Review Article

Theory and Didactic in Olympiodorus and the Alexandrian School

A Discussion of Two New Translations

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Abstract

This review article considers two recent Italian and English translations of works by Olympiodorus of Alexandria and his immediate successors (sixth century CE). These translations make accessible to a wider audience a number of works that help us understand a transitional period in the history of thought. This review takes a closer look at some of the substantive views expressed by the translators and evaluates editorial and translation choices. We should beware of exaggerating the differences between these sixth-century philosophers, this review argues, while recognizing that there may be considerable distance between what they thought and what the surviving texts show.

Keywords

Olympiodorus – Elias – David – commentary – *prolegomena*

Francesca Filippi. *Olimpiodoro d'Alessandria. Tutti i commentari a Platone. Introduzione, traduzione, testo greco a fronte e note.* (2 vols). Sankt Augustin, Academia Verlag, 2017. lxxviii, 390; lxxvi, 504 pp. Pr. € 65,00. ISBN 9783896656841; 9783896656858.

Sebastian Gertz. *Elias and David. 'Introductions to Philosophy' with Olympiodorus: 'Introduction to Logic'.* London, Bloomsbury, 2018. viii, 257 pp. Pr. £ 85,00. ISBN 9781350051744.

1 Entering a Transitional Period

Francesca Filippi's two-volume Italian translation with notes of Olympiodorus' Platonic works and Sebastian Gertz' English translation of three introductory works from sixth-century Alexandria help make this transitory period in the history of philosophy more accessible. The transition is still insufficiently understood. It is a transition to philosophical traditions—Armenian, Syriac, Byzantine, Arabic—that require more investigation. And while the philosophical era from which it derives has received intensifying scrutiny, the relations of sixth-century philosophy and earlier thinkers remain debated. This time of transition itself, however, also needs to be examined for its own character.¹ Filippi's and Gertz' work helps this effort.

Filippi (hereafter: F.) translates Olympiodorus' commentaries on the Platonic dialogues *First Alcibiades*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo*, as well as the *Prolegomena to Plato's Philosophy*, which she claims should be credited to Olympiodorus. Gertz (hereafter: G.) translates Elias' and David's respective *Introductions to Philosophy* (as he translates the *Prolegomena*) and Olympiodorus' *Introduction to Logic* (*Prolegomena logica*). Both authors have contributed to the study of late ancient Neoplatonism in earlier work, F. with a monograph on Proclus' commentary on the *First Alcibiades* (2012), G. with his book on Olympiodorus' and Damascius' commentaries on the *Phaedo* (2011). In addition to its value as a translation, F.'s work also develops a substantive view of Olympiodorus' place in the history of philosophy that is a welcome contribution to the discussion among Neoplatonic scholars. G.'s volume, an addition to the *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* series, has no such aim but nevertheless gives us a good sense of the importance to the Alexandrians of the business of introducing students to ancient thought.

¹ For an argument that stresses the *status aparte* of the sixth century see Perkams 2017, 22–28.

2 Olympiodorus: The Last Neoplatonist?

Introducing the œuvre of Olympiodorus, F. proposes to read it as testimony of a phase of consolidation and expansion in the Neoplatonic school. She surveys negative valuations of the philosophical quality of Olympiodorus' œuvre and more recent insistence on the importance of the didactic reasons behind a less speculative and ontological orientation of his commentaries. According to F., recent studies share two features: a concern to defend Olympiodorus from the criticisms of previous generations and the tendency to measure Olympiodorus' philosophical quality by the similarity between his works and those of his Athenian predecessors (vol. 1, xvii). However, she argues, this double agenda risks obscuring our view of Olympiodorus' own contribution on his own terms. More specifically, she warns against the assumption to see a tight connection between theoretical similarity between Olympiodorus and Proclus and a similarity in their works, so that divergences from the Proclan model in the type of commentary Olympiodorus writes are signs of theoretical divergence (vol. 1, xviii). But this, she argues, mistakes the logic of the development of the Neoplatonic school. In any school, we can discern a phase of theoretical innovation and one of consolidation and expansion. We should recognise Olympiodorus as a consolidator. In the phase of consolidation, the school seeks to fit the theoretical novelties into the cultural environment by integrating what is compatible with them in other cultural traditions, by refuting what is incompatible with them, and by maximizing the explanatory power of the terms used in communicating these ideas. Had the socio-political circumstances not been such as to put an end to pagan teaching in Alexandria, F. submits, the sixth century would have constituted the high point of Neoplatonism in late antiquity (vol. 1, xix).

In her discussion of the socio-political circumstances, which make themselves felt particularly in the *Gorgias* commentary (vol. 2, xvi), F. weighs in on the debate on the event that we know as the closure of the Athenian Academy (vol. 1, xxiii-xxix) as well as on the conditions in Alexandria itself (vol. 1, xxix-xxxvi). On the Athenian side, F. considers to be mistaken the interpretation that ties the closure of the school mainly to the provincial authorities and that sees a pushback against magic and soothsaying behind the triad of 'philosophy, astronomy and dice' in the law, as reported by Malalas, that leads to the ban on philosophy in Athens (*Chronicle* 18.47).² Banning dice would have been

2 The whole passage reads: 'Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ὑπατείας τοῦ αὐτοῦ Δεκίου ὁ αὐτὸς βασιλεὺς θεσπίσας πρόσταξιν ἔπεμψεν ἐν Ἀθήναις, κελεύσας μὴδὲνα διδάσκειν φιλοσοφίαν μῆτε ἀστρονομίαν [*Thurn; νόμιμα Dindorf*] ἐξηγεῖσθαι μῆτε κόττον ἐν μιᾷ τῶν πόλεων γίνεσθαι ('During the consulship of

motivated by anti-gambling convictions anyway (as happened elsewhere and later). Moreover, F. argues, we should resist the preference for *ἀστρονομία* over *νόμιμα* that is necessary for this interpretation (as accepted by Thurn, Malalas' most recent editor). There is much to say in favour of *νόμιμα*: it was part of Justinian's push to be the sole legal authority that independent exegeses of the law were prohibited (F. ties this to closures of legal schools in Alexandria, Rome, Caesarea etc.). So it makes sense to think the Athenian law included the prohibition of *νόμιμα ἐξηγείσθαι*. Finally, Thurn's reading, which is based on a parallel from a very different context (vol. 1, xxvii), does not deliver what is needed, F. argues. In the sixth century, *ἀστρονομία* and *ἀστρολογία* were kept separate (F. adduces Ol. *In Mete.* 19.20-27 Stüve as—convincing—evidence).³ For F., then, philosophical teaching was indeed the target of imperial legislation. F. develops a plausible case,⁴ although not one most at home in a book on Olympiodorus.

F.'s treatment of the situation of the Alexandrian school goes back a long way to describe the setup of the Alexandrian school in previous centuries (vol. 1, xxix-xxx), and even to reference the statements and works about Christians of Aelius Aristides, Celsus and Porphyry (vol. 1, xxx-xxxii). She rightly concentrates on an event or arrangement that is likely to have had major implications for philosophers in the following decades: with pagan philosophers caught in the spotlight of an imperial investigation in the late 480s, Olympiodorus' teacher Ammonius and the bishop of Alexandria (Petrus Mongus, most likely) came to an agreement that allowed Ammonius to continue teaching. F. describes two rival reconstructions of events: on the one hand, the theory that Ammonius adapted his teaching to make it unobjectionable to the Christians, and on the other hand the theory that Ammonius collaborated and to a degree betrayed his former colleagues. F. argues that in the absence of more evidence we should accept a synthesis of both interpretations. This is somewhat disappointing, since the evidence for such a middle position is not better than for either of the rival theories.

Whatever the circumstances, it seems likely that Olympiodorus was the last major pagan philosopher of ancient Alexandria, as F. firmly insists. In his own lectures, Olympiodorus took the presence of Christian students into account. He goes out of his way in his *Gorgias* commentary, for instance, to reassure

Decius, the emperor issued a decree and sent it to Athens ordering that no one should teach philosophy nor interpret astronomy [/the laws] nor in any city should there be lots cast using dice', tr. Watts, mod.). Note that, contrary to what F. implies, both *νόμιμα* and *ἀστρονομίαν* have MS support.

3 A similar passage: Simpl. *in Ph.* 293.10-15.

4 For an alternative interpretation see e.g. Watts 2006, 128-138.

them that they should not be disturbed when they hear of pagan myths. At no time, F. argues, did this detract from his commitment to pagan philosophy. But the very next generation of teachers was no longer pagan. Moreover, they abandoned the Neoplatonic design of philosophical education. They no longer taught Plato and gave a new orientation to philosophical teaching (vol. 1, xxxv).

This picture of Olympiodorus as the last committed Proclan has two main aspects: the Proclan nature of his teaching and the difference between his and his successors' works. In sections entitled "ortodossia proclusiana" in her introductions, F. gives references to passages that show Olympiodorus adhering to Proclus' views on e.g. the vehicles of the soul, demonology, causation or the One (vol. 1, lix-lx; vol. 2, xxii-xxiii; vol. 2, xlvii-xlviii). At times, however, she states her case in Proclan terms to such a degree that the effect is the misleading suggestion that, e.g., Olympiodorus speaks of henads or expounds Proclus' theory of evil.⁵ Nonetheless, I think F. is right to regard the sometimes brief references to more technically ontological ideas that we find in Olympiodorus as evidence that this philosopher stood by these ideas, even if he does not discuss them in long stretches of his texts.⁶

The strong distinction F. makes between Olympiodorus on the one hand and Elias and David on the other is untenable, in my view. It may well be the case that these were Christian teachers.⁷ But we should be careful to draw conclusions about their philosophical interests from their religious allegiance. The arguments F. offers for the idea that their attitude towards the tradition and to teaching was fundamentally different from Olympiodorus', moreover, are weak. First, it is too quick to argue from the absence of commentaries on Plato after Olympiodorus that his successors were no longer interested in him. Second, F. points to the *Prolegomena philosophiae* that have come down to us as

5 Henads: vol. 2, xxii. F. provides no direct reference in the context, but this appears to be based on *in Grg.* 47.2, 243.16-244.4 Westerink (F.'s n. 62 to page vol. 2, nxxiii), which only goes so far as to state that reality does not proceed from the first principle without intermediaries. Proclan theory of evil: vol. 1, lx; vol. 2, xlvii. Both passages contain statements that lies preserve something of truth (*in Alc.* 32.7-9, which does include the terms *παρυφίσταται* and *αὐθυπόστατον*; *in Phd.* 4.6.4-5).

6 It should be noted that F. increases Proclus' presence in Olympiodorus' text by including his name where he is not mentioned explicitly. At *in Alc.* 39.5, the undetermined *φησὶν* becomes "dice Proclo". It is more natural to supply Alcibiades or Plato, given *φησὶν* and *ἔλεγεν* in 38.23-24. Proclus' commentary does not have a parallel statement in this context. This is different a few lines later, where the commentators agree almost *verbatim* (39.9-11 ~ Procl. *in Alc.* 120.14-15; and see Westerink's apparatus for the sequel). Still, to translate *καὶ ὅτι*, one line after *ὡς Ἀριστοτέλης φησί*, by "Proclo dice anche che ..." is tendentious.

7 Although we are not even sure that these were their names, as G. points out (3) and F. does not (for the argument and evidence see Wildberg 1990).

Elias' and David's as evidence of this new orientation in philosophical didactic. She claims that they are general surveys of philosophy which no longer had as their primary aim the introduction to a curriculum of Aristotelian and Platonic works (vol. 1, xxxv). One problem with this claim is that Olympiodorus most probably also wrote *Prolegomena philosophiae*, as G. points out (2).⁸ Moreover, F. mischaracterizes the *Prolegomena philosophiae*, which with their definitions of philosophy, and their clear stated order of proceeding from the preliminaries of philosophy via those of logic to the preliminaries to Aristotle, clearly do have an introductory function.

Third, F. sees a difference in method between Olympiodorus and Elias. Olympiodorus' commitment to the tradition is evident from the three elements of his philosophical practice, F. argues (referring to *Prol. log.* 10.24-35): independent judgement, adherence to the tradition and 'ai modelli e ai criteri esegetici veri' (τύπους καὶ κανόνες ἀληθείς), which she understands to refer to the "canoni ermeneutici della propria tradizione filosofica" (vol. 1, xliii). Elias, F. says, only speaks of judgement in this context. For Elias, explicating Plato by Plato and Aristotle by Aristotle takes precedence over using hermeneutical school principles. The role of the teacher is to maintain "una laica equidistanza" to both (vol. 1, xliv). The texts F. refers to concern one of the traditional questions before embarking on Aristotle's philosophy: what the teacher should be like. Contrary to what she claims, however, Olympiodorus and Elias answer in very similar terms: a teacher should be ἐξηγηματικός and ἐπιστημονικός,⁹ an interpreter and in the possession of knowledge. In Olympiodorus' *Prol. log.* 10.24-35, the criteria "esegetici" that F. refers to are "patterns and standards of truth", in G.'s translation, by means of which a teacher ought to adjudicate between the claims of different philosophical schools. In other words, they are part of what it is to possess knowledge. These standards are neither particularly exegetical nor presented as tradition-specific. The relevant text in Elias (*Prol.* 122.25-123.11)¹⁰ not only features the same two requirements, it also quite clearly sees Aristotle as leading up to Plato and requires that the exegete can teach it in this way (123.9-11).

8 G. points to *Prol. log.* 4.9-10 (moot); 16.26 (convincing). There is another reference in *in Phd.* 1.11.5-6 (πρόδηλον δὲ τοῦτο ἐκ τῶν ἐγκυκλίων ἐξηγήσεων), which F. renders incorrectly as "è già stato chiarito in precedenza, in sede di esegesi generale", footnoting a reference to the *theōria* of the current *in Phd.* lecture (1.2.17-20).

9 In *Ol. Prol. log.* 10.25, Elias 122.25 has ἐξηγητής and ἐπιστήμων.

10 Nn. 172-174 to vol. 1, xliv are confusing (the references are by MS page, but leaving out *recto* or *verso* indications, with Busse's line numbers) and in part erroneous.

3 Introducing the Texts

Elias and Olympiodorus, then, seem to be closer than F. presents them. This comes out nicely in G's volume. Olympiodorus' *Introduction to Logic* has much in common with Elias' and David's *Introductions to Philosophy*. As he notes, all three provide "a lively picture of what it might have been like to sit in a first year philosophy course" (2). What these students will certainly have learnt is that the classics they are being introduced to are to be handled with care. There is a proper order in which to approach them and there are many things you should know before you do. Their teachers often explain that the exact number of preliminaries, divisions, definitions etc. involved in this philosophy course is not random, but expresses the completeness of the view of philosophy which they are being taught. This seems designed to impress upon the students the value of their roughly thousand-year-old philosophical tradition. G. mentions the importance of numbers for these thinkers in his introduction (5), but is more concerned to bring out what he considers to be philosophically salient in these texts. Among such features is the interlinkage of practice and theory in these Alexandrians' conception of philosophy (7-8).

F's introductions to the individual dialogues are generally helpful, although some topics (myths in the *Gorgias*, the argument of opposites in the *Phaedo*) take up much space for an introduction. Introducing the *Phaedo* commentary, F. offers good comments on what its lost *proem* could have looked like, as well as an effective discussion of the relationship between the political, the purificatory and the theoretical philosopher in Olympiodorus' frame of thought. In the introduction to the *Gorgias* commentary, F. suggests that the division of the dialogue into four rather than three parts could be Olympiodorus' own (vol. 2, xx-xxi). In this dialogue, which she like most dates to early in Olympiodorus' career, F. thinks Olympiodorus is at his most cautious. In this text, the socio-political context makes itself felt most. F. offers helpful Neoplatonic parallels and Stoic antecedents to Olympiodorus' talk of the philosopher's need to hide behind a *τεῖχος* in difficult times.¹¹

F. includes the *Prolegomena philosophiae Platonicae* as a work by Olympiodorus. Her position, as stated and argued in the introduction, is more nuanced, however. She rejects a number of Westerink's reasons for dissociating the work from Olympiodorus, on generally good grounds. To mention one argument: The discrepancy between the *Prolegomena* (10.43-46) and *in Phd.*

11 But the metaphor is not "di origine stoica" (vol. 2, xxvii): F. fails to make explicit that the *τεῖχος* of *in Grg.* 41.2, 208.2 Westerink and 45.2, 234.13 Westerink, is that of Socrates in *Pl. R.* 496d7 (see Griffin 2014, 73-75).

(4.6.7-8) on whether or not the senses discern essences may not be that great, F. argues, since we should differentiate what kind of essences are at stake in each context (vol. 1, xlv-xlvi). F. does not, however, address Westerink's concerns about the different attitude towards religion he discerns in the *Prolegomena*.¹² Despite rejecting Westerink's arguments, F. does not attribute the work to Olympiodorus. What we have, she thinks (vol. 1, l-li), is the result of a student of Olympiodorus' reworking and abridging Olympiodorus' *Prolegomena*, drawing on some of his other works, and notably including a Life of Plato (that deviates from Olympiodorus' at the beginning of *in Alc.*, a reason for Westerink's denial of authorship). Although F. does not say so, this construction would also take care of the omission of Apollo's paternity of Plato in *Prol.* 1.26-60 and the work's avoiding talk of δαίμονες (*Prol.* 9.7, 12.13, 13.19), two further reasons for Westerink's view. But the construction, in the end, is not that different from Westerink's position.¹³

4 Texts and Translations

The Greek text on which the translations are based is, in the case of F., Westerink's, which she prints;¹⁴ in the case of G., Busse's (from volumes 12 and 18 of the *CAG*). G. notes a number of departures from this text, most of them suggested by Busse in his apparatus. Some are helpful, some less so. As a helpful example I note the emendation at *El. Prol.* 19.4 to read ἀνουςίους; or the inclusion of David, *Prol.* 2.10-12, based on the Armenian version.¹⁵ As an example of an unnecessary emendation I mention the transposition of *Ol. Prol. log.* 16.27-28 to after 16.14: Olympiodorus is not criticizing the Peripatetics here.¹⁶

12 Westerink 1962, xlix and 1990, lxxxviii.

13 Putting distance between the *Prolegomena* and Elias serves F.'s case for a substantive difference in outlook between Olympiodorus and Elias.

14 Without the apparatus, which makes it difficult for the reader to assess the status of text within angle brackets.

15 Convincing too is the deletion of ἡ θεολογική from *Ol. Prol. log.* 9.10-12, defended fully in Gertz 2016; or the proposal at *Ol. Prol. log.* 15.8-9 to read ὑπὸ γὰρ τὸ μαθηματικὸν ἀνάγεται, καὶ τὸ μαθηματικὸν ὑπὸ τὸ θεωρητικόν. I also agree with G.'s omission (with Busse) at *Dav. Prol.* 23.2; retaining βρέξον at *Prol.* 34.11; and excising ἄλλως τε ... αὐτῆς at 54.31-55.1.

16 οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ καὶ ἡ ἐλάττων ἔρρωται at 16.20 is not "is not at all robust" but "not least robust"; at 16.27 "reasoned ... from" should be "reasoned ... for" (cf. 17.2-3). At *El. Prol.* 7.24 we should not add θεόν; τοιοῦτον already does the work. At *Prol.* 19.5 we should not accept the addition (with MS P) τὴν ζωὴν; at *Prol.* 33.18 the proposal διδόμενον; the expression is δίκας διδόναι in the active. At *Dav. Prol.* 39.19 we should not read τὸ μὲν ... τὸ δέ instead of τὸν μὲν ... τὸν δέ: David says that Pythagoras has defined philosophy on the basis of its subject matter; Plato on the basis of its goal (this is clear from 26.10-15 and 45.31-46.1, while

All emendations are marked by angle brackets (somewhat confusingly, since the ‘Conventions’ page states that these indicate “additions” to the text).

Both have produced highly readable translations. F. regularly and G. occasionally chooses to render particularly terse passages in the Greek in a more expansive Italian or English, in G.’s case marked by square brackets. There are, unfortunately, a number of inaccuracies in G.’s translation, making it unreliable in places.¹⁷ Moreover, as a result perhaps of the editorial process, in a number of cases sentence splitting in English has obscured the sense of the Greek.¹⁸ The number of typo’s and omissions is limited.¹⁹ The volume includes

at 25.26 the text should be emended from *ὁ ἀπό* to read *οἱ ἀπό*, leaving out the preceding comma, cf. 26.13).

- 17 In one case the translation has unfortunately become very hard to follow. In his characterization of arithmetic at *Prol.* 29.11-15, Elias says: *καὶ περὶ μὲν τὸν καθ’ αὐτὸ ἀριθμὸν καταγίνεται ἡ ἀριθμητική, ζητοῦσα τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἀριθμῶν καὶ τὰ πάθη, ὡς ὅταν λέγῃ ‘τῶν ἀριθμῶν οἱ μὲν ἄρτιοι, οἱ δὲ περιττοί’, καὶ τούτων τὰ εἶδη· οὐδεμίαν γὰρ ἔμφασιν ἑτέρου ἀριθμοῦ παρέχει, εἰ δὲ εἴπῃ διπλάσιον, τριπλάσιον, ἔμφασιν καὶ ἑτέρου παρέχει, τοῦ μὲν ἡμίσεος, τοῦ δὲ τρίτου.* This becomes “Arithmetic deals with number by itself, since it examines the natures and accidents of numbers, as when you say: ‘some numbers are even, and others odd’, and their species. No qualification produces one kind of number, for example when you say ‘double’ and ‘triple’, and [some] qualification produces another kind, [e.g.] ‘about half this’ on the one hand, and ‘about a third of that’ on the other hand.” As I read Elias, the subject of *παρέχει* in each case is the one making the statement, which produces an *ἐμφασίς* of a different number. So we should read something like: “as when someone says ‘some numbers are even, and others odd’, and their species, he does not cause the appearance of another number. But if someone says ‘double, triple’, he causes the appearance of another number as well, in the one case that of a half, in the other that of a third.”—A few other cases: At Elias, *Prol.* 8.7-8, rendering *ἀναλυτικῶς* and *συνθετικῶς* by “can be divided” and “can be arranged” obscures the point that Elias traces the definitions of philosophy to their principles and then returns to their resulting particular order and formulation. At *Prol.* 34.9-16, the translation reads: “Aristotle too knows the division into legislation and jurisdiction, since he imposes laws and passes judgements on himself. He imposes laws [on himself], as when we sing to ourselves ...”. Here the Greek has *ἐπίσταται δὲ καὶ τὴν εἰς τὸ νομοθετικὸν καὶ δικαστικὸν διαίρεσιν ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης, εἴπερ ἔστι καὶ ἑαυτῷ νομοθετεῖν καὶ δικάζειν· νομοθετεῖν μὲν, ὡς ἡνίκα ἐπάδωμεν ἑαυτοῖς κτλ.* We should translate the middle phrase as “since it is possible to impose laws and pass judgements on oneself”. At *Dav. Prol.* 75.26, “according to the Aristotelians” should be within the scope of what “the Platonists say”. At *Ol. Prol. log.* 9.29 the *τέλος* of philosophy is the “goal” and the “summit” a couple of lines later (9.32). Similarly at 25.7 the *ἀγῶνες* are “main arguments” but “questions” at 25.13. Many more cases could be listed.

- 18 E.g. the construction *ὡς/ὅν τρόπον ... οὕτω* at *El. Prol.* 1.17-18; *Ol. Prol. log.* 2.10-12, 4.33-5.1.

- 19 Some of the more significant typo’s or slips: the list on p. 6 does not include the question of homonymy; p. 9 under (6) for “style” read “composition”; *El.* 3.6 for “purpose” read “cause”; 17.34 add “in” after “in”; *Dav.* 4.26 for “knowledge” read “known”; 41.30 delete “do not”; 78.6 for “divisions” read “definitions” *bis*. A substantial number of Greek words and little phrases are omitted in the translation.

helpful and succinct notes, as well as a useful English-Greek glossary and a Greek-English index for each of the three works.

In F's volumes we find fluent translations with some happy choices. At *in Alc.* 56.9-11, for instance, where Olympiodorus explains why Socrates asks Alcibiades to answer his questions,²⁰ F's rendering "Socrate non intendeva tenere i propri discorsi (τοὺς λόγους αὐτοῦ) come se fossero morti e privi di anima, ma li voleva ... congegnati in armonia con i suoi interlocutori (προσδιλεγόμενοις)" seems preferable to the recent English translation by Griffin 2015: "Socrates did not want to draw dead and unbreathing words from him, but ... [words] suitable to people engaged in dialectic".²¹ As far as the *Prol. Plat.* are concerned, F's translation and the other recent Italian translation by Motta 2014 are comparable, F's rendering being smoother on the whole and Motta's closer to the Greek.²² To take a representative example: F. renders *Prol.* 16.3-6 (ἐπεὶ τοίνυν μεμαθήκαμεν ὡς ὁ διάλογος κόσμος ἐστὶν καὶ ὁ κόσμος διάλογος, ὅσα εἰσὶν τὰ συνιστῶντα τὸν κόσμον, τοσαῦτα καὶ τοὺς διαλόγους εὐρήσομεν) as: "Abbiamo affermato che il dialogo è un Universo e che l'Universo è un dialogo, cosicché gli elementi costitutivi dell'Universo saranno anche quelli che definiscono il dialogo." Motta has "Poiché dunque abbiamo appreso che il dialogo è un cosmo e il cosmo un dialogo, quanti sono gli elementi che costituiscono il cosmo, altrettanti troveremo essere anche gli elementi che costituiscono i dialoghi."

However, F's translations also contain a number of infelicities.²³ Closer attention to Westerink's notes would have prevented some.²⁴ The endnotes have

20 In the Greek: ὁ Σωκράτης οὐ νεκροὺς καὶ ἀπειψυγμένους ἐβούλετο προάγειν τοὺς λόγους αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ' ἐνεργοὺς καὶ ζῶας, ὡς εἰπεῖν, καὶ πρέποντας τοῖς προσδιλεγόμενοις.

21 Also, at *in Alc.* 208.10, "si lamenta" (though a bit specific) and 209.12, "critichi", for λαμβάνεται seem preferable to Griffin's "presents" and "understands". (In singling out these cases I do not mean to criticize Griffin's translation in general; I think non-Italian readers are better served by Griffin's version.)

22 As far as this non-native reader can tell, Motta's notes to the translation are usually more relevant to the text.

23 As to infelicities, I note a few issues with technical terminology: e.g. τὰς γνωστικὰς sc. δυνάμεις as "Gnostici" at *in Alc.* 16.10; σύμμετρα as "valori comuni" at *in Grg.* 37.3, 191.22 W; εὐλογος could have been translated more consistently in *in Phd.* 1.9; ἐγκυκλίῳν ἐξηγήσεων in 1.11.6 (see n. 7). Further, at *Prol. Plat.* 16.8-9, χρόνος and τόπος are nom., not dat. At *in Alc.* 2.114 and 2.128 αὐτῇ is rendered as αὐτή. At *in Alc.* 217.7 τῇ κόρῃ, the pupil of the eye in *Alc.* 133a2, becomes "a una sua vestale". In *Grg.* 50.4, 265.15 W "redenzione" is used for κακάθαρται. There are only occasional omissions.

24 The following renderings would have profited from consulting Westerink: ἡμίσχετος at *in Phd.* 3.4.3 as "univoca" (Westerink's note *ad loc.* explains the origin of this "half-relation" with Theodorus of Asine). At *in Alc.* 8.18 the ἀρχῶν about which Κύλων asked the Pythia are clearly not the "principi degli esseri" that "Chilone" wanted to know about (Westerink refers to Thucydides' report, 1.126, about Cylon). At *in Alc.* 8.19 τὸ Μεγαρικόν receives a

much to offer and are particularly rich in references to the prior Neoplatonic tradition. Sometimes they are more useful in offering the theories behind the commentary or some background on other ancient figures, than as quick elucidation of Olympiodorus or the passages themselves.²⁵ For a work this size the typographical and other slips are few.²⁶ For reference formats it would have been preferable to choose Westerink page numbers as much as possible and for quick reference an indication of the current *praxis* in the header would have been useful.²⁷

5 The Teacher, His Text, and His Thought

If we return for a moment to the question of how to characterize philosophy in sixth-century Alexandria, we should perhaps draw a distinction between what we have and what these authors thought. It remains a remarkable fact that for Elias and David we only have evidence of commentaries on Aristotelian works or works leading up to the Aristotelian ones; and for Olympiodorus, in terms of the philosophical works, what has come down to us is either Aristotelian or lower-level Platonic (lower in terms of the curriculum).²⁸ Brief references to Neoplatonic ontology throughout the latter's work make it highly likely, as F. underscores, that Olympiodorus has a grounding in Proclus' theory that goes well beyond what he communicates in the commentaries. What he

footnote about Stilpo of Megara, but it is a reference to the lines we have as *Anth. Pal.* 14.73 (as Westerink as well as Griffin notes).

- 25 Rich but less helpful notes are, for instance, note 82 to *in Alc.*, which offers three dense pages with previous views on the *ὁχλήματα* of the soul; note 89 to *in Phd.*, which gives an account of the soul in previous Neoplatonists without clarifying the difficulty at hand, i.e. that Olympiodorus speaks of the irrational part of the soul *simpliciter* being extinguished at death.
- 26 A small typographical selection: at vol. 1, xviii *infra* I noted "motodo"; vol. 1, xxi refers in English to the "*Digest*" and "*Institutes*"; vol. 1, xlix "testi testi", and read "Theosebius" for "Ctesibius"; vl. 1, lxxv n. 235 read "Procl." for "Olimp."; n. 241 read "107" for "108" (there are many more such slips in the references); vol. 2, xxv "aristitico" and "Filipono"; *in Alc.* 2.112 and *in Grg.* 17.3 line 98.22 Westerink are printed double; at *in Phd.* 9.6.4 "a a".
- 27 The references use Norvin pages for the *in Grg.* and *in Phd.* and Hermann pages for the *Prol.*; line numbers from Westerink's editions; and section numbers in square brackets. The latter are often inaccurate. The Westerink line numbers are really the approximate line numbers of the translation. The combination of Westerink line numbers with page numbers from the older editions often results in imprecise references, with double sets of the former belonging to one page in the latter.
- 28 Although we should take seriously Olympiodorus' mention of a commentary of his on the *Sophist* (110.8-9); it is mentioned in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* at 246.11-12. On the waning importance of the higher levels of the Platonic curriculum in Alexandria see Tarrant 2017.

communicates is highly tailored to his audience.²⁹ To a considerable extent, F.'s doctrinal and G.'s didactic Olympiodorus exist side by side.

Olympiodorus's own knowledge of Neoplatonic views derives, apart from his own reading and thinking, from his own teacher in Alexandria, Ammonius—in contrast to his Alexandrian predecessors, Olympiodorus never went to Athens to study, as far as we can tell. Of Ammonius, however, we also only have commentaries on Aristotelian works.³⁰ Here it is worth remembering that philosophical schools at the time operated with inner circles of a few dedicated students and colleagues of the main figure and lectures for a broader audience.³¹ I think it is plausible that Ammonius and Olympiodorus, and possible that even Elias, David and Stephanus, continued to provide much more technical instruction to their inner circles than would be immediately evident from their surviving work.

An added reason for being cautious when drawing inferences from the surviving work is its second-hand nature. For one, the actual writers of these texts were students, whose reliability is not always a given. What is more, there is evidence of interference in the texts. In the case of Elias, this is debatable. G. joins Busse in thinking that three Christian elements in the text ought to be excised as later intrusions (3 and *ad loc.*).³² In Olympiodorus' *Commentary on the Phaedo* (9.6) the writer offers an (unsuccessful) argument against metempsychosis, on the heels of Olympiodorus' own treatment of it. F. makes the interesting suggestion (vol. 2, 454 n. 294) that the λόγος which the writer aims to prove false (at *in Phd.* 9.6.4-5) is that of Cebes at *Phd.* 87a-88b. According to F., the passage is actually consistent with Olympiodorus' thought. However, this is an implausible reading of the passage. The writer's aim is stated quite generally: he aims to show that ὁ περὶ τῆς μετεμψυχώσεως λόγος is false. The commentary at this point concerns *Phd.* 69e-70c. Only a few lines later the writer invokes *Phd.* 87a-88b as the basis of an objection to Plato's position. Our view of this passage must therefore remain that it is someone else's attempt to prove Olympiodorus wrong. As a result, we should reckon with the possibility that there is, at times, a considerable distance between our text and what Olympiodorus taught. Nevertheless, even for the latter, the texts are what we have. And they reveal much about conceptions of philosophy in this transitional sixth century. Filippi and Gertz are to be applauded for making them available to a much wider audience.

29 F. notes this (vol. 1, lx), as have others (e.g. Renaud 2008, 91-92; Opsomer 2010, 702-703).

30 Olympiodorus (at *in Phd.* 8.17.6-7) mentions a μονόβιβλος of Ammonius' on (part of) the *Phaedo*. Again, this should caution us when making inferences from surviving material.

31 See e.g. Watts 2006, 29-31.

32 "According to the false opinions/myths of the Greeks" at 7.3 and 12.1; and an anecdote about the bishop Synesius at 31.23-25.

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