[Book review of:] Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes Volume 1. Western Scholarly Networks and Debates, edited by D. Calma
Martijn, M

published in
International Journal of the Platonic Tradition
2021

DOI (link to publisher)
10.1163/18725473-12341508

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license
Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:
vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

Download date: 18. Sep. 2023

One of the landslides in the historiography of ancient and medieval philosophy is the recognition of the import and role of the medieval reception and reworking of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*. The volume here reviewed, the first of a triad of essay collections on this topic, will no doubt contribute greatly to that recognition. It is dedicated to the late Marc Geoffroy, co-organizer of the three conferences at which most contributions were first presented. This is a book for specialists, and a scholarly *Fundgrube*, as shown by the fact that Latin and occasionally Greek quotations are not translated, the high density of information, and the appendices, more on which below.

The second volume, which appeared last year, has as its subtitle “Translations and Acculturations”, and contains contributions on the Byzantine, Arabic, Hebrew, and Renaissance traditions. The third volume, with the subtitle “On Causes and the Noetic Triad”, is scheduled to appear this December, and focuses on two key concepts, causality and the noetic triad, in late ancient thought, and their reception in Byzantine and Latin authors. As we learn from the editor Dragos Calma in his introduction, this first volume, subtitled “Networks and Debates”, focuses on the most extensive tradition, that of the Latin Middle Ages, and on a broad variety of philological, philosophical and theological aspects of the networks of exegesis and transmission of both the *Liber de Causis* and its ancient ancestor, Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* (*ET*).

I will briefly return to Calma’s introduction below. The volume falls into two parts: the first part contains ten chapters covering a broad range of topics on the *Liber de Causis* (*LDC*), and the second part contains six chapters on the reception of Proclus’ thought in Byzantine and Latin medieval philosophy. Of the sixteen chapters, ten are written in French, and six in English.

Poirel starts off the volume with a conceptual analysis of the very nature of an exegetical tradition. He proposes a notion of the (exegetical) corpus of texts as a rich texture, of the commentary as intentional and conscious interpretation and actualization, and of *l’oeuvre*, in the fluid and ambiguous sense of a (perceived) work and of a collection of works commented upon. In the exegetical corpus, he distinguishes three stages, the age of initiators, the age of continuators, and the age of conservators—the first working as “acrobats without nets” (20), the last representing the ending of the commentary tradition or the integration of the commented text in the philosophical toolbox of the time. As Poirel also indicates, often exegetical traditions are not as straightforward as this triad suggests, but as a conceptual distinction it is a useful tool, as
shown by his application of the ‘age of conservators’ to Chrysostomus Javelli’s 16th c. commentary on the LDC.

Caiazzo presents a very detailed analysis of the first development of the LDC from Gerard of Cremona’s Latin translation of the Arabic Book of the Pure Good, in the late 12th century, and its creative uses in France (Alain de Lille and Dominique Gundisalvi) and England (esp. Alexander Neckham) shortly after. As she shows, in these early stages the interest in LDC concerned matters of psychology (and especially the immortality of the soul), rather than metaphysics.

Retucci illustrates how, despite the fact that in general the Franciscans’ use of the LDC is rather limited, Thomas of York instead does rely on it in his Sapientiale (1259–59/60). York’s use is also interesting because he does not ascribe the work to Aristotle, and distinguishes the propositions (anonymous author) from the commentary, which he ascribes to Alfarabi.

Miolo more broadly discusses the presence of LDC and ET in Merton College, Oxford and Peterhouse, Cambridge. The picture emerging is vivid: both texts were included in personal and college libraries. Combined with the relative (compared to Paris) absence of commentaries, this suggests that both were read and taught, but not as required parts of the curriculum.

Weijers gives a catalogue and discussion of the 13th c. Parisian glosses on the LDC. Her conclusion is a negative one, which nonetheless sparks the imagination: despite the large influence of the LDC, the ‘maîtres ès arts’ were apparently not very interested in it, if the addition of marginal comments can be taken as a sign of interest in a text. Glosses are often copied from Aquinas, and sometimes altogether absent.

Krause and Anzulewicz describe the history of Albert the Great’s extensive use of the LDC, showing how it changed from what they call ‘decontextualized transformations’ of ideas in his pre-Parisian work, to ‘anchored transformation’ in Summa de creaturis and the Sentences (183), where the latter can be subdivided again into a more content driven use and a more methodology inspired use.

Malgieri discusses a fascinating detail in both Henry of Ghent and pseudo-Henry: that the fourth proposition of the LDC (“Prima rerum creatarum est esse et non est ante ipsum creatum aliud”) is sometimes called ‘the first.’ This strange labeling, Malgieri proposes, reflects an evaluative judgment of the place the proposition has in debates on transcendentals. She argues for identifying ps-Henry as Henry in light of this idiosyncracy.

Counet presents another important negative contribution, namely the relatively marginal role of the LDC in Duns Scotus, and even some critical responses to the work. Scotus seems to be ‘cherry-picking’, as he uses only a
couple of its propositions, or rather metaphysical principles, and either as a source of arguments supporting what he considers the erroneous theories of his ‘adversaries’, or instead as a source of arguments supporting his own criticism of such theories. The principles he uses concern the reduction of all plurality to unity, and the superiority of the causal power of the first cause. Interestingly, especially his quote of the principle concerning unity seems to rely on Proclus, rather than LDC, although Scotus refers it to the latter.

Calma’s chapter starts with a careful discussion of the LDC and Proclus’ metaphysics in Siger of Brabant’s criticism of Aquinas’ theory of transubstantiation. He then moves on to the echoes of Siger’s treatment in four post-1270 commentaries on the LDC, specifically concerning production without intermediaries, as crucial element in the debate on occasionalism.

As part of a larger project disclosing 15th century quodlibets from Prague and Erfurt, Székely discusses the general differences between those and the Parisian quodlibets. The most interesting feature of the central European quodlibets is perhaps that they are not spontaneous, but rather very well prepared.

Part 2 starts with Zavattero’s paper on the influence of Eustratius’ reading of Proclus’ theory of universals. She convincingly argues that, after Moerbeke’s translation of Eustratius’ In EN, that influence is found in the context of ethical discussions of Albert and others, but that it later also seeps through in Berthold of Moosburg’s commentary on Proclus’ own ET.

Guldentops offers a careful analysis of Bate’s use of Proclus’ Elements of Theology, specifically on the topics of participation and the soul, and his avoidance of using Proclus on theological issues. He shows that Proclus is far more present than the LDC in Bate, who often uses him to platonize his main philosophical inspiration, Aristotle.

Imbach uses the massive 14th century commentary on the Elements of Theology of Berthold of Moosburg, to find support for Boulnois’ criticism of Heidegger’s definition of metaphysics as ontotheology: in Berthold commentary, and especially in his methodological introduction, we can clearly see that Medieval metaphysics is far broader than Heidegger’s definition allows for. Specifically, Imbach argues, Berthold distinguishes (Aristotelian) metaphysics as proper science of being from (Proclian) metaphysics as proper science of principles.

King’s paper also looks at Berthold of Moosburg’s work, but from a different angle. He builds upon Ludueña’s work demonstrating the influence of Eriugena on Berthold’s thought, and focuses on two specific aspects: the different Eriugenian authorities behind Berthold’s work, and the place of Eriugenian thought in Berthold’s Christianizing of the vehicle of the soul. Especially
interesting for students of Proclus’ work is probably Berthold’s theory of the twofold descent of the soul: a descent into being and a descent into becoming.

Kaluza presents evidence of a pervasive presence of Proclus’ thought in 15th c. Gilles Charlier. After presenting Charlier’s place in the 15th century, Kaluza focuses on different aspects of the notion of divine goodness in his first quaestio collativa and Commentary on the Sentences, and shows how Charlier sides with Albert, often using arguments from Proclus (as well as other sources, among which LDC).

Finally, with Bartocci we move into a rather different, but also interesting area: Renaissance readings of Proclus’ Commentary on the Parmenides. Bartocci looks at Nicolas of Cusa, Pico, Ficino and Contarini. The most interesting interpretation is perhaps that of Contarini, who presents a reading of the Parmenides that is rather critical of the Platonists: he assumes that the Parmenides is not a logical or theological dialogue, that instead Plato is playing around, while at the same time presenting some deep metaphysical questions.

The book contains a number of invaluable resources: besides the indices of manuscripts, of ancient and medieval authors (which includes the Renaissance authors), and of modern authors, we find a large number of useful tables and/or lovely appendices, providing for example a schematic overview of the LDC’s reception ‘genealogy’, references to the mentions and uses of the Liber de Causis and Elements of Theology in the authors discussed, and more importantly, first editions of (parts of) the manuscripts consulted (e.g. of Henry of Ghent(?), Javelli, and Simon of Tišnov).

Before concluding, I have two nits to pick: Brill publishes expensive books, which leads one to expect impeccable editing. Calma did an impressive job, but the volume does unfortunately contain some typos. More importantly: most of the illustrations, consisting of photos of manuscript pages, are too small to be legible. That said, however, I cannot but conclude that this is an important volume. As general contributions of this volume to the historiography of medieval philosophy, let me refer to the five points mentioned by Calma in his introduction: the LDC and the ET belonged to the centre of medieval university discussions both earlier and later than commonly held; we get a more refined picture of the differences between local and global exegetical traditions; the volume offers first scholarly editions of parts of the largely unpublished and uncharted corpus of commentaries on LDC and ET; the common pictures of both the watershed in the attribution of the LDC—to Aristotle until Aquinas recognized it for what it really was—and of the role of LDC in Christianizing Aristotle, are adjusted; and further avenues of research clearly open up in the wake of this volume. And I would add that the volume
paints a vivid picture of the intellectual landscape of the 11–15th centuries, especially of the shifts in balance between Proclus and LDC in the 13th c. and after, when sometimes the influential LDC makes place for the ET, or instead both remain important sources, and of the wealth of exegetical uses of these sources, sometimes immediately and connected with active interactions (e.g. direct quotations, commenting, teaching, and glossing) and sometimes more indirectly, as treasure house of philosophical and theological arguments. I look forward to reading the other volumes, which should shed further light on the deep entrenchment of Proclian arguments and concepts in the intellectual language of the Middle Ages.

Marije Martijn
VU Amsterdam
m.martijn@vu.nl