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Of the Ineffable: Aporetics of the Notion
of an Absolute Principle

DAMASCUS

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1. INTRODUCTION

JUST AS PHILOSOPHERS are forgotten when they are no longer perceived as having anything to say to the present age, so they can be rediscovered when epochal shifts move new issues or newly re-evaluated ideas and themes into the forefront. One philosopher who has so far undergone at least the first part of this fate is Damascius—to such an extent that to date there is no translation into English of his principle work, *De primis principiis* (ΠΕΡΙ ΤΩΝ ΠΡΩΤΩΝ ΑΡΧΩΝ), known also under the title *Dubitaciones et solutiones* (ΜΙΟΠΑΙ ΚΑΙ ΑΥΤΕΙΣ). Yet he was anything but unknown in his own time: by many he would have been considered the leading living philosopher. Damascius' work is subtle and rigorous, but it is difficult to appreciate at a distance from the late Hellenistic age and the crisis of the Logos that produced it and that it perfectly expresses. Our own age, however, has experienced a comparable crisis of confidence in language. In some ways paralleling Damascius' late stage in the evolution of the Greek thought of being, our own position late in the cycle of the modern philosophy of consciousness prepares us to return to this anomalous, aporetic thinker with renewed, keen appreciation for his methods of thinking and his conclusions.

Presumably of Syrian origin, "Damascius" is thought to have taught rhetoric in Alexandria before transferring to Athens two or three years prior to Proclus' death in 485 AD. Around 491–92, his doubts concerning rhetoric, due to his declining faith in the truth of words, issued in a "conver-

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sion" to philosophy in the hope of concentrating "not on words but on the essence of things."¹ He seems to have become himself the head of the Academy in Athens, the "successor" (διόδοχος) of Plato before going into exile in Persia subsequent to the interdiction placed upon the teaching of pagan philosophy in 529 AD. His reception, together with other Greek philosophers, in the court of King Chosroes, newly come to the throne, may have sown seeds that eventually transmitted something of Neoplatonic thought to Iranian Sufism.

Damascius' work drives discourse to the limits of its intelligibility in order to show where it breaks down and yields to the ineffable that cannot be rationalized. This effect is fortified by a style that is highly recursive and elliptical. Damascius' method is to employ rigorous rational critique in order to generate aporias that force the mind beyond the parameters of discourse altogether. Aporetic logic becomes in this way, at the same time, a spiritual method, earning Damascius the reputation of being a mystic as well as a philosopher.²

Whereas Proclus developed a way of negations to be used in some positive way to express, or at least point to, the transcendent, Damascius rejects even the *via negativa*. It is still based on language and as such is worthless; only the unknown is left for him after language has failed and been negated, and the only appropriate behavior is silence.³ Of course, in Proclus, too, negative discourse in the end negates even itself (*negatio negationis*) and issues in silence. But Damascius uses the more skeptical-sounding vocabulary of reversal or turning around and against itself (*επιπρηνέσθαι, ερεπτορμή*) of discourse that refuses and annuls itself. Some scholars therefore hypothesize an indirect influence of skeptical thought upon Neoplatonic philosophy.⁴ Damascius is indeed radically skeptical concerning all language as applied to the transcendent principle, and yet this language negatively registers a vertiginous experience of radical transcendence. To this extent, he is comparable to his contemporary, Dionysius the Areopagite. However, Dionysius is positioned at the source-

spring of a numerous progeny of Christian apophatic theologians to come, whereas Damascius concludes the genealogy of ancient pagan Neoplatonist philosophers.

For most Neoplatonists, the first principle was the One, and it was usually considered to be identical with Plato's Good. Proclus expressly denies that there can be any principle beyond this: "There is none other beyond the one, for the one and the good are the same thing, and therefore it is the principle of all things."⁵ But Damascius seems to have worried that the One, as principle of all, was involved in relations that contradicted its absolute transcendence. He therefore posited a "wholly ineffable" (*πανελάωσ ἀπύπτος*) principle beyond even the One, criticizing the main current of Neoplatonic thought that placed as absolutely first the One, which is a One-All, ground and principle of all that is.⁶ On Damascius' own authority (*De principiis*, II. 1, 4-13), we know that Iamblichus (c. 245-325) was actually first to sustain the necessity of an ineffable principle anterior to the Neoplatonic One.

Following Iamblichus, Damascius presses more than any of his Neoplatonic predecessors the contradiction between the absolute transcendence of the first principle and its being a "principle," that is, its being coordinated with what comes after it. Even its being said to be "transcendent" is problematic because "the transcendent always transcends something and thus is not absolutely transcendent, since it has a relation to that which it transcends" (*De principiis*, I. 21, 8-10). Damascius judges any principle that could still be placed in relation with the All to be compromised in its transcendence. In the interest of securing its absolute transcendence, he posits a first principle anterior to the One that is not coordinated with any whole and that refuses every relation. Some scholars ask what this "principle" could possibly explain. But it is rather by throwing the very mode of our questioning into check that such a "vague," that is, totally inexpressible, principle does actually impinge upon our experience of reality and even exposes the ultimacy of this experience. The ut-

ter lack of any specifiable ground beyond itself for experience emerges as itself the most fundamental aspect of experience.

Among many philosophical works, especially commentaries on dialogues of Plato known indirectly or only in small fragments, Damascius' main philosophical testament consists in his *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles* and his *Commentary* on the last seven (for him, eight) hypotheses of the second part of the *Parmenides*. These have often been considered parts of a single work, since in fact the *Parmenides* commentary leaves out the first hypothesis and comments only on the succeeding seven (for Neoplatonists, eight). Evidently, Damascius felt he had dealt with the questions raised by the first hypothesis in his work on first principles, even though this work is structured as a treatise of speculative philosophy rather than as a commentary. Nevertheless, the issues concerning the unsayability of the One, or how it could be known even to be unsayable, or rather be unsayable as absolutely unknown, are exactly those raised by the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* in the tradition of commentary stemming from Proclus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry. In fact, Damascius recurs expressly at frequent intervals to "what Plato says" in this first hypothesis concerning the unknowable, unsayable One. He reads the first hypothesis as about an unknowability and ineffability beyond even the One, which can in no way itself be thematized—and yet the failure of our efforts to do so itself opens a whole new field for inquiry into the contents of our ignorance, together with a motive for silent veneration. From behind the One as metaphysical ground of thought and thereby also of being, their first principle, opens up the abyss of the ineffable.

Damascius has been somewhat forgotten in the course of history. *Aporitic* generated by purely logical principles, for example, that the principle of all can be neither in the whole nor outside it (*De principiis*, chapter 1, omitted in the following excerpt), have sometimes seemed little more than sterile exercises in abstraction. However, read for its import as apophatic writing, or as a writing of silence, Damascius' work poi-

gnantly expresses the crisis into which logical thinking periodically falls, particularly that into which it had fallen at the close of a millenary epoch of the most extraordinary development of philosophical thought in ancient Greece. Damascius' thought is a powerful sign of the times in its acute articulation of an aporetic logic—of the check to the powers of logos that issues in an opening to the beyond of logos.

Damascius' extreme relevance to our present cultural predicament has been signaled by Giorgio Agamben, who begins a recent work turning on quintessentially apophatic modes of thought with reminiscences of this generally neglected philosopher who conceived the supreme principle of all as so ineffably transcendent that it cannot even be affirmed to be transcendent and ineffable.⁷ This transcendent that must be posited as "not even transcendent" (section 1) prefigures, for example, the "step/not beyond" ("*pas au delà*") over which Maurice Blanchot's thought hovers and hesitates. Such connections have begun to be explored, among others, by Sara Rappe, who undertakes to bring Damascius into dialogue with contemporary continental philosophy, emphasizing as common to both an intensive orientation to textuality and exegesis and a radical questioning of conceptual and discursive thinking.⁸

Amidst the recent resurgence of apophatic or negative theological modes of thought especially in postmodern culture, the times are ripe for a rediscovery of Damascius and of his rigorously aporetic method of philosophizing—together with his profoundly apophatic vision of reality. The following selection from the opening of his greatest original work is meant to serve as a sketch of his horizon for thinking. I do not consider the following piece to be a definitive translation. My goal has been to bring Damascius to our attention so that he can receive the expert translation and treatment that he richly deserves. He has extremely much to say to the present age.

The basic reference for the complete Greek text of ΑΠΟΡΤΑΙ ΚΑΙ ΑΥΤΕΙΣ (*Dubitantes et solutiones*), comprising

HEPI TON TPΣTIZN APXΩN (*De primis principiis*) and EIZ

TON ΠAATIZNOZ ΠAPMENAHN (*In Platonis Parmenidem*),

is *Damasci Successoris Dubitationes et Solutiones*, ed. C. F.

Ruelle, 2 vols. (Paris, 1889-99; rpt. Bruxelles: Culture and

Civilization, 1964). This text has been corrected several

times, most recently by the edition of Laender Gerrat West-

erink: *Traité des Premiers Principes*, vol. 1: *De l'Ineffable et*

de l'Un, trans. Joseph Combes (Paris: *Les Belles Lettres*,

1966). I translate the text established by Westerink, adopt-

ing the section titles, and following the French translation of

Combes in interpreting difficult phrases. The extract, com-

prising chapters 3-8 of the first part of the first division of

the *Treatise on First Principles*, corresponds to Ruelle,

1.4-16, and to Westerink and Combes, 4-22.



Damascius, *Doubts and Solutions Concerning*
First Principles, Part 1, Chapters 3-8

2. OF THE INEFFABLE:

APORETICS OF THE NOTION OF THE ABSOLUTE PRINCIPLE

[NECESSITY AND INEFFABILITY OF THE PRINCIPLE]

Our soul therefore divines that of all things, conceived in whatever way, there is a principle beyond all and without relation to all. Therefore it should be called neither principle, nor first, nor before all, nor beyond all, much less be proclaimed all; it must not be proclaimed, nor conceived, nor conjectured at all. For that which we think about or ponder is either some thing among all things, and this is the most common case, or else, if we completely purify that which we think, it is the whole, even if we ascend to the simplest of things, by undoing things and being ourselves undone, towards the simplest, which is of all things the most all-encompassing, as the last periphery not only of beings but also of non-beings. For beings have as their last limit the unified and

wholly undifferentiated (for every whole consists of a mix of elements), while the many have for their last limit the purely one; for we can conceive nothing simpler than the One, the wholly one and only one. And even if we say it is principle, and cause, and first, and the most simple, "up there," these designations will all be one and according to the One; but we, incapable of understanding, divide ourselves about it, predicating of it the categories that are divided up among us, unless we esteem them also as unworthy, since in their multiplicity they are unfitting for the One. It is therefore not knowable, it is not nameable; since it would by this be made many. But still these predicates are in it according to the One, because the nature of the One includes all, or rather produces all, and there is nothing that the One is not. Therefore all things flow, in a sense, from it; and that which is the cause, properly speaking, and the first, is also the end itself and itself the last, the wall, so to speak, around all things; and it is the one nature of many, not the nature which in them precedes from it, but that which, anterior to them, is the generator of the nature that is in them; it is the most indivisible head of all, in whatever way this all be said, and the greatest envelopment of the whole, whatever way we speak of it.

But if the One is the cause of all and encompasses all, what will enable us to mount up beyond it? For perhaps we advance in emptiness straining towards the nothing itself; for what is not even one is nothing at all by rights. For how can we know that there is something beyond the One? For the others need nothing else besides the One; that is why the One alone is cause of the many. Therefore, the One is necessarily cause, because it is necessary that the cause of the many be only the One; for this can be neither the nothing (since the nothing is cause of nothing), nor the many themselves, since they are uncoordinated; and how, then, should the many form one cause? And even if there are many causes, they will not be cause of one another, because they are uncoordinated and because it would be circular: each would, accordingly, be cause of itself; therefore none would

be the cause of the many. Necessarily, therefore, the One is cause of the many, and it is the cause of the connection among them; for it is a certain common spirit that is the connection and the unity of them with one another.

3.

If then someone caught up in these aporias should come saying that the principle of the One is for him sufficient, and should as a codicil add: since we can neither know nor ponder anything more simple than the One, how then can we conjecture something beyond this last conjecture and notion?—if someone should come speaking these things, we would, of course, forgive him for the aporia (since such a thought seems inaccessible and unmanageable), but nevertheless starting from the things that are more known to us, to be stimulated are the unsayable travellings in us towards the unsayable (I do not know how to say) awareness of the sublime shining of that truth. Since, in the things down here, that which is unbound by all is nobler than that which is bound, and that which is unconditioned nobler than the conditioned, as the theoretical is nobler than the political, and Chronos, it must be said, than the demiurge, and being than the forms, and the One than the many of which it is the principle, even so more worthy than the simple causes and their effects, more than ultimate principles and what they ground, is that which transcends all such things and which enters into no coordination or relation, as is evident to reason. Since by nature the One is placed before the many, and the more simple before that which is in whatever way more composed, and that which contains before that which is contained within; the beyond, if you wish to call it that, is beyond every such binary opposition, not only beyond terms of the same rank, but also beyond those characterized as the first and what comes after it.

4.

Furthermore, the one and the unified, and the many that come after them and separate themselves, constitute the whole; for as many as separate themselves are that unified unity [also] from which they separate themselves, and all that are many are also the One from which they devolve; one it is, nonetheless, when not even more so, because the many come after it and are not in it, and likewise for the unified, given that it is before the distinctions, the sum (σύνθεσις), totality (*a priori*) of the beings that distinguish themselves. Whether according to its connection or according to its own nature, each of the two is all; but the all cannot be first, nor principle; not according to coordination because even the last beings coexist with it, and not according to the One because it is one and all at the same time according to the One (that which is completely beyond all we have not yet found), and because the One is the crown of the many as the cause of those that are from it.

What is more, we know the one in the thoroughgoing purification of thinking towards the simplest and most all-encompassing. But that which is most venerable must be ungraspable to every knowing and every conjecturing, since, even in things down here, that which always escapes upwards is more worthy in our conceptions than that which is more accessible, so that most worthy is that which completely evades our conjectures. If, then, this is nothing, the nothing must be of two kinds, that which is better than the One and that which is inferior to it. If we walk in the dark speaking this way, there are then two ways of walking in the dark, the one falling upon the unsayable, the other upon that which is in no way nor in any relation. For the latter is unsayable, as even Plato says, but according to the worse [way], while the former is such according to the better [way].

If, now, we investigate whether there is some need of this latter, this is the most necessary of all needs, the fact that all proceeds, as if from an inaccessible sanctuary, from the ineff-

fable and in an ineffable mode; for it is not as the One that it produces the many, nor as the unified that it produces the beings in process of distinguishing themselves, but as the ineffable that it produces ineffably all things alike.

Now if saying these very things about it, that it is ineffable, that it is the inaccessible sanctuary of all, that it is incomprehensible, we undergo the reversal of the *logos* and are turned over (*περιτροπήθεα*) in our discourse, it is necessary to know that these are names and concepts belonging to our minds' travails, which, however numerous they are in daring to seek for it recklessly, find themselves stopped on the threshold of the sanctuary not to be entered, and nothing announces what belongs properly to it, but rather their aporias and failures disclose our own proper passions with respect to it, not manifestly but through indications, and this to those who are capable of understanding these things.

5.

[OF THE ONE THAT IS SAVABLE AND UNSAYABLE]

Nevertheless, we see that in these travails even in relation to the One our thought suffers the same difficulties, is dismayed in the same way, upset and turned upside down. For the One, says Plato, if it *is*, is not even One [*Parm.* 141e0–12]; and if it is not, no discourse will suit it, so that not even negation (*ἀρνήσις*) will suit it; nor any name, for the name is not simple; nor any belief, nor any knowledge, for these are not simple; even intellect is not simple, so that the One is completely unknowable and unsayable (*ἄπρητον*). Why then should we search for anything else beyond the unsayable?

Perhaps Plato by the mediation of the One led us up ineffably to the ineffable now set before us, beyond the One, precisely by suppression of the One, just as by suppression of the others he led us to the One; since Plato in the *Sophist* knows the One by a certain positing, and shows it to be according to itself preexistent to being. And if, after having been lifted up to the One, Plato became silent, even that

seemed to Plato fitting about that which is wholly secret—to keep absolutely silent in the ancient mode; for in fact this discourse is very temerarious when it falls upon ingenious ears; of course, having raised the problem of that which is not at all nor in any respect, the discourse was reversed and risked being precipitated into a sea of dissimilitude, or rather into a void without substantiality. And if demonstrations are no longer fitting even to the One, that is not surprising; for they are human and divided up and composite more than is fitting. In fact, these demonstrations are not suited even to being, for they are specific, or rather not even for ideas, being rational; and is it not Plato himself who in his *Letters* declared how nothing that is ours can signify the forms, neither image, nor name, nor definition, nor belief, nor knowledge? For the forms can be sought only by intellect, which we do not yet have, as long as we are content with dialectical argument. And even if we manage to effect intellection, at least of a specific nature, we will not be able to apply it to the unified and to being; and should we happen to achieve intellection of a general nature, still this would not be susceptible of being woven together and united with the One; finally, even should we effect unitary intellection, and this should gather itself completely to the One, nevertheless this last simplifies itself in mounting towards the One, if indeed there is still any knowledge of the one; but we let this point wait. Since there are many modes of the ineffable and unknowable, so also the One must be in the same way. Nevertheless, with the resources that we have at present, we make an attempt at discernment of things so great through indications and conjectures, and purifying our thinking in order to know such unusual things and elevating it through analogies and through negations, scorning the things near us in this world, and being thereby conducted away from these less worthy things towards the more worthy. This then is what we have been doing up to now. And perhaps the ineffable is so completely ineffable that it is not possible to posit of it even that it is ineffable; while as concerns the One, evading all com-

position of definition and of name and every distinction such as that of known from knower, by another way it is known as the simplest and the most encompassing, and not only one, as if that were the property of the One, but as a One that is all and one before all, not of course like a specific one belonging to the all.

These, then, are the travailings and how we purify them towards the simply one and one true cause of all. It is completely certain that the One in us conjectured thus, as nearer to us and as more closely akin to us and as entirely more lacking in obscurity than that other One, lends itself more readily to such a conjecture; for on the basis of such a One, posited in whatever way, the passage to the simply one is easy; and even if we in no way arrive at that One, being borne upon the simple one that is in us we can make conjectures concerning the One that is before all. The One is thus, in one sense, sayable (*ῥητόν*) and, in another, unsayable. But the ineffable One is to be honored by total silence, and first by a total ignorance, which holds all knowledge in contempt.

6.

[ON THE UNKNOWABILITY OF THE INEFFABLE]

So let us then examine precisely this second matter, how the ineffable can be said to be completely unknowable; for if this is true, how can we write all these things, dilating upon it? For we certainly do not want to generate fictions, speaking many delicious things about it. But if the One is in reality without connection to all and without relation to all, and is itself nothing of the all and not even itself, this itself is its nature, which we are in a position to know and to strive to disclose others to know.

Moreover, even its being unknowable is an unknowability that we either know or ignore. But if we ignore it, how do we say that it is wholly unknowable? And if we know it, it is to that extent already knowable, inasmuch as, being unknowable, it is recognized as unknowable.

After all, there is no denying something of something else if one has no idea of what it is being denied; nor can this be said to be not that, if there is no hold whatever on that; for what one knows cannot be said to be or not to be what one knows not, as Socrates says in the *Theaetetus*. How then shall we deny that which we in some manner know of that which we wholly ignore? For that is like someone blind from birth asserting that heat does not consist in color. And perhaps this man will rightly say that color is not heat; for heat can be felt, and he knows it through the sense of touch, but color he wholly ignores, unless it should be tactile; for he knows that he does not know, and such knowledge is not of it but simply of his own ignorance. And, of course, even in saying that this principle is unknowable, we do not report anything about it, but rather we confess our own feeling about it; for the insensibility of the blind man is not in color any more than in blindness but in him; and likewise the ignorance of this principle that we ignore is in us, for even knowledge of the knowable is in the knower, not in the known. But if the knowable were in the known, as being like a shining of it, so one would say the unknowable is in the unknown like a dark cloud belonging to it, or an obscurity on account of which it is ignored by and invisible to all. Saying this, one ignores how blindness is a privation, as is every ignorance, and that as it is with the invisible, so also with the ignorable and unknowable.

Of course, in the other cases privation of a certain quality leaves still another; for the incorporeal, even if it is invisible, yet it is intelligible, and the unintelligible can be something else, such as one of the properties that is ungraspable by intellect. But if we remove every notion and every conjecture, and if we say that this privation is unknowable to all our knowing, we declare unknowable that upon which we have no view and remain completely without vision; not that we should say something of it, like its inaptitude to be seen by vision, as in the case for the intelligible, or its inaptitude to be known by the common, substance-knowing intellect, as is the

case with the One, but we should say that it in no way allows any grasp upon itself, not even a hint or suspicion. For we say not only that it is unknowable, so that being something else it would have the nature of the unknowable, and we do not say it is being, nor one, nor all, nor cause of all, nor beyond all; we deem absolutely nothing at all to be predicable of it. Not even the nothing and the beyond all and the supra-cause and the disconnected from all are the nature of it as such, but only eliminations (*ἀπορροή*) from the things after it.

How, then, do we say anything about it? Or is it not the case that, knowing what comes after it, we somehow know it in that we deem these things unworthy to be affirmed, so to say, of the totally ineffable? For just as that which is beyond any knowledge is better than that which is grasped by knowledge, even so that which is beyond all conjecture must be more venerable—not that this greater venerability is knowable; or rather, having this greater venerability is as if in us and in our passions/impressions, and we declare it wonderful on account of its being completely ungraspable by our thoughts. For, through analogy, if that which is unknowable by perfection is superior to that which is wholly knowable, it is necessary to say correspondingly that the wholly unknowable by perfection is superior to all, even if it does not possess the highest, nor the best, nor the most venerable; for these things are our conventions concerning itself, which flees our thought and conjectures completely. We recognize it to be the most wonderful by not even conjecturing about it. For if we conjecture something, we are seeking something else prior to this conjecture; and either we seek infinitely or it is necessary to stop at the absolutely ineffable.

7.

[THE INEFFABLE IS NOT AN OBJECT OF OPINION]

Can we then demonstrate anything about it, and is it itself demonstrable, this [ineffable] that we deem not to be conjecturable? Or rather, speaking these things we give a demon-

stration concerning it, but do not demonstrate it, nor is the demonstrable in it; for neither anything else nor the demonstrable is in it, not even itself, but we demonstrate our ignorance and speechlessness (*ἄφροσύν*) in regard to it, and that is what is demonstrable.

What then? Do we not hold an opinion about it in these things we say? But if there is an opinion about it, it is also a matter of opinion. Yet, we opine that it is not, and this opinion is true, as Aristotle says. Therefore if this opinion is true there is some fact by conforming to which the opinion is made true, for the opinion is true because the fact exists; nevertheless, how should it [the ineffable] be and how be true, that which is wholly unknowable? We could say that the non-being of it and its being unknowable are true, in the sense that the truly false is true; for it is true that the false is false. Of course, these things must be united as privations and as not in being in any way, where that which founders can imitate the form of substance, as the absence of light, which we call shadow, can take something from and can counterfeit the light; for if there is no light, there is no shadow either. But nothing of that which in any way is can be attributed to that which in no way or respect is, as Plato says, therefore not even non-being nor any privation whatever. But even “that which in no way or respect is” is improper as used to signify it; for this [expression] is, and its meaning is something among things and that which is an object of opinion is; and even if one opines that it in no way is, at the same time this object of opinion itself is among beings. Therefore Plato more accurately says that which is nothing and in no respect is ineffable and inopinable according to the worst, just as we say it is according to the best.

However that may be, we are of the opinion that it is not an object of opinion. Discourse reverses itself (*τρέπτει ἑαυτήν*), Plato says, and in reality we no longer have even opinion. What then? Do we not think and believe that it [the ineffable] is so and so? In fact, these are our affections concerning it, as has been said often. Yet we have this notion in us. But

then it is empty, as the belief in the empty and unbounded. So just as about things which are not we accept opinions that are imaginings and fictions (as we represent the sun as a foot in diameter, though it is not of this size), so if we form an opinion concerning that which in no way or respect is, or concerning that [the ineffable] about which we now write these things, this belief is ours and it precedes in us in emptiness; in saying this we think we are seizing it, but it is nothing for us—by so far it exceeds our thought.

[ON OUR IGNORANCE WITH REGARD TO THE INEFFABLE]

How, then, is as much ignorance as arises within us concerning it [the ineffable] demonstrable? In fact, how do we say that it is unknowable? According to a first ground already invoked, because we always find more worthy that which is above knowledge; so that if that which is above all knowledge were findable, it would be found to be also the most worthy, but its not being able to be found suffices for the demonstration. According to another ground, because it is above all; and if it was in whatever way knowable, it would itself also be in the all (for that which we know we call all), and then it would have something in common with all, namely, being knowable; now the things which have something in common are all in one order, so that again it would be with the all; therefore it follows that it must be unknowable. According to a third ground, specifically, because the unknowable is in beings, just as the knowable is there, albeit in a relative manner. So just as we call the same thing in some respect big and in another little, so also we call it knowable and unknowable in different respects; as the same thing by participating in the two forms of the big and the little is simultaneously big and little, likewise the same thing, having participated in the knowable and the unknowable is both; and just as the knowable preexists, it is necessary that the unknowable preexist, and especially if it is superior to the knowable, as the intelligible unknowable is to the sensible un-

knowable that is knowable to the intellect. For the superior cannot be privation of the inferior if this is a form, especially if the superior belongs to the intelligible. For all absence and all privation of form is in matter or in soul; but how could it find itself in the intellect, in which all things are present? Unless we invoke a privation according to superiority, as the formless, which is the supra-formal and non-being, which is the beyond being, and the nothing, which is the truly unknowable in its transcendence over everything. If now the One is the last knowable among the things which we somehow know or conjecture, then the beyond-the-One is the first totally unknowable, that which is so unknowable as not even to have unknowability for its nature, nor do we attain it as unknowable, not knowing finally even if it is unknowable. For our ignorance of it is complete, and we know it neither as knowable nor as unknowable. Therefore, we are turned all about as completely lacking any point of contact with it, since it is nothing, or rather is not even that, the nothing. Therefore, it is in no way or respect, or rather is beyond this, if this is the negation of being, while it is the negation even of the One, that is, the nothing (of one).

But [one could object] the nothing is empty and the collapse of all, but this is not what we think concerning the ineffable. In fact, the nothing [of one] is of two kinds: that which is beyond and that which is short of; for the One, too, is of two sorts, the last, that is, the One of matter, and the first, that is, the One that is older than beings; thus also the nothing [of one] is double: that nothing which is not even the last One, and that which is not even the first One. Therefore, double is also the unknowable and unsayable: that which cannot be conjectured, not even as the last One, and that which cannot be conjectured, not even as the first One.

Is it then in relation to ourselves that we posit the unknowable? All that is not paradoxical, but (if saying so be permitted) it [the ineffable] must be unknowable even to the most honored intellect; for all intellect looks to the intelligible, and the intelligible is either form or being. But perhaps

divine knowledge knows this and is known by it, by this unitary and supra-substantial knowledge. But this applies to the One, whereas the ineffable is beyond the One. Speaking generally, if it were known with the others, it too would be of them; for it would have being knowable in common with the others, and it would be ordered together with the others according to this common measure. Moreover, if knowable, it would itself be grasped, at least by divine knowledge; this would consequently determine it; and every determination in the end ascends to the One; but it is above the One. Consequently, it is completely undetermined and unlimited, so that it is such even for every knowing; consequently, it is unknowable even to divine knowing. Besides, knowledge attains the known, either as beings or as existents or as participants in the One, while the ineffable is beyond all these; the knowable is relative to knowledge and the knower; consequently, it too would have a certain coordination and relation with such things.

In addition, even the One is in danger of being unknowable, if indeed the known and the knower must be different, even when both should be in the same thing, such that the One would not be able to know itself as the really one; for there is no duality in the One, there will therefore be in it no knower and known. Consequently, even the god who remains only in the One and is united with this One which is simple, will not be united with it in duality; for how could the double be united with the simple? And if the god knew the One through unity, there would be the One known, on the one hand, and the One that knows, on the other, and the nature of the One would be shown by each, whereas it is unique and one, so that it is not united as something different united with another, for instance, as something knowing with a known, but is itself only one; thus it is not one according to knowledge. But on how this is so concerning the One, more later.

[THE TOTAL REVERSAL OF DISCOURSE]

Thus that which is not even one is so much the more unknowable, for Plato says well that it is impossible to affirm either that it is known or that it is not known. But if the last knowable is the One, we do not know anything beyond the One, so that the things we say are vain rhapsodies. Therefore knowing the things we know, we know also this about them, that they are unworthy (if saying so be permitted) of that which is posited as first; since not even knowing yet the intelligible forms we judge their images which are established in us as unworthy of the undivided and eternal nature of these forms, while the images produced in us are divisible and much changing. So much the more, being ignorant of the totality (συνολικῶς) of the forms and types, but having of them the image, which is the totality of the separated types and forms, we conjecture that being is such as this, although it is not this but something better and that which is most unified. On this basis, we conceive the One also, not by taking up together but by simplifying all things into it; for in us this simplicity itself establishes itself in relation to the all in us, for it is right and necessary that it achieve this perfect simplicity. For that which is one and simple in us is not at all that which these words say, except that they are an index of that illustrious nature.

Thus, having in whatever way grasped with our mind all that is knowable and conjecturable, [arriving] even as far as the One, we judge it right (if it is necessary) to express the inexpressible and conceive the inconceivable); we judge it nevertheless right to posit that which is irreconcilable and which cannot be coordinated with the whole and which is so transcendent that in truth it has not even the property of being transcendent. For the transcendent always transcends something, and thus is not absolutely transcendent, since it has a relation to that which it transcends, and, in sum, a certain coordination even if with preeminence; if therefore it must be posited as being really transcendent, let it be posited as

not even transcendent. For taken exactly, the name does not prove true with regard to what is proper to the transcendent, for the transcendent is at the same time already coordinated, so that it is necessary to deny it even this name. But even negation is still a certain discourse, and the deniable is a reality, while *it* is nothing, thus not even deniable, nor expressible at all, nor knowable in whatever way, so that it is not even possible to negate the negation; but this complete reversal of discourses and thoughts is still the demonstration imagined by us of what we say: And what will be the limit of discourse, except impotent silence and the avowal of unknowing with regard to those things into the knowledge of which it is not permitted to enter, since they are inaccessible?

8.

Could one not make the following demand, provoking to jealousy with such discourses? If on the basis of these things here we wish to seize something concerning it, [we would say that,] since everywhere in these things the monad is at the head of a certain proper number (for there is one soul and many souls, one intellect and many intellects, one being and many beings, and one henad or unity and many henads), then presumably the argument requires that there be one ineffable and many ineffables, and the ineffable would have to be said to be ineffably productive. In fact, it would engender a kindred plurality. But these and similar discourses are oblivious of the *aporiae* which have been previously discussed; for nothing is common to it [the ineffable] and the things here, and nothing belongs to it of the things which are said or thought or conjectured; therefore not even the One, nor the many, nor productivity or engendering or being a cause in whatever way, nor whatever analogy, nor resemblance. It is not like things here, either “that” or “those”: rather, neither “that” should be said nor “those,” neither that it is one nor that it is many; but rather it is necessary to keep silence, remaining within the ineffable sanctu-

ary of the soul, without going forth. And if it is necessary to indicate something, most useful are the negations of these predicates—that it is neither one nor many; neither productive nor infecund, neither cause nor deprived of causality—and such negations, I know not how, overturning themselves absolutely into infinity.

NOTES

1. Cited in Joseph Combes' introduction to Damascius, *Traité des Principes* (Paris 1966), lxiii.
2. Cf. Combes (note 1), xxv–xxvi. See, further, H. D. Saffrey, “Neoplatonist Spirituality, II: From Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (London 1986), 250–65.
3. Cf. Karel Mertley, *From Word to Silence, II: The Way of Negation, Christian and Greek* (Bonn 1986), 253.
4. Alessandro Linguiti, *L'ultimo platonismo greco: Principi e conoscenza* (Florence 1990), 71–73 and 99. See also R. J. Wallis, “Scepticism and Neoplatonism,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. W. Haase (Berlin 1987), 911–54, and Sara Rappé, “Damascius' Skeptical Affiliations,” *The Ancient World* 29.2 (1998) and “Scepticism in the Sixth Century? Damascius' Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 36.3 (1998), 337–60.
5. Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1963), proposition 20: καὶ οὐκ ἔστι τῷ ἐνὸς ἄλλο ἐπέκτεσι. Ταύτων γὰρ ἓν καὶ τὰς αὐτῶν ἀρχὴν ἀπὸ πάντων.
6. Cf. Linguiti (note 4), 15–17.
7. Giorgio Agamben, *Idea della prosa* (Macerata 2002), 9–12.
8. Sara Rappé, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge 2000).