Book Notes

Aristotle and the Aristotelian Tradition

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This will be my last set of booknotes on ‘Aristotle’: I am handing over this task to Ben Morison. Four of the books which I kept for this occasion concern aspects of the Aristotelian tradition (ancient, medieval and modern) rather than Aristotle himself, and I shall start with these. Robert Todd’s annotated translation of Themistius’ commentary on, or rather interpretative paraphrase of, Aristotle’s *Physics* IV, published in Richard Sorabji’s series ‘The Ancient Commentators on Aristotle’, is dedicated to the memory of Henry Blumenthal, to whose careful scholarship on the Aristotelian commentators we owe so much. T.’s translation appears to be clear and reliable and his explanatory notes are brief (in accordance with the general format of the series) but generally adequate. In his introduction he characterizes Themistius’ paraphrases as targeted at readers who wished to revisit Aristotelian treatises with which they were already familiar, and as pitched at a level somewhere between strictly elementary expositions on the one hand and more expansive commentaries of the kind written by Alexander of Aphrodisias on the other. In a separate preface Sorabji more or less qualifies Blumenthal’s characterization of Themistius as a (or in fact: the last) ‘Peripatetic commentator’, by noting that there are some occasions where Themistius does side with contemporary Neoplatonism, as in his commentary on the *DA* where he rejects Aristotle’s empiricist account of concept formation. True though this may be, such occasions are few and far between. In general Themistius stays pretty close to Aristotle, although he sometimes includes digressions offering material that does not correspond with anything in Aristotle’s text. In the commentary on *Physics* IV we find two examples of this procedure, both directed against Galen’s attacks on Aristotle. One (149, 4-19) con-

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cerns the alleged circularity of Aristotle’s attempt to define time. The other (114, 7-12) discusses a thought experiment adduced by Galen to prove the existence of a self-subsistent three-dimensional space. Imagine a vessel with its contents removed and no other body flowing in. What are we to suppose will be left between its extremities? According to Themistius, Galen is begging the question by just assuming the existence of the void space which he is supposed to prove. In his Corollary on Place (576, 12 ff.) Philoponus will later claim that Galen is not assuming any such thing, but that he is just exploring the consequences of the assumption that no other body flows in. Themistius himself, by the way, brings in his own presuppositions: ‘eliminating the mutual replacement of bodies is no different from completely eliminating body’. In other words, he claims that Galen’s thought experiment ignores a fundamental principle of physics, viz. the theory of antiperistasis. As Todd suggests in his notes ad loc., there is a strong possibility that these anti-Galenic passages go back to Alexander of Aphrodisias, who is known to have attacked Galen’s views on place and time. So even here (pace Sorabji’s introduction, p. vii) ‘originality’ need not be the correct term. But of course in the history of ideas lack of originality does not entail insignificance, and instead of desperately looking for traces of originality we may simply value Themistius’ commentary on the Physics for what it is: a clear and intelligent survey which constituted an important link in the transmission of Aristotle’s ideas. It is good to have this part of it available in translation.

As for the significance of Themistius in general, his paraphrases enjoyed great popularity among the Aristotelian commentators of late antiquity and, in Latin translations, in the Aristotelian tradition in the later Middle Ages and the early modern period. His commentary on the De Anima, for example, played an important role in the late medieval debate on the immortality of the individual intellect. In the 15th century Nicoletto Vernia’s Padovan lectures on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics made constant reference to Themistius, and claimed that no one could be found who was more learned: ‘proinde adorate verba Themistii’. I owe this reference to Edward Mahoney’s contribution (‘Aristotle and Some Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophers’) to the volume The Impact of Aristotelianism on Modern Philosophy, edited by Riccardo Pozzo.² The book presents the papers of a 1999 conference on the Rezeptionsgeschichte of Aristotle’s conception of the intellectual virtues, but only some of the articles actually address this theme. One of these is Stanley