

From Ta Metá Ta Physiká to Metaphysics

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After Aristotle's death only his immediate successor Theophrastus raised questions that would later be called metaphysical.¹ In the extant fragments of Theophrastus' work we do not find talk of being as being, and the metaphysical problematic is primarily the theological problematic, because it is concerned with knowing the first principles, and these principles are divine.² When in turn Theophrastus died, the great scientific legacy of Aristotle (called the esoteric writings) vanished, and with them the books devoted to first philosophy perished. In the Lyceum they were no longer concerned with being as being or with the first principles.

Only three centuries after the Stagyrte's death was the legacy returned, primarily the esoteric writings intended for an educated reader.³ This hap-

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¹ In the oldest extant manuscripts (from the tenth century), the thoughts of Aristotle's successor are called *On the metaphysics of Theophrastus* (*Theophrastou ton metá ta physiká*). Cf. TEOFRAST [THEOPHRASTUS], *Pisma* [Writings], 113, 410, note 1. *Metaphysics*. However, this title could not have come from Theophrastus. According to Ingemar Düring, the original title was *The Science of What Is First* (*Peri ton proton theoria*). Cf. DÜRING, *Aristoteles. Darstellung und Interpretation Seines Denkes*, 591.

² "What this first intelligible substance is, or what they are, if more than one, can be revealed through (adiaporia by) analogy or some other comparison. (According to the opinion of the many or the wise,) the first principle of all is divine. By analogy, the first principles being sought should be assumed to have power and superiority over others, just like god is superior to all other beings." THEOPHRASTUS, *On the First Principles* (known as his *Metaphysics*), 265 (4b11-4b18).

³ Today the word "esoteric" means something occult and distant from science. In the Greek language *esoterikós* literally means something external, but occult. In the case of Aristotle's scientific writings the intention was that would could be analyzed by adepts properly prepared for this by the education they received earlier. So today as well, wri-

pened because Tyrannion produced a new edition, and then Andronicus of Rhodes did the same (the eleventh scholar of the peripatetic school). Among these writings were found fourteen books without a single clear title. They began with a new reading of the text, which in the lifetime of the author was probably only a collection of notes from lectures called *logoi* or *pragmateia*, but were not a finished work.⁴ The collection was difficult to read because of the arrangement of the books and because of the problematic contained in them.⁵ After all, Aristotle himself forewarned that this problematic was the most precious for man, but was also the difficult.⁶ The works of the Stagyrite that were saved and published were subjected to a procedure typical of Hellenistic culture, which was methodically assimilating the Greek legacy.⁷ This was commentary. Commentaries were written not only in Hellenistic circles, but also over the course of time in Syrian, Arab, and Latin circles.

I. Commentaries: the Assimilation and Continuity of Culture

What was a commentary? Initially it consisted of notes simply to help in remembering something. We find this root meaning in the Greek word (*hypomnemata*) and the Latin word (*commentarius*). A commentary thus at first had the character of an oral statement that was then written as a didactic aid for further readings.⁸ Over the course of the notes became to take the form of commentaries in the proper sense that covered a broad palette of topics. Various problems and matters, both

tings in philosophy are not analyzed in newspapers or on television, but at university, and in this sense they are esoteric, that is, within the university.

⁴ W. JAEGER, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Metaphysik des Aristoteles*, 138-148. Cf. J. OWENS, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 75; H. B. GOTTSCHALK, "The Earliest Aristotelian Commentators", 31.

⁵ Controversy continues to this day whether the arrangement of the fourteen books was accidental or whether it holds some key of its own. According to J. Owens the main key is the aporiai in Book B, the resolution of which is shown in order in the books that follow. Cf. OWENS, *The Doctrine*, 69-106.

⁶ ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* 1.2, 982 a 6-982 b 11.

⁷ Andronicus did not include the *Hermeneutics* in his edition since he thought that it was not written by Aristotle. GOTTSCHALK, *The Earliest*, 56, note 2.

⁸ PRAECHTER, "Review of Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca", 38. The proof of this is that we first find oral readings in notes, in which the *viva vox* of the lecturer is written down, that is, certain forms of addressing the receiver as a listener and not as a reader.

private and public and not necessarily connected with science or education, came into play.

A commentary of strictly scientific character became an exegesis (*exege-sis*, Gk.). An exegesis contained not only a relation dedicated to something, but also an elucidation and detailed analysis of the text. Such a commentary-exegesis became widespread in Hellenistic times, mainly in Alexandria, and it was one of the highest literary forms.⁹ Commentaries were written on works by authors known as authorities in the field of literary culture as a whole, such as poets, tragedians, comedic writers, historians, rhetoricians, representatives of the particular sciences (medicine, geography, mathematics, and astronomy), and finally by philosophers. Plato and Aristotle were regarded as the greatest philosophers.

Commentaries were not necessarily written with a view to publication. They were primarily for use in schools and were adapted to listeners at specific levels. Hence the author himself would write several commentaries on his work (Galen) with various readers in mind. The commentary also had in view not only the development of some particular discipline, but the spreading of the discipline through didactics. Didactics, however, required explanations. Thereby also the legacy of the preceding epochs could be preserved. The legacy was constantly being kept alive by the commentaries.

The structure of a commentary was carefully planned and varied. In one reading (*praxis*) there would first be a general discussion (*theoria*), and then it would pass on to the text (*lexis*).¹⁰ In most cases the source text was divided into parts. The length of the parts depended on how the text was to be received, with one length for reading audibly, another for reading silently. In the Alexandrian school the custom arose of picking out a unit of text that could be read in an hour or less.¹¹ When the text was intended for someone who read silently, then at a relatively early date (already in the time of Aspasius, second century AD) the method of division into short fragments (*lemmata*) was adopted, and the commentator analyzed these fragments. Yet another form was the paraphrase. Iamblichus and following him Themistius, used the paraphrase, although Themistius gave himself

⁹ "Commentators on Aristotle", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/aristotle-commentators/>)

¹⁰ PRAECHTER, *Review*, 48.

¹¹ R. SORABJI, "The Ancient Commentators on Aristotle", 8-9.

the credit for inventing the new method, and it is probable that he did not write commentaries in the strict sense.¹²

The Arabs took up the method of commenting on short fragments (*lemmata*), a method spread by Alexander of Aphrodisia, and following Galen and Themistius they introduced abbreviations (*epitome*) and paraphrase. These last two forms had the virtue of providing greater freedom to the commentator in presenting his own interpretation.¹³ Although Avicenna was known for paraphrase and showed aversion to commentary on short fragments, with the help of such a method he wrote commentary on a work called *Aristotle's Theology* (of which Aristotle was not the real author).¹⁴

Exegesis on the Sacred Scriptures and on works in literature, rhetoric, law and medicine influenced the character of philosophical commentaries among the Christians.¹⁵ Over time, the structure of the commentary changed. Initially commentaries were glosses written in the margins to explain the more difficult passages, but later for didactic and academic reasons the *questio* and the *lectio* appeared. In the works of St. Thomas Aquinas, a *questio* is a problem (e.g., the origin of creatures from God, S. Th., I, 44), which is divided into several articles, or questions (art. 1, Is it necessary for every being to have been created by God? art. 2, Is prime matter created by God?). The *lectio divina*, on the other hand, referred chiefly to the way the Sacred Scripture was read, which required concentration, love, and piety (Origen). It was something more than a cold academic commentary on account of the matter of the commentary, that is, contents revealed by God.

Paraphrase, which Avicenna preferred, found an imitator in Albert the Great. However, the method that Averroes used in what was called the long commentary, and which was present in the work of Alexander of Aphrodisia, in turn influenced St. Thomas Aquinas. It was to comment on one sentence after another singled out in short fragments.¹⁶

Averroes, who was called the Commentator, used three kinds of commentaries: a literal commentary where a text would be analyzed word by word; a paraphrase where some sort of fragment or passage would be commented upon; and a synopsis where he would present a view in short form

¹² C. D'ANCONA COSTA, "Commenting on Aristotle: From Late Antiquity to the Arab Aristotelianism", 225-226.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 243.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 244.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 202.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 202-206.

on some topic.¹⁷ Moreover, in Arab literature we may also encounter an imitation of the *lectio* and the *questiones* (something like the organized notes of students), and commentaries that appealed to aporiai and propositions to resolve them were made.¹⁸

Very many ancient commentaries were lost irrevocably either in whole (the commentaries of Adrastus and Aspasius) or in part (Galen, Alexander of Aphrodisia). Alexander of Aphrodisia was regarded from centuries as the model commentator (Gk. *exegetes*) who faithfully represented the thought of the Stagyríte, and his counterpart among the neo-Platonists was Simplicius for his greatness.

II. Commentaries on Aristotle

As we have mentioned, commentaries on Aristotle began to be written with the re-edition of his works by Andronicus of Rhodes.¹⁹ This continued without interruption to the eighth century, and then after two centuries the tradition was revived again to last to this day.²⁰

We may mention several currents from ancient times and the medieval period. The first current began with Andronicus and ended with Themistius (fourth century). Figures such as Boethius of Sidon, Athenodorus, Aristo of Alexandria (although this is somewhat uncertain), Eudorus, Alexander of Aegae, Sotion, Achaius, Adrastus of Aphrodisia, and Aspasius. These commentators regarded the Stagyríte's philosophy as a coherent

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 233.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 234.

¹⁹ Although it is difficult to believe this, it was only then that Aristotle began to be more widely known among the Roman. The testimony of Cicero is important here. When Cicero writes of "some *Topics* of Aristotle", it is not surprising that to one of the rhetoricians of that time "But the obscurity of the subject deterred you from the books; and that illustrious rhetorician to whom you had applied answered you, I suppose, that he knew nothing of these rules of Aristotle. And this I was not so much surprised at, namely, that that philosopher was not known to the rhetorician, inasmuch as he is not much known even to philosophers, except to a very few". CICERO, *Topics*, 1.1. Cicero also became familiar with the master by chance, although he was dealing with only on work: "And such ignorance is the less excusable in them, because they not only ought to have been allured by those things which he has discovered and explained, but also by the incredible richness and sweetness of his eloquence." ("*sed dicendi quoque incredibili quadam cum copia tum etiam suavitate*"), *Topics*, 1.1. Cf. SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 1.

²⁰ PRAECHTER, *Review*, 36.

whole and so their work was reduced chiefly to an effort to understand, explain, and defend his views. In his commentaries they tried, on the one hand, to explain the Philosopher's position, and on the other hand to defend him against the objects of his adversaries who represented other philosophical schools, esp. the Platonists and the Stoics.

The attitude of these commentaries was best summed up by Alexander of Aphrodisia who remarked that Aristotle's philosophical views were closer to the truth than those of the other philosophers, and he saw his task as simply showing more clearly what the Stagyrte had so perfectly presented (commentary on *De anima*).²¹ Commentators were required to know all the Stagyrte's works, so that only in the context of the whole they could interpret the meaning of selected passages. Andronicus himself instilled this belief in the commentators. Andronicus thought that the whole of Aristotle's views was coherent, and so, to speak in modern language, it constituted a system.

At the moment when neo-Platonism began to take first position, a familiarity with the works of Plato became necessary so as to show the harmony between Aristotle's views and the views of his teacher.²²

The main work upon which commentaries were first written, and upon which they were most often written, was not *ta meta ta physika*, but the *Categories*. Andronicus of Rhodes analyzed them word for word, while Boethius of Sidon adopted a more complicated method: he first made paraphrases and made interpretations. This method was probably so profound and intelligent that it evoked the admiration of Simplicius, one of the most esteemed and influential commentators of the end of ancient times. The commentaries of Aspasius also enjoyed great prestige. Unfortunately only his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is extant, but his commentaries on the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* have perished.

However, for a long time Alexander of Aphrodisia was regarded as the foremost, most faithful, and indeed as the model commentator. He directed a school in Athens in the late second and early third century AD. He wrote commentaries on most of Aristotle's works, including the *Metaphysics*, but today only his commentary on the first five books of the *Metaphysics*

²¹ ALEXANDER, *De anima* 2, 5-9. Cf. *Commentators on Aristotle, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

²² H. J. BLUMENTHAL, *Aristotle and Neoplatonism in Late Antiquity. Interpretation of the De Anima*, 32.

ics is regarded as authentic. Alexander of Aphrodisia's influence on later commentators was so great (even if they did not always agree with him) that often they referred to him not by name but as the "commentator" (*ho exêgêtês*).²³ He was enjoyed the respect of Plotinus, Simplicius, and later the Arab philosophers, in particular Averroes. Themistius (fourth century), who worked to represent faithfully Aristotle's views, is regarded as the last peripatetic commentator.

To sum up, the first phase was an attempt to interpret Aristotle's views in the light of his entire philosophy, not for purely historical reasons, but because his philosophy was regarded as true.

The second current was already beginning in the third century when commentaries on Aristotle were starting to be dominated by neo-Platonism. The motivation was entirely different than in the preceding phase. The commentators did not intend to make faithfully to interpret and explain Aristotle's thought but, first, to show the unity of Greek philosophy as a whole, and second, they primarily wanted to show that there was agreement between Aristotle and Plato, or to be more precise, that Aristotle was a loyal student of Plato. Plato held the first position. He was regarded also as a commentator, but in this case, not a commentator on philosophical works, but on reality itself.²⁴ Such an attitude of unification had appeared earlier, because in the second century AD in Middle Platonism Aristotle's views in logic were simply regarded as the views of Plato himself.²⁵

Among the commentators in the second movement we may mention Porphyry, Dexippus, Syrianus, Ammonius, Asclepius, Simplicius, Olymiodorus, John Philoponus, Elias, and David. Simplicius was the foremost.²⁶

²³ Although Simplicius was a neo-Platonist, he regarded Alexander as the most faithful commentator on Aristotle. Cf. BLUMENTHAL, *Aristotle*, 14-15.

²⁴ SIMPLICIUS, *In de Caelo*, 131, 1. We should keep in mind here that the neo-Platonic commentators did not think of themselves as neo-Platonists, since the term "neo-Platonism" did not appear until the beginning of the nineteenth century. For them, Plato above all was the philosopher because he interpreted reality, hence the measure of the value of every philosophy was its agreement with Plato's views. This applied both to Aristotle and to Plotinus. Cf. BLUMENTHAL, *Aristotle*, 15, 24-25.

²⁵ PRAECHTER, *Review*, 35.

²⁶ Simplicius presented a collection of ten questions that a comment must find answers to: 1. how and why did the names of philosophical schools appear? 2. What is the arrangement of the Aristotelian treatises? 2. Which treatise should we regard as the first one? 4. What is the purpose of Aristotle's philosophy? 5. What leads to this end? 6. How should we interpret his arguments? 7. Why does he use vague (*asapheian*) expressions? 8. How should his arguments be interpreted? 9. What sort of reader or listener is being ad-

Porphiry is considered the author of a treatise in seven books, the title of which speaks for itself: *On the School of Plato and Aristotle as One*.²⁷ The fact that a student of Plotinus who enjoyed very great prestige would present things this way necessarily defined Aristotle's position among the neo-Platonists and set the direction for how his works were interpreted. This required much ingenuity because Plotinus himself criticized Aristotle's *Categories*.²⁸ Moreover, in its most important points, Aristotle's philosophy was diametrically opposed to Plato's philosophy. What could result from such a marriage? The result was that one of the two philosophers would be regarded as predominant, and that philosopher was Plato. Aristotle was made to adapt to Plato and to Plotinus. The Aristotelian criticism of Platonism, so strong in many works, was watered down. Aristotle's metaphysics was platonized, even in its most perfect version, which was Plotinus' system. Plotinus in appearance only had made a synthesis of the views of both Greek masters. In reconciling Aristotle with Plato two arguments were chiefly used. We may find these arguments in the commentaries of Simplicius. In the first argument, it was thought that when Aristotle criticized Plato he had in mind those who misunderstood Plato, and so there was really no difference between him. In the second argument, the difference in their positions was merely verbal, since the same though was simply formulated in different ways.²⁹

As an example, we can see how Porphyry had fit Aristotle's metaphysics into Plotinus' system. He said with complete conviction that the Aristote-

dressed? 10. How many divisions should be expected in each of the Aristotelian treatises, of what sort, and on what basis? It is clear that a commentary written in this way was the fruit of a high literary and philosophical culture. Cf. PRAECHTER, *Review*, 42-43.

²⁷ Only fragments have are extant in an Arab translation, SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 2.

²⁸ Dexippus' second and third book of commentary on the *Categories* was devoted to answers to the objections of Plotinus. There he drew on the commentaries of his predecessors Porphyry and Iamblichus. When Plotinus charged that Aristotle had made a mistake by accepting one genus for all substances (material and immaterial substances), Dexippus answered that the *Categories* were written with a beginner in philosophy in mind, one who would understand defined words, but not beings. Plotinus himself presented a metaphysical solution by referring to the Aristotelian conception of analogy (later called the analogy of attribution). Plotinus thought that the concept of substance belonged to something in the first meaning from which the rest comes, and in this case this would be the intelligible substance. Here it would be easy to move from Aristotle's metaphysics to Plotinus' philosophy. Cf. PIERRE HADOT, "The Harmony of Plotinus and Aristotle According to Porphyry", 125-128.

²⁹ BLUMENTHAL, *Aristotle*, 26.

lian conception of substance that the Aristotelian conception of substance would necessarily lead to the acceptance of the One; the One is not a substance, and it is the principle of all substances.³⁰

Nothing could be further from Aristotle, yet this was regarded as in agreement with his views.³¹ Another abuse in interpretation concerns Aristotle's views on the role of the Good in maintaining the order and unity of the cosmos. Porphyry thought that all substances participate in the divine Good as in their principle, with the result that the whole takes the form of an ordered system.³² However, this was an "improvement" of Aristotle's system. For Aristotle the link between the cosmos and God was based, metaphysically speaking, on the weakest type of causality, namely final causality, and final causality alone.³³ Finally, the Aristotelian *pros hen* (*af henos*) analogy, later called the analogy of attribution, was interpreted in the spirit of emanationist doctrine as a departure from the One and a return to the One.³⁴ The analogy of attribution was exchanged for the neo-Platonist *way up and down* (*proodes kai epistrofé*). Meanwhile, the Aristotelian analogy of attribution shows the relation between categories that already exist and does not describe the ontological origin of accidents from substances. Although the categories are secondary to substance, they cannot be reduced to substance.³⁵

³⁰ "In Porphyry's eyes, the Aristotelian doctrine of *ousia* presupposes and ultimately entails the Plotinian One". *Ibidem*, 134.

³¹ For Aristotle, substance alone was the highest category of being, and so there no primeval principle above substance, not was there anything supra-entitative above being. The being that substances draw from the first substance is based not on emanation but on movement for which the first substance is the end-purpose, whether direct movement (the first intelligences) or indirect (the sublunary world). Aristotle discusses these questions in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*.

³² HADOT, *The Harmony*, 135.

³³ Aristotle accepted as an evident fact that the world was eternal, hence the main problem was change or motion, not the coming-into-being and existence of being in general. Final causality, which is most important in the order of change, is the weakest kind in the ontological sense. He gave up the idea of treating God as the efficient cause, since in light of his *Physics*, an efficient cause can only operate by direct contact. This meant the God would be material. To sum up, at the level of the *Physics* there is no solution as to what sort of nature the agent of motion possesses, while in the *Metaphysics* (Book L) the entire strength of the argumentation is directed to the First Unmoved Mover as the final cause.

³⁴ HADOT, *The Harmony*, 136.

³⁵ However from the logical point of view they can be treated as being of equal importance, for they are different, even if from the metaphysical point of view they are not of equal weight, as substance is the main category. However, if one leaves aside the *Meta-*

While discussion at the level of the interpretation of Aristotle's writings provided an occasion for verifying the theses stated by appealing to source texts, another procedure took the form of a sort of manipulation. Aristotle was treated as the author of works of a purely neo-Platonic character that he did not write at all. This may be said first of all of *Aristotle's Theology* (in fact a selection from Plotinus' *Enneades*), and the *Book of Causes* (probably written by Proclus). These works came from definitely neo-Platonist circles and expressed neo-Platonic philosophy. However, when they began to function as works of Aristotle, and Aristotle's name was highly respected, it is not surprising that neo-Platonism gained an adherent in Aristotle.

A notable effect of the mismatch between idealism and realism, between Plato and Aristotle, was the structure of philosophical education, which was arranged as follows: logic, ethics, politics, physics, and theology. There was no longer room for metaphysics as the theory of being, but metaphysics was absorbed by theology. Logic, which for the Stagyrte was only a tool of knowledge, was included among the sciences. The domination of theology may be understood in the context of neo-Platonism. For neo-Platonism the most important object of human appetite (but not of human cognition) was the One, from which came the hypostasis of Intellect and Being. The leading out of the One beyond philosophy later would not be a great problem for the successors of Plotinus, and the place of philosophy, or more precisely metaphysics, would be occupied by speculations on "after-worlds" in which mythology, astrology, and magic came together (Iamblichus, Proclus).³⁶

Why did the neo-Platonists ascribe a special role to the *Categories* from among all Aristotle's works? They regarded the work as an introduction to the study of Plato's philosophy. The categories are literally predicates that point to ten fundamental modes of being, including first substance (which as first cannot be a predicate in the strict sense, but only a subject). The predicates as names at the level of concepts (that is, at the level of the meaning of names) may not only refer to concrete reality, which is intellectually

physics, and if one draws metaphysical conclusions from a logical interpretation of the *Categories*, then there will be Platonization of Aristotle. This happened in the cause of many philosophers of late antiquity and the Middle Ages (such as Gilbert de la Porrée). Cf. GILSON, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 141. Finally in recent times as well, when logic is becoming first philosophy, metaphysics as second philosophy would be a variety of Platonism, and so it would be *de facto* ontology.

³⁶ I wrote more extensively on this in *Science in Culture*, part II, chapter 2.

a more difficult procedure, but also may they could be transferred to the level of the ideas, which intellectually is a much easier operation. Ideas, after all, are objectified concepts where the meanings of names are identical to ideas, while concrete material beings are much richer in content than are concepts, which are always some sort of simplified image of reality. In effect, at the purely intellectual level, the human reason moves more freely among concept-ideas than among concept-aspects that have reference to concrete material beings apprehended not only by the intellect, but also by the senses.

To sum up, the Aristotelian *Categories*, which were intended to refer to the reality of the world around us, became a springboard for Platonism, and the categories of being were changed into category-ideas. Aristotle was useful in the presentation of Platonism from the point of view of logic and language, but his theory of being was overlooked because it had been replaced by Plato's ideas. For indeed Aristotle's categories apprehended at the level of language as instruments of cognition direct our thought toward material beings, while in the case where the categories were platonized they were directed, as it were, from order of concepts to the ideas. By the same token, Aristotle's logical works served as an introduction to Plato's philosophy and theory of ideas, not as an introduction to the *Metaphysics*, whose object included the material world.

It is not strange that the culmination of an education in philosophy was not Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but the Platonic dialogues *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*. These works take up ontological issues (the concept of being), cosmological issues (the origin of the universe), and theological issues (the nature of the supreme being and of the first cause). Ontology is cultivated on the frontier between epistemology and linguistic speculations, while cosmology and theology draw from both philosophy and mythology. Plato had the final say in philosophy and the program of education, not Aristotle, from whose legacy the works on logic and theory of language were primarily expounded upon. Porphyry also asserted that the categories do not concern being, but concern names and their meanings.³⁷ Meanwhile, for Aristotle the fundamental reference point for the categories was being.³⁸

³⁷ Therefore the problem of the definition of "five words" (genus, species, difference, property, accidental feature) rather than an analysis of states of being came to the center stage. PORPHYRY, *Isagoge* 6.

³⁸ "There are several senses in which a thing may be said to 'be,' as we pointed out previously in our book on the various senses of words; for in one sense the 'being' meant

A clear majority of neo-Platonists subordinated Aristotle to Plato; they put on Aristotle views he never taught. Ammonius, a student of Proclus, thought that Aristotle was a follower of the theory of ideas (ideas existing in God's mind), and that God played the role of an efficient cause (and not merely a final cause).³⁹ Ammonius' view later influenced Al Farabi who wrote *On the Harmony Between Plato and Aristotle*. Simplicius had also expressed such a view early. As we recall, he was one of the most important neo-Platonic authorities among the commentators.⁴⁰ Porphyry and Iamblichus commented on Book VII (L) of the *Metaphysics*. In turn, Syrianus, the teacher of Proclus, was probably the first neo-Platonist who made a detailed analysis of Aristotle's entire metaphysics, although only his commentaries on Books B-G, and M-N are extant. Syrianus intended to defend Plato against Aristotle's attacks, but in turn he drew on the description of Plato's "unwritten views" as presented by Aristotle himself.⁴¹

To sum up, the phase of neo-Platonic commentaries moved from Aristotle's metaphysics to Plato's idealism and the emanation-theory of Plotinus. The commentaries were thus a far advanced interpretation with respect to the choice taken, to take philosophy as a whole as unity, and they regarded neo-Platonism as the dominant tonality.

Why did this happen? Why were the Greek commentators inclined to reinterpret Aristotle's thought, and why did the neo-Platonic commentaries make Aristotle subordinate to Plato? We may propose the following answer: the Greek commentators were primarily exegetes who did not have in addition "a philosophy of their own". The texts of the Stagyrite that had been discovered and published were so difficult and extensive that it would have been an immense undertaking to reconstruct his views in light of the whole. The neo-Platonists, on the other hand, did have "a philosophy of their own". That philosophy was ultimately conceived of in terms other than those of theoretical knowledge: the purpose of philosophy as the neo-Platonists saw it was to reach the first cause and to be united with the deity. For this reason Aristotle's philosophy, which was becoming better and better known be-

is 'what a thing is' or a 'this', and in another sense it means a quality or quantity or one of the other things that are predicated as these are." *Metaphysics*, trans. Ross, 7.1, 1028a 10-13. Aristotle here mentions examples of the categories (substance, quality, quantity) as modes of being.

³⁹ SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 3.

⁴⁰ SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 4.

⁴¹ D'ANCONA COSTA, *Commenting*, 208.

cause of the Greek commentaries, could be incorporated in some way into a certain stage in the neo-Platonist road to the One, and then Plato's philosophy could be added, although this was a quite considerable addition. It was not a matter of reconciling Aristotle with Plato, but of their complementary roles in the emanation-based conception of philosophy of Plotinus himself. This philosophy included a way down (*proodos*), that is, the emanation of hypostases from the One, and a road up (*epistrofê*), that is, a return to the One. Only elect philosophers could make the full return.

The rich and elastic schema of the emanation-based vision of being allowed for an eclectic treatment of previous philosophy, because in practical terms the views of each thinker could find a place for itself in the schema, not as a whole, since currents or philosophical systems taken in themselves could differ widely, but as parts of the greater and higher whole that Plotinus presented. Thus a distinction must be made between the problem of a reconciliation of the views of Plato and Aristotle in the order of their philosophical systems, and the complementary adaptation of their views to yet another super-system, the philosophy of Plotinus. This in turn was made subordinate to religion by certain very influential successors (Proclus or Iamblichus). As a result, the interpretation of certain philosophical texts and commentary acquired the status of a "handmaid of God".⁴² The study of Aristotle was regarded as a special initiation of a lower degree, and the study of Plato was regarded as an initiation of a higher degree.⁴³

After Alexandria was conquered by the Arabs in 641 the great tradition of the practise of philosophy and the making of commentaries was broken.⁴⁴ However, after a certain time (beginning in the ninth century) the Arabs started to assimilate the legacy of Greek culture and started the third phase of the writing of commentaries. The interruption was not total because outside of Alexandria and Athens the Syrians were very active. The Syrians translated into Syriac Greek works including Aristotle's and already existing commentaries. Since Arabic became the language of science after the fall of Christianity and the domination of Islam in the lands of Asia, the Syrian scholars began to translate from Syriac into Arabic the Greek works that had been translated into Syriac.⁴⁵ It is uncertain whether

⁴² O. ZWIERLEIN, "Interpretation' in Antike und Mittelalter", 89.

⁴³ PRAECHTER, *Review*, 41, note. 32.

⁴⁴ BLUMENTHAL, *Aristote*, 51.

⁴⁵ GILSON, *History*, 181. The culture of translations into Arabic was very high. They thought that a translator should possess high qualifications. According to Al-Jahiz, a

the Syrians wrote their own commentaries, but we do know that a Syrian monk named John of Euphemia was the author of the *Theology of Aristotle*, a work that was regarded for a long time as an original work of the Stagyrite.⁴⁶ The work had great influence in the Middle Ages. Its intention was not so much to reconcile Plato with Aristotle as primarily to reconcile Plotinus with Aristotle, and to do so in such a way that excerpts from the *Enneades* (Books IV–VI) could be made to agree with the name and authority of Aristotle. This was an example of a very advanced manipulation in which it would be hard to suspect the author of ignorance, since these were not paraphrases but entire books drawn from another famous philosopher. This manipulation had far reaching effects for the later history of philosophy because in how philosophy was understood, it gave the clear advantage to neo-Platonism as it looked to all the authorities (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus).

This is also readily apparent in the attitude of the Arab commentators. While they did not take a position against the views of Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus, in reality they had to favour Platonism and neo-Platonism.⁴⁷ The winner was neo-Platonism, both with regard to the interpretation of Aristotle's views and as to how philosophy as a whole was understood. Neo-Platonism most of all set the tone for how the Arabs received Greek philosophy, especially since the influence of two strong neo-Platonic schools met in Baghdad, the one school being from Alexandria (which the Arabs had conquered in 642), and the other from Harran.

In the first half of the tenth century, Abu Bisr Matta ibn Yunus, a Nestorian, and a translator and commentator of Aristotle's works, was the central figure in Baghdad in philosophy. The commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisia, Themistius, and Olympiodorus were translated.⁴⁸ The *Categories* continued to play the primary role as an introduction to philosophy, together with Porphyry's *Isagoge*. This even more strongly determined how

translator should possess the same knowledge as the author whose works he is translating. He should be perfectly fluent in the language of the work that is being translated, and of his native language. He will also keep in mind that there is no perfect correspondence between the two languages; the languages may have a bad influence on each other with regard to vocabulary or syntax. The translation of religious and theological texts involves special difficulties. Manuscripts should be provided in undamaged conditions. Cf. *Abdurrhâmân Badawi, La transmission de la philosophie grecque au monde arabe, 21-25.*

⁴⁶ GILSON, *History*, 637.

⁴⁷ GILSON, *Historia*, [History], 182.

⁴⁸ D'ANCONA COSTA, *Commenting*, 233.

philosophy was understood in neo-Platonism. Basically the *Isagoge* preceded the *Categories* in the program of education. They used Syrian and Arabic translations of commentators such as Porphyry, Stephen of Alexandria, Allinus, John Philoponus, Ammonius, Themistius, Theophrastus, and Simplicius. They also read from Aristotle's *Hermeneutics* together with the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisia, John Philoponus, Iamblichus, and Porphyry, Galen, Themistius, and the epitomes of Stephen.⁴⁹ Many of these authors were known to the Arabs in the context of their commentaries on the *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, *On the Heavens*, *On Generation and Corruption*, *Meteorology*, *On the Soul*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

As for the *Metaphysics*, they looked to the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisia and Themistius, but only on Book L. They also used the commentary of Syrianus on Book B. We know that the Arabs were familiar with these commentaries, although not all had been translated into Arabic.⁵⁰

One way or another, the context of the assimilation of Aristotle's philosophy by the Arabs was definitely neo-Platonic, and this defined the framework in which philosophy was practised.⁵¹ The fourth phase was that of Christian Latin commentaries.⁵² The Latin commentaries, whether on poetical works, in particular Virgil's, or philosophical works, such as Cicero's or Lucretius, had been appearing in Rome. The Christian commentaries, including commentaries on philosophical works, began with Boethius. Boethius planned to translate all the works of Aristotle and Plato into Latin and to provide the works with commentary.⁵³ The untimely and tragic death of Boethius cut the plan short, but he did translate almost all the works in logic and the *Physics*, to which he added commentaries on entire works or certain passages.⁵⁴ Boethius' translations were made with a spirit of great piety fostered by his high level of literary culture.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 235-236.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 242.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 227-229.

⁵² As for Byzantium, we may speak of a certain interest in Aristotle in the eleventh and twelfth century due to Psellos, when there was the "Byzantine Renaissance". Michael of Ephesus, Eustratius, and Sophonias wrote commentaries. Cf. PRAECHTER, *Review*, 36-37.

⁵³ S. EBBESEN, "Boethius as an Aristotelian Commentator", 348-349.

⁵⁴ SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 19.

⁵⁵ "The translations of the basic texts are extremely faithful to the originals which are rendered word by word and morpheme by morpheme with a supreme contempt for normal Latin sentence structure. The choice of this procedure was very deliberate. Boethius

However, Boethius did not take the first Greek commentators as his example, but was strongly influenced by neo-Platonism. Through neo-Platonism he joined Plato with Aristotle, and paganism with Christianity. In his second commentary on the *Hermeneutics* (79, 9– 80, 1) he admitted that he wanted to show the harmony between the views of Plato and Aristotle.⁵⁶ As a result on account of his pioneering work in translating philosophical texts into Latin, the neo-Platonist way of understanding philosophy reached Christianity in philosophical, theological, and terminological sense.⁵⁷ This brand of neo-Platonism resting on the authority of Boethius began to seem like an integral part of Christianity, a view to which many philosophers and theologians easily succumbed. However, Boethius' translations were not the only way whereby neo-Platonism permeated western Christianity.

Shortly after the death of Boethius the Western Roman Empire fell apart, resulting in an interruption in the continuity of classical culture, including philosophy, for some centuries. The first renaissance was due to Charlemagne, while the reactivation of philosophy, albeit philosophy strictly connected with theology, began among Irish monks who had migrated to France. John Scotus Eriugena was pre-eminent among them.⁵⁸ He translated from Greek to Latin the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio*, and some of Maximus Confessor's commentaries. Eriugena for his own part wrote a commentary St. John's Gospel and on Pseudo-Dionysius' *Celestial Hierarchy*.⁵⁹ Because of the authors who were translated and commented upon, Eriugena was also influenced by neo-Platonism, which had begun to permeate Christianity through theological works and at the same time gave a certain hue to the framework of the accepted philosophy.

A real renaissance occurred in the twelfth century when there was a great project to translate Greek works into Latin, both from Greek and

was a consummate master of Latin prose, but he wanted his readers to see the real thing.⁵⁷ EBBESEN, *Boethius*, 375.

⁵⁶ SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ We may only note that somewhat earlier Fredegisus, a student and successor of Alcuin, had become interested in philosophy. He wrote two philosophical opuscula in which he followed Plato in holding the eternal existence of matter and the pre-existence of souls. GILSON, *History*, 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 609.

from Arabic. The first Greek translator was Jacob of Venice (1130) who went to Byzantium and translated some of Aristotle's works. Gerard of Cremona translated these works from Arabic in the mid-twelfth century (*Posterior Analytics* with the commentary by Themistius, *De naturali auditu*, *De coelo et mundo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Meteorology*). He also translated the works of Alexander of Aphrodisia and the very influential *Book of Causes* (which is a selection of excerpts from the *Elements of theology* of Proclus). Toledo was the main centre for the translation of Greek and Arabic works into Latin. In Toledo they began to translate Aristotle from the original Greek texts, and Henry Aristippus made enormous contributions to this.⁶⁰ However, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* was constantly absent from the translations, although they translated the *Metaphysics* of Avicenna and Algazel, and many other philosophical works, including some of Plato's dialogues (the most important of which was the *Timaeus*), of the neo-Platonists, Pseudo-Dionysius, Arab authors, and Jewish authors.⁶¹

In the next century the process of translation accelerated so that the most important legacy of Greek and Arab philosophy became available in the Latin language.⁶² William of Moerbeke who lived in the thirteenth century was the author of the greatest undertaking. He translated Aristotle's complete works, including his *Metaphysics*.⁶³

To sum up, the Latin translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* appeared relatively late, so late in fact that it allowed others works, including commentaries on the *Metaphysics* to perpetuate an utterly non-Aristotelian and neo-Platonic image of philosophy.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 235.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 235-236.

⁶² SORABJI, *The Ancient*, 22. It is worth mentioning here that in Byzantium commentaries appeared in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. There was no problem of translation, because in Byzantium Greek was the official language. The works of Eustratius and Michael of Ephesus were among the most important commentaries. The commentators were under the tutelage of Princess Anna Comnena. She took part in seminars they directed. However, Byzantine culture did not have great esteem for philosophy, hence it did not shine for any special achievements in that field.

⁶³ Moerbeke also translated neo-Platonist commentaries from Greek into Latin. David C. LINDBERG, *The Beginnings of Western Science*, 204-206.

III. Latin Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics

What was the intention of the Christian authors who commented on Aristotle? Did they approach commentary with any sort of philosophical or theological assumptions? Were they trying to "christianize" Aristotle as the neo-Platonists had tried to platonize Aristotle (and so first to make Aristotle agree with Plato, then to subordinate him to Plotinus)? The Christians indeed seemed to christianize the Stagyrte as the neo-Platonists had platonized him. However, such an analogy would be oversimplified. The positions of neo-Platonism and of Christianity with respect to philosophy were different.

In the case of neo-Platonism, we should consider two aspects. First, the neo-Platonists treated philosophy as a unity comprising the views of many authors, including Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus, with the latter two treated as more important. The neo-Platonization of Aristotle in this case consisted in mitigating or neutralizing the Stagyrte's objections to Plato's teaching (especially Plato's theory of ideas), and then in joining both philosophies to the system of Plotinus. From the systemic point of view, the philosophy of Plotinus was a more cohesive whole than the philosophies of his predecessors, both with respect to the status of the supreme principle, and the conception of how the entire cosmos came into being. There were elements in Plato that were only in a germinal stage. We don't know what the Idea of the Good was (it is hard to see it as a personal being or a deity), and the description of how the world began in the *Timaeus* was half mythological. Aristotle's First Mover only beheld himself. The First mover was accessible in cognition only to the first sphere of stars (which were intelligences), but the world did not come from them. In this case, the process of connecting Plato's philosophy with Aristotle's consisted in filling the shortcomings of either one with the other. The most important advance was that God who was intellect (Aristotle) knew ideas (Plato). However, Plotinus' vision, as we know, went further. God who knows ideas was a somehow composite being (God, ideas), and yet what is supreme must be simple. That which is supreme is above intellect and above ideas. It is above being. From it comes the intellect that knows ideas together with being. But how does it come about? Here Plotinus introduced an unusual solution, but one that united the cosmos as a whole: the way of emanation. The One emanates from itself the first hypostasis, which is Intellect together with ideas. The first hyposta-

sis, and not the One, then brings forth the next hypostasis. Thus in succession emanation reaches the final term, which is matter. Afterward a return begins, an upward way to the One.

Plotinus' vision was coherent intellectually, and even stunning, if we may so describe it. Over the centuries and in many civilizations it gained followers. Various philosophical currents could be adapted to it, just as the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics were joined to it. Moreover, the vision was open to various religions which could find in it an intellectual underpinning (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Finally, it made it possible for philosophy to return to mythology, which took place among such well known neo-Platonists as Proclus or Iamblichus, if only for the reason that emanationism was inspired by solar religions, with the radiation so typical of phenomena associated with the Sun, and this probably suggested to Plotinus the idea of the emanation-based conception of being.⁶⁴ Moreover, neo-Platonism was adopted by religions that otherwise fought each other, although Plotinus for his own part was definitely hostile to Christianity. Neo-Platonism was elastic and universal, both in the philosophical and religious dimension.

Just as the neo-Platonization of Aristotle was fostered by two inauthentic works published under his name (*Book of Cause*, and *Theology of Aristotle*), so the neo-Platonization of Christianity was fostered by the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius, who was identified with the disciple of St. Paul (present at the death of the Most Holy Virgin Mary), with Dionysius from the *Acts of the Apostles* (17, 34), or with the founder of the Abbey of St. Denis near Paris. In each case it was a great Christian author whose views, especially when expressed in such works as *On the Divine Names* that were later often commented upon, had a definitely neo-Platonist character. Today we know that the works of this enigmatic character were written in the fifth century and were based on the philosophy of Plotinus and Porphyry, which was the source of the neo-Platonism of the works, and they were not neo-Platonic because the author had been an inspired Christian.⁶⁵

Yet despite the strong pressure of neo-Platonism, not all Christian thinkers yielded to its intellectual charm. There was a return to the source texts of Aristotle, in which there was no mention of emanation, and the divine intellect did not know being as being, but only itself.

⁶⁴ For more on this topic, see my *Science in Culture*, part II, ch. 2.

⁶⁵ GILSON, *History*, 597.

On the other hand, Aristotle could not be expected to present Christian philosophy or theory because he had lived and wrote four centuries before Christ. Aristotle was a pagan and did not know Revelation, the Sacred Scriptures. He never came into contact with the Jews, was born before Christ came into the world and was not obliged to form a philosophy or theology to meet the needs of Christianity. So also there was no need to christianize Aristotle by force. It was possible to consider from an intellectual distance the problem of how much his views were in harmony with Revelation and how much they were not, and how useful they could be for cultivating theology, since people were clearly enough aware that philosophy is necessary to theology.

Meanwhile neo-Platonism approached philosophy in an almost religious manner, if not to say an ideological manner, and it platonized or plotinusized the Stagyrite's thought by force. The Christians had no need for such a procedure because Aristotle's authority was not necessary to add credibility to the faith. However, it could be necessary to understand the faith within certain bounds. The controversy over these bounds or limits was not only about the role of philosophy, but also about the autonomy of philosophy in human cognition and in theological cognition. It was not necessarily "in the interest" of Christianity to platonize or christianize Aristotle, since as a pagan Aristotle had a right to be ignorant of revelation. What was important was the purely intellectual (truth-oriented) level in the framework of natural human cognition lacking the special grace necessary for a property interpretation of revealed contents.

When the neo-Platonists made a religion of philosophy, then the philosophical authorities such as Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus had to stand in agreement. This was the occasion for a special "stretching" of their views. This was not necessary in the case of Christianity because these philosophers were not authorities in matters of faith, and their philosophy as a human thing not only could be in disagreement with revealed contents, but could quite simply err in the sphere accessible to human cognition. Hence in many commentaries by Christian authors on the writings of Aristotle showed the conflicting views of various philosophies, and Aristotle's positions did not need to be taken as the last word. In this way faith and Revelation could help in restoring a neutral and philosophical approach to the views of Aristotle. The intellectual skill that philosophy provides needed to be developed, skill in reading the truth about reality, for this in turn

would help in understanding the contents of Revelation. These contents, although they had a supernatural source, were communicated in human language based on analogies (most often metaphors) to the world around us. For this reason they needed to understand the real world in order to conceive of the supernatural in some measure. For just this reason philosophy was necessary, which in a true interprets reality and does not supplant religion or theology.⁶⁶

This is seen, for example, in the Latin commentaries on the *Metaphysics*, which focus primarily on explaining Aristotle's views, along with controversies and difficulties in interpretation. The personal views of the commentators could be stated in other works, whether strictly philosophical works, or theological works containing elements of philosophy. In those works also there would be wider discussions on particular topics. However, a commentary on the *Metaphysics* would be more didactic than interpretative. It would be a sort of introduction to metaphysics for beginners.⁶⁷

Thomas Aquinas commented on twelve of Aristotle's works, including the *Metaphysics*, a commentary that contains relatively few of Thomas' own views. The commentator's may be crucial for metaphysics as a science, but as not precisely for Aristotle's metaphysics. In the case of medieval commentaries a new approach to the texts of the Stagyrte appeared. On the one hand, it was a matter of explaining what Aristotle had in mind, all the more since it was not the easiest text. On the other hand, metaphysics was treated as the science that seeks wisdom, and so seeks truth. Hence the main purpose was not so much to provide a faithful interpretation as it was to understand reality. Moreover, over the centuries there were new currents and philosophical positions that could no longer be crammed into the conception of one philosophy, as happened at the end period of ancient philosophy. Thomas also had revealed theology (*sacra theologia*), which meant that its supernatural status had to be preserved. It was different from the mythology of the Greeks, which in turn had influenced the cosmological views in Aristotle's metaphysics.

For the sake of illustration we may show here some instances where Thomas intervened with his own position while commenting on Aristotle

⁶⁶ Cf. MIECZYŚLAW Z. KRĄPIEC, *Filozofia w teologii. Czytając encyklikę "Fides et ratio"*.

⁶⁷ J. ISAAC, "Saint Thomas interprète des oeuvres d'Aristote", 356. Here I am following J. Owens, "Aquinas as Aristotelian Commentator", 215.

as identified by J. Owens. He treated act and potency, in the same as unity and plurality, as a consequence of being (*ea quae consequuntur ens*), while Aristotle in the same context had not mentioned act and potency.⁶⁸ Thomas emphasized more strongly than did Aristotle separateness (*separatum*), that is, the transcendence of substances such as the divine substance and immaterial substances (angels). In the context of the controversy between Averroes and Avicenna, Aquinas wanted to stress, following Avicenna, that *ens commune* is the object of metaphysics, the divided substances are its cause.⁶⁹

Moreover, in St. Thomas the metaphysical conception of God is different from that in Aristotle, and it flows from another conception of being. For this reason when Thomas accepted the term *teologia* for metaphysics, he was emphasizing in his commentary that it was permissible only when it apprehended God not in Himself, but as a cause.⁷⁰ To summarize, in order to emphasize the transcendence of God (and the angels) Thomas said that they are separate not only as are the objects of mathematics (conceptually), but also in existence (*et non solum secundum rationem, sicut mathematica, sed etiam secundum esse, sicut Deus et intelligentiae*).⁷¹ For Thomas as a theologian this was a crucial problem in establishing the limits of human cognition with respect to what is known by Revelation. However, he also accented an aspect of being that did not appear in Aristotle-existence (*esse*). Insofar as neither God nor the angels could exist in matter, then *ens commune*, which had been separated from them, was described as that which can exist without matter. Here in turn Thomas enters in polemics with Avicenna. The commentary on the metaphysics, esp. the introductory remarks on its object, were the occasion for this.⁷² The next important intervention concerned the object of divine cognition. Aristotle had said that God knew only himself, since nothing else was worthy of being an object of His knowledge, while St. Thomas remarked that God is the principle of all things, and He knows that things as He knows Himself (nr. 2614–2615).⁷³ This position, of course, is definitely different from Aristotle's.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 217-218.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 218.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 219.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 222.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 225.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 227.

Thomas' commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, without ceasing to be a commentary, also looked at metaphysics as such as a science that seeks the truth (and so with no regard to who was the author of metaphysics). However, this is kept to a minimum, since metaphysical questions and polemics are raised with greater freedom in other works such as *Contra Gentiles* and *De Veritate*. Hence we must agree with J. Owens that from the quantitative point of view, Thomas' commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is primarily a commentary.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ "With the foregoing data from the survey of the commentary on the *Metaphysics*, one in the position to formulate the questions about the kind of procedure the work involves. Quantitatively, the overwhelming percentage of the book confines itself to explanation of the Aristotelian text just as the text stands, with recourse to other Aristotelian treatises and to other writers for elucidation as the occasion demands. [...] Even with the strictly philosophical explanation, however, at times the judgements are made and the decisions are given on the strength of the Thomistic metaphysics of existence. These occasions are few comparatively, but they are concerned with philosophically important issues". OWENS, *Aquinas*, 228.

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