

**Marios Koutsoukos, *Fruits of the Divine Work: Attaining  
Eudaimonia Through Theurgy***

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Theurgy, ‘the divine work’, is one of those systems of spiritual practice which flourished in what John Dillon aptly terms the ‘Underworld of Platonism’, in Late Antiquity. It is a life-long pursuit of communication with the divine One, employing ritual expertise to invoke and manifest the multiform taxonomies of cosmic beings with the aim of gradually elevating the practitioner’s soul through the successive spheres of being (Majercik 1989:1-3).

But what purpose does this ascension of the soul serve in practical terms? Why would one decide to devote the tremendous effort and discipline required to achieve it? The purpose of this paper is to examine these questions from an emic perspective, to the degree that is possible, in order to shed more light on our current understanding of the motives behind theurgy. It is not always easy (nor entirely feasible for that matter) for modern scholars of antiquity to adopt such a perspective and understand primary sources in perfect sync with the cultural and philosophical subtext which they carry. Yet, in order to approximate this analytical perspective as much as possible, we will have to rely mainly on Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis*<sup>1</sup>. Iamblichus was a Neoplatonic philosopher who flourished in the first half of the fourth century as the head of the School he founded in the city of Apamea, in modern-day Syria. His work *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans and Assyrians*,

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<sup>1</sup> The original text of the *De Mysteriis* cited in this paper is that of Clarke et al., 2003. All translations are also taken from the same edition, with emendations by myself.

commonly referred to by the abbreviation of its Latin title simply as the *De Mysteriis*, is an epistolary treatise in defence of theurgy. It is the most complete and intricate description of Iamblichus' theurgic system whose influence transcended the borders of the School of Apamea and the Near-East and shaped the metaphysics of the Platonic School of Athens in the middle of the fifth century onwards. The scope of this paper prohibits it from going into the minute details of Iamblichus' theurgic system. Rather, it will focus solely on the last chapter of his work and argue that the bottom-line goal of theurgy is the attainment of well-being<sup>2</sup>. Through a discussion of Iamblichus' own arguments on the matter, we will show how this well-being is not merely a perceived state of mind but it also a lived physical experience, encompassing the body and fully harmonising the theurgist's physical existence with all the components of the cosmos.

To understand how such a unification of the material and the immaterial can be conceived of as possible, not to mention highly desirable, one must first adopt the Iamblichean understanding of what theurgy is: it is a synthesis of science (in the Platonic sense of the term<sup>3</sup>) and metaphysics. It essentially provides a philosophical background for ceremonial magic and religious rites. At the same time, Iamblichean theurgy takes Neoplatonism out of the purely intellectual sphere and puts it into tangible and effective action

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter X, which Iamblichus entitles *ὁ περὶ εὐδαιμονίας λόγος* (the discourse concerning happiness). The translation 'well-being' for 'εὐδαιμονία' used in this paper's title follows that given by Clarke et al. 2003:351. For the purposes of this paper, the terms *eudaimonia*, well-being and happiness are used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> For an elucidating discussion of Plato's philosophy of science and what constitutes science in the Platonic understanding, see Gregory 2000:62-67 & 83, and also DiGiacomo 2022:17 & 22-23

by considering rationality and revelation as interlinked and complementary<sup>4</sup>. In order to better adopt the aforementioned emic perspective, we need to first understand that Neoplatonism is an etic term. It refers to the interpretation of Plato's philosophy and metaphysics which began in 245 CE when the celebrated philosopher Plotinus moved from Alexandria, where he had studied, to Rome and there amassed about him a large group of followers<sup>5</sup>. In truth, however, Plotinus, just like Iamblichus after him and all the other 'Neoplatonists', regarded himself simply as a Platonic philosopher who wasn't so much inventing new interpretations of Plato as he was following in the master's footsteps, being a link in an unbroken 'golden chain' of intellectuals which was perceived to go back even further than the Classical Era, to Pythagoras and the Pre-Socratic philosophers themselves<sup>6</sup>. This belief, however, did not mean that Neoplatonic philosophers were Platonic purists. If anything, they were children of their time; a time of pronounced syncretism in religio-philosophical thought and ritual practice. As such, connecting the dots between Platonic metaphysics and ceremonial magic that could impact physical reality wasn't so much of an innovation as it were a natural conclusion of the era's dominant way of thinking. In this context, *eudaimonia* (happiness, or well-being in the broader sense- of the term) was understood both as a philosophical as well as a physically achievable *desideratum*. In Plato's *Symposium*<sup>7</sup>, Diotima and Socrates discuss the purpose of having good things (τὰγαθὰ), i.e., intelligible sources of well-being (*εὐδαιμονία*) as well as physical ones, like health or beauty. They very quickly reach a unanimous

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<sup>4</sup> Addey, 2014:239-240 & Shaw, 1985:4-6

<sup>5</sup> Remes, 2008:1

<sup>6</sup> Remes, 2008:3-5

<sup>7</sup> *Symp.*, 240e-205a

consensus: happiness (*εὐδαιμονία*) is the result of one's possession of the good:

—And what will one attain who gets good things? —That's easy to answer, I said; he will be happy. — Yes, she replied, those who are happy are happy through the acquisition of good things, and we have no further need to ask for what purpose a man wishes to be happy, when he wishes to be so.

—Καὶ τί ἔσται ἐκείνω ᾧ ἂν γένηται τάγαθά; —Τοῦτ' εὐπορώτερον, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ἔχω ἀποκρίνασθαι, ὅτι εὐδαίμων ἔσται. —Κτήσει γάρ, ἔφη, ἀγαθῶν οἱ εὐδαίμονες εὐδαίμονες, καὶ οὐκέτι προσδεῖ ἐρέσθαι ἵνα τί δὲ βούλεται εὐδαίμων εἶναι ὁ βουλόμενος.

As Price<sup>8</sup> observes when discussing the concept of *eudaimonia* in Plato, these aforementioned 'good things' can be distinguished between goods which facilitate action and goods which are attained through action. Thus, the sources of man's well-being can rely on conditional or unconditional goods. Conditional goods are resources at one's disposal that when put to proper use lead to a positive outcome, but when used badly can have catastrophic effects. They are what enables one to do more than the average person. From a more Neoplatonic point of view, this 'average person', as we shall presently see, is none other than the non-theurgist, the man bound by the bonds of necessity and fate. On the other hand, unconditional goods are those whose possession and usage cannot have negative results. Wisdom, for instance, is such an unconditional good.

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<sup>8</sup> Price, 2011:11-13

For Iamblichus, divine foreknowledge (*θεία πρόγνωσις*), a quintessential result of theurgy properly practiced, is one such unconditional good. The Apamean sage makes it abundantly clear that this type of foreknowledge has nothing to do with vulgar magical techniques of divination or prognostication<sup>9</sup>. When it is conjoined with the gods, it truly gives the practitioner a share in divine life, a life full of all the goods (*Μόνη τοίνυν ἡ θεία μαντική συναπτομένη τοῖς θεοῖς ὡς ἀληθῶς ἡμῖν τῆς θείας ζωῆς μεταδίδωσι*).

Nevertheless, this gods-given foreknowledge is not all-encompassing or all-seeing. In a way, it is a conditional good as well since it relies on the providence of the gods themselves. When it is necessary to exercise virtue, Iamblichus says, being in a state of uncertainty concerning future events contributes positively to a more virtuous course of action undertaken. In effect, the gods provide to the theurgist all that they need for the improvement of the soul (*ἔνεκα τοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν βελτίον ἀπεργάζεσθαι*<sup>10</sup>), effectively acting as the dispensers of both conditional and unconditional goods. Thus, we find theurgy's ultimate aim to be firmly grounded in Platonic reasoning: if theurgy is union with the gods and union with the gods is attainment of all that is good, then theurgy is the obtainment of all that is good (i.e. *eudaimonia*) through communication and establishing an affinity with the gods, as stated by Iamblichus<sup>11</sup>:

Know, then, that this is the first road to well-being, having for souls the intellectual plenitude of divine union. But the sacred and theurgic gift of

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<sup>9</sup> *Myst.*, X.3.288.5-11

<sup>10</sup> *Myst.*, X.4.289.15

<sup>11</sup> *Myst.*, X.5.291.8-12

well-being is called the gateway to the creator of all things, or the place or courtyard of the good.

*Αὐτὴ μὲν οὖν νοεῖσθω σοι (ἡ) πρώτη τῆς εὐδαιμονίας ὁδός, νοερὰν ἔχουσα τῆς θείας ἐνώσεως ἀποπλήρωσιν τῶν ψυχῶν· ἡ δ' ἱερατικὴ καὶ θεουργικὴ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας δόσις καλεῖται μὲν θύρα πρὸς θεὸν τὸν δημιουργὸν τῶν ὄλων, ἡ τόπος ἡ ἀλύξ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.*

When starting on this path of union with the divine, the soul is purified through its experiencing of the good and, alongside with it, the body as well –though to a lesser degree since it is immersed in matter and, therefore, subject to the imperfections of that sphere (*ἀγνείαν τῆς ψυχῆς πολὺ τελειότεραν τῆς τοῦ σώματος ἀγνείας*<sup>12</sup>). It is only once this purification has taken place that the mind (*διάνοια*) is released from “everything which opposes it” and union with the gods is achieved<sup>13</sup>.

In order to understand this experience of *eudaimonia* from a Platonic perspective and how it encompasses both the physical and the intelligible aspects of an individual’s being, we must turn our attention to the *Philebus*, the Platonic dialogue which focuses on that very theme. In this dialogue, Philebus contends that the good consist of enjoyment (*τὸ χαίρειν*), pleasure (*ἡδονήν*) and delight (*τέρψιν*) and everything similar to those<sup>14</sup>. All of these, obviously, are physical aspects of well-being. On the other hand, Socrates, his collocutor, on the other hand, maintains that true *eudaimonia* is derived from thought (*φρονεῖν*), and intellection (*νοεῖν*) and memory (*μεμνηῆσθαι*) and

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<sup>12</sup> *Myst.*, X.5.291.12 & 292.1

<sup>13</sup> *Myst.*, X.5.292.1-3

<sup>14</sup> *Phlb.*, 11b4-6

all that is related to these, i.e., correct belief (*δόξαν τε ὀρθήν*) and true reasoning (*ἀληθεῖς λογισμούς*)<sup>15</sup>.

As Jorgenson<sup>16</sup> points out, Socrates is not directly opposing these characteristics of *eudaimonia* to the physical ones put forth by Philebus, but rather presents them as better and more agreeable to physical experiences of well-being. In other words, physical *eudaimonia* is not entirely excluded from the picture of union with the divine; it just plays a secondary role and is just one of the first steps towards it. In effect, Iamblichus is adopting the viewpoint of Socrates in the *Philebus* and expounding upon it. His wholistic view of a unified cosmos, where material and intelligible things are but different hypostatic links in the same chain of being, couldn't exclude any expression of the good, even if it were merely physical. After all, the Platonising mind recognises an intrinsic connection between the divine and the good. All that is bad, Iamblichus argues, comes from a forgetfulness (*λήθη*) concerning what is good and from a deception (*ἀπάτη*) concerning what is bad. Just as the good is intrinsically connected with the divine<sup>17</sup>, so is the bad inseparable for the mortal, where fate and necessity are the operative forces<sup>18</sup>. According to Iamblichus, it is through the “sacred methods” (*ἱερατικαῖς ὁδοῖς*) of theurgy that one is to be liberated from the bonds of necessity and fate and thus experience a better, more refined form of well-being through direct communication with knowledge of the divine<sup>19</sup>:

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<sup>15</sup> Phlb., 11b7-c1

<sup>16</sup> Jorgenson, 2018:119-122

<sup>17</sup> *Myst.*, X.4.289.6-7

<sup>18</sup> *Myst.*, X.5.290.10-11

<sup>19</sup> *Myst.*, X.5.290.12 & 291.1-2

Thus, we must consider how one might be liberated and set free from these bonds [of necessity and fate]. There is, indeed, no way other than the knowledge of the gods. For understanding the Good is the paradigm of well-being, just as obliviousness to the Good and deception concerning evil constitute the paradigm of evil things. The one, therefore, is united with the divine, while the other, inferior, destiny is inseparable from the mortal.

*Σκοπεῖν δὴ δεῖ τίς αὐτοῦ γίνεται λύσις καὶ ἀπαλλαγὴ τῶν δεσμῶν. Ἔστι τοίνυν οὐκ ἄλλη τις ἢ τῶν θεῶν γνῶσις· ἰδέα γάρ ἐστιν εὐδαιμονίας τὸ ἐπίστασθαι τὸ ἀγαθόν, ὡσπερ τῶν κακῶν ἰδέα συμβαίνει ἢ λήθη τῶν ἀγαθῶν καὶ ἀπάτη περὶ τὸ κακόν· ἢ μὲν οὖν τῷ θεῷ σύνεστιν, ἢ δὲ χείρων μοῖρα ἀχώριστός ἐστι τοῦ θνητοῦ.*

Necessity and fate are concepts intrinsically linked with the sublunary world of matter in Neoplatonism. Necessity, in the Platonic theology of the *Timaeus*, is that which governs the behaviour of all material things, in contrast to the activities of the intellect, which are associated with the soul<sup>20</sup>. Necessity can be understood as natural or causal necessity: this means that material things are always determined by the agency of external causes. They are the mercy of circumstance, i.e., fate. The soul, on the other hand, is able to perform rational actions and be the cause of these. In effect, intellect can manipulate necessity and break its vicious circle which generates human passions<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Tim.*, 46c-e

<sup>21</sup> Mason, 2006:284-285



Within this theurgic context, fate is to be understood as the supernatural source of all physical necessity. In the *Chaldean Oracles*, a text received by Late Antique theurgists as profoundly authoritative, we read the aphorisms ‘do not turn your attention to nature; her name is marked by fate<sup>22</sup>, and also that ‘the theurgists do not become part of the herd of fate<sup>23</sup>’. This portrays accurately the contradictory vision of theurgists who, according to Shaw<sup>24</sup>, held that only through mortal existence human beings could come to experience the bliss of immortality. Thus, it becomes evident that although the intellectual goods of the cosmos take precedence over the material ones, they must both coexist in a harmonious state, rectified through theurgy, in order to produce *eudaimonia*. The embracing of this precedence of intellectual happiness over material well-being is also the dividing line between theurgists and vulgar magicians. A magician would pursue *eudaimonia* by seeking to address everyday problems and satisfy material needs and wants through supernatural means. A theurgist, on the other hand, has much higher aims, befitting a philosopher who seeks to be in unity with the all-encompassing one<sup>25</sup>. In Iamblichus’ words, this notion is expressed in the following terms<sup>26</sup>:

Nor do the theurgists pester the divine intellect about small matters, but about matters pertaining to the purification, liberation and salvation of the soul.

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<sup>22</sup> Fr. 102: *Μὴ φύσιν ἐμβλέψῃς· εἰμαρμένον οὐνομα τῆσδε*

<sup>23</sup> Fr. 163: *Οὐ γὰρ ὑφ’ εἰμαρτὴν ἀγέλην πίπτουσι θεουργοί*

<sup>24</sup> Shaw, 2016:177-178

<sup>25</sup> Corrigan in DeConick et al., 2013:524 & 526

<sup>26</sup> *Myst.*, X.7.293.4-6

Οὐδὲ περὶ μικρῶν οἱ θεουργοὶ τὸν θεῖον νοῦν ἐνοχλοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ περὶ τῶν εἰς ψυχῆς κάθαρσιν καὶ ἀπόλυσιν καὶ σωτηρίαν ἀνηκόντων.

It is safe to suppose that these ‘small matters’ Iamblichus mentions are spells such as those found in the *Greek Magical Papyri*, where gods are invoked to secure the love of a woman<sup>27</sup>, to cause illness to another person<sup>28</sup>, to grant success in gambling<sup>29</sup>, to separate a couple<sup>30</sup>, or perform a healing<sup>31</sup>. In what way then does theurgy differ from vulgar magic on a practical level, when it too calls upon the same gods as the magician in its search for *eudaimonia*? Is it only through the perceived loftiness of its purpose? No. Divine epiphanies, i.e. the physical manifestation of the gods on the material plane, is the practical aspect of theurgy’s attainment of *eudaimonia*. Regardless of the operator’s philosophical conceptions of what constitutes the good, it is ritual expertise which brings down the dispensers of all that is good and receives *eudaimonia* directly from the source<sup>32</sup>:

The disposition of the souls of those making invocations receive, at the epiphany of the gods, a perfection freed from and superior to passions, and at the same time an activity entirely better than they themselves could attain, and they participate in a love divine and an enormous gladness of mind.

Αἱ τῶν καλούντων τῆς ψυχῆς διαθέσεις ἐπὶ μὲν τῆς ἐπιφάνειας τῶν θεῶν παθῶν ἐξηλλαγμένην καὶ ὑπερέχουσαν παραδέχονται τὴν τελειότητα

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<sup>27</sup> PGM VII 981-993

<sup>28</sup> PGM IV. 2441-2621

<sup>29</sup> PGM VII 423-428

<sup>30</sup> PGM XII 365-375

<sup>31</sup> PGM XXIIa 9-10

<sup>32</sup> *Myst.*, II.9.87.11-13 & see also II.6.81.10-12

ἐνέργειάν τε κρείττονα παντελῶς, καὶ θεῖον ἔρωτα καὶ εὐφροσύνην ἀμήχανον  
ῶσιν μεταλαγχάνουσιν.

In effect, as Gregory Shaw has pointed out<sup>33</sup>, the degree to which the theurgist attains *eudaimonia* is perceived as a gift from the gods themselves, a product of divine providence. True and lasting well-being only begins when mortal passions are overcome and replaced by something much more fulfilling to the soul than mere material goods.

To reiterate and conclude, theurgic well-being is a ritualistic approach to the process of purifying and perfecting the soul. Despite its focus on the intelligible, it does not negate the existence of the body. In fact, it is a process where the first stepping stone is the purification of the body, so that it also enjoys everything good. Furthermore, the gradual ascent towards theurgic *eudaimonia* prepares the mind for communication and communion with the divine. In turn, this leads to a union with the gods, who are the source of all that is good and the dispensers of well-being throughout the cosmos. Finally, this participation in an utmost state of contentment and bliss deposits the human soul in the bosom of the demiurgic god (τῷ δημιουργικῷ θεῷ) securing a unification of the alone with the alone.

This theurgic paradigm of attaining well-being rests partly upon the philosophical understanding that the world of matter is subject to a determinism beyond one's control and partly upon the belief that this preordained fate can be transcended through focused ritual action. In this light, *eudaimonia* is not entirely an intellectual achievement, a point of view

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<sup>33</sup> Shaw, 2003:37-39

of the individual, but something which is bestowed from an outside agency. Nevertheless, this ‘gift’, as Iamblichus calls it, is actively earned through ritualistic communion with the One and not passively received through mere supplications. Theurgy enables the practitioner to assume control of their own fate up to a certain degree and thus takes precedence over simple religious praxis. In other words, the key to *eudaimonia* is a proactive engagement with the cosmos and its spiritual taxonomies.

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