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Aspects of Political Philosophy in Iamblichus

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For humankind is weak and small, is short-sighted and has nothingness in its nature. The one cure for its erring nature, its confusion and unceasing change is its sharing to the extent possible in divine light.

(*De Mysteriis* III 18)

Wishing to speak of political philosophy in Neoplatonism must seem an impossible task to one who follows a common notion in assuming that the otherworldly character of Neoplatonism entails the exclusion from it of political philosophy. This assumption has been challenged.¹ As a matter of historical fact Neoplatonic philosophers were involved in politics.² On the theoretical level, however, the precise place and form that political philosophy can take in the framework of Neoplatonism are matters which are far from clear. In what follows I would like to collect some indications concerning this in Iamblichus. Given the small amount of Iamblichus' work that has survived, we can hardly hope for more than results that are sketchy and fragmentary. My evidence will be taken principally from Iamblichus' treatise on Pythagoreanism and from the excerpts from Iamblichus' letters preserved in Stobaeus' anthology. The use of these documents involves, as I shall indicate, further limitations to what we can hope to achieve. Occasionally, I shall refer to Iamblichus' predecessors and successors, to the extent that this might shed some light on the themes being examined.

I

The tendency in later Neoplatonism to articulate philosophy along the lines of an Aristotelian division of the sciences implies that political philosophy (in some form) must have a place. This had occurred much earlier of course in the history of Platonism. A well-known example is provided by the Middle Platonist Albinus (Alcinous) who, in his *Didaskalikos* (ch. 3), divides philosophy 'according to Plato' into three branches, theoretical, practical and logical. The differentiation of the theoretical and practical branches of philosophy is Aristotelian: theoretical philosophy includes theology (i.e. metaphysics), mathematics and physics; practical philosophy is composed of ethics (care of moral habits), 'economics' (care of the

household) and politics (care of the city and its salvation, σωτηρία).³ We find much later in Iamblichus a similar division of philosophy into theoretical and practical sciences, the latter including politics. Two chapters of Iamblichus' *De communi mathematica scientia* (chs 15 and 30) are of particular interest in this regard.

Chapter 15 shows how mathematics penetrates the whole of philosophy, that is all of the sciences of which philosophy is composed. This is demonstrated first in the case of the theoretical sciences, theology (55.8ff. Festa) and physics (55.22ff.), and then in relation to the practical sciences, politics (56.4ff.) and ethics (56.8ff.). The account of the role played by mathematics in politics is rather vague: mathematics 'leads the ordered movement of actions (πράξεις), provides the movement of stable theorems, brings equality (ισότης) to all and the appropriate agreement (ὁμολογία)'. If the nature of political philosophy remains somewhat obscure, at least its place in philosophy as a whole is assured. What Iamblichus says about ethics is a little clearer: mathematics reveals to ethics the principles of the virtues and the paradigms of friendship, of happiness and of other goods. This is the subject of a later volume of the work *On Pythagoreanism* of which the *De communi mathematica scientia* is vol. 3, i.e. vol. 6 *On Arithmetic in Ethical Matters*.⁴

The theme of the omnipresence of mathematics is taken up again in chapter 30 of *De communi mathematica scientia*, where the same division of philosophy into theoretical and practical sciences is used. As regards politics and ethics (91.27ff.), Iamblichus tells us that mathematics reaches down to the objects of these sciences, constitutions and moral order, finding the appropriate measures in relation to rectitude of mode of life (βίος), of household and of cities, using these measures for the best, for moral improvement, for the best education, and for other such benefits.

Assuming then that these two chapters of vol. 3 of the work *On Pythagoreanism* are relevant to Iamblichus' views on the structure of philosophy,⁵ we may conclude that political philosophy had a place for him in philosophy, occupying, as a practical science, a position subordinate to the theoretical science that is mathematics (from which it receives its paradigms) and concerning itself with cities, constitutions, the organisation of actions, the promotion of equality, agreement, the moral improvement and the good in general of citizens.⁶

In attempting to see what might be intended by the rather vague indications given in *De communi mathematica scientia* chapter 15 about the nature of political philosophy, we can hardly do better than to refer to what Proclus proposes in his revision of Iamblichus' text in the *Commentary on Euclid* (23.12-24.20 Friedlein).⁷ Proclus specifies the reference to ordered movements of actions in Iamblichus by speaking of the measures of the appropriate times (καιρός) for actions, the measures of cosmic cycles, the numbers appropriate for procreation and for promoting harmonious life. What he has in mind in particular is the marriage number of Plato's *Republic* (546c ff.) – discussed also by Iamblichus elsewhere (*In Nic.* 82.19-83.18 Pistelli) – whereby procreation is to be programmed, as well as the astronomical knowledge whereby the life of the ideal city ought to be guided.

Another text in Proclus is of interest for the question of the place of political philosophy in the hierarchy of sciences. The passages I have discussed above deal

with the dependence of politics on one of the theoretical sciences, mathematics. In his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (I 32.1ff. Diehl) Proclus examines the relation between politics and the lowest of the theoretical sciences, physics. Political theory is both inferior and superior to physical theory: it is inferior in that it concerns the organisation of human affairs whereas physics deals with a larger order; it is superior in that a political order already exists in intelligible reality. The ideal city pre-exists in the intelligible, and exists in the heavens and (lastly) in human lives. Thus Plato's *Republic* precedes his *Timaeus*, although it concerns a moral order inferior to the perfect order of the universe. If politics occupies a lower place in the structure of philosophy, it derives its principles nevertheless from a transcendent level of reality, intelligible immaterial being.

II

Proclus' discussion of the place of political philosophy comes at the beginning of an early work and may well reflect the views of his teacher Syrianus. However, similar ideas can already be found in Iamblichus if we turn to the excerpts from Iamblichus' letters preserved in Stobaeus' anthology. Our use of this evidence is somewhat restricted by the fact that the excerpts are of a popularising and sometimes banal nature, and by the difficulty in placing the excerpts in their original context, both that of the letters as wholes and that of the collection(s) of letters from which the excerpts are taken.⁸ However the excerpts do contain some information that corroborates and extends the conclusions presented above.

A number of excerpts expound the conventional Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic definition of the human good as assimilation to god, as leading a divine life as far as possible, which life can only be that of the rational soul abstracted from and indifferent to material existence.⁹ We find then the expression of an other-worldly attitude which, we might be inclined to infer, can have little time for political philosophy. This inference is not however supported by an excerpt from Iamblichus' letter to Dyscolius (IV 222.7ff. Wachsmuth-Hense). In the context of discussing qualities in leadership, Iamblichus defines the goal of the good ruler as being the happiness of his subjects, for

the common advantage is not separated from the private. Rather, individual advantage is contained in the whole and the part is saved (σώζεται) in the whole, in animals, cities and other natures.

If, we may conclude, the individual good is found in that of the city, and rulership is responsible for the common good which it secures on the basis of political wisdom, then the individual depends in some way on this wisdom in order to reach the good. But is this good divinisation? And how does the city function in helping citizens to reach it?

Excerpts from two other letters go some way towards answering these questions. An excerpt from Iamblichus' letter on moderation (σωφροσύνη, III 271.8ff.) speaks of good order (εὐταξία) as containing pleasures within limits and saving (σώζει)

households and cities, 'according to Crates' saying. And furthermore it approaches already somehow to the form of the gods'. An excerpt from Iamblichus' letter to Asphalius on practical wisdom (φρόνησις, III 201.17ff.) is more informative. This wisdom is described as leader of the virtues. It receives its generation (ἀπογέννησις) from the pure and perfect intellect – the reference here, I take it, is to intellect as a transcendent hypostasis. Wisdom looks to this intellect and is perfected by it, finding in it the model of its activities. It is this wisdom that brings about the communion (κοινωνία) between gods and men. It is in accord with this virtue in particular that we are assimilated to the gods. It allows us to discriminate between what is good and advantageous and the opposite. It judges and rectifies deeds. In brief it is

the governing leader of men and of the whole order among them, bringing cities, households and individual ways of life (βίος) up to the divine model, painting them according to the best resemblance, erasing this, adding on that, and in both imitating appropriately the model. So indeed does wisdom make divine-like (θεοειδέει) those that have it.

The link between the political good and divinisation is clearly established in this text. The virtue of wisdom, exercised we may suppose by rulers, provides these rulers with a divine model according to which they shape the life of the city, painting, as it were, an image in it of the divine. The citizen achieves divinisation through the divinised city of which he is a member. Proclus' intelligible city, which acts as a principle of political philosophy, is already present in these excerpts from Iamblichus.

Hierocles' *On Providence*, as summarised by Photius, contains a passage (Photius *Bibl.* 251.464b ff.) which presents at greater length some ideas we have found in Iamblichus. The passage deals with Plato's distinction (*Phaedrus* 248a ff.) between the philosopher and the lover. The true philosopher pursues contemplation and avoids political activity, practicing the purificatory virtues. The lover cultivates the practical virtues 'because of the divine', partakes of intelligible goods and is politically active. He is represented by the guardians of Plato's *Republic* who, like artists, sketch the good city using a divine model. Hierocles is quoting here from *Republic* 500e2ff., which is paraphrased in what follows: the artist rulers take the city and men's character as if they were a tablet which they purify, sketching the shape of a constitution on it, looking to what is by nature just, beautiful, moderate, and what, as Homer says, makes men divine-like (θεοειδέει). Thus the rulers erase this, paint on that, so as to make men's characters as far as possible pleasing to the divine.

The passage in Hierocles brings out clearly the connection between the Iamblichean excerpt quoted immediately above and Plato's *Republic*: Iamblichus' wisdom that paints men and cities according to a divine model corresponds to Plato's artist rulers.¹⁰ The likeness to the divine that wisdom paints is that of which Homer speaks in Plato's text (*Rep.* 501b6-7). Cities are divinised, assimilated by a guiding wisdom to a divine model which, in Iamblichus' Neoplatonic universe, is found in a transcendent hypostasis, the perfect intellect that produces wisdom.

The following pages of Photius' digest of Hierocles are also of interest. The lover who is painter of constitutions, educator and diviniser of men, is not inferior to the purely contemplative philosopher. Both possess the same philosophy; they are equally worthy. They differ in that the lover is distinguished by his philanthropy (φιλανθρωπία), whereas the philosopher excels in his individual action (ἰδιοπραγία).

Hierocles' reluctance to subordinate the life of political action to that of contemplation is remarkable. It is also noteworthy that the life of political action as represented by the lover appears to be inspired by philanthropy, a quality that is already mentioned by Iamblichus in an excerpt from a letter to Agrippa (IV 223.9), where the superiority of the ruler over his subjects is said to be made acceptable by his goodness and philanthropy (χρηστότης, φιλανθρωπία).¹¹ If goodness and philanthropy guide, in Iamblichus and Hierocles, the political action of the philosophically informed leader, this motive might be compared with that of Plato's philosopher kings who, one feels, would much rather continue in the life of contemplation, but leave it on account of their obligations to society, due to which they devote themselves to the tasks of political office (*Rep.* 517c-d, 520a-c). In Iamblichus and Hierocles there is no hint of such sacrifice or obligation.

A similar positive attitude to political action, a similar absence of tension between it and the life of contemplation can be found already in Plotinus (VI 9.7.20-26):

...the soul must let go of all outward things...and even ignoring itself, come to be in contemplation of that One, and having been in its company and had, so to put it, sufficient converse with it, come and announce, if it could, to another that transcendent union. Perhaps also it was because Minos attained this kind of union that he was said in the story to be 'the familiar friend of Zeus', and it was in remembering this that he laid down laws in its image, being filled full of lawgiving by the divine touch. Or, also, he may think civic matters unworthy of him and want to remain always above.... (trans. Armstrong)

In Plotinus, the life of contemplation is not given up for that of political action; the latter may (but does not necessarily) follow the former, being inspired by it to communicate the good. Action, as Plotinus says elsewhere (III 8.4.36-43), may accompany contemplation as the communication of this contemplation at a lower level. Indeed the world itself is a kind of by-product that accompanies the contemplative life of higher principles.

Our survey of Stobaeus' excerpts from Iamblichus' letters might include finally mention of two texts dealing with law and rulership. The first, from Iamblichus' letter to Agrippa, includes an elaborate encomium of law: it is 'the king of all',¹² as the source of all goods, as benefiting all civic arrangements and men's lives (IV 223.14ff.). Iamblichus also stresses the need for rulers who, as responsible for the law, are as incorruptible as humanly possible. A second text derives from a letter on marriage (IV 587.16ff.). Iamblichus describes the rule of husbands in households as that of a certain type: it is not that of a despot (who rules for the advantage of the superior, his own), nor that of certain skills (which care for the good of the inferior, i.e. the client), but that of politics, 'which cares equally (ἐξ ἴσου) for the common

good'. This classification of types of rule derives from Aristotle¹³ and is found also in a text attributed to the Pythagorean Callicratidas concerning domestic happiness.¹⁴ It has been noted that Aristotle considers the superiority of the male in the household as natural and political rule as arising among free and equal citizens, whereas Callicratidas regards *both* domestic and political superiority as determined by nature.¹⁵ I am not sure, however, how much weight the Iamblichean excerpt can bear in this regard. Is Iamblichus suggesting that conjugal rule, like political rule, derives from consent among equals? Is he merely saying that, as in households, there are in cities certain members pre-eminently fitted to rule (like Plato's guardians), whose rule is accepted by the citizens and who rule equally for the good of all?

The following conclusions might be proposed on the basis of this review of the excerpts from Iamblichus' letters. The human good, as assimilation to god or divinisation, is achieved, to the extent that man is a member of society (i.e. man as embodied), in a divinised city. Iamblichus conceives of the divinised city on the model of Plato's utopia, a state ruled by leaders inspired by wisdom, a knowledge of intelligible reality in whose likeness they 'paint' the city. Their wisdom includes mathematical and astronomical principles such as those identified as forming the contents of political philosophy in the first section of this paper.

Although the evidence is very limited, some comparisons might be ventured between the *Republic* and Iamblichus' ideal state: Iamblichus' rulers act, not out of obligation to society, but out of goodness and philanthropy. (Plotinus and Hierocles indeed suggest that political action may result from contemplation as a communication of the good.) The wisdom guiding the rulers in Iamblichus is a product of a transcendent hypostasis, perfect intellect. Thus political divinisation fits neatly into the Neoplatonic hierarchy of emanation. Law appears to play a more important role in Iamblichus' political theory than it does in the ideal state of Plato's *Republic*. However this last point requires further investigation, in relation for example to Iamblichus' use, not only of the *Republic*, but also of Plato's *Laws* and Aristotle's *Politics*.¹⁶

III

In the final part of this paper I would like to return to the work *On Pythagoreanism*, this time to vol. I, *On the Pythagorean life*. We might read Iamblichus' account of the Pythagorean life, as portrayed by Pythagoras and his followers, as exemplifying an ideal that he wishes to recommend to his contemporaries on the threshold of the fourth century AD,¹⁷ an ideal that combines the life of contemplation with that of political action. To what extent, we might ask, does this ideal match the results established thus far concerning Iamblichus' political philosophy?

There is some difficulty in interpreting every detail given in *On the Pythagorean life* as contributing to a model that Iamblichus wishes to propose. The sources used by Iamblichus in the book sometimes disagree on certain points and this disagreement is on occasion left unresolved. An example can be found in chapter 6, where Pythagoras' departure from Samos is explained by his wish 'to avoid political business' (trans. Clark), or by the contempt shown in Samos for education. Else-

where, in Italy, Pythagoras shows little reluctance to engage in political activity, at least as legislator (see below). This disagreement suggests that the degree to which Pythagoras was a contemplative philosopher who avoided politics was already a matter of dispute in Iamblichus' sources. Notwithstanding such cases of differences between sources, a generally coherent image, I believe, emerges.

Pythagoras' education included (ch. 5) 'staying in Crete and Sparta because of their laws'. (It has been noted¹⁸ that these conservative régimes were admired also in Plato's *Laws*, 624c ff.) A comparison is made between Pythagoras and Minos, the mythical lawgiver we have met above in Plotinus. Pythagoras became involved (unwillingly?) in Samian politics and, on arriving in Croton, inspired laws and ordinances which were regarded 'as if they were divine commands' (ch. 6). He and his disciples¹⁹ also acted as legislators for other Italian cities (chs 7, 27, 30) and this legislation was based on 'political science' (πολιτική επιστήμη, ch. 30, sec. 173). Thus among Pythagoras' scientific contributions to mankind are those of political philosophy, in particular the theory of 'the best form of civic life' (πολιτεία, ch. 6). A rather obscure mathematical account of the best constitution, which is said to have inspired Plato, is given in chapter 27, the main point of this account being, it appears, that the constitution is designed according to proportional equality, a system of harmonious relations between unequals.²⁰ We are given to understand that tyranny is not acceptable as a form of government (ch. 32), nor is the rule of the rich or of the people (ch. 35). I would suggest that the best constitution for the Pythagorean might not be very different from that sketched in the *Republic*, i.e. rule by a philosophical elite. The importance of law and of lawful rulership is stressed (e.g. ch. 30, sec. 171, ch. 31, sec. 203), as is the need that rulership be freely accepted (ch. 30, sec. 183). Finally the injunction to 'follow god' is emphasised as a Pythagorean principle, as the goal of all philosophy and of all life (e.g. ch. 18, sec. 86). The ideal Pythagorean is portrayed as the perfect imitator of the divine and the best of rulers of men.

To the degree that these aspects of the Pythagorean life correspond indeed to elements of Iamblichus' understanding of the place and content of political philosophy, as traced above in parts I and II of this paper, we may consider Pythagoras and his disciples as examples of Iamblichus' ideal of the contemplative and politically active philosopher.²¹

Notes

1. Cf. W. Beierwaltes, *Denken des Einen* (Frankfurt, 1985) 111, n.103; cf. also 24-31.

2. Cf. for example, G. Fowden, *Pagan Philosophers in late antique Society, with special reference to Iamblichus and his followers*, Oxford D. Phil. thesis 1979, who shows (193ff.) how most Neoplatonists were well-to-do and often had aristocratic connections. On Iamblichus' royal background cf. J. Dillon, *Iamblichus Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973) 4-5.

3. Albinus (Alcinous) *Didaskalikos* Hermann (ed.) 153-4.

4. Cf. my *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity*

(Oxford, 1989) ch. 3.

5. The Aristotelian division of sciences can be found also in Iamblichus' curriculum of Platonic dialogues (*Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, L.G. Westerink [ed.] [Amsterdam, 1962] 26, 10-35; cf. xxxvii-xl). Although the dialogues are classified (according to the theoretical sciences) as being physical or theological, the practical sciences are present also in that the first dialogues of the curriculum are seen as cultivating ethical and political virtue as preparatory to theoretical virtue.

6. In his curriculum of Platonic dialogues (above n.5), Iamblichus identifies the *Gorgias* as relating to political virtue. Although he seems not to have written a commentary on the *Gorgias* he does use the dialogue in contexts that are relevant to politics (below nn.12, 20). In this connection we will find below that he also uses the *Republic* and (possibly) Aristotle's *Politics*. Proclus' curriculum as a student included, as regards political virtue, the *Republic*, the *Laws* and the *Politics* (cf. H.J. Blumenthal, 'Marinus' Life of Proclus: Neoplatonist Biography' *Byzantion* 54 [1984] 487-8).

7. For the argument that Proclus is revising Iamblichus in this part of the *Commentary on Euclid*, cf. my *Pythagoras Revived*, 157ff.

8. On these excerpts cf. B. Larsen, *Jamblique de Chalcis* (Aarhus, 1972) I 50-1. In addition to the problems mentioned, the question of the identity of the addressees of Iamblichus' letters requires investigation.

9. Stobaeus *Anthologium*, C. Wachsmuth, O. Hense (eds) (Berlin, 1884-1912) II 173, 176; III 706; IV 907.

10. Cf. also Iamblichus *Protrepticus* ch. 10 (in particular 55.1-56.2 Pistelli).

11. Although perfectly banal of course as a political virtue in imperial times, philanthropy had already been associated with Pythagoreanism by Aristoxenus; cf. H. Diels, W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin, 1952) I 469.28; Pseudo-Archytas, *On Law and Justice* in H. Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period* (Abo, 1965) 36, 4; Hierocles, *Comm. on the Golden Verses*, F. Kohler (ed.) (Stuttgart, 1974) 30, 24.

12. Pindar Fragment 169, 1 quoted by Plato *Gorgias* 484b.

13. *Politics* III 6 1277b30ff.

14. In Thesleff, op. cit. 105.11ff.

15. Cf. P. Moraux, *À la recherche de l'Aristote perdu: le dialogue 'Sur la justice'* (Louvain, 1957) 24-5, 83-5.

16. Cf. above nn.6, 13.

17. Cf. J.A. Philip, 'The Biographical Tradition – Pythagoras' *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 90 (1959) 192-4; M. von Albrecht, 'Das Menschenbild in Iamblichs Darstellung der pythagoreischen Lebensform' *Antike und Abendland* 12 (1966) 51-63.

18. G. Clark, *Iamblichus: on the Pythagorean Life* (Liverpool, 1989) 10.

19. A group of whom are referred to as πολιτικοί; cf. ch. 18, sec. 89, ch. 25, sec. 108, ch. 27, sec. 129, ch. 28, sec. 150.

20. Plato's text on proportional (geometrical) equality (*Gorgias* 508a) concludes a series of excerpts from the *Gorgias* presented by Iamblichus as Pythagorean in *Protrepticus* chs 17-19.

21. I am indebted to the participants in this conference for drawing my attention to some important facts and for raising issues that I hope to pursue.