
The Ancient Commentators on Plato and Aristotle by Miira Tuominen

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This ambitious monograph is the sixth in a series published simultaneously by the University of California Press and Acumen Publishing in Britain. The series intends to provide introductory studies of the major figures and themes in ancient philosophy. Among those already published, the volume on the Cynics by William Desmond and the volume on Neoplatonism by Pauliina Remes take up topics not normally treated with any degree of rigor in introductory texts. Forthcoming in the series are volumes on the non-Western philosophical traditions in Islam, Confucianism, and Indian Buddhism. This volume presents material with which even many specialists in ancient philosophy are unfamiliar. It is an altogether laudable effort to provide a clear and accurate introduction to the last great phase of ancient philosophy.

The 15,000 pages or so of the works of the ancient commentators on Plato and Aristotle written between, roughly, AD 200 and 600, comprise a good deal more than half of all the works of ancient philosophy that exist today. For this reason alone, it is unfortunate that this vast and complex body of work is so little known even among specialists in the field. That is perhaps slowly changing owing in part to the heroic efforts of Richard Sorabji and a dedicated team of translators who have over the last 20 years or so worked to provide scholarly English translations of the most important of these works. To date, about 70 volumes have been published with another 30 or so planned. Sorabji has published in 2005 a most valuable and convenient bridge to these works in a three volume sourcebook containing a large amount of the material arranged thematically give reference.

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Tuominen, quite reasonably, relies heavily on the division of material provided by Sorabji. After an introduction to the commentary tradition and the methodology of the commentators, there are chapters on epistemology [41–69], science and logic [70–117], physics [118–157], psychology [158–199], metaphysics [200–236], and ethics [237–279]. A concluding brief chapter summarizes the major issues discussed. The commentators whose positions are the principal focus of these chapters are Alexander of Aphrodisias (second–early third century), Themistius (*ca* 317–388), Porphyry (234–*ca* 305), Simplicius (*ca* 490–560), and John Philoponus (*ca* 490–570). Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus and a few others make occasional guest appearances. The title of the book is somewhat misleading because the actual extant commentaries on the works of Plato—few though they may be—are hardly discussed at all. Nevertheless, someone seeking to get an overview of the range of subjects taken up by the Aristotelian commentators will find in this book a good beginning. There is an especially helpful and substantial discussion of what was, during this period, the state-of-the-art regarding what we would call philosophy of science and formal logic. These subjects were, not surprisingly, the focus of much commentary material on the works comprising Aristotle's *Organon*, but they are seldom treated in much detail in the general histories of ancient philosophy.

Tuominen follows a fairly perspicuous format: a brief introduction to the philosophical issues under each heading, and then a survey of the views of the main commentators selected. Those unfamiliar with this material will no doubt discover in this book numerous challenges to contemporary received wisdom about what Aristotle is getting at or what are the problems he faced.

I have two main problems with this book. The first is that the author does not attend sufficiently to the Platonic principles that these mainly Platonic commentators on Aristotle brought to their work. Although there is a brief mention of this in the introduction, Tuominen does not keep before the reader's mind the fact that the reason for the extensive commentaries on Aristotle (with the possible exception of Alexander of Aphrodisias) was to provide an introduction to Platonism, to the so-called higher mysteries, according to Proclus and others. So, in order to appreciate the frequent criticisms of Aristotle made by the commentators, it is necessary to bring to the fore the Platonic principles which constituted the starting-points

for the treatment of Aristotle. This the author does only sporadically. For example, since Plato's Demiurge is seldom invoked, a spurious distinction between the Demiurge and the Neoplatonic Intellect is assumed [131].

A related criticism, though more important, is the rather cavalier and inaccurate presentation of Aristotle's own philosophical positions. As Simplicius notes at the beginning of his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, the commentator on Aristotle must have read all of Aristotle and assimilated it before attempting to comment on a single work. This is I think equally true for an expositor of the commentary tradition.

Here are some examples of where I think the author has simply gotten Aristotle seriously wrong, or at least has presented his views in a most misleading fashion. Tuominen suggests [43] that Aristotle endorses in a qualified way the last definition of knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) in Plato's *Theaetetus*, according to which knowledge is true belief plus a *λόγος*. This definition is rejected in that dialogue. It is not true that Aristotle endorses it; in fact, in both the *Posterior Analytics* and his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that there is no knowledge of 'things that can be otherwise', that is, of the objects of belief (*δόξα*). This error colors the discussion of the commentators, when it is averred that they do not intend to 'restrict knowledge to permanent, necessary and unchanging facts' [93]. But in fact, following Aristotle, this is exactly what they do. The error is further magnified throughout a rather misleading discussion of the putative empiricism of the commentators. Another example is the treatment of *De anima* generally and Aristotle's view of human and animal cognition. It is not, I think, true to claim that the self-reflexivity of cognition that Aristotle ascribes to humans is also possessed by animals [162]. I do not understand what it means to say that 'something analogous to inference is attributed to them'. It is the immateriality of intellect that allows for self-reflexivity in Aristotle (and the commentators) and there is no evidence (despite the passages cited from *De anima* and *De somno*) that Aristotle thought that animals had immaterial intellects. It is at least misleading to say that *φαντασία* is, for Aristotle, a capacity that we share with animals [184]. For although animals do have this, Aristotle in the *De anima* clearly distinguishes the 'rational' imagination that we possess from the non-rational imagination of animals.

The treatment of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which prepares the way for the discussion of the commentaries on, among other things, the *Categories* (which is not, of course, a work of metaphysics for Aristotle) is very odd indeed. According to Tuominen, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* offers an analysis of the sensible [201]. I suppose that this is in some sense correct; but it can hardly stand when coupled with the claim that, for Aristotle, 'the structure of being must be the structure of sensible reality' [210]. The ancient commentators were certainly not alone in understanding that Aristotle did not identify the primary focus of the science of being with sensible substance. Yet, supposing this, it is natural that the author would include the discussion of the categories of sensible reality under metaphysics.

These mistakes serve to undermine somewhat an otherwise admirable effort to erect some signposts for new travelers on what is now the last frontier of ancient Greek philosophy. The prodigious work involved in assembling this survey will no doubt be received with gratitude by many students in the field.

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