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Gyburg Uhlmann

The Noise of the Books

Practices of Knowledge Transfer in
Damascius' *Vita Isidori*

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The Noise of the Books

Practices of Knowledge Transfer in Damascius' *Vita Isidori**

Gyburg Uhlmann

1 Introduction

The last scholar of the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens, Damascius, presents in his narratives of the *Vita Isidori*,¹ written sometime between AD 515 and 526, a rich panorama of life stories and character sketches of intellectuals who were of significance in the schools of the 4th and 5th century AD. The perspectives of these *vitas* and images have their own implicit agenda that deals with the question of which paths lead to truly philosophical wisdom. Although the text pluralizes the image one may have of the intellectual community of late antique philosophical schools its agenda is essentially hierarchic and implies strong assessments of the different modes of and ways toward philosophical living.

These evaluations favor alternative ways of gaining knowledge and wisdom that are to be followed beyond the traditional curricula of late antique learning and beyond scholarly techniques and customs such as love of books or interest in research traditions. This comes in a way as a surprise, since Damascius' own career builds on this curriculum. In the traces of his teaching that have come down to us he follows these guidelines, too, for example when he gives lessons on the *Phaedo* and the *Philebus* and affirmatively reflects the curricular order of the reading of these canonical texts.² And what is more: Damascius uses the same techniques of philosophical exegesis in these lectures,³ including the analysis of

*The argument presented in this paper was developed in the context of the SFB 980 Episteme in motion, funded by the DFG (German research foundation). I am grateful to Sandra Erker and Christian Vogel for their helpful comments and suggestions and to Orla Mulholland for suggesting linguistic improvements as a native speaker.

¹Damascius' *Vita Isidori* is cited according to the edition of P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, Athens 1999.

²Cf. Leendert G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, Amsterdam 1962, XXXVIIIff.

³Cf. Leendert G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo: Olympiodorus*, Amsterdam 1976, 7-27 (overview of the history of commentaries on the *Phaedo* in Antiquity).

(Platonic) arguments by using the formal instruments of Aristotelian logic, the importance of which he downplays in the *Vita*. Furthermore, even though his “high” interpretation of the Platonic *Parmenides* and his treatise *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, which clearly evoke the Iamblichean and Athenian tradition of metaphysical practices, present philosophical approaches beyond, i.e. higher than, the rational discursive level, Damascius presupposes this level of discursive thinking as the basis from which one can start in order to circumplay the intellective and intelligible objects.

In this paper we follow the traces of knowledge transfer in the different text genres that produce a tension between traditional school philosophy and a specific institutional agenda of Damascius’ Neoplatonic Academy in Athens by observing the discourses on knowledge acquisition in both the *Vita Isidori* and Damascius’ philosophical commentaries.⁴ We argue that the entanglement of the *Vita Isidori* with other school text genres and the school politics of the Academy is even stronger than has hitherto been assumed⁵ and that it is therefore necessary to analyze it as an integral part of the text environment of the late antique philosophical schools. That will even increase the importance of analysing Damascius’ works for a social history of late antiquity since the *Vita Isidori* declares Damascius’ intent to broaden the reach and range of influence exerted by the educational institutions of philosophical teaching upon cultural developments.

We furthermore suggest that Damascius’ *Vita Isidori* has a specific Iamblichean subtext. It is specific both for Damascius’ plan for a Renaissance of Athenian Platonism which had declined for the last decades and for Damascius’ use of the text genre of philosophical narrative. This subtext has two major focus points: first of all, it suggests alternative curricula to the traditional school curricula and can therefore function as an invitation to the Athenian Academy and to students who – for different reasons – prefer to circumvent the established rhetoric and logic classes. Secondly, it favors the preoccupation with Platonic ideas, i.e. intelligibles, with a particularly strong emphasis and thereby distinguishes Athenian philosophical classes from Alexandrian ones.

We will show the impact of this subcutaneous agenda by consequently contextualizing the *Vita Isidori* in its textual environment, where nothing similar is to be found, neither in Damascius’ own works written in different text genres nor in texts that are akin or in other ways connected to his *Vita*.

The paper, therefore, has the following structure: we start (1) with traces

⁴With a very short and exemplary glance at scholia in Byzantine manuscripts that carry forward the exegetical strategies of the late antique texts.

⁵Polymnia Athanassiadi has argued that the *Vita Isidori* integrates different text traditions: beside the philosopher’s vita the tradition of paradoxa and images of an intellectual and social history: P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, 39f.

of Iamblichean philosophy that was pursued by Athenian Platonists in the *Vita Isidori* and its textual environment; this will be followed by (2) examples of the preference for non-technical philosophical practices in the *Vita Isidori* as an alternative path to wisdom and the noise of the books, i.e. the evaluation of earlier commentators; and (3) the narrative strategies that present (subtle) arguments against other approaches to philosophy such as (mere) logic, natural philosophy or rhetoric and grammar respectively. Finally, we will (very briefly and sketchily) (4) compare the preference for non-technical, non-logical approaches to philosophical knowledge with the reflections about the scope of the Aristotelian organon and the logic classes that were based on it, in Ammonian commentaries and examples from Damascius' commentaries and his Athenian predecessors.

2 The *Vita Isidori* in context: Iamblichean ancestry in Damascius' *Vita Isidori*

The *Vita Isidori* has not been preserved itself. Thanks to the transmission of excerpts in the library of Photius and the Suda we have approximately a quarter of the original text, rearranged for the purposes of Photius' studies and the encyclopedic alphabetical organization of the material in the Suda. It is because of the contempt that Photius wants to express for the pagan perspective of Damascius' writings and its personnel that we know of the dedication of the *Vita Isidori*.⁶ It is thus interesting that Damascius dedicated it to an intellectually outstanding female student who had given the impulse for the composition of the *Vita*. Theodora's family looked back on Iamblichus as its ancestor. It is not unlikely that this outstanding intellectual tradition supported the wish also to educate the female family members.⁷ Photius knows that Theodora went through the traditional curriculum starting with studies in grammar and poetry, continued with rhetoric and dialectics and also geometry and arithmetic and even became acquainted with the disciplines of philosophy.

This dedication endows the text with a markedly educational and academic/school context, which means that the *Vita* is far from being anti-scholastic in the sense of being located outside a specific school environment. The information that it was written for an advanced pupil in the philosophical classes underlines its paedagogical scope and allows us to contextualize all the narratives of the *Vita* within the school context and the general Platonic environment

⁶Photius, *Bibl.* 181, 125b, reprinted by Clemens Zintzen ed., *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, Hildesheim 1967, 317 and P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, 334.

⁷Edward Watts, *Hypatia: An Ordinary Life*, Oxford University Press, 2016 (in press, ch. 2, which I had the chance to read as a manuscript).

that Damascius, the last head of the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens, uses for his platonic academic program or at least relates to it.

Moreover, the name Iamblichus adds up this. He was involved in the process of structuring the philosophical classes in antiquity, since he added specifically to the Neoplatonic design of a curricular structure of the readings of Plato's and Aristotle's writings in the philosophical schools.⁸ Even though there was a lecture plan before that, it is Iamblichus to whom later commentators⁹ refer when they deal with the anagogical path of learning that had been established as a stable element in the Neoplatonic schools, and with the Platonic theology that forms the *θριγκός*, the keystone of philosophical education. Connected to this curriculum is also the enhancement that Iamblichus achieved in the development of the Neoplatonic scale of virtues in regard to the higher philosophical virtues.¹⁰ It is also in the *Vita Isidori* that Iamblichus gains this specific aura (33,5; 34).

Complementary to this specific – with focus on theoretical education and the intelligible realm – contribution to the school curriculum Iamblichus is renowned for his “higher” interpretation of Plato with special emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge about the intelligible realm and for his – in this respect and for this reason – relatively lower placement of the Aristotelian treatises and sciences.¹¹ Damascius in the course of his exegeses in his commentaries on Plato (and in his treatise *de principiis*) frequently refers to Iamblichus' strong tendency to uncover a meaning of Platonic texts that is situated on the level of the intelligible or the noetic forms.¹² In most cases he supports this interpretation, also in defense

⁸Cf. Leendert G. Westerink, *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, xxxvii; Alain Festugiere, *L'ordre de lecture des dialogues de Platon aux Ve/VIe siècles*, in: *MH* 26, 1969, 281-296.

⁹I.e. Procl. in Alc. 11,11-13; in Ti. (I) 13,14-16.

¹⁰Cf. H.-D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds eds., *Marinus: Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*, Paris 2001, introduction: xli-xlii, see l-xcviii and cf. Dam. in Ph. I 143. (διὸ καὶ αὐταὶ παραδειγματικάι, ὅτι προηγουμένως αὐτοῦ εἰσὶν τοῦ νοῦ αἱ ἀρεταί. ταύτας δὲ προστίθησιν ὁ Ἰάμβλιχος ἐν τοῖς Περὶ ἀρετῶν. “therefore these virtues too are called archetypal, inasmuch as virtues belong primarily to intelligence itself. This category is added by Iamblichus in his treatise *On Virtues*.”, transl. Westerink)

¹¹cf. John Dillon, *Iamblichus of Chalcis* (c. 240– 325 a.d.), in: *ANRW* 2.36.2, 1987, 863–909, 906f.; in the context of a broader doxography with different perspectives on the paradigm in Ti. 28c: Procl. in Ti. (I) 321,25-30; Procl. in Ti. (I) 164,22-25: ὁ δὲ γε θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος τόπον ἤκουσεν οὐδεμίαν σωματοειδῆ διάστασιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ τῆς γῆς διήκουσαν ἀσώματον αἰτίαν τὴν ἀνέχουσαν τῆ ζωῆ τὰ σώματα καὶ περιέχουσαν πᾶσαν διάστασιν; in Ti. (I) 400,2f.; (distancing Iamblichus' interpretation from that of Amelios, Theodoros and Xenarchos: in Ti. (I) 426,3-4.

¹²In doing so he follows the line of Syrianus and Proclus, where one can find similarly accentuated reverential references to Iamblichus: Syr. in *Metaph.* 38,38f.; 103,7; 140,15; 8,17-19; Procl. in Ti. (I) 146,9-11; in Ti. (II) 142,26-28; in Ti. (III) 247,16f. (reference to Iamblichus' exegesis of the *Phaedrus*); in Ti. (I) 19, 9-11: ὁ δὲ γε θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος ὑψηλολογούμενος ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ῥήσει τοὺς περὶ τὴν νοητῶν θέαν γεγυμνασμένους ἀσυμμέτρως ἔχειν φησὶ πρὸς τὴν περὶ τὰ αἰσθητὰ διατριβήν (“The divine Iamblichus speaks in a higher mode/level in this speech and says that those who practice the vision of the intelligibles are ill-prepared/unbalanced for the preoccupation with

against other approaches to the Platonic text.¹³

But even in cases where Damascius tends toward another interpretation, he refers to him as “divine Iamblichus” (ὁ θεῖος Ἰάμβλιχος) or “the great Iamblichus” (ὁ μέγας Ἰάμβλιχος).

This holds true for the exegesis of Phd. 69e6-72e2 that has been identified by Westerink as an independent treatise.¹⁴ It is thus – at least concerning the form of argument – strongly entangled with the two lectures on the *Phaedo* that have been preserved by students’ lecture notes. In this lemma, Damascius reports that Iamblichus tried to show that in the *Phaedo* the argument from opposites is in itself sufficient for the proof of the immortality of the (rational) soul whereas Damascius – following Syrianus and Proclus – favored the exegesis that the first four arguments in the *Phaedo* function only as necessary and not as sufficient proofs and are therefore only part of the proof, arguing that Plato’s Socrates’ statements and their wording support this view.

This is significant since Damascius’ interpretation locates the *Phaedo* on an essentially rational-discursive level that is below the intelligible realm. On this level arguments have to be collected one after the other and add up to each other each with specific functions, while this consecutiveness is superseded in the *theoria* of the intelligible by reflections about the oneness of the intelligible multitude.¹⁵ In contrast, Iamblichus made an advance that situated the arguments on a higher level where each single argument includes all the others and is linked to them in the enfolded, i.e. not discursively distinguished, way of intelligible items.

sensible objects.”); Iamblichus’ name is often connected with a reflection on the ἐξηρημένα ἰδέα: in Ti. (III) 357, 26f.).

¹³Examples: in Prm. 31,13-18 (Καὶ μήποτε τοῦτον περιενόει καὶ ὁ μέγας Ἰάμβλιχος, ἀξίων αἴτιον εἶναι τι τοῦ προτέρου καὶ ὑστέρου τῶν εἰδῶν, οὐ τῇ ιδιότητι, ἀλλὰ τῇ θέσει, καί, ὡς λέγει ἐκεῖνος, τῇ τάξει τῆς ὑποστάσεως. Δοκεῖ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλο καὶ ἄλλο εἶναι τὸ χρονικὸν ὕστερον,... (“Perhaps, the great Iamblichus embraced this when he claims that necessarily something must cause the earlier and the later of the forms, not because of its specific characteristic but because of the placement, and, as he says, the order of its subsistence. For, the temporal “later“ seems to be different from that...”))

¹⁴Cf. Leendert G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo: Damascius*, Amsterdam 1977, 16f.

¹⁵Dam. in Ph. (I) 207,1-11: Τὸν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐναντίων τοῦ Πλάτωνος ἐν Φαίδωνι λόγον οἱ μὲν παλαιότεροι τῶν ἐξηγητῶν οὐδὲ ὡς ἐρρωμένον ὄντα διασφύζειν ἠδυνήθησαν οὐδὲ ἀμύνεσθαι τὰς κατ’ αὐτοῦ φερομένας τῶν ἑτεροφύλων αἰρέσεων βολάς. ὁ δὲ μέγας Ἰάμβλιχος, ‘οἷος ἐκεῖνου θυμός’, ὑπὲρ τὰ ἐσκαμμένα πηδήσας (über die Grube springen = Ziel verfehlen) ἐσπούδασεν αὐτὸν τελεώσασθαι εἰς τοσοῦτον, εἰς ὅσον ἀποδεῖξαι παντελεῖ τὴν ψυχῆς ἀθανασίαν, οὐδὲ Σωκράτους αὐτοῦ τηλικούτον ἐπ’ αὐτῷ φρονήσαντος. ὁ δὲ ἐν πᾶσι συμμετρία παρισωμένος Συριανὸς τῶν τε προτέρων τὸ ἰδιωτικὸν τε καὶ ἄπορον φυλαξάμενος καὶ τοῦ Ἰαμβλίχου τὸ μέγα χαλάσας ἐπειράθη καὶ ταῖς Σωκράτους ἐπαγγελίαις ἐμμένειν καὶ τοὺς διακωμωδοῦντας τὴν ἐπιχείρησιν ἐξελέγχειν ὡς συκοφαντοῦντας. τὰ μὲν οὖν ἄλλα διωρίσατο καὶ προωμολογήσατο κατὰ νοῦν τε ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐαυτῷ εἰωθότως, ‘ἀτὰρ οὐ τέλος ἔχετο μύθων’.

In Damascius' commentary or commentating treatise, respectively, this is performed by starting with Syrianus' interpretation and adding some "minor points" (διὸ καὶ ἐγὼ μικρὰ ἄττα προσθεῖναι βούλομαι) where Syrianus' exegesis did not seem to be satisfactorily close to the Platonic text (πολλῶν τε γὰρ ἐπεισοδίων ἐδεήθη μὴ κειμένων ἐν τῷ λόγῳ ("For he needs many additions that are not to be found in the text").¹⁶ The underlying basic text of the commentator that is agreed upon, i.e. Syrianus, is presupposed.¹⁷ In the oral teaching the teacher presumably reads the text out to his students, as regards the use of the written text the reader is asked either to remember it from the lectures or to have a copy of Syrianus' commentary at hand. Damascius then arranges the further questions to be settled after one has read Syrianus (Dam. in Ph. (I) 209-220), collects the relevant text passages from the Platonic text that helps to solve the problems (221-230), and presents his own answers (231-242 and 243-251). For the solution of the problems he uses the traditional methods from the logic classes such as dihaeretic and syllogistic methods.

For example in Dam. in Ph. (I) 228 Damascius uses the dihaeretic method to elucidate the modes of recurrence. In a scholion in the Ms. Marc. Gr. 196 that has been identified as part of the so-called Philosophical Collection, written in the third quarter of the 9th century, the understanding of the dihaeretic structure is supported by a diagram.¹⁸ It is probable that in the late antique philosophical classes such diagrams were in use, too.¹⁹ Although the text Dam. in Ph. (I)

¹⁶Dam. in Ph. (I) 207,10-208,9.

¹⁷Cf. Dam. in Ph. (I) 208,7-9: ἀξιῶ δὲ ἐγὼ τὸν ἐντευζόμενον γεγυμνάσθαι πρότερον ἐν τοῖς ἐκείνου τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἱεροῖς σκέμμασι τὰ γὰρ καλῶς εἰρημένα μεταγράψαι οὐκ εὐλογον εἶναι μοι δοκεῖ. ("I shall take it that the reader has first studied the divine thoughts of my great predecessor, since I see no sense in repeating what has once been well said.", transl. by Westerink)

¹⁸Christian Brockmann, Scribal annotation as evidence of learning in manuscripts from the First Byzantine Humanism: the "Philosophical Collection", in: J.B. Quenzer, Dmitry Bondarev and J.U. Sobisch eds., Manuscript Cultures: Mapping the Field, Berlin 2014 (Studies in Manuscript Cultures 1), 11-33 (mit Fig. 1-10), cf. 20: the annotations (of Vind. 100 as part of the Philosophical collection like Marc. Gr. 246 and 196) show familiarity with the learned tradition of late antique Aristotelian scholarship and are by no means spontaneous annotations; see also Leendert G. Westerink, Lectures on the Philebus. Wrongly Attributed to Olympiodorus. Text, Translation, Notes and Indices, Amsterdam 1959, XV-XX; id., The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo: Olympiodorus, 15-17; id., The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo: Damascius, 29-32; Dieter Harlfinger, Die Textgeschichte der pseudo-aristotelischen Schrift Peri atomon grammon, Amsterdam 1971, 28f.

¹⁹This holds true for syllogistic diagrams, too. Damascius uses συλλογισμός, συλλογίζεσθαι in his commentaries: Dam. in Ph. (I) 264 (with an explanation in 265); 426; 405f.; 26f.: [62c9—e7] Ὅτι τὸν ἐξ ἀντικειμένων πλέκει συλλογισμὸν ὁ Κέβης ἀπορῶν 'φεύγειν θεοὺς θέλει ὁ φιλόσοφος ὁ φεύγων θεοὺς οὐ φιλόσοφος ὁ φιλόσοφος ἄρα οὐ φιλόσοφος'. — Ὅτι διαπταίει ὁ Κέβης, ἐν μὲν οὐ διοριζόμενος ποῖον θάνατον ἐθέλει ἀποθνήσκειν ὁ φιλόσοφος, δεύτερον δὲ οὐκ ἐννοήσας ὅτι καὶ ἐν Ἄιδου θεοὺς ἔχομεν δεσπότητας ἀγαθοὺς καὶ ἢ ἄρα κρείττους τῶν τῆδε ἢ κρείττοσι δυνάμεσι χρωμένους. ("Cebeus expresses his difficulty in the form of a syllogism from contradic-

208-251 has some features that tend to go beyond the scope and intellectual level of regular exegesis for school purposes, i.e. the reference to several earlier commentators, there is no reason to separate it totally from the lecture notes and oral teaching. It seems to be just a different and more detailed product of one and the same institutional context.²⁰

In the Byzantine scholia the dihaeretic and syllogistic presentations of the Platonic argument that are written down as propositions or diagrammatically written or drawn are supplemented by syllogistic diagrams that go back to the school of Alexander of Aphrodisias.²¹ We find several other examples for the use of the traditional methods of the organon, i.e. in Dam.in Phd. I, 56 (simple categorical syllogism in the first figure); 131 (complex categorical syllogism in the first figure): first-figure syllogisms are schematized by rectangular clamping; second-figure syllogisms as triangle with the middle term opposed to the hypotenuse (i.e. Dam.in Phd. (I), 361).

A specific feature in philosophical commentary in those commentaries of the Athenian tradition that are intended for master students and expert discussions is that earlier and contemporary commentators are imagined to be involved in an – ahistorically situated – philosophical dialogue in which they struggle for the best exegesis. In these reports each one and each line of tradition contributes to the true meaning but no one is always completely right.²²

Damascius in his commentaries on Plato put this characteristic into prac-

tory premises: The philosopher wants to run away from the Gods, a man who wants to run away from the Gods is not a philosopher, therefore the philosopher is not a philosopher.” (transl. by Westerink); cf. also: 131; 155; 184; 57 etc.

²⁰It would be helpful to study the relationship between the lecture notes and the passage 208-251 in more detail in order to gain insights about the horizon of oral and written teaching and philosophical publications.

²¹Nikos Agiotis, Some Remarks on the Use of Diagrams in Greek Manuscripts Transmitting Aristotle's Prior Analytics and Relevant Commentaries, talk at the conference “Aristotelische Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Editionsphilologie” at the Freie Universität Berlin on 03.12.15.

²²I.e. in Ph. I 144 (“Ὅτι εἰσὶ καὶ αἱ ἱερατικαὶ ἀρεταί, κατὰ τὸ θεοειδὲς ὑφιστάμεναι τῆς ψυχῆς, ἀντιπαρήκουσαι πάσαις ταῖς εἰρημέναις οὐσιώδεσιν οὖσαις ἐνιαΐαι γε ὑπάρχουσαι. καὶ ταύτας δὲ ὁ Ἰάμβλιχος ἐνδείκνυται, οἱ δὲ περὶ Πρόκλον καὶ σαφέστερον.... (“Lastly, there are the hierartic virtues, which belong to the Godlike part of the soul; they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, with this difference that while the others are existential, these are unitary. This kind, too, has been outlined by Iamblichus, and discussed more explicitly by the school of Proclus,...” (transl. by Westerink)); in Ph. I 172 (“Ὅτι οἱ μὲν τὴν φιλοσοφίαν προτιμῶσιν, ὡς Πορφύριος καὶ Πλωτῖνος καὶ ἄλλοι πολλοὶ φιλόσοφοι οἱ δὲ τὴν ἱερατικὴν, ὡς Ἰάμβλιχος καὶ Συριανὸς καὶ Πρόκλος καὶ οἱ ἱερατικοὶ πάντες. ὁ δὲ Πλάτων τὰς ἐκατέρωθεν συνηγορίας ἐννοήσας πολλὰς οὖσας εἰς μίαν αὐτὰς συνήγαγεν ἀλήθειαν, τὸν φιλόσοφον ‘Βάκχον’ ὀνομάζων (“To some philosophy is primary, as to Porphyry and Plotinus and a great many other philosophers; to others hierartic practice, as to Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and the hierartic school generally. Plato, however, recognizing that strong arguments can be advanced from both sides, has united the two into one single truth by calling the philosopher a Bacchus;...” (transl. by Westerink).

tice by creating a link between the Syrian Iamblichus and his Athenian followers Proclus and Syrianus and by distinguishing this group from other lines in the Platonic tradition, especially anti-Iamblichean lines like that of Theodorus and his followers. Although the members of the “Iamblichean group” are mostly in favor of uncovering meanings of the Platonic text that add to an understanding of the intelligibles, it is Iamblichus who performs the most radical approach: it is, thus, called into question by Damascius whether all these Platonic texts allow the same “high” interpretation as the *Parmenides*, a dialogue the exegesis of which in Damascius’ view must be undoubtedly performed in an Iamblichean manner. Since in the curriculum, which was introduced by Iamblichus, the *Parmenides* serves as an all comprising *theoria* of the intelligible, the dialogue could therefore be viewed as the embodiment of the intellectual form of knowing something simultaneously in total. It represents the summit of philosophical education, at the same time surpassing and transcending its limits and the limits of the traditional system of education, an ideal object for Iamblichean approaches and pathways to knowledge. The commentaries use this link between Iamblichus and the *Parmenides* as embodiment of philosophy itself widely.

The validity of this insight is regarded as being thus so absolute in the truest sense of the word that Damascius even uses it in his narratives of the *Vita*²³ in order to polemicize against Marinus’ weak interpretation, which has not learned to maintain the high level of intelligible principles of being.²⁴ In this text genre Damascius does not develop or further discuss new exegetical strategies for certain texts or text genres but uses already established ones for his other narrative purposes. The narratives thereby (implicitly) refer back to the school text genres and the (oral and written) exegetical culture of the philosophical classes.

Still, the text genre of the philosophical *vita* and narratives on philosophers opens up other options for the placement of the Iamblichean tradition: Damascius uses the name and ancestry of Iamblichus to support the idea of a laboratory of philosophy that is performed beyond and independent of the teaching of the logical techniques. He establishes a new form of Iamblichean teaching and studying that dedicates itself to the study of the Platonic forms alone. It is thereby intended and presented as a free place beyond the formal requirements

²³All translations of the *Vita Isidori* are taken from P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*. In some cases I have slightly adapted her translation.

²⁴Cf. Isid. 97 H-I: ὁ δὲ Μαρῖνος τῷ ἀτόνῳ τῆς φύσεως οὐδὲ τοῦ Παρμενίδου τὴν ὑπεραίρουσαν ἐξήγησιν τοῦ διδασκάλου ἤνεγκεν, ἐπὶ τὰ εἶδη δὲ τὴν θεωρίαν κατήγαγεν ἀπὸ τῶν ὑπερουσίῳν ἐνάδων, ταῖς Φέρμου καὶ Γαληνοῦ τὸ πλεόν ἐννοίαις ἐπισπώμενος ἢ ταῖς ἀκηράτοις ἐπιβολαῖς τῶν μακαρίων ἀνδρῶν (“Because of his dull nature, Marinus could not sustain his teacher’s exalted interpretation of the *Parmenides*, but dragged down the inquiry from the transcendent henads to species, following for the most part the theories of Firmus and Galen rather than the undefiled approaches of the blissful men.”). In his commentaries on the *Parmenides* he only once refers to Marinus, and he does so in a positive way: in Prm. 294,13-15.

of philosophical teaching and as the result of a specifically individual decision in favor of a truly philosophical life.

In the *Vita Isidori* Iamblichus is exclusively present as the intellectual ancestor of Isidorus: 34a (cf. 98c). It is emphasized that the foundation of Isidorus' philosophical life is the choice of a specific and exclusive (Athenian) intellectual ancestry that goes back from Proclus to Syrianus, to Iamblichus, and finally to Plato himself,²⁵ – a choice that was to some degree hazardous, since Iamblichus' approach to Plato was not uncontroversial: some just could not follow his lofty thoughts, while others suspected his *theoriai* to be mere rhetorically skilled verbal jingles.²⁶

In the *Vita Isidori* we find several hints that are subversively in favor of this special, suprarational discourse that Damascius elegantly links with the Athenian tradition.²⁷ This is particularly evident in the – remarkable – narrative on Hierocles, who studied under Plutarch of Athens before moving to Alexandria and whom we know from his commentary on the Golden Verses, an influential document of the Pythagorean tradition. Damascius introduces him as “Alexandria’s ornament” whose higher level of thought was happily connected with an outstanding ability in speech and constituted an astonishingly great breadth of mind (διάνοια). Once, a pupil of his, Theosebius, wrote down his lecture on Plato’s *Gorgias*. Later, he compared it to the commentary that he wrote down from another lecture by Hierocles and recognized that they differed in almost every respect, but both produced the meaning of Plato’s text in the best possible way.²⁸

²⁵Isid. 34d (Suda IV 479, 2; 274, 11; 463, 9, s. vv.: προσεῖχε δὲ τὸν νοῦν ἐς τὰ μάλιστα μετὰ Πλάτωνα τῷ Ἰαμβλίχῳ, καὶ τοῖς Ἰαμβλίχου φίλοις δὴ καὶ ὀπαδοῖς. ὧν ἄριστον εἶναι διίσχυρίζετο τὸν ἑαυτοῦ πολίτην Συριανόν, τὸν Πρόκλου διδάσκαλον. (“After Plato he particularly devoted himself to Iamblichus and his friends and adepts, the best of whom he claimed was his own fellow-citizen Syrianus, the teacher of Proclus.”) = part of Isid. 34d (Athn.))

²⁶Isid. 34b.

²⁷Isid. 85a: Asclepiodotus is said of having not been capable of Plato’s lofty thoughts; 97i Marinus drags down the interpretation of the *Parmenides* to a lower level; 46d: Theosebius.

²⁸Isid. 45a: οὗτός [Ἰεροκλῆς] ποτε τὸν Πλάτωνος Γοργίαν τοῖς ἐταίροις ἐξηγεῖτο εἷς δὲ τις τῶν ἀκροατῶν, Θεοσέβιος, ἀπεγράψατο τὴν ἐξήγησιν. πάλιν δ', οἷα εἰκόσ, ἐκ δευτέρου τοῦ Ἰεροκλέους εἰς τὸν Γοργίαν καταβαλλομένου μετὰ τινά χρόνον τὴν ἐξήγησιν ὁ αὐτὸς ταύτην ἀπεγράψατο, καὶ ἀντιπαραβαλὼν τὰ πρότερα καὶ τὰ ὕστερα εὔρεν οὐδὲν τῶν αὐτῶν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, ἐκότερα δὲ ὅμως, ὃ καὶ παράλογον ἀκοῦσαι, τῆς Πλάτωνος ἐχόμενα καθ' ὅσον οἶόν τε προαιρέσεως. τούτῳ μὲν οὖν ἐπιδείκνυται τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἡλίκων ἦν ἄρα τὸ τῶν φρενῶν πέλαγος. (“On one occasion he was expounding to his students Plato’s *Gorgias*, and one of his pupils – Theosebius – wrote down his commentary. As was natural, some time later Hierocles again gave a class on the *Gorgias*; the same pupil took down the commentary and comparing his previous notes with the ones taken later he found almost nothing the same, though both versions – extraordinary though this may sound – reproduced Plato’s meaning to the extent that this is possible. This indicates how broad was the ocean of his mind.”)

From this narrative we learn about the variations of different lectures by the same teacher that occur in the course of time, although one has to carefully consider that Damascius is aiming to astonish the reader at the unexpected difference and the possibility of the validity of different interpretations. However, the narrative also visualizes something else: it illustrates the suprarational level of thinking that Hierocles performed: instead of mutually exclusive alternatives of meaning through rational concepts, Hierocles developed meanings that coincide and add up on an intellectual level beyond rational discourse. Subtly, Damascius calls him the ornament of Alexandria, suggesting that his “great ocean of intellect” is an exceptional case among all the rational technicalities of logical classes in Alexandria.²⁹

3 Alternative curricula – the role of “logical technicalities” in philosophical studies

In his first introduction of Isidore Damascius adds a comparison and contextualization of his teacher that, as Polymnia Athanassiadi has pointed out,³⁰ is significant for his following narratives, which intend to formulate/perform a “criticism of current opinion on the ideal philosopher”³¹:

ὡς ἔγωγε ἐνίοις ἤδη περιτετύχηκα τὰ μὲν ἔξω φιλοσοφοῦσι λαμπρῶς ἐν τε μνήμῃ βαθείᾳ πολλῶν δοξασμάτων καὶ ἐν ἀγχιστρόφῳ δεινότητι συλλογισμῶν ἀπεράντων καὶ ἐν δυνάμει συχνῇ δαιμονίας αἰσθήσεως, εἴσω δὲ τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀποροῦσι καὶ πενομένοις ἀληθοῦς ἐπιστήμης. (Isid. 14, 8-12)

“I have indeed chanced upon some who are outwardly splendid philosophers in their rich memory of a multitude of theories; in the shrewd flexibility of their countless syllogisms; in the constant power of their extraordinary perceptiveness. Yet within they are poor in matters of the soul and destitute of true knowledge.”

Athanassiadi’s observation needs to be carried further in order to explain the specific agenda that Damascius puts into practice and the impact of the narrative strategies: A second significant testimony in the *Vita Isidori* illustrates the preference for pathways to philosophy that lead beyond traditional training classes and thereby help to contextualize also the role of the propaedeutic technical philosophical studies as the underlying Iamblichean subdiscourse:

²⁹Cf. Isid. 111 (S. 266, 19-23); 35a; 37e.

³⁰Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Persecution and Response in Late Paganism*, in: JHS 113, 1993, 1-29, 2.

³¹*ibid.*

οὐκ ἤβούλετο συλλογισμοῖς ἀναγκάζειν μόνον οὔτε ἑαυτὸν οὔτε τοὺς συνόντας ἐπακολουθεῖν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ μὴ ὁρωμένῃ, κατὰ μίαν ὁδὸν πορεύεσθαι συνελαινομένους ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου, οἷον τυφλοὺς τὴν ὀρθὴν ἀγομένους πορείαν (Isid. 38)
“He did not want to force either himself or his students to uncover the invisible truth only through syllogisms, to pursue one way alone, rounded up by logic, as blinds that are guided on the right path.”

Emphasis is laid on the alleged claim of exclusiveness that is connected with the traditional higher education that starts with the studies of the organon, the formal instruments of rational thinking. Damascius insinuates here that such an exclusiveness reduces or impedes individuality and autonomy in the acquisition of knowledge. In his (Platonic) school commentaries he nevertheless builds on the traditional logical training methods and uses them widely for his own exegeses of the text.

This discrepancy becomes even more significant if we compare the *Vita Isidori* with the text most akin to it, the *Vita Procli*³² written by Isidorus' predecessor Marinus. In Marinus' eulogy on Proclus there is no comparable bypassing of the preparatory logic classes. Marinus reports that Proclus after having achieved theoretical virtue “no longer gained knowledge discursively and by acts of apodeictic reasoning” (VP 22,9-11), but only stuck to the strict anagogical structure of the *Vita Procli* which he derived from the Neoplatonic scale of virtues. On this level of perfection Proclus can act without rational thinking on the higher level of intellective simplicity and immediate grasping of intelligibles. However, by confirming this perfection Marinus does not show his pupils alternative models of knowledge acquisition but illustrates mental activities that are – in respect to the progression of learning – later than the logical skills for scientific proofs. On the contrary, in Marinus' narrative the traditional steps towards philosophical perfection are taken for granted and never rendered moot.

What is most striking in Damascius' narrative is that there is – as far as we can judge from the remaining text passages and their assumed composition – no such thing as a strictly pursued anagogical structure similar to that in Marinus' text. Even though, as Dominic O'Meara has shown convincingly,³³ the Neoplatonic scale of virtue is an underlying structure for the multiple life stories of Platonists in the *Vita Isidori*, this theme is not dominant and it is not the universal structuring principle of the main narrative. Damascius emphasizes the multiplicity of pathways to knowledge and the philosopher's wisdom. At the same time he configures Isidore as a new kind of teacher, who does not force anybody into the nar-

³²Marinus' *Vita Procli* is cited according to the edition of Henri D. Saffrey and Alain-Philippe Segonds eds., *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*, Paris 2001 (Les Belles Lettres).

³³Dominic O'Meara, *Patterns of Perfection in Damascius' Life of Isidore*, in: *Phronesis* 51, 2006, 74–89, esp. 88.

row framework of a given learning frame but wants to free his own mind and that of his followers. Edward Watts has shown convincingly how the very emphasis on deficiencies in discursive and imaginative abilities helped to present Isidore (and others) as real philosophers who transcend the level of rational thought.³⁴ Yet this affirmative judgement fulfills another function, too: it establishes the ambitious and innovative image of a new kind of teacher, a teacher who goes beyond the limits of traditional education.

Damascius therefore not only performs a counter narrative to Marinus' Proclean story but also configures a new idea of multiple educational paths to philosophical wisdom, in which the traditional education is marked as onesided and not sufficient to support inner improvement inside the (rational) soul:

ὅτι καὶ τῶν βιβλίων τὸν ὄμαδον παρηγεῖτο, πολυδοξίας μᾶλλον αἴτιον ὄντα ἢ πολυνοίας. ἐνὶ δὲ μόνῳ τῷ διδασκάλῳ ἐπαναπαυόμενος πρὸς μόνον ἐκεῖνον ἀπετύπου ἑαυτὸν, τὰ παρ' αὐτοῦ λεγόμενα ἀπογραφόμενος. (Isid. 35a)

“He [sc. Isidore] did not care about the noise of the books that causes a plurality of opinions rather than a multiple knowledge. He has entrusted himself to one teacher alone, he shaped himself by imitating him.”

Clearly, the use of an acoustic metaphor is significant: Damascius thereby illustrates the defectiveness of book knowledge and traditional commentary practices. Books make noise because in antiquity they are – usually – read aloud.³⁵

In the text just quoted the juxtaposition of “noise” and “polydoxia” also induces the meaning of the discord of opinion: Books are even louder if they are discussed controversially in the classrooms and over a long period of time spelled out by a many-voiced chain of interpreters. The Greek “ὄμαδον” supports this association for it can have the meaning “(noisy) confusion” and “chaos”, in some cases in connection with military actions and involvement,³⁶ but also with the clattering of voices in a crowd.³⁷ Plato uses the conjunction of books and noise also with a critical tone.³⁸ Damascius enriches this image by the emphasis of plurality and discord with perceptible noise and disorder.

However, books are – in Damascius' narrative – also noisy in the sense that can be contrasted to real inner and self-reflexive knowledge. Book knowledge

³⁴Edward Watts, *Damascius' Isidore: A Perfectly Imperfect Philosophical Exemplar*, in: *Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia* 7, 2014, 159–168.

³⁵Cf. W.A. Johnson, *Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity*, in: *American Journal of Philology* 121, 2000, 593–627. Johnson argues rightly for a sociological contextualization of each source on reading practices in antiquity.

³⁶Il. 7, 307.

³⁷Hom. Il. 23.234; Od. 10.556 ; much cited in ancient scholia in Homer is θαύμαζεν πῦρὰ πολλὰ τὰ καίετο Ἰλιόθι πρὸ αὐλῶν συρίγγων τ' ἐνοπήν ὄμαδόν τ' ἀνθρώπων (Il. 10,12f.).

³⁸R.364e-365a.

tends to remain the knowledge of others and therefore outside the inner self of the student and does not support him in his struggle for inner noetic wisdom.

This intention becomes obvious in two other related passages on Isidore:

ῥητορικῆς καὶ ποιητικῆς πολυμαθίας μικρὰ ἤψατο, εἰς δὲ τὴν θειοτέραν φιλοσοφίαν ἐξώρμησε τὴν Ἀριστοτέλους. ὁρῶν δὲ ταύτην τῷ ἀναγκαίῳ μᾶλλον ἢ τῷ οἰκείῳ νῶ πιστεύουσαν, καὶ τεχνικὴν μὲν ἱκανῶς εἶναι σπουδάζουσαν, τὸ δὲ ἔνθεον ἢ νοερόν οὐ πάνυ προβαλλομένην, ὀλίγον καὶ ταύτης ὁ Ἰσίδωρος ἐποίησατο λόγον. ὡς δὲ τῶν Πλάτωνος ἐγεύσατο νοημάτων, οὐκέτι παπταίνειν ἡξίου πόρσιον, ὡς ἔφη Πίνδαρος (Olymp. 1, 114), ἀλλὰ τέλος ἔχειν ἤλπιδεν, εἰ τῆς Πλάτωνος διανοίας εἶσω τῶν ἀδύτων δυνηθεῖ διαβαλεῖν, καὶ πρὸς τοῦτο ὁ πᾶς αὐτῷ δρόμος ἐτέτατο τῆς σπουδῆς. (Isid. 34d)

“He spent little time on rhetorical and poetical erudition, throwing himself into the more divine philosophy of Aristotle. Yet seeing that it too relied on the minimal rather than the essential qualities of the mind, striving to be rather technical and scarcely propagating the divine and the spiritual, Isidore thought little of this as well. But hardly had he touched on the teaching of Plato “than he felt that he did not have to search any further”, as Pindar says, considering that he would reach his goal if he could penetrate into the shrine of Plato’s thought, and it was this end to which the course of all his efforts was directed.”

But not only the technicalities of Aristotelian philosophy failed to satisfy Isidore’s pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. He also did not gain improvement by reading and listening to the books and inquiries of others:

ἦν δὲ καὶ εὐρετῆς ἐτοιμότητος ὧν τε αὐτὸς ἠπόρει πρὸς ἑτέρους καὶ ὧν ἕτεροι πρὸς αὐτόν, οὐ πολυμαθία καὶ ἀλλοτρίων δοξασμάτων ἱστορία καταχωννύς μὲν τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ ἀποκρύπτων, ἐπιστομίζων δὲ τοὺς ἀποροῦντας. οὐδὲ ἦν τῶν βιβλίων πολυήκοος, ἀλλὰ ῥώμη γενναίας φύσεως καὶ θεῶν ἀγχισπόρου ἐν ταῖς ἐξηγήσεσιν ἦν θαυμάσιος. πόθῳ τε ἀμηχάνῳ τῆς περὶ τὸ θεῖον βακχείας οἷον ἀπομαντευομένῳ ἐώκει τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας εὔρεσιν. (Isid. 37e)³⁹

“He was also very inventive both in proposing questions for discussion and in solving the problems that others put forward to him, not using mere erudition and the relating of other people’s opinions to bury and conceal the truth and to silence his questioners. Nor had he read many books, but he was remarkable in his expositions through the power of a nature which was noble and akin to the gods. In his infinite rapture of his yearning after God he resembled a seer who divined the finding of the truth.”

Again, we find the acoustic wording with the double meaning that Isidore did not often listen to books when they were read out or when he read them aloud,

³⁹Athanassiadi’s translation was slightly changed by the author [GU]; vgl. E80 Zintzen (Epitoma Photiana 243)= Athanssiadi: 35b.

and the second meaning that he was not submissive in respect to book knowledge. The second meaning explores the sensual impression and reflects it in the reservation against the impact that books might have on inner ascents. Books are *only* loud and not fit to find their way into one's inner mind. To be sure, Damascius plays with the book as material object, the reading practices and the (recognizable) content of books. And we have to ask what provoked Damascius' reservation in this particular context?

For Damascius' negative characterization is astonishing in many senses: In the commentary tradition that was practiced in the Neoplatonic schools in antiquity reading and re-reading, listening to the teacher who reports and comments on earlier commentators, repetition of insights of others formed the basis of the higher philosophical education. These practices were meant to lead the students to a self-determined and autonomous learning and acquisition of knowledge. The very practice of reading and commenting anew upon texts was meant to be itself philosophy and by its very doing a step towards wisdom. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the narrative of a philosophical vita requires another attitude towards book knowledge and these commentary practices.

This becomes very clear in the narrative of Marinus' *Vita Procli*, a text in which at the higher levels of education reading and commenting are the most prominent practices of learning and philosophical improvement. Proclus is said to have made his first steps towards self-governed research by reading and interpreting Plato's *Phaedo* together with his teacher Plutarch of Athens the product of which would be called the *Commentary on the Phaedo* by Proclus.⁴⁰ His later teacher, Syrianus, took him all through the writings of Aristotle while using them as a preparatory practice for the reading of Plato's dialogues. He did so appropriately and "according to the right order" (ἐν τῷ ὀρθῷ) of knowledge acquisition. It is not a question of alternative paths but a question of order and ascent. Writings of the ancient and former commentators also play an important role in the theological studies that Proclus performed: Marinus tells us that Proclus ran through all the treatises of the ancient and distinguished between those insights and sayings that were true and useful and those that were not.⁴¹

This is marked as an essentially literary practice, especially by the reference that Marinus inserts. He implicitly refers to the famous narrative from the Callimachean Hymn to Apollo where Apollo kicks Envy (Phthonos), disagreeing with his poetics. Callimachus' poetic first person narrator of the hymn reflects this burlesque scene and wishes Blame (Momos) where Envy (Phthonos) has been sent by Apollo.⁴² When Damascius uses the same reference and does so even more

⁴⁰V.P. 12.10.9-15.

⁴¹V.P. 22.15-28.

⁴²Call. H.Ap.105-113.

explicitly than Marinus it is probable that he is thereby entangling the Hellenistic literary text with Marinus' philosophers' narrative.

It is Ammonius' father Hermeias whom Damascius involves in this inter-textual movement: Hermeias, after studying under Syrianus and together with Proclus moving to Alexandria, became an important teacher in the Alexandrian philosophical teaching institutions. As Edward Watts has argued for Isidore⁴³ the deficiencies that Damascius lists in Hermeias' characterization are not meant in the first place to diminish the influence or importance of Hermeias' teaching but to profile a different kind of ideal teacher: someone who is not above all perfect in the techniques of logic and rational argument but who excels in virtue. On the other hand Damascius' picture of Hermeias is rather complex since his deficiencies in rational argumentation are accompanied by a preference for book knowledge that he memorized exceedingly well. Here, Callimachus' Phthonos and Momos come into play: If one remembers the decidedly negative attitude towards these figurations it has a certain air of irony when Damascius argues that not even Momos and Phthonos would take offence at him/his virtues.

φιλοπονία μὲν οὗτος οὐδενὸς ἦν δεύτερος, ἀγχίνους δὲ οὔτι σφόδρα ἦν οὐδὲ λόγων εὐρετῆς ἀποδεικτικῶν, οὐδὲ γενναῖος ἄρα ζητητῆς ἀληθείας οὐκ οὐκ οὔδ' οἶός τε ἐγεγόνει πρὸς ἀποροῦντας κατὰ τὸ καρτερόν ἀνταγωνίζεσθαι, καίτοι ἐμέμνητο ὡς εἶπεῖν πάντων ὧν τε ἀκηρόει τοῦ διδασκάλου ἐξηγουμένου καὶ τῶν ἐν βιβλίοις ἀναγεγραμμένων. ἀλλὰ τὸ αὐτοκίνητον οὐ προσήνθει τῇ πολυμαθείᾳ. ἦν γὰρ τὰ μὲν περὶ λόγους ἐνδεέστερος ἢ κατὰ τὴν ἀκρίβειαν, τὰ δὲ πρὸς ἀρετὴν εὖ ἡσχημένος, ὥστε μὴδ' ἂν τὸν Μῶμον αὐτὸν ἐπιμωμήσασθαι, μὴδ' αὖ μισῆσαι τὸν Φθόνον (Isid. 54, 16-19)

"He was more deficient in his ability to argue than in accuracy, but was so well exercised in virtue that not even Momos (Blame) himself would have found fault with him or Phthonos (Envy) taken an aversion to him. Such was his gentleness and sense of justice."

Hermeias does not function as a paradigm for the new teacher and the alternative way to wisdom, but his characterization is partly akin to the new paths that Damascius wants to promote.

The preference for moral rather than academic excellence is here entangled with the reservation against book knowledge which elsewhere is also assumed to remain at the outside of the inner self and not to affect the moral excellence of a person. That becomes obvious in the scattered remarks on Ammonius the son of Hermeias, whom Damascius despite his being one of the most prominent teachers in Alexandria in the 5th century does not grant a proper narrative but only hints at him twice: In the first context his outstanding merits as a commentator

⁴³Edward Watts, Damascius' Isidore: A Perfectly Imperfect Philosophical Exemplar, cf. 160-163.

are mentioned and even praised.⁴⁴

ὁ δὲ Ἀμμώνιος αἰσχροκερδῆς ὢν καὶ πάντα ὄρων εἰς χρηματισμὸν ὄντιναοῦν,
ὁμολογίας τίθεται πρὸς τὸν ἐπισκοποῦντα τὸ τηνικαῦτα τὴν κρατοῦσαν δόξαν.
(Isid. 118b)

“Ammonius, who was sordidly greedy and saw everything in terms of profit of any kind, came to an agreement with the then overseer of the prevailing doctrine.”

This characterization has been much discussed against the backdrop of tensions between Christians and pagans in the 480s in the course of the restitution of pagan school institutions in Alexandria. Whereas most other protagonists of the intellectual elite, such as Isidore, Horapollo, Asclepiodotus und Heraiscus had to flee from Alexandria, Ammonius came to terms with the Christian elite, namely the Christian Bishop Peter Mongus.⁴⁵ But another perspective has to be considered, too. The passing mention is part of the discursive strategies of the *Vita Isidori* and the “Republic of virtues” that Damascius thereby conceptualizes. In this Republic of people who struggle for virtue and philosophical wisdom Ammonius’ stock as a philosopher is not favorable. It is therefore nothing but consistent that Ammonius is almost banished from the narratives on Platonic lives. That opens up a gap in the narrative that should have been filled by the actions of one of the leaders of higher pagan education. It is precisely Damascius’ narrative strategy that reveals Ammonius’ failing.

In the network of the narratives on protagonists who succeeded in the ascent to philosophical perfection and on those who failed, Ammonius’ failure leads to an explanation. There are other cases in which the excellence in (Aristotelian) logic and sciences is especially emphasized while the outcome of this education and perfection is a lack of real philosophical practice. Among these cases is Marinus, successor of Proclus and *diadochos* of the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens: the narratives of his deficiencies shed light on the practices of knowledge acquisition beyond the individual case.

τὰ ἀρέσκοντα τοῖς ἐξηγηταῖς ἀπεγράφετο μάλα ἀκριβῶς, εἰς τὸ τῆς λήθης γῆρας,
ὡς ἔφη Πλάτων, ὑπομνήματα καταλείπων ἑαυτῷ καὶ ἀποθησαυριζόμενος.

⁴⁴ὅτι ὁ Ἀμμώνιος φιλοπονώτατος γέγονε, καὶ πλείστους ὠφέλησε τῶν πώποτε γεγενημένων ἐξηγητῶν μᾶλλον δὲ τὰ Ἀριστοτέλους ἐξήσκητο. ἔτι δὲ διήνεγκεν οὐ τῶν καθ’ ἑαυτὸν μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων τοῦ Πρόκλου ἑταίρων, ὀλίγου δὲ ἀποδέω καὶ τῶν πώποτε γεγενημένων εἰπεῖν, τὰ ἀμφὶ γεωμετρίαν τε καὶ ἀστρονομίαν. (“Ammonius was an extremely hard worker who made the greatest contribution of all commentators who ever lived. He was really an expert on Aristotle. In geometry and astronomy he distinguished himself among not only his contemporaries but also his seniors in Proclus’ classes; indeed I would almost say that in these subjects he surpassed the men of all ages.”) (Isid. 57c)

⁴⁵Edward Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, Berkeley, 2006, 222-230.

ὁ δὲ Μαρῖνος τῶ ἀτόνω τῆς φύσεως οὐδὲ τοῦ Παρμενίδου τὴν ὑπεραίρουσαν ἐξήγησιν τοῦ διδασκάλου ἤνεγκεν, ἐπὶ τὰ εἶδη δὲ τὴν θεωρίαν κατήγαγεν ἀπὸ τῶν ὑπερουσίων ἐνάδων, ταῖς Φίρμου καὶ Γαληνοῦ τὸ πλεον ἐννοίας ἐπισπώμενος ἢ ταῖς ἀκηράτοις ἐπιβολαῖς τῶν μακαρίων ἀνδρῶν (Isid. 97 H-I)

“He copied the selections made by the commentators with extreme meticulousness leaving a store of reminders for himself, as Plato said, with a view to the forgetfulness of old age.

Because of his dull nature, Marinus could not sustain his teacher’s exalted interpretation of the *Parmenides*, but dragged down the inquiry from the transcendent henads to species, following for the most part the theories of Firmus and Galen rather than the undefiled intuition of the blissful men.”

The thereby established image is different from that of Ammonius. However, while Damascius does not argue for a causal relation between Marinus’ excessively diligent reading and copying of the commentators’ exegeses on the one hand and his failing to understand intellectually and perform Proclus’ higher interpretation of Plato’s *Parmenides* on the other, both practices are entangled with each other. Both result from philosophical practices that fail to reach the intellectual level. That leads to both conceptual and exegetical failure and moral imperfection.

It is significant that Damascius quotes a passage from the famous critique of writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (Phdr. 276d). The quotation itself comes from a passage where Socrates affirmatively describes a second best way to preserve knowledge, i.e. second after the dialectical logos inside the mind. Instead of overstating the value and capacity of writing one should assign the written word only secondary, auxiliary functions such as to be a back-up for old age’s forgetfulness. The Greek word *hypomnema* means “aid to memory” in Socrates’ argument in the *Phaedrus*. When Damascius describes Marinus’ learning practice as “all too precise/diligently” the reference to the critique of writing as a whole seems to be the foil for the characterization of Marinus: it is a secondary kind of gaining knowledge if one depends and relies primarily on the insights of others (Galen and Firmus) that are written down and can only be studied in written form. In the case of the exegesis of the *Parmenides* Marinus followed the wrong path even though he could have had access to an immediate oral studying and learning from holy men.

In Damascius the semantic spectrum of *hypomnema* is, at least subliminally, widened, since in the context of philosophical school literature and practices *hypomnema*⁴⁶ is normally terminologically used for independent written com-

⁴⁶Cf. A. J. Festugiere, *Modes de Composition des Commentaires de Proclus*, in: *Museum Helveticum* 20, 1963, 77-100; Marcel Richard, *Apo phones*, in: *Byzantion* 20, 1950, 191-222.

mentaries.⁴⁷ Therefore, the famous passage from the *Phaedrus* is confronted and entangled with contemporary school practices and with Damascius' crusade against the noise of the books, while – as far as we can tell today – in the commentaries on Plato's *Phaedrus* the critique of writing was not used for reflections on the traditional methods of learning and teaching.

Damascius intensifies these reflections in his narratives of the *Vita Isidori* by telling stories about the sage Sarapio, who is said to have honored Isidore by being his teacher, and his reservation against the possession (and use) of books. From the beginning Sarapio is introduced as an – as it were – secret sage, a man who even though he lived an urban life eschewed the public and tended as much as possible to a divine life, freeing himself from the bonds of the body and the bodily and social life. Damascius takes this tendency as an explanation for his abstinence from the “technicalities of philosophy”, i.e. the logical practices of Aristotelian school studies. Instead, he directly immersed himself in the *theoria* of godlike concepts.⁴⁸

He is also said to have possessed only two or three books, among which was the Orphic poetry – the only material thing (*οὐσίαν*) that he bequeathed to somebody.⁴⁹ In this narrative the materiality of books is highlighted. For Sarapio it is only the holiness of the Orphic poetry that makes it acceptable to deal with these material objects, i.e. objects the materiality of which is alleviated by the very content of the books. When Damascius mentions the two or three books for a second time and talks about them as the only material heritage of Sarapio, books are implicitly considered to be of hybrid nature between materiality and immateriality. This hybridity is also expressed by the “noise of the books” but with a very different meaning, since in this case the material phenomenon reflects the (challenged) content which involves the student in an ongoing process of shallowness that never even comes close to the perfection of the philosopher's mind.

4 Analysis of narrative strategies arguing against other conventional approaches to philosophy

Especially when Damascius contrasts Sarapio with a figure who only appeared to have been wise, i.e. the poet and grammarian Pamprepius, the entanglement of merely pretended knowledge and wisdom with preliminary learning (of grammar

⁴⁷Interestingly, Hermeias in his commentary on the *Phaedrus* does not reflect on the semantics of “hypomnema” in the lemmata to Phdr 276c-d.

⁴⁸Isid. 111. 19-22.

⁴⁹Isid. 111 29f. and 41f.

and rhetoric), and real true wisdom with inner reflections without technical erudition, is pivotal here:⁵⁰ We are unusually well informed about Pamprepius' life and fate and the role he played in the pagan persecutions of the 480s in Alexandria.⁵¹ After Asclepiodotus he is the second prominent pagan protagonist whose narrative Damascius designs in such a way as to uncover the invalidity of his claim to intellectual or even philosophical excellence. In the case of Pamprepius Damascius makes it explicit that his wickedness does not need to be uncovered since it has become obvious to everyone.⁵²

Pamprepius had been a loud character indeed. His ability to deceive by the very power of (the perceptual aspect of) speech is highlighted by Damascius.⁵³ Photius does not cite but summarizes Damascius' accounts of Pamprepius' ability to tell miraculous stories; he cites one story, however, that illustrates the contrast between true philosophy and mere (sophistic) illusion and simulation of knowledge:⁵⁴ One time as Pamprepius' later patron Illus wished to listen to a philosophical discussion on the soul that developed into confusion and dissent,⁵⁵ Pamprepius entered the stage and delivered a previously prepared speech that was "well ordered" on the linguistic and rhetorical surface but lacked proper knowledge. However, Illus was impressed and deceived – "an ignorant by the ignorant" – and started to support Pamprepius in his teaching activities (as a grammarian) in Constantinople. Damascius deliberately uses a quotation from Plato's *Gorgias* (Grg. 469b)⁵⁶ in order to underline the dichotomy of true and seemingly true knowledge.

The Platonic passage and its concrete context (in the dialogue between Socrates and his first interlocutor, the rhetorician *Gorgias*) refer to the rhetorical background of the grammarian Pamprepius and the need for the poet/rhetorician to acquire real knowledge about his objects instead of only applying rhetorical techniques, which recalls and reflects Damascius' reservation towards the mere

⁵⁰Isid. 112.

⁵¹Cf. Enrico Livrea, *The Last Pagan at the Court of Zeno: Poetry and Politics of Pamprepius of Panopolis*, in: Ana de Francisco Heredero, David Hernández de la Fuente and Susana Torres Prieto eds., *New Perspectives on Late Antiquity in the Eastern Roman Empire*, Cambridge 2014, 2–30, 7ff. and P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, 269, Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Persecution and Response in Late Paganism*, 19.

⁵²Isid. 77; 112A. cf. *Vita Severi* (ed. Kugener, p. 40.) (Marc-Antoine Kugener, *Vie de Sévère par Zacharie le Scholastique*, Paris 1903 (repr. Brepols 1971) (*Patrologia Orientalis* 2).

⁵³77D.

⁵⁴Isid, 77D.

⁵⁵There is no indication that this event could be connected to the scholarly commentary practices of the Neoplatonic academy in Athens out of which Marinus has prepared a commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* (Enrico Livrea, *The Last Pagan at the Court of Zeno: Poetry and Politics of Pamprepius of Panopolis*, 8).

⁵⁶Cf. Athanassiadi (P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, 199) refers to Grg. 469d but actually the point of the reference is rather 496b.

technicalities of philosophical/logical studies⁵⁷ that are not by themselves concerned with the intellectual objects. By this Damascius succeeds in connecting the alleged superficiality of the grammarian and rhetorician Pamprepicus with logical (Aristotelian) studies. The narrative about topical limitations of rhetoric and linguistic studies is transferred into another context, because the claim for validity of the propaedeutic elementary classes as a whole is called into question.

But there is more: the discussion setting recalls the Platonic *Phaedrus* in which Socrates analytically takes apart a speech that was originally delivered by the famous rhetorician Lysias, a speech that in Socrates' words only pretends to be something real without saying anything sound (Phdr. 243a). Both dialogues, *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, clarify from a different perspective and with a different scope the relationship and fields of expertise of rhetoric and philosophy. Both claim the primacy of philosophy.

Polymnia Athanassiadi has suggested that we should understand the whole *Vita Isidori* as a fundamental critique of the basic role of rhetoric in the educational process.⁵⁸ There are biographical grounds in favor of this thesis: Damascius tells in an autobiographic conversion story how – after a nine year long period at Horapollo's school of rhetoric – he had gained the insight that rhetorical skills do not suffice for the education and formation of the inner self.⁵⁹ However, Horapollo's school played a decisive role in the religious riots in Alexandria in the 480s. The Christian and pagan pupils received tuition not only in grammar⁶⁰ and rhetoric but were taught philosophical issues, too. Since this also included pagan religious practices⁶¹ and Horapollo's school has gained such prominence, it became one of the maior targets of the furore of Christian sects and fell victim to persecution. The experience of persecution, torture and exile remains an important subtext for Damascius stories about the fate of late antique Platonism in the *Vita Isidori*.⁶²

Considering this constellation we do not merely have the simple well known quarrel between Rhetorics and Philosophy nor only another example of the topical narrative about the conversion to philosophy, which we also find in Marinus' *Vita Procli*. There, having emphasized the natural talent for rhetorical exercises (VP 8, 25-31) and his eagerness for continuous studies, Marinus introduces the

⁵⁷Cf. Isid. 111, S. 266, 20.

⁵⁸P. Athanassiadi, Damascius. *The Philosophical History: Text with Translation and Notes*, 41f. (Polymnia Athanassiadi, Damascius. *The Philosophical History*. Athens: Apamea Cultural Association, 1999)

⁵⁹Isid. 122b and cf. also 124.

⁶⁰Zacharias Scholasticus, VS 15, Isid. 120b.

⁶¹Since some of Horapollo's Christian pupils converted to the pagan religion, Zacharias Scholastikos calls Horapollo "Psychapollo", i.e. destroyer of souls: *Vita Severi* (=VS) 32.

⁶²Polymnia Athanassiadi has written an important paper on the subject: Polymnia Athanassiadi, *Persecution and Response in Late Paganism*.

socratic element of a divine daimonion that prevents actions that are not for a person's best. In this case the Socratic-Proclean daimonion prevents Proclus from undertaking a journey to Constantinople for further studies in rhetoric and induces in him the desire for philosophy and for studies in Athens.⁶³ Proclus obeys and abandons his rhetorical studies in order to take part in the philosophical "synousiai" in Athens,⁶⁴ where in accordance with the traditional curriculum he started propaedeutic Aristotelian studies,⁶⁵ which he later – again in accordance with the accustomed path of education – left behind, although the preparatory status of logical training and Aristotelian natural sciences remains untouched.⁶⁶ In Marinus' narrative Proclus strictly follows the path of *anagoge* in which the latter stage presupposes the former. The different stages are clearly distinct from each other and there are no major institutional overlaps or outward circumstances that influenced the success of the ascent.

In contrast to this model Damascius' narrative illustrates the complex entanglement between political, religious and educational parameters. When Damascius tells the story about Illus and Pamprepus it is a story about the classic field of expertise of philosophy, which is occupied on this occasion by a poet⁶⁷ and rhetorician, it is also a story about the soul and the discord of different philosophical positions, it is a story about the phenomenon of the traveling teacher to whom Damascius' narrative implicitly denies the right to take part in the intellectual discussions in Athens and who delivered a speech about the soul in Constantinople that he brought along from abroad, and it is a story about the abuse of power when Illus installs Pamprepus as a publicly funded teacher in disregard of any expert opinion. In this entanglement of unstable political circumstances with philosophical issues it was possible for protagonists of the basic, propaedeutic disciplines to claim to have the same importance and autonomy as the final stage of Platonic intellectual knowledge and wisdom. That means: outside the philosophical classrooms and their (in a way) esoteric textual foundation, the philosophical lemma commentary, the appropriate path to the real philosophical state of mind and true wisdom had to be won back again and again.

The citations from and references to Plato serve the aim of organizing the different stages of philosophical education into a qualitative – so to speak – and exclusive hierarchy. Rhetoric is dependent on philosophical conceptual knowl-

⁶³Marin. VP 9, 6-11.

⁶⁴Marin. VP 9, 6-12-15.

⁶⁵Marin. VP 9, 15f.

⁶⁶Marin. VP 13,4-10. See also: Jaap Mansfeld ed., *Prolegomena: Questions to be settled before the study of an author or text*, Leiden 1998, id., *Prolegomena Mathematica: from Apollonius of Perge to late Neoplatonism*, Leiden 1998.

⁶⁷Concerning the connection between grammar and philosophy cf. Isid. 106b.

edge and has no right to claim further and autonomous validity. The stories Damascius tells about 5th-century Constantinople and Alexandria point out a new constellation in which one cannot be sure that long established and accepted hierarchical positions will not be questioned from the outside and for external reasons. In order to avoid such conflicts and loss of control Damascius opts for the text genre that includes not only scholarly aspects but also religious, cultural, political, social etc. perspectives and contexts, i.e. the (enriched) *vita*, for an alternative pathway to philosophy that is autonomous from other branches of knowledge and focuses directly on the high level of intellectual knowledge and wisdom.

It is therefore no immediate contradiction if he continues and promotes the traditional anagogical pathway in his school commentaries and lectures, for in the exclusive and safe zone for scholarly discussions there is no external aggressor who might question the exclusively conceptual argumentation in the order and systematic relations of sciences. That means that there is no reason to abandon or to bypass the clearly composed ascent to philosophical wisdom.

In the case of Asclepiodotus another local center for philosophical studies comes in this context into focus: Damascius reports how Asclepiodotus succeeded in establishing Aphrodisias as a center for religious practices, while denying him philosophical qualities of any kind whatsoever.⁶⁸ The narrative about Asclepiodotus as a whole is the subject of another paper, but the relation or disconnection, respectively, that Damascius establishes between the different branches of learning is crucial for the argument of this paper. Again, Damascius disjoins the anagogical unity of argumentation techniques – natural philosophy on the one hand, and first science or *theoria* of the intelligible in connection with higher wisdom on the other –, a unity that is presupposed in Neoplatonic school commentaries of the 5th and 6th century.⁶⁹ And he does so in respect to one of the protagonists of late antique platonism, i.e. Asclepiodotus who, although we do not have any writings from him, has left significant traces in the Platonic commentary tradition.

Damascius draws the picture of an overestimated intellectual who in fact did not meet the expectations of real philosophers and who excelled only in argumentation techniques, in the natural sciences that deal with the sensible world, and mathematics. It is a *topos* (at least) in the Athenian commentary tradition to identify the sensible world and natural philosophy as focus fields of expertise of Aristotelian thought⁷⁰, but it is also a *topos* that Aristotle is well aware of the need also to grasp noetic concepts.⁷¹

⁶⁸Isid. 85ff.

⁶⁹Cf. e.g. Syr. in Metaph.80,4-81,6.

⁷⁰Syrian.in Metaph. 80,4-16; Phlp. in de an. 95,29-35; 159,25-28.

⁷¹Phlp. in Cat. 50,23ff; Phlp. in APo 242,26-243,7; Phlp. in de an. 26,3-6.

By “Aristotelianising” Asclepiodotus, i.e. by apprehending him as an Aristotelian philosopher who is primarily involved in the acquisition of knowledge about the sensible world, Damascius goes so far as to claim that he has not only been occupied with the natural sciences but that he has also brought down disciplines and questions that should (in Damascius’ view) not be discussed in the context of the sensible world.⁷² Connected with this fundamental methodological failure is another flaw: Asclepiodotus is accused of sticking (unconditionally) to former authors and sages and harmonizing their doctrines in his “melting pot” of the lower physical level. Again, the ideas of the ancients that are handed down through books seem to prevent a philosopher from thinking without restrictions and from thinking “platonically” lofty thoughts. And again, the book knowledge comes under criticism, here with the special note that there is a closeness between book knowledge and the reduction of philosophical problems to the sensible world.

One narrative about Asclepiodotus is of special significance for Damascius’ method and scope: when Damascius describes Asclepiodotus’ struggle with a well known theoretical problem, the definition of the enharmonic scale, his narrative follows the path of Plato’s description of the Pythagorean mathematician and musician in the seventh book of the *Politeia*, a passage in which Plato develops the concept of the *communis mathematica scientia* and distinguishes his concept from empirical approaches to music and mathematics.⁷³

τὸ δὲ ἐναρμόνιον οὐχ εὔρε, καίτοι μαγάδας, ὡς ἔλεγεν, ὑπαλλάξας καὶ μεταθεὶς οὐκ ἐλάττους εἴκοσι καὶ διακοσίω. αἴτιον δὲ τῆς μὴ εὐρέσεως τὸ ἐλάχιστον μέτρον τῶν ἐναρμονίων διαστημάτων, ὅπερ δίεσιν ὀνομάζουσι. τοῦτο δὴ ἀπολωλὸς ἐκ τῆς ἡμετέρας αἰσθήσεως καὶ τὸ ἄλλο γένος τὸ ἐναρμόνιον προσαπώλεσεν. (Isid. 85b)
 “As for the enharmonic, he did not find it, though, as he used to say, he shifted the bridge along (the monochord) in no less than two hundred and twenty positions. The cause of his failure lies in the very small size of the intervals of the enharmonic scale which is known as diesis. The loss of this intervall from our perception has entailed the disappearance of the entire enharmonic scale, our ear being no longer trained to hear it.”

As in his narrative on Pamprepius Damascius uses Platonic text passages in order to deny Asclepiodotus’ excellence in Platonic sciences and methods, in this case

⁷²Isid. 85A.

⁷³Plat. R. 531a: καὶ περὶ ἀρμονίας ἕτερον τοιοῦτον ποιῶσι· τὰς γὰρ ἀκουόμενας αὐτῶν συμφωνίας καὶ φθόγγους ἀλλήλοις ἀναμετροῦντες ἀνήνυτα, ὥσπερ οἱ ἀστρονόμοι, πονοῦσιν. Νῆ τὸς θεούς, ἔφη, καὶ γελοίως γε, πυκνώματ’ ἅπτα ὀνομάζοντες καὶ παραβάλλοντες τὰ ὄτα, οἷον ἐκ γειτόνων φωνῆν θηρευόμενοι, οἱ μὲν φασιν ἔτι κατακοῦειν ἐν μέσῳ τινὰ ἤχην καὶ σμικρότατον εἶναι τοῦτο διάστημα, ᾧ μετρητέον, οἱ δὲ ἀμφισβητοῦντες ὡς ὅμοιον ἤδη φθεγγομένων, ἀμφοτέροι ὄτα τοῦ νοῦ προστησάμενοι.

from the Politeia. Damascius mocks the allegedly radical empirical approach Asclepiodotus is said to have performed. If then Damascius molds his narrative about Asclepiodotus' on this story about empirical mathematicians who are famously criticized by Plato's Socrates, this narrative functions as a harsh vilification of a person who claimed to be a Platonic philosopher, and lambasts him in a field where a Platonic philosopher is expected to excel.

In contrast to this picture, we find traces of Asclepiodotus' importance and reputation as a philosopher: Outstanding Platonists held him in high esteem, especially in respect of the science of the intelligible realm. Proclus even dedicated his commentary on the *Parmenides* to him:⁷⁴

Σὺ δὲ, ὦ φιλοσοφίας ἐπάξιον ἔχων τὸν νοῦν, καὶ ἐμοὶ φίλων φίλτατε, Ἄσκληπιόδοτε, δέχου τὰ δῶρα τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἐκείνου, τέλεα τελέως, ἐν γνησιωτάτοις κόλποις τῆς σαυτοῦ ψυχῆς.

“Thou, who hast an intellect worthy of philosophy, my dearest friend, Asclepiodotus, receive the gifts of that man, perfect in a perfect way, in the truest lab of thy soul.” (Procl. in Prm. 618,16-20)⁷⁵

He introduces this dedication as the conclusion of his opening prayer to the divine powers of intelligible entities for support in his difficult endeavor to ascend to the summit of the intelligible realm where the scopus of the dialogue is located. This context, of course, underlines the need for an outstanding intellectual mental capacity and praises the vicinity of Asclepiodotus' mind to the intellectual gods and daimones. The close friendship that Proclus expresses supports the impression that Asclepiodotus, far from being excluded from the inner circle of “real” Platonic philosophers, was felt by his leading contemporaries to be one of its centers.

Simplicius addresses him as the best of Proclus' students and remarks that he was fertile in new doctrines,⁷⁶ due to the excellence of his mind.⁷⁷ Olympiodorus calls him “the great Asclepiodotus, the philosopher” and refers to a commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*, which was read in the Neoplatonic schools together with the *Parmenides* as the summit of Platonic philosophy.⁷⁸

⁷⁴Procl. in Prm. 618,16-20.

⁷⁵Proclus' commentary in *Parmenidem* is cited according to the edition of Carlos Steel, C. Macé and P. Hoine, *Procli In Platonis Parmenidem commentaria: Libros I-III continens*, Oxford 2007.

⁷⁶An observation mirrored by Damascius' narrative: *Isid.* 85a: αἰεὶ τι καινουργεῖν ἐπεχειρεῖ.

⁷⁷Simp. in Ph. 795, 12-15. (οἱ δὲ μετὰ Πρόκλον ἕως ἡμῶν σχεδόν τι πάντες οὐκ ἐν τούτῳ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις ἅπασιν τῷ Πρόκλῳ κατηκολούθησαν. Ἄσκληπιόδοτον ἐξαιρῶ λόγου τὸν ἄριστον τῶν Πρόκλου μαθητῶν καὶ Δαμάσκιον τὸν ἡμέτερον ὣν ὁ μὲν δι' ἄκραν εὐφυΐαν καινοτέρους ἔχαιρε δόγμασιν, ὁ δὲ Δαμάσκιος διὰ φιλοπονίαν καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὰ Ἰαμβλίχου συμπάθειαν πολλοῖς οὐκ ὄκνει τῶν Πρόκλου δογμάτων ἐριστάνειν.

⁷⁸Olymp. in *Meteor.* 321,26-29.

Besides, there are hints from excavations in Aphrodisias that Asclepiodotus' school was one of the significant Platonic institutions of his time with strong commitments to the past and the continuity of Platonic philosophy.⁷⁹ At least, the excavations give evidence of a building which would have suited well the purpose of a self-confident pagan Neoplatonic philosophical school, the activities of which were both scholarly and ritual. From the Christian viewpoint we find (polemical) descriptions of those activities in Asclepiodotus' school in Zacharias' *Vita Severi*, a text, that has only been preserved in a Syriac translation,⁸⁰ Zacharias' narratives underline the image of a very successful and visible pagan philosophical institution.

Why, then, does Damascius try to revise this picture? Why does he retell the story of an intellectual who was respected as an excellent Platonic philosopher and with whom Damascius has much in common, and transform it into a story of someone who could not meet the expectations of true philosophical wisdom and was too intensely and too empirically occupied with the sensible world, so that he could not achieve higher knowledge of the Platonic forms that lies beyond the natural sciences and (Aristotelian) logical studies? There are at least two reasons that are likely: first of all rivalry and competition. Damascius draws the picture of an Aristotelian philosopher who sticks to the sensible realm in order to occupy the field of Platonic studies himself with the renovated Athenian Neoplatonic Academy which he tries to promote. Secondly (and connected with (1)): a search for a distinct Platonic profile. Damascius is eager to define clearly what (real) Platonic studies should be like and therefore suggests a clear distinction from other branches and focus points in late antique philosophical education. Here the special medium of philosophical narrative comes into play: in contrast to the (traditional) school commentary Damascius uses the philosophical and biographical narrative that addresses a wider audience for institutional propaganda.

One of its major statements is the central status of Platonic studies and reflections on the intelligible realm and the conviction that logical preparatory studies and methodological training is basically dispensable for the acquisition of real philosophical wisdom. In the medium of the philosophical narrative Damascius was able to address also intellectuals who are for different reasons not acceptable to the philosophical seminars or who could not or did not follow the traditional career path. One target group of Damascius' narrative for whom this holds true are well-educated women from influential families, who could not prepare for

⁷⁹Roland R. R. Smith, *Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias*, in: *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80, 1990, 127-155, cf. 153-155; id., *Late Roman Philosophers*, in: Roland R. R. Smith and Kenan T. Erim eds., *Aphrodisias Papers*, Bd. 2, Ann Arbor 1991, 144-158, cf. 157-158.

⁸⁰Kugener M.-A. ed., *Zacharie le Scholastique: Vie de Sévère d'Antioch*, in: *Patrologia Orientalis* 2, no. 1, 1907 (repr. 1980), e.g. 41

a certain career in the Roman administration but who were educated for educational purposes only. While this exclusion from the male career options and public space certainly restricted the boundaries inside which women could take part in social and cultural life, it freed women from the need to subordinate the choice of classes and teachers to external reasons such as the increase of income.⁸¹ That opened a space for new approaches to philosophy beyond the classical male curriculum.

To be sure, Damascius' denial of the need for the different preparatory stages of philosophical education is not in the first place addressed to women. It is not feministic or anti-patriarchial. But it does not exclude women from access to philosophy but rather facilitates it. This is reflected in the dedication to Theodora and also in the famous narrative about the mathematician and philosopher Hypatia,⁸² who is presented as an extremely gifted Socratic teacher, who taught everyone who wished to listen outside the walls of a classroom, i.e. outside the space of the traditional institutions, and thereby performed an intellectual independence, which Damascius admires.

Therefore, there is a factual (and also understandable) discrepancy with the actual practice in the standard philosophical seminars in which methods from the organon are widely used and in which we find an intense entanglement between Aristotelian and Platonic studies.

This becomes obvious if we take a glance at standard traditional commentaries by Damascius and other Alexandrian school philosophers alike.

5 Logical techniques in the commentary tradition in Alexandria and Athens

To start with Damascius and his school commentaries: We have parts, traces of or references to commentaries on a number of dialogues that were part of the curriculum that had been established by Iamblichus, namely on the *Alcibiades*, *Phaedo*, *Sophistes*, *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, and *Parmenides*. In addition to that there are also traces of commentary practices on the Laws and the Republic. That demonstrates that Damascius adhered to the Iamblichean concept and order of philosophical teaching. Parts of the Alcibiades commentary are preserved as quotations in the lecture notes published under the name of Olympiodorus the Younger, the commentary on the *Phaedo* and on the *Philebus* are *Apo phones*-commentaries, i.e. lecture notes from lectures of Damascius. The commentary on the *Parmenides* is a commentary work that was intended for pub-

⁸¹Edward Watts, *Hypatia: An Ordinary Life*, Oxford University Press, 2016 (in press, ch. 2).

⁸²Isid. 43A.

lication. To be sure, Damascius is not only the author and master of these school commentaries, but also the author of *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* (and also of a very advanced commentary in Plato's *Parmenides*) which develops the Iamblichean tradition of studies on the intelligible realm further and discuss the different intellectual capacities of man's soul. Here, Damascius does not engage in "pedestrian" rational methods but rather argues dialectically in a Platonic sense, struggling for approaches to that what is beyond rational thinking.

But in these contexts there is no reflection on the necessity of rational methods or logical but rather we find practices of suprarational thinking that builds on the rational explication of the objects of knowledge, i.e. here Damascius has no need to explore paths to wisdom that decidedly circumvent specifically rational practices; for rational approaches are presupposed.

In what follows we will concentrate on the commentary on the *Phaedo* and *Philebus* since they most clearly reflect his oral teaching methods in the as it were regular philosophical classes.⁸³

In both lectures the methods that are taught in the elementary logic classes of the philosophical schools are used widely and throughout. In his commentary on the *Philebus* Damascius emphasizes that the dialogue includes topics from different philosophical disciplines: from theology, psychology, ethics and logic.⁸⁴ That means that it is necessary to apply all the methods, which are adaequate for these fields, especially dihaeretic and syllogistic methods that are mentioned explicitly.⁸⁵ There are, then, numerous cases in which Damascius transforms the argumentation into an explicit syllogistic structure.⁸⁶ In addition to that we find reflections on the connection between logical methods and the objects of recognition:

᾽Οτι ἡ μὲν διαιρετικὴ συμπέφυκε τῇ προόδῳ τῶν ὄντων, ἡ δὲ ἀναλυτικὴ τῇ ἐπιστροφῇ, μέσαι δὲ αἱ ἄλλαι τῇ ὑποστάσει αὐτῇ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐοικυῖαι ἀλλ' ἡ μὲν ὀριστικὴ τῇ ἐφ' ἑαυτῆς ἐστῶση, ἡ δὲ ἀποδεικτικὴ τῇ ἀπὸ αἰτίας ἐξηρητημένη. μ'. ᾽Οτι πᾶσαι αἱ τέτταρες μέθοδοι τῶ συναγωγῶ ἢ διαιρετικῶ εἶδει κατέχονται ἢ τε γὰρ ὀριστικὴ συνάγει τὰ μέρη πρὸς τὸν ὅλον ὀρισμὸν ἢ τε ἀποδεικτικὴ ἀπὸ τῆς αἰτίας προάγει τὸ αἰτιατὸν καὶ ὅλως ἀφ' ἑτέρου ἕτερον προστίθησιν. (Dam. in Phlb. 54f.)⁸⁷

"Dihaeretics resemble the progress of being, analytics the turning back, the other

⁸³Cf. the very good editions by Leendert G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*: Olympiodorus, id., *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*: Damascius, id., *Lectures on the Philebus*. Wrongly Attributed to Olympiodorus. Text, Translation, Notes and Indices.

⁸⁴Dam. in Phlb. 10.

⁸⁵Dam. in Phlb. 7,2f.

⁸⁶Dam. in Phlb. 26; 179; 214, 259 etc.

⁸⁷Cf. also Dam. in Phlb. 65; 68.

techniques in the middle resemble the subsistence of things itself; namely horistic resemble the subsistence that is something by itself, apodeictics the subsistence which depends on its cause.

All four methods are held together by synagoge and dihaeresis; for horistics bring together the parts to the whole definition; apodeictics deduce that what is caused from the cause and overall set together one to another.”

Here, it becomes most evident that Damascius links Platonic (Proclean) studies and central ontological concepts with methods of the propaedeutic logic that was taught in late antique schools by the reading of Aristotelian treatises. The use of these methods is not questioned, but repeated and called to mind.

In his commentary on the *Phaedo* Damascius once more uses syllogistic and dihaeretic methods in order to elucidate the Platonic text with ease and certainty.⁸⁸ Although Westerink has argued convincingly that Damascius’ commentary is essentially a report of Proclus’ commentary with a large number of notes and amendments,⁸⁹ that does not necessarily mean that Damascius would not have been able to expunge all logical technicalities if he had wished to do so. To be sure the form which mirrors the oral teaching in which a predecessor’s commentary was used as the basic book which was read out and upon which the lecturer added his comment, is likely to keep the scholarly practices of the traditional philosophical lessons. However, Damascius must have decided to maintain that tradition and to use the techniques that the student learned in the Aristotelian logic classes. For he could also have adhered to Proclus’ philosophical exegesis without further use of the methods of logic. If we conclude from the extant Proclean commentaries: Proclus himself did not – for the most part – make the underlying syllogistic structures of the Platonic argument explicit. Therefore, the helpful tool can also be an addition by Damascius himself. On this we certainly can only conjecture, but it seems clear that in the inner circle of advanced master students the focus on Plato and true philosophical excellence does not require the exclusion of logical techniques.

From the other perspective this seems to be perfectly sound: in the extant commentaries on the *Organon* we have plenty of interpretations in which the propaedeutic role of the (formal quantitative) Aristotelian logic is emphasized. In Simplicius’ commentary on the *Categories* we have the most philosophically precise account of the specific role and importance of language in relation to the soul’s capacities for the acquisition of knowledge and to the distinctiveness of being. The commentator lays emphasis on the possibility of deducing language and logic from the basic potencies of the human soul and of establishing the

⁸⁸Dam. in Phd. 26; 264; 405; 426; 520.

⁸⁹Leendert G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo: Damascius*, 16; id., *The Greek Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo: Olympiodorus*, 18.

connection to the intelligible causes.

καὶ ἔστιν ἡ φωνὴ πέρασ τῆσ ψυχικῆσ ἐνεργείασ, τῶν δὲ περάτων ἔστιν τὸ ἐπιστρέφειν εἰσ τὰσ ἀρχάσ διὸ καὶ ἡ φωνὴ τὰσ ἀποστάσασ ἀπὸ νοῦ καὶ τῶν ὄντων ψυχάσ καὶ διακριθείσασ ἀλλήλων συνάγει τε εἰσ ὁμόνοιαν καὶ τοῖσ πράγμασιν συναρμόζειν ποιεῖ καὶ πρὸσ νοῦν ἀναπέμπει καὶ παρασκευάζει μὴ μόνον ἀφώνουσ ἐθέλειν εἶναι, ἀλλὰ μὴδὲ ἐννοίασ τῶν πραγμάτων ἑτέρασ ἔχειν. οὕτωσ οὖν τὰ ἠνωμένωσ ἐν τῷ νῷ προειλημμένα ἐμέρισεν ἡ ψυχὴ, μετὰ μέντοι τοῦ φυλάξαι καὶ ἐν τῇ διαιρέσει τὴν ἀλληλουχίαν. (Simp. in Cat. 13,4-11⁹⁰)

“Language is moreover the limit of psychic activity, and it pertains to limits to convert [things] to their principles. Therefore language takes those souls which have departed from the intellect and have become distinguished from one another and gathers them together into unanimity of thought; it makes them adjust to things/objects, sends them back up to the intellect and prepares them not only to wish to be without language but to wish no longer even to have concepts which are other than their objects. Thus the soul has particularized those things which were pre-contained in a state of unity in the intellect, yet not without maintaining even in their state of division their mutual connection.”

Simplicius is also very well aware of the limits of logic: it sets a frame in which the distinctions and explanations need to be made without the requirement for any further research (inside the frame of the discipline).⁹¹

Basically the same approach can be found in the logic commentaries from Ammonius' school in Alexandria: the propaedeutic Aristotelian logic does not treat the philosophical objects themselves, but only the formal canon without considering in each case the underlying subject matter.⁹² Therefore, its status

⁹⁰Translation by Michael Chase (Michael Chase ed., *Simplicius: On Aristotle's Categories 1-4*, Cornell University Press, 2003 (Ancient commentators on Aristotle), slightly changed by the author (GU).

⁹¹Simp. in Cat. 133,35-134,4: Διὰ τί δέ, φασίν, μὴ προδιδάξασ περὶ τόπου ἢ χρόνου ὡσ ἐγνωσμένοισ αὐτοῖσ χρηῖται· ἢ ὅτι οὐ τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτῶν παραδοῦναι προτίθεται φυσικῆσ γὰρ ἦν τοῦτο σχέψεωσ, ἦν ἐν τῇ Φυσικῇ ἀκροάσει πραγματεύεται ἀλλ' ὅπερ ἤρκει τῇ λογικῇ θεωρίᾳ, κατὰ τὴν κοινὴν περὶ αὐτῶν ἔννοιαν τὴν εἰσ τὸ οἰκεῖον γένωσ τὸ ποσὸν ἀναγωγὴν αὐτῶν ἐποιήσατο. (“Why, then, without teaching before about place or time does he use them as if they were known? Because he does not want to undertake in the lectures on physics. However, conforming to the logical examination, he leads them up to the specific genus, the quantum, according to the general concept of them.”); 295,13-16: περὶ πάντων δὲ ἐν τῇ Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ τοῖσ τελεωτάτωσ πεποιήται λόγουσ αἱ γὰρ ἀρχαὶ κατὰ μὲν τὴν σημαντικὴν αὐτῶν λέξιν ἐν τῇ λογικῇ πραγματεία δηλοῦνται, κατὰ δὲ τὰ σημανόμενα πράγματα ἐν τῇ Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ οἰκείωσ. (“About everything he argues perfectly in the Lectures on Metaphysics. For the principles are clarified in the logical treatise in respect to the meaningful verbal expression, but in respect to the things that are signified, specifically in the lectures on the Metaphysics.”); cf. 300, 21-23.

⁹²(Ps.)Ammon. in APo 11,3-17: ὥστε καλῶσ οἱ ἐκ τοῦ Περιπάτου τὰ παρὰ Ἀριστοτέλει ἀφορῶντες ὄργανον αὐτὴν φασιν ψιλούς γὰρ κανόνας παραδίδωσιν, οὐ πράγματα λαμβάνων ὑποκείμενα

and role is subordinate to that of the practical and theoretical branches of philosophy.

Especially interesting is Ammonius' complementary consideration in the lemma ad 16a3ff. which has been added after the completion of the proper "scholastic" exegesis.

Ἄλλ' ἐπειδὴ ταῦτα διήθρωται, προσθετέον ἐξῆς τοῖς βουλομένοις ἀνάγειν ἑαυτοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν ὄντων θεωρίαν καὶ τὰς ἐξηρημένας τούτων περὶ ὧν ὁ λόγος αἰτίας σκοπεῖν, ὅτι τριῶν ὄντων ὑπὲρ τὰς φυσικὰς οὐσίας τῶν ἀρχικῶν διακόσμων, τοῦ τε θείου καὶ τοῦ νοεροῦ καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἔτι τοῦ ψυχικοῦ, τὰ μὲν πράγματα θεόθεν παράγεσθαι φαμεν, ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν νόων ὑφίστασθαι τὰ νοήματα, καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν ψυχῶν τῶν κατὰ τὸ λογικὸν χαρακτηριζομένων καὶ παντὸς σώματος χωριστὴν οὐσίαν ἐχουσῶν ἀποτελεῖσθαι τὰς φωνάς. (Ammon. in de int. 24,22-29)

"Since these things have been set out, we must next, for those who wish to bring themselves up to the examination of the things that are, i.w. to look at the transcendent causes of those things which the discussion is about, add that, as there are three primitive orders above the natural substances, the divine, the intellectual, and in addition to these the psychic, we say that things are derived from the divine, thoughts have their subsistence from intellects, and vocal sounds are produced by souls which are formed in accordance with the rational and contain substance separate from all body." (translation by David Blank) (David L. Blank, Ammonius: On Aristotle On Interpretation 1-8, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014 (Ancient Commentators on Aristotle))

Ammonius marks the transgression of disciplinary limits explicitly; however, he points out that despite the clear-cut limits there is room for further exegeses, and that these exegeses might ask about the ontological and epistemological grounds of the order of sciences and of learning in late antique philosophical schools.

It is because of the audience and its capacity to listen and understand and the norms and habits of the philosophical curriculum that the exegesis usually has to stop here. For the object of recognition is sufficiently explained and grasped if the nearest cause (*προσεχῆς αἰτία*) is disclosed. It probably was in the interest of the average student and student group not to extend further the enquiry about the conceptual and ontological reasons of the logical concepts and elements of language theory. For the linguistic concepts in *de interpretatione* are introduced as a tool to facilitate propositional conclusions.

The restrictions upon the transgression into ontological or psychological questions are not located in the quarrel between logic and true philosophy, which

ἀλλὰ τοῖς στοιχείοις τοὺς κανόνας ἐφαρμόζων οἷον τὸ Α κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ Β, τὸ Β κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ Γ, τὸ Α ἄρα κατὰ παντὸς τοῦ Γ.

deals with intelligible objects, nor about the predominance in educational issues and in the order of knowledge, they are rather to be found in the anagogical structure of the philosophical curriculum that attends scrupulously the current suitability (ἐπιτηδειότης) of the student to understand the issue under discussion. And because of that, restrictions are to be found in the institutional contexts in which the students of the logic classes are not necessarily to be expected to attend the higher philosophical seminars, too, or to be on the way to becoming true philosophers or sages respectively.⁹³

6 Conclusions

Why, then, does Damascius use logical tools in his Platonic commentaries yet deny their importance in his *Vita Isidori*? One must conclude that the *Vita Isidori* has addressees that differ from those of the Platonic commentaries. Damascius is – at least – not only addressing those students of his philosophical seminars who have run through the different stages of the educational curriculum starting with the grammar classes and studies in rhetoric followed by the training in Aristotelian logic up to the higher philosophical studies and reading of further Aristotelian treatises and Platonic dialogues.

Those students will have been acquainted with and proficient in the basic methods of logic such as syllogistic and dihaeretic techniques. The discourse on knowledge acquisition and Damascius' clear preference for those alternative paths that lead directly to the *theoria* of the intelligible and the Platonic ideas are addressing another audience: it encourages and invites also those people who take an interest in Platonic philosophy for the sake of the intellectual activity and the cultivation of one's own inner self alone.

The *Vita Isidori* comprises among its narratives many stories about intellectuals and philosophers who looked for and performed alternative ways of education and philosophical activity besides the traditional curriculum. One group among them will have been formed by women from the influential families of the intellectual elite who could afford to and were willing also to educate their female members. Theodora with her family's ancestry is one example for a context in which the *Vita Isidori* is likely to have found an audience and to have been well received, because of its encouragement for those who did not have the opportunity to pass through the logic classes and learn philosophy inside the institutions of curricular education.

Certainly, among the students who could afford – in financial terms but also

⁹³Edward Watts, *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, 1-23; cf. also Raffaella Cibiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Princeton, 2001, Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge, 1998.

in terms of giftedness and interest – to attend the philosophical higher education and the master seminars and meetings of the Platonic philosophers there will have been those who were in favor of alternative ways to knowledge and wisdom and who took a critical stance towards the logical techniques and the strict rules of book knowledge and learning. And finally, there will have been intellectuals or students who supported the Neoplatonic Academy in Athens and Damascius' plan to reinstate Athens as the capital of Platonic thinking in the Roman Empire by focusing on the very center of Platonic philosophy: the reading of Plato's dialogues and the *theoria* of the Platonic ideas following the traces of Iamblichus and the Iamblichean "higher" reading of Plato.

Damascius was looking for a new approach to Platonic texts in the succession of his great predecessor Iamblichus and the Athenian *Diadochoi* Syrianus and Proclus in order to outplay other philosophical institutions in Alexandria or Aphrodisias. He therefore addresses all these different groups and reaches a wider audience which favored the pagan intellectual tradition of Athens.