

## ARISTOTELIAN ETHICS IN BYZANTIUM\*

## Abstract

This paper argues that research in the primary sources must precede the investigation of Byzantine philosophy. Two points are to be considered, on the one hand, the gathering of texts, and, on the other hand, the study of texts in relation to their sources. Thus the external evidence as well as the internal evidence of texts should be examined. In this double regard, the manuscripts containing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are considered. Their authors are Michael of Ephesos, Eustratios of Nicaea, "Anonymus", Heliodoros of Prussa, Georgios Pachymeres, Michael Psellos, John Italos, Nikephoros Blemmydes, George Gemistos Plethon.

*Keywords:* Byzantine philosophy, Aristotle's Byzantine Commentators, Michael of Ephesos, Eustratios of Nicaea, "Anonymus", Heliodoros of Prussa, Georgios Pachymeres, Michael Psellos, John Italos, Nikephoros Blemmydes, George Gemistos Plethon.

This paper is primarily technical in nature. It will argue that when one begins to examine a less investigated area of the field of Byzantine Philosophy, research in the primary sources must still precede every interpretative act and critical approach. Here, research in the primary sources means:

- a. *The gathering of texts.* This is not always an easy task, although the publication in recent decades of new critical editions of texts by Byzantine philosophers has made it more feasible (Benakis, 1991). Older editions of Byzantine philosophers, some of which have been reprinted, also remain useful, some unexpectedly so.<sup>1</sup>

- b. *The study of texts in relation to their sources.* Namely, the identification of sources – distinguishing between instances of mere borrowing and instances of a more critical incorporation of such sources into Byzantine texts – the identification of original elements, of direct or indirect influences, of tendencies in the use of source materials, etc. Here, the ever-expanding secondary bibliography needs to be consulted with caution, since some studies contain errors of interpretation which may be more or less obvious.<sup>2</sup>

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the treatise *On Virtue* can be found.

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<sup>1</sup> One such is the collection of texts by Nikephoros Blemmydes edited by Dorotheos Voulismas and published in Leipzig in 1784, where

<sup>2</sup> There is, for example, the case of the article by Giocarinis, 1964, where Eustratios seems to be a defender of the Platonic theory of ideas, when in fact the opposite is true, as is evident from the texts cited. It is also inexcusable for A. Lloyd to speak of nominalism in Eustratios

This paper will, therefore, necessarily consider both the external evidence and, as far as possible, the internal evidence regarding our texts. While its nature and methods remain to be justified, this paper will have served its purpose and satisfied its writer's aims if it stimulates an interest among new scholars in conducting research and writing about this highly productive area of Greek philosophy, one that has been somewhat neglected. I am certain that they will find such research richly rewarding, whether they engage in 'technical' research work or a more broadly conceived examination of the most significant problems of Byzantine philosophy.

As a starting point, one 'external' fact of particular importance to our topic is the large number of manuscripts containing the *Nicomachean Ethics* which have been preserved from the Byzantine period. There are approximately 120 manuscripts, to which one might add 45 manuscripts of the *Major Ethics* and 25 of the *Eudemian Ethics*. In order to put these numbers into perspective I cite the corresponding numbers of manuscripts of other key works by Aristotle. There are 160 manuscripts of the *Categories* from the Byzantine period, 140 of the *De interpretatione*, 120 for the *Prior Analytics*, 120 for the *Physics*, 60 for the *Metaphysics*, 60 for the *De caelo*, and 40 for the *Poetics*. I have discussed the *Politics* elsewhere (Benakis, 1982<sup>b</sup>). It is, therefore, essential to consider these numbers when considering the knowledge and interest of the Byzantines in the moral- political ideas of Aristotle.<sup>3</sup>

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in the article cited in note 10, when he himself concludes that Eustratios' method may be defined as a form of conceptualism!

<sup>3</sup> See the testimony of Adamantius Korais, who, in his *Hellenic Library* published Aristotle's

Of even greater importance is an examination of the 'internal' elements that constitute this interest, so that one might then understand the relation between our Byzantine authors and the political thinking of the state philosophers of antiquity. The same point can apply to the *Ethics*, where the identification of elements of Aristotle's 'moral' teaching in the works of Byzantine philosophers might be considered in relation to the presence of moral problems and issues within both academic teaching and within a Byzantine *Lebensphilosophie* that was firmly embedded in Christian dogma.

There are numerous Byzantine commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Among the earliest of these was that of Michael of Ephesus (eleventh-twelfth century), who can be found in the circle of philosophers associated with Anna Komnene and who wrote commentaries on book V and on books IX and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>4</sup> A first edition (by contemporary criteria) of these commentaries appeared in Venice in 1541.<sup>5</sup> We must not overlook the fact that Michael of Ephesus was an experienced commentator, with exten-

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*Politics* in 1821 as the first volume of the collection. This was followed in 1822 by his publication of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He wrote the following in his prologue, claiming that *Ethics* is a part of *Politics*: "both are one and the same science, of which *Ethics* can be considered the theoretical part, and *Politics* the practical."

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ephesius, in: *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (=CAG) Vols. XX and XXII, 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Aristotelis Stagiritae Moralia Nichomachia cum Eustratii, Aspasii, Michaelis Ephesii nonnullorum aliorum Graecorum explanationibus*, ed. B. B. Felicianus, Venetiis 1541.

sive commentaries on Aristotle's work: including books V–VIII of the *Metaphysics*, the *Parva Naturalia*, the *Sophistici Elenchi*, the *De partibus* and the *De motu animalium*, which, fortunately, were included in the publishing endeavor of the Prussian Academy.<sup>6</sup> The commentaries by Michael of Ephesus on *Physics*, *De caelo* and the *Rhetoric* have not been preserved. For details of his knowledge and treatment of the *Politics* see my article mentioned above. In addition, the recent secondary literature on Michael is reliable.

In the same period, Eustratios of Nicaea (c. 1050 – c. 1120) composed commentaries on books I and VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> Eustratios's commentaries were also included in the 1541 Venetian edition. Parts of them were also, surprisingly, included in E. Parigiter's 1745 London edition entitled *Aristotle of Morals to Nichomachus* I. For the importance and impact of Eustratios' commentaries on Aristotle's work in the West one should consult a significant series of articles by Mercken, Sorabji, Lloyd, Trizio, and Benakis (see Mercken, 1990b; Sorabji, 1990b; Loyd, 1987; Trizio, 2006; Benakis, 1978-1979). According to Sorabji, the esteemed scholar of the whole tradition of Greek commentaries on Aristotle, Eustratios of Nicaea introduced Platonic, Christian and anti-Arabic elements into his texts, whereas Michael of Ephesus can be seen to have mainly followed the existing commentaries by Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Neoplatonic school of Alexandria. Also of significance for any assessment of Eustratios is the study by Lloyd, which argues that

Eustratios' Aristotelian commentaries were the most interesting of any of those produced by a Byzantine philosopher, as the subject of his discussion was not limited to the philosopher's style or definitions, but rather addressed the philosopher's views and his teachings. Indeed, Eustratios appears to have been a competent philosopher in the tradition of Michael Psellos and John Italos, whose student he was. One finds within his work a combination of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism. This is evident in his resolution of the problem of general concepts (the *universalia*), in which resolution Lloyd also finds that Eustratios has resolved the problem of conceptual realism (conceptualism) that can be found in the Alexandrian commentators, i.e. those of the school of Ammonius and thence of all Byzantine scholars (see Benakis, 1978-1979).

In his study, Lloyd does not treat Eustratios' work on the *Ethics* systematically. There is undoubtedly fertile ground for future research here. One strand that remains noteworthy is Eustratios' influence on Western Christian philosophy. Here, it should be noted that the first Western commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that by Albertus Magnus (Cologne 1250-1252), appeared approximately 130 years later than that by Eustratios. Eustratios was already known in the West by that time, first through James of Venice (approx. 1130) and primarily through the translation and use of his commentaries, particularly on *Logic*, by Robert Grosseteste in England. The latter called Eustratios 'Commentator Graecus' or simply 'Commentator' (compared to the plain 'Philosophus' reserved for Aristotle). On the subject of Eustratios' influence in the West, we have the reliable studies by H.P.E Mercken on Robert Grosseteste's Latin trans-

<sup>6</sup> *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (=CAG) Vols. II,3; XIV; XXII,1; XXII,2; XIV,3.

<sup>7</sup> *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (=CAG) XX.

lations of the Greek commentaries (see Mercken, 1973). Mercken is also the author of a paper, “Ethics as a Science in Albert the Great and Eustratios of Nicaea,” (Mercken, 1990<sup>a</sup>) where the key issue, as to whether a *scientia moralis* rather than a *practica moralis* was possible in the Middle Ages, is examined on the basis of the first Latin commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that of Albertus Magnus. Albertus only wrote on books I and VI. It is in these books that Aristotle deals with issues of method in the *Ethics* and it is where he discusses the intellectual virtues, of which science or *scientia* is one. Eustratios, of course, had commented on these same books and his authority is invoked by Albertus, who refers to him as *Commentator Graecus*. Clearly, an area of enquiry that then arises from this relationship and that deserves greater attention would be an investigation of the extent to which Albertus Magnus’s views on the scientific understanding of ethics were influenced by the writings of his Byzantine predecessor.

Another Byzantine commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the “Anonymous” commentary on books II to V.<sup>8</sup> This text is a compilation of mainly Alexandrian commentaries made by a Byzantine scholar, probably of the thirteenth century. There is a further anonymous Byzantine commentary on book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> No reliable research has yet been carried out on either of these commentaries.

There are also a number of paraphrases that deserve our attention. In 1889 Heylbut published a Late Byzantine paraphrase of the

<sup>8</sup> In *Ethica Nicomachea* 2-5. CAG XX pp. 122-255.

<sup>9</sup> In *Ethica Nicomachea* 8. CAG XX pp. 407-460.

whole of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>10</sup> This paraphrase is attributed to Heliodoros of Proussa in this Berlin edition. It has also been attributed to Andronikos Kallistos (1400-1486) and to Andronikos Rhodios (!) in a first edition that was published in Cambridge in 1679, and has also been attributed to John Filagrius from Crete (s. Wartelle for cod. Napol. Gr. 335). The most likely case is that this paraphrase was the work of Constantine Paleokappas, a 14<sup>th</sup> century monastic scholar.<sup>11</sup> This work, which was a useful teaching tool for the Byzantines, was widely known.

George Pachymeres’ (1242-1310) paraphrase of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was written as part of his extensive work, the *Philosophia*, which sought to provide “commentaries” on the whole Aristotelian Corpus in 12 books and 238 chapters. These had only been published in a Latin translation: Venetiis 1545, Lugduni 1547, Parisiis 1547, 1555, and Basileae 1560. A first critical edition of book ten has now been published within the series “Corpus Philosophorum Medii Aevi - Commentaria in Aristotelem Byzantina” of the Academy of Athens (see Pachymeres, 2002). This great Byzantine historian and philosopher’s method was to select significant passages from Aristotle’s work and then to provide them with explanations in simpler, more comprehensible terms, using language and ideas drawn from the ancient commentators.

Lastly, there is a commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* that is attributed to the emperor John Kantakouzenos, or, under his monastic name, Ioasaph (after 1355), which remains unpublished. This work, however, is

<sup>10</sup> Heliodoros of Proussa, *Paraphrasis*. CAG XIX, 2, pp. 1-246.

<sup>11</sup> This paraphrase is known from Hatch, 1879.

identical to the commentary by Pseudo-Olympiodoros (a paraphrase of the commentary by the Alexandrian Olympiodoros). It is believed that Kantakouzenos had probably commissioned a copy of this text and that this was later mistakenly attributed to him (see Nicol, 1968).

It is not difficult to locate both brief and lengthy references, explicit or otherwise, to Aristotle, the *Ethics*, or commentators on the *Ethics* in other texts by Byzantine philosophers. For example, we can readily find references in the recent editions of Michael Psellos's writings: in chapter seven of the *Philosophica Minora I* and in chapters twelve and thirty-two of the *Philosophica Minora II*.<sup>12</sup> In paragraphs 66-81 of Psellos's *De omnifana doctrina* there are numerous references to book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as well as to the Pseudo-Aristotelean *On Virtue and Vice* and the *Ethica Eudemia*.<sup>13</sup> These instances suggest that Aspasius's commentaries on Aristotle's writings on morality are a common source for Psellos as well as other Byzantines.

A further example is offered by the chapter "On moral virtue and other matters," which is found in the collection *Queries and Solutions* written by the eleventh-century philosopher John Italos.<sup>14</sup> Here, Italos suggests that the ancient philosophers, primarily Aristotle, have given the most exact definition of what might be termed ethical virtue. Italos includes seven passages from books I, II, V and VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in his chapter. The presence of Aspasius's commentary can

also be detected throughout.

The philosopher Nikephoros Blemmydes of Nicaea (1197-1272) also wrote a "Discourse on Virtue."<sup>15</sup> This, like his better-known works, *Epitome on Logic* and *Epitome on Physics*, follows closely upon the structure and language of Aristotle's own works and thus cleaves to the model provided by the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The *Miscellanea philosophica et historica* by Theodore Metochites (1270-1337) is accompanied by a brief table of the names of ancient writers.<sup>16</sup> This contains approximately forty references to Aristotle, without, however, always referencing the specific work by Aristotle cited in the text. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, like the *Metaphysics*, *Politics* and *Rhetoric*, does not appear to have been mentioned by Metochites. A fuller investigation of the *Miscellanea* and his other writings may show that Metochites did, in fact, know and use these works (see Hult, 2002).

Lastly, in this purely descriptive overview, I would like to mention the pre-eminently moral dissertation by George Gemistos Plethon (1360-1452), his "On Virtue". A new critical edition of this text contains an enlightening introduction, from which it is clear that Plethon's main sources are Plato, Plutarch, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *On Virtue and Vice*.<sup>17</sup> Plethon's method itself shows the

<sup>12</sup> *Philosophica minora I* 22-28 and *Philosophica minora II* 23-39, 109-111. See my critical review for these two valuable volumes from the Teubneriana: Benakis, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> *Omnifaria doctrina* 43-49, chapters 66-81.

<sup>14</sup> *Questiones quodlibetales* 87-95, chapter 63.

<sup>15</sup> Νικηφόρου μοναστοῦ καὶ πρεσβυτέρου τοῦ Βλεμμύδου *Ἐπιτομὴ Λογικῆς* [Nikêphorou monastou kai presbyterou tou Blemmydou *Epitomê Logikês*, in Greek] (editio Lipsiae: 1784).

<sup>16</sup> *Miscellanea*, ed. Th. Kessling, Lipsiae, 1821, 838.

<sup>17</sup> *Traite des vertus*. Editio princeps by Br. Tambrun-Krasker, Athens (Philosophi Byzantini 3) 1987.



influence of Aristotle, and the Mystran philosopher's knowledge of the Aristotelian corpus is in any case well-known from his entire body of work (for *Nicomachean Ethics*, see, for example, *De differentiis*, V,1-2 and elsewhere.) Here, however, we can draw a significant distinction: while in Aristotle moral philosophy is "phenomenological", and for that reason largely descriptive, morality in Plethon is the object of science in the strict meaning of the term, and thus is wholly based on the first principles of *Metaphysics*. Therefore, Plethon's method can be seen to be Platonic, for it is to a great extent analytical. But in the case of the last great Byzantine philosopher, too, research will need to address other important aspects of his moral teachings, such as his basic belief in the dual nature of man, in absolute providence, and in the moral-political character of free will, and other such areas.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This article is published with the editorial elaboration of Georgia Apostolopoulou.

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