

## Ineffability and Unity in Damascius\*

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ABSTRACT: One of the distinctive characteristics of Damascius' system is his positing of an absolutely negative first principle. The essay argues that Damascius' "Ineffable" makes explicit the Platonic logic of unity already operative in the Proclean doctrine of henads, but in a fashion that clarifies the unique and aporetic position of the principle of individuation itself. Distributing this aporeticity throughout the system enacts the very causality of the principle itself on every plane of Being. Transcendence, for Damascius, is nothing other than the crisis of intelligibility and of totality, the impasse giving structure to the intelligible world. In his doctrine regarding the First Principle, Damascius also clarifies the status of the 'unparticipated' or 'imparticipable', resolving an ambiguity in Proclus and identifying this property with the withdrawal from Being concomitant with the causal activity of the Gods. In turn, by according an unparticipated phase to the activity of the henads, Damascius also clarifies the ambiguous status in Proclus of the intelligible order of the Gods.

The Damascian Ineffable is not so much a discrete principle as an expression of the absolute negativity of the One, principle of unity or individuation. Because it must bear the weight of the impossibility of reifying the principle of individuation as an individual or unit in its own right, in one respect "the Ineffable" can scarcely be regarded as a principle in itself. In another respect, however, it functions like a principle, with effects at every level of the procession of Being, for there is in each thing some ineffability (*DPI* 25.3).<sup>1</sup> In similar fashion, Proclus speaks of that which is ineffable in the nature of each being (*PT* II 8 56.20).<sup>2</sup> A particular aspect of this distributed ineffability is noted by Damascius (25.4-6): wherever there is *transcendence*, as of the One over Being, Being over Life, or Life over Intellect, the former is "more ineffable" than the latter. "Ineffability", then, displays

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<sup>1</sup> *DP*: Citations of *De principiis* are by volume, page and line number in L.G. Westerink & J. Combès, *Damascius: Traité des Premiers Principes*, 3 vol. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986-1991).

<sup>2</sup> *PT*: Citations of the *Platonic Theology* are by volume, chapter, page and line number in H.D. Saffrey & L. G. Westerink, *Proclus: Théologie platonicienne*, 6 vol. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1968-1997).

characteristics of the procession as a whole, with hierarchical and anti-hierarchical moments, just as the hierarchy of ontic principles is complemented by the direct constitution of each plane of being by its appropriate class of Gods.

Each thing is “ineffable” in its uniqueness, which is essentially a refusal of the separability of attributes. Insofar as all of the attributes of a thing are treated as belonging solely to it, and hence as non-identical with similar attributes in any other, then that thing, no matter how complex in one regard, is absolutely simple or uniform in another. Insofar as knowledge and discourse require universal terms, this atomic individual is “ineffable”. The correspondence between unity and ineffability is thus evident. In turn, some things are more ineffable than others. The lesser ineffability of the latter terms in the ontic chain is given simply inasmuch as the latter posit themselves *relative* to the former, this very relativity rendering them less ineffable. In this fashion, even if we were to evacuate all semantic content from the terms in the series, and thus render them all completely “ineffable” ciphers, the simple successor relation would generate a diminishing “ineffability” for the later terms in the series: if we can say nothing at all about A, about B we can say at least that it includes A, and about C that it includes A and B.

In this fashion the Ineffable embodies the very essence of the hierarchical relationships that Damascius frequently problematizes in the procession of Being. Thus one of the key insights in the aporetic of totality that opens the *De principiis* is that “the things that come *after* the principle are not, in the straightforward sense, ‘all things’,” (*DP* I 1.10-11)—that the *eminence* of a putatively totalizing principle vitiates the very totality of which it is to be the cause. Later in the text, Damascius determines that “nothing is composed of existence [*hyparxis*] and participation [in that *hyparxis*]” (*DP* II 41.15-16), inasmuch as this would render existence equivocal, analogous in one fashion to the matter of the composite,

in another to its form. It is not only hylomorphic relationships about which Damascius is quite strict in this fashion, but any relationships involving hypostatized form, as can be seen, for example, in the discussion concerning “suspended” (*sunêrtêmenon*) substance near the beginning of the surviving portion of his commentary on the *Parmenides* (IPI 3-7), which relegates reversion upon form, in the strict sense, to infra-intellectual “channels” (*ocheto*) (5.19-22).<sup>3</sup> The status of suspended substance relative to the henads is central to the recurring issue in Damascius concerning the relationship of “vehicle” (*ochoun*) and “rider” (*ochoumenon*) as applied to Being and the henads, respectively:

Should one say, along with the philosophers, that the intelligible is [constituted by] the One preceding and Being following, the latter co-unified with the former as much as possible? One ought to say that if they say this indeterminately [*adiakritôs*], then we agree, for [reciprocal] determination begins in [the hypostasis of] Life. But if they mean it in the sense that one is ridden, while the other rides, these [viz., rider and vehicle] are in any case distinguished from one another; but this [distinction] is peculiar to the Intellect, as they recognize, celebrating the reversion of Intellect upon itself [...] (DP III 126. 14-21)

The philosophers in question are speaking indeterminately, in the sense of lacking precision, but as Damascius punningly points out, they are also speaking about the One and Being—that is, the henads, on the one hand, and the substances they ‘ride’ on the other—which

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<sup>3</sup> IP: Citations of Damascius’ *Parmenides* commentary are by volume, page and line number in L.G. Westerink, J. Combès & A. Ph. Segonds, *Damascius: Commentaire du Parménide de Platon*, 4 vol. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997-2003).

initially lack reciprocal determinacy (*diakrisis*) with one another. If the henads and Being cannot be reciprocally determined, as occurs first in the hypostasis of Life, with the emergence of intelligible-intellective ‘space’, then one may in any event establish a hierarchy of *indetermination* between the Gods and Being.

The inability to encompass hierarchical relationships in an overarching intelligible structure determines Damascius’ conception of the relationship between the elements in the Mixed. Damascius considers, but rejects, at least in certain respects, considering the Mixed or radical Being as an assemblage or ‘syzygy’ (*syzeuxis*) of cause and effect, like that of craftsman and tool, or paradigm and image, for “such an assemblage consists only in a certain type of relation [*schesis*], not in a coordination according to substance [*syntaxis kat’ousian*]” (*DP* II 47. 14-18). The specific relevance of this insight to the Mixed will be discussed further below. What matters at this point is Damascius’ persistent recognition that these relationships, in the last analysis, can be hierarchical or they can be intelligible, but they cannot be both. This is why they are traced back ultimately to a principle that is eminent, but absolutely negative in character.

“Ineffability”, then, is transcendence generally: the transcendence of each thing in its uniqueness, which is a transcendence relative to *everything else*, and the *particular* transcendence relative to a hierarchical—and hence ontic—organization. But ineffability is so closely tied to unity that Damascius rejects the notion of a distinct *participatory* structure for the Ineffable, rejecting in particular “that every God is ineffable before [being] one, the way [s/he] is one prior to [being] substance” (*DP* I 26.1-2). Ineffability thus appears as a dependent moment of unity (individuality) as such; why, then, treat it separately?

For Proclus, too, ineffability is peculiarly associated with supra-essential, henadic unity. Thus, in a discussion of the functions of the three intelligible triads, which “mystically

announce the completely unknown causality of unparticipated primary deity” (*PT* III 14 50.16-18), Proclus explains that the first triad announces “the ineffable unity of it,” the second its “preeminence over all powers,” and the third its “engendering the totality of beings” (50.18-20). These three functions explicate the three moments of the first intelligible triad: Limit or Existence (*hyparxis*); Power; and Mixture or Intellect. They also, however, announce the specific transcendence of the supra-essential henadic individual with respect to each of these moments. The henad, as ineffable unity, transcends determinacy (limit), as well as two forms of totality: the relational continuum of powers or divine attributes, and the totality of beings as constituted by the *expression* of divine powers. Ineffability is also linked to unity in Proclus’ account of the relationship between the first principle and the third moment of the first intelligible triad, the Mixed, which parallels the relationship between the henad as operative first principle and the three intelligible triads, while also expressing the cooperating causality of ontic principles: the Mixed, which is the root of Being, “has first, from the God, participation in ineffable unity and in a universal hypostasis,” while it “draws from Limit existence, uniformity, and a stable character [*monimon idiotêta*],” and “from the Unlimited, power and the latent presence of all things in it” (*PT* III 9 37.23-28).

In the systematic interpretation of the Proclean intelligible triads as I have explicated it at length elsewhere, each intelligible triad is a dimension of henadic activity, an interpretation which follows from the fact that the henads operate all the causality attributable to the One.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, one should understand “primary and unparticipated deity” (*PT* III 14 50.17-18) as a *phase of divinity*, that is, of the Gods as such, rather than hypostatize it as a “first God”. Damascius would evidently refrain from reifying a discrete

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<sup>4</sup> The One is not a creator or producer and is superior to causality (*PT* II 9 57.16-17; 59. 14-16, 24), and the positive corollary of this is that the three primary modes of causality all subsist in the intelligible Gods (60. 26-28), that is, in the three intelligible triads, which express the causal activity of all Gods as such.

deity here, inasmuch as he speaks universally, in a manner Proclus does not, though their ends are in common, of *unparticipated henads*, without seeming to treat this as an entirely novel doctrine: “The unparticipated henads are completely united with the participated henads, which is why we call the same ones now participated, now unparticipated, on account of the wholly inexpressible and indistinguishable unity [of them]” (*IP I* 2.17-20). The doctrine of unparticipated henads, which has occasioned debate in the contemporary literature, serves to clarify what Damascius recognized as a potential source of misunderstanding in Proclus’ free use of formalizations regarding the first principle: Damascius wishes to affirm that “unparticipated deity” pertains to *each henad*, and not to some other entity.

There is further support for this reading in *ET* prop. 23, in which Proclus affirms that “all participated hypostases are linked by upward tension to unparticipated existences [*hyparxeis*].”<sup>5</sup> In Proclus the opposition between *hypostasis* and *hyparxis* denotes the opposition between the realm of being and the supra-essential generally; but as “Every God is participated, except for the One” (prop. 116), the participation beings enjoy in the henads is not incompatible with an unparticipated dimension to the Gods’ existential nature. Prop. 123 explains more fully that “All that is divine is itself ineffable and unknown by anything secondary because of its supra-essential unity, but conceived and known through its participants; hence only the First [Principle] is completely unknown, being unparticipated.” The One here is unknown for the same reason that the henads are, but whereas the henads are known in one respect and unknown in another, the One is unknown as such. Each henad is unknown because of that ineffable individuality in which all of the attributes by

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<sup>5</sup> *ET*: Citations of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* are to proposition number in E.R. Dodds, *Proclus: The Elements of Theology*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), translations occasionally modified.

which the henad is known partake immediately of the same uniqueness as the total henadic individual. The One Itself, on the other hand, is unknown because *there is nothing to it* save the supreme unity, which is itself always simply *some unit*, just because it has no formal content, which would necessarily express itself in a participatory structure. Instead of treating “imparticipability” as a sort of eminence attributed to a reified One Itself we need to understand the *reasons* why something is unparticipated, in some respect or absolutely.

Damascius resorts to the un-Proclean formulation of “unparticipated henads” in order to disambiguate the status of the quasi-class of “intelligible Gods”: “Connascent with the simply-one and first cause of all things is engendered the multiplicity that is unparticipated and as similar to it as can be, namely the intelligible genus of the Gods ... the latent organization [*diakosmon*]” (*DP* III 107.15-20), to which compare Proclus’ formulation, in which “the intelligible genus of the Gods transcends unitarily [*heniaiôs*] all the other divine orders [*diakosmôn*] ... It transcends both universal and particular intelligibles and preexists all objects of intellection as an unparticipated and divine intelligible” (*PT* III 28.100.4-11). The reason for the peculiar status of the intelligible ‘class’ of Gods is that, as Damascius well recognizes, the One is not a monad participated by the henads, which would yield the normative class structure of a monad and its participating manifold, but is instead ‘connascent’ (*syngenes*) with them. This is the very sense of ‘unitary’ transcendence: the intelligible ‘class’ of Gods is not some class in addition to the other classes of Gods, it is the ‘class’ of each God *as him/herself immediately the All*. Damascius, by treating the ‘unparticipated’ nature of this quasi-class distributively, clarifies the nature of unitary transcendence as such, and makes certain, in addition, that we cannot mistake his “unparticipated henads” for a further class of Gods by stating explicitly that the same henads are sometimes called participated, sometimes unparticipated.

Unity is linked to ineffability for Proclus and Damascius alike because the inability to isolate and abstract any attribute or property from the matrix of the unique henadic individual affords no formal grasp of these individuals, *only* existential presence. In this respect, the most systematically fruitful designation of ineffability in Proclus may be his characterization of the manner in which the Forms are derived from the divine classes as “unknown and ineffable to us” (*IP* 803.13-14). Between the orders of theurgic *symbola* or *synthêmata*, the “symbols” or “tokens” constituted by the activity of unique deities,<sup>6</sup> on the one hand, and the order of concepts constituted by the activity of dialectic, on the other, there is a transitional moment Proclus finds relatively opaque. This opacity, little remarked upon in Proclus, becomes strongly thematic in Damascius, who strives to theorize it from every possible side, and to pursue it to its most primordial basis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Note, in this respect, that the “ineffability” of *ET* prop. 123 extends beyond the Gods to things merely “divine” (*theia*), i.e., beings taken into relationship with the Gods, but which are surely knowable in some other respect. The Apis bull, for example, may be “ineffable” with respect to his deity, but would be knowable with respect to his bovinity.

<sup>7</sup> See further on this “The Henadic Origin of Procession in Damascius,” *Dionysius* 31 (2013), pp. 79-100.