



BRILL

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF THE PLATONIC TRADITION 14 (2020) 117-119

The International
Journal of the
Platonic Tradition
brill.com/jpt

Jens Halfwassen, 1958-2020

Ordinarius für Philosophie, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg

On the 14 February 2020, Germany lost one of its great metaphysical thinkers, as well as one of its finest scholars of classical antiquity, Jens Halfwassen. Born just outside Cologne (Bergisch Gladbach) in North Rhine-Westphalia on 16 November 1958, the future Cusanus expert attended the Nicolaus-Cusanus-Gymnasium in a fitting indication of things to come. From there he went on to study at the University of Cologne with Karl Bormann and Klaus Düsing, completing the first Staatsexamen in 1985 (Philosophy, History, Classics and Pedagogy). The volumes resulting from his doctorate (*Der Aufstieg zum Einen. Untersuchungen zu Platon und Plotin*. The Ascent to the One. Investigations on Plato and Plotinus) and habilitation (*Hegel und der spätantike Neuplatonismus. Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik des Einen und des Nous in Hegels spekulativer und geschichtlicher Deutung*. Hegel and late-antique Neoplatonism. Investigations on the Metaphysics of the One and of the Intellect in Hegel's Speculative and Historical Interpretation) both ran into multiple editions. After a brief spell as professor at Munich (1997-98) and visiting professor at Tübingen (1998-99), he took up a professorship at Heidelberg in 1999. Several important works followed, including a volume of collected articles (*Auf den Spuren des Einen. Studien zur Metaphysik und ihrer Geschichte*. On the Traces of the One. Studies on Metaphysics and its History, 2015).

The most striking feature of his work was the breadth of his research interests, ranging from ancient and late-antique philosophy (the Presocratics, Plato and the Old Academy, Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Boethius), via medieval and Renaissance philosophy (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Eriugena, Anselm of Aosta, Dietrich of Freiberg, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa), to German Idealism (Fichte, Hegel, Schelling). His philosophical position was characterised by the centrality which he accorded to Neoplatonism, viewing it as a vital link in a philosophical continuity stretching back to Plato and onward to German Idealism, where it found its most cogent expression in Hegel's thought. Thematically, much of his work was concerned with the One to which he accorded particular significance as a prerequisite for thought.

He was involved in numerous initiatives to support philosophical research, as a founding member (1999) and co-President (2011-13) of the Academia

Platonica Septima Monasteriensis and as a member of the Academic Board of the Berggruen Institute of Philosophy and Culture (from 2014). As editor of *Philosophische Rundschau*, he sought to combat the fragmentation of the discipline and as a frequent contributor to *Ruperto Carola* (Heidelberg's research magazine) to explain its significance. Aside from his service to the department, he was actively involved in the wider university as a Fellow of the Marsilius College and as Senior Fellow of the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies; he also edited the *Heidelberger Forschungen* series for Universitätsverlag Winter. Elected to the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences in 2012, he directed the Jaspers project of the Heidelberg and Göttingen Academies (which oversees the production of a complete edition and commentary of Karl Jaspers' writings).

A proud Rhinelander, he maintained intense academic connections with his home state, serving on the Hegel Commission of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences (1999-2017) and the Board of the International Centre for Philosophy NRW in Bonn (from 2011). A sign of the international esteem in which he was held is the honorary doctorate which he received from the University of Athens in 2014, as well as his Senior Fellowship at the Collegium Budapest. He was the recipient of numerous prizes, including a Heisenberg Professorship (1997-1999) and the Rudolf Meimberg Prize, of the Academy of Sciences and Literature, Mainz (2003). To generations of students he is best known as author of the *Plotin* volume in the Beck *Denker* series and to the German public for his frequent engagement in academic debates via articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and on German television.

However, no account of Halfwassen would be complete without mentioning his abilities as a teacher. His annual block seminar at Heiligkreuztal was the highlight of the academic calendar for the students, while the Christmas party which he organised with great gusto was the highlight of the social calendar for the academics. He mentored a stream of gifted doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, who themselves have shaped the research agenda in Germany, including Markus Gabriel, Rainer Schäfer, Tobias Dangel and Max Rohstock. Former students have also successfully applied philosophical approaches to other media: alongside a productive academic career, Florian Arnold presents an extremely popular television series on ZDF, while Giuseppe Blasotta's use of philosophical motifs in his art has been the subject of academic publications. In his obituary in the *F.A.Z.*, Markus Gabriel described Halfwassen as an "encyclopaedic philosopher" and it would be difficult to find a more fitting description of the breadth or depth of his knowledge, which ranged far beyond philosophy to include such topics as Irish or Mughal history, a level

of knowledge which characterised both his teaching and his research.¹ This remarkable level of openness to other intellectual traditions, and ability to forge connections between them, is illustrated by his edited volume (with Raif Georges Khoury and Frederek Musall) *Platonismus im Orient und Okzident* (2005), which examines Neoplatonic structures of thought in Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

I had the privilege of joining Halfwassen's research group at Heidelberg as an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow and later as a Fritz Thyssen Fellow. Alongside Tobias Dangel, we edited *Seele und Materie im Neuplatonismus. Soul and Matter in Neoplatonism* (2016) together. In the final few months, I had been translating his *Plotin* volume, which (together with an appendix of selected articles) is to appear with Franciscan University Press as *Plotinus, Neoplatonism and the Transcendence of the One*.² His former doctoral student, André Lanoue, is currently translating the *Plotin* volume into French. And so Jens Halfwassen shall continue to teach future generations of students about the wonders of Plotinus and the mysteries of the One.

Carl O'Brien

Ruprecht- Karls-Universität Heidelberg

csobrien@uni-heidelberg.de

¹ Gabriel, M. "Zum Tod von Jens Halfwassen: Spuren des Absoluten", *F.A.Z.* 19.02.2020.

² My introduction to this volume "Jens Halfwassen and the German Intellectual Tradition" examines Halfwassen's significant contribution to Plotinian studies in Germany.