

Editorial Announcement

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Scepticism in the Sixth Century? Damascius' *Doubts and Solutions* Concerning *First Principles*

SARA RAPPE

THE *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, an aporetic work of the sixth century Neoplatonist Damascius, is distinguished above all by its dialectical subtlety. Although the *Doubts and Solutions* belongs to the commentary tradition on Plato's *Parmenides*, its structure and method make it in many ways unique among such exegetical works. The treatise positions itself, at least in part, as a response to Proclus' metaphysical system. Thus the first principles alluded to in its title refer to a metaphysical structure consisting of five central elements, the Ineffable, the One, and the Noetic Triad, which Damascius both adumbrates in opposition to Proclus¹ as well as subjects to his own, internal critique. In this article, I will be asking whether or not Damascius' critique of Neoplatonic metaphysics is informed or inspired by ancient Scepticism. No doubt this question catches the reader off guard: if the last exponent of ancient Scepticism is Sextus Empiricus, how could this sixth-century Neoplatonist Scholarch, the last officially appointed Platonic Successor, revert to a tradition that seemingly disappears for well over three centuries?² In what

¹As is well known, Damascius modifies Proclus' own exposition of the Parmenidean hypothesis, positing a first principle to which he gives the title "the Ineffable." For those interested in a dense outline of the elements involved in this treatise, I note that this Ineffable is prior to the One which Damascius says is "unrelated" to the noetic triad. Once more, this noetic triad seems to be a modification to Proclus' system, according to which the dyad follows the One. These five elements—the Ineffable, the One and the intellectual triad, then, complete this system that functions as ontologically parallel to Plotinus' first two hypostases, the One and Being/Intellect.

²The question of Damascius' Scepticism was raised by Ritter in his *Histoire de la philosophie*. In his Introduction to the Bude edition, Combès (xxv, xxxi) suggests that Damascius' aporetic method is tied to his negative theology and is not motivated by Scepticism. Obviously, it is anachronistic to suggest that Damascius is a Sceptic in the sense that he represents a specific school such as Pyrrhonism, or that he attempts to subvert Platonism in favor of Scepticism. Rather, in this article my purpose is to examine Damascius' affiliations.

follows, I suggest that a plausible historical context for such a reversion can be found in contemporaneous Neoplatonic allusions to Sceptical readings of Plato. I then analyze the Sceptical techniques deployed by Damascius in his critique of Neoplatonist metaphysics, focusing especially on his attacks on Neoplatonic theories of intellect and causation. I conclude by speculating on some ideological factors that shaped Damascius' Sceptical affiliations, suggesting that here it is possible to see an initial volley in what was to become a centuries-long skirmish between reason and revelation.

1. THE NEOPLATONISTS READ THE SCEPTICS?

R. T. Wallis has suggested that Plotinus borrows from the Sceptics' arsenal in voicing his own objections against Stoic or Stoicizing epistemology and theology. The seemingly radical stance that Plotinus takes against Stoic notions of divine rationality, virtue, and providence is anticipated by the Sceptics' refusal to grant that an omniscient mind could stand in need of rational deliberation or exercise virtues that imply the presence of corresponding vices, etc. Not only is it the case that Plotinus makes a detailed use of specific Sceptical arguments in his own polemics against the Stoics, he seems to have been the first philosopher to have grasped the implications of Sceptical challenges to Stoic theology, and to have circumvented Sceptical dilemmas by means of his highly original formulations of nondiscursive thinking and negative theology.

That this Platonist might side with Sceptics against dogmatic philosophy would hardly be surprising to the modern student of Plato, but it is also true that historically, this has been an uneasy alliance. In fact, it is just this question, the alliance between Platonists and the Sceptics, that gets rehearsed in the sixth century. Olympiodorus devotes Chapter 10 of his *Prolegomena to the Study of Platonic Philosophy* to the refutation of an *ephectic*, or nondogmatic Plato³: "Plato also superseded the philosophy of the New Academy since that school gave precedence to *akatalepsia* (nonapprehension), while Plato demonstrated that there do exist cognitions grounded in genuine knowledge. Nevertheless, some assert, assimilating Plato to the *ephectics* and to the Academicians, that he too maintained the doctrine of *akatalepsia*." These remarks are curious, for we have no indication that a Sceptical reading of Plato was current or even conceivable at this time. In fact, as the context makes clear, the Sceptics are represented in this passage as a prior philosophical school; chapters 7 through 10 present a concise history of philosophy that is remarkably free from any notions of philosophical currency attributable to any of the views that fall

³On the authorship of the *Prolegomena*, see Segonds' Introduction. The attribution to Olympiodorus is based on a detailed comparison between features of the *Prolegomena* and Olympiodorus' Christian student, Elias.

under its purview: "there has been no shortage of philosophical *haireseis* [schools] both before and after Plato, yet he surpassed all of them by his teaching, his thought, and in every possible way"⁴ (*Prolegomena*, 7.1).

Olympiodorus performs the exegete's role throughout his refutation of a non-dogmatic Plato, turning first to the grammatical item, Plato's use of what Olympiodorus terms the "hesitating" adverbs, such as "probably [εἰκος]," "perhaps [ἴσος]," and "as I imagine [τάχ'ὡς οἴμαι]." Nevertheless Olympiodorus manages to sustain a superficially pedantic tone in the four pages he devotes to this end, eschewing any close reading of the dialogues, briefly glossing *topoi* such as Recollection, or importing issues that have no foundation in Plato, as e.g., his refutation of the *tabula rasa* theory of the soul (10.27).

In short, Olympiodorus' schoolroom lesson has little interest as a document of sixth-century Scepticism: one wonders, for example, if Olympiodorus would have been familiar with any of the writings of Sextus Empiricus, or if it is more likely that he is using the brief paragraph in Diogenes' *Life of Plato* to inform his topic.⁵ Nor indeed has it much value as an exegetical text, as we have seen. Its importance, if it can be said to have any, lies rather in the particular fascination that Scepticism seems to have held for the school of Ammonius, the teacher of Olympiodorus and of Damascius.

We know from Olympiodorus' commentaries on the *Gorgias* and on the *Phaedo* that Ammonius had written a treatise devoted to *Phaedo* 69D4–6, proving that this passage did not call into question or cast doubt upon the immortality of the soul.⁶ Quite possibly, this precise issue, the soul's immortality, was of theological and thus ideological significance at this time, given the comfortable toleration that Olympiodorus had managed to exact from the Christian Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius II.⁷ Hence the question as to Plato's stand with

⁴On Olympiodorus' Platonism, see the forthcoming translation and introduction to Olympiodorus' *Gorgias* commentary by Lykos, Jackson, and Tarrant. Tarrant suggests that for Olympiodorus, "the term 'Platonist' was not strictly accurate. There was no difference, as far as he was concerned, between Platonist philosophy and philosophy itself" (ix).

⁵The word *ephektikos*, used of Plato in *Prolegomena* 10 is found in Diogenes Laertius. At any rate, Sextus at *PH* I 221 does not in fact define Plato as a Sceptic. An alternative possibility is that the Neoplatonists were familiar, not with the works of Sextus Empiricus, but with Aenesidemus. We know that Aenesidemus' book survived until the time of Photius, because of Photius' synopsis of the ten modes associated with Aenesidemus.

⁶We also know that the subject of Plato's dogmatism or Scepticism was frequently raised in the introductions of the Aristotelian Commentators, possibly due to the influence of Ammonius. See the introduction to *Prolegomena*, lxiii.

⁷Segonds, Introduction, xiii. See Damascius V.I., 250.2–3 and R. Asmus, 469–79 (cited by Segonds) for the persecution of pagan philosophers in Alexandria and the possibly profit-motivated cooperation (so Damascius sneers at him) collusion of Ammonius: "Ammonius was shamelessly interested in money and tried to discover a profit in all he devised" (V.I. 250). To go a little further into the realm of speculation than the evidence warrants, we might imagine that Aristotle was the principal Pagan interlocutor in the Neoplatonist debate with the Church over the

regard to such problems naturally arose. Prior to canvassing Plato's opinion, the exegete will of course have to decide if Plato actually can be said to have any opinions.⁸ But I will return to pagan apologetics and the place that Scepticism may have occupied in this process at the end of this article. For now, I note that Olympiodorus transmitted his obsession with the dogmatic Plato to his own student, the Christian Neoplatonist Elias, who again discusses the *Ephektikoi* as a distinct philosophical school in the preface to his *Commentary on the Categories*. In this charming rendition of Plato as champion of truth against its arch detractors, the *Ephectics* who deny that anything can be known, and the Protagoreans who assert that everything is true, Elias too alludes to the immortality of the soul to illustrate his theme:

[The Ephectics] suppressed the refutation of a premise. And this school is also known as the Three-Footed, since they answered with three alternatives: when asked the definition of soul, whether it was mortal or immortal, they answered, "It is either mortal or immortal or neither or both." The school is also known as "aporematic," because it maintains a state of aporia and does not permit solutions. And they oppose the Protagoreans. The Protagoreans maintained that truth prevailed, saying that what each person believes is actually true.

But Plato takes both schools to task in his own terms, refuting the Ephectics in the *Theaetetus* thus: "Do you maintain that nothing can be known as a result of knowing

temporal status of creation, a theological question that has implications for the immortality of the soul. On Arisotelianism versus Platonism in the Alexandrian school, see H. Tarrant, "Olympiodorus and the Surrender of Paganism," in L. Garland, ed., *Conformity and Non-conformity in Byzantium, Byzantinische Forschungen* (1997), 179–90. Tarrant, Introduction to *Olympiodorus, Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, trans. with full notes by Jackson, Lykos, and Tarrant (Brill, 1998), surmises that the Alexandrian emphasis on Aristotle may have been related to Christian opposition to pagan theology and metaphysics. He notes that neither Olympiodorus or Ammonius lectured on the so-called theological dialogues of Plato.

⁸On the "Alexandrian" (associated with Ammonius and Olympiodorus) school's doctrinal compromises with Christianity, see Tarrant, "Olympiodorus and the Surrender of Paganism." In the forthcoming Introduction to Olympiodorus' *Gorgias* Commentary, Tarrant summarizes his stance with regard to Christianity as follows: "Olympiodorus' work is also interesting insofar as he was an openly pagan teacher who was apparently able to practice within a suspicious and occasionally hostile Christian environment, although not without some concerns. He was able to continue his activities after the measures taken by Justinian to suppress pagan teaching (chiefly at Athens) in 529. The Alexandrians' less defiantly pagan stance, as witnessed by their relative lack of interest in metaphysical system-building, may have helped" (ix).

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[this fact] or as a result of not knowing it? For if you do so knowingly, then behold, there is knowledge. But if not knowingly, then we shall not accept what you say, since you don't know [what you are talking about] when you say that nothing is knowable."

Plato refutes the Protagoreans in the *Protagoras*, as follows: "Are we right or wrong when we say that you are wrong, Protagoras? If we are right, then you are wrong, and therefore, there is falsehood. But if we are wrong while you are right, there again falsehood exists. Therefore, whether you are right or wrong, you are wrong." (Elias, *In Cat. Prooemium* 109.24–110.8)

What strikes one about this simple juxtaposition of two free renditions of these dialogues is the imposition of a dilemma concerning the existence of propositional truth. In what follows, we see that Elias is concerned once more to portray Plato as a dogmatic philosopher, and so to rescue him from what he sees as a pair of unattractive, sophistic alternatives. We find in the next passage an almost verbatim echo of the *Prolegomena's* interest in the grammar of doubt: "Some have thought that Plato too belonged to the [Ephectic] school, above all since he used adverbs that indicated doubt, as when he said, "I think so," "Perhaps," "Maybe," and "I guess." This quotation from Elias echoes many themes found in the *Prolegomena*; perhaps the Prefaces to these works were stamped out of a single mold. Whether this material became some kind of scholastic siglum, a seal of orthodoxy or had perhaps a propagandistic purpose, is a question worth exploring, but one that must be postponed for the present. Meanwhile it is enough to notice that Ammonius, Olympiodorus, and Elias not only all belonged to the Commentator tradition, and therefore that their works could well be sets of lecture notes, school disputations, or textbook material,⁹ but that their work on Plato was rather mediocre. According to Damascius, these teachers were entrenched Aristotelians; posterity has disposed of their Platonic Commentaries, which had to compete with the more brilliant works of Proclus and Damascius. We should not expect to find great insights or staggering hermeneutics on the subject of Platonism in these Prefaces or textbooks.¹⁰

Instead, we do find a consistently developed theme, which has to do with the Sceptical reading of Plato's dialogues.¹¹ Although it is not clear how thoroughgoing these authors proved to be in their scrutiny of Plato's epistemology, one fact

⁹Still useful on the subject of Olympiodorus is R. Vancourt, *Les Derniers Commentateurs Alexandrins d'Aristote. L'École d'Olympiodore* (Lille, 1941).

¹⁰Damascius, *Life of Isidore*, 110: "Ammonius was extremely diligent and proved to be of the utmost assistance to the various Commentators of his generation. But he was a rather entrenched Aristotelian." For a comparison between the *Prolegomena* and the *Didaskaliskos* of Alcinoos, see Segonds' *Introduction*, vii.

¹¹Not that the Alexandrian school themselves advocated this Sceptical reading of the dialogues. Rather, they went out of their way to refute such a reading, but also used this refutation in order to emphasize the difficulties of textual exegesis.

seems trenchant: they (like most Neoplatonists) emphasized the hidden if not inscrutable aspects of Platonic doctrine. That is, this concern to defend the dogmatism of Plato arose out of their sensitivity to the qualified, possibly hesitant nature of his assertions, and no doubt to the negotiable character of truth that inevitably arises in the dialogue form, and is marked by the adverbs of hesitation. Olympiodorus casually inserts the Neoplatonic interpretation of Socrates' denial that he is a teacher: "again [Plato] says, 'I teach no one', in the sense of 'I do not impart [my own] teachings to anyone'," and caps this gloss with a paraphrase of the *Theaetetus* and the *Seventh Letter*. In reply to these worries, Olympiodorus and Elias cull sentences from the dialogues that reveal a bias toward what they might regard as true teaching. For example, Olympiodorus ends his refutation of Plato's Scepticism with a paraphrase from the *Gorgias*: "If you do not listen when you yourself are making assertions, then you will not be convinced if someone else is the speaker. How could we consider [the author of this sentence] to be a Sceptic?" (*Prolegomena*, 11.25).

To summarize this discussion, it is reasonably clear that these later Neoplatonic Commentators were less concerned with the actual writings of the Sceptics than with the issue of Plato's dogmatism. Why and how this particular issue arose as a concern for Ammonius is entirely unclear. Furthermore, Ammonius and his school are at least somewhat ambivalent in their assessment of Plato's dogmatism; they clearly distinguish the style and teaching methods that he cultivates from ordinary dogmatism. At times, they hint that Plato's teachings involve an appeal to a kind of intuitive wisdom, based on introspection, divine or innate knowledge.¹² Finally, this hermeneutics of ambivalence is peculiarly associated with one particular exegete, Ammonius, and his immediate students and philosophical descendants. We have evidence that Olympiodorus and Elias were students of Ammonius, and we have very strong verbal agreements within the prefatory material to the Commentary works that these philosophers authored.¹³ With these conclusions in mind let us turn to consider the case of Damascius.

We know from the *Vita Isidori* that Damascius at some point had studied with Ammonius (V.I., 111.10: "Damascius records that Ammonius had expounded Plato to him").¹⁴ However remote his intellectual affiliation with the

¹² *Prolegomena*, 10.

¹³ Cf. p. 61 of Segonds' Commentary on the *Prolegomena*, and the references cited there. See also the following passages. I am extremely indebted to Professor Harold Tarrant of New Castle College for these references. Indeed it is his own work on the exegetical works of the Alexandrian School that has made possible my own very limited inquiry. Hermeias, *In Phaedrum* 20.7; Proclus *In Alc.* 21.10–24.10; 95.25–96.22; Olympiodorus *In Alc.* 24.11–20; 33.21–34.2; 212.14–18; *Olymp.* I 8.3; 6; 14; *Olymp.* *In Gorg.* 60.11–15; 188.15–17.

¹⁴ Zintz, fr. 128. From Suda IV 761, 3 s.v. φρενοβλαβεις.

Alexandrian school, Damascius makes a point of reporting and recording the activities of the group in the *Vita Isidori*, so that we can safely assume his familiarity with its exegetical methods. While this path of inquiry has certainly not led us to the discovery of a Sceptic revival in the sixth century, it has at least enabled us to track the exegetical puzzle of a nondogmatic Plato back into the Late Athenian Academy, via the shadowy figure of Ammonius. Above I have noted that this group of exegetes may or may not have been familiar with the writings of Sextus Empiricus; the evidence warrants us to surmise at most a superficial acquaintance with Sextus. In the next section, I turn to consider the possibility that Damascius employs this conception of Plato as a nondogmatic philosopher to Neoplatonist ends in his aporetic work, the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.

2. DAMASCIUS AND THE LANGUAGE OF SCEPTICISM: THE PERITROPE OF REASON

It must be said at the outset that there is admittedly only slight linguistic evidence connecting Damascius to the thought of Ancient Scepticism. Nevertheless, one term has captured the attention of scholars who work on Damascius. Almost uniquely among the Neoplatonists, Damascius uses the expression *peritrope*, or the collocation *peritrope ton logon*, as a way of framing the implications of language about the ineffable.¹⁵ This word has a history in the annals of skepticism.¹⁶ Although it can be literally translated as 'reversal', its sense in the context of dialectic refers to arguments that are overturned from within, that is by premises internal to, the argument. Sextus Empiricus, for example, refers to a whole class of such turned-about arguments, or arguments whose very assertion undermines the position at issue.¹⁷

Damascius' appropriation of this Sceptical term relates primarily to any statement made about the Ineffable, since the Ineffable is by designation and definition outside the reach of any linguistic system: "our language is self-refuting when we attach such predicates to the Ineffable as 'outside of language', 'nothing at all', 'ungraspable by the intellect' " (C-W I.10). Predicating anything of the Ineffable is, for reasons to be discussed shortly, a very inter-

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion of the term *peritrope*, and especially of how it fits into the philosophical vocabulary of Damascius with regard to the Ineffable, see A. Linguiti's section entitled, "Il Metodo Apofatico e il 'Capovolgimento' del Discorso," in *Principi primi e conoscenze nel tardo neoplatonismo greco* (1990), 63–73. Linguiti points out that this word is only to be found in Syrianus, and hence that Damascius' use of this word is virtually unique in the annals of Neoplatonism. This discussion is entirely indebted both to Linguiti's book as well as to the cogent and intelligent criticism of Dr. Linguiti. Nevertheless in what follows, any errors remain my responsibility.

¹⁶ For the history of the word *peritrope* in Sceptical debates see M. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Later Greek Philosophy," *Philosophical Review* 85 (1976): 44–69.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*

esting and important form of self-contradiction in Damascius' philosophy of language. One scholar has also identified a secondary type¹⁸ of self-refutation that arises from the first category: language about the the Ineffable violates the principle of noncontradiction because any statement made about the Ineffable must also be denied. That is, when applied to the Ineffable, any statement entails its own contradiction, because any such statement fails to refer to any actual object, and so is technically false, as in the following example:

If one is compelled to try to indicate [the Ineffable], then it is useful to do so by negating these [predicates], and [deny] that it is either one or many, that it is either productive or unproductive, that it is either a cause or not a cause, and yet, these very negations also prove to be indefinitely, inconceivably self-refuting. (C-W I.22.15-18)

Since speaking about the Ineffable inevitably generates a series of false statements, Damascius devotes his chapter on *peritrope* to solving these linguistic aporiae both through standard Platonic arguments and by arguments from his philosophy of language. As a Platonist, Damascius has no trouble in showing that contradictory predicates are unproblematic if they are viewed as relative terms that attach to their subjects under certain conditions; 'knowable' and 'unknowable' are analogous to 'big' and 'small'. That is, they are relative terms whose subjects participate in the forms predicated and thus are not predicated within the context of any identity statements (C-W I. 17.12). In this sense, virtually any subject of predication will be subject to contradictory predicates; hence Damascius can say that the Ineffable imparts its ineffability to everything: "in everything there is something ineffable, but some things are by their own nature more ineffable than others" (C-W I.25.3-5).

In a less standardly Platonic solution to the problem of *peritrope*, Damascius argues that the language of negation is not referential; negative adjectives when applied to the Ineffable do not attribute anything to it nor determine its nature. Instead, by using negative language we succeed only in delimiting our own discursive practices:

Nor do we affirm that [the Ineffable] is unknowable in the sense that the unknowable has a determinate nature, being something other, nor do we call it "being," nor "one," nor "all," nor "principle of the all" nor "beyond all things." We deny that it is possible to make any statement about it at all. But this again is not its nature, viz., the expressions "not a thing," "beyond all," "causeless cause," and "unrelated to anything," nor do these attributes constitute its nature. Rather, they serve simply to remove anything that arises after the Ineffable. (C-W I. 13-14)

¹⁸ Linguisti first pointed out these two kinds of self-refuting arguments at work in the *Peri Archon*. See *Principi primi*, 68-69.

Again, Damascius does not reify the conventions of negative discourse nor does he claim that such negative language succeeds in referring:

No name will be able to convey the meaning of the transcendent, since a name belongs to a system of reference. One must finally deny the [name of the transcendent] as well. But even denial is a form of discourse, and that makes what is denied an object of discourse, but the transcendent is nothing, not even something to be denied, in no way expressible, not knowable at all, so that one cannot even negate its negation. Rather the only way of revealing that of which we speak is simply the deferral of language and of conceptions about it. (C-W I.21)

This dissolution of the problem of falsehood from the pragmatics of negation is interesting when we compare Damascius' solution and use of arguments that result in *peritrope* with that of the Sceptics which we find in Sextus Empiricus.

As is clear from the work of Burnyeat, Barnes, and Annas,¹⁹ overturning arguments from within (*peritrope*) was a strategy that, like the *sorites*, both Sceptics and Dogmatics employed across the board in response to a good number of disputes concerning the existence of demonstration, signs, true impressions, and causes. In order to show that the argument "turns itself around," the opponent exposes the contradiction entailed by the assertion of a proposition within a dialectical context that makes the proposition untenable. Thus one cannot prove that there is no proof or show that there are no signs. Another way of showing that the argument "turns itself around" is to show that a contradiction is entailed by the assertion of a proposition, as when the statement that "all statements are true," entails the truth of the statement that "no statements are true."²⁰ Finally, there is a class of arguments that turn themselves around when the contrary of a position is maintained, as in the "Relative Mode."²¹ The Sceptic asserts, "everything is relative." The opponent says, "not everything is relative" and the Sceptic replies, "relative to you, the statement 'everything is relative', is false. Hence this statement, 'everything is relative', is relative."

Damascius is on the whole less interested in these dialectical forms of the *peritrope*, and this fact alone suggests that he might not have been familiar with the examples that the Ancient Sceptics, whether Sextus or Aenesidemus, use.²²

¹⁹ Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation"; J. Barnes and J. Annas, *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 1994), 32, n.130; J. Annas and J. Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 1990), Chapter 11. Burnyeat's catalogue of turn-about arguments is complemented by the extensive citations given in the footnotes of Annas and Barnes.

²⁰ Again, these two classes are well discussed and profusely illustrated in Burnyeat's article.

²¹ On the fallacy of this argument see Annas and Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, Chapter 11.

²² Linguisti leaves the question open (*Principi primi*, 71-73, but see his footnotes 119-21, especially 121, which does corroborate the idea that Damascius may have read the Sceptics). My discussion is indebted to his careful analysis of Damascius' text, his comparisons with Sextus, and his detailed investigations into the language of Damascius.

However, there are some notable exceptions to this generalization that could point to a familiarity with the writings of the Sceptics.²³ One very crucial assertion for both Dogmatists and Sceptics is the statement that "nothing is apprehensible." This statement seems to entail its contradiction, viz., " 'nothing is apprehensible' is apprehensible." The Sceptics offer a solution to this particular *peritrope* at the level of pragmatics. The statement, "nothing is apprehensible," is not, so the Sceptics reply,²⁴ "an affirmation, as the matters investigated by the Dogmatists are, of such a nature as to be inapprehensible; rather, it is to report our feeling in virtue of which, we say, 'I suppose that up to now I have not apprehended any of these things'. . . . Hence everything brought forward to *turn us about* seems to me to be at variance with what we profess." Above we saw that Dasmascius offers this kind of solution to the *peritrope* generated by statements made about the Ineffable: "nor do we affirm that [the Ineffable] is unknowable in the sense that the unknowable has a determinate nature" (C-W I. 13).

This solution involves showing that the speaker's utterance does not consist in a descriptive statement and so is not an assertion about the nature of things. Rather, the statement "everything is unknowable" is more like an index of one's own ignorance; it is perhaps a confession of helplessness, reveals confusions, or simply ends the conversation. In a similar way, we could dismiss the Liar's Paradox by claiming that the words "everything I say is a lie" do not assert anything. They simply help me to realize my desire to confuse my opponent in an argument and actually have no indicative value.

What needs emphasis at this point is not only that Damascius concludes his first presentation about the Ineffable with a chapter that dwells extensively on *peritrope*. More important is the fact that Damascius tries to solve the *peritrope* in a way that directly parallels the Sceptic response to the Dogmatists' fundamental charge, that Scepticism entails dogmatism. Such possible borrowings or echoes of Scepticism in Neoplatonic apophatic theology have already been suggested by Wallis.²⁵ Perhaps, then, it is useful to go back to the historical context introduced at the beginning of this article and try to make sense of this notion of *peritrope* from an interpretive standpoint.

Above we saw that Damascius works in an environment that evinces more

²³At *PH* III. 28, Sextus advances an argument against the dogmatic assertion that there are causes in a way that directly calls to mind the *Peri Archon's* critique of the First Principle as transcendent. Damascius' demonstration that transcendence is an incoherent idea relies on the conceptual reciprocity of cause and effect. See below and *PH* III 28: "It is no doubt plain that for these reasons too the concept of a cause is again *to be turned about*. For if a cause, being relative, cannot be conceived of before its effect." Italics mine.

²⁴Sextus Empiricus, *PH* I 200; Annas and Barnes trans., 50. Italics mine.

²⁵R. T. Wallis, "Scepticism and Neoplatonism," *AFRW* 36.1 (1987), section entitled "The Sceptics and Negative Theology," and Linguisti, *Principi primi*, also notes this section, n. 120.

than a casual interest in the question of Plato's dogmatism, but that the answer to this question is ambiguous. The very intensity of their inquiry, their fascination with Plato's vocabulary of hesitation, and their recollection of the Academic appropriation of Plato, all suggest that the school of Olympiodorus, as we have been calling these commentators, are genuinely puzzled as to the nature of Plato's teaching. The solutions that they offered might not convince a present-day student of Plato's dialogues, since they are for the most part external to the text of Plato. For example, Olympiodorus suggests that Plato teaches by emphasizing the contrast between divine and human intelligence or by means of maieutics, or by helping the student cultivate self-knowledge. Although these are surely legitimate forms of teaching, to the modern student of Plato, they would hardly count as convincing demonstrations that the doctrinal components of the dialogues are meant to stand as a theory of knowledge, for example. The hesitations they discover in Plato's writing: about the force of the doctrines under review are actually mirrored by their own pedagogical practices. Not only are these commentators themselves working in the exegetical tradition and so concerned with the interpretation of texts, they are asking some very profound questions about the nature of pedagogy. Hence their inquiry into Plato's possible Scepticism or concern with a Sceptical reading of Plato could signal a fundamental agreement about teaching methods appropriate to the kind of subject matter Plato had in mind. This subject matter is not easily grasped through doctrine, though of course there is a doctrinal aspect to Plato's methods. What appears as a mere worry in the *Prolegomena* of Olympiodorus becomes a full-blown effort on the part of Damascius to reorient the direction of Platonic pedagogy—or so I shall argue in what follows.

Although it is possible that the now lost works of Aenesidemus may be behind the revived Scepticism of Damascius,²⁶ it is nevertheless possible to use Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* as a key to the Neoplatonist version of *epoche*. In the opening chapters of this work, Sextus considers the dangers of *peritrope* inherent within Sceptical methodologies: how successfully can the Sceptics maintain their position against the dogmatists, if the school as a whole teaches the doctrine of ungraspability or *akatalepsia*? The Sceptics' response is to offer a pragmatic solution: *akatalepsia* is not a doctrinal statement about the way things are, but rather signifies the refusal to make any pronouncement about the nature of things. Apelles the painter is said to have captured the look of horse's lather only after giving up attempts at representation and tossing the sponge at the canvas.

²⁶The works of Aenesidemus were extant until Photius at the very least. The Galen/Favorinus debate would have been known to Neoplatonists via Galen, so they may have taken the trouble to read Favorinus' study of Academicism/Pyrrhonism.

Just so, the Sceptic gains tranquillity after suspending judgment about the nature of reality:²⁷ "Now the Sceptics were hoping to acquire tranquillity by deciding the anomalies in what appears and is thought of, and being unable to do this they suspended judgment. But when they suspended judgment, tranquillity followed as it were fortuitously" (*PH* I xii, 27).

The opening chapters of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* explain *epoche* as a bracketing off of *doxa*, of the attempt to represent reality to oneself or to others. Therefore Scepticism is not an alternative doctrinal system, but simply a number of techniques developed for the purpose of removing the tendency to dogmatize. Damascius seems to take his cue from this Sceptical attitude in writing his own chapter on *peritrope*. After all, how coherent is a metaphysical system that bases itself on the Ineffable as a first principle? If the first principle is unknowable and ineffable, surely a philosophical system formulated on this foundation is subject to *peritrope*, to an overturning from within because of the fundamental premise of this very system. Damascius will then recognize that, whatever metaphysical system he ultimately espouses, this system itself must be called into question if it purports to be a description of reality, or if it presupposes knowledge of the absolute.

If the Sceptics embrace *epoche*, suspension of belief, as their solution to the impending dangers of *peritrope*, one could argue that in a parallel way, Damascius embraces silence or ineffability. As he says concerning the first principle: "we define this term 'ineffable' in such a way that it is not even a term" (*C-W* I.62.10).

If, in speaking about the One, we attempt the following collocations, viz. that it is ineffable, that it does not belong to the category of all things, and that it is not apprehensible by means of intellectual knowledge, then we ought to recognize that these constitute the language of our own labors. This language is a form of hyperactivity that stops on the threshold of the mystery without conveying anything about it at all. Rather, such language announces the subjective experiences of *aporia* and misapprehension that arise in connection with the One, and that not even clearly, but by means of hints." (*C-W* I.6)

The "limit of philosophical discourse [$\pi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\alpha\varsigma\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\upsilon$]," refers to the complete removal of any proposition or any statement about reality. This limit is "silence without recourse" (*C-W* I.22), or "silence that frees us from [our own] productions" (*C-W* I.22).

²⁷ A story of the painter Apelles applies to the Sceptics. They say that he was painting a horse and wanted to represent in his picture the lather on the horse's mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up, took the sponge on which he had been wiping off the colors from his brush, and flung it at the picture. When it hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse's lather (*I* 27; Annas and Barnes trans.).

By the time that Damascius was writing, the so-called 'negation of negation' was a standard provision of Neoplatonic apophatic theology: "nam per negari et ipse removit omnes negationes."²⁸ This move allowed Proclus precisely to use analogical language and so to affirm the causal, or explanatory, status of the first principle, operating as a linguistic switch, so that positive statements could then apply to the One. However, according to Damascius, if such positive language can be deployed successfully in the realm of metaphysics, it is because transcendence is often used as a relative term. In fact Damascius says that the first principle is not properly speaking transcendent, since transcendence presupposes "a relationship to that which is transcended" (*C-W* I.21). Therefore, the negation of negation is not available in the case of the Ineffable, if such a negation actually serves to affirm a positive system: "It is not even possible to negate negation" (*C-W* I.21).

Damascius begins by invoking, as a counterpart to Sceptical *epoche*, the principle of Ineffability that paradoxically becomes the foundation of the Neoplatonist doctrines we encounter in the *Doubts and Solutions*. Certainly this invocation of the Ineffable can be compared to Olympiodorus' exegetical propensity to emphasize the qualified nature of Plato's dogmatism. Damascius then frames his own teaching as nondogmatic and thereby authors a philosophical system whose purpose is not simply to transmit doctrines, but to remove metaphysical doubt. In the next section, we turn to consider some of the doctrinal consequences of this Sceptical invocation.

3. SCEPTICAL TECHNIQUES IN THE DOUBTS AND SOLUTIONS

Quite obviously the critique of knowledge forms the basis of Academic Scepticism and later Pyrrhonism; the undermining of all dogmas is in fact subsidiary to this project, in the sense that *akatalepsia*, nonapprehension, is both a foundational premise of Scepticism as well as a method for achieving its goals, as we have seen. If Damascius' Neoplatonism is informed by Scepticism, it should therefore be evident in his own critique of Neoplatonic theories of intellect. Again, just as the Sceptics need not provide their own criterion of truth to successfully demolish the dogmatists' *kataleptic phantasia*,²⁹ Damascius works by showing difficulties inherent in Neoplatonic conceptions of intellect.

Damascius' strategy is most interesting; he subverts the identity thesis, according to which intellect is its objects (the Neoplatonists appropriated the

²⁸ Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides*, I vi 76, quoted by Linguisti, *Principi primi*, 66, n.92, who discusses Proclus' use of the "negation of negation" in his *Commentary on the Parmenides*.

²⁹ Some scholars do accept that Carneades' *pithanon* functions as such an alternative criterion, but see R. Bett, "Carneades' *Pithanon*: A Reappraisal of Its Role and Status," *OSAPh* 7 (1989) for an opposite viewpoint.

Aristotelian doctrine of isomorphism)³⁰ and instead insinuates a correspondence theory of truth into the Neoplatonist theory: "we can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object*." From a standardly Neoplatonic perspective, the position at which he arrives is one of extreme unorthodoxy. One way of framing Damascius' strategy in terms of the history of philosophy is to say that he takes an anti-Aristotelian line against Plotinus and Proclus, though of course his language is influenced by the epistemological vocabulary of the Stoics.³¹ The Aristotelian doctrine of isomorphism is enunciated at *De Anima*, III.8: in thinking, the mind becomes identical with the form of the intelligible object. Aristotle employs a strong analogy between sense perception and mental perception, describing ordinary thought as a kind of mental receptivity to form.³² Here is the relevant passage from the *De Anima*:³³ "But if thought is like perception, then the mind must be acted upon by the thought object or something else must [happen] which is analogous to this. Therefore, the mind must be impassive, but must be capable of receiving the form." In the following passage we see that Damascius preserves the strong perception/intellection analogy that Aristotle relies on, but nevertheless inserts a modified Stoicizing account, in which the object of knowledge becomes analogous to the impression, the *phantasia*, which presumably carries representational features of the world. Damascius is careful to disassociate his theory from standard Neoplatonic accounts of intellection by coining a new term, *gnosma*, which is formed by analogy to the word, *noema*, but presents none of the associated epistemology of *noesis*.

For sense perception corresponds to the object of sense perception, the faculty of representation corresponds to the impression, and the same is true of the faculty of opinion and of discursive reason: the one corresponds to the object of opinion and the other corresponds to the object of thought. In general, then, knowledge corresponds to the object of knowledge, to coin a new term for this, and the object of knowledge is that which is capable of being known when it has come to be an object of knowledge for a

³⁰ Cf. *Enneads* V. 3.5-45. On Plotinus' own formulation of the identity thesis as a way of circumventing sceptical strategies, see E. Emilsson, "Plotinus on the Objects of Thought," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 77 (1995): 21-41.

³¹ Here even the standard Neoplatonist account will differ from that of Aristotle. For Plotinus explicitly *denies* that the object of thought can act upon the mind or that the mind *receives* the form in the act of intellection. Instead, such receptivity occurs only at the level of *doxa*, or opinion. Plotinus etymologizes the word δόξα, opinion, from the verb δέχομαι, to receive, in keeping with Aristotelian isomorphism: Opinion receives, indeed, that is why it is opinion, because it receives something from an object that is substantially different from that which receives it.

³² *Enneads*, V. 5.1.62. The actual details of Aristotelian noetic isomorphism are open to interpretation. Whether the form of the noeton is numerically one and the same as the form within intellect, or whether the intellect is caused to become like in form to the noeton, is a question that remains problematic whichever horn of the dilemma one chooses to grasp.

³³ *De Anima*, III.4. 13-16; 429a3.

knower. We can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object*.

Most Neoplatonists agreed with Plotinus that in the case of intellectual knowledge, "it is necessary for the knower to be *identical* with the known and for the intellect to be *identical* with its object" (v.3.5.22).³⁴ Above we find Damascius exceptionally denying the identity thesis: "we can say, therefore, that knowledge completely accords with its object, *but it is not its object*." Even when Damascius' arguments apparently recall a Sceptical position, however, they are not always motivated by Sceptical ends, as will become apparent when we compare him with Sextus.

In the following text, Sextus Empiricus argues against the possibility of intellectual knowledge by demonstrating the weaknesses inherent in a correspondence theory of truth. There is no way to guarantee the representational accuracy of one's impressions, since the mind is always conditioned by its own experiences.³⁵

... the intellect does not of itself get in contact with external objects and receive impressions from them, but it does so by means of the senses; and the senses do not apprehend the external objects but only their own *pathe*, if anything. And so the *phantasia* will be of a sensory *pathos*, which is not the same thing as the external object. . . .

Not again can one say that the soul apprehends the external objects by means of the sensory experiences because the experiences of the senses are similar to the external objects. For from which will the intellect know whether the *pathe* of the senses are similar to the objects of sense, when it has not itself met with these external objects. . . . Therefore not even on the basis of similarity will the intellect be able to judge these objects in accord with the *phantasia*.³⁶

Read alongside of this passage from Sextus Empiricus, Damascius hardly seems to be a Sceptic. After all, Sextus insists that the soul *does not* apprehend any external object, but rather, only its own representation of a putative object. Again, the Sceptics will deny that objects correspond to our representations of them,³⁷ whereas Damascius asserts that because intellect conforms to its objects, it is capable of revealing those objects. Therefore the mind does

³⁴ For the continuation of this doctrine in Proclus, *In Tim.* II 287, 3-5: Truth is assimilation of the knower to the known. Cf. further II 287, 9-11.

³⁵ In reading this passage, it is important to keep in mind that Sextus here assimilates all forms of thinking to intellectual knowledge, and maintains no distinction between intellectual versus other kinds of mental activity.

³⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *PH*, Bk. 2, sections 70-72.

³⁷ On the Sceptics' distinction between appearances and what appears to us, cf. Annas and Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, 23: "To say how things appear is to say how they impress us or how they strike us, whether or not it is via our perceptual apparatus that the impression is made. In this sense we regularly contrast how things appear or seem with how they really are. This contrast lies at the heart of Pyrrhonism and its Ten Modes."

truly know, perceive, and opine about objects: "knowledge corresponds to the object of knowledge."

Nevertheless Damascius criticizes the Neoplatonist theory of intellection and specifically the identity thesis that underlies it, in the same way that the Sceptics criticize Stoic epistemology and the correspondence theory that underlies it. Since the Sceptics must only show that the representational account of perception given by the Stoics itself entails that the mind immediately grasps merely *phantasiai* and not objects, they can at once insist on the representational gap that this account leaves open.³⁸ Similarly, Damascius emphasizes the substantive distinction between the knower and the known to show that the intellect never encounters its object, being, as it is in itself. Moreover, he uses premises supplied from within Neoplatonic metaphysics to demonstrate this nonidentity of subject and object.

In his own words, Damascius wants to show that knowledge is a relationship that must maintain "the actual distinction between the knower and the known, with no crossing of boundaries" (R. I.181). The context for his attack on the identity thesis is Proclan metaphysics. Specifically, he exploits Proclus' exposition of the triadic rule of causation (*E. T.* 30; 31) according to which every effect remains in and returns to its cause.³⁹ Since every immaterial entity (e.g., soul or intellect) has the capacity for self-reversion as well, knowledge is the exemplary instance of *epistrophe*;⁴⁰ knowledge equates with the reversion or return of intellect to its own hypostasis, being. It remains for Damascius to overturn this theory from within, a task most easily accomplished by accepting Proclus' account of knowledge as reversion: "Because it returns to Being and to the affirmation of Being, knowledge could correctly be called 'a return' " (C-W II. 148). Here at last the identity thesis becomes the target. Although knowledge entails the reversion of intellect to being, reversion itself entails the fundamental distinction between that which reverts and that to which the knower reverts⁴¹:

Now it is the nature of intellect to return to being and of knowledge to be directed toward being. Furthermore, every return is of something that has proceeded and is already separate and therefore in need of return, although return does not eradicate the separation. Rather that which is separate returns to that from which it has become

³⁸ On the nature of Stoic representations in terms of theories of truth, see J. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (1989).

³⁹ On this topic see S. Gersh, *Kinetos Akinetos* (Leiden, 1973).

⁴⁰ For this doctrine, see A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford, 1990), 126-33.

⁴¹ Although the argument Damascius uses to defeat the identity thesis seems heuristic and even ad hoc (what reason does Damascius offer for his denial that the separation of knower and known can be eradicated?) in fact it rests upon a refinement of Proclus' theory of reversion, according to which there are three different modes or degrees of return: vital, substantial, and cognitive. Damascius wants to rank the different kinds according to the degree of unity achieved by means of the reversion; cognitive reversion, or knowledge, is the least unitive form.

distinct just insofar as it remains distinct and in exactly the way that it remains distinct. All of this is evident from the name, *gnosis*. (C-W II 149)

Summarizing now the increasingly complex structure of Damascius' Sceptical affiliations, there seem to be three steps in his refutation of the Neoplatonic identity thesis. In Step One Damascius accepts Proclus' theory of intellectual reversion but concludes (Step Two) that reversion entails the nonidentity of the knower (intellect) and the object known (knowledge). Finally, in Step Three, Damascius then applies this denial of the identity thesis to Neoplatonic epistemology and concludes that the intellect never knows being as it is in itself, since the intellect can never be strictly identical with being. It is this last application that raises the most interesting questions about Damascius' own theory of knowledge.

As a consequence of his denial of the Neoplatonic identity thesis, Damascius concludes that knowing and being known is a relationship that consists in alterity:

[Question:] What does it mean to say, "capable of being known," and how does this differ from Being? [Answer:] Something is an object of knowledge insofar as it exists in relation to another, whereas it is Being by virtue of what it is in itself. (C-W II 149)

But if the intellect never knows being as it is in itself, must one then conclude that intellect fails to know being at all, that in fact being is unknowable? Being is not exactly unknowable, but it is only available to the knower *qua* object of knowledge:

[Objection:] But it is Being that intellect desires.

[Answer:] It may desire Being, but it attains Being as an object of knowledge. Perhaps we should say that its desire is also of Being insofar as it is known since desires naturally correspond to the capacity to attain the objects of desire, and it follows that, for the knower, to attain Being is to attain it insofar as it is known. (C-W II 150)

Again by analogy to the Sceptics who assert that the intellect knows only its own *pathe*, and never reaches the object itself, Damascius concludes that the intellect knows its object *qua* object known. In other words, as he puts it, "intellect knows Being as the appearance τὸ φαινόν] of Being" (C-W II. 150). After a lengthy and somewhat tendentious argument, Damascius offers his version of the Sceptical thesis we saw operating above in Sextus Empiricus. While the Sceptics maintain that the mind can only know the *phantasia*, or impression, Damascius renders this doctrine with the Neoplatonizing counterpart that intellect can only grasp the *phanon*, or appearance.

Obviously, there is a divergence as well as a similarity when we compare the results of Damascius' critique of knowledge with that of the Sceptics, especially at the linguistic level of comparison. There are few if any direct linguistic

echoes that connect Damascius' critique of Neoplatonist theories of intellect to the Sceptics, though one could argue that he deliberately modifies the Sceptical endorsement of "appearances only" by speaking of "manifestation." One argument that actually does sound much more directly reminiscent of the Sceptics crops up at *C-W II*. 151 ff. Damascius has just finished arguing, as we saw above, that intellect can only grasp the appearance of reality. Next he raises the question, "what is the nature of this appearance?" (*C-W II*. 150.25)⁴² If knowledge can be said to illuminate the nature of being, then is only the "surface [τὸ ἐπιπολήεις]," so to speak, of reality knowable? (*C-W II*. 151.17). Is the manifestation of Being more like a color painted on the surface of an object, or is reality "like a crystal, or some other transparent object, visible throughout?" (*C-W II*. 151.20).

Even in the case of a transparent object, one can distinguish between the body and its transparency. Continuing the analogy, Damascius says:

But still, the body is one thing and that which is visible throughout another, so that even there, if there is appearance, still it is not the same as Being. For in the first place, the same problem will return: [knowledge is] not of Being, but of the appearance of Being, which is not the same as Being. Even in the case of the completely transparent, the body itself is not visible, but only its color.

This example finds its counterpart in Sextus Empiricus' *Ad Math VII*, 293–94, where Sextus tries to show that the nature of body is inapprehensible, arguing that the senses can only perceive the qualities and not the underlying substance:

Further, how is it possible for the bodily substance to be apprehended by them when they do not possess a corporeal nature? Thus the sense of sight, for instance, is perceptive of form and size and color, but the substance is neither form nor size nor color but, if anything, that whereof these are properties; and because of this sight is not able to perceive the substance and only sees the properties of the substance, such as its form, size, color.

Whether Damascius uses the analogy from the perception of color⁴³ under the direct influence of a Sceptical text or not has probably little bearing on the question of the nature and extent of Damascius' Sceptical affiliations. Like the Sceptics, Damascius takes premises from within the dogmatic system he criticizes in order to undermine a theory of knowledge that is foundational to that system. The position at which he arrives—the unknowability of being as it is in itself, the separation of intellect and its object, Being, and the denial of the identity thesis—has, it seems to me, recognizable analogues in the Sceptics' maintenance of *akatalepsia*.

⁴² τι οὖν τὸ φανὸν τοῦτο λεγομῖν.

⁴³ Cf. again *CW II* 151.17: Οὐκοῦν τὸ ἐπιπολήεις γινώσκει μόνον. εἴπερ ὡς χρῶμά τι γινώσκουσι λαμπρότητα τῆς φύσεως.

A further question remains concerning the meaning and results of this Sceptical stance with regard to the intellect, though constraints of space permit merely a survey and not a resolution of the issues involved. Some scholars have suggested that one observes an emergent antirealism or even a subjectivism operating in the philosophy of Damascius.⁴⁴ While this view has been harshly criticized,⁴⁵ one is still left with the need to interpret the often striking formulations encountered in the *Doubts and Solutions*: "Being, insofar as it is in itself alone, is also undifferentiated. But when intellect, separated off, stands apart from Being and Being becomes no longer undifferentiated, but rather something differentiated from that which has been differentiated, to this extent the object of knowledge is revealed in it" (*C-W II*. 152). One could say several things in light of this passage without invoking idealism. For example, it is easy to point out that Plotinus had already insisted on the differentiated nature of intellectual knowledge and on the multiplicity inherent in intellectual apprehension.⁴⁶ Again, it becomes increasingly common in the later tradition for Neoplatonists gradually to assimilate nondiscursive thinking to discursive thinking, by offering more subtle distinctions in the intelligible world (e.g., Proclus distinguishes between noetic and noeric), and by relying on the doctrine of the "One in us" to theorize about the possibilities of a truly unified consciousness. Finally, however, Damascius' criticisms of the Neoplatonic identity theory must be seen within the context of dialectic within the Late Academy. *Marianus Gr.* 246, the unique manuscript witness to Damascius' major writings, contains one small clue about the overall nature of his project in the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles*. In F. 435^r we read the following colophon: "The *Doubts and Solutions* of Damascius the Platonic Successor on the *Parmenides* of Plato, matching and disputing the Commentary of the Philosopher [sc. Proclus]."⁴⁷

It remains for another time to assess the extent of Damascius' criticisms of Proclan metaphysics.⁴⁸ In the next section of this article, I do however want at least to glimpse what is perhaps Damascius' most well known innovation or renovation in the structure of Neoplatonist ontology, and this is his denial of

⁴⁴ Cf. J. Combès's Introduction to Volume I of *C-W*. Cf. also Combès, "Négarité et procession des principes chez Damascius," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 22 (1976): 114–33.

⁴⁵ Beierwaltes, for example, criticizes in a rather sweeping way the "Bergsonian" flavor of certain strands of scholarship concerned with Late Athenian Neoplatonism in his monograph *Denken des Eimen* (Frankfurt, 1985).

⁴⁶ Cf. Emilsson, "Plotinus on the Objects of Thought."

⁴⁷ Δαμασκίου διαδόχου εἰς τὸν Πλάτωνος Παρμενίδην ἀπορίαὶ καὶ ἐπιλύσεις ἀντιπαραινόμεναι τοῖς εἰς αὐτὸν ὑπομνήμασιν τοῦ φιλοσόφου.

⁴⁸ Cf. Linguisti, *Principi primi*, for an initial assessment. Linguisti is judiciously wary about agreeing with the more pronounced but highly controversial statements of Brehier concerning the radically new nature of Damascius' metaphysics when compared with those of Proclus.

the First Principle. In what follows I look at this denial in terms of how it might reflect Sceptical critiques of causation.⁴⁹

As Barnes has shown, the Sceptical criticisms we find in Sextus Empiricus (as well as in Aenesidemus, whose modes Sextus summarizes in *PH* I) are directed against belief in causal relations as well as belief in actual causes. At times, the Sceptic will attempt to demolish causal explanation as such, because it plays such a crucial part in the investigation of the unseen and indemonstrable.⁵⁰ At other times, the Sceptic will go after bigger quarry, such as God, who thus functions as the supreme efficient cause or becomes a universal principle of explanation of the kind that the Sceptics proscribed.⁵¹ Similarly, we find that Damascius works by arguing both against causal reasoning as well as specific causal principles. Much of what he has to say on the matter is directed against the work of Proclus.

In the case of Proclus, we are fortunate in having his theorems on causation gathered in propositions 7–13 and propositions 75–86 of his *Elements of Theology* (henceforth, *ET*). Damascius criticizes Proposition 7, “every productive cause is superior to that which it produces⁵²” (another closely related proposition is 75, “every cause properly so called transcends its resultant”⁵³) in his discussion of procession and reversion. He criticizes Proposition 11, “all that exists proceeds from a single first cause,” in the opening chapter of the *Doubts and Solutions*, where part of his strategy consists in utilizing very general arguments against causal explanations. It is hard to know, when surveying this material, where Damascius’ motivations lie. Do his criticisms of causation amount to an all-out assault on the structure of Neoplatonic metaphysics, given their negative implications for the theory of emanation? Or is there a methodological objection at stake in this debate? Here again, the answer to these questions awaits a more detailed investigation of the nature of Late Neoplatonic dialectic. For the present, we turn to Chapter 1 of the *Doubts and Solutions*.

Behind this chapter stretches the debate between Iamblichus and Porphyry concerning the status and number of principles before the first noetic triad. Just as contemporary scholars puzzle over the extent to which Plotinus is willing to concede positive attributes to the One,⁵⁴ Plotinus’ intellectual succes-

⁴⁹For the Sceptic critique of causation as it was possibly formulated in the lost work of Aenesidemus and developed in Sextus Empiricus, *PH* III and *MIX*, see J. Barnes, “Pyrrhonism, Belief, and Causation,” in M. Burnyeat, ed., *The Sceptical Tradition* (Berkeley, 1983).

⁵⁰Ibid., 157.

⁵¹Ibid., 158.

⁵²Translations of *ET* are those of Dodds’s 1963 edition.

⁵³On this fundamental causal theorem in the history of Neoplatonism, see Lloyd, *Anatomy of Neoplatonism*. On Proclus’ views on causation, see Barnes, “Pyrrhonism, Belief, and Causation.”

⁵⁴E.g., J. Bussanich.

sors disputed this question among themselves, with Porphyry possibly elevating the causal aspect of the One at the risk of collapsing the second hypostasis into the first.⁵⁵ Responding to this solution, Iamblichus proposed that there were two first principles before the level of Being: the first One, which was not associated with causality, and the second One, which was.⁵⁶ Damascius examines the issue more fully at I 86–94 and tends to approve the position of Iamblichus as against Porphyry, without committing himself entirely to the Iamblichean solution. What follows is an abridged translation of this chapter:

Is that which is designated as the one principle of all things beyond all things or is it one among all things, the summit of everything that proceeds from it? And are we to say that all things are with the [first principle], or after it and [that they proceed] from it? (CWI. 1.1–5)⁵⁷

Damascius begins his treatise by asking, “Is the one principle of all things beyond all things, or is it one of all things?” Characteristically, he denies both sides of the dilemma: since ‘all things’ designates that from which nothing is lacking, ‘all things’ must include the cause of all things:

The term ‘all things’ [refers] in the strict sense to that from which nothing is absent. But [now we are supposing that] the principle itself is missing. Therefore that which comes after the first principle is not in the strict sense all things, but rather all things except the first principle.

After dismissing the first half of the dilemma, Damascius goes on to reject the second. If all things include their cause, there is no cause for all things, since the cause will be included among its effects. But without the cause, the effect cannot exist.

Now if all things are together with the first principle, there cannot be a principle for all things, since on the supposition that the principle can be subsumed by all things, there would be no principle [i.e., no beginning, no cause] for all things. Therefore [let us say that] the single coordinated disposition of all things (which we designate by the term, ‘all things’) is without a first principle and uncaused, lest we [continue the search] *ad infinitum*. (CW I.2.9–12)

⁵⁵One difficulty in documenting the history of this debate involves the authorship of the Anonymous Commentary on the *Parmenides*, a Neoplatonist treatise thought by Hadot to have been authored by Porphyry.

⁵⁶For the details of this debate see J. Dillon, Introduction to *Iamblichi Chalcidensis in Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta*.

⁵⁷With this opening sentence of the *Peri Archon*, one can compare *ET* 5: “Every manifold is posterior to the One.” To demonstrate this proposition, Proclus assumes the contrary, that the many is coexistent with the One, and that the One and the many are of the same order, *συστοιχα* by nature. He concedes that there is no objection to the One and many being temporally coordinate. This admission will be important when we compare the Sceptics on the temporal aspect of causal relation.

Therefore, he concludes, all is neither from a cause, nor a cause: τὰ ἅρα πάντα οὔτε ἀρχὴ οὔτε ἀπ' ἀρχῆς.

The argument constructed in the opening paragraph of the *Doubts and Solutions* focuses on the relational character of the First Principle: because the causal aspect of the One is relative to its effects, its transcendence must be compromised. And yet this is a method of approach that Proclus explicitly rejects at *ET* 5 when he tells us that the manifold is not ontologically coordinate, is not σύστοιχα, with the One. Rather it is ontologically posterior to the One, so to suppose that the One and the Many are correlatives is simply a mistake to be avoided, not a worry to be taken seriously.

Damascius' argument seems informed by a skeptical critique that targets the relational character of causation in general. In fact, throughout the *Doubts and Solutions*, we find a larger concern with the unknowability of relatives that extends into other aspects of Neoplatonic metaphysical speculation with which Damascius finds fault. One very clear example occurs in the section on theories of intellect, already touched on above: "Since the elements that constitute a given relation mutually give rise to one another, will it not follow that the effect acts on the cause, and the object of desire on the subject of desire, and the knower on the known?" (CW II 156.20). This passage expresses a specific worry that the knower in some way might condition the known or that the object can change in relation to the subject of knowledge. All the examples in this passage suggest some notion of ontological relativity, the thought being that the patient conditions the agent, and hence that in some way the causal sequence flows backwards from effect to cause.⁵⁸ Thus the resolution for this aporia denies that the cause possesses any ontological dependence on its effect:

Therefore the effect does not produce the cause, but rather, the cause produces both itself and the effect, because it brings about the effect simultaneously with the relationship [that consists in their] coordinate existence. Before it brings about the existence of the product, the effect, the desirable, or the knowable, the cause as it were makes itself knowing, desiring, causative, and productive. (CW II.158)

Annas and Barnes have shown that even among ancient Sceptics, the so-called "Relativity Mode" actually draws on (at least) three different kinds of relativity: epistemological, semantic, and ontological.⁵⁹ Not all of these kinds are actually compatible with Scepticism and not all of them are present in the discussion of Sextus Empiricus at *PH* I 135–40.⁶⁰ In fact, our text refers to a

⁵⁸ One interesting feature of the example cited above is the avoidance of the standard collocation for "relativity," for which the Greek is usually *ta pros ti*, "things relative to something." Damascius actually uses the Porphyrian word for "relation," *synesis*, and cites examples from the *Phaedo* to illustrate this category.

⁵⁹ Annas and Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, Chapter 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

passage from Plato's *Phaedo* seemingly related to problems associated with nongenuine changes: Damascius mentions a spurious kind of change that comes about when the patient does not actually come into contact with the agent, but rather is said to change by virtue of a change in its relationship to the agent, as for example in the case of proximity.

One could argue that the "Relative Mode" crops up in its epistemological form when Damascius discusses the relationship of transcendence, and specifically, the transcendence of the first principle to its effects (the "all things" of *Doubts and Solutions* I.1). For comparison, we turn to *Outlines of Empiricism*, III.20–22, where Sextus presents a series of arguments calculated to impugn the very concept of causation⁶¹:

It is impossible to conceive of the cause before grasping its effect as its effect; for we only recognize that it is cause of the effect when we grasp the latter as an effect. But we cannot grasp the effect of the cause as its effect if we do not grasp the cause of the effect as its cause. (*PH* 20–21, Barnes trans.)

Sextus' point, that we cannot conceive of a cause, rests upon the idea that cause and effect are correlative terms; neither can be grasped without the other. Yet from this argument, Sextus thinks he is entitled to conclude:

If, therefore, in order to conceive of the cause it is necessary to recognize the effect beforehand, and in order to recognize the effect it is necessary to know the cause beforehand, the circular mode of puzzlement shows that both are inconceivable. (*PH* 22, Barnes trans.)

Sextus' argument fails because, as Barnes points out, Sextus wrongly substitutes for Proposition 1 (You cannot conceive of A as cause of B before you conceive of B as effect of A) Proposition 1' (You cannot conceive of A as cause of B unless you have already conceived of B as effect of A). Although Proposition 1 does not entitle Sextus to infer Proposition 1', nevertheless, his complaint against the causal relation has some merit. It is hard to conceive of a cause without understanding the idea of an effect. This conceptual interdependence seems to be what Damascius objects to in the case of the first principle. To be a cause is already to exist in relationship to an effect. Thus the notion of a transcendent or first cause seems dubious.

Another aspect of Damascius' argument focuses on the temporal relationship between cause and effect. If the One is the cause of all things, then it must be temporally prior to all things. And yet, since 'all things' is a term that must include the One, the One is no longer prior to its own effects. Once more, this exploration of the temporal aspect of causality seems informed by the skeptics. Here is the argument from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III 25–26:

⁶¹ Barnes, "Pyrrhonism, Belief, and Causation," 173.

When the cause produces the effect, the cause either subsists already qua cause or it does not exist qua cause. And if it does not, it cannot produce the effect. But if it exists qua cause, it must subsist and exist as a cause previously, before it brings on the subsequent effect, which is said to be accomplished by it on the assumption that it already exists qua cause. But since cause is relative, that is to say, relative to the effect, it is clear that it cannot, qua cause of this effect, be prior to the effect. (*PH* III 25, Barnes trans.)

Thus there are two mutually exclusive ways of construing the temporal relationship between causes and effects. Insofar as causes produce their effects, they "precede their effects in time," but insofar as causes are relative to their effects, they "do not precede their effects in time."⁶² Because each of these temporal relationships is inherent within the notion of the cause, once more the causal relation is inconceivable. The structure of this argument is clearly discernible in the opening argument of the *Doubts and Solutions*: the One must precede all things since it produces all things, and yet because it is related to all things as their cause, its existence implies the simultaneous existence of all things. Hence, the One both precedes and does not precede all things.

4. CONCLUSION: SCEPTICISM, BELIEF, AND REVELATION

One problem with the account I have given of Damascius' Scepticism is the parallel I have insisted on from the beginning, namely, I have equated Damascius' criticisms of Neoplatonic metaphysics with a Sceptical position, when in fact what seems to be at issue are doctrinal disputes that bear on such topics as intellect and the first principle. Even the examples illustrating Damascius' criticisms of Neoplatonic theories of intellect are far removed from the Sceptics' concern to target, not knowledge as such, but belief.⁶³ It may be that the Sceptic will go out of his way to demonstrate the incoherence of arguments purporting to rely on knowledge or to demonstrate the truth of a given theory of knowledge. In the end, however, the goal of ancient Scepticism is to remove belief, to subscribe to no opinions, and to suspend judgment.⁶⁴

Above we saw that Damascius' school revives Platonic dogmatism by invoking the tradition of self-knowledge, of intuition, or divine wisdom. In this sense, Damascius' insistence on the fallibilism of the metaphysical project and with it the discursive account of reality that metaphysics attempts, is not a refutation of dogmatism *per se*. Damascius is like the Sceptics insofar as he offers a thoroughgoing critique of the prior tradition, targetting the funda-

⁶² Ibid., 177-78.

⁶³ Cf. Annas and Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, 135.

⁶⁴ Cf. R. Bett, *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Ethicists* (Oxford, 1997), Introduction; Annas and Barnes, *Modes of Scepticism*, Introduction.

mental premisses of Neoplatonic ontology, epistemology, and theology. But it must also be recognized that he purports to offer solutions for the problems he discusses.⁶⁵

Against the comparison of Damascius' thought to ancient Scepticism, it could further be objected that even though, for Damascius, the ungraspability of the First Principle implies the consequent uncertainty of metaphysical doctrine as such, this uncertainty does not itself imply Scepticism. In fact, it must be recognized that Damascius is finally a dogmatist because he attempts to teach, transmit, or at the very least orient the reader to a vision of truth that is paradoxical.

Returning now to the text with which this article began, the *Prolegomena to the Study of Plato's Philosophy* (Section 27, entitled "Methods of Teaching"), it becomes clear that Damascius' school recognizes a variety of methods through which Plato conveyed his modified dogmatism. At the very top of the list of fifteen recognized methods comes *enthousiastikos*, that is, teaching by means of divine inspiration. Olympiodorus also mentions the "method of likeness," which consists in using images to convey the higher realities. This method is associated by the Athenian school with the word *endeixis* (allusion), a word initially linked to Pythagorean symbolism. For Damascius and his school, the language of metaphysics is even at its best allusive; although metaphysical discourse provides us with an image of truth it cannot be conflated with truth, and so is more symbolic or iconic than discursive.

Thus Proclus and Simplicius both allow that any teaching about realities such as intellect and soul must take place by means of *endeixis*, by means of coded language.⁶⁶ In our treatise, the word *endeixis* typically conveys the idea of hinting at or of suggesting a reality which is then left indeterminate. Throughout the treatise, Damascius is at pains to remind the reader that he is speaking as a whole only provisionally, *kata endeixin*, and this word appears over one hundred times in the *Doubts and Solutions* alone. Perhaps the most surprising passage in the *Doubts and Solutions Concerning First Principles* occurs toward the end of the treatise, where Damascius appears to eschew traditional metaphysics in favor of revealed wisdom:

⁶⁵ An important question that I have not addressed here is the extent to which Damascius' own replies to the puzzles he introduces are couched as definitive solutions. Sometimes Damascius argues on both sides of a dilemma, and this form of "in utrum partem" argument is easily comparable to the "isos sthenos," or "equal strength" techniques of the Sceptics.

⁶⁶ Cf. Simplicius, *On Aristotle's On the Soul* 1.1-2.4, sections 26, 11-19; 28, 19; 30, 5, etc. Cf. also Proclus *In Parm.* 1027, 27-30; *In Remp.* I.5,8; 56,3, 61,9, etc. For all these passages and a wealth of other references see Peter Lautner's Introduction to the English translation of Simplicius' commentary on *De anima*, 8-10. I wish to thank Dr. Lautner for providing me with the reference to his work and for discussion about the subject of *endeixis* in Late Athenian Neoplatonism.

We use human language to speak about principles that are divine in the highest possible degree. We cannot conceive or name them without being compelled to use our own ideas about realities that far exceed every mind, life, and being. Even when the Gods instruct some of us concerning these or other matters, they [do not teach] such [thoughts] as the Gods themselves have. Instead, they use an appropriate language when instructing Egyptians, Syrians, or Greeks . . . and so transmit matters of great import to human beings by using a human dialect. (*C-W*, III.140.11–25)

Despite his Sceptical affiliations, Damascius ends his *Doubts and Solutions* with a theological testimony to the truth of his unorthodoxy, his metaphysics of the Ineffable (*C-W*, III.161). In order to justify his own name for the first principle, "the Ineffable," Damascius cites a version of the Orphic Theogony attributed to a mysterious personage named either Hieronymous or Hellanikos. This version gives a prominent place to several deities missing in the more commonly cited version, the *Sacred Discourse in 24 Rhapsodies*, or *Rhapsodic Theogony*. But because these versions omit the deities, they transmit by their very silence the fact that the Original principle is, as Damascius understands it, the Ineffable.⁶⁷

Damascius not only authorizes his own metaphysical innovations by alluding to a primordial tradition, but he also verifies his understanding of metaphysical discourse as presenting a lack of adequate signifiers. This abyssal semiotics is his most authoritative statement. It marks the end of his history of Neoplatonic metaphysics with an almost breathtaking theology of silence.

Damascius writes for those who belong to the tradition but whose intellectual activity impedes their progress. For such people, the only way to remove doubt is to remove human thought altogether. This radical solution may remind us of the earlier Sceptical *epoche* of the Hellenistic academy (though it must be said that the Sceptics were devoted to inculcating doubts and not removing them). And yet, this strong medicine is only prescribed for those who, dissatisfied with every panacea, will only be content with an absolute cure for what ails them. Finally, the only remedy for ignorance is, in Damascius' words, perseverance in unknowing.⁶⁸

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⁶⁷Cf. L. Brisson, "Damascius et l'Orphisme," in *Orphisme et Orphée, en l'honneur de Jean Rudhardt. Recherches et Rencontres* 3 (Genève, 1991), 157–209.

⁶⁸The author would like to thank Dr. Alessandro Linguiti for his spoken and written remarks about the topic and the manuscript. This paper would not have been possible without his generous assistance. Thanks also to Professor Harold Tarrant for reading an earlier draft of this paper and for helpful suggestions about the school of Olympiodorus. Thanks to the Center for Hellenic Studies and to its staff and especially the Directors, Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raflaub, for their help and encouragement. Finally, this paper was improved due to the suggestions of an anonymous reader for *JHP*. Nevertheless, all views as well as any errors remain the author's responsibility.

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