

# New Approaches to the Book *Alpha Meizon* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and to its Unique Neoplatonic Commentary by Asclepius of Tralles

R. Loredana Cardullo (a cura di), *Il libro Alpha della Metafisica di Aristotele tra storiografia e teoria*, Catania 2009, pp. 294.

R. Loredana Cardullo, *A scepio di Tralle. Commentario al libro Alpha Meizon (A) della Metafisica di Aristotele*. Introduzione, testo greco, traduzione e note di commento, Acireale-Roma 2012, pp. 512. Paris 2012, pp. 164.

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So far, many scholars might not have fully realized the paramount importance of the first book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* not only in the context of this complex work's structure and composition, but also in the context its content inspiring the later philosophical tradition. Here, we shall briefly discuss two recent Italian publications that are bound to

enlighten and inspire us with regard to the above mentioned issues. The first of these are conference materials edited by R. Loredana Cardullo (see the title above). It comprises the papers written by thirteen eminent Italian scholars and researchers of ancient and medieval philosophy (Bruno Centrone, Giovanni Casertano, Cristina Rossitto, Aldo Brancacci, Franco Trabattoni, Carlo Natali, Enrico Berti, Giovanna R. Giardina, Daniele Lozzia, Chiara Militello, R. Loredana Cardullo, Concetto Martello, Andrea Vella). Generally speaking, the discussion of the Book *Alpha* focuses on the views of the Pythagoreans, Parmenides, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, Plato's theory of ideas, the account of the first philosophy, the account of the causes, the criticism of the universal science project, and the influence on Plotinus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Asclepius of Tralles and the Latin Middle Ages. Let us note that in this most recent research neither the authenticity of the Book *Alpha* nor the philosophical validity of Aristotle's argument are questioned. In her succinct presentation, the Editor Loredana Cardullo states the following:

„Lungi dal rappresentare soltanto l'*incipit* della *Metafisica*, ovvero sola una semplice introduzione a quello che apparentemente costituirebbe il vero e proprio corpo dottrinale del testo, contenente gli insegnamenti più rilevanti del Filosofo, il libro *Alpha* occupa invece un posto di primissimo piano sia nell'economia di questo scritto, sia in generale nel quadro dell'intera speculazione aristotelica, sia ancora nell'ambito della storia della filosofia in generale e della storia della storiografia filosofica in particolare” (p. 12).

It seems worth noting that recently an international group of scholars and researchers prepared an important related publication: Aristotle's *Metaphysics Alpha: Symposium Aristotelicum*, edited by Carlos Steel, with an Edition of the Greek Text by Oliver Primavesi, Oxford University Press 2012 (560 p.). The work cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that it differs from the aforementioned Italian publication in that the eleven distinguished scholars (Giuseppe Cambiano, Sarah Broadie, Rachel Barney, Gabor Betegh, Malcolm Schofield, Carlos Steel, Stephen Menn, Oliver Primavesi, Dorothea Frede, Michel Crubellier, John M. Cooper) offer a chapter-by-chapter study of the first book of the *Metaphysics*. This is a rather analytical and narrow approach to Aristotle that does not tackle the issue of reception or adaptation of the argument in the Book *Alpha*. A revised edition of this book by Oliver Primavesi is an original and welcome contribution.

On the other hand, in the Italian work we encounter the paper by Loredana Cardullo that bears the telling title: Una lettura neoplatonica di *Metaphysica Alpha*: gli scholii di Asclepio di Tralle trascritti «dalla voce» di Ammonio (p. 239–270). It represents a broader approach to Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism that is characteristic of the University of Catania. The Author is famous for her previous publications, mainly for her extensive study of Syrianus as an Aristotle's exegete (*Siriano esegeta di Aristotele*, 2 vols. Firenze-Catania, 1995-2000). One should also recognize the importance of the concise and substantial monograph: *Aristotele. Profilo introduttivo*. Roma 2007 (180 p.).

In Rome, there has recently appeared her elaborate publication entitled *Asclepio di Tralle. Commentario al libro Alpha Meizon (A) della Metafisica di Aristotele* (see the full title above). It deals with a relatively unknown commentary that comprises the lectures by Ammonius son of Hermeias, a philosopher from the Alexandrian school who lived at

the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. The scholia were literal notes from the lectures (*ἀπὸ φωνῆς* – ‘trascritti da Asclepio dalle lezioni di Ammonio di Ermia’). The thing particularly noteworthy about them is that they are that they are the only Neoplatonic commentary to the Book *Alpha*.

Asclepius’ introductory declaration specifies the aim of Aristotle’s treaty, i.e., τὸ θεολογήσαι. Loredana Cardullo renders it in the following way: „Obiettivo del presente trattato è, certamente, <quello di> trattare di questioni divine. In esso, infatti, Aristotele tratta di questioni divine” (see the extensive footnote 210 and 211 to the text).

All this is meticulously covered in this monograph. The succinct *Premessa* (p. 11–13) is followed by two extensive parts. The first one is *Introduzione* (p. 15–131) that comprises four chapters dealing with the history and content of the Book *Alpha* as well as the tradition of Greek commentaries. Subsequently, there is a detailed discussion of Asclepius of Tralles in recent philosophical historiography and his commentary to the Book is presented as a source of Ammonius’ thought.

The other part contains the Greek text of the scholia (p. 135–215) that is based on Hayduck’s edition from 1888 (= CAG VI/2). It is followed by a translation and extensive exegetical footnotes (p. 216–482). Loredana Cardullo’s work is an invaluable contribution, inasmuch it is the first modern translation of this commentary to the Book *Alpha* of the *Metaphysics*.

The Author notes that Asclepius’ scholia to the *Metaphysics* that have been taken from Ammonius’ lectures cannot be praised for their literary or stylistic accuracy. They contain various lacunas, gaps and repetitions. This fact notwithstanding, they are a valuable source on the metaphysical thought of Ammonius’ master, the famous spokesman for the Alexandrian Neoplatonism. This publication is a significant contribution to the discussion on the controversies between the Athenian and Alexandrian Neoplatonism.

More often than not, the commentaries to Aristotle exceed the volume of the source text. As Asclepius’ language is simple and laconic, the Italian translation is enriched by the appropriate elaborations in brackets. While this significantly elucidates the argument, the text is also further explained by means of the numerous footnotes.

The Italian translation and propagation of the text will undoubtedly stimulate further investigations into the philosophy of Aristotle and its Neoplatonic adaptation, for it is from these scholia that we derive „una testimonianza importante sulla storia del testo della *Metafisica*” (p. 231, note 254). Accordingly, the following important passage seems particularly worth citing (the footnotes are omitted for the sake of clarity):

„Il modo in cui è stato composto: il presente trattato non è stato composto in modo simile agli altri scritti aristotelici, né sembra essere ben ordinato e continuo, ma, da una parte, <sembra> trascurare qualcosa alla continuità del discorso, dall’altra, <dà l’impressione> che intere parti vi siano state trasferite da altri trattati e spesso <sembra> ripetere le stesse cose. Ora, in difesa di ciò, si dice, e si dice bene, che dopo aver scritto il presente trattato <Aristotele> lo abbia mandato in dono al suo amico Eudemo di Rodi, ma che poi costui non abbia ritenuto giusto far conoscere ai più un trattato così lungo. Nel frattempo <Eudemo> era morto e alcune parti del libro erano andate distrutte;

e poiché il pensiero del filosofo <ne> risultava assai incompleto, i successori, non osando aggiungere nulla di proprio pugno, trasferirono dagli altri trattati aristotelici le parti mandanti, accorrandole <al resto> per quanto era possibile. Ma neanche così [*scil.*: dopo questo intervento] si potrà trovare preservata la sequenza delle cose dette.” (4.1–16).

The translator refers the expression ἐν τῷ οὖν μέσῳ χρόνῳ ἐτελεύτησε ... to the death of Eudemus (see also p. 18). It seems, however, that the context points rather to the death of Aristotle himself, who in all probability died before Eudemus. „Now in the meanwhile he <sc. Aristotle> died...” That is what Jonathan Barnes suggests in his study entitled „Roman Aristotle” (in: *Philosophia Togata*, II, Oxford 1997, p. 62). The scholar recognizes the importance of this version of the *Metaphysics* by Eudemus of Rhodos.

Next, there is Asclepius’ another important testimony that concerns the authenticity of the Book *Alpha*: „Dicono che l’*Alpha* maggiore, del duale oggi si parla come del primo libro, non è suo, ma di Pasicle, il figlio di Boeto, che era fratello del suo amico Eudemo. Ma questo non è vero. Il rigore di Aristotele <vi> è mantenuto sia dallo stile sia dal contenuto dottrinale. È tanto più che fa menzione nell’*Alpha* minore.” (p. 232).

This testimony seems to be the source for the author of a certain scholion in the manuscript E from the 10<sup>th</sup> century (*Parisinus* 1853), where the Book *Alpha elatton* was erroneously referred to Pasicles of Rhodos. The work covers the discussion very accurately (cf. p. 17–18 and 232–233).

One could quote various other passages and issues that are to be found in this commentary that has been so excellently translated into Italian. The Author has succeeded in reconstructing the argument and in supporting the interpretation that is advocated for. Her philological competence and accuracy deserve particular praise: the translation of Asclepius’ Greek original is accompanied by extensive footnotes that brilliantly facilitate our understanding of this demanding source text. There can hardly be any doubt that the magnificent work that has been done by Loredana Cardullo is an important event in research on ancient philosophy.