

# DAMASCIUS AND THE PRACTICE OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE: ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT AND COMMUNION WITH THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an overview and introduction to the key elements of Damascius' philosophy. I examine the attributes and the relationship between the Ineffable, the One, and the All as the cornerstones of his theoretical system. I then investigate the role of this system of thought for Damascius and his contemporaries as a guide to the philosophical life and its repercussions for attaining the highest principles. Is contemplation possible or are other means needed, such as theurgy and purification of the soul? Does the philosopher occupy a privileged position in this system, as in the preceding Platonic tradition or is the philosopher's position different, by the experience of void and the inability to speak about and grasp the 'nothingness' of the highest principles?

KEYWORDS: Damascius, Late Neoplatonism, One, Ineffable, *skotos*, philosopher, theurgy, purification, soul, First Principles, theology, philosophy, contemplation.

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## I. On First Principles: the Ineffable & the One

In the *De Principiis*,<sup>1</sup> Damascius applies a method that we can call *aporetic* – since he too uses the term – to investigate the limits of our reasoning in relation to the first principles. He usually concludes a section with a question which he then goes on to investigate by proposing alternative answers which in turn are questioned too. Each inquiry either reaches an acceptable solution or an impasse. He has been called a sceptic by many, an exponent of negative theology who questions the validity of negation by others, or even a mystic with a penchant for Oriental mythologies.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of Damascius' passages from Greek are my own, unless otherwise stated.

It is true that the *Diadochus* often supplements his theoretical endeavours with mythological figures<sup>2</sup> (particularly from the Orphic tradition and the Chaldean Oracles, as well as from other sources) or visual imagery.<sup>3</sup> This interpretive method, whether allegorical or symbolic, is common to Platonic and Christian mystical writers, as well as to philosophical theologians of the East, such as Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist thinkers. In Damascius' view, non-philosophical myths, symbols, and figures are employed as objects of reflection because it is impossible to say anything adequate about the nature of the Ineffable, or of god.

The *Treatise* consists of an elaborate discussion of many speculative subjects.<sup>4</sup> I shall focus mainly on the One and the Ineffable. Turning first to the One, we notice that it is said to be everything and to produce everything. There is nothing that the One is not. It is therefore the cause of everything and embraces it. But owing to our inability to comprehend it, we divide ourselves in relation to it, affirming about it predicates that are familiar to us, only to realize that they are inadequate when applied to the One. So it remains unknowable and unmentionable because otherwise it would be Many.<sup>5</sup>

Damascius posits the Ineffable as the first of all principles, but the One – as the source of all things and principle of the All – is the highest principle in relation to the intelligible world. We might wonder whether the One fits better than the Ineffable into the line of the tradition<sup>6</sup> which holds the first principle of the All as the ultimate and greatest essence of philosophical knowledge, but in this case the suppression of the One by the ineffable principle seems unavoidable.

Even if we are satisfied by the handling of our doubts about the One, we could still make a final point: “since we don't have a notion, not even a conjecture as simple as the One,<sup>7</sup> how could we conjecture something beyond the last possible most simple notion and conjecture?” There is a certain amount of truth in such a doubt, because a conjecture beyond the One certainly seems to be inaccessible and inexplicable. But starting from what we already know, we should try to induce the inexpressible labours<sup>8</sup> that lead towards the inexpressible awareness of the sublime.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *De Princ.* III. 161. 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> *De Princ.* III. 132. 22.

<sup>4</sup> See appendix for an outline.

<sup>5</sup> *De Princ.* I. 5.

<sup>6</sup> That the One for Damascius is transcended by the Ineffable seems to represent a departure from earlier Neoplatonic metaphysics. At the same time, these earlier thinkers did not think that the One was an object of “philosophical knowledge”: it transcends knowledge (i.e. *noēsis*) in Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus.

<sup>7</sup> In *De Princ.*I. 4, Damascius specifies that it must at least be the case that the principle of the All be transcendent to the All itself; the totality the most simple and the simplicity which has absorbed all things, that is the simplicity of the One.

<sup>8</sup> See Westerink's note on the use of the term *odyne* (labour, gestation) by Damascius and Proclus in *De Princ.* I, p.134. Plotinus also uses this metaphor, especially in VI. 7 and VI. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *De Princ.* I. 6. 7-16.

The One is by nature placed before the Many,<sup>10</sup> the more simple before that which is a composite in some way; the more comprehensive before that which it envelops. And maybe the absolute ineffable is so ineffable that we cannot even postulate about it that it is ineffable. As far as the One is concerned, it is ineffable in the sense that it escapes all synthesis of definition and name, and all distinction like that between the known and the knower.<sup>11</sup> While the Beyond [the Ineffable], is beyond contradistinction.<sup>12</sup>

“But if it [the Ineffable] is really without co-ordination and relation to everything else – and if it is nothing at all, not even the One itself – that exactly is its nature that we are in a position to know in a way, earnestly pursuing to make others equally capable of it. In addition, its unknowable character itself, either we know that it is unknowable, or we are ignorant of it”.<sup>13</sup> “So don’t we express an opinion about it in what we say? Or, if there is an opinion about it, it is also an object of opinion. Yes, but our opinion is that it is not, and this opinion is true as Aristotle<sup>14</sup> says”.<sup>15</sup>

“The One is completely unknowable and inexpressible. Why then look for something else beyond the inexpressible? It is maybe the case that Plato, made us ascend ineffably towards the Ineffable, by the mediation of the One. It is of the Ineffable that we always talk of as being beyond the One. Just like he made us turn to the One by the suppression of the One itself and of other things” (*De Princ.* I.9.8-14). But in what ways is the One more knowable than the Ineffable? Even human intellection of the highest kind, i.e. unitary *noesis* which conforms to it in character would not be able to grasp it, because it might prove to be of an unknowable nature. In the meantime other kinds of intellection are rejected.<sup>16</sup>

It is not clear whether these kinds of intellection can be realised in this world. The philosophic modes of existence, which include life in pure intellection can probably be realised both here and in the hereafter, “though in the hereafter they have an excellence far higher than here”.<sup>17</sup> And even though we conceive of the One in the integral purification of our thought towards that which is more simple and compre-

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<sup>10</sup> “How could we know that there is nothing beyond the One, which may have produced it? Because the many would have more than one cause. But in fact the Many need nothing else but the One; that, in other words, is the reason why only the One is cause of the Many” (*De Princ.* I. 5).

<sup>11</sup> *De Princ.* I. 10. 22-11. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *De Princ.* I. 6. 23-I. 7. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *De Princ.* I. 11. 21-12. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De Interpretatione* 11, 21a 32-3 and *Soph. Elench.* 5, 167 a 1.

<sup>15</sup> *De Princ.* I. 15. 6-8.

<sup>16</sup> *De Princ.* I. 10; I. 18. 2-10. He suggests that we can have reservations about knowledge of the Forms as well: “neither a mark, nor a name, nor a definition, nor science is appropriate in signalling the Form. For only an intellect could apply itself to the Forms, which [intellect] we do not yet have, for we like to argue dialectically.”

<sup>17</sup> *In Phaed.* I, 115. At this point we should consider that he might reiterate this view as part of the *Phaedo* commentary and not as his own.

hensive, that which is ‘more venerable’ must be elusive to all conception and conjecture.<sup>18</sup> But the One cannot be purely known by the philosopher. It is simply the highest of all principles that we “know or can conjecture about” as opposed to the Ineffable which lies beyond contradistinction.<sup>19</sup>

Damascius stresses that the desire to know often results in the positing of misleading *hypotheses*. What we say about the Ineffable is the product of our own emotional states<sup>20</sup> rather than the outcome of careful ontological investigation.<sup>21</sup> Even from the first lines of his *Treatise on First Principles* the practice of doubt is the way in which we can relate the One and therefore the Ineffable to what can be known: “That, which we call the unique principle of the All, is it beyond the All, or is it something that takes part in the All, like the top of the beings that proceed from it?”<sup>22</sup> By giving a negative answer to the second part of his question, Damascius induces an impasse for our thought and our way of thinking in relation to the first principles since they are beyond reach. The inaccessibility of the first principles entails the inability of the philosopher to experience them;<sup>23</sup> either by means of a vision of the Good, which Plato describes,<sup>24</sup> or by means of mystical experiences or visions, which Plotinus recounts.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *De Princ.* I. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *De Princ.* I. 18. 2-5. Could this be a case of making a distinction, akin to Bertrand Russell’s, between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description? See Russell 1910-1911, 108–128.

<sup>20</sup> *De Princ.* I. 8. 17.

<sup>21</sup> “We accept fictions, about the things which are not, which are the products of our imagination, as if they were real things (in the same way that we represent the sun as having one foot diameter, while it is not of such dimensions). In the same way, if we form an opinion, either on the subject of that which is not in any way nor in any relation, or on the topic of the Ineffable, this belief is our deed, and in us it progresses towards the void; so, in grasping the Ineffable, we believe to having grasped it, but it is nothing in us, so much it eludes common thought” (*De Princ.* I.16).

<sup>22</sup> *De Princ.* I. 1. 5-7.

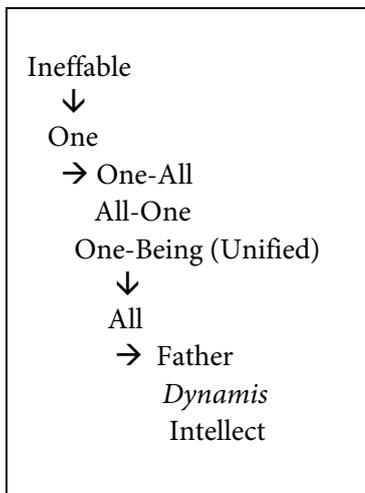
<sup>23</sup> *De Princ.* I. 17. 1-5.

<sup>24</sup> “When seen, it is inferred to be the universal author of all things, beautiful and right, parent of light and the lord of light in the visible world and the immediate and supreme source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that is the power upon which he, who would act rationally either in public or private life must have his eye fixed” (*Republic*, 517c).

<sup>25</sup> Plotinus’ writings are full of mystical experiences related to contact with the intelligibles, since, as he says, actual union with the One is “our one resource if our philosophy is to give us knowledge of the One”. (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, tr. A. H. Armstrong (Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1993: VI. 9. 3). Such a passage as the following describes the experiences of the initiated in contact with the One: “there was no movement in him and he had no emotion, no desire for anything else when he had made the ascent – but there was not even any reason or thought, and he himself was not there, if one must say this; but he was as if carried away or possessed by a god, in a quiet solitude and a state of calm... He had no thought of beauties, but had already run up beyond beauty and gone beyond the choir of

We might think that the things which comprise the All, can either be a principle or something which proceeds from a principle. According to Damascius, the All is neither. It is the totality of all we can conceive of; the plurality of many things of which there is a unique co-ordination, in a sense which includes their principle. In a few words we could say that the All contains its principle because that too is something we can conceive of in some way. But if it is true that the All is neither a principle, nor something which proceeds from a principle, did it come about suddenly out of nothing? Where did this differentiation and plurality that characterises the All spring from?<sup>26</sup>

In this classification of transcendental principles there are two possibilities:



(a) Either the first of all principles should be beyond the All; in which case the All would have to be the principle of itself simultaneously with being the All, and that would destroy its simple essence of being the All. (b) Or the first of all principles should be part of the All; in such a case the principle's identity is altered because it ceases to be merely a principle of the All but becomes part of the All too. This apparent contradiction in terms is solved by Damascius by positing the One as principle of the known world<sup>27</sup> and cause of the All.

Another strand of the *Treatise* is based on theological imagery much more than on pure philosophical speculation.<sup>28</sup> *Skotos* theology<sup>29</sup> is used to

complement the message conveyed in passages as the one above. Expressions such as *skotos*,<sup>30</sup> *skoteinoteta*,<sup>31</sup> are used in order to signify the impression we get of the world that lies beyond the intelligible. More particularly the word *skotos* is used to signify the One and often, in the terminology of the Egyptian priests the Pythagorean One; this is the equivalent of the Ineffable in Damascius. The 'one principle of everything',<sup>32</sup> 'the principle that is beyond the All',<sup>33</sup> 'the inexpressible principle',<sup>34</sup> and 'the ineffable principle'<sup>35</sup> are some of the expressions that alternate with *skotos*.

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virtues, like a man who enters into the sanctuary (*adyton*) and leaves behind the statues in the outer shrine; ...And when one falls from the vision, he wakes again the virtue in himself... and he will again be lightened... This is the life of gods and of godlike and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world" (*Enn.VI. 9. 11*).

<sup>26</sup> *De Princ.* I. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *De Princ.* I. 3. 18-21.

<sup>28</sup> On defining Damascius' position on the map of philosophy versus theology cf. A. Kalogiratou (2007) 58-79.

<sup>29</sup> R. Mortley (1986).

<sup>30</sup> *De Princ.* II. 11. 4; II. 30. 9; III. 167. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *De Princ.* I. 13. 2; *De Princ.* I. 15. 17.

<sup>32</sup> *De Princ.* III. 167. 4.

Like Gregory of Nyssa (and indeed the following passage has several verbal similarities with Gregory's *Life of Moses*), Denys the Areopagite speaks of the dark cloud where "He who transcends all really is": "For not simply is the divine Moses bidden first of all to purify himself and then to separate himself from those not thus purified; but after all purification, he hears the many sounding trumpets and sees many lights which flash forth pure and widely diffused rays. ...And then Moses is cut off from both things seen and those who see and enters into the darkness of unknowing, a truly hidden darkness, according to which he shuts his eyes to all apprehensions that convey knowledge, for he has passed into a realm quite beyond any feeling or seeing... that<sup>36</sup> which is beyond all".<sup>37</sup> It is important to point out that the world of darkness is preceded in this passage by a realm of strong flashing light.

The "light of truth"<sup>38</sup> is also described by Damascius and Plato. It peoples the region exactly below the inaccessible principles and is a product of the One-Being,<sup>39</sup> to which Being is attached. This light is the region of the knowable. In the stages of his ascent when he encounters the world of the Intelligibles – before ascending to the highest principles of the *dark cloud*; the One and the Ineffable – the philosopher encounters visions of light.<sup>40</sup> He can probably compare the light that the *henad* throws on the Intelligible triad, to the sun-light that becomes many different colours through a cloud as a rainbow.<sup>41</sup>

This is where Intellect can function and apprehend realities in the realm of the intelligibles; at the 'front door' of the One.<sup>42</sup> In this Damascius is not alone. Plotinus too makes the distinction between One and Intellect and he describes the single instances which illuminate the life of the sage unexpectedly: "Often, I have woken up out of the body to myself and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down..."<sup>43</sup> Intellect for Plotinus is a separate *hypostasis* which comes directly

<sup>33</sup> *De Princ.* II. 10. 24.

<sup>34</sup> *De Princ.* II. 11. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *De Princ.* II. 30. 4.

<sup>36</sup> As we see from this passage, Christian authors too speak of god in relation to the All.

<sup>37</sup> Denys, *Mystical Theology* I.3: 1000B-1001A.

<sup>38</sup> *De Princ.* I. 122. 14.

<sup>39</sup> C.f. *De Princ.* I. 69. 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> *De Princ.* III. 141. 11-6.

<sup>41</sup> *De Princ.* III. 141. 20-142.11.

<sup>42</sup> On the relationship between this light and the One see *De Princ.* I. 125. 10-8.

<sup>43</sup> *Enn.* IV. 8. 1-9.

after the One. It may correspond to the Intelligible Triad of the Father, the *Dynamis* and the Intellect in the *Treatise on First Principles*.<sup>44</sup>

The ultimate principle is compared by Damascius to a shrine that generates all things ineffably, but it is one not to be penetrated. The word *adyton* that he uses to indicate the Ineffable was the room in the remotest part of the Greek temple. Such is the case with the temple of *Athena* in Athens, the Delphic temple and others.<sup>45</sup> Its inaccessible character symbolised the transcendence of the divine that was thought to be hidden there. All the pains and gestations (*odynai*) of our soul towards an understanding of the Ineffable (*aporrheton*) stop at the front door (*en prothyraï*) of the sanctuary and we are destined never to get in.<sup>46</sup>

The whole discussion in terms of light and darkness that relates to the first principles can be better explained when one thinks that our inability to grasp them does not lie in their own attributes, but is rather due to our limitations [or insufficiency]. Such as blindness could be to those who cannot see:

“It is in fact, as if though someone, blind by birth, would declare that warmth does not underlay colour. Or he will rather say, justly, that colour is not warm; for warmth is, in fact, possible to touch and he knows it by touch, while he doesn’t know colour in any way, except that it is not subject to touch; for he knows that he does not know it; and that is simply not his knowledge of colour, but knowledge of his own ignorance. And naturally, we too, in saying that this [principle] is unknowable, we do not declare something that pertains to it, but we confess our own state in relation to it; for the blind man’s insensitivity and blindness is not in the colour but in himself; and certainly, ignorance of that [principle] which we ignore is in us, for knowledge of the known is in the knower not in that which is being known”.<sup>47</sup>

In the simile of the Cave, Plato implies that it can only be the born philosopher – whose blindness is due to the transition from dark to light – who benefits from education. Education will not put light to blind eyes, or knowledge in a mind where it was not before. But the turning around of the prisoner’s body signifies the turning of the mind ‘from the world of becoming to the world of being’, away from ‘sensual indulgences or gluttony’ or any form of badness towards the Good. Virtues can be instilled only in those who have potential. In the same way Damascius seems to include philosophers in the category of those people who could never turn around to see the light, because of an inborn deficiency. So instead of seeing the light they are

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<sup>44</sup> For an in-depth discussion see J. Bussanich (1997).

<sup>45</sup> The same custom is still respected in Christian Orthodox churches, where usually the inner *sanctum* shelters the bones of a saint or some other sacred object and is inaccessible to the public.

<sup>46</sup> *De Princ.* I. 8. 6-20.

<sup>47</sup> *De Princ.* I. 12. 11-25.

blinded when they look at the Sun and see nothing but darkness. Darkness again is not an attribute of the Ineffable, but a natural reaction of the eyes that cannot see.<sup>48</sup>

## II. On First Principles & Soul Purification: the Philosopher

A question about Neoplatonic philosophy is whether rationalism can have a religious significance. There is a possible conflict in a system that contains a philosophic along with a religious representation of the universe divided into the categories of the sacred and the profane. The religious representation embraces truths revealed by the gods, whereby reality is a hierarchy of values which register a positive or negative sign according to whether the soul is purified or becomes impure in contact with them. According to the philosophic conception there is a rational background to reality, based on argument. In this case reason illuminates everything that can be explained and once justified anything can be good. Can the problem of destiny retain a meaning in a universe the principles of which are graduated according to a necessary law of reason? The originality of each Neoplatonic thinker will thus depend largely on the ways he will suggest to solve this problem.

The mystery religions during the first centuries CE were based upon the sentiment that the soul was bound to elements which rendered it impure. The proper function (goal) of religious practice consists then in delivering the soul, in enabling it to be reborn, by disentangling it from these elements. According to the Hermetic writings: “After this rebirth one remains the same, and yet one does not have the same substance. ... [the birth in Truth] is the death of the terrestrial body, at least in its power over the soul. The twelve wicked inclinations which are born of the body disappear one after another, driven off by the ten divine forces. Then you know yourself with an intellectual knowledge and you know our father.” The Mithraic theologians likewise blended their mysteries with cosmological representations. After death the soul, if judged worthy, ascends into the heavens.<sup>49</sup> The regions of the heavens are divided into seven spheres. When stripped of all sense-attachments, the soul enters the eighth heaven where it enjoys blessedness for ever.<sup>50</sup>

In Damascius’ philosophy, what degree of purity is necessary for a soul to attain immortality? Purity depends on the soul’s incarnate behaviour. Will the human being, whom a soul incarnates, be a philosopher? This depends on one’s previous ethical performance. As all Platonists are committed to “karmic ethics”, a soul could become a god or a daemon, because they too have souls. It all depends on the life it lead as an incarnate being and on the lives it lived before this one. Only the principles of this world – which are apprehended by intellect do not have souls and are rather akin to the Forms.

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<sup>48</sup> “So what? Don’t we think and persuade ourselves that this [the Ineffable] is so? Yes, but these are our own states about it, as we have often said. However, we have in us this opinion. Empty like an opinion on emptiness (*kenon*) and the unlimited (*apeiron*)”. (*De Princ.* I. 16).

<sup>49</sup> E. Vacherot (1845).

<sup>50</sup> A. Cameron (1969) 7-29.

Damascius rejects the importance of discursive reason or dialectics in apprehending the first principles – by pointing out that the way we think of and define the intelligible is only relatively speaking true in accordance with the way things really are.<sup>51</sup> He points out that this is so because the gods communicate these and other realities to us not in the way that they think of them because then we would not be able to understand. They speak them in human language. In the same way as they would speak Egyptian to the Egyptians and Greek to the Greeks. So the language that they use is concepts and verbs and nouns such as the ones that we use to describe them.<sup>52</sup>

Damascius does not describe a transcendental experience of the ultimate truth. He rather points to a way of super-human communication between the gods and man, whereby the products of contemplation refer back to human language, since the gods who communicate with us, relate them in our language. Does then contemplation consist of simply describing and connecting and analysing the different concepts the gods allow us to apprehend? In the contemplative life, the soul “considers the superior entities either as exerting providence over the lower degrees of being, or as remaining within themselves, or as connected with what is beyond” (*In Phaed.* I, 74). The activity of the gods is a kind of exertion of providence over the lower degrees of being, including human lives. Here we should also remember Denys *from the Areios Pagos*<sup>53</sup> who is one of the few authors in the early mystical tradition to acknowledge a reaching out of the god towards the *moving soul*.<sup>54</sup> The activity of intellect described by Damascius in such a state remains mysterious because it is far too passive to be taken as understanding.

On the other hand, for Damascius, death of the human body would be the single experience of loss of life. Death to the soul, (given the soul’s immortality which is established in the second part of the commentary on the *Phaedo*) is its separation from the body and therefore a constant state of purity and detachment (*In Phaed.* I, 52-3). Once this is established there is almost no oscillation of the philosopher between the life of the body and the intelligible world.

According to Plato, the soul must be cultivated as far as possible as if it were already disembodied, in that “practice for death” which is the philosophers’ proper occupation.<sup>55</sup> For Plato, the philosopher king is expected to play an active role in so-

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<sup>51</sup> “Except that we, in discoursing humanly about the super-divine principles, we cannot either conceive or name them in a way other than by using reasonings on the subject of these realities that raise themselves beyond all intellect, and life and the substance of all things” (*De Princ.* III. 140. 14-18).

<sup>52</sup> *De Princ.* III. 140. 12-25. See also S. Rappe (2000) xx + 266.

<sup>53</sup> He studied at the Academy during the late fifth or early sixth century CE. This dating is consistent with his apparent use of ideas found in Proclus and Damascius. See S. Gersh (1978).

<sup>54</sup> A. Louth (1981).

<sup>55</sup> “In the Republic he moved to recognition that conflict occurs in the soul itself. The passions and appetites are acknowledged to have their place in human life and attention is di-

ciety by teaching his fellow citizens<sup>56</sup> part of what he learnt in contact with the Good: “And if, said I, someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out<sup>57</sup> into the light of the sun,<sup>58</sup> do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real” (*Republic*, 515e-516a).<sup>59</sup> Damascius himself never describes any such experience related to the ultimate principles. A result of this is that he posits the first principle of all things as if it were ‘beyond reach’ and its existence related to itself but not to us.<sup>60</sup>

He thinks that if Plato himself might have come to the experience of the One he would certainly have concealed it: “And even if, having elevated himself to the One, Plato became silent, he thought it appropriate to keep absolute silence about that

rected rather to their regulation than to their complete suppression. But Book X shows him still faithful to the conviction that the existence of these conflicting elements in the soul is only made possible by its association with the body, and that in its purity, in its “truest nature”, the soul is characterised by *philosophia*” (S. Gersch 1978, 25).

<sup>56</sup> Even though he may despise them so as to “say with Homer: Better to be a serf, labouring for a landless master and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner”. (*Republic*, 516d).

<sup>57</sup> When such a vision for Damascius is impossible, it is interesting to see that the Platonic future philosopher-king can not only see, but even be *dragged along* to his journey. Would the dragging along be perpetrated by his teacher? Plotinus thinks that it would: “Therefore, Plato says, ‘it cannot be spoken or written’, but we speak and write impelling towards it ... For teaching goes as far as the road and the travelling, but the vision is the task of someone who has already resolved to see” (*Enn.* VI. 9. 4. 11-4).

<sup>58</sup> The ultimate principle is assumed to be the Good in this case. However there exist accounts of Plato’s late period in philosophy according to which that could be the One. Aristotle’s account of the lectures *On the Good* mentions that Plato in his late years taught the One to be good. There is another indication as to whether Plato might have taken the One as first and ultimate principle of the all, and that is in the *Parmenides*. This dialogue has been interpreted by many as a mental exercise or even a joke, while by others, significantly the Neoplatonists, as a proof of Plato’s endorsement of their own interpretation of the One as ultimate principle. In the *Philebus*, Socrates says: “if we are not able to hunt the Good with one Idea only, with three we may catch our prey, Beauty, Symmetry, Truth”. If this is true when the Good (as it happens in the philosophy of Plotinus) lies below the One in the hierarchy, then this gives us an idea of how distant the One could be, compared to the Truth.

<sup>59</sup> We don’t know whether the use of sense perceptions in this case is due to the sense-related metaphors that accompany the vision.

<sup>60</sup> In this he resembles Gregory of Nyssa: “The soul, having gone out at the word of her Beloved, looks for Him but does not find Him. She calls on Him, though He cannot be reached by any verbal symbol, and she is told by the watchman that she is in love with the unattainable, and that the object of her longing cannot be apprehended.” (*Commentary on the Song XII*; 1037).

which is absolutely secret according to the ancient custom; for actually the word [on this subject] is very dangerous that happens to fall in simple ears".<sup>61</sup>

Plotinus too thinks we can come in contact with the Good: "So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. ... and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent; (just as for those who go up to the celebrations of sacred rites there are purification, and stripping off of the clothes they wore before, and going up naked) until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the god, one sees with one's self alone. That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being".<sup>62</sup>

Damascius seems to assign a new mission to the philosopher and by "practice of death" he expects not simply the contemplation of the world of Forms through detachment from the sensible, he encourages a new way of recognising the limits of this world by discerning the void that surrounds it. However the human soul must forego the danger of following a different kind of void than the one which leads away from the sensible, towards true being.

"But, if the One is cause of the All and if it embraces all, which will be our way of climbing beyond it? For maybe we walk into the emptiness, strongly inclined towards nothingness itself; in fact, that which is not One, that is nothing in all justice." (*De Princ.* I, 5, 18-23). The philosopher who ventures beyond the One in search of the ultimate principle will discover that the most simple and comprehensive of all principles lies beyond conjecture and conception and its value lies in its simplicity. There is a difficulty that Damascius envisages in saying that the Ineffable is completely unknowable. If that is the case, how can he write about it? "For we certainly don't want to fabricate fictions, in a state of delirium over things we don't know. But if we are ignorant about it, how can we say that it is absolutely unknowable? And if we are aware of it, it is therefore knowable, since in being unknowable, it is recognised as such."<sup>63</sup>

According to Sarah Rappe, "this set of questions involves us in a second general assessment of the Neoplatonist tradition, involving matters of exegesis and interpretation, the status of philosophy, as a discipline that seeks to describe how things are, even if the very nature of reality precludes such description, and finally the relationship between words and reality as a whole. Can [the Ineffable and] the One be known or is it unknowable? In making even this kind of determination, we are already engaged in making statements that apparently predicate semantic descriptions of something that is, *ex hypothese*, not susceptible of any such statements".<sup>64</sup> Sara Rappe also argues that "Proclus and Simplicius both allow that any teaching about

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<sup>61</sup> *De Princ.* I. 9. 16-19. See also Plato's *Seventh Letter* 341b-345c on a similar train of thought.

<sup>62</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* I. 6. 7. 1-12.

<sup>63</sup> *De Princ.* I. 11. 17-12. 6.

<sup>64</sup> Sara Ahbel-Rappe (2010) XX.

realities such as intellect and soul must take place by means of *endeixis*, by means of coded language". *Endeixis* is a term that occurs over a hundred times in the *De Principiis* alone.<sup>65</sup>

In a way therefore Damascius is telling us that the philosopher who might experience this kind of inability to grasp pure nothingness<sup>66</sup> is the one standing more closely to the truth. "And if that [the Ineffable] is nothing, let us say that the nothing is of two kinds, that which is better than the One and that which is beyond; and if we are walking on the void saying those things, then there are two ways of 'walking on the void' (*kenemvatein*), one is by falling into the unpronounceable, the other into that which does not exist in any way; for this one is unpronounceable, as Plato says too, but it is according to the worse, while that one is according to the best".<sup>67</sup>

Plotinus explains that "It is not in the soul's nature to touch utter nothingness; the lowest descent is into evil and, so far, into non-being; but to utter nothing, never. When the soul begins again to mount, it comes not to something alien but to its very self; thus detached, it is in nothing but itself; self-gathered it is no longer in the order of being; it is in the Supreme".<sup>68</sup> The difference between Plotinus and later Neoplatonists like Damascius is that the latter won't allow for the absolute detachment of the soul from the body, while the body is still alive. It thus becomes impossible for the soul to venture completely into the positive nothingness of the Ineffable, because it is always bound to the body and that results in its inability to escort its own self, so as to say, into that which is total nothingness and alien to the soul.

But for Plotinus there is a danger: many a soul loses itself in multiplicity. Instead of finding its true self it discovers self-determination and separateness from the Father: "when it goes towards itself, (...), wishing to be directed towards itself it makes an image of itself, the non-existent, as if walking on emptiness (*kenemvatousa*) and becoming more indefinite; and the indefinite image of this is in every way dark: for it is altogether without reason and unintelligent".<sup>69</sup> He of course suggests a different way of finding a soul's true self: "Our country from which we came is there our father is there. How shall we travel to it, where is our way of escape? We cannot get there on foot; for our feet only carry us everywhere in this world, from one country to another. You must not get ready a carriage, either, or a boat. Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use".<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> S. Rappe (2000) 209-210.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *De Princ.* I. 7. 24 and I. 16 on the two different kinds of void and nothingness. Clearly Damascius is here referring to the negative kind of destructive void on the nothingness that ensues from matter and also about a possible connection between the notions of nothingness and the unlimited.

<sup>67</sup> *De Princ.* I. 7. 23-8. 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Enn.* VI. 9. 11.

<sup>69</sup> *Enn.* III. 9. 3. 10ff.

<sup>70</sup> *Enn.* I. 6. 8. 22-8.

For Damascius, philosophy can end when one is totally purified: the lifting up to pure intelligence through the path of goodness and wisdom (*In Phaed.* I, 41). By purifying herself, a soul can rise above all bodily affects and die in a way of separation from the body. When staying by herself, she can contemplate reality and perfection. She can pass beyond discursive knowledge to a knowing more immediate, more intuitive. The mind there thinks reality; there is unity between knower and known; Is this possible in our world? Does the figurative entail a physical death of the body? Not necessarily.

Purification (*catharsis*) is a sort of six-step preparation which aims to detachment from the body and all bodily concerns: (a) pleasure and pain, (b) luxurious food or the appetite for meat, (c) sense-perception and (d) imagination, (e) the multiplicity of opinion and (f) the complexity of discursive reason. (*In Phaed.* I, 120). Both purification and contemplation are the ways to god. Whereas the former leads to a god who is by himself alone and transcends all things, the latter leads to a god of a higher order who is united with the principles beyond himself (*In Phaed.* 119). Is union or contact with a god a way of acquiring knowledge? It seems that it is, because Damascius distinguishes himself from his predecessors when he adds a third kind of philosophical life to the two previously existing ones: the life of political action and life in contemplation. He adds purification.

Purification however is a process with progressive steps, while contemplation reflects a constant activity of mind for the one who has attained it. According to *In Phaed.* I, 121 “the same relation that exists between education and life in society, exists also between the life of purification and the life of contemplation”. One may argue that life in society signals the end of someone’s education because he/she knows all that he/she needs to know. On the other hand, ‘life in education’ is often of a higher intellectual standard as the ascent of Plato’s philosopher-king towards the sun indicates. Moreover, as Damascius says in *De Phaed.* I, 100 one cannot distinguish the “learners” i.e. those who are still preparing themselves to become philosophers from the “crowd”, because they both experience the same unpurified ways of feeling and emotions. Only true philosophers can be distinguished from the crowd and that probably means that it does not matter whether they are purified or political or just contemplating kinds of person.

So what is it that the purifying philosopher does differently, how does he qualify for a standard of understanding<sup>71</sup> as elevated as the one that life in contemplation provides? In other words, is there a way other than contemplation of approaching the divine?<sup>72</sup> In this, it seems that Damascius has distanced himself from the Plotinian way to answer this question which would have been a categorical “no”.

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<sup>71</sup> Regarding the portrayal of Socrates, Plato’s exemplary philosopher, by Damascius see A. Kalogiratou (2006) 45-54.

<sup>72</sup> “...which means could we use to ascend beyond it? For maybe we might find ourselves in the void, extended towards nothingness itself; for that which is not One, is nothingness in all truth” (I. 8. 9-11).

For all the Neoplatonists it is evident that the hierarchy of existence is simple at both ends: top and bottom; and more complex in the middle. The Ineffable and pure matter - both simple and represented by the void in Damascius' philosophy - are respectively above and below other more complex intelligible entities that people the world of the All. This observation provides the rational justification for theurgy which was practiced by Iamblichus and later Neoplatonists (in marked contrast to Plotinus, who disapproved of magic). So they seem to confirm Hierocles' view of Neoplatonism as the "purified philosophy of Plato".<sup>73</sup>

Since lower beings are simpler than intelligent beings, and therefore participate in higher hypostases, it might be argued that magical practices, using plants and potions, for example, are more likely to influence higher beings than the merely rational exercises of humans. So, whereas for Plotinus the only activities which draw man near the One are *eros*, *logos* and contemplation, for Iamblichus, Proclus,<sup>74</sup> Damascius and their contemporaries, theurgy is more effective.

According to Algis Uzdaviny, "theurgy' is literally god's work (from 'theoi'= 'gods' and 'ergon'= 'work', activity, operation). (...) For theurgists, the intellect must be engaged, which in turn means that they must not only purify their bodies and lower souls but also their minds. This would involve a regiment of study that includes not only philosophy but also sacred ritual."<sup>75</sup>

One more reason for Damascius to favour theurgy in relation to 'union with the One' for example, is that he posits as first principle an entity, the Ineffable, which is by his own definition, unknowable; therefore, not possible to approach with the mind. His description of this principle is problematic, however, in the sense that one cannot be certain that they are a philosopher or a wise man with the ancient Greek notion of the word, if one cannot feel getting close to first principles by contemplation, theurgy or union.

Damascius, in his book, with the significant title *Philosophical History*, describes a spiritual not an intellectual journey. He maintains that "the Orphic and Chaldean lore" is characterized as superior to "philosophical common sense" (*ton koinon philosophias noun*) (PH 85A).<sup>76</sup> He mentions a lot of incidents that point to the strong links of late Neoplatonism to spiritualist practices. His involvement in these practices did not discredit him as a philosopher in the eyes of his contemporaries. It rather highlights the fact that the changes that led to the philosophers of the west being alchemists, had already become apparent in his day. Polymnia Athanassiadi

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<sup>73</sup> Photius, *Bibliothèque* 214 (173a ff.).

<sup>74</sup> According to Proclus, theurgical power is "better than any human wisdom or knowledge" Iamblichus' longest extant work *On the Mysteries* is concerned mainly with little else. See H. D. Saffrey & L. G. Westerink (1968) I.25.

<sup>75</sup> A. Uzdaviny (2010) 4.

<sup>76</sup> P. Athanassiadi (1999a) 181-182. See also pp. 149-183 regarding the provenance of the *Chaldean Oracles* as well as their use by Damascius and his contemporaries.

suggests that Damascius held in the Academy “esoteric sessions on the Chaldean Oracles”.<sup>77</sup>

The aspiring philosopher, according to Damascius, is thrown into an abyss of semblance between the highest points of his universe and the lowest, as a lot of the attributes he ascribes to the Ineffable characterise also matter: empty, void, dark. This entails a danger, not envisaged by previous Neoplatonic authors: a philosopher could be immersed in matter, while thinking that he has conquered wisdom and the intelligible world, be it by the practice of theurgy or otherwise. In Neoplatonism reaching wisdom and knowledge are highly subjective experiences, but one could always wonder who could guide others and judge their progress, when the way is marred with too much consistency, making parts of the same universe too similar to differentiate. In this case initiation is indeed needed and the uninitiated run a grave risk of falling off the cliffs of wisdom into the abyss of matter rather unknowingly.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> P. Athanassiadi (1999) 46.

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