
The Teachings of Syrianus on Plato's Timaeus and Parmenides by Sarah Klitenic Wear

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Syrianus succeeded Plutarch of Athens as head of Plato's Academy and held that position for only a brief period from AD 432–437. He was a philosopher in the Iamblichean tradition in Neoplatonism and lectured on the works in the Iamblichean canon. Syrianus' views are known to us through surviving commentaries on four books of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (B, Γ, M, and N) as well as through the references to him by his most famous pupil, Proclus (410–485). We also possess notes on Syrianus' lectures on Plato's *Phaedrus* taken by another of his students, Hermeias.

Syrianus' commentaries on the *Metaphysics* have now been translated into English by John Dillon and Dominic O'Meara [2006 and 2008]. In 1997, Hildegund Bernard provided a German translation of the work by Hermeias. In this careful and thorough book, Sarah Klitenic Wear seeks to complete the work that remains by extracting from Proclus' extensive commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides testimonia* for Syrianus' views on these dialogues. I should disclose that I was a reader for this manuscript when it was submitted. I thought then that it would be a valuable addition to scholarship on late antique Platonism and I think now that the final version justifies that initial assessment. (If anyone, apart from me, would like to congratulate me for my good judgement in these matters, I am of course only too happy to accept!)

It has long been known that Proclus' philosophical writings are heavily indebted to those of his teacher. The question of how original Proclus was and to what extent he systematized and recorded the largely oral teachings of Syrianus is probably one that cannot be definitively answered. In selecting pas-

sages in Proclus as those that give us fragments—or, perhaps more strictly, *testimonia*—for Syrianus, Klitenic Wear has been cautious. She confines herself to points in the commentaries where Proclus specifically mentions Syrianus or uses familiar phrases to refer to him, such as ‘our teacher’ or ‘our father’.

Even with this very conservative methodology, Klitenic Wear is able to assemble 25 fragments from Proclus’ *Timaeus* commentary that she regards as solid evidence of Syrianus’ views on that dialogue. It is certainly possible that Syrianus’ presence in the work is far more pervasive than this. Proclus’ biographer Marinus described the composition of this work as taking place while Proclus was studying with Syrianus:

Working day and night with tireless discipline and care, and writing down what was said in a comprehensive yet discriminating manner, Proclus made such progress in a short time that, when he was still in his twenty-eighth year, he wrote a great many treatises, which were elegant and teeming with knowledge, especially the one on the *Timaeus*. [Marinus, *Vit. Proc.* §13, trans. Edwards 2000, 76]

Even so, Klitenic Wear’s conservative strategy is the only methodologically sound option available. While we might suspect that Proclus and Syrianus speak with one voice in many more places, the only principled method for selecting *testimonia* is the one that Klitenic Wear adopts. With respect to Syrianus’ views on the other key dialogue for the Neoplatonists—the *Parmenides*—Klitenic Wear locates 10 fragments from Proclus’ commentary and adds another five from Damascius’ work on this dialogue. Thus, this collection provides us with 40 fragments in total.

For each fragment, Klitenic Wear provides Greek text (or Latin for that portion of Proclus’ *In Parm.* where we possess only Moerbeke’s version), with facing English translation. This is followed by an extensive discussion of each fragment. With respect to Proclus’ *In Parm.*, she uses Steel’s new Oxford Classical Text edition [2007–2009]. For the *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus*, she uses Diehl 1903–1906 of course.

On the matter of translation, Klitenic Wear largely follows the translation of Morrow and Dillon [1987] for Proclus’ *In Parm.* The translation of the passages from Proclus’ *In Plat. Tim.* was completed by Klitenic Wear prior to the publication by Cambridge University Press of the multi-volume translation of that work by Tarrant [2007], Runia and Share [2008], and Baltzly [2007

and 2009]. However, she took account of it when completing the revisions of her book.

The fragments are preceded by a 29-page introduction in which Klitenic Wear succinctly summarizes the results of her findings. She takes care to show the points at which Syrianus disagrees with, or further refines, the views of Iamblichus. She also sets out and justifies her methodology for fragment selection. There is nothing especially new in her methodology—and, of course, that is no bad thing! Klitenic Wear adopts Anne Sheppard's four-stage model for the composition of Proclus' commentaries—a process that involved collaboration with Syrianus. In this model, a lecture by Syrianus was followed by discussion with Proclus, which in turn led to a lecture by Proclus. This was then followed by the transmission of the lecture in the written form that we find in the *In Plat. rem. pub.* Following Dillon's work [1973] on Iamblichus' fragments in Proclus, Klitenic Wear adopts the hypothesis that, when Proclus reports Syrianus' view with «γάρ» and direct speech, he agrees wholeheartedly; and that when he introduces a slight correction, he often uses «γάρ» with accusative and infinitive. Klitenic Wear does offer a suggestion of her own in addition to these methodological observations. She hypothesizes that Proclus' use of the imperfect «ἔλεγεν» to report Syrianus' views may indicate that the teaching was delivered orally. The introduction concludes with a two-page round-up of recent scholarship on Syrianus.

The translation and commentary on the fragments takes up the next 300-odd pages. The volume concludes with a list of frequently cited abbreviations, a bibliography, an index of philosophical terms and names, as well as an index of passages from ancient authors. The book is nicely presented, as we have come to expect with Brill.

Specialists in the area of Neoplatonic studies will find many interesting observations on Syrianus' fragments in Klitenic Wear's commentary. Anyone working in this area will want to have this book on a shelf nearby. But if we move above the specific issues that absorb scholars of late antique Platonism, what does Syrianus have to teach us as students of ancient philosophy and science more generally? The answer to this question—as have I just posed it—is 'Not a great deal'. Far from being a negative judgement on this book or on Syrianus, however, I think that this verdict in fact tells us something about the kinds of questions that we ought to pose about Neoplatonic authors.

Since this is a review for *Aestimatio*—a journal that provides reviews in the history of *science*—let us concentrate on Syrianus' commentary on the *Timaeus*. This, after all, was thought by the Neoplatonists to be work on nature [Proclus, *In Plat. Tim.* 1. 1.5: cf. *Anonymous Prolegomena* 22.21, ff]. Granted, it is supposed to be a distinctively Platonic kind of physics and that makes it more theological than Aristotle's *Physics*, but it is closer to natural philosophy than the purely theological *Parmenides*. What does Syrianus tell us about this dialogue?

Syrianus begins right at the beginning, entering into the dispute about the very first line of the dialogue [*Tim.* 17a]. The fourth participant from the previous day's discussion (depicted in the *Republic*) is missing because it is fitting that these higher mysteries should have a smaller audience. Natural philosophy is a more elevated subject matter than politics. So too the Pythagoreans distinguished those who were able to grasp profound matters from those who heard more superficial teachings. This is consonant with the Iamblichean order of the Platonic curriculum in which the *Republic* and the *Gorgias* pertain to the cultivation of a lower order of virtues—the political virtues.

Syrianus' second fragment comments on *Tim.* 18d–e and reveals an interest in puzzles about human reproduction. Given the sharp distinction between soul and body in Platonism, why does breeding the best male and female guardians produce the best offspring? Does this implicitly commit Plato to the view that the soul enters with the seed, as Longinus thought [Patillon and Brisson 2001, fr. 27]? Syrianus' solution is to give the physical factors in reproduction responsibility for the body alone. But good bodies attract good souls, just as well-made theurgic statues afford an opportunity for the divine to dwell therein.

Fragment 10 discusses Plato's denial of any kind of Democritean plurality of worlds at *Tim.* 31a. There seems to have been an objection to Plato's argument that the unique paradigm implies a unique visible imitation: the cosmos. After all, the Form of Rabbit permits many instantiations. Why should not the same be true of the Form of Living Being Itself on which this cosmos is modeled? Why not many κοσμοί? Syrianus—like Porphyry and Iamblichus before him—sought a principled reason why some forms (e.g., the intelligible Sun) have a unique instantiation, while others may be multiply instantiated.

Fragment 11 also pertains to physics, at least in the Platonic sense. It deals with an objection raised by the third-century Platonist Democritus about Plato's claim at *Tim.* 32a–b that one number is sufficient to establish geometric proportion between two plane numbers. This is one of the few points where I think that Klitenic Wear's commentary is not quite sufficient to the task of placing Syrianus' words in their proper context.

The circular motion of the universe at *Tim.* 34a provides Proclus with an opportunity to invoke Syrianus' views on the *Statesman's* myth of cosmic reversal [*Pol.* 269a, ff]. The Platonist Severus took this notion literally. Syrianus denied this reading of the *Statesman*. It seems likely that Proclus identified the cycle of Zeus and the cycle of Kronos [*Pol.* 272b] with distinct but simultaneous Demiurgic activities [cf. *In Plat. Tim.* 3.309.20; *Plat. Theol.* 5.6, 25.3]. Thus, Syrianus and Proclus both rejected anything like a Stoic ἀποκατάστασις in which the existing world order was destroyed or reversed.

Fragment 19 is, in a sense, an exercise in the classification of living things—a kind of Neoplatonic biology. *Tim.* 39e–40a gives us a four-fold division of living beings based on their residence (or on the organs appropriate for beings with that address):

- (1) the celestial gods,
- (2) the winged kind,
- (3) the aquatic kind, and
- (4) the kind with feet.

How does this classification intersect with the classification in terms of gods, angels, daemons, heroes, and so on, that is also part of the Neoplatonic tradition? Klitenic Wear takes Syrianus' position to be that there are gods, angels and daemons in the celestial realm; with further gods, daemons and birds in the aerial realm; but with 'spirits proper to water and fish' in the water; and only mortal creatures on land. I find that this is one of the few points where I disagree. This reading seems to me to be inconsistent with the following fragment 20, where Syrianus says that the daemonic kind predominates down here (in the terrestrial realm) but that the divine kind is found here as well. In fact, Proclus' insistence that in populating the cosmos with the four kinds of living being the Demiurge bestows 'wholeness in the parts' [cf. *In Plat. Tim.* 3.97.24–98.6] requires that all things should be in all places but in each according to its nature. Hence, I think that we must have gods in water and in the terrestrial realm as well. The Earth itself is an

example of the latter, since it is the first and most senior of the encosmic gods [*Tim.* 40c].

Tim. 41c–d provided an occasion for Neoplatonists to address the question of the relation between the mortal and immortal parts of the soul, or, more generally, the relation between soul and body. The astral body provided an intermediary through which these distinct existences were alleged to be connected. But even here there was disagreement. Porphyry had claimed that the psychic vehicle was itself mortal, while Iamblichus championed its indestructibility. In fragment 23, Syrianus characteristically combines both positions to distinguish a higher, indestructible psychic ὄχημα (vehicle) and a lower, destructible one. Needless to say, even vaguely sympathetic modern readers are unlikely to find such a strategy satisfactory. Surely, the imposition of yet more halfway houses of various degrees of materiality does not adequately resolve the problem of how an impassive and unextended soul relates to an extended body.

Many of Syrianus' fragments from his commentary on the *Timaeus* take up theological questions. These include:

- the classes of gods that correspond to the classes which Solon's Egyptian informant discusses at 24a [fr. 3],
- the position of the Demiurge among the assorted intelligible and intellectual triads [fr. 6],
- the correlation of Plato's Demiurge with the Orphic cosmology [fr. 7] and the relation of the Demiurge to the Paradigm [fr. 8],
- the nature of evil [fr. 9],
- correlations between features of the World Soul and the various divine orders [fr. 16],
- the position of Eternity in relation to other intelligibles [fr. 17],
- the identity of Gaia and Ouranos at *Tim.* 40e [fr. 21],
- the nature of encosmic as opposed to hypercosmic gods [fr. 22], and
- the relation of the Mixing Bowl or Κρατήρ discussed at *Tim.* 41d to various other divine names [fr. 24].

Other fragments address specific points of interpretation in the tradition of commentary on the *Timaeus*. Among these are:

- the senses of the word «λόγος» [fr. 4],

- the correct understanding of the contrast between Being and Becoming [fr. 5],
- the question of whether Plato alludes to a hypercosmic soul [fr. 13],
- the manner in which the psychic ‘divisions’ into portions and the harmonies between them are to be understood consistently with the unity of the World Soul [fr. 14],
- how the World Soul is capable of the opposite motions of the circles of the Same and the Different [fr. 15],
- the sense in which day and night are said to be ‘parts’ of time at *Tim.* 37d–e [fr. 18], and
- the necessity for each human soul to descend into Becoming at least once in every cosmic cycle [fr. 25].

Historians of science or philosophers whose primary concern is the understanding of Plato’s *Timaeus* may regard Syrianus’ contributions as small beer. In some sense, this would be just. By comparison, Proclus seems much more engaged with natural philosophy in general and astronomy in particular. Or—if it is reckless to say that much—it is at least true that Proclus does not mention his teacher in those places where he discusses topics such as the precession of the equinoxes or Aristotle’s arguments for the fifth element. Proclus may have come down on the wrong side of some of these questions (after all, he simply denied the phenomenon of precession) but at least the questions are substantive. But, on the other hand, Proclus also fills page after page with discussions of topics that seem to us every bit as trivial as the relation of Plato’s Mixing Bowl to other divinities in the system. So while his ‘substance to trivia’ ratio may be a bit better than Syrianus, there is an awful lot of what now appears to us to be trivia.

This may, however, be indicative of a failing on our part, not on the part of the Neoplatonists. We do not presently have a framework for thinking about the writings of the late antique Platonists that allows us to see how they could have regarded some of these disputes as important. In my view at least, a necessary first step is to recognize that these writings have their origins in the instructional setting of the schools at Athens or Alexandria. Contextualizing them first requires philosophers and historians of science to investigate more thoroughly the content and significance of late antique παιδεία in general. Then, we must consider the ethical goal of the Neoplatonic curriculum—becoming like god—and form hypotheses about how

discussion of the apparently trivial features of Plato's dialogues could have been thought to facilitate this goal. This may require subjecting these texts to a kind of analysis that is as much rhetorical as it is philosophical. Arguably the great glory of the broadly analytic style in the history of philosophy is the deployment of distinctively philosophical imagination in the rational reconstruction of arguments. But we may need new imaginative resources to reconstruct not merely the arguments that might plausibly stand behind the conclusions but the very *point* of presenting arguments on these topics. Some steps in this general direction are presently being taken but more work is needed before late antique Platonism can claim a place in the standard philosophical canon alongside Hellenistic philosophy. In my view, the nature of that work will be very different from that which propelled Stoic and Epicurean philosophy into the canon in the period 1970–2000.

Professor Klitenic Wear's book does not undertake any such task but it is the sort of fundamental research that must precede that bigger interpretive project. As such, it is an extremely valuable contribution to our understanding of late antique Platonism. I simply wish to signal to those readers who wonder what philosophical payoff justifies this effort on the part of Klitenic Wear and others like her that at least some of us who undertake these labors feel the force of the problem too. We are working on it.

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