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1

Philosophic Lives and the Philosophic Life

Porphyry and Iamblichus

GILLIAN CLARK

How should a philosopher live? Part of the answer to this question is how philosophers have lived; and in the late third and early fourth centuries, two Platonist philosophers, Porphyry and Iamblichus, made use of the biographical approach to the philosophic life. Porphyry's treatise *On Abstinence* portrays the ideal philosopher, who is detached from worldly concerns about politics and property, and who lives so as to minimize bodily desires and to encourage the ascent of reason toward God.[1] This philosopher is more isolated and more austere than either Pythagoras or Plotinus, whose lives Porphyry and Iamblichus describe in texts that are usually read as biographies. Each is credited with a *Life of Pythagoras,* and Porphyry also with a *Life of Plotinus.* These three works do indeed provide the narrative of a philosopher's life, but in each case the conventional title is misleading.[2] None of them is a freestanding biography, and each was written as part of a larger project. Nevertheless, they are often studied as examples of late antique biography, and they are most often read in relation to Christian texts, whether as a response to Christian challenge or as models of holiness that Christians sought to rival.[3]

This chapter attempts a double shift of focus. One shift is from life to lifestyle: from the remarkable individual βίος of the late antique

1. Porphyry, *On Abstinence* (*De abstinentia* = *Abst.*); see References, Primary Sources, at the end of the chapter for full citations. I thank Tomas Hägg, Philip Rousseau, and the participants in the conference on Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity.

2. Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* (*Vita Pythagorae* = *VPyt*) and *Life of Plotinus* (*Vita Plotini* = *VP*); Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean (Way of) Life* (*De vita Pythagorica* = *DVPyt*).

3. For an especially perceptive study, see Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity.*

holy man, the charismatic and wonder-working philosopher, to the philosopher as a teacher among his students, inspiring and promoting a philosophic βίος for which his own life is one kind of protreptic. The other is from debate across the boundary between pagan and Christian to internal Neoplatonist debate about the relationship of human beings to God, and therefore about the way they should live. (The term *pagan* began as Christian disparagement: it is used here because Porphyry would not have cared for the polite modern alternatives. *Polytheist* misdescribes his theology, and *Hellene* imports a fourth-century cultural agenda. Porphyry held that within all cultures a common truth was taught.[4])

Both of these shifts require awareness of time. Porphyry and Iamblichus were at work in the period when, from a triumphalist Christian perspective, the most important trend was the increasing visibility and social acceptance of Christianity in the late third century; and the most important events were persecution under Diocletian, transformation under Constantine, and then, in 325, the council at Nicaea, the first (supposedly) ecumenical council convened by the first openly Christian emperor. Porphyry, born in 234, went to work with Plotinus in 263, and according to the *Suda* (s.v. Πορφύριος, IV p. 178 Adler), he was still alive in the reign of Diocletian forty years later. Iamblichus, born probably in the 240s, was dead by 326.[5] In hindsight, they can be seen as leaders of pagan resistance to the growing strength of Christianity. For fourth-century Christians, Porphyry was the archetypal hostile philosopher, and his books were denounced by a series of Christian apologists and publicly burned by order of a Christian emperor. For fourth-century pagans, Iamblichus was the inspiration for the emperor Julian's attempt to revive and reform traditional religion.[6] Porphyry and Iamblichus are, indeed, still used as resources in debate, not only between Christians and latter-day pagans, but between those who approach philosophy

4. See G. Clark, "Translate into Greek: Porphyry of Tyre and the New Barbarians."
5. See Smith, "Porphyrian Studies since 1913," 719–22, and Dillon, "Iamblichus of Chalcis," 865–66.
6. On book-burning, see Barnes, "Scholarship or Propaganda?" 53; for Christian refutations, see Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca*, 221; on Iamblichus, see Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian and Hellenism*, 7–8, 188.

and religion as intellectuals and those who are also mystics and sacramentalists.

Present-day historians have learned to be cautious about the irresistible rise of Christianity as presented by Eusebius and his successors. We also need to be cautious about any assumption that non-Christian philosophers formed a solid anti-Christian front. The pagan past, like the Christian past, could be canonized and simplified. In the 390s, Eunapius was able to depict a serene philosophic succession from Plotinus to Porphyry, to Iamblichus, and to the students of Iamblichus; but three generations before Eunapius, philosophers competed for status and were preoccupied not with Christianity but with their own fundamental disagreements.[7] Porphyry and Iamblichus were not single-issue philosophers. They debated the central questions of Platonist philosophy: the relationship of the human soul, and of the material world, to the gods, and the expression and restoration of that relationship in philosophic and religious practice. Their rivalry was overt when Porphyry wrote a *Letter to Anebo*, an (imagined) Egyptian priest, confronting this representative of the oldest religious tradition with difficulties about the worship of the gods. Iamblichus replied, in the work known since Marsilio Ficino as *On the Mysteries of Egypt*, in the persona of the Egyptian master Abammon enlightening his disciple on the true meaning of religious practice. The debate between Porphyry and Iamblichus on the philosophic life was less openly confrontational than their debate on religion, but their conclusions on how to live differed just as radically. These conclusions were supported by argument from example, in the form of philosophic biography.

PYTHAGOREAN *LIVES*

Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*, which manuscripts and printed texts present as a separate biography, is an excerpt from the first book of a four-book *Philosophic History*. The *History* extended from Homer to Plato and, according to the fifth-century bishop Theodoret, combined

7. On Eusebius: Markus, *End of Ancient Christianity*, 87–95. Eunapian canon: Miller, "Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography," chapter 10 in this volume; Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 35; Fowden, "Pagan Holy Man," 33–8.

biography with doxography. In the life of Pythagoras, doxography occupies much less space than biography, but the balance may have shifted in other lives. Almost nothing else survives from books 1 and 2, although they included Empedocles, a philosopher important to Porphyry. The fragments of book 3 are passages chosen by Theodoret to discredit Socrates, whereas the fragments on Plato, from book 4, were chosen by Cyril of Alexandria to show how close Platonism is to Christianity. Both these Christian authors were evidently pleased to make Porphyry, the notorious anti-Christian, supply them with ammunition.

The *Philosophic History* thus exemplifies some general problems with Porphyry's work. Most of his writings survive only through the quite different use that someone else chose to make of his material. Important texts are incomplete: the concluding sections of the *Life of Pythagoras* are missing, and so are those of *On Abstinence* and *To Marcella.* There is no secure chronology, for the only fixed date (301) is that given by Porphyry himself to the *Life of Plotinus.* Some texts can be related to Porphyry's years with Plotinus (263–68): *On Abstinence* is addressed to a fellow student, and *To Marcella* was written after Porphyry's marriage to the widow of another. But there is not even that much indication for the *Philosophic History.* We do not know when or why Porphyry wrote it, whether it gave Pythagoras a special status among philosophers, and whether the effect was more like Diogenes Laertius, providing material that every student should know, or like Eunapius, establishing a tradition. In particular, we do not know how Plato was presented in relation to Pythagoras: successor, rival, superior, or one more in the chorus of philosophers.

The survival of the life of Pythagoras, as a separate text, suggests that the rest of the *History* mattered less; but that does not mean it mattered less to Porphyry. Pythagoras was a glamorous character, and Porphyry did a thorough job of collecting exotic source material, so excerptors were naturally interested. It is all too easy for present-day scholars to follow their example and give Pythagoras more than his fair share of attention. Pythagoras was not only exotic, he was the obvious pagan rival to Christ. He was the son of a god, credited with miracles and with supernatural discernment, and a divine teacher who reinterpreted traditional wisdom for his disciples. Pythagoreans had a commitment to the Master and his teachings, acknowledged bonds of friendship across the known world, and followed a distinctive rule of life, sometimes (according to tradition) in communities. All these offered parallels to the Christian churches and to Christian asceticism and monasticism. Pythagoras could claim greater antiquity than Jesus, and his teachings were said to be profound and universal, incorporating the wisdom of many more traditions than Judaism. If Porphyry was consistently and primarily an enemy of Christianity, as Christians from Eusebius on believed him to be, he would have had good reason to promote Pythagoras.

But Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras,* as it now survives, does not suggest any special commitment to Pythagoras, his teachings and his way of life, whether as rival to Christ or as rival to Plato: it reads like a useful collection of material from a wide range of sources.[8] Nor does Porphyry exploit the possible connections between his own life story and that of Pythagoras, who was also Tyrian (in some stories) by birth or education, was taught by Phoenicians and Greeks, and made a journey to Italy, where he was an influential teacher. Perhaps the *History* as a whole was an early work, a scholarly survey produced while Longinus was still the major influence on Porphyry.[9]

Iamblichus, in contrast, clearly did take Pythagoras as exemplifying the philosophic life. Like Porphyry, he provides a narrative of the life of Pythagoras that is not a freestanding biography; unlike Porphyry, he makes his purpose plain. The traditional title *De vita Pythagorica,* which used to be translated as *Life of Pythagoras,* means rather (in the words of two recent English translations) *On the Pythagorean Life* or *On the Pythagorean Way of Life.* The book is the first in a sequence of (probably) ten Pythagorean texts put together by Iamblichus, and it encourages students to embark on this demanding program of study by offering, not just the remarkable βίος, the life, of Pythagoras, but the Pythagorean βίος, or way of life, devised and inspired by the ideal philosopher himself.[10] No student of philosophy could hope to be like Pythagoras, who was in a class of his own. "They have a saying 'Humans are bipeds, and birds, and a third besides,' and the third is Pythagoras" (*DVPyt* 28.144). But the aspiring

8. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived,* 26; but cf. Dillon and Hershbell, *Iamblichus,* 14; Fowden, "Pagan Holy Man," 37.

9. Bidez, *Vie de Porphyre,* 34, challenged by Segonds, *VPyt,* 190–92 (but see Barnes, "Scholarship or Propaganda?" 55–57, and Croke, "Porphyry's Anti-Christian Chronology," 168–85, on Porphyry's supposed *Chronicle*).

10. Translations by Clark and by Dillon and Hershbell; Pythagorean sequence, O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived,* 32–40.

student could find in the calm and ordered community of Pythagoreans a powerful image of himself (or, unusually, herself) as philosopher, committed and serene in spotless white, sharing a lifestyle with supportive companions.

In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus openly responded to Porphyry so as to show him how he should have approached problems of religion. In *On the Pythagorean Life*, he showed how to use the life of a chosen philosopher as protreptic for philosophy: that is, for the intensive study of philosophic texts and for the appropriate lifestyle. If this too is a corrective response, which works of Porphyry's had Iamblichus encountered when he wrote *On the Pythagorean Life?* There is no secure chronology of Iamblichus's life or writings, so argument depends on the texts. The parallels between the two narratives of Pythagoras's life are so close that Iamblichus must have used either the material collected by Porphyry or the same sources. But he used this material in a context suggesting that *On the Pythagorean Life* (whatever its date) is most helpfully read in relation to the *Life of Plotinus*, and also in relation to *On Abstinence.*

The life of Plotinus that Porphyry published in 301, thirty years after Plotinus's death, is also not a freestanding biography. The text is not found independently of the *Enneads*, Porphyry's edition of the writings of Plotinus, and its full title is *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Writings*. It is the preface to the *Enneads*, just as *On the Pythagorean Life* is the preface to the Pythagorean collection edited by Iamblichus. It, too, is protreptic for the study of the difficult material it introduces, and it deploys the life of the author and the philosophic life of his students to show why the material is worth the effort. Both prefaces suggest that the author of the works they introduce was in some sense divine. Iamblichus presents Pythagoras as a soul close to the gods, sent from heaven to assist humans, or actually a god himself (*DVPyt* 8; 135); Porphyry presents Plotinus as a soul whose divine guardian is not a lesser daemon but a divinity (*VP* 10).

Pythagoras and Plotinus were far apart in time, but Porphyry and Iamblichus faced similar problems. If there were any authentic writings by Pythagoras and his followers (and that was very doubtful), they were deliberately obscure. Plotinus had left writings, but they were difficult and tentative explorations of philosophical problems, not the exposition of a system. So there was work to be done before students could even have texts to study. Worse, there was doubt, not

just about the divinity, but about the intellectual credentials of the authors. Hostile reactions to Pythagoras began with Heraclitus; Pythagorean writings, beset by charges of forgery, were dismissed as pretentious nonsense, and Pythagoreans were often regarded as cranks. Plotinus had been accused of plagiarism and incoherence (*VP* 18.1–8), and his way of living and teaching might well seem unhelpful, if not actually damaging, to himself and to emotionally vulnerable students such as Porphyry (*VP* 11, 15). Twentieth-century reactions to the life and work of Wittgenstein are an obvious parallel.

The problems were similar, but the solutions differ, because Porphyry's own testimony is central to the life of Plotinus. In it, complaints are voiced and sometimes answered, and the editor of Plotinus's writings, the "I, Porphyry" who recurs to unintentionally comic effect, is shown to be exceptionally well qualified for his task. He also explains (*VP* 24–26) exactly what he has done to organize his texts. Iamblichus provides, although with characteristic repetition and unclarity, the material for answering the charges against Pythagoras. His editorial voice remains almost unheard, and there is no surviving explanation of how he chose and arranged his Pythagorean sequence.[11]

So the life of Plotinus and *On the Pythagorean Life* are both designed to introduce a sequence of texts and encourage the reader to study them; both affirm the special status of the author and acknowledge, but try to overcome, the controversy that surrounds him. They are in parallel, and they are also in dialogue (even if we cannot be sure who spoke first). There is a further resemblance in that they both appropriate Pythagoras to support different varieties of Platonist philosophy and lifestyle. This is obvious for Iamblichus, less so for Porphyry: but both *On Abstinence* and the new edition of Plotinus, unlike Porphyry's life of Pythagoras, at once invite the reader to recognize Pythagorean influence.

The full title of *On Abstinence* is *On Abstinence from the Ensouled*, that is from eating once-animate foods. The treatise begins by reproaching Castricius, another student of Plotinus's, for reverting to flesh foods and abandoning the principles of Pythagoras and Empedocles (*Abst.* 1.3.3). The arrangement of Plotinus's writings in *Enneads* ("ninefolds") is also a signal. They were so called because Porphyry

11. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, 30–83 (survey 87–91).

had, at some cost in dividing up treatises, reorganized the writings of Plotinus into six groups of nine (three nines in the first volume, two in the second, one in the third). Similarly, Iamblichus selected a canon of Platonic dialogues arranged as a decad (which contains all numbers), followed by a second sequence of one and two (which together produce all numbers).[12] Porphyry does not explicitly justify his choice of significant Pythagorean numbers to order the writings of Plotinus, but in the life of Plotinus, he cites another preface, that of Longinus *On the End*. This work was a response to Plotinus and his student Amelius, in which Longinus said that Plotinus "expounded Pythagorean and Platonic principles more clearly than anyone before him" (*VP* 20.71–74). Porphyry, concerned to show that Plotinus was not derivative, restates this as "Plotinus and Amelius . . . were so far from plagiarizing from Numenius and giving his views the first place in their system that Plotinus deliberately propounded Pythagorean views" (21.6).[13]

As in case of the *Philosophic History*, it would be easy to overstate the importance of Pythagoras. To propound Pythagorean views, or adopt Pythagorean practices, was not an alternative to being Platonist: depending on one's position in a long-running debate, Pythagoreanism was Platonism properly interpreted or Platonism with optional extras.[14] This applies to philosophic lifestyle as well as philosophic theory. Pythagoreanism implied an ascetic lifestyle, but an ascetic philosopher was not necessarily Pythagorean. Plato argued for minimizing attention to the body, because bodily desires distract the soul, and that required some form of spiritual training, ἄσκησις. Avoidance of luxury and sexual indulgence, regulation of food and drink and sleep, were to be expected in any committed philosopher. According to Greco-Roman popular assumptions, vegetarians were usually Pythagoreans, but Porphyry demonstrated in *On Abstinence* that there were many arguments for vegetarianism. Pythagoreans (and Empedocles) argued that rational human souls could be reincarnated in animal bodies; other philosophers disagreed, but were impressed

12. Iamblichus: O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, 97. *Enneads:* Saffrey, "Pourquoi Porphyre a-t-il édité Plotin?" 47.

13. Numenius: O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, 10–14, and 29 on Pythagorean traits in *VP;* see also Gatti, "Plotinus," 12–13.

14. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, esp. 9–29; Dillon, "'Orthodoxy' and 'Eclecticism,'" 119–25; cf. Fowden, "Pagan Holy Man," 36–37.

by the evidence for thought and emotion in animals, or avoided meat because it was expensive and stimulating.

Pythagoras, then, did not displace Plato, though there were differences of opinion about their relative importance. Iamblichus intended his students to read his syllabus of Platonic dialogues in the light of his Pythagorean collection. His *Protreptic*, next in sequence to *On the Pythagorean Life*, combines general and Pythagorean philosophy, and progresses through Plato and Aristotle to Pythagorean precepts.[15] Porphyry has some Pythagorean allusions and subtexts in *On Abstinence*, but makes only occasional mention of Pythagoreans and their principles.[16] This is unexpected, because they would seem to be ideal for a treatise concerned with animals, justice, sacrifice appropriate to the gods, and ascetic communities. Maybe Porphyry observed Pythagorean reticence, once his opening comments had alerted those who knew. But to describe the true philosopher of *On Abstinence*, he borrows (*Abst.* 1.36.3–4) from Plato's *Theaetetus*.

Plotinus, as depicted by Porphyry in the *Life*, has some characteristics that Pythagoreans would have approved. He would not take the wonder drug theriac, which had animal ingredients, or attend the public baths (*VP* 2.3–7); and he was very reluctant to reveal the teachings of his teacher Ammonius and to commit his own to writing (3.24–27). But he overcame this reluctance (which could also have been inspired by Plato, *Epist.* 7.341), and when he did agree to write, it was not in the obscurely dogmatic Pythagorean mode. Plotinus wrote in an exploratory, unsystematic form, following argument and counterargument as in a Platonic dialogue without the interjections.[17] He kept the birthdays of Socrates and Plato (*VP* 2.40–42). He wanted to withdraw from Rome to a ruined city in Campania (12.4): this was an area with strong Pythagorean associations, but Plotinus would have named the city Platonopolis and given it the laws of Plato. Most important of all, the students of Plotinus are Platonic (or rather Socratic) students, quite unlike those of Pythagoras as represented by Iamblichus. The relationship of a philosopher to his students, and how those students should be taught to live, was a primary concern of Porphyry and Iamblichus in writing philosophic biography.

15. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, 40–44; 97–98.

16. *Abst.* 1.36, ed. Bouffartigue-Patillon.

17. See O'Brien, "Plotin et le voeu de silence," and Goulet-Cazé, "Arrière-plan scolaire de la *Vie de Plotin*," 249–56.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

According to Iamblichus, the students of Pythagoras were accepted only after he had tested their suitability. They joined a community that followed a rule of life, but there was a period of probation before they were allowed to speak or to hear the Master. According to Porphyry, the students of Plotinus came to hear him if and when they chose, intervened in the discussion when they had something to say or to ask, and decided for themselves whether, and how far, they would follow his example of ascetic living. Porphyry does not explicitly make the comparison with the students of Socrates, but he recreates, in the life of Plotinus, a self-selected group of students who vary in age, expertise, commitment, and way of life.[18]

The students of Plotinus include examples of the traditional three ways of life: contemplation, politics, and business. Porphyry disapproves of the rhetor Serapion (7.46–49), who could not bring himself to abandon moneylending. Plotinus himself had no known family ties, property, or continuing connection with his home town, but most of his students did, and some continued to engage in politics or even to serve as senators. The senator Rogatianus (7.32–46) was exceptional in refusing to take office as praetor. Porphyry says that anyone who wished could attend the seminar, but there must in practice have been financial and social barriers. Most students of philosophy relied on private funds to give them the necessary leisure. Plotinus also had important friends; a letter of introduction, or a friend to take one in, as Amelius took in the painter Carterius (1.11–14), would surely be needed to get past the porter of the lady Gemina, widow (perhaps) of an emperor, in whose house Plotinus lived (9.1–2).[19]

The group fragmented when Plotinus was terminally ill. He had no designated successor, and the program of study had depended on him.[20] Porphyry refers to lectures by Plotinus and to discussions and exegesis of texts that Plotinus had chosen. A student might volunteer a paper, or Plotinus might ask him to defend a thesis or report on a text, but teaching and discussion were shaped by Plotinus's willingness to pursue whatever question was raised, and the only evidence of progress was Plotinus's approval. This tutorial method never suits all students, and Porphyry notes frustration with the lack of system. Thaumasius (13.12–15) wanted Plotinus to lecture without constant interruptions. Amelius, after eighteen years with Plotinus, had written nothing (4.5) and said that there was disorganized and irrelevant talking (4.35–38). He joined Porphyry in urging Plotinus to write (5.7), but it was Porphyry who eventually organized the piecemeal writings of Plotinus into a thematic sequence.

Some people complained about the content as much as the technique. They said that Plotinus talked a lot of derivative nonsense, and Porphyry's own first reaction was that Plotinus's teaching depended on a fundamental mistake (18.1–11). He wrote a paper arguing that there are objects of thought distinct from acts of thought: Plotinus would then be wrong to suppose that we discover what we truly are by investigating our own acts of thought. Does such dissatisfaction, rather than Pythagorean silence, explain why *On Abstinence* makes no mention of Plotinus, the revered vegetarian teacher of Porphyry and Castricius? But thirty years after Plotinus died, Porphyry could still remember signs of acceptance or interest from Plotinus.

Iamblichus worked with Porphyry either as student or as fellow student. We do not know about his experience as a student, but Eunapius (458–60) has stories of Iamblichus the teacher. In contrast, we have Porphyry's own account of life as a student of Plotinus's, but Eunapius (456–57) knew very little about Porphyry as teacher. (This may be because Porphyry taught in Rome, and Eunapius's connections were in the eastern Mediterranean.) Iamblichus made sure that his students had a curriculum and a structure that did not depend on his presence; he also wrote commentaries on most of the Platonic dialogues in his canon.[21]

On the Pythagorean Life is located in an idealized past, when aspirant philosophers could be put on probation for three years and required to maintain silence for five (*DVPyt* 17.71–72). But the structured and hierarchical lifestyle it advocates could easily be adapted for philosophers from the social elite of late antique cities, like the students Iamblichus taught when he returned to his Syrian homeland.[22]

18. Discussion in Goulet-Cazé, "Arrière-plan scolaire," 231–57; Lim, *Public Disputation, Power and Social Order in Late Antiquity*, 37–47, and id. "Auditor Thaumasius in the *Vita Plotini*," 157–60.
19. Saffrey, "Pourquoi Porphyre a-t-il édité Plotin?" 32.
20. Further examples in Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, 189–90.
21. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived*, 91–105; Dillon, "Iamblichus of Chalcis," 875–78.
22. Fowden, "Pagan Holy Man," 40–43.

He envisages (21.96–100) communities of philosophers living in quiet places outside cities, perhaps near sanctuaries. They spend part of each day in solitary study and reflection, but they also have small-group discussions, help each other with advice, and relax and exercise together. Their philosophic lifestyle avoids luxury but is not unduly austere. Both sexes are expected to be chaste within marriage, but celibacy is not required; there are regulations about food, but wine and some kinds of meat are available at dinner; purity rules ensure that the philosopher is ready at any time to offer sacrifice to the gods. The lifestyle is compatible with the civic duties undertaken (but only after lunch) by some members of the group, and with traditional sacrificial ritual.

This is quite different from the diversity and individualism portrayed in the *Life of Plotinus*, and also from the solitary austerity of *On Abstinence*. Plotinus is absent from *On Abstinence*, and his students are present only in the opening paragraphs, as relays of visitors bringing news of Castricius's lapse. In this text the true philosopher is a priest, working to approach God "alone to the alone" (2.49.1). He lives as befits one in close contact with the divine (1.36–38), but not like the Pythagoreans of Iamblichus, who are always fit to offer sacrifice. He rejects civic concerns and traditional sacrificial ritual; he eats no flesh foods and would prefer not to eat at all (1.45.3); he "does not stoop to marriage" (1.52.2) and appears to live in solitude, conversing only through the texts he reads and writes. When Porphyry collects examples of ascetic communities in different traditions, what interests him is not their mutual support, but the lifestyle that maintains their purity and separates them from household and civic commitments. Brahmans, indeed, do not even live or talk together, and if they are forced into social contact, they recover by voluntary solitude and fasting (4.17.6).

On Abstinence is an extreme, sometimes an obsessive, text. Its insistence on purity and discipline, and its concern with contamination by what goes into the body, suggest the suicidal depression that afflicted Porphyry in the late 260s (*VP* 11), which may have been intensified by Plotinus's death and the dispersal of his students. Porphyry says that the lifestyle it advocates is suited only to a few, even among philosophers (*Abst.* 1.27.1), and a "Plotinian" philosophic life could, on the evidence of Porphyry's own life of Plotinus, have been much more accommodating to human and social needs. It has to be

remembered that philosophers change their minds and try out different arguments in different contexts. In *On Abstinence*, Porphyry rejects traditional religious practice as unworthy of the gods (2.38–43), but he also points out that tradition allows simple offerings; and in *To Marcella* (18), he argues that "the greatest fruit of piety is to honor the divine according to ancestral custom, not because the divine needs anything, but because its most awesome and blessed majesty invites us to reverence."

The personal is also the philosophical: the philosophic lifestyles offered by Porphyry and Iamblichus mirror their own choices. Porphyry left his native city of Tyre to work first with Longinus in Athens, then with Plotinus in Rome. He married relatively late (*To Marcella* 1), in order to protect the widow and children of a fellow student, and without wishing for children of his own; this probably implies that he maintained celibacy. On the evidence, he chose philosophic detachment over the traditional obligation to maintain his family line and his city's political and religious life. Iamblichus traveled to study philosophy, but he returned to Syria, had children, and interpreted civic sacrificial religion as beneficial to worshippers.

But these choices were not only the product of personal temperament: they also reflect an important difference of belief about the relationship of the soul to the material world. The aim of the philosophic life was always to purify the soul and help it to rise by study and contemplation toward the divine. Porphyry held that the material world could only contaminate, and that the philosophic soul must seek to escape that contamination by maintaining its connection with the divine. Iamblichus, as his students would come to understand in their program of study, interpreted Platonism as teaching the presence of gods in the material world. It followed that the embodied soul must not seek only to escape, but must do its share in establishing order and harmony.[23]

PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS

Porphyry and Iamblichus differed on fundamental questions. Their use of biography at least reflects those differences, and was probably a weapon in their continuing debate. But they both saw themselves

23. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 1–17.

as Platonist philosophers, working for the understanding of a tradition common to the great Greek philosophers and to the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. Did they think their tradition needed defense against Christianity?

Some Christians held that divine revelation had superseded the philosophy of Greece, others interpreted Christianity in Platonist terms, but all Christians acknowledged the supremacy of Christ and of the Bible as a divinely inspired text. Porphyry presents Plotinus, and Iamblichus presents Pythagoras, as exceptionally close to the divine. Their writings are inspired by their closeness to God, and study of these writings is itself a spiritual exercise, which, by increasing the student's understanding, helps the soul in its effort toward reunion with the divine. The *Enneads* and *On Pythagoreanism* are sacred texts.

Such a presentation of a great philosopher and his writings need not have been a reaction to Christian teaching: pagans and Christians agreed on the reverent study of central texts, but differed on what those central texts should be. Here, again, we must beware of hindsight. Porphyry is notorious for having written fifteen books against the Christians. Fragments of *Porphyry against the Christians* survive because Christians set out to refute them, but both the authenticity and the title of the fragments are disputed.[24] It is not clear either that Porphyry wrote a separate work with the title *Against the Christians* or that he was a lifelong campaigner against Christianity. What is clear is his lifelong disapproval of those who knew, but rejected, the common philosophic tradition.

As a young man, Porphyry met Origen, and Eusebius (*Historia Eccl.* 6.19.5) cites with indignation his comment that Origen was trained in Greek philosophy, including that of Plato and of eminent Pythagoreans, but lapsed into lawlessness (that is, into Christian refusal of social norms) and also used allegory inappropriately on the plain sense of Christian scripture.[25] Porphyry later encountered several varieties of Christians among the students of Plotinus (*VP* 16): those he regards as worthy of comment were (in his opinion) heretics

24. For Porphyry's supposed *Against the Christians*, see Harnack, challenged by Barnes, "Porphyry *Against the Christians*"; id., "Scholarship and Propaganda"; and Beatrice, "Towards a New Edition of Porphyry's Fragments Against the Christians." See also Simmons, *Arnobius*, 220–22.

25. Sellew, "Achilles or Christ?"

who claimed descent from ancient philosophy but said that Plato had not plumbed the depth of intelligible reality. This catchword recurs in *On Abstinence*, where one of Porphyry's targets is represented (1.42) as arguing that there is no need for self-restraint, because "depth" can absorb all impurities as the sea does. There is no mention of Christians in *On Abstinence*, although there are some images that Christians shared with Platonists.[26]

Plotinus, according to Porphyry, often challenged the heretics in his seminar, and he wrote a treatise against them to which Porphyry, when editing the *Enneads*, gave the title *Against the Gnostics* (*Enn.* 5.9). The favored students of Plotinus joined in the attack. Amelius wrote forty volumes on the book of Zostrianus, and Porphyry demonstrated that writings ascribed to Zoroaster could not be authentic, but must be a later forgery.[27] This scholarly task is relevant to Porphyry's famous comparison of the Gospel narratives and supposedly expert knowledge of Judaeo-Christian scripture; neither was difficult for the learned pupil of the great Longinus. Porphyry does not even mention, in the life of Plotinus, that he had also down-dated the book of Daniel, which was alleged to be ancient prophecy and was important to Christian claims of antiquity.[28] What stands out here is not a sustained attack on Christians, but a sustained defense of the antiquity and authority of Platonist philosophical tradition.

Porphyry's decision to reedit the works of Plotinus in 301, thirty years after Plotinus's death, may have been influenced by a perception of Christian success. Diocletian's campaign to restore traditional religion entailed repression of Christians, and Christians experienced it as targeted persecution. It is possible that Porphyry was one of Diocletian's intellectual advisers, although the arguments are tenuous.[29] Even if he was not, the campaign would provide a context for encouraging people to read Plotinus as "the philosopher of our time" (*VP* 1.1). Fifteen books against the Christians, whether they were a separate work or part of a defense of tradition, could be the other side

26. Igal, "Gnostics and the 'Ancient Philosophy' in Porphyry and Plotinus"; Tardieu, "Gnostiques dans la vie de Plotin"; Shaw, *Theurgy*, 10–12. Shared images in *Abst.* 1.37–41, ed. Bouffartigue-Patillon.

27. Zostrianus: Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*, 202–3.

28. Casey, "Porphyry and the Origin of the Book of Daniel."

29. Barnes, "Scholarship or Propaganda?"

of the coin. But this, like so much else in Porphyry's life and work, is speculation; all that is certain is that Christians from Eusebius on perceived Porphyry as their fiercest opponent.

It was different with Iamblichus. The emperor Julian apparently planned to use him as the theorist of a Hellenic revival, complete with vocational clergy, restored temple cult, religious instruction, and welfare funds.[30] Iamblichus was particularly suitable because he tried to integrate philosophy with traditional religious practice. But he had died at least thirty years before Julian's attempt to challenge the Christian Church, which by then had experienced almost fifty years of government support and subsidy. Welfare funds, in particular, were an imitation of Christian giving: Iamblichus emphasized the bonds of affection, φιλία, linking different levels of the universe, but is not known to have deduced any need to help the poor.

Iamblichus is also not known to have attacked Christianity, unless commitment to another philosophical and religious tradition may be taken as an implicit attack. He was not demonized, as Porphyry was, by Christian writers, and his extant works do not openly allude to Christianity. It remains possible that he was aware of the Christian Gospels when he wrote *On the Pythagorean Life* and intended to rival some of their claims about Christ.[31] But the parallels that can be drawn between Pythagoras and Christ, or between Pythagoreans and Christian ascetics, need not mean that an author who wrote about Pythagoras did so in order to challenge Christians.

Porphyry was, almost certainly, dead before Constantine's victory; Iamblichus lived for some years after it, but may not have been disturbed by the edict of toleration or by Constantine's subsidies to Christian churches. We do not know how visible the Christian presence was in the late third century, or how far Christians in Egypt or Syria had gone in developing their own variety of philosophic life, namely, the individual or communal practice of asceticism.[32] Consequently, we do not know whether Christianity presented a serious challenge to the authority, and claims to holiness, of pagan philosophical and religious tradition.

30. Athanassiadi-Fowden, *Julian*, 188.

31. Edwards, "Birth, Death, and Divinity in Porphyry's *Life of Plotinus* and Related Texts," chapter 2 in this volume; Dillon and Hershbell, *Pythagorean Way of Life*, 25–26; more generally, Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 121–43.

32. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 9–11; Rousseau, *Basil*, 70–82.

Once again, an awareness of time is required. The source material is such that pagan asceticism (actual or represented) of the late third century has to be compared with Christian asceticism (actual or represented) of the late fourth. The Christian texts have good reason to challenge, explicitly or tacitly, the pagan texts; but the converse need not be true. For example, there are probable allusions to Pythagoras in Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, which were probably intended to show that the uneducated Antony surpassed the great philosophers.[33] But the *Life of Antony* is thought to be a text of the mid fourth century, and is hence not a reliable source for Christian asceticism at the time of its dramatic date in the mid third century. Its allusions to Pythagoras cannot help us to understand the concerns of Porphyry and Iamblichus in the late third and early fourth centuries.

Sometimes what looks like an allusion to a rival actually reveals a shift in attitude and behavior. Iamblichus may not have been aware of any Christian monastic communities in the late third or early fourth centuries, but in *On the Pythagorean Life*, he uses two words that later became technical terms of Christian asceticism. Some Pythagoreans in the first Italian communities are said to be κοινόβιοι (*DVPyt* 6.29), that is, they lived a life in common. This means that they shared a lifestyle that allowed for family groups, and that their property was managed in common. It does not mean anything like Christian coenobite monasticism, which was single-sex and required renunciation of property. Other Pythagoreans, after the death of Pythagoras, lived solitary lives in deserted places, μονάζοντες ἐν ταῖς ἐρημίαις (*DVPyt* 35.253). Iamblichus has taken this phrase from Porphyry (*VPyt* 58) or from their common source, but it sounds like an allusion to desert-dwelling Christian solitaries. Athanasius, perhaps thirty years later, used μονάζοντες of Christian celibates who led an ascetic life, although still within the city.[34] But the Pythagoreans live in lonely, not in desert, places; and (more important) Iamblichus does not think it is good for them. They are μονάζοντες, living in solitude, because μονωθέντες, left alone and demoralized by the death of Pythagoras.

This example is interesting because it points to differences, not just between pagan and Christian, but between pagan and pagan. Those

33. Festugière, "Sur une nouvelle édition du *De vita Pythagorica* de Jamblique"; Meredith, "Asceticism—Christian and Greek."

34. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, 9.

who engaged in ἄσκησις, spiritual training, had to make choices about holiness in relation to society. How far should they withdraw from the obligations of civic life and householding, and how much should they concede to the body's needs for food and rest, sex and company? Should they aim for serenity or for purity? Iamblichus accepted the traditional duties to family and city, and his imagined Pythagorean communities, although separate and rule-governed, allow for civic involvement. Plotinus, as described in Porphyry's *Life*, has no family, eats and sleeps very little, and disregards his health to the point of allowing a fatal illness to develop (*VP* 2).[35] But he is still a social being, who lives in the capital city among friends and students, knows important people, and acts as arbitrator in lawsuits and as trustee for orphans (9).

In *On Abstinence*, Porphyry advocates more radical choices for a minority among philosophers. His ideal philosopher (*Abst.* 1.36–38) does not even know where to find City Hall and lives in quiet places even if they are (like Plato's Academy) unhealthy. He does not deliberately damage his health, because illness is a distraction, but he has no need to be physically fit (1.27.1). Porphyry also rejects the standard Platonist argument that the philosopher may (and usually should) make a reasoned choice to procreate legitimate children so as to meet his obligations to family, city, and gods. Holy men, he says (4.20), have taught that purity is being unmixed with one's opposite and impurity is being mixed with it. Intercourse (μίξις) is the mixing of opposites: male and female, body and soul, life and death. If conception occurs, soul is contaminated by its association with body. If conception fails, the living body is contaminated by dead seed. Briefly (1.41.4), "everything is shameful in comparison with the life according to intellect, and one should abstain from everything just as from sex; though nature must be conceded some nourishment because of the necessity of generation."

Detailed study of philosophic lives brings out the variety of pagan asceticism, just as detailed study of Christian asceticism has brought out its diverse and experimental character.[36] There are still some general contrasts between the pagan asceticism of the third century and the Christian asceticism of the fourth. The role models of Christian

35. Plotinus on illness and death: S. R. L. Clark, "Plotinus," 289; Dillon, "Singing without an Instrument."

36. Elm, *"Virgins of God"*; Rousseau, *Basil*, 61–76, 190–210.

texts are faced with the same choices as the pagans, but their response is more extreme even than Porphyry's in *On Abstinence*. Withdrawal from civic preoccupations becomes renunciation of social and financial status. Commitment to the ascetic life is symbolized by changing one's clothes for the coarse, dark, probably dirty clothing of the "lower orders," the *humiles*. Quiet residence in one's own or someone else's house, preferably a country villa, becomes withdrawal into solitude, and the "lonely places," ἔρημα χωρία, sought by some philosophers become the desert, the ἔρημος, actual or self-created. Celibacy when it is appropriate, and rejection of sexual indulgence, becomes virginity for life and acute concern with any manifestations of sexual desire. Moderation in food, drink, and sleep becomes severe deprivation of all three; time given to philosophy becomes a marathon of prayer and Bible study; minimal attention to the needs of the body becomes lasting, and sometimes punitive, damage to health. Christian communal monasticism had as one of its purposes the moderation of individual extremes, but Pachomian or Basilian monasticism was far stricter than anything imagined by Iamblichus. Porphyry comes nearest to them with the non-Greek ascetic lifestyles he collected from first-century sources, which are perhaps the earliest examples of (actual or imagined) single-sex communities.

There is also a difference in concern for less privileged human beings. If a pagan ascetic in the later Roman empire chose to escape from the burdens of parenthood and civic obligation, other family members had to take on the renunciant's property and obligations. Neither Porphyry nor Iamblichus suggests that that the poor should benefit from what the philosopher does not need. A Christian who renounced property would be expected to give in charity, but might, like the pagan, be most concerned with liberation from the burdens of property and status. Dressing like a *humilis* did not always, or often, mean living and working among the poor.[37] But the Christian ascetic was required to have humility, a sense of lowliness and dependence in relation to God and to spiritual superiors. A Christian who had renounced wealth and status might be surpassed by someone who had never had social status or education. The pagan ascetic, leading a deliberately simple life, was, like his role models, a member of a social, intellectual, and spiritual elite.

37. G. Clark, "Women and Asceticism in Late Antiquity."

Porphyry, according to Augustine (*De civitate Dei* 10.32), sought a "universal way" of salvation, but this does not mean a way accessible to all. Porphyry's universalism is that of the spiritual elite in a range of eastern Mediterranean cultures. He is contemptuous of the common man (*Abst.* 1.52.3–4) who cannot make the moral and intellectual effort required by *On Abstinence*, and still more of the philosophically educated Gnostic (1.42) who could make the effort, but claims that it is not necessary. Iamblichus is credited with wider sympathies because he argued, in *On the Mysteries*, that traditional cult, including animal sacrifice, was an expression of religious truth; but Julian's vocational clergy could not have used the writings of Iamblichus to instruct the simple faithful.

These are arguments, not for deliberate countering of Christianity by Porphyry and Iamblichus, but for a vocabulary of commitment common to pagan and Christian. Differences of practice, between pagan and pagan, as between pagan and Christian, depend on differences of belief about human beings in relation to God. Pythagoras and Plotinus, as presented by philosophical biographers, are intellectual giants who have undergone a lengthy education before they begin to teach. Their lives are narrated in order to help and inspire students of philosophy, and those students must be educated enough to make spiritual progress by work on their difficult texts, and disciplined enough to keep the demands of body and society in their place. But the great value of philosophic biography, for the late antique student and the present-day historian, is that it puts philosophy in context. The divine philosopher is seen as a living human being, who must lead and advocate the philosophic life in dialogue with students and colleagues and in the society of his time.

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