III 234.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also *De philosophia ex oraculis* fr. 349 12-16; 350.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Abst.* II.41.5.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* X.27; X.9; *Regr. Anim.* fr. 287, 288, 290.

way, Theurgy may even have a cathartic function, but it is not able to raise the soul into pure contemplation... this is a function of philosophy.

There are thus, for Porphyry, two distinct paths of purification. This is clearly explained in the fragments of his work *De Regressu Anima* preserved by Augustine.<sup>17</sup> There, Porphyry emphasizes that the rational soul cannot be purified by theurgical rites (*De Civ. Dei* X.27). Augustine says that Porphyry did not find Theurgy useful to the philosopher since it was only a means of purification of the lower soul. Through Theurgy the daemon can elevate the lower parts of the soul not to the Father (the One), but only to the ethereal deities (ibid.). In this manner, Theurgy was effective as “quasi-purgatory”, and, according to Augustine,<sup>18</sup> even this was admitted with much hesitation and embarrassment on the part of Porphyry. In fact, for him such rituals were reserved only for those intellectually unfit for philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Augustine alludes to an “other way” granted by Porphyry to purify the lower soul: the virtue of continence (“*possession continentiae virtute purgari*”; ibid. X.28). This is the path conceived by Porphyry as the means for novice philosophers to purify their lower soul and their *ochema*. This path was independent of any assistance offered by the traditional cults and rites, and properly prepares philosophers to progress to a last stage which aims for the contemplation of intelligible realities, and ultimately union with the One. But that was not an easy achievement. Porphyry emphasized the fact that only a few will reach God by virtue of their intellect (ibid. X.29).<sup>20</sup>

Augustine said that Porphyry's war cry was “to avoid all body” (*omne corpus esse fugiendum, De Civ. Dei* X.29), and this seems really to be in conformity with *Abst.* Solitude and isolation are constant themes in the work. For Porphyry, the true philosopher, one of a few among the philosophers, is committed to the purification of the body and soul, “working to approach the god, alone to the alone, by his own effort, without disruption from an entourage” (*Abst.* 2.49.1). For a Platonist it is, in fact, crucial to minimize distractions caused to the soul by bodily

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<sup>17</sup> *De Civ. Dei* X.27; *Regr.anim.* fr. 293; 287; 288.

<sup>18</sup> *De Civ. Dei* X.27; *Regr.anim.* fr. 288.

<sup>19</sup> See Simmons (2009).

<sup>20</sup> See Chase (2004); Cipriani (1997).

affections, and this was also true for Iamblichus.<sup>21</sup> However, Porphyry's philosophical asceticism is far more extreme than Plato's. The few ones willing to be a true philosopher must follow a rigid ascetic conduct that goes far beyond protecting themselves from contaminations by eating the wrong kind of food; even though still living in community, they should distance themselves from social life, seeking solitude and silence, in preparation for death.

Plato characterized the philosophical life as practicing to die (ἀποθνήσκειν μελετῶσι, *Phd.* 67e5).<sup>22</sup> The body, according to Plato's Socrates, is very distracting. It has to be fed, it gets sick, it causes us desires and fears, and we must fulfill its general needs. But even though Plato has affirmed that “we must keep ourselves pure from it [the body] until God himself sets us free” (*Phd.* 67a),<sup>23</sup> and that purification consists in “separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living, so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed from the body as from fetters” (*Phd.* 67c-d),<sup>24</sup> he never ceased to care about corporeality and political life.<sup>25</sup> Porphyry, however, seems to discard these concerns in the more advanced stages of the philosopher's development.

Porphyry formalized and systematized a scale of virtues,<sup>26</sup> and in it the political virtues were contemplated as the first to be cultivated because they were intended to impose measures on the passions associated with the activities of human nature. He, however, made it clear that the political virtues were only a preliminary stage

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<sup>21</sup> The Platonists generally believed that the soul descends from the immaterial and divine realm in order to engage with materiality. Theories about the cause of this descent are many and diverse, but regardless of why it occurs, the soul is now in the material, changing, mortal world, the farthest from God, and in a body that demands its attention. However, the soul is able to turn to God again, and philosophers must work to purify themselves from the contaminating effects of existence in the material world.

<sup>22</sup> Compare with Porphyry, *Abst.* 1.51.3.

<sup>23</sup> All translations from *Phaedo* are by Harold North Fowler.

<sup>24</sup> Compare with Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.20.9: “Purification is separation from all these, purity is singling out”.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. *Laws* and *Philebo*, later writings of Plato.

<sup>26</sup> See Porphyry, *Sententiae*, 26. See also Fideler's introduction in Zimmern's translation of *Porphyry's Letter to his wife Marcella* (1986) 29-32; Simmons (2015) 115-125; Goldin (2001).



(πρόδρομοι) to the highest virtues which aimed at detachment from passions, as much as possible, to bring man near to the assimilation in the divine.<sup>27</sup> His asceticism gains even more strength with the philosophical endorsement of his master's doctrine concerning matter, which considered it as the cause of evil.<sup>28</sup>

There is a clear ascetic motivation of Porphyry inspired by the image he bequeathed to us of his master. Among many references in this regard,<sup>29</sup> the first words of *On the Life of Plotinus*, written by Porphyry, points to this direction: "Plotinus, the philosopher who lived in our time, seemed ashamed of being in the body." (*Life of Plotinus*, 1). This scenario of rejection of matter, to a greater or lesser extent, was, as is well known, quite common in late antiquity, with its most extreme expressions in Christian self-mortification and the Gnostic depreciation of materiality.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Porphyry imposed such sharp criticisms to the Egyptian Anebo confronting the ritualistic practices that Iamblichus promoted and employed in his School, presupposes a well-structured philosophical ground, one in which Theurgy does not have the power to elevate the soul beyond a matter that was considered as the source of evil. And even this scanty recognition that Porphyry ascribes to theurgical rituals, of purification of the lower soul, becomes frivolous by ensuring that another path is to be followed by the philosopher, a path where the purification of the "pneumatic part" and the yearned for

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<sup>27</sup> Porphyry, *Sententiae* (ch. 32). See also O'Meara (2003) 44-46.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Enn.* I.8(51), 3.35-40 (τὴν ὑποκειμένην). On matter characterized as τὴν ὑποκειμένην see: *Enn.* II.4(12), 5.18-19. See also O'Brien (1969) and Brisson (2014). For Porphyry on evil: *Sententiae* 8. For Porphyry on matter: *Sententiae* 20.

<sup>29</sup> Besides Plotinus' biography written by Porphyry, depicting him as a reluctant earthly being longing to free his soul from the shackles of the body, there is, for example, in Plotinus' own treatise about love, a declaration of his chastity, where he condemns sexual relationship as a faulty act (*Enn.* III.5(50)1, 34). Both, Plotinus and Porphyry, seem to express the same disdain in respect to the descent of the soul to the material world: Porphyry, in *Abst.* 1.30.2, by making an analogy saying that we are in exile from our homeland, and that we should make the effort to remind ourselves of its manners and language in preparation for our return, practically repeats Plotinus' statement that: "We must fly from here and separate ourselves from what has been added to us" (*Enn.* IV.8.4; see also II.3.9).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Dodds (1965) 35.

ascension of the intellectual soul back to the One were achieved “by yourself”.<sup>31</sup>

### Iamblichus’ response

Given the nature and tone of the criticisms, Iamblichus’ response under the pseudonym of Abammon immediately demonstrates a coherent maneuver suggesting his intention to impose and defend the whole ritualistic tradition derived from Egyptian wisdom. Iamblichus sees himself not as an innovator, but as the defender of a tradition, a fact reinforced by the adoption of the pseudonym, an ancient practice used as a means to reinforce prestige by referring to a traditional source of wisdom. For Iamblichus, Egypt was the chief source of Greek wisdom, and, as is known, Pythagoras and Plato before him actually were believed to have studied there.<sup>32</sup> Thus, it is not possible to dissociate “Egyptian” wisdom from the set of practices it encompasses, since such practices not only reflect such wisdom but are intrinsic to it. Their merits must then be defended against the accusations of being mere witchcraft, or even charlatanism. Under such an understanding, it is Porphyry, with his resistance to ritualistic practices as a form of aid to the soul’s ascension, who lost the trail of the sources of his own knowledge and, thereby, also lost the means of attaining the ultimate goal of philosophy. It is in this context that Iamblichus ironically addresses Porphyry as if he were a pupil seeking to learn from an Egyptian priest.<sup>33</sup> The proper approach to the soul’s ascension could not be solely the ascetic and theoretical discipline of Porphyry. Iamblichus, then, proposes Theurgy, the action of the gods during ritual acts, as a means for the human being to fulfill the innate impulse to return to the Good / One (ἐπιστροφή); an aim which Iamblichus insistently claims to be fundamentally the same as philosophy’s. Such ascent, however, is not urged without first recognizing man’s own ugliness in comparison to divine beauty.<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> *De Regressu Animae*, fr. 2, 19, 21-28.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *de Myst.* I.1.2,8-3,4; see also Clarke; Dillon; Hershbell (2003) 5 n. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *de Myst.* I.1.2,4-7. About the possibility of a noble priesthood ancestry of Iamblichus, related to the Priest-Kings of Emesa, see: Clarke; Dillon; Hershbell (2004) XIX. All translations from *de Myst.* are by Clarke; Dillon; Hershbell (2004).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *de Myst.*, I, 11, 39, 13. Iamblichus acknowledges the human soul’s dependency and inferior status within the divine hierarchy, and he is quite direct

innate urge for the Beautiful, and the subsequent return to the Good, is fulfilled by Theurgy, the path to *eudaimonia*.<sup>35</sup>

In a strategic maneuver using the Platonic concept of participation (μετέχειν), Iamblichus established, against Porphyry and Plotinus, his distinction between the soul and the *Noûs*, affirming the *Noûs* as being anterior to and separated from the soul, and, therefore, ontologically other.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, because of this, the soul descends completely into materiality. And, although there is an apparent hiatus between the human being and the divine *Noûs*, it is precisely this distance that forms the foundation of Iamblichus' doctrine of a divine hierarchy that links and unifies the Good and the divine *Noûs* with the human souls. Man rises in this hierarchy by means of an elaborated *paidea* of ethical, virtuous and scientific progression. The human soul, which finds itself in materiality, far distanced from the Good/One and the *Noûs*, has in its primary foundations, i.e. the gods, the essential and indissoluble bond of attachment to both.

Even though, for Iamblichus, the human soul is distinct from all the higher entities and separate from Intellect, it does possess a disposition toward intellection (κατὰ νοῦν διάθεσις; *de An.* 457.48,7). In *de Myst.* I.5, we are told that the essence of the Good (οὐσία τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) is not present to human souls but the pure/purified souls “do enjoy a degree of retention and possession of it” (*de Myst.* I.5.15,13). What the soul possesses is a capacity, good in form (ἀγαθοειδῆ; *de An.* 457.48,8), to engage in intellection at different levels, but for that the soul is dependent on the higher entities.<sup>37</sup> Yet, it is by means of materiality itself that one finds the fundamental and sacred means of access to the immaterial. It is through materiality that we stimulate our intellectual disposition (διάθεσις), attuning ourselves to the higher realms:

*de Myst.* V.23.232,13-233,8

...for matter also issues from the father and creator of all, and thus gains its perfection, which is suitable to the reception of gods. And, at the same time, nothing hinders the superior beings

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about it: “so far as concerns the divine perfection, even the perfect soul is incomplete” (*de Myst.* III.149.10), a “nothing” compared to the gods (cf. *de Myst.* I.15.47.13–48.4), and he also states that she is “at the bottom, deficient, and relatively imperfect within the intermediaries” (*de Myst.* I.21.2).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *de Myst.* X.5.

<sup>36</sup> As evinced by Finamore (1997), and more recently in Finamore (2017) 368-373.

<sup>37</sup> See Finamore (2017) 370-373; (2018) 97-108.

from being able to illuminate their inferiors, nor yet, by consequence, is matter excluded from participation in its betters, so that such of it as is perfect and pure and of good type is not unfitted to receive the gods; for since it was proper not even for terrestrial things to be utterly deprived of participation in the divine, earth also has received from it a share in divinity, such as is sufficient for it to be able to receive the gods. (*de Myst.* V.23.232,13-233,8)

This is of great importance if we consider the context in which Iamblichus was immersed, remembering that around him were schools of thought that assumed matter as the principle of evil, from which man must release himself. The position of Iamblichus in relation to matter comes to be decisive in his sophisticated theory of symbols, by which he brilliantly argues for the efficacy of ritual.

In his view of a unified cosmos, coupling sensible and intelligible, material and immaterial, the symbols (σύμβολα - σύνθηματα), preserved by an archaic knowledge, establish a bond and the key of access to the immaterial in matter, due to its essential and gnostic correspondences. Due to the divine illumination,<sup>38</sup> in the proper context the symbols reveal the ethereal experience of the divine. Thus, in *de Myst.* III.17 (141,11–12), Iamblichus talks about “pebbles, staffs, wood, stones, fire, barley” as examples of illuminated objects. Nevertheless, we learn a few lines later (142,3–7) that divine illumination is not limited to inanimate objects but also reaches human beings. In both cases, receptivity (ἐπιτηδειότης) is the key factor. Differently from inanimate objects, however, human beings need to purify themselves properly to be able to receive the divine illumination. The degree to which one will consciously experience the visions during the possession states, while being able to remember it afterwards, depends on whether the possessed is in participation (μετουσία), communion (χοινωνία) or union (ἔνωσις) with the divinity.<sup>39</sup> “Iamblichus implies that participation involves experiencing divine consciousness but not remembering the experience, while communion and union imply increasing familiarity and affinity with,

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<sup>38</sup> As John Finamore (1999) notes: “Iamblichus defends the view that although the gods are superior to us and exist separately, they illuminate this realm with their light. It is this light that allows the gods’ presence in this lower world.” (87) Cf. also Addey (2014) 222-237, and Finamore (1993) 55–64.

<sup>39</sup> See Addey (2014) 229-237, and Finamore (2013) 351-354.

and consequently memory of, the divine visions experienced during the possession state.” (Addey, 2014, 230) The development of this receptivity is achieved by means of an elaborated *paidea* of ethical, virtuous and scientific progression.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in cases of union with the divinity, as John Finamore (2013) explains, “in which the theurgist or medium is conscious of the images and can report them after the rite is completed, the gods’ illumination affects only the ethereal vehicle and not the rational soul itself. This requires rigorous philosophical training so that the rational soul stays alert and ‘tuned in’ as the rite is underway.” (353) The purity of this experience was the goal: to be pure and unified with your primordial divinity without any affectation (πάθος) from matter. This perfect purity is reached only by the few purified souls.<sup>41</sup> To attain that, one must rise up a scalar gradation of this pure experience. The pursuit of this perfect purity is initiated by the soul’s connatural *gnosis* (ἔμφυτος γνῶσις) about the gods and natural desire (ἐφέσει) towards the Good.<sup>42</sup> In this context Theurgy presents itself as a *téchne* (θεουργικὴ τέχνη; *de Myst.* II.10.92,3-5) that facilitates divine union and purification, which occur beyond any thought (ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν; *de Myst.* II.11.96,14) and knowledge (ὑπερήνωται; *de Myst.* II.11.98,9). It combines the highest philosophical knowledge, the noetic, with the mystical experience of the divine manifestation.

The foundations of Iamblichus’ explanation of the efficacy of rituals and divine manifestations are completed by an aesthetic-gnostic-ontological binding between symbol, *phantasia* and *ochema*. The Iamblichean *ochema-pneuma* assumes a distinguished metaphysical importance in relation to the Porphyrian doctrine in his decisive step of immortalizing it, making it the eternal vessel of the soul and, thereby, assuring the eternity of one’s individuality, which is only transcended by the few pure souls in their union with the One. Notwithstanding, even the pure souls will be enwrapped by their vessels once again in their next and necessary descent, since for Iamblichus there is no definitive return to the One. Moreover, the *ochema* is endowed, as it is for Porphyry, with a fundamental faculty for human cognition, the *phantasia*. In the ritual, the correct application of symbols (σύμβολα-συνθήματα) unveils the link between the gods and the particular in the

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<sup>40</sup> See Moreira (2014).

<sup>41</sup> See Moreira (2017).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *de Myst.* I.3.7,12–8,2.

sensible world that correspondingly partakes of them.<sup>43</sup> The theurgist (θεαγωγούντι) sees the descending divine *pneuma* and “is mystically obedient to and directed by it” (*de Myst.*, III.6.112,8-10). Precisely because it is situated in the *ochema* of the soul, its ethereal and luminous pneumatic vehicle, *phantasia*, the imaginative faculty of man, sensory decoder and psychic intermediary, plays the unveiling role. It is there that the deities are contemplated as their ethereal manifestations, while the human rational soul becomes connected to *Noûs*. Not only the manifestations vary according to the purity of each person's *pneuma*, but also the person's needs of material symbols.<sup>44</sup>

As an intermediary ontological layer between the body and the soul, *ochema-pneuma* is necessarily also between the particular and the universal. This means that it is involved, on one hand, with the process of sensory reception, and on the other, with the application of the universal to the particular. Symbols receive the divine illumination and have the power to engage our intellectual disposition. A symbolic connection is thus established that awakens the revelation and allows the manifestation of a corresponding divinity's *phásmata* that can be contemplated in *phantasia*. Let us remember here Iamblichus' insistence that the divine does not manifest itself by human coercion,<sup>45</sup> not at all, but by its goodness and the recognition of itself in the symbol.

The ideal condition for human beings to receive the divine illumination is by having a pure *pneuma* and a rational soul philosophically prepared to properly engage in intellection. The purer the *pneuma* the higher the deities to which one ascends, closer to the

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<sup>43</sup> See Shaw (1995) 48-50. It is known that Iamblichus accepted the doctrine of a divine *σειρά*, i.e., each god is the patron of a series of beings that unfolds hierarchically through the several layers of reality, from the Intelligible to the material realm (cf. Dillon, 1973, 291 and 416). Note also that errors can occur in the theurgic process resulting in the subversion of ritual power and the manifestation of subversive inferior beings (*de Myst.*, II.10.91,6-92.5). Such errors occur by the ignorance and impurity of the executor of the ritual (*de Myst.*, II.10.92,6-11, II.11.95, 12-96.5). The dangers of polluted (μισμοῦς) people performing rituals are strongly emphasized by Iamblichus (*de Myst.*, III.31.176,13-117,6 III.13.130,2-3; III.13.130,3-6; III.13.129,17-18; 131,6-14; III.29.173,2-6; III.31.177,7-12).

<sup>44</sup> See Shaw (1995) 143 – 152.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *de Myst.*, I.21.66,6-16; II.11.95,15-99,10; III.1.100,10-101,7; III.18-19; III.22.153,18-154,17; III.31.178,16-179,12.

One. As Finamore (2017) explains: “A successful ascent comes about because the soul undergoes ritual purification, gradually is raised stage by stage to the Intelligible realm, and thereby becomes more likely to attain to intellectual thought. At the moment when the soul succeeds and starts to think intellectually, it is not merely in the presence of the Intellect. It is united to it.”<sup>46</sup> (376) It is then by “pure and blameless intellections (καθαραῖς καὶ ἀμέμπτους νοήσεσιν) which it has received from all eternity from those same gods” that the human soul joins itself to them in *gnosis* (cf. *de Myst.* I.3.9,12-13). Differently from human reasoning, *gnosis* of the gods does not involve otherness,<sup>47</sup> in this way, the “pure intellections” (καθαραῖς νοήσεσιν) necessarily transcend the *lógos* in the sense of rational discourse. The “first principles of *lógos* and life” (τοῦ λόγου καὶ τῆς ζωῆς ἀρχῶν; *de Myst.* I.3.9,5) are aprioristic to any attempt to demonstrate them that we might have. It is a mystery so transcendent that we are not allowed to express it verbally, but it is revealed to us, from within our own soul, or from without, but not by thought and reasoning.

#### Final remarks

In his responses to his critical interlocutor, Iamblichus presented, in *De Mysteriis*, a sophisticated and innovative philosophical explanation of the true nature of the interactions between the divine and human as found in traditional Greek cults and the theurgical art (by means of rituals, sacraments, prayers and oracles). This paper traced the two core philosophical differences that led these two philosophers of the Ancient (Neo)Platonic school to divergent philosophical and soteriological paths, and brought about this singular quarrel between

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<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to remember that, for Iamblichus, human souls are “in a precarious situation since our souls are weak and structured to descend again even as we are engaged in intellectual thought. Such is our nature, and so we shall eventually cease intellection and will return to our earthly life, where we will simultaneously be engaged in lower-order thinking and striving to ascend again.” (Finamore, 2017, 378-379) See also Finamore, 2018, 108-110.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *de Myst.*, I.3.9,8-11; I.3.9,11-13; I.3.10,4-7. As Gregory Shaw (1995) explains: “Iamblichus’s reference to *noēsis*, *gnōsis*, or *eidēsis* to describe contact with the gods should not be confused with human modes of understanding. These terms were used as metaphors to describe the soul’s pre-essential contact with the gods, and Iamblichus always qualified them as innate (*emphutos*), natural (*sumphutos*), uniform (*monoēidēs*), or pure (*katharos*) to distinguish them from human understanding.” (120 – 120)

them. One of the differences concerns the nature of materiality, if matter itself must be regarded as an obstacle to the ascension of the soul or as propitious for its purification. The other is about the nature of the pneumatic vehicle (*ochema-pneuma*) of the soul and its role in the purification of the soul. Iamblichus and his response to Porphyry provided substantial innovations that established much of late Neoplatonists' philosophy

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