

Fragments & The Golden Verses

Iamblichus



Fragments of Iamblichus

Translated by Thomas Moore Johnson, 1909

From the Epistle to Macedonios Concerning Fate

[Stobaeus Eclog Phys Lib I, cap 6, Lib II, cap 8.]

I. All beings owe their existence to the one, for even the first being itself is derived directly from the one. Much more do universal causes owe their power or efficiency to the one, and are held together in one connecting chain, and are moved in harmony, by the principle which is prior to the many. According to this theory, since natural causes are multiform and manifold, and depend on many principles, and from one universal cause multitude is suspended, and all things are interwoven with each other by and through one bond, the bond or chain of many causes is referred to the one power most comprehensive of cause, which is the bond of many causes. Therefore this one is the bond constituted from the multitude: nor does it make the supervening union from the connection, nor is it dispersed among particulars or individuals, but according to a guiding and predetermined chain of causes in itself, it perfects all things, binds them in itself, and leads them uniformly to itself. Wherefore fate or destiny may be defined as one supreme order containing all other orders together in itself.

II. The essence of the soul is immaterial, independent, incorporeal, totally ungenerated and indestructible, having from itself existence and life, wholly self-motive, and the principle of nature and all motions. Being of such a character, therefore, it comprehends in itself a life free from and independent of the body. So far, therefore, as it gives itself to the things of generation, and subjects itself to the revolution of the universe, so far it is controlled by fate, and becomes subservient to the physical necessities; but so far as it exercises its intellectual energy independently, so far it voluntarily acts as to its own affairs, and apprehends the divine and good and intelligible.

III. Wherefore it behoves us to live the life of the intellect and of the Gods, since this alone gives unfettered power to the soul, and liberates us from the bonds of necessity; and causes us to live not merely a human but a divine life, and one naturally full of divine goods.

IV. And, to speak briefly, the motions produced in and about the world by fate are similar to the immaterial and intellectual energies and motions in the intelligible world, and the order of fate is an image of the intelligible and undefiled order. But secondary causes are referred to prior, and the multitude in generation to the impartible essence or nature; and thus all the things of fate are conjoined with the pre-guiding providence. By the same essence, therefore, fate is interwoven with providence, and by virtue of its nature providence is also fate, and subsists from and about it. These things being so, the principle of human actions is in harmony with both these principles, viz, providence and fate, of the universe, but there is also in us a principle of actions, i.e., the rational soul, which is independent of nature and not subject to the motion of the universe. On account of this it is not contained in the motion of the universe: because the soul follows its own motion and not the motion of the universe, it is above fate; and because the universe does not influence it, it is of a superior order, but so far as it is distributed to all the parts of the universe and is allotted certain divisions from all the elements, and is used by all these, the soul is contained in the order of fate, acts in connection with it, fills it, and uses it rightly. And so far as the soul contains in herself a pure reason and the perfect, and is independent and self-motive, energising from herself, so far she is liberated from all external things. But so far as she assumes other lives, falling into generation and associating with the body, so far she is interwoven with the order of the universe.

V. But if anyone thinks that by introducing chance and fortune he will destroy order, let him learn that there is nothing in the universe unordered or incoherent, nor without cause, nor indeterminate, nor without a purpose, nor any thing proceeding from nothing, and arising by accident. Therefore the order and series of causes is not destroyed by fortune, nor the union of principles, nor the mastery or rule of the primary principles extending through and over all things. It is better therefore to define fortune as the order of superior things, and of other things which are inferior, so far as she is an overseer of events and a concomitant cause of them, and anterior to them; which fortune we at one time call a god, and at another a daemon. For when there are superior causes of events a god is the principle or ruler of them; but when there are natural causes, a daemon. Therefore all things perpetually become from causes, nor is anything introduced into generation without

order.

VI. Why are the goods of life apparently distributed contrary to desert or undeservedly? But this question it is not right to ask, since on nothing else than man himself and on the will of man do true goods depend: and the chief of these are determined by the will. But the question originates in the ignorance of the multitude. There is no fruit of virtue other than itself. The upright or virtuous man is not injured by fortune, for the magnitude of his soul makes him superior to any event or accident. Neither do evils happen to him contrary to nature, since the excellence and perfection of the soul satisfy the highest principle of man. And, indeed, the things which seem to be evil or adverse exercise, secure and augment virtue; and without them it is impossible for men to become good and upright. And therefore it is the essential characteristic of the upright man to honour virtue above all other things, and to place the perfection of reason in a happy life alone: other things he holds as nothing, and despises them. Since therefore the soul constitutes the real man, and the soul is intellectual and immortal, and its virtue, good and end subsist in the divine life, truly nothing of mortal things can either augment the perfect life or diminish its felicity. In brief, our felicity consists in the intellectual life, so nothing of intermediary things can either increase or subvert it. In vain therefore are fortune and its worthless gifts praised by men.

From the Epistle Concerning Temperance

[Stobaeus Flor Lib IV, 61 etc, Lib V, 136.]

I. Every virtue despises everything of a mortal form or nature, but chiefly honours the immortal. But this is especially the serious purpose of temperance, holding in contempt the pleasures which nail the soul to the body, and firmly established on holy pedestals, as Plato says. [Plato, Phaedrus, 254b.]

II. For how does temperance not make us perfect, banishing wholly from us the imperfect and passionate? You may know that this is the case by considering, for example, the story of Bellerophon, how, aided by temperance, he destroyed the Chimaera, and every brutal, savage and wild race. In brief, the excessive domination of the passions does not permit men to be men, but draws them down to the irrational nature, and the brutal and the lawless.

III. But excellent order or rightness of conduct restraining the pleasures within proportionate bounds preserves both families and cities, according to the saying of Crates. Moreover, it brings us near in a certain respect to the form of the Gods. Wherefore Perseus, advancing to the highest good of temperance, guided by Athena, cut off the head of the Gorgon, which signifies, I think, desire drawing men down into matter, and petrifying them by a stupid abundance of material experiences.

IV. The foundation, therefore, of virtue, as Socrates said, is the mastery of sensual pleasures; and temperance is viewed as the ornament of all goods, as Plato affirmed. But this virtue is the stability of the best habits, in my opinion.

V. Hence I affirm with absolute confidence, what is really acknowledged, that the beauty of temperance extends through all the virtues, and unites all the virtues in one harmony, infusing in them due proportion and union with each other. Temperance (*sophrosyne*) being therefore of such a character supplies assistance to the implanting of the other virtues; and when they are implanted gives to them a perpetual security.

VI. The constitution of the seasons of the year and the blending of the elements with each other preserve a harmony or accord most beautiful and temperate. And all this, on account of the character or order of the most beautiful measures (proportions), is called the cosmos or universe.

VII. I affirm therefore the same things about all the powers of the soul, viz, the symmetry or due proportion which they have to each other, the arrangement of spirit, desire and reason, according to the rank appropriate to each. And of these the division of that which rules and is ruled being seasonably or rightly made in that which is fitting, *sophrosyne* will be multiform.

From the Epistle to Asphalios On Wisdom

[Stobaeus Flor Lib III, 55.]

The argument shows that wisdom, being the leader of the virtues, and using all of them - just as the intellectual eye perceives by the intellectual light the objects which are present to it - assigns to them their orders and measures and most appropriate disposition. Wisdom, therefore being of a primary subsistence receives its origin from a pure and perfect intellect. Hence it looks

to the same intellect, is perfected by it, and has this as the measure and most beautiful exemplar of all its energies. If also there is to us a certain communion with the Gods, it is specially constituted through this virtue; and through this we are assimilated to them in the highest degree. And the knowledge, too, of such things as are good, profitable and beautiful, and of the contraries to these, comes to us from this virtue; and the judgment and correction of works which ought to be done are by this directed. And, to speak summarily, wisdom is a certain executive leader of men and of the whole order of their nature; and referring cities and homes, and the particular life of everyone, to a divine exemplar, it forms them according to the best similitude - exterminating some things, and purifying others. Thus, therefore, wisdom renders its possessors similar to divinity.

From the Epistle to Sopater On Truth

[Stobaeus Flor Lib X, 14.]

Truth, as the name implies, makes a conversion toward the Gods and their undefiled energy; but doxastic imitation which, as Plato says, is fabricative of images, wanders about that which is atheistic and dark. And the former indeed received its perfection in intelligible and divine forms, and real beings which are always the same; but the latter looks to that which is formless, and non-being, and which has a mutable subsistence, and its visive power is blunted. The former contemplates that which is; but the latter apprehends such a form as appears to the many. Hence truth associates with intellect, and increases our intellectual nature; but doxastic imitation, looking to that which always seems to be, hunts after folly and deceives.

[Plato considers truth multifariously. According to his doctrine the highest truth is characterized by unity, and is the light proceeding from the good, which imparts purity and union to intelligibles. The truth which is next in dignity is that which proceeds from intelligibles, and illuminates the intellectual orders, and which an essence unfigured, uncoloured and intangible first receives, where also the plain of truth is located, as it is written in the Phaedrus. The third kind of truth is that which is connascent with souls, and which through intelligence comes into contact with true being. For the psychical light is the third from the intelligible; the intellectual deriving its

plenitude from the intelligible light, and the psychical from the intellectual. And the last kind of truth is that which is in sensibles, which is full of error and inaccuracy through sense, and the instability of its object. For a material nature is perpetually flowing, and is not naturally adapted to abide even for a moment. — Taylor.]

The Golden Verses of Pythagoras

The famous Golden Verses attributed to Pythagoras may not have originated with him, as the majority of critics assert, but they contain an epitome of his philosophy, enunciating his chief precepts in a harmonious, elegant and concise form. If these precepts were put into practice the result would be a moral and intellectual revolution in human life, which would be of an inestimable benefit to mankind. The Golden Verses have been often edited, and translated into many languages. An excellent English version by the Rev John Norris, a Platonic thinker of high reputation, author of a curious and abstruse Essay on the Intelligible World, of great value, was published in 1682, and is reprinted for the sake of those who desire to read the complete text of the Verses. Hierocles' Commentary is one of the finest ethical treatises ever written, and richly deserves a continuous, profound study.

First the Immortal Gods as ranked by law
Honour, and use an oath with holy awe.
Then honour Heroes which Mankind excel,
And Daemons of the earth, by living well.
Your parents next and those of nearest blood,
Then other Friends regard as they are good.
Yield to mild words and offices of love,
Doe not for little faults your friend remove.
This is no more than what in you doth lye,
For power dwells hard by necessity.
Doe these things so; but those restrain you must
Your Appetite, your Sleep, your Anger and Lust.
From filthy actions at all times forbear,
Whether with others or alone you are;
And of all things yourself learn to revere.
In Deed and Word to Justice have an eye:

Doe not the lest thing unadvisedly.
But know that all must to the shades below,
That riches sometimes ebb and sometimes flow.
Bear patiently what ill by Heaven is sent,
Add not unto your griefs by discontent.
Yet rid them if you can, but know withall,
Few of those Thunder storms on good men fall.
Oft good and ill doe in discourse unite,
Be not too apt to admire, nor yet to slight.
But if through errorr any speak amiss,
Endure it with mildness, but be sure of this,
That none by word or action you entice
To doe or speak to your own prejudice.
Think before action Folly to prevent;
Rash words and acts are their own punishment.
That doe, which done, after you'll ne'er repent.
That which you know not, doe not undertake,
But learn what's fit, if life you'll pleasant make.
Health is a thing you ought not to despise,
In Diet use a mean, and exercise;
And that's a mean whence does no damage rise.
Be neat, but not luxurious in your fare,
How you incur men's censure have a care.
Let not thy state in ill timed treats be spent,
Like one that knows not what's magnificent,
Nor by a thrift untimely rake too clean,
'Tis best in every thing to use a mean.
Be not mischievous to yourself; advise
Before you act, and never let your eyes
The sweet refreshings of soft slumber taste,
Till you have thrice severe reflections past,
On th' actions of the day from first to last.
Wherein have I transgressed? What done have I?
What duty unperformed have I passed by?

And if your actions ill on search you find,
Let Grief; if good, let joy, possess your mind.
This doe, this think, to this your heart incline,
This way will lead you to the life Divine.
Believ't, I swear by him who did us show
The mystery of FOUR, whence all things flow,
Then to your work, having prayed Heaven to send,
On what you undertake, a happy end.
This Course, if you observe, you shall know then
The constitution both of Gods and men.
The due extent of all things you shall see,
And Nature in her Uniformitie.
That so your ignorance may not suggest
Vain hopes of what you cannot be possess.
You'll see how poor, unfortunate mankind
To hurt themselves are studiously inclined,
To all approaching good, both deaf and blind.
The way to cure their ills is known to few,
Such a besotting fate do men pursue.
They're on cylinders still roll'd up and down,
And with full tides of evil overflown,
A cursed inbred strife doth work within,
The cause of all this misery and sin,
Which must not be provoked to open field,
The way to conquer here's to fly and yield.
And now from ill, Great Father, set us free,
Or teach us all to know ourselves and Thee.
Courage, my soul; Great Jove is their allie,
Their duty who by Nature's light descry;
These Rules if to that number you retain,
You'll keep, and purge your Soul from every stain.
Abstain from meats which you forbidden find
In our Traditions, wherein are defined
The Purgings and Solution of the Mind.

Consider this: then in the highest sphere
Enthroned your Reason, the best Charioteer.
So when unbodied you shall freely rove
In the unbounded Regions above,
You an immortal God shall then commence,
Advanced beyond Mortality and Sense.