
Aristotelianism in the First Century BCE: Xenarchus of Seleucia by Andrea Falcon

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Andrea Falcon's splendid new work on one of Aristotle's ancient Greek followers, Xenarchus, offers an elegant example of the potential for the commentary format to address larger questions than the ideas of a single author. Falcon not only offers text, translation, commentary, and interpretative essays on his particular subject but also considers much broader questions of orthodoxy, school practice, philosophy in the first century BC, and the formation of the commentary tradition in the post-Hellenistic period. No scholar studying this period, or interested in the Aristotelian school, would want to miss this.

The exploration into the work of Xenarchus of Seleucia—one of the few figures whose work survives from the Aristotelian revival of the first century BC—is nicely framed by a quote from Pierre Duhem, contrasting the reception of Aristotle's ideas by medieval philosophers with the 'rebellious' attitude of his immediate successors. Although most of what we know about Xenarchus' views concerns his criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth substance—the idea that the heavens are composed of a distinct material and form a realm separate from the sublunary spheres—Falcon nonetheless argues that Xenarchus should be regarded as a Peripatetic philosopher. His main reasons are that Xenarchus' notorious criticisms are reached from close study of Aristotle's text and are thus congruent with school practice, and that, on other issues where we know about his ideas, they are less critical.

By focusing attention on what exactly constitutes 'orthodoxy', Falcon challenges a common response to those philosophers who are identified with a school and yet seem not to accept all opinions of its founder. As Falcon notes, the doctrine of the fifth substance was widely critiqued by Aristotelians as

well as other schools. Falcon's other point is that 'orthodoxy' is scarcely possible at a time when there was no sense of Aristotelianism as a system [21]. He suggests that Aristotelian philosophers of this period felt a need to consolidate their founder's work as systematic in order to compete with Stoicism.

In addressing Xenarchus' most famous departure from Aristotelian views, Falcon stresses that Xenarchus was not drawing on Hellenistic theories of motion or on Stoicizing influences [39–42] but was in fact engaged in a close reading of Aristotle's own text and pointing to inconsistencies [17, 177, 202]. He positions Xenarchus as part of a 'return to Aristotle and Plato' of the late first century BC [17] and draws out the evidence for the beginnings of the commentary tradition in this period, noting that no particular literary form was standard during this period [25].

Falcon contrasts the basis of Xenarchus' divergence with that of Strato of Lampsacus, an earlier scholarch from the third century [21ff]. The latter is indeed an important foil, although I suspect that in contrasting the two, Falcon obscures an important commonality, which is the extent to which both philosophers depart from Aristotle's views on the basis of new discoveries of the Hellenistic period. The mathematical analysis of the cylindrical helix is crucial to Xenarchus' critique of the arguments for the fifth substance, a point that is somewhat underplayed in Falcon's focus on internal tensions. And in stressing the role of textual exegesis in the first century revival, Falcon—who doubts the story that Aristotle's school lacked copies of his books [169]—might have noted that Strato's work shows sufficiently detailed responses for us to doubt this (and also offers an early example of collections of ἀπορίαι).

Falcon seems right to note that the reports of Xenarchus likely place undue emphasis on a particular controversial issue. Falcon brings out the intrinsic interest of Xenarchus' most famous contribution to ethics, which is the attempt to find Aristotelian antecedents for the Stoic notion of the πρῶτον οὐκ εἶναι in Aristotle's account of love [42ff]. This influential Stoic doctrine points to a baby animal's innate impulse towards that which is beneficial to it. The attempt of other schools to read this concept back into the work of their school founder illustrates an attitude that is nicely analyzed: Falcon makes a good case that this was not seen as anachronism but as an attempt to read Aristotle correctly. Translating this technical terminology is notoriously difficult and Falcon does it well, although I did not find 'first appropriate

thing' [42] or 'prerational desire for ourselves' [156] especially felicitous at conveying the sense to readers unfamiliar with the Greek originals.

These are minor quibbles, however. This book provides much more than a traditional edition and commentary, even while it does the primary task very well. Falcon modifies the traditional format where it does not fit the particular case, such as with distinction between direct quotations and *testimonia*; he supplies the text of Aristotle's work for the reader's convenience where appropriate and divides long reports into manageable chunks with accessible commentary. Some really excellent, quick introductions to difficult topics include the historical notes on Xenarchus' biography [11–12] and discussion of the religious attitude of later commentators [96] or the possible ambiguity in Aristotle's use of «ἐπιπολάζειν» [112]. Some discussions might even have been expanded, such as the controversy over a change of language to rephrase a modal claim as a claim about dispositional properties [118], the controversy over the criteria of simplicity used in classifying the cylindrical helix among mathematical lines [68–70], or the significance of 'assent' in Hellenistic philosophy [151].

The short but excellent essays accompanying the material on Xenarchus provide larger historical background. A succinct introduction to the role of Alexander of Aphrodisias in the transmission plays generous tribute to the fine work of R. W. Sharples, to whom the book is dedicated. Falcon's impressive scholarship shows especially in tracing the reception of Xenarchus' work through the Arabic scholarly tradition and into the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This is an excellent volume by a thoughtful and careful scholar sensitive to philosophical as well as historical issues: it sets a high standard for an accessible yet significant volume on one of the more obscure philosophers of late antiquity. It does its job too well to imagine that it will be superseded in the foreseeable future.