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Prof. GIUSEPPE CAMBIANO
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SIMPLICIUS AND THE SUBVERSION OF AUTHORITY

HAN BALTUSSEN

SIMPLICIUS' elaborate commentaries, written after 532 C.E., have always stood apart in the post-Plotinian tradition of late Platonism.¹ Unlike many philosophical commentaries from 300-500 AD (Porphyry, Syrianus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius), they are not notes taken in class 'from the voice of the teacher' (*apo phônês*), they are not short on clear source references, nor are they, on the whole, cavalier in representing other people's views. Instead, they are very scholarly due to lavish source materials, full of actual quotations, and make use of source referencing. These features illustrate how he aims to be well-documented, responsible and comprehensive in his clarification of Aristotle's text. One other peculiarity which has been noted by students of late Platonism (also clarified in my recent study of his methodology),² is his attempt to counteract the intellectual influence of Christianity and their accusations of disunity among pagans, against which they placed the unified theology of the Trinity: he aims to present the Greek philosophical tradition as unified.

The style and sheer size of the commentaries have undoubtedly led to a very negative image of these works. Modern notions of scholarship ('commentary' as a collection of random notes on another author is regarded as a form of writing which lacks initiative and originality) and strongly classical ideas about philosophy contributed to a negative image of late Platonism. Accused of ponderous scholasticism and stifling traditionalism, they became named «Neoplatonists», a term intended to label them as a debased form of Platonism. Viewed as a paragon of this negative image, Simplicius is perhaps the one author who most deserves renewed attention in a revisionist account of the role of dissent and authority in the Platonist tradition. His fragmented presence in Diels-Kranz as a provider of information on Presocratic philosophy reinforced his role as a mediator rather than a philosopher.³

For our purposes in this paper I understand 'authority' to refer to the assumed importance of philosophical views (and by proxy, the holders of these views or the books in which these are laid down) as sources of a truth to be accepted without testing or disputing these. Its close connection to 'author' and hence the aspect of authorship of certain works (seen as genuine) will remain in the background. In addition, the Platonist tradition developed a particular style of teaching which relied heavily on teacher-pupil transmission and the authority of one intellectual or spiritual leader. This led modern scholars to characterize them as 'pagan holy men', an adequate description which also strongly suggests authority of a specific kind.⁴

Han Baltussen, Classics DX 650 114, School of Humanities, The University of Adelaide, SA 500, Australia.
han.baltussen@adelaide.edu.au

¹ BALTUSSEN 2008. This paper builds on the groundwork done in the monograph, but also goes beyond it by fleshing out the particular theme announced in the title: the subversion of authority.

² See n. 1. On the commentary tradition see FAZZO 2004, D'ANCONA 2007.

³ On his role in doxography see e.g. KAHN 1960, pp. 13-15, 166 ff.; BALTUSSEN 2005.

⁴ See BROWN 1971, 1998, FOWDEN 1982.

Given the quantity of quotations from and references to authors between the sixth c. BC to his own time found in Simplicius' commentaries, the question of his own relation to these sources becomes particularly pressing. Is he merely collecting the comments and views of earlier thinkers or is he adding anything to the philosophical discourse himself? It will be obvious that if the first holds, we will have to resign ourselves to admitting he is a 'mere commentator'; but if the second holds, it opens up the possibility of dissent. In what follows I shall argue for the latter position.

The issue can be reformulated as a multi-part question: How can one make a contribution to an existing discourse, if its main objectives are (i) to comment on a fixed set of texts (Plato, Aristotle, Chaldean Oracles),¹ i.e. a canon which is considered the 'gospel's truth', (ii) to incorporate, as in the case of Simplicius, all the existing scholarship and exegesis available, and (iii) to harmonise the whole of Greek philosophy from its beginnings up to the present day (600 B.C.E. - 530-560 C.E.)? The tensions between these three objectives are clear: the potentially oppressive body of literature on Plato and Aristotle poses a considerable challenge to anyone trying to add anything to it: the presumed authority of a canon is at odds with the idea of development, while comprehensiveness in reporting all known interpretations is also bound to reveal disagreements. The harmonising tendency, strongest in Simplicius' work, creates further challenges for a synthetic account; the acceptance of a canon (or rather: two canons) sets up a third hurdle to any manoeuvring room for an interpreter. It is this problem which is at the heart of this paper by trying to answer the question: what is Simplicius' attitude towards previous thinkers inside and outside the Academy while he produces a harmonising account of Greek philosophy?

1. THE ROLE OF AUTHORITY IN SIMPLICIUS

There is no word for 'authority' per se in ancient Greek, but there are different ways to approach our search for the notion of authority, which may illustrate the *de facto* attitude towards former authors: the teaching practices is one factor, the preferred books to be studied are another. The former is reinforced by the elaborate use of epithets for luminaries of the Platonist school (part of the so-called 'Golden Chain'), the latter by the existence of a canon. Both factors conspire to create a situation where the word of the teacher and his explication of revered authors or works (Plato, Aristotle) carry most weight in determining doctrine. But a third aspect must not be overlooked: late Platonism can be described as a religious outlook, and more so since Iamblichus and Syrianus added their distinctive contribution (theurgy and soteriology resp.) to the already broad stock of ideas incorporated into Platonist thought.² Simplicius states somewhere that 'the study of physics ... arouses us to marvel and magnify the maker of the cosmos',³ in other words, his commentaries on *Physics* and *On the Heaven* are a form of worship through intellectual means, in which his respect for the established tradition contributes to the effort of clarifying the interpreters of nature (and the interpreters of the interpreters).

Simplicius' use of earlier commentators as significant voices in the philosophical discourse has been noticed by scholars, but his precise attitude to them has not yet been

¹ On Simplicius' reading of Plato see e.g. GAVRAY 2007.

² On Iamblichus see DILLON 1987, BLUMENTHAL 1997.

³ RIST 1967, p. 240, paraphrasing in *Phys.* 5.19. Cf. BALTUSSEN 2008, p. 195.

studied in detail. He also shows considerable respect for the immediate students and successors of Aristotle, most probably because he adheres to the (implicit) view that students have privileged access to the thoughts of the master – the result of the Platonist preference for close teacher-pupil relations (*sunousia, sunanagnôsis*).¹ Thus he may report Theophrastus' qualified endorsement of an Aristotelian position or Eudemos' version of a Presocratic text (via Alexander, e.g. in *Phys.* 115,11ff. = A28). Eudemos' role is of interest here, because Simplicius puts great store in his views as an early Peripatetic, but also because he is one of the earliest *exegetes* on Aristotle and the Presocratics.² In this case Simplicius reports his version of the Parmenidean statements on being *via* Alexander (115,11) and from Eudemos' *own* physics (115,15), adding the latter because the brief report of Alexander is not considered clear.

The question as to whether he is slavishly following his teachers and predecessors or shows a more independent mind seems the most relevant here, since it can be a gauge for the role of authority in his work. They raise questions relevant to the commentary tradition as a whole. The nature of ancient philosophical commentaries has often been misrepresented. They are not, as research of the past three decades has clearly shown, straightforward clarifications of Plato's and Aristotle's thought, but philosophical works that take these authors as their basis.³ They are a hybrid between commentary *per se* (clarification of meaning and internal coherence) and the conceptual exploration of ideas within the framework of a new philosophical system. Another common belief that has recently come under fire is the idea that the Neoplatonists are a unified front explicating and defending Aristotle and Plato on the basis of Plotinus' interpretation of these classical thinkers, and a continuing tradition of teacher-pupil. This so-called 'golden chain' has turned out to be a well-constructed myth of self-representation.⁴ Simplicius in particular helped to sustain this picture by advertising a kind of universal agreement (*symphônia*) among Greek (pagan) philosophers.⁵ But we should not follow his lead here: late Platonism may have appeared unified *intellectually*, but it was never monolithic *philosophically*. Once this is acknowledged, we can allow ourselves to examine the text afresh and be open to any signals of dissent or disagreement.

A further important notion to clarify is the idea of originality. The modern idea is mostly related to artistic and creative achievements considered unique in some way. In the ancient world originality was not a positive concept: in literary pursuits emulation was the standard, novelty (*kainotomia*) was often quite unpopular.⁶ That is not to be taken as saying that they were never original, but authors who had to position themselves *vis-à-vis* existing work in the same genre would aim for distinctiveness while building on established practices. At times Simplicius' self-presentation may suggest that he is but a conduit for earlier views: if anything in *Cat.* 2.30-3.4, 11-16 foregrounds his restraint in adding anything new. But this not only is a well-worn trope, it is also a qualified judge-

¹ On these see esp. MANSFELD 1994. The learned nature of late Platonism is rightly highlighted by FOWDEN (1982, p. 38) as one of the reasons for its diminishing appeal.

² Eudemos comes into Simplicius' observations on Presocratics on several other occasions (concerning Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Empedocles), based on his work in the history of science. SIDER (2005, p. 46) acknowledges that Eudemos consulted the text of Anaxagoras thus going 'beyond Aristotle'. O'BRIEN (1969, p. 151) also thinks Eudemos had a copy of the poem.

³ See GERSH 1973, SORABJI 1990, BLUMENTHAL 1997.

⁴ See WATTS 2006, Ch. 4, ATHANASSIADI 1993, p. 3. Cf. p. 133 n. 1 below for further references.

⁵ See HADOT 1974, SAFFREY 1991, KARAMANOLIS 2006.

⁶ See for instance Aristotle on *kainotomein*, *Pol* 1305b41, 1316b19.

ment that signals his awareness of being part of a long exegetical tradition in which (the claim of) philosophical originality is avoided. What is more, it is anything but an admission of uncritical deference: traditionalism did not exclude critical judgment and disagreement, as his own teacher Damascius illustrates in his comments against Proclus (*in Phys.* 795.15-17).

In the case of Simplicius this situation leads to particular strategies to overcome these obstacles, one of which is to somehow manipulate the text (omission, semantic stretch, redefining of terms and concepts).¹ The general aim is to declare disagreements among Plato and Aristotle, or among those two thinkers and any other philosophers, as superficial or non-existent, in the belief that the proper type of analysis can defuse these issues. More often than not this concerns explaining away the differences by rephrasing or reinterpreting particular words, sentences or key terms.

There can be no doubt that Simplicius follows his commentator predecessors in many respects. The fact that he writes commentaries (*hypomnēmata*) is traditional.² The selection of works to be commented on, and drawn from, is also part of the school tradition. Even the format has its antecedents, although he uses a combination of line-by-line explication (Alexander, Proclus) with question-and-answer (Plotinus, Porphyry).³ But there are also marked differences in his working method, some of which I mentioned at the outset: briefly, he is more meticulous in source referencing, he seeks out original texts to quote from and validate his interpretation, his works are probably not from an active school environment, and he is far more extreme in seeking a harmony among Greek pagan philosophers than anyone before him.⁴

One indicator of his respect for previous Platonists is his use of epithets. In itself not an innovation, this characteristic shows him give tacit approval to the privileged position of some great masters. Thus he regularly refers to Iamblichus as *theios* ('the divine Iamblichus') and more often than not he gives a direct quotation when discussing his ideas.⁵ As I have argued recently, epithets range from *hēmeteros hēgemôn* and *ho philosophos* to *kritikôtatos*, *philosophôtatos*, *meGas*, *daimonios*, *theios*.⁶ The most common epithets for (near-)contemporaries are *philosophos*, *daimonios*, and *thaumasios*, but it is not easy to make out whether Simplicius is adding any himself. They do represent a certain hierarchy, which Simplicius may have adopted. In the case of Proclus this is clear from his comment «those after Proclus up until our time (*eis hēmôn*) almost all follow Proclus not only on this point, but on all other issues» (*in Phys.* 795.11-13).⁷ Their usage suggests a mixture of standardized characterisation and honest respect.

Originality is a problematic notion in ancient writings. It has often been pointed out that ancient authors were not interested in being 'original' in the same sense as the post-

¹ A more detailed treatment is given in BALTUSSEN 2008, ch. 1.2.2.

² Cf. p. 121 n. 2 above. But he also refers to his own works as *scholai* (e.g. at *in Phys.* 461.15 to refer back to *in Phys.* book 1).

³ See for instance: *in Phys.* 395.20-1 (line-by-line); *in Phys.* A.8 (includes question-and-answer).

⁴ For details see BALTUSSEN 2008, *Introduction* and ch. 2-5.

⁵ *In Phys.* 60.7; 639.23; 642.18; 702.19; 767.20; 786.11; 787.4,11,27; 792.20; 795.3,6,16. Cf. BALTUSSEN 2008, p. 154.

⁶ For *hēmeteros hēgemôn* see *in Phys.* 462.20 (applied to Ammonius); *ho philosophos* (applied to Syrianus); *kritikôtatos* (*in Cat.* 199.17 applied to Syrianus); *philosophôtatos* (*in Cat.* 3.9 applied to Syrianus); *meGas* (*in de Cael.* 397.29 applied to Syrianus); *daimonios* (unexpectedly applied to Aristotle). The respectful references to predecessors is a feature common in late commentators, sometimes claimed as of divine origin, e.g. David (proem to his *Commentary on Porphyry's Isagogê* [= 6T Smith]) reports that the Delphic oracle called Porphyry 'learned' (*polumathês*) as distinct from his pupil Iamblichus who is called 'divinely inspired' (*enthous*).

⁷ Cf. HADOT 2001, *introd.*, pp. XLVII ff.; DODDS 1963.

Romantic notion we entertain suggests. To bring something new was of interest, but it would always go hand in hand with respect for traditional and existing practices. This tradition-bound approach, found in most literary genres, may be rooted in a deep suspicion against novelty for the sake of novelty, but may also reflect mechanisms typical for oral cultures to safeguard established knowledge in a way that is manageable. The late Platonists, who were part of a rich and overwhelmingly copious philosophical tradition faced a particularly difficult challenge: how should one balance the need for explicating and developing their doctrines, while continuing to include the accumulated mass of notes and comments arising from the school discussions? In the case of Simplicius this seems to have been an especially acute problem, most likely as the result of his scholarly pursuits, by which he strives to include as many sources as he could get his hands on.¹ But there are practical as well as ideological motives behind his general strategy which make him walk the fine line between conformism and originality, between tradition and innovation.

2. CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH EARLIER PHILOSOPHERS

A critical attitude towards earlier thinkers is a time-honoured approach in Greek philosophy. Polemic may well be an important stepping stone towards philosophical exegesis.² For the Platonist school there is also sufficient evidence that debate about Plato's works started in the generation following the first scholarch.³ His dialogues were not easy to interpret and led to a dogmatic and a sceptical strand among his followers. Whilst the assumption that philosophers would disagree may strike the reader as an obvious, and hence trivial, claim, it remains useful to remind ourselves of this point, because it provides some balance in the debate on long-lasting philosophical schools, which tend to become more and more dogmatic. But disagreement remained an important part of the philosophical discourse all along.

Late Platonism showed signs of dissent early on. Plotinus was quite critical of Aristotle. His treatment of the *Categories* illustrates this clearly, and the interpretation put forward creates a fundamental shift in how these should be read.⁴ On this same issue his student Porphyry was critical of Plotinus, returning to a reading which allowed the categories to be about words, not things.⁵ In some ways this debate continues within the Platonist tradition, given the importance of the *Categories* for their philosophy as an introductory work.⁶ Some small case studies will allow us to understand how Simplicius manages to offer interpretations of texts which incorporate a *subversion of authority*. In some cases this is palpable and explicit (Plotinus, Alexander, Damascius), in others it is rather subtle and discreet. In what follows I discuss these broad types in order to show that Simplicius is always keen to appear fair and concerned with the truth, yet also tries to avoid appearing original or disrespectful. I am not including his polemic against Philoponus, because (a) it has been admirably dealt with by others, and (b) in this case it is unclear where the authority lies.⁷ The most interesting and least studied

¹ He mentions *anagraphais historikais* (in *Phys.* 28.33-4).

² I make a fuller argument for this claim in BALTUSSEN 2003 and 2007; cf. BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 173-176.

³ J. DILLON, *The Heirs of Plato. A Study of the Old Academy (347-274 BC)*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003 (Pb. 2005); cf. L. GERSON, *Aristotle and Other Platonists*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2005.

⁴ See G. KARAMANOLIS, *Plato and Aristotle in Agreement?*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006.

⁵ HADOT 1984. On the intricacies of the dispute see SORABJI 2004, vol. 3, pp. 56-58; DE HAAS 2001.

⁶ BARNES 2006.

⁷ See HOFFMANN 1987a, b.

case which includes the above mentioned «subtle subversion» (Alexander of Aphrodisias) will be given a separate section (§3).

2. 1. *Explicit disagreement*

1) Porphyry's polemic against Plotinus on the *Categories* arose, as indicated above, over the metaphysical side of Aristotle's analysis of reality, or being. Never properly justified, the *genera* of being rested on claiming ten different ways to predicate, from primary substance to its secondary properties. As Sorabji has eloquently shown (building on Gillespie), these determinations seem to originate in the class room.¹ The dispute that arose concerns the status of these 'categories': are they things or merely terms referring to things? Plotinus denied them real existence, in agreement with Plato's model of transcendent entities; Porphyry preferred to see them as real things.²

2) Simplicius makes comments against Proclus in his so-called *Corrollaries on Place and Time* (in *Phys.* book 4).³ For in *Phys.* Proclus is only mentioned in the *Corrollaries*, in which Neoplatonic views on time and place are discussed on the basis of recent views. Simplicius offers an appreciative evaluation of Proclus' views on place (611,11-614,8), commenting that his theory is expounded 'with great originality' (12, *kainoprepê*); the closing comment in Simplicius' overview strongly suggests that he has presented a fairly comprehensive account (614,8: *tauta kai toiauta peri topou phêsi ho Proklos*). It is probable that he based it on Proclus' account in the commentary on Plato's *Republic* (2.198-202 Kroll) where he provides an even more detailed account of the properties of place.⁴ Simplicius goes on to quote from Proclus' text (25 ff. in 'his own words') by saying (25-6) he 'expounded his opinion clearly and expertly' (*saphôs autên kai sunêvêremenôs exetheto*).⁵

Yet when he recounts Proclus' defence of the interval as place, after having rejected the views that it was either matter or form, and Aristotle's view since that leads to absurdities, Simplicius is seen to be more critical of what Proclus said, raising objections to the position of 'incorporeal interval' (615,13ff.). He suggests that immateriality can still produce an impression, thus visibility (616,26-8).

As I have argued elsewhere, Proclus' prominent place here is not to be explained from the fact that his is the best theory (explicitly denied at 616,26-32), but from the difficulties he raises about Aristotle's theory and the counter-suggestions that are shared by many 'hypotheses' (616,31). This attitude bears witness to Simplicius' attempt to mobilise earlier Platonists to 'neutralise' or defuse ideologically sensitive claims in Aristotle (and Alexander). And since the innovative nature of Proclus' view is emphasized (as it is for Damascius, 624,3-4), novelty may, in this case, also be a reason for inclusion. So when Proclus is praised in the concluding paragraphs of the excursus on place for having established that there are 'things superior to, and with a more divine body, than this

¹ SORABJI 2004, vol. 3, pp. 54-58.

² Porphyry himself was criticized by his student Iamblichus, see esp. DILLON 1973, pp. 28-29.

³ It is likely that he uses Proclus' book which worked through and 'solved the objections' (in *de Caelo* 640,24-5). This section is partly based on BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 155-157.

⁴ See URMSON 1992, p. 32 n. 24; it is probable given the mention of the *Rep.* at 613,1. Cf. SORABJI 1988, ch. 11-12 on Proclus' interpretation of place as a 'kind of body' (614,10).

⁵ This, as URMSON 1992, *ad loc.* points out, is ironic, since Simplicius' references to other texts are quite vague. But the whole section shows that other authors/texts are involved: Chaldaean Oracles, *Timaeus*, Theophrastus.

universe', we must infer that Simplicius understands him to be talking about the whole place of the universe (643,36-644,2). Nonetheless Simplicius concludes by saying 'some true conception of place and did not miss its general character', allowing all properties to contribute. But it is Damascius, his teacher, who is held up as having produced the best analysis.

3) The polemical comments against Syrianus (*in Phys.* 193,16-19) concern the important question of first principles.¹ While most references indicate clear agreement with him, he appears quite late in the commentary on the first book (192,29) on the issue of first principles, and an objection is raised against his (Neoplatonist) reading at 193,16-19. During a discussion of opposition among principles, in particular form and lack of form ('privation'), Ammonius', Alexander's, Porphyry's and Syrianus' ideas are scrutinized and the latter's notion of opposition (quoted 192,29-31) is questioned in relation to the categories:

In this context it should in addition be said against (*pros*) the words of the most philosophical Syrianus, that if he takes excess and defect (*tên hyperokhên kai elleipsin kuriôs akouêi*) in the specific sense, the appropriate antithesis would belong to quantity only; for in the other categories it also exists by way of quantity.

The rephrasing of Platonic doctrine in late technical terminology is evident. A few lines later the objection against Syrianus is extended to Alexander as well (193,4). The agenda for this discussion had been laid out earlier (191,13-17). It raises four points which originate with the authors mentioned – which suggests that *their points* have in fact *set* the agenda for the discussion.

Thus we see that Simplicius is not afraid to voice dissent against all the major figures of the Platonist school, and on substantive issues. Yet the questions and criticisms often concern very specific details and his final verdict still aims to stay within the broad framework of Platonist doctrine. His task is one of evaluating the different authorities competing for dominance, and he is seen to strive for a balanced decision, strongly influenced by ancient authority (Aristotle, Theophrastus, Eudemus) or very recent authority (Iamblichus, Damascius).

2. 2. *Discreet disagreement*

The possibility of a subtle critical attitude was already noted by Urmson who expressed it pointedly (my italics): «Despite modern opinion, the later Neoplatonists were *critical* of, and *quietly irreverent* to, their authorities».² One of the rules of engagement in ancient debates within schools (hardly ever expressed explicitly) was that criticism was not likely to be very direct, if the person criticised was still alive. A famous example is Theophrastus, whose subtle corrections of Aristotle's doctrines has often been mistaken for timidity, hesitation or lack of judgment and ideas.³ A famous exception is of course Aristotle's criticism of Plato's Ideas.⁴

For Simplicius one case stands out quite clearly: his discussion of his teacher's view on place. A very brief account should suffice since this has been analysed extensively by

¹ Based on BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 159-162.

² URMSON 1992, p. 107 n. 40.

³ A view defended in BALTUSSEN 2006b, cf. SHARPLES 1987.

⁴ But one might infer from that act of open criticism that Plato was already dead.

others.¹ Damascius' role in Simplicius is marginal in general terms, but very prominent in some parts. He is clearly present in the so-called *Corollaries on Time and Place* (like Proclus, discussed above), which are marked by the fact that they express Simplicius' views in conversation with his master. These 'digressions' are in fact mini-essays and include a review of previous opinions. In the digression (corollary) on place he voices several criticisms against his teacher, while taking up Theophrastus' notion of place as the alternative.² Sorabji has shown that Simplicius goes beyond the Theophrastan interpretation, found in Iamblichus and Damascius. Concerning place Simplicius disagrees with Damascius' idea that measure (viewed as a kind of mould, *tupos*) gives things size and arrangement. Each thing has a unique place (*idios topos*) which moves along with it (629.8-12). In the excursus on time he evaluates Aristotle's rejection of the questions as to whether time exists (according to Aristotle its parts don't, so time itself cannot), and whether an instance can cease to exist. Since the late Platonists posit two kinds of time, a higher one which is 'above change' (as Iamblichus maintained) and lower time, he can avoid the paradoxes Aristotle had to deal with by claiming that the higher kind is immune to paradox, while the lower kind is a stretch of time between two instants. Simplicius thus reports Damascius' solution, but merely agrees that time exists as something which continuously comes into being, divisible in thought only. He will add his own solution that time is infinite (without beginning or end), if viewed as a cycle, in the discussion on the continuum (*Phys.* 6).

In short, the authority of the teacher is not a guarantee for acceptance of his views, in particular because Simplicius has other authorities to measure him against. It is this aspect of his strategy – the collocation of many authorities – which leads him to remain open to further exploration and evaluation, and to be less partial towards one particular solution than one might expect.

3. INCORPORATING A PERIPATETIC AUTHORITY

One author who stands out in the vast commentaries seems to do so on account of his authoritative view on Aristotle: the Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias. His role in the works of Simplicius has been clarified in recent research (D'Ancona, Sharples, Fazzo, Baltussen), but much more work is needed.³ If there is one good test-case to weigh up the dominant presence it is Alexander. As a commentator partial to Aristotle one would expect him to be in disagreement with Simplicius, whose position may be characterised as that of a Platonist; yet, because of developments since the second c. AD up to the sixth c. AD, Simplicius' Platonism is of an unusual kind, constituting a mixture of Aristotelian and Platonic ideas. Simplicius' respect (whether genuinely his or a more traditional stance since Plotinus) is clear from his descriptive labels:

¹ SORABJI 1987, pp. 7-23.

² See SORABJI 1983, pp. 208-210 (I summarise BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 163-165 here).

³ In ch. 4 of BALTUSSEN 2008 I offer an initial assessment of Alexander's role in the commentary on *Physics* with some statistics on his name occurrences (based on TLG-E): «Among the many references to his commentator-predecessors Simplicius mentions Alexander almost 1200 times, of which c. 700 occur in the 1300 page commentary on the *Physics*», i.e. once every other page (!) (2008, p. 109). For Simplicius' access to Alexander's works, we know titles from his own references: commentaries discussing Aristotle's *Physics* (*in Phys.* 430,3; 530,16), his *On the soul*, *On the heavens* (both at *in Phys.* 1292,2-3), but also Alexander's own treatise *De mixtu* (*in Phys.* 530,15), a polemic against Zenobius the Epicurean (*in Phys.* 489,21), and perhaps a commentary on *Generation and Corruption*. See also p. 130 n. 1 below (D'ANCONA).

‘most knowledgeable of Aristotle’s exegetes’ (*in Phys.* 80,15) or ‘the most careful of Aristotle’s partisans’ (*in de Caelo* 378,20-1). Alexander’s commentaries became influential for all the reasons we might expect: they were detailed, sensible discussions of the text and not overly partisan or obsequious in their interpretation. Simplicius’ may have been especially appreciative of his attitude, because he himself wanted the would-be commentator to be objective in his approach to Aristotle (*in Cat.* 7,26-9).

Several different approaches can be distinguished in his critical assessment of Alexander regarding philosophical issues.¹ There is *strong disagreement*, in which Simplicius will state his dissatisfaction clearly, but there is also *subtle subversion*, where the manner of expressing dissent is couched in diplomatic terms or (rhetorical) questions and verbs of doubt. It will be interesting to sample passages belonging to both categories and to consider in detail the reasons for these two approaches. The central questions are whether strong disagreement is motivated by ideological considerations, or whether subtle subversion is a way to salvage Alexander’s hostile position within a Platonist interpretation of Aristotle. Yet even if preliminary statistics suggest dissent from a much revered commentator (see below), he is seen to take pains not to be blunt or harsh in his expression of doubts (here the Greek adverb *mêpote* is a marker for dissent). I will review three examples of each group.

Simplicius’ approach in arguing explicitly *against* Alexander is characterised by detailed objections to his interpretations of Aristotle. In the commentary on *Physics* (188-93 Diels) he confronts Alexander on matters of philosophical and philological import. For instance, at *in Phys.* 193,24 ff. he launches a series of queries regarding the interpretation of the highest genus and the need for opposition among first principles (*Physics*), after describing Syrianus’ treatment of his issue, whom he also criticizes (*in Phys.* 193,16-30):

In this context it should in addition be said against (*pros*) the words of the most philosophical Syrianus,² that if he takes excess and defect (*tên hyperokhên kai elleipsin kuriôs akouei*) in the primary sense, the appropriate antithesis would belong to quantity only; for in the other categories it also exists on account of quantity. But if [20] he accepts it [= opposition] according to the stronger and more defective, how can he make this claim if every category receives it? For there are differences [of degree] in each [opposition] and of these differences the one (aspect) is stronger, the other more defective. (tr. Baltussen forthc. -a)

The passage clearly shows traditional respect (use of epithet), while also offering a number of objections to the interpretation Syrianus proposed. His method is to question the solution and illustrate the (bad) consequences. He also speaks up against his teacher and Alexander in this same way, again showing how the final verdict depends on weighing up the proposals of several authoritative philosophers:

Against (*pros*) the words of our teacher who bears witness and against Alexander [it must be asked], first, how will the opposition of substance also be available to the other categories, when each needs to have a proper opposition, [25] just as they have the proper genus? For if existing and the genus and the opposition [would go] from substance to the others, substance would be the one first genus and there would not be ten first (genera); for it is not the case that being does not exist for the others from substance, but it is present first for substance, and after that for the

¹ Although textual problems are relevant on occasion, I am excluding those where there is a simple dispute over the manuscript versions of particular passages (e.g. *in Phys.* 429,29-430,2; 734,12; 1017,20 etc.).

² On epithets used by Simplicius see above p. 124 n. 6 and cf. BALTUSSEN 2008, p. 155.

others, very much like arrangement is not present from the first to the second, but for all from the common structure. (tr. Baltussen forthc. -a)

Although the 'questioning' of their views might seem a sign of respect, he does not hold back on voicing dissent and suggesting a different direction.

The two other passages to consider are from the commentary on *On the Heavens*. This commentary opens with a comment from Alexander on the question of the purpose of the work (1,1 *skopos*; cf. 5,5 ff.). The review of existing opinions, so familiar from Aristotle, occurs here too, in line with the programmatic statement in his commentary on the *Categories*.¹ Alexander is paraphrased as claiming that the purpose or subject is 'the world'. This turns on definitions of 'heaven', where one of three senses distinguished is based on Plato (*Tim.* 28B) but he also mentioned Theophrastus as a 'witness' to the interpretation offered, now including the five elements *present in* the world. So Simplicius ends up rephrasing Alexander as saying that the subject of *On the Heavens* is the world (Plato) *and* the five elements (Theophrastus). But this is not a final verdict. The other views that follow (Iamblichus and Syrianus) are slightly different. Simplicius goes on to evaluate them in broader terms, before trying to come to some kind of compromise. He states:

Each of the aforementioned [scholars], in my view, gives his own account of the subject-matter in the light of his division of Aristotle's physical works. For some of them concern the natural principles which are common to every natural object, such as matter and form, motion and place, and time and nature itself, and the productive causes which arise as subsidiaries of it, as well as those things which natural scientists have thought to exist (although in fact they do not), such as void and the infinite, things the books of the treatise entitled the *Physics* explain. (tr. Hankinson)

This shows nicely how he strives to take all (known) relevant views into account, yet it should also be fairly clear that his selection is based on established 'authorities' within the Platonist tradition (including 'non-Platonists').²

Yet we also find critical comments on some of them. At 5,5 ff. he impugns him with lack of clarity, only saying that, had he said the subject is 'the world', he would not have taken issue with him. Instead he then attempts to (re)interpret Alexander as possibly meaning that it is «about the world in the sense of being about the simple elements which are in the world, or insofar as the whole world is contained within the heaven as Iamblichus says but not about the both the entire cosmos and all of the simple bodies» (5,6-9). Hence, when Simplicius a little later paraphrases Alexander as having claimed that the work «concerns the world as a whole ... in the first book», this is no longer rejected; what we have here is a 'sanitized' version of Alexander's in the light of Iamblichus' view mentioned earlier.

A further passage of interest is found at *in de Caelo* 269,30-270, 34. Here he discusses the way in which Aristotle connected metaphysics with the cosmological argument on

¹ See *in Cat.* 7,23-32 and BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 33-36. Another Aristotelian principle he uses is the search for *general agreement*, e.g., *in de Caelo* 266, 36-267,1: «I think one should first of all investigate what is said to be agreed by everyone».

² Alexander was already used by Syrianus, and it is likely that Syrianus stimulated interest in Alexander (see §3). On Syrianus and Alexander see LUNA 2001b, pp. 72-98; D'ANCONA 2002, pp. 221, 238-242; and BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 160-161.

the world's uniqueness.¹ After some preliminaries he adduces Alexander's claim that Aristotle shows in *Metaphysics* 12 that there is only *one prime mover*. His argument in favour of this reading makes use of the immaterial and incorporeal nature of the mover; Simplicius objects that one mover will only move one thing, and builds an elaborate case based on *Metaph.* 12.8 (270, 18-20) in direct opposition to Alexander, about whom he says repeatedly that he had problems (270,10; 271,15).²

These three examples were chosen to illustrate that Simplicius speaks up against established authorities on matters great and small. His commentaries show him as a tireless evaluator of known views. Although he selects mostly eminent contributors to the philosophical discourse on Plato and Aristotle, on balance he makes a real effort to incorporate important interpretations as well as compare them. His allegiance to the Iamblichian-Damascian version of Platonism (or: Plotinism) is never threatened, yet he still manages to keep enough distance to subject them to critical analysis.

When we now move on to consider some brief examples of *subtle subversion*, we see that the manner of expressing dissent seems muted or almost absent. Instead Simplicius offers alternatives, often introduced by particular words. But this *modus operandi* is not necessarily an indication of doubt, hesitancy or uncritical respect. I will start with a passage already briefly discussed in my book on Simplicius (2008), but will add two new examples to broaden the dossier and illustrate certain other aspects of his method.

A quite subtle argument is developed with regard to earlier suggestions on the text (*in Phys.* 423,12-13, 20-1). Simplicius reviews manuscript versions (another consequence of his collector's zeal), comparing Aspasius' proposal with that of Alexander:

perhaps Aspasius' reading is *safer*; ... I do not know why Alexander thinks what follows accords better with the latter reading (*graphê*) than with the other. For I think (*oimai*) that the internally initiated appears new here in the examples, which are from the crafts, even if health and disease are in some way natural. [transl. Urmson]

The passage shows how he *questions* Alexander's proposal without contradicting it, then gives his own view (*oimai*).

A second passage to be adduced is found at 538, 14-20. In this part of the commentary the issue under discussion is how form determines matter. Alexander is presented as having said that «Aristotle made it clear when he said 'as by surface and limit'. For the form, taken in the sense of shape, is that which determines and circumscribes matter and limits it, not the form taken as potentiality and account. For if lead is defined by weight and this is its form, this, however, is not its form *qua* body, but its being bounded by a surface.» That is Alexander's view.» (tr. Urmson). Simplicius' clear demarcation of the view of Alexander leads into a characteristic alternative interpretation, introduced by 'perhaps' (*mêpote*),³ arguing that «perhaps everything, including the qualities, should be taken as the form determining the matter», adducing Aristotle's own words to back this up: «when the limit and the attributes of the sphere are abstracted from, nothing is left except the matter» (209b9-11). It is possible that the Alexander quotation

¹ The discussion of first things in *Metaph.* 12 and *Phys.* 8.6. Other critical episodes worth mentioning are in *de Caelo* 526,16-17 and 559-560.

² HANKINSON 2004, p. 148, n. 464 already points this out, with reference to 270,18-30.

³ Already mentioned above, p. 129. The adverb occurs 423 times in the two physical commentaries (*in Phys.* 281 times; in *de Caelo* 142 times), though some may be not his (cf. the Porphyry quotation at *in Phys.* 264,27). See also BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 129-131.

is taken out of context so that we cannot assess the tenor of the argument fully, but Simplicius stages a rather convincing refutation with the support of the base text by the first scholar himself. In this case, The Commentator loses out against The Philosopher.¹

The third and final passage illustrates the balancing act Simplicius has to do on occasion, when trying to give his predecessors their due, while still criticising them. At 715,10-24 he sets out by commenting positively on Alexander («explained almost everything well»), but then notes that there are some small points that «deserve comment».² His style of 'comment' is oblique or subtle, by way of rhetorical questions and an alternative proposal, worded tentatively:

[10] While Alexander explained almost everything well, he added a few small points that deserve comment. For Aristotle at the beginning of the passage now before us, said that 'before and after are primarily in place'; Alexander says that this is the equivalent to 'before and after are primarily in place, i.e. in the moving [15] magnitude. 'For', he says, 'it is by position that the magnitude that is in a place has a before and after'. (i) What did he mean by this? For the before and after by position belongs to place, but not to the magnitude that is in a place. For the positions of a magnitude are relative to motion, which has its positional before and after from place. Also its positions are not simultaneous, but the magnitude [20] occupies different ones at different times. But the positions in place are simultaneous. (ii) How, then, could the before and after in motion be derived from the before and after in position of the thing that moves? So (iii) perhaps (*mêpote*) Aristotle, when he said that there is a before and after in magnitude, there too meant not 'in the moving magnitude' but 'in the distance over which the motion occurs'.

The issue of motion and magnitude is an important one in Aristotelian physics. Alexander's position aims to clarify the phrase about 'before and after in place' as referring to whatever it is (a magnitude) that moves. Simplicius prefers another interpretation. Again we see how close textual reading produces his 'corrective interpretation' by using questions (i, ii) and tentative description (iii), yet the marker for his own alternative (*mêpote*) signals his preference for a deviation from the great Peripatetic commentator.

Alexander's role in Simplicius requires further work. But it is clear that his role is unusual in its pervasive presence in the commentaries, which can be taken as a measure of his immense authority. There seems to be a parallel with the early Peripatetics (Theophrastus and Eudemos)³ in how his authority came to be acknowledged, in that his chronological and intellectual 'closeness' gives him some advantage. His authority was most likely also boosted by earlier endorsements or at least usage in earlier Platonist commentators (e.g. Plotinus, Syrianus). Yet in Simplicius' hands he emerges as anything but untouchable, which is clear from the many objections brought against him.⁴ Nevertheless, despite the many disagreements on major and minor issues, his authority stood firm.

¹ There are many other examples where Alexander is accused of misreading the text (implied in this case), for instance 429,24; 576,30-577,8; 594,17-34; 702,25-703,9 (on Plato) etc.

² Urmson's «that deserve attention» seems weaker, so I have used the noun 'comment' (the Greek has *tina mikra ... epistaseôs axia*). I also omit his «also» (not in the Greek).

³ For more detail on their authoritative role in Simplicius see BALTUSSEN 2008, ch. 3.

⁴ For *in Phys.* books 3-8 approximately one quarter of the cases referring to Alexander contain an expression of disagreement.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have made the case for the position that Simplicius is more independent as a philosophical writer than modern scholarship has allowed. As soon as he became used as a source for Presocratic philosophy, attention was deflected from his own contributions to the philosophical debate. In broad terms Simplicius remains loyal to his teachers, but it would be wrong to see him as a mindless copyist or a slavish collector of *doxai*. This means that there is room for changing our view of him. Late Platonism may have formed a united front, but this does not preclude critical reading and assessment of previous views, and to disagree amongst themselves. I have attempted to illustrate the extent to which Simplicius found fault with, and criticised, his fellow Platonists and other fellow commentators. That this was not always done by head-on confrontation may be explained from the historical situation he found himself in: firstly, he had to cope with an immensely learned and copious tradition, a task which he took on with considerable courage and resourcefulness; secondly, he was forced to choose a defensive line of argument with respect to the presentation of pagan philosophy in a world which had been taken over by Christianity. This circumstance contributed importantly to his predicament and the ensuing strategy. As I concluded in my summing up of his methodology: 'In trying to defend the Platonist point of view in contradistinction to the Christian outlook he uses polemic to persuade and refute, the comprehensive exegesis to clarify and proselytise'.¹

The extent to which he is seen to dissent would need further confirmation, but the preliminary evidence suggests that it is in proportion to the difficult balancing act forced upon him by his historical position; philosophically, he is a seventh generation Platonist since Plotinus taught his new doctrine, and ideologically, he finds himself 'surrounded' by an increasingly hostile world. Given the sheer amount of material canvassed and processed, it is a miracle he managed to express a personal view at all. As the works stand, he does so cautiously and judiciously. In his *modus operandi* he comes in fact close to the ideal commentator outlined at *in Cat.* 7.23-32, with the added bonus that he offers quotations to support his arguments.² A partial explanation for his 'cautious' comments, offered as muted disagreement, could be offered by saying that to criticize fellow Platonists too strongly might weaken one's overall position. A final peculiarity also hints at his ability to take a more objective stance: Simplicius has on occasion a detached view of the Platonists, since he refers to them as «the Platonists do this or that», as if he were not to be counted among them.³ It coincides with his unusually comprehensive scope of source analysis, an approach which was bound to produce tensions, and hence difficulties in presenting a unified picture of the philosophical tradition, whether it was meant to be Greek (a wide perspective) or Platonist (a narrow perspective). It can be concluded, therefore, that respect for authority can go hand in hand with criticism and dissent in Simplicius, without jeopardizing the fundamental tenets of Platonism.

¹ BALTUSSEN 2008, p. 195. On the interactions between Platonists and Christians see de LABRIOLLE 1948, BARNES 1991, ATHANASSIADI 1993, EDWARDS 2006, WATTS 2006, pp. 86-96.

² On his use of quotation see BALTUSSEN 2008, pp. 42-48, esp. 44.

³ See e.g. *in Phys.* 320,23,27; 571.30; 657.28 and *in de Caelo* 303,33; 571,9; 640,23; 649,29.

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