

Alexander of Aphrodisias

On the Soul. Part 1: Soul as Form of the Body, Parts of the Soul, Nourishment, and Perception. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Victor Caston. Ancient Commentators on Aristotle. General editor: Richard Sorabji. Bristol Classical Press (imprint of Bloomsbury Academic), London 2012. Pp viii + 248. £67,50 (hardback) £22,49 (paperback) £24,99 (PDF e-book).

Recent scholarship on the ancient commentators on Aristotle has confirmed the massive impact of Alexander of Aphrodisias on the interpretation of Aristotle in the entire philosophical tradition after him, from Late Antiquity, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, to the present.¹ For English readers Caston's new translation of one of Alexander's central independent works, *De anima*,² edited with a solid introduction and extensive and detailed notes, is a welcome addition to scholarship. It supersedes the dissertation of Fotinis that predates the revival of studies in the ancient commentary tradition.³ Italian and French readers could already profit from annotated translations by Accattino-Donini⁴ and Bergeron-Dufour respectively.⁵ The volume under review only deals with the first part of Alexander's treatise (*DA* 1,1-46,19); the second part will be covered in a separate volume.

This volume is divided into the sections that are familiar from the series: introduction (1-22), textual notes and emendations (23-28), translation (29-70), commentary (71-168), bibliography (169-176), extensive English-Greek and Greek-English glossaries, and indices (177-248). The philosophical interest of Alexander's *De anima* fully warrants 200 pages of explanation and apparatus for 40 pages of translation.

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- 1 For a wide-ranging survey see Kessler, Eckhard. "Alexander of Aphrodisias and his Doctrine of the Soul. 1400 Years of Lasting Significance." *Early Science and Medicine* 16 (2011): 1-93 (English translation of his introduction to the reprint of Alexander's *Enarratio de anima ex Aristotelis institutione* (CAGL 13), Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2008).
 - 2 Alexander *De anima* is not a commentary on Aristotle's work; the commentary Alexander also wrote is lost, and survives only in numerous quotes and paraphrases in later commentaries on *De anima*.
 - 3 Fotinis, Athanasios P. *The De Anima of Alexander of Aphrodisias: A Translation and Commentary*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1979 (not mentioned in Caston's bibliography).
 - 4 Accattino, Paolo, and Pierluigi Donini. *Alessandro di Afrodizia. L'anima. Traduzione, introduzione e commento*. Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1996.
 - 5 Bergeron, M., and R. Dufour. *Alexander Aphrodisiensis. De l'âme. Texte grec introduit, traduit et annoté*. Paris: Vrin, 2008.

There is no doubt that this volume is of the highest quality. The translation is accurate, sensitive to the nuances of Alexander's Greek, and offers the reader an understandable text also where long sentences and technical vocabulary could easily lead one astray. Caston carefully defends his translations in the commentary, esp. when anything philosophical depends on it. He addresses all relevant scholarship on Aristotle and Alexander, and frequently discusses the textual and interpretative choices of his Italian and French fellow translators. Inspired by Bob Sharples, the pioneer of modern Alexander studies to whom the volume is dedicated, Caston reads Alexander sympathetically, as a philosopher who believes that there is more truth in Aristotle than in the rival schools of Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, but demands a measure of freedom to update Aristotle to the needs of second century AD philosophy. For Alexander the defense of Peripatetic superiority is a matter of daily practice, and not merely an intellectual exercise. Alexander held a chair in Peripatetic philosophy in Athens, which was one of four chairs inaugurated by Marcus Aurelius, one for each of the main philosophical schools, so that his rivals were near. No wonder Alexander openly or tacitly addresses, e.g., criticisms launched against Aristotle by Atticus, who is believed to have held the Platonic chair just before Alexander came into office, and corrects earlier Peripatetic interpretations, e.g. by Boethus, which, according to Alexander, rendered Aristotle vulnerable to Stoic or Platonic attacks.

The most famous part of Alexander's *De anima* consists of the first 26 pages that do not correspond to any major section of Aristotle's *De anima*, although much of it echoes Aristotle's physical and metaphysical works. Caston explains that Alexander here aims to provide the conceptual framework of Peripatetic psychology, i.e. the metaphysical foundations on which the whole theory rests. Thus Alexander proceeds systematically, and diverges from Aristotle's dialectical approach; by consequence, Alexander tends to focus on his contemporaries, and less on his predecessors (p. 3).

In many ways Alexander's theory of form and matter elaborates on Aristotle. Alexander offers the first systematic defense of prime matter as the foundation of the mutual changes of the four elements into one another. In his discussions of prime matter he combines Aristotelian descriptions of matter with related terms familiar from Middle-Platonist and Stoic theories of matter (p. 5). He also defends a middle way between Stoic materialism and Platonic forms which Caston dubs non-reductive materialism. Yet, the precise nature of Caston's interpretation remains somewhat unclear. Let us focus on what is at once a most interesting philosophical puzzle, and a good example of the sophistication of Alexander's exegesis.

The opposite sides of the spectrum are familiar enough. Against the Stoics, Alexander considers soul immaterial; against Galen, and some positions recorded in Plato's *Phaedo*, Alexander rejects the analogy of soul with health or harmony if it leads to a reduction of soul to the blend or ratio of the constituents of the body; against Platonists, Alexander insists that more needs to be said about a composite living being than a reference to Forms can explain. But what exactly is the relation between soul and body? According to Caston who is explicitly opposing earlier work by Sorabji and Kupreeva in various respects, the suitable corporeal blend is a *sufficient* condition of soul; souls of different species of living beings are different *because* their bodies are, due to their specific blend of lower forms and bodies in ever more complex layers, from prime matter upwards. Souls are no different from other physical forms: they are emphatically not identical with either the blend or its ratio but 'supervene on', or 'emerge from', or even 'follow', or are 'a consequence of' corporeal blends as immaterial entities. They have causal powers the underlying body or any of its constituents does not have, much like the healing powers of medical drugs.

Problems arise once we realize that Galen stresses the vocabulary of 'following' as the best expression of reductionism, whereas Alexander seems to avoid it when formulating his own most considered opinion. Moreover, in his *Quod animi mores* Galen not only employs this vocabulary, he also uses it to interpret passages from Aristotle's biological works and the *Parva naturalia* in support of his materialism. So Alexander will have to do much more work to distinguish himself, and Aristotle, from Galen. Moreover, it is unclear what the difference is between 'supervenience' and 'emergence', and whether 'to come to be *epi*' could not simply mean 'to come to be on top of, in addition to' *sc.* the blend or harmony as such. That seems to be all that Alexander requires in many instances in which he uses the terms. But there is more: Caston rightly stresses (pp. 3-9) that for Alexander the soul-body relationship is not unique: this type of hylomorphism applies across the board to all physical forms, *as well as* to the hierarchy of powers of the soul (66,6-8). This systematisation of Aristotle's physics and metaphysics is one of Alexander's lasting contributions to philosophy. But in the case of the powers of the soul, Alexander expressly denies that they follow one from the other by necessity, both because, for instance, some animals have perception but not memory or imagination, and, ultimately, because his ethics requires that imagination, assent, and reason are *not* sufficiently determined by lower levels of soul-body organisation (*De anima* 72,13-73,2). So either Caston's reading of Alexander's hylomorphism is too strong, and we need to allow for different applications in different contexts (perhaps a sign of an as yet unfinished integration of views in Alexander), or we have to find a different interpretation for Alexander's general terminology

that does not run into these difficulties. Finally, it is difficult to envisage how corporeal blends as sufficient causes for the presence of immaterial forms can be reconciled with Aristotelian teleology. This problem looms larger in light of Alexander's insistence, in *De fato* and *Mantissa*, that in Aristotle's world providence or fate do not rule over particulars. In this context we can only conclude that much remains to be investigated, and Caston's interpretation, though comprehensive and well-argued, may not be the final answer.

This leads me to a general observation at the end of this review. Caston well situates Alexander in the polemical context of Athens around 200 AD, and his interpretations draw on many other works of Alexander. Nevertheless Caston does not confront the question whether "the various divergences, modifications, and revisions, as well as elaborations and further developments" (p. 2) Alexander permits himself in relation to Aristotle's *De anima* serve a further purpose beyond polemics and Peripatetic defense. Is Caston right in believing that Alexander is successful in creating a coherent Peripatetic philosophy (which would warrant drawing support from all quarters), or should we consider *De fato*, *De mixtione*, *Quaestiones*, *Mantissa*, and the commentaries as reflections of an ongoing project of more and less fortunate expressions of the best possible Aristotelian theory (in which case drawing on other works may be confusing the picture)? Finally, Caston does not make clear whether he believes any part of Alexander's theory to be incompatible with Aristotle. He has chosen to remain neutral even on the notion and function of prime matter (p. 16, and n. 26 on 3,28-4,4). But perhaps such broader questions are not at home in a work of this kind. One thing should be clear, though: any researcher who wishes to pursue the study of Alexander of Aphrodisias will have to thoroughly familiarize herself with Caston's insightful comments on *De anima*—and will eagerly await Caston's second volume of Alexander *On the soul*.

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