ASINUS PHILOSOPHANS:
Allegory’s Fate and Isis’ Providence
in the Metamorphoses

Friedemann Drews
Universität Rostock

1. Introduction: Imago asini philosophantis?

At the end of book 10, the reader of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses (Met.) encounters the ass, i.e. the narrator Lucius, commenting with indignation on Paris’ famous judgement (which has just been performed on-stage in pantomime): even then, exordio rerum, at the beginning of world history, injustice had taken its course when Venus bribed Paris to give the apple to her as the most beautiful of the goddesses. Oddly enough, with his annoyance increasing, Lucius ends up mentioning Socrates, who had unjustly been compelled to take the cup of hemlock by the Athenians. The effect of the ass’s indignation is comic, and the impression of the moralising ass is all the more grotesque if the reader takes into account that, only recently, the very same ass had functioned as a matrona’s sex-partner, which Apuleius describes without refraining from rather explicit language. The caricature of the ass complaining, as it were, about all the injustice of the world is picked up by the narrator himself with self-mockery: anticipating a reader’s possible

1 This article is the completely revised version of my paper given (in German) at the Rostock conference on the Isis-Book (November 2008). I am particularly grateful to Wytse Keulen for helpful advice and, of course, for organising the conference and AAGA III.

1 ... indignationis meae ... impetum (Met. 10,33,4).
2 Cf. GCA 2000, 395.
3 Met. 10,33.
5 Met. 10,19,3.
objection, it occurs to Lucius that the reader might not be inclined to warmly welcome a ‘philosophising ass’.

The questions much debated by Apuleian scholarship of whether the novel’s objective is (a) mere entertainment or (b) perhaps entertainment combined with other things such as serious religion or (c), as a whole, a (more or less) hidden allegory of Lucius’ initiation into the Isis-cult – all these issues seem to be mirrored in the one picture of the *asinus philosophans*, which, in connection with the prologue, could be called an *imago*. If the diverse interpretations – despite their different approaches – do have a certain ‘common basis’ in the paradox of the *asinus philosophans*, a one-sided argument might be insufficient. Therefore I would like to rephrase these questions: in which respect does Apuleius write an entertaining, comic novel (the *asinus* motif)? In which respect does the novel include serious religion or theology (the *philosophans* motif)? In which respect do the two of them form a paradox (matched by the motif of the *asinus philosophans*)? Is this paradox characteristic of the novel as a whole, and if so, in which respect(s)?

The methodological approach to first distinguish several, even contradictory aspects on the level of discursive thinking (*ratio*) is characteristic of

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7 *sed ne quis indignationis meae reprehendat impetum secum sic reputans: ‘ecce, nunc patiemur philosophantem nobis asinum?’* ... (*Met.* 10,33,4).

8 As Kirichenko 2008 also picks up the *asinus philosophans* in his title (which I did not know when I planned my paper for the conference), I should like to point out that my approach to the motif is radically different: whereas Kirichenko takes the comic motif in combination with the prologue in order to prove that “we are urged to realize that Apuleius uses philosophy not to redeem but to intensify the bawdy humor of his fictions” (106, my italics), I think, the reader is meant to be aware of Lucius’ development: first, he is the ‘gullible dupe’ (Harrison 2000, 231, 245) and stupid ass; however, by the help of Isis (and her priests), he gradually – not all of a sudden – becomes what he is at the end: Isis’ initiate (for the discussion of the issue of ‘Entwicklungsroman’ cf. Scobie 1978, 46; Hijmans 1995, 376; Sandy, 1994, 1529, 1562). Because of the development the narrator Lucius (as well as the author Apuleius) wants to stress, Lucius tells his story from the perspective of the ‘experiencing ego’, i.e., when he calls himself an *asinus philosophans* in book 10, he does not “forget about the double-time perspective essential to any first-person fictional account”, but intentionally “presents himself as still an ass at the moment of narration” (Kirichenko 2008, 92), because – at this moment – he does not want his reader to know what he will become in book 11 (and, retrospectively, already has become). Therefore, in opposition to Kirichenko, I should like to consider the *asinus philosophans*-motif as representing the comic character of the first ten books; however, in book 11, the reader is meant to observe what becomes of this comic motif when Isis ‘enters the stage’ (see the end of this article). – For the relation between the first ten books (the world of becoming) and the final book (Isis), and on ‘eleven’, see Heller 1983 and (building on Heller) Alpers 2006, 36-46.