

MYTHIC PARADIGMS AND THE PLATONIC LIFE: BECOMING A BACCHUS IN DAMASCIUS' *PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY*

GRAEME MILES
*University of Tasmania**

Abstract: The fragmentary biographical work by Damascius, known as either the *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical History*, appears to have begun with the myths of the dismemberment of Osiris and Dionysus. These programmatic allusions establish an important theme in the text that followed: 'becoming a Bacchus'. This, as is clear from Damascius' *Phaedo Commentary*, refers to the process of unifying and liberating oneself from the body at the 'cathartic' stage in the Neoplatonic scale of virtues. The acquisition of likeness to this specific deity is, therefore, a vital though far from final stage in the progression towards the ultimate goal of late antique Platonic philosophy: 'becoming like god as far as possible'.

Keywords: Damascius, biography, *Philosophical History*, *Life of Isidore*, Dionysus/Bacchus

I. Introduction

Damascius' biographical work, the *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical History*, began, it seems, with myths: the dismemberment and reassembling of Dionysus and Osiris. There has been, in the scholarship on this text, only a little discussion of what this mythic opening means: a few remarks by Clemens Zintzen and more recently by Polymnia Athanassiadi.¹ More, however, remains to be said in clarifying the significance of these myths for the text that followed. In particular, this opening needs elucidation in relation to what it means to 'become a Bacchus' (both in the *Philosophical History* and more generally in Damascius' thought) and where this state might lie in the Neoplatonic philosophical progression. This last query, as will emerge, becomes in part a question of what the relation is between becoming a particular god (Dionysus/Bacchus) and the notion of 'becoming like god in so far as is possible', the accepted aim of Platonic philosophy.² In clarifying the conceptual basis underlying Damascius' work I shall draw on his *Phaedo Commentary*, which also addresses the notion of becoming a Bacchus and the position of this process in the broader ascent through the scale of virtues.³ The *Philosophical History*, by its nature as a biographical text, considers the development of virtues and the possibilities of becoming a Bacchus and of godlikeness through the exemplification of these things in specific individuals.

It is not possible, with a fragmentary text like this one, to be entirely confident of the overall structure. The reconstruction of Athanassiadi, however, like the earlier ones of Rudolf Asmus and Clemens Zintzen, takes Photius' first account (paragraphs 1–230 of codex 242) to give the spine of

* graeme.miles@utas.edu.au. My thanks go to audiences at the 37th conference of the Australasian Society for Classical Studies (2016) at the University of Melbourne and at the University of Western Australia's Classics Seminar Series for their questions and warm reception of this paper. I am grateful to the journal's anonymous readers for several helpful suggestions.

¹ Zintzen (1967) 6–9; Athanassiadi (1999) 74–79.

² The phrase comes, of course, from *Theaetetus* 176b2–3. For some discussion of its reception, see Sedley (1999); Baltzly (2004); Runia (2013); Russell

(2004); Tsuchihashi (2015). Further on Damascius and his times, see Steel (1978); Chuvin (1991); Rappe (2000); Watts (2005); Athanassiadi (2006); Beauchamp (2008); Brisson (2008); van Riel (2010).

³ Krulak (2017) astutely discusses Damascius' Bacchic ideal in relation to the tension between philosophy and 'the hieratic art'. Though he too considers the treatment of this ideal in the *Philosophical History* and *Phaedo Commentary*, the present article is concerned primarily with the articulation of this ideal through myth and its concrete depiction in character.

the text, and arranges the fragments within this structure.⁴ This is very likely correct, but for the purposes of the present discussion it is important only that the fragments which I am treating as programmatic did indeed fall at the beginning of the text. This is surely even more likely; if Photius did deviate from the order of Damascius' work, it is probable that he would have done this later in his summary rather than when outlining the beginning. Beyond the programmatic position of these fragments the following discussion will also consider some further patterns, namely contrasts and comparisons between individuals which Damascius appears to be inviting his readers to make. These, as will emerge, are considerably less dependent on the order in which the text originally appeared.

Another kind of structural principle in the text (complementary to the sequence established from Photius) has been proposed by Dominic O'Meara, who sees the Neoplatonic scale of virtues as Damascius' main tool in weighing up the strengths and weaknesses of his characters. The assessment of such 'patterns of perfection' does indeed seem to have figured prominently in Damascius' account, though it was evident to Photius (as indeed it is to O'Meara) that imperfection is just as much the author's subject.⁵ Indeed, the negativity of many of Damascius' remarks about his colleagues, even those whom he clearly respects, has often been noted. He commonly mixes criticisms with his praise – as, to take one example, in his account of Asclepiodotus: 'Asclepiodotus was not perfect in his talents, as he seemed to be to most people, but while he was very sharp at bringing out perplexities, he was not especially acute in understanding, nor was he consistent with himself, both in other regards and concerning more divine matters, which are invisible and intelligible and exceptional in Plato's thought.' Damascius goes on both to praise Asclepiodotus' excellence in mathematics and empirical enquiry into the natural world and musical scales, but sharply criticizes him for collapsing ethics and metaphysics down to this same level (85A Ath.; 127 Zintzen). This was hardly the only view that could be taken of a philosopher to whom Proclus himself dedicated his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, addressing him in glowing terms as his 'dearest friend' (φίλων φίλτατον) and 'one possessing a mind worthy of philosophy' (φιλοσοφίας ἐπάξιον ἔχοντα τὸν νοῦν).⁶ The case of Marinus is similar: the biographer of Proclus, according to Damascius, 'did not reap the deep furrow of ideas, from which shoot forth the wise contemplation of the nature of the truly existent' (97F Ath.; 144 Zintzen). Yet this is the man to whom Proclus dedicated his essay on the myth of Er (*In R.* 2.96.2) and whose extant *Proclus or On Happiness* brilliantly combines the rhetorical norms of encomium with the developed, Neoplatonic scale of virtues. Other views, plainly, were possible; in the former of these two examples the narrating voice implicitly invites us to side with him (the knowing diagnostician of philosophic souls) rather than 'the majority' who are misled by mere mathematical acumen.

It may be no great surprise that a thinker as incisive as Damascius should have hard and contentious things to say about his contemporaries. What I would like to explore, however, is how this fits with the more usual function of philosophical biography: the establishment of ideals. Of course, in any analysis of personal shortcomings there is an implication of what a person *should*

⁴ Building on the efforts of earlier scholars, who had largely identified the fragments, the first attempt at a reconstruction was that of J.R. Asmus (1909; 1910), who published a German translation of his version of the text, though without the Greek. Half a century later, Zintzen (1967) produced a Greek edition of the fragments, which is admirably methodical and accompanied by excellent notes, but far from readable. More recently, Athanasiasi's edition and translation greatly improves the text's accessibility, though L. Brisson (2001) is doubtless correct that serious students of the text will still wish to consult Zintzen as well. It has, consequently, become the convention to cite the fragment numbers of both Athanasiasi and Zintzen.

⁵ O'Meara (2006). See also Watts (2013) and, most recently on the ideal of the philosopher in the text, Trabattoni (2016).

⁶ *In Prm.* 618. G.R. Morrow and J. Dillon speculate that Proclus may have wished to draw Asclepiodotus from his physical enquiries towards higher things ((1987) 20 n.6). The dedication implies at least that Proclus believed Asclepiodotus to have the capacity to apprehend this summative text of the Neoplatonic curriculum. Damascius' philosophical work both benefits from the systematization of Proclus and reacts strongly against him. For a detailed overview of Damascius' response to Proclus, see van Riel (2010).

be, but beyond this Damascius paints a picture of a fragmented ideal, with some characteristics in one person and some in another. Even Isidore himself does not escape criticism, though he emerges with a fuller set of virtues than do many others. This possibility appears in large part because of the broad canvas on which Damascius works; the focus beyond any single individual allows for this composite portrait of human excellence and human failing.

The fragmented ideal also, I will argue, is reflected in some mythic images of fragmentation (Dionysus/Bacchus and Osiris), which place this feature of Damascius' narrative within his broader philosophical and religious convictions, in particular evoking the notion of the descent of souls into matter as a descent into fragmentation, and the possibility of reuniting oneself and returning to an initial state of unity, becoming a Bacchus.⁷ A general supposition of my approach is that philosophical biography is in a meaningful sense a type of philosophical writing; if we can take philosophy in this period to be much more than a set of doctrines, a way of living and thinking (as Pierre Hadot influentially argued),⁸ the biographical texts become not merely sources of data to recount in the introduction to books on ancient philosophy before moving on to the 'hard stuff', but works that are essential to the overall philosophical programme of late antique Platonism, exploring in narrative terms the possibilities of integration (and disintegration) of human beings, and especially of philosophers.

II. Dismembering and reconstituting Dionysus

To turn, then, to Damascius' myths. Very early in the *Philosophical History*, Damascius appears to have discussed the Egyptian myths of Osiris and Isis (3A–C Ath.; 3, 4 Zintzen).⁹ The more securely attested part of this passage (3A Ath.; 3 Zintzen) runs: 'Among the gods, the Egyptians especially used to worship Osiris and Isis, believing that Osiris was the universal demiurge (τὸν μὲν ἅπαντα δημιουργεῖν), arranging matter by forms and numbers, and that Isis watered and nurtured his creation through innumerable channels of overflowing life.'¹⁰ Already in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, allegories of various kinds are applied to Osiris and Isis, though none is identical with that employed by Damascius.¹¹ Equally old, dating back to Herodotus (2.144), is the equation of Osiris and Dionysus in what appears to be a related fragment (3B Ath.; 4 Zintzen): 'Some say that he is Dionysus, others that he is another god. He was torn in pieces by the *daimōn* Typhon; this was a great consternation to the Egyptians, and his dismemberment (*sparagmos*) is everlastingly remembered.' The material is not, of course, astonishingly new, but its placement at the beginning of a collective biography calls for discussion.

The fragments preceding these had introduced the notion of the Egyptians as the oldest people (1 Ath.; 1 Zintzen) and an Iamblichian understanding of the ritual actions of Egyptian priests (2 Ath.; 2 Zintzen).¹² While this is certainly relevant to the Egyptian (Alexandrian) setting of much of Damascius' narrative, as Zintzen suggests, I propose that the references to the dismemberment of Osiris and Dionysus also pick up Damascius' evident interest in these myths as symbols of the fragmentation implicit in descent into the human condition, and fixes these myths firmly in readers' minds as preparation for the gallery of imperfect and partial philosophers and others to follow. They also prefigure the importance of one particular rung on the scale of virtues, as I shall discuss below.

⁷ It may well occur to readers to wonder whether the *Philosophical History* suggests the possibility of assimilation to gods other than Dionysus/Bacchus. In the surviving fragments there is no indication that there was any such discussion, though in the current state of the text it is, of course, impossible to be sure.

⁸ On philosophy as a way of life, Hadot (1995) and (2004) remain fundamental.

⁹ Asmus ((1909) 268, 280) first attributed Zintzen's *fr.* 4 (Athenassiadi's 3B) to Damascius.

¹⁰ Translation from Athenassiadi (1999), modified.

¹¹ On this text, see the commentary of J.G. Griffiths (1970). Damascius' association of Isis with water is especially striking in comparison with Plutarch, who generally does not follow the traditional, Egyptian connection between Isis and water, but does imply it on two occasions (355F, 365F). See Griffiths (1970) 303–04.

¹² Athanassiadi ((1999) 75 n.3) notes that 2B is a summary of Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* 10.6–7. On Damascius' criticisms of Proclus, often returning to positions inspired by Iamblichus, see n.6 above.

The longest Neoplatonic discussion of Dionysus' dismemberment is in Damascius' *Commentary on the Phaedo* (1.1–12),¹³ where he is commenting on Socrates' argument that philosophy is a preparation for death, yet the philosopher rejects suicide. What is important in this passage for understanding the allusions to Dionysus' and Osiris' dismemberments in the *Philosophical History*, is the following: Damascius draws upon the Orphic myth in which Dionysus, son of Zeus and Persephone, is made king of the gods by his father. Hera and the Titans plot against him and lure him out to join the Titans, who are pretending to be Bacchantes.¹⁴ They hand him a *thyrsus* in place of his sceptre and distract him with some toys, in particular a mirror. While he gazes on himself in the mirror they dismember and devour him. Athena saves his heart, Apollo whatever else remains. The Titans are then burned to ashes, from which humanity is created. Dionysus is reborn from Semele.¹⁵ As is often the case in commentaries, Damascius reports the views of predecessors with partial agreement, before making his own case. Porphyry, he says, had hinted at (προϋπενόησεν) the view that the 'custody' or 'prison' (φρουρά) in which the soul finds itself in the body is 'of the Titanic order and culminates in Dionysus' (*In Phd.* 1.2).¹⁶ Creation, Porphyry said, divides into the indivisible and divisible, the former being under the rule of Zeus, the latter under Dionysus. Each has his own set of subordinate deities: the Olympians under Zeus, the Titans under Dionysus (*In Phd.* 1.3). Damascius disagrees, however, saying that the Titans cannot be under Dionysus as no manifold (ἄριθμός) opposes or destroys its governing monad (*In Phd.* 1.4). Dionysus, he proposes, has both a divisible and an indivisible character; he is indivisible when seated on the throne of Zeus, divisible when proceeding from there into the universe: 'such is the nature of the universe, which has rather the character of an aggregate and is held together by a totality whose parts are distinct' (*In Phd.* 1.4).

This, then, is the cosmological part of the myth, but it is in the birth of humanity from the ashes of the Titans that Damascius approaches its implications for human beings. Because of our origin from the fragments of the Titans, who had recently consumed Dionysus, human beings partake of both natures. When we are fragmented and irrational, we are Titanic; 'when we come together to [unity] we become Dionysi, entirely complete' (ὅταν δὲ εἰς ἐκεῖνο συμβῶμεν, Διόνυσοι γινόμεθα τετελειωμένοι ἀτεχνῶς; *In Phd.* 1.9).¹⁷ At this point, Damascius can bring together the bodily 'prison' of the *Phaedo* and the Orphic myth; Dionysus is the one who 'releases the bonds on whomever he wishes' (ὁ λύων τὸν δέσμον ὃν ἂν ἐθέλη; *In Phd.* 1.10);¹⁸ he is the cause of release, a view which Damascius supports with the quotation of an Orphic hymn (*fr.* 232 Kern; *In Phd.* 1.10–11). The term of imprisonment itself is defined by the gods, and so, while the philosopher aspires to be freed by Dionysus (and to become Dionysus), he or she does not commit suicide as it would be an offence against the gods (1.12).

A further discussion of how one becomes a Dionysus/Bacchus appears later in this same commentary. At sections 1.165–72 Damascius discusses the notion of philosophy as initiation, and beyond this the relationship between philosophical ways of becoming liberated from the body

¹³ On Damascius' authorship of this text, which is not ascribed to an author in the manuscript as the beginning is missing, see Westerink (2009) 15–17. It consists, in fact, of two separate series of lectures on the *Phaedo*.

¹⁴ For a broader discussion of Damascius and Orphism, see Brisson (1991).

¹⁵ Edmonds (1999) is rightly sceptical of attempts to project the myth in the form found in Damascius back into the early Orphism of the sixth century BC. I am concerned, however, with the understanding and use of this myth specifically by Neoplatonists, especially Damascius, rather than with how this may differ from or resemble earlier Orphic and other sources.

¹⁶ Tr. Westerink (2009).

¹⁷ The Orphic myth is an important one for late antique Platonists. See on this Brisson (1987). Yates (2004) compares this myth with that of the castration of Ouranos and creation of the Melian Nymphs. On this passage and the discussion of the scale of virtues, see Demulder and van Riel (2015).

¹⁸ The wording also recalls the beginning of the speech of the Demiurge to the gods at *Timaeus* 41a7–8, where too the making and dissolving of bonds in the cosmos is discussed.

and approaching the gods, on the one hand, and ritual means, on the other. The two approaches work in parallel and bear close structural similarities. Progression in the scale of virtues (from civic to cathartic to theoretic virtues) is likened to progression through the grades of the mysteries (*In Phd.* 1.167), and just as these mysteries aim, Damascius says, to bring the souls of participants back to their origin, so too the philosopher's progression in the virtues achieves this same end (*In Phd.* 1.168). Ritual and philosophical activity both aim at the same goal and resemble each other. They are not, however, interchangeable. Damascius asserts that the conjunction (συναφή) produced by philosophical means is 'not so exact (ἀκριβῆ) nor in accordance with the ineffable union (κατὰ τὴν ἀπόρρητον ἔνωσιν)'.¹⁹

The last passage of concern for this discussion is one of the most cited in Damascius:

The first Bacchus is Dionysus, whose ecstasy manifests itself in dancing [*basis*] and shouting [*iachē*] that is, in every form of movement, of which he is the cause according to the *Laws* [II 627a5–d4]; but one who has sanctified himself to Dionysus, in that he has become like him (ὁμοιωθεὶς αὐτῷ), also shares in his name. When a man leads a Dionysian life, his troubles are already ended and he is free from his bonds and released from custody, or rather from the confined form of life; such a man is the philosopher in the stage of purification.

Some primarily honour philosophy, for instance Porphyry and Plotinus, and many other philosophers. Others primarily honour the hieratic art, such as Iamblichus and Syrianus and Proclus and all the other hieratics. Plato, however, recognizing that there were many arguments in favour of each, brought them together to a single truth, when he called the philosopher 'Bacchus'. For the one who has separated himself from the realm of becoming (γένεσις), if he should be placed in the middle, will draw each of these together. Nonetheless it is clear that [Plato] honours the philosopher by calling him Bacchus, just as we honour Intellect by the name of 'god' and light of which we can speak by the name of the ineffable light.²⁰

What do these dense lines tell us? Dionysus is the source of all motion (*kinēsis*), and so plays a demiurgic role in establishing the cosmos. The myth discussed earlier, in which the dismemberment of Dionysus was a foundational image for the dispersal of the soul into the body and of the world-soul into the universe, is once more implicit. So too is the result of this Dionysian nature for human beings, the possibility of reassembling oneself into the image of Dionysus. A human being becomes a Bacchus, that is, by coming to resemble the first Bacchus, Dionysus. The human Bacchus or Dionysus is specifically one who has released himself from the bonds of the body, that is, who has mastered the cathartic virtues. This release can be achieved by two distinct but complementary paths: the philosophical and the hieratic. Whether such a distinction continues beyond the level of the cathartic virtues is not made clear here, and the existence of a class of hieratic or theurgic virtues would suggest that it does not.

Just as the *Commentary on the Phaedo* moves from the discussion of the Orphic myth of dismemberment and rebirth to examine the relationship of hieratic and philosophical approaches to liberation, so too the *Philosophical History* appears to have made a similar transition from the myths of the dismemberments of Dionysus and Osiris to reunification of the soul and the nature and the purpose of the hieratic art and philosophy.²¹ The sequence of thought appears to have been very similar; an 'esoteric', allegorical description of the descent of souls into matter and the potential for their reintegration and liberation led to a discussion of the ways in which reunification might be brought

¹⁹ *In Phd.* 1.168. For discussion of this complex passage, see Krulak (2017).

²⁰ *In Phd.* 1.171–72, adapting heavily Westerink's translation (2009).

²¹ The order of Photius' summary, followed by both Zintzen (1967) and Athanassiadi (1999), makes clear that

Damascius moved from the passage on Osiris and Isis (3 Ath.; 3 Zintzen) to the reunification of the soul (4C Ath.; 5 Zintzen). An intervening fragment, really a *testimonium* (4B Ath.; 3 Zintzen), is a remark by Photius on a quirk of Damascius' style.

about: philosophy and theurgy. Placing this discussion at the beginning of a collective biography which will map the virtues and the imperfections of a host of philosophers and others indicates, I believe, Damascius' purpose in presenting us with these character-sketches and accounts for the hardness of criticism that Photius (and many others) have found objectionable; these are examples of differing degrees of reintegration of the self, differing stages on the road to divinization.²²

The inclusion of Osiris in the *Philosophical History* alongside (and equated with) Dionysus also requires some comment. The motif of dismemberment and reintegration is, evidently, the point of comparison, assisted by the ancient syncretism of the two deities. The dismemberment by Typhon, as well as resembling Dionysus' dismemberment by the Titans, also suggests a theme which will be of central importance in the text to follow: the Typhonic age which Damascius presents, in which the Christians (whose identification with Typhon is a standard late antique Platonist code) have come to dominance.²³ Quite apart from the souls of individuals, the world itself, in Damascius' view, has been overrun by the forces of irrationality and discord, and is in need of a return to unity in Dionysus and beyond that in Zeus.

The introduction of the myth of the dismemberment of Osiris by its nature evokes the antagonist of Osiris, Typhon. Though 'the Typhonic' is often equated with the Christians in Damascius, as it is in Marinus' *Proclus*,²⁴ this is not exclusively so. In fact, the most extreme example of the Typhonic for Damascius is the pagan agitator, grammarian, poet and self-styled prophet Pamprepius. The details of Pamprepius' career are complex and well documented,²⁵ but need not concern us directly here. What is most important for understanding Damascius' account is that he considered Pamprepius and his prophecies of the resurgence of paganism to be largely responsible for the persecutions of AD 489, in which many of Damascius' close friends and family suffered. Opposite to Damascius' ascetic ideal as embodied in Serapion, Pamprepius is said to be ambitious, avaricious, lustful, undisciplined. While Serapion is a vestige of the Golden Age, 'Pamprepius was Typhonic, and was a beast yet more many-headed and more furious than Typhon. There is no one now alive who does not know what Pamprepius was like, his soul and his fate' (112A Ath.; 287 Zintzen).

Pamprepius is clearly, then, a counter-image to the ideal, but he and the Typhonic nature that he represents are also a cosmic necessity. A brief fragment states that 'Pamprepius was a fit instrument of that necessity that is contrary to the more beautiful' (ὄργανον ὁ Παμπρέπιος ἐπιτήδειον τῆς πρὸς τὸ κάλλιον ἀντιπνεούσης ἀνάγκης ἦν: 113D Ath.; 295 Zintzen). This is more than just resignation at the way events turned out; Damascius shares with other late antique Platonists a sense that evil needs to exist in the universe to oppose the good. Moreover, corrupt individuals can be chosen by the gods precisely to act in accordance with their own evil inclinations when this is required by the divine plan. Proclus in his *Commentary on Plato's Republic* makes precisely this point in his discussion of the violation of the oaths by Pandarus in *Iliad* 4:

For this reason Athena, going forth in accordance with the plan [*nous*] of her father, does not move just anyone to this deed, but she is said to seek out Pandarus, who is especially suited to the action [*energeia*] which will bring about punishment:

searching if she might find somewhere Pandarus, opposed to the gods (*Il.* 4.88).²⁶

²² On the assessment of characters against the scale of virtues, see O'Meara (2006).

²³ The fundamental article on these concealed allusions is Saffrey (1975). See most recently Lamberton (2016), which addresses the issue with particular reference to Proclus' *Commentary on Plato's Republic*. Barnes (2013) argues strenuously against the existence of such code-words in late antique Platonism.

²⁴ See Marinus *Proclus* 15 on 'Typhonic winds'.

²⁵ On Pamprepius in Damascius, see Athanassiadi (1999) 269 with n.301.

²⁶ Proclus clearly takes *antitheos* in the Homeric line in this instance as 'opposed to the gods', as is made clear shortly afterwards (*In R.* 1.104.2), where it is glossed in this way. He would certainly have known that this sense would not work on all occasions in Homer.

For such a type really is rare and difficult to find, one that will submit to doing anything and having anything done to them, being opposed to divinity because of the Gigantic²⁷ and utterly brazen disposition of the soul. So then just as doctors are not responsible for the incisions and cauterizations, but rather the diseases of those being treated are responsible, so the gods too are not responsible for these acts of impiety regarding the oaths and the treaty, but rather the dispositions of those performing these acts. And secondly, in addition to this, we should think not that Athena is said to go forth and compel Pandarus to action, but only to test whether he would give himself over to this action.

The brief fragment concerning Pamprepicus, in conjunction with the rest of Damascius' picture of this individual, suggests that his assessment of Pamprepicus' role must have been similar. Pamprepicus' corruption had made him the perfect instrument for the evil that providence required.

To return, however, to the positive image of the Bacchus; these myths are treated as more than just arbitrary human stories to convey cosmological and anthropological beliefs. Speaking of the dismemberment of Orpheus in his *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, Proclus compares the poet's death with the dismemberment of Dionysus, stating that Orpheus is said to suffer this end because he was a leader of Dionysian initiations (1.175.1), and adding that such dismemberment is a σύνθημα of Dionysus. This is more than merely a sign or symbol, if we take these to be culturally conventional coinages. A σύνθημα, in the late Neoplatonic view, bears a natural and essential relation to the deity of whom it is a sign.²⁸ This insistence on *sparagmos* in the opening of the *Philosophical History* signals then the centrality of Dionysus, liberator and unifier, to Damascius' thought and to this text in particular. Much as Proclus begins his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* with a complex invocation, embracing the gods from the highest levels down to the lowest, Damascius begins his portrait of his master and his age with myths that convey the fragmentation of that age and the individuals whom he knew, and that aimed towards the reintegration of both. The myth, in short, is regarded as an interpretive tool, but beyond this is also a vehicle through which to live and a ritually efficacious *sunthēma/sumbolon*.

Only one person is explicitly said to have become a Bacchus in the surviving fragments of the *Philosophical History*: the hermit Heraiscus. Though it is, of course, possible that this claim was made for others (and it is highly likely that Isidore was so described), the only surviving reference is a brief fragment: 'And Heraiscus had become a Bacchus, as the dream prophesied to him' (76A Ath.; 172 Zintzen; Suda II 572.32 s.v. Heraiskos). The fragments concerning this individual, gathered by Athanassiadi as her fragment 76, give some indications. In addition to his kind character (76B Ath.; 173 Zintzen), Damascius remarks on Heraiscus' prophetic powers (76A, 76B Ath.; 172, 173 Zintzen) and ability to distinguish animate and inanimate statues of the gods (76E Ath.; 174 Zintzen). Despite his relative weakness in intellectual combat and reluctance to pursue arguments to their conclusions (76D Ath.; 182 Zintzen), he had the 'opposite gift' of *eumoiria*, which appears to mean that he possessed a natural inclination towards intellection,²⁹ rather than to discursive argument. This does not mean that Damascius placed a low value on argument, as is obvious from his own works as well as his careful valuations of the argumentative abilities of others in the *Philosophical History*, but that, if one part must dominate over the other, then purity of spirit and dedication to reunification of oneself and union with the gods was a higher priority. Similarly, Serapion, the other teacher of Isidore, lived an isolated life (μυνάδα βίον: 111 Ath.; 34 Zintzen) and had little interest in formal philosophical education. Nonetheless, his constant focus on 'the inner and

²⁷ The Giants for Proclus represent rebellion against the gods, due to the traditional myth of the Gigantomachy and their use as an image of materialism in Plato's *Sophist*. Marinus speaks of Christians as 'vulture-giants' (γυπογγάντων) at *Proclus* 15.19. On this term, see Saffrey et al. (2001) 118–19 n.8.

²⁸ On *sumbola* and *sunthēmata*, see Coulter (1976); Struck (2004).

²⁹ On *eumoiria*, see Saffrey et al. (2001) 170–71 n.2, which cites *PH fr.* 73 (Suda II 459.3 s.v. εὐμοῖρία) for the definition: '[inclination] towards vision and intellection of the truth and falsehood [is] *eumoiria*'. See also Proclus *In Ti.* 3.52.16; Marinus *Proclus* 33.

the indivisible' makes him a representative of 'the age of Cronus' (111 Ath.; 33 Zintzen). It is worth noting that of the 'three or four books' which Serapion owned, it is the poems of Orpheus which Damascius mentions as the special object of his devotion. These poems, mentioned often by Neoplatonists as a sacred text, are implied to be all the textual assistance that a great soul like Serapion needs. His preference is much more than an aesthetic one; it is, rather, an indication of his reading of this text as spiritual exercise (much as the poems of Homer or the Chaldaean oracles were used).³⁰ The choice of the *Orphic Poems* also implies a high level of philosophical and spiritual development; in Marinus' *Proclus* this text is studied by the protagonist under the supervision of his teacher Syrianus as part of his development of the theurgic virtues.³¹

It is highly likely that Isidore, the protagonist of the biography and the student of the Bacchus Heraiscus, was also credited with attaining the Dionysian liberation. Isidore, like every other character in the text, is not described as faultless: his dinner parties were frugal to the point of absurdity (24C Ath.; 51 Zintzen), he was a little gullible at times (17 Ath.; 21 Zintzen) and had only an average memory (14 Ath.; 17 Zintzen). In regards to the most important characteristics, however, Damascius has nothing but praise. 'To sum it all up in a word, he clearly illustrated in his deeds the saying of Pythagoras, that a human being is most like god' (ὁμοιότατον ἔχειν τῷ θεῷ τὸν ἄνθρωπον). The meaning of this likeness to god Damascius spells out for his readers: eagerness to do good and generosity to all, lifting of souls above all kinds of evil, rescuing bodies from unjust or impious suffering, participation in public affairs, as far as possible (26B Ath.; 24 Zintzen). Despite the overt reference to Pythagoras, Plato is also, of course, behind this passage, in particular *Theaetetus* 176b2–3: 'becoming like god, so far as this is possible' (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δύνατον), a phrase whose influence is difficult to overestimate. Damascius knowingly quotes the final part of this phrase as well, suggesting a very specific limitation in his own age on the operation of the godlike sage; it is Christian dominance which limits the possibilities for political action of Isidore, just as it is in the life of Proclus, as we see it through Marinus. Nonetheless, as Isidore approaches this likeness to god, despite his limitations in less important virtues, he is able to assist in the similar ascent of others.

III. Becoming a Bacchus and likeness to God

What then is the relationship between 'becoming Bacchus' and 'likeness to god'? Though it might be tempting to equate the two, this is not in fact the case. Gathering oneself together, becoming a Bacchus, is not the end of the process of ascent. This describes in mythic terms the philosopher's task at the level of the cathartic virtues. Damascius' *Commentary on the Phaedo* 1.138–51 offers a general survey of the scale of virtues as this was understood by late antique Platonists: though the virtues each have a constant character at all levels, they appear differently at each (*In Phd.* 1.149). The lowest level of the virtues are those found in the body itself, the natural virtues; next come the ethical virtues of normal, civilized behaviour (acquired by habit and true opinion), then the civic or political virtues (as discussed in the *Republic*). Beyond these come the cathartic (that is, purifying) virtues, concerned with separation from the life of the body. Since Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.2.3), these had been regarded as the topic of the *Phaedo*.³² Beyond these lie the theoretic or contemplative virtues, by which the soul practises intellection and comes to know the intelligible. Beyond this again there is somewhat less consistency in our sources, but Damascius lists the virtues as the paradigmatic (or archetypal) and the hieratic ones. When encountering terms of myth like Bacchus or Typhon in the texts of late antique Platonists it is always vital to bear in mind that these have precise points of reference in their overall systems of thought.

³⁰ On progressive salvation through the reading of Platonic texts, see Baltzly (2014).

³¹ Marinus, *Proclus* 26. Krulak (2017) 470–71 sees Heraiscus' Bacchic character in the combination of philo-

sophical and supernatural gifts.

³² On the development from Plotinus to Porphyry, see Brisson (2005) 130–36; on Marinus' use of the scale of virtues, see Saffrey et al. (2001) XLI–C.

Becoming a Bacchus, as became clear above, means mastering the cathartic virtues, purifying the soul of its connection to the body insofar as this is possible prior to death. It is because the myth of Dionysus' dismemberment and reintegration was understood as belonging to this level that it was so fully discussed in Damascius' *Commentary on the Phaedo*, since that dialogue was considered Plato's major treatment of the nature of the cathartic virtues. The collective reading of the *Phaedo*, which this record of Damascius' lectures records, was itself an exercise in the acquisition of these virtues. What is implied by stating that Heraiscus became a Bacchus is that he achieved such perfection in cathartic virtue as is possible for one who was still embodied.³³ The other qualities that Damascius ascribes to him bear this out. He showed appropriate anger against wickedness and was courageous in response to 'the assaults of human beings, without ever overstepping the limits of justice' (πρὸς τὴν πονηρίαν θυμούμενος καὶ πρὸς τὰς ἐπιβουλὰς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀνδριζόμενος, οὐδαμοῦ δὲ παρεκβαίνων τὸ μέτρον τῆς δικαιοσύνης: 76C Ath.; 173 Zintzen). At each level of the scale of virtues, one virtue is said to 'be characteristic' (χαρακτηρίζειν)³⁴ or 'to shape' (εἰδοποιεῖν) that way of life; it is courage that shapes the cathartic life (*In Phd.* 152). Though the example of courage in dealing with others is an instance of courage at the level of civic rather than cathartic virtue, the characterization of Heraiscus specifically through courage is appropriate for one occupying this level. His rejection of physical life (the life of *genesis*) exemplifies specifically 'cathartic' courage (76C Ath.; 173 Zintzen).

To claim this attainment for Heraiscus does not, however, imply in itself that he reached the higher goal of union with the One. Though still higher achievements appear to be claimed on his behalf in other fragments, it is difficult to be certain of the full details of Damascius' assessment of any of his characters. That Damascius is speaking specifically about mastery of the cathartic virtues and the beginning of *theōria* when he speaks of becoming a Bacchus is confirmed by Marinus' use of the same terms in his *Proclus or On Happiness*. This text, which combines the rhetorical norms of encomium with the Neoplatonic scale of virtues as its structuring principles,³⁵ describes this stage of Proclus' philosophic ascent as follows:

From this kind of virtue [*sc.* cathartic virtue] he advanced painlessly and patiently and as if on an initiatory ladder, and ran up to the greater virtues beyond these, guided by his fortunate nature and systematic education. Already he was purified and had risen up above the realm of becoming (γένεσις) and looked down upon the 'narthêx-bearers'. He entered into Bacchic ecstasy (ἐβάκχευε) around the first principles and saw for himself the blessed visions there (22.1–9).

Proclus then is clearly 'a Bacchus' at this stage of his life, but still greater achievements appear in the remaining chapters of the biography, detailing his achievements at the theoretic and theurgic/hieratic levels. Heraiscus, similarly, appears to display 'theurgic' abilities in another fragment of the *Philosophic History* (153A Ath.; 107 Zintzen and 76E Ath.; 174 Zintzen; derived from Photius and the Suda respectively).

Heraiscus had by nature (αὐτοφυῆς) the ability to distinguish animate and inanimate cult statues. As soon as he looked at one he was afflicted in his heart by the divine impulse and leapt up body and soul, as if under the influence of a possessing god. If he was not moved in this way the statue was soul-less and had no share of divine inspiration. In this way he recognized that the ineffable image of Aïōn, which the Alexandrians honoured, was possessed by the gods. This was both Osiris and Adonis, through a divine union that may truly be called mystical.

³³ Hernández de la Fuente (2013) 464 takes this fragment of Damascius to mean that Heraiscus became a Bacchus after his death. Given Damascius' more extended discussion of 'becoming Bacchus' in the *Commentary on the Phaedo*, I think this less likely, though not impossible.

Athanassiadi (1999) 57, 195 also sees the transformation of Heraiscus occurring in his lifetime.

³⁴ See, for example, Proclus *In R.* 1.12.24–13.6.

³⁵ See on this the introduction of Saffrey et al. (2001) XLI–C.

Given the fragmentary state of the text, we cannot know where this passage came in relation to Heraiscus' mastery of the cathartic virtues and progression to the contemplative. Though it might seem that the phrase 'he had by nature the ability to distinguish' would indicate that this was a life-long ability, Proclus' progression to the theurgic class of virtues in Marinus' account also mentions the role played by his innate ability (*phusis*), though this ability could, it seems, only come into effect at this stage. Damascius was not, of course, obliged to follow slavishly the scale of virtues, nor did he so follow it. It might be added that imposing this structure on Proclus' life raises problems of chronology for Marinus too, which are solved by a little vagueness at some points.³⁶ Nonetheless, what I think is clear from this is that Damascius paid particular attention to Heraiscus' mastery of the cathartic virtues and progression to higher ones, and that the achievement of these higher levels did feature in his account. This may be borne out as well by the apparitions which appeared as Heraiscus was being mummified, in accordance with traditional Egyptian rites (76E Ath.; 174 Zintzen), exemplifying in his death the supernatural abilities with which Damascius credited him.

The scale of virtues, like other such gradations in late Platonism, aims in part to produce a smooth progression without abrupt jumps from one stage to another. Nonetheless, the transition from the cathartic to the theoretic is a particularly important milestone in the Platonic progression.³⁷ It is clear from the passages discussed that Damascius, Marinus and others placed considerable emphasis on 'becoming Bacchus' and so perfecting the cathartic virtues. Moreover, in the history of the development of the scale of virtues, the distinction between the civic/political and cathartic virtues is the central one, which motivated the development of this idea in Plotinus (*Enneads* 1.2.3). His purpose there is to reconcile the very different things that Plato says about virtue in the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, and it is from this discussion that the subsequent developments unfold. It is perhaps because of the centrality of this stage, and the emphasis that late antique Platonists tended to place on it, that it is so easy to misread passages like those in Damascius as referring to the ultimate goal of the Platonic path: union with the One.

In connection with Isidore's other teacher, Serapion, there was occasion earlier to mention the 'Cronian life'. This is a further and related mythic image for this stage of spiritual/philosophical attainment, and is associated with Serapion in the surviving fragments of the *Philosophical History*. This philosopher, we are told, scorned money and lived an entirely celibate life. He was, moreover, a kind of hermit, living apart in a little hut (111 Ath.; 287 Zintzen). But for his acquaintance with Isidore no one would have known of his existence at all (111 Ath.; 34 Zintzen). This is where the language of myth enters once more: 'He would not have been known after [his lifetime], if some one of the gods had not wished to grace humanity with a paradigm of the Cronian life, so that the account of it might not seem merely a myth, lacking any supporting testimony from history (111 Ath.; 287.10–12 Zintzen).

The criteria for 'the Cronian life' are clear from the context in which this life appears. Serapion had the bare minimum of concern for his physical body, entirely disregarded money and reputation, and dedicated himself only to 'two or three books', especially the Orphic poems (287.5–9 Zintzen).³⁸ In this first fragment Serapion serves in part as a contrast to the 'Typhonic' Pamprepicus, as discussed above. Other fragments give further details of the Cronian life. In addition to reiterating his solitary existence, Zintzen's fragment 33 (Suda IV 324.22 s.v. *Σεράπιων*) states that 'he continued [throughout his life] in no word or action other than constantly bringing together and unifying himself, in so far as is possible, relative to the inner and the more indivisible'. We are concerned once more, in other words, with the practice of the cathartic virtues, developed ulti-

³⁶ On the tension between chronology and the structure of his text by the scale of virtues, see Miles (forthcoming).

³⁷ On the cathartic virtues, see Baltzly (2006).

³⁸ Given the usual ranking of texts in the Neoplatonic curriculum it is likely that the others would have been either the *Chaldean Oracles* or Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, the summative dialogues of the Iamblichean curriculum.

mately from the notion of philosophy as practice of death in the *Phaedo*. It is apt too that the 'Cronian life', that is, the life which is a vestige of the Golden Age, is chosen as the image. While the notion of ages or races of humanity was common mythical knowledge, it also had long and close associations with Dionysus, as for instance in the quasi-Golden Age miracles of the maenads in Euripides' *Bacchae* (677–774). It had also been adopted as a utopian image in the Orphic literature for which Serapion had a particular fondness. We have then traces of two complementary mythic images, both associated with Dionysus, to describe the practice and perfection of the cathartic virtues: one becomes a Bacchus and lives the Cronian life.

IV. Conclusion

Placing these mythic allusions in the *Philosophical History* against the background of the closer argument and more detailed analysis that is possible for Damascius in the *Commentary on the Phaedo* has allowed, I hope, a clearer understanding of what exactly late antique Platonists might mean by these apparently passing allusions. To refer to a philosopher as a Bacchus is not simply a broad and ill-defined compliment, nor does it imply that he or she has reached the ultimate goal of the Neoplatonic life. Likewise it is not simply a generic insult to refer to one's adversaries (be they pagan or Christian) as 'Typhonic'. These terms only take on their full sense in the broader context of late antique Platonic thought as a whole. Beyond this, it is vital to remember that we are dealing with an understanding of philosophy that is likely to be fundamentally alien: the philosophic life is nothing less for these thinkers than a complete transformation of the philosopher's being.

One thing that the study of philosophical biographies alongside that of the more abstract philosophical texts should do is alert us to the type of texts that we are reading and give some indications of the ways that they were read by their creators and initial audiences. Heraiscus and Serapion may have left little textual trace and appear therefore to have been negligible individuals within the vivid Neoplatonic scene that Damascius paints for us. But Damascius, evidently, did not consider this to be the case. What we see and value, the written text, is just a secondary manifestation of the real activity: living the philosophical life and achieving liberation through interpreting Platonic texts, internalizing the inspired poem or, simply by continued effort towards the inner and ineffable, striving to become a Bacchus and, beyond that, towards a more broadly understood 'likeness to god'.

Bibliography

- Asmus, J.R. (1909) 'Zur Rekonstruktion von Damascius' *Leben des Isidorus*', *ByzZ* 18, 424–80
 — (1910) 'Zur Rekonstruktion von Damascius' *Leben des Isidorus*', *ByzZ* 19, 265–84
 Athanassiadi, P. (1999) *Damascius: The Philosophical History* (Athens)
 — (2006) *La lutte pour l'orthodoxie dans le platonisme tardif de Numénius à Damascius* (Paris)
 Baltzly, D. (2004) 'The virtues and "becoming like God": Alcinoüs to Proclus', *OSAPh* 26, 297–321
 — (2006) 'Pathways to purification: the cathartic virtues in the Neoplatonic commentary tradition', in H. Tarrant and D. Baltzly (eds), *Reading Plato in Antiquity* (London) 169–84
 — (2014) 'Plato's authority and the formation of textual communities', *CQ* 64, 793–807
 Barnes, J. (2013) 'Proclus and politics', in V. Harte and M. Lane (eds), *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge) 168–87
 Beauchamp, J. (2008) 'L'enseignement à Athènes au Vie siècle: droit ou science des astres?', in H. Hugonnard-Roche (ed.), *L'enseignement supérieur dans les mondes antiques et médiévaux* (Paris) 201–18
 Brisson, L. (1987) 'Proclus et l'Orphisme', in J. Pépin, L. H.-D. Saffrey (eds), *Proclus: lecteur et interprète des anciens* (Paris) 43–104
 — (1991) 'Damascius et l'Orphisme', in P. Borgeaud (ed.), *Orphisme et Orphée: textes réunis en l'honneur de Jean Rudhardt* (Geneva) 157–209
 — (2001) 'Le dernier anneau de la chaîne d'or', *REG* 114, 269–82
 — (2005) 'Système philosophique de Porphyre dans les *Sentences* B: physique et éthique', in L. Brisson

- (ed.), *Porphyre: Sentences* (Paris) 107–38
- (2008) ‘Famille, pouvoir et argent dans l’école néoplatonicienne d’Athènes’, in H. Hugonnard-Roche (ed.), *L’Enseignement supérieur dans les mondes antiques et médiévaux* (Paris) 29–41
- Chuvin, P. (1991) *Chronique des derniers païens: la disparition du paganisme dans l’Empire romain, du règne de Constantin à celui de Justinien* (2nd edition) (Paris)
- Coulter, J.A. (1976) *The Literary Microcosm: Theories of Interpretation of the Later Neoplatonists* (Leiden)
- Demulder, B. and van Riel, G. (2015) “‘Nombreux sont les porteurs de thyrses, mais rares les Bacchants’”: Olympiodore et Damascius sur le *Phédon*’, in S. Delcomminette, P. d’Hoine and M.-A. Gavray (eds), *Ancient Readings of Plato’s Phaedo* (Leiden) 270–92
- Edmonds, R. (1999) ‘Tearing apart the Zagreus myth: a few disparaging remarks on Orphism and original sin’, *CLAnt* 18, 35–73
- Griffiths, J.G. (1970) *Plutarch’s De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff)
- Hadot, P. (ed. A. Davidson) (1995) *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Malden)
- (tr. M. Chase) (2004) *What is Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge MA)
- Hernández de la Fuente, D. (2013) ‘Dionysus and Christ as parallel figures in late antiquity’, in A. Bernabé, M. Herrero de Jáuregui, A. Jiménez San Cristóbal, R. Martín Hernández (eds), *Redefining Dionysos* (Berlin) 464–87
- Krulak, T. (2017) ‘Philosophy, ἱερατική, and the Damascian dichotomy: pursuing the Bacchic ideal in the sixth-century Academy’, *GRBS* 57, 454–81
- Lamberton, R. (2016) ‘The invisible adversary: anti-Christian polemic in Proclus’ *Commentary on the Republic of Plato*’, in S. Weisser and N. Thaler (eds), *Strategies of Polemics in Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Leiden) 230–38
- Miles, G. (forthcoming) ‘Philosophers and their Neoplatonic lives: problems and paradigms’, in K. de Temmerman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook to Ancient Biography* (Oxford)
- Morrow, G.R. and Dillon, J. (1987) *Proclus’ Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides* (Princeton)
- O’Meara, D. (2006) ‘Patterns of perfection in Damascius’ *Life of Isidore*’, *Phronesis* 51, 74–90
- Rappe, S. (2000) *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius* (Cambridge)
- Runia, D. (2013) ‘The theme of becoming like God in Plato’s *Republic*’, in L. Brisson and N. Notomi (eds), *Dialogues on Plato’s Politeia (Republic)* (Sankt Augustin) 288–93
- Russell, D. (2004) ‘Virtue as “likeness to God” in Plato and Seneca’, *JHPH* 42, 241–60
- Saffrey, H.-D. (1975) ‘Allusions antichrétiennes chez Proclus le diadoque platonicien’, *RSPH* 59, 553–63
- Saffrey, H.-D. and Segonds, A.-P. with Luna, C. (2001) *Proclus ou Sur le bonheur* (Paris)
- Sedley, D. (1999) ‘The ideal of godlikeness’, in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul* (Oxford) 309–28
- Steel, C. (1978) *The Changing Self: A Study on the Soul in Later Neoplatonism: Iamblichus, Damascius and Priscianus* (Brussels)
- Struck, P.T. (2004) *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton)
- Trabattoni, F. (2016) ‘Il filosofo platonico secondo Damascio’, in M. Bonazzi and S. Schorn (eds), *Bios Philosophos: Philosophy in Ancient Greek Biography* (Turnhout) 259–74
- Tsuchihashi, S. (2015) ‘The likeness of God and the imitation of Christ: the transformation of the Platonic tradition in Gregory of Nyssa’, in G.D. Dunn and W. Mayer (eds), *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium* (Leiden) 100–16
- van Riel, G. (2010) ‘Damascius’, in L.P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge) 667–96
- Watts, E. (2005) ‘Where to live the philosophical life in the sixth century? Damascius, Simplicius, and the return from Persia’, *GRBS* 45, 285–315
- (2013) ‘Damascius’ *Isidore*: collective biography and a perfectly imperfect philosophical exemplar’, in M. Dzielska and K. Twardowska (eds), *Divine Men and Women in the History and Society of Late Hellenism* (Kracow)
- Westerink, L.G. (2009) *Damascius: Commentary on Plato’s Phaedo* (2nd edition) (Dilton Marsh)
- Yates, V. (2004) ‘The titanic origin of humans: the Melian nymphs and Zagreus’, *GRBS* 44, 183–98
- Zintzen, C. (1967) *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae* (Hildesheim)