

Contradiction and God Between Neoplatonism and the Byzantine Tradition: Proclus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Nicholas of Methone

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1.

Introduction

In the Byzantine theological and philosophical tradition, one often finds various authors grappling with the simultaneity of opposite, contradictory terms predicated of God: God is participated and unparticipated; God is being, and God is not being (albeit, as beyond being); God is intellect and beyond intellect; and so on. All this suggests that such statements made involve suspending the principle of non-contradiction (PNC), or at least changing the meaning of the terms in the affirmative and negative propositions.

In large part much of this language goes back to the Pseudo-Dionysius of the 5th to early 6th centuries CE who predicates assertions (*kataphaseis*) and negations (*apophaseis*) of God, while God at once transcends both assertions and negations. Much of Ps.-Dionysius' framework goes back to the Neoplatonist tradition's interpretation of the first and second hypotheses of Plato's *Parmenides*,¹ where in the first, negations and affirmations are removed from the "One" in the hypothesis, while in the second, affirmations are predicated of the "One". For Neoplatonists these "Ones" indicate two principles of all reality: the first hypothesis' subject indicates the One-itself, as the first principle of all things, while the second hypothesis indicates Being, or Intellect, which contains the Platonic Forms.² Whereas Neoplatonists distinguish between the "One" of the two hypotheses as the One-itself (*simpliciter*) and Being, respectively, Ps.-Dionysius effectively collapses the two "Ones" in speaking of God as both embracing assertions and negations simultaneously as well as transcending them.³

The change in metaphysics on the absolute, first principle between a Neoplatonist framework and a Byzantine Christian framework lies behind a shift in language about the first principle. As Carlos Steel established in a 2003 article, what we find in Proclus is not an affirmation of contradictories about the One-itself, i.e. a suspension of the PNC, but rather something else: the predication of negations only which leads to a suspension of all discourse, including contradictory predications. Although Nicholas of Cusa claims support from Proclus for his famous doctrine of God as embracing the coincidence of

¹ On the first hypothesis, see Plato, *Parmenides* 137c4–142a8; on the second, see *Parm.* 142b1–155e3.

² For an overview of the history of Platonists interpreting the hypotheses, see Corrigan (2010).

³ Lourié (2014) argues that Ps.-Dionysius' use of simultaneous assertions and negations of divine names for God is a case of paraconsistent logic, or in his words "metaphorical paraconsistency" (esp. 116–117). For a discussion of Lourié and others' paraconsistent logical reading of Ps.-Dionysius and other Byzantine Church Fathers, see Rojek (2024). My paper compliments Lourié's approach, albeit mainly focusing on the Neoplatonist and Aristotelian background that leads to Ps.-Dionysius' (and thereby Nicholas of Methone's) paraconsistent usage.

contradictions in himself, it is more likely from Ps.-Dionysius, as Steel notes, that Nicholas draws support for his position.

Although Nicholas of Cusa is perhaps more well-known in discussions on the PNC and God, in this chapter I wish to give a brief look at the Byzantine Christian tradition on this issue by focusing on two authors—namely, the early Byzantine Ps.-Dionysius, and the middle Byzantine reader of Ps.-Dionysius, Nicholas of Methone—and I will trace how we get from Proclus, who affirms the PNC in discussing the One, to Nicholas of Methone, who denies the PNC in talking about God (in responding, it turns out, to Proclus). As we will see, whereas certain later interpreters of Ps.-Dionysius, like Albert the Great, attempt to defend the PNC—such that claims like “God is not-A” indicates God’s essence (*per essentiam*) while “God is A” indicates an effect of God, i.e. externally (*secundum quid, scilicet causaliter*)⁴—other interpreters like Nicholas of Methone rather affirm opposed properties inherent to God—such as that God is Being-itself, as the paradigm of all beings, and is beyond Being, as transcending all things—in such a way that the PNC is indeed suspended. A key factor in these different positions, as we will see, is in what way negations either lead to ineffability or, instead, more discourse. In turn, how the PNC is suspended, and how the contradictory claims can be made and are non-trivial, should be considered in more depth as we move from Proclus to Ps.-Dionysius. A key to this transition is the late Neoplatonist Damascius, the last leader of the Platonic Academy in Athens before its closure in 574 CE, who transformed Proclus’ framework: it is on this basis that we find Ps.-Dionysius and Nicholas establishing their position.

2. The Neoplatonist Background [1]: Proclus

Proclus articulates his view on predication for the first principle in his *Parmenides Commentary* where he discusses the method of hypothesis before the beginning of the first hypothesis in Plato’s *Parmenides*.⁵ As Carlos Steel shows, Proclus presents a methodological reflection on negative theology within a Neoplatonist frame:⁶ the differing levels of assertions and negations that the different hypotheses present proceed from the lower structures of being up to the highest level, and end with only negations obtaining for the One of the first hypothesis—before the negations themselves are negated.⁷ For Proclus, it is rather the acceptance of the principle of non-contradiction that shows that there are different subjects between the first five hypotheses that pertain to distinct levels of being.⁸

We see this succinctly put when Proclus argues that “the argument does not say this, that the contradictory propositions are true together and that the opposite attributes follow on it, but rather that, for the object, the same thing exists in one respect, and it does not in another respect”.⁹ Despite assertions and negations applied to the same “One” across the different hypotheses, this rather suggests that opposed predications apply only “in one respect” and “not in another”. In the claim’s

⁴ Albert, *Super Dionysii mysticam theologiam*, cap. 2 (ed. Colon. 37.2, 459.45–49). Cf. Steel (2003) 583.

⁵ Proclus, *In Parm.* V, 997.13–1007.26.

⁶ Steel (2003) 585–586.

⁷ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 514.41–521.25.

⁸ Steel (2003) 589–590.

⁹ Proclus, *In Parm.* V, 1001.18–20. Translations my own unless otherwise noted.

immediate context, Proclus is concerned with cases in the hypotheses where attributes are both affirmed and denied of their subjects—for instance, in the third hypothesis, where the “One” is said to be both “one” and “many” as well as “not-one” and “not-many”,¹⁰ although in different respects as the character Parmenides clarifies shortly after.¹¹ More broadly, Proclus uses this principle to argue, like other Neoplatonists, that the “One” in each hypothesis refers to different subjects, rather than one and the same subject in all the hypotheses.¹² The first hypothesis then corresponds to the One-itself as first cause, the second to Being-itself as containing the Forms, the third to Soul-itself as cause of all ensouled, living beings, and so on.

After discussing the PNC’s use in the *Parmenides*’ hypotheses, Proclus revisits the PNC when he analyzes the final part of the *Parmenides*’ first hypothesis and its conclusion on the One:

[...] it is no surprise if Plato, everywhere respecting the principles of contradiction (*axiomata contradictionis/ta tês antiphaseôs axiômata*), says here that both the assertions and the negations are false of the One at the same time. For with regard to the things stated, they [i.e. assertion and negation] distinguish what is true and false: but where there is no statement (*sermo/logos*), what kind of contradictory proposition (*antiphrasis*)¹³ would belong to such a thing?¹⁴

Proclus here comments on the end of the *Parmenides*’ first hypothesis at 142a6–8, when the negations that were applied to the “One” in the hypothesis are, themselves, negated.¹⁵ In the first sentence, Proclus re-formulates Parmenides’ conclusion that the negations, alongside their corresponding affirmations, are “false of the One at the same time”: this implies that truth values can be assigned to these propositions, albeit here in the form that not-A and not-not-A. Proclus’ second sentence, however, refines this claim: because Parmenides concludes that there is no statement (*logos*: cf. *Parm.* 142a2), Proclus takes this to mean that there are no propositions—i.e. they have been removed. This would mean that no truth value can be assigned to either propositional form made in relation to the

¹⁰ Cf. Plato, *Parm.* 155e4–7.

¹¹ Plato, *Parm.* 155e9–10: “At one time, then, does it participate, and at another it does not participate; for only in this way could it both participate and not participate in the same thing.”

¹² Proclus, *In Parm.* VI, 1041.5–10. On Proclus’ survey of the four different types of interpretation of the *Parmenides*’ hypotheses in the second half (1: aporetic; 2: gymnastic/logical exercise; 3: about being; and 4: about all things deriving from the One), see *In Parm.* I, 630.11–645.6. For discussion of these previous interpretations, see Brisson (2010).

¹³ In the critical apparatus, Steel uses ἀντιφασίς in place of the original Latin manuscript’s *affirmatio* in family g (= *kataphasis* in the original Greek [possibly family Γ]). Here I follow Steel’s emendation, although the original *affirmatio* could also be read here—effectively the meaning remains the same: what affirmative proposition (and, by implication, negative proposition, and thus contradictory) is possible for the One, if all argument (*logos*) is suspended?

¹⁴ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 519.10–15.

¹⁵ Plato, *Parm.* 142a6–8: “[*Parmenides*:] Is it possible, then, that these things [i.e. the negative attributes spoken of so far] can be maintained concerning the One? [*Aristotle*:] It certainly doesn’t seem so to me”.

One: for in this case, there simply is no proposition, pro- or contra.¹⁶ For Proclus this means that the One is completely ineffable in itself—which is what the first hypothesis ends with, after all the propositions have been removed.¹⁷

How Proclus understands the “*axiômata antiphaseôs*” is not immediately obvious, particularly in the plural form, “principles” or “axioms” (*axiomata*).¹⁸ Although he does not specify, the PNC is implicitly one of these so-called “axioms” when Proclus states that “the assertions and the negations are false of the One at the same time”: i.e. the One does not admit of contradictory propositions, as being simultaneously A and not-A. Inasmuch as the assertion and negation are false, the principle of the excluded middle (PEM) is suspended, where otherwise only one or the other is affirmed. Given this, if we go back to Proclus’ claim about the “axioms”, there is a puzzle over what others Proclus has in mind that are preserved. On the one hand, the PNC is certainly preserved. However the PEM appears to be suspended rather than preserved, since the inverse is held: the One is (at once) not-A and not-not-A—in other words, the One is indeterminate with regard to the affirmation or negation of A.

In contemporary intuitionist logic we could conceive of suspending the PEM while preserving the PNC. This is at least a natural read one could give of the text of the *Parmenides*’ first hypothesis: we end up saying that not-A and not-not-A obtain for the One (= PEM suspended) yet we also say that the One is not, positively and at the same time, A and not-A (= PNC preserved). On the other hand, it is not clear that Proclus would maintain the possibility of accepting one principle without equally accepting the other—or, in turn, suspending one without suspending the other. In ancient philosophers previous to Proclus, one often finds the entailment of the PEM and PNC together.

¹⁶ For an interpretation similar to Proclus’ of the final part of the first hypothesis, see the later, 6th-cent. CE Neoplatonist Asclepius, *In Met.* 158.18–23. (Special thanks to Sokratis-Athanasios Kiosoglou for pointing out this connection.)

¹⁷ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 521.12–25, esp. the final lines 22–25: “Whence it is fitting that Aristotle [*scil.* the dialogue-interlocutor] also, accompanying [Parmenides], denies (*apephêse/e dat*) it [*scil.* the multitudinous development of arguments about the One] in relation toward the ineffable (*pros to arrêton/ad indicible*). For it is by negating that he also removes all the negations. And it is with silence that he has concluded the study about [the One] (*tên peri autou theôrian/de ipso theoriam*)”.

¹⁸ As far as I see, the earliest usage of the specific phrase *axiôma* or *axiômata antiphaseôs* goes back to Alexander of Aphrodisias, talking about the singular *axiôma antiphaseôs* at *In Met.* 272.10, which Alexander connects with the collective (plural) *axiômata* that belong to the discussion of being as such (*In Met.* 265.6–25)—in turn connected to Aristotle’s discussion of metaphysics, or first philosophy, as considering “those things which are called in mathematics axioms and substance” (*Met.* 1005a19–21). On Aristotle on the PNC, see Cohen (1984) and, especially in dialogue/contrast with Plato, Anton (1972). On Alexander on the PNC, see Kupreeva (2023). Proclus’ master Syrianus, in commenting on Aristotle on the principle of the excluded middle (PEM) in *Met.* 1008a3–11 (Syrianus, *In Met.* 71.13–72.3), refers to the PEM as one of the plural “principles of contradiction” (Syrianus, *In Met.* 71.15: *tôn tês antiphaseôs axiômatôn*). On Syrianus on the PNC, see O’Meara (2009) and Longo (2010), esp. p. 629: “This mention of more than one principle of non-contradiction is quite exceptional—thus far I have not found a single parallel in ancient philosophy—the more so when we recall that not only does Aristotle himself not mention any such plurality, but other ancient commentators of *Metaphysics* do not either.” This last piece of evidence would give credence to the suggestion that Proclus is implicitly including the PEM in the plural “principles of contradiction”.

In *Metaphysics* Γ.4, for instance, Aristotle argues that those who hold that “contradictories are all true of the same thing at the same time” (equated with the PNC) also hold that it is not necessary to affirm or deny a given proposition: “For if it is true that he is a human and not a human, it is clear that he will also be neither a human nor not a human”.¹⁹ While denying the PNC for Aristotle results in denying the PEM, does the inverse hold?²⁰ For instance, does saying that the One is not-A and not-not-A necessitate one to say that the One is—consequently—A and not-A? Aristotle does not discuss this possibility, but appears to include it as part of a set of principles in the text broadly connected with the acceptance of contradictory propositions asserted of the same thing. From Aristotle up to Alexander of Aphrodisias and Syrianus (Proclus’ master), all seem to accept the PEM as mutually implied with the PNC. We see this particularly in Alexander’s commentary on the PEM in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Γ.4, when he argues that holding to the negation of not-A, besides negating A, implies a kind of affirmation

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Met.* Γ.4, 1008a3–6.

²⁰ On the other hand, in contemporary paraconsistent logic and certain dialetheist accounts, one can maintain the suspension of the PNC without also suspending the PEM: in other words (e.g.) one can maintain the necessity to maintain A and not-A (or simply A or not-A) but not be a trivialist in maintaining something is neither A nor not-A. On this see Priest (2006a) 35–36 and (2006b) 73–81. As we will see below in the case of Damascius and later authors, the suspension of the PNC is taken in a non-trivialist sense in the case of the first cause: for, in one sense, it indicates two aspects co-existing without negating the real values of those contradictory properties (= preservation of PEM); in another sense, it also reveals the transcendence of the first cause in relation to those aspects identifiable with created beings (= suspension of PEM).

(i.e. not-not-A = A).²¹ In turn, the Neoplatonist Syrianus in his commentary on *Metaphysics* Γ.4, some two centuries after Alexander, also approves of this entailment of the PEM with the PNC.²²

This stands as a contrast to a text earlier in his commentary where Syrianus seems to mark out an exception to this rule. In commenting on *Metaphysics* B.2, Syrianus mentions Aristotle and other predecessors who maintain the PEM and PNC, and then shows how his own (Platonist) audience marks an exception:²³

[Aristotle] accepts both positions here [*scil.* the PEM and PNC], but we will simply add to this that the second position is true absolutely, but that the first is true if taken with a further specification (*prosdiorismou*). For it is necessary that everything either be affirmed or denied, when it comes to beings which can be grasped by scientific knowledge (*epistêmêi*). Since if there be something which is above being (*huperousion*) and which has

²¹ Alexander, *In Met.* 293.13–15: “[...] ‘is not human’ would negate ‘is human’, and ‘is not non-human’ would negate ‘is non-human’, which is in some sense itself also an affirmation—an affirmation by transposition—which they take as equivalent to the negation ‘is not human’” (transl. Madigan). (As Madigan observes in a footnote (n. 544), Alexander’s charge is that his/Aristotle’s anti-PNC opponent blurs the distinction between human and non-human, at the same time insisting upon the distinction.) The implicit acceptance of double-negation implying affirmation (i.e. not-not-A = A) would indicate, following De Morgan’s Law, the suspension of the PEM: ((not-A & not-B) iff not-(A or B)) → not-(A or not-A). Of course, it does not seem that Proclus accepts De Morgan’s Law (much less Alexander’s argument) if the double-negation is applied between hierarchical terms, i.e. terms not on the same level of being: see e.g. Proclus, *Platonic Theology* II.5, 38.18–25: “In reality negations, it seems to me, come in three particular types: sometimes [1], being more of the nature of principles (*archoidesterai*) than affirmations (*tôn kataphasêon*), they are generative and perfective of the generation of affirmations; sometimes [2] they are placed in the same rung as affirmations, and the affirmation is in no way more respectable than negation; and then sometimes [3] they obtain a nature inferior to affirmations, and they are nothing but deprivations of affirmations”. As Martin (2002) recognizes, Proclus’ threefold notion of negations, and the way he applies it logically, does not conform to “the laws of double negation or contraposition, but to its own laws”, i.e. effectively as an intensifier, such as holding that “hyper-hyper-happy” stands over “hyper-happy” just as the latter stands over “happy”, and so on (using Martin’s examples: see his pp. 72–73). It is not clear where or how Proclus relates the PNC/PEM to this three-fold level of negation. As I suggest below, it seems Proclus’ way around Alexander’s adherence to De Morgan’s Law is to suspend discourse (*logos*), which would be an extension on sense [1], earlier: in other words, the One as not-A (sense [1]) is negated (sense [1]), which is an extra step *above* the negation (not-A) that generates the affirmation (A). Florian Marion discusses this issue in much greater depth in a forthcoming paper.

²² Syrianus, *In Met.* 71.13–72.3. Syrianus particularly recognizes Aristotle as showing that those who suspend the PEM, by in turn suspending the PNC, are still forced “either into allowing some determination in things and not condemning things to disorder and indefiniteness, or else not holding themselves to be rational or in general perceptive beings” (71.28–30; transl. O’Meara-Dillon).

²³ Cf. Syrianus, *In Met.* 18.18–21: “Our elders had two positions concerning this principle: on the one hand, nothing escapes this principle, but all must necessarily be shown affirmatively or negatively, such that both premises cannot miss the mark in anything, but one or the other is true; and, on the other hand, that it is impossible for both to be true at the same time” (transl. O’Meara-Dillon). On this passage, see Longo (2004), esp. 91–94, who posits Parmenides, the Pythagoreans, and Plato as these “elders” (*presbuteroi*) who ultimately confirm Aristotle’s position (according to Syrianus—who, otherwise, tends to point out disagreements with Aristotle in the commentary).

no name nor knowledge (*epistêmên*) nor is generally speakable, how could it be necessary for this to be subject to affirmation or negation, when all discourse (*logos*) is false in relation to it? But these things belong to another, deeper discussion (*scholês*).²⁴

One can see Syrianus' direct allusion at the end of the passage to the final set of conclusions in the *Parmenides*' first hypothesis, where there is no name, knowledge, or opinion for the One. Syrianus takes the final negation—where all statements, including negative ones, are “false in relation to [the One]”—as evidence that the PEM is suspended. It is interesting that Syrianus marks an exception for the special metaphysical case of the One but does not develop a logical argument for why the PEM—as such—can be suspended apart from the PNC: the only reason stated is in the case that no “further specification” is taken.

Yet how does the PNC remain “true absolutely”? If, in a case like the One, not-A and not-not-A are possible while A and not-A remain impossible, how can the Aristotelian logical inference that the co-entailment of the PEM and the PNC be bypassed? Or does Syrianus have another logical framework in mind? We do not have an answer in this text, yet the fact that he says that “these things belong to another, deeper discussion” suggests that this may have been a school question²⁵—one which, as we will shortly see, Damascius seems to be directly aware of.

All of this brings us back to Proclus' claim that Plato does not suspend “the principles of contradiction” (*axiômata antiphaseôs*):²⁶ almost certainly he must have in mind all the principles mutually entailed by the PNC, including the PEM, as Syrianus would have it. However, it also seems clear that Proclus has in mind Syrianus' assertion that the PEM is suspended for the One in his interpretation of the first hypothesis' final negation when he states that “both the assertions and the negations are false of the One at the same time”. But then the question remains: what other “principles” besides the PNC are preserved, if the PEM is not preserved? In addition, the same question for Syrianus, earlier, could be presented to Proclus as well: how can the PEM be suspended while the PNC remains preserved, if both Platonists concede that the two are (also, otherwise) co-entailed?

While attempting to solve this tension in Proclus and Syrianus goes beyond the bounds of this paper, it is worth returning to Proclus' conclusion that “where there is no **statement** (*logos*), what kind of contradictory proposition (*antiphrasis*) would belong to such a thing [i.e. the One]?” The clue lies in Proclus' explicit removal of *logos*, rather than the *axiômata*: when there is no *logos*, i.e. a statement or account which implies a propositional form of saying A or not-A of some object, then no contradictory proposition can be made. We can see this as an application of Proclus' claim that propositions are made “referring to the One” (*peri tou henos/de uno*) but not *directly* “about” or “around the One” (*peri to*

²⁴ Syrianus, *In Met.* 18.22–27; transl. O'Meara-Dillon, slightly modified. I thank Sokratis-Athanasios Kiosoglou for pointing out this crucial passage.

²⁵ In the background is also Syrianus and Proclus' different approaches to metaphysics, or first philosophy, in contrast to Aristotle: for the latter, the PNC is the first, unconditional (*anupotheton*) principle for first philosophy; for the former, as Platonists, it is rather the One (or Good) which is the *anupotheton* principle, i.e. over the PNC. Hence there was a tension with later Neoplatonists, like the latter, in their adaptation of, and response to, Aristotle and his views on metaphysics: on this see O'Meara (1986) and Steel (2005) (esp. 8–10).

²⁶ Cf. n. 14.

hen/circa unum),²⁷ in the same way that Plotinus says that we speak as referring to the One (*peri autou*), but we do not speak the One (*auton*) directly.²⁸

In this sense, the PNC could be said to be “preserved”—or rather, it simply does not obtain—insofar as there is no proposition constructed which can have its contradictory affirmed or denied (i.e. “A and not-A”): for all propositions have been removed, such that there is no proposition which can have a truth value assigned to it. *A fortiori*, the PEM, also, does not obtain, since there is no negation to be applied (i.e. “not-A and not-not-A”). The One is thus be ineffable, following Proclus’ interpretation of the first hypothesis’ final negation of all the negations—matching the soul’s state, once it has transcended the discursive level of assertions and negations.²⁹

Still, though, we are left with a paradoxical situation with Proclus’ One. On the one hand, the PNC and PEM (among the other *axiômata antiphaseôs*) do not obtain, inasmuch as the One transcends *logos*—i.e. all constructible propositions. On the other hand, negative propositions are still constructed and used, even if the One transcends *logos*, such that only the PEM is suspended, strictly speaking (as Syrianus explicitly argues), when the final negation of the negations is posited. Insofar as Proclus (alongside Syrianus) follows Aristotle’s logical framework, the PNC must also be suspended for the One: for both the PEM and PNC stand or fall together.³⁰ Yet how Proclus does or does not follow the Aristotelian logical theory for the One remains, in some sense, ambiguous.

²⁷ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 518.21–22.

²⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* V.3.14.1–4. It is possible that Proclus and Plotinus in drawing this distinction may be drawing on Aristotle, *Met.* Γ.4, 1006b13–15, where the latter argues that “the human’ signifies not only about one thing (*kath’ henos*) but also one thing (*hen*)”, where “human” indicates something distinct besides other attributes, like paleness and being musical (e.g.), that are “about” the object. Neoplatonists, as esp. Plotinus and Proclus, may be attempting to detach one attribution from the other, in maintaining the ability to speak about attributes corresponding to the One without directly addressing (in physical-like terms, like *peri hen/circa unum*) the One in itself.

²⁹ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 520.33–521.6: “For this whole dialectical method, which works by negations, conducts us to what lies before the threshold of the One, removing all inferior things and by removal dissolving the impediments to the contemplation of the One, if it is possible to speak [thus]. But after going through all the negations, one ought to set aside this dialectical method also, as being troublesome and introducing the notion of the things denied with which the One can have no neighborhood”.

³⁰ Although see the *proviso* at the end of n. 21, above. This is an aspect not picked up by Steel (2003) 597, when he claims that “whatever we say of the First, however ingenious our discursive strategies may be, using affirmations and negations, all we say is false. In this sense, the principle of contradiction is suspended, not however to allow us to make contradictory statements true and to indulge in all sorts of speculative inconsistencies. Never, Proclus affirms, can two contradictory statements be true.” Certainly Steel is correct in these latter two sentences—but that is because all speech, i.e. *logos*, is removed. (In other words, if speech is removed, one cannot even say “all we say is false”—because there is nothing to be said!) Steel appears to elide the implicit tension pointed out earlier: while, according to intuitionist logic, we may be able to suspend the PEM without suspending the PNC, it is not clear that Proclus himself allows this move—or he does not explicitly countenance it. As will be next considered, this may simply reflect a broader tension in Proclus’ approach.

The tension in Proclus balancing his logical claims with his interpretation of Plato's concluding lines parallels a more general tension in the principle Proclus arrives at in the *Parmenides*' first hypothesis. Carlos Steel describes it well when he says that "[Proclus'] whole position remains somehow ambiguous: there is a first principle beyond the one that still functions as the one of the first hypothesis; it is absolutely ineffable and nevertheless subject to a dialectical analysis".³¹ It is this tension that Damascius exploits as a central tenet of his metaphysical framework, in contrast to Proclus' own: for Damascius, the true first principle is entirely ineffable (hence termed "the Ineffable"), while the One becomes subordinated under this as the identifiable first cause of all beings.³² The One's ineffability presupposes a principle which is *entirely* ineffable—not, for Damascius, the subject of a dialectical analysis as in the first hypothesis.

In this respect, the end of the first hypothesis for Damascius is crucial for the subject it reveals. Whereas for Proclus the conclusion leaves us in pure ineffability—or at least that is how Proclus intends it—for Damascius it still leaves us with something, i.e. the One:

Plato also [*scil.* in the *Parmenides*], having reverted to that principle, did not need another principle in the arguments (*tois logos*). For that ineffable principle is not a principle of arguments nor of knowledge, since it is neither a principle of lives, nor of beings, nor of ones (*henôn*),³³ but of all things simply speaking, posited above every thought. Therefore he did not make any indication concerning that principle (*peri ekeinês*), but from the One he made negations of all other things except the One-itself. For in the final place he denied its being one, but not the One. In addition to this, he denied the negation itself, but not the One, and every name, thought, and knowledge [he denied], and what more could one say? He denied Being-itself, whole and entire, yes even the Unified and the Unitary, and, if one wishes, the Unlimited and Limit, the two primary principles,³⁴ but he did not in the least deny the One that is beyond all of these. And therefore he posits it in the *Sophist* as the One before Being, and in the *Republic* he posits it as the Good beyond all being. But nevertheless only the One is left remaining.³⁵

³¹ Steel (1999) 365.

³² For an overview of Damascius on the Ineffable and the One, among the plethora of recent publications, see Van Riel (2010) 675–680, Vlad (2019), and Greig (2021) 219–307. For an analysis of the Ineffable in relation to the PNC and PEM, see Pitteloud (2022); my paper here focuses more on the One and the PNC/PEM, for Damascius, especially in the context of the end of the first hypothesis and in response to the tension of the mutual entailment of the PNC/PEM, which Pitteloud does not address.

³³ Most likely Damascius has in mind the henads with "ones"—i.e. the intermediate principles coming between the One and Being by which all beings participate in unity. On the henads, see Proclus, *ET*, Prop. 21 (esp. 24.22–33), and Prop's. 113–116. On the henads in Proclus and Damascius, see Greig (2021) 186–202 (for Proclus) and 148–151 (for Damascius).

³⁴ Implicitly referencing the two principles responsible for Being from Plato's *Philebus* 16c–e and 23c–d. On the Limit and Unlimited as principles in Damascius, see Van Riel (2002) and Greig (2021) 265–275.

³⁵ Damascius, *De princ.* I, 55.9–25.

One of the major thrusts of Damascius' argument is that, even if we come to an entity that is ineffable in regards to any positive, or also negative, attribute considered in relation to it, the subject matter of the hypothesis remains. Indeed this is a strong contrast to Proclus' argument, above: Proclus speaks of the first hypothesis' arguments, including the final negation, as taking us to what lies before the "threshold of the One" (*prothura tou henos*), reaching implicitly a purely ineffable principle.³⁶ And yet, as Damascius notes, the same principle still remains the subject of the hypothesis' dialectical analysis, which is, in turn, the starting point for subsequent subjects of the ensuing hypotheses: e.g. the negations made of the first hypothesis' "One" are the causes of the corresponding assertions made of the second hypothesis' "One", i.e. Being.³⁷ We can recall here the distinction Proclus makes where speech is possible with reference to the One (*peri tou henou*) but not when "about" or "around" the One (*peri to hen*), i.e. said directly of the subject. Damascius' claim appears to be that, when all negations are spoken and the negation of the negations is predicated *peri tou henou*, we are still left with the subject itself, i.e. *to hen*, about or in reference to which the ineffability obtains. In this sense, even the final negation still implies a truth value: it is said in reference to an object, even if stripped of all properties, such that the negation is still a proposition, and thus part of language.³⁸ The main thrust of Damascius' point, then, is that this is not an absolutely ineffable subject: we still have a subject in virtue of which ineffability obtains; the One is only *relatively* ineffable.

This is one of the main points of Damascius' conclusion, just afterward, that there must be a further, absolutely ineffable principle beyond the One. Damascius directly raises the question whether, then, the One is knowable and speakable, or unknowable and unspeakable, or in certain respects both the former and the latter. While Proclus asserts the middle option, as we have seen, Damascius argues for the latter:

Indeed, by means of negations, one could speak of [the One], while by means of affirmation it is ineffable. And again, it could be knowable or conjecturable by simple knowledge, but entirely unknowable by compound knowledge; that is why it is not graspable even by a negation.³⁹

³⁶ Proclus, *In Parm.* VII, 520.31–521.3.

³⁷ Cf. Proclus, *In Parm.* VI, 1075.13–24.

³⁸ In this respect, Damascius departs from Proclus' idea that the kind of negation used for the final negation (i.e. sense [1]: cf. n. 21) leads to the total removal of *all* propositions (and thus language): whereas, for Proclus, sense [1] implies an asymmetry (superior) to the attribute negated, sense [2] implies being at the same level of the attribute negated; in other words, the negative propositions imply truth values, while the final negation removes all truth values (and language). Damascius seems to combine Proclus' senses [1] and [2], such that when the final negation of negations is predicated, the corresponding (lower) affirmations are implied (similar to sense [2] in Proclus' three-fold negation scheme), as discussed below.

³⁹ Damascius, *De princ.* I, 56.2–6. This passage forms the conclusion of Damascius' second of three "ascents" (*anabaseis*) to reach the first principle of all things in *De princ.* I, 27–61; in this second "ascent", Damascius attempts to show the principle indirectly, through what is secondary to that which lacks need, which in the end leads to an ineffable principle that cannot be identified with a lack of need. For further discussion of this particular passage on the One and the Ineffable in *De princ.* I, 55–56, see Greig (2021) 288–291.

For Damascius, the negations do not just make clear the principle's ineffable status—inasmuch as they negate the affirmations after it—but they also indicate the One in itself. It is this aspect that makes the One speakable and hence knowable, inasmuch as it transcends its effect of all things (*ta panta*), or in the context of the *Parmenides'* second hypothesis, Being. We see this borne out in Damascius' conclusion that the One “reflects” opposite attributes:

And generally insofar as it is posited as One, by this it has been coordinated in some sense with the things posited in some other way, since it is the summit (*koruphê*) of things which subsist by position. And in the same way there is much in [the One] which is ineffable, unknowable, uncoordinated, and without position, but with the faint reflection (*emphaseôs*) of their opposites, while those attributes are better than the latter [i.e. their opposites].⁴⁰

It is here that we see the full impact of Damascius' interpretation of the *Parmenides'* first hypothesis, especially with regard to the PNC: the One, in fact, “reflects” the attributes that come after it, as much as it also transcends them. Insofar as the One remains as the hypothesis' subject matter, it is the starting point or “summit” from which all things (*ta panta*), or Being (in the context of the second hypothesis), come to be, which have a position and are knowable and speakable. These positive attributes are the “faint reflections” perceived in the One, together with its own nature as “ineffable, unknowable, uncoordinated, and without position”. Opposite attributes are thus affirmed of the One at once: as both knowable and unknowable, effable and ineffable, coordinated and uncoordinated, and so on.⁴¹ Although only hinted here, one can see Damascius' argument following a broad shift in the way he sees the One's causality, and intelligible causes in general, not simply as transcending their effects but also as anticipating within themselves the nature of their effects.⁴²

Damascius' analysis in the passage, above, leads us to revisit the end of the first hypothesis and Proclus' claim that Plato respects the “principles of contradiction”—implicitly the PNC and PEM. On Proclus' interpretation, the final negation of all the negations removes all *logos*, and thus leads us to pure ineffability. On Damascius' reading, however, this is not the case, or not entirely: it reveals the One left alone, ineffable in its own nature, but nevertheless the beginning of all that comes from it. *Logos* is then not *entirely* removed from it: the One remains speakable in some sense. Consequently, it is still subject to the question whether the PNC and the PEM obtain or are suspended. Damascius initially follows the form of the first hypothesis' analysis: the One is not-A and then, with the final negation, it is not-not-A. In this regard, he suspends the PEM insofar as the One is not determinately either A or not-A. But given the passage above, Damascius also accepts that the One bears the “faint

⁴⁰ Damascius, *De princ.* I, 56.6–10

⁴¹ In this case, Damascius—by contrast to Proclus—seems to accept De Morgan's Law, going back to Alexander and Aristotle: i.e. the double-negation of an attribute implies its affirmation, even in the case of the One; see earlier nn. 38 and 21, and below.

⁴² A particular example of this is in Damascius, *In Parm.* I, 4.10–5.5, where Damascius critiques the idea from Proclus that the henad and its intelligible effect are fully distinct, using the metaphor of a rider (*ochêma*) and his vehicle (*ochoumenon*) (line 15); instead Damascius emphasizes the unity of the two compounded together in the unity of the henad. On this issue and the passage, see Butler (2013) (esp. 82). On Damascius' view of causality, see Greig (2021) 118–153 (and in the context of the One and henads, 148–151).

reflection” (*emphasis*) of its opposite attributes: it rather *is* A and not-A. Consequently, the PNC is also suspended. While Damascius is led this way by his metaphysical analysis, there may also be a logical aspect to this analysis: by the law of double negation, the final negation of the negation entails an affirmation, i.e. not-not-A thus implies A; hence, if the One is not-A and not-not-A (= PEM suspended), then it is not-A and A (= PNC suspended).⁴³

This conclusion, however, needs qualification. While Damascius affirms opposite attributes of the One, he argues that the One cannot contain these opposites by its own nature or subsistence (*kath’ huparxin*): “how will the opposites exist together up there (*ekei*)?”.⁴⁴ While the One implies the compresence of contradictory attributes, one set (i.e. the purely negative, “superior” attributes) must come from a principle which pre-exists (*proiuparchei*) the One: i.e. the Ineffable, which for Damascius lies outside any dialectical analysis and must be pre-supposed in the analysis of the One in the first hypothesis. Contradictory attributes are then affirmed of the One insofar as it possesses one set (i.e. the negative attributes) “by participation” (*kata methexin*)⁴⁵ and the other (i.e. the positive attributes) by what comes after it, or, in other words, insofar as it causes those features. We see this elsewhere in the *De principiis* when Damascius calls the One “all things” (*ta panta*), inasmuch as it contains all things within its pure unity, at the same time that it transcends all things as their cause:⁴⁶ hence, the One both is “all things” and is not “all things”—a predication Proclus would strictly deny.

In this sense the One is a middle ground, as Damascius makes explicit:⁴⁷ in itself it is neither purely ineffable and transcendent, but it is neither purely the positive attributes that belong to the second hypothesis. Going back to the *axiômata*, the PEM is suspended in this sense (neither A nor not-A); at the same time, because it has contradictory attributes affirmed of it, from the two sides, the PNC is also suspended (both A and not-A).

Granted, what makes Damascius’ position on the One possible is his positing a notion of pure ineffability which is detached from the causal process entailed in the *Parmenides*’ hypotheses. On the one hand, one might say that Damascius just shifts the predicational analysis by positing an extra

⁴³ Cf. n. 21 above, where Alexander of Aphrodisias implicitly acknowledges the double negation law.

⁴⁴ Damascius, *De princ.* I, 56.13.

⁴⁵ Damascius, *De princ.* I, 56.14: “[...] or they [i.e. the superior, negative attributes] are in the One according to participation (*kata methexin*), and they come from somewhere else, from the first which is such.”

⁴⁶ See e.g. Damascius, *De princ.* I, 3.9–12: “For the One is not like a minimum, as Speusippus seemed to say, but ‘One’ as absorbing all things. By its simplicity it has resolved all things, and it has made all things. Wherefore all things are from it, so that it is itself ‘all things’ before all things (*panta auto pro tôn pantôn*).” As I argue in Greig (2021) 231–243, Damascius partially agrees with Proclus in arguing against the notion of the One as pre-containing the causes or distinct items of its effects, i.e. as an implicit multitude; nevertheless he argues that inasmuch as all things proceed in their plural nature from the One, while the One does not contain plurality in itself, the One should still have “all things” predicated of it as pre-containing its effect without its characteristic plurality or distinction: on this see *De princ.* I, 93.8–94.12.

⁴⁷ Cf. Damascius, *De princ.* I, 9.10–18: “[We say] forthwith [that] Plato, through the middle-term (*dia mesou*) of the One, has brought us in an ineffable way to the Ineffable now set forward beyond the One, namely by the removal-itself of the One, just as in this way by negation of the other [conclusions] he has brought us around to the One”. Notice the contrast of the Ineffable as “the removal-itself of the One” with *De princ.* I, 55.21–22 (“[Plato] did not in the least deny the One that is beyond all of these”).

“step” or principle:⁴⁸ negations, for instance, are still employed in referring to the Ineffable, but in a way that leads to self-contradiction and overturning (*peritropê*)⁴⁹—something we do not see in Proclus. On the other hand, perhaps in this latter sense, we see how the Ineffable cannot play the role that Proclus’ One-as-ineffable plays. In any case, it is rather the way that the first principle’s causality is understood, especially in embracing contradictory predicates, in the role of Damascius’ One, that is of greater import when we compare with Proclus. And this becomes a key factor when we look at Ps.-Dionysius’ conception of the first principle.

4. Byzantines on Contradiction and God [1]: Ps.-Dionysius

While Damascius splits Proclus’ first principle into two—namely the Ineffable, beyond the *Parmenides*’ first hypothesis, and the One, the subject of the first hypothesis—Pseudo-Dionysius collapses the two principles back into one principle. Unlike Proclus’ One, the principle, or God, for Ps.-Dionysius is affirmed as both beyond all things and ineffable and as embodying the perfections of all things. While most scholars have compared Ps.-Dionysius with Proclus on the first cause, a comparison with Damascius is more apt from what we have seen:⁵⁰ for Damascius the One admits properties which obtain at the level of Being in contrast to Proclus’ One. In turn, while scholars of Ps.-Dionysius have claimed that the pseudonymous writer “collapses” the *Parmenides*’ first and second hypotheses,⁵¹ inasmuch as he predicates negations and affirmations of God, a more plausible explanation is that he is adapting, and perhaps widening, Damascius’ interpretation of the first hypothesis’ One as anticipating the features of Being that it produces after itself: it is rather in this respect that we see the simultaneous predication of affirmations and negations.⁵²

The first place where we see this juxtaposition of attributes is in *De divinis nominibus* V.8, which describes God as being all things, as their cause, and simultaneously beyond them:

⁴⁸ At least this is one common charge against Damascius’ notion of the Ineffable in contrast to Proclus: see e.g. Van Riel (2017) 76–77.

⁴⁹ Vlad (2019) (esp. 61–126) will refer to this as “para-discursive means” or predication in referring to the Ineffable. On the instrumental use of “overturning” (*peritropê*) for the Ineffable, see Vlad (2019) 141–179 and Castagnoli (2010) 114–120. See also Pitteloud (2022) (esp. 333–335) who argues that the Ineffable, as Damascius discusses it, not only lies beyond the PNC but also lies beyond the PEM (i.e. as neither A nor not-A) inasmuch as one infinitely engages in overturning when discussing the Ineffable.

⁵⁰ Comparisons of Ps.-Dionysius with Damascius are still far and few between, but among others, see S. Lilla (1997), Curiello (2013), Mainoldi (2018) 108–113. I discuss in further detail the connection between the two in Greig (2024), of which this section develops some corollary points from the paper.

⁵¹ As originally discussed in Corsini (1962) 115–165 and Gersh (1978) 153–167 (esp. 154–156), and elaborated in Wear and Dillon (2007) 33–35, 45–48.

⁵² I discuss this in Greig (2024), partly building on Timothy Riggs’ thesis in (2010) and (2011) where he argues that Ps.-Dionysius’ dual attribution of affirmations and negations fits with Proclus’ language for the henads. Halfwassen (2015) 314 suggests that Ps.-Dionysius may have had access to a now-lost commentary on the *Parmenides*’ first hypothesis which would posit the One as anticipating the corresponding features of the second hypothesis’ “One”; although Damascius’ commentary on the first hypothesis doesn’t survive, we already see suggestions of this reading throughout the *De principiis*. See n. 46, above.

For [the divine nature] is indeed not this, nor is it that, nor is it in some way, nor in another way, but it is all things (*panta*) as the cause of all things and as [having] all principles in itself, encompassing (*sunechôn*) and possessing beforehand all the conclusions of all beings, and it is beyond all things insofar as it exists transcendentally in a super-essential way (*huperousiôs huperôn*) before all things. And therefore all things are indeed predicated of it at once, and it is nothing which belongs to all things: it is entirely figure (*panschêmos*) and entirely form (*paneidos*), and it is without shape (*amorphos*), without beauty (*akallês*), anticipating within itself the beginnings, middles, and ends of beings transcendentally and in a way without figure (*aschetôs*), and it immaculately radiates being (*to einai*) to all things through a single, supremely unitary cause.⁵³

One can see Ps.-Dionysius' language here expanding on the predication of opposites that we saw in Damascius' One. Just as Damascius recognizes the One's position as beyond all things (*ta panta*) in its own nature, yet as anticipating what it produces and thus *being* all things in itself, so Ps.-Dionysius makes the same move in affirming God, or the divine nature, as having "all things" predicated of it at the same time that it is not all things or belongs to all things. Just as Damascius distinguishes the respects in which the One is, and is not, the predicates of being speakable, knowable, and coordinated (among the features belonging to all things), Ps.-Dionysius also distinguishes between features proper to God—namely negations like being super-substantial or beyond being (*huperousiôs*), being without figure (*aschetôs*), not being determined as other beings (i.e. not being "this" or "that" [*tode*]), and so on—and features belonging to the domain of beings which God produces—such as being "all form" (*paneidos*), "entirely figure" (*panschêmos*), and so on.⁵⁴ Yet in spite of the different respects in which the contradictory predications are made, Ps.-Dionysius is similar to Damascius in that he masks the distinction between the two, opposed attributions when predicating them of God or the One

⁵³ Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* V.8, 187.8–16.

⁵⁴ This would follow Ps.-Dionysius' ascription of Being as the most fitting among the divine names predicated of God: see *De div. nom.* V.5, 184.2–3. As D'Ancona Costa (1996) 366–367 recognizes, this marks a shift from Proclus for whom the first cause is "directly responsible only for the first 'step' of a linear process, in which each level of reality is deduced from the previous one"; it should be noted that the same observation can be made for Damascius' One inasmuch as it produces the Unified which, in turn, produces the plurality of beings: see e.g. Damascius, *De princ.* I, 93.22–94.4 (cf. Greig (2021) 240–244). For Ps.-Dionysius, by contrast, the first cause directly produces all beings in their plurality.

(respectively):⁵⁵ the basis for the contradictory claims come from different vantage points (*viz.* the cause's nature and the effects' nature), but otherwise both are asserted together and at once (*hama*).

This leads us to two general interpretations of Ps.-Dionysius' contradictory claims about God, which Andrew Radde-Gallwitz has termed the "Causal Interpretation" (CI) and the "Transcendent Interpretation" (TI).⁵⁶ Proponents of CI maintain that Ps.-Dionysius does *not* suspend the PNC (and thus PEM): for them, every contradictory claim Ps.-Dionysius makes implies that one horn, i.e. that God is A (e.g. God is moved/in motion),⁵⁷ *only* indicates the effect of the cause (e.g. beings, the effect of God, are moved/in motion), while the other horn, i.e. the negative (e.g. God is unmoved), pertains to the cause in itself (i.e. God). Proponents of TI, on the other hand, maintain that Ps.-Dionysius *does* suspend the PNC/PEM: hence the contradictory claims that God is A and not-A apply equally to the same subject (e.g. God is—in himself—moved/in motion and unmoved), regardless of the effects of that subject as a cause. On the one hand, CI proponents find support in the passages where Ps.-Dionysius claims that affirmations about God are made from the level of creatures.⁵⁸ On the other hand, as Radde-Gallwitz argues, Ps.-Dionysius does argue that God contains the attributes of creatures

⁵⁵ As Halfwassen (2015) 314 notes, Ps.-Dionysius' description of God is similar to Plotinus' interpretation of the *Parmenides*' second hypothesis fitting his second principle of Intellect (*nous*), where Plotinus frames Intellect's contradictory attributes in a way that masks the aspectual distinction that Plato himself makes in the second hypothesis: "Platon leitet diese entgegengesetzten Bestimmungen des seienden Einen zwar jeweils aus unterschiedlichen Hinsichten ab, unter denen das seiende Eine betrachtet werden muß; insofern verletzt er das Widerspruchsverbot selbst hier nicht. Aber bei der zusammenfassenden Formulierung der Ergebnisse dieser Ableitungen läßt er die Hinsichtenunterscheidungen weg und formuliert bewußt widersprüchlich. Plotin interpretiert das so, daß gerade die Paradoxie die der allumfassenden Einheit des seienden Einen angemessene Aussageweise ist" (Halfwassen (2015) 313). It is on this basis that Ps.-Dionysius, for Halfwassen, "nicht Proklos folgt, sondern Plotin, dessen Henologie und Noologie Dionysius dabei verbindet" (314). From what we have seen, Damascius fits alongside Plotinus as an influence (and closer contemporary) for Ps.-Dionysius.

⁵⁶ Radde-Gallwitz (2010) 244–245. For proponents of CI, besides Albert the Great (see above, n. 4) see e.g. Lilla (1980) (esp. 103) in the context of infinity (*apeiria*), and see Radde-Gallwitz (2010) 245–250 for a discussion of CI. For proponents of TI, see among others Mortley (1986) 248–252; see also Beall (2023) for a contemporary defense of a contradictory account of the Trinity along similar lines to TI. For a partial *via media* to TI and CI, see Jones (2005) who defends a reading of Ps.-Dionysius along the lines of the 14th-cent. CE Gregory Palamas' essence-activities distinction in God: this comes closer to TI (i.e. the divine attributes are "really", or at least formally", immanent in God), but insofar as there is a distinction (*in re*) between the attributes and the divine essence in itself (i.e. as beyond the attributes), similar to CI.

⁵⁷ For this example, cf. Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* V.10, 189.12–13: "[The divine nature] is both at rest and in motion, and neither at rest nor in motion [...]". The claim of God as paradigmatically in motion, rather than being unmoved, shows up in Nicholas of Methone, e.g. *Refutation*, Preface, 5.3–15, although n.b. Nicholas argues that God should be understood as self-moved *instead of* unmoved, rather than both, as Ps.-Dionysius maintains: on this, see Robinson (Forthcoming).

⁵⁸ This would concord with what has been called "unmarked equivocation" in literature on the Trinity and Incarnation: i.e. "God is A and not-A" is stated with unspecified equivocal references (i.e. implied referent of A = created effects; referent of not-A = divine essence). See also n. 77 below.

within himself, not just as an external relation but in a “real” way pre-contained in himself.⁵⁹ This would also concord with the way Damascius frames the One as being all things (*ta panta*) itself, such that it is even more *ta panta* than *ta panta* itself outside the One.⁶⁰ Inasmuch as Ps.-Dionysius follows Damascius’ line of thought, Radde-Gallwitz is correct in that it this leads us to the TI position—i.e. that Ps.-Dionysius does suspend the PNC and PEM.

However, even if contradictory attributes are affirmed of God and the PNC is suspended, there still remains a limit on the language used for God. In classical logic with the PNC/PEM suspended, this would result in triviality: any and all claims could be equally made and be equally true when applied to the subject, i.e. God. However for Ps.-Dionysius (as well as Damascius) there is a limitation on the attributes used which entail contradictory claims: namely the positive assertions which are, in turn, negated, can only be drawn from either the created world (hence effects of the first cause) or revelation directly from God (i.e. beyond the created order).⁶¹ This we see further developed below.

5. Byzantines on Contradiction and God [2]: Nicholas of Methone

Here we turn to the 12th-century CE Byzantine intellectual Nicholas of Methone and his claim that God transcends the principle of contradiction (*to tês antiphaseôs axiôma*), effectively making explicit what we saw in Ps.-Dionysius. The claim comes up in Nicholas’ *Refutation of Proclus’ Elements of Theology*,⁶² in his critical interpretation of Proposition 1, which states that “Every plurality participates in unity (*tou henos*) in some way”.⁶³ In the proposition, Proclus argues that all beings characterized by plurality or multiplicity imply some form of unity as the basis of their existence—what eventually will be used to show that a principle of pure unity, i.e. the One, is the cause of all things’ being.⁶⁴ While Proclus’ claim about unity is meant in a weak sense, i.e. as possessing a property (“participated” in this sense) rather than as participating a separately-existing principle, Nicholas takes Proclus’ claim in Proposition 1 in this latter sense.⁶⁵ From this, he treats Proclus’ proposition as part of a broader attack

⁵⁹ Radde-Gallwitz (2010) 250–253, referring to Ps.-Dionysius’ metaphor (*De div. nom.* V.8, 188.2–3) of the sun as pre-containing or “anticipating” (*proeilêphe*) the causes of the plurality of things that participate in it; see also the passage above in *De div. nom.* V.8, 187.8–16.

⁶⁰ Cf. n. 46, above.

⁶¹ For Ps.-Dionysius, see e.g. *De div. nom.* II.7, 132.1–4 (discussed more below), and for Damascius, see e.g. *De princ.* III, 140.13–141.9; for further discussion of Damascius and the use/limitation of language in relation to reason and revelatory sources, see Van Riel (2024).

⁶² “Refutation” in the title is one translation for *anaptuxis*, which can also be translated as “explication”. The format of the commentary is, broadly speaking, polemical, as Nicholas sets out in the Preface (Nicholas, *Refutatio*, 1.8–5.15), which could justify either translation—“explication” insofar as Nicholas does (at times) attempt to understand Proclus, although typically according to Nicholas’ own criteria, often using Ps.-Dionysius as his measure for interpreting and responding to Proclus.

⁶³ Proclus, *ET*, Prop. 1, 2.1.

⁶⁴ Proclus, *ET*, Prop’s. 4–5, esp. 6.4–21. For an analysis of Proclus’ argument for the One in Prop’s. 1–6, see Greig (2021) 156–170.

⁶⁵ On these different readings of Prop. 1, see Kiosoglou (2023).

by Proclus against the Christian conception of a trinitarian God.⁶⁶ Whereas Proclus—for Nicholas—posits the first principle as simply “one” without distinction, God for the Christian position is both “one” and “three”:

One must know that the things demonstrated by [Proclus] concerning one and multitude do not at all give offense to us [i.e. Christians] in regard to the doctrine of the highest Trinity, since, to speak as does the great Dionysius, that which is worshiped by us is both “one and three” and “neither one nor three”, since it is “beyond every one and every multitude”, seeing that it is in fact even “superior to number”, and “transcends every word and every concept”.⁶⁷ We confess therefore that the divinity is a Trinity and that the same is a monad and the one; its being three does not negate its being the one, nor does its being the one negate its being three, but rather, from both it is confirmed to be both. For it is three, not as being measured by number (*arithmô metroumenê*), but as what gives substance to every three and measures every number; for this reason it is not a countable three, so that it could also be called a multitude, but is the one and only Trinity, and not by participation in the one (for such a three is countable and belongs to the same order as the multitude), but as itself being the one.⁶⁸

Here, Nicholas views Proclus’ claims in the *Elements’* Proposition 1 and elsewhere as denying the possibility that there can be a co-inherence of three entities (i.e. the Christian Trinitarian *hypostases* or persons, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in the domain of the One.⁶⁹ Nicholas uses Ps.-Dionysius’ claims that God is both “one and three” and “neither one nor three”, where “one and three” indicate the identity of the one divine nature or essence with the three Trinitarian persons, while “neither one nor three” indicates God’s transcendence: the affirmation of God being “three”, in this instance, indicates rather “what gives substance to every three and measures every number”. One can see Nicholas here following the pattern of ascribing affirmations to the first principle from the level of the effects, however in the case of the affirmation of “three” there is a dual role: God is “three” as [a] giving substance to all “countable” threes—i.e. threes that imply distinction (*diakrisis*)—while transcending the distinction that obtains in created threes, and thus embodies being “three” in a paradigmatic role; but also God is “three” as [b] indicating the three Trinitarian persons, apart from being the cause of created “threes”. While the predication of God as three in sense [a] is determined from observing created beings, the predication of three in sense [b] is known only from revelation: at least we see this from Nicholas’ own source, Ps.-Dionysius, affirming that the three Trinitarian persons are known as

⁶⁶ Nicholas, *Refutation*, Preface, 4.3–18, especially where he anticipates the *Elements’* Proposition 1, and considers Proclus as “scoffing perhaps at us worshipers of the Trinity as revering a multitude before the one or even together with the one” (transl. Robinson).

⁶⁷ Nicholas here paraphrasing specific lines from Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* XIII.3, 228.17–229.14.

⁶⁸ Nicholas, *Refutatio*, Preface, 4.19–5.3 (transl. Robinson).

⁶⁹ Indeed there is some irony that Nicholas has no access to Damascius (or perhaps explicitly did not use Damascius insofar as he was pagan), since Damascius distinguishes the One into three “aspects” or (ultimately) principles—i.e. the One-All, All-One, and the Unified—while the principles are grasped only by analogy (*kata analogian*) from the level of its effect of [distinguished] Being, whereas they transcend distinction (*diakrisis*) that obtains at the level of Being. On this see Greig (2021) 257–275.

such only from the Christian Scriptures,⁷⁰ and Nicholas himself, earlier in the Preface, affirms that things known by revelation are more certain than what can be grasped by reason apart from revelation.⁷¹ Once again this conditions the kind of affirmations that can be employed before negations obtain⁷²—which, as we will see, implies non-triviality in the kind of claim Nicholas makes about contradictory claims allowed for God.

The conditions in which one can make contradictory claims of God being A and not-A, and not-A and not-not-A, come into view when Nicholas comments on Proposition 1 after the *Refutation's* Preface. It is here that Nicholas explicitly suspends the PNC when discussing God as the “one” which transcends the kind of “one” or unity that Proclus analyzes in Proposition 1:

[...] “for each of the many”, [the proposition] says, dividing the multitude into the individual things (*ta kath' hekaston*) of which it is composed and into which it can be divided; then, supposing that the individual will be “either one or not one”, it employs the principle of contradiction (*to tês antiphaseôs axiôma*) along with logical division (*diairesei*); then again in like manner it sub-divides the not-one (that is, what is distinguished by opposition to the one) into many and nothing. It is clear therefore that the one that pre-transcends (*proexêrêmenon*) the [sort of] one that is opposed to and co-ranked with the multitude—that one is not comprehended by the demonstration, because it transcends every division and demonstration, and in relation to it even the principle of contradiction falls apart.⁷³

Nicholas' argument for the PNC failing for God is made as a corollary to his analysis of Proclus distinguishing between “one” and “not-one” in the individual parts of a given entity characterized by plurality: that is, its unity can be broken down into parts, each of which may be one or not-one.⁷⁴ Nicholas recognizes that Proclus employs the PNC when affirming that an entity must ultimately be constituted from parts which are determinately one or not-one: since the latter, for Proclus, results in an absurdity, only the former can be accepted. Nicholas accepts this principle for entities that imply being “one” and “not-one” together, or as he puts it “co-ranked with the multitude”, yet for the ultimate “One” as the cause of these entities, Nicholas denies that the PNC obtains, insofar as God is transcendent over “every division and demonstration”. This would follow Nicholas' adoption, above in the Preface, of Ps.-Dionysius' language affirming contradictory claims of God—e.g. God as “one and three” and as “not-one and not-three”. In this respect Nicholas simply makes explicit what we already have seen in Ps.-Dionysius.

⁷⁰ See e.g. Ps.-Dionysius, *De div. nom.* II.7, 132.1–4.

⁷¹ Nicholas, *Refutation*, Preface, 1.8–2.17. On Nicholas' skepticism of reason as a source of certain knowledge, esp. in relation to Proclus, see Greig (2022) (esp. 176–181).

⁷² See also Ps.-Dionysius, *De caelesti hierarchia* II.3, 12.20–13.3: “If, then, the negations concerning divine things are true, but the affirmations are unfitting, the revelation through dissimilar representations is more appropriate for invisible things.”

⁷³ Nicholas, *Refutation* 1, 5.25–6.6 (transl. Robinson, slightly modified).

⁷⁴ Proclus, *ET*, Prop. 1, 2.2–10.

Later on in his commentary on Proposition 7 in Proclus' *Elements*, Nicholas brings up the PNC in his discussion of how the Trinitarian persons and the divine essence can be distinguished, even if the divine nature otherwise transcends all distinction:

[...] it is unfitting that “equal” and “unequal” be predicated of the simple Trinity that has neither quantity nor size; for it is neither of these, since it is above size and above number [...]. But if, stretching these terms, we sometimes transfer them to it and say that it is equal with itself and again unequal, we are not thereby caught opposing ourselves. For we do not propound opposites with respect to the same thing, but with respect to one thing and another; for we say “same” with respect to the super-natural nature, but “other” with respect to the difference of persons. For on the one hand the three are called equal in their identity of substance and nature, but on the other hand, the Father is called “greater” than those who are not from him, since he is cause of these effects.⁷⁵

At the beginning of the passage Nicholas shows how assertions and negations, like “equal” and “unequal”, do not obtain for God, insofar as God transcends all such created categories: in effect similar to the *Parmenides*' first hypothesis' suspension of negations and their corresponding assertions at the conclusion (and, in this respect, a suspension of the PEM). The key line after this is Nicholas accepting the concession, “if, stretching (*katachrômenoi*) these terms, we sometimes transfer (*metapheromen*) them to it”: in other words, the affirmations spoken of God, i.e. using terms from the created level, then imply the use of the PNC.⁷⁶ Hence, referring to the Trinitarian persons in contradistinction to the divine essence can only be done when “transferring terms” from the created level: in this sense “equal” applies to God, insofar as it refers to the Trinitarian persons being of the same divine essence, while “unequal” applies, insofar as the Father is distinct from, and also greater than, his production of the Son and Spirit.⁷⁷ Affirmative terms predicated of God, when abstracted from their corresponding negations, then entail the PNC when contradictory attributes, like “equal” and “unequal”, are asserted

⁷⁵ Nicholas, *Refutation* 7, 11.27–12.1 (transl. Robinson). The reference to the Trinitarian person of the Father being called “greater” is from the Bible: see John 14.28.

⁷⁶ This would follow Nicholas' affirmation elsewhere of the PNC when discussing beings or concepts that pertain to created being. See e.g. Nicholas, commenting on the part of the Nicene Creed which affirms “one holy catholic and apostolic Church”, in *Oratio* 4, 268.22–29, esp.: “Since the churches are many according to parts— [i.e.] by place, by time, by order, and by number—and are different from each other by other differences, it is doubtlessly not that by saying that the Church is one and not-one that we reject the principle of contradiction (*to tês antiphaseôs anairoumen axiôma*): for we say these things in one sense and in another sense (*kata allo kai allo*).” Several thanks to Alessandra Bucossi for help in understanding this passage.

⁷⁷ Nicholas' distinction may here recall the so-called “reduplicative strategy” used by Thomas Aquinas and other Latin medieval philosophers, according to which contradictory properties can be ascribed to the same subject, God, albeit in different respects (e.g. God is A qua X and God is not-A qua Y): this then allows for preserving the PNC while conceding contradictory properties of the same subject. On this see Cross (2002) (esp. 192–205), Stump (2002) 211–218 (in the context of Aquinas), and a forthcoming paper by Johnny Waldrop and Dominic LaMantia discussing problems with the Thomist version of the reduplicative strategy in contrast to a Scotist account maintaining a distinction of *rationes* (including the divine persons) in God prior to any act of intellection (in this case, I would maintain, Nicholas is closer to the Scotist account in virtue of his dependence on Ps.-Dionysius: cf. the discussion above, including n. 56).

in different respects. It is when considering affirmations and negations *together* in the case of God that the PNC and PEM are then suspended.⁷⁸ And in turn, it is notable that the negations predicated of God, for Nicholas, should lead to ineffability and silence and, ultimately, a suspension of concepts and intellectual activity.⁷⁹

In the background one sees the Damascian reading of the first hypothesis' One, as simultaneously a symbol of the Ineffable and as the summit and first, identifiable cause of beings, telescoped through Ps.-Dionysius into this predicational usage. Nicholas' explicit denial of the PNC for God merely confirms and explicitly acknowledges what we already have seen in Ps.-Dionysius.

6. Conclusion: Comparing with Nicholas of Cusa and the Later Byzantine Legacy

Insofar as Nicholas follows Ps.-Dionysius' method of predicating both assertions and negations of God, as well as suspending both of God, one can see the parallels to Nicholas of Cusa in the latter's claim that God is grasped through the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia contradictorum*).⁸⁰ For the kind of apophatic theology of those like Cusa and others, the employment of positive and negative discourse—and in this sense, the suspension of the PNC—is that by which God's transcendence can be grasped, or at least that by which the soul could be said to be prepared for mystical union with God. There is a possible contrast one could draw (a discussion of which is an immense *desideratum* but beyond the bounds of this paper): on the one hand, Cusa emphasizes the role of discourse in apophatic theology; on the other hand, as Carlos Steel notes, Proclus emphasizes the suspension of all

⁷⁸ Here I think the claim of Opsomer (Forthcoming) on Nicholas and his suspension of the PNC in the case of God needs refining. Opsomer claims, commenting on Nicholas' *Refutation 2*, 7.5–8: "God is one, not because of participation in unity; and God is not-one, but not in the sense that he merely participates oneness. God is rather One and Triad in a manner that super-transcends multitude. These claims can only be made sense of, I think, if one either abandons PNC or denies the very meaning of the terms plurality, one, and three." Opsomer unfortunately does not mention or discuss Nicholas' commentary on Prop. 7 (11.27–12.1) as a background to the commentary on Prop. 2. As I understand Nicholas in line with Prop. 7, claims like God being "one and triad" as transcending multitude can only be understood by way of analogy, or by Nicholas' term of "transferring" (*metapherein*), from countable instances of number (i.e. "one", "three", "multitude"). The PNC is not, then, suspended, when analyzing the meanings of the terms as countable (and created); when predicated of the Godhead by analogy or "transference", where negations more properly obtain (cf. Nicholas, *Refutation 8*, 12.19–20, and n. 61 above), the PNC in *this* respect is suspended. While concurring with Opsomer that Nicholas' strategy in responding to Proclus is flawed (especially in the context of the *Elements of Theology's* own argumentative strategy), I do not see Nicholas' suspension of the PNC—taken by itself—as problematic: he simply re-adapts Ps.-Dionysius' own suspension of the PNC.

⁷⁹ See Nicholas, *Refutation 1*, 6.6–7.2, esp. 6.23–30: "[...] pulling off every sensation, every intellection, every scientific and logical method together with our very intellectual power, and wholly abandoning our whole selves in this way, we approach the contemplation of the divine realities in this manner, on the one hand revering unspeakable things in silence, and on the other hand faithfully thinking and confessing only those very things that the only-begotten Son [...] has ineffably declared to us" (transl. Robinson).

⁸⁰ See Robinson (2017) 254, esp. n. 21, and for further discussion, see the next chapter after this by Richard Blum, "The Ways God Overcomes Contradictions in Human Understanding".

discourse, seen in the way that he applies only negations to the One, and then the suspension of those negations: discourse is hence suspended, even in this negative sense.

As we have traced from the beginning of this paper, Proclus takes this final negation, not as itself a negative discourse (*logos*), but as suspending discourse (*logos*) itself: how he can thus avoid the charge of inconsistency by claiming only the suspension of the PEM without the suspension of the PNC. But there is a paradox in employing discourse to suspend discourse, i.e. to get to the ineffable, as Proclus intends. As we saw with Damascius, such a suspension in discourse, though pointing to the ineffable, still implies discourse itself: in other words negating the negations implies the assertions just as much as it implies the ineffable (and hence the dual role of the One as ineffably transcendent and simultaneously as identifiable first cause). Although Damascius limits the kind of negations and affirmations spoken of the One (e.g. as knowable and coordinated, rather than—for Ps.-Dionysius—as Being-itself and beyond-Being, as motion-itself and beyond-motion, and so on), it is this dual move that leads to the suspension of both the PEM and PNC for Damascius' One. This becomes the gateway by which we see Ps.-Dionysius also suspend the PEM and PNC for God.

It is notable that, when looking at the later Byzantine tradition, such as Gregory Palamas in the 14th cent. CE or Gennadios Scholarios in the 15th cent. CE, there is much grappling with the Ps.-Dionysian tradition affirming contradictory attributes of God without drawing *some* kind of distinction—a distinction which respects the transcendent unity of God but in which the PNC is, in some sense, preserved. Palamas is particularly known for defending a distinction in God between the divine essence (*ousia*), as completely beyond being and unparticipable, and the divine activities (*energeiai*), as representing the perfections of God:⁸¹ by this distinction, one and the same God could be said to be simultaneously unparticipated (in respect of the former) and directly participated (in respect of the latter)⁸²—a strategy similar to Nicholas' when the latter discusses the Trinity, as we saw above. Scholarios, while accepting Palamas' distinction, tries to adapt the essence–activities distinction to a version of Duns Scotus' formal distinction,⁸³ such that the distinction between attributes in God—though not true, real distinctions that imply division and separation—are both extra-mental and at once respect divine unity and transcendence.⁸⁴ In both cases one finds attempts to allow for the affirmation of contradictory attributes without entirely doing away with the PNC.

All the same, when we look at Ps.-Dionysius and Nicholas earlier in the Byzantine tradition, in the background there remains the legacy of Proclus' approach, alongside Damascius', in the use of negations in apophatic theology. Predicating contradictories of God for Ps.-Dionysius and Nicholas is only meant to show that, while God embodies the perfections of Being, the mode of God's being as beyond all things and divisions is one that the soul should imitate. Hence, just as ineffability is the ultimate principle of things, for both Proclus and Damascius, Ps.-Dionysius and Nicholas similarly emphasize this aspect. It is not clear if Cusa would see the coincidence of opposites in this light, but it is this broadly Neoplatonic approach in apophatic theology that survives into Ps.-Dionysius and Nicholas. The affirmation of contradictories in God—though limited by the metaphysics of divine

⁸¹ See e.g. Gregory Palamas, *Second Letter to Barlaam* 32, discussed in Sinkewicz (1982) 188–196. For a general discussion of Palamas, see Pino (2023), and on Palamas' late Byzantine to modern legacy, see Russell (2019).

⁸² Hence, “God is A and not-A” would map on to: A = the divine activities/not-A = the divine essence.

⁸³ See Golitsis (2017) and Kappes (2017).

⁸⁴ On the formal distinction in Duns Scotus himself, see Grajewski (1944) 59–61 and Cross (1999) 149.

causality and Christian revelation—has a functional use in the soul's ascent as well as a role in Byzantine metaphysics and theology.⁸⁵

7.

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⁸⁵ I wish to thank Sokratis-Athanasios Kiosoglou, Alessandra Bucossi, Therese Cory, Behnam Zolghadr, Roberto Granieri, and an anonymous reviewer for their immensely valuable suggestions and feedback in helping to complete this chapter. I also wish to thank the Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (FWO), within the framework of the project *Substance and the Sensible World between Pagan Platonism and Early Byzantine Christians* (grant ref. 3H210442), for their generous support in the preparation of this article.

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