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PROCLUS AND DAMASCIUS ON ΦΙΛΟΤΙΜΙΑ

The Neoplatonic Psychology of a Political Emotion

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RÉSUMÉ. Cet article examine les opinions des néoplatoniciens tardifs sur le phénomène social de la *philotimia* (« amour des honneurs » ; « ambition »). Sur la base du *Commentaire de l'Alcibiade* de Proclus, on montre que la *philotimia* est une émotion qui résulte d'une compréhension imparfaite de la véritable nature de l'honneur et du pouvoir. La mauvaise *philotimia* pousse les ambitieux à poursuivre une carrière politique en quête de pouvoir mondain et de prestige, au prix de l'étude de la philosophie. La bonne *philotimia*, au contraire, peut les pousser à rechercher ce qui est véritablement bien et donc les mettre sur la voie de la philosophie. L'histoire fournit maints exemples de bonne et de mauvaise *philotimia*. Damascius, dans sa *Vie d'Isidore*, en fait usage pour éloigner ses lecteurs de l'arène politique et les conduire vers la poursuite de la philosophie.

SUMMARY. *This paper examines the views of the later Neoplatonists on the social phenomenon of philotimia ("love of honour(s)"; "ambition"). On the basis of Proclus' Commentary on the Alcibiades it is concluded that for the Neoplatonists philotimia is an ambiguous emotion that results from an imperfect understanding of the true nature of honour and power. Bad philotimia prompts ambitious people to pursue a political career in search of worldly power and prestige at the cost of the study of philosophy. Good philotimia, on the contrary, may inspire them to search for what is truly good and hence put them on the track of philosophy. History provides many examples of both good and bad philotimia. Damascius, in his Life of Isidore, uses such stories to steer his readers away from the political arena towards the pursuit of philosophy.*

1. Introduction*

Emotions are not universal. We do not have, for example, an equivalent of the ancient emotion of φιλοτιμία.¹ Usually translated as ‘ambition’, it literally means something like “the love of honour(s)”, “the desire for public esteem”. It may be an alien emotion to us, yet it was one of the driving, and often disruptive, forces of ancient political life. It was what made the ancient politicians, invariable members of the elite, tick and spend their money on public services in order to outshine their peers. This holds true for classical Athens, but it holds equally true for the world of late antiquity. Peter Brown, in his well-known book *The Making of Late Antiquity*, reserves an entire chapter for the phenomenon of φιλοτιμία. Talking about the 3rd century, which he describes as “an age of ambition”, he comments:

[Φιλοτιμία] committed members of the upper class to blatant competitiveness on all levels of social life. This was expressed with a candor and an abrasiveness peculiar to the society of the Roman Empire. Whatever reticence we may associate with the classical *polis* had long vanished.²

Brown is writing about the beginnings of late antiquity, but when one browses through the fragments of Damascius’ *Life of Isidore* in which the last Diadoch paints a colourful, if not unbiased, picture of the intellectual and political life in Athens and Alexandria at the very end of late antiquity, one

* Versions of this paper were read at the colloquium “The Power of the Form: Platonists and the Roman Empire” (Gargnano, 2014) and at the MusaPH Oberseminar (Munich, 2015). I have profited much from the stimulating discussions at both occasions.

1. The Neoplatonists, as do other Greek authors, refer to φιλοτιμία as a πάθος, the word that since Aristotle is used in ancient Greek to signify something like our modern concept of emotion, hence my description of it as a political emotion. On πάθος as emotion and the problems involved in defining both πάθος and emotion, see, for example, Konstan (2015 p. 401-402), who doubts whether φιλοτιμία is an emotion in the modern sense, yet observes (*o.c.* p. 402 n. 1) that Thomas Hobbes *De cive* 3, 26 lists ambition among “the perturbations of the mind”.

2. Brown 1978 p. 31.

finds that in the meantime little had changed. He often invokes φιλοτιμία as an explanation for people's actions, both laudable and reproachable ones. By doing so, he shares the traditional view of φιλοτιμία as an ambivalent emotion as we find it elsewhere in ancient Greek literature.³

It would be wrong, however, to think of Damascius' frequent references to φιλοτιμία as commonplace remarks. They are informed by Neoplatonic reflections on this omnipresent and powerful political emotion. The topic was especially discussed in relation to the Platonic *First Alcibiades*. As we shall see, it is no coincidence that this was the first of the traditional curriculum of twelve Platonic dialogues that Neoplatonic novices were made to study. In the anonymous *Prolegomena to Plato*, a text roughly contemporary to Damascius, those students were told that the *skopos* (aim) of the *Alcibiades* is

(...) to expose the φιλοτιμία that lives in everyone of us. In each of us there lives the ambition of an Alcibiades, which we must discipline and train for something better.⁴

This short remark is interesting for two reasons. First, the term φιλοτιμία occurs only once and without much emphasis in the entire dialogue (Plato *Alc.* 1, 122c7). It thus tells us more about what was on the minds of the late Neoplatonists than about the actual content of the *Alcibiades* itself. Secondly, the Neoplatonists apparently thought that the sentiment of φιλοτιμία could fulfil a useful role in the education of the young, provided that it was properly directed. This is at odds with Plato, who, for example in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*, regarded φιλοτιμία for the most part as an undesirable emotion.⁵

This somewhat unexpected interpretation of the *Alcibiades* raises the following questions: (1) what exactly, according to the later Neoplatonists, is φιλοτιμία? (2) why do they think of it as a potentially useful emotion? and, finally, (3) how do they harness this emotion for philosophical purposes? The first part of this paper (§§ 2-4) seeks to answer the first two questions by analysing Proclus' discussion of φιλοτιμία in his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*. The second part of the paper (§§ 5-6) deals with the third question. I shall argue that instances of φιλοτιμία in Marinus' *Life of Proclus* and Damascius' *Life of Isidore* are meant to teach the readers *une leçon par l'exemple*, not unlike the *Lives* of Plutarch of Chaeronea.

3. As the editors M. de Pourcq and G. Roskam (2012 p. 1-8, quotation on p. 2) put it in the introduction to a recent volume on φιλοτιμία in the Middle Platonist Plutarch of Chaeronea and contemporary authors: "From its earliest occurrences in extant Greek literature, the notion of φιλοτιμία is thus characterized by a fundamental ambivalence." For examples of the ambivalent attitude towards φιλοτιμία in Greek literature, see also the seminal paper by F. Frazier (1988, esp. p. 112-116) on φιλοτιμία in Plutarch.

4. Anonymous *Prolegomena*, 23, 22-24; trans. Westerink 1962.

5. On Plato's predominantly negative view of φιλοτιμία, see Renaut 2013.

2. Proclus on the *philotimia* of Alcibiades

In the *First Alcibiades* Socrates tries to win over young Alcibiades to the cause of philosophy. The dialogue stresses the ambitions of this cocky young man who was in due time to become one of the most notorious politicians of the ancient world. As I just noted, φιλοτιμία is barely mentioned in the text. All the same it became a central theme in later evaluations of the character of Alcibiades. According to Plutarch in his *Life of Alcibiades*, for example, both Alcibiades' corrupters and Socrates appealed to his φιλοτιμία and ambition. The former did so with evil intentions, Socrates, on the other hand, tried to direct Alcibiades' φιλοτιμία towards noble things.⁶

Socrates' interest in this *enfant terrible* of Athenian high society called out for an explanation. Why did Socrates think him worthy of his affections? Proclus' discussion of this issue (*in Alc.* 133, 18-139, 9) leads him to dwell on the nature of φιλοτιμία as a noble emotion. Fusing the myth of the winged charioteer and the myth of Er from the *Republic* into one seamless account, Proclus (*in Alc.* 136, 10-1137, 1) explains Alcibiades' ambition from his experiences before birth. According to the myth of Er, those souls that have lived well will spend the next thousand years in heaven, while those souls that have behaved badly in a previous life are thrown into some subterranean space where they are punished. Proclus identifies those souls that spend time in heaven with the souls that according to the myth of the winged charioteer in the *Phaedrus* follow the Olympian gods when they tour the heavens in contemplation of the Forms. Each soul follows the god that suits his personality best. Alcibiades is one of those souls that before his present life followed in the train of Zeus, the universal ruler who is characterized by divine power and honour. Even though these souls get glimpses of real divine power and honour, they do not necessarily fully comprehend its nature.⁷ As the *Phaedrus*-myth insists, the human souls have a hard time controlling their horses. Therefore, unlike their divine leaders, they do not enjoy the uninterrupted contemplation of the Forms. In a similar vein, according to the myth of Er, some of those souls that had been awarded time in heaven had in their previous lives behaved well because they happened to live in a well-governed city, not because they had studied philosophy and grasped the true essence of morality. As a result, such souls, when the time to choose one's next life comes, tend to do so rashly and unwisely. In Proclus' word, such souls

6. Cf. Plutarch *Alc.* 6, 3 (on the abuse of Alcibiades' ambition by his corrupters) and 7, 5 (on Socrates' attempts to put Alcibiades' ambition to good use). On the theme of φιλοτιμία in general, see Nikolaidis 2012, and p. 43-44 in particular on these passages.

7. But what might this true, divine τιμή be? The word τιμή may also be used to refer to an office that is entrusted to someone (cf. LSJ s.v. τιμή I. 3). In the present context these offices with which the gods are honoured refer to the responsibility that is assigned to each one of them for a certain part of the universe.

(...) long themselves for a similar life and want to rule as many people as possible and to excel over the other people, just as those gods rule over the realm of becoming, and they want to steer the universe, just as those steer everything that is inferior to them. Out of desire for this, they rush at tyranny, power and honours (ταῖς τιμαῖς ἐπιτηδῶσι), and some of them choose a life dedicated to honour (φιλότιμος βίος), others the life of a tyrant.⁸

Ambitious people, because they labour under a misapprehension of the true, divine nature of power and honour, now pursue mere “images and shadows” (τὰ εἰδῶλα καὶ τὰς σκιὰς φιλοφρονοῦνται, *in Alc.* 136, 13) of it. All the same, since true power and honour are divine, the aspirations of tyrants and honour-loving people are noble impulses towards the intelligible, away from the material realm. As such they are superior to people who pursue a life of the fulfilment of bodily desires. The latter are souls that spent time in the subterranean prisons and as a result are now only interested in instant gratification (Proclus *in Alc.* 138, 3-9). For this reason, ambitious souls like that of Alcibiades stand to profit much from the attention of philosophers like Socrates who can help them to clarify their inborn, yet fuzzy, notions about power and honour.

In an alternative explanation of why the ambitious Alcibiades is worthy of Socrates’ attention, Proclus focuses on the relation between φιλοτιμία and θυμός. In the *Phaedrus*, for example, φιλοτιμία is especially associated with the good horse.⁹ As we can learn from Hermias’ commentary, the Athenian Neoplatonists assumed that the two horses stand for the mortal aspects of the human soul: the good horse represents θυμός, the bad horse the desiring element of the soul; the charioteer, by contrast, represents the immortal, rational aspect of the soul.¹⁰ The mortal aspects of the soul are hence themselves not rational, but whereas the bad horse only listens to brute force, the good horse, θυμός, is susceptible to reason. Therefore the good horse is an ally of reason in its attempts to keep the bad horse of non-rational desires in check, just as the military in the *Republic*, characterized by their θυμός, are auxiliaries to the philosopher-kings. In his *Commentary on the Alcibiades* Proclus picks up on this association between the reasonable θυμός and φιλοτιμία. He first points to Plato’s account of the degeneration of political constitutions in *Republic* VIII:

(...) let it be observed that after the constitution which is in accord with reason (κατὰ τὸν λόγον) comes the honour-regarding and timocratic form of government (φιλότιμος καὶ τιμοκρατική); for the latter arises immediately after

8. Proclus *in Alc.* 137, 13-19.

9. Cf. Plato *Phdr.* 253d6: the good horse is a τιμῆς ἐραστὴς μετὰ σωφροσύνης τε καὶ αἰδοῦς.

10. Cf. Hermias *in Phdr.* p. 193, 20 Couvreur 1901; p. 202, 14-15 Lucarini-Moreschini 2012 (“Ἴππους οὖν λαμβάνει θυμὸν καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν) commenting on Plato *Phdr.* 253d.

the former and the departure from the best form of life proceeds to this kind first, as Socrates observes in the *Republic*.¹¹

As is well-known, Socrates in *Republic* 8 describes five different types of constitution which are related to the tripartite psychology that he had developed previously. Each constitution derives its particular character from the type of soul that dominates it. The best constitution, the aristocracy, is led by souls in which the rational part is in charge. Next (*R.* 8, 545a2-550c3) comes the honour-loving constitution (φιλότιμος πολιτεία), which Socrates by want of an existing name calls τιμοκρατία. In this type of society, associated by Socrates with Sparta, souls dominated by their spirited part (θυμός) rule. After this second-best constitution follow three inferior types of constitution, which are dominated by souls in which the desiring element rules supreme.

Proclus takes a more positive view of timocracy than Plato does. Whereas the latter presents it as the first step on the way down already “laden with countless evils” (*R.* 8, 544c4-5), Proclus thinks of it as the final step on the way up. Reading the account of the gradual decline of constitutions as a description of the descent of the human soul into the realm of matter, Proclus claims that Plato calls φιλοτιμία “the ultimate tunic”.¹² These “tunics” (χιτῶνες), are layers of increasingly material substance that cover the immortal, rational soul when it descends and that together constitute the mortal, non-rational

11. Proclus *in Alc.* 138, 10-14; trans. O’Neill 1971.

12. Proclus *in Alc.* 138, 15-16: διὸ καὶ ὁ Πλάτων ἔσχατον χιτῶνα τῶν ψυχῶν ἀπεκάλει τὴν φιλοτιμίαν. The identification of φιλοτιμία with the ultimate tunic of the soul is a common place, see the informative discussion by Segonds (1985 p. 204, n. 3 to p. 115). As Segonds notes, the phrase as such does not occur in Plato’s writings, yet a remark along those lines is attributed to him by Dioscurides in his *Memories*, quoted in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 9, 507: “But besides being malicious, Plato was eager for fame (πρὸς τῇ κακοηθείᾳ καὶ φιλόδοξος), for he said that ‘The last thing we put off at death itself is the tunic of fame (ἔσχατον τὸν τῆς δόξης χιτῶνα), in our will, in our funerals, and in our tombs’” (trans. Douglas Olson 2008 adapted). The precise reading of the passage is a matter of dispute. Douglas Olson in his recent Loeb-edition follows the reading of the manuscripts (ἔσχατον τὸν τῆς δόξης χιτῶνα), against Kaibel’s conjecture (τὸν τῆς φιλοδοξίας χιτῶνα, cf. Kaibel 1887-1890). He comments (2008, p. 281 n. a): “These words do not occur in Plato’s extant writings: even if he wrote them, δόξης, which Dioscurides took to mean “fame,” may rather mean “false opinion,” cf. *Theaet.* 161e, and to alter the text as Kaibel does is to disguise the lengths to which this detractor will go in distorting what Plato said.” But what do funerals and tombs have to do with false opinion? Rather, I suggest, Plato censures the notoriously expensive burials and tombs of the Athenian elite, which were intended to secure post-mortem fame. Plato was not alone in his criticism, as appears from repeated restrictive legislation, for example (allegedly) by Solon and, later, by Demetrius of Phaleron in 317 B.C.E. Thus, Dioscurides did not distort the intention of Plato’s words, even though, of course, these do not support the slanderous suggestion that Plato himself was φιλόδοξος. Even so, there is no need to change the perfectly sound δόξης into φιλοδοξίας.

aspect of the soul.¹³ While soul itself is an active principle, matter is passive. Hence, the more material the descending soul grows, the more affections (πάθη) it is subjected to. The ultimate goal of human life is to strip off these “tunics” and return to our original pristine condition, so that we shall again be “naked”, as the Oracle says, and establish ourselves near God, having become pure and unalloyed rationality (λόγος)” (Proclus *in Alc.* 138, 22-139, 1). Souls that are characterized by *philotimia* are almost naked, i.e. purely rational, apart from that last tunic—as opposed to souls that are in the grip of all sorts of bodily desires.¹⁴ They “dwell in the porch of reason”, and “have characters that are closely related to reason”, since “our θυμός is nearer to it than the desiring element.”¹⁵

3. Alcibiades and Pericles: the ambivalence of *philotimia*

So far, Proclus has concentrated on the positive aspects of φιλοτιμία. Since the θυμός is the part of the mortal soul that is most closely related to the immortal, rational part of the soul, it may act as a powerful ally of reason in its fight against the unruly movements of the non-rational desiring part of the mortal soul. On the other hand, however, φιλοτιμία on its own, without the guidance of reason, turns into a corrupting force, as the case of Alcibiades aptly illustrates. In his *Commentary on the Alcibiades* Proclus highlights this ambivalence of φιλοτιμία by contrasting the good politician Pericles to the bad politician Alcibiades. Socrates (*Alc.* 1, 105a7-b3) suspects that Alcibiades, who is about to enter the political arena, hopes that the Athenians will think him more worthy of honour (ἄξιος τιμᾶσθαι) than Pericles or anyone else before him. From this phrase, Proclus deduces

13. Cf., e.g., Proclus *in Ti.* 3, 297, 20-4: the human soul, when it descends to earth, is invested with different χιτῶνες from the different elements, i.e. an aerial, watery and earthy one; finally, it receives the visible body.

14. Proclus *in Alc.* 138, 15-19: “For that reason Plato calls the desire for honour (φιλοτιμία) ‘the ultimate tunic’ of the souls. For while disdain for money and contempt for pleasure are present even in rather average souls too, many people that are thought of as impressive are overcome by honour, reputation and power.”

15. Cf. Proclus *in Alc.* 139, 3-9. The expression ἐν προθύροις τοῦ λόγου (“in the porch of reason”) is apparently inspired by Plato *Phlb.* 64c1 ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ νῦν ἤδη προθύροις (“the porch of the Good”), a phrase repeatedly quoted by Proclus and other Neoplatonists. The expression “porch of reason” in relation to the honour-loving θυμός, recurs in the course on the *Phaedrus* taught by Proclus’ master Syrianus and recorded by Hermias. Syrianus (*Hermias in Phdr.* p. 194, 9-13 Couvreur 1901; p. 202, 29-203, 13 Lucarini-Moreschini 2012) connects the myth of the winged charioteer to a discussion of the distribution of the parts of soul through the body in *Timaeus* 69e-70b. There the θυμός, the best of the mortal elements of the soul, i.e. Proclus’ “tunics” (χιτῶνες), is located in between the immortal, rational part of the soul in the head and the non-rational desiring part situated in the underbelly, as some sort of “guardhouse” located before the citadel, i.e. in a location comparable to Syrianus’ and Proclus’ “porch of reason”.

that, unlike Pericles, Alcibiades is not concerned about the good of the city or its preservation, but only about honour and power (τιμὴ καὶ δυναστεία). He is φιλότιμος, not προνοητικός, i.e. he does not imitate the providential care of the gods as a good politician should.¹⁶ “History tells us (ἡ ἱστορία λέγει)” thus Proclus (*in Alc.* 147, 10-15), that “Pericles was the most illustrious among the demagogues”, because he had studied philosophy with Anaxagoras. Alcibiades, by contrast, lacked this philosophical refinement, as appears from the fact that there is no limit to his ambitions. Since he wants to outdo both Pericles and anybody else before him, Proclus calls this sort of φιλοτιμία a πάθος (“emotion”):

For, generally speaking, each of the emotions is without limit and measure, since it is not controlled by reason. For reason is limit, while passion is without reason and limit.¹⁷

In fact, on the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, the political virtues in general are identified with the Peripatetic ideal of *metriopatheia* (measured emotions), as opposed to the subsequent purifying virtues which aim at *apatheia* (no emotions at all). These political virtues thus “adorn those who are still here and make them better by limiting and putting measure to the impulses of the θυμός and the desires, and the emotions (παθή) in general by eliminating false opinions”, as Marinus defines it in his *Life of Proclus* (18, 11-17) while paraphrasing Plotinus’ definition in *Enn.* 1, 2 [19] 2, 13-17.¹⁸

Marinus supplies this definition at the end of his discussion of Proclus’ political virtues and corresponding activities in the course of which he also addresses the issue of φιλοτιμία:

Proclus was indeed φιλότιμος, but he did not adopt this φιλοτιμία as an emotion (πάθος), as is the case with others. Rather he had this φιλοτιμία in regard to virtue and the good alone. And probably nothing great would ever happen among humans without such a force.¹⁹

16. Proclus *in Alc.* 146, 20-23. This ambivalence of φιλοτιμία had already been pointed out by Aristotle: “We blame the honour-loving man (φιλότιμος) as aiming at honour more than is right and from the wrong sources ... But we sometimes praise the honour-loving man as being manly and a lover of what is noble (φιλόκαλος)...” (Aristotle *EN* 4, 4, 1125b8-12; trans. Ross-Ackrill-Urmson 1980 adapted). In other words, the problem with some φιλότιμοι is that they want to receive as much honour as they can get, regardless of the reasons for which they are honoured. Plutarch *Agis*. 2, 3 (discussed by Nikolaidis 2012 p. 49-50) makes a similar point.

17. Proclus *in Alc.* 147, 26-28.

18. On the political virtues and their place on the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, see O’Meara 2003 p. 40-49 (in particular p. 41 on Plotinus *Enn.* 1, 2 [19] 2 and p. 44 on *metriopatheia*) and, more recently, Linguisti 2013, who rightly points out that whereas Plotinus had stressed the separation between the lower, political, virtues and the higher ones, later Platonists emphasised the continuity between these virtues. The present discussion of the role of *philotimia* in the *Life of Proclus* aptly illustrates this emphasis on continuity.

19. Marinus *Procl.* 16, 13-17. For the last remark, cf. Plato *Smp.* 178d1-4.

Marinus here presents Proclus' φιλοτιμία as an undeniable, yet somewhat uneasy fact about Proclus' personality. One might have expected that a celebrated philosopher such as Proclus would have managed to become totally "naked", completely stripped of all emotions. Yet, as we have seen, φιλοτιμία is the last and most difficult "tunic" to get rid off. Marinus hastens, however, to explain that Proclus' φιλοτιμία was not some unchecked emotion, but instead a noble impulse towards the good.

Marinus' remarks about Proclus' political activities as well as his φιλοτιμία, remind us that Proclus was not only a lofty metaphysician, but also a member of the Athenian elite. This aspect of personality hardly ever transpires in his many philosophical writings. In his *Hymn to Athena* (H. 7, 47-50), however, Proclus prays that Athena may not only give him spiritual goods, but also worldly ones such as "fame" (κλέος) and a "place of prominence among the people" (προεδρίην ἐνὶ λαοῖς). As Nicole Belayche has recently observed these prayers fit "parfaitement dans l'idéal de *philotimia* qui animait les membres des élites civiques et guidait leurs actions publiques".²⁰ According to Marinus (Marinus *Procl.* 12, 9-15), Proclus' teacher Plutarch of Athens put this love of honour of his young pupil to good philosophical use. "Serving himself of the φιλοτιμία of the young man as an instrument", he convinced Proclus to turn his notes of the lectures of Plutarch on the *Phaedo* into a proper book by telling him that if he did so, there would be a commentary under his name on the *Phaedo*.²¹

4. Intermediate conclusions

Let us for a moment pause and take stock of what we have learnt from Proclus' discussion of φιλοτιμία in the *Alcibiades*:

(1) Proclus thinks of the politicians' desire for honour as a noble impulse, since honour as such is a divine thing.

(2) The problem with politicians, however, is that they have lost view of true, intelligible honour and pursue a shadow of it in this world (public esteem). If they come to see what real, intelligible honour is, they will turn away from the political domain and concentrate on the philosophical pursuit of the intelligible.

(3) Φιλοτιμία is strongly associated with the θυμός, an element of the mortal soul that is related to but not identical with the immortal rational part of the soul. It needs the rational part to impose order and limit on it, the so-called political virtue of *metriopatheia*.

(4) "Disciplining and training φιλοτιμία for something better"—which

20. Belayche 2013 p. 97.

21. Likewise, Porphyry (*Plot.* 19, 20-22) claims to have prompted Plotinus to write down a more articulated and fuller version of his views by playing on his φιλοτιμία. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this journal for drawing my attention to these passages.

according to the anonymous *Prolegomena* is what Plato intended with the *Alcibiades*—is therefore as much a matter of the improvement of our thinking (a better articulation of the notion of honour) as that of a sub-rational part of our soul (i.e. the θυμός).

(5) Given that the θυμός is sub-rational, it follows that in addition to the philosophical clarification of the concept of honour, some other, sub-rational means of improvement are needed as well.

5. Moral lessons from history

In the second part of this paper, I shall concentrate on the use of history as a way to discipline the sub-rational θυμός, the last “tunic” that envelops our rational soul. When elsewhere in his *Commentary on the Alcibiades* (224, 1-226, 8) Proclus sketches his theory of *paideia*, he explains that whereas the perfection of the “tunic” related to physical desires is a matter of habituation (it is after all not rational at all), that of the tunic in between the desiring and rational part of the soul should be perfected by means of “admonishments and instructive discourse” (διὰ τῆς νοουθεσίας καὶ τῶν διδασκαλικῶν λόγων; in *Alc.* 225, 6-7; cf. 225, 3-4), just as one might expect in the case of a soul-faculty that is susceptible to reason, yet does not itself reason.²² It is the sort of instruction that one gives to children who may yet fail to fully understand why they should do something, yet can be taught that they should do it. According to the *Prolegomena*, the *Alcibiades* provides such admonishments in a subtle way. As its author observes, addressing people indirectly about their behaviour is often more effective than confronting them directly. For this reason, the *Alcibiades* deals with φιλοτιμία,

(...) not by itself, but in the individual. For thus, when we see other people rebuked, for example, or praised, we will sooner be compelled to admit the justice of the rebuke or to envy the people who are praised.²³

Thus the blame heaped on the historical figure of Alcibiades should serve as a lesson to us all, as should Marinus’ praise of the many virtues of Proclus. I now intend to show that Damascius’ *Life of Isidore*, or the *Philosophical History* as is sometimes called, is, at least in part, intended to fulfil a similar function.

In a stimulating article, Dominic O’Meara (O’Meara 2006) has compared Damascius’ *Life of Isidore* to Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*. The latter work describes how Proclus advances through the different stages of virtue until he reaches ultimate perfection and deification. This same Neoplatonic scale of virtues, O’Meara demonstrates, is essential for the understanding of Damascius’ *Life of Isidore*. However, whereas Marinus’ biography provides us

22. I discuss Proclus’ theory of *paideia* in van den Berg 2014.

23. Anonymous *Prolegomena* 15, 24-27; trans. Westerink 1962.

with a Neoplatonic saint, Damascius' work is populated with people who are not even nearly perfect. The patriarch Photius, who—even though we owe to him the survival of many fragments of this work—is clearly no friend of Damascius, puts this down to Damascius' desire to glorify himself. O'Meara, though, offers an alternative, more attractive explanation. From the fact that *The Life of Isidore* is dedicated to Theodora, an upper class pagan woman who had been a student of Damascius, he deduces that Damascius intended his book for the edification of his students and other philosophically minded readers.²⁴ Damascius would thus enter in the footsteps of, for example, the Platonist Plutarch of Chaereonea, whose famous *Parallel Lives* recall the way in which Damascius likes to juxtapose the people that he describes in contrasting pairs.²⁵ As we have seen, Proclus in a similar vein compared "what history tells us" about the good politician Pericles to the bad politician Alcibiades. Damascius in fact explicitly draws attention to the edifying function of history in general in the following passage:²⁶

For the *polloi* the persuasiveness and guidance offered by history (πειθὴ καὶ παραίνεσις ... ἀπὸ τῆς ἱστορίας) is more fitting than that provided by other kinds of discourse – ancient rather than recent history, since it conveys something more familiar to the listener.²⁷

It seems unlikely, though, that this general remark about the use of history applies without qualification to *The Life of Isidore*. The intended readership of *The Life of Isidore*, Theodora and her friends, would hardly think of themselves as *hoi polloi*. They were, after all, members of the pagan Alexandrian elite. So were most of the people portrayed by Damascius in *The Life of Isidore*. This is, I suggest, no coincidence. Damascius hoped to persuade his readers to pursue the path of virtue by holding their peers from recent history up as both positive and negative examples, rather than by lecturing them directly about the importance of virtue. Not surprisingly, φιλοτιμία, the ambivalent emotion characteristic of the upper class, plays an important role in these edifying stories.

6. *Philotimia* and *philodoxia* in Damascius *Life of Isidore*

Damascius parades a certain Maras from Syria who was extremely wealthy as a positive example of political virtue. Richness may bring out the worst in someone,

24. O'Meara 2006 p. 88. For Photius' view on Damascius and Theodora, see Photius *Bibl.* 181 = Athanassiadi 1999: 335-341 (testimonium III).

25. As O'Meara 2006 p. 82 points out.

26. O'Meara 2006 p. 88 n. 36.

27. Damascius, *Life of Isidore*, Fr. 29A Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 54 Zintzen 1967; trans. Athanassiadi 1999 adapted.

(...) but abundance did not induce arrogance (ὕβρις) in him; his extravagant wealth was not conspicuous, but he used it as an instrument of justice and philanthropy, providing for the needy and eager for honor in public affairs (φιλοτιμούμενος ἐν τοῖς πολιτεύμασιν). (...) Indeed, he did not consider it just behaviour if he merely abstained from wronging any of his fellow-citizens but only if he never tired of pouring benefactions on them.²⁸

Damascius here paints a traditional picture of φιλοτιμία: φιλοτιμία is a positive emotion that incites the rich to behave virtuously. In return for this, the rich receive the respect that is due to them: Damascius goes on to report that “Maras won his way into a proverb on the just treatment of one’s neighbours.”²⁹

The story may be compared to Marinus’ discussion of Proclus’ political virtues. Proclus by practising generosity, “instilled in Archiadas a certain zeal” to do likewise.³⁰ Because of his unparalleled munificence, he was always respectfully called “the most pious Archiadas”, even long after his death.³¹ So, just as Proclus inspired Archiadas to do good by setting an example of generosity, thus playing on the competitive ethos of the elite, in the same way the examples of Maras and Archiadas, carrying with them the promise of lasting public esteem, should stir the readers of Damascius and Marinus to do likewise.

In contrast to Maras, ambition did not bring out the best of Severianus. This Severianus, who came from one of the best families of Damascus, was a typically timocratic man. Damascius describes him as:

(...) ambitious (φιλόδοξος) to an unparalleled degree, yet also bringing to light through his honourable deeds and words (τιμίους ἔργους τε καὶ λόγους) the virtue hidden in his soul.³²

Φιλοδοξία is nearly synonymous to φιλοτιμία, be it that whereas φιλοτιμία may be positive as well as negative, φιλοδοξία has strong negative overtones (Nikolaidis 2012 p. 35). The reason why Damascius here uses φιλοδοξία is because, even though it prompts Severianus to do honourable deeds (τιμία ἔργα), he did not manage to control his θυμός.³³ Because of this he was a very harsh judge who became responsible for the deaths of a good number of

28. Damascius *Life of Isidore*, Fr. 92, 2-10 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 226 Zintzen 1967; trans. Athanassiadi 1999 adapted.

29. Tr. Athanassiadi 1999; the verb that Damascius uses ἐξενίκησεν (“won his way into”) is significant: φιλόνικος (fond of victory) is almost synonymous to φιλότιμος, cf., e.g., the description of the second-best constitution as φιλόνικός τε καὶ φιλότιμος (Plato *R.* 8, 545a1-2).

30. Marinus *Procl.* 14, 14, 14: καὶ ἔργῳ δὲ ζῆλόν τινα αὐτῷ ἐνέτικτεν.

31. Marinus *Procl.* 14, 25-27: ὡς καὶ τοὺς ἐφ’ ἡμῶν ἀνθρώπους, εἴποτε ἐθέλοιεν μνήμην αὐτοῦ ποιῆσθαι, οὐκ ἄλλως ἢ τὸν εὐσεβέστατον Ἀρχιάδαν εὐφίμῳ τῷ στόματι καλεῖν.

32. Damascius, *Life of Isidore* Fr. 108, 22-24 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 278 Zintzen 1967; trans. Athanassiadi 1999 adapted.

33. On what was wrong with Severianus, cf. O’Meara 2006 p. 81.

people, for which he would later have to pay the price. He could have avoided all this, if, as had been his original intention, he had become a philosopher rather than a politician. However, his impulsive nature came in the way and launched him into his ill-fated political career. Damascius stresses that it was not just a matter of “fate and necessity, but also of free choice, which is a bad thing”.³⁴ The example of Severianus too must have struck a chord with many of Damascius’ elitist readers, who were in a comparable position of having to choose between a life of philosophical contemplation and political action.

If Severianus is a bit of a tragic figure because he wrestles with his choice in life, this is not the case for the notorious Pamprepus. Damascius describes him as “being a lover of honour and not wishing to appear second to anyone”.³⁵ Since he realised that he could not outdo Proclus in philosophy, he turned to literary studies instead. Because of his burning desire to be the number one in his field, he was highly successful, and was, at least for a time, “honoured by the Athenians as a very noble teacher”.³⁶ However, his boundless ambition not only made him do the most magnificent things, but also the most terrible ones,³⁷ so that when Damascius makes up the bill he describes him as a beast (θηρίον) and his way of life as the opposite of the perfect Cronian, i.e. aristocratic life of the intellect.³⁸ In short, he is hardly an example to aspire to.

7. Conclusion

Philosophers like to believe that they influence politicians, and students of the history of philosophy are eager to find clues that such was indeed the case. In this paper, however, we have seen the opposite: the impact of political reality on the study of philosophy. As the quotation from Peter Brown at the start from this paper brought out, φιλοτιμία was a very powerful element in late antique society. Students who came to the Neoplatonists to receive the only form of higher education available at that time all belonged to an elite that was preoccupied with this consuming desire for public recognition. Many promising students like Severianus and Pamprepus, who could have continued to become serious philosophers, eventually turned to politics and other occupations that offered better opportunities to gain public honours than the metaphysical star-gazing in which the Neoplatonists excelled. In

34. Ἡ εἰμαρμένη καὶ τὸ χρέων, ἔτι δὲ τὸ ἀνθαίρετον, ὃ τι ἐστὶ κακόν, Fr. 108, 16-17 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 278 Zintzen 1967.

35. Ὁ δὲ φιλότιμος ὦν καὶ οὐδενὸς ἐθέλων φαίνεσθαι δεύτερος, Fr. 112B1 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 289 Zintzen 1967.

36. Ἐτιμᾶτο πρὸς τὸν Ἀθηναίων, οἷα διδάσκαλος οὐκ ἀγεννής, Fr. 112B, 16-17 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 290 Zintzen 1967.

37. Πραγμάτων ... μεγίστων τε καὶ κακίστων, Fr. 112B, 17-18 Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 290 Zintzen 1967.

38. Fr. 112A Athanassiadi 1999, Fr. 287 Zintzen 1967.

this way, political reality put the topic of φιλοτιμία on the Neoplatonic agenda. If it had not been so important in society, it would not have become a central issue in the Neoplatonic interpretation of the *Alcibiades*, the very first dialogue that those students read. Neither would it have played such a prominent role in Damascius' *Life of Isidore*. Even though it may sometimes seem differently, the Neoplatonists did not work in splendid isolation from the brutal outside world.

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