DAMASCIUS'
Problems & Solutions Concerning First Principles

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

SARA AHBEL-RAPPE

Damascius' *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*

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Translated by Sara Ahbel-Rappe
Introduction and Notes
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Contents

Prolegomenon

The following introduction and text presume a high degree of familiarity with the principal tenets, methods, exponents, and terminology that constitute the exegetical enterprise of Neoplatonism as it is found in its latest phase, in the sixth century CE. But to enter into a detailed analysis of the questions that Damascius posed for his *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, which in large part involves a retrospective glance at this tradition as a whole, would hardly be possible without some understanding of the history that led up to the complex dialectic of the *Problems and Solutions*. Therefore, this prolegomenon is offered as a reader's guide to the first centuries of the philosophical movement we now refer to as Neoplatonism. Those who are already familiar with the tradition may prefer to proceed to the Introduction proper, where Damascius is introduced in the context of his life, major works, and in terms of the central philosophical disputes he had with his great predecessor Proclus.

The intellectual development that we now refer to as Neoplatonism (in fact, writers in this movement thought of themselves as Platonists or simply as philosophers) was the most influential philosophical movement of the Roman Empire, and achieved its stature by combining metaphysical speculation on the esoteric meanings of Plato's dialogues with a contemplative vision of reality. At once erudite and eclectic, Neoplatonism drew on the six centuries of philosophical development between Plato's Academy and its own emergence in Alexandria in the third century CE, from the complementary Platonisms of, for example, Numenius and Philo of

Alexandria, and from the Aristotelian Commentator tradition inaugurated by Alexander of Aphrodisias. Neoplatonism above all used philosophical structures to expound and expand the dimensions of inner experience. It was the brilliantly original work of the Plotinus (204–270 CE) as recorded in the *Enneads*, edited and published by Plotinus' disciple Porphyry, that inspired and provided the foundations for the work of later Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus (active 245 CE) Proclus (412–485 CE) and of course, Damascius (CA. 467–540 CE).

Virtually all that we know of Plotinus' life comes from Porphyry's essay *The Life of Plotinus*, which Porphyry published alongside his edition of the *Enneads* (the title in Greek means "Nines," as there are six groups of nine essays each, the divisions of which were established by Porphyry). Plotinus was born in Alexandria, studied philosophy for eleven years, and joined Emperor Gordian III's campaign against the Persians; after the failure of that expedition, Plotinus moved to Rome, where he began to teach philosophy. Plotinus committed nothing to writing until almost the age of fifty, and instead concerned himself with the difficulties presented by individual students during the course of personal instruction.

Rather than presenting themselves as innovators or original thinkers, ancient philosophers tended to present themselves as exegetes of previous texts or doctrines, and the Neoplatonists were no exception.[1] Perhaps the most famous example of this traditional claim to orthodoxy is found in *Ennead* V.1.8, Plotinus' doxography concerning his doctrine of the three primary hypostases, the soul, the intellect, and the One: "our present doctrines are an exegesis of those [ancient teachings], and so the writings of Plato himself provide evidence that our doctrines are of ancient origin. (V.1.8.11–15)."[2] What exactly does Plotinus mean when he calls his doctrines an exegesis of Plato's text, especially in the context of *Ennead* V.1? To answer this question is gain a theoretical foothold in the often abstract world of Neoplatonic metaphysics.

Plotinus uses the three initial hypotheses in the second half of Plato's *Parmenides* in order to sketch his own metaphysical doctrine, according to which reality has three primary different hypostases or orders: the One, intellect, and soul. Plotinus refers the first hypothesis ("if the One is," *Parmenides* 137c4) to the One beyond being, the transcendent source of all. The second hypothesis refers to a subsequent stage of reality that arises when the wisdom inherent within the One turns back on the One, giving rise to Being/intellect, the intelligible world that consists of intellects each contemplating all the other intellects, rather like a hall of mirrors. This order of reality represents Plotinus' transformation of the Platonic forms via an Aristotelian conception of divine thought eternally contemplating itself. Transitory being originates in the third hypostasis, at the level of soul, which is present both on a cosmic level as caretaker of all that is soulless, and as the embodied individual whose destiny is to return to his origin by recovering his lost unity with the One.

There is also a dynamic aspect of the philosophy that is best understood as a spiritual circuit. In *Ennead* V.1, Plotinus uses the physical similes of perfume, snow, and sunlight to describe the eternal process of emanation, the radiation of all beings from the One. The cosmic respiration or universal pulse that constantly sends forth beings from the One into a state of manifestation derives from the self-giving nature of reality. Nevertheless, the soul can begin to recover from its apparent separation and only discover its native fullness when it undertakes its cosmic mission of returning the multiplicity back into the source. Iamblichus formally introduced a language to convey some of the aspects of this spiritual life; the name he gave to it was theurgy, which he discussed in his work *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*. The book opens with Iamblichus adopting the persona of an Egyptian prophet who will attempt to answer Porphyry's objections concerning the ritual efficacy of certain symbols for the purpose of uniting the individual soul with the gods.

Our last chapter of Neoplatonism returns to Athens, where the Athenian Academy under the direction of Proclus and then Damascius flowered again, only to close its doors in 529 under Justinian. Proclus Diadochus is best known for his *Elements of Theology*, an aphoristic work that sets out the basic principles of Neoplatonic metaphysics in a systematic presentation that is modeled on Euclid's *Elements*. Proclus elaborates what by comparison is Plotinus' austere view of the unseen world (One, intellect, soul) into a complex and intricate series of triads that are characterized in various ways, principal among which are the intelligible triad, limit, unlimited, and mixed (with the mixed, or Being, itself the head of a triad that consists in Being, life, and intellect), and also the dynamic triad of procession, remaining, and reversion. The three kinds of realities that inhabit this world that devolves from the One or Good are henads or gods, intelligences, and souls. In a sense, Proclus reinvests in the cultural aspect of paganism, translating the Iamblichean valorization of pagan ritual into a spiritual vortex of endless possibility. And yet at the heart of what may fairly be described as the Proclean system rests the One in its function as cause and source, to which all lower forms of reality are destined to return. This One grounds the metaphysics of Proclus in what pagans and Christians alike understood as a way of negation, of reaching God by denying any attributes or any qualities.

In encountering the three greatest philosophers of the Neoplatonist movement, Plotinus (204–270 CE), Iamblichus (active ca. 245 CE), and Proclus (412–485 CE), it becomes apparent that they are separated by a period of centuries. Moreover, Damascius, the subject of our study and the last scholarch of the Athenian Academy, was active half a century after Proclus. It is well to keep this fact in mind when we discuss the dialectical activities of Damascius vis-à-vis his predecessors. In most cases, he will have been reading texts that are entirely lost to us, as for example Iamblichus' extensive commentaries on the dialogues of Plato, and several of those by Proclus. The developments that

define the progress of the school take place over spans of time that, by comparison with other philosophical schools (such as Classical versus Hellenistic philosophy) would have almost precluded scholastic or doctrinal continuity. These temporal circumstances alone make the exegetical and dialectical strategies of Damascius extraordinarily difficult to recover, even though we possess so much of his writing (see Introduction below for a survey of the extant works).

The brief synopsis of Neoplatonic metaphysics offered above immediately raises problems, and as we shall see, again in survey form, the history of later Neoplatonism is largely the story of how key metaphysical issues in the tradition are solved via the mediation of fundamental exegetical strategies. First, there is a problem with respect to the first principle and its relationship to all other levels or aspects of reality. Briefly, the puzzle can described as follows: if the One, which by definition lacks multiplicity, differentiation, qualities, attributes, and even being, is the highest, most complete, or most real identity, then how do the Neoplatonists account for the proliferation of various kinds of being, the very fact that there is life, mind, intelligence, and all that they imply, in all of their profuse diversity? If we say that all of these beings are "from" the One, then what causes their departure from this ultimate identity? If the One is the cause of all beings, and this causality is conceived as a kind of participation of all things in the One, then the transcendence of the One is compromised at the outset. And yet if the One remains isolated in its transcendence, this raises the question of how it communicates reality to any of the other aspects of being, either severally or as a whole.

Thus in *Ennead* V.1 Plotinus locates this difficulty over the derivation of all things from the One as one of the major traditional problems of philosophy:[3]

"But [soul] desires [a solution] to the problem which is so often discussed, even by the ancient sages, as to how from the One, being such as we say the One is, anything can be constituted, either a multiplicity, a dyad, or a number; [why] it did not stay by itself, but so great a multiplicity flowed out as is seen in what is the real beings and which we think correct to refer back to the One." (V.1.6.3–8).

To some extent, the history of Neoplatonism after Plotinus is a record of responses to this question. Plotinus attempted to finesse this difficulty within his *Enneads* by distinguishing between what something is in itself, versus what something is in relationship to another, or by his doctrine of two acts, most clearly articulated in V.4.2.27–30:

> Αλλὰ πῶς μένοντος ἐκείνου γίνεται;
> Ἐνέργεια ἡ μέν ἐστι τῆς οὐσίας, ἡ δ' ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας ἑκάστου· καὶ ἡ μὲν τῆς οὐσίας αὐτό ἐστιν ἐνέργεια ἕκαστον,ἡ δὲ ἀπ' ἐκείνης, ἣν δεῖ παντὶ ἕπεσθαι ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἑτέραν οὖσαν αὐτοῦ.

> But how, when that abides unchanged, does intellect come into being? In each and every thing there is an activity which belongs to the *ousia* [the being of something] and one which goes out from the *ousia*, and that which belongs to *ousia* is the activity which is each particular thing, and the other activity derives from that first one, and necessarily follows it in every respect, being different from the thing itself.

As applied to the One, Plotinus discusses the way that intellect is generated without actually mentioning these two kinds of activity: "This is, if we may say so, the first act of generation; the One, perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself. This, when it has come into being, turns back upon the One and is filled, and becomes intellect by looking toward it" (V.2.1.7–10).

Now, for Plotinus, the internal activity is identical to the *ousia*, the being or essence of something, whereas what that internal activity consists in is actually a contemplation of or reversion toward what is higher. In other words, *ousia* and *energeia* are really two ways of talking about the same reality. In the case of the One itself, there can strictly be no activity in it, since it is beyond essence, nor is there anything higher for it to contemplate. The One, then, contemplates itself, and yet it cannot do so inasmuch as the One is not an object of thought. Therefore, in turning toward itself, it becomes intellect. To the extent that the One initiates this self-directed activity, it "becomes" a phase of intellect known as "inchoate" intellect.[4] In order to find language for the notional distinction between the One as thinking itself and the One as quasi-object of its own thought, Plotinus relies on the Aristotelian conception of *dunamis*, the potentiality that becomes actualized as an object of thought. For example, in *Ennead* III.8.10.1 he calls the One the "*dunamis panton*," or the power that gives rise to all things. At the same time, Plotinus' astute reading of Plato's *Parmenides* here plays an important role, in the sense that Plato distinguishes the consequences of the assertion that the One is, both for the One itself and for others (cf. the so-called fourth hypothesis): "If the One is, what are the consequences for the others?" 156b6–159b. "We have next to consider what will be true of the others, if there is a One. Supposing then, that there is a One, what must be said of the things other than the One" (157b5–7). Thus, to phrase the topic in terms of a more Platonic idiom, the internal act of the One is, in some sense, what it is in itself; the external act is how it is for others.[5] But in saying this much, we have already altered the nature of the One: the One cannot be something in itself, since this of course implies containing its own activity, its own *ousia*, which we have seen, as One, it must lack. And yet, in containing itself, it will be subject to the distinction between self and other, between the container and what is outside of that container. It is in this sense

that scholars have made a point of emphasizing that, whenever the One reverts to itself, that is, whenever inchoate intellect "sees" the One, what it sees must be an image of the One.[6]

Whatever we say about the difficulties of Plotinus' solution or solutions, and much has been said, it is enough to note that the question he raises invites the solutions that, as I have said, become the central tenets of Neoplatonic metaphysics. For our purposes we need to see, again in broad outlines, how Proclus' conception of the One's causal role prepares the stage for Damascius' own work in the *Problems and Solutions*. Bearing in mind that Proclus' career comes one and a half centuries after Iamblichus, whose own contributions to the history of the One must be reconstructed from the reports of Proclus and of Damascius himself, and bearing in mind as well that much of Proclus' teaching on his own admission derives from the exegetical work of his teacher, Syrianus, we turn to Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*, where, to some extent, Proclus poses much the same problem that we saw operating in *Ennead* V.1.6, when he writes:

> The first principle is not simply deprived of the things that are denied of it, nor are these things without any communion with the One, but they are actually derived from that source; and it is not true that, even as whiteness neither generates the line nor is generated by it, so the things following on the One are not generated from the One; for they derive their subsistence from it. (VI.1074–1075)

For Proclus, as he says in the *ET*, Proposition 11: "all that exists proceeds from a single first cause." Proclus then defines the One as the cause of all things, as causing that which it itself does not possess, through the doctrine according to which "every cause properly so-called transcends its effects" (*ET*, Proposition 75). This principle is also enunciated in the terms of Proclus' interpretation of the *Parmenides*, a great deal of which, he tells us, he actually owes to Syrianus. Proclus says of the One, "everything then, which is negated of the One proceeds from it. For it itself must be no one of all other things, in order that all things may derive from it" (VI.1076; IP p. 429). Proclus suggests that all that the second hypothesis of the *Parmenides* asserts is denied by the first, and indeed, that the very negations of the first hypothesis actually cause the corresponding positive assertions to be found in the second hypothesis (VI.1075). Thus the One produces by means of negations; this is very strange language, and it may seem to be much less satisfactory than even Plotinus' metaphorical accounts of generation, which refer to the undiminished giving of the One, of its giving birth.

Other features of Proclus' account include a kind of mediation, wherein the two Pythagorean terms, *peras* and *apeiron*, limit and limitlessness, act as principles that somehow produce Being, in a quasi-mathematical metaphor. Perhaps we can see that Proclus' primal pair are an attempt to externalize the

imagery of act and potentiality we saw operating in the case of Plotinus' One. Therefore, the One has, as it were, elements that in some sense share its realm; by denying that there is any potency, any *dunamis*, in the One, Proclus must transfer this function to the primal limit that functions with the primal limitlessness to, in a sense, produce the realm of Being (*PT* III 9, p. 31).[7]

So far the discussion has remained fairly uncomplicated, despite its obscurity and abstraction. For Plotinus, it would seem that the One itself, the highest principle, enjoys a perfection that cannot remain sterile; it must in its abundance, says Plotinus, overflow. For Proclus, the causality of the One is mediated by a pair of antithetical principles, which somehow produce the realm of intellect, which then undergoes a proliferation that far surpasses anything we find in the *Enneads*, as Proclus distinguishes between different levels of intellect, and between intellect qua hypostasis (the Greek word he uses for this is *noeton*) and intellect as it exists in the domain of the human individual (the Greek word he uses for individual intellect is *noeron*).

As was remarked at the outset, Damascius is writing some years after Proclus and what amounts to two centuries after Iamblichus. What we find in his writings is a systematic tendency to criticize the developments of Proclus' metaphysics by introducing and fundamentally elevating a prior interpretation of Iamblichus. Thus, although Damascius sympathizes with Proclus' and Plotinus' insistence on the transcendent simplicity of the One, he does so to the extent that he is not actually content to call the One, "the One." Instead, it has no name—perhaps it can be called the Ineffable:

> Is the so-called One Principle of all things beyond[8] all things or is it one among all things, as if it were the summit of those that proceed from it? And are we to say that "all things" are with the [first principle], or after it and [that they proceed] from it? If someone were to assert this last hypothesis, how could [it] be something outside of all things? (*C-W* I.1.1–10)

Damascius launches his *Problems and Solutions* by calling into question Proclus' derivation of all things from the One, a doctrine that, as we saw, Proclus was able to support and still maintain the transcendence of the One, by showing that, in the words of *ET* Proposition 7, "every cause properly so-called transcends its effect." Damascius advances what is both a critique of Proclus' theory of causation at the level of the Ineffable, the highest principle, as well as a positive account of the One, in the remaining chapters of his *Problems and Solutions*. Therefore, Damascius, like his predecessors of the preceding centuries, once more responds to what we saw was Plotinus' initial inquiry—why does the One, which lacks all attributes, flow forth, so to speak, as "all things"?

In distinguishing between the One qua cause of all things and the Ineffable as the ultimate ground of reality whose transcendence cannot be mitigated via any causal relationship, Damascius draws on the resources of Proclus' own

predecessor, Iamblichus, as we saw, and as he makes clear in chapter 43, *C-W* II.1 of the *Problems and Solutions*:

> After this let us propose to inquire into whether there are two first principles before the first intelligible triad, the one that is entirely Ineffable and the other that is independent of this triad, as the great Iamblichus held in the twenty-eighth book of his most perfect work, *Chaldaic Theology,* or whether (as the majority of his successors thought) the first intelligible triad is [immediately] after the Ineffable and unique causal principle or whether we should descend even lower than this hypothesis and say with Porphyry that the Father of the intelligible triad is the one principle of all things?

The fact that Damascius investigates the Ineffable qua first principle also leads him to discuss a second issue raised by his predecessors as well, and again (according at least to the Neoplatonic reception of the text) implied in Plato's *Parmenides*, concerning the rationale for metaphysical discourse as such, as well as the basis for knowledge of the first principle. A second problem therefore is connected to the first issue, which as we saw, was essentially metaphysical in nature, and touched on the question of the meaning of causation in Neoplatonism as a whole. Depending on how the first issue is solved, then, we will want to ask how this One, the transcendent principle, can be known at all, and if so, as what can it be known? 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 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.

But this inquiry into the meaning of transcendence is not the only issue that Damascius elaborates in this treatise. He also addresses the question of the One's causality in something like the terms that Plotinus poses in *Ennead* V.1.6. Here again, Damascius draws on the resources provided by his predecessors in articulating his own solutions to this issue. As we saw, Plotinus left the fecundity of the One largely unexplained—he relied on metaphors that implied the infinite generosity of the One coupled with its infinite power. Proclus, of course, assumes this much when he writes that "every manifold in some way participates [in] unity," but has some difficulty in explaining how the One is something in which all things participate. Again, as we saw, he arrives at a compromise solution when he suggests that there are principles in the realm of the One, the primal pair consisting in limit and the unlimited, that bring about the realm of Being as their product.

This solution does not satisfy Damascius, and much of the *Problems and Solutions* is devoted to a discussion of this "realm of the One," which for Damascius just translates into a discussion of the One. For him, the word "One" will imply "all things." The One includes all things by its very nature, and so there are actually three names for the One, which present the One in terms of three aspects: the One, the One-all, and the Unified. Sometimes Damascius refers to these aspects or names of the One as "henads."

Damascius is everywhere addressing Proclean metaphysics, and often he is actually pitting an Iamblichean interpretation against Proclus' opinion. To see this, we must go to the text of Proclus. For Proclus and Iamblichus, *peras* and *apeiron* are related to a Pythagorean interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*. This interpretation functions as the basis for their explanation of how the world of multiplicity, expressed as the gradations of Being, arises from the absolute One. The dyad therefore constitutes a manifestation of the hidden or latent power of the One, that is, its all-possibility. As Van Riel (2001) has demonstrated, Proclus actually coins a word, *ἐκφάνσις ekphansis*, manifestation, as a way to display the relationship between the dyad, *peras* and *apeiron*, and the One.[9] For both Proclus and Damascius, I take it that in some sense the nature of the One is revealed or is made manifest in what for Damascius are the henads, actually facets of the One, or in the realm of the One, and in what for Proclus constitutes the first dyad that is an *ekphansis*, a showing of the nature of the One. Yet as such, the world of Being according to the interpretation of Proclus is "generated" while the primal pair (the dyad) is a manifestation of the One. Moreover, for Proclus, "generation is inferior to manifestation."[10] Thus Being does not have its own nature;[11] essentially, for Proclus *peras* and *apeiron* function like form and matter; their product, a synthesis of the infinite power of the One together with the unity of the One, is a compound, that is, Being.

Damascius' strategy of criticizing Proclus involves the tendency to use Iamblichus against Proclus if at all possible. If Damascius includes the Unified within the order of the henads, or in the realm of the One, it is not without interest that he alludes to a similar doctrine in Iamblichus' now lost *Commentary on the Parmenides*, that the Unified remains in the ambit of the One: "How is Iamblichus' interpretation of the intelligible different, when he says that it subsists 'around the One' and never emerges outside of the One?" (II 93) And again: "And so Iamblichus also represented the intelligible as in the One, because the intelligible was more united to the One and more conformed to it than to Being" (II 97). This fragment[12] is important evidence for the origin of Damascius' own views on the nature of the henads, that is, the One-all, the all-One, and the Unified. The intelligible realm as a whole is not something new, adventitious, caused, or produced. It is not only that, as per Proclus, the infinite power of the One and the perfect unity of the One are its primary manifestations, but that Being itself is another face, the most outward face, of the One.

Thus Damascius makes this exegetical point in keeping with a larger criticism of Proclus' views of causation, according to which plurality is other than the One, participates in the One (*ET* 1: Πᾶν πλῆθος μετέχει πῃ τοῦ ἑνός), and the One itself does not actually include multiplicity. Damascius' exegesis of the three henads in his *Lectures on the Philebus* and in chapters 53–58 of the *Problems and Solutions* demonstrates a different view of causation. For him, the One includes all things.

To summarize, not only does Damascius differ from Proclus in conceiving of Being as incipient within the realm of the One, as the power of the One to be all things, but this Being is also conceived as intelligible. Thus at root it is actually the intelligible realm that reveals the power of the One, but there is no "'production" or coming into being of the intelligible. The henads, including the Unified as the root of intelligible Being, are not only manifestations of the One; they actually are the One, considered in its aspect as all things. If this sounds like a contradiction, creating a doctrine that confuses multiplicity with unity and fundamentally erases the very fact that the One is one, then Damascius would only agree with Plotinus when he calls the One δύναμις τῶν πάντων (III 8.10.1).

Sometimes Damascius equates the One and the One-all with Proclus' limit and unlimited. But significantly, he differs from Proclus in suggesting that the third henad, the Unified, is an aspect of the One that functions as the source or seat of subsistence, the ground of Being. In other words, Being is not so much a product of the One as it is already implied by the very nature of the One. The "outflow" that Plotinus so vividly describes in *Ennead* V.1.6 is no longer "outside" the One, since nothing can be outside the One.

Thus Damascius will say things like "we can have no conception of the One that is both perfect and unique. And therefore it must not even be called One, unless in the same way, it should no less be called all things." Throughout his discussion of the first principles, however, Damascius maintains a much more aporetic stance than Proclus. Even if he suggests doctrinal innovations, his very manner of couching them is more often than not obscured by what we saw was operating as a crucial factor in his investigations, that is, the problematic nature of metaphysical discourse as such. For example, in discussing the causality of the One, Damascius asks:

> What follows after this discussion is an inquiry into whether there is a procession from the One into its subsequents, and of what kind it is, or whether the One gives no share of itself to them. One might reasonably raise puzzles about either position. For if the One gives no share of itself to its products, how has it produced them as so unlike itself, that they enjoy nothing of its nature? (*C-W* I 99)

On the other hand, Damascius wants to claim that no such procession is possible, given that procession implies distinction (the distinction between

what proceeds and what does not proceed) and therefore, there can be no procession from the One:

> Every procession takes place together with distinction, whereas multiplicity is the cause of every distinction. Distinction is always the cause of multiplicity, whereas the One is before multiplicity. If the One is also before the One in the sense that the One is taken as one without [others],[13] then a fortiori the One is before the many. Therefore the nature of the One is entirely without distinction. And therefore the One cannot proceed (*C-W* I 100).

In fairness to Proclus, we must understand that sometimes Damascius advances a criticism of the theory of procession in a way that isolates one aspect of the theory, without also framing the theory in terms of the completeness of Proclus' work. Not only does Proclus suggest that the One is the cause of all things, and that every cause transcends its effects, but he also provides for what has been called a "circular" model of causation. That is, for Proclus, "every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it" (*ET* Proposition 35). Proclus discusses this spiritual circuit in his *IP* 620, when he reminds the reader that "every plurality exists in unity." Thus when it comes to understanding the fundamental relationship between the transcendent principle and its manifestations, Proclus and Damascius are not really far apart; indeed, Proclus insists that there is an unparticipated aspect of each and every hypostasis, including the One. Moreover, the primary sense of the hypostasis is its subsistence as what Proclus calls a "whole before the parts" (*ET* Proposition 67).

Yet Damascius can also show himself to be a very effective critic precisely because he is ultimately profoundly versed in the metaphysics of Proclus. After posing the aporia concerning transcendence in the opening sections of the *Problems and Solutions*, as well as his general criticism of Proclus' understanding of Being as the product of the henadic realm, Damascius launches a sustained inquiry into the meaning of Proclus' spiritual circuit insofar as it relies on the concepts of "procession" and "reversion." In the words of E. R. Dodds, Proclus' theory derives from a paradox that:

> is a necessary consequence of the attempt to reconcile transcendence with immanence by the Neoplatonic theory of causation. If the procession is to be timeless, and if reversion is to be possible, the lower can never be cut off from the higher; but if individuality is to be real, and if the higher is not to be infected with plurality, the lower must be actualized as a separate being, not simply a part of the higher.[14]

Damascius has no easy task, then, in unraveling the terms of this paradox, a deed that he accomplishes by revealing what are at least on the surface the

fallacies entailed by Proclus' solution of circular causation: "What is it we mean when we say, 'remaining in the cause'? Something must be either first or third, so that it cannot be the processive if it is still that which remains. Does remaining mean that what proceeds has its origin in the cause? But this is absurd: cause must be prior; effect is subsequent. Perhaps the cause remains while the effect proceeds?" (*C-W* II 117)

But now the whole idea of remaining in the cause is trivialized, and amounts to no more than the tautology that the first is not the second, and so forth. Again, Damascius critically examines the structure of procession, showing that reversion is part of a unified triad, in which the three moments act together to define the nature of an hypostasis, but at the same time, reversion is also a dissolution or undoing of the very effects achieved through the process of procession. How is it possible for reversion to assume these very different functions? Damascius also points out that "reversion" is ambiguous between something's achieving its own definition from an inchoate state, and something's returning to a higher source or to its cause.

Not only, then, does Damascius incorporate substantive criticisms of fundamental Proclean tenets into the aporetic compass of his treatise but he also engages in a detailed criticism of Proclus' own exegetical activities vis-à-vis the text of Plato and the larger exegetical project of the late Athenian Academy, which involves the application of various Hellenic and even non-Hellenic theological traditions to Platonic material. The wealth of the detail that Damascius supplies in this context may prove to be, even to the most ardent devotee of late antique Platonism, daunting. How then, are we to assess Damascius' goals and achievements in this text, which moves from the fundamental assumptions involved in Platonism to a syncretistic religiosity, and along the way attempts to highlight the dialectical clashes of its chief exponents?

To answer this question, we need to see that Damascius' innovations in the realm of metaphysics are actually implied both by Proclus' complete theory of cyclical creativity and indeed by Plotinus earlier, as for example when he says at *Ennead* VI.5.7.1–2: "for we and what is ours go back to real being and ascend to that and to the first which comes from it."[15] The spiritual circuit, the return of all to the One and especially the soul's special function as a conduit of this return, is the crucial premise of Neoplatonism insofar as it constitutes a religion. What, after all, is the place of the human self in this cosmic drama of the One's radiance and of attaining to the goal of wisdom, which is to uncover a vision of the whole? The soul's destiny is to return to the One, not just in the sense that the soul will develop wisdom or knowledge but also in the sense that the soul becomes instrumental in the completion of the spiritual circuit.

Now the *Problems and Solutions* does not advance into a consideration of the status of the soul, but in another work, Damascius' own *Commentary on the Parmenides*, Damascius once more takes up a dialectical exploration of his

predecessors, Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus, in terms of their discussion of the place of the human soul in the realm of real being. As this controversy falls outside the scope of our text, it will not be necessary to drag the reader into an extended discussion of yet another dialectical triangulation in the work of Damascius in this prolegomenon,[16] which perhaps may be taken as a preview of the exegetical strategies that Damascius pursues in the *Problems and Solutions* alongside the aporetic development of the work as a whole. In it, Damascius rehearses the fundamental problems of Neoplatonist metaphysics. To some extent, as he is working across the centuries from his great predecessors, his own reprisal of the tradition will constitute a necessary part of his membership in the tradition.

But it is also true that, far more than his predecessors, Damascius amplifies the question-and-answer method that we often find in the ancient commentaries that seek to uncover every possible nuance of Plato's text, which for them, as we saw, enjoyed the status of scripture. The reader is likely to be put off by Damascius' relentless interrogation of Neoplatonic scholasticism by means of what, after all, amounts to a highly scholastic form of exegesis. This prolegomenon, therefore, will close by reminding the reader that for scholarchs of the late Athenian Academy, philosophy was conceived as a sacred rite: learning, teaching, belonging in the transmission of wisdom—all of this is part of a larger conception of philosophic activity, one that has its place, ultimately, in the cosmic scheme.

Neoplatonism is not just an exegetical metaphysics that attempts to reify the hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides*. This manifestation of the One in all things is, at last, just the life of the soul, as it undertakes the journey of awakening to its source in the One, and also its cosmic mission of returning the multiplicity back into the source. Porphyry alludes in the *Life of Plotinus* to the dying words of the sage: "strive to bring the One in yourself back to the One." According to the third-century philosopher Iamblichus, knowledge or intellection does not deliver the soul from the constraints of embodiment. To complete its cosmic task, the soul must win over the whole chain of being that links our ordinary world with the ultimate principles of reality. "Thinking does not connect theurgists with divine beings, for what would prevent those who philosophize theoretically from having theurgic union with the gods? Rather . . . it is the power of ineffable symbols comprehended by the gods alone, that establishes theurgical union" (*DM* 96).

For these philosophers, theurgy and scholasticism are fused; the most sacred rite is to engage with the text of Plato, since the Plato of this period was no longer just an Athenian philosopher but a vessel of divine knowledge: "I beg all the gods and all the goddesses to . . . open up the doors of my soul and allow it to receive the divinely inspired doctrine of Plato" (Proclus *IP* 1.617.1). It is in this spirit that Damascius rehearses and to some extent

creates a dialectical vision that spans the centuries of philosophical activity of a school that managed, whether despite or because of its ponderous textual exegesis, to remain a living tradition. Damascius' eventful life is a witness to the end of this tradition as well, and it is to this life that we turn in the Introduction.

Note on the Translation

This translation of the *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* is based entirely on the Westerink and Combès edition.[1] I have not consulted the manuscripts, since it seemed that very little would be produced by such a consultation, given the recent critical edition of Westerink. The purpose of this translation, introduction, and commentary is to make this text available to a wider range of English-speaking readers, in the hopes of stimulating research on this last phase of late antique Platonism. Moreover, the notes concentrate on Damascius' relationships with his philosophical predecessors, especially Iamblichus and Proclus. For detailed matters of philology concerning the Greek text, readers are advised to turn to the edition of Westerink. I have added a glossary at the end, which contains phrases or technical terms in English and then cites the corresponding Greek phrase or word.

The paragraph numbers refer to the numbering system found on *Parisinus Gr.* 1990, a manuscript from the seventeenth century. As these paragraph numbers are cited in LSJ and were the regular way of referring to the *Problems and Solutions* prior to the completion of the edition of Westerink, it has seemed expedient to retain this numbering system.[2] The division into sections is my own. For reference to the Greek text, the pagination of the Westerink edition is indicated in this translation. Other than the translations of the critical editions of Ruelle (1899) and Westerink (1986–1991) the only translation of Damascius' *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles* into a

modern language is that of Galpérine.[3] There has never been a translation into English, although translations of Damascius' *Philosophical History* (or *Life of Isidore*), and his lecture notes on the *Phaedo* and on the *Philebus* have all received English translations.[4]

Abbreviations

BZ	*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
CAG	*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*
CJ	P. Krueger, ed. 1877. *Codex Justinianus*. Berlin
CP	Damascius. 2002–2003. *Commentary on the Parmenides*. 4 vols. Text by Carlos Steel. Paris
C-W	Damascius. 1986–1991. *Traité des premiers principes*. 3 vols. Translated by J. Combès. Edited by L. G. Westerink. Paris
DA	Aristotle. *De anima*. Hicks, R. 1908. *Aristotle De Anima. With Translation, Introduction, and Notes*. Cambridge
De Gen. et Cor.	Joachim, H. 1922. *Aristotle on coming-to-be and passing-away (De generatione et corruptione)*. Oxford
D-K	Diels, H., and W. Kranz. 1974. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 3 vols. Original edn. 1903; reprint of 6th edn. Berlin
DM	Iamblichus. *De Mysteriis*. Greek edition: 1966. *Les Mysteries d'Egypte*. Texte etabli et traduit par E. Des Places. Paris. English translation: 2003. Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell. Atlanta
Enn.	*Enneads*. Greek edition: 1964, 1976, 1982. *Plotini Opera*. Edited by P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer. Editio minor. 3 vols. Oxford

ET E. R. Dodds, ed. 1963. *Proclus. The Elements of Theology*. Oxford

Extr. Chal. Proclus. 1891. *ek tēs chaldaikēs philosophias. Ecologae e Proclo De philosophia chaldaica; sive, De doctrina oracvlorvm chaldaicorvm. Nvnc primvm edidit et commentatvs est Albertvs Iahnivs* Accedit Hymnvs in devm platonicvs, vvlgo S. Gregorio Nazianzeno adscriptvs, nvnc Proclo Platonico vindicatvs. Halis Saxonem

In Cat. Porphyry. *In Categorias*. Busse. *CAG* IV

_____. Simplicius. 1907. *In Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium*. Kalbfleisch. *CAG* VIII

In Met. Syrianus. 1870. *In Aristotelis Metaphysica commentaria*. Edited by H. Usener. Berlin

IP Proclus. *In Parmenidem*. Greek text: 2007. *Procli In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*. Edited by Carlos Steel. Oxford. Vol. I, Books I–III. English translation: 1987. J. Dillon and G. Morrow, G. *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*. Princeton

In Phaed. Damascius. 1977. *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*. Vol. II, *Damascius*. Edited by L. G. Westerink. Amsterdam

In Phil. Damascius. 1959. *Lectures on the Philebus*. Edited by L. G. Westerink. Amsterdam

JHS *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

JRS *Journal of Roman Studies*

LSJ Liddell and Scott. *Greek-English Lexicon*. New edition: Jones and McKenzie. 1968. Oxford.

Marc. Gr. *Marcianus Graecus*

Or. Ch. *Chaldean Oracles*. Greek edition: *Oracles Chaldaiques*. 1971. Texte etabli et traduit par E. Des Places. Paris

PH Damascius. 1999a. *The Philosophical History*. Edited and translated by P. Athanassiadi. Athens

PT Proclus. *Platonic Theology. Theologie Platonicienne*. Edited by H. D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink. 5 vols. Paris. English translation by Thomas Taylor, *The Platonic Theology*. London, 1816; rpt. New York, 1986

R Damascii Successoris. 1899. *Dubitationes et solutiones de primis principiis*. Edited and translated by C. Ruelle. 2 vols. Paris

VP *Vita Procli*. The Life of Proclus. Greek edition: Marinus. 2001. *Proclus ou sur le bonheur*. Texte établi, traduit, et annoté par H. D. Saffrey et A.-P. Segonds. Paris

Damascius' *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*

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Introduction to the Life and Philosophy of Damascius

Life

Damascius (ca. 462–538)[1] was head of the Platonic Academy at Athens in 529 when the Christian emperor Justinian issued a decree that banned the teaching of philosophy in that city.[2] Upon the closing of the Academy, Damascius led a band of pagan philosophers out of Athens into exile, perhaps settling at Harran, a town in northern Mesopotamia on the border of the Persian Empire, known for its cosmopolitan paganism. In Harran's heady mixture of Greco-Arab-Syrian traditions, Damascius' legacy might have found congenial soil.[3] We are particularly fortunate in possessing not only a significant number of works written by Damascius or derived from his writings, but also in possessing fragments from his semi-autobiographical work, *The Philosophical History*, or *Life of Isidore* (henceforth *PH*). Damascius' *PH* charts the intermittent struggles in Athens and in Alexandria between polytheist philosophers associated with the Neoplatonic Academy and various Christian communities. This book also provides a sketch of the *diadochia*, or transmission of the scholarchy to successive heirs of the Academy, as it existed in late antiquity.

From the *PH* and from Zacharias' *Vita Severi* (written in Greek, though what survives are Syriac epitomes of the lost work), we gain some idea of Damascius' early life.[4] Born in Damascus (a fact deduced from his name) Damascius came to Alexandria in the 480s to study rhetoric at Horapollo's school, a "coeducational" institution where pagan and Christian students studied side by side.[5] Several fragments in

the *PH* confirm Zacharias' report that relations between the Neoplatonist communities of Athens and Alexandria were close, as students of Proclus made their way to Horapollo's circle.[6] Nevertheless, Alexandria was host not only to warring factions of pro-Chalcedonian and Monophysite Christians but also to a rising tide of anti pagan persecution. The *Vita Severi* offers a narrative of tumultuous times during which mutual intolerance between the rival factions of the school eventually broke out in rioting. In 489 Horapollo was arrested and tortured, while members of the school were forced to flee or go into hiding.[7] The *PH* paints a compelling picture of a group of intellectuals under siege: arrests, interrogations, acts of courage and capitulations—all punctuate Damascius' account of a crisis within the pagan circles of Alexandria. Isidore[8] and Damascius, caught up in the general persecution, decided to go to Athens, where the study of philosophy in some ways still flourished due to the influence of Proclus.

Isidore and Damascius journeyed for eight months, passing by way of Syria. It was on this journey that Damascius seems to have lost his taste for the profession of rhetoric. Athanassiadi connects fragments 137a, b, c, and d together and associates them with this crossroad in Damascius' life: "How pernicious an activity was rhetoric, focusing all my attention on the mouth and the tongue and turning it away from the soul and from the blissful and divine lessons which purify it. Realizing this, I was sometimes distracted from my rhetorical exegeses with which I had been occupying myself for nine years" (Athanassiadi 1999a, 307). Damascius and Isidore then took up residence in Athens, where Damascius became a student of Marinus, Proclus' successor and biographer. The *PH* emphasizes that Proclus' successors were intellectually incapable of assuming the scholarchy, and that the position had become something of a sinecure. Damascius describes Domninus, a student of Syrianus and contemporary of Proclus, as "competent in mathematics" but of superficial ability in other branches of philosophy.[9] Evidently Proclus condemned his philosophical innovations as unorthodox, and he was passed up as a candidate for the succession. Marinus also comes in for harsh criticism in the *PH*, being the target of several disdainful anecdotes. Marinus' lack of intellectual development resulted in a dull-witted commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*, in which he emphasized the Platonic forms rather than the Neoplatonic henads, thus endorsing a retrospective and conservative reading of the dialogue.[10] By 515, Damascius himself had succeeded to the title of Diadochus.[11] During the period between 515 and 529, the year that Justinian issued his interdict against pagan teaching, Damascius composed a number of works, including the *PH*, perhaps commentaries on Plato's *Phaedo*, *Philebus*, *Parmenides*, and a lost commentary on the *Timaeus*, as well as the original metaphysical treatise, the *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.[12]

Damascius, noticing the decline of the Academy after Marinus, did all he could to strengthen the practice of philosophy in Athens. Relying on a thorough survey of Damascius' extant or reported works, as well as Damascius'

connections to Simplicius, who studied under Ammonius at Alexandria and under Damascius at Athens, Hoffmann has emphasized Damascius' return to the established Neoplatonic curriculum.[13] In the *PH* there is evidence that Damascius' predecessor, Isidore, was deeply alarmed about the subordination of philosophical studies to ritual, and feared that the general intellectual rigor of traditional philosophy was declining in the face of mounting external opposition. Damascius is especially critical of Hegias, a wealthy patron of traditional religious institutions who headed the school sometime after Proclus in the 490s. Damascius reports that "Isidore urged Syrianus and Hegias to restore philosophy which was now wasting away, as was their duty" (fragment 11a). At 150a, Isidore severely reprimands Hegias (who lavished funds on the restoration of pagan shrines, fragment 145a) for promoting theurgy over philosophy:

> If, as you maintain, Hegias, Isidore was telling him "the practice of theurgy is divine," I too admit it. But those who are destined to be gods must first become human; this is why Plato too has said that no greater good than philosophy has ever come down to mankind, but it has come to pass that nowadays philosophy stands not on a razor's edge, but truly on the brink of extreme old age.

Damascius, then, took seriously the injunctions of his predecessor, and attempted to redirect the school toward the systematic study of Aristotle, the Platonic dialogues, and theological literature, including the Orphic theogony and the *Chaldean Oracles*. Moreover, as we shall see, his philosophical works promoted the exegetical methods of Proclus' teacher Syrianus, while critically overhauling the tenets of Proclean metaphysics. Throughout the commentaries there is a studied attention especially to Iamblichus and Proclus, whose doctrines Damascius frequently compares. By the time Justinian's ban was promulgated, some of the most important philosophers of the sixth century, gathering from all parts of the Eastern Empire, had assembled around Damascius' Academy. The historian Agathias records Damascius' voluntary exile from Athens:

> Damascius the Syrian, Simplicius the Cilician, Eulamias (or Eulalias) the Phrygian, Priscianus the Lydian, Hermias and Diogenes both from Phoenicia, Isidore of Gaza—the finest flower, to wax poetic, of philosophers in our time—taking exception to the reigning ideology among the Romans concerning the divine, thought that the political climate of the Persians would be more favorable.[14]

To what extent was the edict issued by Justinian a vendetta against the renewal of the Academy under Damascius? Obviously, such a question is hard to answer, given the indirect evidence concerning the scope and wording of Justinian's interdict.[15] Damascius (at the advanced age of sixty-seven) and his fellow philosophers had to abandon Athens, the patroness of philosophy, for a

precarious journey beyond Roman imperial reach.[16] The recurrent trauma that had threatened philosophers in prior eras (recall Socrates in 399 or Proclus' year-long exile in Lydia) repeated itself in 529, when under the edict of Justinian it was once again no longer legal to practice philosophy in the city of Athena.[17] Preferring exile to silence, perhaps the philosophers anticipated greater intellectual license in the milieu of the Persian court, to which they made their way, according to the report of Agathias.[18] Supposedly the young king, Chosroes, had philosophical sympathies, although his patronage was destined to prove unsatisfactory. Or else, as has been argued, they never actually embarked on a journey to Ctesiphon, capital of the Sassanian Empire. Tardieu understands Agathias' report as legend in the manner of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, invoking the tradition of failed alliances between philosophers and rulers. There is, however, one other passage in Agathias relevant to the entire Persian episode, according to which in the year 532 Chosroes concluded a "Pact of Eternal Peace" with Justinian. According to the terms of this pact as reported by Agathias, the philosophers now fell under the protection of the Persian prince: "When these men return home they will spend the rest of their lives free of any fear, as private individuals, never forced to profess belief in anything contrary to their conscience or to change their traditional views" (II.31). [19]

What happened to Damascius and his retinue when they left the Persian court, if indeed they ever arrived? At one time, the view that the Athenian School resumed, after some abatement under a formal prohibition but a practical lenience, generally prevailed among historians of late antiquity. More recently, I. Hadot (1990) in her translation of Simplicius' *Commentary on the Enchiridion of Epictetus*, together with P. Athanassiadi, have powerfully advanced the thesis of M. Tardieu (1990) concerning the establishment of a Neoplatonic school in Harran under the protection of the Persian Empire. Before examining this point, it will be helpful to start with the circumstances in Athens that led up to what has been called the closure of the philosophical schools.[20]

Damascius reveals that there were, by the time of his own administration of the school, certain estates associated with the institutional title of Diadochus:

> The estate of the *diadochi* does not come directly from Plato, as is commonly thought. Plato was poor, owning only the garden of the Academy, which formed a tiny part of the *diadochica*. For the revenue from the garden amounted to just under three gold coins, whereas eventually the total income had reached the sum of one thousand coins or even more by the time of Proclus, as pious lovers of learning who died at various times bequeathed to the philosophers the requisite means for the leisure and tranquility of the philosophical life. (*PH* 102)

This entry in the *PH* suggests that there were private holdings, or, in Alison Franz's translation of the crucial *diadochica*, endowment funds that were regularly

bequeathed to the professors of the school from generation to generation. One very strong argument against the reopening of the school in Athens, after the Persian chapter, is a citation from Olympiodorus that speaks clearly of the "theft" or "confiscation" of these properties by the time he wrote his *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, ca. 560 CE: "Perhaps Plato refused all salary because he was a wealthy man. This is just why the endowment funds had been preserved to the present day, and this despite the multiple predations that have afflicted them."[21]

Numerous entries within the *PH* suggest that the life of the last Neoplatonists was gracious and that the members of the school belonged to a privileged social class.[22] Damascius writes of Severianus, his own mentor in the study of rhetoric, that he was descended from "one of the best families" (fragment 108a). He describes Agapius, another member of Proclus' school, as having "amassed a great amount of money" (fragment 107). Franz's interpretation of the archaeological record, according to which a wealthy cadre of philosophers inhabited a sumptuously appointed enclave near the Acropolis, lends further credence to the financial independence of the school. Moreover, this site shows signs of sudden abandonment in 529, the year of Damascius' exile.[23] Excavations at the Acropolis revealed a housing complex of exceptional beauty and elegance on the northern slope. One structure at the site in particular (Franz's House C or the Omega House) has been identified as a possible residence for the last of the Neoplatonic scholarchs, on the grounds that an extraordinary collection of statuary was deliberately sealed inside two wells on the premises in the year 529,[24] the year of the pagan exile and of the confiscation of pagan property as ordered by the decree of Justinian:[25]

> We forbid anyone stricken with the madness of the impure Hellenes to teach, so as to prevent them, under the guise of teaching those who by misfortune happen to attend their classes, from in fact corrupting the souls of those they pretend to educate. They will not receive state pensions, having no licenses either by Sacred Scripture or earthly law, to claim for themselves any immunity whatsoever.[26]

The Christian historian John Malalas reports the actual closure of the school. An ordinance (*prostaxis*) prohibiting the teaching of philosophy is attested in Malalas' *Chronographia*, though again its interpretation is contested, and Franz's findings have been critically reviewed in Fowden 1982. In particular, Fowden questions the idea that philosophers lived in the expensive villas on the northern slope of the Acropolis. The statuary in House C is classical, but perhaps its owner was a Christian with exceptionally good taste in classical sculpture. However this may be, Fowden does concede (a point reiterated by Hoffmann) that whether the philosophers inhabited the larger complex or merely had rich friends who lived there, at least one structure (identified by Franz as the official residence of "the Scholarch" or "House of Proclus")

matches very closely Marinus' description in the *Vita Procli* (*VP*), 29: "[Proclus'] house, in which his 'father' Syrianus and his 'grandfather,' as Proclus called him, Plutarch also lived, was . . . visible or at least capable of being seen on the Acropolis of Athena." This structure, like Proclus' house, enjoyed immediate proximity to the Parthenon.

Athenian paganism seems to have been exceptionally tenacious. Franz's survey of the archaeology of late-antique Athens shows that the major temples of the city were still accessible in the sixth century. As Homer Thompson observed, "the old gods . . . held on longer in Athens than in almost any other part of the ancient world."[27] And yet, if we are to trust the archaeological record, we can only conclude that the ban on philosophy in Athens was lasting; Damascius and his colleagues had truly been practicing philosophy at the end of an epoch.[28]

At the same time, Olympiodorus and Simplicius (as well as more compromising representatives of the school vis-à-vis what Damascius and his colleagues contemptuously referred to as "the present circumstance" or as "the dominant ideology")[29] continued to produce exegetical works on Plato and Aristotle after 532.[30] Along with Tarrant (2000), it is reasonable to assume that at least Olympiodorus taught and published in Alexandria. Why the political climate there was more amenable to the continued practice of philosophy is not a question that we can pursue here. We have already mentioned the other possibility, that some of the late Neoplatonists did not remain in Alexandria, but instead transferred operations to Harran. Perhaps a few words will illustrate some of the difficulties associated, in turn, with this position. One interesting find is an epigram collected in the *Palatine Anthology*, and evidently written by Damascius. This epigram was carved on a stele in Emesa, Syria, in 538 CE, and confirms that Damascius returned to his native Syria after his sojourn in Persia.[31]

Tardieu has suggested that the presence of Damascius in Syria presents evidence for a line of transmission of Platonism to Islam, by which Neoplatonic traditions took hold in Harran. Tardieu's thesis relies heavily on a now controversial interpretation of a passage that details the visit of the scholar al-Mas'udi to Harran. In this narrative, al-Mas'udi describes a gathering place of the Sabians, where he sees a doorknocker inscribed in Syriac with a Platonizing motto, "He who knows himself becomes divine." Yet Arabists are increasingly sceptical that the word Tardieu translates as "gathering place" can refer to what he infers is a school or institution.[32]

Hadot has argued, partially in response to the careful summary of Hoffman (1994), that Simplicius composed at least the majority of his surviving oeuvre in Harran. Hadot approves the evidence presented by Chuvin, who details the juridical texts relevant to the measures taken by Justinian against pagan activity in Athens. Other evidence is supplied from within Simplicius' *In De Caelo* (26, 19, Heiberg 1894), where Simplicius indicates

that he has never personally made acquaintance with his contemporary Platonist Philoponus, who taught in Alexandria.[33] Because this question entails much more information than we can discuss profitably in this context, I will end this discussion of whether or not Neoplatonism remained in some sense institutionalized or less formally implanted in the Arabic traditions—via the work of the remnants of the Athenian school in Harran—with yet another piece of evidence, one that indeed set M. Tardieu in search of links between Manichean Gnosticism and late-antique Neoplatonism. Evidently Simplicius evinces a detailed knowledge of Manichean cosmology in his *Commentary on the Enchiridion of Epictetus* XXXV, 90–91 (Simplicus 2003, Hadot ed.), and in the words of Tardieu: "There were only two towns in the Byzantine Empire where one could find exclusively Manichean adherents: Constantinople . . . and Harran, where they settled at the end of the third century and where they remained due to the sociopolitical climate."[34] According to Tardieu, Simplicius, whose above-mentioned commentary owes so much to the philosophy of his teacher Damascius, particularly with reference to its psychological tenets and its doctrine of the embodied soul (for which see infra), must have continued his associations with the scholarch, who ended his life in his native Syria. However, in her detailed review of Tardieu, Luna has shown that much of the material that Tardieu relies on is suspect owing to faulty translation, or false assumptions, such as the assumption that only in Harran would Simplicius have had contact with Manichean cosmology.[35] Whatever city we may imagine to have played host to Simplicius and the remaining entourage of Damascius, it probably was not Athens, and it likely was not Alexandria. Perhaps there were other cities that might have had supportive pagan communities in the sixth century, but Damascius' exile in 529 brought the formal school to a close.

Most of the preceding material has been gleaned from the *PH*, as preserved in fragments of Photius' *Bibliotheca,* or *Epitome of Ancient Works* (Photius 1959–77). A caveat in working with the text, then, is that Photius' epitome does not have the status of a primary source. Moreover, the *PH* is of a piece with late-antique hagiography, which employed stock themes and motifs to describe its subjects. As a result, it is hard to know how much of the *PH* involves anything like a factual description of events in Damascius' lifetime. A similar difficulty applies to the "Lives" of Porphyry and Marinus, so no one of these texts can be a measure for the others.

The *PH* is also a pilgrimage narrative that records a form of spiritual tourism. As such, it is a very ancient genre, if we consider the origins of the Greek word *theoria* or sightseeing.[36] As sightseer, observer of lands, shrines, and customs, the sage embarks on hazardous or arduous journeys to distant realms. Among such time-honored travelers, one might number Odysseus and Plato (according to the *Seventh Letter*, which has Plato traveling to Egypt to learn a more pristine wisdom), along with Plotinus, whom Porphyry has joining a

military expedition in hopes of a voyage to India, and perhaps even Pausanias, whose *Periegesis* has been likened to a tour guide for Hellenic pilgrims.[37] The "Lives" of the Neoplatonist philosophers are notable for such pilgrimage accounts: the excursion of Iamblichus' school to the hot springs of Gadara, where pupils bathed with their professor; Proclus' visit to the temple of Adrotta in Lydia.[38] The *PH* has Damascius and company embark on an eight-month expedition to Syria, and to the Hellenic cities of Heliopolis, Beirut, and Aphrodisias. Damascius describes Isidore as a kind of spiritual sightseer: "He [Isidore] was devoted to travel, not of the empty and hedonistic kind which gapes at man-made buildings and the size and beauty of cities; but, if he ever heard of some extraordinary or sacred phenomenon, whether secret or manifest, he wanted to witness it for himself" (*PH* 21a).[39]

Though the fragments of the *PH* provide only a sketchy outline of this journey, Damascius and Isidore presumably traveled to ancient cities whose sanctuaries had been closed, whose oracles were muted.[40] In the rapidly disintegrating world of late paganism, Isidore's "tour" had special importance. Damascius writes: "without gods, without oracles, a philosopher has no place."[41] Damascius and Isidore had come to witness the *aporrheta*—the prodigies or phenomena that now took the place of elaborate temples. The water of the Styx, local deities, and dreams en route all figure into what is purportedly Damascius' travelogue. The geographic settings of the ancient world become landscapes of the spirit, where local shrines and caves form a pagan cartography. Damascius was aware that he was writing in the twilight of a world his predecessors had philosophized as continuing to exist eternally in relation to the One. Damascius followed a venerable tradition of asserting the primacy of landscape in the location of shrines. As pagans witnessed the destruction of their temples, they attempted to prevent what they saw as a spiritual drought from decimating the sanctity of the world. One must appreciate the importance of this tradition in light of the general purpose of the *PH*: to commemorate the sanctity of the Hellenic religion.

Major Works

Overview

For extensive discussion of all of Damascius' works, whether surviving or lost, readers should consult Westerink and Combès, Introduction to *C-W*, and Hoffmann 1994. What follows is a brief inventory of Damascius' known works, with more extended discussion of themes relevant to the study of the *Problems and Solutions* and Damascius' philosophy. Damascius' works are usually divided into two groups, literary and philosophical. The two literary works attributed to Damascius are the *Paradoxa* and the *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical*

History. The *Paradoxa* is entirely lost, but from Byzantine reports it evidently contained stories of the miraculous or supernatural, perhaps comparable to that of the *1001 Nights*. Damascius admittedly displays a taste for such stories in the *PH*, with its descriptions of unusual phenomena, or *paradoxa* (sparking horses, prophetic stones, and the like).

Philosophical

Damascius lectured or composed commentaries on Plato's dialogues in keeping with the Neoplatonic curriculum developed in the third and early fourth centuries under the influence of Iamblichus. We have evidence for this form of education in the *Anonymous Prolegomena to the Study of Plato*,[42] written in the sixth century, but containing evidence for the curricula used much earlier. The *Prolegomena* lists a considerably scaled-down reading program that excludes the aporetic dialogues on the grounds that they are incomplete and lacking sufficient doctrinal content. In general, the reading order correlated closely with the Neoplatonic system of ranking kinds of virtue. The *Alcibiades* (a dialogue hardly recognized as genuine among scholars today) came first in the schedule, since it promoted self-knowledge. It was followed by the *Gorgias* (constitutional virtues) and the *Phaedo* (purificatory virtues). The first decad of dialogues led up to the *Philebus* (study of the Good), a theological dialogue, and the series was crowned by the two "perfect" dialogues, the *Timaeus* (all reality via physics) and the *Parmenides* (all reality via metaphysics).

Damascius' philosophical works exist in varying degrees of completeness. Westerink's introduction to the *Lectures on the Phaedo* contains a useful discussion of the surviving lectures. There are traces of or references to commentaries on the *Alcibiades*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Laws* I and II, *Republic*, *Philebus*, and *Parmenides*. Of these, the *Commentary on the Parmenides* was written by Damascius himself, while the *Alcibiades* commentary survives as quotations in a commentary by Olympiodorus. The *Phaedo* and *Philebus* commentaries survive in the form of reports—*apo phones*—or lecture notes from a series given by Damascius. We know of other commentaries from internal references within the extant Damascian corpus.

Damascius also lectured on Aristotelian works or at least on topics pursued by members of the Aristotelian commentator tradition. Of these, the most important are the fragmentary remains of Damascius' treatise *On Number, Space, and Time*, preserved in Simplicius' *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*. The two loci of this treatise's remains are in the Corollary on Space (601–645) and Corollary on Time (773–800).[43] There are also some quotations in Philoponus' *In Meteora* from a work by Damascius entitled *Aristotle's Meteorology*. For a more comprehensive discussion of the putative contents of these lost works, readers should consult the very thorough discussion of Combès and Westerink in the Introduction to *C-W*. English translations are available for the following works:

Simplicius' commentary on the *De Caelo*, the reports of the *Lectures on the Philebus* and *Phaedo*, and the *PH*.

Philosophical History

TEXT. The *Life of Isidore* or *Philosophical History* is a lost work partially preserved in fragments from Photius' *Bibliotheca* and from entries in the *Suda* (1928–38. *Suidae Lexicon*, I-V ed. A. Adler. Leipzig). This work is one of the more widely studied of Damascius' writings due to its great interest as a source of late-antique intellectual history and politics. There are two editions of the work: Zintzen's edition of 1967 and Athanassiadi's edition and English translation of 1999. Damascius' life as reflected in his study of Isidore has been reconstructed by Asmus from the fragments found in Photius and the *Suda*.[44] Zintzen's edition carefully follows the placement of the fragments based on Asmus's arrangement.[45] Recently, Athanassiadi has challenged much of the earlier editorial work and printed an edition that goes back to Adler's edition of the *Suda* and Henry's edition of Photius, both of which informed Zinzten's text. There are two recensions of Photius, an earlier edition and a later edition (the latter being stylistically superior), as well as the prosopographical entries of the *Suda*. Athanassiadi follows the previous editors in regarding Photius 1–230 "as the spine of the reconstructed text," and disperses the *Suda* fragments where appropriate. She then divides the whole text by combining several fragments into 159 "thematic units of uneven length." How much of the original text is preserved in the fragments is unknown.

The *PH* introduces us to the major figures in the philosophical community of Alexandria, especially Isidore; follows Damascius' intellectual biography as a young student of rhetoric in Alexandria; describes the persecution of Hypatia, who was martyred in 415; moves to events in Athens in the 490s following the death of Proclus; discusses the final destruction of Horapollo's school and the flights of Damascius and Isidore; and ends with the arrival of Damascius and Isidore in Athens and the philosophical reforms that Isidore was concerned to foster in the Academy.

THEMES. Damascius' *Philosophical History* is unusual for the Neoplatonist biographical genre in that it is written in the first person, with Damascius serving as an eyewitness to the events and persons described. Twice Damascius calls attention to the truthfulness of his account and insists on the reliability of what he reports,[46] and on his purpose, which must be divined from several fragments that treat of the question of Isidore's embodiment (5 a, b, c; 6 a): "My friend, someone might object, just what is the proof that your philosopher [Isidore] originated from that class of souls?" (6a) Damascius' central theme is the restoration of philosophy, a task for which a certain class of souls receives

embodiment. Isidore's soul is the subject of the *PH*: "flying down from the vault of heaven, it attached itself to life on earth" (5b).

Again, the same theme emerges in 5c: "I thought that he was shouting as he descended into generation, 'I have arrived here from a better place'" (5c, Athanassiadi 1999a).

The class of soul that Damascius is referring to here can be identified with that which "descends for the salvation, purification, and perfection of this realm," discussed by Iamblichus in his *De Anima* (fragment 29). As Dillon and Finamore clarify in their edition of the fragments of that text, the pure souls "are born in the bodies of the especially spiritual and philosophical."[47] Later we shall investigate Iamblichus' theory of the soul and its descent, as reflected in Damascius' *Commentary on the Parmenides*. For now, it is important only to note that Iamblichus seems to have interpreted *Phaedrus* 248c, where Plato speaks of a class of soul that does not descend into embodiment but remains "unharmed," as indicating that some souls never break their contact with the intelligible realm. These souls do undergo embodiment according to Iamblichus, as all human souls must, and yet they are able to "stand aside from nature," meaning they can free themselves from passions and live a detached or purely contemplative life (*DM* 18).[48] Damascius relies on this doctrine of the pure soul, or one belonging to the contemplative order, in identifying the true nature of Isidore's philosophical disposition. Thus the *PH* stands as a narrative account of Isidore's cosmic mission—the rejuvenation of philosophy, defined by Damascius as "merging with god, or rather complete unity, the return of our souls back to the divine, [by means of] reverting and concentrating themselves away from the great division" (4c).

Damascius declares that he will only report the direct sayings of his master or events that he himself has observed. Damascius' work on behalf of the disintegrating Academy and the spiritually restorative activity of Isidore's pilgrimage (6c) converge on the aspiration of restoring the contemplative life. The narrative of the *PH* unfolds as a chronicle of Isidore's return to Athens for the accession of the *diadochia*, or Platonic succession. Isidore manifests civic virtue in exhibiting bravery during persecution, and strength of character in the face of political intrigues and general malaise within the Academy. Throughout the book, the persistent theme is of Damascius and his co-philosophers living under the threat of philosophy's demise; the book as a whole is pervaded by distressing metaphors such as old-age, sunset, extinction and so forth. We read that Κινδυνεύει ἀποσβῆναι τῆς ἀληθείας τὸ χρῆμα· "The heart of truth is in danger of being extinguished" (36a), and that Καὶ δύσεται τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἅτε οὐ δυναμένοις αὐτοῦ φέρειν τὴν ἀνατολήν "[Wisdom or truth] will set for human beings, since they are unable to endure its divine arising" (36c).

Nevertheless, for Damascius, merely standing by and passively awaiting the end (he refers to a certain necessity that operates through maleficent agents) is not an option: "men speak euphemistically of virtue in reference to a life that

is adverse to action, but that is not how things truly stand, in my view. . . . Those who sitting full of arguments and philosophizing in a corner discourse very pompously about justice and moderation, usually disgrace themselves when compelled to undertake some action" (124, 1–3; 10–11).

In late Neoplatonism, teaching and learning were thought to constitute a sacred rite. Proclus begins the *Platonic Theology* (*PT*) with an allusion to the doctrine of an eternal chain of transmission extending back to Plato. Wisdom abides in a timeless storehouse but is manifested temporally when conditions are ripe, or human beings are capable of receiving it. Παρ'αὐτοῖς τοῖς θεοῖς διαιωνίως ὑφεστηκυῖαν ἐκεῖθεν τοῖς κατὰ χρόνον αὐτῆς ἀπολαῦσαι δυναμένοις ἐκφανῆναι. "Residing with the gods eternally, [wisdom] from there is revealed temporally to those who are able to appreciate it" (*PT* I.6.2–3). Moreover, this possibility of receiving divine wisdom is continually present with each successive generation, and the transmission is accomplished out of gratitude for those who made it available: "one must . . . also make available the signs of the blessed vision for the next generation" (*PT* I.7.13–14).

The injunctions of Proclus that receiving Plato's wisdom is a supreme blessing, while generosity toward others manifests the gratitude for one's own enlightenment (I take this to be what Proclus is speaking of when he mentions the "blessed vision"), undergird the purpose of Damascius' *Philosophical History*. Part of this doctrine of transmission also encompasses a vaguely sketched idea that the souls of some philosophers belong to a distinct rank. We saw that Damascius mentions that Isidore's soul descended from "that tribe (*ethnos*) of souls," while Proclus uses metaphors such as "sacred tradition," "choir," and "Bacchic rite" (*PT* I.7.1). As Athanassiadi suggests, it could well be that Damascius felt compelled to write this appreciation of his own teacher Isidore on receiving the *diadochia*, both to clarify what the function and significance of this office was for his tradition and to pay back his own debt of gratitude for the generosity of his teacher. It should be noted that Trabatonni and Combès also agree with this interpretation. Trabatonni (1985, 86–87) sees the work as a programmatic manifesto directed toward mobilizing the pagan community at Athens.

Anonymous Lectures on the Phaedo I and II

TEXT. The reports for the anonymous *Lectures on the Phaedo* attributed to Damascius are found on a single manuscript, *Marc. Gr.* 196 ff. 242–337 along with an anonymous *Lecture on the Philebus*, also attributable to Damascius. The first contains what Westerink believes to constitute an independent treatise written by Damascius, *On the Argument from Contraries in the Argument for the Immortality of the Soul*. The lecture notes are divided according to days, marked with a notation device that corresponds to the astronomical symbol for the sun.

As with the other Damascian commentaries, what we are confronted with in these works are commentaries upon commentaries. Damascius expounds the Platonic lemmas or refers to a distinctive passage by summarizing the Proclean interpretation and then proceeding to refine it. Often Damascius' point is of an extremely technical nature; in other instances the purport of his criticism is unrecoverable due to the omission of the position under attack. Occasionally, however, Damascius critiques Proclus on substantive issues, especially in the *Problems and Solutions*, where his differences with Proclus are perhaps greatest. The anti-Proclean metaphysics of the *Problems and Solutions* make that work one of the most innovative treatises of the Neoplatonic corpus, as we shall see.

THEMES. The *Lectures on the Phaedo* contain three major divisions: On Death, On the Immortality of the Soul, and On the Myth of the Soul's Destinies. Although the first part, On Death, discusses a comparatively small portion of text (eight Stephanus pages out of nearly 120) it contains approximately one-third of the total commentary. Occupying an early position in the Neoplatonic curriculum, as its purpose is to teach the purificatory virtues, the *Phaedo* is a kind of advanced beginner's dialogue. Its true subject is proper care of the soul, which involves firmly setting out for the life of a person "who has detached himself from birth and death" (*In Phaed*. 172.5). This detachment or "real death" admits of differing degrees, depending on the virtues cultivated as well as on the nature of the first principle that one seeks in the pursuit of wisdom:

> The final goal for the philosopher committed to a social life is contact with the God who extends his providence to all things; for the one on the way to purification contact with the God who transcending all things is with himself alone; for the contemplative philosopher contact with the God who is united with the principle superior to himself and wishes to be theirs rather than his own; therefore Plato says: "to touch the Pure without being pure." (119)

The authentic life of the philosopher is one that frees itself from all social roles and disdains ceremony or badges of office. If the philosopher finds that he is called on to perform such a role, he still carries out all his activities "in search of purification." If he should need sacred robes for this purpose, he will wear them "as symbols, not as garments." This stripping away of the unnecessary is dictated insofar as one attains to the successive degrees of purification, "meeting one's own pure self" (I 67).

What are the possibilities for such an attainment? Is the contemplative life in the world of genesis even possible (I 115, on *Phaedo* 66e2–67a2)?For Damascius, Socrates' life and death are exemplary precisely because he answered these questions in the affirmative. Anxiety surrounding the viability of the contemplative life, a life that had fallen into decline, as we saw, owing to historical

forces and personal vices, is balanced by an insistence that such a life is possible for one who chooses it. The problem, Damascius believes, is that "someone who practices philosophy without effort will not reap its fruit" (*In Phaed.* I 168.14)

The philosophical life entails the cultivation of the entire spectrum of virtues from civic to hieratic. Its attainment is a spiritual progression of seven stages that are the subject of I 138–151. Each stage corresponds to a relevant passage from the curriculum. Damascius attributes several innovations in the traditional classificatory scheme to Iamblichus' treatise *On Virtue*,[49] which lists the following grades of virtue: natural, ethical, political, purificatory, theoretic, paradigmatic, and hieratic. This gradient is based on the levels of being at which the practitioner discovers his continually ascending identity, from the body (natural virtues, shared with the animal kingdom), all the way up to the hieratic virtues (virtues that are proper to the One and no longer are attached to specific states of being).

Since the gods themselves possess all of the virtues, the contemplative is not entitled to omit any, including the so-called lower virtues (civic, natural, and ethical): "virtue cannot be insight alone but must include the other three." Throughout the *Lectures on the Phaedo*, the theme of unceasing commitment to the path of philosophy combines with unflinching self-knowledge. There is a danger of the philosopher hiding behind robes, as we saw, claiming ethical privileges that others do not share, or relying on the contemplative lifestyle to excuse inactivity. One senses the urgency of Damascius' exhortation to bravery—"unwavering firmness toward the inferior"—which he holds as the prerequisite to the philosophical life: "First one has to stand firm against the inferior powers, then revert upon oneself, then develop one's own natural activity" (*In Phaed.* I 152).

ORPHISM IN THE LECTURES ON THE PHAEDO. Religious symbolism associated with Orphism is prominent in Plato's dialogue, in the oft-quoted passages (i.e., *soma/sema*, "many carry the Thyrsus, few the Bacchants"), in the descriptions of the afterlife (107d5–e4), and in the sacred geography depicted at 109a–110b1. Recent work has done much to uncover Plato's own appropriation of Orphic and Pythagorean teachings, and Peter Kingsley has now devoted an important book to establishing this connection through a close reading of the mythic passages in Plato's *Phaedo* and *Gorgias*.[50] Furthermore, the discovery of the Derveni Papyrus[51] has confirmed scholarly conjecture about the Orphic setting or tone of the myths in both of these dialogues, since this papyrus "consists of the allegorical interpretation of a poem ascribed to Orpheus."[52] Neoplatonists developed these Orphic allusions beyond exegesis of the *Phaedo*, to complement their Platonist metaphysics with a divine revelation.

Damascius spends some time on the Orphic background to Socrates' injunction against suicide at *Phaedo* 61c2 and following, and explains this part

of the text by reference to the Orphic sequence involving Dionysus and the Titans.[53] In the *Lectures on the Phaedo*, Dionysus is responsible for the souls' fall into human consciousness, but also comes to free them from their bondage to the body: "when they submit to their punishment and take care of themselves, then, cleansed from the taints of Titanic existence and gathered together, they become Bacchus, that is to say, they become whole again" (I 166).

The lecture series opens with the meaning of the word "death" in the *Phaedo* in general, and the problem of suicide that the text raises at *Phaedo* 61c2–62b6. The discussion of suicide reveals much about the Orphic elements in Damascius' exegesis of Plato's works. Damascius focuses on the word "esoteric" that Plato uses to describe why suicide is prohibited to humans, and to the "custody" (*In Phaed*. paragraph 2) to which humans are charged during the time of their embodiment. This custody is of the titanic order. In paragraphs 3 and 4, it becomes clear that Damascius is actually grappling with Proclus' explanation of Plato's text. Proclus claims that the Titans rule over the divided form of creation, under the monad of Dionysus. Damascius replies that the Titans are actually introducing another form of creation or demiurgic activity that is essentially opposed to the rule of Dionysus:

5. Why are the Titans said to plot against Dionysus? Because they initiate a mode of creation that does not remain within the bounds of the multiform continuity of Dionysus.
6. Their punishment consists in the checking of their dividing activities. Such is all chastisement: it aims at restraining and reducing erroneous dispositions and activities. (*In Phaed*. paragraphs 5 and 6, Westerink's translation)

The titanic mode of life denotes a fragmentary condition of existence, the result of a desire to be a separate self, cut off from the continuity of what human beings share with superior and inferior forms of being. The custody that Socrates discusses in the *Phaedo*, then, is interpreted as the guarding power of Dionysus, who liberates human beings from their limitations and isolation, as well as the experience of embodiment itself, which is meant to teach the soul "what it is to be an individual" (paragraph 10). The rending of Dionysus reveals the divine origins of the human soul and the fundamental participation in the cosmic generosity that is its rightful share. For example, Proclus quotes an Orphic fragment (25, Kern 1922) describing the rending of Dionysus in his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*: "This is why the theologians say that at the dismemberment of Dionysus his intellect was preserved undivided through the foresight of Athena and that his soul was the first to be divided, and certainly the division into seven is proper primarily to Soul" (Morrow and Dillon 1987, 808).

For most late Neoplatonists, the dismemberment of Dionysus signifies a cosmogonal event—when the soul is divided or distributed into the world of

space—as well as an anthropological process, setting the stage for the soul's ultimate liberation from matter. The Neoplatonists, then, use the Dionysus episode of the Orphic sequence to account for the proliferation of multiplicity within the divine orders, and the origin of the human soul especially. Offspring of the Titans and ward of Dionysus, the soul's destiny is "deliverance," or freedom from all forms of limitation or separation from the all (*In Phaed.*, paragraph 12). This connection with Orphic literature is paralleled by the use of Orphic categories in the ranking of the Parmenidean hypotheses, both in the *Problems and Solutions* and in *Commentary on the Parmenides*. Its significance here is that the Orphic myth and, in particular, the celebration of Dionysus as source of creation and as bestower of liberation shows the Neoplatonists meditating on the status of multiplicity. Dionysus allows the Neoplatonists to understand multiplicity not just as an inferior station to the One in the strictly nondual metaphysical tradition of the *Parmenides*, but as the play of generosity, abundance, and goodness, all of which are aspects of the One under its nature as the Good.

Lectures on the Philebus

As we have seen, the *Lectures on the Philebus* are found together with the two versions of the *Lectures on the Phaedo* in the form of a *reportatio*, or reader's notes, in a manuscript that also contains several commentaries by Olympiodorus (on the *Gorgias*, *Alcibiades*, and *Phaedo*), *Marc Gr.*196. These lectures or sets of lecture notes, like the *Commentary on the Parmenides,* are based on a now lost commentary of the same name by Proclus, which is alluded to in the *PH*. Marinus showed Isidore his own *Commentary on the Philebus*, whereupon Isidore told him that Proclus' commentary would suffice. Its subject, according to the Neoplatonic curriculum, is the Good, and in particular, the Good that belongs to sentient beings.

For Platonists of late antiquity, it is standard practice to associate the three principles of *Philebus* 27, limit, unlimited, and mixed, with the first stages in the devolution of reality after the One.[54] In the metaphysics of both Proclus and Iamblichus, *peras* and *apeiron* constitute a dyad after the One, becoming conduits of unity and multiplicity, and introducing the possibility of reality outside of the ineffable first principle. The third nature, the *Philebus*'s mixed, introduces a subsequent stage of development, which Proclus and Iamblichus understand as the intelligible world, or the realm of Being. Being forms the apex of the intelligible triad, which is, as it were, composed of two elements, the limited and the unlimited, that constitute its parts; hence its equivalence to the Platonic "mixed."[55] Thus the three kinds of Plato's *Philebus* are the fulcrum around which reality proliferates and the hidden fullness of the One pours forth into the world of manifestation.

Here is Greek text of the *Philebus* 27d6–10, as printed in the Oxford Classical Text with the bracketed words indicating a textual variant; some editors print the neuter form of this phrase, as opposed to the masculine gender; thus the mixed in this line refers either to the mixed life or to the mixed qua ontological kind.[56]

> Καὶ μέρος γ' αὐτὸν φήσομεν εἶναι τοῦ τρίτου οἷμα γένους· οὐ γὰρ [ὁ] δυοῖν τινοῖν ἐστι [μικτὸς ἐκεῖνος] ἀλλὰ συμπάντων τῶν ἀπείρων ὑπὸ τοῦ πέρατος δεδεμένων, ὥστε ὀρθῶς ὁ νικηφόρος οὗτος βίος μέρος ἐκείνου γίγνοιτ' ἄν.
>
> We will, I think, assign it to the third kind, for it is not a mixture of just two elements but of the sort where all that is unlimited is tied down by limit. It would seem right, then to make our victorious form of life part of that kind. (Cooper 1961)

Neoplatonist commentators focus on 27d7, where Plato seems to say that the mixed is not composed of the two prior principles. Some commentators worry over Plato's view here; this clarification of Plato evidently characterizes a remark of Proclus, when he says: "Let no one be astonished that Socrates in the *Philebus* assumes that the mixed is prior to the limit and the unlimited, whereas we in turn show that the limit and the unlimited transcend the mixed. For each of these [limit and unlimited] is in two senses, the one is prior to being, the other is in being, the one generates the mixed, and the other is an element of the mixed" (*PT* III 10.42.12–17).

Damascius departs from this orthodox interpretation of the *Philebus*, suggesting that there are not two constituents of the mixed, one unifying and the other multiplying. He also denies that the mixed is equivalent to Being. Instead, the mixed has its own function as the channel by which all things pour forth from the One into the possibility of Being. The mixed fuses the unity of the first henad with the all possibility of the second henad, to create a third nature that is the peer of the first two henads, insofar as the first henad must contain all things and the second henad must belong to the One. Hence the third henad expresses just this realization of the all in the One and the One in the all, which is in turn a fundamental feature of the reality Damascius attempts to discern.

In chapters 55–58 of the *Problems and Solutions*, Damascius elaborates his interpretation of the mixed qua henad, which, as he says, "'will exist by virtue of its own nature and not as the combination of plural elements" (II 43.1–2). Criticizing Proclus' interpretation, Damascius suggests that Proclus' way of reading the passage necessitates an infinite regress. There will have to be a mixed before the mixed, which gives the nature of the mixed, and then there will be two principles in this mixed, and they will have to have causes, and so on, ad infinitum:

> It will be necessary to introduce a principle for the mixed that has the unique character of the mixed, and is itself called "mixed," as a kind of indication [representing] its nature, which subsists prior to the true "mixed" (so too with the one and the many, we also assign some other version of the one and the many before the homonymous elements in the mixed) and before the mixed there will be the two principles once more. But in this way we shall go on positing principles before principles indefinitely. (II 43)

Here his view is difficult to recover; on the one hand, he seems critical of Proclus and Syrianus (his standard appellation for them is "the philosophers"). But what this criticism consists in is hard to say; he goes on to say that the principles of the mixed are not, in fact, limit and the unlimited, which then combine to form the mixed as Being. Instead, each, the limit and the unlimited is the principle of all things: "Rather, each of the two is the principle of all things, the one is the principle of all things as differentiated and many and indefinite, or however [one likes to express it], and the other is the principle of all things as unified,[57] and as ones, and as informed by limit" (II 43). As if by way of agreeing that his exegesis is uncertain at this point, Damascius now reiterates the question at stake:

> Do the participations in the two principles bring about the mixed? For the argument once more reverts to the question of whether or not the one and the many are elements [of the third], *a position that the philosophers come to, but that we do not accept*.
>
> And so let us also bring in the seventh line of demonstration, that is, that each of the three principles is all things and also before all things. But the third principle is all things in the unity of all things, while the first is all things in the One, as a unique and perfect simplicity, and the intermediate is all things in all things. The One is the One before all things, the second is all things, and the third is the One-all as unity. (II 34)

Thus Damascius tries to uproot the interpretation that sees the limit as the monad, the unlimited as the dyad, and the latter as acting upon the former in order to generate number, for example. Instead, there is no production of the mixed; it rather functions as the productive cause of the intelligible order. That Damascius is couching his interpretation as a response to Proclus is clear from a comparison with *PT* III 9.15–20, where Proclus says explicitly that the mixed is intelligible, and further that the mixed is "made" and that its generation is lower than that of the prior henads, the limit and unlimited, whose reality is not "made" but "manifested." To summarize, then, in reply to Proclus'

interpretation, Damascius insists that the mixed is not generated, is a henad, and has its own distinctive nature.

> The same argument will apply both to the composite nature of the mixed which arises when this composite nature is contemplated [by us], in our own weakness, and to the purified simplicity of the mixed, even if one makes the monad and the indefinite dyad the two principles, yet contemplates the unified triad as from these two, still the triad is not composed from three things, but it is itself the one of the triad, and therefore has one distinctive triadic character that contains all things in this very one. (II 52)

What difference, ultimately, does this elevation of the Unified to the status of henad from its status as intelligible make? How does this criticism of Proclus relate to the larger issue of late antique dialectic?

We return to the exegetical situation: Damascius is everywhere addressing Proclean metaphysics, and often, as here, he is actually pitting an Iamblichean interpretation against Proclus' opinion. If Damascius includes the mixed within the order of the henads, or in the realm of the One, it is not without interest that he alludes to a similar doctrine in Iamblichus' now lost *Commentary on the Parmenides* that the Unified remains in the ambit of the One: "How is Iamblichus' interpretion of the intelligible different, when he says that it subsists 'around the One' and never emerges outside of the one?" (II 93). And again: "And so Iamblichus also represented the intelligible as in the One, because the intelligible was more united to the One and more conformed to it than to Being" (II 97). This fragment (cited by Dillon in his commentary as fragment 2b of Iamblichus' lost *Commentary on the Parmenides*, cf. Dillon's own commentary on pp. 391–393 of Morrow and Dillon 1987) is important evidence for the origin of Damascius' own views on the nature of the intelligible triad, One-all, all-One, and the Unified. Even the Unified, the lowest member of this order, is treated here as belonging more to the order of the One than to the intelligible. To some extent, the various exegetes are working with the same understanding but employing different terminology. For example, right at the beginning of his *ET*, Proclus uses language that will remind the reader of Damascius' third henad, the Unified, and distinguishes the Unified from the One as such, which he calls the *autohen*, the One in itself (*ET* proposition 4): Πᾶν τὸ ἡνωμένον ἕτερόν ἐστι τοῦ αὐτοενός. "All that is Unified is other than the One in itself."

Thus Damascius makes this exegetical point in keeping with a larger criticism of Proclus' views of causation, according to which plurality is other than the One, participates in the One (ET Proposition 1: Πᾶν πλῆθος μετέχει πῃ τοῦ ἑνός) and the One itself does not actually include multiplicity. Damascius' exegesis of the three henads in his *Lectures on the Philebus* and in chapters 53–58 of the *Problems and Solutions* demonstrate a different view of causation. For

him, the One includes all things. All things cannot arise from what is other than the One, and there is no source of multiplicity except the One.

Of themes that are particular to the philosophy of Damascius, Westerink rightly points out that nos. 12–16, the brief excursus on "the appetitive function of intelligence," is echoed at *Problems and Solutions* I, 185, 16–22. Commenting on *Philebus* 11b4–c2 (is intelligence or pleasure or their mixture the human good?), he answers this question and suggests that appetite is an element of intellect, or rather that "the isolation of intelligence is forced and impossible . . . for the love of truth is a strong emotion and so is the joy of attaining it" Another way of stating the solution is to say that, contrary to the strict tripartite division of appetite, emotion, and intellect of Plato's psychology, Damascius assigns the faculty that may be translated as "desiring inquiry" (*zetetikos*) an analogous function to that of the *orektikon*, or appetitive faculty.

In the *Lectures on the Philebus*, we encounter Damascius' understanding of the meaning of the mixed life:

> the analogue of the appetitive function is the urge to inquiry; for inquiry can be described as cognitive appetition, being a way to an end, just as appetition is directed to an end; knowledge, however, is attainment of truth, and its analogue is attainment of desire, to which, for want of a more appropriate term, one might apply the word 'enjoyment.' (*In Phil.* 13.5)

Hence the cognitive life is the best life, since it combines pleasure and knowledge. To the extent that we no longer have Proclus' *Commentary on the Philebus*, it is hard to know in what way Damascius might be replying to Proclus' interpretation of *Philebus* 12 ff.; nevertheless, here I will venture a speculation as to what aspect of Proclus' work Damascius responds to.

In order to present this speculation, I turn to consider the corresponding passage in *Problems and Solutions,* in which Damascius' recognition of the "desiring intellect" is confirmed. At *Problems and Solutions* II 155 16–22, Damascius actually defines intellect relative to the intelligible as "that which is capable of desire."

> Why then is intellect both, knower and known, whereas substance is only knowable, although it is itself seen in a certain distinction, as has been said? We must reply that the *knowable wishes to be something desirable,* whereas what is capable of knowledge wishes to be *that which desires,* but these things too are relative to each other, in distinction, just as intellect and substance are. And yet substance is what is desired, since it is superior, and intellect that which is capable of desire.

To what extent is this doctrine of the appetitive intellect a response to Proclus' exegesis? In my view, Damascius' understanding of the intellect as appetitive derives from his fuller treatment of the topic of intellectual reversion. In the *Problems and Solutions*, for example, Damascius' criticism of the Proclean

theory of intellection and specifically, the identity thesis that underlies it, is linked to his conception of the intellect as appetitive. In his discussion of intellect, Damascius emphasizes the substantive differentiation between the knower and the known, a fact that follows from the very definition of knowledge as cognitive reversion on the part of intellect toward Being. When Damascius says that "the desirable comes before the desiring and is distinct from it, because it has imparted to the latter [that which desires] the desire to acquire itself, in the latter's very remoteness" (II 158), he clearly makes the fact of intellective desire dependent on the prior construct of knowledge as reversion. For Damascius, the theory of intellectual reversion actually works against the competing Neoplatonic doctrine, that the knower and the known are one in the act of intellection: "Knowledge belongs to things which are either distant from each other or from themselves, and which are divided by means of otherness. Without otherness there could be no knower, no known, and no intermediate term, that is, knowledge" (II 154).

Thus intellect desires Being precisely because it is separate from Being; intellect never knows Being as it is in itself, since the intellect can never be strictly identical with Being: "in general, then, knowledge subsists according to the content of knowledge (*γνῶσμα*),[58] if this expression is allowed, and the content of knowledge is the object of knowledge, but [as it] already comes into being in the knower. [Another way to put it is to say that] knowledge accords with this content of knowledge but it is not the content of knowledge" (II 159).

As a whole, this approach to knowledge is consistent with the late Neoplatonist devaluation of the Intellect as the lowest member of the Intelligible triad, and with Damascius' own recommendation that knowledge must be unitive, or rather, there must be a release from all knowing, if Being is ever to be encountered as it is. It is this erotic drive on the part of the knower that is generated through difference which accounts for the fact that throughout his discussion of intellection, Damascius consistently employs an erotic vocabulary:

> Q What do we mean by the expression, "manifestation?"
>
> A Manifestation is what allows secondary principles to appear, and it makes itself available commensurate with those wishing to enjoy it and desiring to embrace the illumination that precedes it. (*C-W* II 151).

Commentary on the Parmenides

The lengthy *Commentary on the Parmenides* is found together with the *Problems and Solutions* on a single manuscript, *Marcianus Graecus* 246, separated by a lacuna. This manuscript belonged to a celebrated philosophical library from the last quarter of the ninth century, whose contents included works of Plato, Proclus, Olympiodorus, Maximus of Tyre, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Simplicius, John Philoponus, and Damascius. According to the conjecture

of Westerink, this collection is a copy made shortly after the philosophical library at Alexandria was transferred to Byzantium, perhaps in the seventh or ninth centuries.

In order to discuss the evolution of the commentary tradition on Plato's *Parmenides*, a summary of the hypotheses in the second half of the dialogue, on which the Neoplatonists based exegeses is helpful:

First hypothesis: If the One is, what are the consequences for it?
137c4–142a8: negative conclusions
Second hypothesis: If the One is, what are the consequences for it?
142b1–155e3: positive conclusions
Third hypothesis: If the One is and is not simultaneously, what are the consequences for it? 155e4–156b5: negative and positive conclusions
Fourth Hypothesis: If the One is, what are the consequences for the Others? 156b6–159b: positive conclusions
Fifth Hypothesis: If the One is, what are the consequences for the Others? 159b–1604: negative conclusions
Sixth hypothesis: If the One is not, what are the consequences for it?
160b–163b: positive conclusions
Seventh hypothesis: If the One is not, what are the consequences for it?
163b–164b: negative conclusions
Eighth hypothesis: If the One is not, what are the consequences for the Others? 164b5–165e1: positive conclusions
Ninth hypothesis: If the One is not, what are the consequences for the Others? 165e2–166c5: negative conclusions

The Neoplatonists held that Plato's *Parmenides* was a theological disquisition that charted not only the fundamental principles of reality but also the emergence of any possible form of being from one transcendent source.[59] The *Problems and Solutions* and the *Commentary on the Parmenides* have their place within this tradition of exegesis. We have already seen the force of Plotinus' claim to orthodoxy in *Enn.* V.1, 8, Plotinus' doxography concerning his doctrine of the three primary hypostases, Soul, Intellect, and the One.[60] If the One is beyond Being (a premise that Plotinus took directly from Plato's *Republic*) then Being only emerges as a subsequent stage of reality, at the level of Intellect, while transitory Being, or becoming, originates in the Third Hypostasis, or Soul. Plotinus left it for his followers to iron out the details of precisely how the entire dialogue mapped onto the universe as a whole. Proclus, the fifth-century Athenian Neoplatonist, left a catalogue of these attempts in Book VI of his *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* (col. 1052.31 ff.). There he set forth in astonishing detail the evolution of this exegetical tradition, beginning with Plotinus' disciples, Amelius and Porphyry, and ending with the interpretation of his own teacher Syrianus.[61]

The metaphysical interpretation of the latter half of the *Parmenides* began at least as early as the Neopythagorean Moderatus, perhaps alluded to at *IP* 640.17, when Proclus speaks of the "ancients."[62] Tarrant, starting from a suggestion made by E. R. Dodds in 1928, has shown that Moderatus recognized eight levels of reality in the hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. Tarrant quotes the following fragment from Porphyry's *On Matter* that purports to give a testimony on the theory of Moderatus: "Following the Pythagoreans, this man [Moderatus] declares the first One to be above Being and all substance, while the second One is true Being and the intelligible (he says it is the Forms) while the third , which is that of Soul . . . participates in the One and the Forms." (Simplicius 1892, 230 36–40, translation by Tarrant 2000, 157)

Proclus' intricate elaboration of the Parmenidean hypotheses follows Syrianus in holding that:

> The First Hypothesis is about the primal god, and the Second is about the intelligible world. But since there is a wide range in the intelligible world and there are many orders of gods, his [Syrianus'] view is that each of these divine orders has been named symbolically by Plato . . . all having their proper rank, and portraying without omission all the divine stages of procession, whether intelligible, intellectual, or supracosmic, and that thus all things are presented in logical order, as being symbols of the divine orders of being (*Commentary on Plato's Parmenides* [1864] 1961, 1061.21, Dillon's translation in Morrow and Dillon 1987, with omissions).

In other words, as Professor Dillon has succinctly said in his introduction to the translation of Book VI, "the First and Second Hypotheses actually run through the whole extent and variety of the divine world from the intelligible monad down to the . . . daemons, heroes and angels dependent on the divine Soul" (Dillon 1987, 388). From Syrianus, Proclus adapted two principles in his exegesis of the Parmenidean hypotheses; as Saffrey explains, "there are as many negations in the first hypothesis as there are affirmations in the second and what is denied in the first hypothesis of the first god, the One, is precisely what is affirmed in the second hypothesis and which constitutes the essential characteristics of the gods subordinated to the One" (Saffrey 1965, I, 58). Saffrey then goes on to summarize the consequences of these discoveries as follows: "In following carefully the series of negations of the first hypotheses or that of the affirmations in the second, one can immediately obtain the rigorous order of the classes of the gods in the divine hierarchy" (translated from the original French).

Most of Proclus' *Commentary* is now missing, but some of it can be reconstructed from Damascius, and also from Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, Books III–VI. The Second Hypothesis corresponds to the intelligible world, or *kosmos noetos*. However, in late Neoplatonism this order of reality itself is understood