CHAPTER 21

Simplicius and Philoponus on the Authority of Aristotle

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1 Introduction

Simplicius of Cilicia and John Philoponus of Alexandria share many common features but differ in one most important respect: their interpretation of Aristotle. They were contemporaries and both attended the seminars of Ammonius, son of Hermias, in Alexandria. Ammonius (died shortly before AD 517) was a Neoplatonist who focused his teaching more on Aristotle than on Plato, and it was presumably under his influence that both Simplicius and Philoponus commented on Aristotle and not on Plato. Throughout their commentaries, however, one is guided to radically opposing interpretations of Aristotle’s philosophy.

Simplicius endeavoured to establish Aristotle not only as an unshakable authority in philosophy of language and natural philosophy but also as a philosopher who fully shared with Plato knowledge of the divine truth (i.e. the truth about the first realities of cosmos: the Soul, the Intelligence, and the One). Philoponus, on the other hand, rejected Aristotle as an authority, countered many of his arguments in his Aristotelian commentaries, and openly opposed Aristotle in his treatise On the Eternity of the World against...

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1 Cf. Simplicius, On Aristotle’s On the Heavens 462.20–21, where Simplicius reports witnessing an important astronomical observation made in Alexandria by his “teacher Ammonius.” As for Philoponus, many of his commentaries consist in polished notes (ἀποσημειώσεις) taken from the seminars of Ammonius, on which see more below. Nevertheless, Simplicius says (On Aristotle’s On the Heavens 26.18–19) that he is not aware of having ever met Philoponus. However, this lack of personal acquaintance with his adversary is easily justified, if it is assumed that Simplicius had already left for Athens (where he joined the Platonic successor Damascius), when Philoponus, who was originally devoted to the study of grammar (γραμματικάς), started studying philosophy with Ammonius. Simplicius’ qualification of Philoponus as a “young crow” (On Aristotle’s On the Heavens 42.17: νεαρὸς κόραξ), suggests that Philoponus was younger than Simplicius.
Aristotle. One should abstain, however, from thinking in a simplistic manner of Simplicius as the “traditionalist” and of Philoponus as the “modernist.” Philoponus seems to have fully accepted the authority of Moses while commenting on the Genesis, and the fully equal rank that Simplicius granted to Aristotle and Plato was a novelty within the Neoplatonic tradition. Both philosophers, we might say, served a religious purpose by using a philosophical method; they both had recourse to philosophical exegesis, the former in order to demolish Hellenic authorities and establish the truth of Christianity, mainly its doctrine of creationism, the latter in order to defend Hellenism as a unitary and perennial system of thought.

2 Simplicius’ Vindication of Aristotle

Alongside his commentary on Epictetus’ Handbook, Simplicius wrote extensive commentaries on the following Aristotelian writings: Categories, Physics, and On the Heavens. He shared with other Neoplatonists the idea that philosophy was not accessible at once but had to be instilled into the soul of the novice progressively according to an organized and carefully planned curriculum. Aristotle had to be taught before Plato; moreover, within Aristotle’s works, the logical treatises had to be taught before the treatises on natural philosophy, and within Aristotle’s treatises on natural philosophy, the Physics, as a work on the common principles of nature, had to be taught before the treatise On the Heavens. Simplicius, however, composed his Aristotelian commentaries following an order that is contrary to the progression of the curriculum: the commentary on the Categories refers back to the commentary on the Physics, while the commentary on the Physics refers back to the commentary on the treatise On the Heavens. Unless one is willing to accept the implausible solution of fortuity, the only compelling explanation for this “anomaly” is that Simplicius

2 This treatise, otherwise lost, survives only in Simplicius’ abundant quotations. The fragments are collected and translated in Wildberg 1987.
3 There is by now an almost full consensus (the only exception, to my knowledge, is Hadot 2014) that the commentary on Aristotle’s On the Soul, ascribed to Simplicius in the manuscript tradition, is the work of Simplicius’ fellow Priscian of Lydia, as was suggested by Bossier-Steel 1972; see also Steel 1997: 105–140. As I too believe that Priscian is the author of this commentary, I will not discuss it in the present contribution.
4 See Hoffmann 1998.
5 The Neoplatonic curriculum is discussed in detail in Hadot 1990.