Plotinus’ tractate VI 8 (39), *On the freedom and the will of the One*, is one of the richest and at the same time one of the most puzzling that the philosopher has left to us. Rich because we find in it the first systematic consideration and the first defence of the character of the divine first as *causa sui*, and because these provided Plotinus with such an abundance of opportunities to carry forward his examination of the nature of divine freedom. Puzzling because the origins of the thesis against which Plotinus is arguing remain unknown to us to this day. Now, it turns out that Plotinus, in this well-known discussion, attributes to the One some particular characteristics that are next found in another work every bit as puzzling, Iamblichus’ *De mysteriis*—a fact that has not so far been noticed in any study known to me. My present purpose is, first of all, to draw attention to the way in which Iamblichus, possibly echoing Plotinus, represents the divine in this work, and next to see how far the line of argument he develops might in its turn help to establish more accurately the philosophical context of the propositions advanced by Plotinus in tractate 39.

**Iamblichus (De mysteriis, III 17–20)**

The background to Iamblichus’ assertions in this work may partly be inferred simply by restoring the true title of the *De mysteriis* which, as we know, is the ‘Reply of Master Abammon [= Iamblichus’] to Porphyry’s *Letter to Anebo* and Solution of the Difficulties it contains’. Thus it can be seen that in this letter Iamblichus is concerned with defending his

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* Translated from the French by Christopher Strachan.

doctrine against the attacks mounted upon it by Porphyry in this, now lost, Letter. Of particular interest, as we shall see, is the use he makes here of divination.

At the end of De myst. III 16, Iamblichus summarises his conception of divination as follows:

It emerges from all that has been said that the gods employ many intermediate instruments to send signs to mankind [...] They themselves, however, set apart from everything, having no relationship or co-ordination whatever with the world of becoming manage all that belongs to becoming and to nature according to their own will (κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν βούλησιν). So, then, this explanation of divination is consistent with the account of the demiurgic and providential activity of the gods. For in common with that account, it does not drag the Intellect of the supreme beings down towards us to the level of things here, but, while the Intellect remains self-contained, takes signs and all divination back to it and discovers that they proceed from it (p. 138, 6–139, 4)

The emphasis placed here on the gods‘ ‘own will’ as opposed to nature is striking. The gods’ will makes itself known not only in divination but, more precisely, in ‘the demiurgic and providential activity of the gods’.

Iamblichus is here seeking to counter Porphyry’s objection that ‘the divine humbles itself in the service of mankind’ (139, 12), as if it were bound and somehow constrained by their prayers. And Iamblichus explains that we should not on any account confuse divine ‘service’ with what is in reality nothing less than the surplus power of the gods, their overflowing goodness, their being the cause that embraces everything, their concern for us and their protection’ (139, 14–17). His aim is to make clear that divine action depends upon a will that is completely unfettered: ‘God is not divided up to correspond to the various types of divination, but is the source of all of them without undergoing any division. He does not bring them about piecemeal, some at one time others at another, but he executes them all en bloc at the same time in one intuitive act (κατὰ μίαν ἐτευχήσειν); and in the matter of signs he is not restrained, circumscribed or limited by them, but contains all the signs in himself and he encompasses all of them at a single moment and creates them from himself in a single act of

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2 The most recent reconstruction is that of A.R. Sodano, Porfrio, Lettera ad Anebo’ (Napoli, 1958).
3 The translations are based on those of Des Places, with some modifications.