

# Beyond the *Principle of Non-Contradiction*: Damascius on the Ineffable

Luca Pitteloud

This is the accepted manuscript (post-peer review, pre-typesetting) of an article published in *Rhizomata: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* (De Gruyter Brill), online in 2023. The final published version (Version of Record) is available on the publisher's website at <https://doi.org/10.1515/rhiz-2022-0017>

## Introduction

A rather enigmatic claim about the Ineffable is made by Damascius in his treaty, *Problems and Solutions concerning First Principles* (*De Principiis*). Wondering if we may be able to have a cognitive access to the Ineffable, Damascius writes: ‘And if we know, at least in this respect it is knowable, namely, insofar as it is unknowable, it is known as unknowable’.<sup>1</sup> This is not the only apparently contradictory claim that can be found in Damascius’ treaty. In fact, it seems that for the last of the Neoplatonists, when it comes to giving an account of the ultimate principle of reality, the Ineffable, we must go beyond the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC). Although Damascius is not the first Neoplatonic philosopher to explore how it is possible to give a discursive account of what lies beyond being and intelligibility, the radicality

---

<sup>1</sup> *Princ.* 12, 5-6: ‘εἰ δὲ γιγνώσκομεν, ταύτη ἄρα γνωστόν, ἢ ἀγνωστον, γιγνώσκεται ὅτι ἀγνωστον.’ Pages and lines quoted in this chapter are taken from the edition of (Westerink, 1986). Translations are from (Ahbel-Rappe, 2010) with some modifications.

of his discourse on the Ineffable leads to a highly original approach that is worth looking at in the context of this volume.

More specifically, in this chapter I will investigate the relationship between the ultimate principle of reality, the Ineffable, and the first principles of logic, especially the PNC. Quite often in the *De Principiis*, Damascius appears to endorse a view according to which it is necessary to admit contradictory claims about the Ineffable. However, its existence is assumed as a *unique* principle and thus it is explicitly claimed that it escapes any regression. An examination of these two aspects might be useful as it will help us to understand how Damascius highlights the limits of human language and discursive thought.

### **The first *aporia***

Silence also plays an important role in Damascius' attitude towards what he names the Ineffable. However, before reaching a state of silence, Damascius considers the status of the first principle quite extensively. Damascius' most famous argument can be found in the first lines of his work, *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*<sup>2</sup>. Without any kind of introductory remarks, Damascius writes: 'Is the so-called one principle of all things beyond all things or is it part of it, as if it were the summit of those things that proceed from it? And do we say that all things are with it [i.e. what is called the first principle], or after and from it?'<sup>3</sup>. Damascius offers here a dilemma between two propositions (*poteron*) which must be taken as exclusive: either (a) the Principle of All Things (PAT) is beyond all things or (b) it is part of all things. That is:  $((a) \rightarrow \neg(b)) \wedge ((b) \rightarrow \neg(a))$ . Nothing *a priori* prevents this alternative *not* to be

---

<sup>2</sup> Important studies of Damascius' treaty are: Galpérine (1987), Linguiti (1991), Dillon (1996), Hoffmann (1997), Ahbel-Rappe (2010), O'Meara, (2013), Tresson-Metry (2012), Vlad (2019), and Pelin (2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Princ.* 1, 4-7: 'Πότερον ἐπέκεινα τῶν πάντων ἐστίν ἡ μία τῶν πάντων ἀρχὴ λεγομένη, ἡ τι τῶν πάντων, οἷον κορυφὴ τῶν ἀπ' αὐτῆς προϊόντων; καὶ τὰ πάντα σὺν αὐτῇ λέγομεν εἶναι, ἢ μετ' αὐτὴν καὶ ἀπ' αὐτῆς;'

exclusive as in the case of a PAT that could hypothetically be both beyond all things and a member of all things. However, Damascius will not admit this possibility as will become clear from the examination of the two horns of the dilemma. Damascius starts by looking at (a).

Let's first assume that the PAT is beyond all things (a). In this case, the following four senses that can be given to the expression '*ta panta*' become unsatisfactory. First, all things *stricto sensu* (1, 9: *haplōs*) means *that from which nothing is absent* (1, 8-9). Now if the PAT were to be outside (1, 8: *ektos*) of all things, then *ta panta* would not be *ta panta*. In other words, in that scenario, all things would not be all things in the strictest sense, only all things except for the PAT.

Second, all things could be defined as a limited plurality (1, 11-12: *polla peperasma*) since unlimited things (*ta apeira*) could not exactly be all things (1, 12-13). In that sense, all things must be understood as *a limited whole*, i.e. all things must refer to a determined set of entities. Damascius explicitly excludes here the possibility of the existence of an infinity of things because in that case all things could not be described as a whole. He adds that the whole (1, 14: *pantotēs*) implies limit (1, 13: *horos*) and inclusion (1, 14: *perilepsis*). In short, *ta panta* must be a whole. If so, then, the PAT must be held to be the upper limit (1, 15: *peras to anō*) of the whole.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, if all things must be understood in the sense of a limited whole, then nothing (*ouden*) can be found outside of it (1, 13).<sup>5</sup>

A third meaning is then added to 'all things': the plurality of things that constitute a unique coordination (2, 3: *mia suntaxis*). An illustration of such a concept would be, for

---

<sup>4</sup> This must be understood within the nonplatonic hierarchical scheme of reality which goes from its lower (matter) to its upper end (the One).

<sup>5</sup> One might wonder why could the principle not be the outer limit? The principle would then be beyond all things in the sense that it limits those things, but also part of all things in the sense that the boundary of a whole is part of the whole. It will appear in the following lines that for Damascius, the principle, if it has to be the principle *of* all things, must belong to the whole in the specific sense of being coordinated to it. As it possesses an ontological superiority, it can be described as the upper limit of all things.

instance, an army which forms a single coordination when a general gives the order. As the PAT is the principles *of* all things, the relationship between the principle *and* all things must be a coordinated one, that is a relationship between a cause and its effects (2, 2). In the case of such a relationship of coordination, it is not possible to admit that the PAT could be found beyond all things, uncoordinated with them, since it is by hypothesis a principle. Consequently, the PAT must be found *in* the whole (2, 4: *en tois pasi*).

Finally, Damascius claims that what we call ‘all things’ in the full sense (2, 5: *haplôs*) is the whole (2, 4: *holôs*) of what can be conceived (2, 5-6: *ennooumen*). As it is possible to conceive the PAT, it must belong to all things, exactly as, Damascius adds, when we say the ‘the whole city’, we mean the rulers and the ruled.

The examination of the first horn of the dilemma (a) leads to the conclusion that if the PAT is beyond all things, in any of the four senses of this expression that are examined, the whole would not really be the whole of all things since the PAT would not be part of it. In other words, either all things are not *really* all things (but only all things without the PAT), or the PAT, if it does not belong to all things, does not belong to the coordinated reality that represents the whole and, in consequence, does not exist since nothing can exist beyond the All. Thus, (a) must be false.

Damascius proceeds to examine the second horn of the dilemma (b). Since, if (a) is false, (b) must be true, which implies that all things must be with (2, 9: *meta*) the PAT. However, if this is the case, we face a new alternative. Let’s consider the set constituted by all things *plus* the PAT, that we shall call ALL THINGS. Since ALL THINGS include the PAT, then either (i) ALL THINGS do not have a principle or (ii) an infinite regress (2, 12: *ep’ apeiron aniômen*) must be admitted. To understand better this alternative, a premise borrowed from Aristotle (*Phys.* III, 203 b6) is added by Damascius: ‘it is necessary for everything either to be

a principle or to be from a principle<sup>6</sup>. It has been suggested that the introduction of this premise would make the argument invalid as it would imply a confusion between the distributive and the collective senses of the expression ‘all things’.<sup>7</sup> In other words, it should be asked if Damascius commits in his reasoning the fallacy of composition, i.e. attributing, without any justification, the properties of the parts to the whole. If the whole is a unified coordination of things in which each of them needs a prior cause, as it has been defined in (a), it does not necessarily imply that the unified whole needs, for itself, a previous cause. However, this argument becomes valid if a hypothetical premise is added, namely that the whole conceived as the unified coordination of all things that is in need of a prior principle. In other words, an ordinated and coordinated whole cannot exist without a transcendent cause, since by the very fact that it is coordinated it finds itself in need of a cause and a principle *of its coordination*.

If this premise is admitted then, necessarily, ALL THINGS must have a principle (ii). The problem with this alternative is that it generates an infinite regress: since ALL THINGS must have a principle (let’s call it PAT<sup>2</sup>), then as PAT<sup>2</sup> and ALL THINGS are coordinated (PAT<sup>2</sup> being the principle and cause of ALL THINGS), then ALL THINGS+PAT<sup>2</sup> must have a principle (PAT<sup>3</sup>) and so on. This regress must be rejected since, in order to explain and justify the coordination of the unified whole constituted by all things, we would be led to an infinity of principles.<sup>8</sup> But, it has already been granted that the whole must be limited.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, by hypothesis (b), the PAT must be with (2, 15: *sun*) all things and cannot be outside of them (2, 15: *exō*). Thus, (ii) must be false. However, if the whole does not have a principle, and if everything must either be a principle or from a principle, then the whole must be a principle (i). But this alternative turns out to be false, since there is nothing outside of ‘all things’ and

---

<sup>6</sup> *Princ.* 2, 12-13: ‘Ἄλλὰ μὴν δεῖ γε πᾶν ἢ ἀρχὴν εῖναι ἢ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς·’

<sup>7</sup> O’Meara (2004: 103).

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the kind of regress found in Aristotle and analysed by Duncombe in this issue.

<sup>9</sup> It was admitted that the whole is limited under the horn (a) of the dilemma, not as a premise true only for (a) but more generally for any use of the concept ‘whole’. For Damascius, any whole must be limited and consequently it applies also to (b).

consequently nothing to be the principle of. Again, if ‘all things’ means a unified and coordinated whole, including all that exists, then nothing could exist as the effect of all things (2, 17-18: *hôs tōn pantōn apotelesma*). So, since the whole is neither a principle (i) nor is it from a principle (ii), then (b) must be false. Schematically, this first *aporia* can be described in this manner:

Either the PAT is beyond ‘all things’ (a) or it is with ‘all things’ (b).

If (a), then

- (A): ‘all things’ are not ‘all things’
- (B): the principle of all things is not the principle of all things

(A) and (B) are impossible (contradictions) → (a) is false

If (b), then

- (C): “‘all things’+ the principle” is a principle (same contradiction as in (A))
- (D): “‘all things’+ the principle” is in need of a new principle, etc. (infinite regress)

(C) and (D) are impossible (contradiction and regression) → (b) is false.

What is striking in this dilemma is the fact that both horns (a) and (b), which are exclusive, turn out to be false. This *aporia* seems to be different from the Aristotelian type, which aims at making some progress on an issue by examining different alternatives in order to eliminate the false one(s) and chose the correct one.<sup>10</sup> On first appearance, it seems that Damascius might be offering a skeptical *aporia*.<sup>11</sup> However, this needs not to be the case. The inspiration is the second part of the *Parmenides*. Damascius’ first *aporia* seems very similar to

---

<sup>10</sup> For Aristotle, *aporiai* are zetetic tools which characterise the philosophical enquiry. See, for example, *De An.* III, 7, 431a24 and *Met.* A2, 289b17.

<sup>11</sup> There has been quite a lot of discussion of Damascius’ skepticism. See, for example, Ahbel-Rappe (1998) and Tresson-Metry (2012: 35-39) on Damascius’ use of the skeptic *peritropē*. Within Damascius’ *De Princ.* it is possible to distinguish between different kinds of *aporiai*: alternative questions, distinctions (no more F than not-F), contradictions (F and not-F), and exclusions (neither F nor not-F). For a list and analysis, see Tresson-Metry (2012: 33-35).

the first series of deductions about the One (D1).<sup>12</sup> The structure is in both cases a violation of the PEM (Principle of the Excluded Middle): if  $x$  is, then  $x$  neither is F nor not F. In other words, the conclusions reached are that both the One and the PAT neither are F nor not F. More narrowly, Damascius has shown that the PAT neither is part of the whole nor not part of it.<sup>13</sup> This first *aporia* is just the beginning of a long series of others that are all consequences of it.<sup>14</sup> The main tension at the center of the first *aporia* is the contradiction that arises from two opposing requirements for the PAT: it must be both absolute and relative, transcendent and immanent in relation to the whole.<sup>15</sup> It must be noted that in Damascius' *aporia*, what appears contradictory are our conceptions (*ennoia*) of what we call the PAT.<sup>16</sup>

Before going into more detail, let us address one question that seems to arise: what actually *is* the PAT? According to the dominant Neoplatonic interpretation, it is the One.<sup>17</sup> However, Damascius rejects this possibility, since the One, as a principle and cause of the many, must be related, and consequently immanent to them. Since the whole must be understood as implying the notions of distinction (2, 21: *en pléthei*) and plurality (2, 21-22: *tini diakrisei*), then the source of these characteristics must be the One (3, 1: *to hen*) and the Unified

---

<sup>12</sup> It could be asked if the *De Princ.* could somehow be Damascius' interpretation of the first series of deductions of Plato's *Parmenides*, since in Damascius commentary on this dialogue, (D1) is missing. See on that (Westerink, 1986), pp. LVII-LX. It has also been suggested by Galpérine (1987: 33) that Damascius operates an inversion of (D1) and (D2) in his interpretation. According to Tresson-Metry (2012: 195-204), no inversion is needed but only a change of point of view.

<sup>13</sup> Damascius does not consider the possibility of taking the upshot to be that there is no principle of all things, since supposing that there is such a principle has contradictory results. Indeed, all his reasoning presupposes a Neoplatonic derivative scheme of reality.

<sup>14</sup> On the PAT as a whole (I, 3, 18-25), as a One-whole (I, 3, 25-4, 12), on the necessity to go beyond the One (I, 5, 18-6, 16), on the un-cognoscibility of the PAT (I, 11, 17-12, 12; I, 14, 1; I, 14, 20-16, 19; I, 18, 2-13, I, 20, 5-9), on the transcendence of the PAT (I, 21, 3-14), on the apophatism of the PAT (I, 21, 15-22). For a complete list see, Tresson-Metry, (2012: 68-69, n. 111).

<sup>15</sup> This idea also is clearly expressed in the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides*, in which it is stated that the principle is an itself which however differs from itself (XIV, 5-6: *to auto touto ... heautou diapherei*).

<sup>16</sup> *De Princ.* I, 2, 5 and 19; 4, 14; 6, 9 and 7, 18-21.

<sup>17</sup> The One which is the subject of (D1) and identified with the Good beyond being from *Republic* 509b must be, in that case, a principle inherent to the whole reality. Damascius does not accept Porphyry's idea that the One could be both prior to the whole and part of it, as it would introduce duality into the One (it would be both transcendent and immanent). See on that Caluori (2018: 273-275).

(3, 1: *to hēnōmenon*). This first distinction initiates more complex ones which aim to describe the ontological process of derivation from the One to the many as it is common in Neoplatonic metaphysics. The details and subtleties of the scheme go beyond the scope of this chapter. Though it is worth noting that the One is described here as the primary degree of unity in the series of unified multiple things.

What Damascius goes on to describe is a transitional process of disunification from the One itself, which somehow contains in itself ‘all things’ in an undiscernible manner. One might think, as an illustration, of a sort of nuclear fusion in which everything can be found in a state of absolute pre-differentiation, a kind of One-before-the-All which pre-contains the All.<sup>18</sup> The One in its relationships with all things can thus be said to be ‘those things before division by not being subject to division in any way’<sup>19</sup> and must somehow ‘swallow all things’ (3, 10: *panta katapion*). This expression suggests that the One in its plenitude anticipates the All and consequently, in its absolute simplicity, can be called the ‘All prior to the All’ since it is an anticipation of the All. Damascius seems to argue here that ‘all things’ proceed from the One because the One itself is all things before they are all things (3, 12: *panta kai auto pro tōn pantōn*). These distinctions might seem obscure to the unfamiliar reader, but what is worth noting is that whatever else the distinction between the One and the All may imply, for Damascius the very fact that the One is the coordinated cause of ‘all things’ implies that the One must also be taken with (3, 22: *sullaboimen*) ‘all things’. As the first *aporia* has shown, we must look for another principle prior to all things (3, 24: *archēn heteran pro tōn pantōn*). This further principle will not be considered either as anticipating the differentiations within the All (as the One is) or as being coordinated to the things that come after it. Contrary to this

---

<sup>18</sup> The Ineffable, which will be hypothesised prior to the One, is sometimes compared to a black hole. See Dillon, (1996: 126-127).

<sup>19</sup> *De Princ.*, I, 3, 8: ‘ἐκεῖνο πρὸ τοῦ μερισμοῦ, κατὰ τὸ πάντη ἀμερές’.

principle, Damascius argues that the One both is in some way or another (4, 1: *hopōsoun*) the All and prior to the All. The One actually is more one than it is ‘all things’ (4, 2: *mallon hen ē panta estin*) since it is one in itself (4, 3: *kath’ heauto*) and it is ‘all things’ in the sense that it is the cause (4, 3: *aition*) of them. In other words, the One is both absolutely one and yet takes part in a certain duality (4, 6: *diploēn*) by being the anticipation of the All.

Damascius immediately adds that it is *we* who actually make these divisions and create that duality (and even create multiplicity) because ‘the One, by the fact of being One, is all things in the simplest possible mode’<sup>20</sup>. However, very interestingly, even if it is from our point of view that duality is created within the One, it does not remove the necessity for the postulation of a further principle since ‘even if someone should say this, nevertheless it is necessary that the principle of all things transcends all things as well as the simplest totality and the simplicity that absorbs everything, namely the simplicity of the One’.<sup>21</sup> It appears here that even if the One is the purest simplicity that can be found, it is nevertheless necessary to hypothesise a further principle *outside* of the coordinated systems deriving from the One. As Damascius puts it, our soul conceives a PAT that is both beyond all things and uncoordinated with all things (4, 14-15: *archēn epekeina pantōn asuntakton pros panta*). Since the One cannot be this PAT, then it must be something else that Damascius, following Iamblichus<sup>22</sup>, calls the Ineffable or the Absolute. Since this principle must be unrelated to the All, it cannot even be called principle (*archē*), nor cause (*aitios*), nor first (*prōtos*), nor yet prior (*pro*) to all things, nor beyond (*epekeina*) all things (4, 15-17). Again, we are left with a problem: the PAT, which is beyond all things, cannot be said to be beyond all things.

<sup>20</sup> I, 4, 8-9: ‘έκεινο γὰρ τῷ ἐν εἶναι, πάντα ἔστι τὸν ἀπλούστατον τρόπον’.

<sup>21</sup> I, 4, 9-11: ‘εὶ δὲ καὶ τοῦτο λέγοι τις, ὅμως ἐξηρημένην δεῖ εἶναι τὴν τῶν πάντων ἀρχήν, αὐτῶν τῶν πάντων καὶ τῆς ἀπλούστατης παντότητος καὶ τῆς πάντα καταπιούσης ἀπλότητος, οὕτα ἡ τοῦ ἐνός.’

<sup>22</sup> See *De Princ.* II, 1, 4-8.

Damascius even states that ‘nor indeed can it be celebrated as anything at all, nor conceived of, nor even hinted at’<sup>23</sup>. In our reasoning and process of intellectual purification, we may attempt to reach the coordinated principle of all things, namely the One which is the ultimate limit of all beings. As we try to cognitively approach the One, we must recognise that it is impossible to conceive anything simpler than the One which is totally and solely one (5, 1-2: *tou pantē henos kai monon henos*). This allows Damascius to develop an important idea about the predication with regards to the One:

Even if we speak of it as the principle or cause or first or most simple, in that realm, such predicates and any other are only according to the One. But we, unable to grasp it, divide ourselves in relation to the One, and so we attribute to it the predicates that are divided in ourselves<sup>24</sup>, except that they are unworthy of it, since they, in their multiplicity, cannot be applied to the One.<sup>25</sup>

All the predicates we attribute to the One are thus not really adapted to it since by using them to describe it, we are injecting them into the One and make of it a plurality. What we should actually assert is that these predicates are in the One according to the One (5, 9: *en autōi kata to hen*) which is, as such, ‘not knowable nor nameable’ (5, 7-8: *oude ara gnōston oude onomaston*). Consequently, the One is the cause of ‘all things’ in its pure simplicity and it pre-contains ‘all things’ in a manner that we cannot properly understand since at our cognitive level we need to grasp things in their multiplicity and with their divisions. Divisions are in us and not in the One. But even so, the One is the cause of all multiple and divided beings which

---

<sup>23</sup> *De Princ.* I, 4, 16-17: ‘οὐδ' ὅμως ὑμνητέον, οὐδ' ἐννοητέον, οὐδὲ ὑπονοητέον’. Damascius believes that Plato gives an allusion to the Ineffable at the end of (D1) in the *Parmenides* (142a6-8) when claiming the One ‘is neither named nor described nor thought of nor known, nor does any existing thing perceive it’.

<sup>24</sup> In the sense that every predicate which we use in order to express the idea of unity is divided in us because we are not able to grasp the purest and absolute unity, precisely because our own nature is divided.

<sup>25</sup> I, 5, 2-7: ‘ὅ καὶ εἰ ἀρχὴν λέγοιμεν καὶ αἴτιον καὶ πρῶτον καὶ ἀπλούστατον, ἐκεῖ ταῦτα τε καὶ πάντα τὰ ἄλλα μόνον κατὰ τὸ ἐν· ἡμεῖς δὲ συνελεῖν οὐ δυνάμενοι μεριζόμεθα περὶ αὐτὸ τὰ ἐν ἡμῖν μεμερισμένα ἐκείνους κατηγοροῦντες, πλὴν ὅτι καὶ ταῦτα ἀτιμάζομεν, ὡς πολλὰ τῷ ἐνὶ μὴ ἐφαρμόζειν.’

constitute the All. As such, it is a principle or cause of all things, which remains for us unknowable, since our mode of grasping things implies alterity, division, and multiplicity.

Now, if the One is an ineffable principle of all things, why then do we need to suppose another further principle? Damascius precisely addresses this issue by stating the following question: ‘But if the One is the cause of all things and the container of all things, in what manner can we ascend beyond it?’<sup>26</sup> It seems likely that, as the One is the principle of which everything is derived, there is nothing beyond it and we are, to quote one of Damascius’ favorites expressions, ‘stepping into the void’ (5, 20: *kenembatoumen*).<sup>27</sup> If we are led to suppose the existence of a principle beyond the One, since this principle cannot even be one (5, 20: *mēde hen*), it must be nothing (5, 20: *ouden*)<sup>28</sup>. Seemingly, the many things which constitute the whole of reality only need one ultimate cause, namely the One. Let’s look closely at Damascius’ reason to admit the Ineffable. If we consider ‘all things’ as implying the existence of the ‘many things’, then it is necessary, argues Damascius, that the One is the only (5, 25: *monon*) cause of the many (*ta polla*). Two possibilities must be first rejected as possible causes of the many things: (i) nothing (*to ouden*) and (ii) the many (*ta polla*) themselves. Obviously, in the case of (i), ‘the nothing cannot be the cause of anything’<sup>29</sup>. As for (ii), it must be remembered that, by themselves, the many are uncoordinated (6, 1: *asuntakta*). That is, as such, the many cannot be a unique cause (6, 1: *hen aition*). And even if we assume that they could be a plurality of causes (6, 2: *polla aitia*), we would be left with two impossibilities; (a) it is not possible to find a plurality of causes *between* the uncoordinated many and (b) any possible causality found between the many would be circular (6, 2-3: *dia to kuklōi*). It seems that the argument goes like this: if the One were supposed not to exist as a unique cause of the many, then the many would

<sup>26</sup> I 5, 18-19: ‘Ἄλλ' ει τὸ ἐν πάντων αἴτιον καὶ πάντων περιεκτικόν, τίς ή ἐπεκείνα καὶ τούτου ἀνάβασις ἡμῶν;’

<sup>27</sup> On this expression, see Vlad (2017).

<sup>28</sup> On this expression, see Tresson-Metry (2012: 228-229).

<sup>29</sup> I, 5, 25-26: ‘τὸ γὰρ οὐδὲν αἴτιον οὐδενός’.

be uncoordinated (ii), in which case, they could not act as causes of each other (un-coordination implies the absence of causality between the many) (a), so each of the many could only be the cause of itself which implies circularity (b). Thus, the many cannot be causes of each other (6,2: *allēlōn*). Necessarily, then, the One must be the cause of the coordination (6, 5: *aition suntaxeōs*) of the many.

At this point, Damascius recognises that we could appear to be satisfied by claiming that the One is the ultimate principle of all things. It also seems that we can only have a conception (6, 9: *ennoian*) and a suspicion (6, 9: *huponoian*) of the One but not of something beyond it. However, Damascius adds, ‘from what is more known to us, we must accustom ourselves to the ineffable pangs in ourselves toward the Ineffable (for I know not how to express it) consciousness of that sublime truth’<sup>30</sup>. We will come back to the notion of the pangs or labours (*ōdines*) of our soul trying to give birth to knowledge. What is important for now is that Damascius provides us with an argument in favour of the existence of the Ineffable: ‘For since in our realm of existence that which is unrelated is much more valuable than that which is related, and that which is uncoordinated is more valuable than that which is coordinated, (...).’<sup>31</sup> Damascius recognises here that there is a scale of ontological value between things (for example, on this scale, the contemplative life is higher than the political one, Being than the Forms, the One than the many). This implies that within ‘all things’ there is a hierarchy that is guided by the fundamental idea that the more an entity is free from dependence, the higher it is on that scale. If this premise is accepted, then, since the One is the principle of ‘all things’ and thus must be related to the All, it is not completely independent and cannot be the most valuable and highest thing. In other words, as the One is related to the many, it must exist as *something*

<sup>30</sup> I, 6, 13-16 : ‘έκ τῶν ήμιν γνωριμωτέρων, ἀνεθιστέον τὰς ἐν ήμιν ἀρρήτους ὠδῖνας, εἰς τὴν ἄρρητον οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως εἴπω συναίσθησιν τῆς ὑπερηφάνου ταύτης ἀληθείας.’

<sup>31</sup> I, 6, 16-17 : ‘έπει γὰρ ἐν τοῖς τῇδε τὸ ὄσχετον πάντη τιμιώτερον τοῦ ἐν σχέσει καὶ τοῦ συντεταγμένου τὸ ἀσύντακτον.’

completely independent and uncoordinated beyond the One and the many (conceived as a series of causes and effects), ‘which completely transcends these relationships and stands in no relationship nor coordination whatsoever.’<sup>32</sup> Since the One is related to the many, there must be *something* prior to both of them, which must be beyond (*epekeina*) any opposition (*antithesis*) and even beyond the opposition between ‘the first and what comes after the first’ (7, 4: *tēs hōs prōtou kai meta to prōton*).

To sum up, Damascius has *first* offered a valid deduction to prove that the One must be the unique cause of the coordinated many. The deduction has the form of a *modus tollens*: if the One were not the unique cause of all things, then either (i) or (ii). But they are both false. (i) leads to a contradiction and (ii) to a reduction *ad absurdum* (both (a) and (b) imply an absurd consequence, which entails that (ii) is false). So, it can be concluded that the One must be the unique cause of the many. However, the argument does not stop here and another *modus tollens* is introduced: since (1) it must be admitted that the ultimate principle must be completely independent<sup>33</sup> and (2) the One is not completely independent, then the One cannot be the PAT. But if the PAT is not the One, what is it and what can be said of it?

### About the Ineffable

Even if the One lies beyond being, we can nonetheless attempt to grasp it by the purification of our conjecture of it (7, 18-19: *kata tēn diakathairomenēn huponoian*). However, the most venerable of all things cannot be an object of conception or conjecture (7, 20-21: *ennoiai kai huponoiai*). As there is no possible characterisation of this ultimate principle,

<sup>32</sup> I, 6, 21-22: ‘τὸ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐκβεβηκὸς καὶ ἐν οὐδεμιᾷ συντάξει καὶ σχέσει ὑποτιθέμενον, (...).’

<sup>33</sup> This property of being absolutely self-sufficient (*autarkestaton*) is attributed to the One by Plotinus (V, 4, 1; VI, 9, 6). The fact that the One is already ineffable implies for some that postulating another further principle is just postponing the problem to another unnecessary level. See Opsomer (2013: 639-642).

Damascius claims that the PAT must be a nothing (7, 25: *ouden*). But two sorts of ‘nothing’ exist: one is superior to the One (the Ineffable), the other inferior to it (non-being). Consequently, they are two ways of stepping into the void (*kenembatein*), either towards the superior nothing, the Ineffable (8, 2: *to arrēton*), or towards the inferior one, the absolute nothingness, which has no existence at all.<sup>34</sup> Now, if the Ineffable is a superior nothing, then arises the question of its relationship to the All. Damascius has argued that the Ineffable is absolutely independent and without relation to ‘all things’. In this context, the Ineffable is compared to a shrine (8, 7: *aduton*). However, to the surprise of the reader, Damascius affirms that ‘from that realm everything proceeds as from an inner shrine, but in an ineffable manner.’<sup>35</sup> This is rather surprising since the argument developed has just shown that the Ineffable must be completely independent from, and unrelated to, the All. This seems to be a contradiction that Damascius explicitly recognises:

If in saying these things about it, that it is Ineffable, that it is the inner sanctuary of all things and that it cannot be conceived, we feel the reversal of our argument, it is necessary to realise that these are names and concepts that express our labour pains, (...).<sup>36</sup>

By using the concepts of *peritropē*<sup>37</sup> and *ōdines*, Damascius appears to claim that, because of our own cognitive limits, when we try to grasp the Ineffable, we are faced with a reversal of our arguments that is a sort of self-refutation. Before looking into more details, it must be noted that this reversal of the discourse is a consequence of our own labour pains when we attempt to talk about the Ineffable, which is in itself inaccessible to us. In consequence,

---

<sup>34</sup> Damascius alludes here to Plato’s *Sophist*, 238c9-10 where Parmenides’ non-being is under scrutiny.

<sup>35</sup> I, 8, 7-9: ‘ώσπερ ἐξ ἀδύτου πάντα προιέναι, ἐκ τε ἀπορρήτου καὶ τὸν ἀπόρρητον τρόπον’

<sup>36</sup> I, 8, 12-15: ‘Εἰ δὲ αὐτὰ ταῦτα περὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες ὅτι ἀπόρρητον, ὅτι ἀδύτον τῶν πάντων, ὅτι ἀπερινόητον περιτρεπόμεθα τῷ λόγῳ, εἰδέναι χρὴ ὅτι ταῦτα ὄνόματά ἔστι καὶ ὥματα τῶν ἡμετέρων ὠδίνων, (...).’

<sup>37</sup> This reversal of the argument does not only concern the Ineffable (9, 10; 16, 5; 18, 9; 21, 18; 22, 19; 26, 3; 85, 2) but also the One (9, 3; 38, 15; 85, 1), and even the absolute non-being (9, 21; 23, 3; 23, 25). This expression can be found in Sextus Empiricus (*PH* 2,88; 2,91). Castagnoli (2010: 105), calls the kind of self-refutation that Damascius uses an ‘operational self-refutation’, that is ‘the very fact of asserting *p* also entails a commitment to something else which is in conflict with *p*, and thus to a contradiction’.

when attempting to give an account of the Ineffable, what is in fact revealed to us are our own affections (*pathē*) filled with the puzzles (*aporias*) and failures to find solutions (*ateuxias*) about it, and those affections are not proper arguments but mere indications (*endeixis*) about the Ineffable (8, 17-20). What does Damascius mean by this?

First, we have to notice that the reversal of the arguments does also concern the One, since, as Plato affirms in the conclusion of (D1) in the *Parmenides* (141e10-12), the One, if it is, is not even one (9, 3-4: *ei estin, oude hen estin*). As a consequence, there is no discourse, negation (9, 5: *apophasis*), name, opinion , or science about the One, which is completely unknowable and ineffable (9, 7-8: *pantēi agnōston kai arréton*). According to Damascius, this means that no demonstration (9, 23: *apodeixeis*) can be undertaken about the One since our demonstrations are human and consequently divided and composite (10, 1-2: *memerismenai kai sunthetōterai*). Our own cognitive limitations dictate that we can only access the All through a discursive process which implies definitions, names, divisions, and distinctions, the most fundamental of which being the one between the subject and the object of knowledge (11, 2: *hōs gnōstou apou tou gignōskontos*). We may, nevertheless, try to purify ourselves and attempt to suppress our divided nature in order to get closer the One by describing it as the ‘One that is all things and before all things’ (11, 4-5: *hōs panta hen kai pro pantōn hen*). It is worth noticing that this method of purification may also be used in order to try to get closer to the Ineffable, which is even more ineffable than the One. In general, the ascent toward any ineffable object implies the need to ‘purify ourselves for the reception of unfamiliar concepts, and so we ascend by means of analogy and by negations’.<sup>38</sup> However, the Ineffable lies beyond the One and accessing it cognitively appears to be even harder. Damascius thus claims that ‘it is perhaps the

---

<sup>38</sup> I, 10, 18-19: ‘καὶ διακαθαιρόμενοι, πρὸς τὰς ἀσυνήθεις ἐννοίας καὶ δι' ἀναλογίας ἀναγόμενοι καὶ δι' ἀποφάσεων,’

case that the absolutely Ineffable is that about which we cannot even posit its ineffability.<sup>39</sup> As there is a direct link between the absolute One and us, we can ascend to the One itself by taking as a starting point the One that is in us (11, 13) and, thus, make some conjecture about it. As a consequence, the One will appear both communicable and unspeakable (11, 14-15: *rēton kai arrēton*). Apparently, the story is different for the Ineffable which is completely unknowable and must be honoured by a complete silence (11, 15: *pantelei sigēi*). However, Damascius will not get completely silent about the Ineffable.

### Knowable as unknowable

How is it possible to claim that the Ineffable is completely unknowable? Damascius is fully aware that it is paradoxical to write about something that is fully unknowable. He wants to avoid writing fictions (11, 20: *ou logopoiooumen*) about the Ineffable but recognises that if the Ineffable is without coordination to anything and unrelated to all things (11, 21-22: *asuntakton tōi onti pros panta kai ascheton pros panta*), then it is, in fact, nothing at all, not even the One itself (11, 22-12, 1: *kai ouden tōn pantōn, oude auto to hen*). Now for Damascius this is precisely the nature (12, 1: *phusis*) of the Ineffable. In order to state clearly the difficulty, an *aporia*, which is clearly reminiscent of the *Meno* Paradox (80e2-5), is introduced:

Further, either we know about the Ineffable's unknowability, or we are ignorant of it: but if ignorant, how can we say that it is completely unknowable? And if we know it, at least in this respect it is knowable, namely, insofar as it is unknowable, it is known as unknowable.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> I, 10, 22-24: 'Καὶ μήποτε τὸ μὲν πάντη ἀπόρρητον, οὕτως ὡς μηδ' ὅ τι ἀπόρρητον, οὕτως τιθέναι περὶ αὐτοῦ·'

<sup>40</sup> I, 12, 3-6: "Ἐτι δὲ αὐτὸ τὸ ἄγνωστον αὐτοῦ ἡ γιγνώσκομεν ὅτι ἄγνωστον, ἡ ἀγνοοῦμεν· ἀλλ' εἰ μὲν τοῦτο, πᾶς λέγομεν ὅτι πάντη ἄγνωστον; εἰ δὲ γιγνώσκομεν, ταύτη ἡμα γνωστόν, ἡ ἄγνωστον, γιγνώσκεται ὅτι ἄγνωστον;" (On line 6, Westerink (1986) has ὄν instead of ἡ, which does not change the meaning of the argument).

This *aporia* assesses the unknowability of the Ineffable: either i) we know this unknowability or ii) we are ignorant of it. If (ii), we are not justified to claim that the Ineffable is unknowable: since we are supposing here that we don't know that the Ineffable is unknowable, which implies that we cannot say whether or not it is unknowable, we cannot make this claim. If (i), by claiming that we know that it is unknowable, we are actually making an affirmation about the Ineffable, namely that it is knowable as unknowable, and consequently we appear to know something about the Ineffable. The conclusion of this *aporia* is striking: if by our previous arguments we have reached the conclusion that the Ineffable, as completely uncoordinated, is wholly unknowable, then this *aporia* has just shown that the Ineffable is not *even* unknowable. In order to solve the *aporia*, Damascius alludes to an affirmation that is found in the *Theaetetus* (188c2-3) about false belief (*pseudē doxa*), which states 'that one cannot say that what he knows either is or is not that which he does not know'.<sup>41</sup> In Damascius' mind, this not only implies that we should not identify what we know with what we do not know, but also that what we know is *not* what we do not know. For Damascius it is not possible to deny something we know (e.g. the unknowability) of something we do not know (the Ineffable). In other words, it is not possible, according to Damascius, for something we do not know anything about (such as the Ineffable) *not* to possess a certain property we know of (its ineffability) (12, 11-13).

In order to better explain this claim, Damascius uses the following example: 'it would be like someone blind from birth declaring that heat does not belong to colour'.<sup>42</sup> Let's suppose that someone blind from birth would say something like 'the colour is not warm' on the grounds that when this person touches the colourful object he would not feel it as warm. Indeed, this

<sup>41</sup> I, 12, 9-10: 'ὁ γὰρ οἶδέ τις, ὁ μὴ οἶδεν, οὐκ ἄν τις εἴποι εἶναι, οὐδὲ μὴ εἶναι'.

<sup>42</sup> I, 12, 13-14: 'ὅμοιον γὰρ ώς εἴ τις ώς ἐκ γενετῆς ὃν τυφλὸς ἀποφαίνοιτο θερμότητα μὴ ὑπάρχειν χρώματι'

person is able to feel heat by the use of the sense of touch. In the case of touching the colourful object, the person could then claim that it is not warm when touching it, since the object does not feel warm. In other words, the colour, the person would say, is not tangible in the very sense that it does not have any effect on the sense of touch.<sup>43</sup> Now, the important conclusion for Damascius is that this person does not actually know anything about colour. As a matter of fact, this person knows that he does not know (12, 15-16: *oiden gar hoti ouk oiden auto*) what colour is, and his knowledge (12, 18: *gnōsis*) actually is a knowledge of his own ignorance (12, 19: *tēs oikeias agnoias*).<sup>44</sup> When claiming that the colour is not perceptible by the sense of touch, the blind person does not speak about the colour but about himself, more precisely about his own inability to perceive the colour. To say more, the blindness is not a property of the colour but of the person. In the same manner, when we say that the Ineffable is unknowable, we are not attributing a property to the Ineffable but are in fact talking about our own inability, even blindness, in relation to the Ineffable. To sum up this idea, Damascius claims that ‘the ignorance we have of this principle is in us, just as the knowledge of the known is in the knower, not in the object known’<sup>45</sup>. Thus, the *aporia* about the unknowability of the Ineffable is apparently solved: claiming that we know that the Ineffable is unknowable does not imply the attribution of a property to the Ineffable but refers to our own affection (*pathos*) in relation to it.

### Neither F, nor not-F.

Does the fact that there is no knowledge of the Ineffable also imply that there can be neither demonstrations nor opinions about it? Unsurprisingly, Damascius will deny any

---

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed analysis of this argument see, Tresson-Metry (2012: 206-211) and Caluori 2018: 279).

<sup>44</sup> Damascius does not consider here a possible intellectual knowledge of the colour, for example knowing that heat does not belong to colour on *a priori* grounds, namely, that colour is just not the sort of thing that has a temperature. He is concerned about a knowledge of the nature of colour.

<sup>45</sup> I, 12, 23-25: ‘καὶ τοίνυν ἐν ἡμῖν ἡ ἀγνωσία ἐκείνου ὁ ἀγνοοῦμεν· καὶ γὰρ ἡ γνῶσις τοῦ γνωστοῦ ἐν τῷ γιγνώσκοντι, οὐκ ἐν τῷ γιγνωσκομένῳ’

possibility of demonstration (14, 21: *apodeikton*) and conception (14, 21: *huponoēton*) about the Ineffable. Damascius makes a distinction here between demonstrating the Ineffable and demonstrating something about (15, 1: *peri*) the Ineffable. As such, there is nothing demonstrable about the Ineffable (15, 2: *oude to apodeikton en ekeinōi*). The only things we can demonstrate is in fact our ignorance and *aphasia* about it (15, 4: *peri auto agnoian te kai aphasiān*). Now if this is the case, it seems that it is not possible to predicate anything of the Ineffable, and silence ought to be the only acceptable attitude. However, things are a bit more complicated for Damascius and a clarification about the question of predication is in order. If we come back to the radical *aporia* about the Ineffable, we are left with the idea that, as completely uncoordinated, ‘there is, in fact, nothing in common between the Ineffable and the things here, nor could anything belong to the Ineffable that is expressible, thinkable, or conceivable’.<sup>46</sup> A consequence of this idea is that there is no analogy (22, 12: *analogia*) nor likeness (22, 12: *homoiotēs*) between the Ineffable and the things we know of. Strictly speaking then, we should not call the Ineffable a ‘that’ (22, 12: *ekeino*), nor even one, nor many (22, 13: *oude hoti hen oude hoti polla*). Damascius appears to reject here a possible solution he himself he has suggested earlier in order to grasp the Ineffable: the use of analogy. Another option was also put forward, namely the denial of predicates. With regards to negation, Damascius claims:

However, if it is necessary to give an indication of what it is, one should do so by means of negations of these predicates: it is not one or many, not prolific or sterile, not cause nor not a cause, and as we use these negations, I don’t know how, they overturn themselves infinitely and without qualification.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> 22, 7-9: ‘οὐδέν γάρ ὅ τι ἔκείνω κοινὸν πρὸς τὰ τῆς οὐδ' ἀν εἴη τι αὐτῷ τῶν λεγομένων καὶ νοούμενων καὶ ὑπονοούμενων’.

<sup>47</sup> I, 22, 15-19: ‘Εἰ δὲ ἄρα ἀνάγκη τι ἐνδείκνυσθαι, ταῖς ἀποφάσεσιν τούτων χρηστέον, ὅτι οὐδὲ ἐν οὐδὲ πολλά, οὐδὲ γόνιμον οὐδὲ ἄγονον, οὐτε αἴτιον οὔτε ἀνάτιον, καὶ ταύταις μέντοι ταῖς ἀποφάσεσιν ἐτ' ἀπειρον ἀτεχνῶς οὐκ οἶδα ὅπως περιτρεπομέναις.’

It seems then that, for Damascius, it is possible to give an indication of the Ineffable by the use of negations, i.e. by asserting that the One neither is F nor not-F. Here, explicitly, Damascius claims that the only way to give an account of the Ineffable implies not only to deny predicates to the Ineffable, but also to deny the negation of these predicates. In other words, in order to follow Damascius' prescription, we should, in the case of the Ineffable, reject the PEM. However, this rejection seems to entail the reversal (23, 3: *peritropē*) of themselves in the form of an infinite regression (22, 18-19: *ep' apeiron*). In what sense does the use of negations imply a reversal?

As we have seen earlier, for Proclus, when it comes to describing the first principle, even negations must be denied since, as such, a negation refers to an object and thus qualifies that object.<sup>48</sup> Damascius agrees with this idea and explores it further. One example to illustrate this idea is the example of the absolute non-being (15, 18-19: *tou mēdamēi medamōs ontos*), which is sometimes referred to by Plato.<sup>49</sup> Nothing which somehow *is* can be attributed to the absolute non-being, that is, 'neither not-being nor privation in general' (15, 20-21: *oude ara to mē on oude sterēsin holōs*). Now, if we remember that for Damascius there are two kinds of non-being, the superior (the Ineffable) and the inferior (the absolute non-being), we might ask ourselves if we could also use the expression 'absolute non-being' to refer to the Ineffable. Damascius rejects this possibility arguing that even the expression 'absolute non-being' and its signification (15, 22: *sēmasia*) belong to being (15, 22: *on gar touto*). For Damascius, in fact, both the absolute non-being and the Ineffable are ineffable (16, 2: *arrēton*) and not objects of opinions (16, 2: *adoxaston*). If negations refer to and characterise an object that belongs to

---

<sup>48</sup> Damascius considers here predicates as properties. In consequence his claim is true for 'narrow scope' negation (not-F) and not for 'wide scope' negation (it is not the case that F).

<sup>49</sup> *Parmenides*, 166a2-6 and *Sophist*, 237c2, b7-8, 240e2.

being, they could not be used to qualify the Ineffable, and in consequence negations must also be denied of the Ineffable. Coming back to the question of the unknowability of the Ineffable, Damascius can claim that our ignorance about the Ineffable is complete (18, 7: *pantelēs*), as we know it neither as knowable nor as unknowable (18, 8-9: *kai oute hōs gnōston oute hōs agnōston ekeino gignōskomen*).

Shall we then conclude that the Ineffable is nothing at all? Not even this conclusion is possible for Damascius since, if negations must be suppressed, then necessarily the Ineffable is not even nothing (18, 10-11: *mallon de mēde toutou ontos, to ouden*). More specifically, it is beyond non-being, since non-being is the negation of being (18, 12-13: *tou ontos apophasis*).<sup>50</sup> What is implied here by Damascius is that it is not possible to find one single predicate which could be attributed to the Ineffable. Take for example the predicate, ‘transcendent’ (21, 7: *to exēirēmenon*), which is sometimes used to qualify the Ineffable. As transcendent always means transcendent *of* something, the Ineffable, if hypothesised as transcendent, cannot in fact be transcendent of all things. Thus, this predicate, as soon as it is attributed to the Ineffable, must immediately be denied of it. But that is not the end of it! Not only must each and every predicate be denied of the Ineffable, but, as soon as we have denied a predicate, it appears also necessary to deny the negation of the predicate, on the grounds that any negation is a certain discourse about something:

But denial is itself a kind of discourse, and that about which the denial is made is a reality, but the [Ineffable] is nothing at all, and therefore no denial can be made

---

<sup>50</sup> The Ineffable is not only beyond non-being, it is also a nothing by being the negation of the One (18, 12-13).

concerning it, it is altogether outside the realm of language, and it is not knowable in any way at all, so that it is not even possible to declare the negation.<sup>51</sup>

This last formula (*hôste oude apophênai tēn apophasis dunaton*), which is an allusion to Proclus<sup>52</sup>, is a clear example of Damascius' method of reversal. Roughly, it implies that for any predicate F, if attributed to the Ineffable, it must first be denied, and then this denial must be denied again. This is called here a complete reversal of discourses and thoughts (21, 18-19: *hē pantēi tōn logōn kai tōn noēseōn*) and is explicitly referred to as a kind of demonstration (21, 19: *apodeixis*) of the Ineffable.<sup>53</sup> But does the method of reversal imply a regression?

### Regression and reversal

We have encountered in our journey into Damascius' *aporiai* two different kinds of regression. It might be useful to give more details about it. The first kind of regression can be found in the first *aporia* about the PAT. It has been suggested that if the PAT were not to be part of 'all things', then, according to the alternative (D), the set constituted by 'all things' and the PAT would be in need of another principle, and this reasoning would need to be pursued *ad infinitum*. For Damascius, even though we cannot possess any knowledge and conjecture of the Ineffable, we should nevertheless recognise its uniqueness: 'If we got hold of it in our thought, then we would still be in search of something else that was prior to the thinking. And this would either go on forever, or else it would have to come to a stand in that which is absolutely

<sup>51</sup> I, 21, 15-18: 'ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡ ἀπόφασις λόγος τις, καὶ τὸ ἀποφατὸν πρᾶγμα, τὸ δὲ οὐδὲν οὐδὲ ἄρα ἀποφατόν, οὐδὲ λεκτὸν ὅλως, οὐδὲ γνωστὸν ὄπωσον· ὥστε οὐδὲ ἀποφῆναι τὴν ἀπόφασιν δυνατόν.'

<sup>52</sup> *In Parm.* 1073, 2-1074, 21.

<sup>53</sup> For Damascius, the negation of negation is a manner of getting closer to the Ineffable. In the case of the other 'nothing', the absolute non-being, this kind of approach is not even possible as 'if it is declared to be absolute non-being, in the sense that it is postulated to be neither being nor one nor ineffable, and does not exist in a manner that can be affirmed or denied, nor is it the subject of reversal, nor of the contradiction, (...).' (I, 23, 22-25: 'εἰ δὲ οὕτω λέγεται μηδαμῶς ὃν μηδαμῆ, ως οὔτε ὃν, οὔτε ἀπόρρητον τιθέμενον, οὔτε καταφατικῶς, οὔτε ἀποφατικῶς, οὔτε κατὰ περιτροπήν, οὔτε ἀντιφατικῶς, (...)').

ineffable.<sup>54</sup> What is striking in this claim is that it admits, on the one hand, the ineffability of the first principle, and thus its absolutely undetermined nature, and, on the other, the necessity for it to be unique. It is a classical assumption<sup>55</sup> that whenever a cause shares a common characteristic with its effects, the need for a further cause might appear. However, in Neoplatonic metaphysics, this is usually not an issue as the One, the ultimate principle of all reality, is also the unifying unique cause of everything. The One is by definition *first* and nothing lies beyond it<sup>56</sup>. However, at first sight, since Damascius assumes the existence of the Ineffable beyond the One, he might be opening a box that had been closed by previous Neoplatonists thanks to the postulation of the One. Is this a Pandora's box? Since, beyond the One, there is another first principle, the Ineffable, which is (in a way that is impossible for us to understand properly) the cause of everything. It might be asked if this supposition does not imply a regression like the one that can be found in the different versions of the Third Man argument, especially in the one that is described in the first part of the *Parmenides* (132a-b). The common characteristic here is the ineffability shared between the One and the Ineffable that would end up generating an infinite series. Damascius dismisses the possibility of an infinite regress (I, 14, 18: *ep' apeiron*), as it seems to be for him a metaphysical impossibility: 'all things' as a coordinated whole cannot be derived from an infinity of causes. In other words, the Ineffable, although completely undetermined for us, must nonetheless have one determined property, namely its uniqueness.

The second type of regression that can be found in Damascius is the reversal of the argument (*peritropē*). The regression becomes apparent when we try to predicate any kind of

---

<sup>54</sup> I, 14, 17-19: 'εἰ γάρ τι ὑπενοοῦμεν, ἐζητοῦμεν καὶ ἄλλο πρὸ τῆς ὑπονοίας· καὶ ἡτοι ἐπ' ἄπειρον, ἡ ἀνάγκη ἐν τῷ παντάπασιν ἀπορρήτῳ στῆναι.' See also, for the same meaning: I, 2, 12; I, 14, 18.

<sup>55</sup> The so-called *One Over Many* assumption when indistinctly applied to both the cause and the effect could entail an infinite regression as in the Third Man argument. See in this volume the analyses of Souza and Duncombe in this issue.

<sup>56</sup> See on that matter Pitteloud (2020).

property of the Ineffable and, by doing so, form an opinion about it: ‘But still, we do have an opinion of it, namely, that the Ineffable is not the object of opinion. Thus, the discourse reverses itself, as Plato says<sup>57</sup>, and we cannot, in reality, even have an opinion concerning it.’<sup>58</sup> As we have seen, for Damascius the reversal of the discourse is a process he describes as stepping into the void. This type of reversal is precisely described as implying the use of both negations and negations of negations (22, 18-19). More precisely, the argument reverses itself at the moment we try to predicate something on the Ineffable. For any predicate, the claim that the Ineffable is F must immediately entail a contradiction, for it will simultaneously appear that the Ineffable also is not-F. However, the contradiction does not, so to speak, stop here. Since negations are *derived* affirmations about the Ineffable, they must also be denied. Thus, the contradiction does not end with the claim that the Ineffable neither is F, nor not F. This reversal, for Damascius, will continue *ad infinitum* (22, 18-19: *ep’ apeiron*). Indeed, the predication ‘not-F’ must also be denied of the Ineffable. The process will keep going, as ‘*not not-F*’ must in turn be denied of the Ineffable, and so on. This is the second meaning of the reversal of the discourse. This kind of reversal must be distinguished from the other one, as, contrary to the first kind, it does not necessitate the exclusion of a regression based on the premise that, by assuming such regression, there would be no first principle of reality. Indeed, the second type of reversal is described as a kind of regressive process of self-contradiction. In other words, in the second type of regression, what we actually have is an infinite process of contradiction. For Damascius, there is then a sort of regression that is in fact more related to contradiction than to infinity. One might indeed ask what is the difference between contradicting once and doing it infinitely?

---

<sup>57</sup> *Phaedo* 95b5 and *Sophist* 238d4-241b3.

<sup>58</sup> I, 16, 5-6 : ‘ἀλλὰ γὰρ δοξάζομεν ὅ τι ἀδόξαστον, ἢ περιτρέπεται, φησίν, ὁ λόγος, καὶ τῷ ὄντι οὐδὲ δοξάζομεν.’ See also, I, 22, 18-19, 75, 5 and 130, 4.

## Conclusion

Our inquiry into Damascius' description of the Ineffable has us led to look more closely at the relation between the first principle and the principles of logic. As the Ineffable does not only lie beyond the intelligible sphere, but also beyond the One, the three principles of logic cannot be applied to it. This means that, in order to grasp the Ineffable, we must give up the assumption that the principles of logic apply universally. What lies beyond being is ineffable. The rules of logic cannot be applied to the supra-being realm. This implies that in order to describe any entity which does not belong to being, we must not only admit that contradictory predicates can apply at the same time, in the same manner, to the same subject, but also that these kinds of entity will escape an application of the principle of identity (ID). Rejecting the three principles of logic was harshly criticised by Aristotle: those who do so will have to live in a world of total indetermination in which everything is mixed together, a world in which it is impossible to refer to any object and in which they will have to keep silent. Damascius, so to speak, when describing the first principles, the One and the Ineffable, somehow revisits in a positive manner what appears to entail, for Aristotle, relativism and skepticism.

As we have seen, it is possible to distinguish between a rejection of the PNC and the PEM. The One is, for Damascius, a principle that is coordinate to the All, and which, by anticipating it, pre-contains all the predicates in an undifferentiated manner. As such, since the One can be said to be both F and not-F, for it contains in it all contradictory predicates, it lies beyond the PNC. The case of the Ineffable is slightly different. Its complete and absolute ineffability leads Damascius to claim that no predicate whatsoever can be attributed to it, not even negation. The Ineffable then, by being neither F, nor not-F, must be situated beyond the

PEM. This distinction might appear artificial since, as both the Ineffable and the One lie beyond the Intellect, they lack any determined property, and, consequently, the principle of ID cannot be applied to both of them. However, we should remember that Damascius is more concerned about the epistemological/psychological than the ontological version of the three principles.<sup>59</sup> In other words, it is us, in our attempt to grasp the first principle, who must deny these principles and, by doing so, encounter our own cognitive limits in relation to them. Recognising these limits is not an easy task and will even cause pain in our souls, but, by doing so, we will get closer to the One and to the Ineffable.

What is remarkable in Damascius' resolution of the first *aporia* is that he is led, by means of an argument, to distinguish between two ineffable principles, the One and the Ineffable, which are, at least in our reasoning about them, two distinct entities. In order to navigate between the One and the Ineffable, we still need deductions. For even though having to accept recurring contradictions might cause a feeling of metaphysical vertigo, we have still reached the conclusion that the reversal *ad infinitum* of our arguments about the Ineffable does not entail the existence of an infinity of first principles. Stepping into the void, beyond the principles of logic, will, at the end, lead us to choose silence. But not the empty silence of skepticism.

## References

Ahbel-Rappe, S. (1998) 'Scepticism in the sixth century? Damascius' Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 36(3), pp. 337–363.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ccontradictory discourses about the Ineffable exemplify the *pathē* of our souls in relation to it. The distinction between epistemology and psychology being a modern one, it seems that for Damascius, what comes into play are our own human limits when it comes to trying to grasp the first principle.

Ahbel-Rappe, Sara. (2010) *Damascius' Problems and solutions concerning first principles*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Allen, R. E. (1997) *Plato's Parmenides*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Bloom, L. (2017) *The Principle of Non-Contradiction in Plato's Republic: An Argument for Form*. Lexington Books.

Caluori, D. (2018) 'Aporia and the limits of reason and of language in Damascius', in Politis, V. and Karamanolis, G. (eds) *The aporetic tradition in ancient philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 269–284.

Castagnoli, L. (2010) *Ancient Self-Refutation: the Logic and History of the Self-Refutation Argument from Democritus to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, S. R. L. (2008) 'Deconstructing the Laws of Logic', *Philosophy*, 83(323), pp. 25–53.

Cousin, V. (ed.) (1864) *Procli philosophi platonici, opera inedita: quae primus olim e codd. mss. parisiniis italicisque vulgaverat nunc secundus curis emendavit et auxit*. Parisiis [Paris]: Prostant apud Aug. Durand.

Dillon, J. (1996) 'Damascius on the Ineffable', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 78(2), pp. 120–129.

Dillon, J. M. and Morrow, G. R. (trans.) (1987) *Proclus' Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Galpérine, M.-Claire. (1987) *Damascius: Des premiers principes: apories et résolutions*. Lagrasse: Verdier.

Hoffmann, P. (1997) 'L'expression de l'indicible dans le néoplatonisme grec, de Plotin à Damascius', in Lévy, C. and Pernot, L. (eds) *Dire l'évidence (philosophie et rhétorique antiques)*. Paris: L'Harmattan, pp. 335–390.

Kirwan, Christopher. (tran.) (1993) *Aristotle's Metaphysics. Books G, D, and E*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Kroll, W. (1902) *Syriani in Metaphysica commentaria*. Berolini: Typis et Impensis G. Reimeri.

Lachance, G. (2016) 'Platonic Contrariety: Ancestor of the Aristotelian Notion of Contradiction?', *Logica Universalis*, 10(2–3), pp. 143–156.

Linguiti, A. (1991) *L'ultimo platonismo greco: principi e conoscenza*. Firenze: L.S. Olschki.

O'Meara, D. (2004) 'Notes on the Aporetics of the One in Greek Neoplatonism', in Narbonne, J.-M. and Reckermann, A. (eds) *Pensées de l'Un dans l'histoire de la philosophie (Mélanges W. Beierwaltes)*. Paris/Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, pp. 98–107.

O'Meara, D. (2008) 'Le fondement du principe de non-contradiction chez Syrianus', in Longo, A. (ed.) *Syrianus et la métaphysique de l'Antiquité tardive*. Napoli: Bibliopolis.

O'Meara, D. J. (1993) *Plotinus: an Introduction to the Enneads*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

O'Meara, D. J. (2013) *Sur les traces de l'absolu: études de philosophie antique*. Fribourg: Academic Press.

O'Meara, D. J. and Dillon, John. (eds) (2014) *Syrianus: On Aristotle Metaphysics 3-4*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Opsomer, J. (2013) 'Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius', in Warren, J. and Sheffield, F. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*. London: Routledge, pp. 624–642.

Pelin, A. (2021) *Modalités et structures causales dans la philosophie des principes de Damascius: Présentation de Gerd Van Riel*. 1st edn. Baden-Baden: Academia-Verlag (Symbolon). doi: 10.5771/9783896659064.

Pitteloud, L. (2020) 'Plotin et l'argument du troisième homme', *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, 11(1), pp. 118–133.

Steel, C. (2008) ‘Beyond the Principle of Contradiction? Proclus’ „Parmenides“ and the Origin of Negative Theology’, in Pickavé, M. (ed.). De Gruyter, pp. 581–599.

Tresson-Metry, C. (2012) *L’aporie ou l’expérience des limites de la pensée dans le Péri Archôn de Damaskios*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. doi: 10.1163/9789004216129.

Vlad, M. (2017) ‘Stepping into the Void: Proclus and Damascius on Approaching the First Principle 1’, *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*, 11(1), pp. 46–70.

Vlad, M. (2019) *Damascius et l’ineffable : récit de l’impossible discours*. Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin.

Westerink, L. G. (ed.) (1986) *Damascius : Traité des premiers principes*. Translated by J. Combès. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.