

Gods and Daimons in the Platonic Economy of Sacrifice*

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ABSTRACT: “Let us sacrifice, therefore, but let us sacrifice, as is appropriate, offering different sacrifices to different powers,” (*De abstinencia* 2, §34). Drawing upon Porphyry’s *De abstinencia* as well as Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis* and other relevant texts, this paper looks at the systematic and phenomenological dimensions of Platonic philosophers’ accounts of different sacrificial practices, centered on the distinction between animal and vegetarian sacrifices. To what experience of the divine are different sacrificial practices correlated? How do these manifest the ontological differences between theophanies on different planes of being? In particular, how is it that the same deity may be worshiped by animal as well as vegetarian sacrifices? How do the social dimensions of the sacrificial economy relate to the divine providence at work in the world? What are its implications for questions of social justice? What is the significance for the worshiper in a given time and place of the historical accounts writers offer of the institution of diverse sacrificial practices, in accord with Porphyry’s notion that “It remains for those who come later to heal by purifications the faults concerned with food of those who came before,” (2, §31)?

Book 2 of Porphyry’s essay “On Abstinence from Animal Food” treats the problem of animal sacrifice, which concerns Porphyry precisely because his piety and his vegetarianism are both deeply held values. His piety is of such a nature, as well, as to respect tradition and to hesitate to intervene in it with a heavy hand, though he is not so hesitant as his colleague Iamblichus, with whom we also find him in dialogue on this issue in Books 5 and 6 of Iamblichus’ *On the Mysteries*. In response to the problem presented by animal sacrifice—which both philosophers recognize as a problem, despite their other differences—a certain common doctrine is hammered out and which is handed down to the Platonists who came after them, though between Porphyry and Iamblichus there are some distinct differences of inflection and emphasis, at least. This doctrine involves two major elements: a static or synchronic account of how the hierarchy of divine powers is activated through different kinds of offerings, and a dynamic, diachronic or historical account of how

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sacrificial practices evolved and a possible future in which the Gods would still be honored, and experienced in the full range of their powers, but no longer through animal sacrifice, as part of a general evolution of humanity toward vegetarianism.

The purpose of the present essay is to undertake a reconstruction of this doctrine. Whereas the synchronic account draws largely upon the hierarchical taxonomy of divine activity developed within systematic Platonism, the diachronic account draws in significant part upon a lost work of Theophrastus preserved through a lengthy quotation in Porphyry's essay, as well as upon the work of Empedocles, who exercised a powerful influence in this regard upon Plutarch, as we can see from the surviving fragment of his work "On the Eating of Flesh", which surely influenced Porphyry's essay. What will be important in the diachronic account is not so much the details of the historical account, which may have little in them that is empirically accurate, but the forces they identify at work in the development of sacrificial practice, and the tensions present in it from the very beginning, the resolution of which will result in the elimination, for all intents and purposes, of animal sacrifice. I equivocate here somewhat, because the structure articulated by these philosophers does not permit human reason to replace the will of the Gods as communicated through methods such as prophecy and divination, but it does make it increasingly unlikely that such communication would be interpreted so as to require the shedding of blood.

I. The Synchronic Account

Porphyry applies the principle of offering the "first-fruits" to the whole range of divine manifestation, so that to the highest phase of divinity nothing objectifying is offered, not even internal speech, but merely pure conceptions and the elevation of our own intellect,

while to the intelligible phase of the Gods hymns are offered, as the first-fruits of our beautiful conceptions of them and as thanks “for truly nourishing us through the vision of themselves” (*De abst.* 2 §34).¹ Porphyry mentions the Pythagorean practice of consecrating numbers and diagrams to the Gods (§36) as a further example of how the principle of first-fruits, accepted by him as valid, operates in a far wider context than commonly conceived.

In the lower reaches of divine activity, however, the principle of objectification immanent to each deity leading to increasing internal multiplicity, particularly through the hypostasis of Soul, an indeterminate multiplicity of beings generically termed *daimons* are generated in the divine series. Porphyry is not so clear as later Platonists about the direct emergence of daimons from each God—thus, Proclus states that “About every God there is an appropriate series of angels, heroes, and daimons, for every God leads a multiplicity which receives his own form.”² Porphyry may see the ties between Gods and daimons as being somewhat looser, daimons emerging as part of the general procession of Soul into Nature, and only then coming into participation with certain Gods to varying degrees. Porphyry distinguishes, within the genus of daimons, between a higher and a lower class.³ What distinguishes these higher daimons from the lower, according to Porphyry, is the degree to which they are able to dominate, or on the contrary are dominated by, their pneumatic substance, or, as he puts it at §39, 168.17-20, whether the pneuma of the daimon

¹ Passages from *De abstinentia ab esu animalium* are by section number and, where necessary, page number in *Porphyrii Philosophi Platonici Opuscula Selecta*, ed. A. Nauck (Leipzig: Teubner, 1886). Translations are based on those of Gillian Clark, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) and Thomas Taylor (1823, repr. in *Select Works of Porphyry* (Westbury, Wiltshire: Prometheus Trust, 1999)), freely modified.

² Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, 3.166.

³ Porphyry seems to regard at least part of the higher class of daimons to be identical with the *angeloi* (cf. διαγγέλλοντας, §38, 167.22). Proclus also speaks of the tendency to use the term *daimôn* generically to include angels and heroes, e.g., at *In Tim.* 3.165.11-14.

is “in balance” (*en summetria*) or not. This pneumatic substance being sensitive to impetus (*hormên*) from the environment, the daimons who do not dominate their pneumatic substance are subject to being moved by the environmental pneumatic continuum. The ‘balance’ of the pneuma, therefore, is an equilibrium with the environment, with imbalance being manifest as a passivity toward ambient influences which makes such daimons subject to agitations and disorders sufficient for Porphyry to say that these daimons are “deservedly called maleficent” (168.4-5).

Porphyry’s bias in favor of incorporeal cult as well as a purely contemplative life can lead him to treat the shallow or transitory goods on the material plane as virtual evils. Even Porphyry, however, recognizes that it is necessary to honor the Gods on the strictly corporeal plane, and thus he affirms that “we also shall sacrifice” (§43) but from those cultically specified substances which are without harm,⁴ or rather, that minimize harm, for as he notes, “It is sufficient, indeed, that in plants we take upon ourselves parts of death, for the sake of our life here” (§50). That one also kills something when eating plants, often used as an argument for the incoherence of vegetarianism, here is used as a justification for the piety of substituting non-animal sacrifices on the material level of worship. This is a particularly salient point in light of Iamblichus’ remarks on the material Gods, to whom

every sort of change and destruction, and in general processes of dissolution are suitable ... not to them in themselves, but because of the matter over which they rule. For no matter how completely they may transcend it, nevertheless they are present to it; and even if they embrace it by virtue of an immaterial power, yet they subsist in combination with it.⁵

⁴ Note that throughout his text Porphyry uses the verb *thucin*, ‘to sacrifice’, to refer *both* to animal and to non-animal offerings. Note the similar usage of *thuô* in the anonymous poet Porphyry quotes at §58.

⁵ Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 5, 14/218. Passages from this text are cited according to book and section number/page number from the Greek text; translations are those of Clarke, Dillon,

There is a certain tension implicit in the position of such Gods, as we can see from Iamblichus' careful use of the phrase "present to". The material God is present to the world as it is, but the very mutability and changeability of material circumstances entails that ways of life and customs can change, and the Gods operating on the material plane will be present to those as well. Modes of worship have changed as society has changed, as is clear from the account Theophrastus offers in the long fragment incorporated by Porphyry.

Even without that factor, however, there is an ambiguity involved in the administration of material beings who come to be and pass away, insofar as that administration is on the one hand on behalf of those beings who come to be, but on the other hand, it is the operation of the processes themselves, which may be seen as essentially destructive, rather than constructive; Aristotle, for example, conceives time as essentially destructive.⁶ Thus while acknowledging the appropriateness of destructive processes to material divinity, Iamblichus also explains that, since

in all cases their own creations are particularly pleasing to the creators ... whether it is a case of animals or plants or any other products of the earth that are administered by higher beings ... [s]ome among such things, when preserved and kept intact, serve to increase the kinship of those who preserve them with the Gods—that is to say, those which, in remaining intact, preserve the power of community between Gods and men. Such are certain of the animals in Egypt, and such is the holy man everywhere. Others, however, make the kinship more prominent through being sacrificed, these being those whose resolution into the first principle of their primary

and Hershbell, *Iamblichus: On the Mysteries* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁶ "Things grow old by time, and people forget through time, but they have not learned or become young or beautiful; for time in virtue of itself is a cause rather of destruction since it is a number of motion, and what a motion does is to make a thing depart from what it is," (Aristotle, *Physics* 220a25-27).

elements makes them akin to the causal principles of the higher beings [...]
(*DM* 5, 24/235)

Even though *in all cases* the things that come to be on the material plane are pleasing to their divine creators, then, it is only in the exceptional case, even where humans are concerned, that this or that individual corporeal being can be said unequivocally to be closer to the Gods in their material continuance rather than in their material dissolution. This demonstrates the strength of the entropic theme, so to speak, in the general Platonic account of materiality.

Even an account which recognizes an irreducible role for destructive processes in worship, whether that is expressed through the destruction of animals or of plants or other substances, must acknowledge, according to Porphyry, the tendencies to which entities on this plane are already prone, and which can be exacerbated by animal sacrifice. Porphyry speaks of the “vehemence”, “suddenness”, and “rapidity” of the operations of the lower class of daimons, contrasting this with the slow and orderly operations of the higher class (§39). As in Proclus’ later systematic account the procession of the daimons corresponds to the emergence of the forms of time,⁷ here already the daimon is a being that essentially measures and patterns time. The higher class of daimon creates long cycles, with fewer peaks and valleys, it would seem, whereas the lower class create dramatic swings of fortune, fostering an attachment to “riches, power, and pleasure, vainglories from which discord, war, and things like these are produced” (169.27-170.2). Moreover, Porphyry argues that all harm attributable to divine agencies must logically be the work of the lower class of daimons, for

the good never harms and the bad never benefits ... But the divine is by nature the most just of all things, since otherwise it would not be divine. So

⁷ See, e.g., *In Parm.* 7, 1233-1239; *In Tim.* 3, 38ff, on which see further my “Time and the Heroes” in *Walking the Worlds: A Biannual Journal of Polytheism and Spiritwork* 1 (2014) (forthcoming).

this [harmful] power, and this role, must be separated from the beneficent daimons ... The maleficent daimons harass mortals in many respects, some of them important, but in every respect there is no way that the good daimons will neglect their own concerns: they forewarn, so far as they are able, of the dangers impending from the maleficent daimons, by revelations in dreams, or through an inspired soul, or in many other ways ... [T]hey send signs to everyone, but not everyone understands what the signs mean [...]

(§41)

Where it appears that harm has come to beings as an expression of divine wrath, Porphyry locates this entirely within the economy of the lower daimons themselves: “[T]hey direct us to supplications and sacrifices to the beneficent Gods, as if they [the Gods themselves] were angry. But they [the lower daimons] do these and similar things so as to turn us away from correct conceptions about the Gods and toward themselves” (§40). And indeed, people who “are bound to external things and have not yet mastered their passions” may have to perform certain sacrifices to propitiate these powers “since if they do not, there will be no end to their labors” (173.42-3). But we can see how a prophetic warning to avert a threat from lower daimons could be instead mistaken for a warning to propitiate wrathful Gods.

As such, we may say that the human and the daimon are joined in a common struggle: to the degree to which we are slaves to our passions, our destiny becomes bound up with those of daimons who are also passive to their substrate. Porphyry explains that “the violent slaughter of animals compels souls to delight in that which they have left behind” (§47, 175.13-15). The souls in question here are not only those of the animals which have been evicted from their bodies prematurely, and who linger in the very flesh, but also those souls contaminated by contact with these, and induced thereby to consume the flesh themselves. With respect to the daimons, from “the savor of sacrifices” their “pneumatic body is fattened,” as it is nourished “in a complex fashion and from complex sources” (§42,

172.3-5), “rejoicing in all that is likewise inconsistent and incompatible” (§40, 169.22-3). This very bond between our own situation and that of the daimons of the material world, however, suggests the possibility of a joint emancipation.

II. The Diachronic Account

Humans and daimons have in common that they are temporal beings, and therefore on the individual level as well as within wider frames, they have histories. For Empedocles, the vicissitudes of daimons—who are apparently consubstantial with the Gods, if the terms are not indeed for him interchangeable—are directly related to partaking of flesh, as a result of which Empedocles states that he himself is “an exile from the Gods and a wanderer” (frag. 107/115),⁸ though apparently finding his way back. Empedocles is particularly concerned in frags. 118-125 with animal sacrifice. In an earlier era, he explains, in which the power of love (*philia*) as a cosmic principle was stronger, humans worshiped bloodlessly, offering to Aphrodite, “Queen Kypriis”, their primary deity, “holy images and painted animal figures, with perfumes of subtle fragrance and offerings of distilled myrrh and sweet-smelling frankincense, and pouring on the earth libations of golden honey” (118/128). Such benign cultic practice was inseparable from the amity that existed between humans and other animals in this setting: “all creatures, both animals and birds, were tame and gentle to men, and bright was the flame of their friendship” (119/130). When this regime came to an end, many daimons must have changed their forms as a result of taking part in the sacrificial economy, in whatever role, whether as the sacrificers, as the creature sacrificed, or perhaps

⁸ Translations of Empedocles are from M. R. Wright, *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995). Citations are to Wright’s numbering of the fragments/Diels-Kranz’s numbering.

as the recipient of sacrifice as well. Note, for example, that while “King Zeus” is specifically said not to have received cult in the Aphrodisian era (118), he is nevertheless explicitly stated to be an eternal cosmic principle in his own right in frag. 7/6.⁹ The Gods themselves, therefore, in Empedocles’ account, like all other living beings, all of whom it seems are generically “daimons” for him (cf. frag. 51/59), change their natures under the pressure of the changing balance of cosmic principles, specifically the waxing and waning of Love and Strife.

That Empedocles was taken to offer insight into the nature and behavior of daimons in the present day is indicated by the discussion in Plutarch’s *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, in which the vicissitudes of oracles which go in and out of operation is attributed by Cleombrotus to the vicissitudes of the daimons themselves who, under the authority of the Gods, are the immediate operators of the oracles. This account is disputed by Heracleon, who charges Cleombrotus with having “take[n] by the handful from the verses of Empedocles sins, rash crimes, and God-driven wanderings, and impose[d] them upon the daimons” (*De defectu* 418e). Thus Empedocles is not necessarily talking about events in the distant past and future of a clearly defined cosmic cycle, but could be understood to offer alternative ways of seeing the processes happening around us now. This point of view, moreover, would mean that our actions matter, that they may determine, in effect, whether Love or Strife waxes in the world.

According to this reading, the status of daimons is not static, and the actions we undertake together with them can either elevate them and help them to emancipate

⁹ In the quarrel ongoing since antiquity concerning the elemental identifications of Empedocles’ ‘roots’ (*rhizai*), the possibility of a change of nature for Zeus in the different cosmic regimes could suggest his identification with fire, inasmuch as the distinction between mundane fire and a non-destructive ‘fire’, whether conceived as heavenly *aithêr* or the *pyr technikon* of the Stoics, is well attested in later thinkers, and could have played a role in lost portions of Empedocles’ work.

themselves from a passive and corrupting state or can embroil them and ourselves deeper into whatever tangled destiny we have wandered together. Porphyry alludes to the general condition of souls in this respect in his *Sententiae* (§37),¹⁰ in which he speaks of a “poverty” (*penia*) of the soul when it inclines itself to matter, becoming “in want of [*aporia*] all things” from being “emptied of its proper powers,” while the soul experiences “satiety” (*koros*) when elevated to intellect, the terms “poverty” and “satiety” here clearly suggesting the status of the daimonic in Plato’s *Symposium* (202e-204a), between *Poros* (Resource) and *Penia*.¹¹ In the state of emptiness or *aporia* the soul of whatever kind is present to everything in its environment passively, and can thus only reflect the balance of cosmic and historical forces at a given place and time. This is the condition of Porphyry’s “maleficent” daimons, who are “complex” and nourished from complexity, inconsistency and incompatibility, not only complex foods but also complicated traditions built up over time and hence difficult to critique.

In the long fragment Porphyry quotes in *De abstinentia*, Theophrastus offers an historical account of how animal sacrifice came to be a part of religious life. It is not important to recount this history in detail, but only to recognize the forces Theophrastus discerns at work in the process, and their effects. The sacrifice of animals arises from a mistaken expansion of the first-fruits principle to things to which it ought not to have applied. Due to the role which eating animal flesh plays in human society, the expansion of the first-fruits principle to animal sacrifice creates internal contradictions in sacrificial practice that ultimately result in, as Porphyry puts it, “non-sacrificers and bad sacrificers” (§7). On the one hand, the “non-sacrificers” are either atheists or those who stand apart

¹⁰ *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes*, ed. B. Mommert (Leipzig: Teubner, 1907).

¹¹ Porphyry refers again to *Penia* and *Poros* at *Sententiae* §40 (p. 38), followed closely by a quotation from Empedocles (39.4-5).

from religion “because they think the Gods are base, no better than us in nature”; on the other hand, the “bad sacrificers” become entangled in the sacrificial economy of the lower daimons. Indeed, we can see from Theophrastus’ account how the circumstances of the consumption of animals, as expressing either exceptional wealth or deprivation, or in reaction to some trauma, exhibit in themselves the operation of the economy of the lower daimons, with its extremes and its complexity. The relationship with the Gods grows complex as society becomes more stratified, and choices have to be made, an ethical judgment made with regard to offerings that fall outside the norm of what the majority of people can offer to the Gods freely and often. This is why Theophrastus begins his account of the deviation of sacrificial practice from the introduction of costly aromatics, the name of which he fancifully derives from *arasthai*, “to curse”. Porphyry returns to this theme at the end of chapter 2, where he speaks of the confusion fostered by the introduction of extravagance into sacrifices, including the belief that the divine can be bribed, and that the Gods delight in extravagance, rather than in the character of those who approach them and the spirit in which offerings are made (§60-§61). Expensive and complex offerings, also, we may infer, as involving the involuntary—or at least, not strictly voluntary¹²—participation of many other souls, exhibit a similar daimonic economy as the animal sacrifice. This suggests a common argument against animal sacrifice and exploited human labor in the offering.

¹² The symbolic ‘consent’ of the animal to be sacrificed is a feature of traditional Hellenic sacrifice which is not specifically addressed by Porphyry, but he apparently rejects the claim that this consent is genuine, insofar as he states that “[N]o one is holy if he returns favors out of other people’s possessions without their consent, not even if he takes crops or plants. How could it be holy when injustice is done to those who are robbed? But if a man who takes even crops from others cannot sacrifice them in holiness, it is certainly not holy to sacrifice by taking something more valuable, for that makes the wrongdoing greater. Now soul is much more valuable than that which grows from the earth, so it is not fitting to take it away by sacrificing animals” (§12). We may note that even were Porphyry to recognize genuine, and not merely *pro forma* consent on the animal’s part, that Platonic scruples against suicide would still render the sacrifice inappropriate to the Gods themselves.

Beyond this lies the issue of the entire relationship of the Gods to human economies. Are the Gods merely *present to* the injustices, inequities and thoughtless cruelties of human society, or do they exert a constant critique of these, however much it is unheard or misunderstood? That the material plane is essentially the realm of process and change, at the same time that it serves as the justification for destructive sacrifice, also entails that critique and transformation of tradition are inherent to it. Nor is such critique and transformation an evasion of sacrifice, but the fulfillment of its innermost logic. The significance of sacrifice for Iamblichus no longer lies in the notion of nourishment, but rather in a special kind of negation. Iamblichus speaks of this in speaking of *fire*:

[E]ven as the Gods cut through matter by the fire of the thunderbolt, and separate off from it those elements which are immaterial in their essence, but are overcome by it and imprisoned in it, and render them impassible instead of passible, even so the fire of our realm, imitating the activity of the divine fire, destroys all that is material in the sacrifices, purifies the offerings with fire and frees them from the bonds of matter, and renders them suitable, through the purification of their nature, for consorting with the Gods, and by the same procedures liberates us from the bonds of generation and makes us like to the Gods, and renders us worthy to enjoy their friendship, and turns round our material nature towards the immaterial. (*De mysteriis* 5, 12/215.11-216.6)

The significance of passivity and impassivity here lies in the orientation toward activity in the world on behalf of the divine or in the passive participation in the existing economy of forces. Matter, for most Platonists, is not a substance, but the passive dimension of any regime of formation. In the negation of its materiality, then, the *authentic* sacrifice will expend, so to speak,¹³ its place in a cosmic economy in which it is passively inscribed

¹³ Compare Georges Bataille's theory in *The Accursed Share* of sacrifice as the expenditure of a 'surplus' relative to an economy of physical or symbolic/intellectual production.

according to its type—its species or universal—and be recognized instead in its unique individuality, in which it manifests its kinship with the Gods, who are above all else characterized by this quality.¹⁴ Once this is understood, the necessity of sacrifice, in a second step, is transposed from the sacrificial object to the *sacrificer*, as the one who operates at the junction of these two manifolds (i.e., the hierarchical or monocentric economy of species/forms and the polycentric manifold of unique individuals). Finally, once the sacrifice and the sacrificer have become identical, all sacrificial ritualism is ‘esoterically’ reinscribed as soteriology. This operation is, moreover, an indispensable moment in the theurgical program because it eliminates the illusion of a ‘progression’ from a sacrificial/ritual paradigm to a soteriological/mystical paradigm.

Thus Iamblichus speaks of two kinds of sacrifice (*DM* 5, 15/219-220), one which is “simple and immaterial and purified from all taint of generation ... whereas the other is filled with bodies and every sort of material business, that which is proper to souls which are not pure nor released from all generation.” We must beware of carelessly assimilating what Iamblichus says here to a simplistic dualism. ‘Generation’ here is not an absolute ontological determination, but a relative one for the theurgist. A thing belongs in one respect to the realm of generation, in other respects to higher domains. Generation is the passive determination of a being, whereas the divinity of anything lies in its activity. The purpose of the sacrifice, then, whether it is animal or plant or inanimate object, does not lie in the destruction of its matter in the mundane sense. For what is matter, as the reified substrate of sensation, but our own passivity toward the object? Sacrifice, therefore, lies in the recognition of the other subject, which is also inescapably the experience of pure alterity in ourselves. To be sacrificed, in the genuine sense, is to be withdrawn from the economy of

¹⁴ On the position of the offering, see my “Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2007, pp. 1-20.

being another goat, another human, another instance of any universal, and to become the unique individual that *is*. At this point the theology of sacrifice and that of salvation become indistinguishable. The sacrifice, when not understood in its proper logic, is not a genuine sacrifice, but merely a moment in the lower daimonic economy; and once understood properly, that violent supplement can add nothing to the soteriological structure nor, of course, to the natural processes of change and mortality operating on all corporeal beings in any case. It is impossible to identify any particular temporal process as releasing a being into individuality; one can only state that whenever this occurs, the mystic fire is present.¹⁵

¹⁵ For a valuable comparative account of mystical sacrifice in Hindu theology, see Sri Aurobindo, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, 3rd ed. (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1971).