



WORKSHOP

Breaking Idols, Embracing Doubts From idolatrous to Sceptical Attitudes

14 - 15 May 2024

Besides referring to specific philosophical positions, scepticism can also be taken in a broader sense as a general disposition towards reality and truth. An analogous extension in meaning, however, is also noticeable in what can arguably be regarded as the opposite of scepticism; to wit, idolatry, which signifies the human practice of worship, but can also be generalised to indicate a *forma mentis*.

In both cases, a change in perspective is involved: from actual philosophical and historical phenomena to the ways of thinking they imply. Rather than scepticism and idolatry, it would then probably be more accurate to talk of sceptical and idolatrous attitudes, with the former posing a relentless challenge to supposedly immovable truths, while the latter are characterised by an uncritical acceptance of their validity.

In this context, philosophical interpretations of Jewish anti-idolatry have certainly made a far from negligible contribution to the debate, promoting a questioning approach against any form of intellectual subjection to dogmas, assumptions, or authorities.

This workshop will focus on the contrast between idolatrous and sceptical attitudes, exploring its various aspects in the light of philosophical and Jewish sources alike.

Convenor

- Beniamino Fortis (Universität Hamburg)

Participants

- Chiara Adorisio (Sapienza Università di Roma)
- Agata Bielik-Robson (University of Nottingham)
- Caterina Diotto (Universität Hamburg)
- Haris Papoulias (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)
- Melissa Raphael (Leo Baeck College London)
- Lars Tittmar (Freie Universität Berlin)
- Michael Zank (Boston University)

Tuesday, 14 May 2024

Welcoming Remarks

09:45 **Giuseppe Veltri**, *Head of the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies*

Session I

Chair Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)

10:00 **Pictures between Idolatrous and Sceptical Attitudes**
Beniamino Fortis (Universität Hamburg)

11:00 *COFFEE BREAK*

11:30 **The Sceptical Icon: Byzantine Aesthetics against Idolatry**
Haris Papoulias (Universidad Complutense de Madrid)

12:30 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

Chair Kirill Chepurin (Universität Hamburg)

13:30 **Smashing the Idol of Glorious Death: The Marrano Theology of Survival**
Agata Bielik-Robson (University of Nottingham)

14:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

15:00 **Idolatry – Fetish – Utopia: A perspective from Critical Theory**
Lars Tittmar (Freie Universität Berlin)

19:00 *DINNER*

*Restaurant “Citta Vegan Izakaya”
Grindelhof 17, 20146 Hamburg*

Wednesday, 15 May 2024

Session I

Chair *Guillem Sales-Vilalta (Universität Hamburg)*

10:00 **Debunking Patriarchal Idolatry:
Diotima's Epistemology and the Experience of Women Christian Mystics**
Caterina Diotto (Universität Hamburg)

11:00 *COFFEE BREAK*

11:30 **Created in the Image of Patriarchy:
Second Wave Jewish Feminism and the Criticism of Divine and Human Idols**
Melissa Raphael (Leo Baeck College London)

12:30 *LUNCH BREAK*

Session II

Chair *Beniamino Fortis (Universität Hamburg)*

13:30 **The Things They Carried: Graven Images, Prophecy, and the Law**
Michael Zank (Boston University)

14:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

15:00 **"Uniqueness" as an Antidote to Idolatrous Thinking:
Hermann Cohen's and Max Stirner's Critique of Idolatry**
Chiara Adorisio (Sapienza Università di Roma)

Venue

Universität Hamburg
Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies (MCAS)
Jungiusstraße 11 C | 20355 Hamburg
3rd Floor, Room C319

Abstracts

Pictures between Idolatrous and Sceptical Attitudes

Beniamino Fortis

In the context of the production and reception of pictures, two notions are particularly relevant for the topic of idolatry: the notion of *pictorial function*, which stands for “the way a picture is thought to relate to its non-pictorial object”, and that of *visual attitude*, which indicates “a way of looking at pictures that determines their functions”. Based on these definitions, the antithesis between idolatry and anti-idolatry can be interpreted as a contrast between different *pictorial functions* and their underlying *visual attitudes*.

Considering ancient and modern sources, this paper focuses on two main functions – presentification and representation – and their corresponding attitudes, showing how both, albeit in different ways, are exposed to the risk of idolatry. It will be argued that a *sceptical moment* is an essential component of any attitude that effectively prevents idolatry.

The Sceptical Icon: Byzantine Aesthetics against Idolatry

Haris Papoulias

Could an icon be a device of scepticism? Could an image theory help us avoid the idolatrous gaze? An affirmative answer to these questions lies at the core of Byzantine aesthetics and its constant struggle against idolatry. This contribution suggests an alternative reading of Byzantine Iconoclasm and its consequences. According to such reading, it is not correct to talk about an iconophile victory over iconoclasm. Rather, a third position can be delineated that is new and radically sceptical of the idolatrous powers of every visual culture. It is arguable, moreover, that this new image theory is largely due, not to the rejection – as is often believed – but to the fulfilment of the Jewish Law: an eloquent example of the particular inverted logic of Byzantine aesthetics.

Smashing the Idol of Glorious Death. The Marrano Theology of Survival

Agata Bielik-Robson

This presentation offers an argument against martyrology as it emerges from the writings of the three modern Marrano thinkers: Michel de Montaigne, Baruch Spinoza, and Jacques Derrida. In their thought deeply concerned with the apology of life, the Marrano choice of living over against the idol of martyrological death becomes affirmed despite the price of forced conversion. Although seemingly excluded from the Judaic tradition, the *conversos* remain thus close to the iconoclastic core of Judaism; they continue its crusade against pagan immanent gods, by criticising the fetish of the glorious death as the part and parcel of pagan idolatry. Montaigne’s polemic against the “choice of death” formulates exactly the same the

anti-idolatrous arguments that can be found in Maimonides' "Epistle on Conversion", even if unknowingly. Both, Maimonides and Montaigne, understand Jewish revelation as the highest imperative of *u-baharta ba-hayim* – "Choose life!" (Deut 30:18) – that overrules every possible choice of death, including also the honorary self-sacrifice of *kiddush ha-Shem*. In the Marrano "theology of survival", therefore, the martyrological impulse becomes questioned precisely as the last ditch of idolatry which "overestimates death" as the "absolute master" and "immanent god". By not obeying the self-sacrificial logic and choosing life instead, the Marranos smash the thanatic idol and give a new, truly post-idolatrous meaning, to the Jewish *toray hayim*, the "teaching of life", which releases the notion of survival from the grips of the pagan "metaphysics of death".

Idolatry – Fetish – Utopia. A Perspective from Critical Theory

Lars Tittmar

In the critical theory of the so-called Frankfurt School, scepticism can be directed at both the existing conditions and the possibility of changing them. In this intellectual context, the necessity of overcoming the existing toward something better is essentially connected to the topics of utopia and the ban on images. The first part of this presentation investigates the significance of this relationship (which also shows the enormous influence of sources from the Jewish tradition), focusing on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. The relationship between idolatry and the fetishization of the object is then addressed with reference to two conceptions: Walter Benjamin's materialist aesthetics, as expounded in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and Adorno's "primacy of the object" (*Vorrang des Objekts*), which is a central figure of his *Negative Dialectics*. Through dialectics, critical theory not only reveals itself as an anti-idolatrous way of thinking, but also opens a perspective that goes beyond the existing.

Debunking Patriarchal Idolatry:

Diotima's Epistemology and the Experience of Women Christian Mystics

Caterina Diotto

Idolatry in modern times has been conceptualized as the annihilation of the hiatus between reality and the symbolization process of a culture, as Emil Fackenheim once wrote. In this regard, then, the efforts of Italian Second Wave Feminism to debunk the patriarchal system by creating a new symbolic order can be understood as a cultural struggle to reject a sociopolitical form of idolatry: the idea that patriarchal languages, concepts, structures, and beliefs are one with reality.

Italian Second Wave Feminism is rooted in Luce Irigaray's Theory of the Sexual Difference, referring in particular to her feminist interpretation of the Lacanian concept of "symbolic order". The symbolic represents the cultural and political structure of power relations expressed in language. The more a symbolic is hierarchical, focused on the point of view of a

privileged social group, the more it tries to present itself as natural and inevitable – in other words, it grows more and more idolatrous. The patriarchal symbolic is highly hierarchical and has been hegemonic for centuries. Deconstructing its assumptions and beliefs has always been one of the fundamental aims of Feminism. However, feminist philosophers face a deep epistemological problem: how is it possible to radically change the symbolic, while being immersed in it?

By delving into the early works by Adriana Cavarero and Comunità Filosofica Femminile Diotima of Verona, this paper will show how Teresa of Avila's and Marguerite Porete's writings helped Italian feminist philosophers trace a path to overcome the problem and give life to a different symbolic order.

Created in the Image of Patriarchy: Second Wave Jewish Feminism and the Criticism of Divine and Human Idols

Melissa Raphael

Second Wave Jewish and Christian women's liberationists understood the problem of women's objectification as more than that of their reduction to decorative and compliant objects of desire. More basically, false images of women were seen as a primary sin against their full humanity as speaking subjects and agents of their own experience, and against the divinity of God, in whose image they were created.

Noting that Jewish and Christian feminist theologians' criticism of patriarchy as idolatry had different reasons and sources, this illustrated lecture explores how the Jewish feminist criticism of idols lent the wider women's liberation movement a prophetic dynamic that is too often overlooked.

The Things They Carried: Graven Images, Prophecy, and the Law

Michael Zank

Taking the speech of Isaiah 46 as a point of departure, it will be argued that the worship of graven images made it possible – *via negativa* – for the biblical prophets to proclaim a deity whose presence can only be discerned *post factum*, by looking at past experience. The interpretation of that experience in Isaiah 46, a prophecy buoyed by the optimism of the age of Cyrus II of Anshan ("the Great"), ironically subverts the making (and carrying) of graven images into an "image" of the living God who carried Israel and, in a further ironic expression, fashions humans in his own image (Gen 1). This interpretation will be used to critique Margalit and Halbertal's schematic approach to idolatry. This reading will be informed by Plato's critique of writing as interpreted by Wolfgang Wieland, and by *Guide I*, 54, Maimonides's interpretation of the prophecy of Moses.

“Uniqueness” as an Antidote to Idolatrous Thinking: Hermann Cohen’s and Max Stirner’s Critique of Idolatry

Chiara Adorisio

The biblical critique of idolatry acknowledges that people have a proclivity towards worshipping all sorts of things that are not God. Modern and contemporary philosophy, since Spinoza, criticizes idolatrous thinking tendencies in the name of a true philosophy. The critique of idolatry can be used to show how people become oppressed by their own creations or to better understand the relationship between religion and philosophy.

The goal of this paper is to reflect on the concept of “uniqueness” in two different and distant philosophers, Hermann Cohen and Max Stirner. While the Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen devoted an important chapter of his posthumously published work, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1919), to the concept of God’s uniqueness, which he finds already in medieval Jewish philosophy and to which he assigns a seminal role in his synthesis between Jewish sources and philosophical rationalism; the 19th century’s anarchist, Max Stirner, realizes in his *Das Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1845) an iconoclastic and still topical turn in philosophy, in which the individual, aware of his uniqueness, frees himself from oppression and idolatry: “Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of my uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness”. “If I set my affair on myself [*Stell’ Ich auf Mich meine Sache*] the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: All things are nothing to me”. Both philosophers see “uniqueness” as an antidote to idolatrous thinking.