

BETWEEN *PISTIS* AND *LOGOS*: IAMBlichUS AND THE (RE)ENCOUNTERING OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

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Abstract

This article reflects on the approximation between *pistis* (belief) and *logos* (reason) that began to deepen in the Imperial period, largely due to the work of authors such as Philo of Alexandria and Nigidius Figulus, who placed philosophy at the service of religion. The trend asserted itself in subsequent centuries and reached its full-fledged form in Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist master who became notable not only as a philosopher, but also as a hierophant and, beyond that, as a theurgist – that is, a sorcerer. For this reason, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that in Iamblichus' thought, philosophy and religion can be practically taken for each other, at a time when the ancestral deities of Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Phoenicians and many other peoples were targeted by the severe blows of Christians, as they sought to establish a new world purified from Pagan "impiety".

Keywords

Roman Empire; Late Antiquity; Philosophy; Religion; Iamblichus.

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Resumo

Neste artigo, temos por objetivo refletir sobre a aproximação entre a *pistis* (crença) e o *logos* (razão) que começa a se aprofundar na época imperial, em boa parte devido ao trabalho de autores como Filon de Alexandria e Nigídio Fígulo, quando ambos passam a colocar a filosofia a serviço da religião, tendência que se afirmará no decorrer dos séculos posteriores até encontrar a sua forma mais bem acabada em Jâmblico, um filósofo neoplatônico que se notabilizará não apenas como filósofo, mas também como hierofante e, mais que isso, como teurgo, ou seja, feiticeiro. Por esse motivo, talvez não seja exagero afirmar que, no pensamento de Jâmblico, filosofia e religião praticamente se confundem, num momento em que os deuses ancestrais de gregos, romanos, egípcios, fenícios e tantos outros povos eram alvo de severos ataques desferidos pelos cristãos, que buscavam instaurar um novo mundo depurado da “impiedade” pagã.

Palavras-chave

Império Romano. Antiguidade Tardia. Filosofia. Religião. Jâmblico.

Introduction

The history of Western thought – and the very meaning of this expression, as one considers its vagueness – has always been based on an assumption shared by the most diverse currents of interpretation of the ideas that emerged in Classical Antiquity, were passed on to the Middle Age and then irradiated to places removed from their European epicenter, such as the Americas: namely, the assumption that reason (the *logos* of Greek philosophers) was the ultimate category capable of conferring unity and intelligibility to the intellectual path of Westerners – Europeans, truth to tell – from Greece to the present day. This conception, in turn, embedded at least two key assumptions: first, that the cradle of Western thought was Greece and, particularly, the regions that started to be structured as *poleis* in the 8th century BCE. And second, that by speaking of *Western thought*, one would refer foremostly to the thinking of a philosophical nature, that is, under the rules of logic, which do not admit detours or contradictions, while seeking to depict the order of the world via a coherent and, thus, credible discourse. Such discourse would befit the men who occupied a privileged position in the scale of human development, as Classical philosophy was seen as a benchmark for valuing the “advancement” or “retrogression” of a society or civilization. Hellas’ reason is credited for suddenly entering history by the hands of thinkers from newborn *polis*, thereby inaugurating a new stage in the way individuals think. Philosophy was incorporated to the *paideia*, that is, to the educational pathway of Greek men. Roughly considered a synonym for science, it became a criterion for differentiating between “barbarous” and “civilized” societies. Such contrast was perpetuated, *mutatis mutandis*, until the first half of the 20th century, as we see in Lévy-Brühl’s distinction between logical and pre-logical (or savage) thinking, which was fiercely criticized by Lévi-Strauss (Montero, 1990: 36 *et seq.*). Philosophy was considered a superior modality of knowledge with the ability to go beyond the myth – the ‘puerile’ and ‘primitive’ explanation of the origin, function and meaning of beings and things –, raising man from ignorance and submitting him to the sieve of reason. This initiative was seen to be so remarkable that some did not hesitate to assert that a *Greek miracle* had been worked by the philosophers, underscoring thereby the role of Greece’s pioneers who introduced reason into the world.

Yet, as Jean-Pierre Vernant showed (1990: 349-350) with his usual astuteness, philosophy cannot be absolutely considered as a “traveler without luggage”, inasmuch as the intellectual structures with which the Greek philosophers thought were already present, in a way or another, in the mythological narratives. For this reason, beyond an irreducible

opposition, Vernant points out to an otherwise unsuspected philosophical affiliation to mythology, which is equivalent to rehabilitating the religious discourse as one of the foundations of philosophical thought. His argument inaugurates another path for interpreting the place of philosophy in Antiquity, since we should not a priori drive philosophical thought apart from its original environment, marked as it was by a deep attachment to the supernatural, mystical and wondrous realm. Thus, against what many would like to affirm, philosophy was never the only modality for explaining the world. There were other equally valid modalities, such as religion, as the Greeks themselves did not refrain from acknowledging. Moreover, despite its rational framework, philosophy could in some circumstances accommodate streaks of irrationality, by valuing intuition and divine inspiration, and by pegging its reasoning not to *logos* but, instead, to *pistis*, that is, to plain belief arising from revelation, without resorting to a logical explanation. In the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods, *logos* and *pistis* certainly maintained a sometimes convivial, sometimes conflicting relationship – which, however, never led, as we shall see, to a mutual exclusion. Despite the comings and goings of this relationship, in the early days of the Imperial era, we begin to observe a clear approximation between *pistis* and *logos*. Such approximation was largely on account of the works of authors such as Philo of Alexandria and Nigidius Figulus, who cast philosophy at the service of religion – a trend that was asserted in subsequent centuries until attaining its most elaborate form in Iamblichus, a Neoplatonic author from the second half of the 3rd century CE who became notable not only as a philosopher, but also as a hierophant and, even further, as a theurgist, that is, a sorcerer. For this reason, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that in Iamblichus' thinking, philosophy and religion practically merge at a moment when the ancestral deities of Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Phoenicians and many others were targeted by the fierce blows of Christians, who attempted to establish a new world depurated from Pagan "impiety".

Dialogues between philosophy and religion in ancient Greece

According to Most (2016: 300 *et seq.*), despite the numerous features that set the world of Greeks and Romans apart from our own world, ancient philosophy accounts for a relevant and respectable share of the intellectual background of modern man, and stands behind a large network of university departments aimed at teaching and research activities on the thinking of figures such Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius – to mention only a few more prominent authors,

whose reflections would have otherwise slipped into oblivion. Yet, our filtration or reception, or resignification of their legacy is mostly focused on what Enlightenment-theoreticians deemed to be the most relevant contribution of the Ancients to the construction of a new and increasingly secular society: the intransigent defense of logical thinking against any intrusion of a divine or supernatural nature. When all was said and done, this led to a false impression that ancient philosophy, differently from medieval philosophy – which would be marked, or ‘contaminated’ by an indecorous complicity with Christianity – bore no familiarity with the religious aspects of human existence. Such impression was further strengthened by the fact that with the passing of time, ancient beliefs and rites were practically suppressed from the record and ceased to exist in actual times, except for a number of considerably dispersed practices. Some of them were preserved at the heart of Christianity itself, such as the dedication of votes (*vota*) to saints, which recasts an extremely ancient pagan tradition. But as we analyze ancient philosophy in its own context, while relinquishing the additional layers of ‘rationality’ that Enlightenment authors and their successors ascribed to them, we find a much more complex and, under certain aspects, disconcerting picture: the world that unveils itself before us is no longer a Greece carved with the chisel of reason and estranged from the unconscious impulses of human psyche and from the inflows of mystery, secrecy and divinity; instead, we find a Greece in which irrational, marvelous and transcendent elements were unequivocal realities, as Dodds (2002) once showed. Ancient philosophy was certainly – and will never stop being, it must be said – a subject aimed at elaborating on, refuting and methodically refining arguments and theories that regard all existing or purported things. And it was not only that, since it was also seen as a *way of life* encompassing self-transformation, in the sense of spiritual elevation, for its practitioners. This way of life found expression in the attire wore by the philosophers, in the food they consumed and in the direct associations they maintained with the deities (Most, 2016: 305). For this reason, from at least the 7th century BCE and until the end of Antiquity, philosophers were not infrequently considered as *theioi andrés*, that is, as divine men (Petrovic; Petrovic, 2016: 41 *et seq.*) – a view that exposed, from the outset, the links between philosophy and religion. Pythagoras and Empedocles, in this regard, were emblematic *theioi andrés* figures.

Born in Samos, a *polis* from the coast of Asia Minor in the mid-6th century BCE, Pythagoras distinguished himself as the most notable *theios áner* of Antiquity. According to a widely disseminated narrative, Abaris, a legendary thaumaturgist from Thrace, recognized Pythagoras as a protégé of Apollo – the deity that had enabled him to work prodigious feats

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(Anderson, 1994: 12). Unfortunately, we know now little about his career; despite a diversity of biographical accounts written by authors such as Apollonius of Tiana, Porphyry and Iamblichus, the events of his life were frequently distorted as a result of fabricated memories that prevailed to the detriment of the real facts. However, we do know that in approximately 530 BCE, Pythagoras left Samos for Croton in the south of the Italian Peninsula, where he founded a sect or society that congregated the so-called Pythagoreans. In addition to his extraordinary intellectual capacity, expressed in the contributions he made to several branches of human knowledge and, notably, in the fields of mathematics and music, he was also considered as a man with supernatural gifts, capable of simultaneously appearing at two distinct places – a phenomenon known as bilocation – and evoking past lives in conformity with his explanations on the perennial nature of the soul and its transmigration from one body onto another (Hornblower *et al.*, 2012: 1245-6). Everything seems to suggest that in the condition of a divine man, Pythagoras observed many religious precepts by refraining not only from eating meat, but also from having contact with hunters and butchers, in addition to certain sexual restrictions. For Pythagoras and his disciples, the human body was converted into a prison and place of penance and purgation. Sensual pleasures were held to be retrenched and controlled by *áskesis*, a set of rules and exercises aimed at elevating and purifying the soul. Such conception brought Pythagoreanism close to the orphic currents in vogue in Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE. And not by coincidence, Pythagoreans and Orpheans were often taken for each other, as was witnessed by Ion of Chios, a poet from the second half of the 5th century BCE, for whom Pythagoras had composed poems under the pseudonym of Orpheus – a fictitious character, to be said in passing (Dodds, 2002: 152 *et seq.*).

In addition to Pythagoras, another of his contemporary thinkers was celebrated as a *theios áner*. It was namely Empedocles, a philosopher born into an illustrious family in approximately 492 BCE in Akragas (today, Agrigento), an *apoikia* founded by Gela in southern Sicily. As well as in the case of Pythagoras, we know little about Empedocles, and the information collected by Diogenes Laërtius (VIII, 2) – an author of the 3rd century CE – has many interpolations resulting from the legend around his figure.² Empedocles is known in our days for his theory on the four perceptible elements of matter (earth, water, fire and air). But in Antiquity, he was more than a philosopher or thinker, since his activities also comprised the realm of religion. As well as Pythagoras, he was an adept of the theory of

² It must be pointed out that although Diogenes Laërtius considers Empedocles as a disciple of Pythagoras, no evidence of such fact has been found.

reincarnation or transmigration of the soul, by asserting that the spirits (*daimones*) move from one body onto another in the course of successive cycles (Hornblower *et al*, 2012: 504). It was said that Empedocles usually presented his teachings as divine revelation, assuming the *persona* of a wiseman uttering oracles (Kingsley, 1995: 319). Soon after his death, stories about his supernatural attributes began to circulate; he was said to have the ability to resurrect the dead and command the winds. And the exegesis of the few remaining fragments of his work suggests that he publicly avowed such feats in his lifetime. It is important to highlight that Empedocles and Pythagoras were responsible for disseminating the belief that the soul, by skillfully using the adequate techniques, could detach itself from the body in a phenomenon that parapsychologists later recognized as the projection of consciousness, or extracorporeal projection (Dodds, 2002: 150).

Differently from Empedocles and Pythagoras, not all ancient philosophers were remembered by posterity as divine men in strict sense, that is, as enlightened individuals ultimately capable of performing thaumaturgic deeds. This, nonetheless, would not be a sufficient reason for establishing a dissociation between philosophical knowledge and religious belief, because atheism was by no means an ideological force in Antiquity. Very few philosophers – for instance, Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene, both in the 5th century BCE – went as far as to disclaim the deities' existence. Not even Protagoras, who is at times seen as an exponent of Greek atheism, challenged the existence of the deities themselves, but only the inconsistencies of some mythological narratives and the characteristics of some allegedly puerile or extravagant rituals. Not even Xenophanes or Plato, by criticizing the myths of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, had the intention of demolishing the Greek religious framework; instead, they set out to replace it by some more defensible philosophic forms, which led them to propose the notion of an essentially omniscient, all-powerful and benevolent divinity. For Plato, a divinity supportive of Beauty and Goodness would be pure thought in union with the ideas and categories of a divine nature, and it would be the task of man to rise towards it by means of reflection. And Aristotle held that the only way in which man could reach true happiness would be by cultivating the inner divine spark, a procedure capable of allowing the mortals to overcome their imperfect condition and drawing near to the deities, as Plato had taught already (Most, 2016: 313). The Stoics, in turn, bound the study of divinity to the study of *physis*, that is, of nature, and postulated an identity between the deities and the world in such way that theology became a part of physics, thus reinforcing the linkages between religion and philosophy. As to Epicureans, despite the critical views of their defamers who accused them of atheism and

impiousness, Epicurus and his followers recognized the existence of a plurality of anthropomorphic and immortal deities in the form of innate images that expressed an ideal of perfection and happiness. The point, for Epicureans, is that the deities would be too far removed to be concerned about the trivialities of this world, though men could still pay homage to them by participating with reverence, but without fear, in civic rites. Furthermore, Epicureans did not deny either the reasoning that by dedicating himself to philosophy, man could share the tranquility and wellness of the deities, to the point of resembling them, as much as possible (Reale, 1994a: 195 *et seq.*).

Most Greek philosophers, therefore, were neither inclined to refute religion, nor to confront it. Instead, they strove to enhance and systematize it, an endeavor that could be furthered in two ways: first, by elaborating on the explanations of a religious nature bequeathed on them by tradition; and second, by modifying myths, rites and cults that could somehow violate, with their features, the principles of reason or morality. In order to offer a more acceptable version of the religious beliefs and practices of their time, the philosophers acted at three levels: the cosmological level, the eschatological and the moral (Most, 2016: 308-309). By means of cosmology, they sought to answer the questions about the origins of the world – a topic that pagan cults, bound to the localism and immediacy of human experience, were not accustomed to pay attention to. From the eschatological standpoint, their interest was concentrated on the destination of the human soul after death, which required a unitary and coherent explanation about the afterlife, which Paganism had always lacked. Finally, in moral terms, the philosophers strove to discipline human behavior between birth and death in order to solve the flagrant absence of moral rules of the Greco-Roman religious system. For instance, Plato insisted in the idea that a divinity, as the source of the Good and perfection, should have goodness as one of its main attributes. His assertion clearly contradicted the current view that Pagan deities, similarly to the mortals, had countless vices (Mueller, 1936).

The finding that the domains of philosophy and religion were not estranged from each other but, instead, were truly permeable, must not induce us to assume that their relations were always harmonious and mutually supportive. In contrast, many authors in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE were known as representatives of what Dodds (2002: 182) defined once as the “Greek Enlightenment” – for instance, Hecataeus, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Protagoras and Socrates, for whom the myths and rituals of Paganism should be treated with some reservations, though without ultimately denying the existence of the

deities. Heraclitus, as it seems, was the first to admit that Greek mythology sometimes caused him embarrassment, and that he sought, therefore, to reform it via rational explanations. Xenophanes, his contemporary, was a stern critic of the amorality of the poems of Homer and Hesiod, while unconditionally denying the validity of divination practices. Heraclitus, on his turn, doubted the premonitory value of dream experiences and did not ascribe a validity to the catharsis produced by religious rites, comparing the purification of the human body by the blood of sacrificed victims to the attempt to clean up one's own dirtiness by bathing in the mud. It did not take long for such positions, as it seems, to rouse the animosity of conservatists, who were upset at the sight of the cults of the *polis* under the scrutiny of men bereft from any *eusebeia*, that is, any reverence towards the gods. Consequently, starting in the second half of the 5th century BCE, several purges are known to have taken place in Athens, affecting those thinkers – one may say, nonconformist thinkers – who somehow became a threat to the *pátrios politeia* in its ancestral beliefs and values. The first to be struck was Anaxagoras, judged for impiety in approximately 437 BCE. His persecution was followed by that of Diagoras of Melos, a contumacious critic of the Eleusinian Mysteries, who reputedly escaped a death-sentence by fleeing. Finally, the best-known case is that of Socrates. Accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth, he was sentenced to death by poisoning in 399 BCE in a trial that earned wide and lasting notoriety.

As stated above, most of these thinkers did not consider the religious experience as illegitimate, or absurd – quite the contrary. What they did reject was the possibility that the belief in the deities, *pistis*, could become a source of positive knowledge, thus drawing a clear line between what could be known by human intelligence and what could not. Therefore, they should be described not as atheists, but as agnostics: for although they did not doubt the existence of the gods, they had difficulties to formulate any rational explanation about them. At any rate, the “Greek Enlightenment” was not capable, at least in a first moment, either to sever or ease the bonds between philosophy and religion, as one may interpret from Plato's work. After having contact with Sicily's Pythagorean circles in approximately 390 BCE, Plato began to reflect more intensely on the transcendental world. From then on, the Greek rationalist tradition received a new magic and religious impulse. Inspired by Pythagoras' lessons, Plato assimilated the soul-transmigration theory and endorsed the depuration of bodily excesses, so the soul could be regenerated and return to its divine source. In the attempt to reconcile philosophy and the deities of the city, he proposes a set of laws aimed at regulating the interactions between men and the divine. In Plato's ideal *polis*, beliefs would be submitted to the control of philosophers, based on proven propositions capable of being

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taught without reservations. Even without forsaking the idea of a supreme divinity infused with Beauty and Goodness, Plato began to admit the existence of all deities, including those from the celestial realms and those of the underworld, in addition to *daimones* and heroes. Thus, despite defending reason's capacity to produce intelligible explanations on the physical and metaphysical realities, there is no doubt that the discussions with religious content attracted him considerably (Mueller, 1936: 468).

After Plato, the philosophical systems of the Hellenistic period (in particular, Stoicism and Epicureanism) seemingly experienced an intellectual *démarche* and went back, in a way, to the intellectual currents of the 5th century BCE – yet, without cutting asunder the ties between philosophy and religion. For exponents of the Stoic doctrine such as Zeno of Eleia and Chrysippus, moral perfection is an aim that can be attained only by the rational faculties, and there is nothing of irrational in the human soul that should be brought under control (Dodds, 2002: 40). Passions would be merely the result of a faulty judgment that can be corrected by reason. In frank disagreement with Plato, the Stoics held that the deities did not transcend the world, but were immanent to it (Most, 2016: 315). Such view contributed to ascribe to this philosophical current a much more concrete dimension, so to speak, aimed at the challenges imposed on man in the path of moral enhancement, which sensibly diminished the room for deductions about the nature of the deities, the destiny of the soul after death and the hierarchical ranks among the invisible beings that became the object of demonology and angelology in later periods. As faithful practitioners of Democritus' materialistic doctrine, Epicureans taught that the world and the human soul are not a product of any divine intervention but, instead, a casual arrangement of atoms. By so doing, they disengaged themselves from the need to reflect more deeply on deities, which explains the inexistence of a strictly Epicurean theology (Dumont, 1986: 86-87).

Philosophical currents of the Imperial Age and the search for transcendence

As a counterpoint to the intellectual *ethos* of the Hellenistic Period, a movement occurred in the beginning of the Imperial Age that arguably brought back to the philosophers' agenda the questions linked to the existence of deities, the role of the human soul, the possibility (and the convenience) of a union between man and the divine, and, most importantly, the validity of *pistis* as a legitimate form of knowledge of beings and things. This movement culminated in mid-3rd century

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Neoplatonism; and the school of Iamblichus in Chalcis stood out as its representative. Starting in the late 1st century BCE and extending throughout the Imperial Age, a seeming resumption both of the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato enabled the emergence of two philosophical currents, which experts call Neopythagoreanism and Middle Platonism. These two schools were decisive in the development of Neoplatonism. The common denominator of their views, one may say, was their conception of matter as an independent principle and the root of evil. In this sense, incarnation was considered a punishment for the soul and, at the same time, an opportunity of spiritual elevation for those willing to cultivate the divine and unite themselves with it in its fullness (Dodds, 1975: 33 *et seq.*). What started to be consolidated at that point is what some authors call Neoplatonism's *mysticism*, a word derived from the Greek *mystikon*, which refers to secret, absolute and marvelous things. Mysticism would be the ultimate experience of contact with the essence of truth, and one's fullest surrender to an absolute power, which implies a supraempirical experience (Bazàn, 2002: 86 *et seq.*), a journey or ascent during which course the soul is purified while contemplating *gnosis* or the *apocalypse*,³ i.e., revealed knowledge. This can be seen in the case of philosophers from the Imperial Age, many of which were believed to have risen to the condition of *theioi andrés*, as well as their precursors Pythagoras and Empedocles. As a result, the philosophical currents of the Imperial Age increasingly invested in the techniques capable of leading to *ekstasis*, that is, the mediumistic trance by which an individual may merge with the divinity, as taught by Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism.⁴

Another common denominator between the main schools of the Principate was the idea that divinity did not coincide with the *physis*, i.e., the world

³ In Greek, knowledge obtained by the intellect, that is, knowledge that depends on learning, was called *gnosis* or *episteme*. But depending on the context, the term *gnosis* could also refer to the mystical knowledge conferred on those persons authorized to perform theurgical rites, that is, the ones who were able to experience *epopteia* or divine epiphany. In this case, *gnosis* can be taken as one of the synonyms for the word *apokalypsis*, in the sense of knowledge arising from divine revelation, cf. Clarke (2001).

⁴ In classical Greek, *ekstasis* meant any deviation from the ordinary state of consciousness, any sudden change of behavior. The term could also be used as a synonym for "awe" or "dread". In medical context, it could have a connotation of hysteria, insanity or even divine or demoniac possession. Thus, originally, *ekstasis* did not refer to a mystical union with the divine, but to a state of possession or mediumistic trance, when the divine descended to Earth and assumed control of a human body. Only with Plotinus did *ekstasis* acquire the meaning of a complete surrender to divinity, an assimilation into the ineffable or the One. Such semantics is quite predictable, since the trend then was to appreciate the contacts of man with the superior forces. For further details, see Dodds, 1975: 101 *et seq.*

or nature, but was, instead, an absolute and transcendent entity. It would be then the task of men – or, better said, of those in love with philosophy – to rise to its level, since it was assumed that by incarnating, the human soul experiences a process of corruption, hence the need to restore its original integrity, which could only be attained by means of asceticism. A notable outcome of this literal crossing towards union with the divine, incorporeal and transcendent dimension was a revaluation of *pistis*, of faith, as a genuinely effective and legitimate modality in the obtainment of knowledge, since, by faith, man could have the conditions to realize the Truth that originated from God or from the gods. For any person instructed in the lessons of Greek philosophy, even in its Platonic branch, *pistis* was the least dependable among the resources at the disposal of the human intellect. It was practiced by common and illiterate individuals incapable of translating it into rational terms, i.e., incapable of employing the categories of logical thinking – the very foundation of what philosophers professed. Thus, *pistis* had since long occupied a secondary position in the agenda of the topics they addressed (Dodds, 1975: 159). This reality began to change in the period from the 1st century BCE to the 1st century CE, when thinkers stood out for their commitment not only with restoring *pistis* as an efficacious instrument of learning, but also (and surprisingly enough) with appreciating its value vis-à-vis the *logos*. In this process, we see a clear geographical dislocation of philosophy from Greece to the East, since all the most influential philosophical currents in the Roman Empire at some point either referred to the ancestral wisdom of Egyptians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Iranians, or effectively flourished in Egypt, which was considered as the millenary homeland of magic and, not less importantly, of philosophy itself. This explains the inventiveness of several traditions, according to which Plato had learned philosophy with the *magi* of the Near East (Potter, 1994: 190), whereas the source of the lessons transmitted by Pythagoras would have been Egypt and Babylon (Anderson, 1994: 12). In this regard, it is certainly not by mere chance that the turning point in the philosophical reflections of the Imperial Age can be situated in Alexandria, where we see the flourishing of the intellectual work of Philo, a Hellenized Jew born in approximately 30 BCE.

Philo's greatest contribution to the history of ancient philosophy doubtlessly resides in his confrontations with the materialistic currents of the Hellenistic Period, particularly Stoicism and Epicureanism, inasmuch as he reintroduced the study of incorporeal and transcendent elements into the intellectual debates of his day. He also stressed the need to reach out beyond reason in the human search for God, by unconditionally vindicating the usefulness of *pistis* as a gnoseological medium – a viewpoint that conferred a clear religious substance to his philosophy.

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Philo was a Jew born in Alexandria, the ancient Ptolemaic capital that distinguished itself for centuries as one of the most – if not the most – important intellectual centers of the ancient world. As an author, he combined the study of Greek philosophers with the traditions of Jewish scriptures with rare ability, which undoubtedly benefited him in the effort of building a synthesis between Greek philosophy in which rationalism had hitherto performed a leading, though not absolute role, and Eastern forms of knowledge which, in turn, were marked by a deeply religious worldview. As Reale (1994b: 219) states, the attempt to merge Hebrew theology and Greek philosophy “inaugurates the alliance between Biblical faith and Hellenic philosophical reason, which was destined to become widely successful with the diffusion of the Christian discourse”. With Philo, divine revelation definitively becomes a subject of intellectual speculation, thus subverting the entire Classical and Hellenic philosophical tradition, which, while recognizing the validity of divine inspiration (as Plato had done), still underscored the role of *logos* in translating such inspiration into an intelligible – nay, rational – discourse. But he offers a new alternative by suggesting a dependency of *logos*, considered either as word or as the human faculty of reasoning, on *pistis*, that is to say, on unconditional faith in the revealed divine word. To this effect, his proficiency in the sacred texts of Judaism was as decisive as his training in the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrines, which set him in tune with the trend of resuming the studies on Pythagoras and Plato, which was already in course in the final decades of the 1st century BCE.

The emergence of Neopythagoreanism as an intellectual movement was largely due to the efforts of Nigidius Figulus, an aristocrat and a friend of Cicero who brought back the teachings of Pythagoras in the final century of the Republic, after they had been somewhat forgotten in the course of the Hellenistic Period. Indeed, starting in 360 BCE, everything seems to suggest that the Pythagorean circles, which had never attracted an expressive number of individuals – as occurred frequently with all philosophical schools of Antiquity and, needless to say, of contemporary days too – dwindled more and more. This dying out led some authors to pinpoint a disarticulation of the Pythagorean school until its resumption by Figulus, under new garb, which was then dubbed by experts as Neopythagoreanism. Kingsley (1995: 322-323), however, asserts that Pythagoreanism never fully disappeared from the Mediterranean Basin, but remained active all along, even if in underground form, in Sicily and Athens. In either case, it is starting with Figulus and with the doctrine’s introduction into Roman aristocratic settings that Pythagoras became visible again. Without a doubt, Figulus’ Pythagoreanism drew largely from the work of Bolus of Mendes, an Alexandrian philosopher of the 3rd

century BCE who wrote many treatises associated with the pseudo-Pythagorean literature (only a few fragments are still extant today). With this Eastern intermediation, Neopythagoreanism advanced toward deepening the religious traits that were already visible in it since the 5th century BCE, to emerge as an important philosophical-soteriological current. The authors linked to it, such as Moderatus of Gades, Nicomachus of Gerasa, Numenius of Apamea and his epigone, Cronius, in addition to Apollonius of Tyana – a well-reputed *theios áner* from Cappadocia, reinvigorated and updated an entire debate on the transcendent nature of the deities, on non-corporeal and immaterial aspects of existence and the immortality of the soul, by affirming that philosophy ultimately stems from divine revelation. For this reason, Pythagoras was revered as a divine man, a prophet instructed by divinity itself (Reale, 1994b: 340-341). The identification of Neopythagoreanism with mysteries and the sacred is so intense that, in Late Antiquity, the word *Pythagorean* became a synonym for “esoteric” and “occultist” (Kingsley, 1995: 326).

Concurrently with Pythagoreanism, another highly influential current at the time was Middle Platonism. The two philosophical currents were even confounded with each other on many occasions, as in the case of Numenius of Apamea, who has been cited at times as an author of one current or the other.⁵ In this regard, it is important to stress the inappropriateness with which we sometimes apply the labels “current” or “school” to exceedingly fluid and heterogeneous intellectual movements, as both terms suggest the existence of strong organic bonds among their members. In reality, we see a number of features that bring together in a rather floppy manner the thinking of authors with a high degree of autonomy, and who not rarely expressed their reasoning with remarkable eclecticism, reaping contributions from quite distinct origins. For this reason, any attempt to push them into clearly demarcated categories becomes elusive. For instance, according to Romano (1998: 20), Middle Platonists never constituted a school of thought in the strict sense. What united them was in essence their interest in Plato’s lessons, which began to be reread and, further, resignified by an influx of elements from Aristotelianism, Stoicism and, above all, Neopythagoreanism.

The first representative of Middle Platonism was arguably Eudoros of Alexandria, who, in the second half of the 1st century BCE, proposed an interpretation of the Platonic doctrine according to Neopythagorean

⁵ The ambiguity in Numenius of Apamea’s definition is not by chance, since he saw himself as an heir of the Pythagorean tradition and a champion of Plato’s lessons against the ultra-intellectualistic trend that prevailed among the authors in connection with the Academia, cf. Kingsley, 1995, p. 328.

principles. After Eudoros, many other thinkers from the Imperial Age can be identified as Middle Platonists. The record of some of them, for instance, Plutarch, Aulus Gellius and Apuleius, has been preserved with quite consistent information. But regarding a few others, such as Thrasyllus, Calvisius, Taurus, Alcinous and Nigrinus, we unfortunately know too little. In any case, in general lines, the theoreticians associated with Middle Platonism, as well as those with a Neopythagorean inclination, set out to reflect on the immaterial and transcendent realms, breaking with the materialism of the Hellenist schools and bringing to the fore the metaphysical and theological components of philosophy. With this approach, they invested time and effort in the study of daemonology, an ancient branch of Greek thought that covered the *daimones*, that is, invisible mediators between the deities and men. From the ethical standpoint, on its turn, the key recommendation of Middle Platonists was *imitatio Dei*, a befitting stand for a philosophical system aiming, primarily, at the supralunar world (Reale, 1994b: 276 *et seq.*).

Along the Principate days, Neopythagoreanism and Middle Platonism underwent a gradual convergence that led to the emergence of Neoplatonism, a syncretic current of thought which, despite having the works of Plato as its key reference, drew from the contributions of many other philosophical and spiritual currents, including Hermeticism. Ammonios Saccas, a thinker who taught the Platonic doctrine in Alexandria in the first half of the 3rd century, is considered to be its precursor. Many illustrious figures studied under his guidance, for instance, Origen the Christian, Origen the Pagan and Longinus, in addition to Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism. A man of Greek and Egyptian origin, Plotinus received his intellectual training from Ammonios Saccas and left for Rome in 244, after participating in a campaign in Persia under the command of Gordian III – an occasion when he had the opportunity of deepening his knowledge of Eastern thought. In strictly philosophical terms, the innovation inaugurated by Plotinus is the statement that the One – an absolute and transcendent category – is the source of all existing things, and that the secondary principles to which existence is bound depend on it. The One can thus be described as the First Principle, even though, as Romano (1998: 106) ponders, such a reading might not be faithful to Plotinus' thought, as this assumption would lead us into ascribing the predicate of being to what would be, instead, the principle of being – hence the difficulty of fitting the One into any ontological category. In any case, with the theory of the One, Plotinus definitively breaks with the linkages between physics and theology as maintained by the Stoics. The divine continued to be the ultimate aim and source of all things, but the material universe, i.e., the cosmos, was a defective reality susceptible

to degradation. Although the beings and things would still have the spark of divine presence within themselves, the One would be absolutely perfect, pure and transcendent and consequently protected from the corruption ingrained in *physis*. The entire Neoplatonic ethics derives from this central reasoning, since the mission of man on Earth would be to return to the One by freeing himself from the traces of materiality that still keep him bound to ignorance and a hostage of passions (Most, 2016: 315-316). After Plotinus' passing in approximately 270, Porphyry – one of his most talented disciples – became the director of the school in Rome and continued the reflections of his master, particularly on the need for the return of the human soul to the celestial spheres. To attain this aim, a philosopher should cultivate *apatheia*, the absence of passions, by adhering to a contemplative and reflexive attitude towards life, which would then lead him to an assimilation within the One (Romano, 1998: 124).

Iamblichus of Chalcis: philosopher, hierophant, theurgist

Although Plotinus and Porphyry, as well as Plato and many other theoreticians, had proposed that the ultimate aim of philosophy should be the mystical union with the divinity, both thinkers assumed that such operation should be accomplished by means of intellectual activity – which would definitely require the use of reason. The movement of spiritual elevation toward the divine would thus hinge on man's intellectual faculties, and not on any supernatural grace. Moreover, the possibility of asceticism resided both in the potential identity of the soul with its divine foundation and in a cosmic imperative according to which all things must revert, in the end of the days, to their source. For this reason, Plotinus had many reservations about having *pistis* as a useful or necessary tool for inquiring into the One. For many years, Porphyry remained loyal to Plotinus' lessons but, towards the end of his life, he already considered *pistis* as a privileged modality of knowledge, since without an intervention of faith it would be rather impossible to attain the Truth (Dodds, 1975: 119 *et seq.*). By appreciating the role of *pistis* in the process of merging into the One, Neoplatonists gradually converted philosophy into religion, at a level never attained before by any other philosophical current in Antiquity. To a certain extent, this momentum seems to be related with the rise of Christianity as a prevailing intellectual force in the Roman Empire, since the dialogue between faith and reason was also an evident issue among Christians thinkers of that time – as one may find in Origen, an author who sought to strengthen the authority of *pistis*, as established by Paul, using the categories of Hellenistic *logos*. The contribution of Iamblichus – the

most notorious of Porphyry's students – to this debate was decisive.

A native of Chalcis, a Coele-Syrian city, Iamblichus was born in approximately 240 into an illustrious family. In his youth, he is likely to have studied in Alexandria, where he became acquainted with Neopythagoreanism through Nicomachus of Gerasa's works (Reale, 1994b: 554). One may say this experience was decisive in his education, as he had manifested a bent toward the Neopythagorean propositions, to the point of writing a biography of Pythagoras (which has fortunately reached us). In his thirties, Iamblichus was a student of Anatolius, a Christian philosopher who later in life was ordained Bishop of Laodicea. Anatolius taught then in Caesarea of Palestine, and it was probably by his recommendation that Iamblichus resolved to study with Porphyry in Rome. We do not know for sure how much time Iamblichus spent in Rome, or when he left it. It is assumed that he lived in the city in 280 - 300 and returned to Syria to establish his own school before his master's disappearance in 305. Upon closer reflection, the decision of going back to his homeland is somewhat odd, inasmuch as Iamblichus – the most brilliant of Porphyry's disciples – was a natural candidate to succeed him as the school's leader. In the opinion of Dillon (1987), Iamblichus' return to Syria is likely to have been motivated by an intellectual divergence between him and Porphyry regarding the place of theurgy in the program of philosophy students. In any case, in the early 4th century, Iamblichus settled in Daphne, in the outskirts of Antioch, where he founded a school and taught students who later earned notoriety in their paths as philosophers, such as Sopater, Aedesius, Eustachius and others.⁶ Most authors recognize the year 325 as the most probable date of Iamblichus' death.

Iamblichus' intellectual importance amidst the transformations experienced by philosophy since the early Principate days resides less in the originality of the Platonic (or Neoplatonic) propositions he put forth – most of which had been already established by Plotinus and Porphyry – than in his effort to dissolve philosophy into religion. This led him to introduce a topic practically ignored in the agenda of philosophers until then: the epistemological – and, one may say, soteriological – worth of ancient Pagan rites. This innovation confers a conspicuously practical

⁶ According to Bidez (1919), Iamblichus settled in Apamea, as suggested by the correspondence of Pseudo-Julian. On his turn, Dillon (1987: 870), based on the account of John Malalas (an author from the 6th century CE), believes that Iamblichus settled in Daphne. Here, the preference for Malalas' version is due to the fact that he was a native of Antioch and, therefore, a knower of his own city's history. However, the issue remains controversial.

character to his school, even though, in the opinion of Smith (2000), Iamblichus can also be righteously considered the first thinker of Philosophy of Religion, since his interests cover theoretical, as well as verbal and ritual aspects of man's relationship with the divine. With Iamblichus, the philosopher converts himself into a priest whose task is not only to develop rational explanations on how the universe came into being, on the meaning of human life and on the attributes of deities and other invisible entities, but also to officiate religious rites accepted as efficacious options in enabling the human ascent and the obtainment of knowledge of the divinities, in general, and particularly of the One, thereby reaching the source of Truth. Iamblichus was therefore the first philosopher to ascribe a protagonist role to *theourgeia*, that is, to ceremonial magic, which was held capable of enabling the officiant's spiritual elevation and the experience of *epopteia*: a contemplation of the divine, a privilege of initiates. To clarify his viewpoint on the subject, Iamblichus wrote in approximately 280 a treatise with ten books, in which he synthesized the main aspects of theurgy and assessed its value in gnoseological terms.

Currently known as *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, his treatise had another title when it was written: *The reply of Master Abamon to the letter of Porphyrius to Anebo, and the solutions to the questions it contains*. In 1497, the work's title was modified by Marsilio Ficino, a renaissance scholar who renamed it as *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldeorum, Assyriorum* as he prepared its first translation into Latin. This title was doubtlessly more attractive to a public increasingly interested in the Eastern customs and traditions particularly the Egyptian ones. The title was then reproduced by Nicolas Scutellio in his Latin translation of 1556, and by Thomas Gale in the *editio princeps* of 1678 (Ramos Jurado, 1997). Certainly, for the sake of convenience, the title was abbreviated to *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, which does not do justice to the work's overall content, considering that only its two final books deal with Egyptian beliefs. The first editors did not question the authenticity of *De Mysteriis*, but in the 19th century, Ed Zeller posited that the work had not been written by Iamblichus but, instead, by one of his disciples. The polemic lasted until 1911, when, after conducting an extensive philological study, Karl Rasche definitely credited Iamblichus as the text's author, as well as Proclus and Damascius had done in Antiquity (Des Places, 1966). Most authors date the writing of *De Mysteriis* to the years 280 - 300, after Iamblichus' stay in Rome. As to the pseudonym he adopted in his reply to Porphyry, it is possible that the word *Abamon* includes "Ab" and "Amon", to convey the sense of "Amon's Father", that is, "the Father of the Gods" - a rendition of the Greek expression *theopator*, which was used to denote the theurgists (Ramos Jurado, 1997: 8). Unfortunately, the original *Letter to Anebo* was lost. Its partial reconstruction is possible only via a few sparse

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references in works of Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodoret of Cyrus and Augustine, as well as in *De Mysteriis*, since Iamblichus' method of reasoning is one of refuting Porphyry on a point-by-point basis. This reveals how much adherence to theurgy was a polemic issue in Neoplatonic circles.

In the ancient philosophical lexicon, the word *theourgeia* is in a way a neologism. Its use is attested to for the first time in a work of the mid-2nd century entitled *Chaldaic oracles*. Although a tradition preserved in the *Suda* – a 9th century Byzantine dictionary – ascribes its composition to an author named Julian, we do not know whether this would be Julian the Chaldean or his son, Julian the Theurgist. Only a few fragments of the *Chaldaic oracles* have been preserved. This was a work composed in hexametric verses as a collection of esoteric revelations characterized by a deep eclecticism, through which one could detect the influences of practically all leading philosophical currents of the time – Platonism, Middle Platonism, Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism – in association with astrology and Eastern beliefs (Montero, 1997: 185). Theurgy is presented in the *Oracles* as a repertoire of magical procedures capable of expanding the philosopher's insight regarding the supralunar world, and facilitating his mystical union with divinity. It represents the first attempt to ascribe a philosophical validation to Pagan rites, in particular, to magic and divination (Potter, 1994: 203). But beyond that, *theourgeia* – which originally means “work of the gods” – claimed for itself a higher standing than that of *theologia*, or “discourse on the gods”, which, in turn, sought only to understand the higher beings in rational or rationalized terms by means of the *logos*. Theurgy did so by appealing to *pistis* in the belief in the ability of magic rites to bring the philosopher into direct contact with the deities and other invisible powers, thus incorporating into the philosophical activity Pagan rites that had been ignored by philosophers' reflections for centuries. To this end, the correct manipulation of *symbola*, that is, of the material and immaterial apparatus at the theurgist's disposal – including stones, plants, animals, statues, metals, conjurations and imprecations believed to have been revealed to mortals by the deities themselves – was essential (Tanaseanu-Döbler, 2013: 105). Yet, it must be mentioned that in practical terms, theurgy did not include anything new vis-à-vis the plethora of esoteric practices of soothsayers and sorcerers at all places in the Roman Empire. Such practices were often called *goeteia* or black/vulgar magic, and many of them are exemplified in the *Greek magical papyri* (Betz, 1996). The distinction between *theourgeia* and *goeteia* did not regard, therefore, the magic rites *per se* but, instead, the purposes of officiants and more or less sophisticated explanations provided on them. From the legal standpoint, however, theurgists and *goetes* could be taken to court on account of *veneficium* or

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maleficium (Silva, 2003) – i.e., for crimes of sorcery.

No extant source suggests that Plotinus read the *Chaldaic oracles* or ascribed any relevance to theurgy as an asceticism-method. This does not mean that he denied the efficaciousness of magic – a practically unthinkable option for someone in his days –, but the topic did not interest him, since, in his view, man's merging into the transcendent dimension represented by the One was not an operation performed by means of a ritual. Instead, it was for him a training of the mind and an intellectual exercise, we may say, as had been taught previously by Plato (Dodds, 2002: 289) – a philosopher who probably had not taken part in Egyptian or Chaldean mysteries (however much, as we saw above, a whole subsequent tradition posits that the basic matrix of Plato's philosophy derived from the East) (Shaw, 1995: 7). On his turn, Porphyry held a somewhat ambiguous opinion on the value of Pagan rites for philosophy. As an enthusiast of oracular guesswork before joining Plotinus' circle, he wrote in his youth a work entitled *The philosophy of oracles*, expressing an appreciation for the revelations conveyed by the deities to men by means of inspired soothsayers and prophets – though he did not explicitly mention the *Chaldaic oracles*. There is robust evidence, therefore, that Porphyry did feel strongly inclined to incorporate esoteric teachings to his thought. Eventually, such inclination might have led him to accept theurgy as a useful source of intellectual and spiritual enhancement for philosophers. But his interaction with Plotinus produced a noticeable break in his thinking, as we may observe in the *Letter to Anebo* – a full-fledged manifesto against the possibility of any philosophic utility for guesswork and magic. After Plotinus' passing in 270, Porphyry resumed an evident interest in oracular divination and incorporated the *Chaldaic oracles* into his reflections, as we see in *De abstinencia* and, even more clearly, in *De regressu animae*. This latter work even cites theurgy. But Porphyry still refused to ascribe a primacy to it and held that it played a secondary role in the purification of the *pneumatike*, that is, of the spiritual soul – which distinguished itself from the *noérá*, or intellectual soul (Des Places, 1989: 18 *et seq.*). For him, theurgy was but a *preparatio* for philosophical life. And this justified its inclusion into the list of secondary disciplines.

Standing in opposition both to Plotinus and Porphyry, Iamblichus places theurgy at the heart of the Neoplatonist philosophical system.⁷ He does so by proceeding from the assumption that the philosophical *paideia* taught by Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, as well as the beliefs and rites of

⁷ In the writings of Iamblichus and later Neoplatonists, the references to ritualistic magic do not always use the word *theourgeia*. Sometimes, such rites are cited as *ieratike*, *telestike*, *ierourgia*, *mistagogia* and *theiasmos*, cf. Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013: 14).

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Paganism, drank from the same source: the power of the gods. By practicing theurgy, a philosopher not only reflected on or contemplated the divine potency, but also performed rites capable of elevating him unto the realm of the deities, including the One – the source of being. According to Shaw (1995: 4), this deep change introduced by Iamblichus into the very foundations of Neoplatonism stemmed from the perception that contact between man and the deities of Paganism had been neglected by the philosophers who preceded him, since the intellectual faculties were more appreciated by them for spiritual asceticism than the succor eventually bestowed by the deities on mortals. This explains his emphasis on ritual aspects of Paganism and his view of theurgy as the only discipline capable of bridging the gap between the supra- and sublunary spheres. For Iamblichus, the philosophy of his time was contaminated to a considerable extent by a rationalist *hybris* that threatened to set men apart from the origin of perfection and knowledge, and from the gods. It was therefore urgent to restore the bonds between the human and divine realms, as Plato proposed in the past both in the *Laws* and *The Republic*, by referring to the myth of a Golden Age when men, backed by Chronos and guided by the *daimones*, enjoyed peace, prosperity and justice. By falling prey to pride over their condition, men began then to govern themselves, while ignoring the deities, thus giving cause to affliction. Iamblichus, as much as Plato, vindicated the establishment of a new alliance between the deities and men. To attain this aim, it did not suffice for a philosopher to devote himself to *theologia*, that is, to reflection on the deities, for this implied the uttering of a discourse circumscribed to purely human terms. *Theourgeia*, in turn, was a medium depending only on divine grace, which unequivocally pointed to the superiority of *pistis* vis-à-vis *logos*, as we can see in the following passage from *De Mysteriis* (I.12):

The illumination that comes about as a result of invocations is self-revelatory and self-willed, and is far removed from being drawn down by force, but rather proceeds to manifestation by reason of its own divine energy and perfection, and is as far superior to (human) voluntary motion as the divine will of the Good is to the life of ordinary deliberation and choice. It is by virtue of such will, then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon theurgists, summoning up their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, even while still in the body, to detach themselves from their bodies, and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.

According to Iamblichus, the vision or illumination (*epopteia*) experienced by the philosopher or *epopta* (he who contemplates the divinity or the invisible powers) during the theurgic rite is a gift or grace bestowed upon men only at the deities' will. In another passage further on, as he opposes Porphyry's argument that theurgists can unite to the gods by using their

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intellectual faculties alone, Iamblichus makes a point to emphasize that:

It is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of the unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone; for thus their efficacy would be intellectual, and dependent upon us. But neither assumption is true. For even when we are not engaged in intellection, the symbols themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work, and the ineffable power of the gods, to whom these symbols relate, itself recognises the proper images of itself, not through being aroused by our thought. For it is not in the nature of things containing to be aroused by those contained in them, nor of things perfect by things imperfect, nor even of wholes by parts. [...] I have laboured this point at some length for this reason: that you not believe that all authority over activity in the theurgic rites depends on us, or suppose that their genuine performance is assured by the true condition of our acts of thinking, or that they are made false by our deception. [...] Thus, divine purity does not come about through right knowledge, in the way that bodily purity does through chastity, but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge. Nothing, then, of any such qualities in us, such as are humans contributes in any way towards the accomplishment of divine transactions (*De Myst.* II, 11).

Together, the two excerpts above allow us a clear glance at the cornerstone of Iamblichus' philosophical program, namely, his emphasis on the practice of theurgy, that is, of the magic ritual as the main access path to the One. This not only consolidates the re-encounter of philosophy and religion, but also expresses in full bloom the originality of his thought, as he is the first to theorize on the ritualistic dimension of Paganism, seeking thereby to cherish it as an indispensable discipline for philosophers. This feature confers a distinction on him in the context of ancient philosophy, which only recently has been drawn to the attention of those less interested in censuring him for an alleged irrationalism than in fathoming the fine filigree of his thought.

For Tanaseanu-Döbler (2013: 17; 100), a ritual is a set of actions and gestures that distinguish themselves from common behavior with the aim of producing a connection between the practitioner and the realm of divinity. Iamblichus describes such ritual as a *techné* or *episteme*, in other words, as a systematic body of knowledge structured into subdisciplines, which a philosopher must master along his training. In *De Mysteriis*, the most highly appreciated of these disciplines is *mantike*, the clairvoyancy resulting from divine inspiration – a topic extensively covered in its third book. According to Iamblichus – who remains faithful, in this regard, to a well-established tradition of Antiquity –, such clairvoyancy or divination would branch off into two large extensions: first, an inductive branch, which depends on human logic for decoding the revelatory signs of the future, for instance, in connection with astrology, haruspicy and auguries;

and, second, the inspired experience, which would be directly bestowed by the deities in situations when the requestor was asleep, as in the case of oneiromancy, or in a state of mediumistic trance, as it happened in the oracles.⁸ But this distinction was not limited to the clairvoyancy-technique, as it included the very premonitory capacity contained in the act. Since inductive divination practices required the intervention of the human intellect, they had a limited scope and could only predict facts of daily life. On its turn, inspired divination supported by the deities was not strictly aimed at predicting the future, but at allowing its practitioner to participate in their intellection and mirror them while uttering his oracles. Thus, *mantike* would be another means at the philosopher's reach in his effort to draw nearer to the divinities and ensure, thereby, his own salvation (Addey, 2014: 272-275).

Final remarks

As we saw above, in general lines, Neoplatonism was a 3rd century philosophical current capable of stitching together the distinct intellectual and esoteric traditions that thrived in the Roman Empire since the transition from the Republic to the Principate – including, not less importantly, Christianity, a current to which Porphyry nurtured a deep aversion (substantiated by his now lost refutation of the followers of the Good News). Despite the often-conflicting relations of Christians and Neoplatonists, it is difficult not to conclude that by enabling a heretofore unprecedented appreciation of *pistis* among Pagan philosophers, Neoplatonism somehow reacted through the work of Iamblichus, in the terms of classical culture, to a trend that was led, in a certain way, by the Christians themselves. According to Clarke (2001: 2), while the Church Fathers increasingly reached out to the *paideia*-foundations to uphold their professed beliefs, Pagans, on their turn, were soon capable of grasping the persuasive strength embedded in the divine word and began to present their own teachings in the form of revelation. From this angle, Neoplatonism in Iamblichus and his school represented the Pagan intellectual movement most closely resembling Christianity in ancient

⁸ Another divination modality often practiced by theurgists was *telestike*, in which the deities' statutes became simulacra of the mediumistic conveyors. Inflated by the divine breath, these channelers would be also capable of making predictions and conveying orientation to their requestors. As a divination-technique known for a long time by the Egyptians, *telestike* was nonetheless not an object of in-depth attention by Iamblichus in *De Mysteriis* (VII.1), and only appears in a brief passage of the work.

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culture. This would contradict the opinion of authors such as Shaw (1995: 4), for whom Iamblichus' thought had few links with Christianity as one of the leading religious currents of the Empire in the second half of the 3rd century (it is worth remembering). Iamblichus, on the one hand, incorporated to his thinking a key category of the Christian *Weltanschauung*, namely *pistis*, and converted it into the foundation of theurgy, a *techné* or *episteme* bestowed on man by the gods; on the other hand, he mobilized this feature in a fierce defense of Pagan rites and beliefs, by directly opposing Plotinus and Porphyry, who rejected the validity of bloody sacrifices – perhaps, the most characteristic rite of Paganism from time immemorial. With the purpose of safeguarding blood sacrifices, which Christians held to be deeply repulsive, Iamblichus did not hesitate to reinterpret Pythagoras' thinking by vindicating that he (Pythagoras) had only prohibited it to contemplative philosophers – i.e., those who had already attained a higher level –, while permitting it without any reservations to others (Tanasaenu-Döbler, 2013: 114-115). Iamblichus, on his turn, recommended such sacrifices to all lovers of philosophy, indistinctly. Not incidentally, Pagans in subsequent centuries have praised him as a bulwark of Paganism and attuned his figure to savior deities such as Helios and Aesculapius (Bidez, 1919: 35).

As closing remarks in this reflection on the course of philosophical thought under the Principate, it would do well to ask ourselves about the meaning of Iamblichus' *oeuvre*, since that he is an author frequently accused of capitulating before irrationalism, a trend that started to become prevalent in his days. For instance, for Dodds (2002: 290), by making concessions to theurgy, Iamblichus exposed without subterfuges how far the Greek-Roman *intelligentsia* of the Imperial era had subsided into a hopelessness-crisis – a reason, therefore, and an encouragement for reading him with caution. Due to Dodds' influence, Iamblichus was for a long time interpreted by some as a fanatic and credulous author, while others considered him a thinker without any originality, whose most memorable feat would have been to corrupt Pagan philosophy by introducing into it the exquisite features of religion and magic (Ramos Jurado, 1997: 20). In recent years, however, and against the tides of such views, some readers set out to restore Iamblichus' authority by drawing attention to him as a careful exegete and a competent philosopher, recognizably in *De Mysteriis* – a work that has been praised as an authentic masterpiece of ancient philosophy.

None of these views, however, seems to be the most precise one. First, because as Clarke (2001: 1) authoritatively argued, it does not seem that Iamblichus judged philosophy to be the most efficacious method of

knowledge – a position that led him to ascribe to theurgy, instead, the leading role in the pursuit of Truth. For him, any attempt to grasp divine revelation via study, instead of by the practice of rites, would be simply a waste of time. Second, because in Antiquity, *pistis* and *logos* were two foundational categories of philosophy itself, even though their alliance was expressed in distinct hues across different thinkers, currents and times. It would not be very productive, in this regard, to judge ancient philosophy through the lenses of Cartesian rationalism, which prevails in today's academic settings. Maybe the best path for understanding Iamblichus' thought in its complexity is to admit, as Paul Veyne (1987) has admitted, the existence of distinct programs of truth validated by the cultural parameters of each time and place – which, in turn, would make it difficult to judge one program of truth in the light of another. Finally, one must not lose sight of the fact that in Iamblichus' Neoplatonism, a philosophical explanation presupposes a mediation by magic-religious categories; and that this does not, and must not, be seen as an inconvenient concession to irrationalism, or as a degradation in intellectual terms.

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