

# CHRISTIAN WILDBERG



Christian Wildberg, professor of classics, will advance to emeritus status on July 1, 2018. Like the famous British scientist and novelist C. P. Snow, Christian has been that rare talent with the vision and ability to bridge “two cultures” at Princeton, serving as a valued member of the Department of Classics and the Program in Classical Philosophy. On the philosophy side, he has been able to contextualize analytical rigor with an extraordinarily broad knowledge of philosophy’s history, while for classicists he has opened up new vistas for those who may read Greek and Latin fluently but are pulled up short by phrases like  $\sim(A\&\sim A)$ .

For Christian, the tradition of classical philosophy extends for more than a millennium, from the archaic period to the end of late antiquity, and it includes such topics as mysticism and the cult of Dionysus alongside Aristotle’s cosmology; to this he adds interests in Greek literature and religion. Such breadth reflects his training, which includes a master’s in theology from the University of Marburg and a Ph.D. in classics from the University of Cambridge in 1984. After a junior research fellowship at Caius College, Cambridge, and an assistant professorship at the Freie Universität Berlin, Christian joined the Princeton faculty in 1996.

In over 50 articles, four monographs and five edited volumes, Christian has made seminal contributions in several areas of ancient philosophy. His doctoral dissertation *John Philoponus’ Criticism of Aristotle’s Theory of Ether*, supervised by G.E.L. Owen and G.E.R. Lloyd, set the scene for a long and deep engagement not only with Philoponus, a sixth-century Christian commentator and critic of Aristotle’s philosophy. It also inaugurated Christian’s sustained and probing exploration of Aristotle’s natural philosophy and metaphysics, culminating in (among other things) important contributions to volumes of the *Symposium Aristotelicum* on Aristotle’s *On Generation and Corruption* (1999, published in 2004) and on the philosophical difficulties through which Aristotle puzzles his way in Book Beta of his *Metaphysics* (2002, published in 2009). Furthermore, it began a career-spanning fascination with philosophy in late antiquity, a strong fit with Princeton’s distinction in that field.

Soon after earning his Ph.D., Christian published two books on Philoponus' criticisms of Aristotle's natural philosophy: *Philoponus Against Aristotle on the Eternity of the World* (1987) and *John Philoponus' Criticism of Aristotle's Theory of Ether* (1988). These were soon followed by another book on closely related topics: *Simplicius Against Philoponus on the Eternity of the World* (1991), co-authored with David Furley, whom Christian was to succeed as a professor in classics at Princeton. The intellectual milieu of the later ancient commentators on Aristotle is dominated by Neoplatonism, a system of philosophical ideas characterized by a hierarchical conception of reality that is strongly influenced by Plato and Aristotle but that is at the same time distinctive. Christian's interest in Neoplatonism may have started as part of his attempt to understand the fascinating historical figure of Philoponus, but it soon took on a life of its own, resulting in publications on Neoplatonist ethics (2002), and on Plotinus' conception of nature (2009). Recently Christian published a magisterial article on Neoplatonism for the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016), and he is currently at work editing a *Handbook of Neoplatonism* that will be published by Oxford University Press.

To anyone familiar with Christian's work in ancient philosophy, it is clear that his interest in Philoponus is in large part a sympathetic one for a strikingly independent thinker. Operating against the background of thinkers who were deferential to the great philosophers of the past (above all, to Plato and Aristotle), Philoponus reads Aristotle as a fallible and flawed thinker and adopts an openly critical attitude towards a figure widely regarded as The Philosopher. Philoponus' independence made visible intellectual possibilities that no one had explored before, and Christian's engagement with the tradition of later ancient commentators on Aristotle continued and is continuing. Among the fruits of this engagement are the erudite and enormously helpful entries in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* on Philoponus, Elias, David, Olympiodorus, and Syrianus, all written between 2003 and 2009.

In much of Christian's work as a scholar and a teacher, one can see his appreciation of intellectual independence, of the imagination and courage it takes not to limit oneself to doing business as usual. The same is true of Christian's interest in the literary aspects of ancient intellectual history. In 2002 he published *Hyperesie und Epiphanie*,

subtitled “an exploration of the meaning of the gods in the plays of Euripides.” His careful readings showed that this allegedly “atheistic” playwright advanced a bold and innovative concept of piety as a willing service to the gods and their inhuman moral code even when it was reciprocated with disastrous effects.

Christian’s scholarly contributions to the study of ancient philosophy and of classics have been rich and varied, but remarkably cohesive. While at Princeton, Christian organized a long-standing and immensely successful philosophy reading group that, each week during each semester since fall 2001, has brought together faculty members and graduate students to pore over difficult texts. The classics department has profited from Christian’s wide knowledge of Greek literature and from his deep knowledge of the language, which he has taught to beginners and to graduate students wishing to try their hands at composing Greek prose.

As a teacher, Christian has taught undergraduates mainstays like Plato, Aristotle, and the interdepartmental “Introduction to Ancient Philosophy” course and also innovative courses of his own: a course Christian developed on “From Pandora to Psychopathy: Evil from Antiquity to the Present” regularly drew hundreds of students eager to survey understandings of human wickedness ranging from Homer to the Holocaust. His graduate teaching is marked by the same breadth, supplementing the canonical authors with seminars on the letters of Plato and Aristotle, Plotinus, as well as Euripides and Isocrates. Christian’s encouraging advising has provided intellectual and moral support to graduate students, as well as stimulation of a multi-year reading group going through the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a syncretic collection of esoteric Greco-Egyptian wisdom texts that is neglected now but was a powerful stimulus to early Christianity and the Renaissance.

In addition his research and teaching, Christian has generously served the field through editorial work. He is an editor of the leading international journals of ancient philosophy, *Apeiron* and *Philosophia Antiqua*, and co-edits two monograph series, *Philosophia Antiqua* and *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum*. Together with Michael Wachtel, professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures, he prepared a posthumous edition of *Dionysos und die vordionysischen Kulte*, a treatise on ancient religion by the Russian symbolist poet and Indo-Europeanist Vyacheslav Ivanov.

Christian has served as a member of the Managing Committee of the American School for Classical Studies in Athens and at Princeton served as head of Forbes College from 2006–10 as well as being actively involved with the Program in Classical Philosophy, the Center for the Study of Religion, and the Committee for the Study of Late Antiquity. His work as director of the Program for Hellenic Studies will be a particularly significant component of his legacy at Princeton: as he takes an especially long view of the history of Greek philosophy, so his advocacy for this program has helped foster a perspective on Greek culture as something continuous that resists a hierarchical periodization into classical, Byzantine, and modern.

Christian thus takes with him the gratitude and admiration of two departments as he goes on to the University of Pittsburgh and once again bestrides their Program in Classics, Philosophy, and Ancient Science and their Department of Classics as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor.