

# Can theurgy be considered a form of magic?

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This paper examines the relationship between theurgy and magic in the ancient world. It discusses what theurgy and magic are, despite the former remaining somewhat an enigma to modern scholars and the latter being notoriously difficult to define. Ancient philosophers such as Iamblichus considered theurgy a way of life, representing 'Gods work' rather than 'Gods talk' while the attitude towards magic was at best ambiguous. It is argued that the relationship between theurgy and magic can only be analysed by comparing and contrasting the practices of each, rather than their respective philosophies. What emerges is that the level of intent of the practitioner is key in differentiating theurgy from the most commonly practiced magic, as well as the inner disposition and learning of the theurgist versus the magician.

## Introduction

This paper explores the question of whether theurgy can be considered a form of magic. Theurgy, literally meaning 'gods work' or 'divine work,' in Greek *theourgia*, was embraced by prominent Neoplatonist philosophers over a period of some 300 years beginning with the Chaldaean Oracles (second or third century AD).<sup>38</sup> The Chaldaean oracles consisted of a compilation of mystical pagan oracles, which Neoplatonist philosophers such as Iamblichus (c. AD 245-c.325) and Proclus (AD 410/412-485) regarded as the sacred text of theurgy.<sup>39</sup>

Iamblichus was perhaps the first Neoplatonist philosopher to expound theurgy as both a religion and philosophy, involving extensive ritual practices. For E.R. Dodds, theurgy was 'Magic applied to a religious purpose and resting on a supposed revelation of a religious character.'<sup>40</sup> Modern scholars like

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<sup>38</sup> Addey, Crystal, Oracles, Dreams and Astrology in *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, ed. by Curry, Patrick, and Voss, Angela (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) ch.3, p.1.

<sup>39</sup> Dodds, E.R., Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol.37, Parts 1 and 2 (1947) p.55.

<sup>40</sup> Dodds, Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism, p.61.

Dodds have used terms like religion and magic to help define the scope of theurgy and its practices. The problem, as Gregory Shaw points out, is that theurgy still represents an enigma and scholars have tended to apply their cultural values to define the subject to fit neatly into their world view.<sup>41</sup> The first part of this paper is dedicated to discussing what theurgy is, its aim, scope and practices.

The term magic is complex to define. According to Owen Davis, a social historian, defining magic 'is a maddening task.'<sup>42</sup> Many scholars often appear to dismiss magic as an irrational manifestation of primitive societies and what appears to be the problem is that attempts to understand what magic is, are often confounded by the fact that the experience of magic falls outside the field of conscious/rational human experience.<sup>43</sup> Immanuel Kant commented that 'though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience,' and this exemplifies the difficulty in defining magic.<sup>44</sup> An inclusive definition of magic requires that meaning can be applied universally to different cultures and traditions, and Davis achieves this when he states that 'magic is far more than a venerable collection of practices. We need to understand it as a language, a theory, a belief, an action, a creative expression, an experience, and a cognitive tool.'<sup>45</sup> In the context of magic in antiquity all these factors may have been present and may explain their different usage, as well as, the various meanings ascribed to the term.

Part two of this paper will compare and contrast theurgy and magic with the aim of assessing their potential relationship. This essay mainly relies on Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis (DM)* as the main primary source on theurgy and seeks to clarify the debate as to whether theurgy was a form of magic through an

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<sup>41</sup> Shaw, Gregory, *Theurgy: Rituals of Unification in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus, Traditio*, Vol.41 (1985), p.3.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, Owen, *Magic, A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Kindle Edition, p.1.

<sup>43</sup> Starck, Rodney, *Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science, Review of Religious Research*, Vol.43, No.2, (Dec. 2001) p.102.

<sup>44</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Smith, N.K., (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) pp., 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, *Magic*, p. 111.

analysis of modern scholarly literature.<sup>46</sup> Because of the difficulty in encapsulating the term magic in a simple definition, and because the theory of magic remains inherently elusive despite the existence of fragments of ‘magical’ texts like the Chaldaean oracles, this paper will focus more on how theurgy differs from the more profane forms of magic.

### What is theurgy?

According to Crystal Addey ancient philosophers considered theurgy ‘as a way of life or, strictly speaking, as a way of being, as well as a nexus of ritual practices.’<sup>47</sup> The emphasis on living and experiencing theurgy meant that it was unlike theology in the sense that it represented ‘God’s work’ rather than ‘Gods talk.’<sup>48</sup> Addey suggests that it was a life-long endeavour which was experiential, subtle, as well as mysterious.<sup>49</sup> Iamblichus states that theurgical questions ‘require experience of actions for their accurate understanding’ and that ‘it will not be possible to deal with adequately by words alone.’<sup>50</sup> The emphasis on experience suggested a way of life in which there was individual spiritual development, a type of development that was inner rather than outer since the goal of theurgy was the soul’s union with the divine. Addey adds that theurgy involved ‘a set of ritual practices alongside the development of ethical and intellectual capacities which aimed to use symbols to reawaken the soul’s pre-ontological causal connection with the gods,’ functioning mainly through divine love and ‘subordinately through cosmic sympathy’.<sup>51</sup> If the goal of theurgy was the ascent of the soul to the divine, the means by which this could be achieved was through the purification of the intellect, the attainment of moral virtues and symbols made active through cosmic sympathy. Cosmic sympathy was however in turn rendered possible by divine love.

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<sup>46</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Trans. Clarke, Emma C., et al. (Atlanta, USA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Addey, Crystal, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, (London & New York, Routledge, 2016) Kindle Edition, p.24.

<sup>48</sup> Shaw, Gregory, *Theurgy of the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1995) p.5; Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Clarke Introduction p. XXIX.

<sup>49</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.24.

<sup>50</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.2-3.

<sup>51</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.24.

Iamblichus stated that undefiled divine worship ‘brings the pure to the pure and the impassive to the impassive,’ suggesting the principle that “like attracts like.”<sup>52</sup> Thus theurgic ritual involved the soul ascending to the gods rather than the gods descending to the human/natural realm.<sup>53</sup> It is also perhaps, as Gregory Shaw argues, one of the reasons why Iamblichus has often been misunderstood by modern scholars since post enlightenment culture is more attuned with the idea that the Gods reach down to men rather than vice versa.<sup>54</sup> The question of ascent and descent of the gods is important when comparing theurgy to magic since the latter, according to James Frazier, often involved manipulating or constraining the gods to do the will of the *goes* or sorcerer, while the theurgist invoked the epiphany or manifestation of the gods. Iamblichus called the *goes* bidding of the gods a ‘transgression’ that reflected ‘the audacity of men.’<sup>55</sup>

Although it was humans that performed theurgic rites, Shaw observes that ‘...it was the gods who directed the work’ through a subordination of human will to divine will.<sup>56</sup> Subordination suggests an abandonment of individual will to serve something greater and it can be inferred from this that for the theurgists humanity was composed of two natures, one that potentially sought to ascend to or reach the gods while the other descended or was attracted to matter. In fact, Iamblichus seemed to believe that this duality was caused by the damage the soul encountered on its descent into the material world, which would explain the dual attraction to what is above and what is below. According to Iamblichus, theurgy was the only means by which the soul could return towards God.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.11.

<sup>53</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, IV.10.

<sup>54</sup> Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, p.3.

<sup>55</sup> Frazier James, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, (New York: MacMillan, 1922). pp.65-68; Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, IV.10.

<sup>56</sup> Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, p.1.

<sup>57</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Clarke, Emma et al. Introduction, p. xxvii.

## The cosmology and practice of theurgy

The cosmology of theurgy was based, according to Iamblichus, on three principles which included *philia* (divine love), the Platonic derived concept of *sympatheia* (universal or cosmic sympathy) and *symbola* (symbols).<sup>58</sup> It was, however, divine love that caused cosmic sympathy, and cosmic sympathy, in turn, charged the symbols used in theurgic rituals with divine meaning. Divine love permeated all things binding them together to form sympathetic connections that were 'activated' through symbols. Thus, according to Proclus 'the wise men of old brought together various things down here with their heavenly counterparts, and brought down Divine Powers into this mortal place, having drawn them down through similarity (*homoiôtetos*).'<sup>59</sup> Proclus suggested that through the agency of *sympatheia* all 'things are full of Gods', and what connected the gods to theurgic rituals were the symbols or what Proclus called the physical expression of 'divine chains.'<sup>60</sup> The symbols could be anything in nature like stones and plants and could also be a physical object (like a statue) in sympathy with a particular god and include what Iamblichus refers to as secret names of the gods or "barbarian names"<sup>61</sup>. The latter were non-Greek words invoked during theurgic rituals, but which could also be inscribed on cultic statues (*telestika*) and other talismans.

### Was theurgy a form of magic?

The meaning of the term magic cannot be separated from the context of culture and scholars, as already stated, are not unanimous on its definition.<sup>62</sup> Thus, it is more straightforward to focus on some of the practices of magic and how these potentially compare and contrast with theurgy. The Greek word for a range of magical practices was *goeteia* (sorcery), and these included spells, curses and the making of amulets as well as other practices more associated with sorcery. The usage of the term *goetitia* was however ambiguous even in

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<sup>58</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 1.12, 4.3, 4.9.

<sup>59</sup> Proclus, *On the Sacred Art*,

<http://www.brynmawr.edu/classics/redmonds/645w12.html>, (accessed 08/07/2017), p.3.

<sup>60</sup> Proclus, *On the Sacred Art*,

<http://www.brynmawr.edu/classics/redmonds/645w12.html>, (accessed 08/07/2017)  
pp.3-4.

<sup>61</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, pp.114-115.

<sup>62</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, pp. 31-32.

antiquity because a distinction was made and often a judgemental attitude taken, whether implicit or explicit, between the different forms that magic took. Iamblichus in *DM* was concerned with distinguishing theurgy from the more vulgar *goeteia* and says of the latter that 'there are some who overlook the whole procedure of contemplation...they disdain the order of the sacred observance, its holiness and long protracted endurance of toils.'<sup>63</sup> What Iamblichus indicated was that in contrast to theurgy, *goeteia* lacked a right attitude towards the divine, potentially questioning the purity of intent of the *goes* or sorcerer.

Not just Iamblichus, but also some modern scholars like Addey and Shaw focus on separating theurgy from the commonly practiced and basic magical ceremonies of the time, going against the consensus which saw little difference between *goeteia* and theurgy.<sup>64</sup> According to Addey, theurgic rituals were old and derived mainly from the religious traditions of Greece, Egypt and Babylon rather than from magical techniques practiced at the time.<sup>65</sup> Georg Luck believes that compared to magic, 'theurgy was supposed to be grander, more exalted, full of deep religious feeling.'<sup>66</sup> Two themes emerge from these observations and, will be discussed below. The first concerns the question of intent behind the practice of magic versus theurgy and the second focuses attention on the possibility that there are different levels of magic to which theurgy was potentially a higher form.<sup>67</sup>

Similar to magic, theurgic rituals were performed by human beings but what theurgy stressed was that it was the gods who directed the rituals and controlled the symbols.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the ceremony involved the subordination of the person performing the ritual to divine will.<sup>69</sup> Iamblichus stated, 'and do not furthermore compare the clearest visions of the gods to the images produced artificially by magic,' once again distancing *goeteia* from theurgy.

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<sup>63</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.13.

<sup>64</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, pp.31-40; Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, pp.1-28.

<sup>65</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.32.

<sup>66</sup> Flint, V., Gordon, R., Luck, G. and Ogden, D., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), p.149.

<sup>67</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, pp.33-34.

<sup>68</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, IV 2-3.

<sup>69</sup> Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, p.1.

Addey observes that there are three substantial differences between magic and theurgy. The first has to do with the receptivity and way of life of the person practicing theurgy, the second relates to the use of symbols that contain divine love and sympathy and the third, that the capacities of the theurgists are gifts from the gods.<sup>70</sup> The question of the intent of the person practicing theurgy was important since according to Addey, theurgy 'focused on an intellectual or spiritual turning upwards' or what Iamblichus states as a 'procedure of effective contemplation.'<sup>71</sup> The intent of the theurgist versus the magician was critical in differentiating the two practices. In antiquity, the term magic attracted a negative reputation mainly due to its ubiquity and the associated qualitative decline of its practice.

The separation from religion and the commonplace nature of its activity, suggest that magic was not truly comparable to the uncontaminated/pure aspect of theurgic ritual that was defended by Iamblichus.<sup>72</sup> The unfair trial against the philosopher Apuleius (c.124 AD – c.170 AD) for purportedly practicing magic to bewitch into marriage the wealthy widow Pudentilla, was a perfect example of the mundane or banal level to which magic was held accountable.<sup>73</sup> What the Apuleius case suggests is that the authorities were concerned about the spreading of magic outside the boundaries of official religion and that its practice was potentially considered self-serving, as well as, a means of preying on the weak and gullible.

The theurgist was required to be receptive and ritual practice demanded an inner/spiritual preparation, and as already stated a pure motivation or intent. Addey suggests that the theurgist had to make his or her 'soul as similar as possible to the upper, divine realms, by assimilating himself or herself to the purity and eternal nature of the gods.'<sup>74</sup> Contemplative practices allowed the theurgist to develop receptivity but what was also important to reach the divine realms was intellectual purification. Here lies perhaps one of the significant

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<sup>70</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.34.

<sup>71</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.34; Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 3.13.

<sup>72</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, II. 10-11, 11.

<sup>73</sup> <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/apuleius/>, accessed 09/07/2017.

<sup>74</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.26.

differences between magic and theurgy, the fact that theurgy stresses the development of intellectual capacities for the ascent of consciousness to take place. The final goal of the theurgist was *anagoge* or the raising of the soul to the *nous* or pure mind, and according to Iamblichus only a theurgist who was also a philosopher could attain this.

The importance of metaphysical and intellectual knowledge was suggested by Iamblichus when he stated, 'Effective union never takes place without knowledge...but divine union and purification actually go beyond knowledge.'<sup>75</sup> The emphasis on learning as the means by which the soul can ascend to higher realms distinguishes common forms of magic from theurgy, and also suggests the existence of a class (social) divide between practitioners of both disciplines. Luck observes that Neoplatonist philosophers who were also priests and practiced theurgy were different from ordinary street magicians and diviners, stating that they were 'more priest like figures than the ordinary *magos*.'<sup>76</sup> There seems to have been a clear intellectual, as well class distinction, between those who practiced theurgy and those who practiced magic.

Addey's second and third distinctions between theurgy and *goeteia* relate to the belief in cosmic sympathy and that theurgic ability was given to humanity by the gods. As Iamblichus states 'The whole of theurgy presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it is performed by men, and as such observes our natural rank in the universe; but on the other, it contains divine symbols, and in virtue of them is raised up to union with the higher power.'<sup>77</sup> This double aspect is important since it suggests, as Shaw points out, that all theurgical activity was vertical with the aim of lifting human souls up to the gods through using symbols whose identities were horizontal (in nature/material), but imbued with cosmic sympathy or a divine cause.

The importance of the relationship with a divine cause was what potentially also differentiated *goeteia* from theurgy, and Emma Clarke observes that magic mainly operated within the confines of nature manipulating and exploiting natural forces rather than 'demonstrating the causative power

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<sup>75</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, 2.11.

<sup>76</sup> Flint, V., Gordon, R., Luck, G. and Ogden, D., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), p.149.

<sup>77</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, IV 2-3.

behind and beyond them.<sup>78</sup> In this context, Dodd's comparison of the sacred rites of theurgy to modern spiritualist phenomena is questionable since there is little evidence to support the view that theurgy attempted to control the gods and fate through ritual practice. This leads to a final question raised by scholars, which is can magic be divided into a higher and lower form? And on this basis, can theurgy be regarded as a higher form of magic?<sup>79</sup>

Since many of the theurgic rituals involving oracles, prayer, and sacrifice originated from the polytheistic religions of ancient Greece, Egypt, and Babylon, Dodds argues that theurgy can be considered a higher form of magic.<sup>80</sup> Some of the ritual techniques used by theurgy derived from mystery cults such as that of Pythagoras who employed both symbols and aphorisms in ritual ceremonies.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the manufacture of 'magical statuettes of gods' was not a monopoly of the theurgist but was a practice widespread in ancient Egypt. Therefore, if all ritual was magical, then theurgic ritual was as Dodds says, 'magic applied to a religious purpose,' rather than vulgar magic which primarily served a profane end.<sup>82</sup> Dodds considers that the charging of statues and divinatory practices were magical acts, and it is a compelling argument. Theurgic rituals involved practices that could be considered forms of magic measured against Davis' inclusive definition of the term, mentioned in the introduction, which stressed the experience, the creative expression, the action, and belief of magic.<sup>83</sup> However, beyond the actual practices themselves, which raise more questions than answers, the key was the disposition and intent of the practitioner. The motivation of the practitioner was perhaps the only clear and net separation that existed between theurgy and magic.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the question of whether theurgy could be considered a form of magic. The difficulty in establishing a connection between the two lies

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<sup>78</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, Clarke, Emma, Introduction, xxvii.

<sup>79</sup> Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, p.61-62 ; Sheppard, Anne, Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy, *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol.32, No.1, (1982), pp. 212-224; Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, pp.38-39.

<sup>80</sup> Dodds, *Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism*, p.55.

<sup>81</sup> Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism*, p.32.

<sup>82</sup> Dodds, *Theurgy and its Relationship to Neoplatonism*, p.63.

<sup>83</sup> Davis, *Magic*, p.111.

in the elusive nature of the term magic, and also in the fact that theurgy, despite dedicated texts, remains a mysterious subject. As an esoteric discipline that stressed inner spiritual development, theurgy needed to be experienced to be understood. Therefore, it meant different things to initiates of theurgy compared to outside observers. From an outsider's perspective, some parallels can be drawn between the rituals engaged by both theurgists and magicians.

It is possible to suggest that theurgic rituals using statues, divination, oracles, amulets, words and prayers, and sacrifice were also the tools of magicians practicing both inside and outside the context of a particular religion. What differentiates the two are the inner disposition, the learning and the intent of the theurgist versus the magician. The problem is one of meaning since the term magic remains difficult to define across cultures. Mystery can breed faith, but also doubt and suspicion and in the ancient world the disassociation of magic from religion was perhaps incremental in giving magic a negative reputation.

Theurgy was a lifelong endeavour or as Shaw observes a 'lifelong labor,' which consisted of a process of inner development that potentially led to the ascent of consciousness to the divine realm.<sup>84</sup> It was more than a philosophy since it was experiential and could not be intellectually understood. Ritual served to link the divine and the material through 'chains' of cosmic sympathy. Magic, and in particular, *goeteia* separated from religion could be viewed as a vulgar expression of a profane science where the practitioner manipulated forces that were not linked to divine causes. Thus, magic stripped of religious context does not seem comparable to theurgy, although magic practiced in the context of mystery cults or within the confines of religious practice may well correspond to types of theurgic ritual. In the end, the question of whether theurgy was a kind of magic depends on the form of magic under analysis, the context in which it was practiced, and the motivation of the practitioner. Iamblichus stressed this last point beyond all others in differentiating the theurgist from the sorcerer.

Lastly, the double aspect of theurgy combining a vertical and horizontal activity that fed on each other to ascend the soul towards god makes it different from magic or *goeteia* whose aim was often to gain practical/material goals. Seen as such, theurgy was an esoteric discipline in which the spiritual predominated.

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<sup>84</sup> Shaw, *Rituals of Unification*, p.22.

The same cannot be said for *goeteia* whose primary concern was the attainment of tangible results.

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