

EXCELLENCE
CLUSTER



TOPOI

PROJEKTBERICHT | RESEARCH REPORT

RESEARCH GROUP (D-II-2) PLACE, SPACE AND MOTION

PLACE, SPACE AND MOTION IN LATER PLATONISM

Research results of the period from
01.04.2008 – 01.04.2012

Members of the research project

Prof. Christoph Helmig, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Topoi Principal Investigator

Dr. Christopher Noble, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Research Associate

Ioannis Papachristou, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Doctoral Fellow

Prof. Frans de Haas, Leiden, Senior Fellow

Dr. Francesco Verde, Rom, Senior Fellow

Prof. Jan Opsomer, Leuven, Senior Fellow

Description of research question, approach and results

Research question

How did later Platonists understand the competing theories of ‘space’ and ‘place’ developed by Plato and Aristotle, and how were these theories challenged and transformed in late Antiquity?

Research methodology and approach

Philosophy in late Antiquity was self-consciously rooted in a long tradition of philosophical inquiry, and was conducted within the framework of a broadly Platonist conception of reality (standardly termed ‘Neoplatonism’). Our research methods were tailored to take account of this distinctive feature of later Greek philosophy, and to emphasize the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation.

While our primary area of inquiry lay in later Greek philosophy, philosophical reflection on space and place in this period was conducted by way of engagement with (1) Plato’s account in the *Timaeus* of the so-called ‘Receptacle of becoming,’ which he also characterizes as ‘space’ and ‘place,’ and (2) Aristotle’s critical interpretation of Plato’s theory and the positive alternative to it that he develops in his *Physics*. In addition, Platonist philosophers were aware of, and sometimes framed their own positions in opposition to, the theories of absolute space championed by the Hellenistic schools, Stoicism and Epicureanism. A close study of the Platonic and Aristotelian texts that served as the point of departure for later philosophers thus formed an integral part of our research program, while specialists in Hellenistic philosophy were invited to help supplement the group’s core strengths in other periods of Greek philosophy. With a view to investigating later Platonism in its broader historical context, we, together with the other members of the Junior Research Group “Place, Space and Motion”, organized a series of seminars and conferences on discussions relevant to our research ques-

tions in Plato and Aristotle, on the responses offered in the Hellenistic period, and on the reception of these earlier discussions by later Platonists. Our project was thereby able to capitalize on current work on the intellectual background for later Platonist theories, as well as on the varied skills and areas of expertise of group members trained in Philosophy and Classical Philology. In these cooperative efforts and in our own individual projects, we approached our research questions through a study of the relevant texts that was attentive to their argumentative content and sensitive to pertinent philological problems. Our aim was to offer reconstructions of the philosophical theories of space and place advanced in our source texts (and the relevance of these theories to the related conceptions of motion and change), as well as historically informed accounts of the place these theories occupied in the Greek philosophical tradition.

Since later Greek philosophy has been, by comparison with earlier periods, less extensively researched, we reached the conclusion that much foundational work remained to be done on the central figures and texts from this period. Our projects thus spanned the chronological scope of late Antique philosophy – from Plotinus (3rd cent. AD) to the last great figures in Neoplatonism, the Aristotelian commentators Simplicius and Philoponus (6th cent. AD) – and shared a common focus on tracing the reception and transformation of Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories of space. Noble worked on Plotinus’ interpretation of Plato’s ‘Receptacle’ and his attempts to accommodate Aristotelian criticisms of the Platonic theory. Helmig and Opsomer, looking to a period in which Plato and Aristotle were taken to be in general agreement, are preparing a translation and commentary for Proclus’ *Elements of Physics*, a text in which Proclus (5th cent. AD) attempts to integrate Aristotelian theories of locomotion and change with Platonist natural philosophy. In a separate project, Helmig is preparing a monograph on late ancient theories of space that involves the reconstruction of Proclus’ and Damascius’ theories of space on the basis of Simplicius’ *Corollary on Place*. In his dissertation, Papachristou examines the highly innovative theories of place and void developed by Philoponus and positions them relative to the views of his contemporary and rival Simplicius.

The main projects of the group were further supported by several short-term research visits and conferences. Frans de Haas, a leading scholar on Philoponus and Simplicius, came to Berlin to advise Papachristou on his dissertation and to collaborate with Helmig on Simplicius. Papachristou also traveled to Princeton, under the auspices of both Topoi and the Graduate School for Ancient Philosophy’s Ancient Philosophy and Science Network (ASPN), to work with his second-advisor Christian Wildberg. Nathan Powers, a specialist on Stoicism, and Francesco Verde, an expert on Epicureanism, pursued article projects on space and void in Hellenistic natural philosophy and presented their findings at the group’s research seminar. The group also organized major international conferences on theories of space in Hellenistic philosophy and in Simplicius and Philoponus at which Noble, Helmig, De Haas, Opsomer, and Papachristou gave presentations based upon their research.

Results

Noble focuses on Plotinus' interpretation of Plato's 'Receptacle' in the *Timaeus* as prime matter and his proposal that Plato's descriptions of it as 'space' and 'place' are to be understood in metaphorical terms. He argues that this reading of Plato's theory is mediated by Aristotle's identification of Plato's 'Receptacle' with the ultimate substratum for change, and by Aristotle's critical reports on Plato's views about the nature of this substratum. Aristotle's charge that the Platonic identification of the substratum for change with privation makes it vulnerable to destruction when it acquires sensible properties leads Plotinus to hold that the substratum takes on sensible properties in such a way that it is not qualified by them. In light of this view, Plotinus maintains that Plato describes the 'Receptacle' as a 'place' in virtue of the fact that it remains unaffected by what comes to be present in it, just as a place is unaffected by a body moving into it. Some results of Noble's study appeared in: Christopher Noble, "Plotinus' Unaffected Matter", in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 44 (2013), 233–277.

In a separate article project, which is connected with Papachristou's research on Philoponus, Noble considers how Aristotle's theory that the circular motion of the celestial body has no contrary can be defended against Philoponus' challenges. The results of this project appeared as: Christopher Noble, "Topsy-Turvy World: Circular Motion, Contrariety, and Aristotle's Unwinding Spheres", in: *Apeiron. A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science*, 46.4 (2013), 391–418.

Helmig and Opsomer have been engaged in the production of the first English-language translation and commentary on Proclus' epitome of Aristotle's *Physics* 6–8, called the *Elements of Physics*. This project will make an important Neoplatonic text more readily accessible to researchers working on Aristotle and scholars of late Antiquity. A key aspect of this project is a comparison of the interpretations of Proclus with those in Themistius' *Paraphrase of the Physics* and Simplicius' commentary on *Physics* 6–8, a procedure that has brought to light some evidence that Proclus' epitome exerted influence on Simplicius' commentary. Their research has also led to a reassessment of Proclus' attempt to integrate Aristotelian physics with Neoplatonic metaphysics. They have shown that Proclus' *Elements of Physics* is not a mere summary of Aristotelian doctrine (as has generally been thought), but rather that both the form and content of this treatise exhibit characteristically Neoplatonic commitments and readings of Aristotle. Some results of this project have already appeared in Opsomer's article "The Integration of Aristotelian Physics in a Neoplatonic Context: Proclus on Movers and Divisibility."

Helmig's work on Proclus' *Elements of Physics* is closely associated with a separate monograph project (Christoph Helmig, *Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition. A study on*

Proclus and his Predecessors, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca et Byzantina 5, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012) on late ancient theories of space. One product of this research is his article (co-authored with Pavel Gregorovic) “ΟΜΟΣΕ ΧΩΡΕΙΝ: Simplicius, *Corrolarium de loco* 601.26–27” in *Classical Quarterly* 61.2 (2011), 722–730.

In his dissertation, Papchristou has offered a new account of Philoponus’ theories of place and void. Papchristou argues that these two concepts are systematically connected since the possibility of void, whose existence Philoponus defends, requires an account of place that is independent enough from bodies to exist while being empty. In developing these theories, Philoponus is emphatically rejecting Aristotle’s denial of the existence of void, as well as Aristotle’s view that place is dependent on bodies. Papchristou also shows that Philoponus defense of the existence of void requires him to develop answers to Aristotle’s arguments against the possibility of motion through a void, and that Philoponus formulated his impetus theory of motion, which prefigures later theories of inertia, for this purpose. On the basis of this re-examination of Philoponus’ theory, Papchristou is able to offer a fresh assessment of its relation to that of Simplicius. Integral to this study is a new account of the structure of Philoponus’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*, according to which we should distinguish between two different contexts for Philoponus’ presentation of his own views, ‘digressions’ and ‘corollaries.’

Discussion of the results in the light of current research

Noble’s work on Plotinus’ interpretation of the Timean Receptacle shows that it owes much more to Aristotle’s testimony on, and criticism of, the Platonic theory than has usually been thought, and also reveals fairly substantive (and often overlooked) disagreements between Peripatetic theories of prime matter and Plotinus’ rehabilitated version of Platonic position. His project on circular motion suggests that Aristotle’s theory of *aether* has much better resources for resisting Philoponus’ challenge than has been recognized.

Helmig and Opsomer have challenged the orthodox view that Proclus’ *Elements of Physics* is a mere summary of Aristotelian doctrine by highlighting its distinctively Neoplatonic commitments and readings of Aristotle. They have also discovered evidence that parts of Simplicius’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics* are influenced by Proclus’ text. Their translation and commentary will contribute to on-going research in this area by making an important Neoplatonic text available for the first time in English, by providing the first detailed commentary on the text, and by offering a fresh reconsideration of the state of the Greek text.

Helmig’s monograph project on late Antique conceptions of space will contribute to recent attempts to develop a more complete picture of the diversity of Neoplatonic views on this topic and to a better

understanding of Simplicius' complex attitude towards Aristotle. In his monograph *Ideas and Concepts. Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition* (Berlin 2012), he explores how ancient epistemological theories account for the acquisition of concepts such as 'place' and 'matter.'

Papchristou's dissertation fills a lacuna in the scholarship on Philoponus' contributions to physical theory in late Antiquity by offering a much more thoroughgoing examination of the related doctrines of void and place than was previously available, and by drawing new connections between his impetus theory and these doctrines. His related work on the form of the commentary provides a new framework for interpreting the evidence for Philoponus' own positive views (as opposed to his attempts to provide faithful exegesis of the Aristotelian position he rejects).