
Simplicius: On Aristotle, On the Heavens 3.1–7 translated by Ian Mueller

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There has been a recent revival of interest in the latter books of the *De caelo*, where Aristotle develops his account of the four sublunary elements.¹ Additionally, the work of Richard Sorabji and others for the series *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle*, now over 90 volumes, has re-invigorated the study of the reception of Aristotelian cosmology and Aristotelian approaches to natural science in general. Ian Mueller's English translation of Simplicius' *On Aristotle, On the Heavens 3.1–7* is a valuable addition to both of these projects. Simplicius' commentary on *De caelo* is an important historical source for the background, reception, and development of Aristotle's views on the material elements of sublunary bodies. Mueller's clear translation and introduction have made this source accessible to a wider audience, while at the same time providing the specialist with thoughtful textual suggestions, notes, and references.

Simplicius (AD ca 490–560) was one of the last Neoplatonist commentators, writing his commentaries after the Academy in Athens was closed by Justinian in AD 529 [1]. His commentary is the only commentary on *De caelo* extant (there is a paraphrase by Themistius preserved in a Hebrew translation of a lost Arabic version that was itself translated into Latin), and now nearly the entire work has been translated for Sorabji's *Ancient Commentators* series. Most of the commentary on book 1 was translated in three volumes by Hankinson [2002, 2004, 2006], while the commentary on book 2 was translated in two volumes by Mueller [2004, 2005]. This new volume, covering most of the commentary on book 3, and a seventh volume, on *De*

¹ See especially [Bowen and Wildberg 2009](#).

caelo 3.7–4.6 also by Mueller,² completes the English translation of Simplicius' *De caelo* commentary.

The volume contains an introduction by Mueller, the translation, an appendix on the argument at *De caelo* 303b13–304b11, a list of textual questions (emendations), notes to the translation, a bibliography, and an English-Greek glossary. Also included are a Greek-English index, an index of names, a subject index, and several addenda, the most important of which lists quotations of Alexander of Aphrodisias in this volume that are included in Andrea Rescigno's collection [2008] of fragments of Alexander's lost commentary on the *De caelo*.

In *De caelo* 3.1–7, Aristotle begins his investigation of the sub-lunary bodies and their elements by looking to the accounts of his predecessors: the Eleatics, the material monists and pluralists, and Plato. These initial chapters primarily contain Aristotle's criticisms of these earlier views, but the criticism is always constructed with the aim of giving a positive account of bodies and their elements [26: cf. *De caelo* 298b1]. This positive account is not delivered until *De caelo* 4.4, when Aristotle completes his demonstration of the elements as simple natural bodies differentiated by the simple motions up and down and generated from each other by reciprocal substantial change. By the end of 3.7, however, Aristotle has made some progress towards his goal: he has proposed a definition of 'element' and argued that the elements must be generated from each other.

Aristotle opens chapter 1 by criticizing the view in the *Timaeus* that body itself is generated from simpler mathematical parts. In chapter 2, his aim is to establish that the simple bodies have weight or lightness. In chapter 3, he defines an element as that 'into which other bodies are divided and which inher[e]s <in bodies> ... and which itself cannot be divided into things different in kind' [76: cf. *De caelo* 302a14–15], and claims that simple bodies meet this definition. In chapters 4 and 5, Aristotle discusses the number of elements and concludes against Democritus, Anaxagoras, and the Presocratic monists, that there are finitely many elements but more than one. In chapter 6, Aristotle claims that it will become clear how many elements there are and what they are like by determining whether the elements are eternal or are subject to generation and corruption.

² [Ed.] See the review by Pierre Pellegrin on pp. 41–42.

He concludes that the elements are generated from each other; and, in chapter 7, he begins a discussion of how this takes place—whether by separation from mixtures as Democritus and Empedocles think or by reciprocal transformation as Plato holds [e.g., *Tim.* 53e2–54d3]. Our volume ends in the middle of the commentary on chapter 7, where Aristotle refutes the Democritean and Empedoclean account of generation as the separating out of elements from mixtures.

Simplicius' commentary on *De caelo* 3.1–7 is exegetical in form, and his exegesis relies heavily on his (and other Neoplatonists') belief that the positions of Plato and Aristotle are in harmony. Beginning from a *lemma* (a short section of text), Simplicius will typically summarize Aristotle's position, often explaining how the *lemma* is related to what Aristotle said before and supplementing Aristotle's elliptical assertions about his predecessors' positions with longer quotations from their works. (Many of the quotations in Simplicius' commentaries are our only source for the writings of the Presocratics.) Simplicius then discusses different ways in which Aristotle's arguments have been interpreted before introducing his own reading. The interpretations which he rejects are frequently those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, the second century Peripatetic commentator from whose lost commentary on *De caelo* Simplicius cites extensively. Alexander, according to Simplicius, exaggerates the disagreements between Plato and Aristotle. To show their agreement, Simplicius asserts that Aristotle's criticisms are aimed at the superficial or literal meaning, but not the true or intended meaning, of Plato's text, and then elaborates on what he thinks this true and intended meaning is.

The commentary, then, both documents the reception of Aristotle's natural science and expresses sixth-century Platonist philosophical views, and Mueller has done a reasonably good job at balancing both aspects of this text. He accomplishes this by applying a kind of exegetical parsimony to his introduction and notes. Mueller confines his discussions of the commentary's historical and philosophical context almost exclusively to what is presented in the text: Aristotle, his targets in *De caelo* 3.1–7, Alexander of Aphrodisias, and Timaeus of Locri.³ His translation, as well, closely follows a type-correspondence of one English word for one Greek word. The effect of this style is that the reader is free to interpret an English text in

³ The discussion of Timaeus of Locri is very interesting and rewards attention.

a manner as close to interpreting the original Greek edition as possible. For those readers who want to understand Simplicius' aims and methods as a Neoplatonist commentator, he invites them to consult Hankinson's introduction to the first volume of *On Aristotle's On the Heavens* 1.4–9 [2004] as well as Han Baltussen's *Philosophy and Exegesis in Simplicius: The Methodology of a Commentator* [2008]. One might also do well to look at Phillipe Hoffmann's 'Sur quelques aspects de la polémique de Simplicius contre Jean Philopon' [1987].

Mueller's translation is accurate and literal, and in general a pleasure to read. This in itself is a great achievement. He follows closely Heiberg's text [1894] with a few reasonable emendations, most of which he carefully notes, often including a translation of the alternative text. This style of translation makes the volume an excellent aid for those with a moderate understanding of ancient Greek or for those who are approaching Simplicius' writing for the first time. The introduction includes a summary of *De caelo* 3.1–7, summaries of Simplicius' claims concerning other authors mentioned in the commentary, and a discussion of the text that he used to prepare this translation. The notes provide clarifications of obscure arguments and are mostly very helpful. Mueller has also done an excellent job of collecting cross-references and pointing the reader to the texts in which Simplicius or someone whom he mentions makes a particular claim under discussion.

The volume also includes whole passages of Aristotle's *De caelo* translated by Mueller from Moraux's edition [1965], where Heiberg's text and the manuscripts have only *lemmata*. This is helpful for the reader, as it unifies the diction between the two texts, making it easier to connect Simplicius' commentary with the *De caelo* itself. However, including a translation of the whole of Moraux's text into a translation of Heiberg's might suggest to the reader, perhaps artificially, that our text of *De caelo* is the same text Simplicius read when he composed his commentary, a suggestion that would, I think, need defending. As Mueller points out [19], the *lemmata* found in A (Heiberg's favored ms.) represent only about 10% of the *De caelo* [121]; assuming that the *lemmata* were not added by a later editor, this 10% is the *most* we could know of what Simplicius read. Mueller, however, is sensitive to this worry: the text of *De caelo* not found in the manuscripts is marked with square brackets, and in his 'Textual

Questions' [120–121], Mueller lists passages where it appears to him that Simplicius read something other than our text.

The inclusion of all of Aristotle's *De caelo* raises a further question of interpretation. I said earlier that Simplicius' commentary both documents the reception of Aristotelian science and expresses a form of sixth-century Platonism. Overall, I think Mueller has balanced both aspects of the commentary; however, to offer one criticism of this volume, I think that Mueller occasionally emphasizes the former aspect at the expense of the latter, obscuring the content of some of Simplicius' arguments. Mueller asserts on several occasions in his introduction that Simplicius is 'completely committed to the idea that Aristotle understands and agrees with Plato and that [Aristotle's] criticisms of Plato are directed against a superficial reading of Plato's text' [11: cf. 2, 4]. This view has become common in some circles; but in the context of an otherwise objective and parsimonious translation and notes, it seems out of place. It is one thing for *Simplicius* to *say* that he believes that Aristotle understands and agrees with Plato, and quite another thing for *us* to *assert* that he is committed to this idea. Mueller has not made a case for this latter view, and I do not think the text bears it out.

For instance, in chapter 1, Aristotle criticizes Plato for claiming in the *Timaeus* that the elements are generated from indestructible and indivisible planes existing actually in the bodies they compose [e.g., 36: cf. 299a2–11]. The main force of the criticism is against what he takes to be a Democritean streak in Plato, namely, that generation is the same as composition from indivisible parts. Aristotle, in contrast, maintains that generation (either from the elements or of the elements) is a case of substantial change resulting from the union of matter and form through the action of an efficient cause.

Simplicius, interestingly, agrees with Aristotle that

those who say that bodies are composed of planes or planes of lines or lines of points do not say that they are composed as if from matter and form, but as if from those things [*scil.* planes, lines, points] as parts. [48: cf. [Heiberg 1894](#), 573.15–21]

Yet, Simplicius defends Plato and the Pythagoreans by reading the Aristotelian distinction between composition from parts and generation from matter and form back into the *Timaeus* and the Pythagoreans. Simplicius, against Alexander, claims 'that we [*scil.* Platonists]

also make a body with qualities from matter and form' [53: cf. Heiberg 1894, 579.5]; and he concludes his discussion of the generation of bodily elements from mathematical entities by claiming,

It is clear that these people [*scil.* the Pythagoreans, but Plato is also implied] said that things are composed from numbers on the grounds that numbers pre-contain [περιειληφόντων] in themselves all the forms in a fundamental way [ἀρχοειδῶς]. [55: cf. Heiberg 1894, 580.13]

The adverb ἀρχοειδῶς, which Mueller translates 'in a fundamental way', is perhaps better rendered 'in the manner of a principle', since Simplicius is using this term to emphasize that (according to Simplicius) Plato and the Pythagoreans really believed bodies were composed from planes or numbers, not as a whole from parts, but as from a principle, i.e., as the principle or ἀρχή of form, which, when united with matter, generate bodies.

Simplicius is not as interested in making Aristotle agree with *Plato* (despite what Simplicius himself says) as he is in showing that Aristotle and Plato are in agreement concerning certain Platonist theses about the structure of the cosmos and the sublunary world. Simplicius uses a similar strategy to defend Parmenides. When Aristotle claims that Parmenides mistakenly applied intelligible qualities to the sensible world, Simplicius argues that Parmenides distinguished the intelligible and sensible world, and that Aristotle is criticizing only a superficial reading of Parmenides [18: cf. Heiberg 1894, 557.1]. I think that it would be a stretch to say Simplicius' intention is to show that Aristotle understood and agreed with Plato by showing that Aristotle understood and agreed with Parmenides; however, this is what Mueller's view would amount to. A more parsimonious reading suggests that Simplicius believed all three philosophers agreed on roughly the same set of Platonist theses to which Simplicius himself subscribed.

These questions of interpretation, however, are in no way meant to detract from what is, overall, an excellent translation of Simplicius' commentary on *De caelo* 3.1–7. By making Simplicius accessible to a wider audience, Mueller's work on this volume is an invaluable contribution both to the study of Simplicius and to our understanding of the transmission and reception of Aristotelian science and cosmology. It should be purchased by any library with an interest in Ancient

and Late Antique philosophy and science, and will rightly become the standard text among English readers of Simplicius' commentary on *De caelo* 3.1–7.

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