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Chapter VII. Damascius and Hyperignorance

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VII. Damascius and Hyperignorance

Damascius represents an extreme, the end of a development, which caricatures that development. The last chair-holder of the Platonic succession in the Athenian Academy, Damascius, was to see it closed in 529 A.D., by the Christian Emperor Justinian. He then went East, with other Greek philosophers to the court of King Chosroes in Persia. Given the evolution of his views, he was probably well-advised to go East, rather than stay in the West: his philosophy constitutes one of the clearest case-studies for those who wish to seek for affinities between the philosophy of Greece and that of the East. Damascius' emphasis on silence, on the failure of reason, and on the idea of hyperignorance takes him closer than any other Neoplatonist to the themes of Buddhist philosophy, and there is curious symmetry between the content of his philosophy and its historical encasement: the exhaustion of the Platonic tradition is accompanied by Justinian's closure of the Academy, for quite other reasons, and the eclipse of logic in favour of supra-rational knowing, is accompanied by his departure eastwards. We do not know what human and intellectual contact, what level of cultural exchange, may have lain behind the move to Persia, but the question is a fascinating one. (Alan Cameron, in the *Last Days of the Academy at Athens*, discusses the reputation of the king among Athenian philosophers, and generally takes the view that the period of Damascius was one of renaissance for the Academy. Damascius' brilliance is beyond question, but he is a classic case of one who threw away the ladder after climbing it.)

Damascius stresses the desire to know, with the suggestion that this results in the erection of misleading hypotheses. The excellent article by M. Combès (*Negativité ...* 115) puts it this way: "All that we say about the Ineffable, whether in the negative or positive mode, is merely the product of our own states (οἰκεῖα πάθη)". Damascius postulates a desire to know on the part of both the knowing and the knowable:

It must be said that the knowable wants to be desired, and that which knows wants to be desired, within the difference of various relations, and in relation to each other as mind and being. (*Dubitaciones* 81, p.185)

Reason desires that which is knowable because it is absent from it. (Clearly enough, the fact that something is absent does not cause us to desire it, for that fact alone: as with Spinoza much later, so with Damascius; desire seeks its object because it already shares in it.) But when reason attains the object of its desire, it is no longer a matter of knower and known, but a certain unity follows, a relationship of being (οὐσία). Thus reason is capable of be-

ing both knowable and known: it exists in two aspects but is fundamentally the same. If Damascius were of the twentieth century he would speak of the abolition of the subject, and indeed he means something like this. Knower and known merge: both want to be desirable: they are known separately as mind and being from time to time, according to the relations obtaining at that time. If one is to separate them, one would say that being is desirable, and mind that which is capable of desiring. But Damascius' view is thoroughly integrationist: desiring and the desired are but two phases of the one reality:

Further, the knowable is that which is desired by the knowing subject: knowledge is thus a return (ἐπιστροφή) of the knowing subject to the knowable; and every return is a conjoining. (27, p.48)

The highest principle, however, is beyond either knowledge or unknowability: it is merely the object of our "own feelings" (οἰκεῖα πάθη: 4, p.7). Whilst M. Combès (*Négativité...* 116) gives a somewhat florid interpretation of the term πάθημα (6, p.11), the general lines of his interpretation are right. (He represents Damascius as saying that the Ineffable is the object neither of our knowledge, nor our ignorance, but of our "torment"; the passage seems to have quite a different meaning.) Overall however, Combès has made an excellent point, which one could put like this: since the ultimate principle is beyond the reach of language and knowledge, those linguistic and gnostic products which put themselves forward as descriptions of It, must spring from emotional sources only. They have no rational or ontological basis: their origin is merely psychological. We have already seen with Proclus the notion of the soul's ὠδίς, its straining, or its anguish (see p.99, 116: "son travail d'enfantement", as Saffrey translates it, thereby including the notion of the labour of child-birth in that of the pain of ignorance seeking to convert itself into knowledge.

Names come from human intentions, rather than from anything in reality which might warrant them. Pythagoras gave the Ineffable a name because he had to teach philosophy (46, p.92). In fact the name One is relatively suitable to the highest principle: it can have some usefulness to apply the highest and most noble names to the One, "as what could be regarded as symbols of the highest sanctity" (49, p.100). It is clear that such words have no real ability to express the inexpressible, and in fact the term "One" applies to other principles. The utility of such terms lies not in their rational significance.

As Westerink has noted, from the basis of his deep knowledge of the texts, Damascius comments on Proclus, criticizing and enhancing the work of the latter. He presupposes the reader's knowledge of Proclus' writing on the Parmenides, and adds his own views as a further layer. It is therefore with particular interest that we find in Damascius an attack on negation and analogy, defended by Proclus against some unnamed opponents:

There is an illegitimate form of reasoning, which proceeds via negations, and one which proceeds via analogies, and yet another, the syllogism which proceeds by the linking of necessary conclusions: indeed it does not know how to grasp all these things, but as it were treads on air, knowing things on the basis of other things. So that if one does not know the simple, one cannot know the whole proposition, nor therefore the whole syllogism. And analogy always deals with things which have no existence whatever: "as the sun is to the seen and the seeing, so is the One to the known and the knowing". The sun we know, but the One we do not know. Negation abstracts what we know, but what it leaves we do not know. (26, pp.46-7)

This is a forcefully put argument against the classic three ways of knowing the One. Damascius strikes at their weakest point, in that each of them depends on knowing things on the basis of other things. They are therefore limited to the world of existents and multiplicity. Each of them has the same weakness, in that in each case something is not known, and this absence constitutes a fatal gap in the machinery of the argument. One can draw analogies between things one knows, but one cannot do so where one side of the comparison is unknown. One can negate or abstract, and one will learn by this so long as there is something left to know, but where the remainder is unknown, one remains uninstructed. This vigorous attack in the Sceptical style on the axis of Neoplatonic epistemology is in direct contrast to the view of his predecessor, Proclus.

Damascius is formulating an attack on the method of negation, and we have already seen Proclus alluding to such opposition. In the preceding chapter it was noted that Proclus had opponents in this matter; though he does not say much about them (see p.108). The question there concerned the precise nature of the objections to negative theology, and we may now use Damascius to fill in the gap left by the silence of Proclus' opponents: his objections to negation are probably those of the opposition in Proclus' circle.

A further trenchant attack on the epistemology of negation is launched by Damascius:

But negation is a kind of statement (*λόγος*); the negated is an entity. But the Nothing is neither a negated entity, nor an entity which is expressed in any way whatever, nor knowable in any way. Thus it is impossible to negate negation. (7, p.15)

Damascius rejects the concluding claim of Proclus' commentary on the Parmenides (see p.116), namely that in the end negation itself is negated, thus leading to silence. Whilst Damascius is prepared to concede the silence, he does not admit the idea of an ascent to negation, and up through a final double negation.

What can be the end of this discussion, but intractable silence...? (7, p.15)

The general thrust of his rejection of negation here is similar to that of the passage mentioned above. He continues (8, pp.15–16) to castigate those who have failed to recall that the Ultimate has nothing in common with the things in this world. Any attempt at analogy (ἀναλογία) or assimilation (ὁμοιότης) will fail because of the gulf between the known and the unknown. Both negation and analogy are damaged by this absolute ontological discontinuity, and Damascius thus situates himself within a branch of Neoplatonism which opted for a radical transcendence, with the consequent rejection of these classical methods of overcoming ontological difference. His advice is that it is better to “remain at rest within the unspeakable depths of the soul” (8, p.16). And if it is necessary to “show something”, then it is better to use negations. We could speak of Him in such terms, calling him the “in no way, nowhere”. This would be nothing but “idle chatter”, says Damascius, but we may still want to do it. The implication is that of all the idle chatter that takes place, the negation is the best, though it should not be imagined to be of more significance than it is. The use of the word “show” (ἐνδείκνυσθαι) is revealing, since it suggests “pointing out”, or “displaying”. It is a sign that language has fallen on hard times when linguistic acts are reduced to the status of non-complex physical acts, such as pointing. The soul may wish to point in the direction of the Nothing: if it sets the soul at ease to do so, it may, by uttering the useless negatives “in no way, nowhere”. Language is reduced to empty gesticulation.

Other things should be said about Damascius’ repudiation of negation in the passage quoted above (7, p.15). Why is it impossible to negate negation? The argument seems to mean that since negations are statements which apply to things, one cannot negate negation itself. Since negation is only a linguistic construct, it cannot itself be negated. In any case, the Nothing is not even a negated entity. Thus any attempt to apply a negative statement to it will fail to result in the required double negation: neither is it an expressed entity, so that even a first attempt at negation will not succeed. The negated thing must be available for any negation to succeed. These appear to be the arguments telescoped into this brief passage, which encapsulates Damascius’ objections to the conceptually more optimistic views of Proclus. For him, negation has an affirmative value: for Damascius, it is idle chatter, as much as any other verbalizing, though preferable in some sense.

But the real achievement is to attain the state of “hyperignorance” (ὑπεράγνοια: 29, p.56). It is astonishing to find a Greek philosopher coining such a term, and advocating such a state, but this is nevertheless the position of the last Academic. He describes it like this: referring to Plato’s analogy about seeing the sun (Rep. 532A), Damascius notes that at first one sees it from afar. The closer one approaches, the less one sees of it, and in the end one sees neither it nor the other things outside it. The eye being flooded with light becomes the light itself.

Is the One unknowable by its own nature, if indeed the unknowable is something other, beyond the One? The One wishes to be by itself, with no other. The unknowable, which is logically opposed to the knowable is beyond the One, entirely unspeakable; we agree that we neither know it, nor are ignorant of it. We are rather in a state of hyperignorance in respect of it, whose proximity obscured even the One. (29, p.56)

The One "abides in the inner sanctuary of that silence". Early Neoplatonists had been radical in their expulsion of the One beyond being itself, yet even this degree of transcendence is transcended by Damascius. Beyond the One lies a further principle, called only "that yonder" (*loc. cit.*). As suggested in the passage above, this principle transcends not only knowledge, but also ignorance: it lies beyond this pair of opposites, and so our state in relation to it can only be described as "hyperignorance". This higher principle obscures the One by its proximity. What does this mean? Seemingly that as we approach it, it floods our whole seeing apparatus with its own presence, to the extent that all else is obliterated from view. The hyperunknowable principle floods the mind's eye, so that even the One becomes an other, which disappears from view. And yet the One wants to be by itself.

There is a curious comparison between such metaphysics, and Christian theology. The latter is flooded with images, and replete with anthropomorphic descriptions of the divinity and its workings. At the time of Justinian, who terminated Damascius' academic employment, this image-bound system of thought was the main alternative to the pure metaphysics of the Neoplatonists, with their theurgic substructure. The present Christian problem, of whether God should be referred to in masculine imagery and by the masculine pronoun, was resolved by the Neoplatonist Damascius with his suggested use of the term "that yonder". Yet the apparently image-free metaphysics of the Neoplatonist is also anthropomorphic in one major respect: these transcendent principles have desires. In the end the motivating force of the abstract Neoplatonist principle is desire itself: thus the One "wants to be by itself".

Damascius proceeds (29, p.57) to develop this theme. "That yonder" does not abide being known (29, p.56): then follows a statement on what may be known, which captures a great deal of Neoplatonist thought.

... the genuinely knowable is that which is perceived in a certain distinction, and which is in some way species (*εἶδος*). This, by its own circumscription accepts circumscribing knowledge. Wherefore knowledge begins from such as this: but its opposite is entirely unspeakable, and is not capable of being grasped. (29, p.57)

This is classical Neoplatonism. What is known is that which is distinguishable, or divisible, and that which is circumscribed. The casting of a circumference around an entity is that which makes it both a thing, and a knowable thing. Both concepts, that is of divisibility and circumscription, are clearly

linked; the drawing of boundaries is that which enables the division to occur. The idea of *eidos* ("form", or "species") is also crucial: it is this basic notion of Greek philosophy which is dominant here. This term, which has such broad ramifications in Greek philosophy, originally means "shape" or "outline", and comes to mean "class" in the logical sense. It forms the axis of the discussion in Plato's *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*, but despite its tendency to develop an abstract meaning, never loses its connection with the idea of shape. Circumscription, divisibility and shape are all linked in this way, thus providing us with the picture of the knowable.

Yet the soul suffers its anguish, its desire for knowledge of the ultimate. In its search to produce some offspring this "gnostic labour" continually misproduces: it deals only with the offspring of the One, and not with that principle which lies beyond it. Damascius concludes this section with a statement which summarises the dilemma at the heart of every metaphysical system:

This is the cause of the fact that all research, every judgment about that principle is ambiguous, according to whether it is knowable, or unknowable. (29, p.57)

The fundamental problem of a system which posits a transcendent principle lies in this ambiguous character of the knowledge acquired. Such a principle has a face which is open to knowledge, and in some sense available to the mind: yet behind this face lies another reality, which is inaccessible and clothed in mystery. This is the aspect which escapes imagery, and defies any attempt to put it into words: the mystery which lies behind the familiar. Any principle which is connected with our experience, but is at the same time defined as lying beyond it, offers this ambiguous aspect. The familiar gives way to the unfamiliar.

Damascius emphasizes the oppositeness of the transcendent principle. This is a development, and represents a kind of radicalism on his part, in comparison with Proclus. In the second last of the passages quoted (29, p.57), the transcendent is referred to as the "opposite" of the knowable: the word used is *ἀντίξους*, which signifies "opposed", in concept or place. It has been noted earlier (p.110) that Proclus was at pains to eliminate the notion of oppositeness from his account of transcendence: further, that he repudiated the idea that negative theology was a means of dealing with such oppositeness. He espoused a view of negation which allowed the negative to produce other than opposites. It is clear, however, that there was a group among his contemporaries who thought of the transcendent principle as opposite. Damascius aligns himself with this party, and sees it as opposite to the One, the next hypostasis. The consequences are clear: Proclus is able to emphasize continuity and accessibility, in the manner suitable to a theurgist/philosopher, whilst Damascius stresses the absolute gulf which separates human experience from the

transcendent. The latter lays much more emphasis on the impotence of language and thought: such "gnostic" activities amount to nothing more than pointing aimlessly. At least we know the direction, even if we do not know what we are pointing at.

"All that we say here is but vain rhapsody" (7, p.14).

This is but one of the striking remarks of Damascius, whose philosophical language sounds a new note within the history of Greek philosophy. He continues with the theme of the supersession of language: we know the things we know, but we also know of them that they are limited. We simultaneously know them and assess them, and in this case we find them to be unworthy of the first hypothesis (of the Parmenides).

There is a problem here, about the possibility of knowing one's own ignorance, on which Damascius has firm views. He quotes Plato (*Theaetetus* 199A) to the effect that it is impossible not to know what one knows. If one really does know it, then one cannot claim ignorance, though of course one may make a mistake of some kind. Damascius agrees, but limits the extent of his endorsement:

For Plato rightly says that it is impossible to say that one knows, and that one knows nothing; but the last knowable thing is the One, and we know nothing beyond the One. All that we say here is but vain rhapsody. (7, p.14)

Such language will inevitably turn into silence, as we realise that we know nothing of those things which we are not permitted to know, because it is impossible for us to know them (7, p.15). In fact Damascius would seem to be controverting Plato, in that he admits that we know our ignorance, of that which lies beyond the One. The logical problem is clear: how can we know about that which we do not know? The same problem arises over the self-supersession of language: how does discourse stand outside itself, in order to be able to assess itself, and find itself wanting? Language can only provide linguistic products; it cannot provide anti-language products.

Damascius addresses himself to the question in section 6 (p. 9). If this thing really is unknowable, he asks, how is that we are writing so much about it? Is this incessant word-manufacturing simply pointless? Further, with respect to that which is said to be unknowable, it is not clear whether we knew this to be the case, or whether we are ignorant of it. Ignorance might seem to be appropriate to that which is not known, but if we are in fact ignorant of it we can make no claims about its unknowability. Damascius continues with what seems to be an argument against negative theology, which goes as follows (6, p.9). One cannot negate a thing of another, unless one knows the other: the man blind from birth can deny that colour possesses warmth. He is

able to do so because he can experience warmth, though he knows nothing of colour. In fact his negation is defective, because of this asymmetry in what he knows: all he knows of colour is that it is not sensitive to touch. This piece of knowledge is not in fact a form of knowing colour, but it is knowing his own ignorance. Similarly, when we say of the ultimate principle that it is unknowable, we do not succeed in making a genuine negation, since we are not fully cognizant of both elements in the negative statement: like the blind man, we are in fact revealing our own ignorance. Just as he "knows" that colour is not sensitive to touch, we "know" that the ultimate is unknowable. This, suggests Damascius, is not knowledge at all, but simply an admission of our own mental state.

Damascius' argument is a subtle critique of the *via negativa*. We have noted elsewhere his opposition to it, and his apparent alignment with the anti-negation group alluded to by Proclus. He returns here to his familiar argument, that to employ negation (or analogy for that matter), one must have knowledge of both entities, namely the quality negated and the thing of which the quality is negated. Now in this case the thing concerned is unknown, and the negative method cannot do its work. However with the blind man argument, Damascius is adding something: suppose, he says, negation were used. What logical assessment of it can be given? His answer is that like the blind man's statement about colour not being sensitive to touch, the claim about the unknowability of the Ultimate is not a claim about the Ultimate at all, but a statement of the limits of one's own mental capacity.

It is therefore in us that the unknowing of that of which we are ignorant resides. For the knowledge of the known is in the knower, not in the thing known. (6, p.10)

Unknowing is a state of the subject, misrepresented as the unknowability of the object.

Thus Damascius' contribution is to make negation a state of the subject, and this is a unique development. It is in keeping with his emphasis on the subject elsewhere. We have noted already Proclus' tendency to reduce discourse and thought all to that straining of the mind to create ($\omega\delta\iota\varsigma$), but Damascius goes much further, and employs philosophical arguments to reduce apparently objective statements to subjective self-assessments.

The same theme is developed in an extraordinary passage in sections 4 and 5 (pp. 6-8). That highest being, most worthy of our veneration, is said to be Nothing. There are two kinds of nothing, that which is higher than the One, and that which is lower than it. "If in saying this", says Damascius (4, p.6), "we are walking in a void, there are also two ways of walking in a void". There is the Nothing which is so because of its perfection, and that which is so because of its imperfection. If in the course of discussing this principle of Nothingness, our language is undermined ("pris de vertige", says the transla-

tor Chaignet for 4, p.7, l.3), then we must realise that the names we generate spring simply from our anguish to create (ὠδίζ). These words

... reveal nothing about That yonder, but they reveal only our states in respect of Him, and indicate the puzzles and privations arising from them, not clearly, but allusively, and these things are available only to those who are able to understand them. (4, p.7)

Again language is reduced to the status of revealer of subjective states, of their “puzzles and privations”, the latter being understood as “lacks”. This unknowingness has already been said to be part of the individual subject, rather than a characteristic of the Ultimate, such as unknowability. What is the nature of this feature of the human consciousness?

The answer must lie in the doctrine of hyperignorance, explicated on pp.122 ff.: this is the state of being engulfed by a reality too great to be seized, or parcelled up: the flooding of the consciousness by such a reality can only produce this state of unknowingness, designated by the term “hyperignorance”.

What we have with Damascius is a critical rejection of the negative theology tradition, on both logical grounds, and the grounds of his radical definition of the otherness of the Ultimate principle. Damascius continually returns to the state of the subject, in his analysis of human epistemological efforts: what these reveal is nothing about the state of the highest essence, but they show the state of the would-be knower. All epistemological efforts are reduced to the *odis*, the anguish for the creation of ideas.

Damascius believes that all discussion about the Ultimate terminates in silence, and he more than any other Greek philosopher lays emphasis on the emptiness of language, the “walking in the void” which discourse represents. He turns the way of negation and of analogy against themselves, and psychologizes them. Though these two modes were to go into medieval theology as standard epistemological tools, Damascius, the last of the Greeks, has already refuted them. In their place he puts the faculty of unknowingness, which he has shown to exist in the human consciousness. It is not mere ignorance, or forgetfulness, or even a failure: it is rather a capacity, an ability not to know. Hence the term “hyperignorance”, that capacity to withdraw from the meretricious attractions of circumscribing knowledge. There is no more resoundingly hostile statement on discourse and its capacities in Greek philosophy. Damascius’ technical terms are περιτρέπεσθαι (“to be confounded”) and κενεμβάτεῖν (“to step into a hole”), elsewhere translated as “to walk in a void”. This is his verdict on language which endeavours to reach that which is beyond the One: such talk is like stepping into a hole.