

# The Philosophical Originality of a Theologian: The Case of a Patristic Author Forgotten and Overlooked by History

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**ABSTRACT** This paper explores possible reasons for the comparatively low estimation of the potential philosophical significance of Byzantine theological thought, which, in contemporary studies, is frequently viewed as lacking philosophical depth and originality. The ultimate question here, though, is whether we should grant that theology may, in fact, contain original and valuable philosophy. In order to subject the issues involved to scrutiny, I undertake an analysis of the important case of the legacy of John of Damascus, which, in my opinion, actually furnishes some answers to these questions.

**KEYWORDS** John of Damascus; originality in philosophy; originality in theology

The impulse to write this article came to me as a result of having read a review of a book devoted to the history of Byzantine philosophy. The reviewer was quite disappointed, because in a book which, in his opinion, ought to have been concerned with philosophical issues *sensu stricto*, he had found nothing but a cluster of theological conceptions, with no original philosophical element. Such a verdict cannot be ignored, for opinions of this kind relating to Byzantine philosophy as such are shared by some major scholars.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, due to the works of Etienne Gilson, the

1. Cf. Katerina Ierodiakonou and George Zografidis, "Early Byzantine Philosophy," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 843–48. Early Byzantine philosophy is defined by the authors of the chapter on its early development as "philosophy in transition." In the opinion of the authors of the entry entitled "Byzantine Philosophy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, this period is "usually covered in accounts of late Ancient Philosophy, of which it is a seamless continuation." Katerina Ierodiakonou and Börje Bydén, "Byzantine Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2008 Edition), published electronically September

original character of Medieval Christian philosophy has been recognized for at least the last half-century. We do accept as philosophy the fruits of such thinkers inspired by religious ideas as Soloviev and Schleiermacher, in spite of the impressive amount of theological content in their works. On the other hand, Byzantine theological thought, which has inspired medieval thinkers, Russian philosophers, some German idealists, and many others, is seen as lacking philosophical depth and originality. No matter how deeply I disagree with opinions of this sort, I would like to explore the possible reasons for such a comparatively low estimation of the potential philosophical significance of Byzantine theological thought—and, on many other occasions also, of theological thought generally. Do we normally assume that a theologian cannot be original, if his discussions should lead him to be engaged in philosophy? Can theology contain original and valuable philosophy? And what, in fact, do we mean by using the terms “original” and “originality” in connection with philosophical and theological thought?

Instead of theorizing about the issue, I propose to undertake an analysis of an important case in the history of philosophy: one which, in my opinion, actually provides answers to these questions. The case in point is that of John of Damascus, the author to whom I myself have devoted my recent studies. I shall therefore make use of the results of my research into this author, as a basis for offering some conclusions that could hardly find a place in any other paper.

The case of John Damascene is of special interest, as it puts into question the notion of originality in theology as such. John’s legacy was and is considered to be, on many levels, simultaneously both original and derivative. He was recognized by his contemporaries as one of the greatest defenders of orthodoxy during the Iconoclastic calamity, even though one can hardly speak of any immediate and explicit impact of his conceptions on the formation of the theology of icons. To be sure, for a very long time his legacy was one of the main points of reference for both Eastern and Western thinkers. Yet, even with all of the recognition given to his works, in the East he was perceived mainly as the one who had synthesized and transmitted the great tradition of Greek patristics, while as regards his philosophical

8, 2008, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2008/entries/byzantine-philosophy/>. To take another example, *The Routledge History of Philosophy* devotes no section at all to any period of Byzantine Philosophy. See G. H. R. Parkinson and S. G. Shanker, eds., *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, *From Aristotle to Augustine*, ed. David Furley (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), vol. 3, *Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John Marenbon (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

contribution, he was considered by the Orthodoxy to be an example of the appropriate use of philosophy and reasoning within theology. Be that as it may, for the Western tradition he became one of the greatest of theological authorities. Actually, he was the last Greek author accepted in the West as *auctoritas*.<sup>2</sup> The works of John Damascene were well known and used by such great Western minds as Peter Abelard, Grosseteste, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. To show the scale of John's impact on Western theological thought it is enough to mention that Thomas Aquinas referred to his positions on a variety of issues, doing so to an extent that is comparable to his use of Augustine or Dionysius the Areopagite. Among the many different questions of a theological and philosophical nature in connection with which John's opinions were invoked, there was one of special weight and importance for medieval philosophy: the problem of individuation. In relation to this particular issue, John's conception was discussed by John Duns Scotus, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines, Peter of Auvergne, and John Baconthorpe, as being of no lesser importance than those of Porphyry, Boethius, and Avicenna.<sup>3</sup>

The evaluation of John's legacy is, nowadays, quite different from both the traditional Eastern and medieval appraisals. Today, his originality as a theologian, preacher, and poet is not questioned. And yet, John the philosopher is regarded by scholars as little more than a compiler. Such a discrepancy between the opinions of undoubted philosophical authorities on the one hand and of modern scholars on the other with respect to his legacy cries out for clarification. The putative reasons for seeing John Damascene as an unoriginal author stem from historical preconceptions and comparisons that are only concerned with textual similarities, but nevertheless also represent conclusions arrived at somewhat hastily on the basis of his own words. Analyzing these reasons, I shall reformulate the confused concept of originality that has, in my view, been deployed in cases like this one to condemn authors as not being genuine thinkers.

At the outset I would like to point out that in my opinion there are several important and original conceptions to be found in the works of John Damascene. Here, I shall mention in brief only those related to his philo-

2. Michael Frede, "John of Damascus on Human Action, the Will, and Human Freedom," in *Byzantine Philosophy and Its Ancient Sources*, ed. Katerina Ierodiakonou (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 2002), 67–70. Richard Cross, "Perichoresis, Deification, and Christological Predication in John of Damascus," *Medieval Studies* 62 (2000): 69.

3. Joannis Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, VII.422; Godfrey of Fontaines, *Quodlibet.*, VII.5; Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet.*, II.8.69–95; Peter of Auvergne, *Quodlibet.*, II.5.65–68; John Baconthorpe, *Quaestiones in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, III Sent.11.2.3.

sophical thought: they are his conception of individual being, his treatment of philosophy in theology and his methodological approach.

John's conception of the individual first appears in his apologetic treatises on icons—works of the utmost importance that offer, without any doubt, a groundbreaking theological conception.<sup>4</sup> It is possible to say that before him, the theology of icons had not existed *sensu stricto*. Today, no one seems to doubt John's role or the significance of his input into the process of establishing this as a core issue for Eastern theology.<sup>5</sup> Putting the matter very briefly, he transformed a discussion of religious images into a dispute about Christological and soteriological issues, involving the metaphysics of Incarnation. John's justification of icons is based on and determined by his Christological views. He saw the dismissal of the humanity of Christ, on the grounds of his divinity, as being one of the main reasons for the rejection of icons. Hence he based his justification of icons on the theologically orthodox doctrine that Christ's divine nature is inseparable from humanity's being united with it in the one single hypostasis that is God the Word.<sup>6</sup> In his opinion, the roots of Christological problems are then in turn to be found in the fact that philosophical terms, especially ones referring to individual entityhood, had been employed in theological discourse in an imperspicuous and unclear manner.<sup>7</sup>

This reflected a serious difficulty: even by the time of the 7<sup>th</sup> century there was no well-delineated philosophical conception of individual being on which theology could rely, or from which it could draw its conceptual tools. Even though the doctrinal statements of Chalcedon contained a distinction between the way of existing of nature / substance and that—the hypostatical existence—of real individual entities, this had not eliminated ambiguous usages of terminology.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, providing definitions

4. *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images (Orationes de imaginibus tres)*, written shortly after 730, hereafter cited as *Imag*. In the present paper we shall use the edition of the Greek text *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, ed. Bonifatius Kotter, 5 vols (Patristische Texte und Studien. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969; 1973; 1975; 1981; 1988).

5. See Thomas F. X. Noble, "John Damascene and the History of the Iconoclastic Controversy," in *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Richard E. Sullivan*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and John J. Contreni (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1987).

6. *Imag*. 1.4.69–77=3.6.69–77; 1.16.11–14; 1.21.13–16=2.15.13–16; 3.26.16–18; 54–59. As regards John's Christology, see Keetje Rozemond, *La christologie de saint Jean Damascène* (Ettal: Buch-Kunstverl, 1959), while for more on the theology of icons, see Noble, "John Damascene and the History."

7. John of Damascus, *Expositio fidei*, 47.39–40. Hereafter cited as *Exp*.

8. John acknowledged the fact that Christian authors used certain key philosophical terms,

of philosophical notions had not lain within the purview of the Council. Neither could this be done on the basis of contemporary philosophical teachings. The question of individual being lay far beyond the interests of the philosophical schools of pagan antiquity. As a matter of fact, it was not recognized as a philosophical issue until the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> In effect, the lack of clearly defined terminology resulted in the rise of the new Christological controversies of the post-Chalcedon era. Moved to try to resolve Christological problems, John therefore had to embark on his own philosophical quest for an understanding of individuality before it had even seen the light of day as a purely philosophical issue.

John's conception of individuality manifests discernible signs of originality and can be found nowhere outside of his own writings. He elucidates individual being, i.e. hypostasis, as the principle of existence of each particular in itself and the union of its essential components. Forming his conception, John transformed and developed traditional Platonic transcendental essentialism and the patristic conception of the hypostatical mode of existence.

Here we should point out that John intended his philosophical vision of individuality to serve first and foremost as a tool that would enable proper elucidation of the content of Revelation. This emerges in his treatises right from his earliest works, but was formulated more explicitly in the *Dialectica*.<sup>10</sup> Medieval authors, discussing his philosophical stance on the question of individuals and individuality, primarily referred to his theological works.

The manner in which philosophy was used when articulating this particular conception shows accurately how John understood both philosophy as such, and its role in theological discourse. One may consider his

such as "substance," "nature," "form," "individual," "person," "individual substance," and "hypostasis," synonymously. See *Dialectica*, 31.26–29, 42.8–12. Hereafter cited as *Dial*.

9. Since Plato it had been understood not as "something" (τι), i.e. as real essence, but as "suchlike", and later on was defined as a "collection of qualities." In other words, in the Platonic tradition, which had had the greatest impact on patristic thought, an individual was regarded as not a true being. See *Theatetus* 157 b–c; *Timaeus* 49d–50c. For "collection of qualities" see Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos*, 4.7.8–12; Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.3.8.16–30; Porphyry, *Isagoge* 7.19–24. Strictly speaking, Aristotle, in spite of the fact that he considered the primary substances, i.e. particular ones, to be the real beings, did not deliberate on the existence of particulars. As with the Platonists, it was the secondary substances, i.e. forms, genera and species, that mainly occupied his attention.

10. For more on John's conception of individual and individuality, see Anna Zhyrkova, "Hypostasis—The Principle of Individual Existence in John of Damascus," *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 61, no. 1–2 (2009); Zhyrkova, "John Damascene's Notion of Being. Essence versus Hypostatical Existence," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2010).

treatment of philosophy to be yet another original aspect of his thought. Certainly, he did not consider philosophical matters to be a part of the content of Revelation. Nevertheless, he acknowledges Greek philosophy as possessing seeds and tokens of truth. He states that the considerations of philosophers may be used as tools for seeking and understanding the absolute truth. Philosophy thus has a preparatory character and constitutes a foundation for theological reflection.<sup>11</sup> Alluding to St. Paul, he compares himself to a bee that assembles fragments of truth and rejects what is false.<sup>12</sup> Such a stance is firmly rooted in the works of patristic authors, especially those of the Alexandrian school.<sup>13</sup> However, John adds a new element to this position: he treats philosophy as an instrument and servant of theology—something quite alien to Greek theology.<sup>14</sup> Partaking in the established tradition, John not only recognizes that Greek philosophy has some true elements and is useful for theology, but also turns it into one of the bases for theological discourse. This is to invest it with more than a merely instrumental function. For the Damascene, philosophy provides theology with notions and conceptions that enable the elucidation and accurate formulation of theological issues.<sup>15</sup> One might even claim here that John inaugurated discursive and speculative theology. A similar approach to the role of philosophy in theology only appeared in the Latin West in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in Peter Damian's formulation of a *philosophia theologiae ancilla*.<sup>16</sup>

John of Damascus did not just rely on a selected school of philosophy. On the one hand, in the *Dialectic*, he outlined a traditional Neoplatonist curriculum containing components based on Porphyry's *Isagoge* and Aris-

11. *Dial.*, 1.52–70.

12. *Proemium* (hereafter cited as *Proem.*) 43–51; *Dial.*, 1.52–55. See 1 Tm. 6:20.

13. Following the claim of such Jewish authors as already Josephus Flavius and Philon of Alexandria, we should acknowledge that early patristic writers believed that Plato had taken over his wisdom from Moses' philosophy, holding him in great esteem. See *Stromateis*, I.22.150.4. Clement admitted that all branches of Greek philosophy, except for the Epicurean one, have elements of truth.

14. *Dial.*, 1.56–59. See Linos G. Benakis, "Philosophy and Theology in Byzantium," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 1, no. 3 (2005).

15. In chapters 3 and 66 of the *Dialectica* John also provides a list of six definitions of philosophy, which belongs to the tradition of the *Prolegomena Philosophiae*. See Mossman Roueché, "The Definitions of Philosophy and a New Fragment of Stephanus the Philosopher," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 40 (1990). However, those definitions do not in fact make any contribution to his vision either of what philosophy is or of its role in theological discourse, as presented by him in *Dial.*, 1.52–70.

16. The idea appears, in much less aphoristic formulation, in *De divina omnipotentia* (Migne *PL*, 145.603b–d), and is attributed to Peter Damian on the basis of this fact.

totle's *Categories*—and, in addition, in his treatment of philosophical notions involved in Christological argumentation, he seems to have used the works of his Byzantine predecessors, such as Leotius of Byzantium, Anastasius Sinaita, and Maximus the Confessor. On the other hand, his method consisted very much in redefining some and recombining other philosophical concepts. John's metaphor of the bee gives a very good insight into his approach. For a bee not only chooses the right flowers to collect nectar from but also transforms the latter into tasty, healthy and condensed nourishment. As with the bee, John did not simply put together various philosophical contents. Frequently he altered philosophical ideas for theological reasons, sometimes doing it in a very subtle manner. Nevertheless, those alterations several times resulted in the formation of radically new philosophical contents. And indeed, this is how it happened that he came to put forth one of the most coherent and consistent anthropological conceptions of the human individual. On the one hand, he built on the Aristotelian anthropological construction, accepting the soul's function and relation to the body—but with, however, one exception: he did not accept the soul as a form. For John, all created reality is material, and even the soul is not anything else but a special kind of matter. On the other hand, using Neoplatonic logic and patristic insights, he defined hypostasis as the principle of individual existence: for him, it is hypostasis, not the soul, that is the principle of human entity and basis for its integrity. His view of the human being thus avoids the dualism that opposes the soul, construed as form, to the body construed as matter and thus as inferior to it.

John's *Fount of Knowledge*, one of his latest works,<sup>17</sup> applies and reflects in its structure his view of the role of philosophy in theological discourse. It is considered to be the first summa in the history of theology.<sup>18</sup> However it is not being the first comprehensive study of that time that makes *Fount of Knowledge* distinctive. This work is of significance for the history of thought by being the first in which a well-defined methodology is applied to a theological treatise. What is more, for the first time a theologian of-

17. The *Fount of Knowledge*, as is stated in the *Proemium*, was written at the demand of Cosmas Bishop of Maiuma, who was a former monk at Mar Saba and also a close friend of John, to whom he dedicated the treatise. Since Cosmas had been made Bishop of Maiuma in 743, the work could not have been written before that date. Hence it was most probably written more than ten years after the *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*.

18. Gerhard Podskalsky, *Theologie und Philosophie in Byzanz: Der Streit um die theologische Methodik in der spätbyzantinischen Geistesgeschichte (14.–15. Jh.), seine systematischen Grundlagen und seine historische Entwicklung*, Byzantinisches Archiv (München: Beck, 1977), 104.

fers a methodological justification of the structure of his own treatise and defines the role of philosophy in theological discourse.

In *Fount of Knowledge*, John achieved great clarity in defining and using terminology. Its philosophical content provides a much needed clarification of terms and definitions, allowing us to understand his arguments, as put forward in other works by him. Methodologically, it was meant as an introduction to various theological issues, and it should be treated as a guide and a tool for understanding his thought.

In developing theological teaching, and adopting and transforming philosophical notions and conceptions, John obviously had no intention of proclaiming himself to be an original and authoritative theologian or philosopher. Instead, he constantly underlined that he was not separated from tradition, and saw himself as a part of tradition. Thus he did not hesitate to make use of Christian sources extensively. Even in extremely original works, such as the *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, he put together a florilegium of Church Fathers in order to show that his teaching is not opposed to the traditional one, and, as a matter of fact, may be viewed as stemming from tradition itself. He also openly admitted the use he had made of his philosophical sources. Due to the number of sources he drew on in his work, his actual contribution to the development of philosophy and theology only really becomes visible in the context of a thorough comparative analysis—one aimed at bringing to light his structural reformulations.

This admixture of elements that are original with numerous references to diverse sources, combined with his self-declared faithfulness to tradition, furnish the grounds for a variety of possible construals of John's place in the tradition, and for divergent evaluations of his place in the history of thought generally. According to the Eastern reading, he was and is to be seen as an author who, conveying Greek heritage, formed the proper and well-defined way of applying reasoning and philosophy in theology. In the Middle Ages, he was seen as one of the greatest theological and philosophical authorities. And today, he is perceived as nothing more than a compiler. Naturally, one wonders what has led to such a dramatic divergence of judgments. Do those differences stem merely from different levels of familiarity with textual dependencies and sources? Or, is there, possibly, some other factor that has influenced those conflicting opinions?

The Eastern Orthodox perception of John's heritage is backed by historical reasons—ones that run deep and are of a highly intriguing kind. For in spite of his extensive recognition, John is admired mainly as a carrier forward of tradition. An interesting explanation of this fact can be found in



the works of Thomas Nobel. The latter offers an explanation for the quite strange fact that the Iconodule Council of Niceae in the year 787 made no actual references at all to John's teaching on icons, while at the same time it did recognize him as being one of the most important defenders of religious imagery. Nobel thinks that there are two possible causes for this strange inconsistency. Firstly, the Council's intention could have been to minimize the role of emperors in the Iconoclastic controversy. Taking into account the fact that, in his *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, John had heavily and sharply criticized the Emperor's iconoclastic politics and refuted the rights of any sovereign to intervene in theological subjects,<sup>19</sup> any reference to his works would have been considered an affront to the entire reigning dynasty.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, Nobel points out that the Council's remit was to achieve a complete refutation of the iconoclastic council of 754 at Hieria, but did not extend to the introduction of new theological conceptions.<sup>21</sup> John's genuine Christological and soteriological vision and justification of icons could therefore have proved too revolutionary for the council, which only meant to re-impose the traditional order and system. The only part of his *Apologies* utilized by the Council was his unprecedented and very impressive dossier of patristic testimonies on icons. It served as one of two sources of texts cited at the council.<sup>22</sup> In other words, from "the Damascenus qua original thinker" and

19. *Imag.* 1.1.24–34, 66.8–16, 2.4.12.19–47, 16.61–90, 3.41.

20. Noble, "John Damascene and the History," 106–7; Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 83. Noble also notices that another theologian who, surprisingly, received hardly any attention at Niceae II was Maximus the Confessor, also known for his criticism of imperial involvement in theological doctrine. Similarly, neither interpolated versions of the letters of Gregory II, nor a letter of Gregory III, mentioned by Hadrian, which also contains a critique of Leo III, were read at Niceae II. Also, other iconophile treatises of the mid-century, such as *Nouthesia gerontos, Adversus Constantinum Caballinum* and *Adversus Iconoclastas* were probably omitted in the Nicean document on account of their strong disapproval of Emperor Constantine V. See *ibid.*, 83 n. 150. Cf. Paul Van den Ven, "La patristique et l'hagiographie du Concile de Nicée de 787," *Byzantion* 25–27 (1955–57): 336–38; Kenneth Parry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (New York: Brill, 1996), 136; Paul Speck, *Kaiser Konstantin VI: Die Legitimation eines Fremden und der Versuch einer eigenen Herrschaft; Quellen Kritische Darstellung von 25 Jahren byzantinischer Geschichte nach dem ersten Ikonoklasmus* (München: Fink, 1978), 134–40.

21. See Aidan Nichols, "The *horos* of Niceae II: A Theological Evaluation," *Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum* 20 (1988): 172; Christoph von Schönborn, *L'icône du Christ: Fondements théologiques; élaborés entre le I<sup>er</sup> et le II<sup>e</sup> Concile de Nicée (325–787)* (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1976), 148; Vittorio Fazzo, "Il concilio di Nicea nella storia cristiana ed i rapporti fra Roma e Bisanzio," in *Cultura e società nell'Italia medievale: Studi per Paolo Brezzi* (Roma: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1988), 358.

“the Damascenus qua expert of patristic thought”, the second was chosen to the exclusion of the first. It seems, therefore, that the very originality of John’s theology of icons brought down upon him, ironically, the label of compiler. It was probably already politically preferable in the Nicean and post-Nicean periods to consider his treatises as mere collections of traditional materials. With time, John’s own conceptions became an integral part of Eastern orthodox tradition. Yet because their author was regarded as a mere carrier forwards of the tradition, they were consistently considered just to be parts of the older tradition that he had, supposedly, only been involved in passing down.

By contrast, the Latin West simply had no idea that someone could be labeled or even stigmatized in this sort of way, and for medieval authors, moreover, originality itself was just not an issue of interest. In a kind of naïve (at least for contemporary scholars) way they considered that an idea belongs to the one who formulated it well, and not to the one who first uttered it. That, certainly, reflected a systematic approach to philosophy rather than a historical one. Therefore, medieval thinkers could read John’s texts without any preconceptions at all. Treating his thought as possessing a complex but internally coherent content, they did not try to deconstruct it into a mere sum of all the sources used. Consequently, they concentrated on what, in their opinion, was novel, different and ingenious in his works.

Nowadays, probably because of a renewed interest in Patristics amongst the principal Christian confessions, John has once again become a subject for research. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, research seems not only to have neglected medieval opinions regarding his contribution, but also to have judged it even more mercilessly in respect of its perceived lack of originality than did the traditional orthodox view. John is accused of a *total* lack of original philosophical thought, and of being nothing more than a mere compiler. Such a sharp judgment is based mainly on the analysis of his work *Dialectic*, or *Philosophical Chapters*, which constitutes the first part of his monumental work *Fount of Knowledge*. These chapters are generally considered to be a compilation that contains no systematic philosophical doctrine at all.<sup>23</sup> In the view of Gerhard Richter, John, due to his low level of philosophical knowledge and very limited access to the original literature, was capable only of putting together a compendium from

22. Noble, *Images*, 92–93, 97.

23. This opinion is repeated in every textbook dealing with Patristics, as well as in monographic studies devoted to John Damascene. See, for instance, the recent research of Andrew Louth, *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

already existing compendia or collections.<sup>24</sup> As a matter of fact, Richter attributes only a very small number of the chapters of the *Dialectic* to John's authorship.<sup>25</sup> In his opinion, the Damascene could be granted only one innovation, which consists in the three-part structure of the *Fount of Knowledge*. Still, Richter claimed that there is no connection between its first and third parts, as John did not make use of the philosophical content of the *Dialectic* in his *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*.<sup>26</sup> Richter arrived at such conclusions through an exclusively historical approach: he himself claimed that systematic philosophical analysis was entirely superfluous in historical studies. Thus, he refrained from any critical analysis, and concentrated instead on the search for the origins of John's treatise, employing the method of textual comparison.<sup>27</sup> As a result, he was led to claim that John was a "Kompilator im engsten Sinne des Wortes"—i.e. a compiler in the narrowest sense of the word.

Mossman Roueché holds a more moderate opinion concerning John as the author of the *Dialectica*. At least, he recognizes that the Damascene, as with Maximus the Confessor, Theodore of Raithu and Anastasius Sinaita, had received a philosophical education.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the works of those authors furnish evidence of philosophical activity after the period of his "philosophical lecturing" in Alexandria, which lasted probably until the dissolution of the university in 729. According to Roueché, the *Dialectica* belongs to the kind of logic handbook, or rather, collection of excerpts, written by Christians, and which contained excerpts from the Alexandrian commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories* and Porphyry's *Isagoge*.<sup>29</sup> In his opinion, John's treatise was itself based on such handbooks, but being a more comprehensive and better work of its sort, written by a major theologian of the times, it succeeded in displacing most of them, making the diffusion of other similar works unnecessary.<sup>30</sup> Roueché underlies that while logical compendia played an important role in the transition undergone by Aristotelian philosophy over the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the importance

24. Gerhard Richter, *Die Dialektik des Johannes von Damaskos: eine Untersuchung des Textes nach seinen Quellen und seiner Bedeutung*, *Studia patristica et Byzantina* ([Ettal]: Buch-Kunstverlag Ettal, 1964), 276, 279.

25. *Ibid.*, 74–78.

26. *Ibid.*, 271, 273–75.

27. *Ibid.*, 271, 211–12.

28. Mossman Roueché, "A Middle Byzantine Handbook of Logic Terminology," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 29 (1980): 71–72.

29. Mossman Roueché, "Byzantine Philosophical Texts of the Seventh Century," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 23 (1974): 61–65.

30. Roueché, "A Middle Byzantine Handbook," 83.

of the *Dialectica* appears to lie in preserving the collected and codified elements of Aristotelian logic, which had previously been disseminated in the form of a variety of excerpts and compendia.<sup>31</sup>

While these opinions might seem, at first view, well founded, they miss several very important points. First of all, those authors themselves were prepared to rule out even the very possibility of John having produced an original idea, on the basis of a bias against “uneducated monks.” Most certainly, John can hardly be considered to have been a poorly educated person. It is well known that he belonged to a dynasty of high-ranking officials, who served in the fiscal administration of the Umayyads. There is also a strong tradition to the effect that he succeeded to the position of Logothete, after his father Sarjun ibn Mansur.<sup>32</sup> It is highly possible that he would have received the education proper to persons of his social background who spoke Greek, and had been educated in the schools of the Greek rhetoricians. John’s command of Greek prose, and the quality of his poetry, indicate that he must have received at least some sort of classical education. Therefore, even if one does not give credit to the tradition according to which he obtained an outstanding philosophical education from a certain Greek monk by the name of Cosmas,<sup>33</sup> one still has no right to assume that his philosophical knowledge was so limited as not to allow him to create a philosophical compendium himself. Similarly, the assumption that John, being a simple monk, had very limited access to philosophical works seems ill-founded. The famous monastery Mar Saba, which was John’s home and place of work, was very well known for its dedication to high intellectual culture and probably had an outstanding library.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, those who consider John to be a merely secondary and unoriginal thinker either marginalize or neglect several important and genuine elements of his works. It seems that the quest for textual sources, so typical of contemporary studies, overshadows John’s original input. Any compilatory character the *Dialectica* may have need not, however, preclude originality on the part of John’s philosophical thought. The very fact that, in *Pege Gnoseos*, the first part of *Dialectica*, he elucidated his methodology and gave a justification for the structure of the treatise has no equivalent in the theological literature of the time. But of greater importance is the

31. Roueché, “Byzantine Philosophical Texts,” 67.

32. Cf. J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, XIII.357b.

33. Cf. *Vita S. P. N. Ioannis Damasceni*, Migne PG, 94.441–444.

34. Cf. Albert Ehrhard, “Das griechische Kloster Mâr-Saba in Palästina: Seine Geschichte und seine literarischen Denkmäler,” *Römische Quartalschrift* 7 (1893).

fact that of the several philosophical conceptions presented in the *Dialectica* which manifest discernible signs of originality, none can be found elsewhere except in his own theological writings.

While it cannot be completely excluded that John Damascene based the integrity of his *Dialectica* on the texts of other authors, assuming this requires that we posit the existence of another Christian author, close in time and even in place to him,<sup>35</sup> to whom we in fact owe all of the original ideas mentioned above, but of whose theological or philosophical legacy we have not the slightest evidence. Being in agreement, however, with another medieval author, William Ockham, that there is no need to multiply beings without necessity, I think that there is no need to unnecessarily invent a proto-Damascene. And I am thus willing to ascribe the philosophical achievements of that presumed sole author to the very same person whose name and authorship have been linked to them over the course of the entire theological and philosophical tradition—i.e. to John of Damascus himself.

Whatever may be said in answer to the contemporary charges of unoriginality brought against John, his cause can still seem indefensible in the light of his own declaration of being faithful to tradition. While for the East he is an important author even if he is merely a link in the chain of tradition, and for the medieval West it is important only that he utters some ideas very clearly, according to contemporary preconceptions (or even prejudices) about originality he will count as unoriginal, and so not worthy of attention, just because he did not *intend* to go beyond tradition. But let me now analyze John's ostensibly clear statement that he had not said anything that had originated from himself.<sup>36</sup> For it seems hardly possible to ascribe any kind of originality to someone who has presented *himself* as merely a conveyer of tradition—unless, that is, we understand “being original” in a significantly different way.

In his *Dialectica*, John explicitly states that he is going to propose nothing of his own:<sup>37</sup>

35. The available collections of philosophical excerpts predating the *Dialectica* are limited in respect of their origins to the period of 7<sup>th</sup> century and to the region of the Byzantine provinces Palæstina Prima and Palæstina Secunda.

36. The Damascene also added to the main body of his works a substantial amount of patristic testimony aimed at showing that the thoughts presented by him are in accordance with tradition. His *Apologia against Those Who Decry Holy Images* is an example of such an approach. Each of its parts is followed by a florilegium of patristic testimonies. *Exposition of the Faith* does not contain a florilegium, yet is full of quotations and references to works of the Greek Fathers.

37. All translations of passages of John Damascene into English are mine.

As I said, I shall tell nothing of my own, but I shall gather into one the fruits of toil of accepted teachers, and, as much as it is in my powers, make a brief discourse, being in everything obedient to your command. (*Proem.*, 60–63)

I shall say, thus, nothing of my own, but I shall put forward summarily things said in a scattered manner by godly and wise men. (*Dial.*, 2.9–11)

The above declarations seem to confirm the opinion that John put forward no ideas of his own. For to admit today that one is going to say nothing of one's own is tantamount to recognizing that one has, oneself, nothing at all to say. An open declaration of repeating, or even building on, someone else's conceptions, is perceived today as a confession of a lack of creativity. To be creative and original is to be different from others, and the more different one is, the more likely one is to be recognized as a creative thinker. All of this sounds perfectly reasonable and logical. It is hard, thus, to imagine that someone presenting the fruits of creative and original thoughts of his own would pretend in front of his readers that he was merely engaged in expressing the product of the intellectual labor of others. Hence one has, it seems, no reason to look for even the smallest traces of originality in the Damascene, after having read what he himself professed to being engaged in. Likewise one will not even credit him for the philosophical conceptions found in his other works, if they should happen to also appear in the *Dialectica*.

I argue, however, that John's statement should neither be taken too literally, nor taken out of context, but also should not be construed according to our modern understanding of "originality". It ought, instead, to be analyzed from a broad historical and theological perspective. Scholars of ancient and medieval traditions are well acquainted with the custom of ascribing original ideas to previously recognized authorities or even of concealing one's identity behind such authorities. At this point, what comes to mind is the very elegant response given by Umberto Eco to the accusation that medieval culture as such was preoccupied with commenting on commentaries and quoting authorities just because it was not capable of creating anything new. He replied that contemporary culture maintains an appearance of being original even when, in essence, it only repeats well-known matters,<sup>38</sup> whereas medieval culture, even when producing something new and original, tried to conceal it behind a veil of repetitions.

38. And yet even with the contemporary obsession with originality, I could not agree more with the opinion of Maxim Kantor, that it is quite easy to differentiate Brueghel from Bosch, but to distinguish the early works of Schnabel from the later ones of Twombly is

Researchers, however, must perform the difficult task of discovering when it is the case that a medieval author has, in fact, introduced new and genuine contents, even while trying to persuade the recipient that he has only repeated things already uttered.<sup>39</sup>

The same explanation could very well be applied to the works of many patristic authors. Especially in the time of John Damascene, the renunciation of originality and disguising of oneself as an authority was standard practice. Any intellectual innovation was presented only as a consideration pertaining to, or as a commentary upon, already established doctrine.<sup>40</sup> One of the most eminent examples is, most certainly, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite—an author who consciously preferred to ascribe all of his works to a person with unquestionable authority. As a matter of fact, John was not only a part of such a tendency, but also, in the manner and methodology of his writings, someone who foreshadowed the Middle Ages.

There is, however, a point of still greater importance for anyone who wishes to really understand the question of originality as it pertains to John's thought and to his own self-evaluation. As has been most accurately emphasized by Andrew Louth, the Damascene was a man of the Sacred Tradition. Certainly he had been shaped by the theological tradition and was engaged in following, with full awareness, the ways of traditional theological thought and doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Yet there is another side to that tradition itself. Within the core of that tradition, John himself is an essential element. The sacred tradition of the Church, being in its essence the "tradition of truth" (*traditio veritatis* or, in the formula of St. Irenaeus, *κανὼν τῆς ἀληθείας*<sup>42</sup>) does not amount to just historical memory and loyalty to a preserved legacy. Tradition, as has been splendidly put by George Florovsky, "is the inner, mystical memory of the Church". Tradition, in other words, is the unity and continuity of the spiritual experience and of the life of grace itself. Faithfulness to tradition, then, is not just commitment to some received content, but is rather constituted by its living relationship with the Christian faith and life.<sup>43</sup>

unthinkable without reading the subtitles. See Maxim Kantor, *Uchebnik risovanya*, vol. 1 (Moskva: O.G.I., 2006), 17.III

39. Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, "3rd printing, with corrections" ed., (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1986), 10.

40. The best example of such an approach is furnished by the works of John's predecessor, St. Maximus the Confessor.

41. Louth, *St. John Damascene*, 15–16.

42. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.1.20.53.

It seems that this view of what it means to partake of a tradition informed John's explanation of his decision to undertake the difficult task of writing the treatise. The first passage of John's *Dialectica* adduced here refers to his earlier statement that he himself would say nothing. But the only text that this suggestion could itself pertain to is his comments concerning why, in spite of numerous concerns, he had complied with the order to write the treatise in the first place.<sup>44</sup> Justifying his decision, he states that he who receives the illuminating grace that comes from God is filled with the Spirit. Such a man becomes purified in his heart and enlightened in his understanding. But, what is more important for our study, in John's opinion such a person is an instrument of the Spirit, who speaks through him. John was confident that due to the prayers of his superior he would be filled with the Spirit:

I shall speak the words that are the fruit not of my own thought, but fruit of the Spirit illuminating the blind, accepting and proclaiming loudly all that much what he gives. (*Proem.*, 40–42)

What John Damascene's denial of his own authorship of the words he himself wrote in the book actually means, then, is this: that his work is the fruit of the Spirit, while he himself is only an instrument subservient to Revelation. This is possible, however, only within the Sacred Tradition. It is not surprising, then, that he underlines the bond of his work with that tradition by stressing that he aims to gather together the labors of prominent and accepted teachers. He remained faithful to the Sacred Tradition as the unity and continuity of the spiritual experience and the life of grace. Therefore, he turned to that same tradition for the answers to theological as well as philosophical questions. Even when working on the *Dialectica* he was, quite probably, already making use of the existing logical handbooks written by Christians. The outcome of his work did not bring new contents into the Tradition. And if it had done, this would have meant that he himself had not stayed loyal to it, because all of the content of that tradition was supposed to have been received in, and thus be limited by, Revelation. A theologian faithful to the Tradition cannot add anything original or new to it: indeed, doing so would be tantamount to betraying it. Revelation, once received, cannot be amplified: no new things are there to be revealed, so we necessarily already have in place the entire and in-

43. Georges Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), 36–37.

44. *Proem.* 21–42.



tegral content of the theology. The only thing that a theologian can do is to qualitatively develop the understanding of the content as it has already been received in Revelation. Hence a theologian, subservient to Revelation, cannot *sensu stricto* be original at all. Even when he comes to a better and deeper understanding of the truth, he cannot see this achievement as the result of his own thought, for the sacred nature of the very subject being studied requires the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

John's works have most definitely contributed to a better comprehension of that which is received in Revelation. Nevertheless, his contribution was a development of, and within, the tradition of which he was a part. In my opinion, his explorations of theological questions did lead to original philosophical solutions and conceptions. Yet he did not consider even those new philosophical ideas to be his own achievements. Being original, either as a philosopher or as a theologian, was not one of his aspirations. All of his desires as an author were consistent with acting in the service of Revelation and its understanding. Even when his thought was, in fact, responsible for introducing developments in our comprehension of theological and philosophical issues, he himself preferred to see it as an integral part of the Sacred Tradition, and he presented it accordingly. He did not consider himself to be an independent and original author, but merely an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

The case of John's legacy shows just how powerful both historically conferred forms of stigmatization and present-day preconceptions can be. The modern appreciation of originality, conceived of as one's having one's own personal opinions and, on that account, differing from all others, influences our perception. Thus, contemporary research frequently concentrates on lines of influence, sources, textual similarities, and dependencies. Although such an approach might be deemed correct, especially in purely historical studies, it may also, in certain cases, disrupt the proper evaluation of someone's thought. This is, I have tried to show, exactly what has happened in the case under consideration here. Nowadays, researchers prefer to view John's works as only conveying material that is unoriginal, and ignore both the original parts and the sometimes slight, but nevertheless consequential, changes he introduced. As a result, one of the greatest minds of Eastern thought—one who may be said to have both concluded and crowned the Patristic epoch—has gone down in the history of ideas as a mere compiler. But I suppose that that *is exactly* how John Damascene would have wished to be remembered. For one who cares to serve as the proper tool of God will not be troubled by human opinions and judgments. And I would even go so far as to risk saying that, probably, this is the only

possible way for a Christian theologian to really and truly be a theologian. If there is only one real truth revealed fully in the Incarnation of God the Word, then there just is no room for being original in the contemporary understanding of this term. A theologian simply has no choice but to be that truth's humble servant. Even if a theologian unintentionally functions as a philosopher, his thought ought to be subservient to Revelation and the Sacred Tradition of the Church. Of course, a theologian may, and should, work towards ever deeper explorations of Revelation, either theologically or philosophically. But he ought still to be a part of the Tradition, developing what is contained within the latter's ongoing legacy, rather than inventing an alternative reality. Otherwise he would have traded being obedient to the Truth for being merely original.

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