Han Balthussen, *Philosophy and Exegesis in Simplicius: The Methodology of a Commentator*. London: Duckworth, 2008. Pp. xii + 292.

This is a most welcome book, by a scholar who has had much to do with Simplicius over the last decade or so, as part of the great *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* project, initiated by Richard Sorabji (indeed it is to Sorabji that the book is dedicated). The fruits of this experience are evidenced on more or less every page. As B. remarks, it has not been customary hitherto to focus on the personality or methods of Simplicius himself, as opposed to his value as a source for previous figures, both commentators and original authors, such as the Presocratics—such would have been the attitude of the great Hermann Diels, for example, who edited the *Physics Commentary*, as well as making so much use of him for his *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* and *Doxographi Graeci*; but undoubtedly Simplicius merits some attention for himself.

The book consists of six chapters, with an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction sets out the parameters of the problem: what should one expect in the way of philosophical attitudes from a late antique Platonist such as Simplicius, and how B. himself proposes to proceed in evaluating him. He emphasises that there are many ways in which this is something of a ‘work in progress’, but he certainly provides enough material to give us a good idea of what Simplicius is up to. Above all, learned though he is, and copiously though he quotes his predecessors, we should not expect Simplicius to be in any anachronistic way an ‘objective’ scholar. He is a Platonist, and his purpose is to assimilate Aristotle (and indeed the Presocratic philosophers) into the Platonist system.

Ch. 1, ‘The Scholar and his Books’, introduces us to what is known of Simplicius’ life and education (with Ammonius in Alexandria and Damascius in Athens, in the early decades of the sixth century), and addresses the major problem of the location and circumstances in which he composed his vast commentaries—necessarily after the official closing of the Academy in 529, and the return of the philosophers, of whom he was one, from Persia in 531. The Harrañ hypothesis of Tardieu runs into the great problem of the availability of source materials in such a relatively outlying place, and B. is inclined to reject it. The alternative is a return to Athens, or possibly Alexandria, where at least there were good libraries.

For one salient aspect of Simplicius’ work is his extraordinary range of reading, and his willingness to provide us with verbatim quotations from this, extending from Presocratics such as Parmenides, Melissus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, through immediate followers of Aristotle, such as Theophrastus and Eudemus, and then the great second-century A.D. Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias, down to his Neoplatonic predecessors Porphyry and Iamblichus,

Syrianus and Proclus, and his own teacher Damascius. B. devotes separate chapters to each of these categories of predecessor.

Ch. 2, 'Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy? Origins of Ancient Wisdom', looks at his use of Parmenides, Empedocles and Anaxagoras in particular, and makes various suggestions as his overall purposes in this. It is certainly notable that Simplicius favours verbatim quotation even of prose authors—in contrast, for example, to such a figure as Proclus, who prefers to paraphrase prose authors at least—but I think that I would rest content with Simplicius' own explanation (and apologies for over-quotation!), that he was concerned to preserve as much as he could of sources that were becoming increasingly rare in his day. It does not mean that he is not prepared to distort their meaning in a Neoplatonic direction.

In Ch. 3, 'Towards a Canon: The Early Peripatetics', he turns to a study of Theophrastus and Eudemus, and in particular their comments on, and adaptations of, Aristotle's *Physics*. It is here, I fear, that one begins to realise that this is the sort of book that is best appreciated if one has the original works it is discussing at one's elbow, as one generally does not—in this case, chiefly Simplicius' vast *Commentary on the Physics*. However, B. undoubtedly gives a good account of how Simplicius uses Theophrastus, and particularly Eudemus, whom he actually refers to far more (132 references as against 37!), for the clarification of Aristotle's doctrine.

Ch. 4, 'Ghost in the Machine? The Role of Alexander of Aphrodisias', deals with Alexander, who is indeed Simplicius' chief authority—quoted or mentioned in all fully 1200 times, of which around 700 in the *Physics Commentary*. Alexander is for Simplicius simply 'the commentator', and is of basic importance to him. After giving a useful account of Alexander's own exegetical achievements, B. tries to draw up something of a typology of ways in which he is used by Simplicius (4.3): first, he can be used as simply a helpful source for understanding Aristotle; secondly, he can be quoted and criticised, on a matter of interpretation or doctrine; thirdly, he can be quoted in connection with a variant in the manuscript tradition. Of all these he gives examples, emphasising how central Alexander is to the whole commentary tradition.

Ch. 5, 'Platonist Commentators: Sources and Inspiration', takes us through the later Platonist tradition of commentary, with a glance at the Middle Platonists, but focusing chiefly on Porphyry and Iamblichus, and the establishing of the 'harmonizing' interpretation of Aristotle of which Simplicius is the heir. The use of these Platonist predecessors is particularly notable in the case of the *Categories Commentary*, but it affects the others as well.

Lastly, in ch. 6, 'Polemic and Exegesis in Simplicius: Defending Pagan Theology', he deals with Simplicius' fierce controversy with his Christian contemporary

John Philoponus, and well as with his more civil criticisms of Alexander. The bitterness of his assaults on Philoponus do, as B. argues, bring home to us how far Simplicius is a heroic and tragic figure, trying to preserve and synthesize the whole of the Hellenic (I do wish we could give up the term 'pagan'!) philosophical tradition in face of the ever more insistent Christian challenge, and composing his vast commentaries for a now largely imaginary coterie of students.

An Epilogue resumes all these findings, and B. appends some useful appendices, including one listing the probable contents of Simplicius' library, which certainly brings it home to us that these great works of his could not have been composed while wandering about the Syrian desert on the back of a camel. He really must have been back in Athens, with some access to the library of the Platonic School. At any rate, with this study, B. at last gives Simplicius something of his due as a scholar as well as a commentator.

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