

Damascius' exegesis of *Philebus* 27, on the nature of the Mixed

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Introduction: Exegesis in Late antique Platonism

Damascius (ca. 462-538) was head of the Platonic Academy at Athens in 529 when the Christian Emperor Justinian issued a decree that banned the teaching of philosophy in that city. Damascius lectured or composed commentaries on Plato's dialogues in keeping with the Neoplatonic curriculum developed in the third century under the influence of Iamblichus. There are traces of or references to commentaries on the *Alcibiades*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Timaeus*, *Laws* I and II, *Republic*, *Philebus*, and *Parmenides*. Of these, the *Commentary on the Parmenides* was written by Damascius himself, while the *Alcibiades* commentary survives as quotations in a commentary by Olympiodorus. The *Phaedo* and *Philebus* commentaries survive in the form of reports "apo phones," or lecture notes from a series given by Damascius. These lectures, or sets of lecture notes, like the *Commentary on the Parmenides*, are based entirely on a now lost commentary of the same name by Proclus, which is alluded to in the *PH*. According to this anecdote, Marinus showed Isidore his own *Commentary on the Philebus*, whereupon Isidore told him that Proclus' commentary would suffice. Its subject, according to the Neoplatonic curriculum, is the Good, and in particular, the Good that belongs to sentient beings. My topic addresses a lemma in Damascius' own *Lectures on the Philebus* that evidently responds to the interpretation of Proclus. We have independent evidence for the Proclean exegesis from remarks in Proclus' *Platonic Theology*, a text that we shall discuss shortly.

In addition to the *Lectures on the Philebus*, Damascius discusses the *Philebus* interpretation extensively in his major work, the *Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles*, which treats the initial principles of Neoplatonic metaphysics. Starting with the Ineffable, Damascius here addresses the One, followed by the three Henads or aspects of the One (One-All, All-One, and the Unified), and finally, the intelligible world, whose apex is the Unified, or Being. Being introduces the Intelligible Triads, whose arrangement is the subject of the last part of the book. Damascius uses nomenclature of varied provenance to describe these same structures, framing his own doctrines in terms of Platonic, Pythagorean, and Chaldean equivalents. Thus the three Henads can also be described as Limit, Unlimited and Mixed, or as Monad, Dyad, and Many. The *Problems and Solutions* exhibits a thorough-going critique of Proclean metaphysics, starting with *ET* Proposition 11, (all that exists proceeds from a single cause), going on to pose problems concerning the status of the primary henads, proceeding to critique the Proclean triadic view of procession and reversion, and severely undermining the status of intellectual reversion in establishing being as the intelligible object. Damascius investigates the internal contradictions lurking within the theory of descent as a whole, showing that similarity of effect and cause is vitiated in the case of processions where one order

(e.g. intellect) gives rise to an entirely different order (e.g. soul). Finally, he ends the *Doubts and Solutions* with a detailed criticism of Proclus' arrangement of the intelligible triads.

Damascius' exegetical strategies pivot between Proclus and Iamblichus. This is certainly the situation that we find in his interpretation of *Philebus* 27a. In what follows, I will be asking what this preference for Iamblichus means, and suggesting that Damascius criticizes Proclus' views about causation pretty much *tout court*, and that here, as elsewhere, he pits Iamblichus against Proclus as a way of undermining the latter. Damascius is evidently concerned with the possibility of what Dillon has called Iamblichus' metaphysical ambivalence: the third henad, while it functions as a monad in the intelligible triad, is also an aspect of the one that is, by Iamblichus' own admission, necessarily prior to this same triad. It is this Iamblichean doctrine that shapes Damascius' own interpretation of the *Philebus*.¹

In this paper, I discuss Damascius' exegesis of *Philebus* 27d7, on the composition of the Mixed. An ongoing clarification of the Platonic tradition constitutes the late antique version of dialectic; Damascius expresses his originality as a philosopher in the terms of subtly different interpretations that signal importantly different theoretical positions. In the case of his exegesis of the *Philebus*' Mixed, Damascius infuses a new approach into the orthodox position by positing an independent nature for the Mixed, considering it, contra Syrianus and Proclus, not yet as the first member of the intelligible triad, but rather as an aspect of the One. Thus, Damascius' approach to the *Philebus* involves him in a dialectical engagement with the prior work of Proclus. It is obvious to the reader of Proclus that Damascius lacks the systematic holism of his predecessor, and not only presents the reader with no specific tenets such as we find in the *ET*, but also abruptly and frequently attacks Proclean formulations. Any student of Neoplatonism will wonder what Damascius' accomplishment as the last of the scholarchs was, what his surviving texts tell us about the conduct of philosophical debate in the last phase of the Academy, and what, if anything, he contributes as an original thinker.

II. Damascius on the Third Henad

For Platonists of late antiquity, it is standard practice to associate the three principles of *Philebus* 27, limit, unlimited and mixed, with the first stages in the devolution of reality after the One.² In the metaphysics of Proclus and Iamblichus, *peras* and *apeiron* constitute a dyad after the One, becoming conduits of unity and multiplicity, and introducing the possibility of reality outside of the ineffable first principle. The third nature, the *Philebus*' Mixed, introduces a subsequent stage of development, which Proclus and Iamblichus understand as the intelligible world, or the realm of Being. Being forms the apex of the intelligible triad, which is as it were composed of two elements, the limited and the unlimited, that constitute its parts; hence its equivalence to the Platonic 'mixed.'³ Thus the three kinds of Plato's *Philebus* are the fulcrum around which reality proliferates and the hidden fullness of the One pours forth into the world of manifestation.

Here is Greek text of the *Philebus* 27 d 6-10, as printed in the OCT, with the bracketed words indicating a textual variant; some editors print the neuter form of this phrase, as op-

¹ Dillon *BMCR* 2007.10.33

² As Dillon (2003) has shown, it is conceivable that Pythagorean interpretations of this part of the *Philebus*, according to which the indefinite or *apeiron* functioned as a dyad that acted upon the One or first principle, resulting in the development and elaboration of the order of primary beings, already figured into the early Academy. For Proclus on the *Philebus* see *PT* III.9.

³ Cf. *ET* 89 : all true Being is composed of limit and infinite and 90: prior to all that is composed of limit and infinitude there exist substantiality and independently the first Limit and the first Infinity

posed to the masculine gender; thus the Mixed in this line refers either to the mixed life or to the mixed qua ontological kind.⁴

Καὶ μέρος γ' αὐτὸν φήσομεν εἶναι τοῦ τρίτου οἶμαι
γένους· οὐ γὰρ [ὁ] δυοῖν τινοῖν ἐστι [μικτὸς ἐκεῖνος] ἀλλὰ
σμπάντων τῶν ἀπείρων ὑπὸ τοῦ πέρατος δεδεμένον, ὥστε ὀρθῶς ὁ νικηφόρος οὗτος
βίος μέρος ἐκεῖνου γίγνοιτ' ἄν.

“We will, I think, assign it to the third kind, for it is *not a mixture of just two elements* but of the sort where all that is unlimited is tied down by limit. It would seem right, then to make our victorious form of life part of that kind.” (Cooper, *Plato. Complete Works.*)

Damascius departs from this orthodox interpretation of the *Philebus*, suggesting that there are not two constituents of the Mixed, one unifying and the other multiplying. He also denies that the Mixed is equivalent to Being. Instead, the Mixed has its own function as the channel by which all things pour forth from the One into the possibility of Being. The Mixed fuses the unity of the first Henad with the all possibility of the second Henad, to create a third nature that is the peer of the first two Henads, insofar as the First Henad must contain all things and the second Henad must belong to the One. Hence the third Henad expresses just this realization of the all in the One and the One in the all, which is in turn a fundamental feature of the reality Damascius attempts to discern. In sections 55-58 of the *Problems and Solutions*, Damascius elaborates his interpretation of the Mixed qua Henad, which as he says, ‘will exist by virtue of its own nature and not as the combination of plural elements.’ (II 43.1-2) Criticizing Proclus’ interpretation, Damascius suggests that Proclus’ way of reading the passage necessitates an infinite regress. There will have to be a Mixed before the Mixed, which gives the nature of the Mixed, and then there will be two principles in this Mixed, and they will have to have causes, and so on, ad infinitum:

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

Here his view is difficult to recover; on the one hand, he seems critical of Proclus and Syrianus (his standard appellation for them is ‘the philosophers’). But what this criticism consists in is hard to say; he goes on to say that the principles of the mixed are not, in fact, limit and the unlimited, which then combine to form the mixed as being. Instead, each, the limit and the unlimited is the principle of all things:

“Rather, each of the two is the principle of all things, the one is the principle of all things as differentiated and many and indefinite, or however [one likes to express it], and the other is the principle of all things as unified and as ones, and as informed by limit.” (II 43)

As if by way of agreeing that his exegesis is uncertain at this point, Damascius now reiterates the question at stake:

“Do the participations in the two principles bring about the Mixed? For the argument once more reverts to the question of whether or not the one and the many are elements [of the third], a position that the philosophers come to, but that we do not accept. And so let us also

⁴ For example Cooper’s translation reads *mikton ekeionon*.

bring in the seventh line of demonstration, viz., that each of the three principles is all things and also before all things. But the third principle is all things in the unity of all things, while the first is all things in the one, as a unique and perfect simplicity, and the intermediate is all things in all things. The One is the One before all things, the second is all things, and the third is the One-all as unity.” (II 34)

Thus Damascius tries to uproot the interpretation that sees the limit as the monad, the unlimited as the dyad and the latter as acting upon the former in order to generate number, for example. Instead, there is no production of the Mixed; it rather functions as the productive cause of the intelligible order. That Damascius is couching his interpretation as a response to Proclus is clear from a comparison of *PT* III 9 15-20, where Proclus says explicitly that the Mixed is intelligible, and further that the Mixed is ‘made’ and that its generation is lower than that of the prior Henads, the Limit and Unlimited, whose reality is rather, according to Proclus revealed. To summarize, then, in reply to Proclus’ interpretation, Damascius insists that the Mixed is not generated, is a Henad, and has its own distinctive nature:

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

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

III: Exegesis as dialectic in later Neoplatonism

We return to the exegetical situation: Damascius is everywhere addressing Proclean metaphysics, and often, as here, he is actually pitting an Iamblichean interpretation against Proclus’ opinion. To see this, we must go back to the text of Proclus. For Proclus and Iamblichus, *peras* and *apeiron* are related to a Pythagorean interpretation of Plato’s *Philebus*. This interpretation functions as the basis for their explanation of how the world of multiplicity, expressed as the gradations of Being, arises from the absolute One. The dyad therefore constitutes a manifestation of the hidden or latent power of the One, that is, its all-possibility. As Van Riel has demonstrated, Proclus actually coins a word, *ekphansis*, manifestation, as a way to display the relationship between the Dyad, *peras* and *apeiron*, and the One.⁵ For both Proclus and Damascius, I take it that in some sense the nature of the One is revealed or is made manifest in what for Damascius are the Henads, actually facets of the One, or in the realm of the One, and in what for Proclus constitutes the first Dyad that is an *ekphansis*, a showing of the nature of the One. Yet as such, the Mixed according to the interpretation of Proclus is ‘generated’ while the Dyad is a manifestation of the One. Moreover, for Proclus, ‘generation is inferior to manifestation.’⁶ Thus the Mixed does not have its own nature⁷; in

⁵ Van Riel, 144 points out, “Plato says that the god has “shown” *peras* and *apeiron*” at *Philebus* 23c9-10. Proclus substitutes the word, δεῖξαι, with ἐκφαίνειν.

⁶ *PT* III 9, 36, 17-19. “Ὅσῳ δὴ τὸ ποιεῖν τοῦ ἐκφαίνειν καταδέεστερον καὶ ἡ γέννησις τῆς ἐκφάνσεως, τοσούτῳ δὴπου τὸ μικτὸν ὑφειμένην ἔλαχε τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐνὸς πρόοδον τῶν δύο ἀρχῶν.

To the extent that making is inferior to manifesting and production is inferior to manifestation, by so much the mixed has received an inferior procession from the One than the Dyad.

this sense, Damascius is right that the very existence of the Mixed in Proclus' schema implies an infinite regress. Essentially, for Proclus *peras* and *apeiron* function like form and matter; their product, a synthesis of the infinite power of the One together with the unity of the One, is a compound, i.e., Being. Damascius' strategy of criticizing Proclus involves the tendency to prize apart the two philosophers, and to use Iamblichus against Proclus if at all possible. If Damascius includes the Mixed within the order of the Henads, or in the realm of the One, it is not without interest that he alludes to a similar doctrine in Iamblichus' now lost *Commentary on the Parmenides*, that the Unified remains in the ambit of the One:

"How is Iamblichus' interpretation of the intelligible different, when he says that it subsists "around the One" and never emerges outside of the One?" (II 93)

And again:

"And so Iamblichus also represented the intelligible as in the One, because the intelligible was more united to the One and more conformed to it than to Being." (II 97)

This fragment (cited by Dillon in his *Commentary* as Fragment 2b of Iamblichus' lost *Commentary on the Parmenides*, cf. Dillon's own commentary on pp. 391-393) is important evidence for the origin of Damascius' own views on the nature of the Henads, viz., the One-all, All-one, and the Unified. The Intelligible realm as a whole is not something new, adventitious, caused, or produced. It is not only that, as per Proclus, the infinite power of the One and the perfect unity of the One are its primary manifestations, but that Being itself is another face, the most outward face, of the One. Actually, Proclus almost suggests as much when he says that the Mixed 'receives its existence as a whole from the One.' Yet Damascius will emphasize the difference between Iamblichus and Proclus.⁸

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

Conclusion: the Henads

To summarize, not only does Damascius differ from Proclus in conceiving of Being as incipient within the realm of the One, as the power of the One to be all things, but this Being is also conceived as Intelligible. Thus at root it is actually the intelligible realm that reveals the power of the One but there is no 'production' or coming into being of the intelligible. The Henads, including the Unified as the root of intelligible Being, are not only manifestations of the One; they actually are the One, considered in its aspect as all things. If this sounds like a contradiction, creating a doctrine that confuses multiplicity with unity and fundamentally erases the very fact that the One is one, then Damascius would only agree with Plotinus when he calls the One Δύναμις τῶν πάντων. III 8, 10.1.

⁷ Van Riel (2001), 147, cites *PT* III 10, 41.19-20: τὸ μικτὸν οὐκ ἦν αἴτιον καθ' ὅσον ἐστὶ μικτόν

⁸ To some extent, the various exegetes are working with the same understanding but employing different terminology. For example, at the beginning of his *ET* Proclus uses language that will remind the reader of Damascius' third Henad, the Unified, and distinguishes the Unified from the One as such, which he calls the *autohen*, the One in itself (*ET* proposition 4): Πᾶν τὸ ἠνωμένον ἕτερόν ἐστι τοῦ αὐτοενός.

All that is Unified is other than the One in itself.

How can the intelligible realm reveal the One if the One lacks what the latter reveals? If all things are forever outside of the One, then they cannot reveal the One. Plotinus attempts to solve this problem by saying that the One gives what it does not have. Proclus tries to create a ‘cause of becoming’ that somehow lets the One off the hook. Proclus’ dyad produces Being, and this production is at the root of all genesis, for the Mixed, as we have seen, is the first appearance of genesis, resulting in a ‘product’ that is a mixture of its constituent parts, yet somehow less real than they are. For Damascius, the three Henads do not produce Being or the Mixed; rather, it is the mind that must constantly negotiate between the fullness and unity of the One. In trying to apprehend the One, the mind inevitably fails and instead grasps the One under the aspect of the Henads; the mind must contemplate the One as all things, or else it must contemplate all things as dependent upon the One, or else it must contemplate the expansion of the One into all things. Each of these ways of looking at the One is a kind of projection that the mind conjures up as it grapples with intractable metaphysical problems.

“Neither “the one” nor “all things” accord with [the One]. These are a pair of binary oppositions that divide our consciousness [of the One]. If we focus on the One as simple, we lose sight of the complete perfection of that principle. But if we conceive it as all things simultaneously, we destroy its unity and simplicity. The cause of this is that we ourselves are divided and we distractedly consider its characteristics as if they were separate.” (I, 80.19-81.2)

Damascius’ exegesis of *Philebus* 27, exploiting interpretive differences between Proclus and Iamblichus, in order to reject the Proclean notion of causation, is an example of how the late academy conducted dialectic.