In chapter III we have seen that philosophy of nature in Proclus’ reading is an exposition concerning the divine causes of the universe that starts from hypothetical starting points, uses dialectical methods, like geometry, and that nonetheless has its epistemological foundation in the activities of αἴσθησις and δόξα. Thus book II of Proclus’ commentary describes philosophy of nature in its most Platonic sense, namely theological philosophy of nature. Once the transcendent causes of the universe have been treated, however, we find that Proclus emphasizes other aspects of the nature of φυσιολογία, each time in accordance with the exegetical context, to the extent that in every single book of Proclus’ commentary we find another characterization of φυσιολογία. The changes have two reasons, one heuristic and one epistemological.

(1) To state the obvious, Proclus presents his philosophy of nature within the confines of a commentary, so to a large extent he is bound to the text of the Timaeus. Moreover, in his exegetical practice Proclus adheres to Iamblichus’ heuristic principle which says that the interpretation of every element of a Platonic text should fit the general subject matter of that text, even when such a reading is not immediately evident.¹ In the latter case one should neither ignore the passage in question as irrelevant to the σκοπός of the dialogue, nor apply a mere superficial reading without connecting the passage to the whole. This principle gives commentators the freedom to reject earlier interpretations that to their minds do not obey that principle, but it also obliges them to always give eccentric passages both the superficial and the so-called appropriate reading. In our context, Proclus always has to study the Timaeus passages φυσιολογίας.

¹ On Iamblichus’ principle see 1.2, n. 35.
The second reason is more interesting from a philosophical point of view. Just as Nature, the subject of philosophy of nature, is present in different manners on different levels of Proclean reality, so φυσιολογία, which discusses them all, has different characters when covering different aspects of its subject matter. The theological/dialectical approach is suitable for giving an account of the transcendent causes of the natural world, but other ways of access to and modes of presentation of knowledge of nature have to be available for the ontological levels below the transcendent causes.

This fourth chapter concentrates on Proclean philosophy of nature (φυσιολογία) as pertaining to those lower levels of the natural world, taking our cue from Proclus’ own characterizations of φυσιολογία after the second book. That is, I am interested especially in what Proclus thinks Plato is and should be doing. If anything, Proclus is extremely sensitive to fine distinctions, be it ontological, methodological or other. With regard to his conception of philosophy of nature this shows in his acute awareness of possible shades of the science and in explicit discussions concerning its limitations. For example, from the moment we embark on the exposition of what Proclus calls the second hypostasis of the universe, the perceptibility of the realm of generation is highlighted, following the first lemma discussed:

Τ IV.1 That which comes into being must be corporeal, and visible and tangible ... (Tim. 31b4)

Since the corporeal nature of ‘the becoming’, and hence the perceptibility of the body of the world here comes to the centre of attention, it is not surprising that Proclus’ conception of philosophy of nature changes accordingly. Thus in the first pages of book III “concerning ourselves with φυσιολογία” is considered to be synonymous with “inquiring into the perceptible.” In the same breath, however, this φυσιολογία in the sense of inquiring only into the perceptible is rejected as being too narrow if it involves excluding certain aspects of Plato’s text.

In summary, apart from the theological/dialectical philosophy of nature of the second book of the commentary, in the remaining books we encounter the following other characterizations:

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2 In Tim. I 2.29–4.5. For φύσις see chapter II.
3 Or ‘the creation of aggregate wholes’ (τὴν τῶν ὅλων ποίησιν μερῶν) at Tim. 31b ff.
4 In Tim. II 23.9 ff.: esp. τὸ πρὸς αἰώνιαν μόνον ἐπιζητοῦντας ... φυσιολογίας μόνης φοντίζειν ... τὸ αἰώνιον.
5 Ibid. This passage is discussed in further detail below, under IV.2.2.