

Patterns of Perfection in Damascius'

Life of Isidore

DOMINIC J. O'MEARA

In memory of Henry Blumenthal

ABSTRACT

In this article, it is shown that, following the precedent set in particular by Marinus' *Life of Proclus*, Damascius, in his *Life of Isidore*, uses biography so as to illustrate philosophical progress through the Neoplatonic scale of virtues. Damascius applies this scale, however, to a wide range of figures belonging to pagan philosophical circles of the fifth century AD: they show different degrees and forms of progress in this scale and thus provide an edifying panorama of patterns of philosophical perfection. Each level of the scale of virtues is shown to be exemplified in Damascius' biographies. It is suggested that few, in Damascius' opinion, reached the highest levels of virtue and that philosophical decline is intimated in his descriptions of his contemporaries.

In a paper given at the Institute of Classical Studies in London in 1983, Henry Blumenthal showed that, in his *Life of Proclus*, a eulogy commemorating in 486 the first anniversary of Proclus' death, Marinus praised his teacher by showing how Proclus, throughout his life, had ascended a scale of virtues leading to happiness.¹ Biography here is panegyric in purpose, and the virtues and deeds of a hero that are praised are those of a philosopher. In this respect we might compare Marinus' *Life of Proclus* with two other philosophical 'lives' written earlier, towards the beginning of the fourth century, both as frontispieces to two editions: the *Life of Plotinus* that Porphyry placed at the beginning of his edition of Plotinus (the *Enneads*), and the *Pythagorean Life* which is the first volume of Iamblichus' Pythagorean corpus. Here too, philosophers' lives exemplify philosophical perfection and as such are presented as exemplary.²

Accepted July 2005

¹ H. Blumenthal, 'Marinus' Life of Proclus: Neoplatonist Biography', *Byzantion* 54 (1984), 469-94. For the date of Marinus' text see the Introduction to the excellent edition by H.-D. Saffrey and A.-Ph. Segonds, *Marinus: Proclus ou Sur le bonheur*, Paris 2001, xli-xlii.

² On Iamblichus' text see now G. Staab, *Pythagoras in der Spätantike. Studien zu De vita Pythagorica des Iamblichos von Chalkis*, Munich-Leipzig 2002 and M. von

In this article, I would like to suggest that a work written by the last head of the Neoplatonic school of Athens, Damascius (c. 460-after 538), the *Life of Isidore* (his teacher), is written in the same way: it too is biography structured so as to exemplify a philosopher's ascent through a scale of virtues, a scale conceived in Late Antique Neoplatonism as a programme for progress in philosophical perfection. However Damascius' work is also very different from the 'lives' composed by his Neoplatonist predecessors: he tells the exemplary story, not of one, but of many individuals who illustrate in different ways and to different degrees the ascent to higher philosophical virtue. In Damascius' *Life of Isidore*, as I would like to show, the lives of the members (male and female) of the Neoplatonic circles of the Greek East in the fifth century AD provide a wide range of different moral and intellectual itineraries, an exemplary panorama of different patterns in philosophical perfection.³

I

Before turning to Damascius' *Life of Isidore* it may be useful to recall briefly some aspects of the late Neoplatonic theory of a scale of virtues, since this scale will provide us with important clues for understanding Damascius' text.⁴ The theory of a scale of virtues was introduced into Neoplatonism by Plotinus' treatise *On the Virtues* (*Enn.* I, 2). It was then formalized by Porphyry (on the basis of *Enn.* I, 2) in his *Sentences* (ch. 32), extended by

Albrecht, J. Dillon, *et al.*, *Jamblich Pythagoras: Legende-Lehre-Lebensführung*, Darmstadt 2002. In both volumes there is discussion of von Albrecht's controversial thesis that Iamblichus' *De vita Pyth.* presents the complete scale of virtues of later Neoplatonism.

³ I will cite Damascius' *Life of Isidore* following the edition and translation (sometimes slightly modified) published by P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius The Philosophical History*, Athens 1999, using her numbering of the fragments and giving in square brackets the numbering used by C. Zintzen, *Damascii Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, Hildesheim 1967. I follow in general Athanassiadi's identifications of the persons to whom the fragments refer. Athanassiadi prefers for good reasons (61-2) the title *Philosophical History* for Damascius' text, but for reasons of convenience I will cite the title habitually used by scholars, the *Life of Isidore*. For Damascius see the comprehensive survey by P. Hoffmann, 'Damascius', in *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques* II, 541-593.

⁴ A very complete presentation of the evidence concerning the Neoplatonic scale of virtues can be found in Saffrey and Segonds' introduction (above n. 1), l-xcviii. They cite in particular Damascius' definitions of the different levels of virtues in his *Commentary on the Phaedo* and discuss (xciii-xcvii) some inconsistencies and difficulties concerning the names and number of the highest levels of the scale, difficulties which, for our present purposes, might be left aside.

Iamblichus in his (lost) work *On the Virtues*, and standardized in this extended form in the Neoplatonic schools of the fifth and sixth centuries, where it finds expression, for example, in Marinus' *Life of Proclus*. From these schools, if we are to believe Umberto Eco's hero Baudolino, it was transmitted through the ages by a female philosophical dynasty of 'Hypatias' exiled in some mysterious East, where Baudolino, a protégé of Frederic Barbarossa, learnt about it. Baudolino's Hypatia tells him

To exercise the natural virtues, achieve perfection of sight and hearing, vigour of body, memory, and facility of learning . . . You make a step forward by cultivating wisdom, strength, temperance, and justice, and finally you arrive at acquiring the purifying virtues: we try to separate the soul from the body, we learn to evoke the gods . . .⁵

Did Baudolino's muse feel she should simplify things for him? Had the theory of a scale of virtues become somewhat distorted in its transmission to her (and to Eco)? She does at least mention the first level in the scale of virtues, that of the 'natural' virtues, which are certain physical and psychic qualities with which we are born (for example, a healthy constitution, a good memory). She omits one (or perhaps conflates two) of the next levels, that of 'ethical' virtue (moral dispositions acquired merely by habituation, by training, as in the case of animals and children) and that of 'political' virtue (moral and intellectual qualities acquired with the exercise of reason). 'Political' virtues represent the highest level in moral and intellectual perfection in our lives as souls living in bodies, souls seeking to bring good order to embodied existence. The next levels in the scale of virtues concern soul as perfecting *itself*, independently of the body, and as attempting to assimilate itself to the divine as far as possible (the goal of philosophy for the Neoplatonist philosopher), achieving thus a perfection superior to that possible in embodied existence. These higher levels of perfection are the 'purificatory', 'theoretical' (or 'paradigmatic') and 'theurgic' virtues.

In what follows, specific examples of these different levels of virtue will be encountered. But at first it will be useful to stress the following general points concerning the late Neoplatonic scale of virtue. (1) The four cardinal virtues (wisdom, courage, moderation and justice) are found on the different levels of the scale (there is thus, for example, political wisdom, purificatory wisdom, theoretical wisdom), in such a way as to suggest a

⁵ U. Eco, *Baudolino*, Engl. transl., London 2002, 433 ('strength' here, translating 'forzezza', ought to mean courage).

continuity in the scale, an intensification in degree of virtue at each successive level. The four cardinal virtues may also involve a host of subsidiary virtues.⁶ (2) The scale of virtues is asymmetrical in the sense that one may acquire lower virtues, without reaching higher levels, but access to these higher levels presupposes that one has already reached the lower levels. (3) Although the same virtues can be found in different forms at different levels, certain virtues may characterize (or dominate) particular levels in the scale. Thus moderation is dominant in 'ethical' virtue, justice in 'political' virtue, courage in 'purificatory' virtue, and wisdom in 'theoretical' virtue. (4) Finally, the different levels of virtue may also be distinguished in terms of the degree to which the virtues entail each other. Thus, on the level of 'natural' virtue, incompatible qualities (i.e. certain virtues combined with certain vices) may be found in the same individual, whereas, on the level of 'ethical' virtue, this incompatibility may not be found, but nor again will 'ethical' virtues necessarily entail each other as they may on the level of 'political' virtue.

Examples of these general principles will be given in the next section. However a preliminary illustration, which might make more plausible the proposed project to read Damascius' *Life of Isidore* in terms of the Neoplatonic scale of virtues, might already be provided, starting from what Damascius tells us there about (the original!) Hypatia (43A [F102]). She

was born, brought up and educated in Alexandria and, being endowed with a nobler nature (φύσιν γενναϊοτέρᾳ) than her father, she was not content with the mathematical education that her father gave her, but occupied herself with some distinction in the other branches of philosophy . . . As well as being a gifted teacher, she had reached the peak of practical virtue and was just and moderate; she remained a virgin, but as she was remarkably beautiful and attractive one of her students fell in love with her and, not being able to control his passion, he betrayed it to her as well.

Hypatia was thus superior to her father in 'natural' virtue, allowing her to go further in philosophy. Her sexual purity is an indication of her excellence in 'ethical' virtue, a level of virtue in which moderation (with particular reference to sexuality) was essential and which her infatuated student

⁶ For the subsidiary virtues see Macrobius' summary of the Neoplatonic scale of virtues in his *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, I, 8, 7 (and L. Flocchi, 'La classificazione delle virtù politiche in Macrobio, *Commentarii in somnium Scipionis* 1, 8', *Quaderni del dipartimento di filologia, linguistica e tradizione classica dell' Università di Torino*, n.s. 2, 2003, 257-66). Thus *temperantia* (σωφροσύνη), for example, includes *castitas* and *abstinentia*, among other virtues, and *iustitia* includes *amicitia*, *pietas*, and *humanitas* (φιλανθρωπία), along with other virtues.

was far from reaching. She also possessed 'political' virtue (referred to here as 'practical' virtue), where justice is primary. But did she go any higher in the scale of virtues? Did she reach higher levels of philosophical perfection? We will come back to these questions later.

II

In what follows, then, I propose taking the Neoplatonic scale of virtues and using it as a key for reading Damascius' *Life of Isidore*. Relating each level of the scale of virtues to the text, I would like to show that Damascius presents the lives of his philosophical contemporaries and predecessors as expressing this scale in various ways and to different degrees. He provides in a sense his evaluation of the philosophical merits, achievements (and shortcomings) of these individuals, whose lives thus exemplify for the reader a range of degrees in philosophical progress. The results of my approach are summarized in the chart appended to this article.

It should be stressed that this chart must be seen as necessarily incomplete and probably in need of correction. Damascius' text has survived only in the form of extracts preserved by Photius and the Suda, fragments which may represent perhaps as little as a quarter of the whole. We can therefore assume that, were we ever to discover more of Damascius' text, we would need to supplement and adjust the conclusions derived from the evidence available to us at present. It is perhaps as if by chance one were to come across some shreds of an evaluation of research at our university: one could hardly expect such shreds to give a full and just picture of the work of our colleagues and ourselves! Another word of caution concerns the difficulty, in some cases, of making precise identifications of virtues. Since, as noted above, the same virtues are found (in different forms) at different levels of the scale of virtues, and since higher levels can subsume lower levels, it is sometimes not certain at which precise level of virtue Damascius wishes to situate the life of certain individuals. Finally, being an accomplished rhetorician, Damascius does not confine himself to a mechanical use of the standard terminology for the scale of virtues, which can also make for difficulty in precise identification. Yet in many cases it is clear with which levels of virtue Damascius wishes to associate the lives he describes and thus many of the results collected in the appended chart are firm, even if the chart itself must remain incomplete. In what follows I would like to illustrate, explain and justify these results by relating the fragments of the *Life of Isidore* to the successive levels of the scale of virtues, starting with the first, lowest level, that of 'natural' virtue.

(i) *Natural Virtue*

Certain qualities of body and soul can be possessed from birth, not only by humans, but also by animals. Thus we learn from Neoplatonic authors that lions are by nature courageous, cattle moderate, storks just and cranes wise.⁷ In Damascius' text we meet unjust hippopotami (74B [E98]) and a knowledge-loving donkey.⁸ As for humans, the individuals described by Damascius often have natural virtues (εὐφυΐα), the prerequisites for access to higher levels of virtues, but they possess these natural virtues to different degrees and in different combinations, sometimes joined with natural vices, these differences (together with what one might receive through fortune, τύχη, what kinds of parents, social well-being, etc.) conditioning to some extent their differing moral and intellectual histories.

Damascius's teacher Isidore, presumably foremost among the heroes in his narrative, was only moderately endowed as regards his senses, imagination and memory, as compared to others whom Damascius had met, who had exceptional powers of sense-perception and memory (14 [E17]). These modest natural endowments, Damascius claims, which were adequate instruments for use by the soul, indicate where the priority lay in Isidore: not in the union of soul and body, but in soul alone. Furthermore, Isidore had an exceptional love of the truth (ἀψεύδεια), which meant that he could be a little too plain-spoken (23 [E23, F45]). And he was not a lover of money (φιλοχρήματος), but was naturally 'economical' (24 [E24]). In these respects Isidore compares, not always favourably, with Proclus who, in the chapters of Marinus' *Life of Proclus* dealing with Proclus' 'natural' virtues (chs. 2-6), is said to have been exceptionally well-endowed as regards sense-perception (εὐαισθησία), to have had a good memory and many other natural qualities of body and soul, including the love of truth (ἀψεύδεια) and no love for money (φιλοχρηματία).⁹ In ascribing these virtues to Proclus,

⁷ See my *Platonopolis. Platonic Political Philosophy in late Antiquity*, Oxford 2003, 46. For wise cranes see Plato, *Statesman* 263d4; R. Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals*, London 1993, 10. The virtues and vices of animals constitute of course a much wider theme in ancient literature: see, for example, Basil of Caesarea, *Homilies on the Hexameron*, homilies 7-9 (in particular 9, 3, 82A) and Sorabji, 91-92 (with many more texts).

⁸ 47 [E60]; I discuss the φιλομαθία of this donkey in 'Bons et mauvais rhéteurs dans la *Vie d'Isidore de Damascius*', to appear in: *Ad tertiam sophisticam aditus* (Mélanges J. Schamp), ed. E. Amato *et al.*, Bruxelles 2005.

⁹ Marinus, *Life of Proclus* 2, 13-4, 48. S. Diebler, 'Panorama littéraire et vies de philosophes néoplatoniciens: le cas de la *Vie d'Isidore de Damascius*', *Vies anciennes d'auteurs grecs: mythe et biographie*, ed. P. Brunet and M.-P. Noël, Tours 1998 (*Archipel*

Marinus makes very extensive use of a passage in Plato's *Republic* where the various qualities of 'philosophical natures' (485a10-487a6), who may become philosopher-kings, are described.¹⁰ Proclus is almost too perfect in Marinus' account of his natural virtues, whereas Damascius' Isidore is sufficiently endowed in regard to what really matters, the use to which the natural qualities of body and soul, in the union of body and soul, can be put in the service of higher virtues, those of soul alone.

Other individuals are described by Damascius as having uneven natural endowments. Asclepiodotus, for example (85A [E126]), 'was not perfect as regards natural endowment (εὐφύια)': he was very sharp in raising difficulties, but not very bright in understanding things.¹¹ This meant that he would excel on the lower, rather than higher, levels of the philosophical sciences. The Alexandrian Zeno, as Damascius presents him (67 [F239]), was 'by nature a good (ἐπιεικῆς) and pious man, but rather sluggish in the arts and sciences', being very slow intellectually and having a poor memory.¹² Domninus, the Syrian mathematician and rival of Proclus, had poor physical health (89A [F218], 94B [E136]), which became the occasion of a display of moral deficiency (impiety), when he ate pork although he could have avoided this.

Unevenness in natural endowments of body and soul could, in some cases, go as far as the presence in the same individual of natural virtues and natural vices. Thus Proclus' pupil Ammonius, later to be head of the school in Alexandria, was superior in natural endowments (εὐφύεστερος) and love of knowledge (φιλομαθέστερος) to his brother Heliodoros. He was also very hard-working (φιλοπονώτατος)¹³ and would distinguish himself in explaining Aristotle and in mathematics (57BC [F127, E79]). However, he

égéen 1 [1994-1995]), 81-93, describes the *Life of Isidore* as using and reacting to Marinus' *Life of Proclus*.

¹⁰ The heavy use made by Marinus of the passage of Plato's *Rep.* is shown typographically by Saffrey and Segonds in their edition of Marinus. Other natural qualities possessed by Proclus, according to Marinus, and stipulated by Plato as belonging to a philosophical nature are: quickness in learning (εὐμαθής), generosity and pleasantness (μεγαλοπρεπής, εὐχαρίς), the desire and love of knowledge (φιλομαθής), being just and gentle (ἡμερός), sociable (not δυσκοινώνητος), not a lover of the things of the body (especially pleasure), having no meanness (ἀνελευθερία) and no fear of death, being well-ordered (κόσμιος).

¹¹ For sharpness (ὀξύς) and brightness of mind (ἀγχίνους) in the philosophical nature see Plato, *Rep.* 503c2.

¹² For ἐπιεικῆς see Plato, *Rep.* 487d3, 488a3, 489b4-5.

¹³ For the quality of φιλοπονία see Plato, *Rep.* 535b6-c4, d1-7; Blumenthal (above n. 1), 491. Its complete deficiency is sloth (see 16AB [F21, F64]).

suffered from a serious flaw, a vice excluded from the 'philosophical nature', as Plato described it in the *Republic*, the love of money.¹⁴ This vice, allowed by Ammonius to dominate his life, must mean failure in the scale of philosophical perfection.

(ii) *Ethical virtue*

Natural endowments could be developed by an appropriate education in childhood and youth so as to form ethical virtues (as natural deficiencies could be corrected through training), or they could be corrupted and ruined by deleterious influences.¹⁵ The ethical virtue that seems most important is moderation (σωφροσύνη), which involves acquiring a correct disposition as regards sub-umbilical desires, in particular sexual desire.¹⁶ Damascius cites many cases of people who succeeded or failed in acquiring this virtue. Hilarius, for example (91 [F222-5]), had the natural virtues of goodness (ἐπιεικής), love of knowledge and intellectual sharpness, but had difficulty in his youth in regard to moderation, a deficiency which meant that later in life, despite showing courage and wisdom when faced with his wife's adultery, he was not accepted in Proclus' school on account of his licentiousness. Examples of perfection in sexual purity are provided by the virginity of Hypatia, as we have seen above, of Sarapio (111 [F287]) and of Marinus (97B [F238]). And if a philosopher were to marry for the purpose of child-bearing, as did Theosebius, he could later decide with his wife to live chastely (46E [F110]).

Ethical virtue includes not only the moderation of desire, but also the appropriate habituation of the other irrational force in the soul, spirit (θυμός).¹⁷ Here also, Damascius has a story to tell, that of Severianus, who possessed the natural virtue of being sharp-witted (ὀξύτης), had a strong sense of justice and was free of greed. However, he was also naturally combative and desirous of honour (φιλόνεικος, φιλόδοξος),¹⁸ and could be driven by his spirit (θυμός) to the extent that, in his activity as judge, he was responsible for murders and failed his life in this respect (108 [F278, F280]).

¹⁴ 118B [F316]. Damascius uses the term αἰσχροκερδής (see Plato, *Rep.* 408c3-4).

¹⁵ See Plato, *Rep.* 490e2-495c6. For the contrast between natural endowments and ethical dispositions (ἤθη) in Damascius, see for example 54 [E74, F120], 68 [F143], 146A [E223, F354].

¹⁶ For the connection between these desires (sex, food, etc.) and love of money, see Plato, *Rep.* 580e-581a.

¹⁷ 15A [E18], Isidore, referring perhaps to the level of 'political' virtue.

¹⁸ See Plato, *Rep.* 581a9-b2.

In describing and comparing the varying natural endowments and moral qualities of individuals, Damascius offers us a number of illustrations in the form of contrasting pairs of brothers.¹⁹ We have encountered already the example provided by Ammonius and Heliodorus. Their father, Hermeias, is also contrasted with his brother Gregory. Hermeias was not by nature very bright (ἀγγίνους) and not a vigorous seeker of the truth, but he was naturally good (ἐπιεικής) and a hard-worker and had the virtues of gentleness and, most notably, justice.²⁰ His brother, Gregory, on the other hand (55 [E75, F123]), was very sharp-witted and rapid in learning, but he was also of an unsettled ethical disposition (ἤθη). When the brothers returned to Alexandria after their study of philosophy in Athens, Gregory became mentally ill: his 'instrument' (his brain?) could no longer serve his faculty of reasoning. Isidore's teachers in Alexandria, Asclepiades and Heraiscus, also formed a pair of contrasting brothers: whereas one had exceptional natural talents, the other was stronger in science.²¹ Nomus and Januarius, another pair of brothers, are also contrasted (109 [F284]): both excelled in 'political' virtue, in equity and justice, but Nomus was superior in natural endowment (εὐφυέστερος), in love of knowledge (φιλομαθέστερος), whereas Januarius was superior in wisdom and moderation in the political sphere. Damascius' teacher Isidore also had a brother, Ulpian, who excelled in natural intelligence (we remember Isidore's modest endowments here) and made a name for himself as a mathematician. He also possessed ethical virtue, but did not involve himself in political matters, as did his brother, nor did he go as far elsewhere in the philosophical sciences, but died young (123 [F324]). The sons of Hegias, Eupeithius and Archiadadas, are also juxtaposed: Eupeithius was superior in natural virtue (εὐφυέστερος), but inferior in ethical disposition (ἤθη) to his brother, who was superior both to him and to their father in virtue (146A [F354]). Finally, such is Damascius' liking for these contrasting fraternal diptychs, that we may surmise that the

¹⁹ This appears to relate to the rhetorical practice of *epikrisis* in encomia (the comparison of individuals in terms of their virtues and vices), examined, for example, in relation to Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* by T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives. Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Oxford 1999, 244ff. Many of Duff's observations concerning Plutarch might also be applied to Damascius (e.g., 248). See also P. Cox Miller, 'Strategies of Representation in Collective Biography: Constructing the Subject as Holy', *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. T. Hägg and P. Rousseau, Berkeley 2000, 217.

²⁰ 54 [E74, F120-122]. Such was Hermeias' virtue that not even Momus could find fault with him, Momus who closes Plato's description of the philosophical nature (*Rep.* 487a).

²¹ 72A [F161]; see 76CE [F173-4]. We return to Heraiscus below.

Ammonianus who is described as a relative of Syrianus (47 [F111]), who shared his natural and ethical qualities, but taught poetics (whereas Syrianus went far beyond this propaedeutic level in philosophy), was his brother.²²

(iii) *Political Virtue*

Many of the individuals described and compared by Damascius, characterized in various ways and to differing degrees with qualities in the range going from 'natural' to 'ethical' and 'political' virtues, do not seem to have progressed any further in the scale of virtues (see appended chart). This may have to do with the fact that 'political' virtue represents the highest level of perfection in *human* existence, in the embodied life of the soul, to which soul brings rational order as regards both its irrational drives (its inner 'republic') and its relations with others, whereas the levels of virtue above it ('purificatory' virtues, etc.) concern the perfection of the soul taken in itself and seeking to live a *divine* life, to assimilate itself to the divine.²³ There is thus an important transition, a considerable step, from 'political' virtue to the levels of virtue above it in the scale.

The virtue which particularly characterizes 'political' virtue is justice, and justice is often noted in Damascius' descriptions of his protagonists.²⁴ This justice could take the primary form of inner justice, i.e. the proper functioning of the inner republic of the soul under the rule of reason (ethics), as in the case of Theosebius (46D [F109]), or it could extend to bringing order to relations with others in the household ('economics') or in the state ('politics'), as in the case of the exemplary Maras (92 [F226]), a wealthy man whose perfection in justice made him a benefactor of his neighbours and of his city in Syria. Thus justice could be associated with philanthropy, as it is also in the case of Aedesia (56 [F124]), as it could be associated with friendship.²⁵ Isidore distinguished himself in these virtues, according to Damascius. Not only did he excel in friendship (26A [F49]);

His actions were a clear illustration of the manner in which Pythagoras conceived of man as most resembling god: eagerness to do good and generosity extended to all, indeed the raising of souls above the multiplicity of evil which encumbers the

²² For poetics as constituting, with rhetoric and logic, a propaedeutic study in the late Greek Neoplatonic curriculum, see D. Black, *Logic and Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, Leiden 1990, 17-51.

²³ See Porphyry, *Sentences* ch. 32, ed. Lamberz 25, 6-9; Hierocles, *Commentary on the Golden Verses*, Prologue, ed. Koehler 6, 5-21.

²⁴ 26B [F24], 56 [F124], 69A [F155], 83B [F189], 92 [F226], 109 [F284].

²⁵ See above n. 6.

world below; secondly the deliverance of mortal men from unjust or impious suffering; thirdly, engagement in public affairs to the extent of one's abilities (26B [F24]).

Nomus and Januarius have already been met above as exemplars of political justice. Another example of political justice is provided by Marcellinus, ruler of Dalmatia (69A [F155]), who also had the virtues of political wisdom and courage,²⁶ but who became the victim of treachery (69D [E91]). Another political failure recorded by Damascius is that of Severianus, a failure due however in his case to his own ethical deficiency, as we have seen.

(iv) *Purificatory Virtue*

As 'natural', 'ethical' and 'political' virtues can often be identified in Damascius' accounts of the figures who appear in the fragments remaining from his *Life of Isidore*, so are his references to the higher levels of the scale of virtues relatively rare. Few individuals, if we are to judge from these fragments, succeeded in going beyond the level of human perfection in the direction of a divine life. This was, it seems, Isidore's own opinion.²⁷ One who managed to do this was Sarapio, an Egyptian recluse known only to Isidore, and who, as Isidore described him to Damascius, led a life 'which was not that of a man, but quite simply a god-like existence' (111 [F39]). Isidore considered himself as Sarapio's heir and equal and thus could describe to Damascius the transition from human life through purification of the body towards the divine (22 [F40]):

He used to say that when the soul . . . (is) at first disengaged from the body, it concentrates on itself; then it abandons its own habits (ἤθη), withdrawing from discursive into intellect's thought; finally, at a third stage, it is possessed by the divine and drifts into an extraordinary serenity befitting gods rather than men.²⁸

Hermeias also reached the purifactory virtues, it appears, since, facing death and being confident in the immortality of his soul (54 [F120]),

²⁶ Another example of courage was provided by Hierocles (45B [F106]).

²⁷ 34D [E36]. Isidore, according to Damascius here, himself applied the scale of virtues to his predecessors, judging Aristotle and Chrysippus as very gifted by nature, as lovers of knowledge and hard-working, but not reaching the divine levels (the 'theoretical' virtues?) attained by Pythagoras and Plato, just as, more recently, Hierocles and others reached human perfection, but not the divine.

²⁸ Compare Porphyry's description of the purificatory virtues in *Sentences* ch. 32, 24, 3-5; 25, 3-4; 31, 9ff. (purification as ἀπόστασις σώματος 32, 1, beginning with τὸ γνῶναι ἑαυτὸν ψυχὴν ὄντα ἐν ἀλλοτρίῳ πράγματι 32, 4-5).

What gave him this courage was his virtuous life disowning the bodily nature, turning to itself and experiencing the separation as it already stood face to face with immortality.

It is likely also that we should include others in this group,²⁹ those who seem to have attained the 'theoretical' virtues, such as Syrianus, since they would have had to pass through the 'purificatory' virtues in order to reach the 'theoretical' virtues.

(v) *Theoretical Virtue.*

In dealing with the 'theoretical' virtues, which represent intellectual perfection, we should distinguish between those who manifested natural intellectual talents and acquired intellectual skills, but did not progress far in the scale of virtues,³⁰ and those who did progress far enough to reach an intellectual perfection close to divine knowledge (14 [E17]). Isidore described some of the theoretical virtues, it seems, as follows (33B [F74]):

As regards divine principles, Isidore laid down well-defined terms and criteria to distinguish them from things human: in industriousness (φιλοπονία) absolute efficiency; in quick intelligence (εὐσύνετος γνώμη) aloofness from the obvious and habitual conformity with the multitude; in love (ἔρωσ) an unswerving impulse towards that delight in intelligible beauty which is never diverted elsewhere.³¹

Isidore, of course, like his mysterious mentor Sarapio (111 [F41]), reached theoretical perfection (34A [E33]):

He had a mind which was lofty . . . leaping up immediately on the smallest pretext towards the most exalted contemplation. He was rooted in the very purity of Plato's ideas . . .

Who else reached this level? Marinus, who distinguished himself as a mathematician, clearly did not (97F [E144]). Hypatia may not have, despite her accomplishments, if this is indeed what Damascius means in his comparison between her and Isidore (106A [E164]):

Isidore and Hypatia were very different, not only as man differs from woman, but as a true philosopher differs from a geometer.

The expression 'true philosopher' (τῷ ὄντι φιλόσοφος) may perhaps indicate the person who reaches the summit of philosophy, theoretical wisdom;

²⁹ Perhaps Olympos, who not only attained 'political' virtue, but seems to have gone even higher (42 [F97]).

³⁰ See 89A [F227]: Domninus. For the reverse case see 71B [F162]: Isidore.

³¹ See Plato, *Rep.* 490a9-b7.

it is also used to distinguish Syrianus from his grammarian relative.³² Others who did not reach theoretical perfection were Hierocles, in Isidore's opinion (34D [E36]), and Theosebius (46D [F109]).

(vi) *Theurgic Virtue*

It is difficult to find, in the fragments remaining from Damascius' *Life of Isidore*, clear examples of individuals reaching the highest level in the scale of virtues, 'theurgic' virtue. We should assume that this was at least as rare as was success in reaching 'theoretical' virtue. Perhaps we can also assume that Damascius' hero, Isidore, and his equal, Sarapio, went this far. Perhaps another instance is that of the priest Heraiscus, who had uneven natural talents (76D [F182]), ethical and political virtue (76C [F173]), but was also particularly close to the gods, so much so that (76E [E107]):

They say that even Proclus recognised Heraiscus as being superior to himself, for Heraiscus knew all that Proclus knew, whereas the reverse was not the case.

This was very high praise indeed from Proclus, a philosopher who, according to Marinus, had reached the summit of the scale of virtues. It is possible that the lost parts of Damascius' work might have mentioned other examples of such perfection, but it is likely that these would have been small in number, as compared to the many instances of people exemplifying 'natural', 'ethical' and 'political' virtues.

III

Damascius' *Life of Isidore*, as far as we can tell from the fragments of it that remain, was an extraordinarily rich and complex work, a fascinating description of the life of pagan intellectuals at the end of Late Antiquity in the Greek East, a document of great value to the historian of religion and society, of the arts, sciences and philosophy of the period. Such a work poses many problems and the approach I have used above is not intended to yield a complete account of the work. However, much of what survives of the work does relate, as I hope to have shown, to a precise project: starting from a specific and detailed theory of a scale of virtues, as this theory was systematized in Late Antique Neoplatonism, Damascius often presented the many different persons and lives that fill his work in terms of this scale of virtues. The extent to which this is done has not been noticed by histo-

³² 47 [F111]. Marinus, also, is not a 'true' philosopher (89A [F227]).

rians, nor have they noticed to what extent specific philosophical terminology and theories structure Damascius' biographies.

In organizing his biographical accounts in terms of the scale of virtues, Damascius was following the precedent set by Marinus' *Life of Proclus* and, to some extent, by Porphyry in his *Life of Plotinus* and by Iamblichus in his *Pythagorean Life*. But at least one aspect that makes Damascius' work very different is the fact that it presents the life, not of one paradigmatic philosopher, as does Marinus in the *Life of Proclus*, but of a wide range of individuals whose lives showed different constellations of qualities and deficiencies in the scale of virtues, which, added to their different circumstances of birth and experience, gave different histories of failure and success in reaching the goal of philosophy, assimilation to the life of the divine. Starting with different social backgrounds, the gifts or handicaps of fortune,³³ these individuals also differed in natural endowments of body and soul. Some had the natural endowments required in Plato's description of the 'philosophical nature' to a high degree, some less so, some having only some of these accompanied by certain deficiencies. Some had excellent sense-perception, bright intelligence, good memory, were hard-working, lovers of knowledge and seekers of the truth, others had only some of these talents, or to a lesser degree, or may have suffered from bodily deficiencies. Isidore's modest endowments, as compared to those of Marinus' Proclus, were however sufficient for access to the higher levels of virtue, those concerning the soul alone. In childhood and youth, characters would be formed well or badly. Good or bad influences could give a child ethical virtues, in particular moderation in desire, or could corrupt the child in such a way that no further progress in the scale of virtues would be possible and a failed life would result. Ethical virtues could become political virtues when reason, rather than training, would determine the moral qualities of the soul in its embodied life. This rule by reason would concern both the interior life of the individual and relations with others in the household and in the state. Political virtues are required for good political action, which, however, may be frustrated by external factors (Damascius gives the example of Marcellinus). Political virtue represented the highest level in human perfection, in the perfection of soul as embodied. Those who reached the level of political virtue were quite numerous, as compared with

³³ Great wealth could attract bad influences which could ruin a child's moral education: examples are provided by Hegias and his family (145B [F351], 146A and E [F352-5]); see Plato, *Rep.* 494cd).

the few who seem to have gone further, reaching levels of virtue representing the perfection of soul taken in itself and sharing more closely in a divine life. These higher levels were those of the purificatory, theoretical and theurgic virtues.

The Patriarch Photius, one of our two sources for extracts from Damascius' *Life of Isidore*, criticizes Damascius for seeking to exalt himself by putting down the people he appears to celebrate in his book, even if Damascius himself, Photius claims, was of no great distinction even on the human level, not to speak of what is higher.³⁴ Photius has noticed, then, the evaluative aspect of Damascius' book and it is true that Damascius puts each of his personages in his or her (moral and intellectual) place: some people do much better than others; and even the best report, that on Isidore, is not without blemish. But it is not certain that Damascius' purpose thereby was to glorify himself. Photius tells us that Damascius dedicated his book to a pupil of his (and of Isidore), Theodora, a pagan woman whose ancestors were related to Iamblichus, who was educated in the propaedeutic disciplines (poetics and grammar) and in philosophy, in particular in geometry and arithmetic.³⁵ This information makes it much more likely that Damascius intended his book for the edification of his pupils and of other such readers, who might be curious about the perspectives which a philosophical life might promise, who would find in Damascius' book examples of differing philosophical itineraries, a veritable panorama of the possibilities and patterns of philosophical perfection.³⁶

But Damascius' evaluation, it might be felt, may say more than this. If one is to go by the results summarized in the appended chart, one might think that they suggest that levels in philosophical perfection tend to decline as we approach the time when Damascius is writing his work. We might be tempted to connect this with the growing political pressure exerted on élite pagan circles, for whom life became more and more impossible, and with a social context felt by philosophers as more and more deleterious to the moral and intellectual education of the soul.³⁷ Indeed Damascius' book

³⁴ Photius, *Bibl.* 181, 126a; reprinted in the editions of Damascius' *Life of Isidore* published by Zintzen 318 and Athanassiadi 336.

³⁵ Photius, *Bibl.* 181, 125b, reprinted by Zintzen 317 and Athanassiadi 334 (Photius must have these details from Damascius' dedication, which would thus appear to have even suggested what Theodora's present place in the scale of virtues might be and what could be her future in the scale).

³⁶ Compare 29A [F54]. One might recall the paradigms of lives to be chosen by souls in the myth of Er in Plato's *Rep.* (618a), even if the context is quite different.

³⁷ See, for example, my 'Simplicius on the Place of the Philosopher in the City (*In*

is also the story of pagan decline, of persecution, resistance, betrayal, compromise and collaboration. Might Damascius be looking back to when philosophy was stronger, in the time of Isidore? The theme of philosophical decline is certainly present in Damascius' work.³⁸ But it would be difficult to be sure that such a decline in philosophical life is being illustrated in our chart, given the large gaps in our evidence. What the chart shows most clearly is how rare it was for philosophers to succeed in going beyond the level of human perfection (political virtue) in the direction of living a divine life. The presence in Damascius' book of examples of such achievement (Isidore, Sarapio), although they belonged to an earlier, more heroic generation, could still stand for that to which Damascius' readers could look as their ultimate goal.³⁹

University of Fribourg

Note on the appended chart

The chart lists in the vertical axis the persons mentioned in this article, arranged in descending order *very roughly* in some sort of chronological succession going from the beginning to the end of the fifth century (this cannot be done very successfully, since many of these individuals were more or less contemporaries and since few precise dates are available). The list does not of course include all persons named in Damascius' work. The horizontal axis lists from left to right, in rising order, the levels of the scale of virtues. For each name I give the placing in the scale suggested in the fragments of Damascius' *Life of Isidore*. Where precise identification of the level of virtue is uncertain I add a question mark (in the shaded area where the identification is plausible, outside the shaded area where it is doubtful); "+/-" indicates a mixed record. I also wish to recall in general (as noted above) the limitations of such a chart.

Epictetum chap. 32)', *The Greek Strand in Islamic Political Thought*, ed. E. Gannagé, P. Crone et al., in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 57 (2004), 98.

³⁸ 18 [F30], discussed by H.-D. Saffrey, 'Le thème du malheur des temps chez les derniers philosophes néoplatoniciens', *Chercheurs de sagesse* (Mélanges J. Pépin), ed. M.-O. Goulet-Cazé et al., Paris 1992, 424-26, reprinted in his book *Le Néoplatonisme après Plotin*, Paris 2000, 207-218; see also Athanassiadi 24.

³⁹ I would like to thank Bob Sharples and those who commented on this paper when it was given at the Institute of Classical Studies in London in May 2003. I am grateful also for help given by John Dillon, Lucas Siorvanes and Ermanno Malespina and in particular for the corrections and suggestions made by the anonymous reader and the editors of this journal, who helped me reconsider my concluding paragraph.

Virtues	Natural	Ethical	Political	Purificatory	Theoretical	Theurgic
Hypatia				?	?	
Syrianus					?	?
Hierocles						
Domninus	+/-					
Hermeias	+/-					
Gregory	+/-					
Theosebius						
Sarapio						?
Heraiscus	+/-					?
Maras						
Aedesia						
Olympos				?	?	
Hilarius		+/-				
Marinus	+/-					
Ammonius	+/-	?				
Asclepiodotus	+/-		+/-			
Isidore	+/-					?
Ulpian						
Severianus		+/-				
Marcellinus						
Dorus		+/-				
Archiadas						
Theagenes			+/-			
Hegias	+/-					
Eupeithius						
Nomus and Januarius						