

“People in Dark Times”: Damascius on Political Persecution and the Philosophical Way of Life

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Abstract. *The Neoplatonic philosophers developed a complicated and quite ingenious concept of the grades of virtue, starting with such common human virtues, as the natural, ethical and political, and finishing which those attainable only by the real seekers of the highest truth, such as the purificatory, contemplative, paradigmatic, and hieratic. In the paper I trace the evolution of the Neoplatonic grades of virtue by means of the select passages from Damascius’ “Philosophical History,” which deal specifically with the character of Damascius’ revered teacher. The life of Isidore is presented by his student as an ascent along the path of Neoplatonic perfection, moreover, by chance or not, but in the surviving fragments of this work, which tells about many remarkable philosophers and theurgists, it is Isidore who ultimately attains the last seventh degree of virtue. Possessing outstanding personal qualities and even the gift of the seer, he was a teacher of the Socratic type, most eager to help students achieve the purificatory virtues that alone determine the further path of philosophical perfection. The position of Damascius and his attitude to the philosophical way of life is further illustrated by a series of lively portraits of Athenian and Alexandrian philosophers of his time.*

Rezumat. *Filosofii neoplatonici au dezvoltat o concepție complicată și destul de ingenioasă a gradelor virtuții, începând cu virtuțile omenești comune, cum ar fi cele naturale, etice și politice, și terminând pe care cele atinse numai de către adevărații căutători ai adevărului cel mai înalt, cum ar fi cele purificatoare. În această lucrare urmăresc evoluția gradelor de virtute neoplatonice prin intermediul pasajelor selectate din „Istoria filozofică” a lui Damascius, care se ocupă în mod specific de personajul veneratului profesor al lui Damascius. Viața lui Isidor este prezentată de elevul său ca o ascensiune pe calea perfecțiunii neoplatonice. În fragmentele care s-au păstrat, Isidor este cel care ajunge în cele din urmă la ultimul grad de virtute. Posedând calități personale remarcabile și chiar darul viziunii, el a fost un profesor de tip socratic, cel mai dornic să-i ajute pe elevi să atingă virtuțile purificatoare. Poziția lui Damascius și atitudinea sa față de modul de viață filozofic este ilustrată în continuare printr-o serie de portrete pline de viață ale filozofilor atenieni și alexandrini din timpul său.*

Keywords: virtues, truth, purification, education, Neoplatonic school.

A philosopher in antiquity is first of all the exponent of a certain way of life: Cynical, Stoic, Epicurean, Platonic.² The Neoplatonist philosophers were no exception, turning in the eyes of their biographers into true paragons of perfection, whose virtues (ἀρεταί) were manifested at all levels of the multi-layered Neoplatonist universum.

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² There is abundant evidence of this in various biographies, the earliest of which date back to the time of Plato and Aristotle. Philosophical biography as a genre must go back to the Peripatetic school, in particular to the works of Aristotle's disciple Dicaearchus (Fr. 33-52 Mirhady). For details, cf. Stefan Schorn (2018).

The idea of degrees of virtues was clearly formulated by Plotinus in a special treatise (*Ennead* 1.2 [19]; O'Meara 2019). Porphyry reformulated it in *Sentences* 32 and practically realized it in the biographies of Pythagoras and Plotinus, in which both the ancient philosopher and the teacher of Porphyry himself appear as perfect sages, who by their moral qualities far surpassed the ordinary representatives of the human race. Iamblichus also devoted a special work to degrees of virtue, which unfortunately did not come down to us, and wrote a treatise about the Pythagorean way of life, which opens the cycle of his Pythagorean works. Marinus wrote a biography of his teacher Proclus, Olympiodorus returned to the origins of the tradition and produced a short biography of Plato, and Damascius offered a wide panorama of Neoplatonic life in his *Philosophical History*.³

The cardinal virtues of the ideal citizen, which Plato discusses in the *Republic*, such as prudence, courage, self-control and justice, are supplemented by Plotinus with more perfect, purifying ones. Their task is to bring the soul to intelligence, in order to discover in it the paradigms of each of these virtues. Porphyry develops his teacher's idea and speaks of four kinds of virtues – civic (πολιτικάί), purificatory (καθαρτικάί), contemplative (θεωρητικάί) and paradigmatic (παραδειγματικάί).⁴

The civic (or social) virtues, which cultivate the four cardinal virtues, are designed to curb all kinds of desires peculiar to the body. The purificatory virtues enable the next step to be taken, that is, a complete distraction from all carnal desires, which in turn enables the philosopher in the third step to direct all attention to the mind, and in the fourth step to achieve “union with its essence” (*Sentences* 32.70-82). Clearly purification plays a key role in this process. The success of the whole enterprise depends directly on it, for the purificatory virtues “are acquired only in this life,” and only through them is “ascent to higher” degrees of them possible. Know thyself, comprehend that you are “a soul bound in a foreign thing,” says Porphyry, and you will make the right step on the path of purification. Only then will you be able to “collect yourself, also spatially, from the body, acquiring a perfectly impartial disposition toward it” (*Sentences* 32.100-105). In this way you succeed in getting rid, as far as

³ The full text of Damascius' work has not survived, but it was available to Patriarch Photius (ninth century), who described it as ‘not so much a biography of Isidore as an account of other men, both his predecessors and contemporaries.’ He quotes and retells excerpts from these accounts in various places in his monumental *Library* (first selecting some biographical accounts and then going back to the beginning of the essay and using those sections that he liked for literary reasons). He also notes that the book consisted of about 60 chapters and was too large to be considered a biography. In the *Suda* (tenth century) our work is called *Philosophical History* and is used as a source for examples of the use of various words and expressions as well as for biographical articles. In a number of instances the information from Photius and the *Suda* overlaps. Fragments of Damascius' work were first collected and translated into German by Rudolf Asmus (1911). On the basis of this work Clemens Zintzen (1967) published them half a century later. Finally, Polymnia Athanassiadi (1999) has again studied and systematized the evidence available to us. This translation of selected passages from the *Philosophical History* is based on that publication.

⁴ Porphyry, *Sentences* 32.1-5. For a commented edition and translation, cf. Brisson 2005, vol. 2, esp. 628-642.

possible, of the cares, sufferings, and experiences that prevent you from ascending to a higher level, and attain the tranquility of the soul necessary for contemplation.

The scheme is further developed by Iamblichus, who gives each of the levels of virtue a specific name and adds three more to Porphyry's four levels. These virtues, in ascending order from level to level, are as follows: natural (φυσικαί), ethical (ἠθικαί), civic (πολιτικά), purificatory (καθαρτικά), contemplative (θεωρητικά), paradigmatic (παραδειγματικά), hieratic or theurgic (ιερατικά / θεουργικά).

The special treatise of Iamblichus on the virtues, as already noted, has not come down to us, but his theory is reconstructed on the basis of the reports of Marinus, Damascius, and Olympiodorus. Marinus lists the levels of the virtues in the biography of his teacher, stopping specifically at the contemplative and noting that the others are already beyond ordinary human abilities (*Life of Proclus* 3.1-7). The theurgic ones are mentioned further on in the biography, while Marinus directly links the establishment of this level of virtues to Iamblichus (26.20-22). The term "paradigmatic" is not used at all. Quite on the contrary, our other source, Olympiodorus (Commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* 1.8.2-3 Westerink), leaves out the hieratic virtues, which has given rise to the assumption that only Damascius placed the paradigmatic virtues between the contemplative and the hieratic (Commentary on Plato's *Phaedo* 1.138-144 Westerink).⁵ In contrast, John Finamore, in a special study, insists that the entire seven-part scheme goes back directly to Iamblichus (Finamore 2012, 124-129).

Natural virtues such as well-developed senses, physical endurance, and good health are given to us from birth (συμφύντα, *Life of Proclus* 4.5), but each individual seeker of perfection does not receive them quite by accident. Proclus, as Marinus notes, was one of those rare beings who "did not drink the cup of oblivion" (5.6-7),⁶ that is, who in rebirth managed to chose the philosophical way of life. Damascius says the same about natural virtues (Commentary on *Phaedo* 1.138.4), noting further that ethical virtues are just the opposite, acquired by man in the process of education and belong to both the rational and irrational parts of the soul (εἰσὶ δὲ ὁμοῦ λόγου τε καὶ ἀλογίας, *ibid.* 139. 4), whereas the civic virtues use the rational part of the soul to order the irrational (λόγου κοσμοῦντος τὴν ἀλογίαν ὡς ὄργανον ἑαυτοῦ, *ibid.* 140.2).

In this new and more developed scheme, the purifying virtues are again intended, according to Olympiodorus, to free oneself from emotions and experiences, whereas the contemplative ones only take effect after the soul has managed to "escape" (πεφεύγασιν) from them altogether (Commentary on *Phaedo* 8.2.12). Or, according to Damascius, our being through them "aspires to the mind rather than to the soul" (Commentary on *Phaedo* 1.142.3). In this respect they are intermediate in character and have value only insofar as they lead to the

⁵ Westerink 1976, vol. 1, 117-118; Saffrey, *Segonds* 2002, xciii-xcviii.

⁶ According to his biographer, he remembered that he was a link in the "Hermaic chain" and that the soul of the Pythagorean Nicomachus lived in him (*Life of Proclus* 28). Damascius says the same of Isidore (*Philosophical History*, fr. 5, cf. fr. 13).

paradigmatic virtues inherent in the mind itself (διὸ καὶ αὐταὶ παραδειγματικά, ὅτι προηγουμένως αὐτοῦ εἰσὶν τοῦ νοῦ αἱ ἀρεταί, *ibid.* 143.4).

On the connection between the paradigmatic virtues and the higher, theurgic virtues we read in Olympiodorus (Commentary on *Phaedo* 8.2. 19-20), who states that theurgy is precisely designed to solve the main task of Neoplatonic philosophy, which is to ensure the union of our mind with the intelligible essences (καὶ φιλοσοφίας μὲν ἔργον νοῦν ἡμᾶς ποιῆσαι, θεωργίας δὲ ἐνῶσαι ἡμᾶς τοῖς νοητοῖς, ὡς ἐνεργεῖν παραδειγματικῶς). Marinus (*Life of Proclus* 22.8-15) describes a similar process. According to him, naturally endowed with excellent gifts, Proclus was quickly transformed from a thyrsus-bearer into a true Bacchante (Plato's metaphor: *Phaedo* 69c), from discursive and evidential cognition making the ascent to contemplation of the paradigms of the divine mind (τὰ ἐν τῷ θειῷ νῷ παραδείγματα), gaining on this path a virtue that could be called not reason but wisdom or even something more than that.

The path to this supremely indescribable and super-intelligent state has, in a way, a providential character. Damascius relates it directly to πρόνοια (Commentary on *Phaedo* 28.6).⁷ A central episode in Proclus' biography also illustrates this well. According to the biographer (*Life of Proclus* 29), wishing to help a girl named Asclepigeneia, the philosopher visited the temple of Asclepius, which at that time was living out its last days and had already been destroyed by Christians in the days of Marinus.⁸ As soon as he addressed a prayer to the Savior “in the ancient manner,”⁹ a miracle took place and the girl recovered. This event was important for the preservation of the Neoplatonic school continuity because the rescued girl was the granddaughter of another Asclepigeneia, the daughter of Proclus' teacher Plutarch, and later became the wife of Archon Theagenes (who later provided considerable assistance to the Academy) and the mother of the future scholarch of the Academy, Hegias (Damascius, *Philosophical History*, fr. 63B and 145 Athanassiadi). It can be assumed that, according to his

⁷ Which points to unity at the highest level of the Neoplatonic universe, the level of the Henads. For more details, see Finamore 2012, 127, who, with reference to Saffrey, Segonds 2002, 153 n. 1, also notes the equivalence in this place of πρόνοια and πρὸ νοῦ. However, the term can also be understood in a more familiar sense as a foresight or even a foreknowledge of the future. For a recent work on the Henads theory, see. Mesyats 2012.

⁸ The temple of Asclepius was situated on the southern slope of the Acropolis, next to the temple of Dionysus and close to the house which, as Marinus reports here, belonged to Proclus' teacher Plutarch and in which both Plutarch's successor as head of the Academy, Syrian, and Proclus himself later lived. For more on this house, see Frantz 1988, 43 sq., Castrén 1991, 475 sq., Camp 1990, Karivieri 1994, Saffrey, Segonds 2002, 34, Edwards 2000, 104, and our article Afonasin, Afonasiņa 2014. On the significance of Asclepius (as well as Athena and other gods) for Proclus' philosophy, see. Afonasin 2017. An excellent biography of Proclus is Wildberg 2017.

⁹ Prayer in the ancient manner is, of course, an example of the application of that secret “Chaldean” knowledge which was passed on to Proclus by Asclepigeneia the elder, Plutarch's daughter. It is noteworthy that the knowledge of Chaldean rituals which Plutarch received from his father or grandfather, the “great” Nestorius, was passed on not to his son but to his daughter, perhaps, as John Dillon suggests (Dillon 2007, 123 n. 16), because his son Hierius, though a philosopher, was not well suited for it. See also Brisson 2017.

biographer, Proclus as a “theurgist” was not simply seeking to thank the family of his mentor, but also “foresaw” the consequences of his action.

By calling the philosopher a Bacchante, Plato, according to Damascius (Commentary on *Phaedo* 1.172), sought to show that anyone who succeeds in distracting himself from the process of becoming, as it were, wears the robes of both philosopher and theurgist. It is true, notes the Neoplatonist, that among the philosophers of the school there are those who prefer philosophy (such are Plotinus and Porphyry), and those who are more inclined to theurgy (such are Iamblichus, Syrian, Proclus and other “hieratics”).

As head of the Platonic school, Damascius must have felt it his duty to show the way to restore the balance which had been lost, and, yielding to the requests of his students and especially of Theodora, an enlightened lady who, like Iamblichus, came from a noble Syrian family, compiled a biography of his teacher Isidore, placing it in the broad context of the philosophical life of his time.

Like Proclus in his biography of Marinus, Isidore retains some personality traits in Damascius' memoirs, but on the whole he appears as a kind of role model whose virtues are perfect on all levels of the Neoplatonic universe. Unfortunately, the text of the biography has not survived in its entirety, but the fragments that have survived, as Dominic O'Meara (2006) has shown, make it possible to discern traces of the same methodology in Damascius' work as in Marinus'. The life of Isidore is also presented by his disciple as a path of ascent along the path of Neoplatonic perfection, and, coincidentally or not, in the surviving fragments of this work, which recounts many remarkable philosophers and theurgists, the final seventh degree of virtues is apparently attained ultimately only by Isidore. Possessing outstanding personal qualities and even the gift of vision, he was a teacher of the Socratic type (fr. 37 et al.), most of all eager to help his students achieve the purificatory virtues (fr. 38B et al.), which determine, as we know, the further path of philosophical perfection.

II

Damascus saw Athens as a haven, a refuge from the political battles of Constantinople and the fury of the religious fanatics of Alexandria, although here too the great legacy of Plato faded in the hands of unprincipled orators and narrow-minded commentators, who continued to pursue their own objectives. In this respect Christianity seemed more a symptom than a cause of the decline of an ancient tradition in need of rethinking and revival than ever before. The success that accompanied Damascius in this enterprise and the unprecedented rise in the prestige of philosophical education in Athens led to his imminent collapse – the ban on the teaching of philosophy under the imperial decree of 529. At the beginning of the sixth century, a young and ambitious philosopher, who had received a versatile rhetorical and philosophical education at the famous Horapollo school in Alexandria and who had fled from there with his teacher Isidore to escape persecution by Christian fanatics, sought to revive the school –

spiritually and physically,¹⁰ gathering in Athens, according to Agathius Scholasticus, the best minds of “the whole Hellenic world” (*On the reign of Justinian* 2.30.3).

It is in this context that the treatise we are studying arises, having been created, it may be assumed, in the first decade of the sixth century, in the early stages of Damascius' public career, seeking not only to secure the place for his school in the academic tradition of Platonism, but also to define the goals that this new educational institution had for itself. It is also possible that the biographical material Damascius presented in his work was reinterpreted by him gradually as events unfolded, including the ones that took place after the closure of the school and the forced journey of the Athenian Platonists to Persia.

The text of the *Philosophical History* has not reached us and is reconstructed on the basis of excerpts from later compilations, so its original composition cannot be reconstructed. Polymnia Athanassiadi (1999) divides the fragments into several sections. First come a few introductory notes on Hellenistic Egypt (ff. 1-4); the next section gathers those passages which enable to make a portrait of Isidore, the teacher of Damascius (ff. 5-38), followed by a series of sections which constitute the “philosophical history” proper, both in Alexandria (ff. 39-58, 71-96, 106-131) and Athens (59-70, 97-105, 145-152). A separate group of fragments (132-144) may be singled out, in one way or another, concerning Damascius’ “philosophical conversion” and his journey with Isidore from Alexandria, via Gaza, Bostra, Beritus, Aphrodisias and other cities to Athens.

The various accounts of philosophical life in Alexandria and the misadventures of the Platonic philosophers in that once highly cultured city deserve special treatment. As far as Athens, we first encounter the events here in fr. 59, where, quite predictably, Damascius speaks of Proclus. Despite the fragmentary nature of the text, we are presented with a rather varied and diverse picture of philosophical life in Athens, beginning with the undisputed founder of the local school of Neo-Platonism, Plutarch.

Of all the Athenian philosophers of the time, the young Damascius must have been most impressed by the Syrian Salustius, whom his contemporaries regarded as a Cynic, with all the attributes attached to this status. He walked barefoot all over the *oikumene* (66C), never cooked food (66D) and, like Diogenes of Sinope, answered the questions of the powers-that-be with audacity and wit (66A). This ascetic way of life reportedly did not compromise his physical and mental health at all (66B); moreover, according to Simplicius (*Commentary on Epictetus' Enchiridion* 13; fr. 66G), he allowed himself various antics, such as putting hot coals on his lap and testing how long he could stand it.

Salustius was an instructor of Socratic type. He constantly tested and provoked young men, making them wonder if they had really consciously chosen as their profession such a difficult subject as philosophy. Damascius himself was no exception. According to him,

¹⁰ On the place where Damascius probably established his school, cf. Athanassiadi 1999, 343–346. In general on the fate of the Athenian school after Proclus, cf., for instance, a series of essays in Cameron 2016.

Salustius was testing the youth by discreetly setting intellectual traps for them to fall into because of their youthful haste, thereby making sure that they were “not good enough” for such a path (fr. 66F). Another and no less effective scenario seems to have been criticism of other teachers and schools (66E), and Salustius, who had received an excellent rhetorical education (fr. 60) and also earned universal respect for his moral qualities (fr. 66A, B), wit (fr. 60 and 66A) and natural “perspicacity” (fr. 70), must have done so very convincingly. Unfortunately, we have only one substantive account of Salustius’ philosophy. Damascus writes that he considered the fifth Platonic virtue to be the “true opinion” about the gods, adding that it can also be inherent in perfectly flawed people (fr. 66A). This observation shows that Salustius participated in some capacity in the discussion of the question of degrees of virtue so important to the Neoplatonic school. In this respect the account of Proclus, who, as Damascus notes, “placed theology above all other branches of philosophy, and preferred piety to its opposite, the austere life striving for virtue” (fr. 59E), is remarkable. If this is true, the position of Salustius, who throughout his life strove for moral perfection but was markedly skeptical of everyday manifestations of religious piety, shows perfectly the source of his disagreement with the head of the Athenian school of Neoplatonism (ff. 68).

Another group of fragments deals with the history of the Athenian school of Neoplatonism during the last years of Proclus’ life and some time after his death in 485. Proclus considered Isidore, the Alexandrian philosopher and unique person, according to Damascus, above all his disciples and wanted to see him as his successor. But despite his entreaties, Isidore remained adamant, pointing out that he was afraid of sinning before the gods in pursuit of human glory (fr. 98D).¹¹ On the contrary, two other candidates, according to our historian, yearned for this very glory. One of them was the philosopher Asclepiodotus, who had studied in Alexandria and then, having married the daughter of a local magnate, moved to Aphrodisias and opened his school there. It is reported that at Proclus’ call he immediately arrived in Athens (fr. 99A), but for some reason he was not elected. Nor do we know about the fate of Proclus’ only “favorite” philosopher Zenodotus (fr. 99B), and it is difficult to say whether fr. 99C, which describes the reaction of one of the rejected candidates, refers to him or to Asclepiodotus. It must have been even more problematic for Proclus to openly seek the leadership of the haughty dabbler of fortune, Hegius, son of the school’s benefactor, Senator Theagenes. We know that there were objective preconditions for his nomination. First of all, Hegius clearly possessed certain talents, so that Proclus not only personally taught him, but also saw fit to teach the young man Chaldean theology, something that usually completed rather than began the circle of Neoplatonic sciences. But Hegius must also have regarded himself as the successor of his great ancestors, the priest Hegius and the founder of the school Plutarch (fr. 145B), and, being related to them, must have seen not only spiritual but also legal reasons for his claim to

¹¹ It can also be suggested that Isidore was aware of the problematic nature of his candidacy in the context of the current political situation, for he had fled Alexandria, was wanted, and had even been arrested once.

the Plutarch house, where Proclus himself lived and the considerable funds of the school (fr. 102), to which he was probably prepared to add his own. As such his status is easily comparable to that of Speusippus, Plato's nephew and successor. But on the other hand, seeking to become “holier than others” (fr. 145C), Hegius too irritated those around him with his religious zeal, restoring forgotten rituals and pagan shrines (even against the wishes of his relatives), which could not but provoke the negative reaction of the authorities and the fury of the Christian adversaries, perhaps not as numerous as in Alexandria, but still active enough. After all, someone, according to Marinus, had destroyed the famous temple of Asclepius in Athens, to which Proclus had already gone in order to save Asclepigeneia, the future mother of Hegius himself, from an unknown disease (*Life of Proclus* 29). Be that as it may, Hegius did run the school for a time, probably after the death of Marinus and at the request of Isidore who was leaving the city (fr. 151C and E), becoming, according to Damascius, the cause of the decline of philosophy in Athens (145A).

The immediate successor of Proclus, Marinus is of genuine interest to Damascius. Regularly emphasizing his poor health, which may have prevented him not only from living but also from adequately understanding Proclus’ “sublime interpretations” (fr. 97), Damascius speaks of him with respect, emphasizing his diligence, honesty, restraint, and, importantly, political tact (fr. 100A), all the qualities necessary for someone to adequately lead a school and dispose of its property in these dark times.

In contrast, Damascius did not share Marinus’ philosophical position at all, nor did Isidore, whose criticisms, allegedly led Marinus to burn his own commentary on Plato’s *Philebus* (fr. 38). We know from our sources that Marinus taught Aristotle’s philosophy (ibid.), studied mathematics, and adhered to an epistemological interpretation of the *Parmenides*, believing that this dialogue treats of ideas and not of gods, thus not accepting the teaching of Iamblichus and Proclus on the Henads (fr. 971-J). This does not mean that theurgy and the “philosophical religion” of the Neoplatonists were alien to him, as his biography of Proclus, full of wonderful stories and descriptions of the very “purest insights of the blessed man” which Damascius accuses him of not understanding (fr. 971), clearly shows. Marinus’ philosophical position is slightly revealed by a small treatise recorded “from the voice” by his disciples, a commentary or rather an introduction to the *Data (Dedomena)* of Euclid. In this work Marinus obviously considers himself a successor of his teacher: since Proclus composed a commentary on Euclid's *Elements* (cf. Morrow 1970), his successor must have felt obliged to comment on another work of the great mathematician. Strictly speaking, the extant text does not deal with the mathematical sections of the *Data*, being limited to a parsing of basic terms and definitions, which certainly confirms Marinus’ interest in epistemology and logic.¹² At the same time, we

¹² For text, translation and commentary of Euclid’s *Data*, see Taisbak 2003; for Marinus’ work, see also Oikonomides 1977.

can assume that, like in case of Proclus, mathematics was of interest to him only as rather elementary prolegomena for the study of Platonic philosophy.

In fact, in this small treatise Marinus explains the basic terms of this peculiar work by Euclid, a kind of problem book. What is the “given” (τὸ δεδομένον), Marinus asks, what, in general, is Euclid’s treatise and to what field of knowledge should it be referred? Some think that the “given” is something comprehensible and reducible to one thing, such as orderly (τεταγμένον) as in Apollodorus, known (γνώριμον) as in Diodorus, or expressible (ῥητὸν) as in Ptolemy, even if the values are only approximately known. Others believe that the term refers to the initial data of a given problem (number of points, segments of a certain length, etc.). Others believe that the given is ordered and present (πόριμον), ordered and known, or known and present. The ordered is opposed to the disordered (ἄτακτος). Thus a single line passing through two points is ordered, but a circle passing through two points is not ordered because it is not a single line. It is true that the same figure can be ordered in one respect and not in another, as, for example, an isosceles triangle is ordered with respect to its shape but not ordered with respect to its size. Some things are known to us in fact, such as the length of this road, while others are known to us by virtue of their intrinsic properties. For example, if two segments “with two names” (ἡ ἐκ δύο ὀνομάτων), that is, such segments whose length squares are only commensurable (Euclid, *Elements* 10.36), are added, then the whole becomes incommensurable (ἄλογός ἐστιν) – we know this because of the properties of the mathematical object itself. The irrational (incommensurable, ἄλογα) as such is not necessarily unknown (ἄγνωστα). What is present is that which can be constructed and that which is evident without proof (even if things themselves are not defined). In contrast, the absent (ἄπορον) is that which is “beyond our reach,” such as the square of a circle.

Then, having defined the concepts, Marinus considers their joint use. For example, how do the ordered and the disordered, on the one hand, and the present and the absent, on the other, relate? The spiral was ordered but not present for mathematicians before Archimedes, whereas objects that arise in countless ways and are disordered in this respect become present if one proposes a way of constructing them. It can also be observed that not everything that is known is quantified, but everything that is quantified is known; incommensurable segments are known but not expressible, whereas all whole numbers are expressible but not all are known; incommensurable objects can be quantified, but nothing expressible can be unexpressible, etc. The main thing, Marinus proves, in combining these terms, is to understand the difference between the properties of things themselves in nature and our knowledge or ignorance of these properties. Archimedes proved the orderliness of many things that his predecessors did not consider as such. If we ignore this, we will confuse the examples “as to us,” “as to their nature,” and “as to their measurement.”

Therefore, in defining the subject of Euclid’s treatise, Marinus suggests that we immediately discard the first – we are not at all simply faced with tasks ‘given’ (as it seems to

some) by those who formulated them. He suggests not separating the second and third, since this inevitably leads to an incomplete definition. A complete definition of the “given” must always include both the known (γνώριμον) and the present (πόριμον), with Marinus proposing to treat the former by analogy with genus (γένει) and the latter with distinction (διαφορᾶ). Only along this path do we approach “scientific definitions” (τοῖς ἐπιστημονικῶς... ὀρισμοῖς). Such, in fact, is the content of this short essay. In its concluding part Marinus briefly indicates the place of the treatise among the other works of Euclid and, with reference to Pappus' commentary on the *Data*, concludes that the method of this work is analysis rather than synthesis.

III

It is the duty of the Neoplatonist to oppose the “dominant faith.” This duty, however, can be fulfilled in different ways. One can, like Serapio, lead a private life unnoticed by the representatives of the dominant ideology (fr. 111). This Alexandrian philosopher, who must have been an older contemporary of Isidore and his personal friend, succeeded in this way, “locking himself in his little house” and “associating with his few neighbors only in case of emergency.” The philosopher was distinguished by his piety, always taking part in public rituals concerning traditional religion, all the rest of the time leading a “godlike existence,” composing hymns to deities, meditating and interpreting books of Orpheus, which he, not having any other property, bequeathed to Isidore. He was a profound thinker who often discussed difficult theological questions with Isidore, without in any way seeking to make these discussions public. Damascius writes specifically about this unique personality, noting that otherwise people would never have known about him and his way of life, and contrasting him with numerous ambitious and often superficial colleagues in the philosophical world, especially those who by their defiant behavior only made matters worse and upset the rare delicate balance even where it was achieved from time to time. A striking example, “in all things contrary to Serapion,” was the rhetorician and political figure Pamprepus.

Possessing certain literary talents, Pamprepus advanced rapidly both in his homeland of Egypt and in Athens, where he not only became a famous grammarian, but also married a wealthy woman, which must have opened for him the way into politics (fr. 112B). He also showed an interest in philosophy, competing with the Athenian Platonists, all except Proclus, whose wisdom he “could not even approach” (fr. 112B). Not having succeeded among the experts in philosophy, he nevertheless learned to rubbush in the eyes of the uninitiated, particularly by winning over with his eloquence a major Constantinopolitan dignitary named Illus, which enabled him to make a brilliant career in the capital (fr. 77D). But this was the beginning of the end, when, having supported Illus' unsuccessful action against the emperor Zeno, he actively intervened in politics, inciting the adherents of traditional religion first in Constantinople and then in Alexandria to oppose the emperor and restore the ancient order,

showing them some “prophecies” which foretold the imminent doom of Christianity (fr. 113 L-N).

Pamprepius met an ignominious end, and rightly so (fr. 115C), but this activity, his and the others like him, led to the severe suffering of many people who had led a decent life – grammarians, rhetorician and philosophers, whose only fault was their rejection of “the prevailing faith.” The head of the Alexandrian philosophical school, Horapollo and the philosopher Heraiscus, whom, according to Damascus (fr. 76E), Proclus himself had praised, was tortured on the rack, demanding to betray the philosophers Harpocras and Isidore, who had fled from the persecution of the authorities (fr. 117 and 128). Julian, Damascius’ brother, was arrested in the public baths and also tortured (fr. 119F, H-K). None of them betrayed their own friends. The outstanding Alexandrian grammarian Agapius was arrested (fr. 126), the theurgist Maximinus was executed in Constantinople (fr. 139), the sophist John died under torture (Fr 131), sharing the fate of Hypatia (Fr 43E), who had been killed by Christian fanatics some decades before. The list can be easily expanded. The Alexandrian philosopher Ammonius, unable to withstand the pressure, was forced to make a deal with the authorities (fr. 118). However, as Damascius thinks, it was, as in the case of Horapollo the Elder, a mercenary calculation that played a role here (fr. 120B). On the contrary, Severianus, a high-ranking official who had received an excellent and comprehensive education in rhetoric and Roman law, and then studied under Proclus himself, was unwilling, at the risk of his career, to accept the offer to become a Christian from the emperor Zeno himself (fr. 108).

The authority of pagan philosophy was also imperceptibly undermined by characters like Hilarius, who gave his wife to a friend, and who, thus freeing himself from family obligations, rode to Athens from Antioch accompanied by concubines to study philosophy with Proclus (fr. 91). Acamatius was no better, who, not confining himself to the art of divination, endeavoured to convince the people of Heliopolis that he knew about philosophy, so that Isidore and Damascus, who were passing through that city, had to make an effort to convince people otherwise and show the complete incompetence of this “simpleton” (fr. 140).

And yet Damascius seeks and seems to find a decent way out for the honest man living in these dark times. He does not agree to “crawl into a corner,” “and from there philosophize majestically and verbally about justice and prudence,” for “speeches unsupported by works are vain and empty” (fr. 124). To this end he goes to Athens and, thanks to his organizational talents, revives the academic tradition, which had visibly faded after the death of Proclus, but which is now, according to Agathius Scholasticus, flourishing again and bringing together the best minds of “the whole Hellenic world” (*On the Reign of Justinian* 2.30.3).

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