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*Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: III. Book 3, Part 1: Proclus on the World's Body* edited and translated by Dirk Baltzly

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The commentary of the Neoplatonist Proclus on Plato's *Timaeus* might not be the most obvious choice to find enlightenment on ancient scientific thought. For although the topic of the *Timaeus* might attract, the reputation of the author for extremely complex metaphysical constructs, and the fact that the study of the *Timaeus* (and the *Parmenides*) formed the climax of the Neoplatonic curriculum as the summation of Plato's view of the natural world as a work of the divine demiurge, are not the most auspicious signs. A cursory glance at the text would readily confirm this impression. The metaphysical framework appears throughout in all its subtle complexity. One might easily then succumb to the prejudice that we are dealing with the imposition of an *a priori* metaphysical model to interpret the physical universe. Of course that in itself need not be without interest for the scientific observer. But, surprisingly perhaps, Proclus frequently reveals himself as sometimes less dogmatic even than Aristotle on issues concerning physical reality, as Lucas Siorvanes has made very clear in his *Proclus: Neo-Platonic Philosophy and Science* [1996].

It is this aspect of Proclus that Baltzly is concerned to unlock and understand in this edition, which contains the translation of pages 1–102 of volume 2 of Ernest Diehl's three volume edition of the Greek text [1904–1906]. As Baltzly points out, we do have the French translation with notes by Festugière [1966–1968]. But Neoplatonic scholarship has advanced considerably since its publication. And, more importantly, Festugière was primarily interested in the theological and metaphysical aspects of Proclus' commentary. Of course these cannot be ignored if we want to understand the relationship of metaphysics and science in the ancient mind; and Baltzly

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makes clear in his introduction and useful tabulation of the contents of the commentary that, in the part of his commentary translated in this volume, Proclus is very much concerned with the nature of the divine model in its relationship to the universe, i.e., a paradigmatic viewpoint. And yet within this framework, Proclus is seen to present arguments which are flexible and open, for example, his arguments against Aristotle on the necessity of a fifth element or his more accommodating views on the characteristics of the four elements. Where Aristotle sees only hot and cold, Proclus argues against the resulting polarization of the two extreme elements, and suggests a wider range of characteristics and proportional mixture.

Elsewhere, when arguing for the sphericity of the cosmos, Proclus firstly introduces what he calls 'philosophical' arguments, which are largely prompted by the text of Plato, before listing a number of physical arguments, mostly taken from Aristotle but with some interpretations of his own. He concludes with what he terms 'mathematical' arguments which are astronomical and belong more to the class of physical than philosophical arguments which, though also mathematical in expression, are based on abstract notions of proportion. Other interesting forays include arguments against the existence of a void 'beyond' the cosmos. More curious to us, perhaps, is his denial that the cosmos has sense-organs. Whilst the ancient mind had to cope with the idea that god 'hears' and 'speaks' and 'sees', for us the more interesting aspect of this enquiry is the careful discussion which it raises about the nature of sentient reality and the attempt to identify different grades of life. The enquiry is, of course, provoked by the Neoplatonic doctrine relating levels of cognition and activity or life, a doctrine which required the universe to be an ensouled 'living-being', but it then touches on the universal issue of locating and describing the nature of life-activity. It is precisely in such areas that metaphysics and physics explore some common ground.

Another historically important theory which makes its appearance throughout is the origin of light which is associated with the loftiest of the four elements, fire. Fire, like the other elements, has its cause in the Demiurge as an incorporeal Form. The fire in the universe is a corporeal expression of this. Once again the borderline between incorporeal and corporeal is touched on when Proclus

discusses the mirror-like ‘smoothness’ of the outer surface of the cosmos which is able to receive and presumably convert in some way the intelligible light.

Proclus’ mode of presentation and his arguments are not always easy to follow. His frequent citing of the ‘theologians’ (primarily the Orphic verses, but including also Pythagoreans, the *Chaldaean Oracles*, and even Homer), whilst intended by him to present us with an illuminating overview of how all Hellenic wisdom forms a consistent world view, is for us often confusing, odd, and distracting. But Baltzly manages, in his notes, to give enough information to decode them without overwhelming us in gratuitous detail. The footnotes are extensive and provide the needed guidance to the sources, particularly Aristotelian, of which Proclus makes use. The translation is clear, and textual additions and corrections are introduced with discernment and always signaled. The reader is well-served not only by an index of Greek terms but also by a glossary of translations of key terms with their original Greek and a transliterated form. In addition, the translations of some sensitive key terms are accompanied in the text by the transliterated original in parenthesis. Baltzly rightly has not stuck rigidly to one translation for each term, but has chosen on each occasion the most appropriate of a number of possible English versions. The translation reads well as it prefers ease of interpretation to awkward literalness. A good example of this kind of sensitivity is the translation ‘pyramid shape’ where the Greek has ‘such a shape’. Baltzly has correctly done for us the interpretation from the original Greek context to produce a readable translation, but also helpfully explains in a footnote [87n144] how he has taken this liberty. Sometimes, however, a term seems to be downgraded somewhat, e.g., the translation of *κατ’ αἰτίαν* as ‘in a preparatory way’, a translation which dilutes the causal sense. But he does give the transliterated phrase in the text (and we could find *αἰτία* in the glossary, though we would have to know to look under ‘cause’).

Proclus’ general layout, too, is not always easy to follow but Baltzly has usefully provided a summary and headings which keep us on the right track, even if Proclus is at times a little inconsistent in his method with periodic generalizing under the heading *θεωρία* and occasional sequences of close textual analysis which is conventionally termed *λέξις*. As Baltzly correctly points out, the successive

treatment of ten demiurgic gifts to the world is the guiding structure to Proclus' commentary. More than anything, this top-down approach serves to demonstrate the essentially metaphysical nature of this commentary; for, in the final analysis, a Platonist would have to admit that the intelligible model of the world is a more appropriate object of secure knowledge than its ever-changing physical image. But this does not diminish the importance of Proclus' contribution to our understanding of how science and metaphysics may work together, and this translation with its commentary and introduction will be an important aid in the further evaluation of Proclus' place in this tradition.

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