

### 3 Later Neoplatonist Treatment of Matter: Iamblichus, Proclus and Denys

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we propose to investigate some of the connections observed between pagan Neoplatonism and the Dionysian corpus. This will be attempted by exploring in turn the characteristic themes of Iamblichus and Proclus in dealing with matter, materiality and evil, then moving into a briefer review those themes in *CD*. By ordering the research in this way the intention of remaining sensitive to the changing elements in Athenian Neoplatonism should be supported, particularly on the contentious issue of theurgy, so that we can make some initial judgement over the placement of Denys as a thinker. It will be borne in mind that ambivalence to matter is not unusual in late antique thought.

Although the New Testament indicates a tension between the domain of the world and that of the Father, between flesh and spirit<sup>1</sup>, the opposition between the soul and the body is also a characteristic of the Neoplatonist School derived from Plato himself. But the issue is not clear cut and one of the concerns of the Platonists and Neoplatonists was to address the ambivalence of the sense-world problem inherent in Platonism. This division can be seen below in the contrast between *Timaeus*' doctrine of the goodness of the sensible world, whereas *Phaedo* assumes that the body does harm to the soul<sup>2</sup>.

#### *Timaeus* 29A

Now if so be that this Cosmos is beautiful and its Constructor good, it is plain that he fixed his gaze on the Eternal; but if otherwise (which is an impious supposition), his gaze was on that which has come into existence. But it is clear to everyone that his gaze was on the Eternal; for the Cosmos is the fairest of all that has come into existence, and He the best of all the Causes.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Phaedo* 65C

Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously led astray ... - in despising the body and avoiding it, and endeavouring to become independent - the philosopher's soul is ahead of all the rest.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, 1 John 2.15, Ephesians 2.3.

<sup>2</sup> Plotinus shows this ambivalence to matter particularly in *Enneads* 1.8 and 2.4, holding that it exists because of evil but is not evil itself. Nevertheless he cites the *Timaeus* - which has the sensible creation as a good - more than any other Platonic work (*Plotini Opera*, ed by P Henry & H-R Schwyzer, Oxford, 1983, pp361-64).

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 29A, (online text, <http://perseus.csad.ox.ac.uk>).

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 65C, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans by H Tredennick, London, 1954, pp83-84.

It was noted in Chapter 2 that the developments in Church and academy during the third and fourth centuries effectively brought Christian and pagan thought closer together. One of the significant influences in the pagan part of this dynamic was Iamblichus of Apamea (c245-330) who, in reacting to the influence of Plotinus and Porphyry, is reputed to have changed the course of later Neoplatonism. Claiming to recapitulate classical thought, Iamblichus inspired a new Neoplatonic orthodoxy and was revered by Julian the Apostate (332-63), Syrianus (ob c437), Proclus (c412-85), and Damascius (c462-c531). He is also among the more important philosophical influences evident in *CD*, particularly concerning his advocacy of ritual as a necessary element in the ascent of the soul.

With regard to this connection, Andrew Louth<sup>5</sup> raises the question of how far Neoplatonist ritual (*θεουργία*) influenced Denys' Christian rites. He traces the source of this emphasis of ritual back to Iamblichus who, unlike Plotinus or Porphyry, embraces theurgy with some enthusiasm. Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* is not to be dismissed, argues Louth, as 'a farrago of magical nonsense', for it represents 'a serious and carefully argued attempt to incorporate theurgy into man's search for contact with the divine'<sup>6</sup>. In this chapter this argument will be tested through an investigation into Iamblichus' cosmological and anthropological views and a more particular treatment of his understanding of theurgy in *De Myst*, with its significant use of matter in the scheme of salvation.

Some of Iamblichus' philosophical teachings seem to be radical departures from the Plotinian school, some were opposed - or perhaps misunderstood - by those who in turn followed him. Apparently esoteric and often obscurely expressed, it is nevertheless clear that these ideas represent the impetus that changed the direction of later Neoplatonism, broadening Plotinian philosophy to embrace the expression of symbolic and religious ideas, and attempting to sift from paganism what was incoherent, manipulative and occult. Iamblichus could therefore be said to bridge the chasm between cult and academy.

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<sup>5</sup> Louth, A, 'Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986), 432-38.

<sup>6</sup> Louth, 'Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism', p433.

### 3.2.1 Iamblichus: A Revised Cosmology and Anthropology

The philosopher's search for meaning in human activity was already undergoing a significant shift during 'the age of anxiety' between the second and fourth centuries, which forms the background for Plotinus' attitude towards the soul as an essentially undescended entity. To Iamblichus' mind these changes represented a divergence from Platonic orthodoxy towards dangerous, dualistic notions of both the soul and cosmos: it was touched by the shadows of 'underworld' Platonism found in the Hermetic *Poimandres* and Numenius<sup>7</sup>. Gregory Shaw identifies the most significant of these heterodox forms as the gnostic reversal of the Platonic creation myth, with its reinterpretation of the Demiurge and World Soul. At the most primal level this spawned the notoriously negative attitude towards matter since, in the revised myth, the generation of the sensible realm was held to be the result of sin and error.

This 'anti-cosmic' motif, sharply divergent from the earlier beneficent expression of the Demiurge, is characterised well by Shaw when he writes that 'the sensible world was a maleficent prison, and the orders of the heavens, which for Plato served as media for a return to the divine, were transformed into spiritual oppressors who held souls captive in matter'<sup>8</sup>. The need for some kind of corrective to this theology of cosmic alienation - helpful to those outside the philosophical elite - is particularly clear in the issue of human suffering and the existence of evil. Ironically Plotinus' doctrine of the undescended soul was itself an attempt to solve this problem.

When refuting the gnostics, Plotinus represents their view that individual souls suffer because of the fall of the World Soul, the summation of all individual souls. But, he argues, the World Soul cannot itself fall<sup>9</sup> and so concludes that embodiment of a soul entails a period of temporary suffering and confusion<sup>10</sup> which can be overcome by education and imitation of the gods<sup>11</sup>. Little comfort, however, seems to be offered to

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<sup>7</sup> Numenius of Apamea, the most extreme dualist of the Middle Platonists, held doctrines unacceptable to many Neoplatonists: he opposed the Neopythagorean monists by asserting that Matter existed independently of God and (unlike Plutarch or Atticus) was to be identified with Absolute Evil (*T* 30 = Chalcidius *in Tim* 295ff); he held that all embodiment was evil for the soul (*T* 40 = Iamblichus *de Anima* 380.14-19); and his account of the soul's descent into the world through the planetary spheres necessarily brought upon the soul greater and greater impurity. Some of these doctrines clearly influenced the assumptions of Neoplatonists (R T Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, London, 1995, p35).

<sup>8</sup> Shaw, G, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, Pennsylvania, 1995, p61.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.7.

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.7ff.

<sup>11</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.18.

those in profound pain by asserting that the soul has not actually descended fully into the body, as Plotinus' teaching implies.

Iamblichus agrees that it is the nature of the embodied soul - a correct anthropology - which provides the key to overcoming human failings. Through grasping the true nature of the soul's condition, he argues, a redirection of its activity can facilitate communion with the divine. But by contrast with Plotinus, his scheme revolves around the doctrine of the *complete* descent of the soul and the necessary use of theurgic ritual to locate the authentic experience of the human soul within the cosmos.

In his refutation of Porphyry's *Letter to Anebo, De Myst*, Iamblichus regularly appeals to the orders of the cosmos and the importance of the correct placement of humanity within them. In *De Myst* 1 we find many references to the 'more excellent genera' and their characteristics: in descending order, gods, *daimônes*, heroes and (embodied) souls, although further intermediate genera are appended later<sup>12</sup>. What had with Plotinus been a relatively simple metaphysical scheme of three hypostases - One, Intellect, and Soul - was probably complicated by Amelius 'who had a special weakness for triads'<sup>13</sup>, and then scholastically elaborated by Iamblichus to the system of genera characteristic of later Neoplatonism.

One of the main features of this Iamblichian elaboration of the cosmic genera is the emphasis given to the Pythagorean principle of mediation<sup>14</sup>. In *De Myst* 1.5 the characteristics of the mediating genera between the metaphysical extremes of god and soul - *daimônes* and heroes - are described in some detail. Heroes are superior to souls in power, virtue, moral beauty and greatness but related to them, mediating immortality to the mortal world. Similarly *daimônes* are inferior to gods but related to them, causing the otherwise invisible goodness of gods to be visible in operation: they make manifest

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<sup>12</sup> At *De Myst* 2.3 Iamblichus may be responding to Porphyry's terminology when he lists other intermediary entities which expand the hierarchy of genera to gods, archangels, angels, *daimônes*, heroes, sublunary *archônes*, material *archônes* and human souls. (All following references to *De Mysteriis* will be in this format: *De Myst* BOOK.CHAPTER (Part) PERICOPÉ.LINE, Des Places PAGE NUMBER).

<sup>13</sup> Dillon, J M, in *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, trans by G R Morrow & J M Dillon, Princeton, 1987, p xv.

<sup>14</sup> Denys shows a similar attachment to mediation, for example, commencing both *CH* and *EH* with an explanation of how these hierarchies function as mediating structures for spiritual advancement and the operation of unifying divine light.

what is ‘without form’, ‘καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα λόγον αὐτοῦ εἰς λόγους φανεροῦς προσάγουσαν’<sup>15</sup>, connecting the extremes in an ‘indissoluble common bond’.

The whole cosmic hierarchy is also conceptualised by Iamblichus<sup>16</sup> according to particular configurations of οὐσία, ταυτότης, and ἑτερότης (essence, generic sameness and difference). The proportions of these three elements determine the place of all entities within the cosmos, the human soul with its material vehicle being that with most ἑτερότης. A related scheme of ontological division, distinguishing between hypostasis and genus, is also shown in *De Anima*. Here Iamblichus takes issue again with the ‘shadow of gnosticism’ present in the works of philosophers who confuse the incorporeal substances of different genera, and the overly-optimistic view of human nature associated with such teaching.

They even place in the individual soul the Intelligible World, the Gods, the *Daimones*, the Good, and all races superior to the soul; and in each soul they contend that all these exist in the same way, though for each in a manner appropriate to its essence. Holding this opinion without question is Numenius, and Plotinus agrees with it, though not entirely, Amelius vacillates towards it, and Porphyry is in doubt about it, sometimes he earnestly rejects it and sometimes he follows it completely as having been handed down from on high. According to this view, the soul, considering its entire essence, is in no way different from the *Nous*, the Gods, or the Superior Races.<sup>17</sup>

Emphasising its mediating role, Iamblichus seems nevertheless convinced that the human soul is generated at a quite different ontological level from the Intellect, being defined by its essence as the mean term between the corporeal and the incorporeal domains, possessing features of both. With this ontological separation of the soul with respect to Intellect, Iamblichus in effect removes the means of deification through intellectual introspection taught by Plotinus: return to the unified, divine activity through one’s own resources is simply impossible for the partial, embodied soul. In hypostatic terms, deification must therefore depend on divine rather than human activity, and with regard to the individual soul often carries a cautionary *δοκεῖ*. In *De Myst* 2.2 he uses exactly this basis to explain the manifestation of superhuman energies in the human soul.

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<sup>15</sup> Iamblichus, *De Myst*, 1.5 (17.3-4).

<sup>16</sup> Dillon notes this as Proclus’ reading of Iamblichus in *Iamblichi Chalcidensis: In Platonis Dialogos Commentariorum Fragmenta*, ed and trans by J M Dillon, Leiden, 1973, p378.

<sup>17</sup> Iamblichus *De Anima*, *Stob* 1.365.7-21, cited in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p70-71.

“Ὅθεν δὴ καὶ δοκεῖ παντοδαπὰς οὐσίας καὶ ἐνεργείας λόγους τε παντοίους καὶ εἶδη τὰ ὅλα παρέχειν ἐν ἑαυτῇ ἢ ψυχῇ. Τὸ δ’ εἰ χρὴ τάληθές εἰπεῖν, ὥρισται μὲν αἰεὶ καθ’ ἓν τι, κοινοῦσα δ’ ἑαυτὴν τοῖς προηγουμένοις αἰτίοις ἄλλοτε ἄλλοις συντάττεται.<sup>18</sup>

From which indeed also the soul seems to show manifold essences and energies, reasons of all kinds and the whole genera in itself. But if the truth is told, it is always defined according to one thing, and communing itself with the guiding causes, it is ordered differently from one time to another.

Alongside his emphasis on the requirement of clear hypostatic distinctions in the task of locating the essence of the human soul, lies another deliberate modification of what Iamblichus took to be the Plotinian system. This concerns the interplay of Aristotelian technical language and Platonic imagery, a synthesis that Shaw suggests was a contributory factor in the adoption of Gnostic positions, ‘that put a breach between physics and metaphysics, materiality and spirituality ... [the] kind of bifurcation that Iamblichus saw in Plotinus’s and Porphyry’s metaphysics’<sup>19</sup>.

Iamblichus, like most Neoplatonists, saw harmony in the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, even integrating the latter’s view of the soul as *ἐντελέχεια* of the body<sup>20</sup> into his work, with the associated distinctions of *οὐσία*, *δύναμις* and *ἐνέργεια* as an emanative triad.

[E]ven the essence (*ousia*) of the [human] soul is not easily perceptible to everyone. (Only) the *Timaeus* at any rate has given a full revelation of its essence ... but to make clear the powers (*dunameis*) of Daimons is easy enough. We attain to a perception of them through their activities (*energeia*) of which the powers are the immediate mothers; for a power is a median between an essence and an activity, put forth from the essence on the one hand, and itself generating the activity on the other.<sup>21</sup>

As he implies, this interplay of the principles of entelechy and triadic mediation is important in Neoplatonism for discerning particular genera through their activities. But, against Porphyry, Iamblichus holds that the revelation of essence through activity must

<sup>18</sup> *De Myst* 2.2 (69.14-19).

<sup>19</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p72 n14.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, typically at *De Anima* 2.1: ‘ἔστι δ’ ἡ μὲν ὕλη δύναμις, τὸ δ’ εἶδος ἐντελέχεια’, also *Metaphys* 8.3,9; 8.8,11.

<sup>21</sup> Iamblichus, *In Alcibiadem*, frag 4.9-16 in *Iamblichi Chalcidensis*: ed & trans by J M Dillon, Leiden, 1973, pp74-75.

not be confused with a *definition* of essence through activity<sup>22</sup>. Such a procedure would entail inverting the ontological order, making matter the defining characteristic of a number of conflated immaterial entities. Rather, Iamblichus holds that each divine genus must be self-substantiating, that its activities could neither determine nor exhaust its essence. For ‘if you apprehend the peculiarity to be ... differing in their whole essence and whole genus, a certain simple condition of being, definite in itself; in this case, your conception of peculiarities will be reasonable’<sup>23</sup>.

Through this proper application of the triad *ousia-dunamis-energeia*, the far-reaching subtleties of Iamblichus’ vision of the human condition as fully descended and mediating become clearer. He naturally distinguishes carefully between individual or fragmented ‘partial souls’ and the ‘World Soul’ which, as in the Plotinian system, is conceived as an un-descended entity, free from the injury caused by descent into multiplicity and embodiment. However, echoes of the negative appraisal of the material realm, particularly on this issue of embodiment, are still echoed by Iamblichus in his debate with Porphyry at *De Myst* 5.2, suggesting, perhaps, that his views are no more consistent than those of Plotinus.

<p>οἶον ὃ λέγω τῇ μὲν ὅλη ψυχῇ  προεστηκέναι τοῦ κοσμικοῦ παντὸς  σώματος, καὶ τοῖς οὐρανίοις θεοῖς  ἐπιβεβηκέναι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ  σώματος οὔτε βλαβερόν ἐστιν εἰς  παθῶν παραδοχὴν οὔτε ἐμπόδιον  πρὸς τὰς νοήσεις, τῇ δὲ ἐν μέρει  ψυχῇ κοινωνεῖν πρὸς σῶματι πρὸς  ἀμφοτέρα ταῦτά ἐστιν  ἀλυσιτελές.<sup>24</sup></p>	<p>This is what I say, that the soul as a whole presides over all the cosmic body, as the gods have been mounted upon the heavenly: neither is hindered by passivity nor receives impediment to the intellections. But in a partial soul the communion with a body is in both these ways disadvantageous.</p>
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Here we can see that the activities of mortality and embodiment - suffering and impeded intellection - are associated particularly with the embodied human soul, setting it apart as a unique median between mortal and immortal realms, despite it possessing a

<sup>22</sup> *De Myst* 1.4 emphasises this: ‘For your question asks, “How essences are known by energies, by physical motions, and by accidents?” The very contrary, however, to all this takes place. For if energies and motions were constitutive of essences, they would be the lords of the difference which is between them. But if essences generate energies, the former being separate prior to the latter, will impart to motions, energies, and accidents, that by which they differ from each other’ (trans by Thomas Taylor).

<sup>23</sup> Iamblichus, *De Myst* 1.4, trans by T Taylor, in S Ronan, *On the Mysteries*, Hastings, 1989, p25.

<sup>24</sup> Iamblichus, *De Myst* 5.2 (200.4-10, p158).

common hypostatic origin with other immortal souls like heroes and *daimônes*. Iamblichus therefore assigns to the human soul elements of both mortality and immortality, and can even consider it as both<sup>25</sup>.

This negative association of material embodiment, therefore, still influences his thought, but Iamblichus also sees another facet to the essence of mortality. As noted above, all souls are located hierarchically according to the quotient of *ταυτότης* and *ἑτερότης* associated with a particular *οὐσία*. He considers the dominance of *ἑτερότης* in the human soul - greater than all others - as sufficient to project for itself a mortal cycle of life to which it is bound. In terms of entelechy, the human soul's activities show that its essence combines inseparably both mortal and immortal parts. Similarly, Proclus responds in the manner of Iamblichus to those who would separate the two, 'someone might say the soul in bodies is divisible with regard to the intellect, not because it is only this but because, compared to the intellect, it appears to be so, whereas with regard to the divisible essence it appears indivisible'<sup>26</sup>.

Iamblichus takes this mixed notion of the human soul, separated from the gods from its corporeal conception onwards, from the Platonic metaphor of the 'demiurgic mixing bowl'<sup>27</sup> which portrays the purity and consistency of human souls as disrupted. But in his commentary on the *Timaeus*<sup>28</sup> and on many occasions in *De Myst* he expresses a third aspect to the soul's fully descended status, that seems to place the source of confusion again with embodiment. Referring to the soul's immortal aspect as the presence of divine 'ratios', he argues that although every soul carries from its demiurgic source the immortal *λόγοι*, which cannot be damaged, its coherence is no longer

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<sup>25</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, pp66-7 notes that the Pythagorean principle of the 'mean' is applied thoroughly by Iamblichus to all hypostases, including the embodied soul. 'If the Many is conceived as a triad and that opposed to the Many is conceived as a monad, the dyad would be a borderland between them. Therefore, the dyad possesses the characteristics of both' (*Theologoumena Arithmeticae* 10.9-11). In the case of the souls, the dyad is the 'borderland genera' of celestial souls between the unity of the World Soul and the multiplicity of the individual souls. Celestial souls therefore possess both perfect intellection (like the World Soul) and a single and moving body (like the individual souls).

<sup>26</sup> Proclus, *In Tim* 3.30.30-32.6, in S Sambursky, *The Concept of Time in Late Neoplatonism*, texts and translation, Jerusalem, 1971, p44.21-26. Shaw vaguely attributes this to Iamblichus: it is in a passage containing some quotations from him but it seems more likely that this sentence is of Proclus himself.

<sup>27</sup> *Timaeus* 41D (text online <http://perseus.csad.ox.ac.uk>): "For the rest, do ye weave together the mortal with the immortal, and thereby fashion and generate living creatures, and give them food that they may grow, and when they waste away receive them to yourselves again." Thus He spake, and once more into the former bowl, wherein He had blended and mixed the Soul of the Universe, He poured the residue of the previous material, mixing it in somewhat the same manner, yet no longer with a uniform and invariable purity, but second and third in degree of purity. And when He had compounded the whole He divided it into souls equal in number to the stars, and each several soul He assigned to one star.'

<sup>28</sup> *In Tim* fr 82, *Iamblichi Chalcidensis*, trans by Dillon, p194-95.

uniform but disrupted through embodiment. The activities of these disrupted, materially dependent entities is, says Iamblichus, ‘like plants producing fruit’<sup>29</sup>, the body only gradually manifesting the soul’s potential activities and powers as it matures.

The powers of the soul and its modes of being are several, and following a measured chronology in which the developing body is appropriately disposed from one period of time to the next, it participates first in a vegetative life, then in sensation, next in an appetitive life, then it participates in the rational soul, and finally in the intellectual soul<sup>30</sup>.

The metaphor of the growth of a plant, an entity even lower in the cosmic hierarchy, can seem a strange one for the soul’s *παιδεία*. But this is where the purpose of full descent at embodiment is most significant, not only for the human soul, but for the whole cosmic hierarchy which is also involved in the soul’s *παιδεία*. For, Iamblichus claims, even the ‘one most ancient and venerable’ of the divine causes is involved in a perfect sacrifice: ‘συγκινεῖται μὲν ὑπὸ τῆς τελείας θυσίας πάντα τὰ αἴτια’<sup>31</sup>. So the creative desire of the Demiurge proceeds, via embodiment, into the sensible world where, through theurgy, the entire cosmos becomes ritually unified, as the soul’s ascent returns the demiurgic desire to its immortal cause. This kind of ‘erotic circulation’<sup>32</sup> could not take place without the soul’s profound separation from the divine in embodiment. Far from being punitive or accidental, the full descent of the soul is therefore a necessary pivot for the sensible world’s salvation through this cycle of divine love, without which the divine could not experience yearning itself, through the love of a radically different being.

Clearly the language used by Iamblichus for expressing the nature of the human mortal-immortal hybrid changes with context, perhaps with the maturity of his thought. For example, terms like ‘rational’ can exhibit a certain fluidity, sometimes suggesting a kind of *imago dei* idea, at others an intermediate stage in the soul’s *παιδεία* between an appetitive and intellectual existence, prior to spiritual awakening. But the radical notion

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<sup>29</sup> *Stob* 1.373.15, cited in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p74.

<sup>30</sup> *Stob* 1.381.7-13, cited in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p75.

<sup>31</sup> *De Myst* 5.9 (210.3-4, p164).

<sup>32</sup> Iamblichus’ preferred term for the demiurgic power defining theurgic ascent is *φιλία*, as at *De Myst* 5.26 (239.6-13, p182) although the more general Platonic term is *ἔρως* which characterises Proclus’ reading (*In Tim* 2.54.5) of key fragments of *Chaldean Oracles*: ‘τοῦτον δὲ τὸν μέγιστον καὶ τελεώτατον δεσμὸν ὃν περιβάλλει τῷ κοσμῷ πανταχόθεν ὁ πατήρ ... <δεσμὸν πυριβριθῆ ἔρωτος> τὰ λόγια προσείρηκεν.’ (But this greatest and most perfect bond which the Father everywhere throws around the world ... the Oracles have called ‘bond of Love, heavy with fire’), R D Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation Commentary*, Santa Barbara, 1982, fr 39, p124-25.

of ambiguity in the soul's actual *οὐσία*, implied by his Aristotelian activity-reveals-essence method, would seem to be an abiding element of his teaching, since that is how his psychological heritage is presented by his successors.

Carlos Steel<sup>33</sup> draws this conclusion from examining the fragments of Iamblichean thought preserved in Priscianus' commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*.

<p>εὐλογον ἄρα μᾶλλον δὲ ἀναγκαῖον οὐ τὴν ἐνέργειαν μόνην, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ αὐτὴν τὴν ἀκροτάτην, τῆς ἡμετέρας φημί, διαφορεῖσθαί πως καὶ χαλᾶσθαι καὶ οἷον ὑφιζάνειν ἐν τῇ πρὸς τὰ δεύτερα νεύσει<sup>34</sup>.</p>	<p>It is therefore more reasonable and necessary to say that not only the activity but also the highest essence of our soul is in some way relaxed, broken up, and has its existence constituted, so to speak, in its descent toward lower lives.</p>
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Steel also notes<sup>35</sup> Priscianus' reading of Iamblichus that the *οὐσία* becomes mortal at the point of embodiment, that its own fragmentation is triggered in animating a body. The term used for this change<sup>36</sup> is *παρθραυώμενος*, and echos Plato's use of *παρθραύω* to describe the breaking up of the soul's wings in the descent into a body<sup>37</sup>. Of Iamblichus' noted successors, however, only Damascius maintains this view unequivocally, since for Proclus and Priscianus the notion of attributing diversity and change to the soul's actual essence tends to be an inference too far. For them the *οὐσία* projected an *ἐνέργεια* at variance with its own character, for 'every participated soul has an eternal substance but a temporal activity'<sup>38</sup>. Against Iamblichus, such a position implicitly maintains the source of the problem of mortality, diversity and change as the somatic accretions encountered in the material world. The source of suffering is not the fundamental ambiguity of the human *οὐσία* but merely the passing instability of matter - whether or not the result of a cosmic accident - and in psychological terms we may have progressed very little from Plotinus or indeed Numenius.

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<sup>33</sup> Steel, C G, *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius, and Priscianus*, trans by E Haasl, Brussels, 1978.

<sup>34</sup> Priscianus, *In Libros Aristotelis de Anima Commentaria*, 241.7-10, text and trans in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p100.

<sup>35</sup> Steel, *The Changing Self*, p57.

<sup>36</sup> Priscianus, *De Anima* 220.2-15.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 248D.

<sup>38</sup> Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed & trans by E R Dodds, Oxford, 1963: proposition 208 holds this although 211, being aimed at the Plotinian theory of the upper and lower soul, seems to contradict it.

Regardless of our liking for Iamblichus' particular anthropology, the vital manner conceived by him for ultimately overcoming the soul's fragmented and alienated state is what he calls *θεουργία*, in which the mortal activities of disrupted souls are made coherent through the action of the divine. This is where his rather pessimistic psychology of ambiguity is worked out critically in the domain of popular, traditional pagan ritual. It is also where he readily takes up cudgels against the sterile, elitist notions that he sees in the Plotinian system. For, far from helping humanity, Iamblichus is convinced that what Porphyry argues for - simpler hypostatic divisions, higher and lower human soul, definition of essences through bodies, and the rejection of the presence of immortal *λόγοι* in embodiment - all combine to exacerbate the problem of cosmic alienation.

“Ὀλως δὲ τῆς ἱερᾶς ἀγιστείας καὶ τῆς θεουργικῆς κοινωνίας θεῶν πρὸς ἀνθρώπους ἀναίρεσις ἐστὶν αὐτὴ ἡ δόξα, τὴν τῶν κρειπτόνων παρουσίαν ἔξω τῆς γῆς ἐξορίζουσα. Οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο λέγει ἢ ὅτι ἀπώκισται τῶν περὶ γῆν τὰ θεῖα καὶ ὅτι ἀνθρώποις οὐ συμμίγνυται καὶ ὡς ἔρημος αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ὁ τῆδε τόπος.”<sup>39</sup>

This notion is an abrogation of all the holy rites and of the theurgic communion from gods towards men, banishing the presence of superior beings from the earth. For it says nothing other than that the divine is distanced from the vicinity of earth and cannot mingle with men, and that this region is a desert without gods.

### 3.2.2 *Iamblichus' Notion of Theurgy*

Originating during the latter part of the second century, theurgical language seems to have been derived from the younger of the two Chaldean Juliani, who styled himself *θεουργός*, probably, as Bidez and Dodds suggest, to distinguish himself from the mere *θεολόγοι*<sup>40</sup>, as one who through sacrificial acts could alter the course of human - and divine - events by the manipulation of cosmic structure. Julian would thereby be claiming to move beyond *discourse* on the divine into the realm of divine *activity*, a word-play that we also find in Denys<sup>41</sup>.

It is clear that theurgy was not an important element in pre-Iamblichean philosophy. Although it is not certain that Plotinus encountered it, we may assert with confidence

<sup>39</sup> Iamblichus, *De Myst* 1.8 (28.6-11, p54).

<sup>40</sup> Dodds, E R, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Los Angeles, 1951, p283.

<sup>41</sup> *EH* 3.3.5 ends with the phrase ‘καὶ ἐστὶ τῆς θεολογίας ἢ θεουργία συγκεφαλαίωσις’ as a description of the relationship between Old and New Testament readings in the *Synaxis*.

that he would have found the notion repugnant. According to Porphyry<sup>42</sup>, he showed contempt for prophetic figures and the *Enneads* avoids the word *θεουργός* and all cognates, referring to similar ritual activity with the stricture *γοητεία* (sorcery). Porphyry himself is less consistent but typifies the rationalist attitude when he describes theurgy as a vain attempt to purify the soul through ritual acts by those incapable of philosophy<sup>43</sup>. Despite this, Augustine<sup>44</sup> shows disappointment in finding ambivalence to theurgy in Porphyry's works, a feature that seems totally lacking in Iamblichus. For theurgy - although never systematically defined - becomes for him the axis for articulating a union between Hellenistic rational philosophy and the best of traditional pagan ritual. Iamblichus' explication of theurgy is a characteristic element of late Athenian Neoplatonism, through which he was to become much admired by Julian the Apostate.

Theurgy is therefore the banner under which Iamblichus gathers all that he finds reputable about pagan religion in distinction from all that is bad - according to Porphyry's charges - in the closing doxology of *De Myst.* He argues here that the divine intellect should not be disturbed with trifling concerns but with the salvation of the soul, that religion should not involve the initiate in esoteric studies if they are of no use to humanity, and urges that diviners should not be deceived by 'a certain fraudulent *daimôn*'<sup>45</sup>. Such accusations, Iamblichus accepts, bring disrepute upon the pagan cults. But, he retorts, none of these diversions characterise proper theurgic ritual. Theurgists simply do not do these things.

Theurgy, as seen above, concerns a means of appropriating divine energies, of using the particular route of ritual to achieve the more general Platonic objective of *ὁμοίωσις θεῶ*, where any of a large repertoire of traditional rites could facilitate the desired result. The treatment presented by Iamblichus often concerns a proper articulation of the contrast between human and divine activity, held firm by his anthropology of the fully descended soul, which exhibits mortal but also potentially immortal characteristics. The core issue is elicited at a simple level by asking the question, 'is theurgy something that god does or something that the human does?'

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<sup>42</sup> Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 16, Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans by S MacKenna, London, 1991, pcxiv.

<sup>43</sup> Porphyry, *De Regressu Animae* 32.5-5, cited in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, p14.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *Civitas Dei* 10.9.

<sup>45</sup> *De Myst* 10.7.

Invariably Iamblichus treats theurgy as ‘god-work’ in the subjective sense: work done *by* a god (and not objective work done *for* a god) and so distances it from the notion of *θεολογία*, ‘god-talk’, an essentially human activity associated with philosophy. The latter implicitly lacks the element of active divine participation and may be typified among the rationalist Neoplatonists as *θεωρία*, contemplation of the divine. By contrast *θεουργία* moves beyond mere contemplation of divine power to enact it in such a way that the participants’ souls benefit from a ‘work of the gods’. Thus, in the dialogue that Iamblichus creates with *De Myst*, Iamblichus avoids Porphyry’s ideal of contemplative priesthood: *θεόσοφος* appears only once in *De Myst*, *θεουργός* being preferred overwhelmingly<sup>46</sup>.

### 3.2.3 *The Praxis of Theurgy*

Given that the genre of *De Myst* is one of philosophical controversy, it is no surprise that the word *θεουργία* appears most often in the context of defending the place of pagan ritual within the philosophical framework of Neoplatonism. The adversary is of course Porphyry, who tends to relate to ritual matters as dubious folk-religion, best avoided if not thoroughly repellent. Porphyry’s main objection observes that pagan ritual undermines the impassivity and transcendence of the gods. Iamblichus responds to one of his barbed phrases - *αί θεῶν ἀνάγκαι*<sup>47</sup> (the constraints of the gods) - arguing that proper theurgy, far from undermining the Neoplatonic edifice, is experienced as setting forth transcendent divine powers, reinforcing the doctrine so dear to Porphyry.

Διὰ πάντα δὴ οὖν τὸ ἐναντίον  
 συμβαίνει οὐ σὺ συνελογίσω·  
 ἀκήλητον καὶ ἀβίαστον  
 συμβαίνει εἶναι τὸ θεῖον, εἴπερ  
 ὄντως ἀληθεῖς εἰσιν αἱ τοιαῖδε  
 ἐν τῇ θεουργίᾳ δυνάμεις, οἷας  
 ἡμεῖς ἀπεδείξαμεν<sup>48</sup>.

Hence, through these particulars, the  
 contrary to what you infer takes place. For  
 it happens that a divine nature is incapable  
 of being allured, is impassive and  
 uncompelled, if there are in reality such  
 powers in theurgy, as we have  
 demonstrated there are.

To support this presence of transcendent powers, Iamblichus alludes to some of the more gory aspects of the pagan rituals which suggest theurgical efficacy, equating the

<sup>46</sup> Ronan (ed), *On the Mysteries*, p10.

<sup>47</sup> *De Myst* 1.14 (44.11, p64).

<sup>48</sup> *De Myst* 1.14 (45.4-8, p64), Taylor, T (trans).

claim of divine possession with the suspended human passivity of those held in a state of trance.

Τεκμήριον δὲ μέγιστον· πολλοὶ γὰρ καὶ πυρὸς προσφερομένου οὐ καίονται, οὐχ ἀπτομένου τοῦ πυρὸς αὐτῶν διὰ τὴν θείαν ἐπίπνοϊαν· πολλοὶ δὲ καιόμενοι οὐχ ἀντιλαμβάνονται, διότι οὐ τὴν τοῦ ζώου ζῶην ζῶσι τηνικαῦτα. Καὶ οἱ μὲν διαπείραντες ὀβελούς οὐκ ἐπαισθάνονται, οἱ δὲ πελέκεις προσαράσαντες τοῖς νώτοις· οἱ δὲ καὶ ξιφιδίοις τὰς ὠλένας κατατέμνοντες οὐδαμῶς παρακολουθοῦσιν. Αἴ τε ἐνέργεια αὐτῶν οὐδαμῶς εἰσιν ἀνθρώπιναι.<sup>49</sup>

But the greatest proof is this: for many are not burned when fire is applied, the fire not touching them because of divine inspiration; and many being burned receive no effect, because they do not live mortally at that time. Also those run through with spits do not feel it, nor those struck on their backs with sacrificial axes; also those cut by daggers on their forearms are in no way conscious of it. So their energies are in no way human.

This motif of the apparent transcending of nature in ritual is offered again by Iamblichus in defence of theurgy's value when Porphyry charges it with philosophical and religious bankruptcy. But in locating the source of ritual 'impiety and impurity' to be 'ignorance and deception'<sup>50</sup>, Porphyry unwittingly unleashes one of Iamblichus' most celebrated criticisms of the sufficiency of rational Neoplatonism. He first playfully points out the faults of Porphyry's argument, attenuated, he claims, by language that is merely philosophical and logical, and then compares the traditional, widely-held and unifying efficacy of ritual with the more rarefied fruits of theoretical philosophy:

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἔννοια συνάπτει τοῖς θεοῖς θεουργούς· ἐπεὶ τί ἐκώλυε τοὺς θεωρητικῶς φιλοσοφούντας ἔχειν τὴν θεουργικὴν ἔνωσιν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς; νῦν δ' οὐκ ἔχει τό γε ἀληθὲς οὕτως· ἀλλ' ἡ τῶν ἀρρήτων καὶ ὑπὲρ πάσαν νόησιν θεοπρεπῶς ἐνεργουμένων τελεσιουργία ἢ τε τῶν νοουμένων τοῖς θεοῖς μόνον συμβόλων ἀφθέγκτων δύναμις ἐντίθησι τὴν

for conceptions of the mind do not unite theurgists with the gods, since what hinders those philosophising theoretically from having theurgical union with the gods? Now this really is not what happens; but the inexpressible, perfecting work beyond all understanding, divinely performed, which is both conceived by the gods alone and through power of inexplicable symbols, inspires the

<sup>49</sup> *De Myst* 3.4 (110.5-13, p104).

<sup>50</sup> Porphyry, in Ronan (ed), *On the Mysteries*, p61.

Contrary to Plotinian mysticism, theurgical union works independently from the intellect of the theurgist and involves the operation of (often material) symbols, ‘μὴ νοούτων ἡμῶν αὐτὰ τὰ συνθήματα ἀφ’ ἑαυτῶν δρᾶ τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον’<sup>52</sup>. This means that divine energy is effectively called forth by that which is itself divine - the symbols - rather than the theurgist or, in Plotinus’ conception, the divine, un-descended aspect of the soul, accessed through *θεωρία*.

Despite this apparent exclusion of the theurgist himself from the ritual, the preparation of the theurgical adept is far from unimportant, since the beneficent divinities will only pour forth their gifts on those who are morally pure and competent in the principles of theurgy. ‘Ὅσοι μὲν θειοὶ τῆς ἀληθείας τῶν ἀγαθῶν εἰσι μόνως δοτῆρες, μόνοις τε τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ἀνδράσι προσομιλοῦσι, καὶ τοῖς διὰ τῆς ἱερατικῆς ἀποκεκαθαμένοις συγγίγνονται’<sup>53</sup>. It might seem hard, therefore, not to find a certain ambivalence in Iamblichus’ insistence on human passivity on the part of the theurgist, since his spiritual state is so important. Later in the work, however, this tension between human ascetic discipline and the power of the divine is to some extent resolved through an account of the importance and necessity of prayer. For, as Iamblichus states, ‘ἔργον τε οὐδὲν ἱερατικὸν ἄνευ τῶν ἐν ταῖς εὐχαῖς ἰκετειῶν γίγνεται’<sup>54</sup>.

Ἡ δ’ αὐταῖς ἐγχρονίζουσα  
διατριβὴ τρέφει μὲν τὸν ἡμέτερον  
νοῦν, τὴν δὲ τῆς ψυχῆς ὑποδοχὴν  
τῶν θεῶν ποιεῖ λίαν εὐρυτέραν,  
ἀνοίγει δὲ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ τῶν  
θεῶν, συνήθειαν δὲ παρέχει πρὸς  
τὰς τοῦ φωτὸς μαρμαρυγὰς, κατὰ  
βραχὺ δὲ τελειοῖ τὰ ἐν ἡμῖν πρὸς  
τὰς τῶν θεῶν συναφάς, ἕως ἂν ἐπὶ  
τὸ ἀκρότατον ἡμᾶς ἐπαναγάγῃ

But the long exercise [of prayer]  
nourishes our intellect and makes the  
reservoir of the soul very much deeper  
for the gifts of the gods, and it opens  
for men the things of the gods, and  
accustoms us to the dazzling of the  
light, and after a little time perfects  
the things in us towards union with  
the gods, until such a time as it might  
raise us to the summit.

<sup>51</sup> *De Myst* 2.11 (96.13-97.2, p96).

<sup>52</sup> *De Myst* 2.11 (97.4-6, p96).

<sup>53</sup> *De Myst* 3.31 (176.3-6, p144): ‘Those entities that are truly divine are givers only of the good, associating only with good men and those purified through the hieratic art’.

<sup>54</sup> *De Myst* 5.26 (238.14-15, p181): ‘nothing sacred happens without both an act and the supplicatory prayers’.

In fact, the reception of divine benevolence through theurgical ritual is represented as transcending the categories of passivity and activity on the part of the practitioner. For when a superior being - a god, *daimôn* or angel - completes a theurgic rite, it cannot be by virtue of being *forced* by the prayer of the theurgist: such an argument would be both incoherent and impious. Instead, divining is effected through neither necessity nor passivity, for these categories are attributes of human activity and are quite foreign to the involvement of superior, transcendent beings<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless a particular grey area is admitted by Iamblichus in the case of a theurgist ‘commanding’ spiritual entities. For this he offers two justifications. Firstly, he argues that the reasoning power available to the theurgist - by virtue of his own nature - is such that irrational spirits may be commanded as inferior natures. This is reasonable since mature human reason can be more pure and perfect than entities which extend to the whole material order: the former is intellectual, the latter physical. Secondly, theurgical priests, when energised by the divine symbols, are both humanly bound to the nature of the universe but also divine in an ecstatic sense, by virtue of their unity through the divine signs with the more excellent natures of the gods<sup>56</sup>.

The kind of preparation required for mystical ascent through theurgic sacrifices is, according to Iamblichus, quite straightforward in principle<sup>57</sup>. For although those in the world are nurtured and brought to maturity by worldly powers, being unable to pass beyond what is mundane, he appeals to the generally accepted realm of the incorporeal, distributed throughout the corporeal world, and its importance. For when a theurgist is united with a higher divinity - ‘*τις τῶν θεουργικῶν θεῶν ὑπερκοσμίως μετόσχοι*’<sup>58</sup> - he will transcend all that is material in his worship through the supermundane power of the god.

But unlike the wide acceptance of the incorporeal realm to which he appeals, such an occurrence is actually quite rare in Iamblichus’ reckoning, only likely to take place after a long period in the sacerdotal office. It is not therefore fitting that it should be promulgated as a thing common to all, nor even to novices or those of moderate proficiency in theurgic operations. Such people, after all, approach sanctity from a

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<sup>55</sup> *De Myst* 3.18 (46.3-4, p125).

<sup>56</sup> *De Myst* 4.2 (184.7-8, p148).

<sup>57</sup> *De Myst* 5.20 (227.6, p174).

<sup>58</sup> *De Myst* 5.20 (228.2-3, p175).

formative basis that remains partially corporeal, ‘καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι ἀμωσγέπως σωματοειδῆ ποιοῦνται τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν τῆς ὁσιότητος’<sup>59</sup>.

The human race can therefore be classified into three broad categories. The great mass of people, being governed by the laws of nature, is bound to the physical order and employs practical reasoning only on matters relating to nature. A certain few, however, employ a supernatural power of the intellect, ‘ὑπερφυεῖ δὴ τινι δυνάμει τοῦ νοῦ’<sup>60</sup>, and are taken from the realm of the mundane to a separate and pure intellect, ‘πρὸς δὲ τὸν χωριστὸν καὶ ἀμιγῆ νοῦν περιάγονται’<sup>61</sup>, becoming superior to physical powers. Perhaps predictably, the third group lies in the mean position, being swayed by both the natural and to some extent the supernatural pure intellect. Of this intermediate category, some will ascend to liberation from the powers of nature, some will remain bound by mundane things.

Different modes of worship are therefore described by Iamblichus as appropriate to each group, dependent on whether the realm of *νοῦς* or *βίος* has the upper hand. Thus even the great mass, for whom the Plotinian school has little hope or interest, has its own place:

τὴν θρησκείαν ἐπιτηδεύουσι τῇ φύσει πρόσφορον καὶ τοῖς κινουμένοις ὑπὸ τῆς φύσεως σώμασι, τόπους τε καὶ ἀέρας καὶ ὕλην καὶ δυνάμεις τῆς ὕλης, καὶ σώματι καὶ τὰς περὶ τοῖς σώμασιν ἕξεις καὶ ποιότητας, κινήσεις τε τὰς προσηκούσας καὶ μεταβολὰς τῶν ἐν γενέσει, καὶ τᾶλλα τὰ ἐχόμενα τούτων ἐπιτηδεύοντες ἐν τε τοῖς ἄλλοις τῆς εὐσεβείας μορίοις καὶ δὴ καὶ ἐν τῷ θηπολικῷ μέρει. Οἱ δὲ κατὰ νοῦν μόνον καὶ τὴν τοῦ νοῦ ζωὴν τὸν βίον διάγοντες, τῶν δὲ τῆς φύσεως δεσμῶν ἀπολυθέντες, νοερόν καὶ ἀσώματον ἱερατικῆς θεσμὸν διαμελετώσι περὶ πάντα τῆς	these should practice a form of worship adapted to nature, and to the bodies that are moved by nature, and should choose for this purpose appropriate places, air, matter, the powers of matter, bodies, and the habits of bodies, qualities, and proper motions, the mutations of things in generation, and other things connected with these, both in other parts of piety and in that part of it which pertains to sacrifice. But those who live conformably to intellect alone, and to the life of intellect, and are liberated from the bonds of nature, these should exercise in all the parts of theurgy the intellectual and
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<sup>59</sup> *De Myst* 5.20 (228.11-12, p175): ‘for these, in some way or other, attend corporeally to the most holy’.

<sup>60</sup> *De Myst* 5.17 (223.16-17, p172).

<sup>61</sup> *De Myst* 5.17 (223.18-224.1, p172).

Here we see that although Iamblichus reserves the term *θεουργία* to those freed from nature's bonds, an associated pattern of worship and life is open to those bound to the material realm. This underlines the fact that Iamblichus' theurgical *παιδεία*, far from being the preserve only of a spiritual elite, is a religious system incorporating both intelligible and sensible domains and operating in a manner appropriate to the powers that govern the individual's psyche. However, it is important to note that the ideal form of worship does not involve material things at all, being undertaken by the most advanced at a solely intellectual or spiritual level. That this, in particular, is still called 'theurgy' by Iamblichus shows a serious attempt to retain a distance between his conception of deification and the self-moved, theoretical mysticism of the Plotinian school. However, most of those treading the theurgical path would fall in the category he calls *οἱ μέσοι*, and embrace a mixture of the forms of material and spiritual piety. Only some of this group practice this combination as a foundation for ascent to 'things of a more honourable nature'. But whatever is individually appropriate, the ritual basis for life - whether material or intellectual - remains essential: 'ἄνευ γὰρ αὐτῶν οὐκ ἄν ποτε παραγένοντο τὰ ὑπερέχοντα'<sup>63</sup>.

### 3.3.1 *Theurgy and Matter in Proclus*

Since Koch and Stiglmayr's work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has been accepted that Denys was influenced perhaps most directly by the writings of Proclus (c410-485) through whom it would seem the teaching and influence of Iamblichus was systematised and passed on<sup>64</sup>. Indeed, Everett Ferguson echoes the sentiments of Hathaway, Vanneste and Nygren<sup>65</sup> when he writes that 'much of the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite is a putting of Christian dress on the thought of Proclus'<sup>66</sup>. So from the treatment of theurgy in Iamblichus we shall proceed to review the Procline restatement of its part in the cosmic hierarchy and so to a fuller investigation of his treatment of matter. Particular reference will be made to the arguments of *De Malorum*

<sup>62</sup> *De Myst* 5.18 (224.11-225.5, p173) Taylor, T (trans).

<sup>63</sup> *De Myst* 5.18, (225.9-10, p173).

<sup>64</sup> Saffrey (Saffrey H-D, 'New Objective Links Between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus', in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, ed by D O'Meara, 1982, pp64-74) keeps this interest alive through his analysis of the *scholia* of John of Scythopolis.

<sup>65</sup> The views of these writers, who concur in finding nothing of concrete Christian experience in Denys, are outlined in Chapter 2.

<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, E, 'Proclus', in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed by E Ferguson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, 1999, p951.

*Subsistentia*, the work that Denys so readily utilises in *DN* 4.18-33 and which has so firmly secured Proclus as a source for his thought.

Locating the core of the Procline view of theurgy with respect to Iamblichus is not a straightforward matter. Lucas Siorvanes suggests that the placement of theurgy as the final course in Proclus' Academy renders it as the culmination of philosophy, far removed from vulgar magic: 'theurgy is not a short-cut to God (Iamblichus gave the impression that it was open to the uneducated). At the Athenian School, the study of revelatory, sacred writings and induction into theurgy were offered at the very end of the curriculum'<sup>67</sup>.

Iamblichus does indeed associate the materially-bound rituals of the uneducated with his scheme of theurgy, but reserves deification to those who are intellectual and theurgical adepts. Noting Siorvanes' comment might lead us to expect from Proclus a form of theurgic ascent drawn more towards Plotinian *θεωρία*. We have noted already one way in which Proclus reverted to the more Plotinian view of the soul's essence - that only its activities were mortal - against Iamblichus' teaching that its essence also took on the characteristics of mortality from the moment of embodiment. However, some argue that the received view of theurgy as a ritual technique may be due to the way in which Iamblichus' emphasis on divine grace was disregarded, leaving the critical tradition of theurgy open to the re-infestation by magical influences epitomised by *Chaldean Oracles*.

Polymnia Athanassiadi<sup>68</sup> suggests that this is clear in the fact that, although Proclus lavishes praise on his forebear, the ways in which both his methodology and metaphysics deviate from Iamblichus germinates a different kind of theurgy.

Whereas Iamblichus is sarcastic towards those who stick to the letter of the Platonic text, and has recourse to analysis only as a last resort, Proclus is fascinated by the word, opts gladly for the splitting of hairs, and seems to be happy only when he can indulge in an orgy of scholastic analysis. Inevitably then, the way in which Proclus describes the theurgic ascent of the soul sets emphasis on knowledge rather than virtue and on the fragmentation of the cosmos rather than in unity ... Ironically, the theory of divination put forward

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<sup>67</sup> Siorvanes, L, *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science*, Edinburgh, 1996, p192.

<sup>68</sup> Athanassiadi, P, 'Dreams, Theurgy and Freelance Divination: the Testimony of Iamblichus', *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 128-29.

by the influential head of the Athenian School has a lot in common with those ideas of Porphyry which are challenged in the *de Mysteriis*.

This more Porphyrian understanding of theurgy, with an emphasis on complicated hieratic technique, goes hand in hand with the irrationalism of animated statues, rain-making, conjuring and other religious magic, as opposed to mystical union with the divine. We have shown already that such a conception does little justice to Iamblican theurgy, the contrasts of which with respect to Plotinian mysticism are easily overstated. However, Damascius' influential comment on the *Phaedo* has long been interpreted as placing both Iamblichus and Proclus within the magical kind of theurgy: 'οἱ μὲν τὴν φιλοσοφίαν προτιμῶσιν, ὡς Πορφύριος καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ φιλοσόφοι· οἱ δὲ τὴν ἱερατικὴν, ὡς Ἰάμβλιχος καὶ Συριανὸς καὶ Πρόκλος καὶ οἱ ἱερατικοὶ πάντες'<sup>69</sup>. Is the association of Proclus with more magical hieratic practices any more fair?

Theurgy does not play as significant a part in Proclus' corpus as in that of Iamblichus (although only *De Myst* remains intact of his major works). But Anne Sheppard<sup>70</sup> has examined the various accounts of Procline theurgy, including the evidence of Hermias and Marinus, and concludes that he deals with three kinds of theurgical ritual. Firstly there is a purely ritualised form of 'white magic', secondly a ritual which raises the soul to the level of the intellectual principle, and thirdly a solely intellectual activity that brings union between the 'one of the soul' and the First Hypostasis, the One. All three come under the umbrella term of 'theurgy'. Sheppard wonders whether the third form is simply an abuse of the term (even though this epitomises ideal theurgy in Iamblichus). But she argues that this purely intellectual theurgy remains in Proclus' understanding a form of magic as it relies heavily on the sympathetic basis of the cosmos. Its basis of operation is by the same mechanism evident in the sympathy between plant forms like the heliotrope, via the sun, to the god Apollo, and so to the One: a typical chain of affinity. The Procline theurgist, she argues, uses stones, plants, or animals to affect higher entities to which they correspond. He thereby seems to be concerned less in this context with mysticism and virtue than with the detail of traditional ritual. The fragment of Proclus' lost work *On the Hieratic Art* shows this clearly:

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<sup>69</sup> Westerink, L G (ed), *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Oxford, 1977, 2.2 §172, cited in A Sheppard, 'Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy', *Classical Quarterly* 32, (1982), 212.

<sup>70</sup> Sheppard, A, 'Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy', *Classical Quarterly* 32, (1982), 212-24.

Sometimes it happens that just a single herb or stone is sufficient in a ritual operation. So spurge-flax is sufficient for the actual appearance of a God. For an amulet, laurel or a thorn shrub or the squill or coral or diamond or jasper. For knowledge of the future, the heart of the mole, and for purification, sulphur and seawater<sup>71</sup>.

Present also in this text is an underlying theme of the theurgist's personal potency: 'the wise men of old brought together various things down here with their heavenly counterparts, and brought down Divine Powers into this mortal place'<sup>72</sup>. This would seem to represent a theurgical understanding at variance with that of Iamblichus and more in line with that of the Juliani, aligning *θεουργία* again more closely with the objective acts of *γοητεία*. Even when dealing with the mystical and anagogical aspect of theurgic ritual, Proclus ends his discussion in this fragment with jarring phrases.

Longing to go beyond these and similar things [physical objects], they came to know the Daemonic Powers which are essentially linked to the activities of nature and physical bodies, and by this means they drew down these Powers in order to communicate with them. From the Daemonic Powers they moved straight up towards the very Actions of the Gods instructed in some matters by the Gods themselves, but in others moved by their own efforts to an accurate conception of the appropriate symbols<sup>73</sup>.

These chains of reality linking the spiritual realm to that of nature are fundamental both to Procline theurgy and cosmology, encompassing the observational affinities noted by the ancients, as with phototropic plants and the sun. All entities, Proclus argues, are governed by the principle that the higher the cause, the more fundamental and powerful it is, also the more generically simple<sup>74</sup>. This means that the higher causes extend their power further down the cosmic hierarchy than lower causes, even reaching their potency as far down as those entities that have least in common with them, such as those comprised of unstable and passive matter. Thus Unity and Being extend the character even to simple bodies, whereas specific causes like Intellect and Soul irradiate only as far as living creatures. Dodds<sup>75</sup> gives a table of this schema of principles based on Proclus' *Platonic Theology* 3.127-9 that helps to illustrate this.

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<sup>71</sup> Proclus, *Περὶ τῆς ἱερατικῆς τέχνης*, in *On the Mysteries*, trans by S Ronan, pp148-49, Greek text from *catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques Grecs VI*, ed by J Bidez, Brussels, 1928, 139-51.

<sup>72</sup> Ronan, *On the Mysteries*, p148.

<sup>73</sup> Ronan, *On the Mysteries*, p149.

<sup>74</sup> Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, props 57, 70-72.

<sup>75</sup> Dodds, in Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, p232.

τὸ ἔν	<i>causes:</i>	uncaused
	<i>properties:</i>	maximal unity
τὸ ὄν	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, maximal being
ζωή	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, being, maximal life
νοῦς	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν, ζωή
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, being, life, maximal intelligence
ψυχή	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν, ζωή, νοῦς
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, being, life, intelligence, discursive reason
ζῶα	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν, ζωή, νοῦς
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, being, life, minimal intelligence
φυτά	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν, ζωή
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, being, minimal life
νεκρά σώματα (τὸ ἄψυχον)	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν, τὸ ὄν
	<i>properties:</i>	unity, minimal being
ύλη	<i>causes:</i>	τὸ ἔν
	<i>properties:</i>	minimal unity

*Table 1: Schema of Being according to Proclus*

In the realm of theurgical affinities, these principles suggest a metaphysical explanation for physical properties and, in offering a rationale for affinities between higher and lower entities, secure a paradoxical vein in the chain of being. There is a shared simplicity of causes which represents a meeting of extremes, a characteristic noted by Plotinus<sup>76</sup>. It seems, however, that only Proclus produces a theoretical explanation for the descent from the simplicity of the One to complexity, then back to simplicity again with Matter.

Dodds suggests that implication of a more direct connection of φυτά and νεκρά σώματα with higher causes is important in theurgic magic, and Wallis<sup>77</sup> - noting Dodds' comment - reiterates the religious significance of the paradox. Since matter is produced directly from the One, whereas Soul is separated by several intervening terms,

<sup>76</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.13.

<sup>77</sup> Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp156-57.

he writes, ‘it would seem obviously easier to contact the divine power in material objects’, although he admits the lack of a substantiating text. Against this, Siorvanes contends that the argument of special theurgical significance in material bodies, due to the affinity with the simplicity of the One, is a ‘fundamental misunderstanding of Proclus’ metaphysics of participation and causation, and the aim of theurgy’. Proclus is acutely sensitive, he claims, to the metaphysical chain of being and carefully warns against letting the rational faculty fall into the void of non-being through attachment to something of too lowly an order. ‘If theurgists attempted to reach divinity through material objects, their soul would descend to darkness, the underworld Tartarus of unruly matter’<sup>78</sup>.

Of far greater importance, he suggests, is the difference between independent, self-substantiating entities and their dependent, participated counterparts. The former principles (the upper portion of the table above) have their properties in actuality while the latter bear only irradiations or shadowy images of their properties. Any form of ascent for the human soul would necessarily entail attention to the higher, self-substantiating genera.

Siorvanes’ reminder of fundamental Platonic assumptions does not, however, dislodge the impression that matter plays an important symbolic role in ritual. While it is not of itself the source of the energy for ascent, it contains a ‘spark of divine goodness’<sup>79</sup> that renders it useful, as we can see in the fragments directly concerned with theurgy. There seem to be, in fact, two aspects to Proclus’ attitude to matter. The first may be represented by his predilection for the details of the occult craft, where we see particular physical properties being of great concern, whereas the second view emphasises the lowly status of entities far removed from the self-substantiating genera.

This second view predominates in his philosophical works, as in *The Elements of Theology*, which states that ‘the less perfect members of the lower order, which are many degrees removed from their proper originative principle, are incapable of enjoying such participation’<sup>80</sup>. Similarly his commentary on the *Parmenides* questions the viability of searching for absolutes in those things where form and limit are fading

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<sup>78</sup> Siorvanes, *Proclus*, p187.

<sup>79</sup> Siorvanes, *Proclus*, p188.

<sup>80</sup> Proclus, *Elements*, prop 110.

out. ‘For how could we attain to form and limit and bound through things boundless and formless? ... For these are the characteristics of all generation, incompleteness in oneself, divisibility, temporality, from all of which the Forms are free’<sup>81</sup>.

### 3.3.2 *Matter and Evil in Proclus*

We noted above that Plotinus cites the *Timaeus*, with its positive view of created order, more than any other Platonic work. He can also assert the goodness of matter (*Enneads* 1.8, 2.4, 2.9.3-4) but his tendency to locate the cause or result of evil within the material realm is also marked, as in *Enneads* 1.8.4.

The bodily Kind, in that it partakes of Matter, is an evil thing. What form is in bodies is an untrue form: they are without life: by their own natural disorderly movement they make away with each other; they are hindrances to the Soul in its proper Act; in their ceaseless flux they are always slipping away from Being.

Proclus, however, by applying his views about the place of matter in the metaphysical hierarchy, and carrying long-held views like those of the *Timaeus* through to their conclusion, is led to assert the value and goodness of both stable matter as a cosmic substratum created by the One, and also unstable, ‘gross’ matter found in the mundane world.

If bodies are made of limit and unlimited ... it is evident that matter is an unlimited and form a limit. If, therefore, as we have already said, God substantiates every unlimited, It also substantiates matter, which is the last unlimited. And that is the First and Ineffable Cause of Matter; and because everywhere the sensible exist by analogy to the intelligible causes ... likewise, the unlimited which is down-here [gross matter] derives from the Prime Unlimited ... . For it has been shown elsewhere that the Prime unlimited, which is prior to the mixed existence (Being), is established at the summit of the intelligibles and from there it extends its irradiation as far as to the last of things, so, according to it, Matter proceeds from the One and the Unlimited which is prior to Being ... For this reason, matter is to a degree good and infinite, as well as that which is most obscure and formless.<sup>82</sup>

Plotinus’ material suspicions are clearly not supported within Proclus’ metaphysics: the refutation of matter as the cause of the soul’s evil is one of the main objectives of *De*

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<sup>81</sup> Proclus, *In Parmenidem* 889.10-15, trans G R Morrow & J M Dillon, Princeton, 1987, p250.

<sup>82</sup> Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, ed by E Diehl, Amsterdam, 1965, trans by T Taylor, cited in Siorvanes, *Proclus*, p188.

*Malorum Subsistentia*<sup>83</sup>. Beginning with the assumption that matter is a subject without quality or form, Proclus argues that it cannot result in evil: ‘συμβεβηκέναι μὲν γὰρ αὐτῇ τὸ κακὸν οὐδαμῶς δυνατόν, ὅτι καθ’ ἑαυτὴν ἄποιός ἐστι καὶ ἀνείδεος καὶ ὑποκείμενον, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ, καὶ ἀπλοῦν, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἄλλο ἐν ἄλλο’<sup>84</sup>. So if, as some say, matter really is evil, it must logically be the source of evil, wholly evil, τὸ πρῶτως κακὸν, and that which is odious to the gods. Then it can subsist in something else, as well as its existence as primary evil, so having a two-fold nature mirroring the two-fold nature of the good. In this way matter would be the last of all things just as good is the first: nothing can be better than good, nothing worse than matter.

Proclus then argues that we have a situation either where two opposing causes or principles exist, good and evil, or that evil must somehow be caused by good. The former position is untenable as it contradicts the notion of a supreme monad: one or the other must be prior. However, the latter is also rejected by Proclus since the notion of the ultimate good generating its opposite would seem to deny the transcendent cause possession of its own nature. A riot of meanings ensues as the generated entity, through participation in its cause, would have its opposite form: ‘τὸ μὲν ἀγαθὸν ἔσται κακὸν ὡς τοῦ κακοῦ αἴτιον, τὸ δὲ κακὸν ἀγαθὸν ὡς ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρηγμένον’<sup>85</sup>. By reflecting on the status of matter as a cosmic necessity, that evil is a privation of existence whereas matter is the nurse and mother of generation (a regular theme in *Timaeus*), Proclus infers that the equation of matter and evil is without foundation. ‘εἰ δὲ ... καὶ κίσκει τὴν γένεσιν, καὶ – <ὡς φησιν αὐτός> – τρέφει, κακὸν δὲ οὐδὲν παρ’ αὐτῆς μητρὸς οὔσης τοῖς ἐξ αὐτῆς, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννωμένοις’<sup>86</sup>.

Proclus then tries again to locate the source of evil. Does it still somehow lie in the embodied state? Beyond denying the equation of matter and evil, he infers that the existence of debility and evil in souls occurs prior to embodiment, implying that matter and body cannot be the cause. He bases this assertion on the allegory of the charioteer and his horses in *Phaedrus*<sup>87</sup>, where many of the celestial souls following the procession of the gods are prevented from the beatific vision of reality through

<sup>83</sup> Proclus, *De Malorum Subsistentia*, in *Tria Opuscula*, ed by H Boese, Berlin, 1960, 30-37.

<sup>84</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 30.3-6.

<sup>85</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 31.16-18.

<sup>86</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 32.20-22.

<sup>87</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 248A, trans by W Hamilton, London, 1973, p53.

weakness. So too the unruly behaviour of the horses of these chariots has a tendency downwards in the scale of being, which represents a celestial soul falling to earth prior to embodiment<sup>88</sup>. The soul would not, Proclus concludes, depart from the vision of perfect reality unless already debilitated. Similarly matter, lacking the power to effect such a cause, cannot draw intelligible souls to itself, which suggests both that souls themselves generate the impulse away from the source of being and that the body is not the source of the embodied soul's evil. 'παντὶ γὰρ ἢ φυγὴ τοῦ κρείττονος κακόν, καὶ πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἢ πρὸς τὸ χεῖρον· καὶ δι' ἀσθένειαν πάσχουσιν ἃ πάσχειν τὰς τοιαύτας δεῖ κακῶς ἐλομένας. εἰ δὲ παρὰ τῆς ὕλης ἄγονται, ποῦ τὸ αὐτοκίνητόν ἐστι καὶ αἱ τῆς ψυχῆς αἰρέσεις;'<sup>89</sup>.

The cosmic necessity of matter is the theme to which Proclus then returns to conclude his discussion of evil and matter, presenting necessity as a third entity together with good and evil: 'ἄλλη μὲν ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ φύσις, ἄλλη δὲ ἢ τοῦ κακοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα μὲν ἀλλήλοις ἐναντία· τρίτη δὲ ἄλλη, μήτε ἀγαθὸν ἀπλῶς οὔσα, μήτε κακόν, ἀλλ' ἀναγκαῖον'<sup>90</sup>. And that which is necessary is defined as all that is for the sake of good, so that whatever is generated exists on account of it. Then we have a situation where a kind of evil exists for the sake of generation. In fact, as far as it is necessary for generation to take place, this evil is actually good and must not be called real evil, being divinely produced: 'γεγονέναι θεόθεν ὡς ἀναγκαῖον καὶ εἶναι τοῖς ἐφ' ἑαυτῶν ἰδρῦσθαι μὴ δυναμένοις εἶδεσιν ἀναγκαῖον'<sup>91</sup>.

Proclus is clearly associating matter with this ambiguously natured state when, at the culmination of this part of *De Mal Subs*, he ponders the ultimate purpose of the existence of a mixed substance that is neither good nor evil. This question, of why the cause of all good should give existence to a nature which is not simply good-in-itself, is in Proclus' estimation what lies at the heart of the whole problem of ambiguity experienced in material existence and τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. For without the fabrication of a sensible domain no nature would exist capable of the desire to participate in the essence

<sup>88</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 33.7-11: 'Exorbitat enim malitie equus participans, ad terram repensque et gravans, materia non ente. Quando enim in terram ceciderit, tunc et materie communicatio et que hic tenebra; ibi autem et ante hec debilitas et oblivio et malum'. ('For the horse which participates of depravity, becomes heavy and verges to the earth. For when the soul has fallen to the earth, she then is connected with matter, and is involved in the darkness of the terrestrial realms. But prior to her lapse, she experienced debility, oblivion and evil'. (Taylor, T (trans); some of the text is extant only in medieval Latin).

<sup>89</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 33.21-3.

<sup>90</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 36.13-15.

<sup>91</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 36.21-2.

of the source of the good. So we have on one hand that which is primarily desirable and on the other that which desires, a dyad the existence of which is a necessary element of reality, permitting a nature alien to and distant from the primary good in order that from outside, as it were, an entity might desire communion with the source of its own existence. ‘ἄλλο γοῦν τὸ πρῶτως ἐφετόν, ἄλλο τὸ ἐφιέμενον ἐκείνου καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἔχον· ἄλλο τὸ μεταξὺ πάν, ὃ τοῖς μὲν ἐφετόν ἐστί, τῶν δὲ ἐφίεται, δηλαδὴ τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ καὶ ὧν ἕνεκά ἐστί’<sup>92</sup>.

Here we see the same pattern of the procession and return of love or desire that was noted in Iamblichus’ doctrine of the fully descended soul, the radical separation of which from the divine holds the key to the ritual unifying of the cosmos in theurgy. Both suggest a profound mystical purpose for the material world. For Iamblichus the procession of *φιλία* into the sensible realm unifies the cosmos, enabling the demiurgic desire to return to its immortal cause via the receptivity of human nature. With Proclus the same essential circulation of desire is expressed as contingent on the existence of the generated material realm, with its ambiguous goodness suggesting a kind of *felix culpa*. Both replace the accidental or punitive understanding of the material cosmos with that of necessity. Implicitly they also agree that embodiment is not the source of the human soul’s suffering but rather a divinely sanctioned state and somehow a necessary element of reality.

So Proclus, despite clear convictions about the low status of matter, almost repeats the metaphysical explanation for the material universe that we found in Iamblichus, including the assertion that embodiment and the body are not the cause of the soul’s evil. He closely parallels the assertion of Iamblichus that the human soul’s actual *οὐσία* suffers mortality, that it is itself a mortal-immortal hybrid, while avoiding his language of essence and energy. Like the arguments for theurgic ritual of Iamblichus, Proclus’ specific clarifications of the ambivalences within the sense-world problem not only avert the difficulties of Gnostic dualism, but provide a potential resource for Neoplatonists who claim a different theological tradition, perhaps pre-eminently Denys.

Therefore, after briefly reviewing the relationship between Proclus and Denys on the issue of matter and evil, we shall proceed to examine the way in which Denys uses

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<sup>92</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 36.29-32.

material language more generally. This should yield a preliminary indication of the extent to which he carries over Neoplatonist assumptions, whether or not he reworked them, and the areas upon which they impact most in his treatment of the Church's life.

### 3.4 *Denys' Treatment of Matter*

Proclus begins *De Mal Subs* with the definition of evil as an absence of good<sup>93</sup>, a perversion of the universal aspiration towards the good, subsisting in a 'parhypostatic' state with neither absolute principle nor divine paradigm. As implied in the arguments concerning matter, evil only occurs at lower metaphysical levels<sup>94</sup> (but not just in the material realm), can never occur unmixed and will always be turned by providence into good. This subordinate basis for dealing with the occurrence of evil is also evident at the heart of Denys' treatment of the Eucharist, occurring in the anaphoral material of *EH 3* where the Fall is described as the perverse rebellion of humanity against all that is truly good, 'pitiably turning to mortality'<sup>95</sup>. *DN 4.18-33*, however, repeats many of the central arguments of *De Mal Subs*, a relationship upon which the theory of dependence first argued by Koch and Stiglmayr<sup>96</sup> rests.

Even if we set aside the shared metaphysical aim of asserting the subordinate status of evil, the parallels between these two texts are so numerous that the theory of close dependence still raises no objections. Verbatim phrases, occasional neologisms in *CD* drawn from *De Mal Subs*, and the common analogies used all indicate this kind of relationship. A single example of each is given below.

Proclus, *De Mal Subs*

Denys, *DN 4*

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<sup>93</sup> *De Mal Subs*, 2.1-4.

<sup>94</sup> *De Mal Subs* 50-4 *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> Denys, *EH 3.3.11* (trans by C Luibheid).

<sup>96</sup>Koch, H, 'Der pseudo-epigraphische Character der dionysischen Schriften', *Theologische quartalschrift* 77 (1895); Stiglmayr, J, 'Der Neuplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagiten in der Lehre vom Übel', *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895).

<p>πάν οὖν κατὰ φύσιν ὄν καὶ αἰεὶ ὄν ἐξ αἰτίας ὠρισμένης γεννᾶται, τὸ δὲ κακὸν οὐ κατὰ φύσιν ... (44.11-12)</p>	<p>Πάν τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ἐξ αἰτίας ὠρισμένης γεννᾶται. Εἰ τὸ κακὸν ἀναίτιον καὶ ἀόριστον, οὐ κατὰ φύσιν ... (CD 1, 175.16-17)</p>
<p>... ἐφεξῆς ἡμῖν ῥητέον τὴν λεγομένην παρυπόστασιν ἐνταῦθα τιθεμένοις· (50.2)</p>	<p>Διὸ οὔτε ὑπόστασιν ἔχει τὸ κακόν, ἀλλὰ παρυπόστασιν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἕνεκα καὶ οὐχ ἑαυτοῦ γινόμενον. (CD 1, 176.16-177.1)<sup>97</sup></p>
<p>ἀλλ' οὔτε πυρὸς φασι τὸ ψύχειν, οὔτε ἀγαθοῦ τὸ κακὸν ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ παράγειν. (41.7-8)</p>	<p>Τὸ κακὸν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ, καὶ εἰ ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ ἔστιν, οὐ κακόν, οὐδὲ γὰρ πυρὸς τὸ ψύχειν οὔτε ἀγαθοῦ τὸ μὴ ἀγαθὰ παράγειν. (CD 1, 163.9-11)</p>

Given the theoretical agreement between Proclus and Denys on the nature of evil and its relationship with matter, it is interesting to note the character of Denys' actual usage of material language<sup>98</sup>. Of the two basic substantives, *ύλη* is used rather less than *σῶμα*. Of those contexts showing these terms in a clearly positive or negative light, *ύλη* carries the more negative connotations of the two, alluding most frequently to the lowly place of matter in the metaphysical scheme. Typically at *DN* 4.1 (CD 1, 144.8) Denys asserts the freedom of celestial beings from corporeality<sup>99</sup>. But a notable exception to this pattern lies in *DN* 4.28 (CD 1, 174.4-175.4), the passage refuting the link between matter and evil, where arguments from *De Mal Subs* are presented. This comprises a three-fold defence of the status of *ύλη* against the ambivalence of Plotinus, including a return to Plato himself<sup>100</sup>.

Ἄλλ' οὐδὲ τὸ πολυθρύλητον· Ἐν ὑλῇ τὸ κακόν, ὡς φασι, καθ' ὃ ὑλῇ. Καὶ γὰρ καὶ αὕτη κόσμου καὶ κάλλους καὶ εἴδους ἔχει μετουσίαν.

Ἄλλως τε πῶς ἢ ὑλῇ κακόν; Εἰ μὲν γὰρ οὐδαμῆ οὐδαμῶς ἔστιν, οὔτε ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακόν. Εἰ δὲ πῶς ὄν, τὰ δὲ ὄντα πάντα ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ, καὶ αὕτη ἐκ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἂν εἶη ...

Εἰ δὲ ἀναγκαῖόν φασι τὴν ὑλὴν πρὸς συμπλήρωσιν τοῦ παντὸς κόσμου, πῶς ἢ ὑλῇ κακόν;

<sup>97</sup> The subordinate existence of evil as 'parhypostatic' is a Christian neologism with Denys according to Lampe (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed by G W H Lampe, Oxford, 1961).

<sup>98</sup> Appendix A tabulates instances of the main verbal forms in *CD*.

<sup>99</sup> Other examples are at *DN* 4.28 (CD 175.1-4: instability of matter), *CH* 2.2 (CD 11.4: materiality is dishonourable to the heavens), and two in *CH* 2.4 (CD 14.21: those lacking reason are bound by appetites for material things; CD 15.2: materiality and matter are 'far beneath' immaterial entities).

<sup>100</sup> Denys, *CD* 174.4-5, 8-10, 14-15: the first is objecting to *Enneads* 1.8.3sq, the third echoes *Timaeus* 49Asq, 50Dsqq and 52dsqq via *De Mal Subs* 32.1-4.

Another negative occurrence of *ύλη* concerns the correlation of moral failings with material attachment at *CH* 2.4 (*CD* 14.21) where *σωματικός* is also found; this is one of four passages where this issue is raised, of the others *ύλικός* is used twice in *DN* 8.8 (*CD* 1, 205.9,13: attachment to material things is not a sign of true piety), and both *ύλικός* and *σῶμα* appear in *Epistle 10* (respectively *CD* 1, 208.14: union with God is characterised by abandoning passion for material things; and 209.6: bodily sufferings are disparaged). *Ep 10* purports to be written to St John the Theologian in exile on Patmos and so Denys takes care not to imply that St John is not actually troubled by bodily suffering since to do so would imply material attachment and moral failing.

As we have already noted, *ύλη* is used by Denys in affirming the place of matter in the divine economy using the linguistic currency of Proclus. But he is also able to rework the concept of matter as a cosmic necessity in terms of the efficacy of the ‘sacred veils’ of scripture and liturgy. An interesting passage in *CH* 1.3 does just this, using Neoplatonist concepts as a foundation for his description of the Church’s ministry in Scripture, rites, discipleship, hierarchy and Eucharistic participation in Christ.

Διὸ καὶ τὴν ὀσιωτάτην ἡμῶν  
 ἱεραρχίαν ἢ τελετάρχισ ἱεροθεσία  
 τῆς τῶν οὐρανίων ἱεραρχιῶν  
 ὑπερκοσμίου μιμήσεως ἀξιῶσασα  
 καὶ τὰς εἰρημένας ἀύλους  
 ἱεραρχίας ὑλαίοις σχήμασι καὶ  
 μορφωτικαῖς συνθέσεσι  
 διαποικίλασα παραδέδωκεν, ὅπως  
 ἀναλόγως ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν  
 ἱερωτάτων πλάσεων ἐπὶ τὰς  
 ἀπλᾶς καὶ ἀτυπώτους ἀναχθῶμεν  
 ἀναγωγὰς καὶ ἀφομοιώσεις, ἐπεὶ  
 μηδὲ δυνατόν ἐστι τῷ καθ’ ἡμᾶς  
 νοῖ πρὸς τὴν αὐλον ἐκείνην  
 ἀναταθῆναι τῶν οὐρανίων  
 ἱεραρχιῶν μίμησίν τε καὶ θεωρίαν,  
 εἰ μὴ τῇ κατ’ αὐτὸν ὑλαίᾳ  
 χειραγωγίᾳ χρήσαιτο τὰ μὲν  
 φαινόμενα κάλλη τῆς ἀφανοῦς  
 εὐπρεπείας ἀπεικονίσματα  
 λογιζόμενος καὶ τὰς αἰσθητὰς  
 εὐωδίας ἐκτυπώματα τῆς νοητῆς  
 διαδόσεως καὶ τῆς αὐλου

All of this accounts for the fact that the sacred institution and source of perfection established our most pious hierarchy. He modelled it on the hierarchies of heaven, and clothed these immaterial hierarchies in numerous material figures and forms so that, in a way appropriate to our nature, we might be uplifted from these most venerable images to interpretations and assimilations which are simple and inexpressible. For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odours which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights

<p>φωτοδοσίας εἰκόνα τὰ ὑλικά  φῶτα καὶ τῆς κατὰ νοῦν  θεωρητικῆς ἀποπληρώσεως τὰς  διεξοδικὰς ἱερὰς μαθητείας καὶ  τῆς ἑναρμονίου πρὸς τὰ θεῖα καὶ  τεταγμένης ἕξεως τὰς τῶν ἐνθάδε  διακοσμήσεων τάξεις καὶ τῆς  Ἰησοῦ μετουσίας τὴν τῆς  θειοτάτης εὐχαριστίας μετάληψιν  ...<sup>101</sup></p>	<p>are images of the outpouring of an  immaterial gift of light. The  thoroughness of sacred discipleship  indicates the immense contemplative  capacity of the mind. Order and rank  here below are a sign of the  harmonious ordering toward the divine  realm. The reception of the most divine  Eucharist is a symbol of participation  in Jesus.</p>
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The other four passages where the place of matter in the divine economy is affirmed all concern the Incarnation. *DN* 2.9 uses *σωματικός* in asserting that not even the first rank of angels understand the ‘most evident idea in theology’, the Incarnation (*CD* 1, 133.5-12); *DN* 3.2 uses *σῶμα* in referring to the *Theotokos* at the Dormition as ‘that mortal body, that source of life which bore God’ (*CD* 1, 141.4-14); *Epistle 4* affirms that God in Christ had human nature, citing as evidence the virgin birth and the miracle of water holding the weight of his corporeal feet (*CD* 2, 160.12-161.2); and *Epistle 9*, referring perhaps to the kind of anthropomorphic symbolism suggested by Psalm 2.7, cites the ‘womb of God’ as a typical example using *σωματικός* (*CD* 2, 194.8-9).

A tendency for *σῶμα* in particular to imply something positive, however, becomes clear and pronounced when considering the remaining instances of material terms. Several passages appear to be concerned with warding off a dualist conception of human nature by asserting the presence of God in perceptible bodies, all of which are in *DN*. In 1.6 Denys asserts the omnipresence of God in the human faculties of mind, soul and body (*CD* 1, 119.6); 4.4 argues that divine light reaches all things, nourishing and purifying perceptible bodies (*CD* 1, 148.3); 4.7 affirms that the human faculties - including corporeality - are all caused and maintained by the One (*CD* 1, 153.1); 4.27 contends that bodies cannot be the source of evil since minds and souls can be evil too (*CD* 1, 173.17-174.3); 4.32 states that the source of evil in bodies is the disruption of natural order (*CD* 1, 178.2); and 8.5 maintains that the power of the Good reinforces the bond of body and soul (*CD* 1, 202.19). All six of these passages contain as a key the substantive *σῶμα*.

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<sup>101</sup> *CD* 8.14-9.6, trans by C Luibheid.

The same situation exists in the instances of *σῶμα* in *EH*. Offering a counterpart to the affirmation of the material aspect of nature, these all deal with a defence of materiality in the liturgical rites of the Church. *EH* 2.3.1 contains a defence of material symbolism in baptism against the charge of profanity (*CD* 2, 73.11-74.1 includes *σωματικός* as well as *σῶμα*); 3.3.12 describes the moral-ascetic response to participation in the *synaxis* as a clinging to Christ as members of one body, imitating the sinless divine life in the flesh (*CD* 2, 93.3); and nine positive instances of *σῶμα* occur in the chapter on the funeral rite (*CD* 2, 121.2,14; 123.14,15; and five in 129.23-130.5) which argue that the entire person is made holy, that the bodies ‘yoked to sacred souls’ deserve the same reward, being members of Christ, and so are accorded honour in burial.

### 3.5 *Conclusions*

Reviewing the assertions made by Iamblichus yields a cluster of issues over which theurgy stands guard. A general historical and cultural aim of his output seems to be continuity with the great philosophers, to whose influence he appeals, and so a restoration of traditional Platonic *παιδεία*. His witness to theurgical efficacy takes the transcendence of the gods very seriously, and claims to be demonstrating and setting forth its presence in the midst of the mundane world. The effect of this transcendent power on the human is soteriological, conceived as an ascent from mundane nature through ritual. As such he insists that the fruit of Hellenistic learning is not just a logical system, but a way of life that leads potentially to ineffable union with the divine. But by contrast with Plotinian mysticism, this is achieved through divine rather than human energy, an issue upon which Iamblichus is quite emphatic. So that although a disciplined way of life is to be prized, the actual requirement is a soul trained to receive divine benevolence. A further contrast with Plotinus is shown in Iamblichus’ broadening of the appeal of mystical ascent beyond the rarefied intellectual elite. Theurgy is instead a comprehensive religious system for all kinds of people.

Too much, however, can be read into the differences between Iamblichus and Plotinus beyond the conviction of the full descent of the soul and its consequences. We note that only some of *οἱ μέσοι* will ascend to a mature spiritual competence. These, together with the elite who have already broken free from nature’s bonds, will not be concerned with the use of material things but will use purely ‘asomatic’, intellectual ritual in their theurgic ascent. Beyond the source of divine energy for this ascent being ‘other’,

located outside the human person and nature, it is not all that clear how this differs from traditional *θεωρία*.

Andrew Smith is persuasive when arguing that the apparent divergence between Plotinus and Iamblichus is semantic rather than substantive<sup>102</sup>. In a similar vein Clemens Zintzen suggests that Iamblichus' whole contribution flows from changing Plotinus' emphasis on the soul's 'noetic impulse' into the divine gift of 'theurgic grace'<sup>103</sup>. We agree with this, but would argue that the effect is manifestly more substantive than semantic.

Without further biographical material on 'the divine Iamblichus' we shall probably never know whether the primary stimulus of this critique of ritual and the rapprochement of *θεουργία* and *θεωρία* came from harmonising Aristotle's entelechy with Plato, or whether it was religious experience that led him to reconfigure Neoplatonist psychology. Perhaps Iamblichus himself would not find such a question constructive. Nevertheless, the significance of his articulation of the hybrid human mediation between material and spiritual domains is cosmic, as Shaw states.

Thus, theurgy saved the soul *and* the cosmos, for without [embodiment] Eros would never arise as the 'firstborn god,' and the cosmos would never come to exist. For a theurgist, his experience in a corporeal form was the linchpin of the cosmos: embodiment was a creative and sacramental act.<sup>104</sup>

By defending the traditional pagan rites in this way and drawing their practitioners and supporters under his aegis, he effectively mediates between the philosophical coherence of the academy and the still lively and popular piety of the cults, to the benefit of both. In this light it might be fitting to modify Dodds' digest of *De Myst* as a 'manifesto of the irrational'<sup>105</sup> to take into account the impressive cluster of philosophical and religious convictions articulated by Iamblichus as 'theurgy'. These suggest that far from it being a sorcerer's technique, it is indeed a term unlocking important pathways in the search for the divine within the sensible world, routes that were threatened by

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<sup>102</sup> Smith, A, *Porphry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition: A Study of Post-Plotinian Neoplatonism*, The Hague, 1974, pp86-9.

<sup>103</sup> Zintzen, C, 'Bemerkungen zum Aufstiegsweg der Seele in Jamblichs De Mysteriis', *Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, ed by H D Blume & F Mann, Münster, 1983, p319.

<sup>104</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, pp124-25.

<sup>105</sup> Dodds, E R, 'Theurgy and its relationship to Neoplatonism', *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947), 55-69.

Porphry's attacks on the proof of miracles, aimed at Christians. A recent edition of *De Myst* does just this, calling it 'a manifesto of the miraculous'<sup>106</sup>.

Rowan Williams<sup>107</sup> suggests that Iamblichus' teacher, Anatolius, was the same Alexandrian Anatolius who ended his days as Bishop of Laodicea<sup>108</sup>, so that we have - perhaps surprisingly - one of the more famous pagan philosophers being taught by a learned Christian. But then we cannot avoid noticing the thematic affinities present between Iamblichus and Christian theology. Parallels exist between his doctrine of the fully descended soul and the Fall, theurgy and grace, on the importance of prayer, and ritual efficacy. There is also, worthy of further research, an Orthodox doctrinal tradition of the divine λόγοι within creation stemming from Maximus the Confessor<sup>109</sup>. Sometimes the similarity of these themes has been overlooked or misunderstood. In his classic primer on Neoplatonism, R T Wallis has influenced many in asserting that Denys' 'sacramentalism tended to lose its supernatural element and become hard to distinguish from pagan theurgy'<sup>110</sup>, a view which we argue from Iamblichus alone is seriously flawed.

Iamblichus' surviving texts approach ritual from a mainly psychological and cosmological perspective rather than that of Proclus' hieratic technique based on cosmic structure. It is hard not to conclude that the latter's contrasting emphasis on a more mechanistic process of access to the divine, rather than on involvement in the divine work of cosmic unification after prayerful preparation, sets him apart from his predecessor. Objectifying physical properties of plants and animal into chains of affinity, connecting the material order with the gods, is quite different from anything extant of Iamblichus, for whom cultic ritual when properly - theurgically - exercised points to the beneficent activity of divine transcendence<sup>111</sup>. For all Proclus' importance in developing the notion of divine providence, ἔρως προνοητικός<sup>112</sup>, Iamblichus'

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<sup>106</sup> Clarke, E C, *Iamblichus' De Mysteriis*, Brookfield (Vermont), 2001.

<sup>107</sup> Williams, R, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, 2001, p31; similarly G Clark, intro to *Iamblichus: On the Pythagorean Life*, Liverpool, 1989, px.

<sup>108</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea extols his virtues, especially his learning in Greek philosophy and science, in *Ecclesiastical History* 7.32.

<sup>109</sup> Meyendorff, J, *Byzantine Theology*, New York, 1979, p132.

<sup>110</sup> Wallis, R T, *Neoplatonism*, p161.

<sup>111</sup> *De Myst* 3.11 discusses three cultic situations involving women, but emphasises that the multitude of sacrifices, ceremonial detail, fasting and washing, all show that the god is entreated by prayer to approach. Also the inspiration of the prophetess shows that a more ancient god is present, who transcends the locality and is the cause of the place, the country and the whole divination.

<sup>112</sup> Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p154, notes Proclus' *In Alcibiades* 54-56.

emphasis on theurgical grace has apparently retreated to be replaced to some extent by the theurgists' own intellectual effort.

A smaller fragment of Proclus, dealing with the signs of divine possession is preserved in Psellus' *Accusation against Michael Cerularius before the Synod*<sup>113</sup>, provides a similar picture of theurgy. The discussion moves from the proper places, gestures and other conditions for invocation of the divine, to the effects on inanimate objects and animate beings. The oracular inspiration of statues is the first example given and the fragment concludes with the warning that 'the manifestations of the Gods are often accompanied by material spirits which arrive and move with a certain degree of violence, and which the weaker mediums cannot withstand'.

Sheppard does not try to coordinate her discussion of Procline theurgy with that of Iamblichus, but her conclusion - that even with the highest form of theurgy Proclus still deals with magical manipulations of cosmic structure - seems well founded. Given that Iamblichus insists against Porphyry that real theurgy concerns gracious mystical ascent, rather than techniques for metaphysical control, Athanassiadi would seem to be justified in associating Proclus more with what Porphyry criticises than with what Iamblichus practised. A rather split attitude is evident in Proclus' writing with, on one hand, the complex and subtle scholastic systems of *The Elements of Theology* and, on the other, his cultic interest in hieratic details, his hymns and the witness of Marinus. One might concern an austere taxonomy of being for the philosopher, but the other can provide a shopping list of ingredients for sorcery. It is therefore unfortunate that the use of the word 'theurgy' by his successors in a more Chaldean sense has drawn Iamblichus' philosophical reputation in the direction of *γοητεία*.

Research into the influences that enabled the resurgence of magical theurgy despite Iamblichus is not our present concern, but it might include the increased influence of *Chaldean Oracles*. We might, however, hold suspicions over the extent to which Proclus integrated his cultic piety<sup>114</sup> with his metaphysics. The Procline appraisal of the material realm is, nevertheless, a theme worthy of interest for - as we have noted -

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<sup>113</sup> *On the Mysteries*, trans by S Ronan, p150, Greek text from É Des Places, (trans & ed), *Oracles Chaldaïques*, Paris, 1971, pp219.14-220.31.

<sup>114</sup> Marinus, *Vita Procli* 19, in *Neoplatonic Saints*, trans M Edwards, Liverpool, 2000, pp86-88.

among his works is the most detailed monograph on the nature of matter from any Neoplatonist writer.

By contrast to the tendency of Procline theurgy, the attraction to Denys of theurgical language may not be unrelated to the strong vein of supernatural, transcendent efficacy that we find in Iamblichus under the same label of theurgy. For rather than in the Chaldean notion, the source of energy in Iamblichian soteriology has been removed from the human ritual operative and placed firmly with the divine. This stance is supported further by Iamblichus' emphasis on the need for prayerful preparation, castigating those who try to possess the divine. The result is that although theurgical language might retain a pagan aura, Iamblichus presents a respectable philosophical and theological account of theurgy to the extent that a distinction from Christian sacramentalism can be difficult to make. We may even go so far as suggesting that his articulation of the imperative of theurgical grace and the use ritual symbols provides a convenient shape for a protocol of sacramental and iconic efficacy, steering between superstitious idolatry and the merely symbolic. Not all his pagan successors, however, may have shared this concern.

From our observations of Denys' works, he appears to have a conception of matter as a morally neutral substance, being placed in the metaphysical order according to the late Athenian scheme associated with Proclus. This position asserts, against a more dualist understanding, that the divine is implicitly present in matter as its cause. Evil arises in the material domain only through the dislocation of matter in the cosmic hierarchy, which entails an affront to natural order. The sense of divine ascent that is envisaged by Denys is also consistent with that of Proclus, tending to be a movement of the soul upwards through sensible symbols, to spiritual or intellectual contemplation. Attachment to the senses and passion for material things is easily contrasted with true piety and divine union by both.

Similarly, from the shared basis of the neutrality of matter Denys follows Proclus in defending the potential of its goodness, indeed, its cosmic necessity, which he clearly asserts in the context of the essential material symbols of the Church's liturgy. This is also clear concerning the human body which, Denys argues, is wholly created and sustained by God. The bond between soul and body is described in Platonist fashion as a 'yoke' but one that is strengthened by the power of the good, bringing about the

sanctification of the body. Thus in the funeral rite the reverence shown to the body symbolises the equal reward from God that it receives with the soul.

Although the particular *σῶμα* of Christ is used in the Pauline sense of the Church as the mystical body in the chapter on the *synaxis*, the passages dealing with the Incarnation use cognates of *ὑλή* as well. We see that this aspect of the Christian revelation, gathering to the divine the issues of corporeality, holds particular moment for Denys when at *DN* 2.9 he refers to it as ‘τὸ πάσης θεολογίας ἐμφανέστατον ἢ καθ’ ἡμᾶς Ἰησοῦ θεοπλαστία’<sup>115</sup>. The term *θεοπλαστία* seems also to be coined by Denys for this purpose<sup>116</sup> and is used elsewhere only twice, once in *CH* 4.4 of the significance of the designation ‘angel’ with reference to the revelation of Jesus’ love for humanity at the Nativity, and in a different sense in *Ep* 9 where unworthy biblical metaphors for the divine are discussed.

However, since the whole of *DN* 2 is devoted to discussion of the unity and differentiation of the divine, this crowning statement suggests an audience associated with the Neoplatonist objection to divine pluralisation<sup>117</sup>. The Incarnation is perhaps ‘most evident’ as it forces a re-evaluation of theology within these categories. We see this relationship between the Incarnation and pluralisation again at the heart of Denys’ liturgical theology, the meaning of the *Synaxis* in *EH* 3. Here we find attention drawn to a series of visual symbols: the hierarch censuring the congregation, the uncovering of the hidden gifts, and the fraction and distribution of the Sacrament. All of these suggest, according to Denys, the manifestation of the hidden God and the pluralisation of the divine unity in the Incarnation.

The celebratory quality of these descriptions of material symbols in the *Synaxis* is strikingly present in the almost sensuous description of fragrant ointment and the purifying, revivifying water of baptism. Participation in the Church’s liturgy through these means brings together the disparate parts of human nature in a spiritual ascent towards God, sanctifying the body and senses of the believer and rendering the material symbols themselves worthy of reverence because of the divine acts - the theurgies - to

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<sup>115</sup> *CD* 1, 133.5-6

<sup>116</sup> According to Lampe (*A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford, 1961) only Athanasius uses this prior to Denys (*Contra Gentes* 19) and then as a pejorative term for the devising of gods in pagan idolatry.

<sup>117</sup> Other passages dealing with the Incarnation and divine unity are at *CD* 1, 112.7, 130.5, 134.7, 135.2, 159.5-10 and 160.7-9.

which they point. Even inanimate matter becomes holy through its role in the Church's liturgical life.

No one would deny, therefore, that the structure articulated by Denys for this ascent with its emphasis on procession and return, differentiation and unity, is strongly Neoplatonic. But there would seem also to be some reason to suggest that the Christian revelation lies at the heart of these interpretative schemes. Indicators of this might include Denys' use of the doctrines of the necessity of matter (Proclus) and that of the imperative of theurgic ritual (Iamblichus) in his defence of the necessity of material symbols in the Christian liturgy. He also emphasises what, to Neoplatonism, is one of the most problematic aspects of Christianity, the Incarnation, as the most central theological theme in his work.