



**HAL**  
open science

# The Foundation of Origenist Metaphysics

Pascal Mueller-Jourdan

► **To cite this version:**

Pascal Mueller-Jourdan. The Foundation of Origenist Metaphysics. Bronwen Neil; Pauline Allen. The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor, Oxford University Press, pp.149-163, 2015, 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199673834.013.6 . hal-04676926

**HAL Id: hal-04676926**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04676926>**

Submitted on 28 Aug 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Copyright

## « The Foundation of Origenist Metaphysics »

Pascal Mueller-Jourdan

### Introduction

This chapter offers a survey of Origen's great work of speculative theology, *On First Principles (Princ.)*, with a view to finding the roots of Origenist metaphysics. As major contemporary scholars have noticed about the legacy of Origen in late-antique theology, Origenism has to be understood in several ways. The nature of the link between Origenism and Origen himself remains one of the most complex issues of the legacy of the great theologian. Numerous studies of the past decades have tried to map the complex web of concepts and ideas that come from ambiguous issues arising from Origen's *On First Principles*. Because of the importance of such a systematic work and, in particular, the recurrence of some of its major themes in late-antique theological and spiritual controversies, it is useful to explore several basic elements which, at the deepest level, were permanently presupposed among Origenists long after Origen wrote. We shall focus specifically on the primary nature of rational creatures, their Fall, and their restoration to the primitive unity and equality that they lost after the misuse of free will.

In the context of a handbook focussing upon Maximus the Confessor's perspectives on theology and philosophy, we will try to highlight the roots of the *Weltanschauung* of Origenism that Maximus knew. It is not irrational today to admit that Maximus inherited the general cosmic vision of all realities introduced by the original inquiry of *On First Principles*. This innovative investigation, radicalized by Evagrius Ponticus, was critically corrected by the Cappadocians. It offered Maximus the occasion to set out his own *Weltanschauung*. If we can recognize in the metaphysics of Origenism the prime matter of Maximus' cosmic liturgy, particularly the connection between metaphysics and chronological sequences of the general divine economy of Creation, it will be obvious that Maximus effected a radical and orthodox reconfiguration of Origen's metaphysics.

## I. A Systematic Synthesis of Christian Faith

*On First Principles* is one of the most controversial treatises of ante-Nicene theology. The original Greek document disappeared because of its very controversial content. We possess only the Latin translation of Rufinus of Aquileia (c.340/5–c.410). This is the text received in Latin theological tradition. But this single Latin source is problematic because Jerome (c.347–420) charged Rufinus with corrupting the original Greek and proposing a rearrangement of Origen's controversial doctrine. For this reason, we shall leave open discussions about choices made for this presentation of metaphysical themes. We shall be guided by the determination to set out some of the controversial Origenian themes that seem to have been the horizon of Maximus the Confessor's critiques of Origenism.

*On First Principles* was probably constructed as a sort of general panorama of Christian faith known as the 'apostolic teaching' (*Princ.* 1. Preface):<sup>1</sup>

- (1) God, one, 'who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be ...';
- (2) 'Christ Jesus, he who came to the earth, was begotten of the Father before every created thing ...';
- (3) 'the Holy Spirit is united in honour and dignity with the Father and the Son ...';
- (4) 'the soul, having a substance and life of its own ...', 'every rational soul is possessed of free will and choice ...';
- (5) the existence of 'the devil and his angels and the opposing spiritual powers';
- (6) '... this world which was made and began to exist at a definite time and by reason of its corruptible nature it must suffer dissolution'. Afterwards, Origen raises the issue of what was before and after this world, emphasizing that 'no clear statement on the point is set forth in the church's teaching';
- (7) the last point mentioned in the Preface is concerned with the question of divine inspiration of the holy scriptures through the Spirit of God.

The entire project of Origen, in every topic examined, is dominated by the wish to stay in conformity with the scriptures and with the church's faith. However, particularly in *On First Principles*, Origen points out several rational difficulties regarding the Creation, as suggested above. He remarks that the divine scriptures, in many places, indicate that this visible world has a beginning and is expecting an end (cf. *Princ.* 3. 5. 1). For Origen, all visible things were

created at a definite time and will remain in their own **(p. 151)** mode of organization until their last days at another definite time. This visible world has a history. It has now a certain age, as Origen asserts: 'In accordance with our belief in scripture we also calculate how many years old it is' (*Princ.* 3. 5. 3), and its current form will pass away at a definite instant (cf. 1 Cor 7: 31). Consequently, this visible world will have as limited a duration as any living being.

But if such a view is accepted, there arises one of the major notable *aporiae* of the Judaeo-Christian idea of Creation. If the current visible and tangible world has a precise temporal beginning as the book of Genesis attests, what was God doing before the world began? The general inquiry following that question is particularly troubling to deal with. To solve such a problem, Origen says: 'We, however, will give a logical answer that preserves the rule of piety by saying that God did not begin to work for the first time when he made this visible world, but that just as after the dissolution of this world there will be another one, so also we believe that there were others before this one existed' (*Princ.* 3. 5. 3). This logical answer, which for Origen respects the rule of piety, is the starting-point for a more complete *Weltanschauung* presupposed by the theologian. If the condition of existence of this present world has initial and final limits, to avoid imputing limits and weaknesses to God's activity, it is reasonable, or at least not illogical, to suppose that his omnipotence and his beneficence are never without real activity. And if he has to have been always in action, it is also reasonable to suppose an object on which he is always acting. If God is always Creator, Justice and Providence, we can understand the reason for which Origen admitted the possibility of postulating the existence of created entities which always benefit from God's justice and providence (cf. *Princ.* 1. 4. 3–4). Thus, he intellectually conceded the thesis of permanent activity of God before the creation of this concrete world, and also the continuity of his action after the consummation of this current visible world. These first elements allow Origen to investigate the status and condition of the coming world promised by the scriptures. They also allow him to infer the existence of realities before the creation of this current visible world (cf. *Princ.* 3. 5. 3–4). But Origen appears perfectly conscious of the fact that he is engaging in a domain of very sensitive exploration, because, once more, there is no clear statement on this in church teaching (cf. *Princ.* 1. Preface). He mentions the weakness and limitation of human intelligence in such a matter, particularly when people try 'to understand how during the whole of God's existence his creatures have existed also'

(*Princ.* 1. 4. 4). Such an issue rouses a ‘conflict in our human thoughts and reasoning’ (*Princ.* 1. 4. 4) in regard to ‘the small and narrow capacity of our mind’ (*Princ.* 1. 4. 4). About such an issue, Origen demonstrates great methodological caution when he declares:

‘Now we ourselves speak on these subjects with great fear and caution, discussing and investigating rather than laying down fixed and certain conclusions. For we have previously pointed out what are the subjects on which clear doctrinal statements must be made, and such statements we made, I think, to the best of our ability, when speaking of the Trinity. Now, however, we are dealing, as well as we can, with subjects that call for discussion rather than for definition’ (cf. *Princ.* 1. 6. 1).

To encompass the total metaphysical framework presupposed by the theologian, it is appropriate now to divide our investigation into three distinctive phases. The starting-point of the inquiry is this present world, characterized by diversity and variety of essences and modes of existence known through physical phenomena, anthropological and ethnological classifications and also through what holy scripture mentions. The future world, or world to come, is the second step of the study. It is known by revelation in the church and holy scripture. The past world, or world prior to Creation of this current visible world, is the last step of such an investigation. It is known by inference from the end to the beginning.

## 2. Metaphysics and History: A Reciprocal Involvement

The starting-point of Origen’s system is to note the variety and natural diversity in the world we experience today. This is verified both by empirical observation and by the various names used in scripture to make distinctions among the great diversity of beings and modes of existence (cf. *Princ.* 1. 5. 1–3). The concept of ‘world’ is ambiguous, and Origen specified its various meanings many times in *On First Principles*, following the well-known Aristotelian method of collecting multiple connotations (πολλαχῶς λεγόμενα) of one particular word (cf. *Princ.* 2. 3. 6; for the method, see Aristotle, *Met.* Book Δ). ‘World’ in scripture has the meaning of ‘ornament’, for example, in the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 3: 16; 3: 24); ‘world’ indicates that it is represented on the garment of the high priest (cf. Wisd. 18: 24); it means this earth of ours together with its inhabitants (cf. 1 John 5: 19); it designates this universe which consists of heaven and earth (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 31); we can also find the use of the word when holy scripture speaks about the world that our Lord and Saviour comes from, beyond this

visible one (John 17: 14–16; 24), and we find it also in the biblical expression ‘before the foundation of the world’ (πρὸ καταβολῆ τοῦ κόσμου) which has great significance in the metaphysics of Origen (cf. *Princ.* 3. 5. 4–5). In those sections of the work, Origen admits the possibility of postulating the existence of one world before, and of one world after, this visible world (cf. *Princ.* 3. 5. 3; see also *Princ.* 2. 3. 1). Yet, insofar as we need to start from the current condition of things, in the context of *On First Principles*, Origen affirms that the term ‘world’ has a comprehensive meaning of ‘all that is above the heavens, or in them, or on the earth, or in what are called the lower regions, or any places that exist anywhere; together with the beings who are said to dwell in them. All this is called the world’ (*Princ.* 2. 9. 3). In this world, Origen distinguishes various hierarchically ordered forms of beings, from supercelestial beings to infernal powers, as well as earthly creatures; and among these last ones, he finds humans. In each of those levels or conditions of existence, Origen clearly reveals its own internal hierarchy. For example, Origen, following the apostle Paul, notes many ordered differences among heavenly bodies, because, ‘There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars, for one star differs from another in glory’ (1 Cor. 15: 41). Such a hierarchy corresponds to astronomical observation and is corroborated by holy scripture. But Origen admits similar hierarchical ordering among rational natures considered as ‘celestial’, such as the holy angels of God (*Princ.* 1. 5. 1; 1. 5. 3). Their different names attested in Paul’s Epistles, as ‘thrones or seats, dominions, principalities and powers’ (Col. 1: 16), and ‘principality, authority, power, dominion’ (Eph. 1: 21), seem to confirm that various ordered ranks and functions are attributed to celestial beings in the general economy of this current world.

Under this ‘celestial rank’ stand the living earthly beings such as humans, rational creatures divided into many categories. For Origen, this rank is attributed to ‘those who occupy a middle position between the good and the bad and are still involved in struggle and conflict’ (*Princ.* 1. 5. 1). As Origen notes, ‘among men, there are no small differences’ (cf. *Princ.* 2. 9. 3). Origen then offers a rather full description of classified differences observable among humans: discriminative qualities, dispositions, ways of life, and fortunes or misfortunes. In the category of earthly rational creatures, Origen includes also ‘certain invisible powers, to which the management of things upon earth is entrusted; and we must believe that among these, too, no small differences exist, just as is found to be the case among men’ (*Princ.* 2. 9. 3).

And finally at the lower level, in following the apostle Paul, Origen intimates that ‘there are also certain ‘infernal’ powers (cf. Eph. 4: 9) and among these in like manner a condition of variety must undoubtedly be looked for’ (*Princ.* 2. 9. 3).<sup>2</sup>

As far as Origen can observe, this current created world is characterized and dominated by huge diversity and variety of situations, in a cosmic arrangement that distributes places and locations to rational natures for some metaphysical reasons that we shall have to explain later. Indeed, in the current organized world, among rational creatures, some of them appear now as celestial above the earth, some as terrestrial upon the earth, and others as infernal under the earth. In this topography, there is a correspondence between the cosmic plan of the visible reality and the condition of existence of spiritual entities. At this single level, that is the current one, diversity and multiplicity of status are the dominant rule for all created realities, especially for rational creatures (cf. *Princ.* 2. 1. 1). But, for Origen, the question of the genuine nature of each one of them remains open for philosophical<sup>3</sup> and theological reasons (the unity promised at the consummation of the age, such as has been revealed in scripture).

Thus, the second step of the investigation of *On First Principles* will be to compare the current condition of things with what scripture claims about the restoration to unity and the common destiny of those who are now in diversity. For the biblical texts, this is one of the main dimensions of the mission of salvation realized in and by Jesus Christ. The current diversity appears to be an accidental part of a more general plan. At least, such diversity will be superseded by unity at the end of this world when God will be ‘all in all’. When the Apostle said that all things will be subjected unto the Son of God and in him unto the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 28), Origen asserts that this means a perfect restoration (ἀποκατάστασις) of the primitive Creation, and finally the reinstatement of rational creatures in their original similarity and equality and in their genuine and natural place, before the foundation of this visible present world (cf. *Princ.* 3. 5. 7–8; 3. 6. 1–9). We should recall that Origenian eschatology remains archaic because the restored nature of rational beings is more or less subject to again losing the unity and stability it has recovered (see *Princ.* 1. 3. 8).

Considering the end as a restoration of a lost status, Origen infers the beginning from that end. Such an inference is emphasized in the first pages of *On First Principles*:

Seeing, then, that such is the end, when ‘all enemies shall have been subjected to Christ’, when ‘the last enemy shall be destroyed, that is, death’, and when ‘the kingdom shall be

delivered up to God and the Father by Christ, to whom all things have been subjected' (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 24–28), let us, I say, from such an end as this, contemplate the beginning of things. For the end is always like the beginning; as therefore there is one end of all things, so we must understand that there is one beginning of all things, and as there is one end of many things, so from one beginning arise many differences and varieties, which in their turn are restored, through God's goodness, through their subjection to Christ and their unity with the Holy Spirit, to one end, which is like the beginning.

(*Princ.* 1. 6. 2)

Thus to sum up, Origen clearly points out three sequential phases for Creation and particularly for the creation of rational beings: (1) the phase before the foundation of this world; (2) the current phase limited by beginning and end; and (3) the phase after this world at the moment of reinstatement of all things in the lost primitive status of nature. The first is characterized by equality, similarity, unity, and stability of all rational created natures (souls and/or minds). Origen explains the reason for such characteristics of rational natures: 'As therefore he himself [God], in whom was neither variation nor change nor lack of power, was the cause of all that was to be created, he created all his creatures equal and alike, for the simple reason that there was in him no cause that could give rise to variety and diversity' (*Princ.* 2. 9. 6). The second is characterized by huge diversity, but also by multiplicity hierarchically ordered for rational creatures, distributed qualitatively—not in the strict sense ontologically—into celestial, terrestrial, and infernal ranks. The third phase is characterized by the restoration of primitive equality, similarity, unity, and stability for souls and/or minds. We must note that for Origen, these three distinctive phases, periods, levels, or stages have never coexisted all together at the same time. They are not simultaneous, but appear one after another (see *Princ.* 3. 5. 3).

### 3. A Primitive Nature Programmed to Endless Progression

Such a tripartite chronological framework, which combines historical and metaphysical considerations, appears to be the base of Origenism. But we have to take into account the metaphysical event which explains the 'accidental status' of the intermediate phase where diversity and multiplicity appear to be the general rule for all created beings. If the end appears to be the restoration of beginning, the final consummation of all things is not simply



a return to primitive perfection because, before the foundation of this current cosmos, the rational creatures were not created in a definitive, perfect, stabilized mode of being. Indeed, they received—along with primitive, equal, and similar rational substance—free will, which leaves open various prospects in their modality of being.<sup>4</sup> Such an indication leads to the necessity for all rational creatures to maintain themselves in equality and stability, in participating in goodness, which resides essentially in the Trinity alone (cf. *Princ.* 1. 6. 2; 2. 9. 6). Well attested in *On First Principles*, such a theory supposes that the rational creatures have a native natural ‘instability’ (see *Princ.* 2. 9. 2) and the possibility of moving themselves in a good or bad way. The good way would be respectful of their own substance and the bad a degradation of their mode of being, as Origen clearly asserts: ‘But since these rational creatures, as we have frequently shown and will show yet again in its proper place, were endowed with the power of free will, it was this freedom which induced each one by his own voluntary choice either to make progress through the imitation of God or to deteriorate through negligence’ (*Princ.* 2. 9. 6).

They have thus the ability, either to progress endlessly in the stability of the divine goodness, or to fall out of its sphere of good and stable influence. That could mean, from a philosophical point of view, that the rational creatures would be naturally characterized by continuous activity and thus by a kind of spiritual movement (i.e. the progress to be made through the imitation of God), because the necessity of securing their stability would be boundless. A comparison with Plotinus’ *Enneads* 5. 1. 1 and *Enneads* 6. 9. 8–9 is relevant here. Such a comparison would help to explain the root of the theory of ‘perpetual progress’ developed by Gregory of Nyssa<sup>5</sup> and its reception, in another context, in the eschatology of Maximus the Confessor, because it points out the infinite and inexhaustible goodness of the divinity.<sup>6</sup> In both cases, we can see a transformation of the intuitive directions proposed initially by Origen.

To explain the transition between the first period of the general economy of Creation and the second period—our own time—Origen underlines a word used many times in scripture, ‘casting downwards’ (καταβολή),<sup>7</sup> as we can read in the following passage:

Still, there is a point which I do not think we ought to pass by lightly, and that is that the holy scriptures call the foundation of the world by a new and peculiar name, terming it καταβολή. This word is very incorrectly translated into Latin by ‘foundation’ (*constitutio*), for καταβολή in Greek has rather the significance of casting downwards (*deicere*).

(*Princ.* 3. 5. 4)

Such a problem, when translating Greek into Latin, illustrates an issue met by Latin translators of Origen, such as Rufinus,<sup>8</sup> through whom we now possess a nearly complete Latin version of the Greek text. But such an interpretation of καταβολή was transmitted in late-antique Origenism as a focal point of its metaphysics: in 630, Maximus the Confessor discussed it again in his *Questions Addressed to Thalassius* (*Q.Thal.* 60, Laga–Steel 1990: 73–81). Maximus deals with the Origenist interpretation of the *aporia* raised by part of the verse: ‘Christ, as of a pure and spotless lamb, who was foreknown before the foundation of the world, yet manifested at the end of time for our sake’ (1 Pet. 1: 19–20). ‘By whom was Christ foreknown?’ Maximus concludes his critique of the exclusive use of such a verse as follows:

Indeed, we reject the argument of some who say that Christ was ‘foreknown before the foundation (καταβολή) of the world’ to those to whom he was later ‘manifested at the end of time’, as though those beings were themselves present with the foreknown Christ before the foundation of the world, and as though the scriptural Word were running away from the truth and suggesting that the essence of rational beings is coeternal with God.

(*Q.Thal.* 60, Laga–Steel 1990: 81, 131–6; Blowers–Wilken 2003: 128)

Origen, focussing on καταβολή to speak about the beginning of this current visible world, interprets it as an indication of the Fall of rational creatures into the thickness and heaviness of corruptible bodies. Such an interpretation is confirmed a few sentences later when he asserts: ‘A descent, therefore, of all alike from higher to lower conditions appears to be indicated by the meaning of this word καταβολή’ (*Princ.* 3. 5. 4). It is probably useful to make clear that Origen does not consider the matter in itself to be a result of the Fall of rational creatures because, for him, matter and/or corporeality is a fundamental and permanent characteristic of created beings (see, for instance, *Princ.* 2. 2. 1).

#### 4. Spirit/Soul and Matter

‘Each spirit or soul, or whatever else rational existences ought to be called’ (*Princ.* 2. 1. 2), essentially alike in nature, possessing knowledge and free will, having thus capacity for endless progress in infinite goodness (which resides essentially in God alone) would have been created *in principio* (we mean before the Creation of the world) with a kind of basic

measured corporeality or corporeal dimension (cf. *Princ.* 2. 9. 1, interpreting Wisdom 11: 20, 'you have created all things by number and measure'). Indeed, Origen considers that the rational creatures never exist without a certain form of corporeality (cf. *Princ.* 2. 2. 1–2; 2. 3. 1–7), because it would appear that the Trinity alone would be absolutely incorporeal (see *Princ.* 2. 2. 2). Such an assertion, however, is subject to various interpretations because it does not mean that the spirit is by nature corporeal. The proper nature of the spirit, mind, soul, or intellect is incorporeal, as Origen clearly affirms (cf. *Princ.* 1. 7. 1), but it also seems that the rational creatures have always an enmattered existence. However, they seem to have this condition of existence in a *materia prima* which would be single prior to the diversity now visible after their fall. As Origen declares: '[M]aterial substance is of such a nature that it can undergo every kind of transformation. When therefore it is drawn down to lower beings it is formed into the grosser and more solid condition of body and serves to distinguish the visible species of this world in all their variety' (*Princ.* 2. 2. 2). Such an assertion indicates that prime matter (or primitive level of materiality) is neutral from an ethical point of view. It could also mean that prime matter would not be 'material' in the sense in which we use the expression today, but a paradoxical intelligible matter. It seems also reasonable to think that the 'absolute' prime matter is not a consequence of a primitive failure of rational creatures, but simply a basic dimension of the divine Creation from the beginning of created beings' substantial existence. In any case, substantial existence implies limits and thus the possibility of experiencing a sort of repletion. In any case, asking whether God created the prime matter in anticipation of the Fall is a very sensitive question that would require a much more thorough investigation, not only in *On First Principles*, but also in the various forms that Origenism took over the centuries.

Yet, as a consequence of the hypothesis of the permanent material dimension of primitive rational creatures, we have to distinguish clearly between the diverse modes of enmattered existence. The primitive mode, before the foundation of this visible world, would be unique, simple, and undifferentiated. The second and thus the current mode, consequent on the Fall and the Creation of this visible world, brings various degrees of thickness of corporeal texture. It is characterized by various forms of composition. This mode of enmattered existence is generated (i.e. affected by generation and specific movement) and, for some compositions, endures corruption. Nevertheless, such an intermediate mode of enmattered existence seems to be condemned to disappear at the restoration of all things. The third and

last level will restore a unique, simple, and common form of enmattered existence, particularly characterized by incorruptibility through the resurrection of Christ. Indeed, the matter of the risen body of Christ will be spiritual (σῶμα πνευματικόν). Such a degree of materiality, according to the rules of inference ('the end is always like the beginning', *Princ.* 1. 6. 2), should be indicative of the primitive degree of measured corporeality (see *Princ.* 2. 9. 1, interpreting Wisd. 11: 20). But such a logical consequence of the beginning as well as the final spiritual (πνευματικόν) degree of corporeality, clearly understood by the first readers of Origen, was probably one of the most controversial issues raised by the inquiry into Creation in this text (cf. *Princ.* 2. 10; Daley 2004: 183–5).

Furthermore, with regards to the Final Judgement and the distribution of rewards and punishments according to the past behaviour of rational creatures, it is difficult to determine if it only indicates an intermediate limited stage before the perfect restoration of all things when God will be all in all, once and for all, or if it means a definitive separation from God. In such a dilemma, it seems Origen shows great methodological caution, particularly in the way he understands the purpose of the punishment, either as a final sanction or as a means of healing (see *Princ.* 2. 10. 4–8).

Clearly, such a theological exploration in *On First Principles* has become a logical system among Origenists. They have given up the methodological caution of Origen who was conscious of dealing with subjects that call for discussion rather than for definition (cf. *Princ.* 1. 6. 1).

## 5. Rational Creatures (λογικά) and *Logoi*: A Differentiated Consideration

All the themes that have been presented up to this point have not addressed one of the most interesting roots of Origenist metaphysics: the permanence of the preformed pattern of Creation in wisdom. Indeed, to avoid confusion in reading *On First Principles*, it is necessary to distinguish correctly two metaphysical levels of existence of Creation. Origen interprets Psalm 103: 24 ('In wisdom you have made all things') as the making of all things in the only-begotten Son of God assimilated to the ever-existing wisdom. He declares: 'If all things have been made in wisdom [i.e. in the Son of God], then since wisdom has always

existed, there have always existed in wisdom, by a pre-figuration and pre-formation, those things which afterwards have received substantial existence' (*Princ.* 1. 4. 5).

According to this brief but crucial assertion, we have to make a clear distinction between the timeless presence of all things in wisdom and their substantial existence. These two levels differentiate the timelessly non-substantial making of the pattern and the substantial Creation in time. The latter is the substantial image of the non-substantial former. In the first stage, all things are distinct, but not separated from wisdom. They are part of it. We can compare such a form of existence with the pre-existence of an artefact's pattern in the craftsman's mind before, but also after, its substantial fulfilment. In the second stage, they have concrete and substantial existence distinct from wisdom. The attribute 'substantial', imputed to the existence of created beings, supposes then a clear distinction between the being of Creation and the being of the uncreated God, which both differ radically in substance. The first stage was already featured a few sentences before: 'In this wisdom, therefore, whoever existed with the Father, Creation was always present in form and outline, and there was never a time when the pre-figuration of those things which hereafter were to be did not exist in wisdom' (*Princ.* 1. 4. 4). All things are always present in God's wisdom. The term 'always' means a mode of existence absolutely outside any consideration of time. It is not just pre-existence, but co-existence or permanent presence of all things in wisdom.

But in the second stage, all things exist also 'in' time and, it is certainly more accurate to say, 'with' time. This is because time is coextensive with Creation as a necessary dimension of it. The fact that rational creatures have knowledge and free will to endlessly progress implies a metaphysical form of temporality due to a certain form of extension. Furthermore, the possibility of explaining the sequence of the economy of Creation in three successive stages, as before, is indicative of such a coextensive dimension, which is however in wisdom as a prefigured form. And, because there was, properly speaking, no time before time, there was no time in which the Creation was not in substance. We could conclude from such reasoning that God is always Creator of created substances. For that reason, it is impossible to date the first Creation, which exists before the creation of this current world, and thus to give it a delimited age, because it appears created 'with' time and not 'at' a certain time. But such a paradoxical view does not mean that created reality is on the same metaphysical level as God. Origen explicitly refutes such a possibility (see *Princ.* 2. 9. 2). Indeed, that could mean

that God would also be coextensive with time and thus, as time is coextensive with created realities, that could relegate the divine to the level of Creation by abolishing the gap that Origen clearly establishes between Creator and created substances.

## 6. About Substance, Inheritance, and Rupture

We can now see how Maximus inherits various elements of Origen's *Weltanschauung*. Maximus also distinguishes between preformed Creation abiding in God and the substantial Creation coextensive with time (see *Amb.* 10, PG 91. 1164A–D). He establishes the same radical gap between substantially created beings and uncreated God (*Amb.* 10, PG 91. 1180B–1181A). And Maximus accepts, with Origen, the ever-existing pattern of all abiding in God under the forms of multiple *logoi* contained in the *Logos*—one, in a unique and unextended form (*Amb.lo.* 7, PG 91. 1081B–C), which acquires substantial separated existence at the opportune moment (καρπός), when new individuals, according to the law of generation, appear in time (i.e. in the historical frame). However, though various aspects of the metaphysics presupposed in *On First Principles* emerge in Maximus' thought, he radically differs from the Origenian system in regard to the conception of created substance (οὐσία). We can legitimately assume that the notion of substance in Maximus' works is more influenced by Aristotle's physics than by Plato's theory of souls. Plato's theory seems predominant in Origenism.

For Origen, the rules and the laws of generation, which order the physical universe, are consecutive to the deviate movement of rational beings away from their original substantial status. Indeed, as we have seen, rational beings pre-exist in substance before the apparition of this world, and this world is the domain of physics characterized by generation, consecutively by movement and change. The variety of substances in the current world, from the angelic ones to the physical ones, is the result both of a collapse of a former mode of existence of substances that are unique, equal, and uniform, and of the anticipated reaction of God, who organizes the second stage of the metaphysical history of the created world. Thus, substance is fundamentally one of the primitive entities. The variety of current substances appears to be accidental, or 'conjunctural'.

For Maximus, generation (γένεσις) is normative for all created entities because, for the unique created world as well as for individual entities that dwell in it, generation is the

starting-point or principle of their real existence. The diversity of substances appearing in physics (and beyond in regard to the angelic substances) is accepted from the beginning as an expression of the richness and the abundance of the divine goodness. The particular substance (οὐσία), or primary substance according to Aristotle (*Categories* 5. 2a11–4b19), does not exist before the substantial appearance of one concretely realized new being (τόδε τί) as a form enmattered. Yet, secondary substance, or common substance (*form/εἶδος*), which is not, in the strict sense, separated from individuals, determines a general *ordo rerum* (i.e. the recurrence of the same forms from generation to generation), expressing the transcendent *ordo rerum*, which is permanently present in God in the form of *logoi*. We could consider the secondary or common substance as well as the other general categories as ‘transphysical’<sup>9</sup> determinations of all created entities. Generally speaking, for Maximus the concept of substance depends on this Aristotelian background which radically rejects any form of pre-existence for rational beings, a characteristic of Platonism. However, in terms of the status of individuals in Maximus’ system, he is also opposed to the Aristotelian doctrine. Indeed, Aristotle admits the post-existence of the soul, once the body has been formed. Against Plato, Origen, and Aristotle, Maximus clearly defends the simultaneity of the creation of soul and body when a new being appears.<sup>10</sup> For Maximus, there is one unique world, which is destined from its origin to be transfigured by the inexpressible power of the Resurrection (*Th.oec.* 1. 66; *Q.Thal.* 22).

## 7. Conclusion : Origen’s Four Stages of Creation

I conclude by reconstructing the framework of the metaphysics of *On First Principles* as follows. With regard to Creation, we have to take into account four modal ranks of existence.

The first level is less properly a stage of existence than a stage of pre-existence of the pattern of Creation in wisdom, that is to say, in the Son of God. This level is absolutely stable because the adverb ‘always’, used to characterize it, means the concomitant and permanent presence of the pattern of all realities in God. At this first level, there is no proper substantial existence. Such realities are not independent creatures but are simply prefigured and pre-determined forms of all things abiding in God’s wisdom, such as the *logoi* abiding permanently in the *Logos*. Thus, we do not have a specific created ‘nature’ beside another

radically different nature, an uncreated one. The difference is only in the form, like the project of an architect in his own mind.

The second stage is properly Creation. It is sometimes called 'first Creation', by which we mean the substantial fulfilment of the permanent pre-existing pattern of Creation. At this level, there appears 'with' time a specific created different nature next to the nature of God. Time, in its more general significance, is one of the basic specifications of created nature. At this second level, different from the first, the substance of rational creatures appears similar and equal. They are related to one 'henad' which is a common form of substantial existence that ensures their likeness and unity. Maximus strongly opposes such a theory (*Amb.lo.* 7, PG 91. 1069A). Rational creatures are characterized by capacity for knowledge, free will, and specifically, a capacity for relation to God from whom they come and acquire substantial specific being. They always have to progress in goodness to maintain themselves in the stability of their own nature. In comparison with the infinity of divine Goodness, it is reasonable to consider such progress as perpetual. Perpetual progress remains an imperative necessity, whatever steps follow. Their misuse of free will and negligence in properly using their own nature provoke a radical collapse of their former mode of being. Such a downfall is denoted in scripture by the word 'καταβολή'. Maximus contests the Origenist interpretation of this term (*Q.Thal.* 60). The existence of free choice before the Creation of the world initiates the third mode of existence, which is the current mode (the physical one) in which we are now. Such a new situation was anticipated by God, who creates our current space–time condition of life in order to classify, hierarchically, primitive minds according to the degree of their failure. The current Creation is not solely a punishment, but the metaphysical consequence of a choice, and perhaps—from a theological point of view—a pedagogical strategy to retrieve the dynamism and progress formerly oriented to goodness and virtue.<sup>11</sup> However, in Origenism, the substance per se of rational creatures does not change. What has changed is the general condition of existence, engaging all creatures in the necessity to restore the primitive mode of being in conformity to the real nature of things, which is referred to as the permanent pattern and pre-configuration of all things in God's wisdom. The current mode of being must be considered to be 'accidental'. It has limited duration because it has a beginning in time and a pre-announced end. At the end of this stage, it will have a fixed age.



There is a fourth stage of existence in which all Creation, and potentially all rational creatures, will be totally restored to their proper nature. Such a restoration is the result of the divine Incarnation of the Son of God, his death, and his resurrection. This new condition will be marked by the necessity of recovering primitive perpetual progress. But the whole system remains fragile because the free will of rational creatures will not be annihilated. The possibility remains of a later misuse of it and, thus, the possibility of re-opening a new stage in this historical framework. The undeveloped eschatology of Origenism, based more on a Platonic than a biblical background, as well as the unstable mode of being of rational creatures' substance, provoked long-standing controversies among the theologians of Late Antiquity.