CHAPTER 10

The Appropriation of Aristotle in the Ps-Pythagorean Treatises

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1 Introduction

The Ps-Pythagorean treatises mark an important step in the reception of Aristotle in antiquity. This is at least the impression we get if we consider that Paul Moraux devoted a whole chapter of his *Aristotelismus bei den Griechen* to the reception of Aristotle's philosophy in these texts.1 Moraux detected a remarkable presence of quotations and allusions to Aristotle's works, both the so-called school treatises and the more popular works, in several of these texts. According to him, the authors of these pseudoepigrapha share with the Platonists of the first century BC and the first century AD the need to combine "ancient" authoritative doctrines to answer problems raised by Hellenistic philosophers. More recent studies have shown that the Ps-Pythagorean treatises are of a piece with the post-Hellenistic approach to Aristotle.2 More directly, the authors of these texts, or at least some of them, may have been among the first to engage critically with Aristotle. However, their aim was not to interpret Aristotle but rather to appropriate some of his doctrines for the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition.

Before looking in detail at how the appropriation of Aristotle is realized in these texts, it may be useful to recall some general features of the apocryphal Pythagorean literature. The Pythagorean corpus transmitted to us is remarkably varied and is the result of a plurality of approaches and styles, as well as of a variety of aims.3 Within this body of letters, collections of precepts, poems, and doxographical accounts, it is possible to isolate a distinctive group of philosophical treatises. These are composed in the same language: an artificial Doric Greek employed with the intention of imitating the ancient dialect as it was used in Magna Graecia at the time of the ancient Pythagoreans.

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1 Moraux 1984: 605–685.
3 For a general overview on aims, strategies and methods of the Ps-Pythagorean literature, see Centrone 2014; Ulacco (forthcoming).
A magniloquent style and the use of poetic and rare words also contribute to an archaic patina and suggest an ancient Pythagorean origin. In most cases, the texts are attributed to Pythagoreans of the second generation, active in the fifth and fourth century BC. Among them, we recall Philolaus of Croton, Timaeus of Locri, Archytas of Tarentum, and Ocellus of Lucania. It remains difficult to establish whether these texts are the product of at least a single philosophical circle if not a single personality, or whether they can be traced back to philosophers promoting different or even competing ideas of Pythagorean philosophy.4

The common philosophical substratum of these texts is a theory of two supreme principles: a principle of definiteness and a principle of indefiniteness. The interaction of these principles is assumed as the explanatory model for each domain of knowledge, from the physical to the ethical, since the two principles are held to rule each level of reality. There is now a broad consensus on dating most of these treatises to the period from the first century BC to the first century AD. Their philosophical context is the emergence of a dogmatic type of Platonism. Affinities have been detected particularly with the extant evidence for Eudorus of Alexandria, whose activity can be dated to the middle of the first century BC and whose interest in Pythagoreanism is well documented.5 Moreover, the assimilation of Aristotelian ideas in some Ps-Pythagoreans texts presupposes the earliest exegetical activity on Aristotle’s school treatises, especially the Categories.6

The Doric Pythagorean pseudepigrapha share a philosophical method that is prominent in much post-Hellenistic philosophy and literature. Many if not most post-Hellenistic authors returned to the ancients and claimed to find their own philosophical claims in their works. Among the ancients, Plato occupied a special position of authority. However, the authors of our texts went further than this: they thought that Plato’s philosophy was a source of truth because he had an ancient, that is, Pythagorean, pedigree. Given the absence of original Pythagorean writings, at least of writings dealing with the philosophical topics in which our authors were interested, they created a corpus of Pythagorean texts in order to demonstrate that these works served as model not only for

4 For the “Pythagorean” identity of the authors of the apocryphal texts, whether their interest in Pythagorean philosophy corresponds to a “renaissance” of Pythagorean circles or a dogmatic current in Platonism, I refer the reader to Centrone 2000.

5 On Eudorus, see chapter 11 (The Reception of Aristotle in Middle Platonism). The affinities between Eudorus and the Ps-Pythagorean treatises have been analyzed in-depth by several scholars. Cf. Bonazzi 2005 and Chiaradonna 2009.