

VLAD (M.) **Damascius et l'ineffable: récit de l'impossible discours**. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2019. Pp. 228. €28. ISBN 9782711628735
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Marilena Vlad's book seeks to bring out the radicality of Damascius and the radicality of his novel conception of the first principle, 'the ineffable'. She underlines how Damascius attends to a paradoxical 'presence' of this principle precisely by repeatedly running into aporias about it. The repetitious return to the impossibility of thinking a first principle and especially an 'ineffable' one is the very mode, according to Vlad, through which such a principle becomes available to thought. Thus, again and again, the same impossibility of truly conceiving a first principle comes up as the author examines all the ways in which Damascius attempts to circumvent the limits of thought, such as by saying that we have no knowledge but a 'divination' of it, by calling the principle 'ineffable' and 'nothing', or also by saying that we never grasp it, but are ever in the process of giving birth to it.

In all these ways, Vlad observes, Damascius breaks with his predecessors and his conception (or lack of conception) of the ineffable breaks with previous understanding of the One, the classical Neoplatonist first principle. As the ineffable surpasses the One, so is Damascius shown to surpass the tradition. And yet, at the end of the book (194), we learn that the ineffable is not a further, separate principle that could be distinguished from other principles. This is the final 'reversal of thought' operated by the concept of the ineffable, but this very reversible calls into question the very radicality and novelty underlined throughout the book. If the ineffable is not a further principle, then perhaps Damascius is not himself breaking with the work of his predecessors. Perhaps he intends his account of the ineffable merely as a further analysis, a deeper understanding of what they discussed when they discussed the One.

Indeed, without a thorough discussion of the problems surrounding the One itself, it is hard to understand why the mystery of the ineffable is a separate mystery from that of conceiving of the One as the principle of all things. For instance, it is actually not clear at all in what sense the One is a single principle: is it a separate individual? If so, it offers a circular explanation of unity, for what will explain its own unity? Is it not an individual? Then how can it be the cause of unity in other things? Vlad occasionally refers to Damascius' distinction of the One as in part unsayable and in part sayable, as opposed to the ineffable, which is unsayable in every respect, but a moment's reflection shows this to be a fragile solution: does Damascius claim that the One has a duality within itself, in which it is in part sayable and in part not sayable? But if so, it is no longer the One. But if one adds that the distinction is only one that we make, we are left again with the question of what really distinguishes the One and the Ineffable, for we also in a way talk about the ineffable.

Against the view that Damascius and his principle represent a break with previous tradition and a leap into the unknown, it would be more profitable to situate his reflections on the ineffable as a reflection on the ineffability already present in the One. Vlad makes much of the fact that Damascius starts off the *De principiis* not with a review of previous opinions on first principles but rather with an aporia about the very notion of a first principle, which very quickly leads to reflection on the ineffable: 'he imposes his principle without relying on prior doctrinal givens, as the interest of his aporetic experience thus surpasses the oppositions of Neoplatonic perspectives and the contradictions inherent to this tradition' (12, translated from the original French). However, Damascius does indeed, later, provide such a history at *De principiis* 2.1–39. Although it is a puzzle why such a history only comes after the discussion of the ineffable, to say that Damascius is not engaging in an intra-Platonic debate seems to be reading too much into the order of the text. Perhaps Damascius wishes to give the impression that he is taking a view 'from

nowhere'. But perhaps his self-presentation is not truthful and not the best way to understand his views.

All in all, Vlad's presentation suffers from faults that she inherits from her source, Damascius. Regarding specific points, her book provides valuable background on the history of some of Damascius' concepts, such as those of divination and the ineffable. In general, though, the experience of reading Marilena Vlad's book is very much one of going over Damascius again, but at a slow and contemplative pace.

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DAS (A.R.) **Galen and the Arabic Reception of Plato's *Timaeus***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 243, illus. facsimile, map. £75. 9781108499484. doi:[10.1017/S0075426922000982](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426922000982)

Plato's *Timaeus* exerted a catalysing influence on medical and philosophical thinking well into early modernity. Das' investigation tracks this influence on Galen and four major medical-philosophical figures of the Islamicate tradition, Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873), Abū Bakr ar-Rāzī (d. ca. 925), Avicenna (d. 1037) and Maimonides (d. 1204). Neither a purely philological project nor a purely theoretical analysis of nuanced philosophical or medical positions, this volume builds on these two approaches to focus in a novel way on the disciplinary 'boundary work' that the Platonic dialogue, and Galen's interpretation of it, inaugurated and sustained in the Islamicate intellectual tradition.

Galen, Das explains, sought to grant medicine greater prestige *vis-à-vis* philosophy, in large part by showing how he could use medicine to assess some of the claims in Plato's *Timaeus* that involved the human body and soul, and even the cosmos; despite the tepid reaction to Galen's initiative in the late ancient Greek world, slightly later Arabic thinkers, especially Ḥunayn and ar-Rāzī, saw Galen's foray into key philosophical questions as an invitation to expand the proper bounds of medicine for themselves. And since the *Timaeus* itself was not available to medieval Arabic readers, their access to the dialogue was filtered through Galen's interpretation of it.

Das shows how Ḥunayn used the Galenic-*Timaeian* encephalocentric model of the soul to elevate the importance of the eye (an outgrowth of the brain), and with it ophthalmology, in his *Ten Treatises on the Eye*. Though Galen had earlier cast doubt on the self-sufficiency of ophthalmology while championing the comprehensive medical knowledge of generalist doctors, Ḥunayn made clear that general medicine as well as philosophy are 'ancillary to the acquisition of specialist knowledge' (72). This reconfiguration of the generalist-specialist relationship, Das notes, anticipates modern views on medical specialization.

Turning to ar-Rāzī's *Doubts about Galen*, Das asserts that ar-Rāzī saw himself as the proper interpreter of Plato and set about showing Galen to be inconsistent with himself and blind to the theological implications of his mere medical learning. Ar-Rāzī claimed that Galen overlooked God's goodness as the true (*Timaeian*) cause of creation, focussing instead on natural causes. An underestimation of God's omnipotence forces supposedly Galenic views on pleasure and the substance of the soul into conflict with Plato (and with views espoused elsewhere by Galen). Though one may wonder if ar-Rāzī's *Doubts* is a 'medical', as opposed to philosophical, work, Das is right to point out that both ar-Rāzī and Ḥunayn were calling for a broader and more inclusive interaction between medicine and philosophy, following in Galen's footsteps.

In the chapters devoted to Avicenna and Maimonides, Das sees a conscious tightening of the disciplinary borders around medicine; as Das brilliantly exposes, Avicenna and