

IAMBlichus: THE TWO-FOLD NATURE OF THE SOUL AND THE CAUSES OF HUMAN AGENCY

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Introduction

Iamblichus' doctrine of the soul poses a problem of internal consistency. Based on the fragments of *De anima* preserved in Joannes Stobaeus' writings, the evidence provided by Priscian of Lydia and the commentary on *De anima* attributed to Simplicius in the manuscript tradition, the very core of Iamblichus' doctrine would appear to coincide with the notion that once the human soul has descended into the world of becoming and joined the body, it changes in substance while preserving its identity.¹ As it has been emphasized in a number of important studies, this thesis was developed and formulated by the philosopher in opposition to Plotinus' doctrine that the soul possesses an immutable and unchanging nature. Usually referred to as the doctrine of the "undescended soul", the latter view rests on a strict ontological distinction between the level of the soul and those of realities superior to it.² A closer examination of other fragments of *De anima*, as well as evidence from Damascius and Hermias of Alexandria, would however appear to challenge the above reconstruction of Iamblichus' doctrine. Based on these sources, Iamblichus would seem to be drawing a hierarchical distinction among individual souls according to their relation to change. What he would be arguing is that the superior class of souls undergoes no change in substance (see in particular Damascius, *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* IV p. 24.1–23 W.-C.). Iamblichus would thus appear to be granting certain categories of souls the same status as the one Plotinus confers on all souls—something Iamblichus criticises in other passages of his writing.

¹ See Prisc. Lyd. *Metaphr. in Theophr.* p. 32.13–19. See too J.F. Finamore—J.M. Dillon (2002) 238–241, 258–259. Other crucial sources for Iamblichus' doctrine of the soul are Procl. *In Tim.* III p. 333. 23 ff. and Simpl. (?) *In de an.* p. 5. 33 ff., p. 89. 22 ff., p. 240. 33 ff., p. 313. 1 ff. (cf. *ibid.* p. 237. 37 ff.). These passages have been collected and translated by A.J. Festugière (1953) 252–257 and J. Finamore (2002) 229–278.

² I would here refer to what by now has become a classic work on the subject: C. Steel (1978). For more recent studies, see J.M. Dillon (2005) and J. Finamore (2009).

I will be discussing this problem in the light of two passages on the two-fold nature of the human soul: the fragment of an epistle addressed to Macedonius, *On Fate*, preserved in Joannes Stobaeus, *Anthologion* II 8. 45 p. 174.9–27;³ and *De mysteriis* VIII 6–7.

The Fragment from the Epistle to Macedonius

The fragment from the *Epistle to Macedonius* (*On Fate*) preserved in Joannes Stobaeus II 8. 45 p. 174. 9–27 W. (45a in the Taormina-Piccione edition) focuses on the human being (ἡμεῖς), conceived as a moral agent situated within the order of the universe yet at the same time independent of it. Iamblichus' approach to this issue—one he inherited from the philosophical tradition—is ethical and metaphysical in nature and consists in linking the individual to the principles determining his action. This epistolary fragment, no doubt drawn from a wider textual context, describes the relation between the principles in question and those of the whole. In doing so, it raises a problem crucial for the purposes of the present enquiry: for one of the principles discussed in the fragment, that “of actions” (τῶν πράξεων ἀρχή), is described as being “separate from nature” (ἀφειμένην ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως) and “emancipated from the movement of the whole” (ἀπόλυτον ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως). At the same time, this principle is unambiguously said to be located “within us” (ἐν ἡμῖν)—and the “us” here is part of the sphere of nature. Within us, then, would appear to reside a principle that belongs to an ontological sphere superior to us. Is such a view compatible with the theory that distinguishes the soul from levels of reality superior to it, as it is preserved in Joannes Stobaeus I 49. 32 pp. 365.5–366.11 and other passages of Iamblichus? Let us first examine the text:

Τούτων δὲ οὕτως ἐχόντων καὶ ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν ἔχει μὲν συμφωνίαν πρὸς ἀμφοτέρας ταύτας τὰς τοῦ παντός ἀρχάς· ἔχει δὲ καὶ ἀφειμένην ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως καὶ ἀπόλυτον ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως ἐν ἡμῖν τῶν πράξεων ἀρχήν· διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἐν τῇ τοῦ παντός, διότι μὲν γὰρ (οὐκ) ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως παράγεται οὐδὲ ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως, πρεσβυτέρα καὶ οὐκ ἀπὸ τοῦ παντός ἐνδιδομένη, προτέτακται· διότι γε μὴν ἀφ' ὅλων τῶν τοῦ κόσμου μερίδων καὶ ἀπὸ πάντων στοιχείων μοίρας τινὰς κατενεύματο καὶ ταύταις πάσαις χρῆται, περιέχεται αὐτὴ καὶ ἐν τῇ τῆς εἰμαρμένης διατάξει, συντελεῖ τε εἰς αὐτὴν καὶ συμπληροῖ τὴν ἐν αὐτῇ κατασκευὴν καὶ χρῆται αὐτῇ δεόντως, καὶ καθ' ὅσον μὲν λόγον καθαρόν αὐθυπόστατον καὶ αὐτοκίνητον ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ τε ἐνεργούντα καὶ τέλειον ἢ ψυχὴν

³ For a study of the fragments from the *Epistle to Macedonius*, *On Fate*, see D.P. Taormina (2010) 181–225, 336–386.

συνείληφεν ἐν ἑαυτῇ, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἀπόλυτός ἐστι πάντων τῶν ἔξωθεν· καθ' ὅσον γε μὴν καὶ ζωὰς ἄλλας προβάλλει ρεπούσας εἰς τὴν γένεσιν καὶ ἐπικοινωνεῖ τῷ σώματι, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἔχει συμπλοκὴν καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ κόσμου διάταξιν.

Given this state of things, the **human principle of acting** too is consonant with **both these principles of the whole** [i.e. fate and providence]; but on the other hand, it also implies the presence **within us of a principle of actions** separate from nature and emancipated from the movement of the whole: for this reason, the principle in question is not contained within the principle of the whole. Because it derives <neither> from nature nor from the movement of the whole, as it is more eminent and is not produced by the whole, it comes first. But as it has distributed some of its parts from all the regions of the universe and all the elements, and makes use of these parts, it is itself situated within the order of fate, contributes to this order, brings its establishment to completion and makes appropriate use of it. Insofar as the soul contains a pure, self-subsistent and self-moving reason that operates by its own means and is perfect in itself, it is free from all external things; but insofar as it also projects other lives that incline towards generation and is in contact with the body, it is also intertwined with the order of the universe.⁴

The above passage presents a number of difficulties. The first is of a textual nature. The surviving text reads ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν ἔχει μὲν συμφωνίαν ... ἔχει δὲ καὶ ἀφειμένην ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως καὶ ἀπόλυτον ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως ἐν ἡμῖν τῶν πράξεων ἀρχήν, but the second part of the sentence (ἔχει δὲ καὶ ἀφειμένην ... ἀρχήν) is rendered problematic by its context. The immediately preceding lines (9–11) mention the “human principle of acting” (ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν), said to be consonant with the principles of the whole. If we are to trust our manuscripts, Iamblichus explains that the principle in question implies the existence within us of another principle, apparently identical to the first (and here described as the principle of actions: τῶν πράξεων ἀρχήν). However, insofar as this principle is independent of nature and the movement of the whole, it is also independent of fate; as such, it appears to possess characteristics that would make it incompatible with the former principle.

Not only is the text preserved rather problematic, but so is the emendation Wachsmuth has suggested: ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἀφειμένη ... ἀπόλυτος ... ἀρχή.⁵

⁴ All translations from the Greek are my own.

⁵ See G. Staab (2002) 405 n. 998, translating the passage as “Allbewegung (in uns?)”, with added in brackets “ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως ἐν ἡμῖν—Bezug von bleibt in der Schwebe”. The problematic nature of Wachsmuth’s emendation has most recently been stressed by Dillon and Polleichtner (2009), who believe it is necessary to add ἡ before ἐν ἡμῖν: ... ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἀφειμένη ἀπὸ τῆς φύσεως καὶ ἀπόλυτος ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ παντός κινήσεως <ἡ> ἐν ἡμῖν τῶν πράξεων

This emendation hardly solves the difficulty posed by the text: for it fails to explain how two apparently identical principles may be assigned anti-theoretical characters. The textual problem is here closely intertwined with the philosophical.

I have thus chosen to keep the text as it is preserved. In justification of this choice, two elements may be invoked for the time being:

1. The parallel structure of the first and second sentence of the text: line 10 ἔχει μὲν συμφωνίαν ... and line 11 ἔχει δὲ καὶ ... ἀρχήν.
2. A parallel with *De myst.* VIII 7 p. 269.15: ἔχει γὰρ ἀρχὴν οἰκείαν ἢ ψυχὴ— which we shall shortly return to.

What requires some clarification is the meaning of the expressions ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν (lines 9–10) and τῶν πράξεων ἀρχήν (line 13).

What Are These Principles?

Lines 10–11 mention “both these principles of the whole” (ταύτας τὰς τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχάς). These “principles” were no doubt also originally featured in a section of the text that is now lost, as is suggested by the pronoun “these” which is used. It is likely the two principles in question are providence and fate, which are examined in the previous eclogue. While the second passage does not immediately follow the first, it is highly probable that it is from the latter that the two terms are here taken up again. The reference subsequently made to nature and the movement of the whole no doubt lends confirmation to the hypothesis that one of the two principles is fate, since Iamblichus describes fate as nature. Evidence is instead lacking for the second principle, although its identification with providence is perfectly plausible, not least because in the writings of later Platonists—particularly those following Iamblichus—providence is commonly regarded as one of the causes of human action. What is crucial, in this respect, is Proclus’ *De providentia*, which argues that providence and fate differ from one another

ambo [scil. providentia et fatum] quidam causas mundi et eorum que in mundo fiunt esse, preexistere autem providentiam fato, et omnia quidem quecumque

ἀρχή (“but it is also the case that the origin of action in us is both independent of Nature and emancipated from the movement of the universe”). The two scholars argue that “it seems necessary to insert <ἡ> before ἐν ἡμῖν, as this phrase needs to be subject rather than predicate of the sentence preceding it” (ad. loc.).

fiunt secundum fatum multo prius a providentia fieri; contrarium autem non iam verum esse: summa enim totorum a providentia recta esse, diviniore fato.
(*De prov.* II 3.7 ff.)

in that—while both are causes of the world and of the things that take place in the world—providence precedes fate, and everything that comes about according to fate comes about far more according to providence. The converse, however, is not true, as the highest things of all are governed by providence, for it is more divine than fate.

This classification which Proclus inherited from tradition essentially coincides with the one Plato developed in *Laws* IV 709 B 7–C 1—a passage Proclus explicitly refers to. Plato envisages human action as depending upon three factors: God (θεός), destiny and opportunity (τύχη καὶ καιρός), and human ability (τέχνη). But what is most relevant for the present enquiry is the fact that in relation to the distinction drawn between fate and providence Proclus mentions Iamblichus himself: the difference between fate and providence, the philosopher explains, “has been examined by Iamblichus in countless writings on providence and fate” (*enim Iamblichus in hiis que de providentia et fato mille accessibus elaboravit*).

According to Proclus, therefore, Iamblichus argued that both providence and fate are the causes of the world and its events, yet in different ways: for everything that takes place according to fate also depends on providence, yet the highest things in the universe depend on providence but not fate.⁶ This evidence from Proclus is further confirmed by fragments of Iamblichus’ epistles. In his *Epistle to Poemenius* (I 1. 35), Iamblichus describes the order of fate as being subject to providence and identifies its subordination as the source of the self-determination or independence of the soul (I p. 43.12: τὸ αὐτεξούσιον τῆς ψυχῆς).

The various elements gathered so far quite clearly indicate that the expression “both these principles of the whole” (ταύτας τὰς τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχάς) at lines 10–11 refers to providence and fate. In the light of this, what also becomes clear is the fact that Iamblichus is free to use the expressions ἡ ... ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν and τῶν πράξεων ἀρχὴν with different meanings and to speak both of a principle of human acting (ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν at lines 9–10) consonant with the principles of the whole—and hence with providence and fate—and of another principle (τῶν πράξεων ἀρχὴν) which in turn depends on providence but not on fate, and as such possesses power

⁶ On this distinction which Proclus himself adopted, drawing upon Iamblichus, see C. Steel (2005) and (2007) 9–10, 16.

of self-determination. This principle of acting that depends on providence but not on fate would transcend the latter. In the extract from Iamblichus' epistle, as line 23 reveals, this principle is said to reside in the soul: in its inferior part, which is subject to fate, as well as in its superior part, which is independent of fate.

The overall structure of the argument presented in eclogue 45a would now appear to be largely consistent.

At lines 9–11 we find a principle of human acting describing the condition of the embodied soul. This principle by necessity obeys the laws of providence and fate.

At lines 11–13 this principle is said to imply a principle of individual actions that escapes the laws of fate. It is further specified (lines 13–16) that this principle of individual actions precedes and is more noble than the order of fate.

Then (at lines 16–21) the theme of lines 9–11 is taken up again and it is stated that by the process of generation souls are allotted certain regions of the universe, through an act presupposing the totality of the universe.

It may thus be argued that the first section of the text and the last (lines 9–11 and 16–21) refer to the condition of souls within the realm of generation and describe the ontological condition of embodied souls, whereas the remaining sections (lines 11–16) point to a specific possibility within this condition: the persistence in the soul of the 'input' of a principle superior to the natural order.

In the light of the above considerations, it is clear that the text preserved in the manuscript tradition is perfectly acceptable and that it would be a mistake to emend it, both from a philological and a philosophical perspective. In the passage in question, Iamblichus does not merely identify two principles of human action (as Wachsmuth's text would suggest), but also defines the relation of subordination between the two, which in turn explains the presence within us of an immanent principle ontologically dependent upon a superior and transcendent principle.

The Network of Principles—Ethics

The theory presented in the fragment of Iamblichus' epistle possesses general value and is centered around the source or cause of action. Starting from the "human principle of acting" (ἡ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀρχὴ τοῦ πράττειν), a network of four principles is established, all of which lack any designation but are scrupulously defined with respect to one another. The "human

principle of acting” is consonant with the principles of the whole (αἱ τοῦ παντὸς ἀρχαί), meaning it does not stand in opposition to these principles, but is rather closely connected to them and contributes to the order they establish.

To this first connection a second one is juxtaposed: for the “human principle of acting” implies the existence “within us” of a “principle of actions” (ἐν ἡμῖν τῶν πράξεων ἀρχή) which does not depend on nature and is superior to it—in other words, a principle free from fate.

The explanatory categories for the two principles of action, then, are “included in the order of fate” and “free from such order”. These categories ensure continuity with the subsequent argument: for they continue to illustrate the two-fold nature of the soul on p. 174, 21 ff.—a notion crucial for the attempt to explain how escaping the laws of fate is possible. Insofar as the soul is self-moving, it is independent of external things; yet insofar as it is in contact with the body, it is intertwined with the order of the universe, that is to say fate. In such a way, a strong correspondence is drawn between these conditions and the previous two ἀρχαί of human action, suggesting it is these ἀρχαί that determine the various activities of the soul.

The Network of Principles—Metaphysics

The network of principles established in the fragment from the *Epistle to Macedonius*, along with the notion of the two-fold condition of the soul, finds a significant and enlightening parallel in book VIII of the so-called *De mysteriis*.⁷ The question here is once more the influence of fate, yet this is examined not from an ethical standpoint (as is the case in the *Epistle to Macedonius*), but from a metaphysical perspective. Based on this new perspective, Iamblichus recalls the Hermetic doctrine according to which man has two souls:

Δύο γὰρ ἔχει ψυχάς, ὡς ταῦτά φησι τὰ γράμματα [i. e. τῶν Αἰγυπτίων], ὁ ἄνθρωπος· καὶ ἡ μὲν ἔστιν ἀπὸ τοῦ πρώτου νοητοῦ, μετέχουσα καὶ τῆς τοῦ δημιουργοῦ δυνάμεως, ἡ δὲ ἐνδιδόμενη ἐκ τῆς τῶν οὐρανίων περιφορᾶς, εἰς ἣν ἐπεισέρπει ἡ θεοπτικὴ ψυχὴ· τοῦτων δὴ οὕτως ἐχόντων ἡ μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν κόσμων εἰς ἡμᾶς καθήκουσα ψυχὴ ταῖς περιόδοις συνακολουθεῖ τῶν κόσμων, ἡ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ νοητοῦ νοητῶς παρούσα τῆς γενεσιουργοῦ κυκλήσεως ὑπέρχει, καὶ κατ’ αὐτὴν ἢ τε λύσις γίγνεται τῆς εἰμαρμένης καὶ ἡ πρὸς τοὺς νοητοὺς θεοὺς ἀνοδος, θεωργία τε ὅση πρὸς τὸ ἀγέννητον ἀνάγεται κατὰ τὴν τοιαύτην ζωὴν ἀποτελεῖται.

⁷ On the context in which the relation between these two texts is to be envisaged, see I. Hadot (2004) esp. 116 and n. 405.

For man, as these writings [i.e. those of the Egyptians] affirm, has **two souls**: one is from the first intelligible and is participant of the power of the demiurge, while the other is given from the revolutions of the heavenly worlds, to which the God-beholding soul returns. Given these conditions, the soul that comes **into us** from the worlds follows the periodic circuits of those worlds; but the soul that stems from the intelligible and is present intelligibly is superior to the cycle of generation, and through this occur both the unbinding of fate and the upward progress to the intelligible gods. Theurgy, insofar as it conducts upward to the unbegotten, is made complete by a life of this kind.

(VIII 6 p. 269.1–12)

The idea of the unbinding of fate here is founded upon the same metaphysical notion that underlies the ethical view espoused in the *Epistle to Macedonius*. The two souls described in *De mysteriis* exist within us just like the two principles in the epistle, and their status too in no way differs from that attributed to the principles. The soul stemming from the movement of celestial bodies may be compared to the principle consonant with the principles of the whole; the soul situated above the cycle of becoming, to the principle separate from nature and independent of the whole.

Both the two kinds of souls and the two principles, moreover, are said to coexist “within us”: in the *De mysteriis* the soul deriving from the intelligible and immanent within us enters as an addition (ἐπισέρπει) into the other kind of soul, that deriving from the universe. Similarly, in the *Epistle to Macedonius* the principle depending on the principles of the whole coexists within us as a principle which is not contained within that of the whole. This correspondence between the two principles and the two kinds of souls is further confirmed by Iamblichus himself, who in order to explain the Hermetic doctrine interprets the term “soul” used by the Egyptians as denoting the latter’s “principle”: “For the soul has a principle of its own (ἐχει γὰρ ἀρχὴν οἰκείαν ἢ ψυχὴν) leading around to the realm of the intelligible (εἰς τὸ νοητὸν περιαγωγῆς), of separation from generated things (τῆς ἀποστάσεως ... ἀπὸ τῶν γιγνομένων), and of contact with being and that which is divine (ἐπὶ δὲ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ θεῖον συναφῆς);”⁸ “there exists another principle of the soul which is superior to all nature” (ἔστι καὶ ἑτέρα τῆς ψυχῆς ἀρχὴ κρείττων πάσης φύσεως).⁹

Finally, in *De mysteriis* the passage from abstraction (the arrangement of elements lacking any denomination) to concreteness (the definition of the principle in question) may again be compared to what we find in the *Epistle to Macedonius*. In *De mysteriis*, this passage takes place through a transition

⁸ *De myst.* VIII 7 p. 269.15–17.

⁹ *De myst.* VIII 7 p. 270.9–10.

from the “principle”, conceived as the cause of being and movement, to “what is best in us” and finally the “soul”:

Κατὰ δὴ ταύτην οἰοί τε ἑσμεν καὶ ἑαυτοὺς λύειν. Ὅταν γὰρ δὴ τὰ βελτίονα τῶν ἐν ἡμῖν ἐνεργῇ, καὶ πρὸς τὰ κρείττονα ἀνάγεται αὐτῆς ἡ ψυχὴ ...

Through this principle we are able to set ourselves free [from the bonds of fate]. For when what is best in us is in activity and the soul is exalted to what is superior to itself ...
(*De myst.* p. 270.13–15)

The *Epistle to Macedonius* transposes the same argument on an ethical level:

καὶ καθ' ὅσον μὲν λόγον καθαρὸν αὐθυπόστατον καὶ αὐτοκίνητον ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ τε ἐνεργοῦντα καὶ τέλειον ἡ ψυχὴ συνελήφεν ἐν ἑαυτῇ, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἀπόλυτός ἐστι πάντων τῶν ἔξωθεν.

Insofar as the soul contains a pure, self-subsistent and self-moving reason that operates by its own means and is perfect in itself, it is free from all external things.
(II 8. 45 p. 174.21–24 W.)

The similarities, correspondences and parallels between *De mysteriis* VIII 6–7 and the surviving fragment from the *Epistle to Macedonius* make the question originally raised in this paper relevant to both texts: is the presence within us of a principle superior to nature inconsistent with the distinction drawn in the fragments of *De anima* and in other passages between the soul on the one hand and the intelligible and divine order on the other? I would suggest a negative answer, based in particular on the evidence from *De mysteriis*. The soul is here described as undertaking a journey. Its point of departure is the realm of becoming, from which it moves in the direction of the intelligible, finally reaching the intelligible and the divine. This passing of the soul into a different realm is constantly emphasized in the text via the description of a series of transformations that the soul undergoes and which ultimately lead it to transcend its own limits and the bonds of fate. In doing so, the soul abandons its own order and common form of life to turn towards a different order: “there exists another principle of the soul” by virtue of which it “is exalted to what is superior to itself” (πρὸς τὰ κρείττονα ἀνάγεται αὐτῆς ἡ ψυχὴ). By this process it then “becomes totally separate from everything that held it fast in the realm of generation (χωρίζεται παντάπασι τῶν κατεχόντων αὐτὴν εἰς τὴν γένεσιν), keeps itself aloof from inferior natures (ἀφίσταται τῶν χειρόνων), exchanges one life for another (ζωὴν ... ἑτέραν ἀνθ' ἑτέρας ἀλλάττεται), and gives itself to a different order, entirely abandoning the former (δίδωσιν ἑαυτὴν εἰς ἄλλην διακόσμησιν τὴν προτέραν ἀφεῖσα παντελῶς).”¹⁰

¹⁰ *De myst.* VIII 7 p. 270.14–19.

Conclusion

The principle superior to nature that is within us, then, would not appear to make the soul—each soul—belong to the intelligible realm; nor would it appear to infuse the soul with the intelligible without altering the latter's transcendent status. Rather, this principle reflects the metaphysical view of participation that Iamblichus adopts to describe the one-sided relation between inferior and superior. In this respect, the soul which has freed itself from fate also acquires a share in the power of the demiurge and operates in such a way as to ascend to what is superior to itself. The law of the distinction separating the various orders of reality here still holds; in a way, it is even reinforced: for the soul is regarded as having utterly descended into the sensible realm—of which it forms an integral part—even if it is independent of this realm when it turns to ontologically superior natures, participating in them through assimilation.¹¹

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