

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY IN LATE ANTIQUITY?

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How can one write a history of philosophy in the late antique period? Would it be possible to produce a synthesis that would do justice both to the breadth of such a title and to the material required? What would its underlying method and contours need to look like? Naturally, collections of essays within the field abound; volumes which deal with this or that important, but often rarefied topic. Sometimes these collections aim at some degree of comprehensiveness and thereby come close to being “histories”. This is true of the 2010, twin-tomed *Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*. The book is self-consciously designed to replace its precursor of 1967, *The Cambridge History of Late Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy*. The change of title is itself enough to underline the victory of the Brownian “late antique” revolution and one hopes that as a result the material and the structure might be suffused with a unity that shows its subject to be neither “late Greek” nor “early mediaeval”.¹ In this it no doubt succeeds, for the new title is clearly an improvement on the old, and the list of chapters provide an excellent up-to-date account of a number of philosophers belonging to the period in question (it being an inexact science to define the period, but debating the point again is so much pedantry that we need not dwell on).²

The new title, however, just as much as the old, does raise further questions about the project. Firstly, although the qualification *Greek* has been omitted in the new title, the old volume’s easygoing and unexamined assumption that the noun “philosophy” might usefully be qualified by an adjective that refers to a language has not really been

¹ Gerson, L. P. (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2010). The editor remarks (p.1) that “the new title indicates a vigorous recognition of the extension of the canon of ancient philosophy far beyond the all-too-narrow confines of the fourth century BCE. Whatever assessment one wishes to make of the value of ancient philosophy, there is today less justification than ever for the truncated view that ignores philosophical writing between Aristotle and Descartes.”

² The *terminus ad quem* (p.2) is “philosophy in Byzantium” and “the initial wave of the Islamic philosophical appropriation of Greek philosophy.” But whence Eriugena, then?

overcome as a methodological problem in approaching its *history*. To this problem we shall return. Second, the use of the term *history* has been retained and, although this ought to confront the author/editor with the challenge of squaring the circle raised by juxtaposing “history” with “philosophy”, the reader may be excused for asking (as the editor himself does) whether such a book does what it says on the cover. Is it a “history” of “philosophy”? What would such a thing look like? The following brief exploration of the contents of these volumes should be taken simply as reflections on the discipline of late antique philosophy as a whole, and are not intended to deal in any detail with the contents of this or that chapter, nor to contradict the arguments and interpretations put forward by its various excellent authors.

Let us begin (in a resolute attempt not to be tiresome) with the appendix to *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, for we shall find there an odd creature which demonstrates *in nuce* the problem with the “history” as a whole. This prolix beast of an appendix claims to consist of a “List of Works of Ancient Authors” which is intended in some manner as an overview of whatever works are constitutive of “late antique philosophy”. Here, says the editor (p.9), “we have tried to provide a compendium of all the works of the philosophers and of the philosophically engaged theologians of our period.” What we in fact find is a list of those producers of literary remains who were fortunate enough to have a chapter, or portion of a chapter, devoted to them within the main part of the work, together with, for each of these individuals, a *complete* list of their works (including spurious attributions, marked as such).

The danger of such a procedure, viz. designating people as “philosophers” rather than texts as “philosophical”, is obvious enough. For even wholly non-philosophical works of those who might at a stretch be called philosophers have necessarily been included, while extremely philosophically-focused works of those who missed the boat (either through their not really being “philosophers” at all or simply through marginalisation) are omitted. In a heuristic summary, this might be forgivable; in a list which is hoped to become a reference point for the use of future scholars, it is potentially catastrophic.³ So we have a list of philosophical works which includes, for example, ps-Maximus Confessor's *Life of the Virgin*, but which excludes Probus of Antioch's *Commentary on Porphyry's Eisagoge*. The former is a piece of devotional literature, albeit engaging in a polemical dispute, the latter a fully engaged philosophical work which develops in a sophisticated way the lecture notes of Ammonius and Olympiodorus. Again, included is Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Herod(!)*, while

³ The list of “Editions and translations of post-classical authors translated into Syriac and Arabic” (p.1171-3) is very hit and miss, if it aims at being a comprehensive guide for researchers. There is an awful lot more translated late antique philosophical material than this, especially if one does not insist on attributions.

Aeneas of Gaza is known only by his dialogue *Theophrastus*. His *Epistles*, surely of more interest to the historian of philosophy than is Herod's biography, are absent. Why has the whole oeuvre of the late fifth century figure Zacharias Scholasticus been omitted? Was his *Ammonius*, a dialogue dealing with the pagan philosophers' arguments for the eternity of the world, not philosophical enough? And where is the Emperor Julian? A discussion of the effects of his policies upon the teaching and practice of philosophy is included (chapter 20), but his works are ignored as if they were no part of that history.⁴

If it is people, rather than texts, that are thought of as "philosophical", then this will wholly control the choice of material, as we can see by the inclusion of Maximus' *Life of the Virgin over Zacharias' Ammonius*. The latter is hardly the most sophisticated attempt to grapple with the issues of the eternity of the world, but was an important one in its day and that alone ought to be sufficient grounds for inclusion, but also and not least because it is a historical witness to the activities and thoughts of other philosophers, as is Zacharias' other well-known piece, the *Life of Severus*. I am not sure whether the exclusion of texts such as these from the compendium is due to an editorial decision that it (or its author) is an "historical" rather than a philosophical item (though David Blank's chapter on Ammonius makes full use of them as sources for the latter's thought), but in any case the compendium fails thereby to give the future historian a rounded picture of the sources required for a "history". The preference given to well-known individuals over texts, which also marginalises the anonymous or unattributed text, will tend to push the future "historian" of late antique philosophy in a rather pre-determined direction. The question of whether the project should have been conducted thematically rather than prosopographically is not discussed in the introduction.⁵

There are two further difficulties in the selection and ordering of the material which have a disproportionate effect on the way that the reader conceives and views the "history" of late antique philosophy as whole. One should be easy to solve; the other rather more tricky. Easy to put right is the assumption that Greek and Latin are the only languages in which philosophy in late antiquity could have been carried on; rather more challenging is the editorial decision to integrate as fully as possible into the history what the volume calls "philosophically-engaged theology".

⁴ Baker-Brian, N. and S. Tougher (eds.), *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate* (Swansea, 2012).

⁵ This despite the fact that the tendency in recent "companions" and "introductions" has been to focus on thematic fields rather than people, or at least to use the former type of approach only as a general introduction to a period, as in Anthony Kenny's recent 4-volume *New History of Western Philosophy*.

Let us look at the latter problem first. Clearly any history of late antiquity must make a genuine attempt to engage with the phenomenon of “Christian philosophy”, however this might be defined. The *Cambridge History* certainly does this and does it vastly more satisfactorily than its predecessor did. The editor hopes that his choice of which “theologians” to include tends towards over-inclusivity rather than the reverse (p.4) and hence his re-assessment of the status of ps-Dionysius is to be welcomed, although I am sure that this mysterious author would not be the only “late Platonist” to feel robbed by the attempt (p.4) to “distinguish” the religious from the philosophical aspects of his thought.⁶ But if the intent is praiseworthy, its execution is not nearly radical enough. The choices still tend to follow the old canonical lines. The three Cappadocian fathers receive a full chapter each, whilst Apollinarius of Laodicea and Eunomius of Cyzicus are omitted – the latter mentioned only briefly as a foil for Basil to compose a refutation; of the former we catch not a whisper. Surely nobody who had read the surviving works of either Apollinarius or Eunomius could doubt that their philosophical credentials were of considerably greater moment (and of greater interest to the historian of philosophy) than most of the works of Gregory Nazianzen, a rhetorician who barely produced anything philosophically novel or sophisticated. But then, of course, Basil and Gregory are the canonical “Fathers” of the Church; Apollinarius and Eunomius were condemned as heretics (ironically enough, for being too Aristotelian).⁷ Eunomius’ predecessor Aetius was routinely condemned for his syllogistic and dialectical approach to Trinitarian dogma, and a glance at his *Syntagmation* will confirm that he is of too great an interest to the historian of philosophy to be omitted from a comprehensive survey.⁸ So too the important Arian philosopher Asterius the Sophist, who also happened (unlike his opponents) to be a professional philosopher, and on those grounds alone much more worthy of inclusion than many. In the light of this, the inclusion of an excellent chapter (by Edward Moore and John G. Turner), reviving the philosophical contribution of “gnostic” thinkers, is welcome given the evidence for the involvement of professional philosophical schools in the development of Gnostic thought, which Stephen Emmel

⁶ We might as well do the same for Iamblichus and Proclus; the time has come for scholars to lay aside the conviction that the only good philosopher is a de-Christianised philosopher, while pagan religiosity belongs to a different category.

⁷ Their surviving works, however, are not insubstantial. In addition to the usual quotations in the refutations of their opponents, Apollinarius’ works survived under the names of more orthodox writers as well as in languages such as Syriac in which it was easier to escape the detection of the authorities.

⁸ For instance, he insisted that names implied essences and thus that the variously named persons of the Trinity could hardly be *homoousion*. Wickham, L. R., “The *Syntagmation* of Aetius the Anomean,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 19 (1968), pp. 532-69.

presented in a recent paper.⁹ It shows that orthodoxy is not the issue here (or perhaps by way of the back door only). But I fail to understand why none of the Gnostic texts have been included in the compendium.¹⁰

Even among “orthodox” thinkers, there seems to be some preferential treatment. Didymus of Alexandria was the most astute (Christian) philosophical thinker from that city between Origen and Philoponus, but he receives only a very brief treatment in the chapter by Andrew Smith on the reception of Porphyry. Are his works really not as worthy as ps-Maximus’ *Life of the Virgin* to be included in the compendium? Is even Cyril of Alexandria (not mentioned) to be considered less philosophically engaged than Maximus Confessor? The latter depends for the most part on arguments from patristic authority, despite his occasional forays into philosophical concerns, while the former was still half functioning in a world in which theological formulae had to be defended from first principles.¹¹ The sixth century patriarch Severus of Antioch (not mentioned) was deeply involved in the “scholastic” attempt to introduce stricter Aristotelian definitions and frameworks into theological reasoning. Take, for instance, his epistolary exchange with a priest from Mesopotamia in which the two men explored in some depth fundamental aspects of the *De Generatione et Corruptione* and contributed to the discussion on the metaphysics of persistence through change.¹² In the work of Severus, this engagement with the late antique Alexandrian form of Aristotelian thought was only just beginning.¹³ In many ways it found its highest and most sophisticated form among a group of sixth century theologian-philosophers such as Leontius of Byzantium and Theodore of Raithou. In terms of the scholastic tradition to which they belonged and the philosophical milieu within which they functioned, these characters belong firmly within late antiquity. I find it difficult to understand

⁹ Emmel, S., “The Gnostic Tradition in relation to Greek philosophy,” in: Giversen, S. (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Texts in the History of Religions* (Copenhagen, 2002), pp. 125-36.

¹⁰ One fears that it may be because the texts in question have the unforgivable characteristic of having no named author attached to them.

¹¹ See Siddals, R. M., “Logic and Christology in Cyril of Alexandria,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 38 (1987), pp. 341-67.

¹² Torrance, I. R., *Christology after Chalcedon : Severus of Antioch and Sergius the Monophysite* (Norwich, 1988). The letters were written in Greek, although only near-contemporary translations have survived. The priest, Sergius, was challenging his patriarch’s interpretation of his own theological formulae on the grounds that it conflicted with the Aristotelian theory of mixtures and properties. Reading between the lines, one feels that Sergius is the more philosophically astute of the pair.

¹³ For a fuller description of this form of scholasticism, its dependence on the Alexandrian commentary tradition, and the break it displays with the rhetorical style of previous theological writing, see Daley, B., “Boethius’ Theological Tracts and Early Byzantine Scholasticism,” *Mediaeval Studies* 46 (1984), pp. 158-91, and earlier the fuller work of M. Grabmann, *Die Geschichte der scholastischen Methode*, 2 vols. (Freiburg, 1909-11).

that a history of philosophy in late antiquity should include a whole chapter on Basil of Caesarea but not a word on Leontius or Theodore. After all, they interacted directly with Aristotle; Basil worked mostly from summaries and handbooks, and even then philosophy was to be ignored when it did not suit,¹⁴ and Gregory Nazianzen, by his own assertion, was proud of reasoning more like a fisherman than an Aristotelian.¹⁵ Nor is this a pedantic debate about the boundaries of late antiquity as a period,¹⁶ for the fact that Eriugena receives the full chapter treatment implies quite an open-ended notion of late antique chronology. This only makes it all the harder to understand the omission of Leontius.

So much for the “hard-to-obviate” problem of integrating theology into philosophy and of the consequences of treating both prosopographically. What of the other problem mentioned earlier that would have been easier to avoid? While the volume which the current one seeks to replace was quite specific in its focus upon *Greek* philosophy (by which I imagine its editor meant a linguistic limitation rather than a geographical one as such), the current volume does not specify any such limit nor overtly suggest that a philosophy can be usefully described as “Greek”. Yet while philosophical texts written in Latin are rightly given equal status, the volume’s espousal of a “long” late antiquity has not been coupled with an equally extensive geographical boundary. The misplaced elitism of the Latin and Greek languages continues to leave its mark, whether by deliberate editorial decision or by oversight. Yet this surely offers a false impression if one is aiming at a history of philosophy across a unified Mediterranean cultural zone (and to define late antiquity geographically in this way seems easier than to define it chronologically). The presumed significance of the classical tongues derives from the literary-critical origins of classics as a discipline and ought no longer to cast their shadow over the historian of culture or of thought whose linguistic boundaries are far more permeable.

The upshot of this limitation has been the omission of a number of pure philosophers, and important ones in their own right, who used the literary classical languages of the eastern provinces of the empire, Aramaic and Hebrew. One need only mention Bardaisan of Edessa, whose work on free will belongs firmly within the “Greek” philosophical ambit, albeit that its author chose to use his mother tongue (the Edessan Syriac dialect of Aramaic) precisely because it was already gaining in literary prestige

¹⁴ *Adv. Eun.* 1.5 (PG29,516C): “Do we really need Aristotle’s and Chrysippus’ syllogisms to learn that the ingenerate has not been begotten either by himself or by another, and is not older or younger than himself?”

¹⁵ *Or.* 23.12.

¹⁶ Though the inclusion of Seneca and even Philo of Alexandria (but not his contemporary Cicero) in the compendium might be thought to be pushing the terminus a quo rather further back than was intended!

in his own day. It is hard to understand why his contribution has been omitted if only in light of the abovementioned chapter on the Gnostic systems of the second/third centuries, whose texts are known to us mostly in their Coptic forms.

This linguistic self-limitation, which is without warrant from the History of Ideas, entails moreover the exclusion of Jewish philosophico-theology alongside the welcome inclusion of its Christian counterpart – with Philo the exception that proves the rule precisely because he wrote in Greek. If any future historian were to attempt a genuinely synthetic “History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity” could he reasonably incorporate Christian texts produced in fourth-to-sixth century Palestine or Asia Minor without doing equal justice to the rich philosophical pickings of the Jerusalem Talmud?

The high literary register of the Syriac language used by Bardaisan also yielded two major thinkers in the sixth century, Sergius of Resh‘aina and Proba of Antioch, whose works would be indistinguishable from the material coming out of the contemporary Alexandrian schools were it not for the language of their composition. Sergius, an establishment figure of the empire through and through, pupil of Ammonius Hermeiou and Justinian’s ambassador to Rome, wrote, inter alia, a long and extensive commentary on the *Categories* and an adapted version of Alexander of Aphrodisias’ *On the Principles of the Universe*. Proba of Antioch wrote a number of commentaries on the *Organon*, which are notable for their occasional rather interesting departures from the models of the Alexandrian teachers.

If the seventh and eighth centuries are to be included in late antiquity (and the inclusion of a chapter for Eriugena suggests that this is intended for the west, and in the east intellectual and cultural continuity remained unbroken until the end of the eighth century), then quite a few more may be added to their number, philosophers who believed themselves and their philosophical context to be still very much part of a “Roman” empire. These individuals and their texts do not belong to the history of Arabic philosophy, nor even to its foothills (except from hindsight); rather they emerged from what can only be called a bilingual Graeco-Syriac environment in which many (perhaps all) students of philosophy were expected to read the works of the great philosophers in the original Greek and to engage with the philosophical curriculum as it was taught in late antique Alexandria. In other words, this is part of late antique philosophy – it is not about “reception”. A holistic view could extend even to Paul the Persian, a classic exponent of Alexandrian platonised Aristotelianism, who wrote his *Introduction to Philosophy* and *Elucidation of the De Interpretatione* for the Persian shah in his own tongue.

This holistic view, by describing philosophy as an ongoing tradition and context for thought, must find a way around a “dark ages” type narrative such as that offered by chapter 47 of our *Cambridge History* as a convenient bridge from sixth-century

Alexandria to ninth-century Baghdad. The latter took off on its own path only after drawing its conception of purpose and method from the Graeco-Syriac experience, as is everywhere evident in the structure and division of the early Arabic texts. Any history of philosophy that is a history of ideas cannot afford to ignore this.

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The foregoing, necessarily brief, reflections lead to a broader problem, which the Cambridge History throws into sharp relief, namely what sort of enterprise it is to write a(ny) history of philosophy. By opting for the prosopographical approach in its structure, the editor's aim was certainly to contextualise his material in a way that one does not find in the 1967 volume. Re-thinking what a "history of philosophy" is, the editor hopes that focusing on the philosophers *in* their contexts avoids the problem encountered in so many discussions between contemporary writers and ancient philosophers, in which the latter are treated rather as contemporary competitors whose ideas exist in a vacuum and who may be reasoned with as across the seminar table. He thereby attempts (p.7) to resist an entirely negative attitude towards those who would urge the identification of philosophy with its own history by suggesting in essence that the responsible historian will seek contextualisation as the necessary prerequisite for commensuration (i.e. the attempt to engage with the ancient philosopher across said seminar table). If he can succeed in the task of contextualisation, then "the defence of the value of the history of philosophy is substantially the same as the defence of the value of philosophy itself."

But a fully contextualised account of late antique philosophy that structures itself prosopographically must beg the obvious question, who, after all, is a philosopher? Does a socio-culturally nuanced history of philosophy require that we define philosophers in the same way as they defined themselves, as professionals belonging to a guild ("the late antique philosopher was, whether he liked it or not, a public figure").¹⁷ The obvious difficulty that presents itself as soon as we choose to adjudicate upon the question of what counts as "proper" philosophy (and hence exclude rabbinic discourse, for instance, because we deem it unlikely to make it onto the reading list of any undergraduate philosophy programme), then we are acting primarily as contemporary philosophers, interested in those we like to imagine as our forebears. But if we act as disinterested historians, even the very notion of chronological development begins to appear suspect – the modern philosopher to whom the story of her art is that of a curve attaining ever more closely to its goal will

¹⁷ Dillon, J., "Philosophy as a Profession in Late Antiquity," in: Smith, A. (ed.), *The Philosopher And Society In Late Antiquity: Essays In Honour Of Peter Brown* (Swansea, 2005), pp. 1-17, at p. 10.

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conflict with the historian for whom empathy with her sources demands that she take a less conditioned view of this linearity and allow instead the late antique notions of continuity to assert themselves, for instance. In any case, it is rather easier to identify logicians proper than, say, genuine ethical or political philosophers. What counts as a serious contribution to ethical or political philosophy in an age in which every religious leader sets himself up as an expert? Either we (re)construct our own notion of a philosopher, or else acknowledge it as a contested notion within late antiquity and construe our history by taking full account of that observation.

There are at least two other ways in which one *might* write a history of late antique philosophy, avoiding the prosopographical or encyclopaedic, reference-style approach. One would be to work through the texts with an eye to the fields of philosophy rather than by individual contributor. It would certainly be desirable in any case to have, for instance, an authoritative overview of the variety of approaches to the philosophy of mind, or to epistemology, in late antiquity and the interconnections between them. Richard Sorabji's books on key themes in ancient philosophy partly fulfil this requirement and his sourcebooks provide much of the key material. Dominic O'Meara has recently outlined a development of metaphysics as a discipline in late antiquity that could provide a model for this sort of approach to describing a history of philosophy.¹⁸ It has at least one significant advantage, namely it allows, or encourages, the omission of clearly non-philosophical works of authors who happened in other parts of their oeuvres to engage in philosophy (such as Maximus or Nicolaus as mentioned above) while at the same time giving their due weight to anonymous or marginal texts, such that by properly considering the contents of those run-of-the-mill introductions and anonymous summaries that filled students' manuscripts the historian may follow the flow of philosophical theories within intellectual culture more generally.¹⁹

The other approach would be to narrate a history of the *practice* of philosophy in terms of its social and political context; philosophy as a way of life as much as a series of intellectual stances,²⁰ just as historians' approaches to late ancient Christianity have tended to move away from a "history of dogmatic developments" (patristics in the old style) and towards a holistic view of "religious practices" from a cultural and socio-

¹⁸ O'Meara, D., "The Transformation of Metaphysics in Late Antiquity," in: Doolan, G. T. (ed.), *The Science of Being as Being: Metaphysical Investigations* (Washington DC, 2012), pp. 36-52.

¹⁹ The question perhaps really boils down to the notion of authorship which has been hotly debated in other branches of the study of the ancient world. When so many texts are falsely attributed or simply anonymous, what matter what name appears at the head of a mediaeval manuscript? This is to go too far really for the case of philosophy which clearly depends on the individual genius in a way that does not apply in historiography, for instance; but the question might need asking.

²⁰ After all, the editor understands full well that "Throughout ... it will be evident that the entire intellectual world of late antiquity is constantly engaged with ancient philosophy" (p.8).

logical (largely phenomenological) point of view. To envisage philosophy's story as a story of groups and traditions, their interrelationships and social factors (an approach favoured by the editor in this case, who speaks of historical filiations, p.7) may appeal more to the historian of culture than to the contemporary student of philosophy. If the task is construed in such a way, then it would be vital (to take only one example) to undertake an analysis of the structures of the late antique school system both through the many useful historical sources (one thinks again of Zacharias' *Life of Severus*) and through its textual productions, the numerous anonymous handbooks, summaries, and philosophical compendia which litter the manuscript collections of many libraries. In Latin, Greek, and Syriac there is a wealth of such material.

Of course, all this "stuff on parchment" does not add much to (today's) philosophy. It does not (nor was it meant to) contribute to the progress of human thinking. But it does encapsulate for us how people went about studying and assimilating the advances made by philosophers over the centuries and explains for us how their ideas came gradually to be so influential across a wide range of cultural phenomena, including, most importantly, theology; for very rarely in the history of Christian theology's "encounter" with Hellenic philosophy were the theologians actually reading and dialoguing with the texts that we like to think of as being constitutive of that philosophy – what they represent for us is rather an attempt to integrate pedagogical philosophy into theological schemes. What we would be seeking then are explanations for cultural phenomena rather than mining texts (or authors) for their dogmas. Both are valid paths. The *Cambridge History* sets out on one of them.

- Baker-Brian, N., and S. Tougher (eds.), *Emperor and Author: The Writings of Julian the Apostate* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2012).
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