

Damascius

Damascius' Problems and Solutions Concerning First Principles.

Trans. Sara Ahbel-Rappe.

New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2010.

560 pages

US\$99.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-515029-2)

At one time translations of the ancient Platonists were a matter of immediate interest to philosophers of general vocation: Werner Beierwaltes has documented the influence of the later Platonists upon German Idealism, Wayne Hankey their influence upon 20th century French thought. As for the anglophone world, the American Transcendentalists were avid readers of Thomas Taylor's translations of Proclus, Melville himself poking fun at their arcane jargon.

It is true that Taylor did not try to make Proclus one of us: he treated the texts of the ancients like clothes handed down, ones that might be too big for us now but which we might grow into. Today, we more often treat the ancient philosophers either as clever children or as cherished but senile elders. So secure are we in the sedimented intellectual history beneath our feet that we leave to the archaeologists of discourse the reception of those antique voices whom we have decided could never surprise us in any way. Accordingly, Taylor's principles of translation too often seem no longer ours. Taylor was rigorously consistent in the rendering of technical terms. He strove, in rendering Greek terms into English, to ground his choices in structural homologies (e.g., using negative formations to render negatives), etymological relationships, and the choices made by historical translators going back to the Roman reception of Hellenic philosophy. When he felt it was systematically important, and lacked a straightforward equivalent, Taylor imported the Greek term. He rendered Proclus' sentence structure so faithfully one can practically, in reading his translation, retrovert the Greek text. In everything he did, his goal was evidently to preserve the semantic richness of the original text. All this, one may charge, results in a text too alien in English; but that alienness is also the availability of the text to say something *beyond* what its translator made of it. This is what we lose when we make the ancient author one of us.

The 20th century saw first-rate English translations of the late Platonists, at the same time that the production of modern critical editions and translations of these texts was occurring primarily in French, and the concern with such texts in general had passed into the hands of specialists. The translation of Proclus' *Parmenides* commentary by Glenn Morrow and John Dillon stands out in particular as a classic of consistency and readability, while E. R. Dodds' translation of the *Elements of Theology*, freer with the text, earns its latitude by virtue of its author's overwhelming erudition and the elegance of its prose. The case of Damascius, however, differs somewhat from that of his predecessor Proclus. Taylor proved, alas, to be mortal, and never gave the 19th century a Damascius to accompany his Proclus. Two of Damascius' shorter commentaries were translated by Westerink, reprinted recently by the Prometheus Trust. His two great works,

however, namely his commentary on the *Parmenides* and his *Aporiai kai luseis peri tôn prôtôn archôn* (*Difficulties and Solutions Concerning First Principles*), had never been translated into English prior to the present volume. This is not surprising. To even begin to grasp Damascius, one must have the most thorough understanding of Proclus, who is for Damascius simply ‘the Philosopher’, as Aristotle was for the scholastics of the Middle Ages. Such knowledge, however, is only to be expected today in the specialist, who has access to the French editions. Moreover, the reception of Proclus even among specialists is not altogether settled. At such a time, it is all the more crucial that a new translation of a key text for an underserved and unprepared English readership embody the virtues I have identified in Taylor’s approach.

The results of failing to do so are on display in this new translation of Damascius from the Oxford University Press, to my distinct disappointment. The translator, Sara Ahbel-Rappe, is certainly among the most promising of the younger generation of Platonic scholars in the English-speaking world. Her debut, *Reading Neoplatonism* (2000), advanced a bold performative interpretation of Platonic metaphysics that brought to the texts an awareness of contemporary thought without anachronism, and seemed to approach the authors as genuine interlocutors. Yet this translation is, in the first place, plagued with errors unacceptable in their number and severity. One must not make such a charge lightly; to supplement and substantiate this review, I have published separately a listing of errata running to six pages:

<http://henadology.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/errata-ahbel-rappe.pdf>

I take no account there of the mundane typographical errors with which academic publications are all too often strewn today, and which are rife in the present volume. It is limited, rather, to severe errors that fatally deform the sense of the text, and none of which, moreover, occur in the French translation. But what is so troubling about these errors is that so many of them seem as though they could never have occurred were the translator truly following the argument. Indeed, the only reason that I caught as many as I did was because of the immediate perception of nonsense or illogicality that caused me to check the Greek and the French. It is likely, given the number and nature of the errors caught in this fashion, that a closer investigation would have found more.

But even if the outright errors could be overlooked, the general approach to the text is faulty. There is no commitment to render faithfully the technical terms with which the text abounds, despite the fact that we ought to value the later Platonism especially for its wealth of precise vocabulary for fine conceptual distinctions. This is often pejoratively termed ‘scholasticism’; rather than defend it here, I will merely remark that if one wants nothing to do with fine conceptual distinctions, one has no business reading Damascius. But in this translation, the same term is rendered in multiple ways, sometimes with a violent shift in sense. *Sunairesis*, for example, is rendered here as ‘compression’, ‘concentration’, ‘aggregation’ and ‘coaggregation’, and the like. These are minor variations, though a single term could have been chosen—perhaps one that would suggest the concept’s roots in what is known to less specialized readers as Platonic ‘collection and division’. To render it at other times as ‘unity’, however, is unacceptable in a text for

which terms touching upon *unity* are of the first importance. *Sunagôgê*, too, is occasionally ‘unity’ here, except when it is ‘concentration’, like *sunairesis*. *Haplos/haplôs/haplotês* is rarely rendered with its straightforward sense of ‘simple/simply/simplicity’, but as ‘absolute’ or ‘unique’ or ‘singularity’. At the same time a single English term—‘differentiation’, in particular—does duty for multiple conceptually distinct terms in the Greek. One could say that these are simply choices a translator has a right to make, but then one sees Ahbel-Rappe *unmaking* these choices all the time, for no discernible reason. Having made the decision—unfortunate, in my opinion, though in accord with the French edition—to translate *huparxis* by ‘subsistence’ rather than the (historically fruitful) ‘existence’, which would in turn free up ‘subsistence’ for the etymologically closer *hupostasis*, the translation abruptly shifts to using ‘existence’ and ‘root existence’ to render *huparxis* for the span of a page (304), then shifts back. Furthermore, ‘subsistence’ is used for *hupostasis* multiple times (295), then the usage reverts back, except when the direct anglicization ‘hypostasis’ is used.

This kind of carelessness makes it difficult to determine what is a simple error and what a deliberate confusion of distinctions. Thus, for example, *heniaios*, ‘unitary’, is persistently, though not consistently, mistaken for *hênômenos*, ‘unified’, but rarely the reverse. The term *heniaios* is systematically associated with the henads, and Ahbel-Rappe uses the term ‘henad’ to refer to the *principles* of Damascius’ system far more often than does Damascius himself. Particularly surprising are Ahbel-Rappe’s Chapters 53 and 54, titled by her ‘On the Three Henads’ and ‘On the Symbolic Nature of the Henads’ respectively, the latter represented in Combès and Westerink by a section titled ‘Statut symbolique des principes’, the former by the end of a longer section titled ‘Contradistinction et analyse’. This raises, as it so happens, another problem with this translation, namely its chapter divisions as compared to the French edition’s. For now, however, the point is simply that the word ‘henad’ never occurs in these two chapters. There are signs (see, e.g., the remark at 59f. that Damascius resists ‘reifying’ the henads) that Ahbel-Rappe has what I would characterize as a broad misapprehension of the role henads play in Damascius’ system. This would go to the heart of Damascius’ whole project, and might be affecting her translation. But when so much is arbitrary, inconsistent and faulty, it is difficult to engage with potential philosophical issues. Moreover, a careful, methodical translation would not require the reader to speculate about what the *translator* means, only what *Damascius* means.

A much longer review would be necessary to deal fully with the translation’s issues—the webpage already mentioned (*supra*) lists some but not all of them. The full spectrum ranges from dropped or incorrect page numbering for the Greek text, or the capitalization of ‘Being’, when the hypostases of Life and Intellect are not capitalized; to more serious hindrances to clarity, such as the erratic and improper use of bracketing, often with misleading or incorrect supplementation, or incorrect or misleading supplementation *without* bracketing; to direct inversions of sense, as when at 354, by virtue of a careless and obvious mistake, Damascius is positioned on the wrong side of the polemic in which he is engaged at that very moment. The handling of prepositions, conjunctions and interjections is frequently faulty, and deforms the logic of a sentence, as when one kind of disjunction is mistaken for another; or the relation between sentences,

as when a ‘for’ turns into a ‘however’; or a whole doctrine, as when Ahbel-Rappe repeatedly renders *kata to hen* by ‘in the One’. There are words here that do not exist in English, such as ‘particible’ and ‘imparticible’; a rogue spell-checker that produces, e.g., ‘hypotheses’ for ‘hypostases’; repeated confusions of ‘intelligible’ and ‘intellective’; and the simply ridiculous, as when, at 150, *êitheoi*, ‘unmarried youths’, is read as ‘demigods’, despite being paired with *parthenoi*, ‘virgins’.

I take no pleasure in writing such a negative review, but fidelity to the discipline requires full candor. The problems with this edition seem to me so serious that I cannot imagine it serving as a standard translation of so important a figure as Damascius in the study of Platonic thought. Hopefully, someone will soon assume the task of providing a reworked and improved edition.

Edward P. Butler

<http://henadology.wordpress.com/>