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**Testimony on Pythagorean abstinence from beans
in a medieval Armenian commentary
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Numerous ancient sources claim that the Pythagoreans were forbidden from consuming beans. Most notable of these is Aristotle fragment 195, part of the lost treatise *On the Pythagoreans*, and preserved in Diogenes Laertius 8.34-5.¹ The Aristotelian fragment provides five possible explanations of the Pythagorean prohibition: [1] beans are like genitals, [2] they are like the gates of Hades, [3] they are destructive, [4] they are like the nature of the universe, [5] they are oligarchical because they are used in drawing lots. Other ancient Greek texts that attempt to explain this curious Pythagorean taboo include fragment 41 of Heraclides Ponticus², which describes an experiment involving throwing a bean into a chest and covering it with dung. After forty days, the bean is supposed to turn in to 'flesh in the figure of a man', explaining the saying of the poet (Orpheus fr. 263) that 'eating beans is like eating the heads of one's fathers'.³ Aulus Gellius presents the view that Pythagoras did not ban beans but used the word κύαμος as a euphemism for testicles, and that the Pythagorean injunction was a cryptic admonition against 'sexual desire' (*a rei veneriae prolubio*).⁴

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century) attributes the commentary to the Armenian bishop and theologian Stepanos of Siwnik (c. 680 – 735).⁵ Three of the four explanations in the commentary do not exactly correspond to any of the ancient Greek sources.

My aim here is to present a first translation of this passage and to compare it to the extant explanations in the Greek tradition. To achieve this goal I begin by presenting a taxonomy of the extant Greek explanations with the hope that this will help in comparing the account in the Armenian commentary with the extant Greek accounts. After that I make some brief remarks on the Armenian commentary and its place in the Armenian philosophical tradition. I then give my translation and analysis of the explanations. I close with some thoughts on the Armenian commentary tradition as an important and mostly untapped resource for the study of ancient Greek philosophy.

The varieties of explanations of Pythagorean abstinence

Explanations of Pythagorean abstinence are either based on considerations that are [1] sexual or reproductive, [2] political, [3] medical or health related, or [4] cosmological or theological. For example, the first explanation in the Aristotle fragment (that they resemble genitals) is clearly connected to sexuality, as is also true of the Orphic explanation given in the Heraclides fragment, which focuses on the alleged generative powers of beans. Explanation 5 of Aristotle, that beans are oligarchical because they are used in choosing rulers by lot, is an example of a political explanation. Explanation 2 and 4 in Aristotle are either theological or cosmological (beans resemble the gates of Hades or the nature of the universe). We find medical or health related explanations in Cicero

⁵ Stepanos Siwnetsi 2007, p. 561-570.

and Apollonius Paradoxographus (probably a 2nd century B.C.E. author)⁶. The latter writes that the Pythagoreans forbade beans because they produce flatulence and are difficult to digest, and even have a psychic effect that results in ‘disturbing dreams’.⁷

The Armenian text background

The Armenian testimony on Pythagorean bean abstinence occurs in a brief commentary on the foundational philosophical text in the medieval Armenian curriculum, the *Prolegomena of Philosophy* or *Definitions and Divisions of Philosophy* (the preferred Armenian title) of the 6th century Neoplatonist David as well as on Porphyry’s *Isagogē*, to which David’s prolegomena served as an introduction. David’s prestige and importance in philosophical formation in Armenia is due to the tradition that he was himself an Armenian.⁸ Beginning in the 5th century Armenian scholars belonging to what has come to be called the ‘Hellenizing School’ (*younaban dprots*).⁹ Along with translations of Aristotle’s *Categories* and *De Interpretatione* and perhaps several dialogues of Plato as well as other works of Greek philosophy and literature, the Armenian scholars translated several Neoplatonic commentaries on Aristotle.

The manuscript of our commentary provides as a title ‘Useful Answers to the *Definitions* and Porphyry by Lord Stepanos, Bishop of Siwnik’. Stepanos is generally

⁶ Cicero, *De divinatione* 1.62, 2.119; Apollonius 46.3.20.

⁷ Medical explanations have become popular in modern discussions of the bean puzzle. See Beasley, who notes the preponderance among people of Mediterranean descent of favism, a genetic deficiency of the enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase that results in an inability to tolerate fava beans (*Vicia faba*). Pythagoras’ injunction must have been against fava beans, since the common and string beans and other beans belonging to the genus *Phaseolus vulgaris* are native to the Americas and thus were unknown to the inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean world.

⁸ For more on David’s place in the Armenian tradition, see Kendall and Thomson.

⁹ For the Hellenizing School, see Manandean and Mercier.

considered to be a member of the Hellenizing School and the translator of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius into Armenian. I will not assume that the attribution of this commentary to Stepanos is correct. More work must be done to either confirm or exclude this hypothesis. In any event, it is very plausible that the commentary emerged from the milieu of the scholars associated with the Hellenizing School.

The Armenian commentary reads as a series of explanatory glosses, some rather terse, for students encountering the texts of David and Porphyry and their unfamiliar terms and references. Many of these commentaries simply identify persons mentioned. *Euthyphro* is identified as ‘a book’.¹⁰ Democritus is said simply to be ‘a physician’.¹¹ It is apparent that the intent of the commentary was to elucidate any terms or references that would have been obscure to beginning students of philosophy in Armenia.

The Armenian text

The section of the commentary that attempts to explain the Pythagorean restriction occurs in the exposition of David’s treatment of the Platonic definition of philosophy as the practice of death. The Neoplatonic commentators who dealt with this Socratic characterization of philosophy were concerned to explain why Socrates seems to counsel against suicide (at *Phaedo* 61C) given that philosophy has death as its ultimate goal (*Phaedo* 64A). In developing their response to this problem the Neoplatonists adduced a number of historical and literary examples of suicides and martyrs. Among them were the Pythagorean couple Myllias and Timycha. Although the accounts differ,

¹⁰ Stepanos 2007 (91-92)

¹¹ Stepanos 2007 (93-94)

they are all based on the report in Iamblichus¹². According to Iamblichus' story, when Dionysius II of Syracuse was unable to obtain the friendship of any Pythagoreans, he sent thirty soldiers under Eurymenes to stop their customary migration from Tarentum to Metapontum. The soldiers, pretending to be robbers, ambushed the Pythagoreans in Phalae in Tarentum, and caused the ten Pythagoreans making the journey to flee. The soldiers would have abandoned their pursuit had the Pythagoreans not ended up in a field of beans, which their teachings did not allow them to touch. Unable to move, they threw sticks and stones at the soldiers, injuring many of them, but eventually being overpowered, they were killed, since, in accordance with Pythagorean teachings, they were unwilling to be taken captive. Returning with disappointment to Syracuse because they were not able to capture any Pythagoreans, the soldiers encountered two other Pythagoreans, Myllias and his wife Timycha, who was pregnant. They were captured by the soldiers and brought back to Dionysius, who offered them all honors if they agreed to rule with him. They refused the offer, so Dionysius promised to let them go as long as they explained why their fellow Pythagoreans preferred death to walking on beans. Myllias replied that he would rather walk on beans than explain why Pythagoreans refuse to walk on beans. Dionysius ordered him removed, and commanded Timycha to be tortured, thinking that as a pregnant woman deprived of her husband, she would quickly capitulate to his demand. Timycha, however, bit off her tongue and spit it at Dionysius.

The account in David is truncated and altered. In the Greek manuscripts the Pythagorean woman is identified as Theano, although the Armenian manuscripts state that the Pythagorean woman was named *Timik'ta* but was also called 'Theano'

¹² Iamblichus 31.189-194

(*T'ēanov*).¹³ Now Timycha is simply asked by the 'tyrant of Sicily' why Pythagoreans refuse to eat beans. Her response echoes that of Myllias in Iamblichus' account. The account ends with her death after she chewed up her tongue.

It is this tragic anecdote that provoked the Armenian commentator to try to explain the Pythagorean rule:

The white bean is like seed¹⁴, so [1] the Pythagoreans said that whoever eats beans eats the seed of his father, and so they decreed that beans not be eaten. Also, [2] a Pythagorean philosopher had gone on a distant journey, and when he returned back home, his wife was pregnant. He asked his wife, 'How did you get pregnant?' and she answered 'I ate a bean.' And so he decreed that beans not be eaten. Another reason: [3] three Pythagoreans were on a journey and a robber fell upon them. Two of them were killed, but one hid in a pile of beans and survived. So it was said that because the beans saved a life, they should not be eaten. <[4] The correct reason is that those who act unjustly by resorting to bribery use a bean as a secret sign that indicates their act of bribery.>¹⁵ (*Matenagirk* 562, 67-72)

¹³ The presence of a variant of the name 'Timycha' in the Armenian manuscripts but not in the Greek is interesting. For possible explanations of this, see Papazian (forthcoming).

¹⁴ *սպիտակ սպիտակ* 'white pea, chickpea' in the commentary on the phrase *գլեծն իլոռունս* 'great peas', which renders *κυάμους*, 'beans'. The insertion of 'white' to qualify beans is perhaps related to the use of beans in lots, since the one who picks the white bean is chosen. The one occurrence of *սպիտակ* in the Armenian version of the Old Testament translates *κύαμον* in 2 Samuel (Kings) 17:28 of the Septuagint.

¹⁵ I bracket this last explanation because its grammar is unlike the rest of the passage. The sentence contains structures more common in later medieval (12th-13th centuries) Armenian than the classical style expected if Stepanos is indeed the author. I suspect it is an addition by a later copyist or redactor.

Analysis of the explanations and their relation to the Greek sources

We can now turn to some remarks on each one of these explanations and how they fit with the Greek testimony. The first explanation is simply a paraphrase of the explanation of Heraclides. The replacement of ‘heads’ with ‘seeds’ perhaps stems from the fact that Heraclides uses the example of a bean planted in dung to interpret the Orphic saying. A very plausible immediate source for the Armenian commentator is John Laurentius Lydus, the 6th century C.E. author of the *De mensibus*, which preserves the testimony of Heraclides.

Like the first explanation, the second explanation also seems to fit under the sexual/reproductive category. What is different here is that the woman exploits the supposed Pythagorean view of the generative powers of beans to mollify her husband’s distress at finding her pregnant after returning from a journey whose beginning evidently preceded the act of conception. There is a significant anomaly in this account. The injunction is not attributed specifically to Pythagoras but to an anonymous Pythagorean man. Taking the reference to beans literally renders the story ludicrous. A perhaps more charitable reading would adopt the interpretation of Aulus Gellius and read the story as a cautionary tale against adultery. In either case we are left with a not very flattering portrait of a Pythagorean couple—one a mendacious adulterer and the other incredibly obtuse and naïve (or at best, on the Gellius reading, issuing an obscure and rather vacuous decree). One may contrast this Pythagorean couple with the more noble portrayal of the martyred Pythagorean couple Myllias and Timycha.

The third explanation, like the second, attributes the origin of the bean injunction to anonymous Pythagoreans rather than Pythagoras himself. It is unique in that the

injunction against beans is attributed to an episode in which a Pythagorean was protected from being murdered by hiding in a pile of beans. It very tenuously evokes the story of the Pythagoreans pursued by the soldiers into the field of beans but is obviously very different. In this case the Pythagorean injunction stems from either a sense of gratitude and desire to honor the bean or a pragmatic concern to preserve bean piles as a safe refuge. This contrasts with the explanations that attribute some negative feature to beans, either their physical effects or their resembling something undesirable. Perhaps the only other accounts that share this feature are Aristotle's fourth explanation that compares the bean to the cosmos or Heraclides' reason, which bestows the potentiality of animal life to the bean and thus makes it deserving of respect. The third Armenian explanation however lacks any cosmic or metaphysical significance, and the anecdote is also not especially favorable to the Pythagoreans. One could hide effectively in piles of many things, not just beans, and a sense of gratitude to a pile of beans that gives rise to a taboo against bean consumption has an air of absurdity.

The fourth explanation is probably a later addition to the commentary. It is introduced as the 'correct' account. It connects the Pythagorean injunction to bribery. This connection has a Greek antecedent though the Armenian account is embellished. The *Scholia mythologica* of Pseudo-Nonnus, most likely an early 6th century eastern Christian, elucidates the classical allusions in the sermons of Gregory of Nazianzus. It is a work probably intended as an aid for students who were reading Gregory's sermons as

part of their secondary school education.¹⁶ In Pseudo-Nonnus the Pythagorean injunction is a cryptic and enigmatic prohibition against accepting bribes:¹⁷

The Pythagoreans were a family of philosophers originating from Pythagoras of Samos. They learned the doctrines of the philosophy through riddles. This riddle was transmitted after the others: Do not eat beans. That is, do not forsake justice by accepting a bribe. For the ancient jurors at Athens used beans instead of pebbles for the judgment in the courts of justice. Therefore they say that one must not eat of the beans from the law courts.

The Pseudo-Nonnus text was translated into Syriac and Armenian, so it is a plausible source, albeit distorted, of the fourth explanation in the Armenian fragment. An alternative source is Michael Apostolus, a 15th century Byzantine author, who also makes the connection between the bean injunction and bribery.¹⁸ If Apostolus is the source, then the insertion of this fourth explanation would have to have been very close to the manuscript date, and the redactor may very well have been the copyist.

The Context of Testimony

One should keep in mind that the attitude of witnesses toward the Pythagoreans as well as their choice of explanations is affected by their own ideological orientation. In this case, the Christian provenance of the commentator may serve to color his attitude toward Pythagorean dietary laws. The commentator is likely to draw a mental connection between the Pythagorean code and Jewish dietary restrictions that he would be familiar

¹⁶ See N.G. Wilson 1970, p. 70 and 1983, p. 23, both cited by Nimmo Smith, p., 8n25

¹⁷ Nimmo Smith 4.17.7

¹⁸ Leutsch 15.11.1

with. The connection would be strengthened by the fact that the prohibitions in Judaism of non-kosher foods and in Pythagoreanism of beans are ubiquitous: certain foods are prohibited to all members of society and at all times, rather than forbidding consumption by members of one sex or age group or at special times of the year.¹⁹ Further, both dietary rules serve to promote group cohesion and unity. In the Pythagorean case, the reasons for the rules are a carefully guarded secret that could not be revealed even under threat of death, as the episode of Myllias and Timycha illustrates. If the Armenian commentator is Stepanos, then we have independent textual evidence that he is very aware of the Mosaic law and that he vigorously rejects literal interpretation and implementation of the Mosaic dietary laws.²⁰ In any case, a Christian commentator may be more likely to be dismissive of such dietary rules and so may more readily report explanations that trivialize the rationale for these rules and are unfavorable toward the movements that demand adherence to them. The context of the testimony may account for the commentator's bias toward a more negative version of explanations of the Pythagorean injunction.

The Value of the Armenian Commentary Conclusion

Let me close with some thoughts about the implications of the Armenian commentary tradition for scholars of Greek philosophy. In recent years important work has been done on the Armenian translations of Greek philosophical texts and commentaries. The

¹⁹ A good comprehensive discussion of food taboos that also draws this distinction between ubiquitous and non-ubiquitous prohibitions is Meyer-Rochow.

²⁰ See Stepanos 2014, p. 76-77.

significance of these translations for ancient philosophy is now generally recognized. Receiving significantly less scholarly attention is the native Armenian commentary tradition. I hope to have at least suggested, though here in a very modest way in this paper ways that study of these texts, many of which are in need of being edited from manuscripts, may also help to expand our understanding of ancient philosophy, both pre-Socratic and after, as well as to better comprehend its reception in later centuries and in a culture that was both profoundly influenced by Hellenism but which also maintained its unique character and identity.

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