

Preparing Ourselves for the Mysteries

In both of his great theological works — the *Platonic Theology* and the *Parmenides Commentary* — Proclus includes some discussion of what is required of a student, in order to be prepared to receive and understand the instruction that is to be presented. It may be worth reflecting on these descriptions of Proclus' ideal student — not by way of exclusion or “gatekeeping,” but as an invitation to something that each of us might wish to aspire to. Insofar as these discussions appear within Proclus' theological works, there's a sense in which they might be accounts, not of the beginner or the intermediate student, but of the person who is preparing herself to enter into the depths of the tradition.

So, in the spirit of pursuing self-knowledge, and of encouraging ourselves and each other as we seek to deepen the ways that we're able to engage with the Platonic tradition, we might bear three questions in mind, throughout tonight's discussion:

1. What might we aspire to, in order to approach the tradition more fully and deeply?
2. What practices or disciplines would help us, in our pursuit of those aspirations?
3. What are the implications of the very different circumstances of our lives and times, our social and personal context, as distinct from those of Proclus and the “typical” student or aspirant of his day?

Turning to Proclus, we might begin with his remarks from the second chapter of the *Theology of Plato*:

But the auditor of the proposed dogmas is supposed to be adorned with the moral¹ virtues, and to be one who has bound by the reason of virtue all the illiberal and inharmonious motions of the soul, and harmonized them to the one form of intellectual prudence: for, as Socrates says, it is not lawful for the pure to be touched by the impure. But every vicious man is perfectly impure; and the contrary character is pure. He must likewise have been exercised in all the logical methods, and have contemplated many irreprehensible conceptions about analyses, and many about divisions, the contraries to these, agreeably, as it appears to me, to the exhortation of Parmenides to Socrates. For prior to such a contest in arguments, the knowledge of the divine genera, and of the truth established in them, is difficult and impervious. But in the third place, he must not be unskilled in physics. For he who has been conversant with the multiform opinions of physiologists, and has after a manner explored in images the causes of beings, will more easily advance to the nature of separate and primary hypostases. An auditor therefore of the present work, as I have said, must not be ignorant of the truth

1 These are the “ethical” or habitual virtues, which comprise the second grade in the traditional Platonic hierarchy of virtues, coming just before the three grades of properly philosophical virtues: the political (or civic, constitutional), the cathartic (or purificatory), and the theoretic (or contemplative). Cf. Damascius' *Commentary on the Phaedo* I.138–144, and Tim Addey's commentary upon this bit of Damascius, in chapter 4 of *The Unfolding Wings*.

contained in the phenomena, nor unacquainted with the paths of erudition, and the disciplines which they contain; for through these we obtain a more immaterial knowledge of a divine essence. But all these must be bound together in the leader intellect. Being likewise a partaker of the dialectic of Plato, meditating those immaterial energies which are separate from corporeal powers, and desiring to contemplate by intelligence in conjunction with reason [true] beings, our auditor must genuinely apply himself to the interpretation of divine and blessed dogmas, and fill his soul, according to the Oracle, with profound love; since, as Plato somewhere observes,² for the apprehension of this theory, a better assistant than love cannot be obtained.

He must likewise be exercised in the truth which pervades through all things, and must excite his intelligible eye to real and perfect truth. He must establish himself in a firm, immovable, and safe kind of divine knowledge, and must be persuaded not to admire any thing else, nor even to direct his attention to other things, but must hasten to divine light with an intrepid reasoning energy, and with the power of an unwearied life; and in short, must propose to himself such a kind of energy and rest as it becomes him to possess who intends to be such a coryphaeus as Socrates describes in the *Theaetetus*.

We have here at least two members of the Chaldean triad of faith, truth, and love — all three of which Proclus will reference in the passage from the *Parmenides Commentary*.

In Proclus' *Parmenides Commentary*, the discussion of the qualifications of the student (and of her teacher) come in the midst of Book IV, where Proclus is commenting on the following bit of Plato's text:

There are many other doubts, indeed, but this is the greatest: if any one should assert that it is not proper forms should be known, if they are such as we have said they ought to be, it is impossible to demonstrate that he who asserts this is deceived, unless he who doubts is skilled in a multitude of particulars, and is naturally of a good disposition. But he should be willing to pursue him closely who endeavours to support his opinion by a multitude of far-fetched arguments: though, after all, he who contends that forms cannot be known will remain unpersuaded.³

Taking this text as his invitation, Proclus elaborates in his commentary.⁴ Note how, while the lemma dealt explicitly with the forms — i.e., at an intellectual level — Proclus joins this with the higher, theological realities toward which the conversation between Parmenides and Socrates is leading.

For it is requisite that the hearer should possess a naturally good disposition, and this in a remarkable degree, that he may be by nature a philosopher, may be astonished about an incorporeal essence, and prior to things visible may always

2 *Symposium* 212b.

3 *Parmenides* 133b.

4 Columns 926–928 in Cousin's edition of the Greek; pages 143–144 (the latter portion of endnote 34) in Taylor's translation of the *Parmenides* (TTS *Works of Plato*, volume III).

pursue something else and reason concerning it, and may not be satisfied with things present; and in short he must be such a one as Socrates in the *Republic*⁵ describes him to be, who naturally loves the speculation of wholes. In the next place, he must be skilled in a multitude of particulars, not indeed in a multitude of human affairs, for these are trifling, and contribute nothing to a divine life, but in logical, physical, and mathematical theorems. For such things as our dianoëtic power is unable to survey in the Gods, we may behold in these as in images; and beholding we are induced to believe the assertions of theologians concerning divine natures. Thus if he wonders how multitude is contained in the one, and all things in the impartible, he will perceive that the even and the odd, the circle and the sphere and other forms of numbers are contained in the monad. If he wonders how a divine nature makes by its very essence, he will perceive in natural objects that fire essentially imparts heat, and snow coldness. And if he wonders how causes are every where present with their effects, he will behold the images of this in logic. For genera are every where predicated of the things of which species are predicated, and the latter indeed with the former, but the former without the latter. And thus in every thing, he who is unable to look directly to a divine nature, may survey it through these as images.

It is requisite, therefore, in the first place, that he should possess a naturally good disposition, which is allied to true beings, and is capable of becoming winged, and which as it were from other persuasions vindicates to itself the conceptions concerning permanent being. For as in every study we require a certain preparation, in like manner in order to obtain that knowledge which genuinely leads to being, we require a preceding purified aptitude. In the next place, skill, as we have said, in many and all-various theorems is requisite, through which he will be led back to the apprehension of these things; and, in the third place, alacrity, and an extension of the powers of the soul about the contemplation of true beings; so that from his leader alone indicating, he may be able to follow his indications.

Three things, therefore, are requisite to the contemplation of an incorporeal nature, a naturally good disposition, skill, and alacrity. And through a naturally good disposition indeed, faith in a divine nature will be spontaneously produced; but through skill the truth of paradoxical theorems will be firmly possessed; and through alacrity the amatory tendency of the soul to the contemplation of true being will be excited.

The term that Taylor translates as “alacrity” is in Greek *prothumia*,⁶ which is intriguingly related to the appetitive or desiring part of the soul, *epithumia*. Both of these, in turn, have a link to *thumos*, the middle part of the soul (which Taylor usually renders as “anger” and modern translators as the “spirited part” or the “irascible part”). The *prothumia-epithumia* pair parallels, at least in its grammatical structure, the mythological pairing of Prometheus (“fore-thought”) and his brother Epimetheus (“after-thought”).

⁵ *Republic* 490a.

⁶ The modern translation by Morrow and Dillon has “enthusiasm” for *prothumia*, but this is misleading, in that this is not obviously related to the divine inspiration or divine madness of the *Phaedrus*, etc.

It may also be worth pausing at this point, to reflect on the triad of Chaldean virtues — faith, truth, and love — as Proclus has elaborated them here, and on the connections that this triad might bear to other familiar triads in Platonic philosophy.

Proclus then concludes the passage by discussing the requirements of the teacher, which complement those for the student:

But the leader of these speculations will not be willing through a long discourse to unfold divine truth, but to indicate it with brevity, framing his language similar to his intellections; nor will he accomplish this from things known and at hand, but supernally, from principles most profoundly one. Nor again, will he so discourse as that he may appear to speak clearly, but he will be satisfied with indications. For it is requisite that mystical concerns should be mystically delivered, and that occult conceptions respecting divine natures, should not be rendered popular. Such then is the hearer and such the leader of these discourses.

And in Parmenides you have a perfect leader of this kind; and hence if we attend to the mode of his discourse we shall find that he teaches many things through a few words, that he derives what he says supernally, and that he alone indicates concerning divine natures. But in Socrates you have a hearer of a naturally good disposition indeed, and amatory, but not yet perfectly skilled; whence also Parmenides exhorts him to exercise himself in dialectic, that he may obtain skill in the theorems, receiving indeed his naturally good disposition and his impulse, but supplying what is deficient. He also informs us that the end of this triple power is the being freed from deception in reasonings concerning divine natures: for he who is deficient in any one of these three, must be compelled to assent to many things that are false.

What guidance do these final paragraphs, ostensibly about the teacher, give to us *as students*? What should we be seeking in our studies, and (beyond what Proclus has already mentioned in his descriptions of the student) is there anything we might do, to prepare ourselves to learn from such a teacher as Parmenides? What sorts of help can a leader offer, and what must we do on our own, as it were? We might also consider the person of Zeno, as situated between Socrates as the nearly ideal pupil in the process of perfection and Parmenides as the ideal teacher.