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Neoplatonic Religio-Philosophical Epistemology in Ammianus Marcellinus' Portrayal of the Emperor Julian

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Abstract

In recent years, approaches to religion and philosophy have led to a reassessment of the relationship between these two concepts in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹ This article explores Neoplatonic thought in Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae* as a unified religio-philosophical epistemology that informs the author's understanding of how the course of history is shaped by the important players within it.

The discussion focuses on Ammianus' portrayal of the emperor Julian according to the principles of this Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology. Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is framed in terms of the four cardinal virtues of the Platonic tradition as a clear link to Ammianus' philosophical position. This portrayal is made under overarching themes of Fate and divine Providence that run throughout his narrative, as an indication of Ammianus' religiosity. Both aspects are intrinsically linked to one another, which this paper demonstrates through reference to the protreptic letters of Iamblichus and Sopater. These letters discuss Neoplatonic teachings on matters such as ethics, political philosophy, and the metaphysical order of the universe. Through this analysis, it becomes apparent that Ammianus was familiar with the Neoplatonic intellectual trends of the fourth century CE, and used this tradition as religio-philosophical epistemology to understand and explain how and why the historical events that he records unfolded as they did.

Introduction

The argument that I present in this paper has two stages. The first stage, elaborated in Part One, reconciles Ammianus' religious and philosophical views into a single religio-philosophical epistemology. It argues that we should not view religion and philosophy as mutually exclusive categories. In antiquity, religion and philosophy were linked, and served a similar fundamental purpose of providing some explanation about

¹ See, for example, Alviz Fernández and Hernández de la Fuente 2023; Layne 2021; Petersen and van Kooten 2017; van Nuffelen 2011.

the universe, how it works, and how humans ought to therefore behave within its ordered structure.

The second stage, expounded upon in Parts Two and Three of this article, consists of an analysis of Ammianus' portrayal of Julian through his use of Neoplatonic teachings on ethics, political philosophy, and metaphysics, alongside the letters of Iamblichus and Sopater for comparison.² In doing this, I demonstrate that Ammianus' laudatory portrayal of Julian is deliberately presenting this emperor as an ideal ruler according to this Neoplatonic religio-philosophical structure.

Ammianus uses these Neoplatonic teachings to explain why it is that Julian was such an extraordinary emperor worthy of the kind of attention that he gives him. According to Ammianus, Julian's embodiment of virtuous behaviour and sound political leadership benefitted the man as an individual as well as the wider empire and its subjects. Indeed, in the Neoplatonic worldview, Julian's soul would have benefitted from this good behaviour by bringing it closer to its true, divine origin. In turn, his imperial subjects benefited from his mild and virtuous rule. This portrayal brought about a harmonious political community in the empire via a peaceable relationship between the emperor and his subjects – the ideal political objective as prescribed by Neoplatonic teachings.³

Julian's portrayed virtues and exemplary rulership go even beyond his achievements in the physical world. Ammianus' history is imbued with ideas of Fate and Providence that align with how they are described in the Neoplatonic worldview expressed by Iamblichus.⁴ In this worldview there is a causal relationship between the immaterial and material realms. Events in the physical world are decided by the predetermined order of Fate, which is itself determined by the gods via the process of Providence. Although Fate is firmly under divine control and cannot be changed by humans, it is possible for individuals who strive to live lives in accordance with Neoplatonic teachings to draw the gods' attention and acquire their favour. The universe in the Neoplatonic conception is fundamentally aligned towards a principle of 'goodness',

² All abbreviations of primary source references in this paper follow those prescribed by the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition.

³ For an introduction to Neoplatonism, see Remes 2008, Remes and Slaveva-Griffin 2014.

⁴ These ideas will be discussed in Part Three of this article, specifically in reference to Iamblichus' ideas as expressed in Stob. *Flor.* 1.1.33; 1.5.17; 2.8.43-47.

and so ‘good’ actions ought to lead to ‘good’ outcomes.⁵ By this logic, Ammianus suggests that Julian was an exceptional man and ruler not just because he was virtuous, but because his qualities led to a reign that was aligned with the fundamental good of the universe.

Ammianus’ portrayal of Julian, therefore, has a specific, Neoplatonic religio-philosophical message for his audience to take on board, Julian, as a model ruler justified by the Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology, serves as an example to be followed by future emperors.⁶ Although Ammianus identifies Rome as being in decline, it is by no means a lost cause. Rome’s rulers may have a chance to put things right if they can bring themselves – and by extension the state – into alignment with the fundamental good order of the universe by following the teachings of Neoplatonism.

Part One: Ammianus and Neoplatonism in the Fourth Century

Ammianus was, as he famously describes himself at the conclusion of his work, a former soldier and a Greek (Amm. Marc. 31.16.9; *Quondam miles et Graecus*).⁷ On account of his composition of a major historical work and the many references to Classical literature within it,⁸ he was well-educated. It is generally thought that he was born into a family belonging to the Greek-speaking ruling class of Antioch, where he may have been instructed by teachers like Libanius.⁹ Ammianus made a career as a

⁵ This principle of ‘goodness’ is discussed in detail in Part Three of this article.

⁶ The portrayal of historical figures as religio-philosophical models to be followed has other parallels in Neoplatonic and late antique Pagan literary culture. For the case of the figures presented in Eunapius’ *Lives*, see for example Baltussen 2020 and Baltussen 2022, and, for the case of Proclus in Marinus’ biography, Costero Quiroga 2023.

⁷ All instances of the original Latin text and English translations are taken from Rolfe 1935–1940, published under the Loeb Classical Library series. For a discussion of the significance of Ammianus’ self-identification, see Hanaghan and Woods 2022: 1-2. As Hanaghan and Woods discuss, it could be an affirmation of Ammianus’ family background, of his knowledge of Greek literature, or indeed an excuse for any lack of knowledge of Latin literature. Another possibility is that of a deliberate use of *miles Graecus* in response to the Christian term *miles Christi*.

⁸ For an extensive analysis of Ammianus’ allusions to earlier Classical works, see Kelly 2008.

⁹ If not his student, Ammianus was at the very least within Libanius’ social and intellectual circle. See Fornara 1999: 328-331.

protector domesticus in the Roman army, and upon retirement in the late fourth century CE he composed his *Res Gestae* at Rome in Latin.¹⁰

This work initially covered a vast period of history, beginning with the reign of Nerva (ended CE 98) and ending shortly after the battle of Adrianople (CE 378). Originally containing 31 books, only the latter 18 are extant. These cover a mere 25-year period between the years CE 354 and 378, meaning that the thirteen lost books would have had to cover a staggering 257 years of history, showing that Ammianus was most interested in addressing contemporary issues rather than simply narrating the past. Clearly concerned with producing an account of his contemporary times, Ammianus prominently positioned the emperor Julian at the pinnacle of the work,¹¹ with ten books dedicated to his brief reign as Caesar under Constantius II and then as sole Augustus.

Ammianus admits that his work will be near panegyric (Amm. Marc. 16.1.3: *Ad laudativam paene materiam pertinebit*).¹² Julian's reign, Ammianus tells us, was so successful and noteworthy that it 'seemed almost like a dream' (Amm. Marc. 22.2.5: *Somnio enim propius videbatur*). Julian functions as the central figure of Ammianus' history for a reason: he stood out as a glimmer of excellence, a moment of near perfection in an era of history where Ammianus depicts an empire in decline (Amm. Marc. 14.6). This decline culminates in the defeat at Adrianople, leading the reader to consider what led to such a disaster.¹³

I argue that Neoplatonic thought is key for understanding this aspect of the narrative. Ammianus makes use of Neoplatonism's teachings to explain why it is that the empire is in decline, and how it might therefore manage to get back on track. Ammianus' heavy use of themes of Fate and Providence in his narrative describe the distribution of divine punishment and favour based on the actions of humans.¹⁴ As I will discuss

¹⁰ For an overview of Ammianus' textual history and a philological analysis of its content, see Kelly 2022.

¹¹ For Julian in Ammianus' narrative, see Ross 2016: 160-161. Ross identified that some kind of metaphysical system was important to Julian in the narrative but, lacking the scope to do so in his study, he did not explore this aspect in great depth.

¹² For this point, see Den Hengst 2018: 258. See also Lançon 2014: 35-36, for a brief discussion of panegyric in the fourth century.

¹³ Hanaghan and Woods 2022: 7. See also Weisweiler 2014: 106-107, for the proposal that Ammianus intended his audience to constantly question the claims that he makes. Weisweiler posits this proposal as an explanation for Ammianus' narrative inconsistencies.

¹⁴ See Mratschek 2022: 294; Paschoud 1986: 160; Divine Providence assumes the features of the goddess Iustitia in Ammianus' work. I discuss this topic further in Part Three of this paper.

in Part Three, these themes reflect the Neoplatonic worldview's understanding of the causal relationship between the immaterial and material worlds. If Rome has lost divine favour, it is because of an absence of morally good behaviour, especially on the part of its leadership.¹⁵ So, the solution to this problem is moral uprightness. The virtuous emperor Julian is used by Ammianus as evidence of the validity of this solution. When Julian assumes the purple, it is as though the goddess Iustitia has returned to earth, setting the worldly order right again (Amm. Marc. 15.5.38; Amm. Marc. 22.10.6).

Belief and Rationality

Approaches to religion and philosophy in Ammianus have come a long way over the centuries.¹⁶ Ammianus' religious themes had long been dismissed either as rhetoric and poetry, or as superstitious nonsense.¹⁷ In the latter part of the twentieth century, this dismissive approach to religion continued as part of the broader scholarly trend of the time which held that Pagans, unlike Christians, did not actually believe in their gods, but merely practiced religious rituals essentially for the sake of tradition.¹⁸ This position was convincingly rejected by Clifford Ando's influential book, *The Matter of the Gods*, in 2008.¹⁹ Ando proposed that although the Romans did lack 'faith' in a Christian sense, in its stead they had knowledge of divine matters, acquired via empirical verification following rituals designed to interpret divine communications through signs and omens.²⁰

Knowledge, however, as Joseph Mackey has pointed out, does not exclude belief. Indeed, belief is the higher-order category out of the two, with knowledge merely designating a belief that is both true and justifiable by the believer with an account.²¹ Belief itself designates a mental state that seeks to represent matters as they stand in

¹⁵ Mratschek 2022: 294.

¹⁶ For a summary of such approaches, see Rike 1987: 1-7.

¹⁷ Witte 1891; Ensslin 1923; Ensslin correctly identified that Ammianus was a Neoplatonist, but he concluded that this philosophical meant that Ammianus' religiosity must therefore be purely rhetorical. Such a position rests upon the false assumption that philosophy and religion are mutually exclusive categories.

¹⁸ Mackey 2022: 3; see also the discussion at pages 27-58 of this publication for a good overview of this perspective, including its links to debates between Catholics and Protestants over the place of ritual and faith in Christianity; See also Mackey 2017.

¹⁹ Ando 2008. For significant works that came to take seriously Ammianus' religiosity specifically, see Rike 1987; Davies 2004.

²⁰ Ando 2008: 13-21.

²¹ Mackey 2022: 20-21.

the world: a person can hold a 'belief' that accepts, or rejects, or doubts, that some state of affairs in the world stands.²² Therefore, if the Romans had a religious system based on gaining knowledge from the gods' communications with them, then they would logically need to believe that those gods existed and had agency in the physical world if that religious system were to have any bearing at all in their society.²³

Having established what we mean by belief and knowledge, and how these relate to ancient religion, we can now turn to a discussion of the role of 'rationality' for the validity of epistemological systems. This role of 'rationality' is an important point to discuss because the concept of 'rationality' has been particularly problematic in studies of ancient epistemologies, and has led to the dichotomy between 'rational' philosophy and 'irrational' religion.²⁴ This dichotomy is in part responsible, as I have mentioned, for the rejection of religiosity as a serious point of consideration in Ammianus and other Roman authors, as well as in the works of the Neoplatonic philosophers who focused on theurgic practices.²⁵

Although Crystal Addey convincingly refuted the 'irrationality' approach to Neoplatonic religiosity and argued that Neoplatonic beliefs can in fact be considered 'rational,'²⁶ for the purposes of this paper I propose that we reject 'rationality' as a useful term altogether. Ammianus believed seriously enough in Neoplatonic teachings to incorporate them into his worldview, and this fact, more so than our modern ideas of 'rationality,' is what matters.

Neoplatonism as Religio-Philosophical Epistemology

Neoplatonism is a religio-philosophical system, but this is not a unique feature of its late antique context. Indeed, we must understand that ever since the beginnings of the Platonic tradition in classical antiquity, religion and philosophy were not entirely separate concepts.²⁷ In Plato's conception, philosophy was seen not as an end in itself, but as a means or service towards something of a higher nature.²⁸ This

²² Mackey 2022: 21.

²³ Mackey 2022: 22.

²⁴ Addey 2014: 183-184.

²⁵ Addey 2014: 171.

²⁶ See Addey 2014: 171-213.

²⁷ Betegh, G. 2012: 625-638; Kukkonen and Remes 2016: 141; Layne 2021: 53, Petersen, 2017: 17. For the opposing viewpoint, see King 2018.

²⁸ Layne 2012: 53.

conception continues to be the case with Neoplatonism, which is a term that describes the continuation of the Platonic tradition into late antiquity, starting with the philosopher Plotinus in the late third century CE.²⁹

In order to explain the concept of Neoplatonism as a religio-philosophical epistemological system, the terms ‘philosophy’ and ‘religion’ must be defined. The definition of philosophy that I use here, apt because it describes what ancient philosophy was and what purpose it had, is derived from Pierre Hadot’s definition: ‘philosophy is the love of and search for wisdom, wisdom being a particular way of life. The initial choice, then, peculiar to each school, is the choice of a particular kind of wisdom.’³⁰ In other words, philosophy is the pursuit of a certain ideal way of life. Neoplatonism prescribes the pursuit of a certain way of life that it considers to be ideal, one of virtue and contemplation, and so it is a philosophy.

As for religion, I use the following definition, which highlights the nature of religion as a technology for social cohesion without rejecting actual belief in the divine: ‘the ritual and social interactions involving agents, objects and places, which were informed by the conception of, and possibility of communication with, the gods.’³¹ Neoplatonism maintains the belief that there are gods and that it is possible to communicate with them by various means, including contemplation and theurgic ritual,³² and so it also includes beliefs and practices that are religious in nature.

Connecting Iamblichus and Sopater to Ammianus

I have chosen to use Iamblichus’ letters, and a letter written by Sopater,³³ as a point of comparison for Neoplatonic thought in Ammianus for several reasons. Firstly, Iamblichus was the third major Neoplatonic thinker after Plotinus and Porphyry, and it was his particular school of thought that came to dominate the Neoplatonic currents of the fourth century CE. Although Ammianus does not mention Iamblichus

²⁹ Remes 2008: 1-2.

³⁰ Hadot 1995: 161; This author’s translation from the original French: ‘*La philosophie est amour et recherche de la sagesse, et la sagesse est précisément un certain mode de vie. Le choix initial, propre à chaque école, est donc le choix d’un certain type de sagesse.*’

³¹ Galoppin et al. 2022: 2.

³² Addey 2014: 179-182,

³³ This Sopater is the son of one of Iamblichus’ students, also named Sopater. I discuss this further in Part Two. For discussions of Sopater and his *Letter to Himerius*, see O’Meara 2005, and Swain 2012: 13-21. Sopater is a great example of the continuation of the Iamblichean practice of protreptic epistolography into the fourth century CE.

specifically,³⁴ he was almost certainly aware of who he was: he names the philosophers Maximus and Priscus as present at Julian's deathbed (Amm. Marc. 25.3.23). Both were students of Aedesius, one of Iamblichus' star pupils (Eun. *Vit.* 6.1-7.10).³⁵

Secondly, Iamblichus is a good fit here because Ammianus was evidently interested in aspects of Neoplatonic knowledge such as divination, augury, and other ritual practices designed to communicate with the divine.³⁶ Iamblichus is well known to have been a major proponent of such ritual activities, especially of theurgy. His theurgic interest had long been dismissed as a serious topic, or even taken as evidence of a decline in the philosophical standards of the time.³⁷ Theurgy had received a similar treatment to Ammianus' religiosity, being dismissed as 'superstitious' and 'irrational', as opposed to the 'rationality' of philosophical contemplation.³⁸ However, theurgy and philosophy were not viewed as incompatible practices by Iamblichus; they both had the same ultimate goal of divine ascent and mystical union.³⁹

Thirdly, Iamblichus' letters were designed to be easily read and digested by people who were not necessarily professional philosophers.⁴⁰ Ammianus himself falls squarely into this category as, granted, he was a well-educated man, but by no means a philosopher himself.⁴¹ It is possible that the letters of Iamblichus, on account of his fame, reached a relatively wide audience in the fourth century CE,⁴² and if so Ammianus may well have encountered them.

³⁴ Nor does he mention Porphyry. Szidat 1982 identifies some Porphyrian influences in Ammianus' work, while recognising the lack of explicitly cited sources. The only one of the three major Neoplatonist thinkers that Ammianus names is Plotinus (Amm. Marc. 21.14.5; 22.16.16).

³⁵ For a discussion of the significance of Iamblichus and his successors during the time of Julian's reign, see also Díaz Bourgeal 2023.

³⁶ This interest will be discussed in Part Three of this article.

³⁷ Armstrong 1967: 260; Sheppard 1982: 212-224; Smith 2004: 77; Theurgy has also been equated with magic: see Dillon 2007: 40. However, as Addey 2012: 133-148 points out, Iamblichus' theurgy, unlike magic, is not coercive of the divine. On the contrary: the theurgist performs the ritual to open up a channel through which the Gods' divine illumination can manifest – it is the Gods who are the active party, and the theurgist who receives their illumination.

³⁸ Addey 2014: 171. Addey summarises and then convincingly rejects this position.

³⁹ Addey 2014: 179. Addey also convincingly argues that Plotinus and Porphyry, though less interested in ritual practices than Iamblichus, were not opposed to theurgic ritual. For this point, see also Tanaseanu-Döbler 2017: 343-353.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the fourth-century practice of protreptic philosophical epistolography, see Marcos 2018.

⁴¹ Rike 1987: 3-4, posed the question: 'how did Ammianus rank as a Plotinus, Porphyry, or Iamblichus?' Of course, Ammianus himself was not a philosopher, and he certainly did not claim to be one himself.

⁴² Swain 2013: 5; Marcos 2018: 282.

In any case, it is clear that Ammianus was familiar with Neoplatonic teachings consistent with those expressed by Iamblichus and his successor Sopater.⁴³ They therefore serve as a useful point of comparison, allowing us to see how the Neoplatonic traditions of the fourth century CE are reflected in Ammianus' history.

Part Two: Neoplatonic Ethics and Political Philosophy

In a clear expression of his Neoplatonic philosophical approach, Ammianus systematically portrays Julian according to the four virtues of the wider Platonic tradition: moderation (σωφροσύνη), practical wisdom (φρόνησις), justice (δικαιοσύνη), and courage (ἀνδρεία).⁴⁴ Ammianus uses their Latin equivalents: *temperantia*, *prudentia*, *iustitia*, and *fortitudo* (Amm. Marc. 25.4.1). Julian is described as an excellent ruler in this regard, being virtuous beyond his years (Amm. Marc. 25.4.7: *Virtute senior quam aetate*). The four virtues were the foundation upon which the Neoplatonic ideal of rulership was built. This ideal is expressed in the letters of Iamblichus and Sopater, which will provide a useful point of comparison here to demonstrate how Ammianus systematically incorporated Neoplatonic ethics and political philosophy into his portrayal of Julian.⁴⁵ I shall proceed here to outline how each virtue is presented in the relevant parts of Iamblichus and Sopater's letters, before giving examples of Ammianus' Julian being portrayed according to each in turn. This systematic portrayal of Julian according to the four virtues is significant, as it demonstrates Ammianus' explicit use of aspects of practical Neoplatonic philosophy in his work which, as I elaborate later, ties into the broader metaphysical structure of the *Res Gestae*.

The Virtue of Moderation in Iamblichus and Sopater

Moderation is, as Iamblichus maintains in his *Letter to Arete*, the virtue that links the other three virtues together and upholds a virtuous lifestyle by establishing order and

⁴³ Szidat 1982: 143-144, also identifies that Ammianus demonstrates an understanding of Neoplatonic thought, which further shows the reach of philosophical discussions and teachings beyond the philosophers' limited circles.

⁴⁴ Dillon 2012: 56.

⁴⁵ For a detailed overview of Iamblichean ethics and political philosophy, see Opsomer et al. 2018: 1379-1383.

harmony within the ruler's self (Stob. *Flor.* 3.5.49).⁴⁶ Sopater presents a similar sentiment, suggesting that an individual who is able to self-moderate can effectively reject and escape from bodily pleasures, thereby averting domination by the irrational and disordered passions of the material world (Stob. *Flor.* 3.5.46).⁴⁷ In this sense, moderation is the foundation upon which a virtuous life is built, and is, as Iamblichus states, 'the surest guarantee of the finest habits of the mind.' (Stob. *Flor.* 3.5.48: Ἀσφάλεια δὲ τῶν καλλίστων ἔξεων ἡ αὐτὴ ἐστὶν ἀρετὴ, ὥσπερ ἐγὼ λέγω). The letters of Iamblichus and Sopater further demonstrate how a ruler's commitment to moderation is also a salient part of his relationship with the ruled. As Sopater reflects in his letter, self-control has the effect of making the ruler worthy of respect by the ruled: rejecting obstinacy, over-the-top adornment, and other excessive and unseemly behaviours shows the ruler to be calm and dignified, and therefore worthy of his high office (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.55; 4.5.56; 4.5.59). This sentiment is further related in Iamblichus' *Letter to Agrippa*, where he recommends that the ruler always assume a mild and sympathetic character in order to avoid the kind of pomp and superiority that the people despise in a ruler (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.76).

The Virtue of Moderation in Ammianus' Portrayal of Julian

Ammianus presents Julian as a ruler who exhibits self-control and moderation to a remarkable degree. We are told that that Julian considered it shameful for any man who considered himself wise to seek any kind of bodily honours since he possessed a soul (Amm. Marc. 25.4.7). Julian therefore self-imposes moderation, and Ammianus states that he followed the rules of this virtue as though he were bound to do so by law (Amm. Marc. 16.5.1). His eating and sleeping habits were austere and frugal (Amm. Marc. 25.4.4; 25.4.5). Fine foods were banned from Julian's table, and he ate nothing more than a soldier's rations (Amm. Marc. 16.5.3; 25.2.2; 25.4.4). At night, Julian slept on a rough blanket, and then only for a third of the night, devoting the rest to contemplation and affairs of state (Amm. Marc. 16.5.4; 16.5.5; 25.4.5). Likewise, Julian controlled his sexual desires – he was never tempted to even look at any captured women on campaign and was inviolably chaste after the death of his wife (Amm. Marc. 24.4.27; 25.4.2). This self-imposed austerity, as Ammianus tells us, gave

⁴⁶ Iamblichus' letters come to us preserved in Stobaeus' *Anthology*. All instances of the original Greek text and English translations of Iamblichus' letters are taken from Dillon and Polleightner 2009.

⁴⁷ Sopater's letter likewise comes to us via Stobaeus. All instances of the original Greek text and English translations of Sopater's letter are taken from Swain 2013.

Julian's soldiers great confidence and respect in their commander (Amm. Marc. 23.5.24).

Julian is also presented as being, for the most part, steadfastly in charge of his own emotions. This observation is especially apparent during his wintering in Antioch in preparation for his campaign against the Persians in Mesopotamia. A dispute between Julian and the Antiochian senate over the emperor's price-fixing policy leads to him angrily writing his satire, *Misopogon*, against the people of the city, an act which Ammianus considers to be inappropriate and excessive (Amm. Marc. 22.14.2). Because of this Julian becomes the butt of many jokes made by the Antiochians, yet he keeps his anger suppressed (Amm. Marc. 22.14.2). Ammianus asserts that this kind of emotional self-control is characteristic of Julian's behaviour. Julian rejects those who wish to influence him through rumours and persistent agitation (Amm. Marc. 22.12.4) and keeps himself calm when mocked or criticised (Amm. Marc. 22.14.3). Julian appears fully aware that, as Iamblichus states in his *Letter to Agrippa* (Stob. Flor. 4.5.54), a bad public reputation or image should not be averted if living with it carries some benefit for the people: the ruler's goal, after all, is not to achieve good optics at all costs, but to bring about the best life for the ruled.

The Virtue of Practical Wisdom in Iamblichus and Sopater

Wisdom in practical application is of the utmost importance for a ruler, whose position requires him to make decisions that could potentially affect millions of lives for better or for worse. Practical wisdom, as Iamblichus states in his *Letter to Asphalius*, 'dominates all the other virtues and makes use of them' (Stob. Flor. 2.2.5), enabling a ruler to tell the difference between right and wrong, and to implement the correct decision for the circumstances at hand using the other three virtues. In a reflection of the Platonic view that ethically correct decisions do not have a universal or essential nature, Sopater indicates that there is a clear need for rulers to adapt and make decisions flexibly based on the specific requirements of each problem that they might face:

It is not difficult for someone composing a treatise to start from the highest principles and chant the righteous hymn of Virtue. But for someone who has to set his words to the music of real events, the argument of our topic

demands approval for the best policy in the situations given to him rather than the 'absolute first according to Nature (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.51).

Τῷ μὲν γε τὸν λόγον διατιθεμένῳ χαλεπὸν οὐδὲν ἐκ τῶν ἄκρων παραγγελμάτων τὸν ὄρθιον τῆς ἀρετῆς ἄδειν νόμον, τῷ δ' εἰς πράξεις ἀληθινὰς τοὺς λόγους ἐντείνειν μέλλοντι τὸν ἐκ τῶν δοθέντων ἄριστον ἀντὶ τοῦ πρώτου τὴν φύσιν δοκιμάζειν ὃ τῆς ὑποθέσεως προστάττει λόγος.

This need means that a ruler must use his practical wisdom to choose the best course of action based on the peculiarities of the situation at hand. For example, in a conflict of opinion or principle with one's superiors, Sopater advises that the wise official should use a subtle and calculated approach to convince rather than directly confront them:

In the case of tasks one cannot get out of fulfilling it may happen that the authorities have not noticed or are ignorant: counter them by preparing a harmonious submission but do not make objections obvious. Overt criticism is troublesome to those in power. But by mentioning things as if they know them or suggesting a review or just asking what you happen to be perfectly well aware of, win them over if they are ambitious for honour by mentioning "honour and service", while if they are interested in those they rule appeal to their attitude (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.52).

Ἄ δ' οὐκ ἔχει μὲν ἀπαραίτητον τὴν ἀποπλήρωσιν, λαθεῖν δὲ ἢ ἀγνοῆσαι τοὺς ἐπιτάξαντας συνέβη, διδασκαλίαν ἐμμελῆ προσαγωνίζεσθαι παρασκευάζων μὴ ἴμφανῶς ἐπισκῆπτων· βαρὺ γὰρ ἔλεγχος ἐμφανῆς τοῖς ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ· ἀλλ' ὡς εἰδόμενος ὑπομιμνήσκων ἢ προβάλλων εἰς κρίσιν ἢ πυνθανόμενος, ἃ γινώσκων οὐδὲν ἦπτον αὐτὸς τυγχάνεις, καὶ φιλοτίμους μὲν ὄντας τιμῇ καὶ θεραπείᾳ προσάγου, τῶν δὲ ἀρχομένων ἐπιστρεφομένους τῆς προαιρέσεως ὑπομίμνησκε.

Likewise, a good ruler – or a subordinate high official, such as Julian when in the office of Caesar – ought to know how, and to what end, he should offer praise to his superior. As Sopater puts it:

Praising disgraceful things purely for the sake of pleasing is a sign of flattery, winning over those in power for people's advantage is a sign of political intelligence (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.54)

Ἐπεὶ κολακείας μὲν τὰ φαῦλα ἐπαινεῖν αὐτῆς ἔνεκα μόνης τῆς ἀρεσκείας, πολιτικῆς δὲ φρονήσεως τοῖς ἐν δυνάμει καθομιλεῖν πρὸς ὠφέλειαν ἀνθρώπων.

Practical wisdom according to these philosophical letters is, therefore, all about knowing or figuring out the best possible decision for the ruler to make in order to foster a harmonious political community. Because the concern here is for wisdom in practical application specifically, we may also see this virtue expressed in any commendable real-world decisions made by the person who embodies it.

The Virtue of Practical Wisdom in Ammianus' Portrayal of Julian

Ammianus presents practical wisdom as a characteristic virtue of the emperor Julian. As a ruler, he is said to exhibit 'wise governing, worthy of the imitation of good emperors' (Amm. Marc. 16.5.16: *Inter has tamen regendi moderandique vias, bonis principibus aemulandas, barbarica rabies exarserat rursus in maius*), an indication that Ammianus intends his portrayal of Julian to serve as a model for future leaders to follow. Ammianus certainly places an emphasis on Julian being especially studious and eager to improve his mind, demonstrating that he actively seeks out the intellectual tools that would enable him to make good decisions as a ruler (Amm. Marc. 15.2.7; 15.8.1; 21.1.7). Evidently, Ammianus wished to emphasise Julian's dedication to working on his mind, and how this intellectual cultivation then translates into practical action. He singles out Julian's skills in both war and peace, his courtesy, and his modesty, as evidence of wisdom (Amm. Marc. 25.4.7). Besides these few examples, we can take any other evidence of Julian's virtuous conduct as being instances of practical wisdom: it is, after all, the one virtue that dominates and makes use of the other three.

The Virtue of Justice in Iamblichus and Sopater

Justice is to be understood here in both a legal and civic sense.⁴⁸ That is to say, the application of laws and court rulings is part of the equation, but so too are all other social or institutional features that foster a harmoniously run political community. As Iamblichus outlines in his *Letter to Anatolius*, for example, such features include the appropriate distribution of honours and rewards, the proper observance of contracts and agreements, and any actions that benefit the common good, restrict harm, and allow human life to flourish (Stob. *Flor.* 3.9.36). A just society is reached when a ruler upholds these things in the community which he rules, and justice itself is, according to Iamblichus, achieved when a ruler embodies the other three cardinal virtues and behaves according to them (Stob. *Flor.* 3.9.35).

Justice, therefore, is crucial to the ultimate goal of Neoplatonic ethics and political philosophy. A good ruler must aim to bring about harmony between himself and those he ruled, and so he must always make decisions in the best interest of the people. When overseeing legal cases, the ruler must have an excellent knowledge of what the law prescribes and must be immune to corruption and bias, as Iamblichus relates in his *Letter to Agrippa* (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.77). When making his final ruling, the good ruler should remain level-headed and tolerant, as Sopater indicates, seeking to be corrective, therapeutic, and proportionate when administering punishment (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.56). Punishments should be administered with equity and leniency, even when the law prescribes a harsher penalty (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.60). For the sake of equity, the ruler must also account for the character and circumstances of each litigant (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.57). In this mild approach to his authority, the good ruler is, as Sopater relates using a Homeric reference, akin to the gentle father of a well-run household (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.55). Iamblichus expresses a similar sentiment in his *Letter to Dyscolius*, where he recommends philanthropic generosity to foster a relationship between the ruler and the ruled that is founded upon benevolence and reciprocity – the ultimate goal of Neoplatonic political ethics:

He guides people more effectively, and even better than that, as a true leader, who provides a generous donation of good things and an unstinting supply of the means of life and establishes a maximum degree of safety

⁴⁸ Dillon 2012: 56-57.

and leisure in living. For this, after all, is the aim of a good ruler, to cause his subjects to flourish (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.74).

Προηγείται δ' ὡς ἀληθῶς ἄρχων μειζόνως αὐτῶν καὶ ἔτι βελτιόνως, (ὄς) τὴν μεγαλοπρεπῆ δόσιν τῶν ἀγαθῶν παρέχει χορηγίαν τε ἄπλετον τοῦ βίου καὶ σωτηρίαν πλείστην καὶ ζωῆς ῥαστώνην ἐντίθησιν. καὶ γὰρ δὴ καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶ τέλος ἄρχοντος σπουδαίου τοὺς ἀρχομένους ποιεῖν εὐδαίμονας.

The Virtue of Justice in Ammianus' Portrayal of Julian

Justice is a major theme in Ammianus' history and is the most prominent of Julian's portrayed virtues, being the virtue governing the relationship between a ruler and his subjects. Ammianus' summary of Julian's character after his death in Book Twenty-Five is clear on this point, where he describes the emperor's reign as a quasi-divine moment:

But yet, in spite of this, his own saying might be regarded as sound, namely, that the ancient goddess of Justice, whom Aratus raised to heaven because of her impatience with men's sins, returned to earth again during his rule, were it not that sometimes he acted arbitrarily, and now and then seemed unlike himself (Amm. Marc. 25.4.19).

Verum tamen cum haec ita essent, aestimari poterat (ut ipse aiebat), vetus illa Iustitia, quam offensam vitii hominum, Aratus extollit in caelum, eo imperante redisse rursus ad terras, ni quaedam ad arbitrium agens, interdum ostenderet se dissimilem sui.

This is the second time that Ammianus uses this particular simile, with the first instance appearing in Book Twenty-Two (Amm. Marc. 22.10.6). While his use of such a simile is undeniably powerful, and indeed borderline panegyric, Ammianus still admits that Julian was a fallible human being who did occasionally make poor judgements and rulings. As he says in his own voice, praise should be given to the great and powerful only when there is also an opportunity for criticism (Amm. Marc. 15.5.38). This kind of approach means that Julian can act as an example of behaviours to be emulated by rulers as well as those that they ought to avoid.

Ammianus' praise of Julian's just rule can be broken into four parts, namely his approach to legal matters, his management of fiscal policy, his treatment of opponents and enemies, and his treatment of the troops under his command. Julian receives great praise for his conduct in overseeing legal cases. We are told that he frequently presided over cases personally, which Ammianus considers to be a positive sign of a just ruler. Even when he would recommend that cases be heard by provincial governors instead, he would still check in on the outcome of each case and mitigate punishments if need be (Amm. Marc. 16.5.13). He showed leniency whenever possible, for example reducing a punishment for sexual assault from execution to banishment where the circumstances of the case proved it best (Amm. Marc. 16.5.12). In Ammianus' history, Julian always showed nuance in assessing the character and circumstances of litigants, showing his authority while being free from cruelty (Amm. Marc. 25.4.8). He was immune to religious bias (Amm. Marc. 22.10.2), and always open to being corrected by his trusted intimates if his decisions were ever too harsh (Amm. Marc. 22.10.3; 22.11.11). He is also said to have amended and clarified some laws to remove any ambiguities present (Amm. Marc. 22.10.7).

Julian's generosity regarding matters of fiscal policy is an important theme of his just rule (Amm. Marc. 25.4.15). Ammianus informs us that when Julian assumed the office of Caesar, Gaul had been suffering greatly from poor tax policies implemented under Constantius II's supervision (Amm. Marc. 17.3.1-17.3.6). Julian, aware that such policies could ruin a province and drive its people into poverty (Amm. Marc. 17.3.3), dedicates much of his time and energy while in Gaul towards cutting unnecessary tax levies (Amm. Marc. 16.5.15; 17.3.6.), to the great delight of the local populace (Amm. Marc. 16.5.14). Ammianus thus shows Julian to be a ruler who displays real concern for the wellbeing of his subjects, painting him as a just emperor in line with Neoplatonic prescriptions.

The third aspect of justice in Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is visible in the leniency and mercy that the emperor showed to some of his enemies and rivals, even to those involved in open opposition to him or in plots against his person (Amm. Marc. 25.4.9). When he eventually came to directly challenge Constantius II's position as Augustus, Julian did not punish the prefect Nebridius for retaining loyalty to Constantius II and protected him from the anger of his own troops (Amm. Marc. 21.5.11-21.5.12). Julian

readily pardons besieged opponents once they are beaten (Amm. Marc. 21.12.19; 24.4.26). He only uses violence if it proves to be the best, or only, option available. For example, Julian is praised when, after becoming Augustus, he purges and executes several of Constantius II's corrupt former court officials (Amm. Marc. 22.3.11 – 22.4.1).

Finally, justice in Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is evident in how he is said to have treated his soldiers. If he needed the troops to undertake some difficult or unpopular task, he would make use of his eloquence to do so, which led the soldiers to develop trust and affection for an emperor 'accustomed to prescribe more drudgery for himself than for a common soldier' (Amm. Marc. 17.1.2: *Plus laboris indicere sibi quam milita*). Even in the heat of battle, Julian rallies wavering troops with mild words rather than by threats or harsh language (Amm. Marc. 16.12.40). This mildness towards the soldiers under his command shows Ammianus' Julian to be a virtuous leader who always has the best interest of his subordinates in mind.

Justice, therefore, features as a critical virtue in Ammianus' portrayal of Julian, being the virtue that most directly governs the relationship between a ruler and the ruled. Julian is depicted as an emperor who understands the significance of this relationship well, with Ammianus placing words that reflect the Neoplatonic political goal of harmonious rule into the emperor's mouth:

Considering, then, that the aim of a just rule is the welfare and safety of its subjects, I was always, as you know, more inclined to peaceful measures, excluding from my conduct all license, the corrupter of deeds and character (Amm. Marc. 25.3.8).

Reputans autem iusti esse finem imperii, oboedientium commodum et salutem, ad tranquilliora semper (ut nostis) propensior fui, licentiam in nem actibus meis exterminans, rerum corruptricem et morum.

The Virtue of Courage in Iamblichus and Sopater

Courage is the virtue that empowers a person to remain principled and implacable when faced with difficult situations. In his *Letter to Olympius*, Iamblichus suggests that courage should be understood as a steadfast state of mind that enables a person to

staunchly face the vicissitudes of life (Stob. *Flor.* 3.7.40). It is effectively a commitment to staying true to one's other virtues no matter the cost, as Sopater makes clear in his letter where he references Aristotle's teaching:

Some tasks it is impossible to refuse when they give orders. The apparent unpleasantness of the action can be alleviated by manner, timing, and harmonious diplomacy. There are some one cannot be compelled to do, to quote Aristotle, not even if one has the proverbial Rock of Tantalus hanging over one, but one must put up with everything willingly – so long as one is careful of doing wrong before suffering it (Stob. *Flor.* 4.5.52).

Τῶν δ' ἔργων ἃ μὲν οὐκ ἔστι προσταπτόντων ἀρνήσασθαι, τῷ τρόπῳ καὶ χρόνῳ τῆς πράξεως πειθοῖ τε ἐμμελεῖ τὸ φαινόμενον ἐπαχθὲς παραμυθητέον. Ἔνια δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἀναγκασθῆναι, φησὶν Ἀριστοτέλης, οὐδ' εἰ τὸν λεγόμενον Ταντάλου λίθον ἐπηρημένον τις ἔχοι, ἀλλ' ὑπομενετέον πάντα ἐτοίμως τὸ δρᾶν κακῶς πρὸ τοῦ παθεῖν κακῶς εὐλαβουμένῳ.

This sentiment prescribes that orders received from one's superiors can be, and indeed should be, refused, if carrying them out would result in the infliction of unjustified harm upon the ruled. As I discuss above regarding the virtue of wisdom, when placed in such a situation the official can seek to convince the superior who issued the order of a different course of action, always with the best interests of the ruled in mind. Courage, therefore, gives a good ruler the strength of character to make reasoned and righteous decisions to the benefit of the polity, all while maintaining good cheer in face of any pain, fear, discomfort, or even death, that may come to him personally as a result (Stob. *Flor.* 3.7.41).

The Virtue of Courage in Ammianus' Portrayal of Julian

Courage is a noteworthy aspect of Ammianus' portrayal of Julian's virtuous character. In the emperor's final speech after being injured on the battlefield, Ammianus has Julian announce to the troops that:

So often as the state, like an imperious parent, has exposed me deliberately to dangers, I have stood four-square, accustomed as I am to tread under foot the storms of Fate (Amm. Marc. 25.3.18).

*Sciens quod ubicumque me velut imperiosa parens consideratis periculis
obiecit res publica, steti fundatus, turbines calcare fortuitorum assuefactus.*

Ammianus considers such a courageous attitude towards danger to be a necessary trait in any good ruler, for, as he notes, it is in royal power that the most numerous and hazardous perils are to be found (Amm. Marc. 26.2.9). Beyond the duties and dangers that accompany the imperial office, Julian is also shown to possess personal bravery on campaign (Amm. Marc. 25.4.12). He endured both heat and cold, and leads from the front line to inspire his troops and quickly rallies them if they should break, placing himself in such proximity to the fighting that he once had to personally kill a Persian attacker (Amm. Marc. 25.4.10; 24.4.4).

Ammianus further presents Julian's courage in resisting the unjust or potentially harmful orders of his superiors. The first instance of this courage is in relation to the burdensome tax policies that were in place in Gaul at the time when Julian assumes the rank of Caesar. When the praetorian prefect Florentius, appointed by Constantius II, wishes to draw additional tax through special levies, Julian declares that he would rather lose his life than allow such a measure to proceed (Amm. Marc. 17.3.2). When Florentius challenges him on this point, Julian calmly demonstrates that existing tax policy was already drawing in a surplus (Amm. Marc. 17.3.4). When Julian again received a proposal to increase taxes, he threw the document to the ground, and when Constantius II himself wrote to him advising care not to undermine his authority, Julian replied that relieving the provincials in Gaul of the burden of extra taxation would be their cause for rejoicing (Amm. Marc. 17.3.5).

The second instance of Julian's evident courage through considered insubordination comes about in his resistance to Constantius II's request for some of the troops under his command to be sent to the east. Knowing that many of these soldiers lived beyond the Rhine and had no wish to leave their homes and families, Julian attempted in vain to argue that it was best to keep them on the western frontier (Amm. Marc. 20.4.4). Even though he failed to convince Constantius II in this instance, he still shows mildness to the troops in question, ordering them to march east alongside their families, and with the help of the public courier service (Amm. Marc. 20.4.11).

Ammianus' portrayal of Julian paints the emperor as a ruler who strives to embody the four virtues prescribed by the Neoplatonic tradition. In contrast to other emperors such as Constantius II, this portrayal shows Julian to be an exemplary ruler whose focus is squarely on increasing the wellbeing and flourishing of the Empire's subjects. Even when Julian fails to entirely live up to a virtuous standard, Ammianus' criticisms of him serve as examples of the kind of behaviour that rulers ought to avoid. Ammianus' portrayal of Julian, based on this Neoplatonic framework of ethics and political philosophy, demonstrates that he holds a ruler's personal ethics to be fundamental to the wellbeing of the Empire. Julian thus serves as a model to be followed by future emperors, who can look to him as a praiseworthy example of how a ruler should behave.

Part Three: Neoplatonic Metaphysics in Ammianus' Portrayal of Julian

The metaphysical side of Neoplatonism, especially as it pertains to Fate, Providence, and the nature of the human soul, is crucial to understanding Ammianus' portrayal of Julian as a model emperor.⁴⁹ As we have seen, Iamblichus' and Sopater's letters outline their teachings on ethics and political philosophy. I will now discuss the metaphysical content expressed in a further three of Iamblichus' letters: *To Macedonius*, *To Poemenius*, and *To Sopater*, before outlining how Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is presented under a similar metaphysical structure.⁵⁰ These three protreptic letters discuss themes that pertain to the more metaphysical aspects of Neoplatonic thought, specifically Fate, Providence, and the nature of the soul.

Iamblichus' teaching on Fate is rooted in his Neoplatonic cosmological view of a universe that emanates from the One.⁵¹ As part of the soul's descent from the immaterial world into the physical, where it becomes embodied within a human being, it becomes governed by a causal chain of multifaceted events. This causal chain is the structured order which Iamblichus defines as Fate. The soul, when encased within the human body, is subject to Fate insofar as it adheres to the workings of the physical

⁴⁹ For an overview of religious themes in Ammianus, see Davies 2004: 265-282.

⁵⁰ The Sopater in question here was one of Iamblichus' students, whose son of the same name is the author of the letter to which I refer in Part 2.

⁵¹ For a detailed overview of Iamblichus' principal metaphysical teachings, see Opsomer et al. 2018: 1363-1370.

world. In the material realm, the soul is anchored firmly and, nonetheless, retains its higher nature.⁵² It is therefore possible for the immaterial soul to transcend the predetermined order of Fate. If a person devotes their life to contemplation of the intellect, then some independence from Fate can be achieved. This contemplation allows a person to live a truly good life, but it does not extend to complete autonomy in the physical world. The human body, like everything else in the material realm, will eventually change and perish. However, in Iamblichus' teaching, a well-lived life may stimulate the Gods to take notice of virtuous and contemplative individuals, and may then use their divine Providence to bring about more favourable outcomes for them in the physical world.

Ammianus expresses a similar position on Fate in his historical narrative. For him, Fate is governed by divine agents via Providence. He also holds that the immaterial soul is of a higher nature than the physical body. As with Iamblichus, Ammianus suggests that those who live virtuous and contemplative lives may receive the favour of the gods, who can use their Providence to determine the order of Fate to their benefit. This idea demonstrates the conceptual link that Ammianus uses between virtuous rulership and the cosmic order of the universe. Julian's virtuous behaviour does much more than make him a good man, or a good emperor to his subjects. It actively attracts the favour of the gods. Ammianus' point is that future emperors should be virtuous not just for their own sake, but for the good of the universe.

Fate, Providence, and the Soul in Iamblichus' Letters

Iamblichus' *Letter to Macedonius* is the most extensive of his protreptic epistles concerning Fate and serves as an effective extrapolation of Iamblichus' metaphysical framework.⁵³ The letter provides an important insight into Iamblichus' teachings on the nature of Fate and its bearing on the lives of humans. He begins the letter with a quote from Plotinus, affirming the monistic Neoplatonic view that 'all things that exist, exist by virtue of the One' (Stob. *Flor.* 1.5.17: Πάντα μὲν τὰ ὄντα τῷ ἐνὶ ἔστιν ὄντα). Moving further down the scale of emanation from the One, we have a level of primal being, and a principle of multiplicity which serves as a matrix for the system of forms, which

⁵² Unlike Plotinus, who taught that part of the soul remained outside the physical realm, Iamblichus considered it to be firmly anchored within the physical matter of the human body.

⁵³ Dillon and Polleichtner 2009: 73-78, provide an accompanying commentary that greatly elucidates the metaphysical substance and complexity of this letter.

Iamblichus presents as causal principles that come into being in intellect, presented here as being (Stob. *Flor.* 1.5.17).⁵⁴ The multiplicity of causal sequences comes together as unified order, which is Fate (Stob. *Flor.* 1.5.17). Fate is the order of events that occur in the physical realm alone, not the intelligible. The movements of Fate are themselves governed and subordinated to the 'good order' established by the intelligible realm, (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.45), the good order being Providence, which is managed by the gods, as Iamblichus states in his *Letter to Poemenius*:

The gods, in upholding Fate, direct its operation through the universe, and this sound direction of theirs brings about sometimes a lessening of evils, sometimes a mitigation of their effects, on occasion even their removal. On this principle, then, Fate is disposed to the benefit of the good but in this disposing does not reveal itself fully to the disorderly nature of the realm of generation (Stob. *Flor.* 1.1.35).

Οἱ θεοὶ τὴν εἰμαρμένην συνέχοντες διὰ παντὸς ἐπανορθοῦνται· ἢ δ' ἐπανόρθωσις αὐτῶν ποτὲ μὲν ἐλάττωσιν κακῶν, ποτὲ δὲ παραμυθίαν, ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ἀναίρεσιν ἀπεργάζεται· ἀφ' οὗ δὴ διακοσμεῖται ἡ εἰμαρμένη τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς, διακοσμουμένη δὲ οὐχ ὑποφαίνεται πᾶσα πρὸς τὴν ἄτακτον φύσιν τῆς γενέσεως.

Providence, then, is effectively the process by which the gods determine the course of Fate, and Fate therefore exists because of and is shaped by divine Providence (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.45). This relationship means that there are no random or accidental occurrences in the physical world – everything is divinely ordained.

The gods' absolute control over Fate via Providence does not nullify the freedom of choice that all individual humans possess. The human soul, according to Iamblichus, is of a non-physical nature. So, it is self-moved, exempt from destruction and generation, and so it is not governed by Fate (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.43). Fate, then, only has bearing over the soul insofar as it gives itself to the workings of the physical world (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.43). This connection means that a life of contemplation and virtue

⁵⁴ For a comprehensive explanation of the metaphysical structure expressed in this passage, see Dillon and Polleichtner 2009: 73-74.

rather than one given to worldly pleasures can result in the soul reaching a certain autonomy and independence from Fate's order:

And in so far as the soul contains within itself a pure, self-subsistent, self-motive, active and perfective reason-principle, thus far it is emancipated from all outside influences; but on the other hand, insofar as it puts forth other levels of life that incline towards generation and consort with the body, thus far it is involved in the order of the cosmos (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.45).

Καὶ καθ' ὅσον μὲν λόγον καθαρὸν αὐθυπόστατον καὶ αὐτοκίνητον ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ τε ἐνεργοῦντα καὶ τέλειον ἢ ψυχὴ συνείληφεν ἐν ἑαυτῇ, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἀπόλυτός ἐστι πάντων τῶν ἕξωθεν· καθ' ὅσον γε μὴν καὶ ζωᾶς ἄλλας προβάλλει ῥεπούσας εἰς τὴν γένεσιν καὶ ἐπικοινωνεῖ τῷ σώματι, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ἔχει συμπλοκὴν καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ κόσμου διάταξιν.

Living this kind of life, focused on the soul's true nature, does more than achieve the 'good life'. Iamblichus suggests that a virtuous, contemplative lifestyle will bring about some kind of divine benefit, even in the physical world:

It is, then, the life lived in accordance with intellect and that cleaves to the gods that we must train ourselves to live; for this is the only life that admits of the untrammelled authority of the soul, frees us from the bonds of necessity, and allows us to live a life no longer mortal but one that is divine and filled by the will of the gods with divine benefits (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.44).

Τὸν κατὰ νοῦν ἄρα βίον καὶ τὸν ἐχόμενον τῶν θεῶν διαζῆν μελετητέον· οὗτος γὰρ ἡμῖν μόνος ἀποδίδωσι τὴν ἀδέσποτον τῆς ψυχῆς ἐξουσίαν, ἀπολύει τε ἡμᾶς τῶν ἀναγκαίων δεσμῶν καὶ ποιεῖ ζῆν οὐκ ἀνθρώπινόν τινα βίον, ἀλλὰ τὸν θεῖον καὶ τῇ βουλήσει τῶν (θεῶν) θείων ἀγαθῶν ἀποπληρούμενον.

These divine benefits are not distributed randomly but are the result of an individual's free choice. Likewise, problems generally arise out of ignorance and a lack of virtue. If one wishes to have good fortune, then one must live according to the ideal and subsequently receive the divine benefit:

For benefits are not dependent on any external cause but on the individual himself and on his free choice, and these are most properly defined in connection with one's chosen mode of life, and the problems raised by the majority of men arise out of ignorance. There is, then, no fruit of virtue other than virtue itself. This is not to say that the good man is worsted by Chance, for his greatness of spirit renders him superior to all accidents of fortune (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.47).

Οὐ γὰρ ἐπ' ἄλλῳ τινὶ κεῖται, ἐπ' αὐτῷ δὲ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ καὶ τῇ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου αἰρέσει τὰ γαθὰ, καὶ ταῦτα ἐν τῇ προαιρέσει μόνον κυριώτατα δὴ ἀφώρισται, τὰ δὲ ἀπορούμενα παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς δι' ἄγνοιαν ἀμφισβητεῖται. οὐκ ἄλλη οὖν ἐπικαρπία τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐστὶν ἢ αὐτῆ ἑαυτῆς. οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ ἐλαττοῦται ὅστις σπουδαῖος ἀπὸ τῆς τύχης, κρείττονα γὰρ αὐτὸν πάσης συντυχίας ἢ μεγαλοψυχία ἀπεργάζεται.

This position echoes the significance that Iamblichus places on theurgy as an important aspect of living a life true to the higher nature of the soul.⁵⁵ Theurgic practices, which were widespread amongst later Neoplatonic philosophers, were a ritual component of a way of life based on ethical and intellectual practice, with the aim of connection, assimilation, and eventual unification with the divine.⁵⁶ Although theurgy differs in its physicality from the contemplation expressed here in Iamblichus' letters, ritual and intellectual activity are both intertwined parts of his understanding of the relationship between humans and the cosmic order of the universe.⁵⁷ Iamblichus suggests that virtuous lives dedicated to contemplation will attract the attention of the gods, who may then adjust Fate to the benefit of those virtuous individuals. Individuals who meet success in the physical world do so, therefore, not by chance, but because their good behaviour effectively aligns themselves to the good order of the universe.

Fate, Providence, and the Soul in Ammianus

Iamblichus' letters therefore give an outline of his teachings and advice on metaphysics as well as ethics and political philosophy, highlighting that the

⁵⁵ Iamblichus discusses theurgy in great detail in his *De Mysteriis*, of which Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2004 have produced a good English translation with accompanying introduction and notes. See also Shaw 1995 and Addey 2014 for more on Iamblichus and theurgy.

⁵⁶ Addey 2014: 3.

⁵⁷ Addey 2014: 171-231.

Neoplatonic worldview understands there to be a causal relationship between the material and immaterial realms. Likewise, Ammianus' work emphasises similar metaphysical ideas, revealing his use of this particular worldview as a way of understanding how Fate, Providence, and the nature of the soul relate to events in the physical world. He shares Iamblichus' teaching on Fate as a predetermined order that is controlled and directed by divine figures and that 'no human power or virtue' can change (Amm. Marc. 23.5.5: *Nulla vis humana vel virtus*). Belief in divine agency is the reason behind Ammianus' emphasis on divination and augury as valid and important practices; the peculiar flight of birds and other signs are deliberate revelations of the future on the part of the gods (Amm. Marc. 21.1.9).⁵⁸ Divine will or favour is thus explicitly and frequently mentioned by Ammianus as a major factor in the outcomes of the events recounted in his history (Amm. Marc. 15.8.9; 16.12.18; 18.3.1; 24.4.1; 25.3.15; 25.7.5; 25.8.3; 26.1.5; 26.1.14; 27.6.6). There are instances where Ammianus suggests that a divinity may be aiding Roman efforts. Gratian, for example, wins a victory 'through the favour of the eternal deity' (Amm. Marc. 31.10.18: *Sempiterni numinis nutu*). Ammianus and the troops, in trouble in Mesopotamia, are 'saved from danger by the favour of the supreme deity' (Amm. Marc. 25.8.3: *Favore superi numinis, discrimine per difficiles casus extracti*). Ammianus describes Julian's fiscal policy reforms in Gaul as being inspired by divine will (Amm. Marc. 18.3.1: *Haec dum in Galliis caelestis corrigit cura*) and calls his successes as emperor the work of Fortuna (Amm. Marc. 22.9.1: *Velut cornucopiam Fortuna gestans propitia, cuncta gloriosa deferebat et prospera*). As well as Fortuna, Ammianus names Adrastia, also known as Nemesis, as one of the particular deities who oversee Fate (Amm. Marc. 14.11.25-14.11.26). It is she who chastises bad actions and rewards good ones (Amm. Marc. 14.11.25), determining the outcome of events that unfold in the physical world:

She, as queen of causes and arbiter and judge of events, controls the urn with its lots and causes the changes of fortune, and sometimes she gives our plans a different result than that which we aimed, changing and confounding many actions. She too, binding the vainly swelling pride of mortals with the indissoluble bond of Fate, and tilting changeably as she

⁵⁸ Though the scope of this present study prevents me from going into greater detail, Ammianus' future signs are a significant part of his historical narrative and are naturally related to his use of Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology. See also Hanaghan 2019 for a discussion of future signs and omens in Ammianus within the broader context of fourth-century religious disputes.

knows how to do, the balance of gain and loss, now bends and weakens the uplifted necks of the proud, and now, raising the good from the lowest estate, lifts them to a happy life (Amm. Marc. 14.11.26).

Haec ut regina causarum, et arbitra rerum ac disceptatrix, urnam sortium temperat, accidentium vices alternans, voluntatumque nostrarum exorsa interdum alio quam quo contendebant exitu terminans, multiplices actus permutando convolvit. Eademque necessitates insolubili retinaculo mortalitatis vinciens fastus, tumentes in cassum, et incrementorum detrimentorumque momenta versabilis librans (ut novit), nunc erectas eminentium cervices opprimit et enervate, nunc bonos ab imo suscitans ad bene vivendum extollit.

So, Ammianus also believes that there is a causal relationship between a person's actions in the physical world and the established order of the universe. Even though human power itself cannot alter the course of Fate, it is possible for the gods to do so at their leisure in response to human actions. Fate can be altered by the gods via their Providence, lifting good people to a happy life and chastising those who are bad.

Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is thus imbued with the Neoplatonic conception of a causal relationship between the material and non-material realms as a feature of the universe. Indeed, as Ammianus tells us, Julian's illustrious life and successful career appeared to have been accompanied and attended to by 'some law of a higher life' (Amm. Marc. 16.1.4: *Videtur enim lex quaedam vitae melioris hunc inveniem a nobilibus cunis ad usque spiritum comitata supremum*). This idea of accompaniment or oversight by some kind of guardian deity or other beneficial supernatural entity such as a *genius* (Amm. Marc. 20.5.10; 21.14.5), is integral to the whole narrative. For example, Ammianus applies it to the Roman state and its enduring successes over the centuries (Amm. Marc. 19.10.4; Amm. Marc. 27.6.6). With regards to individual humans, Ammianus believes that such guardian deities or supernatural entities are assigned to all people at birth:

For the theologians maintain that there are associated with all men at their birth, but without interference with the established course of destiny, certain divinities of that sort, as directors of their conduct; but they have been seen

by very few, whom their manifold merits have raised to eminence (Amm. Marc. 21.14.3).

Ferunt enim theologi in lucem editis hominibus cunctis, salva firmitate fatali, huius modi quaedam velut actus rectora numina sociari, admodum tamen paucissimis visa, quos multiplices auxere virtutes.

These divinities appear to have a similar role to the gods or daemons that Iamblichus briefly mentions in his *Letter to Macedonius* as entities that oversee events in the physical world (Stob. *Flor.* 2.8.46), being in some way associated with a person's soul, and providing for those who live ideal lives:

And Hermes Trismegistus, Apollonius of Tyana, and Plotinus, who ventured to discourse on this mystic theme, and to present a profound discussion of the question by what elements these spirits are linked with men's souls, and taking them to their bosoms, as it were, protect them (as long as possible) and give them higher instruction, if they perceive that they are pure and kept from the pollution of sin through association with an immaculate body (Amm. Marc. 21.4.5).

Hermesque Termaximus, et Tyaneus Apollonius atque Plotinus, ausus quaedam super hac re disserere mystica, atque monstrare, quibus primordiis hi genii animis conexi mortalium eas tamquam gremiis hi genii animis conexi mortalium eas tamquam gremiis suis susceptas tuentur (quod licitum est) docentique maiora, si senserint puras et a colluvione peccandi, immaculata corporis societate discretas.

Julian himself is twice visited by the Roman *genius publicus* at night, who first tells him that he has designs for Julian to lead Rome (Amm. Marc.20.5.10), and, on the second occasion, shortly before his death, makes a final sorrowful appearance in the emperor's tent (Amm. Marc. 25.2.3).

As discussed in Part One, Ammianus' portrayal of Julian highlights his virtuous and contemplative lifestyle. The emperor was extraordinary in his ideal qualities, though he was not perfect, and Ammianus makes this clear in his criticisms of his hero. It is

also clear, though, that Ammianus suggests that Julian's successes in adhering to the ideals of Neoplatonic thought led him to be accompanied by divine favour:

But Julian, elated by his success, now felt more than mortal aspirations, since he had been tried by so many dangers and now upon him, the undisputed ruler of the Roman world, propitious Fortune, as if bearing an earthly horn of plenty, was bestowing all glory and prosperity (Amm. Marc. 22.9.1).

At prosperis Iulianus elatior, ultra homines iam spiribat, periculis expertus assiduus, quod ei orbem Romanum placide iam regent, velut mundanam cornucopiam Fortuna gestans propitia, cuncta gloriosa deferebat et prospera.

Even Julian's death is deemed by Ammianus to be a reward from the gods, as he relates in typical Platonic fashion in Julian's final speech to the troops:

Having learned from the general conviction of philosophers how much happier the soul is than the body, and bearing in mind that whenever a better condition is severed from a worse, one should rather rejoice than grieve. Thinking also of this, that the gods of heaven themselves have given death to some men of the greatest virtue as their supreme reward (Amm. Marc. 25.3.15).

Philosophorum ententia generali perdoctus, quantum corpore sit beatior animus, et contemplans, quotiens condicio melior a deteriore secernitur, laetandum esse potius quam dolendum. Illud quoque advertens, quod etiam dii caelestes quibusdam piissimis mortem tamquam summum praemium persolverunt.

Having reached such a high summit of virtuous and contemplative excellence, then, Julian is rewarded by having his soul released from the physical world. During his earthly life, however, his exemplary conduct brought about many benefits, for himself as an individual, and for the Roman Empire as a whole. This aspect is especially significant for Ammianus' use of Neoplatonic thought as a religio-philosophical epistemology. As we have seen via Iamblichus' letters, Neoplatonic teachings held

that there is a causal relationship between the actions of free-willed humans in the physical world and the metaphysical order of the universe, particularly Fate under the guidance of the Gods' Providence. This relationship is likewise the case in Ammianus. Julian's successful career is therefore not only due to his own actions. His virtuous conduct led the Gods to take notice of him and guided his rulership towards the fundamentally good nature of the order of the universe.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the letters of Iamblichus and Sopater, the Neoplatonic philosophers were interested in spreading their teachings on ethics, political philosophy, and metaphysics to a wider audience than that of professional philosophers alone. Although these teachings may seem superficially to be at opposite ends of a spectrum of 'rationality', they are part of a religio-philosophical system that is logical and coherent by the standards of the philosophers who developed them. Ammianus, though not himself a philosopher, was clearly aware of these teachings on at least as basic a level as they are expressed in the protreptic philosophical letters. His narrative incorporates reflections of these teachings, where they shape his portrayal of Julian as an ideal ruler according to this Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology.

Ammianus' portrayal of Julian is therefore much more than a melancholic panegyric for his lost hero. It is a systematic display of Ammianus' use of a Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology that explains how rulers ought to behave, and why it is so important that they do so. Ammianus identifies an empire in decline and at risk of further deterioration. Using his idealised figure of Julian, he provides a solution to this problem, justified by Neoplatonic thought. Future rulers must strive to follow Julian's virtuous example. This example, Ammianus proposes, will not only guide the leaders themselves towards the better life and eventual reunification with the divine, but will also bring the Roman empire back into alignment with the fundamental good of the order of the universe. The gods, whose Providence had always ensured the greatness and success of Rome, will once again bestow their favour upon the state, if only its leaders can bring themselves to lead lives of virtue for the greater good of all.

This article presented some important perspectives on Ammianus as an author in the fourth century CE. I demonstrated that Ammianus' religiosity and philosophical themes constitute his personal system of belief and knowledge, and that this system is central to his historiography. This aspect is understudied in relation to Ammianus, and there is scope for a lot more to be done in this area. Ammianus' religiosity and philosophical positions are interesting in a biographical sense, but they go beyond this in broadening our understanding of religion and philosophy in the fourth century CE. His use of Neoplatonic religio-philosophical epistemology shows that even in a supposedly Christian-dominated century, the discussions and teachings of the Pagan philosophers were prevalent beyond the limited scope of their intellectual schools. Ammianus appears to be relatively well-versed in these teachings, and yet, in a climate of religious conflict between Pagans and Christians, he remains a largely uncontroversial figure. He expounds the merits of his system of knowledge and belief while avoiding polemicising with the Christians. After all, Ammianus' point, as is clear in his portrayal of Julian, is that Rome needs to reverse its decline. This reversal will not be done if rulers continue to fan the flames of division. Instead, they should strive to create harmony, realigning the state with the fundamentally good order of the universe.

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