
Pierluigi Donini: Commentary and Tradition. Aristotelianism, Platonism, and Post-Hellenistic Philosophy edited by Mauro Bonazzi

Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011. Pp. 466. ISBN 978-3-11-021872-5. Cloth \$182.00

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Pierluigi Donini's contribution to the field of ancient philosophy over the last 40 years is distinctive and important for a number of reasons. His work on the way in which philosophy developed in the immediate aftermath of the Hellenistic era has been pioneering—and all the more noteworthy since his earliest publications come from a time (the 1960s) when interest in the Hellenistic schools themselves was uncommon enough. Then, there is the fact that he is equally at home with the Aristotelian as the Platonic tradition. Everyone knows in principle that the two should be studied together, but the evidence for each throws up more than enough obstacles to understanding for a single lifetime and few scholars can claim to have a firm handle on both. Finally, there is his conviction that both Aristotelians and Platonists are part of a lively and sophisticated intellectual tradition—making him an inspiring guide through a field populated by scholars who often give the impression that (as someone once expressed it to me) they rather despise their material. In the best Italian tradition, Donini unites philological sensitivity with philosophical incision; and the results have been published in a prolific stream of game-changing studies, especially on Alexander and Plutarch, and especially in epistemology and metaphysics.

Commentary and Tradition reprints 22 of Donini's articles (15 in Italian, 3 in French, 3 in English, 1 in German), adding two previously unpublished studies (both in Italian), some cross-referencing between the articles, an English abstract for each, and an *index locorum* for all. The aims of the volume are to facilitate access to Donini's work and, by so doing, to promote the study and understanding of post-Hellenistic philosophy [7]. The result is an impressively broad-

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ISSN 1549-4497 (ONLINE) ISSN 1549-4470 (PRINT) ISSN 1549-4489 (CD-ROM)
Aestimatio 9 (2012) 195-201

ranging, yet surprisingly coherent, account of the period—enough so that it is possible to imagine this book as a way in to the study of the later Aristotelian and Platonist traditions. This is helped by the fact that one of the principal focuses of Donini's work is the characteristic medium of later Aristotelian and Platonist philosophy, the commentary.

In his seminal essay 'Testi e commenti' (reprinted here), Donini argued that commentary was the means by which Aristotelianism and Platonism sought to build coherent systems out of fragmented philosophical traditions; and most of the papers in this volume give substance to that thought or trace its implications—through the Aristotelian tradition in part 1 and the Platonic tradition in part 2. I list the individual papers and their conclusions at the end of this review: it is enough to give a sense of the volume if I add here that Alexander is a central figure in part 1, where the papers are mostly concerned with exploring and exemplifying the different techniques that he used to make sense of Aristotle, with a focus on how he dealt with apparent contradictions within the corpus or with places where expansion and elucidation was needed. Plutarch dominates part 2, especially the way in which his exegesis of Plato reflects his commitment to the unity of the Platonic tradition. Donini is excellent at teasing out the many layers that there are to Plutarch's discussions, particularly those on matters of physics—an imbrication which is convincingly read by Donini as an attempt to associate an appropriate level of ('Academic') uncertainty and caution with the views that we have of the sensible world while remembering that the ultimate answers are to be found in metaphysics and theology. Donini is never quite convinced that Plutarch really succeeded in his unifying mission [cf. 'Testi e commenti' at pp. 249–250]; and in more recent work represented here, he argues that we can see him grappling in particular with a 'Pythagorean' view of Plato which cannot be squared with the 'Academic'.

It is not clear to me why the volume starts with off four relatively minor pieces (including one of the new ones) on a scattering of issues in Aristotle himself. They do, of course, help to give a fuller sense of the scope of Donini's interests and their inclusion is appropriate in so far as the book is also a tribute to him. But they do nothing to promote the sense of thematic unity which is otherwise so strong. What is more, just in so far as they attest to additional strings to

Donini's bow, they risk drawing attention, by contrast, to areas in which he has done less work: for example, on Plato and also on the Hellenistic schools.¹

As it happens, I felt the relative absence of the Stoics in any case. As a matter of methodology, Donini tends to concentrate on the way in which the Platonist and Aristotelian movements construct themselves through the exegesis of their foundational texts, rather than thinking about how their self-definition was shaped by conscious opposition to the Hellenistic schools. There is nothing wrong with that, of course; but there are times when it seems to me that it leads Donini to underestimate the importance, and continuing vitality, of schools such as the Stoa in the post-Hellenistic era [cf. Frede 1999, esp. 778–782]. It is symptomatic of this that Donini is keen to argue some of the Stoicism out of Seneca, for example, in favor of Platonizing tendencies mediated, he suggests, by Antiochus ('Le fonti medioplatoniche di Seneca'). But 'Platonic' motifs in Seneca can be explained in ways that do not compromise his Stoicism.² Indeed, he can easily be read as further evidence for the extent to which the Stoics engaged closely with Plato—and latterly with *Platonism*—throughout the history of their school. Again, in the case of Antiochus himself, Donini plays down the importance of Stoicism in his thought, suggesting that it has been exaggerated by polemical sources [289–290]. But it is Antiochus' own spokesman in Cicero who calls Stoicism a 'correction' of Plato's original system [*Acad.* 1.35]. The thought is explicitly attributed to Antiochus at *Acad.* 1.43.

But in the end, this is only to say that there is a lot that remains to be done in this field. In particular, there are still many layers of debate and interaction that need to be excavated from the two-dimensional histories of philosophy by which they were occluded, and which Donini has done so much—perhaps more than anyone—to combat. His pupil, Mauro Bonazzi, who edited this volume, has crafted a fitting monument to Donini's groundbreaking work and, what is more to the point, a useful conduit for it.

¹ One can check this kind of generalization now, by the way, since the volume includes a bibliography of Donini's published works [453–458].

² Brad Inwood's work here is especially important: cf. the essays in Inwood 2005.

For the use that it might be, I end with a list of the articles in the volume, translating non-English titles and giving brief summaries of their conclusions. An asterisk marks the two articles published here for the first time.³

PART 1: ARISTOTLE AND THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION

- (1) ‘Book *Lambda* of the *Metaphysics* and the Birth of First Philosophy’
 A marks the beginning of questions which led to Aristotle’s distinction of physics and metaphysics.
- (2) ‘Tragic *Mimesis* and the Apprenticeship of *Phronesis*’
 Aristotle’s *Poetics* deals with tragedy in the formation of adult *φρόνιμοι*, complementing the discussion of character-formation of the young in the *Politics*.
- (3) *‘Causes, the Voluntary, and Decision in Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.10–15’
 References to *προαίρεσις* in the *Rhetoric* usually assume the usage of contemporary forensic practice, though occasionally reference Aristotle’s own analysis.
- (4) ‘Aristotle, *De motu animalium* 701a7’
 The passage is to be construed so as to be about the practical syllogism.
- (5) ‘Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Methods of Philosophical Exegesis’
 Alexander’s tactics for dealing with inconsistencies in Aristotle, and for elucidating his thought.
- (6) ‘The Object of the *Metaphysics* according to Alexander of Aphrodisias’
 Alexander usually thinks that the study of being *qua* being coincides with the study of first substances, but in his commentary on *Γ* suggests that they are two *different* types of first philosophy.
- (7) ‘*θεῖα δόναμις* in Alexander of Aphrodisias’
 Alexander, *Quaest.* 2.3 experiments with answers to Platonist criticisms of providence in Aristotle, but does not get very far.

³ The original contents page can be found through de Gruyter at <http://www.de-gruyter.com/view/books/9783110218732/9783110218732.5/9783110218732.5.xml>.

- (8) ‘Alexander’s *De fato*: Problems of Coherence’
A degree of ‘freedom’ is possible—for non-φρόνιμοι only.
- (9) ‘Natural Gifts, Habits, and Characters in Alexander’s *De fato*’
A person’s nature is their fate: exceptionally few people can, through education, transcend this.
- (10) ‘Alexander of Aphrodisias *De an.* 90.3 ff.: concerning the νοῦς θύραθεν’ (co-authored with Paola Accattino)
An emendation to a line athetized by Bruns makes the point that ‘immortal intellect’ is that *which is thought*—the νοῦς θύραθεν.
- (11) ‘Xenarchus, Alexander and Simplicius on Simple Movements and Sizes in the *De caelo*’
A reference to Aristotle in between two replies by Alexander to Xenarchus on simple motions is parenthetical, not an additional argument.
- (12) ‘Justice in Middle Platonism, in Aspasius and in Apuleius’
Aspasius’ ‘theoretical justice’ is a Platonist concept; Apuleius’ division of justice at *De Platone* 7 is based on *Republic* 4.

PART 2: PLATONISM AND POST-HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

- (13) ‘The History of the Concept of Eclecticism’
Six senses of ‘eclecticism’ distinguished and their historiographical uses explored.
- (14) ‘Texts, Commentaries, Manuals and Teaching: The Systematic Form and The Methods of Philosophy in the Post-Hellenistic Age’
Aristotelianism and, in its wake, Platonism resorted to commentary to make coherent systems of themselves.
- (15) ‘Middle Platonism and Middle Platonist Philosophers: A Clutch of Studies’
Reviews articles on Middle Platonism in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, and reflects on attempts to characterize ‘Middle Platonism’.
- (16) ‘Seneca’s Middle Platonist Sources: Antiochus, Knowledge and Ideas’
Seneca’s source for ‘Platonism’ in *Letters* 58 and 65 is Antiochus: this, incidentally, is the one piece which was not originally a self-standing work but an appendix to [Donini 1979](#), a major study presumably too lengthy to be reprinted here in its entirety.

- (17) ‘Plutarch, Ammonius, and the Academy’
Plutarch learned his cautious Platonism from Ammonius, who is *not* contrasted with but *is* the ‘Academy’ of *De E* 387f.
- (18) ‘Science and Metaphysics: Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism in Plutarch’s *On the Face in the Moon*’
Ways in which the *De fac.* signals that its scientific discussion of the Moon needs to be subordinated to a metaphysical/theological understanding.
- (19) ‘Foundations of Physics and the Theory of Causes in Plutarch’
Plutarch’s preferred causes are god and matter; physics is subordinate to such explanations and invokes other causes.
- (20) ‘Plato and Aristotle in the Pythagorean Tradition according to Plutarch’
Plutarch’s ethics relies on the same ‘Pythagorean’ tradition that he invokes to support his metaphysical dualism—a tradition which is at odds with his commitment to the Academy.
- (21) ‘The Heritage of the Academy and the Foundations of Platonism in Plutarch’
A response to [Opsomer 1998](#): Plutarch’s Platonism has a ‘Pythagorean’ as well as an Academic strand.
- (22) *‘Plutarch’s *De genio Socratis*: The Limits of Dogmatism and of “Scepticism”’
The *De gen. Soc.* tries, without quite succeeding, to reconcile Pythagorean and Academic conceptions of Plato.
- (23) ‘Knowledge of God and Divine Hierarchy in Albinus’
The *Didaskalikos* recognizes two gods: a higher ineffable god and a lower demiurge.
- (24) ‘Socrates and his Daimon in the Platonism of the First and Second Centuries AD’
The interest in Socrates’ ‘daimon’ comes from a dogmatic, ‘Pythagorean’ strain in Platonism, which ultimately prevails over the ‘Academic’ view of Socrates.

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