EUSTRATIOS OF NICAEA’S ‘DEFINITION OF BEING’ REVISITED

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In 1954 Pericles Joannou published two short articles in Byzantinische Zeitschrift on Eustratios of Nicaea, our commentator of books I and VI of the Nicomachean Ethics.¹ In the first of these articles, Joannou edited and commented briefly on an extended scholion attributed to Eustratios, in which he interprets a particularly enigmatic passage from John of Damascus’ second oration on the dormition of the Virgin Mary. Joannou argued that the scholion, which he titled the “Definition of Being,” showed Eustratios to be Byzantium’s first nominalist, a conclusion he supported with his second article, a similar edition and commentary on the semeioma from the synodical proceedings against Eustratios in 1117. In 1990 the four manuscripts which contain the “Definition of Being” were reedited and a new reading was published by Klaus Alpers, who put forward arguments that better established its attribution and date.² However, Alpers did not address the philosophical content of the scholion itself but hoped to leave competent scholars a better philological foundation upon which to do so.

The frequent citation of Joannou in subsequent overviews of Eustratios’ life and works suggests that his conclusion regarding Eustratios’ nominalism has gained at least a tacit acceptance.³ In his entry on Eustratios in the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium Alexander Kazhdan claimed that “Eustratios developed the concept of the universalia as pure ‘names,’ whereas he regarded only the individual as existing.”⁴ On the other hand, A.C. Lloyd made a qualified use of these documents as evidence of Eustratios’ commitment to the “Aristotelian logic of universals” since he considered Joannou’s interpretation of the “Definition of Being” to be questionable.⁵ Linos Benakis had deeper reservations

¹ Joannou (1954a); (1954b).
³ Mercken (1973) 6*; Hunger (1978) 34.
⁵ Lloyd (1987) 346. Lloyd acknowledged that the work was difficult and based
and claimed that Joannou’s evidence for Eustratios’ nominalism was “based on a superficial reading.”

Therefore, given the naturally problematic definition of nominalism and in light of the questions regarding its application to Eustratios, it might be worth revisiting the philosophical content of this so-called “Definition of Being.”

Although Joannou refers to Eustratios’ scholion as his “Definition of Being,” our two best manuscripts identify the passage itself as “the most universal definition of Plato’s philosophy.” The meaning of this passage has baffled commentators and translators for centuries since it appears far too abstract for its place within the oration’s narrative. Although Joannou argues against the possibility that the passage is an interpolation, this suggestion is not implausible since 1) the section of the oration that immediately follows the passage deals with the “beyond being” nature of God’s attributes, which, as we will see, is the critical concept found within the passage itself; and 2) the oration is already well-known for an obvious interpolation, the so-called Historia Euthymiaca. Nevertheless, the passage is certainly philosophically ambiguous enough to allow an interpretation that is consistent with the thought of John of Damascus, to whom Eustratios clearly attributes the passage and to its place within his second oration on the Virgin’s dormition.

his argument primarily on another frequently cited instance of Eustratios’ alleged nominalism, his polemic against the monophysitism of Tigranes.


8 See Second dormition 524, n. on lines 34–37. Kotter notes the following: 1) that Jacobus de Billius did not even include the passage in his 1577 edition; 2) that Michel Lequien, who translated the work in 1712, found these lines extremely obscure and incongruent with what was said immediately above and decided to include in the place of his own translation that of Aloysius Lipomanus (1558), hoping that he had had a better text to work with: There is no heavenly order that was not unanimously present, nor was anyone found who, simply because they lived in heaven and were incomparable to lower beings, refused to descend and perform all the services that I have mentioned (qui eo quod in supernis versabatur, nullique inferiorum comparandus esset, descendere, et omnia quae dixi manerib obire recusavit; PG 96.731); and 3) Pierre Voulet’s 1961 translation: No being made an exception. No one, even among the most elevated of those who are incomparable to any other, refused to lower onself and to discharge all these services (Aucun être ne faisait exception. Aucun, même parmi les plus élevés de ceux qui ne sont comparables à nul autre, ne refusa de s’abaisser et de s’acquitter de tous ces services; Sources chrétiennes 80, p. 141).

9 Second dormition 7.1 (p. 524): Ἑνταῦθα λόγοι θεότητος καὶ θεοφρενίας. Ἑνταῦθα τίνες ὄνομα θεοφρενείας καὶ ἐξοδίως. Ὅμοιοι γὰρ ἐνω ἔτι τούτῳ τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν ὑπεράπειραν ἀγαθότητα καὶ τὸ ὑπερμέγειον μέγεθος καὶ τὴν ἀπειρόδονταν δύναμα καὶ τὴν παντοτευκτονίαν ἀδυνάτητον καὶ τὴν ἀπειρόδειαν πλείστως τῆς ἀκαταλήπτου χρηστῆτος, τὴν ἀπειρόδειαν τῆς ἀγάπης ἀβύσσου. For the Historia Euthymiaca, see Second dormition 504–505.