

## Ineffability and Totality in Damascius\*

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ABSTRACT: The opening pages of Damascius' *Aporiai kai Lyseis* offer, based upon established principles of Proclean metaphysics, a powerful critique of the very notion of a totalizing principle. This paper examines the conception of totality arising out of this critique, and argues that Damascius pursues radical consequences that are implicit in Proclus' doctrine of the henads as a totality of unique and hence untotalizable individuals, and that, in turn, the henadology is indispensable to understanding the proper significance of Damascian formulations regarding the Ineffable, Totality, and the nature of multiplicity. Damascius' dialectic results in a totality which can neither be understood as the product of a singular principle, and hence inferred from that principle, even for an ideal knower; nor as the mere effect of all things, with a collapse into empiricism and relativism. Instead, totality must be grasped through the irreducible process of emergence, within the unitary manifold of the henads, of the immanent ontological principle of unification, and beyond this, of the intellective and finally psychical power of reflection upon this cosmogonic process. Damascius' dialectic of totality in this fashion takes in a wider scope than the concept of totality in Proclus, which has a narrower intension than the concept of wholeness. Proclus thus subordinates totality to the integrity of the henadic individual presented as intelligible object, leaving the totality of the system itself ambiguously determined. Damascius takes the bull by the horns, and renders explicit the system's grounding in a divine process in which factual divine subjects actively objectify themselves.

Damascius begins his *Aporiai kai Lyseis* with the problem of totality, specifically, its relation to principle. *Ta panta*, 'all things', are not presented at the outset as problematic, and so his problem is not whether, or why, there is something rather than nothing, but rather the integrity of totality, by virtue of which we say *to pân*, the All. Indeed, whereas Proclus preferentially uses *to pân* in discussing the determination of totality, which emerges through the intellective activity of the Gods (i.e., in the third intelligible triad), Damascius shows a marked preference for *ta panta*. This terminological choice echoes in turn in his characterization of the second principle in the first intelligible triad, which is for Proclus either the unlimited (*apeiron*) or power (*dynamis*), as 'the many (things)', *ta polla*, which has approximately the same relationship to *plêthos*, 'multiplicity', 'the manifold', as *ta panta* has

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to *to pân*. Proclus, by contrast, in his discussion in the *Platonic Theology* (*PT* III 20 67-73),<sup>1</sup> while drawing on the *Sophist* (245a-d), which uses both terms, uses exclusively *to pân*. Nor does Proclus avail himself here of *pantotês*, ‘totality’, though he frequently uses *holotês*, ‘wholeness’, to refer to the determination characteristic of the second intelligible triad (the activity of the intelligible-intellective Gods).

Damascius, for his part, while largely eschewing *to pân*, does use *pantotês*, in a context (*DPI* 1.14)<sup>2</sup> that helps to elucidate his choice: “Nothing therefore manifests itself outside of all things; for totality [*pantotês*] is a certain boundary [*horos*] and a comprehension [*perilêpsis*] as well, in which the principle is the upper limit, while what comes last from the principle is the lower limit; all things therefore are with the(ir) limits [*meta tôn peratôn*],” (1.13-16). ‘Totality’, then, is a quality possessed by *ta panta*, all things, but because the principle is *among* all things, it cannot secure the unity of *to pân*. What secures the unity of totality, rather, is a *reflection* or *intention*, *ennoêsis*, in which the principle is immanent: “The many beings of which there is a single coordination, these we call ‘all things’; so that the principle too is among all things. And in general we call ‘all things’ *simpliciter* whatever we conceive [*ennooumen*] in any fashion, and we conceive the principle as well,” (2.3-6). We find this association between *to pân* and *ennoêsis* again below: “All things are seen somehow at once in multiplicity [*en plêthei*] and in a certain distinction [*en tini diakrisei*], for indeed we do not conceive [*ennooumen*] the All [*to pân*] without these” (2.21-23). The references to *ennoêsis*, however, should not lead us to think that totality is

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<sup>1</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).

<sup>2</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).

dependent upon *human* intentionality. Damascius surely has in mind the relationship between the demiurge and the paradigm as presented by Proclus, who says of the totality (*to pân*) in the third intelligible triad that “It is looking upon [*apoblepôn*] this that the demiurge of the All [*pân*] organizes the sensible All, determining the visible <All> by means of that intelligible All, and <organizing> time according to intelligible wholeness,” i.e., the second intelligible triad (*PT* III 20 72.25-73.3). This cognitive gaze of a God upon another God is the primordial divine relationship, and establishes the reciprocal space in which mediated intellectual multiplicity proceeds.

The synoptic unity of the All, *to pân*, therefore, is always dependent upon some *disposition* of a manifold. Note, in this regard, that ‘all things’, *ta panta*, is not an infinity: “And ‘all things’ would be a delimited many [*polla ... peperasmena*]; for *all* things would not exactly be *infinite* things [*ta apeira*],” (1.11-13). There are two basic types of manifold, according to Damascius, which we may characterize as diacritical/differential, on the one hand, and radical plurality, on the other. Damascius proceeds to explain (2.23-3.2) that the unified or monad is at the head of the diacritical or differential—that is, the intellective—organization, while the One is at the head of the Many, *ta polla*, which is synonymous with the ‘multiplicity’ of the previous passage, and that the One is simpler than the monad. Totality, then, cannot be simplified beyond the distinction between the henadic and ontic domains, the former corresponding to the radical multiplicity of *ta polla*, the many henads constituting the polycentric manifold, and the latter to the differential, mediated multiplicity of passive subjects of unity, unified entities (*hênômena*). The totality that lies beyond this distinction is *anarchos* and *anaitios*, without principle or cause (2.11-12); Damascius establishes as its pseudo-principle his ‘Ineffable’, which “one must call neither principle, nor cause, nor first, nor prior to all things, nor beyond all things, and scarcely then must one

proclaim it to *be* all things; nor, in short, must one proclaim it, conceive it, or conjecture it at all,” (4.15-18).

The critical moment for the relationship between totality (*to pân*) and all things (*ta panta*), comes with the following argument: “Everything [*pân*] must be either principle, or from principle; and so all things [*ta panta*] are either principle or from principle,” (2.12-14). But it cannot be the case that all things are from a principle, because the principle not being included among the totality, the totality is not totality, and therefore the principle is no principle—or at any rate, it is not a totalizing principle. Nor can it be the case that “something would proceed from all things as from a principle ... as the product of all things” (2.16-18). So all things can neither be principle, nor be from principle, nor, as a corollary, can one reason from *to pân* to *ta panta*. Absolute totality cannot possess the unity of a cause, or of an effect, and so in a certain respect, it fails to signify at all. But what is the consequence of the failure of the inference from *to pân* to *ta panta*, from the necessary characteristics of each individual to the necessary characteristics of *all of them*, as a collective? We could only expect to apply such an inference to individuals each of whom *adequately expresses* the totality, among whom, that is, one does not treat some as causes and some as effects.

Such a totality, in fact, could only be the totality of henads, or perfect individuals; and this is the key to the whole opening problematic of Damascius’s work. The proper totality, the only one which can truly consist of *all things*, can only ever be all things taken now in this fashion, now in that fashion: “When we simplify all our thought in regard to all things, we will not categorize all things in the same fashion, but in at least three ways, in a unitary mode [*heniaiôs*], in a unified mode [*hênômenôs*], and in a multiplied mode [*peplêthusmenôs*], thus from one and with respect to one [*aph’henos kai pros hen*], as we

customarily say,” (3.14-18). The Aristotelian structure of *pros hen* equivocation is applied here to the modes of totalization, so that the focal mode is *unitary totalization*. ‘Unitary’ is a technical term applying always to the henads; hence, this mode of totalization refers to positing totality in the manner of the polycentric henadic manifold, in which all terms are contained in each term, but there is no single term that totalizes the set for all. The ‘unified’ mode of totality, by contrast, refers to the ontic totality, the totality composed of Being and beings, and it has a monocentric structure. The ‘multiplied’ mode, as we saw above, can be collapsed into the ‘unified’ mode as its dependency, but Damascius treats it here as irreducibly separate, most likely because he privileges the Unified as the site of the procession of real being (*to ontôs on*) in immediate conjunction with henadic activity, such that it is only with the emergence of diacritical, intellective being that the purely ontic hypostasis is achieved. This purely ontic multiplicity is termed by him ‘multiplied’ because in it all multiplicity is treated as produced from abstract unity, chiefly as declined from forms. Hence, it is ‘multiplied’ from some ‘unified’, that is, from an ontic hypostasis. There is no principle for the production of the unitary or henadic manifold from an abstract unity.

Henads are the only kind of entities that can embrace totality, because all the other henads, and all of Being as well, subsist in *each* henad. They are the only entities who could, so to speak, stand in for everything, for the universe, and allow it to be determined through them, grasped through them, the only entities for whom one could, in principle, reason from the characteristics of *every one of some specific kind* to the character of *all things together, as such*. If the characteristics of henadic multiplicity are not sufficient to determine the totality, then it must remain in the ultimate sense undetermined. This is the totality with which Damascius is concerned in the opening pages of the *Aporiai kai Lyseis*. Damascius begins from what Proclus has provided, and Proclus has not provided a determinacy of

henadic totality as such. For Proclus, the totality belonging to each henad is supra-essential, that is, pre-ontic; but the *determination* of totality arises in the third intelligible triad, which is an intellectual God.<sup>3</sup> It arises, therefore, as part of a discrete organization, a *particular* ontology. It is with difficulty, thus, that one separates the third intelligible triad, as the qualities belonging to any possible cosmic paradigm, from the qualities of the *Hellenic* cosmos which Plato presents, particularly in the *Timaeus*, albeit after a process of eidetic reduction. The intellectual plane is, of course, the plane of the eidetic as such, and so the possibility of this reduction is in fact the goal or *telos* of the activity of the Gods on this plane—as too is the very being of the *teleological*, the formally goal-directed. It is here, in other words, that the circle of speculative thought closes, where the emergence of universality from the existential-factual is enacted. But it is enacted between two deities belonging explicitly to the same pantheon, that is, to the same intelligible-intellectual continuum.<sup>4</sup> Demiurge and Paradigm thus belong to a common totality, but a totality that is narrower in scope than the divinity of each. This can already be deduced from Proclus's account, but Damascius makes it explicit: there is no expressible totality of *all the Gods*.

In stating the problem that “Everything [*pān*] must be either principle, or from principle; and so all things [*ta panta*] are either principle or from principle” (2.12-14), Damascius shows that a simple (i.e., pre-intellectual) totality of all the Gods cannot serve as an expression of the unity of all things, and therefore that there is *no* simple unity of all things. For either we conceive the henads purely as principles, and then we cannot say what they have produced *all together*, henadic production being either singular, in the sense that

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. “The Third Intelligible Triad and the Intellectual Gods,” *Méthexis* Vol. 25, 2012, pp. 131-150.

<sup>4</sup> On the nature of intelligible-intellectual multiplicity, see “The Second Intelligible Triad and the Intelligible-Intellectual Gods,” *Méthexis* Vol. 23, 2010, pp. 137-157.

each God has produced all things, or, in the intellectual organization, in determinate configurations, as, for example, the things that we may say the Olympians have done together, or some subset of them, as when Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades divide the Kronian sovereignty. Or if we conceive the henads all as coming from some principle—i.e., the reified ‘One Itself’—then they are not a totality in any case, but merely a manifold constituted by the activity of some discrete principle, and this simply leads to the twofold disposition of totality (2.24-3.2), or the threefold disposition (3.17), for if we do not accept the focalized polycentric totality, then there is no getting around the opposition between a principle and its effects, once we have reduced this opposition to its most elemental, namely the unified and the principle of unity. And no set of entities will be better candidates, for everything after the henads has a more complex relation to principle.

This basic opposition is also expressed in categorical form in the axiom that “Nothing is composed out of existence [*hyparxis*] and participation, for nothing can have as elements or parts the participation of another in it and its own existence ... In general, elements [*stoicheia*] are somehow coordinate [*homotagê*], while participant and participation are neither coordinate nor from a single contradistinction,” (DP II 41.15-22). Accordingly, the primary mixture must be composed of ‘elements’. The status of intellectual multiplicity, not in its formal-dialectical development, we may say, but in its henadic roots, will have shifted, then, for Damascius. Hence we see that clarifying the relative status of the totality grounded in the third intelligible triad has affected the sense of the “infinite multiplicity” (*apeiron plêthos*) of the *Parmenides* (143a2), which is also grounded in this state of divine activity. Damascius speaks of this infinite multiplicity as “infinite because it has no limit that is not manifold, but is everywhere [*pantachou*] many, only without the *every*-where, for it is rather in *many* places [*pollachou*]; nor is the in-many-places something other in relation to

the many <things> alone,” (II 209.23-210.2). The infinite, like totality, is in this fashion subordinated to ‘the many <things>’, *ta polla*, which is the radical but finite multiplicity of the henads. Thus “The Many <things> are the all <things> [*ta panta*] of the One, themselves also accomplishing the hypostasis of such a one, as do the parts of a whole, or the elements of something having elements,” (II 207.22-208.1). The ‘Many’ are the totality belonging to some one, that is, some unit conceived holistically, a relationship which resembles, but is not identical to, that pertaining to parts of a whole or elements of a ‘unified’ being. The only true example of this sort of multiplicity is the henads, for all of the henads are ‘in’ each, but clearly not like parts of a whole or like essential constituents, for we cannot *deduce* the rest of the Gods from any one. This inclusion which is yet not inherence is, as we have seen, the ultimate totality for Damascius, insofar as he countenances one. This included totality is present in the henad as a continuum of powers, because the totality of henads is the potency of each: “How then can the One and the Many <things> be a single nature? Because *the* Many [*to polla*, singular, instead of *ta polla*, plural] is the infinite power [*apeirodunamon*] of the One ... the all <things> is an all-embracing act of the One,” (III 136.22-24). The unity of the Many things lies solely in the presence of all of them in each one, not in a totalizing one—hence we must be speaking, in the strict sense, of the many henads, for this is exactly the structure of the henadic manifold. Damascian ineffability is based upon that in henadic individuality which resists intellectual appropriation, or what we may appropriately term “totalization”. When Damascius says that the all is simply an all-embracing *act* of the One, he means of *any one thing*—this, he explains, is how unity and totality can be one nature, and this is the *only* way.