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Pythagorean–Socratic *askêsis* in Proclus’ *Timaeus* Commentary

The Platonists of late antiquity took Plato’s dialogues to communicate the wisdom of Pythagoras. However, Plato combined this wisdom with what they took to be a Socratic *philanthrôpeia* (cf. Numenius, fr. 24.71–5, Proclus, *in Tim.* I 7.25). In short, according to a Platonist like Proclus, Plato’s dialogues do not merely contain the truth, but also present that truth in a way likely to transform souls through its reception. The act of reading a dialogue such as the *Timaeus* with a qualified teacher is thus a distinctly Pythagorean–Socratic *askêsis*.

I begin by considering how Proclus supposes a Pythagorean communicates and thus how Pythagorean wisdom is to be received in such a way as to transform the learner. In general, he supposes that the following features are characteristic of Pythagorean philosophy: τὸ ὑψηλόνουν, τὸ νοερόν, τὸ ἔνθεον, τὸ ἀπὸ τῶν νοητῶν πάντα ἐξάπτον, τὸ ἐν ἀριθμοῖς τὰ ὅλα ἀφοριζόμενον, τὸ συμβολικῶς τὰ πράγματα καὶ μυστικῶς ἐνδεικνύμενον, τὸ ἀναγωγόν, τὸ ὑπεραῖνον τὰς μεριστὰς ἐπιβολάς, τὸ ἀποφαντικόν. The Socratic character of the dialogues humanises this abstract, symbolic communication and makes it useful.

This paper considers these general characteristics in relation to a specific instance of Pythagorean and Platonist teaching in the *Timaeus*: the order of the planets (Moon, Sun, Mercury Venus, etc). Proclus ultimately accepts the Chaldean ordering of the planets (Moon–Mercury–Venus, Sun, Jupiter–Saturn–fixed stars). So what does Plato the Pythagorean intend by apparently giving us the “wrong” order? I argue that Proclus’ answer is that good Pythagoreans are not troubled to indicate the spatial locations of actual material bodies. Pythagorean texts *apparently* about things as concrete as the planetary order should instead be thought of as symbolically revealing relations among higher causes. This should change the reader’s attitude toward puzzles arising from the study of natural reality. Pythagorean–Socratic *askêsis* seems unlikely to transform the recipient into someone who has what *we* would call a scientific compartment to nature.

Biography:

Dirk Baltzly is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania and a fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities. He is the translator of volumes 3–6 of *Proclus Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus* (Cambridge, 2006–13) and editor (with Harold Tarrant) of *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (Duckworth, 2007).