
Simplicius: On Aristotle on the Heavens 1.5–9 translated by R. J. Hankinson

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. x+181. ISBN 0–8014–4212–5. Cloth \$69.95

Reviewed by
Ian Mueller
University of Chicago
i-mueller@uchicago.edu

The Greek texts of what are called the ancient commentaries on Aristotle were published in modern editions in the series *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (CAG) between 1882 and 1909, an enormous undertaking making available works produced mainly between the late second century and the mid sixth century AD. In 1987, the first volume of English translations from these commentaries appeared in the series *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* under the general editorship of Richard Sorabji, a series which is now projected to run to over 100 volumes.¹ In the present volume, R. J. Hankinson offers an annotated English translation of the commentary (*In de caelo*) written by Simplicius of Cilicia (first half of the sixth century (AD)) on the middle chapters of book 1 of Aristotle's *De caelo*. The volume begins with a brief preface by Sorabji indicating some of the cosmological issues raised in the commentary and an introduction by Hankinson sketching Simplicius' life and work, his philosophical attitude, and the textual situation;² and it concludes with a bibliography, an English-Greek glossary, a Greek-English index, and a subject index.

In the first four chapters of *In de caelo*, Aristotle argues³ that our ordered world (the cosmos) is made up from five simple bodies,

¹ A good sense of the importance and motivation of the series can be gained from Gerson 2005.

² The introduction is a somewhat shortened version of the introduction to Hankinson 2002. Readers interested in the complex textual situation concerning the commentary might consult the introduction to Mueller 2004.

³ A problem which frequently concerns Simplicius and should concern any philosophical commentator on the *De caelo* is the structure of Aristotle's argumentation, which often seems to be circular.

each with a ‘natural’ place corresponding to its heaviness or lightness: earth, the heaviest naturally located in the lowest, then water, then air, then fire and outside these a fifth body, traditionally called ether, the stuff of the heavens. He also argues that when the sublunar simple bodies are not in their natural place, they tend to move there in a straight line; whereas ether, which does not interact with other bodies, has an eternal circular motion. In chapters 5–9, Aristotle is primarily concerned with the question of what is outside our cosmos. He argues that ether cannot be infinite [c. 5], that none of the other simple bodies is infinite [c. 6], that an infinite body is completely impossible [c. 7], that our cosmos is the only cosmos [c. 8], and that it is impossible for there to be another cosmos [c. 9]; and concludes with the amazing statement that ‘there is neither place nor emptiness (*κενόν*) nor time outside <our heaven>’ [279a17–18]. I and, I think, most contemporary readers do not find these chapters congenial. Throughout Aristotle takes for granted his now discredited doctrines of natural place and motion while arguing against opponents, the most prominent probably being the Greek atomists who reject or would reject them. Simplicius is completely faithful to Aristotle here, invoking his arguments to rebut post-Aristotelians who also reject Aristotle’s conception of the natural. Another discomfiting aspect of Aristotle’s reasoning is his handling of the infinite, e.g., his insistence that a part of something infinite cannot be infinite. Since the conceptual apparatus for dealing with this kind of issue is less than 200 years old, it is not surprising that Simplicius finds Aristotle’s argumentation conclusive; but the modern reader may not be impressed to see the same inadequate arguments driven home repeatedly.

Simplicius is a Platonist or, as many would say, a Neoplatonist. But he wishes to distinguish himself from people whom he calls⁴ friends (*φίλοι*) of Plato [276.10], people who stress the disagreements between Plato and Aristotle. For the most part, Simplicius is extremely respectful of Aristotle and stresses his agreement, or at least his non-disagreement, with Plato. But he is quite willing to invoke ideas from later Platonism, generally thought not to be either Platonic or Aristotelian, to support his interpretation of the text. The

⁴ I refer to Hankinson’s translation using the lineation of the CAG text which is indicated in the margins of the translation.

commentary has a standard format in which a passage, presented in a ‘lemma’,⁵ is discussed, then the next stretch of text is discussed, and so on. This breaking up of the text can impede understanding of its flow and overall structure,⁶ particularly when the commentary brings in outside ideas and questions. Simplicius’ comments have a fairly standard, although not completely standardized, form. The lemma is first summarized in an expanded form, normally three or four times the length of the passage. Then questions are raised, often, in the case of this commentary, relating to interpretations offered by Alexander of Aphrodisias (ca 200 AD), a Peripatetic commentator of decidedly less Platonic inclinations than Simplicius,⁷ but sometimes relating to those by other people who disagree with Aristotle. Simplicius does his best to provide answers to these questions; and, although he frequently prefaces his solutions with a ‘perhaps’, there is usually no question about what he thinks is the best answer. At the end of his discussion, Simplicius sometimes mentions textual points, alternative manuscript readings, proposed emendations, and so forth. Hankinson estimates the ratio of discussion to text discussed in *In de caelo* as 10 to 1. Simplicius’ prolixity is another obstacle to the modern reader, and makes the commentary of little value to the beginner wanting to gain access to the intricacies of Aristotle’s thought; such a person would do better with an annotated translation such as Guthrie 1939 or Leggatt 1995. *In de caelo* is of value, first, as a document in the history of the reception of Aristotle’s thought; second, as a treasure house of historical materials for which we often have no other source; and, third, as a basically word-by-word reading of the text from which even the most experienced Aristotelians can gain insights if they persevere.

The existence of this first (and perhaps last) modern-language translation of a historically important text can only be welcomed.

⁵ The lemmas in the CAG text contain only the first and last words of a passage; but Hankinson, wisely in my view, reproduces whole passages. However, it is important to realize that the words in a lemma are not a sound basis for inferring what text Simplicius read: contrast Hankinson’s note 36.

⁶ I remark that Hankinson’s division of Simplicius’ comments into short paragraphs is sometimes an obstacle to noticing connections.

⁷ The fragments of Alexander’s lost commentary on the *De caelo* are presented and discussed in Rescigno 2004.

Scholars working on *In de caelo* will necessarily depend upon it. Hankinson's extensive notes are primarily devoted to providing references for Simplicius' statements about what Aristotle has said or says elsewhere, filling out his references to other authors or ideas, explaining Simplicius' logical terminology, and assessing the philosophical merits (usually not high) of one or another argument canvassed. There are only a few proposed textual emendations, most of them relatively minor. The translation is serviceable, but it is not literal: a reader familiar with Simplicius' not always transparent Greek would often have difficulty figuring out what Greek lay behind a given translation. In the remainder of this review, I am going to make some critical remarks of detail about translation and interpretation. I hope they will be seen as constructive and helpful and of use to readers of the commentary, since I am convinced that I am reviewing a valuable contribution to the study of ancient cosmology.

- One of the difficulties in reading an ancient commentary is correlating what is said with what is in a lemma. Hankinson's notes are helpful here, but his translations sometimes makes the connection more obscure than it has to be. For example, at 247.35, Simplicius quotes 276a22–23 exactly: but the translation of Simplicius differs from the translation in the lemma. Moreover, in the lemma for 275b6–11, ἐν τόποις is translated (quite rightly) as 'in place'; but in Simplicius' discussion the translation becomes [e.g., at 236.16] 'spatially located', a phrase which might for some carry more conceptual baggage than the Greek original.⁸
- Note 48 says that 207.32–34 is somewhat garbled and might require wholesale alteration. But the sense is quite clear, if one understands αἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ κέντρου ἀγόμεναι, ἐξ ὧν ἡ διάμετρος as the two radii making up a diameter. The standard Greek for 'radii' is αἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ κέντρου <ἀγόμεναι γραμμαί>, which Simplicius uses immediately after at 208.2.
- Note 49 is misleading in paraphrasing 'if the lines are equal, the finite will be equal to the infinite' [208.2] as 'if they are equal they

⁸ I note also that Hankinson does not indicate which edition of the *De caelo* he takes as the basis of his translation. I found this problematic only in connection with 277a31–32, where, so far as I could tell, he was following Guthrie 1939.

must be finite', since Simplicius is arguing under the assumption that only one of the two radii is finite.

- Notes 81 and 82 suggest that Simplicius assigned to Aristotle the odd view that an infinite straight line is bounded because it is one-dimensional. But the interpretation is based on a mistranslation of ἐπ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ μέρος, ἐφ' ὃ as 'in respect of that part wherein' and κατὰ ἕτερον μέρος as 'in respect of another part', overlooking the geometric use of μέρος to mean something like 'direction' [cf. Heath 1926, 420]. 213.16–19 should be translated

Just as a limited line, in so far as it is limited, is not infinite; or, if it is, it is so only in the direction in which it has length without limit; equally, planes, in so far as they are limited, cannot be infinite, even though they may sometimes be infinite in one direction.

- Note 84 misreports the manuscripts of Aristotle, all of which have ζῆ; the variations concern the text of Simplicius at 214.21, which almost certainly read ῆ.
- Similarly note 85 says that Aristotle wrote 'EE' at 272b27; but, in fact, he wrote 'E'.
- At 215.7, the text of Simplicius has 'Aristotle'; the translation, 'Alexander'.
- At *Phys.* 6.10.241b6–7, Aristotle says οὐδε ὅλως τὸ ἀδύνατον γενέσθαι γίνεσθαι ('<It is inconceivable>...generally that that which cannot come to be should be in process of coming to be'), a passage which Simplicius cites at 218.3–4 as τὸ γὰρ ἀδύνατον γενέσθαι οὐδε τὴν ἀρχὴν γίνεται. Hankinson misses this reference, perhaps because he mistranslates Simplicius' words as 'what cannot have come to be is not even beginning to come to be', overlooking the use of τὴν ἀρχὴν with a negative to mean 'not at all'. A similar mistake occurs at 229.19, 21, and 24, at 235.34, and at 260.5. The phrase is correctly construed at 261.14, where the translation should be 'What cannot have moved (κινῆσθαι) to something cannot be moving (κινεῖται) toward it in any way (τὴν ἀρχὴν),' rather than 'what cannot approach something cannot move toward it in any way'.
- The translation of 219.18 misconstrues ἔκθεσις and στοιχεῖον; it should read 'he shows... by impossibility with a setting out of letters.'
- At 274a8, 'weight' should be 'time'.

- At 227.30, the translation describes a division as ‘negative’ with an explanatory note. But ἀντιφατικός means ‘contradictory’, and Simplicius’ point is that the alternatives in the division (‘finite or infinite’) exhaust the possibilities.
- 231.30 κινούμενα should be ‘things moved’, not ‘movers’.
- At 237.1, οἱ παλαιοί (‘the early people’) is rendered ‘the early Stoics’. *Prima facie* this seems very unlikely, given the common use of οἱ νεώτεροι (‘the more recent people’) to refer to the Stoics. The phrase in question is ‘the *thema* which οἱ παλαιοί call third’. That these are Peripatetics is, I think, made likely by the fact that in his commentary on book 1 of the *Prior Analytics* Alexander of Aphrodisias credits Aristotle with discovering the third *thema* [see 274.19–21, 278.6–8].
- In note 272, it is said that at 236.10 Simplicius describes certain arguments as both more concrete (παγματευωδέστεραι) and more general (καθολικώτεραι). But when Simplicius says ‘he once again shows by way of more general and more concrete demonstrations’, he is distinguishing between the concrete argument at 275b6–11 and the discussion which begins at 275b12 with the words, ‘It is possible to argue more formally (λογικώτερον) as follows.’
- At 244.15, ἐν μὲν τῷ προσεχῶς εἰρημένῳ is rendered ‘in the principal argument’, but Simplicius is just referring to what was just said by Aristotle.
- At 245.5, πλῆθος is rendered ‘mass’, but it should be ‘number’ as in the Greek-English lexicon.
- At 249.4, χρώμενος τοῖς προληφθεῖσι is rendered ‘employing some earlier premisses’; but Simplicius’ reference is to the pair of ‘axioms’ which he has stated in his discussion of the preceding lemma and not to the passages cited in note 343. Immediately after, at 249.6, when Simplicius says that something κεῖται, he is referring to the second of these two axioms. Consequently, κεῖται should be rendered as ‘laid down’ not as ‘established’: cf. 249.11, 256.17.
- At 256.1, ἐκεῖ should be ‘there’, not ‘here’.
- At 260.8, ἕκαστον τούτων (viz., heart, liver, bones), ἐν ᾧ ἔστι, καὶ τὴν ἐξ ἧς ἄρχῆς ἔσχε γένεσιν should be rendered ‘each of them had its original genesis in the place in which it is’ (i.e., the heart

is not a heart until it is located where the heart should be), not ‘each of them is in the place where it originally came to be.’

- At 266.1, *προκατασπωμένου τοῦ βαρυτέρου* should be ‘the heavier side is dragged down first’, not ‘the heavier side drags it down first.’
- In note 433, it should be mentioned that the introduction of the astronomical theory of epicycles predates Hipparchus; see, e.g., Toomer 1970.
- There is no reason to think that ‘or the snub’ at 278.15 ‘might be an intrusion’ [note 516]. Commentators often bring in a more standard example when Aristotle introduces an unusual one.
- Note 526 on 280.7 is too elaborate: all Simplicius means is that ‘natural body’ is a less general term than ‘substance’.
- At 285.25, *ἄτοπος οὖν ἢ ὑπόθεσις καὶ τὸ ζητούμενον προλαμβάνουσα τῇ φαντασίᾳ*... should be ‘so the supposition is absurd and assumes in advance, using imagination, what is supposed to be proved...’, not ‘so the supposition which provides what is sought in the imaginary case... is absurd.’
- The suggestion in note 588 that Simplicius thought that the *Metaphysics* preceded the physical works in some ordering is unlikely, and is not supported by the passage in the note. At 288.23, *οἶδε δὲ καὶ πρὸ τούτου αἰῶνα ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῇ Μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ δύναμιν ὄντα τοῦ πρώτου παρ’ αὐτῷ νοῦ*... should be translated ‘and in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle has acknowledged an age (αἰών) which is prior to this one <viz. . . . , the time of this cosmos>, namely, the power of the mind which, according to Aristotle, is primary’... rather than ‘and Aristotle understood “age” prior to this, in the *Metaphysics*, as being the internal capacity of the primary mind...’
- At 290.15, *ἂν εἶπε* should be ‘would he say’ rather than ‘does he say’.
- The emendation proposed for 291.1 is unnecessary for the reason stated in note 608; it has no real textual basis in that it is found only (as far as one can tell from the apparatus in the CAG) as a correction by Bessarion and in an 1865 printed edition of *In de caelo*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Gerson, L. P. 2005. Review of Sorabji 2005. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2005.07.55.
- Gillispie, C. C. 1970–1990. ed. *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. New York.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. 1939. ed. and trans. *Aristotle: On the Heavens*. London/Cambridge, MA.
- Hankinson, R. J. 2002. trans. *Simplicius: On Aristotle on the Heavens 1.1–4* London.
- Heath, T. L. 1926. *The Thirteen Books of Euclid's Elements*. vol. 1. Cambridge.
- Leggatt, S. 1995. ed. and trans. *Aristotle: On the Heavens I and II*. Warminster.
- Mueller, I. 2004. trans. *Simplicius: On Aristotle on the Heavens 2.1–9*. London.
- Rescigno, A. 2004. ed. *Alessandro di Afrodisia, Commentario al De caelo di Aristotele. Frammenti del primo libro*. Amsterdam.
- Sorabji, R., 2005. ed. *The Philosophy of the Commentators, 200–600 AD: A Sourcebook*. 3 vols. Ithaca, NY.
- Toomer, G. J. 1970. 'Apollonius of Perga'. See Gillispie 1970–1990, 1.179–193.