

Aristotelian Biology and Christian Theology in the Early Empire

Introduction

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In recent years, the scholarly literature on late antiquity has seen an increase in studies which examine the interaction and mutual influence between philosophy and early Christianity in the imperial era. These studies have demonstrated not only that the early Christians' biblical hermenutics and theological speculations owe many conceptual debts to the scientific and philosophical milieu of their time, but that there was a reflexive and constructive dialogue in particular between the Church and the Academy.

Although it is certainly true that the majority of Christian interest in late antiquity is centred on Plato (or better, Platonism of one form or another), recent scholarship has however made it clear that Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition at large also played a vital role in the formative groundwork for early Christian theological ideas. Despite the recent attempt to shed more light on the Aristotelian influences which are discernible in the doctrines of ancient Christianity, much work remains to be done. One area of special interest in this field of research that is yet largely unexplored is the reception of Aristotle's biological corpus – *History of Animals*, *On the Parts of Animals*, *On the Generation of Animals*, *On the Soul*, *et alia* – in imperial era Christian theology. This represents a significant lacuna in the scholarship, as the pillars of Aristotle's metaphysical system are firmly planted in the philosophical framework developed in his empirical research on the history, generation, and persistence of living organisms.

The chief aim of this special issue is to contribute to filling this gap by offering a set of articles that are focused on the circulation and use of Aristotelian biological texts and doctrines in the early developmental period of Christian theology, with a particular focus on the period of the first to the fifth century A.D.; more specifically, the period that stems from the apostle Paul of Tarsus to the bishop Nemesius of Emesa – broadly speaking that is, to the early imperial era.

There are however two important methodological *caveats* to any study which attempts to establish the extent of Aristotle's philosophical influence on Christian theology that should be noted: firstly, that Aristotle's biological writings were relatively limited in their circulation, and hence, not entirely familiar among authors in the early empire, and secondly, that there was a strong tendency in later Christian thought to discredit the work of Aristotle (and Aristotelianism more generally). With respect to the first caveat, it is well known that, perhaps due to the prevailing significant influence of Platonic metaphysics, the philosophical schools of late antiquity devoted a particular attention to the works of the Aristotelian corpus which fall within the fields of metaphysics, logic, and physics, while nearly ignoring its biological treatises; save of course, *On the Soul*, whose subject was (and still is to this day) widely considered to be a combination of both physics and metaphysics, rather than biology. With respect to the second, this is a tendency rooted in there being a great deal of fundamental philosophical objections which the early Christians had with the doctrines of Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition – most notably, the mortality of the soul, the eternality of the universe, and the primacy of genera and species (rather than individual beings) in receiving divine providence in Aristotelian metaphysics.

Nevertheless, with these caveats in mind, this special issue intends to provide evidence of the utilisation of Aristotelian biology in early Christian thought. In doing so, this collection of original papers has two aims: to contribute to the understanding of the reception of Aristotelian biology in late antiquity through the exploration of Christian theological texts, and to tease out in more detail the myriad ways in which the early Christian tradition is philosophically indebted to Aristotle's theory of organisms and the living world. Thus the scholarly work contained in this special issue concerns both the history of philosophy in late antiquity and the early Christian period, as it is focused on the transmission of the Aristotelian biological corpus in the ancient Christian theological tradition as well as the evidential case for the former's philosophical influence on the latter.

The first issue raised in this collection of articles is why at some point in the history of ideas Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of the soul, came to be presented as if meshed into a single view: were the early Christian thinkers responsible for this misguided interpretation? Far from, argues Sophia Connell. In her paper, Connell identifies a reading of *the* most famous passage from Aristotle's entire biological corpus (in the *On the Generation of Animal*, where Aristotle remarks that "intellect [*nous*] alone enters from outside"), which became historically dominant and established a dualistic interpretation of Aristotle's views on soul and body. Such dualistic reading is what in turn allowed for a jointing together of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrine on the soul, which was been influential in the history of ideas. This reading however misrepresents Aristotle's position. After explaining how the pivotal passage from *On the Generation of Animal* and two other related texts have been misunderstood by various interpretative traditions, Connell offers her account of the actual import of Aristotle's stance that "intellect (*nous*) alone enters from outside" in its relevant context, namely Aristotle's mature biological thought and in particular his embryology. Connell further shows how the early Christian writers, freed as they were from any philosophical imperative to synthesize Aristotle's and Plato's thought, had in fact an accurate grasp of Aristotelian psychology. While realizing that Aristotle's position would not aid them in their explanation of the soul's survival after death, the early Christians' engagement with Aristotle's science helped them with other aspects of theology concerning the fittingness of soul to body. In closing, Connell argues that early Christian thinkers' sensitivity to Aristotelian science enable them to utilize his embodied psychology in their anthropology.

Anne Siebels Peterson and Brandon R. Peterson examine the early Christians' approach to the soul-body problem from a different point of view. They examine how Aristotle and St. Paul, respectively, accounted for the coming to be of a living body and its passing away. While they do not make any claim that Paul explicitly relied on Aristotle, Anne and Brandon Peterson identify parallel dilemmas in the two thinkers, despite their profound differences, and show how they addressed them with the same conceptual move. Both Paul and Aristotle point their readers toward accounts of bodily development which refuse to collapse into either identity with the past or discontinuity between past and future – Paul and Aristotle insist on both. Such insistence is plausible on each of their accounts because they advance a shared conceptual shift away from prioritizing the temporal order of bodily change and toward a type of teleological order

which they claim “privileges a greater whole”. Paul’s emphasis on the Christologically-centred understanding of the Adamic status of Jesus as the *first man*, Peterson and Peterson point out, is grounded not in his *temporal* priority, but in a conception of the Christ as the goal, or end-point of humanity’s spiritual and ontological development. This Pauline theological move, they argue, mirrors the Aristotelian philosophical emphasis on the *telos* of an organism *qua* fully developed, adult end-state as its ontologically prior and metaphysically privileged state of being, despite it being the temporal product – rather than precedent – of its morphological growth.

Teun Tieleman investigates the views on the soul of an influential early Christian thinker, Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in Syria towards the end of the IV century A.D. In his treatise *On Human Nature*, Nemesius canvasses his conception of the soul and of its relation to the body drawing not only on Christian authors but on a variety of pagan philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the great physician-cum-philosopher Galen of Pergamum. In this article Tieleman concentrates on the question of which impact Aristotle made on Nemesius’s thinking. Was it mediated or direct? Why does Nemesius cite Aristotle and how? Tieleman focuses on Nemesius’ references to Aristotle’s biology in particular, examining a number of passages in Nemesius’ work in the light of Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals and History of Animals* as well as the doxographic tradition. The *trait d’union* among these passages are the themes they cover: the status of the intellect, the scale of nature, and the respective roles of the male and female in reproduction. Tieleman’s research results contribute not only to the specific remit of this special issue concerning the relationship between early Christian thought and Aristotle’s biology, but are more broadly contributing to new approach to Nemesius’ work. Long used as a source for earlier works now lost, Nemesius’ work is shown in this article to provide intriguing glimpses of the intellectual culture of the author’s time, which would be otherwise lost to us and leave a gap in our understanding of this period in the history of ideas.

Broadly with the same approach, Marco Zambon investigates another early Christian thinker, Didymus, active in the Church of Alexandria during the same period in which Nemesius was active in Syria. Zambon investigates which evidence may be gathered from Didymus’ exegetical works (in particular from the lessons on the book of *Psalms* and on the *Ecclesiastes*) of his knowledge of natural sciences and his anthropological doctrine. Based on these texts, Zambon discusses Didymus’ possible sources, raising and addressing a number of questions: What kind of Aristotelian

doctrines can we recognize in Didymus' statements concerning cosmology, biology and anthropology? Is there sufficient evidence to conclude that he had, beside the *Organon*, also a direct knowledge of other Aristotelian works? How important are methods and doctrines coming from Aristotle for Didymus' exegetical practice?

Mingucci's contribution is forward-looking in the sense that it engages with a seminal essay from 1967, by the historian Lynn White, Jr., who argued that today's environmental crisis is ultimately caused by the anthropocentric perspective, embedded in the Christian "roots" of Western tradition, which assigns an intrinsic value solely to human beings. Though White's thesis relies on a particular tradition in reading the *Genesis*, dating back at least to Philo of Alexandria, the idea that the Christian doctrine of creation provided the ideological basis for the exploitation of the nature has proven tenacious, and even today is the ground assumption of the historical and philosophical debate on environmental issues. Mingucci's article investigates which arguments might be given in support an alternative perspective which gives intrinsic value also to the nonhuman content of the natural environment, from a distinctive unique perspective from antiquity – that of Aristotle's philosophy of biology, and in particular his views as presented in passages from *De Partibus Animalium* and the *Politics*.

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