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Human and Asinine Postures in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*

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Abstract: This article examines the ways in which Apuleius' Metamorphoses *thematizes the contrast between the prone posture of the ass and the upright posture of the human. A long philosophical tradition, starting with Plato and Xenophon, argued that the human body was especially constructed for celestial contemplation, while the quadruped body was more suited for baser activities such as eating and sex. Physical posture thus becomes another way for Apuleius to emphasize the "unphilosophical" nature of Lucius-as-ass. Moreover, in Book 11, numerous references to celestial contemplation give the theme an ironic climax. Apuleius uses these celestial allusions, I argue, as further hints that the conversion to Isis is not the final transformation encouraged by this novel, but merely another stage on the road to further insight.*

It is a truism of scholarship on Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* that the hapless narrator Lucius acts like an ass long before he turns into one.[2] Most notably, his self-avowed eagerness to listen to other stories evokes the renowned curiosity of the donkey.[3] But the human Lucius is ass-like in other ways as well: his devotion to food and sex, for instance, anticipates his conversion to an animal that was commonly associated with these carnal pleasures in antiquity.[4] Indeed, in one of his sex scenes with Photis,

[1] I'd like to thank Laurel Fulkerson and the anonymous readers for *CJ*; Erwin Cook and Jared Hudson, who provided comments on an earlier draft; David Harris, who helped with research; and audiences at Johns Hopkins, the University of Gothenburg, and Trinity University.

[2] See, e.g., Schlam (1970) 481; Gianotti (1986) 11-31 (esp. 18-19); Krabbe (1989) 42.

[3] Cf. the very last sentence of the Lucianic *Onos* (56), where the narrator notes that the gods had saved him "not from a dog's butt, as the saying goes, but from an ass's curiosity (οὐκ ἐκ κυνὸς πρωκτοῦ, τὸ δὴ τοῦ λόγου, ἀλλ' ἐξ ὄνου περιεργίας)." In both the *Onos* and the *Met.*, the narrator claims that his asinine curiosity was the source of an ancient proverb (*Onos* 45: ἐξ ὄνου παρακύψεως, "all because of a peeping ass"; *Met.* 9.42.4: *de prospectu et umbra asini*, "about the peeping ass and his shadow"); the latter is actually a combination of two proverbs, on which see Hijmans, van der Paardt, et al. (1995) *ad loc.*

[4] On the association of the donkey with carnal pleasures in antiquity, see Griffith (2006) 224 and 7. The earliest reference to the ass in classical literature, a simile at Hom. *Il.* 11.558-62, describes a donkey defying the efforts of his young overseers to enjoy some grain he is not supposed to be eating; see Gregory (2007) 200-2. Semonides' portrait of the ass-wife (fr. 7, 43-49) also emphasizes her hunger and her lust; see Gregory (2007) 203-5.

he is even mounted by the slave girl (2.17), in anticipation of his transformation into a mount in the next book.[5]

The comic effect of this continuity between the human and asinine Lucius is heightened after his transformation, since the narrator is at great pains throughout to insist on the continuity of his *human* mental capacities.[6] This running joke actually raises a number of serious philosophical questions, not only about the continuity of identity more broadly, but also about the relationship between our minds and our bodies. Do our bodies conform to our mental states, or can our bodies alter the composition of our minds? Of course, Apuleius could have raised these kinds of questions with any number of transformation stories, yet he chose to adapt a story about transformation into a donkey in particular.[7] This choice, too, we can connect to Apuleius' broader philosophical ambitions, as *philosophus Platonicus* (cf. *Apol.* 10.6). As many scholars have noted, Apuleius uses the ass as a foil for the philosophical life.[8] The *curiositas* shared by Lucius and the animal, for example, is revealed by the novel to be inferior to both philosophical insight and religious revelation.[9] Furthermore, as Schlam (1992) 15 has pointed out, the ass's appetite for carnal pleasures such as sex and food invites an allegorical reading of Lucius' transformation, which conveys the Platonic notion that the human body, with its animalistic qualities, confines and pollutes our divine souls; fittingly, Lucius will forgo both sex and food as part of his initiation to the cult of Isis at the end of the novel. Moreover, as Kenney (2003) 166 has argued, the ass's long ears symbolize its ability to listen without full

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[5] A point made by Schwartz (1979) 465-6. On the riding metaphor of this sexual position (the so-called *mulier equitans*), cf. Hor. *Sat.* 2.7.50; Ov. *Ars.* 3.777-8; Mart. *Ep.* 11.104.13-14; see also Clarke (1998) 217-8.

[6] Cf. Lytle (2003) 351: "Lucius insists on anthropomorphizing his predicaments, rationalizing his own behavior as an ass in ways that do not quite coincide with the detail provided." And Finkelpearl (2006) 211: "As has often been noted, sometimes Lucius is determined to prove he is not truly an ass mentally, but at other times his animal body guides him to behave like a donkey."

[7] On the complex and disputed nature of the relationship between Apuleius' *Met.* and other ancient ass tales, see Mason (1993) and Slater (2014).

[8] Cf. Kirichenko (2008a) 92: "The very image of a 'philosophizing ass' is quite ridiculous *per se*." On the (un)philosophical significance of the ass, see also Graverini (2012) 127-8 and Tilg (2014) 69-73.

[9] See Wlosok (1969); Kenney (2003); Tilg (2014) 68-9. For a more ambivalent view of the function of curiosity in the novel, see Winkler (1985) 192-3, Kirichenko (2008b) and Leigh (2013) 136-50.

comprehension, just as those who lack wisdom hear but do not understand what their ears take in.[10]

In this paper, I argue for an additional — and underappreciated — aspect of the "unphilosophical" nature of the ass in Apuleius' novel: its posture. As I hope to show, Apuleius draws the reader's attention to the physical posture of the four-footed beast, particularly how the ass, like other pack animals, has been designed by nature to keep its head pointed to the ground. As we shall see, the notion that the ass has a "terrestrial" posture, shall we say, whereas the human being has a "celestial" posture, is itself an idea with Platonic precedent, and one that Apuleius uses to great effect in the novel. Moreover, as I shall argue toward the end of the paper, an appreciation for the philosophical associations of different bodily postures in antiquity sheds new light on the vexed question of the seriousness of the conversion at the end of the novel.

Prone Postures

In many ways it is not surprising that physical posture is such a prominent theme in the *Golden Ass*.[11] Posture (along with other uses of the body, such as gesture) is a particularly useful tool for exploring one of the central tensions in the novel: whether to ascribe Lucius' behavior to his human intentions or to his animal instincts. When Lucius hangs his head to the ground, is he "playing the ass" (as he himself says on a number of occasions), or is he just inadvertently proving that he is now *really* a donkey? These issues arise immediately after his metamorphosis. Here is how Lucius describes the aftermath of his transformation (3.25.1-2):

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[10] Cf. Gowers (2001) 77, who notes that both Persius and Apuleius use the figure of the ass (and the ass's ears) to make the same point: "everyone has ass's ears until they see the light of philosophy." More generally, Bradley (2000) draws our attention to the extended contrast in the novel between the "higher" life of a free human vs. the animalized body of the slave. Fitzgerald (2000) 94-114 also reads the Apuleian ass as a servile symbol. Cf. Gianotti (1986) 11-31, who notes the tradition of ethical uses of animal metaphors, and who notes that Lucius's "slavery" to corporeal pleasures in book 1-3 anticipates his transformation into an ass.

[11] On the theme of posture in the *Met.*, see Gianotti (1986) 27n.45, who discusses the "bent head" topos in the novel, and in previous philosophical and literary texts; cf. Bradley (2000) 121.

> Ac dum salutis inopia cuncta corporis mei considerans non avem me sed asinum video, querens de facto Photidis, sed iam humano gestu simul et voce privatus, quod solum poteram, postrema deiecta labia, umidis tamen oculis obliquum respiciens ad illam tacitus expostulabam. Quae ubi primum me talem aspexit, percussit faciem suam manibus infestis et 'Occisa sum misera!' clamavit.[12]
>
> And as I, in my poor state, examine the entirety of my body, I see that I am not a bird but an ass. I began to complain about what Photis had done, but now deprived of human gesture and voice, I did what I could: with my lower lip hanging down, looking at her from the side with wet eyes, I was complaining to her silently. And as soon as she saw me like this, she struck her own face with her troublesome hands and shouted, "Poor me! I'm ruined!"

Note how the first sentence highlights the tension between a dualistic and monistic reading of Lucius' transformed self: after examining his entire body (presumably using the reflective powers of his *human* mind), he sees that he *is* an ass (*non avem me sed asinum video*), suggesting a complete identification with his physical self. He then highlights his deprivation of human gesture and voice; he can only communicate with Photis through his glance, which manages to look both sad in human terms (protruding lip, watery eyes), and simultaneously ass-like; she meanwhile strikes her face with her hands, a gesture of lamentation that is no longer available to Lucius.

He can, however, "gesture" with his new appendages in other ways; after Photis' lament, Lucius contemplates punishing her for her carelessness "by striking her with a flurry of kicks and attacking her with bites" (*Met.* 3.26.2: *spissis calcibus feriens et mordicus adpetens*). He thinks better of it, though, realizing that he needs her help to restore his human form (*Met.* 3.26.4):

> Deiecto itaque et quassanti capite ac demussata temporali contumelia, durissimo casui meo serviens ad equum illum vectorem meum probissimum in stabulum concedo.

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[12] For the Latin text of the *Met.*, I have employed the recent O.C.T. by Maaike Zimmerman (2012). Unattributed translations are my own.

> And so, lowering and shaking my head, and silently accepting the insult for the moment, I submit to my very harsh fate, and I retire to the stable alongside my horse, that most excellent steed.

Again, Lucius' narration straddles the line between total identification with the ass and the insistence on a separation of asinine body and human mind. His references to gesture and posture play the same game. In this scene, his gradual acceptance of his fate as an ass comes via his rejection of one stereotypically asinine pose — the recalcitrant donkey — and his decision to move forward with his head cast down — a gesture which Lucius takes as reflective of his mental state, but, as the reader knows, also indicates that he is holding his body as a domesticated pack animal should. Indeed, we have already encountered Lucius' horse in this very pose in the first scene of the novel; after Lucius dismounts and grooms his horse a bit, the animal walks along and grazes, "head down, with his mouth twisted to the side" (*Met.* 1.2.4: *ore in latus detorto pronus*). Here we see the horse engaged in two of his primary bestial obligations, unusually simultaneously: filling his belly and submitting to the movement of others.

Apuleius' use of *pronus* to characterize the posture of the horse is the first of many instances of that word in the novel.[13] Lucius himself will adopt a prone posture even before he turns into an ass; during his flirtation with Photis as she cooks, he leans over her and plants a kiss on her neck (*Met.* 2.10.1):

> Nec diutius quivi tantum cruciatum voluptatis eximiae sustinere, sed pronus in eam, qua fine summum cacumen capillus ascendit, mellitissimum illud savium impressi.
>
> I was no longer able to endure the torture of such extreme pleasure: leaning over her, I gave her a honeyed kiss at the very spot where her hair began to climb to its highest peak.

The nexus of food and sex is a recurring theme throughout Lucius' dalliance with Photis — recall the pileup of double entendres earlier in this scene as Photis cooks her sausage stew. As we shall see, food and sex

[13] Fitzgerald (2000) 102 also makes note of Apuleius' use of *pronus* here.

are precisely the two pleasures that Socrates identifies as bestial in the *Republic*, so it is fitting that we see the word *pronus* used to describe first the horse's posture as he enjoys the former and then Lucius' posture as he aims for the latter pleasure (figured as the enjoyment of food, no less). Significantly, this exact phrasing, with genders reversed (*Met.* 5.23.3: *prona in eum*), is used to describe the posture of Psyche as she stoops over the sleeping Cupid and kisses him, just after she has pricked herself with one of his arrows. The soul itself adopts a prone posture when it gives in to curiosity (which attracts her to the quiver in the first place) and to desire.

Psyche's prone posture as she gives in to desire is significant in another sense, in that it gives a physical shape to an abstract concept, since the adjective *pronus* can refer to an inclination in both a physical and a psychological or moral sense.[14] In the Cupid and Psyche story, Psyche / the soul is *prona* (and as we shall see further on, this concept itself has a Platonic valence), whereas in the outer frame, it is desire itself, *cupido*, that attracts the adjective *pronus*. During their first kiss, Lucius speaks of Photis' "ready desire" (*Met.* 2.10.4: *prona cupidine*), and in another kissing scene he kisses her eyes, which are "wet and quivering and weak with ready lust" (*Met.* 3.14.5: *udos ac tremulos et prona libidine marcidos*). Desire itself adopts the prone posture of the four-footed beast to indicate willingness or eagerness to please. The two meanings of *pronus* — physical and psychological — also come together nicely in the story of the cuckold and the jar in Book 9. As the cuckold sits inside the pot inspecting the cracks in the jar, the adulterer attends to his wife, bending her over the jar itself (*Met.* 9.7.5: *pronam uxorem*). The wife is both physically *prona* — bent face down over the mouth of the jar — and psychologically "ready" or "eager" for her young lover. In the world of the *Golden Ass,* her prone posture itself reveals her total commitment to animalistic desires.

One of the more intriguing uses of the word *pronus* in the *Metamorphoses* comes in the famous Actaeon ecphrasis at the start of book 2.[15] Lucius tells us that the statue group includes a pool at Diana's feet, where the viewer can see the artwork itself reflected in the water. If you stoop down and look at this pool, Lucius tells us, you will see bunches

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[14] I am grateful to Jared Hudson for this observation.

[15] On the Actaeon ecphrasis, see, e.g., Schlam (1984) 105-7; Winkler (1985) 168-70; Heath (1992) 101-34; Slater (1998).

of grapes moving in the water. Since the point of the Actaeon ecphrasis is to warn Lucius of the metamorphic dangers of excessive curiosity — don't be like Actaeon, a warning he of course ignores — it is surely significant that one of the possible modes of viewing this artwork is to stoop over, prone, like a beast of burden (*Met.* 2.4.9: *si fontem … pronus aspexeris*). Moreover, we are not explicitly told whether Lucius himself adopted this point of view, though the fact that the narrator Lucius is aware of it (and even switches to the future-more-vivid, as if he knows for sure that if we just bend over we will see it) implies that he did. If so, the artwork has even tricked Lucius into adopting the pose of the beast he will become, even as he ignored this very message.[16]

Just as Lucius adopts a prone posture on more than one occasion before his metamorphosis into an ass, there are also moments in the novel where Lucius the ass paradoxically adopts an upright posture. Soon after his transformation, for example, he sees some roses sitting in a shrine of Epona high up on a pillar, and he rises up on his hind legs and tries to eat them (*Met.* 3.27.3):

> Denique adgnito salutari praesidio pronus spei, quantum extensis prioribus pedibus adniti poteram, insurgo valide, et cervice prolixa nimiumque porrectis labiis, quanto maxime nisu poteram corollas adpetebam.
>
> And then, recognizing my healing remedy and inclined toward hope, I rise up vigorously, with the ends of my feet extended as far as I could manage; stretching out my neck and lips with maximum total effort I tried to reach the rose garlands.

Here we enjoy not only the humorous picture of the ass standing upright, but also a preview of the return to his upright form when he does finally consume his roses; there may even be a hint that he must earn this upright posture not through mere *fortuna*, by chance seeing roses up on a pillar, but through the contemplation of higher things, as in the opening of Book 11. Thus the text notes ironically that he is "*pronus spei*" ("inclined

[16] And if the point of the novel is to put *us* in the position of "meddlesome curious" people (Kirichenko (2008a) 101), then the play of reflection is doubled back on the reader, who doesn't realize that he is, metaphorically, stooping over and enjoying the show just as Lucius does here. Cf. Heath (1992) 127: "As Lucius looks at his reflection, Actaeon, and does not recognize himself, we look at Lucius and do not recognize ourselves."

toward hope") when he sees the roses. We should note, too, that the one time in the natural world where an ass regularly adopts an upright posture is when the jack mounts the jenny (or a mare, if he's making a mule). So here Lucius the donkey adopts a "human" posture in his attempt to attain heavenly salvation, while his audience would actually associate the posture with the donkey's sexual proclivities.[17]

Philosophical Antecedents

Having established that the posture of the donkey (and of Lucius himself) is a frequent concern of the novel, I would now like to examine in greater detail the philosophical antecedents for Apuleius' interest in posture. As we shall see, the symbolic significance of the downcast head of the ass has to do with where the animal is looking — or not looking, as the case may be. Throughout the *Golden Ass* Lucius and his fellow beasts of burden often keep their heads lowered to the ground, whether in search of food or as a gesture of submission.[18] Apuleius' point in emphasizing this theme is in part due to his interest in exploring the value and the dangers of curiosity.[19] This is an interest his work shares with the ps.-Lucianic *Onos*: the fun, it seems, in writing an entire novel about a man who turns into an ass arises in part from the opportunity to bring to life the ancient proverb about the "peeping ass," and to highlight the disasters that can result when a donkey ignores his "natural" inclination to keep his eye on the ground and sticks his neck out where it does not belong. Lucius' head craning out the window in book 9 provides not only an aetiology of the ancient proverb (or so he claims) but also a snapshot representation of curiosity more generally. Curiosity, in other words, is not just a matter of trying to

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[17] On the many other allusions to animal husbandry lurking in the *Met.*, see Lytle (2003).

[18] On the topos of the downcast head in the novel, see Gianotti (1986) 27n.45. Note, too, that in the two instances where Apuleius uses the phrase *capite demisso* ("with a downcast head") to refer to human posture, the characters are sexual "passives": the Syrian priests (8.27.5) and the woman over the jar (9.7.6). The very same phrase (*capite demisso*) is used as a shorthand for the opposite of stargazing in Seneca (*Ep.* 65.20: *Vetas me caelo interesse, id est iubes me vivere capite demisso*?) and, as Corbeill (1996) 122-3 argues, also conveys sexual passivity twice in Cicero (*Dom.* 83 and *Phil.* 13.24) and once in Catullus (88.8).

[19] On curiosity as a theme in the *Golden Ass*, see especially Penwill (1975), DeFilippo (1990), and Kirichenko (2008b) .

learn about things that aren't your concern, but about trying to *look* at things that aren't your business.

But there is another aspect of Lucius' gaze that Apuleius emphasizes, one that is more directly connected to his posture. The donkey keeps his head down because his worldview is entirely terrestrial, not celestial. This, too, is an idea with philosophical precedent, starting with Plato and Xenophon: the human body is designed for looking up at the heavens, while the quadruped body is designed to keep its head pointed to the ground.[20] Plato even provides a false etymology of ἄνθρωπος from ἀναθρῶν ἃ ὄπωπε ("looking up at what he has seen": *Crat.* 399c). This line of thought argues that humans are uniquely constructed to satisfy their curiosity about the heavens, and that contemplation of higher celestial phenomena inevitably led to a greater communion with the very concept of the divine; the idea passes rather easily into early Christian authors such as Lactantius.[21] Animals, on the other hand, keep their faces focused on the ground, as Plato himself says in the *Republic*, where Socrates asserts that those who reject the pursuit of philosophical inquiry devote themselves to bestial pursuits. Such men never take the time to look to the sky (Plato *Rep.* 586a-b, trans. Shorey):

> ἀλλὰ βοσκημάτων δίκην κάτω ἀεὶ βλέποντες καὶ κεκυφότες εἰς γῆν καὶ εἰς τραπέζας βόσκονται χορταζόμενοι καὶ ὀχεύοντες, καὶ ἕνεκα τῆς τούτων πλεονεξίας λακτίζοντες καὶ κυρίττοντες ἀλλήλους σιδηροῖς κέρασί τε καὶ ὁπλαῖς ἀποκτεινύασι δι' ἀπληστίαν, ἅτε οὐχὶ τοῖς οὖσιν οὐδὲ τὸ ὂν οὐδὲ τὸ στέγον ἑαυτῶν πιμπλάντες.
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> …but with eyes ever bent upon the earth and heads bowed down over their tables they feast like cattle, grazing and copulating, ever greedy for more of these delights; and in their

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[20] See, e.g., Xen. *Mem.* 1.4.11 and passages from Plato below. For a full list of ancient references to the topos, see Dickerman (1909) 92-101, supplemented by Pease (1958) 914-5. It is also noteworthy that many of the Latin references to the topos include the word *pronus*: e.g., Sallust *Cat.* 1.1, Vitruvius 2.1.2, Ov. *Met.* 1.84, Juv. *Sat.* 15.147.

[21] See, e.g., Lact. *Div. Inst.* 2.1, *De ira* 14 and 20 (with thanks to Catherine Conybeare for alerting me to Lactantius' interest in the topos). On the effect of bodily posture on the capacity for rational thought in Plato and Aristotle, see Gregorić (2005). As I argue elsewhere, the philosophical associations of looking skyward had an impact on Roman attitudes to certain forms of domestic decoration; see O'Sullivan (2015).

> greed kicking and butting one another with horns and hooves of iron they slay one another in sateless avidity, because they are vainly striving to satisfy with things that are not real the unreal and incontinent part of their souls.

This is of course not the only passage where Plato makes the point that men who dedicate themselves to food and sex live a bestial life. And indeed many scholars have made note of the relevance of such a theme for Apuleius.[22] As we have already noticed, the text itself encourages the reading that Lucius was dedicated to these bestial pursuits long before his transformation into an ass; furthermore, Mithras the priest's moralizing reading of Lucius' transformation as a punishment of sorts for his "having descended into servile pleasures" (11.15.1: *ad serviles delapsus voluptates*) is also well known. But the importance of the ass's posture in particular to this line of thinking has been less a point of emphasis. Socrates speaks of cattle here rather than donkeys, but the emphasis on the posture of the beast of burden is clear: quadrupeds (and unenlightened humans) look down; enlightened humans look up.[23] Apuleius himself makes a similar point about the suitability of animal posture for their avidity in his Apology, although his emphasis there is the position of the animals' mouth rather than eyes.[24] Furthermore, the Platonic image of the cattle kicking and butting each other in their eagerness for food and sex is directly echoed by Apuleius on two occasions. First, immediately after his transformation, he joins his horse and Milo's ass in the stable, and they quickly make it clear, through their lowered heads and kicking legs, that their food is off limits to this newcomer (3.26.6-8).[25] Second, in Book 7, Lucius-the-ass is rewarded by having his pick of the mares in a nearby field, but is assaulted by the stallions who are protecting their own interests (7.16.3-4).

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[22] Most recently in Tilg (2014) 70-2.

[23] Elsewhere, as Schlam (1970) 480 points out, when talking about the transmigration of the souls of the morally base, Socrates refers to the ass in particular (*Phaedo* 81e), though its posture is not a point of focus.

[24] In his defense of toothpaste (*Apol.* 7), Apuleius notes that the mouth is the most important human feature, unlike "in beasts and cattle" (*feris et pecudibus*), where "the mouth is low and hanging down to their feet, near their path and their food" (*os humile et deorsum ad pedes deiectum, vestigio et pabulo proximum*).

[25] I am grateful to Jaclyn Bowes for alerting me to this connection.

If the ass's body bears witness to its moral and ethical inferiority, then it follows that the human body bears witness to our superiority, and this too is a Platonic idea. It is not just that the physical body reflects an internal psychological reality; rather, it is the physical makeup of our souls that drives our bodies upwards and our posture erect. In the *Timaeus* (90a-b), Plato posits a kind of magnetic attraction between the superior part of the human soul, which is divine, and the divine stuff of the heavens above. Thus the philosophical commonplace that nature made our bodies so that we could look upon her celestial wonders in Plato acquires a physicalist explanation, as our gaze is simply forced upwards by this desire to reunite the divine part of our soul with its divine brethren in the ether. The key notion here is that thinking about higher things — i.e. philosophy — can trigger the posture itself. It is, in a broader, evolutionary sense, metamorphic. Moreover, it is decidedly *not* simply a result of our curiosity about the heavens, as it is in some other philosophical traditions. And the converse is true: donkeys look like donkeys precisely because they do *not* think about a higher order of things: their concerns are decidedly terrestrial, not celestial (*Tim.* 91e, trans. Waterfield):

> τὸ δ' αὖ πεζὸν καὶ θηριῶδες γέγονεν ἐκ τῶν μηδὲν προσχρωμένων φιλοσοφίᾳ μηδὲ ἀθρούντων τῆς περὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν φύσεως πέρι μηδέν, διὰ τὸ μηκέτι ταῖς ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ χρῆσθαι περιόδοις, ἀλλὰ τοῖς περὶ τὰ στήθη τῆς ψυχῆς ἡγεμόσιν ἕπεσθαι μέρεσιν. ἐκ τούτων οὖν τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων τά τ' ἐμπρόσθια κῶλα καὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς εἰς γῆν ἑλκόμενα ὑπὸ συγγενείας ἤρεισαν, προμήκεις τε καὶ παντοίας ἔσχον τὰς κορυφάς, ὅπῃ συνεθλίφθησαν ὑπὸ ἀργίας ἑκάστων αἱ περιφοραί.
>
> Land animals, a brutish race, are reincarnations of men who never applied themselves to philosophy and never pondered the nature of the heavens, because they stopped making use of the circuits in their heads and instead followed the lead of those aspects of the soul that reside in the chest. This way of life bowed their upper bodies and heads down, by the principle of natural affinity, until their forelimbs rested on the ground, and their heads became elongated or otherwise oddly shaped, depending on how an individual's revolutions shrank from disuse.

The process Timaeus envisions here elides the difference between short-term reincarnation and long-term evolutionary change, but notice that his description reads very much like a metamorphosis in progress, but with more of an ethical point than Lucius conveys in his own transformation.

Lucius's metamorphosis is the accidental result of his desire to become a bird, after watching Pamphile turn into an owl. Here, too, we can trace the influence of philosophical posture and points of view. Not only does the bird have the ability to fly closer to the celestial sphere, thus offering a literal version of a kind of communion with the higher spheres, but the bird also enjoys the perspective-altering "view from above" that is another point of focus of ancient philosophical posture.[26] In this topos, the philosopher is able not only to look up to the sky and enjoy a kind of mental travel through the stars, but also to look back at the earth and see just how miniscule his local concerns are, both compared to the size of the earth and the place of the earth in the larger cosmos. In the *Golden Ass,* the many ironic references to Pegasus (6.30.5; 7.26.3; 8.16.3; 11.8.4) convey the same point: Lucius cannot soar to the heavens or even easily direct his gaze there because of the limitations of his asinine body.[27]

Furthermore, while both Pamphile and Lucius actively seek out transformation to birds, they do not do so for what we might consider philosophically suitable reasons. Neither, for instance, mentions a desire to gain a new vantage point on terrestrial concerns, or to acquire more knowledge about the workings of the heavens. Pamphile wants to fly to her lover's house (in the peculiar expectation that he will be less likely to spurn her as an owl), thus her desire for transformation has everything to do with carnal desire and nothing to do with philosophy. Fittingly, we see this same contrast in Plutarch's *De curiositate*; at one point, Plutarch casts *polupragmosune* as a form of mental travel in which the busybody casts his mind to other places. This sort of mental travel is another basic metaphor for philosophical inquiry in Plato and elsewhere, but, as Plutarch clarifies, the *destination* of those mental travels makes all the difference (*De cur.* 4 = *Mor.* 517a, trans. Helmbold):

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[26] On the motif, see Rutherford (1989) 155-61; Hadot (1995) 238–50; Williams (2012) 27–9 and 48.

[27] On the references to Pegasus and Bellerophon, see Gianotti (1986) 83-5; he reads the final appearance of Pegasus in the Isiac procession in book 11 as a sign of Lucius' similar elevation, since Pegasus is ultimately turned into a constellation.

> τοῦ πολυπράγμονος ὁ νοῦς ἅμ᾽ ἐν πλουσίων οἴκοις ἐστὶν ἐν δωματίοις πενήτων ἐν αὐλαῖς βασιλέων ἐν θαλάμοις νεογάμων·
>
> the mind of the busybody is at the same time in mansions of the rich, in hovels of the poor, in royal courts, and in bridal chambers of the newly-wed.

Pamphile's desire to fly into her lover's bedroom is therefore clearly in explicit violation of Plutarch's advice.[28] Lucius' intentions are no more noble, since he is motivated by simple curiosity, apparently of the baser sort. Even if we grant him that his curiosity is visual — i.e. he wants to see more things, and see them differently, as a bird — the point remains that he is not motivated by loftier concerns. That Apuleius is consciously making a point here about unphilosophical postures gains support, once again, from Plato. Near the end of the *Timaeus*, in the part immediately preceding his discussion of four-footed animals, the bird is used as an example of what we might call "false philosophers," or perhaps laypersons who don't "get" what contemplation really *means* for a philosopher. These men are "lightweight, in the sense that although they studied the heavens, they were foolish enough to think that their arguments would never be perfectly secure unless they personally witnessed the phenomena" (κούφων δέ, καὶ μετεωρολογικῶν μέν, ἡγουμένων δὲ δι᾽ ὄψεως τὰς περὶ τούτων ἀποδείξεις βεβαιοτάτας εἶναι δι᾽ εὐήθειαν; *Tim.* 91d-e, trans. Waterfield). Although Timaeus is the speaker here, we have a hint of Plato's notorious ambivalence about celestial contemplation, which has led many to conclude that he is hostile to astronomy as a discipline. The key to rescuing celestial contemplation, for Plato, is that it is a first step to more theoretical contemplation, such as that required for number theory. Thus looking up to the sky may be better than looking down at your plate or at your sex partner, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, but it is only a first step towards interior contemplation.

Elsewhere, in his *Florida* 12 and 13, Apuleius has a great deal to say about birds, a theme that Paula James and Vincent Hunink, among others, have explored.[29] He explicitly contrasts philosophical speech with bird song (*Fl.* 13), and also seems to use parrots in particular as an

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[28] Plutarch immediately follows up the point by instructing the reader to be curious about the workings of nature instead, especially about the heavens (*De cur.* 5 = *Mor.* 517c-d).
[29] See Hunink (2000) and James (2005) .

example of "false philosophers," contrasting their ability merely to mimic voices to the more creative capabilities of the philosopher (according to Hunink (2000)). It seems therefore clear that Apuleius sets bird metamorphosis and ass metamorphosis in opposition in his novel, but that both types in turn are together set in opposition to the philosophical life. Even if we grant Lucius the benefit of the doubt and give him some philosophical credit for wanting to become a bird and adopt a perspective-altering view from above, his desire misses the point, in Platonic terms, that such a view ultimately comes from mental contemplation, not literal contemplation. The bird is no more a philosopher for his communion with higher things than a dog is for his rejection of societal conventions: it is the internal disposition that ultimately matters, not the external.[30]

Contemplating Isis

The novel's emphasis on the limitations of Lucius' asinine posture culminates, appropriately, in Book 11. Given the connection between philosophical posture and the contemplation of the heavens, it is fitting that Lucius' return to human form begins with his nighttime contemplation of the moon rising over the sea at Cenchreae (*Met.* 11.1.1). In this sense, Lucius anticipates his return to human form by engaging in the very activity associated with human posture in the philosophical tradition.[31] Moreover, the theme of celestial contemplation recurs at key moments throughout the book. Immediately after Lucius' prayer to the moon, the goddess Isis appears in much the same circumstances: to a barely awake Lucius looking out over the horizon (*Met.* 11.3.2). Isis rises (*emergit*) from the sea just as the moon did before her. She is a celestial figure as a whole, but also in her composite parts. She wears a flowery

[30] Note that Apuleius' contemporary Galen makes this exact point (*De Usu Partium* 3.3 [Kühn p. 182], cited in Mayor ad Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.140: "those who believe man to have been made erect in order that he might look up to heaven … can never have seen the fish called *uranoscopus*, not to mention various birds, which are much better adapted for looking up than man. The true upward looking, as Plato said, is to fix the mental eye on that which really exists."

[31] Cf. Penwill (2009) 96: "In Cenchreae as in Corinth the ass begins to behave like a human being: but whereas at Corinth this behaviour was on the physical level, in Cenchreae it is on the spiritual. In place of his prurient and Paris-like reaction to the sensuous charms of the girl playing Venus, his response to the full moon rising huge on the horizon is to engage in ritual cleansing and turn to prayer: both peculiarly human activities."

diadem with the distinctive circle at the center, which Lucius calls a "representation of the moon" (*Met.* 11.3.4: *argumentum lunae*). Moreover her mantle is a representation of the cosmos, gleaming black and decorated with the moon and stars. More generally, Isis is not only a celestial figure herself, but her powers also extend to the cosmos; like other powerful women earlier in the *Golden Ass*, notably Meroe and her friend, she has the ability to draw down the stars from the sky.[32]

Celestial contemplation also plays a central role in Lucius' initiation. At first Lucius hesitates to tell us the content of his initiation, lest he be accused of impiety and lest we be accused of "rash curiosity" (11.23.5: *temerariae curiositatis*). But, typically, he relents (*Met.* 11.23.5-6):

> Igitur audi, sed crede, quae vera sunt. Accessi confinium mortis et, calcato Proserpinae limine, per omnia vectus elementa remeavi; nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine; deos inferos et deos superos accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo. Ecce tibi rettuli, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est.
>
> So hear, and believe, these things that are true. I approached the edge of death; I stepped on Persephone's threshold; I passed through all the elements and came back; I saw the sun shining its white light in the middle of the night; I approached the gods below and the gods above face to face and I worshipped right next to them. Behold! I have told you things that you cannot know, even though you have heard them.

Lucius' initiation involves a kind of travel through the cosmos—again, a staple of descriptions of what philosophers were able to accomplish with their mental agility. Tellingly, however, this travel, although it results in knowledge, is cast as a revelation to be believed, not a theorem to be understood. Of course, we might not want to belabor this point: it is certainly true that some philosophical schools took religious initiation as a useful metaphor for the difficult and privileged acquisition of knowledge — Plato above all. Still, though his travel does take him through "all the

[32] A point made by Libby (2011) 305. Her power and allure is also contrasted with that of Venus in the judgment scene in Book 10, as Penwill (2009) has shown.

elements," Lucius' contemplation of the sun and of the gods themselves does not involve philosophical inquiry, but only pure adoration.

Furthermore, Lucius emerges from his initiation dressed as the sun god, brought out for the contemplation of the other initiates, wearing a palm crown and carrying a blazing torch (*Met.* 11.24.4). Thus the metamorphoses continue, and we readers are put in the somewhat incongruous position of gazing at the celestial figure of Lucius himself.[33] If our earlier experience at the Actaeon fountain in Book 2 tricked us into adopting the prone position of a quadruped, then here too the author suggests that our bodies might imitate Lucius' restoration to human form. As we metaphorically gaze on the moon, on Isis, and on Lucius himself, we now employ our bodies for their intended purpose, according to Platonic evolutionary doctrine: celestial contemplation. Moreover, the emphasis on Lucius' contemplation of Isis throughout the book suggests that his restoration to human form is not simply a return to the same kind of human posture he employed in the first three books before his metamorphosis. There the emphasis was on the use of the body to enjoy food and sex, two physical pleasures he ostentatiously rejects as an Isiac initiate in Book 11. Just as the move from Photis to Isis involves the rejection of a "false illumination" in favor of Isis's celestial lights, so too his posture in Book 11 suggests an improvement over his earlier physical position.[34] And this improvement is apparent even in those scenes that do not involve celestial activity. When he is not worshipping Isis, Lucius pleads cases in the Roman forum, an activity that would require the controlled authoritative posture that was essential for rhetorical persuasion and an ideal of elite male deportment more broadly.[35]

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[33] Cf. Lateiner (2001) 248: "Like Actaeon, the gazing Lucius is transformed into an object of the gaze." As Libby (2011) has recently argued, the reliance on sun imagery here and elsewhere in Book 11 is somewhat confusing considering that Lucius is being initiated to the cult of Isis at this point, not Osiris. She takes the point to be an expose of the fraud of Isis, whose moon can only reflect the light of others, but not generate her own, yet it is equally plausible that Lucius' outfit alludes proleptically to his subsequent initiation to the cult of Osiris, and thus is designed to compliment the "culturally refined reader who will be aware of the connection," as Egelhaaf-Gaiser (2012) 57 has proposed.

[34] The quote is from Harrison (2000) 249n174, though he rejects this interpretation in favor of one that emphasizes continuity between Photis and Isis, rather than improvement.

[35] On the central role of bodily deportment and gender in Greco-Roman rhetorical performance, see Gleason (1995).

So I do not agree with those who see the Lucius of Book 11 as the very same dupe he has been throughout the novel.[36] The novel clearly marks Lucius' contemplation of Isis as a step in the right direction, and the hierarchy of postures in the novel helps us see that. Nor would I insist, however, that the improved posture and redirected gaze of both Lucius and us readers is an indication that the novel should be read as a protreptic to Isiac worship. For one thing, such a reading still falls short in Platonic terms. Even in Plato, while celestial contemplation is an improvement over excessive interest in your dinner plate or sex partner, it is not the final goal; thus adoration of a single goddess, no matter how all-pervasive or henotheistic, would not represent an end to progress, either. So the novel allows for continued forms of "improvement" outside the world of the novel—one option, of course, is continued commitment to Platonism but we might just as easily imagine other forms of self-improvement. It is, to borrow Graverini's formulation, satirical not in a modern sense but in an ancient sense; like ancient satire, the *Golden Ass* establishes an ironic distance between its author and narrator, and while this distance often results in moments of comic pleasure, it also nudges the reader along the path to more serious self-reflection.[37] In the end, Apuleius uses these celestial allusions, and references to posture more broadly, I argue, as further hints that the conversion to Isis is not the final transformation encouraged by this novel, but merely another stage on the road to further insight. Lucius's restored body may now allow him to adopt a more philosophical posture, but his gaze is still misdirected.[38]

Conclusion

[36] For the satirical reading of Book 11, see especially Harrison (2000) 210-59.

[37] It is, in that sense, akin to the seriocomic mode of Platonic dialogue itself, as Graverini ultimately concludes. For the connections between the *Golden Ass* and both Roman satire and Platonic dialogue, see Graverini (2012) 118-31; on the broader context of seriocomic approaches in imperial Latin literature, see Graverini and Keulen (2009). Tilg (2014) 98-105 has some similarly useful observations on the compatibility of comic and serious modes.

[38] For similar readings that see Book 11 as only a stage on the road to further insights, see Fick-Michel (1991), Fletcher (2014) 292-3, and Englert (2015).

The seventeenth-century antiquarian Pietro Stefanoni apparently owned a gem that contained a particularly unusual portrait of Apuleius (Fig. 1).[39] On it, the sophist is depicted as a toga-wearing donkey, standing upright, and giving a speech to two listeners, possibly young women. As Gaisser (2009) 77 notes, the image is an extreme example of a long history of conflating Apuleius with his asinine protagonist. She also assumes ((2009) 87) that such a portrait would have made Apuleius cringe, but I wonder whether he wouldn't have been mildly amused. After all, the gem is almost a perfect representation of how Lucius-as-ass imagines himself throughout—as human in every way, save for the minor detail of his shaggy body. Just as Lucius assumes asinine characteristics before his transformation, in this portrait we see him playing the human in the shape of an ass. Fittingly for our discussion, posture and gesture complete the picture (and the joke). The upright, gesticulating donkey is instantly recognizable as an absurdity, on the same level as Lucius' own aside about the reader having to endure the thoughts of a "philosophizing ass" (*Met.* 10.33.4).

As I hope to have demonstrated, the relative bodily postures of humans and donkeys is clearly a persistent theme throughout the *Golden Ass*, and that theme is at least partly inspired by Apuleius' interest in Platonic philosophy. In fact, though I have focused on the celestial versus terrestrial gaze in this paper, there are a number of other philosophically significant postures we might consider, most notably Lucius reclining at table in Book 10. More broadly, the movement of the ass's body throughout Greece suggests a kind of unphilosophical *theoria*; as Montiglio has shown, Apuleius intentionally casts Lucius as an anti-Odysseus (and thus an anti-philosopher), "playfully distorting the topos of the educational journey."[40]

The most notorious reference to Odysseus in the novel comes in Lucius' famous retrospective moment during his narration of his time in the mill, where he reflects that his travels left him no more *prudens* but at

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[39] An engraving of the gem, which may or may not have actually existed, appears in a collection entitled *Gemmae antiquitus sculptae a Petro Stephanonio Vicentino collectae et declarationibus illustratae* (Rome 1627). On the gem, see Gaisser (2009) 77-8.

[40] Montiglio (2007) 100. On the Odyssean model for the *Golden Ass*, see also Winkler (1985) 165-8. On Roman adaptations of philosophical *theoria*, see O'Sullivan (2011) 97-115.

least *multiscius* (9.13.5).[41] Here, too, Apuleius highlights the connection to the philosophical movements of the body. Lucius' insight directly follows his experience at the miller's wheel, where his perpetual revolutions in a small circuit reproduce not only a servile Odyssey, as it were, but also the fixed motion of Plato's planetary sphere — the motion with which we humans should align our psychological movements, if we want to adopt a truly celestial posture. In fact, the way that Lucius is compelled to turn the wheel whether he wants to or not may also be a reference to the notorious metaphor of the dog and the cart that was a paradigm of Stoic determinism.[42] If so, Lucius-as-ass fails in every respect — he is no Odysseus, no Stoic, no Platonist. His asinine body is an incarnation of the unphilosophical life.

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[41] On this scene, see especially Kenney (2003).

[42] Long and Sedley 62A (Hippolytus, *Haer.* 1.21): "They too [Zeno and Chrysippus] affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model. When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity, but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined."

Figure 1. An engraving of a gem, possibly imaginary, depicting Apuleius as an orating donkey. From *Gemmae antiquitus sculptae a Petro Stephanonio Vicentino collectae et declarationibus illustratae* (Rome 1627).

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