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(b. Cilicia, ca. 500; d. after 533)

*philosophy.*

Simplicius was one of the most famous representatives of Neoplatonism in the sixth century. An outstanding scholar, he was the author of extensive commentaries on Aristotle that contain much valuable information on previous Greek philosophy, including the pre-Socratics.

Very little is known of his life. According to Agathias (*History*, II,30.3), he was born in Cilicia. He received his first philosophical education in Alexandria at the school of Ammonius Hermiae,<sup>1</sup> the author of a large commentary on the *Peri Hermeneias* and on some other logical, physical, and metaphysical treatises of Aristotle. These works strongly influenced not only the commentaries of Simplicius but also those written by the philosophers of the Alexandrian School: Asclepius, Philoponus, and Olympiodorus.<sup>2</sup> Simplicius also studied philosophy at Athens in the school of Damascius,<sup>3</sup> the author of *Problems and Solutions About the First Principles*, known for his doctrine of the Ineffable First Principle. According to Damascius no name is capable of expressing adequately the nature of “the one.” Damascius was the last pagan Neoplatonist in the unbroken succession of the Athenian school, where he was teaching when Justinian closed it in 529. Simplicius, who at that time was a member of Damascius’ circle, left Athens with him and five other philosophers and moved to Persia (531–532). Their exile was only temporary, for they returned to the empire after the treaty of peace between the Byzantines and the Persians (533). According to Agathias (*History*, II, 31.4), the terms of the treaty would have guaranteed the philosophers full security in their own environment: they were not to be compelled to accept anything against their personal conviction, and they were never to be prevented from living according to their own philosophical doctrine.<sup>4</sup>

There are grounds for supposing that Simplicius settled in Athens after returning from Persia.<sup>5</sup> Presumably he was not allowed to deliver public lectures and thus could devote all his time to research and writing. Hence his commentaries are not related to any teaching activity; rather, they show the character of written expositions that carefully analyze the Aristotelian text and interpret it in the light of the whole history of Greek philosophy. Simplicius always endeavored to harmonize and reconcile Plato and Aristotle by reducing the differences between them to a question of vocabulary, point of view, or even misunderstanding of some Platonic theories by the Stagirite.

Simplicius was not the first to take this approach. According to W. Jaeger, this trend can be traced to Posidonius and to Neoplatonic philosophy in general. The same method was certainly used by Ammonius, who always attempted to reduce the opposition between Plato and Aristotle to different viewpoints. For example, in dealing with Aristotle’s criticism of the theory of ideas, Ammonius believed this criticism to concern not the authentic doctrine of Plato, but rather the opinion of some philosophers who attributed to the Ideas an independent subsistence, separate from the Intellect of the Demiurge (Asclepius, In *Metaphysicorum*, 69,24–27;73,27).

Apparently Simplicius was persuaded that this approach was in agreement with the attitude of the φιλοσοφία and that it uncovered the true meaning of philosophical doctrines. At first glance, he said, some theories seem to be quite contradictory, but a more accurate inquiry shows them to be reconcilable (*In de Caelo*, 159,3–9). Moreover, in explaining a philosophical text, one should not be biased for or against its author. Hence Simplicius opposed the method of Alexander, who from the beginning is suspicious of Plato in the same way that others are inspired with prejudice against Aristotle (*In de Caelo*,297,1–4). Since agreement on an opinion, even a prephilosophical one has often been considered a criterion of truth, Aristotle and the Stoics frequently used the argument of universal agreement. Therefore, having to cope with the increasing influence of Christianity, late Neoplatonic philosophers wanted to argue against the presumed disaccord between the main representatives of Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, in order to enhance their own doctrine. As a Christian, Philoponus did not have the same motives for harmonizing Plato and Aristotle; he firmly opposed attempts to reconcile them and called this interpretation a kind of mythology. Aristotle, he held, did not argue against those who misunderstood Plato but against the authentic Platonic doctrine.

As a commentator Simplicius did not overestimate his own contributions but was quite aware of his debt to other philosophers, especially to Alexander, Iamblichus, and Porphyry (*In Categorias*, 3. 10–13). He did not hesitate to call his own commentaries a mere introduction to the writings of these famous masters (*In Categorias*, 3,13–17), nor did he cling fanatically to his own interpretations; he was happy to exchange them for better explanations (*In Categorias*, 350,8–9). On the other hand, the work of a commentator is far from being a neutral undertaking or a question of mere erudition: it is chiefly an opportunity to become more familiar with the text under consideration and to elucidate some intricate passages (*In Enchiridion*, Praefatio, 2,24–29; *In de Caelo*, 102,15; 166, 14–16; *In Categorias*, 3,4–6); hence Simplicius’ constant concern to obtain reliable documents and to

check the historical value of this information, as when he verified the information provided by Alexander about the squaring of the circle according to Hippocrates of Chios (*In Physicorum*, 60,22–68,32).

Simplicius adhered to the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the world, as a theory that fits perfectly into the Neoplatonic ontology insofar as the eternal movement of the heavens is a necessary link between the pure eternity of the intelligible reality and the temporal character of material beings. With respect to this question, Simplicius strongly opposed Philoponus, who asserted the beginning of the world through divine creation. Philoponus, however, did not argue as a Christian, nor did he base his refutation of the Aristotelian doctrine on arguments drawn from his Christian faith. According to him, God is the principle of whatever exists; if time is infinite, nothing may ever come to be, because an infinite number of conditions of possibility are to be fulfilled before anything could begin to exist—which is clearly impossible. Simplicius' notion of “infinite” is different; it does not mean an infinity existing at once, but a possibility of transcending any boundary. Consequently the conception of time exposed by both authors is not the same. Simplicius professed a cyclical conception; Philoponus adhered to a linear view without regular return of the same events. Philoponus also substantiated divine creation in time, without preexisting matter; whereas Simplicius maintained that although heaven, the first and highest corporeal reality, is totally dependent upon God, it has never come to exist; it must be eternal, because it springs immediately from God.

In his *Corollarium de tempore* (*In Physicorum*, 773,8–800,25) Simplicius drew a general survey of the different theories about time, dealing with older as well as with more recent philosophers. According to his view, time is closely related to the life of the soul; but the activity of the soul does not merely coincide with time, because it occurs in time. Previous to all things existing in time, there is a time that makes them temporal and arranges the extension of their existence in an orderly fashion. The nature of that time, like the nature of the soul, is intermediary between being and becoming. Consequently the soul does not exist in time but is the principle of the temporal character of its own activity, as it is the origin of the time of the cosmos. To a certain, soul and time may be identified, although the conceptual distinction must be maintained. Simplicius wondered whether this logical distinction may entail an ontological one; his reply was rather hesitant. In stressing the connection between time and soul, Simplicius approached Plotinus; on the other hand, he was also influenced by Iamblichus and Proclus insofar as he dealt not only with the numbered time, but also with the numbering time, that is, the regulating principle of movement.

The earliest preserved work of Simplicius seems to be his commentary on Epictetus' *Enchiridion*. K. Praechter was the first to believe that this work predates the Aristotelian commentaries or even that it was written during Simplicius' stay at Alexandria. Praechter argued mainly from the text that has been chosen for explication; from the absence of references to Iamblichus, Proclus, or Damascius; from the less intricate doctrine of the first principles; and finally from its kinship with the commentary of Hierocles on the *Carmen aureum*.<sup>6</sup> Praechter's thesis is certainly questionable. In two contributions I. Hadot has shown that the influence of Proclus and even of Damascius is undeniable.<sup>7</sup> In his discussion of Manichaean cosmogony Simplicius also seemingly relied on information drawn from conversations with Manichaean sages; this is probably related to his stay in Persia with King Chosroes, who always showed a keen interest in philosophical problems.<sup>8</sup> The allusion to the “tyrannic circumstances” that afforded him an opportunity for dealing with Epictetus' *Enchiridion* (138,17–19) may suggest that Simplicius wrote his commentary after the Edict of Justinian (529). From these and other similar anti-Christian statements that occur in the commentary, and also from the way in which the duty of a philosopher in corrupt states is presented, A. Cameron argued that this work may have been written precisely during the years 529–531.<sup>9</sup>

Among the commentaries on Aristotle, the first to be mentioned according to chronological order seems to be the *In de Caelo*; some passage in the first book of this work, where the criticisms of Philoponus against Aristotle are refuted, are referred to in the commentary on the *Physics* (1118,3; 1146,27; 1169,7; 1175,32; 1178,36; 1330,2; 1335,1). In 529 Philoponus published his *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*. Between this work and his *De aeternitate mundi contra Aristotelem*, he completed two other works, one of which is the commentary on the *Meteorological*.<sup>10</sup> Hence the *In de Caelo* could hardly be dated before 535; presumably the work was written shortly after Simplicius' stay in Persia.

The commentary on the *Physics* is certainly later than the *In de Caelo* because of its reference to this work already noted. On the other hand, it is prior to the commentary on the *Categoria*, because it is the death of Damascius, but we do not know this date. According to A. Cameron,<sup>11</sup> Damascius was alive as late as 538; consequently the commentary could hardly have been written before 540.

Both the commentaries on the *Categoriae* and the *De anima* are to be dated after the *In Physicorum*. To date, the authenticity of the commentary on the *De Anima* has hardly been questioned; nevertheless, certain features may suggest that this work has been erroneously attributed to Simplicius. The solution of this problem is of some importance, because our information about some lost works of Simplicius depends on it. The author of the *In de Anima* six times refers to earlier writings: to an *Epitome Physicorum Theophrasti* (136,29), to a work on the *Metaphysics* (28,20; 217,26), and to a commentary on the *Physics* (35,14; 120,4; 198,5). If Simplicius is to be considered the author of the *In de Anima*, then perhaps only two not unimportant works, namely the *Epitome Physicorum Theophrasti*, have been lost.

Only fragments have been preserved of the commentary on the *Premises* of the first book of the *Element Euclidis* (see *Anarithi in decem libros priores Elementorum Euclidis commentarii*). On the other hand, some scholia on Proclus' *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria* may have been composed by Simplicius.<sup>12</sup> As to the *Scholia in Hermogenis artem oratoriam* (see Fabricius-Hailes, V, 770, referring to Lambeck-Kollar, VII, 549–553), there is no reference to Simplicius in the description of the codex Vindob. Phil. gr. 15 by H. Hunger.<sup>13</sup> Fabricius-Hailes (IX, 567) also mentions a commentary on Iamblichus' *De Pythagorica secta libri tres* and a *Commentarius brevis de Syllogismis*; no trace of either work has ever been found.

Simplicius' work was very influential, especially his commentary on the *Categoriae*, translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke in 1266. Part of the commentary on the *De Caelo* was first translated by [Robert Grosseteste](#),<sup>14</sup> and a complete Latin version was executed by William of Moerbeke in 1271.

## NOTES

1. In his commentaries Simplicius frequently mentions Ammonius as his master: *In de Caelo*, 271,19: 462,20–21; *In Physicorum*, 59,23–24; 59,30–31; 183,18; 192,14; 198,17; 1363,8.
2. Cf. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*. L. G. Westerink, ed. (Amsterdam, 1962), xi.
3. For references to Damascius as the master of Simplicius see *In Physicorum*, 462,17;601.9;630.35;644.10;774.28;778.27;795.14.
4. Some serious criticisms against the reliability of the information given by Agathias were recently raised by A. Cameron; see “The Last Days of the Academy at Athens,” 18.
5. *Ibid.*, 22–26.
6. See K. Praechter. *Simplikios* cols, 206–210.
7. see I. Hadot, *Le Système théologique de Simplicius dans son commentaire sur le manuel d’Epictète*, 270, 272–273, and 278–279.
8. See I. Hadot, *Die Widerlegung des Manichäismus im Epiktetkommentar des Simplikios*, 46, 56–57.
9. See A. Cameron, *op. cit.*, 13–17.
10. See É. Evrard, “Les convictions religieuses de Jean Philopon et la date de son commentaire aux ‘Météorologiques,’” in *Bulletin de l’Académie royale de Belgique. Classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques*, 5th ser., **39** (1953), 345.
11. A. Cameron, *op. cit.*, 22.
12. Proclus, *Théologie Platonicienne*. H. D. Saffrey and L.G. Westerink, ed. and trans., Bk. 1 (Paris, 1968), clii–cliii.
13. H. Hunger, *Katalog der griechischen Handschriften der oesterreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, I (Vienna, 1961). 147–148.
14. See D. Allan, “Mediaeval Versions of Aristotle’s ‘De Caelo’ and of the Commentary of Simplicius,” in *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies*, **2** (1950), 82–120.

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- II. Secondary Literature. On Simplicius and his work, see *Anaritii in decem libros priores Elementorum Euclidis Commentarii, ex interpretatione Gherardi Cremonensis in codice Cracoviensi 569 servata*, M. Curtze, ed. (Leipzig, 1899); A. Cameron, “The Last Days of the Academy at Athens,” in *Proceedings of the Cambridge philological Society*, n.s. **15** (1969), 7–29; E. Ducci, “In – parmenideo nella interpretazione di Simplicio,” in *Angelicum*, **40** (1963), 173–194, 313–327; I. Hadot, “Die Widerlegung des Manichäismus im Epiktetkommentar des simplikios,” in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, **51** (1969), 31–57; and “Le système théologique de simplicius dans son commentaire sur le manuel d’Epictète,” in *Le néoplatonisme. Colloques internationaux du C.N.R.S.* (Royaumont, 1969), 265–279.
- See also H. Meyer, *Das Corollarium de Tempore des simplikios und die Aporien des Aristoteles Zur Zeit* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1969); B. Nardi, “Il commento di Simplicio al De anima nelle controversie della fine del secolo XV e del secolo XVI,” in *Saggi sull’ Aristotelismo padovano dal secolo XIV al XVI* (Florence, 1958), 365–442; K. Praechter, “Simplikios,” in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 2nd ser., III, 204–213; A. I. Sabra, “Simplicius’s Proof of

Euclid's Parallels Postulate," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, **32** (1969), 1–24; and W. Wieland, "Die Ewigkeit der Welt (der Streit zwischen Joannes philoponus und Simplicius)," in *Die Gegenwart der Griechen im neuerem Denken. Festschrift für H. G. Gadamer zum 60. Geburtstag* (Tübingen, 1960), 291–316.

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