

Research Project

The intellectual life of late antiquity is characterized by a strong concern with principles (archai): principles of reality, principles of the world, principles of knowledge. Regardless of how one groups intellectuals in late antiquity – into pagans and Christians, philosophers and theologians – they all speak about principles explicitly or implicitly and some of them actively seek to establish what the principles are (e.g., Plotinus, Porphyry, Origen, Damascius, Gnostics, Hermeticists, theurgists). They clearly deem the project of principles to be crucial for establishing how reality is structured, what the place of humans in the world is, what powers affect our lives, how free are we, how we can attain knowledge, and how we can attain happiness or salvation.

The search for principles (understood as metaphysical or theological) is then an important issue both of itself and also for shaping ethics. The series of talks in the academic year 2023-2024 of the research project The Platonisms of the Late Antiquity continue exploring, as in the previous year, this topic of principles in its broad application in the intellectual world of late antiquity and will examine questions such as how principles account for reality, how principles explain the interaction between the divine and the human world, and how human happiness and salvation is possible given the structure of reality.

Projet de recherche

La vie intellectuelle de la fin de l'Antiquité est caractérisée par un fort intérêt porté aux « principes » (archai) : principes de la réalité, principes du monde, principes de la connaissance. Quelle que soit la façon dont on regroupe les intellectuels de la fin de l'Antiquité – polythéistes ou chrétiens, philosophes ou théologiens –, tous parlent, explicitement ou implicitement, des principes. Certains cherchent même activement à déterminer ce que sont les principes (par ex., Origène, Plotin, Porphyre, Damascius, les gnostiques, les Hermétistes, les théurgistes). Cette recherche est pour eux capitale, afin d'établir la manière dont la réalité est structurée, de réfléchir à la place des êtres humains dans le monde et aux puissances qui affectent leur vie, de penser dans quelle mesure nous sommes libres, comment nous pouvons atteindre la connaissance, ainsi qu'obtenir le bonheur ou le salut. La recherche des principes (métaphysiques ou théologiques) est ainsi un thème important en lui-même et pour la formation éthique. Le Programme des rencontres 2023-2024 du projet de recherche Les Platonismes de l'Antiquité tardive propose de continuer d'explorer comme l'année précédente cette thématique des principes dans le monde intellectuel de la fin de l'Antiquité. Il examinera différentes questions, telles que : comment les principes disent la réalité, comment ils expliquent les relations entre les mondes divin et humain et dans quelle mesure le bonheur et le salut sont possibles pour les humains étant donné la structure de la réalité.

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Année académique 2023-2024


Programme de recherche Les Platonismes de l'Antiquité tardive Principles : Definition, Causality and Ascent I


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FRIDAY, 12 APRIL 2024

14h30 - ROBERT VAN DEN BERG (Leiden University) :
The Platonic Forms as Living Statues: Metaphysical
and Spiritual Paradeigmatism in Plotinus

15h45 - Ilinca TANASEANU-DOEBLER (Georg-August
University of Göttingen) : 

 g2 : Causality and Ascent in Neoplatonic
Conceptions of Speaking about the First Principle

17h15 - Jonathan GREIG (Leuven University) :
Damascius, the One, and the Parmenides First and
Second Hypotheses

18.30 - Sara AHBEL-RAPPE (University of
Michigan) :
Damascius First Principle and C
Neoplatonism

FRIDAY, 12 APRIL 2024

Chair : Luciana Gabriela Soares Santoprete (LEM, CNRS)

• **14h30 - ROBERT VAN DEN BERG (Leiden University) :**

The Platonic Forms as Living Statues : Metaphysical and Spiritual Paradeigmatism in Plotinus

In this presentation, I intend to explore an intriguing image in Plotinus, that of the Forms as living statues. In the first part of my talk, I will examine Plotinus's comparison of the Platonic Forms to living statues. This comparison raises a series of questions: What sort of statues has Plotinus in mind? Why does he compare the Forms, which in Platonic metaphysics are after all the intelligible paradeigmata of the physical cosmos, to statues, which are by definition copies, not exemplars? Why are they said to be alive? I will argue that, in line of the Platonic paradeigmatism of the Timaeus (the intelligible cosmos as a paradigm of the sensible cosmos), we should think of the ultimate principle, the One, as the paradigmatic cause of the Forms. I will refer to this causal relationship between paradeigma and copy as metaphysical paradeigmatism. In the second part of this paper, I will examine how this paradeigmatic relationship between the first principle, i.e., the One, and the Forms, allows the human soul to ascent to the One. I will refer to this form of ascent as spiritual paradeigmatism. More in particular, I will argue that the logoi, which make up the human soul, are copies of the living Form-statues. The ascending philosopher should, by practising the so-called purificatory virtues, animate his innate logoi-statues, so that they morph into the living Form-statues. Contemplation of these Form-statues allows the soul to finally reconnect to the ultimate first principle. In conclusion, I will reflect on the religious Sitz-im-Leben of this remarkable comparison of Forms and logoi to living and animated statues.

15.15 : Discussion

Chair : Éric Crégheur (Université Laval)

• **15h45 - Ilinca TANASEANU-DOEBLER (Georg-August University of Göttingen) :**

“Διτὰ γὰρ αὐτῶν καὶ ὀνόματα παραδίδωσιν ἡμῖν ὁ Πλάτων τῆς ἀρρήτου ταύτης αἰτίας”: *Causality and Ascent in Neoplatonic Conceptions of Speaking about the First Principle*

Can one speak about the first principle? All Neoplatonists from Plotinus to Damascius emphatically deny that the principle in its absolute transcendence can receive a proper designation or name; all speech about the first principle is at best allusive, a way of assuaging the unending yearning to grasp it and point others toward it. Neoplatonic conceptions of communication about the first principle reflect the pivotal role of causality and ascent for developing a proper mode of speech about it. Thus, Proclus in a passage whose beginning is quoted in the title explains that while the first principle as well as the profound union of all reality with it do not admit of any name at all, the fact that the First is origin and thus ontological cause of all things is mirrored in the designation as “One”, the fact that it is the final cause of reality towards and around which

all gravitates, is captured in the “Good” (Theol. plat. 2,6). When this twofold causality and thus the relationship of the First with reality is called into question, speaking about the first principle is fundamentally endangered, as Damascius' reflections about the Ineffable and the One show (De princ. 1,1-26 Westerink/Combès). The paper proposes to explore more closely the role notions of causality and ascent play in discussions about the possibility and limits of speaking about the first principle, and, conversely, how reflections about ineffability in turn shape conceptions of philosophical ascent.

16.30 : Discussion

17.00 : Coffee-Break

Chair : George Karamanolis (University of Wien)

• **17h15 - Jonathan GREIG (Leuven University) :**

Damascius, the One, and the Parmenides' First and Second Hypotheses

While Damascius is known for positing the Ineffable above the One as the true first principle, rather than the One as for nearly all other Neoplatonists, one issue that has not been raised is how Damascius sees the Ineffable functioning as a principle of the One's own causality—since, indeed, the One remains the cause of all things (ta panta). In this talk I would like to look at the relation between the first and second hypotheses of Plato's Parmenides for Damascius and his predecessor, Proclus. In particular, I would like to see how Proclus' interpretation of the henads as belonging, properly, to the second hypothesis, yet providing the “bridge” between the first and second hypotheses, may be a model for Damascius' One.

18.00 : Discussion

Chair : Éric Crégheur (Université Laval)

• **18.30 - Sara AHBEL-RAPPE (University of Michigan) :**

Damascius' First Principle and the Isma'ili Neoplatonism

In this paper I examine approaches to Damascius' characterization of the first principle as ineffable, prior to any function as cause of subsequent, lesser realities.

This paper starts from a survey of work on Damascius to canvas two very disparate views, one which holds that Damascius' philosophical methods invariably eschew dogmatic metaphysics, system building, or even fixed dialectical positions, not because he is a skeptic, but because his purpose in doing philosophy is, broadly, to facilitate self-inquiry. The other view treats Damascius more along the lines of an academic philosopher with stakes in a (correctly articulated) metaphysical system. In the second part of the paper, I discuss Isma'ili Neoplatonism, particularly the doctrine of al-Sijistani and al-Hamza, according to which God is not a cause, but rather makes causality possible. I conclude by discussing what we can learn from the Isma'ili and Damascian attempts to preserve the transcendence of the first principle.

19.15 : Discussion

19.30 : Anna Van den Kerchove (IPT-LEM, CNRS) : Final Remarks