

ON THE GODS: pointers from Iamblichus On the Mysteries:

In the Introduction to *Astronoesis*, Anthony writes:

*"we are going to enter sympathetically into an analysis of experience as conceived by some of the ancient philosophers--to try to understand and appreciate the philosophic insight they summarized in the dictum: **The world is full of Gods.**"*

On the Mysteries of the Chaldeans, is an excellent introduction to the view of "Gods" Anthony talks about. The book purports to be a letter to an unknown priest, in which he answers many questions about the mysteries. The "priest" is assumed to be the 3rd or 4th century neo-Platonist Iamblichus. Here Iamblichus answers questions such as: What are the Gods? And how do we participate in them?

In the first place, therefore, you say "it must be granted that there are Gods." Thus to speak, however, is not right on this subject. For an innate knowledge of the Gods is co-existent with our very essence; and this knowledge is superior to all judgment and deliberate choice, and subsists prior to reason and demonstration. It is also counted from the beginning with its proper cause, and is consubstantial with the essential tendency of the soul to the good. If indeed, it be requisite to speak the truth, the contact with divinity is not knowledge. For knowledge is in a certain respect separated [from its object] by otherness. But prior to the knowledge, which as one thing knows another, is the universe connection with divinity, and which is suspended and inseparable from the Gods. Hence, it is not proper to grant this, as if it might not be granted, nor to admit it as ambiguous; nor are we worthy thus to explore it, as if we had sufficient authority to approve or reject it. For we are comprehended in it, or rather we are filled by it, and we possess that very thing which we are, [or by which our essence is characterized] in knowing the Gods. 23-24

"Supplications, however," you say, "are too foreign to the purity of intellect to be offered to the Gods." But this is by no means the case...

For the consciousness of our own nothingness, when we compare ourselves with the Gods, causes us to betake ourselves spontaneously to suppliant prayer. But from supplication, we are in a short time led to the object of supplication, acquire its similitude from intimate converse, and gradually obtain divine perfection, instead of our own imbecility and imperfection. 62

Notes On the Gods

Here are some excerpts and notes from a discussion of Astronoesis in 1998.

1. In the letter addressed to the unknown Egyptian priest (assumed to be Iamblichus) the questioner asks: *"it must be granted that there are Gods."* Iamblichus says this is not correct.

"It is not proper to grant this, as if it might *not* be granted."

"For an innate knowledge of the Gods is co-existent with our very essence, and this knowledge is superior to all judgments and deliberate choice."

And besides, if "it be requisite to speak the truth, **the contact with divinity is not knowledge**" at all. Prior to knowledge "which as one thing knows another" is "the uniform connection with divinity, which is suspended from the Gods, is spontaneous and inseparable from them."

Further, our contact with the Gods is not really of our doing, for "the connascent perception.... of the perpetual attendance of the Gods, will be assimilated to them." We may have some touch of the Gods at times, but they eternally are in a sameness of subsistence and always are present.

"There is, however, no similitude between the two kinds of knowledge. For the knowledge of divine natures is different from that of other things, and is separated from all opposition. It likewise neither subsists in being now granted, or in becoming to be, but was from eternity, uniformly consubsistent with the soul. " 23-26

2. The writer asks: "*what the peculiarities are by which they are separated from each other?*" Iamblichus says that it is necessary to carry this inquiry in terms of "what the peculiarities are according to essence...according to power...and ...according to energy."

3. Next, the question "*Supplications however, are too foreign to the purity of intellect to be offered to the Gods.*" Iamblichus says: this is by no means the case. "because we fall short of the Gods in power, purity, and every thing else, we shall act in the most opportune manner, by invoking them with the most vehement supplications. **For the consciousness of our own nothingness, when we compare ourselves with the Gods, causes us to betake ourselves spontaneously to suppliant prayer.** ... From our supplication, we are in a short time led to the object of supplication, acquire its similitude from intimate converse, and gradually obtain divine perfection, instead of our own imbecility and imperfection."

Remember Plotinus: "no-one apprehended Beauty who did not first become beautiful." 1.6.8

4. In a prayer to Avalokitesvara, Tich Nhat Hanh supplicates the great bodhisattva to help us to hear, to listen to what others say. We may go further, and say that when we really listen, it is the divine energy of Avalokitesvara which is present. We never hear anything except by participation in the World-Mind energy. So every act of knowing, willing, feeling is a participation in divinity. In Sufi terms, our supplications are already the presencing of the God, or supplication is the way that the Divine energy, coursing through our being, responds us to divinity.

These divine energies which make the universe do not just make it and leave: the energies are present in and as our experience. the IP provides nutriment for each of the Ideas--which we translated as saying that the whole world-mind represented by the Zodiac as a whole provides nutriment in the form of each of the living Zodiacal signs.

5. Next is a question about the efficacy of statues and images. We should not restrict the discussion only to physical statues, but remember that the entire universe is itself a statue of the Gods, and we ourselves are statues, and when we become statues, in the sense of making the mind like divinity, then the divine will be present. Iamblichus says, referring primarily to the stars and heavenly movement, that "the visible statues of the Gods originate from divine intelligible paradigms, and are generated about them. But being thus generated, they are entirely established in them, and being also extended to, they possess an image which derives its completion from them. These images likewise fabricate another order: sublunary natures are in continuity with them, according to one union; and the divine intellectual forms, which are present with the visible bodies of the Gods, exist prior to them in a separate manner."

[In Plotinus:

11. I think, therefore, that those ancient sages, who sought to secure the presence of divine beings by the erection of shrines and statues, showed insight into the nature of the All; they perceived that, **though this Soul is everywhere tractable, its presence will be secured all the more readily when an appropriate receptacle is elaborated, a place especially capable of receiving some portion or phase of it, something reproducing it, or representing it and serving like a mirror to catch an image of it.** 4.3.11

Iamblichus is speaking to the continuity of Divinity throughout the so-called levels of existence. Because there is an inner self-identity of the Unity of the Gods in the One, and each unity in the One with the One, there is already included in the God the entire series of unfolding powers and effects. This guarantees that the unfoldment is inseparable from the presence of the Good.

Looked at another way, the whole of the divine Mind, the successive impression of Ideas, provides the context in and through which the suppersential unity of the Gods will become diversified, unfolded, and woven with the vision of knower/known (as well as life, soul, nature, body.) The Gods are the threads of continuity with the Good or one, present like the light in the various colors manifested by a prism. Each of the series of Gods represented by a henad such as the Saturn series, is both a unity and a distinct expression made possible by the levels of being and divine Ideation symbolized by the metaphysical chart. These Gods are present as the communicative thrust of the One into Being. What this Divine Mind sees or apprehends of the One, the way the One is looked by Mind, is the ideas.

6. Finally, Iamblichus points out the union with divinity sought and found by the Theurgist is beyond words and concepts. "For a concept of the mind does not conjoin theurgists with the Gods, since if this were the case, what would hinder those who philosophize theoretically from having a theurgic union with the Gods? Now however, in reality, this is not the case. " Because, he continues, the true work of the theurgist (the initiatic mysteries of the Egyptians and Chaldeans and Tibetans etc.) is not only effected through thinking, but are "divinely performed in a way surpassing all intelligence, and the power of inexplicable symbols, which are known only to the Gods, impart theurgic union....For when we do not energize intellectually, the synthemata (inexplicable theurgic signs or symbols) themselves perform by themselves their proper work, and the ineffable power of the Gods itself knows, by itself, its own images "

Nevertheless, knowledge is involved, as "efficacious union is not effected without knowledge, yet knowledge does not possess a sameness with this union." 109-111