

Gods, Angels, Daemons and Everything In-Between: Operative Forces in Individualised Religiosity

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Περίληψη: Ο Ιάμβλιχος, στο έργο του *Περί των Αιγυπτίων Μυστηρίων*, μας διασώζει ίσως το πιο λεπτομερές ταξινομικό σύστημα του Νεοπλατωνισμού σχετικά με τα πνευματικά όντα που απαρτίζουν την ιεραρχία του κόσμου. Το παρόν άρθρο ερευνά πώς η γνώση αυτής της ιεραρχίας παίζει κεντρικό ρόλο στην εξάσκηση της θεουργίας, μιας προσέγγισης στην ένωση με τον Έναν Θεό-Νου η οποία χρησιμοποιεί τόσο την Πλατωνική φιλοσοφία όσο και την τελετουργική εξειδίκευση η οποία απαιτείται για να επιφέρει την επιφάνεια των όντων αυτών. Αναλύοντας αυτές τις κατηγορίες όντων και την επίδρασή τους στην ανέλιξη της ψυχής προς την κορυφή της πνευματικής ιεραρχίας, στόχος μας είναι να αναδείξουμε πώς οι θεουργοί, οπλισμένοι με αυτή την εξειδικευμένη γνώση, καθιστούν την λατρευτική τους πρακτική ιδιαίτερα εξατομικευμένη και την διαχωρίζουν πλήρως από την δημόσια θρησκεία.

Abstract: Iamblichus, in his work *De Mysteriis*, provides us with what is perhaps Neoplatonism's most detailed account of a taxonomy of the spiritual beings which comprise the hierarchy of the cosmos. The present article discusses how knowledge of this hierarchy is essential to the practice of theurgy, an approach to union with the divine One that employs not only Platonic philosophy but the ritual expertise necessary to produce an epiphany. By discussing the traits of each of these categories of beings and their correlation to the soul's ascent, we aim to highlight how such specialised knowhow of the spiritual realms and their denizens, enabled theurgists to inform their religious practice in a highly individualised manner—one entirely non-reliant on the ceremonies of public religion.

When it comes to exploring the labyrinth that is individualised religiosity in Late Antiquity, the practice of theurgy stands out as the most complete and cerebrally-structured framework for the cosmos provided by the platonic intellectual elite of the time.

Etymologically speaking, theurgy can be understood as the “work of the gods” or “divine working”. In emic terms, it was a potent synthesis of Platonic philosophy, cosmopolitan religious observances and Orientally-inspired Greco-Roman ceremonial

expertise. Iamblichus, in his work *De Mysteriis*, expounds on his distinctive approach to theurgy, which involves thaumaturgy closely paralleled to that of the Greek Magical Papyri (Fowden, 1986:133).

Iamblichean theurgy is heavily influenced by the orientalism of the times and thus shares so much common ground with Hermeticism that the two become practically interconnected and very often indistinguishable (Johnston, 2008:451).

Of course, theurgy —just like Hermeticism or magic— is not part of the *religio*, the formal state-sanctioned religion. It is a purely individualised pursuit for union with the divine, beyond the sphere of matter. This notion, though Platonic in its origin, fits perfectly well with the cataphatic theology of the Hermetica (*Corpus Hermeticum*, XI.20):

If you do not make yourself equal to god, you will not be able to know god;
for only the like is able to know the like.¹

Ἐὰν οὖν μὴ σεαυτὸν ἐξισιάσης τῷ θεῷ, τὸν θεὸν νοῆσαι οὐ δύνασαι· τὸ γὰρ ὁμοίον τῷ ὁμοίῳ νοητόν.

From a theurgic perspective, the hieratic art is the par excellence tool for emulating the divine. And the first step towards that, as Iamblichus notes (DM V.25.238), is for the theurgist to “make an accurate study of all the entities that surround us, those that inhabit the universe, the gods, angels and daemons” if they are to achieve efficacy in their theurgic practice.

It is important to note at this point that both pagans and Christians, at least since the second century onwards, embraced a monotheistic hierarchical structure for the cosmos (Athanasiasiadi & Frede, 1999:55). This structure, in turn, was populated by a plurality of divine beings who, regardless of what one chose to call them, acted as mediators between the world of matter and the sphere of the divine. The existence of such a plurality did not in any way undermine the belief in the One god as the first principle of the cosmos or the possibility of a return to this primordial source of being (Ibid, 56 & 58).

When Iamblichus (*De Mysteriis*, V.26.238) describes the benefits of prayer in its theurgical context as a tool for achieving *methexis* through a process of gradual ascension through the ranks of the cosmic hierarchy, he employs concepts that would later on be echoed in the orthodox monasticism of the Neptic Fathers:

I declare then that the first degree of prayer is the introductory, which leads to contact and acquaintance with the divine; the second is conjunctive, producing a union of sympathetic minds, and calling forth benefactions sent down by the gods [...]. The most perfect, finally, has as its marks ineffable unification, which establishes all authority in the gods, and enables our souls to rest completely in them.²

¹ My own translation, amended by Copenhagen (2013).

² All translations of the *De Mysteriis* taken from Clarke et al. (2013), with minor amendments by myself.

Φημί δὴ οὖν ὡς τὸ μὲν πρῶτον τῆς εὐχῆς εἶδος ἐστὶ συναγωγόν, συναφῆς τε τῆς πρὸς τὸ θεῖον καὶ γνωρίσως ἐξηγούμενον· τὸ δ' ἐπὶ τούτῳ κοινωνίας ὁμοιοητικῆς συνδετικόν, δόσεις τε προκαλούμενον τὰς ἐκ θεῶν κατά-πεμπομένας [...] τὸ δὲ τελεώτατον αὐτῆς ἡ ἀρρητος ἔνωσις ἐσφραγίζεται, τὸ πᾶν κῦρος ἐνιδρύουσα τοῖς θεοῖς, καὶ τελέως ἐναυτοῖς κείσθαι τὴν ψυχὴν ἡμῶν παρέχουσα.

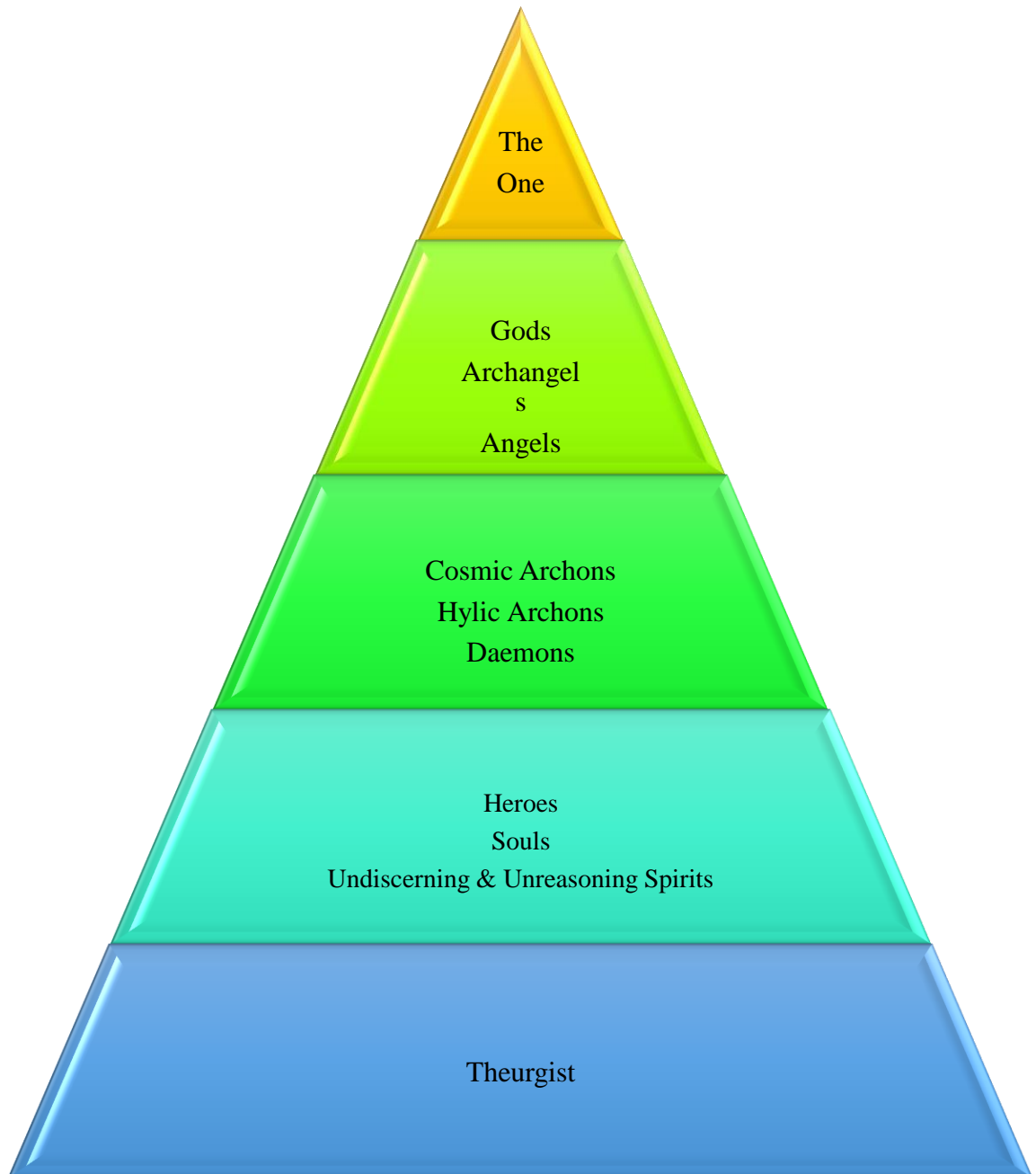
The following schema presents the vertical structure of this cosmic hierarchy –the chain of “sympathetic minds” to be brought into union, as it were.

The grouping of beings (designated by different colours) is based on their similarities and sphere of influence, according to Iamblichus. Beings closer to the One are higher up in the chain of being, in accordance with the Platonic notion that they partake of divine perfection and thus are distant from the grossness and impurity of matter (Mohr, 1985:51-52). In this schema, these would be the gods, archangels and angels. The archons, cosmic and hyllic alike, can be considered as “middle beings”, bridging the higher and the lower classes. The lower classes of being, daemons, heroes, souls and the unthinking spirits are the tiers of the hierarchy, which remain bound by Fate, just like the whole of the sublunary world, instead of being illuminated by the providence of the One. Theurgy is what liberates one from the “herd of Fate”³ and raises him progressively towards the sphere of divine providence, love, and will (Addey, 2014:285).

The theurgist is placed at the bottom of the chart since he is the only material being in this hierarchy possessed of a physical body. Nevertheless, since the cosmos is a temple whose rites are ordained by the Demiurge himself, then the embodied theurgist also has a rightful place within this cosmic *temenos*. If the body was properly consecrated, it wouldn't be a hindrance to the union with the divine realm (Shaw, 1995:51).

Furthermore, precisely due to the purificatory efficacy of theurgy, the practitioner could attain such supernatural power and authority as to be in a position to command and overpower even those beings who were hierarchically placed within the confines of the sublunary world of matter (Dillon, 2017:101-102).

³ *Chaldean Oracles*, Fr. 153: οὐ γὰρ ὑφ' εἰμαρτῆν ἀγέλην πίπτουσι θεουργοί (“the theurgists are not part of the herd of fate”; my translation).



For Iamblichus, ascending the echelons of the cosmic hierarchy is not something that is achieved by mere participation in public religious rites. It requires the employment of the “hieratic art” (i.e., theurgy) in an individualised and hily specialised context. Thus, the theurgist is not only a philosopher but also a high priest in the Egyptian sense of the word: a ritual expert (*De Mysteriis*, V.22.230):

The highest purpose of the hieratic art is to ascend to the One, which is the supreme master of the whole multiplicity [of spiritual beings], and in concert with that, at the same time, to pay court to all the other essences and principles.

Τό ακρότατον τῆς ἱερατικῆς ἐπ’ αὐτό το κυριώτατον τοῦ ὅλου πλήθους ἐν ἀνατρέχει, καί αὐτῷ ἅμα τὰς πολλάς οὐσίας καί ἀρχάς συνθεραπεύει.

Achieving *methexis* through theurgy, however, requires extraordinary effort and a lifetime of devotion. Not everyone can claim this title of ritual expert/high priest (*De Mysteriis*, V.22.231). This position underlines Iamblichus’ elitism, so prevalent in the *De Mysteriis*, and points to his position for a resignification of religion:

But that [Union with the One] does not come about except at a very late stage and to very few individuals, and one must be satisfied if it occurs even in the twilight of one’s life.

Ἀλλά τοῦτο ὀψιαίτατα παραγίγνεται καί τοῖς σφόδρα ὀλιγιστοῖς, καί ἀγαπητόν εἰ καί ἐν δυσμαῖς τοῦ βίου ποτέ ὑπάρξειεν.

At the top of the cosmic hierarchy, Iamblichus places, of course, the One, the first principle. This One is characterised by the same plurality as the rest of the chain of being. It is triadic in nature, comprised of the first god or first principle, existing beyond everything and being immovable; the second god who is the divine intellect and performs a purely contemplative function; and the third god who is the Platonic Demiurge, responsible for the creation of the cosmos (Athanasiadi & Frede, 1999:53-54), including the διάκοσμος τῶν κρειττόνων, the class of higher beings, which is Iamblichus’ umbrella term for gods, angels, daemons and everything in-between.

In the second book of the *De Mysteriis*, Iamblichus goes on to provide a very minute description of the qualities displayed by this class of higher beings, often using the term αὐτοψία to signify a divine epiphany. This term is directly connected with the αὐτοπτος type of ritual described in the Greek Magical Papyri, and its usage doubtlessly implies the ritualistic context of such epiphanies in a private environment (Pachoumi, 2017:25-26).

The epiphanies of the gods are qualitatively distinguished according to the light they emit, their movements, the clarity of the apparition (φάσμα or αὐτοψία) they present and, naturally, on the end result provided by an encounter with them (*De Mysteriis*, II.6.81-82):

The advent of the gods gives to us health of body, virtue of soul, purity of intellect, and, in a word, the elevation of everything within us to their proper principles [...] makes our light shine with intelligible harmony and shows what is not body as body to the eyes of the soul by means of those of the body.

The epiphanies of the archangels are almost on the same level as those of the gods, and there is only a very slight distinction between the two (*De Mysteriis*, II.3.72):

While those [i.e. the appearances in regards to size, shape, and formation] of archangels, though very close to those of the gods, fall short of full identity with them.

Τά δέ τῶν ἀρχαγγέλων, πλησιάζοντα τοῖς τῶν θεῶν, ἀπολείπεται αὐτῶν τῆς ταυτότητος.

This very close similarity to the gods points to a connection via similitude to the Henadic triad of the One: if the gods are the reflection of the first principle on a lower tier of the hierarchy, then the archangels are a reflection of the second god, the divine intellect. This pattern of correspondences between the higher and the lower is crucial to the operative framework of theurgy and extends throughout the entire chain of being, from the One all the way down to the embodied theurgist, in the sublunary realm.

In turn, the angels correspond to the third god, the Demiurge, and are thus inferior in shape, size and formation to the archangels (*De Mysteriis*, II.3.72), they are no longer exempt from motion (*Ibid.*, II.3.72), the light they emit is lesser than that of the archangels and subject to division (*Ibid.*, II.4.75) yet their appearance remains identical to that of their direct superiors (*Ibid.*, II.4.77). Their advent is beneficial, but the boons they bestow upon the theurgy lack constancy and immutability (*Ibid.*, II.6.82), just as nothing created in the cosmos remains constant or immutable.

It is also interesting to note that despite the etymological implications of the term ἄγγελος (messenger), Iamblichean angels do not act as intermediaries between the divine world and the realm of generation. Rather, they perform a much higher ontological function and mediation between the two worlds is left to the archons.

Yet mediation is no simple task. There are two types of archons for it. Hylic⁴ and cosmic ones. Cosmic archons (ἄρχοντες) or cosmocrators (κοσμοκράτορες) are entities ruling over the planetary spheres, and they exercise influence on the sublunary world: οἱ τὰ ὑπὸ σελήνην στοιχεῖα διοικοῦντες (*De Mysteriis*, II.3.71). They are, in essence, planetary gods though of an ilk somewhat inferior to that of the heavenly or noetic gods.

The idea of planetary gods dates back to the late Babylonian astral religion (Lewy, 1952:423) and undoubtedly harmonised both with Iamblichus' own Orientalism as well as his Platonism. According to Platonic cosmogony in the *Timaeus*, the world came into being by the will of the benevolent One, the Demiurge, and through a process of emanations, all was created (*Timaeus*, 29e). The (seven) planets were created for the purpose of being instruments of marking time as well as agents of generating motion throughout the universe (*Timaeus*, 38c).

These archons should not be confused with the Gnostic archons, who are emanations of an evil Demiurge, trapping souls into prisons of flesh in order to keep them separated from god, their source. Rather, Iamblichus would have understood archons as emanations of the benevolent Platonic Demiurge as well as the lowest tier of the second Chaldaic triad, consisting iynges (ἰνγξ), synoches (συνοχεῖς) and teletarchs (τελετάρχαι), who aid in the ascension of the soul (Plaisance, 2013:65&67).

Cosmic archons manifest themselves in a structured and orderly manner, in a remarkable and powerful form, very clearly visible, all of which are traits similar to those of the archangels⁵ and, by extension, to those of the gods. Thus, their sovereign position within the archon genera is established.

⁴ John Finamore (2018:101) classes these archons within hyllic daemons, immersed in matter, as caretakers of the material world. In effect it is these who connect the lower tiers of the hierarchy with the higher ones, where their cosmic counterparts are the gatekeepers.

⁵ *De Mysteriis*, II.3.71; II.4.77; II.4.79; II.5.80.

The second class of archons, the material or hylic ones, preside over matter —just as their name implies. Though they belong to the same category of being as their cosmic counterparts, they are inferior in the hierarchy because they are immersed in materiality (ὕλικῶν ἰχώρων εἰσὶν ἀνάμεστοι).

Their appearance is varied and multiform, and carries with it all the signs of disorder and faultiness associated with matter; most notably, the lack of unity and uniformity. Their epiphany can be hard to endure for the theurgist, and it does not bring about any refinement of the soul of a hypercosmic nature (*De Mysteriis*, II.8.87)⁶ since their function is mediatory.

According to Iamblichus, it is these hylic archons who act as intermediaries between the higher and the lower tiers of the spiritual hierarchy. Thus, they play an instrumental role in the invoking of all inferior entities (daemons, heroes, etc.), and their leader is charged with the task of endowing guardian daemons to humans (*De Mysteriis*, IX.9.284):

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

Ἀεὶ γὰρ ἐν τῇ θεουργικῇ τάξει διὰ τῶν ὑπερεχόντων τὰ δεύτερα καλεῖται· καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν δαιμόνων τοίνυν εἷς κοινός ἡγεμών τῶν περὶ τὴν γένεσιν κοσμοκρατόρων καταπέμπει τοὺς ἰδίους δαίμονας ἐκάστοις.

Daemons themselves are a widely differentiated class of beings. Iamblichus mentions beneficent daemons (ἀγαθοὶ δαίμονες), personal daemons (ἴδιοι δαίμονες) punitive daemons (τιμωροὶ δαίμονες) and wicked daemons (πονηροὶ δαίμονες) which are but a few genera of this multiform class. In general, however, they can undertake tasks with swifter efficacy than the angels,⁷ presumably exactly because they are so closely linked to material reality.

All daemons appear in obscure form, emanating a “smouldering fire”⁸ and displaying forms and attributes according to their nature and function in the hierarchy. When beneficent daemons appear, they display for contemplation ‘their own productions, and the goods which they bestow’. Punitive daemons behave in the same way, only it is visions of punishments that their epiphany manifests. Finally, wicked daemons appear accompanied by all sorts of wild beasts, blood-thirsty and savage, which denotes their desire for blood sacrifices (*De Mysteriis*, II.7.83-84).

All daemons, as beings closely intertwined with the very essence of the material sublunary world, despite being divine in the general sense of the term, hinder the soul’s ascent to higher spheres of being and assail it in its upward climb. According to Proclus (*In Alc.* I 39.16-40.2, trans. Segonds), this testing of the ascending soul is to be expected

⁶ Ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν ἀρχόντων [παρουσίαι] περιβολὴ μὲν πλειόνων φασμάτων περιθεῖ δυσανάσχετος, ἥτοι κοσμικὴ ἢ περιγείως, οὐ μὴν ὑπερκόσμιός δε λεπτότης οὐδ’ ἢ τῶν ἄκρων στοιχείων παραγίγνεται.

⁷ *De Mysteriis*, II.4.75.

⁸ *De Mysteriis*, II.4.77: Δαίμονες δὲ θολῶδες διαφαίνουσι τὸ πῦρ.

in theurgic practice: “in the holiest of the mysteries [theurgy/the ascent of the soul] the visitation of the god is preceded by assaults and apparitions of certain terrestrial daemons (δαιμόνων χθονίων τινῶν ἐμβολαὶ προφαίνονται καὶ ὄψεις), confounding the initiates, pulling them away from the pure gods and inviting them to matter”.

One hierarchical tier below, we find heroes and souls. Though these are inferior to daemons, they are of a very similar nature insofar that they partake of the hylic world and its contaminations.

Heroes manifest themselves in a way very similar to daemons (though inferior in vividness and clarity). The main difference between the two is that the epiphany of heroes inspires the human soul to noble and great deeds. This, however, has the negative side-effect of creating an attachment to the world of matter, as it incites one to concern themselves with perceptible works (αἰσθητὰ ἔργα).⁹ Furthermore, their appearance is gentler than that of daemons and not as outright frightful.¹⁰

Souls are even more burdened with the “excessive pollutions” of matter and the “alien spirits” with which these are made manifest (περισσῶν μολυσμῶν καὶ ἀλλοτριῶν πνευμάτων ἀνατίμπλονται).¹¹ In other words, souls are stigmatized by their attachment to matter and the hylic passions still attached to them.

The appearance of souls “ruins the fruits of hope”,¹² drags one towards the material world, the realm of becoming, and incites in the soul passions which contribute to attaching it even more to the body.¹³ In terms of magical practice, what Iamblichus is saying is that necromancy, the invocation of the souls of the deceased, is detrimental to the goals of a true theurgist.

According to Porphyry, Iamblichus’ interlocutor in the *De Mysteriis*, visions of souls appear when their forms make contact with the *pneuma*, a soul moistened by the wet elemental quality. In his work *De Antro Nympharum*, Porphyry uses the term *psyche* (soul) to denote a “dry soul”, one unaffected by the element of wetness and *pneuma* to signify either damp air or a dampened soul, both of which are the same as the physical body (Campbell, 1968:206). To this understanding, the epiphany of souls is the apparition of human bodies *in potentia* (δυνάμει).¹⁴

Nevertheless, there’s also a distinctly Platonic class of souls –the perfected ones– which have a beneficiary effect on humans when they manifest. Perfected souls, according to Iamblichus, “are established in the order of angels”. Their epiphany brings about spiritual elevation and is salutary to the soul, as it inspires holy hope.¹⁵ In effect, holy men, even when they have passed on, still exercise a positive influence on those who contemplate them and invoke their presence.

On that point, it is interesting to note that the Chaldean Oracles, one of the most venerated and authoritative texts amongst theurgists, was reputedly dictated to Julian

⁹ *De Mysteriis*, II.4.79.

¹⁰ *De Mysteriis*, II.3.71.

¹¹ *De Mysteriis*, II.5.80.

¹² *De Mysteriis*, II.6.83: καταγωγὸς ἐπὶ τὴν γένεσιν ὑπάρχει, φθείρει τε τοὺς τῆς ἐλπίδος καρπούς.

¹³ See also *Phaedrus*, 83d.

¹⁴ This idea is basically Platonic in nature, see Rep. 411B and Plutarch’s *Moralia*, 566A.

¹⁵ *De Mysteriis*, II.6.83

the Chaldean, its author, by the soul of Plato himself via the theurgic technique of ‘calling and receiving’, eight centuries after the Athenian sage had (Majercik, 1989: 2-3).

Finally, there’s one last class of spiritual being, which Iamblichus terms ‘the undiscerning and unreasonable kind (ἀλόγιστον και ἄκριτον γένος).¹⁶ These beings are bereft of judgment and reason and each of them are capable of performing only one specific function in the cosmos. They are agents of necessity, the living gears of a world operating on spiritual machinery (*De Mysteriis*, IV.1.182):

There is, however, another class of being from among those which surround us, devoid of reason and judgement, which has been allotted just one power, in the apportionment of tasks which has been prescribed for each entity in each of the parts of the universe.

Ἔστι δε δὴ και ἄλλο ἀλόγιστον και ἄκριτον γένος τῶν παραγινομένων, ὁ μίαν ἀριθμῶ δύναμιν κατενείματο δια τὴν ἐφ’ ἐκάστοις τοῖς μέρεσι διανομήν ἐφ’ ἐκάστῳ τῶν ἐργῶν ἐπιτεταγμένων. (DM IV.1.182)

Iamblichus gives us precious little detail beyond that, but, in my opinion, these “undiscerning and unreasonable” beings would be perfectly at home in Paracelsus’ paradigm of elemental beings, inhabiting the elemental regions or “wombs” of the cosmos.¹⁷

In summary, the first triad of Iamblichus’ spiritual hierarchy (gods, archangels and angels) perform an anagogic function, leading the soul towards the Demiurge. Ritual contact with these echelons of the hierarchy paves the path for the soul’s ascend towards the sphere of the One and, ultimately, methexis.

Cosmic Archons (i.e. Planetary/Sublunary gods) connect the anagogic categories of being with the katagogic ones –those which drag the soul towards the realm of nature and all things material, thus bridging the divide between spirit and body.

Hylic archons, demons, heroes and souls act as the theurgist’s anchor to generation, though not always in a negative or physically destructive way. Still, they hinder the soul’s ascendant course beyond matter, towards higher spheres of being and, therefore, contact with them should be avoided just like any other vice of the body.

The theurgist, as a ritual expert, knows how to discern between the various taxonomies of spiritual entities. He is able to avoid deception and interact with the highest ones in order to accomplish union with the One.

The ascendant theurgist is the only one who can truly command the lower classes of spiritual beings as he associates himself with their superiors in the ontological chain and successfully emulates their qualities through ritual. Therefore, he has a legitimate claim to undisputed spiritual authority.

After all, the question remains open: do hierarchies below reflect what is above or is it the other way around?

¹⁶ *De Mysteriis*, IV.1.182: Ἔστι δὲ δὴ τι και ἄλλο ἀλόγιστον και ἄκριτον γένος τῶν παραγινομένων.

¹⁷ For a brief discussion on the nature of these elemental beings and their place in Paracelsian cosmology see Daniel, 2006:132-133

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