Critical Review

Philoponus and His Development: Four Recent Translations on Nature, Knowledge, and the Physical World


These four volumes constitute the most recent translations of Philoponus’ commentaries to appear in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle series edited by Richard Sorabji. They also bring to completion the translation of Philoponus’ extant commentaries on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics, Physics, and Book 1 of the Meteorology in the Ancient Commentators series, along with the majority of the texts of Philoponus edited in the Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca. The exceptions are Philoponus’ commentaries on the Categories and Prior Analytics for which there are only currently limited plans (although a forthcoming joint volume of his commentary on Categories 1-5 along with his A Treatise on Whole and Parts is now planned for 2015).

Since first appearing in hardcover, they are also now available both in paperback and eBook versions (a very welcome development for the series as a whole). Each of the four volumes supplies useful information for Philoponus’ approach and interpretation of Aristotle. They shed light on the procedures and views of the Alexandrian school in the fifth and sixth centuries, since
several of Philoponus’ commentaries include notes from the lectures of his teacher Ammonius Hermiae. They all center on scientific themes. The commentary on *Posterior Analytics* 1.19-31 focuses on several issues surrounding the nature of universal statements either obtained through or used in scientific demonstrations; the two volumes devoted to Book 4 of Aristotle’s *Physics* examine issues arising from Aristotle’s treatment of place and the void; and the sections from Book 1 of Aristotle’s *Meteorology* analyze various meteorological and astronomical phenomena, such as the formation of comets, hail, the Milky Way, and various light formations in the upper atmosphere and beyond, along with Aristotle’s account of each.

The quality of both the translations and the notes of all four volumes is very high. One does notice some inconsistencies and uneven qualities comparing the four volumes together, however. One is the conspicuously different typesetting for one, the translation of Philoponus’ comments on *Physics* 4.6-9. As a result it contains rather significantly less material compared to the other three volumes. If the same formatting, spacing, and kerning practices had been followed as that of the others, this volume would likely have come in at under 100 pages. One wonders therefore why Huby’s translation of this material was not simply paired with Algra and Ophuijsen’s translation of *Physics* 4.1-5, as is often done with other volumes in the series. Not only would this would have partially offset the rather high prices of the series in hardcover, but it also would have allowed the significant introductory material of Algra and Ophuijsen’s edition to provide some much needed context for Huby’s volume. Further, it would have helped to bring the somewhat hodgepodge remains of both of these sections of Philoponus’ commentary on *Physics* 4 into some kind of a unity, since both contain material previously translated in the Ancient Commentators series as the *Corollaries on Place and Void*.

Other than this discrepancy, there are only minor differences in emphasis and focus in the supplementary material for the different volumes. All contain very helpful sets of indices and glossaries (though, again, as was to be expected, not always consistent in details). Some translators are more vigorous in their emendation of the text as it has come down to us. Some (Goldin and Martijn, Kupreesa) further provide very helpful correspondences noting where the text that Philoponus is commenting upon differs from Aristotle’s text as we have it today. In general, all of these editions are well copyedited. A few inevitable mistakes do however crop up. But all make substantial and valuable scholarly contributions in their notes and translations of the texts.

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1 Many of these in particular affecting correspondence with page references to the CAG. Those errata that I noticed: (1) in Goldin and Martijn’s volume, on p. 15 “261.16” should have been