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The Neoplatonic Commentators on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

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The Greek Commentary tradition

"More than any other philosophical current of the Imperial period, Aristotelianism operated as a commentary tradition. Based on the texts of the Master -- on their precise wording and terminology -- Aristotelian philosophy found in the commentary format not only a means of transmission, but also a preferred tool for the development of doctrine. A closed system, but not a static one, it evolved in two main directions: internal consistency and external competitiveness. Thus, the basic aim was, on the one hand, systematic coherence and didactical proficiency; on the other, fuller responsiveness to the various issues that emerged in the long span of time between Aristotle and the last traces of an Aristotelian school.

In a broad sense, one can see a development of this sort starting from the early Peripatos, among Aristotle's immediate successors, Eudemus and Theophrastus. But a major part of the process -- namely, work on the texts of Aristotle -- probably came to a halt in the next generation. We are told that the libraries of Aristotle and Theophrastus were dispersed, while the dialogues and the more popular texts remained in circulation (the so-called exoteric works, i.e. those written for publication outside the school). As a matter of fact, the Aristotelian legacy among masters and teachers of the Hellenistic period was often elementary and non-specialized, open to various influences from other contemporary schools, especially Stoicism.

The development of Aristotelianism into a commentary tradition was not completed until the first centuries of the Christian era. This development presupposes, above all, the accessibility of the treatises or *pragmateiai* written by Aristotle for his own school (the so-called 'esoteric' works). Here, according to the commonly held view, a decisive role was played by the editorial activity of Andronicus, a Peripatetic scholar who arranged them and made them accessible during the first century BC. Toward the end of the century, these treatises were available again, or became available for the first time (as seems to have been the case with the *Metaphysics* as a whole, although some of its individual books were already listed among Aristotle's works). The Aristotelian corpus was largely accessible to the 'early commentators', in particular to Boethus of Sidon, a pupil of Andronicus, and to Nicolaus of Damascus. The latter's compendium of Aristotelian philosophy implies the circulation of a *Metaphysics* not too far in content and shape from the one we do have, with the same title, *Meta to physika*.

A major qualitative change took place in the course of the second century AD, when the commentary tradition adopted the specific aims of a period of archaizing and of a return to the classics. Literary Atticism is one of the best-known expressions of this archaizing tendency, which saw in the ancients both a timeless model for stylistic imitation and, in the context of philosophy, a legacy of truth that could be neither extended nor surpassed.

This is why the commentary gained such a central position in Aristotelian literature. Still, it was conceived as something to be used, rather than as a product with a cultural value of its own. For this reason, the successive stages of the commentary tradition tend to obliterate one another. A new commentary on a given work of Aristotle thus appropriated, not without criticism and selection, the interpretative legacy of the preceding commentary. At this point the earlier commentary could cease to be consulted and transmitted and so often came to be lost. In the new commentary, both recent and earlier components co-exist in successive layers, often without distinction, so that it is difficult to determine what the most recent commentator has himself contributed and what he has inherited from his predecessors. For both reasons, therefore, commentaries tend to be an impersonal product: both because of their original purpose -- to help the reader of a text written by someone else -- and because of the peculiar dynamics of their use and transmission. Within the Peripatetic tradition, the personality of the commentator is overshadowed not only by the authority of the Master, but also by the collective authority of the school.

We are now in a position to understand the first basic difficulty that the history of philosophy faces in attempting to give an account of the work of commentators and, hence, in evaluating the Aristotelianism of late antiquity. The evidence is plentiful, but it does not sufficiently explain the activity of individuals. This difficulty is further increased by another factor: the theoretical foundations of nineteenth-century history of philosophy, which inevitably persist in categorizations and evaluations that still have an influence, especially in areas that are not yet fully explored. This approach concentrated, on the one hand, on important individuals, and, on the other, on the reconstruction, through 'successions' or *diadochai*, of a progressive development of ideas that, from imperfect and embryonic beginnings, came to be displayed in all their fullness and power. In both respects, the historical approach has been opposite to the emphases and aims of the commentary tradition itself, which tends to play down the intermediary contributions while looking backward to the past in order to search for (or to reconstruct) a timeless truth, held to be definitively contained in the foundational texts of the school.

Such historiographical difficulties have led to negative judgements on the culture of commentaries. Hence its summary treatment -- if not complete neglect -- in many scholastic manuals, where the commentary seems to be just a dry and long-winded repetition of what is already contained in the texts of the great masters. Nor has the commentary tradition been judged any less critically where it has been possible to point out differences between Aristotle's and a commentator's Aristotelianism: this kind of instances have led to harsh accusations, both of deliberate betrayal, and of incompetence and misunderstanding of the original text.

The rediscovery of the work of the commentators as a living tradition of re-workings of Aristotle's philosophy, and not just of its transmission (or distortion), has taken place only in our own day. And even now, this does not mean that the relevant problems mentioned have been resolved in a single way, nor that methodological principles of inquiry have been firmly and generally agreed on. Rather, specific interests and contexts have prompted the different, particular direction that research on individual topics has followed (...). But it is precisely this plurality of complementary approaches that is producing now one of the richest, most lively and dynamic fields of research in ancient philosophy." (pp. 3-8) (notes omitted)

From: Silvia Fazzo, *Aristotelianism as a Commentary Tradition*, in: P. Adamson, F. Baltussen and M. W. F. Stone (eds.), *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries*, London; Institute of Classical Studies 2004, Vol. One, pp. 1-19.

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[Chronology of Aristotelian Commentators Prior to Aquinas by Erik Norvelle \(PDF\)](#)