

DEFINING PHILOSOPHY (I):  
AN INQUIRY INTO THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF AMMONIUS'  
*PROOIMION* TO HIS COMMENTARY ON THE *ISAGOGE*  
OF PORPHYRY (*IN ISAG.* 1, 1–17 BUSSE)\*

by

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ABSTRACT: Introducing a work which forms, effectively, a type of philosophical preface to the Aristotelian *Categories*, the opening passage of Ammonius' *Commentary on Porphyry's "Eisagoge"* (*In Isag.* 1, 1–17 Busse) was originally intended as the very first step in a philosophical instruction. As such, it demanded considerable authorial effort: after all, it needs to account for several, often incompatible demands, such as establishing the authority of Ammonius (without sacrificing that of Porphyry), establishing the teacher–pupil relationship, indicating the *skopos* of the work (but also that of the entire philosophy course). As a result, the opening sentences of the Ammonian proem remain a testimony to the complexity and intricacy of exegetical effort itself, but also, on a more formal level, to the pedagogical mastery of the Alexandrian.

Regardless of the principal focus of his or her interest, a scholar looking at a commentary is put in a very specific position: while the text which has been studied is a product of an individual mindset and, from the structuralist perspective, an independent, autonomous work, it is also a work heavily dependent (for its emergence, overall structure, and character) on the text which is being commented upon. Even more confusingly, it is also dependent on an earlier, quite frequently no longer existing, exegetical tradition<sup>1</sup>. To balance the relevant perspectives, to account for the varied strands of thought and complex compositional and semantic issues is not easy, not even when dealing with a work which would, at the time of its birth, have been considered elementary. In fact, the

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\* The present essay constitutes a side effect of research conducted according to the terms of the National Centre for Research grant NCN 2012/07/B/HS1/01609 (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw).

<sup>1</sup> For the importance of earlier commentaries, compare e.g. FAZZO 2004; HADOT 1997; 2014: 136–141, and others. The dependence on the earlier tradition is particularly manifest in the case of commentaries on the *Categoriae* – their proems routinely conform to the preset paradigm, a circumstance analysed in detail by PLEZIA (1949) and, more recently, by MANSFELD (1994).