ALEXANDER OF ALESSANDRIA’S COMMENTARY
ON THE METAPHYSICS

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In his *Commentary on the Metaphysics* (ca. 1420), Paul of Venice at times refers to a certain Alexander as one of his sources. Under investigation, the Alexander in question is the Franciscan theologian Alexander of Alessandria (ca. 1270–1314). Such a reference may at first be surprising, considered that Alexander is a minor author and that his writings predate those of Paul by a century. More surprisingly, an analysis of Paul’s *Commentary on the Metaphysics, Book Z*,¹ has shown that Alexander is the principal source for Paul’s Commentary. In most cases, Paul simply takes from Alexander materials for the composition of his Commentary. But there are also cases in which Paul directly discusses Alexander’s interpretation of Aristotle. Elsewhere I have considered a pair of these cases, viz., Paul’s refusal of Alexander’s account of accidental being and his acceptance of Alexander’s theory of essence.² It is not easy to explain the paramount importance of Alexander for Paul. One reason is surely connected to Paul’s epitomizing approach towards medieval sources. Since Alexander’s Commentary was erroneously attributed to Alexander of Hales (†1245), Paul could have regarded Alexander’s Commentary as the first full-fledged Franciscan Commentary on the *Metaphysics*. What is more, because of this attribution, he could have considered it as coming before the fundamental commentaries of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. Such an erroneous attribution is probably one of the reasons explaining the large diffusion of Alexander’s Commentary. But another reason why Paul is so interested in Alexander could possibly be that Paul aims to comment on both Aristotle and Averroes, and Alexander of Alessandria provides him with an invaluable aid, as we shall see, in achieving this goal.

The present chapter is intended to offer an overview of Alexander’s metaphysical thought. I shall begin by giving a few remarks on the origin and structure of his Commentary on the Metaphysics; then, I shall reconstruct Alexander’s position concerning some key metaphysical issues.

1. Alexander’s Commentary on the Metaphysics

Alexander is normally presented as a theologian and a philosopher outside Scotist lines of thought. This is fundamentally true. For example, Alexander polemically dismisses Scotus’s explanation of the principle of substantial individuation or his doctrine of the formal distinction. Nevertheless there are doctrines with respect to which Alexander agrees with Scotus. This is the case, for instance, for Alexander’s doctrine of categorical being. As to this, it must be noted that Alexander displays different attitudes towards Scotus according to whether he speaks as a philosopher or as a theologian. While in philosophy the influence of Thomas Aquinas is predominant, in theology Alexander is instead closer to Scotus. As we shall see below, though, his Commentary on the Metaphysics confirms the image of Alexander as a fundamentally non-Scotist thinker. Indeed, Thomas Aquinas and Henry of Ghent, rather than Scotus, are the key authorities for understanding Alexander’s metaphysics.

1.1. Place and Date of Composition

We know precisely the place of composition of the commentary. Alexander wrote it when he was lector at the Franciscan Studium of Bologna. A marginal annotation in one of the manuscripts transmitting the text explicitly indicates Bologna as the place of composition. Since Alexander was lector at Bologna between 1303 and 1307, i.e., in between his Parisian

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4 Cf. Padua, Biblioteca Antoniana, 386 Scaff. XVIII, fol. 1r: “Quod composuit apud Bononiam.” This reference has been pointed out for the first time by Andrea Tabarroni in “Gentile da Cingoli e Angelo d’Arezzo sul Perhermenias e i maestri di logica a Bologna all’inizio del XIV secolo,” in: Dino Buzzetti, Maurizio Ferriani, & Andrea Tabarroni, eds., L’insegnamento della logica a Bologna nel XIV secolo (Bologna, 1992), pp. 393–423, esp. 422–23.