Stepping into the Void: Proclus and Damascius on Approaching the First Principle

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the idea of “stepping into the void” (κενεμβατεῖν), which can be traced in the thinking of both Proclus and Damascius, but which sets their perspectives apart. Thus, I show how Proclus warns us that to speak about the absolute principle, taking it as an object of thought, is a negative “stepping into the void” that should be avoided. On the contrary, I show that Damascius starts from this warning and tries to prove that the only adequate manner in which we can trace the absolute principle and approach it is precisely through “stepping into the void,” yet, this time, in a positive sense, as a constant attempt to understand that the principle is an absolute void which reverses our discourse.

Keywords

Proclus – Damascius – One – Ineffable – Void

The Neoplatonic thinkers have always been challenged by the question of what is beyond: what is beyond what we can see, what is beyond what we can grasp only through our mind, and finally, what is beyond what we can neither see, nor grasp through our mind? Yet, when one is interested in going ever further, one gets to a point where there is no other thing ahead. Then, the question is: where to go, when one has reached the border of reality, of what can be crossed

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in any way with the mind? What to do in front of nothing? In what follows, I deal with two different attitudes in front of this question. The first belongs to Proclus, who seems to say: beware, not to step into the void, into the nothingness; and the second belongs to Damascius, for whom there is no need to fear the void, because this void can actually be the inner sanctuary out of which everything emerges, in a mysterious, unspeakable way. Though I start my investigation from a point of detail in Proclus, this analysis can illustrate the radical difference between these two thinkers and the way in which Damascius—departing from the perspective of his eminent predecessor—goes far beyond Proclus’ theorization of the layers of reality.

1 Proclus on Avoiding the Void

In his Commentary on Plato’s Republic, Proclus refers to the moment when Socrates announces the Good beyond being. Upon hearing this, Glaucon exclaims in a rather comical manner (μάλα γέλοιως): “marvelous transcendence” (δαιμονίας ὑπερβολῆς, Republic, 509 b8-c2). In Proclus’s interpretation, Glaucon is unable to grasp the nature of the Good beyond being and thus, “he is like stepping into the void (ὡς κενεμβατοῦντος) in regard to the view of that which is beyond all things.” Glaucon is astonished to hear about such a “marvelous transcendence,” as he puts it, and wants to find out more about its nature. In Proclus’ view, he is unable to understand that such a “marvelous transcendence” even exists as such.

Thus, Proclus analyses an earlier passage from the Republic, where Plato raises two questions regarding what can be known: “Tell us, does the person who knows know something (τι) or nothing (οὐδέν)? […] He knows something. Something that is, or something that is not (ὂν ἢ μὴ ὄν)? Something that is, for how could something that is not be known?” Trying to clarify the meaning of these two questions, Proclus operates two distinctions. On the one hand, he differentiates between nothing (οὐδέν) and something (τι), admitting that
knowledge refers to “something,” and not to “nothing”. Then, in the realm of “something,” he distinguishes between “what is” and “what is not,” following the second Socratic question: “if the knower knows something that is or that is not”.6 For Proclus, this “something”—which does not have being, but rather is not (μὴ ὄν)—is an indication of the One, or the Good beyond being, which should not be confounded with the sheer “nothing” inferior to being.7

It is this One-Good, this something beyond being, that Glaucon fails to grasp, when he assumes that the knower can only know “something that is”. In Proclus’ interpretation, this assumption is wrong. Glaucon is unable to bear the sight of the Good, which is neither being, nor nothing, but which still is something (τι). For him, what is different from being can only be situated in the nothingness inferior to being. The Good beyond being—this “One which is not Being, but which is the highest object of knowledge for those who know the beings”8—simply does not fit into his view about reality, and this is why he is so astonished to hear about the “marvelous transcendence” of the Good beyond being. He can neither perceive being, or the non-being inferior to being. Yet, beyond being, there is neither a kind of being, nor a pure non-being, inferior to being. Therefore, to speak about the Good as Glaucon tries to do is “to step into the void,” into what simply does not exist.

There are two ways in which we can understand Glaucon’s advancement into the void, since for him, only being can be known, while non-being is inferior to being and cannot be known. On the one hand, he might be tempted to take the Good as a kind of being, whose nature he wants to determine. He expects to grasp some sort of thing, and he asks for more details about it. In this case, he advances into the void because he expects to hear about something that is, while the Good is no longer a definite object, identified as such, as a certain being. On the other hand, he might take the Good as a non-being, and confound it with the non-being inferior to being; in this case, he “steps into the void” because he advances beyond being, as though this would be a mere nothingness. Glaucon “steps into the void” because he cannot detach himself

6 Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Republic, 1, 265. 1-2 [Kroll]: εἴ ὁ τὶ γιγνώσκων ἢ ὄν ἢ μὴ ὄν γιγνώσκει (my translation).
7 Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Republic, 1, 265. 4-15 [Kroll]: ἄλλο τὸ μὴ ὄν καὶ τὸ οὐδέν [...] εἰλήφθω τοῖνυν τούτο, ὅπερ ἀποφάσκει τὸ οὐδέν, λέγω δὴ τὸ ἔν- τοῦτο οὖν οὐδέν μὲν εἰπεῖν αἰθήσατον, ἐπειδὴ τὸ οὐδέν ἀποφάσκει καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἔν. [...] εἰ τι ἁρα ὄν ἔστιν, μετέχει ἕνος, οὐ μὲντοι εἰ τι ἔν, μετέχει δὲ ὄντος· ἡφικται γοῦν τοῦτο ἔν, ὅ μὴ ἔστιν ὄν.
8 Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Republic, 1, 265. 17-18 [Kroll]: τι ἔν μὴ ὄν μὲν, ἔχασαν δὲ μαθημα τῶν τὰ ὄντα γιγνωσκόντων (my translation).
from this dichotomy between being (that can be known) and non-being (that cannot be known).

We notice that Glaucon is not really stepping into the void, but only looks “like stepping” (ὡς κενεμβατοῦντος). In fact, for Proclus, the void as such cannot exist. Thus, everything comes from the One, which is the absolute principle of all and which has neither weakness, nor duality in itself. The continuity of the levels of reality reflects the unity of the One, and thus has no gap, no void in it. Yet, to fail to recognize one level of the reality is to be like stepping into the void. Glaucon seems to be stepping into the void precisely because he cannot recognize the unspeakable nature of the One-Good.

Yet, in which void does Glaucon seem to step, since, for Proclus, the void does not exist? The void is not a real one, like a certain layer of reality. The void is determined by Glaucon’s inability of grasping the real nature of the Good beyond being and by his attempt to figure out the nature of the Good, as if the Good would actually be some sort of thing. To speak about the Good as if it had a particular nature—when, in fact, it does not—is to step into the void.

But then again, doesn’t Socrates also step into the void, while talking about the Good, trying to reveal its nature, as he promises? Unlike Glaucon, Socrates prefers to hide his opinions regarding the Good, rather than to have them misunderstood by his fellow-listeners. Socrates’ attitude towards the Good is that of refraining from talking about it and of regretting that he was forced to say anything about it directly, unprotected by the veil of any analogy. Socrates avoids the void, because his discourse about the Good does not refer to it directly. Speaking about the Good, Socrates rather conveys its unspeakable nature. Proclus explains that, if Socrates speaks about the Good, it is not in order to determine its nature. He only “seems to unveil something of the ineffable secrets” about the Good, but he does not reveal the Good in itself. While Socrates conveys the unspeakable nature of the Good, Glaucon expects that it actually be possible to speak about the Good. He does not say something inappropriate; in fact, he merely rephrases Socrates’ statement, saying that the Good is transcendent. However, what he fails to realize is that this transcendence cannot be expressed as such, without some necessary precautions. He is

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9 See for instance Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus, 1, 179. 4-5 [Diels edition]: “Since the procession of things is continuous, and nowhere is any void getting left” (οὐδὲν οὐδαμοῦ παρεμπίπτει κενόν); see also 1, 378. 26 [Diels]: “no void has been left in [the spectrum of] beings” (οὐδὲν ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν ἀπολέλειπται κενόν) (translation by Harold Tarrant).

10 Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Republic, 1, 273. 27-274.1 [Kroll] (κἂν ἐξ εἰκόνος τι δοκῇ λέγειν περὶ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ κἂν παραγιγμοῖς τι τῶν ἄπορρήτων, ἀλλ’ οὐ παντάπασιν ὅλην ἐκφαίνει τὴν περὶ αὐτοῦ ἀλήθειαν).
stepping into the void because he is unprepared to deal with the unspeakable, because he does not know, like Socrates, that the nature of the Good is too difficult a matter to be cleared out.

But then, aren’t we always stepping into the void when speaking about the first principle, calling it “the Good” or “the One,” as Proclus himself does and as he thinks Plato did? The answer would be no, because, for Proclus, Socrates’ way of speaking about the Good—just as Parmenides’ way of speaking about the first One in the homonymous dialogue—is in fact a way of not speaking about it, a way of suggesting how unspeakable it is. Thus, for Proclus, none of the names that we use in order to indicate the first principle really refers to it: the principle is not “good,” neither “one,” nor “beyond being,” nor describable through any of the negations from the first hypothesis in Parmenides. Just as Plato suggests, the absolute One cannot have a name.11 The names we use for the One refer to something that has no name and, consequently, they must reverse themselves at some point in our discourse. Following the first hypothesis in Plato’s Parmenides,12 Proclus shows that the One is not even one,13 for, otherwise, it would actually be dual: the One and its name, or the One and the being which links the thing to its name, when we say that “the One is one”.

The two names of the principle—the Good and the One—does not express the principle itself, but rather indicate the two movements of the being: from the principle and back to the principle. They indicate the two functions of the principle in the reality: all things are produced from the non-plural principle and they return to the same principle as to the absolute Good.14 The principle remains inexpressible, while the two names refer to what proceeds from and returns to the principle. Thus, the two names do not refer to the principle as if it were an object of thought,15 but rather to the way in which we perceive the presence of the principle and its effectiveness into reality. For Proclus,
nothing we say about the One really describes it; not even the negations from the first hypothesis in *Parmenides*.

Even these negations reverse at the end of the hypothesis, when, with a last question, Parmenides suppresses all that has been previously said: “is it possible that these things are so for the One?” 16 For Proclus, this last question—for which the answer is “no”—suggests that all previous negations must themselves be suppressed. 17 Thus, even if they refer to the One, the negations in the first hypothesis do not say anything about the One itself, 18 but eventually, they are reversed. Proclus notices that, even though the argumentation starts from the premise that “the One is” (εἰ ἕν ἐστιν), 19 the conclusion says the contrary: “the One is not” (οὐδ’ ἀρα οὕτως ἔστιν), 20 whereas the last question of this first hypothesis suggests that even this negation of the being is inadequate for the absolute One. 21 Thus, the discourse that does not step into the void is a

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Carlos Steel, p. 511. 7-8: “hic autem neque cognitiuus ens neque comprehendens le unum est per se (αὕτη δὲ οὔτε γνωστικὴ οὔσα οὔτε περιλαμβάνουσα τὸ ἕν ἔστιν).”


17 See Proclus, *Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, VII, 70 K: “now at the end he rightly removes from it even the negations themselves. For if the One is not expressible and if it has no definition, then how will the negations be true for it?” (translation by Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon, p. 600); cf. *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*, vol. III, book VII edition by Carlos Steel, p. 518. 36-519. 1: “merito ultimas utique dicet et ipse abnegationes ab uno. Si enim non est dicibile et nullus est illius sermo, quomodo utique abnegationes uere in ipso? (εἰκότως τελευταίας ἀφαιρεῖ καὶ αὐτὰς τὰς ἀποφάσεις ἀπὸ τοῦ ἑνὸς· τί γὰρ μὴ ἔστι ῥήτον καὶ μηθεὶς ἐστὶν ἔκεινον λόγος, πῶς ἂν αἱ ἀποφάσεις εἶεν ἀληθεῖς ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ;)”. See Steel (1999).

18 For Proclus, “It is not the same thing to refer to the One and to express something about the One” (*Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides*, VII, 70 K, translation by Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon, p. 600); cf. *In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria*, vol. III, book VII edition by Carlos Steel, p. 518. 21: “Aliud enim est esse de uno et aliud esse circa unum. (ἄλλο γάρ ἐστι τὸ εἶναι περὶ τοῦ ἑνός καὶ ἄλλο τὸ εἶναι περὶ τὸ ἐν.)”. See also Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, 3, 14. 1-2: “How then do we ourselves speak about it? We do indeed say something about it, but we certainly do not speak it” (translation by A. H. Armstrong).


21 In the Neoplatonic interpretation, this last suppression of the being of the One corresponds to the fact that the principle is beyond being (cf. Plato, *Republic*, 509 b 9). Therefore, it would seem that the last question in the first *Parmenides* hypothesis suppresses even the fact that the principle is beyond being (ἐπέκεινα τῆς σύστασις). The last “expression” of the principle beyond being is the fact that the principle is not even beyond being.
negative discourse, suggesting that we are not to speak about the One, either by saying it has being, or by saying it does not have any being.

For Proclus, we should not speak about the One in a direct manner; in fact, it is impossible to speak about it as such, and whoever tries to do so ends up advancing into the void. The Good, or the One above all that exists is neither being, nor a nothing inferior to being, but it is the unspeakable principle of all being. Above the One, there cannot be anything else, because we cannot ask “what is” the One above being and thus move to something prior and simpler. For Proclus, is it absurd (ἄτοπον) to admit something higher than the One: “either it is beyond the One (ἐπέκεινα τοῦ ἑνὸς), or it is nothing, or it is not One, and each of these alternatives is absurd, so the first principle is that what is truly One and the king of all and the Good”.22

Proclus’ precautions concerning the One have a single reason: they are intended to guarantee the absolute priority of the One: as first principle, the One should neither be integrated into the realm of being, nor be confounded with the non-being inferior to being, nor be surpassed by any other principle; moreover, we are not to speak about it in a direct, descriptive manner. Proclus warns us against this risk of thinking that the One could be known as such, transforming it into an object of thought. This risk concerns all those who are unable to grasp the real, unspeakable nature of the One-Good. Thus, Proclus would say, beware, lest you should step into the void, by projecting some sort of nothingness beyond being, or by speaking about the One as if it actually were a particular being.

2 Damascius on Stepping into the Void

If we are to turn to Damascius, bearing in mind Proclus’ perspective, we might have the impression that Damascius is rushing into the precipice of nothingness, despite Proclus’ warnings. In doing so, however, Damascius has the same goal as Proclus: that is to emphasize the transcendence of the principle, proving that it is completely out of the reach of our discourse. Yet, he proves this not by preventing us from stepping into the void, but by inciting us to actually do so.

What is even more surprising is to see Damascius stepping into the void two times: first at the level of the One, while speaking about it, and secondly,

above the One, towards the real and final nothing of the principle which, for Damascius, is the Ineffable (τὸ ἀπόρρητον).23

2.1 Speaking about the One

First, Damascius steps where Proclus would have said that it is impossible to step, lest we should step into the void. Yet, he does not step into the void like Glaucion did: it is not because he fails to grasp the unspeakable nature of the One-Good, but because, unlike Proclus and unlike the entire tradition, he thinks the nature of the One is not completely ineffable. We still have a certain access to it, due to its relationship to the all; therefore, we can express the One in a certain way.

Following Plato’s Parmenides, Damascius agrees that “the One is unknowable and unspeakable”,24 nevertheless, he argues that the One is not completely unspeakable. More precisely, the One is unspeakable because, as principle of the all, it is above plurality, it does not have any composition in itself, nor definition or name.25 Yet, precisely as principle of the plurality, it can still be indicated as “the simplest and most comprehensive”.26 The One is not included in the all, as a part of it, but it is all, in a unitary manner. Damascius describes it as “all before the all” (πάντα πρὸ τῶν πάντων),27 meaning that the One is all, but prior to the plurality of the all. As such, the One is still coordinated with the all, while the real principle of the all should be completely uncoordinated to the all.28 The One is unspeakable through its nature, but it can still be expressed through its coordination with the all. Damascius’ conclusion is that the One is partly speakable and partly unspeakable.29 Paradoxically, the One is speakable, precisely in as much as we say that it is the unspeakable principle of the all. The One stops being the absolute, unspeakable principle, precisely because we call it that way. Once we think the One is the unspeakable principle

24 See Damascius, On the First Principles (De principiis), Ruelle [R], vol. 1, p. 7. 14; Westerink [W], vol. 1, p. 9. 8 (ἄγνωστόν τε καὶ ἄρρητον τὸ ἕν). Cf. Plato, Parmenides, 141e 10-142a 8. Translations from Damascius are my own.
26 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 6. 18-19; W. I, 7. 19-20: ἀπλούστατον καὶ περιεκτικῶτατον.
27 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 3. 3; W. I, 3. 12. See also R. I, 53. 5; W. I, 80. 1 and R. I, 82.1; W. I, 124. 5.
of the all, we already place it in a relationship with the all and we include it among the things that we can still think. The One ends up in a certain coordination to the all, and this coordination needs yet another principle. Thus, argues Damascius, “the discourse will require from us another principle before the all, which it is not due to conceive as the all, nor to coordinate with the things coming from it”.30

From Proclus’ viewpoint, to talk about the One otherwise than by proving any discourse impossible looks more like stepping into the void. Taking the risk of such void advance, Damascius speaks about the One, not because he does not realize the One is unspeakable in itself, but because he notices how much verbosity we are actually transferring upon it, starting from “the one in us” (τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἕν).31 This latter, inferior one is like an image of the absolute One, thus allowing us to make suppositions on the absolute One, too,32 while the real, absolute principle should only be honoured through silence and through complete unknowing. Damascius’ goal will be precisely that of reaching this state of unknowing that best befits the absolute principle, and in which no supposition works any longer.

2.2 Stepping into the Nothing

Therefore, having thus set his foot on the One, proving that the One is not completely untouched by discourse as the tradition wanted it to be, and that it is not completely uncoordinated to the all,33 Damascius makes yet another

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31 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 9. 3; W. I, 11. 8. On this “human one” or “the one in us” see Combès (1978), reprinted in Combès (1989), pp. 189-197.
32 See also Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides, VII, 54 K: “the One itself is not nameable, but the One in ourselves. By means of this, as what is most appropriate to it, we first speak of it and make it known” (translation by Glenn R. Morrow and John M. Dillon, p. 591); cf. In Platonis Parmenidem Commentaria, vol. III, book VII edition by Carlos Steel, p. 509. 23-26: “Non illud igitur nominabile, sed quod in nobis unum. Per hoc autem ut conuenientissimo ipsi primo circa illud dictimus et insinuamus uiciin. (οὐκ ἐκεῖνο οὗν ὴνομαστόν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἑν· διὰ δέ τούτου ὡς οἰκειοτάτου αὐτῷ τῷ πρώτῳ περὶ ἐκείνου λέγομεν καὶ ἐνδεικνύμεθα τοῖς συγγενέσι.)”.
33 Trabattoni (2011) argues that, for Damascius, the first principle implies a certain contradiction between coordination and incoordination, this contradiction being the distinctive sign of the real first principle. “Le principe qui a la qualité requise, en effet, doit être la non-coordination en tant que telle; mais c’est exactement cette qualité qui crée la contradiction. Dans ce cas, en effet, il n’est pas logiquement possible que la non-coordination absolue maintienne une coordination avec les non-coordinations partielles” (p. 428). Yet, we should notice that, for Damascius, the incoordination is not a quality describing the principle’s nature; in this sense, the principle surpasses any discursive contradiction. See
step even further into the void. This time, he does not just seem to step into
the void, as Proclus would have said, but he actually is stepping into what he
himself reckons as being void (κενόν) and nothing (οὐδέν).

Thus, he suggests that, if we are to find the real principle, which is no lon-
ger coordinated and which our thinking can no longer include into the all,
nor determine in any way, then we must look even above the One. Damascius
claims that Plato, too, indicated this step above the One, though he preferred
to keep the secret upon this matter and to suggest it only through his silence.34

Damascius suggests that the first hypothesis in Parmenides has the goal of
leading us to the ineffable: first to the One, through the suppression of the plu-
rals and then to the ineffable, through the suppression of the One itself, when,
at the end, Plato shows that the One is not even one, nor is, nor can be known
in any way. And yet, Plato is not speaking directly about the ineffable, but, in
Damascius’ view, he is leading us to it ineffably, i.e. silently, for silence is more
adequate to the ineffable than any discourse.35

Damascius decides to make this step towards this ultimate secret of Plato.
Above the One, however, there is nothing, just as the entire Neoplatonic tra-
dition warned us,36 and just as Damascius himself agrees. Thus, as Proclus

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34 See Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 7. 15-17; W. I, 9. 10-12. Trabattoni (2011) suggests that
there is a certain link between Damascius' suppression of the One, in order to get to the
ineffable, and Plato's suppression of all hypotheses, in order to get to the unhypothetical
principle in Republic, 533c8: “Y a-t-il autre chose qu'on puisse véritablement appeler prin-
cipe anhypothétique si ce n'est l'ineffable?” (p. 434). Trabattoni argues that Damascius
proves the necessity of Plato's silence on the first principle, for suppressing everything as
Plato does eventually leads to contradiction and “là où le principe de contradiction est
nié, il ne reste rien d'autre (comme l'avait déjà observé Aristote) que le silence.” (p. 435).
See also Gersh (2014) chapter 2.4 (From the One to the Blank. Damascius), who identifies
in Damascius' perspective a "performative notion of silence" arguing that “the relation
between silence and negation [...] corresponds exactly to that between the performative
and the constative, silence showing what something is indirectly by being silent and nega-
tion stating what something is indirectly by using denials" (p. 150).

35 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 7. 15-8. 2; W. I, 10-18. Napoli (2008) thinks this passage can
be interpreted in two manners: either Damascius considers the suppression of the One
(in Parmenides 141 e 10-12) as a reference to the ineffable, or he is suggesting that Plato
ascends up to the One, but then, instead of going even further, he prefers to say nothing
about the absolutely unspeakable (pp. 444-446).

36 See Plotinus, Enneads, vi, 8, 11. 1-5; viii, 7, 22. 19-20. For Plotinus, the soul cannot go above
the One, because there is nothing above the One, since we cannot ask “what is” the One
beyond being, nor explain it through something else. For Proclus, too, nothing can be
explicitly puts it—following the etymology of the word “nothing” (οὐδέν)—what is “not even one” (οὐδὲ ἕν) is, in fact, “nothing” (οὐδέν), because the nothing is the exact opposite of the one.

Damascius realizes that the philosophical step he is about to make looks like a mere stepping into the void, in the negative sense that Proclus gave it. He admits that: “we might be stepping into the void, stretching up towards the nothing itself”. Invoking Proclus’ warning, Damascius agrees that “what is not even one is nothing, in the rightest sense”. Therefore, he cautiously prepares his step further. He starts by rhetorically arguing that there is no need for anything above the One, since plurality only needs the One for a cause. He is also ready to consent with anyone who, at odds with the present aporia, would simply decide to stop at the One as first principle. And yet, his final decision is to follow this impenetrable path and to advance towards the “unspeakable consciousness of that sublime truth” that lies above the One, even though this leads through nothingness. He deliberately and admittedly steps into what the tradition considers to be utterly nothing, though he admits that even to speak about the nothing—either below, or beyond the One—is to step into the void. Yet, he adds: “if this is nothing, then the nothing must be twofold: superior to the One and below the One; and if, by saying this, we are stepping into the void, then stepping into the void is twofold.”

above the One. Cf. Elements of Theology, § 20, p. 22. 30 [Dodds]: “beyond the One there is no further principle” (οὐκέτι τοῦ ἕνὸς ἄλο ἐπέκεινα) (translation by E. R. Dodds); § 113, p. 100. 10-11 (οὐ γὰρ μηθέν ἐστιν ἐπέκεινα). See also Commentary on Plato’s Republic, I, 292. 7 [Kroll], where Proclus shows that it is impossible to think of anything above the anhypothetical principle, which is the principle of all things: τῶν πάντων δραχήν, ἢ σοῦ ἐπέκεινα νοεῖν δέμιος.

Proclus, Platonic Theology, 11 2, p. 22. 2 (τὸ γὰρ τοῦ ἑνὸς ἐστερημένον οὐδέν); 11, 25, 20-22 (τὸ δὲ μηθέν καὶ κατὸ τοῦ ἑνὸς <ἀπολειπόμενον> οὐδέν ἂν εἴη τὸ παράπαν) and Commentary on Plato’s Republic, 1, 265.7-9: ὅπερ ἀποφάσκει τὸ οὐδέν, λέγω δὴ τὸ ἑν· τούτο σοὶ οὐδέν μὲν εἰπεῖν ἀδύνατον, ἐπείδη τὸ οὐδέν ἀποφάσκει καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἑν.


Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 5, 4-5; W. I, 5, 19-20 (μηκότερο γὰρ κενεμβατούμεν εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ οὐδέν ἀνατεινόμενοι).

Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 5, 4-5; W. I, 5, 20-21 (ὁ γὰρ μηθέν ἐν ἐστι, τούτο οὐδέν ἐστι κατὰ τὸ δικαίοτατον).

Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 5, 19-20; W. I, 6, 14-16 (τὴν ἀρρητοῦ […] συναίσθησιν τῆς ύπερηφάνου ταύτης ήλθείας).

See also Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 13, 24; W. I, 18, 14, where he reaffirms this identity between the nothing and the void: “but the nothing is void” (ἄλλα τὸ οὐδέν κενὸν ἐστι).

Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 6, 22-24; W. I, 7, 24-8. 1.
For Damascius, the step into the void—of which he feigns to fear of being accused, but which he wishes to accomplish—is even more complicated and dangerous than in Glaucon’s case. He does not just risk to step into the void out of ignorance. His “fault” is not the failure to understand the inaccessible nature of this “beyond,” as in Glaucon’s case, but on the contrary: the assumption of a totally inaccessible principle, projected above the One. Moreover, Damascius does not just seem to be stepping into the void, but he actually wants to advance into the void, knowing and arguing that this is the real nothing. This is why he takes Proclus’ assertions—that there is nothing above the One, and that what is “not even one” is “nothing”—with a certain irony, turning them positively. When saying—apparently in agreement with the Neoplatonic tradition—that “what is not even one is nothing” (ὃ γὰρ μηδὲ ἕν ἐστι, τοῦτο οὐδέν ἐστι), what he means is exactly the opposite: for him, there actually is a nothing (οὐδέν) above the One, thus turning this absurd nothing above the One, into a genuine nothing. Why does he do this? Because for him, the really uncoordinated principle, requested by the discourse itself, can only be nothing.

For Proclus this would have been inacceptable, since he describes the principle as “something,” which is neither being, nor nothing. Yet, we might notice a certain ambiguity in Proclus’ perspective. On the one hand, it seems possible to actually know the One, since “the knower always knows something” and the One is this “something non-being” (τὶ [. . .] μὴ ὂν). In fact, this is precisely why he criticizes Glaucon: for thinking that we can only know something that is, and thus, ignoring that there also exists something that is not (i.e. the One or the Good beyond being). On the other hand, Proclus warns us that the One is unknowable, and that speaking about it directly is like advancing into the void.

On the contrary, Damascius says that we must advance into the void, precisely in order not to determine the principle, which is not something, but rather nothing. For him, we can only think “something from the all” (τῶν πάντων τί), or the all itself, while the principle of the all remains out of our grip, and it is impossible to imagine “something” (τί) that could express it. It is only in the realm of the “nothing” that we can search for the real, absolute principle. Yet, Damascius argues, the nothing has two senses: that which is beyond the One and that which is below; likewise, our stepping into the void also has two directions. On the one hand, we advance towards the nothingness in an
inferior sense, towards “that which does not exist in any way”, while the other
direction points towards the unspeakable (τὸ ἄρρητον) beyond the One, which,
for Damascius, is the real nothing.

The negative sense of κενεμβατεῖν was already known from Plotinus, who
uses this term only once, in a context that is of interest for us, in the present
analysis. Thus, Plotinus speaks about the individual soul, which can advance
towards the superior level of reality, thus being illuminated, but which can also
go towards what comes after it, i.e. towards the body. In this case, the soul ad-
vances towards non-being, since there is nothing after it, except a void image
that the soul creates of itself. Attracted by this obscure image, the soul seems
to be stepping into the void.

But for Damascius, this is not the only possible sense of κενεμβατεῖν. He
knows that, in an inferior sense, we risk to fall into the “non-existent nothing-
ness” (τῆς ἀνυποστάτου κενότητος) when we speak about that which “isn’t in
any way”. Yet, in a superior sense, this stepping into the void is an attempt to
find the trace of an uncoordinated principle, which can no longer be indicated
through any predicate, but which is completely ineffable. Why? Because every
“thing” (τι) that we can conceive or suppose falls into the realm of the all; there-
fore, the principle of this all is “that which has escaped all our suppositions”.
The last and simplest supposition is that of the One. Therefore, the principle
is not even One, but rather “beyond the One” (τοῦ ἑνὸς ἐπέκεινα) and “noth-
ing” (οὐδέν). If we are to advance towards it, then we are to step into this
“nothing,” stepping into the void created by the suppression of every possible
supposition. This, however, is a superior manner of stepping into the void.

Damascius explains that we need this principle—that we can only dis-
cover through stepping into the void—because it is from this “nothing” that
tall things proceed without any opposition and thus, without determining the

47 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 6. 25; W. I, 8. 2-3 (τὸ δὲ εἰς τὸ μηδαμὴ μηδαμῶς ύπάρχων). Damascius refers to Plato, who considered this unspeakable, but in an inferior sense. See the Sophist, 237 e 1-7, where Plato shows that, when we try to speak about that which is not, we are not saying anything.
48 Plotinus, Enneads, 111 9, 3. 10-12.
49 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 8. 3-5; W. I, 9. 20-22.
50 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 6. 21-22; W. I, 7. 23-24: “the most valuable would be that which has escaped all our suppositions” (τιμιώτατον ἂν εἴη τὸ πάσας ἐκπεφευγός τὰς ἡμετέρας ὑπονοίας).
51 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 5. 15; W. I, 6. 9: “we have neither notion, nor supposition simpler than the One”.
52 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 14. 7; W. I, 19. 5.
53 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 15. 21; W. I, 21. 16.
principle itself. While the One opposes the plurals and is thus determined as non-plural,\(^{54}\) Damascius’ principle does not have anything to oppose to the all, since it is "nothing" and it is ineffable, producing everything in an ineffable manner, i.e. without bestowing a certain determination upon things and without being itself determined.

Damascius distinguishes this stepping into the void, through which we approach the Ineffable, from the manner in which we approach the One, through a purification of our thoughts towards the most simple, a purification which corresponds to the series of negations from the first Platonic hypothesis. While these negations still leave us with a certain supposition about the One, the Ineffable should be “inaccessible to any notion or supposition”.\(^{55}\) This does not imply further uttering of other negations, but an actual experience of how the absolute principle withdraws from our attempts to suppose anything about it. Thus, Damascius does not simply develop a negative discourse on the principle, but he tries to show that what we call the absolute, uncoordinated principle of all cannot logically be called that way, but rejects the very discourse that tries to establish it as such. Therefore, to step into the void in Damascius’ style is to try to take hold of the principle, and to realize that, at every step of the way, the principle is escaping from any possible discourse, from any attempt to refer to it.

Damascius’ point is not to propose a pure negativity, in the sense that the Ineffable is not even One. He does not simply deny that the principle would have any attribute and that it would be knowable in any way. He does not proceed by denying something from the principle. On the contrary, he starts by trying to utter this principle as “ineffable, sanctuary of the all and inconceivable”,\(^{56}\) from which everything is produced in an ineffable manner. Yet, he notices that the Ineffable—this principle that was imposed by argument—does not hold any discourse, unlike the One, which we can still express in a negative manner, suppressing plurality from it. The ineffable enters the realm of discourse only in order to be instantaneously subtracted from it.

Thus, the discourse—i.e. our argumentation about the principle—imposes the existence of such an uncoordinated principle,\(^{57}\) but, once we admit it, the discourse contradicts itself. Our discourse paradoxically suggests what it denies: “if we say these things about it, namely that it is ineffable, sanctuary of the all and inconceivable, we are reversed in our discourse (περιτρεπόμεθα τῷ..."
The discourse indirectly suggests that we can still speak about the principle—and that we can call it ineffable—though it directly says that we cannot speak about it, nor call it anything. There is a contradiction between what we say—namely that the principle is ineffable—and the very fact that we say something about it. What we say about it would be right, but the very fact of speaking about it is wrong. More precisely, what we say about it would be right, if only we wouldn’t be saying it. Our discourse—as act of speaking—is contradicted and proven inconsistent by our discourse itself, i.e. by what we are trying to say.

In this sense, our attempt to say that the principle is ineffable does not really succeed; we are not saying anything about it, since the very fact of saying is contradicted and reversed. Consequently, what we say about it—namely that it is ineffable—cannot really apply to the principle and it does not express the principle itself. Therefore, the principle is not even ineffable. Our discourse is brought to the conclusion of this ineffable, uncoordinated principle, but the principle reduces our discourse to silence, because the discourse identifies its own inconsistency while trying to refer to the principle.

Damascius’ conclusion about this first experience of reversal is that the Ineffable is ineffable in as much as we cannot even consider it ineffable, i.e. in as much as our attempt to call it that way fails. Thus, the absolute principle is precisely that on which Damascius tries to speak and which he tries to call ineffable, only in order to realize that he cannot logically refer to it, nor call it ineffable. Thus, we are advancing into the void because we realize that we cannot refer to the principle and that what we try to say about it does not apply to it. Yet, the principle is precisely that on which to speak is to step into the void. Our discourse cannot grasp the principle, but it discovers the principle as being precisely that ungraspable, that unknowable, which renders our discourse dysfunctional and makes us step into the void. This principle, argues Damascius, should rather be honoured through silence and through complete unknowing (παντελεῖ ἀγνοίᾳ), because it cannot even be known as ineffable.


59 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 8. 23-24; W. I, 10. 22-24: “maybe the absolute Ineffable is such that we cannot even consider it ineffable”. See also Van Riel (2010), who notices that: “even the name of ‘the Ineffable’ (to aporrēton), by which we could give an empty place to the First in our system, implies too much” (p. 677).

60 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 9. 9-10; W. I, 11. 15-16: “let it be honoured through complete silence and, before this, through complete unknowing, which disdains all knowledge”. For Damascius, silence concerning the first principle has a paradoxical sense: it is a silence...
However, another reversal is thereby produced and we come to step again into the void, because in saying that the principle is completely *unknowable*, and that only complete unknowing can honour it, we still *know* all these things about it, and the very idea that the principle is unknowable comes to be contradicted by our act of uttering it. This problem touches again the very fact of speaking about the Ineffable (telling it uncoordinated, nothing, etc.). Thus, if the principle is really unknowable, we cannot even say that it be such, while, if we can say this, then the principle is not totally unknowable. By the very fact of uttering the unknowable, we stop referring to the unknowable. The sense of the word “unknowable” is contradicted by our saying it, while of the real unknowable we cannot even know that it is unknowable. This is precisely that which our discourse suggests in as much as it steps into the void while trying to call it unknowable, discovering that it cannot refer to it as such, and that what we call unknowable is not yet the real unknowable. This principle is not unknowable in as much as we say this about it, but rather in as much as we realize that we cannot even say this about it.

Thus, like the “ineffable,” the “unknowable” is another step into this void, in which we try to refer to the principle, only in order to discover that referring to it does not work. Consequently, the “unknowable” does not really refer to the principle, but only to our inability to refer to it, to our ignorance about it. This is simply our state of mind concerning the principle. And yet, our discourse tends to transform every reversal of the discourse into another type of discourse that refers to the principle. Thus, we can still consider that we have a certain opinion about the principle, while saying that we do not know the principle even as ineffable or as unknowable. Could this mean that this unknowable principle is still an actual object of our opinion? We realize, however, that we cannot even have this opinion, because it also reverses and we are again stepping into the void while stating it: our opinion suggests that we can still refer to the principle as object of opinion, while our opinion states the contrary: namely that we cannot refer to it, nor know it as such. Thus, the principle cannot be a certain object of opinion, but rather it is that concerning which we step into the void, while trying to assert any opinion. We can ultimately have obtained through discourse, the discourse being both implied and rejected. It is a silence inside the discourse, consisting in the fact that the discourse proves itself impossible. See Vlad (2016).

61 Damascius, *De principiis*, R. I, 11. 19-20; W. I, 15. 3-4: “but we prove our ignorance and speechlessness about it” (ἄλλα τὴν ἡμετέραν ἀποδείκνυμεν περὶ αὐτῶ αὐτὸ άγνοοιν τε καὶ ἀφασίαν).

62 Damascius, *De principiis*, R. I, 11. 20-22; W. I, 15. 6-7: “What then? Don’t we have an opinion about it in what we say?” (Τί οὖν; οὐ δοξάζομεν περὶ αὐτού ταῦτα ἀ λέγομεν;).
the opinion that the principle is not even object of opinion; but once again, our discourse contradicts itself and this opinion, too, is reversed,\textsuperscript{63} since this last, paradoxical opinion suggests that there can be no opinion about the principle.

Thus, just as for Plato in \textit{Parmenides} the absolute One could not even be called one, for Damascius, the first, ineffable principle cannot even be called principle,\textsuperscript{64} nor ineffable, but everything that we try to say or to deny about it comes to reverse itself, making us advance into the void of no-reference. We refer to the principle only in order to discover that this is impossible. Nevertheless, Damascius identifies the presence of the Ineffable, not by actually speaking about it and by including it into our discourse, but on the contrary, by proving that there is a gap and a non-concordance in every name or attribute that we use about the principle: namely a gap between what these names try to say and what they are actually saying or implying.

Damascius’ manner of identifying the presence of the first, absolute principle does not consist in emphasizing its transcendence, because transcendence itself makes sense only within a discursive frame. On the contrary, Damascius focuses on this manner in which the principle subtracts itself from any discourse by which we try to suggest it. This is the case with transcendence itself: we call the principle transcendent, but this very concept of “transcendence” implicitly suggests the opposite. This concept as such is already coordinated, because for us, the transcendent always transcends something else and there cannot be an absolute transcendence, with no relation to any transcended thing. The very concept of transcendence is a relative one. Hence, the real and absolute transcendent (ἐξῃρημένον) cannot be indicated by this name. As Damascius puts it: “its own name does not say the truth about the transcendent”.\textsuperscript{65} Thus, the real transcendent is not what we indicate through this name, but precisely that which the name does not reach any more, that which the name itself proves that it cannot reach.

Thus, our discourse can suggest the principle only indirectly: not through what we say about it, but through our failure to reach it (ἀτευξία),\textsuperscript{66} and to refer

\textsuperscript{63} Damascius, \textit{De principiis}, R. I, 12. 15-16; W. I, 16. 5-6: “We have the opinion that the Ineffable is not even object of opinion. The discourse reverses, says [Plato], and in reality, we don’t even have an opinion”. See Vlad (2014).

\textsuperscript{64} Gersh (2014) notices that the discussion of the Ineffable “is supplemented by briefer references to it as not a principle, as both a principle and not a principle, and as neither a principle nor not a principle, this alternation providing a classic illustration of the reversal of discourse of which he constantly speaks” (pp. 134-135).


\textsuperscript{66} Damascius, \textit{De principiis}, R. I, 7. 6-7; W. I, 8. 17-18.
to it. Stepping into the void is the only adequate manner of speaking about the absolute ineffable principle, because it no longer consists in linking a name and an object—like we do in our normal discourse—, but on the contrary, it consists in noticing that what we refer to actually withdraws from any such link with the names we use. We are discursively stepping into the void when we speak about the principle, and this stepping into the void detaches the principle from every attribute—affirmative or negative—by which we try to reach it. The advancement into the void is the opposite of the usual manner of discourse, in which we apply proper names to every object of thought. The “ineffable consciousness” that we reach about the principle is not obtained through applying the discourse, but through disconnecting any discourse from the ineffable principle.

Damascius pushes to the limit this manner of advancing into the void: at every step, he tries to speak about this nothing, to say that the principle is nothing, only to realize that we cannot actually say that the principle is nothing. He provokes this void advance, in which every assertion about the principle is rejected, and yet, every rejection leaves us with a new perspective about the principle, which we try to formulate as such, as another statement, but which is again rejected, and so forth, in a practically unlimited advance. The advancement is void, because we cannot establish any actual knowledge about the principle; yet, the void makes us advance always further, because we tend to indirectly create a piece of knowledge out of any statement that was rejected from the principle. Thus, the advancement is infinite because any indirect piece of knowledge will in its turn be rejected as inadequate for the principle.

The final conclusion of this infinite advancement into the void, in the search for this superior nothing, is that the principle cannot even be the nothing, because not even this term can indicate a certain nature of the principle. Even the “nothing” risks to be understood as an indication of the principle, therefore, for Damascius, it is more appropriate to say that the “nothing” is not even nothing.67

Thus, to advance into the void means to follow this discourse which tries to capture the principle in its nothingness, but which cannot do so and is finally bound to reverse, simply because the real nothing does not accept to be captured in any way. Nevertheless, the principle proves to be unspeakable, not because we are actually saying it is so, but because we discover that we cannot

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67 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 13. 21-22; W. I, 18, 9-11: “This is why we are completely reversed, having no contact with it whatsoever, because it is nothing, or rather it is not even this: the nothing” (Διὸ καὶ περιτρεπόμεθα πανταχῆ ὡς κατὰ μηδὲν αὐτοῦ ἐφαπτόμενοι, ἀτε καὶ οὐδένος ὄντος, μᾶλλον δὲ μηδὲ τούτου ὄντος, τὸ οὐδέν).
even say it is unspeakable, while trying to say it. We thus discover the Ineffable not by describing it, or by referring to it in any way, but by letting any assertion about it reverse, discovering that we are unable to refer to it and ascribe anything about it. Our discourse cannot state that the principle is ineffable, but it can prove this, through experiencing its own constant failure of stating anything about it. Damascius’ advancing into the void does not determine the void, this superior nothing, but releases it from any attempt to determine it, while establishing it as uncoordinated to the all and as inconceivable for any discourse. For Damascius, there are two alternatives: either to speak about the principle and to determine it, or to step into the void and to keep the principle undetermined. He chooses the latter.

However, is it not contradictory to say that we are actually advancing into the void? For, if we advance into the void, if we really hold a discourse about this void, then we determine it and, consequently, it is no longer void. Is Damascius really stepping into the void, and can anybody do this?
anybody reasonably say something about nothing? In fact, Damascius is trying to step into the void in order to get the opposite effect: namely, to actually experience that, into this void, it is impossible to get any further, despite our persistent efforts, because whatever we say about this superior nothing does not really apply to the Ineffable.

But then again, if he cannot really step into the void as such—in the sense of determining this “nothing” of the principle—, then where is Damascius urging us to step? In fact, this advancing into the void actually takes place inside of us. It is inside of us that we are really advancing, while trying to speak about this “nothing”; yet, in doing so, in trying to speak about the nothing, we discover that the principle really is nothing, precisely because everything that we try to say about it falls short of it. Thus, through our inner advancing into the void, the principle proves to be a real nothing, which is above all that we are trying to say. We are thus advancing into the void towards the principle, not in the sense of determining the principle, but on the contrary: in the sense of obtaining the consciousness that the principle is nothing and that our advance towards it is, in fact, void. It is a void advance into ourselves, that reveals the ungraspable void of the principle of all.

There are two levels of this advancement into the void, or two manners in which we experience it. First, we try to speak about this superior nothing, but we realize that our opinions about it remain empty. Thus, our discourse advances into the void in itself, and it is itself a void discourse. The stepping as such (that is, what we really say) is not into the principle itself, but in ourselves. However, in a second, indirect manner, we also advance into the void itself: for we advance into discovering the void or the nothing, not in as much as we try to speak about it, but in as much as we realize that we cannot speak about it, hence understanding that the principle really is nothing. The advancement into the void thus takes upon a positive sense, on the condition that we maintain the consciousness of the fact that we are not dealing with descriptive assertions, but only with assertions that step into the void into ourselves.

Thus, stepping into the void (κενεμβατεῖν) is eventually possible, not in the sense criticized by Proclus, but in the sense of a sharp consciousness of this “beyond,” which does not accept to be determined in any way. If Proclus seems to say that we should not force the unspeakable, lest we should say it and thus, miss its sense and step into the void, Damascius says the contrary: we have to

71 Damascius, De principiis, R. I, 12. 18-24; W. I, 16. 8-17: “Still, we have in us this opinion. Yes, but it is void, since it is about the void and the unlimited […] this opinion is ours and inside of us it is stepping into the void; seizing this opinion, we think that we seize it [the Ineffable], but that is nothing for us, so much it surpasses our conception.”
force the unspeakable, even the unspeakable above the One, but we have to force it precisely in order to discover how much it is unspeakable, how much it escapes our grasp. It is not the ignorance of the principle’s nature that pushes Damascius into the void—like in Proclus’ interpretation of the Glaucon episode—but on the contrary: it is the advancement into the void which provides Damascius with a keen awareness of the nature of the principle.

Thus, if for Proclus, we should not speak about the principle in a direct manner, lest we should advance into the void, for Damascius, the contrary is true: we should try to speak about the principle, in order that, through this advance into the void, we should realize that the principle is nothing of what we are trying to say about it, not even One or Ineffable, and that, as such, the principle really is unspeakable.

Ultimately, to step into the void is to try to advance where there is nothing more to report, thus, it is an effort of thought which does not render anything anymore, but which experiences and expresses its own reversal (περιτροπή), at every step of the way. The reversal (περιτροπή)—which best describes the manner of the advance into the void (κενεμβατεῖν)—consists in the fact that any assertion turns to its contrary and the slightest attempt to determine the principle undermines itself, like when we call it unknowable, but we realize that, if it were unknowable, we would at least know this about it: namely that it is unknowable. This constantly reversed thinking is the only one that can

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72 In this respect, we disagree with Athanassiadi’s (2006) perspective, who considers that the advance into the void would rather be a “sterile pain” of the soul: “Damascius, quant à lui, ne peut cesser d’avancer, même face à la vacuité absolue. De là la douleur stérile qui travaille son âme; de là aussi cette sensation qu’il a de ‘marcher dans le vide’” (p. 210). In fact, Damascius does not find himself implacably caught into a painful void advance, but, on the contrary, he cautiously prepares this advance, persuading us that, still above the One, there actually is the “nothing itself” (αὐτὸ τὸ οὐδέν), which is not even one (οὐδὲ ἕν), and that this is the actual goal of our quest for the principle of all.

73 See also Hoffmann (1997), who notices: “La tonalité du Traité des premiers principes, qui à bien des égards tient lieu d’un commentaire de la première hypothèse, est pessimiste, angoissée. Un lecteur attentif y relève des notations presque «existentielles»: les ὠδῖνες de l’âme semblent ne devoir jamais être satisfaites, le discours humain est voué à un renversement (περιτροπή) qui condamne nos pensées et nos opinions à marcher dans le vide (κενεμβατεῖν) parce qu’elles sont vaines” (p. 339).

74 See for instance Lavaud (2007): “Damascius introduit cette notion [le renversement] en faisant le constat que le discours négatif n’est pas plus apte à exprimer le premier principe que le discours positif. Nier, en effet, c’est déjà introduire une délimitation entre une qualité et son absence, et c’est donc inévitablement déterminer, enclore dans une nature particulière. En ce sens, le premier principe n’est pas plus indicible que dicible, si l’on entend par indicible ce qui est le simple contradictoire du dicible.” (p. 53).
search for the principle without determining it. Through this reversed thinking, we can actually speak about the principle, trying to perceive its presence, while knowing that the principle is unspeakable, and that it is impossible to speak about it directly. Even if we cannot grasp it, the principle remains the final and constant goal of this constantly reversed thinking, which strives towards it. This thinking is never annihilated, but rather reduced to its bare act of thinking, which no longer has an actual subject of thought, nor a result of its approach.

3 Concluding Remarks

With the problem of κενεμβατεῖν, we deal with two manners of protecting the principle against our inadequate attempt to access it. Thus, Proclus underscores a first aspect of the problem: the principle (i.e. the One) must be clearly distinguished from being, as well as from the nothing inferior to being. Accordingly, Proclus rejects this "void" that the soul projects upon the principle, while trying to determine it in any way, as being, or as inferior non-being.

As for Damascius, he goes even further, putting the matter in its full complexity. He notices that it does not suffice to consider that the principle is beyond being—like a non-being superior to being—in order to assure the transcendence of the principle, because the thinking itself reintegrates this principle into the all of what we conceive. The transcendence of the principle cannot be imposed through the distinction between being and non-being. For Damascius, the principle is completely transcendent, only in as much as it surpasses this distinction. The principle is not a “non-being,” which is still “something” (so as not to be confounded with the nothing inferior to being), but, on the contrary, the principle is an absolute nothingness, because it is not even a non-being superior to being, like the One. Damascius can thus guarantee the

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Metry-Tresson (2012) describes stepping into the void as an annihilation of our thinking, which ceases to exist: “Là où il n'y a plus de point d'appui pour elle, là où il n'y a plus aucun objet, la pensée cesse tout bonnement d'être. […] Lorsque la pensée «marche dans le vide» - image chère à Damaskios - elle n'est plus que néant au sein du néant. Il n'y plus ni métaphysique, ni dialectique. Si tout a été dépassé, et donc les apories aussi, nous ne sommes plus que néant de connaissance et d'inconnaissance. […] Les pensées et les mots ont éclaté.” (p. 74). “Ce verbe «marcher dans le vide» exprime une expérience insolite et très déstabilisante pour la pensée, celle du «sans-objet» et du sans appui, du vide, et du vertige.” (p. 80).
transcendence of the principle, not through the interdiction to advance into the void, but through the invitation to step into this superior void.

As long as we still have a discursive approach of the principle, we remain far from the principle and entangled into its aporias, which Damascius develops at the beginning of his treatise. It is only when we step into the void, that we escape the aporias and we finally approach the principle that is above thinking. This is the reason why Damascius proposes the stepping into the void, like a sort of method to ascertain the transcendence of the principle.

In Proclus’ case, we should refrain from advancing into the void, i.e. from directly speaking about the principle. And yet, Damascius would say that, refrain as much as we could, we are still approaching the principle, albeit by indirect and cautious negations. Therefore, his choice is to actually step into the void, to speak about the principle, and to realize that, try as much as we could to advance towards the principle, we cannot say anything about it, we cannot find any piece of speech that holds concerning the absolute, uncoordinated principle.

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