

**Maddalena BONELLI (ed.), *Aristotele e Alessandro di Afrodisia (“Questioni etiche” e “Mantissa”). Metodo e oggetto dell’etica peripatetica***, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2015 (Elenchos. Collana di testi e studi sul pensiero antico, 62), 190 pp., ISBN 978-88-7088-639-9, €30.00.

Dedicated to the memory of an eminent scholar of imperial philosophy, the much lamented Paolo ACCATTINO, the volume edited by Maddalena BONELLI comprises six essays, preceded by a brief introduction by the editor. Despite its unimpressive size, the volume forms a comprehensive and highly inspiring overview of issues related both to the study of exegetical literature as such and to the study of Alexander’s teachings in particular. By focusing on two texts of an apparently “non-advanced”, school-oriented character, i.e. the *Mantissa* and the *Problemata ethica*, the six authors are able to highlight the importance of the context, of the distance separating the Aristotle of today’s Aristotelian scholars from the Aristotle known and discussed by Alexander.

The first essay in the collection is Laura CASTELLI’s study of the relationship between Alexander’s theoretical exploration of the *Topics* and the practical application of the thus explored principles in the *Ethical Problems* (pp. 19–42). In a nutshell, it emphasises the intimate connection between two seemingly different areas of philosophical inquiry, i.e. the study of logic and the exploration of ethical problems. The *Problemata* are thus studied as an example of a practical exercise of the argumentative principles well known from the *Topics* (as explained in Alexander’s *Commentary*<sup>1</sup>) and, hence, as an illustrative example of Aristotelian dialectics at work. Through a careful reading of the source material, CASTELLI is able to demonstrate the practical consequences of Alexander’s exploration of the *Topics*, to highlight the fundamental importance of logical exegesis in philosophical practice – the *Commentary on the Topics* is thus revealed as a true sourcebook of dialectical methodology. Meanwhile, the apparent focus of the *Problemata* on matters of ethics becomes relegated to the background – instead the focal point of the debate lies in the method, the practical exercise of logical principles.

Paolo ACCATTINO’s exploration of *Mantissa* 19 (pp. 43–57) bears all the hallmarks of the late scholar’s erudition and brilliance: in exploring Alexander’s understanding of the *dikaion* as manifest in the essay, the scholar emphasises the characteristics of the exegete’s concept of what is naturally just as set against the contemporary debate against the Epicureans. His analysis highlights the radicalisation of the original, far less specific intimations of Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* V 10 (1134 b, 18–1135 a, 5). This radicalisation, as ACCATTINO makes clear, is due to the very different philosophical context of Alexander’s treatise: effectively, the past centuries of ethical debates are reflected in the Aphrodisian’s considerations. Of necessity, they affect the understanding of various seemingly self-explanatory terms, thus modifying the essence of the teaching.

Next comes Carlo NATALI’s detailed study of the various versions of seemingly purely ethical issue of pleasure being opposed to virtue (pp. 59–86). Tracing the beginnings of the Aristotelian discussion to *EN* 1152 b, 8–12 and the debate nowadays recognised as a controversy between Speusippus and that attributed to Philebus in the eponymous dialogue of Plato (63 E–64 A), NATALI turns to the two imperial commentators and their respective contributions to the issue. He begins by analysing Aspasius<sup>2</sup>: here, he notes the massive divergence from what is known as the standard attribution. Then, he turns his attention to the surviving writings of Alexander (i.e. *Problemata* 5, 6,

<sup>1</sup> To be precise, CASTELLI’s focus lies with *Topics* I 11 (Alexander’s *Commentary* 94, 25–95, 16).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that inquiries into Aspasius’ work remain excessively rare; the collection of essays edited by Antonina ALBERTI and Bob SHARPLES (*Aspasius. The Earliest Extant Commentary on Aristotle’s Ethics*, Berlin 2013) furnishes the most exhaustive study to date.

7 and 16): while highlighting the difference of approach (the subject is treated as purely theoretical, scientific inquiry, a fact manifested by the appearance of causal *dioti*), he also emphasises the importance of another move, i.e. the elimination of philosophical context (no mention of possible controversy appears, the subject being considered in complete abstraction of the original Aristotelian context of contemporary debate). Now, the essay aims primarily at demonstrating the importance of ethical matters in philosophical training as employed in the school of Alexander, thus supplementing the existing literature on the subject<sup>3</sup>, as well as at showcasing the idea of *Aristotelem ex Aristotele* by making manifest the close reliance of the discussed *Problemata* and the Aristotelian *Ethics* and *Analytics*. Nevertheless, there is much more as the essay may also be considered an important addition to the study of the vagaries of *Überlieferungstradition*. In the essence, this relatively short study both reveals the dangers of taking an imperial author at his word and manifests the many ways in which more or less rigorous and purely theoretical arguments may be developed from far less strict pronouncements of an ancient author.

In his relatively brief essay on Alexander's *Problemata ethica* 22 ("That the Virtues Reciprocate") Jonathan BARNES highlights the complexity of problems related to the study of ancient commentators (pp. 87–114). The text under consideration being written in impressively convoluted Greek, it also seems to be at odds with its own heading: within the argument itself the reciprocity of virtues is mentioned as if in passing, never making it to its conclusion. Still, as BARNES rightly stresses, an interpretation involves the necessity of dealing with a phenomenon of extreme rarity in the surviving corpus of Alexander's writings, namely with the presence of a verbatim quote from Aristotle (*EE* 1145 a, 2–6, to be precise) and, subsequently, with major syntactical problems. Even more importantly, a reader (or a translator) is effectively forced to choose between the indeterminate and the determinate article: after all, the "mixed" formula (one in possession of any virtue is also in possession of all virtues) lies at the heart of the argument for reciprocity. As for the solutions suggested by the scholar: noting the rarity of verbatim quotations in Alexander's philosophical output, BARNES makes a convincing case for an emendation, which – at least partly – improves the continuity of the argument (or, for that matter, its consistency with respect to the purposed subject of the piece). He also provides a detailed, careful study of major interpretative possibilities, thus highlighting the importance of a correct reconstruction of the surviving text. For all BARNES' protestations about his *métier*, his essay remains highly persuasive; additionally, its very detailedness makes it a perfect practical guide to the study of philosophical prose.

The *phronesis* related controversy between Aristotelians and Platonists comes to the fore in Jean-Baptiste GOURINAT's contribution (pp. 115–141): starting with Aristotle's own pronouncements in *EE* V 13 (or *EN* VI 13), the scholar moves on to the detailed discussion of Alexander's approach as manifested in both *Problemata* 15 and *Mantissa* (155, 32–156, 6). As a result of his analyses, he pinpoints the fundamental theoretical difference which separates the Aphrodisian (and his school) from the Aristotelian original: in considering *phronesis* as *gnosis ton poieteon*, the exegete departs from the Stagirite (and hence, from what nowadays would be considered Aristotelian orthodoxy). Moreover, as GOURINAT is quick to note, such a definition of *phronesis* reflects the Stoic way of thinking. Effectively, Alexander's analysis comes to be characterised not only by a major departure from Aristotle himself, but also by an absorption of an inherently Stoic tenet. The empirical dimension of prudence becomes eclipsed by its scientific aspect, which in turn collapses the difference between *phronesis* and intellectual virtues.

Finally, the Stoic context of Alexander's philosophical activity comes to the fore in Cristina VIANO's study of several minor essays of the Aphrodisian related to the problem of *mixis* of virtues (pp. 143–169). As the concept of *mixis* itself belongs to the realm of physical inquiry (in his *Peri*

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<sup>3</sup> Bob SHARPLES' *The School of Alexander?* (in R. SORABJI (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed. The Ancient Commentators and Their Influence*, London 1990, pp. 83–111) remains the main study of the subject.

*kraseos* Alexander himself expended considerable effort in the exploration of the notion so deeply ingrained in the Stoic concept of being), its appearance within the ethical context, most particularly within the context of the debate of *anakolouthia*, opens a vast spectrum of complications.

To summarise: this is an extremely useful volume. Significantly, this usefulness is not limited to the study of specific subjects related to the *Problemata ethica* or the *Mantissa*: the volume discusses a number of issues of a more general character, highlighting the inherent complexity of any research directed at reconstructing the late imperial philosophy: in fact, through a careful inquiry into individual works, it brings into focus the major issues at the heart of the philosophy of Alexander or its study. Thus, in studying the relationship between his various works, it emphasises the “totality” of Alexander’s philosophical endeavour, the mutual relevance of his exegetical and non-exegetical works. A careful study of the argument formulated in a single, relatively brief text pinpoints the problems resulting from accidents of textual transmission. Then, philosophical context is discussed and demonstrated as an element of considerable importance in the shaping of an argument (not to mention of the vocabulary). All in all, what the reader gets far exceeds a simple study of Alexander’s methodology: instead, s/he gets a glimpse of the very mindset that created the *De fato* or the *De anima*, of the sophisticated conceptual and logical system at play, a sense of lively philosophical debate, of wide ranging complexities inherent in the study of this so long neglected period in the history of ancient philosophy. In this sense, the volume is of considerable worth not only to scholars interested in Aristotelian thought, but also to those interested in the intellectual climate of the early third century AD.

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