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PRISCIAN OF LYDIA AND PSEUDO-SIMPLICIUS ON THE SOUL

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Little is known of the life of Priscian of Lydia (born late fifth century CE), who is not to be confused with his older namesake Priscian of Caesarea (fl. c. 500 CE), the famous Latin grammarian. Priscian of Lydia is one of the six philosophers listed by Agathias *Histories* 2.30–1 to have accompanied Damascius on his journey to the Sassanian king Chosroes I (reign 531–79 CE). Agathias suggests they came of their own accord guided by the false impression that Chosroes' reign resembled a Platonic state; he does not connect their journey to the famous closure of the Athenian school in 529. The philosophers soon discovered that Chosroes was far from the ideal king and resolved to leave quickly. Because Chosroes was well disposed towards them Priscian and the others were able to leave Chosroes under the safeguard of a treaty the Persian king concluded with Rome in 532, which comprised a clause that 'these men should be allowed to return to their own country and live there henceforth in safety, without being forced to adopt opinions which they did not hold, or to change their own faith'.¹ Whether they settled in Athens, or perhaps in Carrhae (Harran), where over a century later a centre of Platonic philosophy was flourishing, is still a matter of controversy.²

SOLUTIONES AD CHOSROEM

Priscian is credited with a work apparently written for King Chosroes, and known to us in Latin translation³ under the title *Solutiones eorum de quibus dubitavit Chosroes Persarum rex*. The text does not give us any indication about the circumstances in which it originated. The topics discussed derive from

¹ Trans. Cameron 1969–70: 169.

² See Tardieu 1986, Hadot 1987a, Athanassiadi 1993, Thiel 1999; *contra* Luna 2001, Lane Fox 2005, Lameer 1997.

³ Esposito 1918, Cappuyns 1933, and Wilmar 1937 ascribe the translation to a sixth- or seventh-century scholar; d'Alverny 1977 defends the attribution to John Scot Eriugena or his circle first proposed by Quicherat 1853; Gersh 1986: 769–70 n. 9 prefers to leave the question open.

the tradition of natural history and meteorology, for which Pliny's *Quaestiones naturales* and Porphyry's *Summikka Zetemata*⁴ are the most famous examples. The *problēmata* tradition as exemplified in the *Quaestiones* of Alexander and his school seems less directly relevant, although the questions on the soul and the animal kingdom have themes in common. The work starts with a brief introduction on the order and brevity of the text, and provides an impressive list of sources. Priscian names Plato's *Timaeus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus* and *Politeia*; Aristotle's *Physics*, *De caelo*, *De generatione et corruptione*, *Meteorologica*, *De somno et insomniis*, along with *De philosophia* and the probably spurious *De mundo*; various works or passages from Theophrastus; Hippocrates *De aere aquis et locis*; Strabo *Geographia*; Albinus and Gaius on Plato; Geminus on Posidonius' *De meteora*; Ptolemaeus *Geographia* and *Astronomica*; Marcianus *Periegesis*; Arrian *Meteora*; Didymus, Dorotheus, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius on Aristotle; Theodotus from the *Collectio Ammonii scholarum*; Porphyry *Commixtae Quaestiones*; Iamblichus' *De anima*;⁵ Plotinus *Enneads*; and finally Proclus' *Tres sermones* on the immortality of the soul. If Priscian did not have a library at his disposal, he may have used earlier collections of natural questions, handbooks or doxographies which may account for this plethora of sources. Further research on the rather neglected *Solutiones* and its provenance will have to show whether it testifies, as the title suggests, to Chosroes' acquaintance with Greek scholarship, or mainly to the range of learning available to Priscian. It seems unlikely that we should credit Chosroes with this set of traditional questions, even though Priscian may have seized on the occasion of his visit to Chosroes to compose the work.

The *Solutiones* discusses the following issues:

(1) What is the nature of the human soul? Is it an essence that exists independently from the body, incorporeal, capable of reversion and self-knowledge, and immortal; or is it accident of the body? Is the soul in any way affected by its relation to the body? If not, what is its mode of unification with the body? The answers comply with the view that the self-subsistent soul verges towards the body in *compassio* and *similitudo* without giving up anything of its incorruptible essence and activity (42.25–52.22).⁶

⁴ Dörrie 1959 uses Priscian along with Nemesius of Emesa *De natura hominis* as sources for three Porphyrian questions on the nature of the soul, otherwise lost.

⁵ Finamore and Dillon 2002 use the *Metaphrasis*, but not the *Solutiones*, in the reconstruction of Iamblichus' text.

⁶ *Per hoc igitur anima corpori miscetur salvans sui essentiam et operationem incorruptibilem* (52.21–22, cf. 53.5–7). Gersh 1986: 770–5 has shown that Priscian depends heavily on Proclus in this chapter. For the significance of this statement for the discussion about the authorship of Pseudo-Simplicius *De anima* see below pp. 760–1.

(2) What is the nature of sleep? What happens to the soul when the body is asleep? Is it partly active, partly inactive, and hence of a double nature? Is sleep an affection of the soul, the body, or the composite of both? Is sleep associated with hotness or coldness? All of Priscian's answers closely follow Aristotle (52.25–58.29).

(3) How does vision relate to dreams and prophecy in dreams? During sleep the soul is undisturbed by the body and therefore more receptive of divine activity, in the same way as the cleansed soul is more receptive of intelligibles. Here the Aristotelian discussion lends support to late Platonic psychology (59.3–63.21).

(4) How does the solar year cause the four seasons and different climatic zones? This chapter is indebted to Geminus, Ptolemy and Strabo (63.24–68.11).

(5) How can doctors successfully apply drugs with contrary effects in different patients? Here it is Hippocrates who lends support to late-Platonic physics: like any intelligence the doctor's art provides him with a keen eye to provide to the ever-fleeting matter of the body whatever it needs in the circumstances (68.14–69.16).

(6) How do lunar phases and lunar activity affect tidal variations throughout the waters of the late-ancient world, but especially in the Red Sea? Answers explicitly rely on Strabo, Posidonius and Aristotle (69.19–76.20).

(7) How can air receive weight and fire humidity as in the mutual transformations of the elements? The discussion of weight and lightness, the four elements and their essential qualities and movements largely depends on Aristotle *De caelo* with additional material from Theophrastus (77.3–88.7).

(8) Given that individuals of the same species differ according to the places and climatic conditions they live in, do they differ in form or not? Such variations belong to the irrational and corporeal aspects of living beings, caused by differences in e.g., Hippocratic airs, waters and places, or food, and do not affect their immutable and imperishable form. This is not unlike the adoption of various laws and customs which one learns from one's parents. However, in many instances the natural form limits the range of possible habitats (88.10–93.27).

(9) Why do snakes have venom which is fatal to other living beings (in some seasons and in some regions more so than in others)? In general, why did the creator of this universe (94.9 *huius universitatis constitutor*) compose the world of both opposing and harmonious powers? Such conception of order is surely too much for a partial intellect to fathom (94.3–98.23).

(10) Where does the wind (*spiritus*) and its motions come from? How is it that the magnitude of its power is manifest everywhere, whereas its body, provenance and destination are not apparent? In his discussion Priscian relies on Aristotle *Meteor.* with its theory of exhalations (*inflationes*), and on Theophrastus

De ventis. Then Priscian suddenly breaks off his discussion of even more kinds of wind, and the work ends rather abruptly (98.26–104.6).

Apart from being a display of traditional ancient learning, this survey may serve to show that Priscian seems to have designed at least part of his *Solutiones* as a confirmation of Platonic metaphysics from commonplace physics: throughout unity prevails over plurality, and forms, souls and intellects are carefully kept aloof from the material or corporeal conditions over which they preside.

The *Solutiones* enjoyed some attention in later times. It has been mentioned as a source for the pseudo-Aristotelian *Mirabiles auscultationes*. The work was well known to the medieval encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais (c. 1190–1264)⁷ and was still copied in the fifteenth century.

PRISCIAN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WORK

An undisputed work on psychology by Priscian that has come down to us is his so-called *Metaphrasis on Theophrastus*. It is a Platonic adaptation of Theophrastus' *De anima*, which constituted books 4–5 of a larger work called *Physics*, otherwise lost (cf. Them. *In DA* 108.11–12). The transmitted text is incomplete, and covers the equivalent of most of the discussion of sense-perception, and partial accounts of imagination and thought. Priscian provides a thoroughly late-Platonic interpretation of the Peripatetic material, prompted by the critical questions of Theophrastus. It is noteworthy that in this context Theophrastus' questions to Aristotle's text serve to introduce Platonic solutions, in much the same way as the commentary tradition on the *Categories* was fuelled by the critical remarks of Lucius and Nicostratus, which prompted Porphyry and others to develop Aristotle's philosophy in new directions (cf. Simpl. *In Cat.* 1.18–2.2).

The work received ample attention in later times, and was translated by Ficino and Dalechampius as part of the revival of interest in Theophrastus.

The doctrinal content of the *Metaphrasis* is best discussed in connection with a commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* which all manuscripts attribute to Simplicius. Francesco Piccolomini (1582–1651)⁸ already noted stylistic differences between this commentary and other Aristotelian commentaries by Simplicius. On the basis of his observations he denied Simplicius' authorship. In our times this suggestion was taken up and developed by Bossier and Steel,⁹ noting differences in vocabulary, style, and doctrinal content between these works. In

⁷ Albeit under the name of Priscian of Caesarea.

⁸ *Commentarii in Libros Aristotelis De caelo, ortu et interitu; adiuncta lucidissima expositione, in tres libros eiusdem de anima*, Mainz 1608, 1001–2.

⁹ Bossier and Steel 1972, Steel 1978 *passim*, Steel 1997: 105–40. Their view has been defended by Perkams 2005, cf. Luna 2001: 504 n. 54.

addition, they claimed Priscian of Lydia to be its author. An important argument is a reference to an epitome of Theophrastus *On the Soul* which they regard as a self-reference to Priscian's *Metaphrasis of Theophrastus* (*In DA* 136.25–9).

This two-fold proposal has been received in various ways. I. Hadot has repeatedly disputed the correctness and/or conclusiveness of the arguments against Simplician authorship, as well as the arguments supporting the attribution of the commentary to Priscian.¹⁰ H. Blumenthal and others were prepared to reconsider Simplician authorship, but did not find the evidence adduced in favour of Priscian decisive.¹¹ Since Priscian and Simplicius shared the same milieu around Damascius for some time it was proposed that the commentary is a *reportatio* by a pupil in contact with this circle. There is general agreement, however, that the work is to be situated in this milieu. The discussion continues as the study of the works of Simplicius and Priscian yield new arguments and further insights into the complex development and character of the ancient commentary tradition. Until the question is resolved (if ever), it seems wise to respect the unanimous attribution of the manuscripts, and to consider the commentary as a work by Simplicius.

This discussion has been important for the understanding of both Priscian and the *DA* commentary in that it has made us more aware of the intricacies of the commentary tradition. To give an example: Iamblichus taught that the human soul completely descends from the intelligible realm. This descent causes a change in both the soul's activities and its essence. Since the soul holds a middle position between the intelligible and material realms as a continuously self-developing process, Iamblichus can affirm that the soul remains in itself and is identical to itself as a whole, *and* simultaneously proceeds outside of itself and changes as a whole (*Simpl. In DA* 6.14; 90.4, 20; 95.1, 24). Proclus shrank back from essential change, and ruled that only the soul's activities are affected by the descent.¹² As Steel has shown, the *DA* commentary is full of references to Iamblichus' doctrine.¹³ In the *Solutiones* Priscian seems to state

¹⁰ Hadot 1978: 193–202, Hadot 1987, Hadot 2002; her argument has been adopted by, e.g., Thiel 1999 and Athanassiadi 1993. She has stressed Bossier and Steel did not take Simplicius' commentary on Epictetus' *Handbook* sufficiently into account. Her argument is weakened insofar as she relies on two highly controversial claims, namely that Priscian and Simplicius continued to work at Carrhae (see above), and that Byzantine manuscripts confirm that Simplicius wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which is mentioned at *In DA* 28.17–22 and 217.23, cf. Hadot 1987a; see Rashed 2000 for an opposing view.

¹¹ Blumenthal 1982, Blumenthal 1996: 65–71, Blumenthal 1997: 213–14, Blumenthal 2000: 1–7, Lautner and Urmson 1995: 2–10, Finamore and Dillon 2002: 18–24, Perkams 2003: 84–89.

¹² Cf. Procl. *In Tim.* 3.335.24–5, 338.6–7, 340.14–15. This doctrine is reflected in the structure of *El.* 191: 'every participated soul has an eternal substance but a temporal activity'.

¹³ Steel 1978, *passim*. He did not find it anywhere in Simplicius; Hadot has argued that Simplicius accepted it in the commentary on Epictetus, see Hadot 1978: 201–2, Hadot 1982, and in full detail in Hadot 1996: 70–102; her interpretation is rejected by Steel 1997: 118 as showing merely Damascius' influence.

half of Iamblichus' position when he claims that the union with the body leaves both the soul's essence and activity intact (cf. Prisc. *Solut.* 52.21–2; 53.5–7). This statement suffices as a rejection of Peripatetic and Stoic alternatives to the soul-body relationship which would be harmed by expounding the soul's change. In the *Metaphrasis* he takes Iamblichus as his point of reference, and we find him writing for a philosophically more sophisticated audience. He accepts a wholesale change in Iamblichaeian terms, and uses it to accommodate Aristotle *De an.* 3.4, 429a24 '[intellect] is nothing in actuality before it thinks', and 429b5ff. on the separation of intellect (cf. Prisc. *Metaphr.* 29.26–30.15; 31.15–16; 32.13–14). Even so, elsewhere in the *Metaphrasis* Priscian explains that although the separate human intellect has descended from the unity of separate intelligibles, it has at the same not entirely gone out from the intellect in actuality to which it remains joined. This allows even the separate intellect to be 'affected', namely by receiving its perfections from prior intelligibles. If so, Aristotle's mention of the blank writing tablet makes sense after all, and so do Theophrastus' queries about the nature of the 'affection' of intellect. The separate intellect is 'potential' in the sense of allowing for precisely this type of perfection (cf. Prisc. *Metaphr.* 26.29–28.4).

With a different point of reference and a different audience come a different technical vocabulary and style, even more so when Priscian takes on Theophrastean or Iamblichaeian turns of phrase. Such changes of context may occur between works or even between sections in the same work. Hence the usual criteria of vocabulary, style and doctrine are very difficult to apply; only an exhaustive grammatical and stylistic investigation including philosophically neutral terms may provide some ground for an argument. At the same time the discussion has shown the close proximity between the *Metaphrasis* and the *De anima* commentary, which can be explained from common sources (Theophrastus, Iamblichus or Damascius), from the proximity in place and time (roughly, the same decade of the sixth century CE), and the personal acquaintance between the main philosophers at work at the time. Again, within such parameters it is difficult to find conclusive evidence for any position.

The *DA* commentary is famous for a peculiar interpretation of Aristotle's two types of actuality of the soul, to wit in terms of the possession, or in terms of the exercise of knowledge. Aristotle's definition of the soul as the actualization (*entelecheia*) of an organic natural body (*De an.* 2.1, 412a26–7) contains the remark that 'in the order of becoming' capacity comes before the exercise, although the actuality is logically prior. But is there any becoming in the case of the immortal (part of the) soul? And can the Peripatetic doctrine that the soul is the *entelecheia* of the body, and hence inseparable from it, as Alexander of Aphrodisias chose to emphasize (cf. Alex. *DA* 17.9–15), be reconciled with the

Platonic conviction that the soul does not in any way mix with the body?¹⁴ In commentaries on *De caelo* and *Physics*, Simplicius paraphrases Aristotle in such a way that only the irrational parts of the soul are inseparable as the *entelecheia* of the body, whereas the rational part is truly separable (cf. *Simpl. In Cael.* 279.16–20, 380.16–19; *In Phys.* 268.6–269.4 against Alexander). The *De anima* commentary, however, accepts the claim that the soul is the *entelecheia* of the body, and develops it in a different way. In its role of formal i.e., *defining* cause (*kath' ho*) the soul actualizes the potentialities of the body, which is constituted by nature, by making it a *living* body. Next, the soul utilizes the living body thus constituted and fulfils its potentialities in order to be able to operate in the sensible world. This is presented as a different aspect of the formal causation of soul by which it actualizes the potentiality for motion in the living body (*huph' ho*).¹⁵ On this view, the two aspects of the soul's formal actualization of the body are present on all levels of the soul, and concern all its parts or functions, including thought.¹⁶ If, for instance, strong impressions harm the sense organ, this is to be regarded as the organ losing its 'defining life'.¹⁷ However, there is something stronger than any of these soul powers in us, which exists in us without *entelecheia*. This is the Peripatetic *nous poiêtikos* of *De an.* 3.5, which is truly separate (cf. *Simpl. In DA* 109.2–11). Despite the convergences between the texts noted above, the *Metaphrasis* does not seem to contain any of the terminology of the double *entelecheia*.

Finally, the topic of consciousness has drawn the attention of recent scholarship. The starting-point for any discussion of consciousness is Aristotle's query, at *De an.* 3.2, 425b12–13, how we perceive that we see and hear. For Aristotle this awareness is given with the activity of each sense, which is perceived as such by the common sense. This view is reflected in a report of Theophrastus in Priscian's *Metaphrasis* (cf. *Metaphr.* 21.32–22.1, with reference to Arist. *Somm.* 2, 455a13ff.). Priscian and Simplicius seem to agree in following Damascius. Damascius had distinguished between awareness of thought, especially recollection of intelligibles, and awareness of sense-perception. In the case of thought, he granted the rational soul a special faculty of attention (*prosektikon*); for sense-perception he used *con-science* (*suneidos*) to designate the awareness

¹⁴ Hence Plot. *Enn.* 4.7.8.5 argues against the *entelecheia* interpretation of the soul.

¹⁵ Cf. *Simpl. In De an.* 4.12–34 which combines Arist. *Part. an.* 1.7, 641a14–20; *Phys.* 8.4, 254b30–3, 255a12–18; *De an.* 1.3, 407b24–5 (itself a reminiscence of Plato, *Alc.* 129c–130c). One of the prepositional phrases, which Steel considered non-Simplician, Hadot also found in *Simpl. In Phys.* 283.6, see Hadot 1978: 196–8, also for a different assessment of the passages referred to here.

¹⁶ Cf. *Simpl. In De an.* 71.24–30, 86.1–7 (vegetative soul); 111.24–5, 125.12–36, 128.22–9, 167.22–32 (sense-perception); 205.32–9, 77.5–8, 57.23 (imagination and discursive thought).

¹⁷ *Simpl. In De an.* 168.8–15, commenting on Arist. *De an.* 2.12, 424a28 'the *logos* (sc. of the organ) is resolved'.

of perception in the irrational soul (cf. Dam. *In Phaedo* 1.271–3 Westerink; *In Phaedo* 2.19–22 Westerink). This distinction between faculties was for the most part respected in both the *DA* commentary (cf. *In DA* 187.27–188.14; 289.40–290.6; cf. *In Epict.* 40.23–8, 43.15–17 Hadot) and Priscian's *Metaphrasis*. Priscian seems to add to Damascius' *sunesis* of the senses the self-awareness which comes with their unity in the common sense, called *sunaisthesis* (cf. *Metaphr.* 22.1–23 with 5.10–19). According to Hadot, the *DA* commentary differs from Priscian by attributing to the higher ontological level of common sense a purer awareness than the senses achieve, as a prerogative of human reason, which sets humans apart from animals which lack reason and have only the awareness of the senses.¹⁸ No such distinction is envisaged in the *Metaphrasis*. Pseudo-Philoponus *In DA* seems to have chosen a special position in this debate. Perhaps on the basis of a late reception of Plotinus (cf. *Enn.* 4.4 [28] 8.9–16 and 5.1 [10] 12.5ff.), he seems to have disregarded Damascius' distinction and attributed the task of perceiving perception to the rational soul's *prosektikon*, to the detriment of the common sense (cf. Ps.-Philop. *In DA* 464.18–465.12).

In the first edition of this *Cambridge History*, Hilary Armstrong mentioned Priscian and the *DA* commentary attributed to Simplicius only once, in passing.¹⁹ Since then the *De anima* commentary tradition has been discovered by scholars. The above survey of existing scholarship on the work of Priscian and (Pseudo?) Simplicius shows both that the situation has dramatically improved and that much more research is needed before we fully understand this difficult but fascinating part of the history of philosophy.

¹⁸ Hadot 1997: 71. ¹⁹ Pp. 317 and 489 respectively.