
To undertake to translate the treatise On the First Principles is a task that may be qualified, depending on one’s viewpoint, as heroic, gargantuan, or quixotic. This chef d’oeuvre by the Late Antique philosopher Damascius (c. 458-538 CE) is unique among the philosophical works that have come down to us from late Antiquity. It is not a commentary on a text by Plato or Aristotle, nor a disquisition on a particular philosophical problem. Instead it is an essay on pure metaphysics, or rather an investigation into whether and how we can talk about that which transcends all conceptualization, and therefore all language.

It is largely this profound originality that makes the De Principiis one of the most difficult works in ancient philosophy. It is perhaps not surprising that no English translation of this work has existed until now.

Sarah Abel-Rappe (henceforth SAR), who has already published well-received work on Damascius, was the obvious choice to fill this lacuna in Anglophone Neo-Platonic studies, and she has taken on the challenge with courage and humility.

The difficulty in translating Damascius in general, and the De Principiis in particular, arises, no doubt, from the singular position of Damascius in the Neoplatonic tradition. One of the very last Platonic successors or diadochs, he presided over the closing of the Neoplatonic Academy of Athens in 529 CE, and, depending on which sources and interpreters one chooses to believe, may have led a group of hard-core Neoplatonists into exile, first to Persia, and then, perhaps, to Harran in Mesopotamia. Yet while Damascius did write lemma-by-lemma commentaries on texts by Plato and Aristotle, the De Principiis is something virtually unique in Late Antique Philosophy: a monograph on the highest, most arcane principles of Neoplatonic philosophy. What is more, Damascius was no orthodox, traditionalist philosopher (as one may argue was the case for his student Simplicius). Instead, at least in his De Principiis, he questions the very possibility of metaphysics, whether Neoplatonic or otherwise. Instead of merely repeating the basic Neoplatonic axioms deriving primarily from Proclus, he radically questions the very bases of our knowledge of the highest principles. In the midst of the conservative tradition of Neoplatonic commentators on Plato and Aristotle, Damascius stands out as one of the most radical thinkers of Antiquity, if not of all time.

Since the inauguration of Neoplatonism under Plotinus, who taught a relatively simple system of ontological emanation comprising the One, the Intellect, and the Soul (which, through its lowest part, emanates Nature, or the phenomenal world as we experience it), the history of this philosophical movement is the history of the progressive introduction of more and more levels of reality between
the world as we see it and the Ultimate Principle. Thus, in the place of Plotinus’ scheme One-Nous-Soul, Iamblichus introduced a scheme involving a splitting of the level of Intellect (intellective, intellective-and-intellectual, intellectual) and a principle beyond the One, called the ineffable.

At the end of this long tradition of multiplication of ontological entities, Damascius carries out his own Copernican revolution. Returning to epistemology, he asks: “How can we know the ultimate principle? If we know it, and thereby circumscribe it, how can it still be ultimate?” Damascius’ solution was basically to adopt the scheme of his beloved Iamblichus: beyond the Plotinian One there is the Ineffable, a principle about which we can think and say precisely nothing.

SAR’s book is divided into a brief (13 page) Prologemenon, a substantial (56 page) “Introduction to the Life and Philosophy of Damascius”, the translation itself of Damascius’ De principiis (pp. 65-419), notes (421-503), a Glossary (505-511), Bibliography (513-522), index nominum (523-524) and index locorum (523-529).

As far as the Introduction is concerned, SAR has done a very capable job of summarizing and integrating the quite substantial secondary literature that has arisen around Damascius over the past generation or so (prior to which he was, essentially, neglected). As the heir to some thousand years of Greek philosophy, Damascius’ thought is not easy to grasp at a first approach, and SAR’s introduction, while it does not feature any originality—nor does it claim to—may well be the best currently available in English. Particularly helpful are the brief remarks and summaries with which SAR introduces each thematic unity of chapters: here she shows a very good conceptual grasp of the intricacies of Damascius’ thought. SAR is well acquainted with the secondary literature, much of which is in French, although there are numerous errors in orthography and content in both the Abbreviations (pp. xxix-xxx) and the Bibliography. These are not, unfortunately,

---

1) Although not without occasional slips: Plotinus was not born in Alexandria (p. xiv), but in Lycopolis; Iamblichus was not “active 245 BC” (ibid.), but this is likely to have been the approximate date of his birth.

2) Under the abbreviation CP, for instance, one reads ”Damascius. 2002-2003. Commentary on the Parmenides. 4 vols. Text by Carlos Steel. Paris”. Virtually all this information is wrong: Carlos Steel played no role in this edition, in which the text is by Westerink and the translation, introduction and commentary by Combès with the assistance of A.-Ph. Segonds (and C. Luna for vol. 4). The publisher, omitted by SAR, is Les Belles Lettres, the series (also omitted) is Collection des Universités de France, and the actual dates of publication of the four volumes are 1997 (vols. 1-2), 2002 (vol. 3), and 2003 (vol. 4). The French title, omitted in the case of the In Parm., is also massacred in the case of Iamblichus’ De mysteriis (“Les Mysteries d’Egypte”). Accents are systematically omitted in almost all French titles.

3) There is, pace SR, no translation in Ruelle’s edition of the De Principiis. SR seems unaware that French translations have been published of Porphyry’s Sententiae and Life of Plotinus;
the only signs of a certain philological sloppiness and/or lack of revision in SAR's work, which sometimes, and more seriously, extends to her reporting of the readings of Westerink-Combès' edition.4

The most important element of SAR's work is, of course, the English translation, the first to be published, to my knowledge, of the De principiis. Here, I must admit that my judgment of SAR's work is decidedly ambiguous.

Several methodological questions arise here:

1. In translating an ancient text—Greek, in this case—into English, should one make an effort to consistently render a given Greek term by the same English term? I believe the answer is yes: otherwise the English reader is unable to appreciate the ancient author's arguments, particularly if, as is the case for Damascius, the author relies heavily on allusions, etymologies and plays on words. In this regard, I am afraid SAR fails to provide an adequate translation, particularly in the early sections of her work.

2. Given that Damascius' De Principiis has been very well edited and translated into French, what attitude should an English translator adopt? SAR makes no claim to improve upon the French edition of Westerink-Combès, which she admits she has followed closely. It is to her credit, however, and adds to the impression of intellectual honesty that pervades the volume, that SAR has usually resisted the temptation simply to translate the French translation of Westerink-Combès into that there is an English translation by S. Strange of Porphyry's In Cat., and that there is an English translation by Bechtle of the Commentary on the Parmenides attributed to Porphyry (mysteriously, the only edition cited is the Italian translation (!) of P. Hadot's Porphyre et Victorinus). When one reads, under the heading of Proclus's commentary on Euclid: "Procli Diadochi in Primum Euclidis Elementorum Librum Commentarii ex Reknowledgee Gotofredi Friedlein", one can only assume that a spellchecker has been allowed to run amok. Translations are sometimes (logically) listed right after editions, sometimes far apart (as in the case of Proclus' In Eucl. and its translation), sometimes the translation is noted twice (Dillon and Morrow's translation of the In Parm.), while many translations are completely ignored (Segond's edition and translation of the In Alciadam, Festugière's translation of the In Remp., etc.). A clear indication that the Bibliography has been published without serious revision appears under Seneca, where the Epistulae Morales are said to have been "Edited by <initial?> Reynolds". Theophrastus' Metaphysics is said to have been translated and edited with the collaboration "pour la traduction arabe de Michel" (the surname Crubellier has been omitted). Read Utilium for "Utilum." under Theo Smyrnaeus, etc.

4) With regard to De princ., p. 3, 13 W.-C., for instance, SAR reports (p. 429 n. 6) that "The mss have 'hosper . . . hôste'; Westerink reads 'mê hôsper . . . hôste'". In fact, however, neither the mss. nor Westerink read hôste: both read hősper . . . houtô, and W. does not read mê hősper but suggests ou mê hősper. At De princ. p. 44, 13, SR reports (p. 434 n. 26) that "the manuscript reads ἅπτουσα, not αἴττουσα". But the manuscript, of course, reads ἅπτουσα, and what Westerink proposes is ζήτουσα.
English. There are several instances, however, in which this may have been the wiser course.

Indeed, the most serious objection I have to this book is that, if one may judge by this translation, SAR does not seem to have an adequate knowledge of ancient Greek. Particles are consistently ignored, and entire phrases often misconstrued, apparently owing to a lack of familiarity with the laws of Greek grammar and syntax.

It is true that SAR’s translations improve as the book progresses: fewer egregious errors are to be found in the later parts of the book than in the first few pages. This is, in a sense, normal: every translator starts out uneasily, unsure of her or his author’s stylistic quirks and habits. It is only through lengthy, consistent work that a translator may become familiar with the author’s usage, and therefore able to render it consistently and correctly.

This, however, reveals a fundamental defect in SAR’s work. Although the English has been carefully copy-edited (except for the Bibliography!), one has the clear impression that the translation has been inadequately revised for its faithfulness to the Greek. No attempt has been made to harmonize divergent translations of individual words, so that, in the absence of a Greek-English or English-Greek glossary, the Greekless reader remains afloat in a sea of unconnected verbiage. One has the impression that SAR was pressed for time, so that she did not return to revise the translation of the original chapters, which is often quite poor.

I cannot provide in this space a complete list of what I consider to be the errors and infelicities in SAR’s translation, which covers over 350 pages, most of them containing at least one such error. I will limit myself to a few examples, taken primarily from the first 30 pages or so of Westerink-Combès edition, and divided into three categories:

5) gar (p. 3, 25 W.-C), ge (p. 4, 2). Other examples are too numerous to note.
6) At p. 4, 6-8 W.-C. SAR appears not to have noticed that the verbal forms διπλασιαζόμενοι and πολλαπλασιαζόμενοι are reflexive, so that they are not be translated by “it is we who create a duality concerning its unity, and even multiply that duality” but by “but it is we who (…) being duplicated and even multiplied with regard to its simplicity”. At p. 11, 14-15 SAR’s translation (“Let perfect silence prevail concerning that other principle, and even prior to this, let there be the complete unknowing that disdains all knowledge”) implies she has not understood the grammatical structure of the phrase ἐκεῖνο δὲ παντελῶς σιγῇ τετιμήσθω: tetimêsthô is the third person singular perfect imperative of the verb tímâo, “to honor”, so that the correct translation would be “Let that one be honored by perfect silence, and even before that, by the complete unknowing that despises all knowledge.”
1. Varying translations of the same Greek term:

*to hen*: translated as “unity” p. 67, elsewhere “the One”.

*haplotês* (“simplicity”) is translated as “unity”; cf. p. 4, 7. At p. 4, 11 καὶ τῆς ἁπλουστάτης παντότητος is translated “as well as of the one totality”, where the superlative *haploustatês* is, astonishingly, translated as “one”. One line later, *haplotês* is translated by “singularity”, while at p. 20, 20f. it is rendered by “simplification”. At p. 7, 19 εἰς τὸ ἁπλούστατον is rendered “in the direction of what is simpler”, although *haploustaton* is not a comparative form but a superlative.

At p. 7, 20 ὑπονοιαῖς is translated by “speculations”, a few lines below by “conceptions”, and further on (p. 73) by “hidden meaning”. At p. 14, 16 the verb ὑπονοεῖν is translated by “intuiting”.

*tὸ µηδαµῆ µηδαµῶς ὄν* is sometimes translated as “nonexistence”, sometimes “that which is in no way whatsoever”, and sometimes “that which absolutely is not”. Good luck to the Greekless reader in guessing that we have to do with the same Greek phrase in all these cases. Similarly, Damascius often uses the indefinite pronoun *ekeino* “that one” to designate the Ineffable, and SAR often translates it as “that”. This cannot help but confuse the Greekless reader, as when she writes (p. 79) “and we know that neither as unknowable or knowable”. Again, SAR consistently translates the Greek *ouden*, which means “nothing”, as “not being”, but this latter expression should be reserved to render the Greek *to mê on*.

At p. 30, 7 the expression ἀντιπλεονεκτεῖται τὰ ἄλληλα is translated by “reciprocally determine one another”; later, and more accurately, by “reciprocally prevail over each other”.

SAR sometimes translates the Greek word ἔννοια “concept” by “account”, elsewhere by “notion” or even “criterion”.

2. Omissions of parts of the Greek text:

p. 4, 4-5 W-C. καὶ ἁπλῶς εἰπεῖν δευτέρως, ἓν δὲ πρώτως τό γε ἕν; pp. 6, 22-23: ώς τῷ λόγῳ φάναι (“pour le dire en un mot” Combès); p. 7, 15: µόνον; p. 14, 1ff.: ὄπωσοῦν and θέσιν have not been translated. P. 15, 18ff.: SAR has omitted the clause οὐδὲν τῶν ἄντων ὄπωσοῦν προσεῖναι δυνατὸν.

At p. 29, 9. φασὶν “they say” has been omitted, unless it has been mistranslated by “as it were”, while at p. 31, 14ff. the word πάντῃ (“in all directions”) has been omitted from τὴν πάντῃ διάστασιν.

Perhaps most shockingly, an entire page of Greek from p. 27, 11 W.-C. (Pôs an oun . . . ) to p. 28, 11 ( . . . arkhês aitian diatêrêsei) has been omitted in SAR’s translation.

3. Simple misunderstandings of the Greek:

In the opening pages, the adverb ἄπλως is regularly translated “stricto sensu” or “properly speaking”. The term means almost precisely the opposite (“in general”).
At p. 10, 4-5 W.-C., SAR translates ἀποφηνάµενος by “demonstrated”, although the verb apophainein means simply “to declare”. Same mistake at p. 12, 12 W.-C.

At p. 10, 24f. W.-C., SAR translates τὸ δὲ ἓν οὕτως ὡς πᾶσαν σύνθεσιν ἐκφεῦγον λόγου τε καὶ ὀνόµατος by “The One, on the other hand, is ineffable in such a way as to escape every statement and description”. But sunthesis logou means “compound phrase”, not “statement”; while onoma means “name”, not “description”. At p. 11, 1ff., SAR translates Ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ τινός, ὡς τεθέντος, καὶ εἰς τὸ ἁπλῶς ῥᾳδία ἡ µετάβασις by “But from the One so qualified, however it has been qualified, the ascent to the absolute One is not difficult”. Yet it is highly unlikely that Damascius would refer to the One as τι (“something”). Translate: “But from something that is particular (tinos), however it may be postulated, the transition to what exists in an absolute sense is easy”.

p. 11, 19f. W.-C., SAR translates οὐ γὰρ δὴ λογοποιοῦµεν by “Let us not engage in fiction writing”. But logopoioumen is indicative, not subjunctive as it would have to be for a negative imperative. It therefore means “Are we not making up stories?” At p. 12, 7f., SAR translates “Moreover it is not possible to deny something of another thing, unless one knows that which one denies of the latter”. But the Greek clearly means “One cannot deny one thing of another if one does not know what one is denying it of”: the ignorance in question does not concern predicates, but subjects.

p. 14, 16: θαυµασιώτατον is translated as “the absolutely incomprehensible”: in fact it means “the most amazing”.

p. 20, 14ff. W.-C., συναίρεµα is translated by “totality”, but in fact it means “concentrate”.

p. 21, 20ff.: ὁµολογίας τοῦ µηδὲν γιγνώσκειν is rendered by “agreement to continue to know nothing”, but it is much more likely to mean “the admission that we know nothing”.

p. 23, 19-20: παντελῶς does not mean “certainly” but “completely”. Similarly, πάντως (p. 5, 24) does not mean “completely” but “necessarily, at any rate”.

p. 25, 9ff.: τάξιν τινὰ τῶν προελθόντων ἀπόρρητον means “a kind of ineffable order of the things that proceed”, rather than SAR’s “kind of order of ineffability that governs all the stages of procession”. SAR’s translation of ἄτε πανταχοῦ τῷ ῥητῷ συνδιηρηµένον is completely incomprehensible, since she has failed to understand the technical logical term sundëiêrêmenon, which means “to be divided along with”, i.e. placed opposite something else in a dichotomic diairesis.

At p. 43, 7, κινουµένη cannot mean “capable of movement”, but “in motion, moved”.

I must conclude that SAR’s work is, faute de mieux, the best English-language introduction to the thought of Damascius. The numerous errors and omissions of
the work’s translation, however, make this translation virtually useless for those who read French, and force the Greekless anglophone reader to corroborate SAR’s translations against the more reliable translations of Galpérine and Westerink-Combès.

As gargantuan a task as a complete translation of the *De principiis* may well have been beyond the strength of any one individual.⁷ SAR, a gifted historian of philosophy, should have been encouraged to join forces with an expert Greek philologist to carry out a task of this scale.

In conclusion, it is somewhat disturbing that such sloppy work could be published by Oxford University Press. The decline, or perhaps extinction of the in-house copy editor is no doubt at least partly to blame for this decline in standards, which is by no means limited to OUP. One cannot help but wonder what John Fell, Bartholemew Price, or the collaborators on Liddell-Scott’s *A Greek-English Lexicon* would say if they knew their Press is now publishing works containing such gems as *ex Reknowledgee*.

Michael Chase  
CNRS UPR 76- Centre Jean Pépin  
(goya@vjf.cnrs.fr)  
Paris-Villetjuif,  
France

---

⁷ It is no accident that the great works of French Neoplatonic scholarship have almost always been carried out in collaboration: Saffrey and Westerink for Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*, Westerink and Combès for the *De principiis*, Segonds and Luna for Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*, etc. Similarly, although they are less ambitious from a scholarly viewpoint, Richard Sorabji’s series of translations in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle are almost always the work of several translators when it comes to works of dimensions comparable to those of the *De principiis*. 