

Ancient
Commentators
on Aristotle

GENERAL EDITOR: RICHARD SORABJI

SYRIANUS:
On Aristotle Metaphysics
13–14

Translated by
John Dillon & Dominic O'Meara

B L O O M S B U R Y



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Conventions

[...] Square brackets enclose words or phrases that have been added to the translation or the lemmata for purposes of clarity, as well as those portions of the lemmata which are not quoted by Syrianus.

<...> Angle brackets enclose conjectures relating to the Greek text, i.e. additions to the transmitted text deriving from parallel sources and editorial conjecture, and transposition of words or phrases. Accompanying notes provide further details.

(...) Round brackets, besides being used for ordinary parentheses, contain transliterated Greek words and Bekker pages references to the Aristotelian text.

{...} Braces contain words which the editors regard as added later to the text that Syrianus wrote.

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Introduction

1. Life and works

Of the life of Syrianus few details are preserved to us.¹ We can deduce from a surviving fragment of Damascius' *Philosophical History* (§56 Athanasiasiadi) that he was from Alexandria,² and since he died in or around 437 at an advanced age, we may assume a birth-date of approximately 375 AD. Son of a certain Philoxenus, he, no doubt after studies in rhetoric and the other 'preliminary sciences' in Alexandria (of which he exhibits many traces throughout his surviving works), made his way to Athens, and became a pupil, and ultimately the designated successor, of the distinguished Neoplatonist philosopher Plutarchus, son of Nestorius, head of the Athenian Academy in the early decades of the fifth century. We may imagine him making this move at some time around the turn of the century – even as his most famous pupil, Proclus, did some thirty years later.

Damascius, in a possibly idealising vein, describes him (§47 Athanasiasiadi) as 'tall and good-looking, and possessing a health and strength which lacked no general or particular natural qualities'. We acquire a sort of snap-shot of him (though very much at second-hand) in late middle age from Marinus (*VP* 11-12), when Proclus arrives in Athens in 431. Proclus finds his way to Syrianus' house, which is also the seat of the school, situated just to the south of the Acropolis, not far from the Theatre of Dionysus. Syrianus is at home, in the company of his senior assistant Lachares, and they receive the young Proclus, initially with some caution, as one could not be certain, in those troublous times for Hellenes, where a new visitor's religious allegiances might lie. They were greatly reassured, however, to observe Proclus, as he left them, saluting the Moon, and agreed that he should be accepted into the school.

At this stage, Syrianus had already virtually assumed control of the school, as Plutarchus was by now very old and doing very little teaching (though he did take on the young Proclus, to read Aristotle's *De Anima*, and the *Phaedo*), but within a year or so Plutarchus died, and Syrianus formally succeeded him. He himself, however, only lasted in the post another five years or so, dying not long after 437 AD. At any rate, Proclus, who is reported by Marinus (*VP* 13) to have produced his *Timaeus Commentary* 'in his twenty-eighth year', that is to say, 438 or 440 (depending

on whether we assume him to have been born in 410 or 412), speaks of his Master in the past tense (while also freely acknowledging how much his exegesis owes to his instruction). We also have the story in Marinus, no doubt relayed from Proclus himself, that Syrianus, in his old age, offered Proclus and his fellow-student Domninus a choice of a seminar on the Chaldaean Oracles or the Orphic Poems, but, while the two of them were still haggling over this agonising choice, the old man died.

It is remarkable, in view of the relative shortness of the period of their association, how deeply Syrianus influenced Proclus, both spiritually and intellectually.³ Syrianus was buried in a tomb on the slopes of Lycabettus, and, nearly fifty years later, in 485, when Proclus came to die, he asked to be buried in the same tomb (Marinus, *VP* 36).

Was Syrianus married? Marinus gives no indication that he was. Damascius speaks of his pupil Hermeias marrying his relative (*prosêkousa genei tôi megalôi Syrianôi*) Aedesia, which proves nothing; but the Syrianus who composes the *Commentary on Hermogenes* dedicates it to his 'son' Alexander.⁴ This has caused some confusion, leading certain scholars to doubt whether the *Commentary on Hermogenes* is by 'our' Syrianus at all, but there is no serious linguistic or doctrinal reason to doubt this (though there is in truth very little philosophy evident in the work), so that we must either accept that Syrianus was indeed married, or resolve to take the 'sonship' of Alexander in some metaphorical sense – a favourite pupil, perhaps.

This brings us, at any rate, to the question of Syrianus' *oeuvre*. Unlike his famous pupil Proclus, Syrianus was not a prolific writer. He is credited in the *Suda* (s.v.) with a number of works:

A Commentary on Homer, 7 books

On the Republic of Plato, 4 books

On the Theology of Orpheus, 2 books

On the Gods in Homer

Concordance of Orpheus, Pythagoras and Plato

On the [*Chaldaean*] *Oracles*, 10 books

– and certain other works of commentary (*kai alla tina exêgêtika*).

Under this latter rubric we may perhaps include, besides the present work, and a short commentary on Aristotle's *Categories* attested to by Simplicius,⁵ commentaries at least on Plato's *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*, since there is ample evidence of exegesis by him of both those dialogues in the commentaries of Proclus,⁶ but there remains the disquieting possibility that Syrianus' views, as reported by Proclus, were merely orally delivered.⁷ However, we do have evidence of a work of commentary on the *Republic*, which certainly formed the basis for Proclus' views on that dialogue,⁸ so we may probably credit him with written commentaries on these important dialogues also.⁹ It must also be said, however, that works with the same titles as those listed here are also credited by the *Suda* to

Proclus, in the entry under his name, so there remains the possibility that all of the above works were at least edited by Proclus, perhaps only from Syrianus' lectures.

At all events, it is evident to one who makes the effort to translate him that composition did not come easily to Syrianus. His writing is a good deal more crabbed than that of Proclus, and it is on occasion not easy to grasp his meaning – and this despite his (presumed) familiarity with rhetorical theory. However, a certain liveliness is injected into the text by the degree of polemic against Aristotle in which he indulges, at least in his commentary on these two books, a topic to which section 4 of this Introduction is devoted – though this too can pose its own problems of translation, as one strives to strike the right note.

As regards the *Metaphysics* itself, it seems that, while Syrianus doubtless commented orally on the whole work in the course of taking his students through the works of Aristotle, he confined his written comments to certain books in which he had a particular interest, or rather, perhaps, which he deemed to require special attention from a Platonist. His particular reasons for choosing Books 3 and 4 may most properly be treated in the introduction to the translation of those books, but in the case of Books 13 and 14, the stimulus is plainly their strongly polemical nature. Aristotle is, after all, in these books, striking at the core of the Pythagorean-Platonic world-view, and Syrianus, admiring though he is of Aristotle's intellectual power,¹⁰ and committed as he is in general to the doctrine of the 'harmony of Plato and Aristotle',¹¹ is not going to let him get away with this.¹²

2. Syrianus' philosophy of mathematics

Syrianus' treatment of mathematical number is different from his treatment of divine number.¹³ It has been very well described by Ian Mueller, 'Syrianus and the concept of mathematical number', in G. Bechtle, D. O'Meara, eds, *La philosophie des mathématiques de l'antiquité tardive*, Fribourg 1998, 71-83, and the following summary supplied by Richard Sorabji is based on Mueller's article.

Euclid had defined mathematical number as a multiplicity of units, *Elements* 7, def. 2. But Syrianus makes these units or 'monads' merely the *matter* or *substratum* of number, on which we have to impose, as form, the triad, pentad, heptad, ennead, etc., that we carry in our souls (133,4-5; 10-12). Only so can the units compose three, five, seven or nine; they are not number otherwise (152,8-10). There is only one triad, just as we nowadays think there is only one number, three. In an ennead, there are not three triads, but the one triad taken three times (134,5-20; 135,16-136,17). Addition, division and multiplication apply to the substratum only (133,4-15; 134,5-20). This answers some of the problems that Socrates expressed about addition and division in *Phaedo* 96E6-97B3, before resorting to the theory of Forms as a solution. Because the triad, etc., are

innate in our souls, arithmetical knowledge is innate in all humans (133,14).

The triad or pentad in our soul is itself a unit which owes its unity to having proceeded in its turn from a still higher unit outside the soul in the intelligible world (132,8-14; 135,16-32).

The five units or 'monads' that compose five owe their multiplicity to what Plato called the indefinite dyad (132, 8-14). This indefinite dyad is also in our souls (132,14-20), and it is a kind of matter, dianoetic matter, or the matter of thought (133,14-15).

Within our souls there are two kinds of mathematical number (88,7-9; 123,19-20). One is the monadic number made up of units, the other is the substantial *logos*, the essential concept of a given number, which corresponds to form.

Different again from his treatment of mathematical number is Syrianus' treatment of geometrical entities.¹⁴ He rejects the view of Aristotle that geometrical figures are *abstracted* (*aphairein*) by us from perceptible figures in the sensible world. In order to think of a triangle, Aristotle supposes that we make use of triangular objects in the sensible world, but ignore their irrelevant features. Geometrical triangles exist potentially within physical objects, but they need to be actualised by our mental processes. In order to think of a geometrical figure, we have to ignore far more than we do when thinking of a physical object: we have to ignore the matter in which it is embedded, e.g. *Physics* 2.2, *Metaphysics* 6.1. The figures come to be located within the sensible forms which in perception we receive, *On the Soul* 3.8, 432a4-6, and we think them within images (*phantasmata*), *On the Soul* 3.7, 431b2, so that the intellect is the place of these forms, in which it receives them, *On the Soul* 3.4, 429a15; a27. The most graphic description of the thought process is given in *On Memory* 1, 449b30-450a7. We put before the mind's eye an image of a triangle, but ignore its irrelevant features.

Syrianus has a telling line of objection. He complains that we do not see every shape, and that the shapes we do see are not precise. If it be replied that they could be made precise, he has a very good answer: how would we know what changes to make except through our possessing precise concepts recollected in Plato's way from before birth (95,29-38)? The same question could have been asked about how we know which features of our image to ignore. Syrianus' questions were to be repeated by Proclus, Simplicius and Olympiodorus. Aristotle could have cited as the source of precision the active intellect which in *On the Soul* 3.5 he regards as thinking uninterruptedly within us. But this would be to abandon his whole enterprise of giving an empirical account of how we can think of geometrical figures.

Syrianus' rival view is that our minds contain geometrical *logoi* or concepts gained from pre-natal acquaintance with the Platonic Forms. It is these Platonic concepts that can, because of their accuracy, be used to correct the inexact Aristotelian form residing in sensibles, 95,29-36. These

concepts are not spread out, but we project (*proballesthai*) them onto the screen of the imagination where they come to be spread out. The geometrical figures in the imagination are said, 91,29-34, to be parasitic (*parhuphistasthai*) on the concepts in the mind. Geometers, in his view, would prefer to study the undivided concepts themselves, but through weakness are forced to study the concepts in their images. This theory too is repeated by Proclus and ps.-Simplicius (= Priscian?). But at *in DA* 233,12 and 277,1-6, ps.-Simplicius ascribes the theory of projection in mathematics to the Pythagoreans. So although Porphyry already uses the term 'projection', it may have been introduced into *geometry* by Iamblichus, who sought to integrate Pythagorean philosophy with Platonic. Syrianus at 186,17-19 ascribes to Plato the simpler idea that the objects of geometry reside in the imagination, but not the idea of projection.

It is fortunately not necessary for the understanding of Syrianus' philosophical position in this commentary to enter into a full exposition of the complexities of his metaphysics in its most developed form, as discernible from references in such works as Proclus' commentaries on the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*, and his *Platonic Theology*, since Syrianus does not choose to unveil any more of it here than is appropriate to the defence of the mathematical doctrines of the ancient Platonists and Pythagoreans, which he discerns as being under attack from Aristotle in these two books.¹⁵

For the purpose of dealing with Aristotle, Syrianus is content to expound a system (which he loyally fathers upon 'the Pythagoreans', or 'the men of old', but which owes its origins to much more recent sources, notably Iamblichus)¹⁶ involving a supreme One (implicitly, but not explicitly, above Being), which presides over a pair of principles, Limit (*peras*), or the Monad (*monas*), and Unlimitedness (*apeiria*), or the Indefinite Dyad (*aoristos duas*). In terms of Iamblichean metaphysics, this pair would constitute the lowest level of the henadic realm, and their product, the so-called *mikton* ('mixed entity'), or *hênômenon* ('the Unified'), can be taken as the sum-total of the henads, or archetypes of the Forms, which constitute the contents of the realm of Intellect.

Here, however, since Syrianus is primarily concerned with the nature of Number, it is the Form-numbers which are presented as the first products of the union of the Monad and Dyad. There is a significant passage at p. 112,14ff. (Kroll), where, in the process of confuting Aristotle's malevolent jibes, he expounds the Pythagorean doctrine at some length:

Now these men claimed that, after the single first principle of all things, which they were pleased to term the Good and the supra-essential One, there were two principles of everything, the Monad and the Dyad of infinite potency (*apeirodunamos*), and they apportioned these principles at each level of being in the mode proper to each. For there is an element analogous to the Good in each realm of being, and likewise entities assimilated to the primary Monad and Dyad.

Then, after some criticism of Aristotle, he continues with his exposition (112,31ff.):

We say, then, that the nature of principles is quite distinct from that of Forms, even if some connection of an homonymous nature should supervene in their regard, or rather, not in respect of them themselves (for how could anything supervene upon the most divine of beings?), but in respect of our treatment of them. For a start, the Dyad *qua* principle is the author for all things of generative power and procession and multiplicity (*plêthos*) and multiplication (*pol-laplasiasmos*), and rouses up all things and stirs them to the generation of and forethought for and care of what is secondary to them, and further fills all the divine and intellective and psychic and natural and sensible realms (*diakosmoi*) with the numbers proper to them; and it does not grant that anything whatever is ungenerated of those things which are of a nature to come into existence. The Essential Dyad, for example, confers its own form on all things, whether souls or natures or bodies; so that if the whole world is divided in two, or only the heavens, or the reason-principles of the soul, or, prior to the reason-principles, the circles (for these are the first participants to be affected by the division into two), or some particular living thing that has two eyes or hands or feet, or some other physical attribute, possesses throughout all of itself, along with its own Form, also the Dyad, we will say that this feature is present to them from no other ultimate cause than the Essential Dyad, which is on the one hand first among all the biform entities among the Forms and their cause, but is not for this reason the archetypal Dyad, by which both it and the whole of Intellect is generated. And we say the same about the Monad; for there is a distinction between the archetypal Monad which, together with the Dyad, is the cause of existence to all things, bestowing upon everything self-identity and stability and coherence and eternal life, and the Essential Monad which holds first place of honour among the Forms, by participation in which all things which have been given form enjoy unity and are held together by the principle of coherence (*hexis*) proper to them.

The Dyad, then, is responsible for all multiplicity and individuation in the universe, beginning with the succession of natural numbers, while the Monad imposes Form and individuating qualities on things.

The first product, however, of this pair of principles, as has been said, is the sequence of Form-numbers, which are in one way infinite, but in another may be consummated in the Decad, as comprising all the basic relationships and ratios between numbers, out of which all others may be constructed. We find a significant passage on this at p. 150,4ff.:

That every type of proportion (*analogia*) should be exhibited within

the Decad is obvious enough; for arithmetical proportion occurs in the natural progression of numbers, while geometrical is to be seen in 1, 2, 4, and 1, 3, 9, and the harmonic in 2, 3, 6 and 3, 4, 6. All things, then, he (sc. Aristotle) says, they attributed to the first principles, that is to say to the Monad and the Dyad, Rest and Good to the Monad, Motion and Evil to the Dyad. They could indeed give the title of first principles also to the two columns of opposites (*sustoikhiiai*) in the numbers up to ten, and very aptly so, since even among real beings some depend on the first principles alone, the single One and the pair following upon it, while others have taken on also a formal cause. Why this should be, though, is a rather long story.

The core of the Decad, in turn, is the so-called *tetraktus*, the sequence of the first four numbers, the total of which in fact makes up the Decad. The first four numbers may also be viewed as the archetypes, and generative causes, of the four geometrical elements, point, line, plane and solid, as he reminds us just below (150,27ff.). And so a universe begins to take shape.

We do not need to pursue that process any further on this occasion, since Syrianus is not here concerned with the generation of the Soul or of the physical world, but we do need to say something more about the distinctions that Syrianus would make between various levels of number, since that can be a cause of some confusion, and does involve certain difficulties of translation.

First of all we have, as has been seen, a supreme One, which may also be termed the Good, and then a pair of Monad and Dyad. These, despite Aristotle's efforts to muddy the waters, are not to be regarded as numbers at all, but rather 'principles' (*arkhai*). Their immediate products, however, are, not 'ordinary', monadic or unitary numbers, which are addible to one another (*sumblêtoi*), and composed of undifferentiated units (*monadikoi*), but rather the Form-numbers, which must be regarded rather as 'what it is to be Two, or Three, or Seven', are not addible (*asumblêtoi*), and are not composed of undifferentiated units that can be added to or subtracted from them. Such intelligible numbers, which are also Forms, are creative principles in the universe, and are themselves real essences.

It is this sort of number that attracts a good deal of Aristotle's fire in Books 13 and 14, and it is, correspondingly, Syrianus' concern to defend its existence, and indeed necessity, and to distinguish it from ordinary numbers, which he accepts as inherent in physical things, and supervenient on them – 'later-born' (*husterogeneis*), as he terms them. For Aristotle, however, these are the only meaningful type of number. In consequence, we are faced, for much of the commentary, not with any meeting of minds, but rather with a sensation of ships passing in the night, hooting at one another obscurely and menacingly through the murk. Aristotle, on his part, is not concerned to give a scholarly or fair-minded account of the Platonist position, because he regards it as inherently absurd, and worthy only of demolition by any device of satire or rhetorical distortion he can

muster. Syrianus, in response, adopts a tone of lofty condescension in face of Aristotle's inability or unwillingness to comprehend the higher reaches of Pythagorean mathematical theory, and devotes a good deal of the commentary to trying to set him right on these questions. The result is a highly anomalous Neoplatonic commentary, the nature of which we will explore somewhat further in the fourth section of this Introduction. First, however, we must deal with another troublesome question.

3. Syrianus, Alexander and ps.-Alexander

A conspicuous feature of Syrianus' commentary on Books 13 and 14 is the numerous parallels, often *verbatim*, though on occasion exhibiting a degree of summarising,¹⁷ between Syrianus and the extant commentary on Books 6-14 of the *Metaphysics* that has come down to us in the manuscripts under the name of Alexander of Aphrodisias, but which is universally agreed not to be from his hand. Over the identity of the author, and the relations between him and Syrianus, controversy has long raged, a controversy on which, unfortunately, no unassailable conclusions have been reached, but on which no editor or translator of Syrianus' work can avoid taking some note.

In particular, in recent times a lively contest has been joined on this topic between Leonardo Tarán¹⁸ and Concetta Luna,¹⁹ the former maintaining that Syrianus is dependent on ps.-Alexander, who must therefore be an author of the period between Alexander himself and Syrianus, and thus, most probably, of the fourth century AD; while Luna supports the view of many previous scholars, and most notably Karl Praechter,²⁰ that the author is none other than Michael of Ephesus, the early twelfth century Byzantine commentator and member of the intellectual circle of Anna Comnena.²¹

The question is of some importance to decide, since, as Luna herself points out (op. cit., p. 1), Syrianus makes considerable use of some source, whatever that may be, for what may be termed the non-controversial parts of his exegesis of Aristotle's text in Books 13 and 14, normally at the beginning of his comment on a given lemma. Of 3023 lines of his commentary on Book 13 in the Berlin edition, there are 247 lines in common with ps.-Alexander, while for the commentary on Book 14 the figures are 97 lines out of 1040 (one eleventh and one sixteenth of the whole respectively). In face of this phenomenon, a number of alternative solutions can be advanced:

- (1) Syrianus is dependent on ps.-Alexander.
- (2) Ps.-Alexander is dependent on Syrianus.
- (3) Both Syrianus and ps.-Alexander depend on a common source.

Tarán's claim is, as stated above, that Syrianus is dependent on ps.-Alexander. His chief argument for this is that both Syrianus and the author

commit a number of errors in the interpretation of Aristotle's text that could not be imputed to the real Alexander, and that Syrianus must be relying on ps.-Alexander rather than the other way about. To take one notable example, at p. 777,11-21 of his commentary (which corresponds to p. 154,5-13 of Syrianus' commentary), commenting on *Met.* 13, 1085a9-14, ps.-Alexander imputes to Plato the doctrine connecting the numbers 2, 3 and 4 with line, plane and solid respectively, and that according to which it is the Forms, by participation in the One, that produce the magnitudes to another, unidentified, Platonist, whereas earlier, in a comment on *Met.* 3, 1001b19-25, the real Alexander, at p. 228,10-28, has (correctly) identified the former of these doctrines with Xenocrates and the latter with Plato. This, and a few other less striking passages, lead Tarán to conclude (1) that ps.-Alexander, *without access to the genuine commentary of Alexander on Books 6-14*, composed his own commentary, which he then dishonestly attributed to Alexander; and (2) that Syrianus, coming upon this forged commentary, made use of it in place of the genuine commentary, which must not have been any longer available in his day.

In response to this, Luna (pp. 39-42) suggests that, since Alexander's attribution of the two doctrines may have been somewhat obscured by his adducing also of the evidence of the *Peri Philosophias*, and the question was not in any case of great importance to Syrianus, the latter may simply have got them round the wrong way. Luna, however, can the more easily suppose this because she has convinced herself that ps.-Alexander, whom she identifies, very plausibly, on the basis of numerous linguistic concordances,²² with Michael of Ephesus, is actually making use of Syrianus, rather than of Alexander himself. This assumption, however, though not impossible – if Syrianus is available to us (through a fourteenth-century MS), he was in principle available also to Michael – I find implausible and unnecessary.

Two arguments in favour of this theory which she adduces seem less than compelling. The first concerns the alleged utilisation by Michael of a passage of Syrianus in which the latter quotes Iamblichus, in the fifth book of his *Summary of Pythagorean Doctrines*,²³ on the subject of the void, and in particular on the question of there being a *paradeigma tou kenou* among the numbers, or indeed anywhere among real beings. This Iamblichus denies, and Syrianus' agrees with him. Michael, on the other hand, as Luna admits (pp. 5-6), while using the expression, asserts that there is such a paradigm of void among the numbers (771,22ff.). The flaw in the argument, however, is that there is no reason to suppose that this turn of phrase was in any way distinctive of Iamblichus. Syrianus employs it independently of adducing the authority of Iamblichus in support of the doctrine, so that the actual phrase may perfectly well have been used by Alexander as well, whence Michael can have derived it. The same applies to a parallel passage mentioning the Orphic poems (Syr. *in Met.* 182,9-28/ps.-Alex. 821,5-21): there is really no reason why Alexander could not be familiar with an Orphic cosmogony.²⁴

As against these alleged dependences, we have the overwhelming fact that Michael lacks entirely any trace of Syrianus' distinctive polemical purpose and material (for which see the next section). His only purpose is to elucidate Aristotle, without a trace of the righteous Platonic/Pythagorean indignation that animates Syrianus. In order to do that, he quite shamelessly borrows from the commentary of Alexander, which was available to him, as it had been six centuries previously to Syrianus, but not to us; and he borrowed so successfully that, at some later stage in the tradition – some time after his composition of the commentary in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, but some time before the transcription of the earliest extant MS, A (Par. gr. 1876), of the thirteenth century – the commentary supplanted that of Alexander, and was attributed to him (apart from the stray scholion mentioned above, n. 18).

There is one other curious little piece of evidence bearing on this that has been used in favour of the attribution to Michael, but in which Leonardo Tarán quite rightly detects a flaw. The flaw does not, however, I think, point to the conclusion which he would draw from it. There is a passage in one of Michael's works, his commentary on the *Parva Naturalia*,²⁵ which runs as follows:

The treatises *On the Parts of Animals* and *On the Gait of Animals*, and further those *On Memory and Recollection*, *On the Movement of Animals*, and *On the Generation of Animals*, and *On Shortness and Length of Life*, and along with these that *On Old Age and Youth*, I have now elucidated to the best of my ability. I urge those who may come upon these, if they gain any benefit from them, to give hearty thanks; if they do not gain any such benefit, then at least no harm will accrue to them from them. *I have also written a commentary on the Metaphysics from Book Z through to N.* And now, if God grants me the opportunity, I will make a new start, and enter upon the elucidation of the treatise *On Colours*.

Tarán's claim, and I agree with him in this, is that the sentence in italics is glaringly intrusive within the passage as a whole. Michael is running through his commentaries on Aristotle's biological and psychological (broadly, 'scientific') works, and promising (at least) one more to round off the collection; he is not concerned here to list *all* his Aristotelian commentaries. A mention of a commentary on the *Metaphysics* is not required by the context. So this sentence has been added by an assiduous scribe or scholarly reader, who knew that Michael had written a commentary on at least part of the *Metaphysics*, and – missing the point of his present remarks – wonders why he has not mentioned it here; so he helpfully adds it in. Tarán, as I say, is quite right to discern the intrusive nature of the sentence, but unjustified, I feel, in trying to argue from that that the testimony is worthless. On the contrary, I would regard it as remaining most valuable, even if not emanating directly from the horse's mouth.

A further interesting piece of evidence, not dealt with by Tarán, is the fact that in one manuscript, the *Parisinus graecus* 1853, a scholiast, in three places (ff. 260^r, 272^r, 301bis^r), identifies comments by ps.-Alexander as belonging to *ho Ephesios*, referring plainly to Michael.

So we do, then, have some evidence that Michael wrote a commentary on these books, and that what we have before us is it. Despite the attribution to Alexander in most manuscripts, it seems that a tradition persisted among scribes and scholars that Michael was the true author. Problems certainly remain, however. Why, one may ask, did he choose to write a commentary at all, especially if, as we assume, he did have access to that of Alexander? He may be compressing his original somewhat,²⁶ but he is still composing a copious commentary – if anything, it is Syrianus who is the more compendious, in many cases where they can be compared.²⁷ He may also, particularly in Book 12, be modifying some comments of Alexander which would be offensive to Christian orthodoxy. It would require a more detailed study of the work than can be given to it here to provide even a tentative answer to these questions.²⁸

But further, why did the real commentary of Alexander give way to that of Michael? And if Michael is here committing a conscious forgery, and putting Alexander's name to his work, how comes it that a later reader knows that the commentary is his?²⁹ Tarán's claim that Alexander's commentary was lost, and thus not available to ps.-Alexander, is only tenable on the assumption that ps.-Alexander precedes Syrianus, and that Syrianus is dependent on him, and I regard that as a rather desperate hypothesis. As it is, I can only raise these interesting questions, and leave them to later scholars to solve. Their solution, at any rate, is not essential to the appreciation of the present work.

4. Syrianus as a polemicist³⁰

We may turn now to a notable feature of this commentary that is not so dependent on conjecture. The great majority of the Neoplatonic commentators on Aristotle, notably Ammonius, Simplicius, and John Philoponus (though the latter not infrequently is developing his own, unorthodox Christian agenda in opposition to Aristotle), may be classed as sympathetic or constructive critics. They find themselves able to maintain the pious fiction, part of the Neoplatonist consensus since at least Porphyry,³¹ that Aristotle is essentially in agreement with Plato, differing from him only on peripheral matters or in degrees of emphasis.

For considerable stretches of Aristotle's *oeuvre*, such a position is defensible, at least with a generous infusion of goodwill,³² but there are some passages in face of which any attempt at a benign synthesis must break down, and one of these is certainly Books 13 and 14 of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle is indulging in more or less unremitting polemic against his former colleagues in the Academy. When, therefore, Syrianus resolved to embark on a commentary on these two books,³³ he approached

them in a belligerent spirit quite different from that of the later Alexandrian commentators, though by no means inappropriate to the subject-matter.

What I would like to dwell on here is not so much the substantive philosophical positions taken up by Syrianus in the commentary – these are dealt with in section 2 above – as the rhetorical strategies which he adopts in responding to Aristotle's own polemical sallies. The commentary on Books 13 and 14, in Syrianus' view (81,20-2), is divided into three major topics: (1) whether the objects of the mathematical sciences exist (covering the first three chapters of Book 13); (2) whether the Forms exist, and, if so, how many there are (covering the rest of Book 13);³⁴ and (3) whether these are the first principles of beings (constituting the subject of Book 14). I will select examples from each of these sections to illustrate my theme.³⁵

Syrianus, we may note, begins his commentary with a ringing tribute to Aristotle's excellence as a philosopher, in which he declares his great admiration for his many contributions to knowledge, but at the same time makes it clear that he is not prepared to let him get away with any biased or ill-informed criticism of Pythagorean and Platonic doctrine. We need not doubt that Syrianus' expression of admiration for Aristotle is sincerely meant, but it also undoubtedly serves a rhetorical purpose, as a foil to what is to follow, since these are more or less the last kind words that we are going to hear about Aristotle for the rest of the commentary. Indeed, straightaway things begin to go downhill.

In what directly follows, Syrianus sets out a good deal of his proposed strategy in dealing with Aristotle. Plato and the Pythagoreans are infallibly correct. That is the principle from which we start. When Aristotle directs criticisms at their doctrines, therefore, he is either misunderstanding their position, and attacking some straw man, or he is 'imposing his own hypotheses', generating a contradiction by using terms in his own sense, not in the sense employed by the Pythagoreans and Platonists. Syrianus' strategy, then, in general is to attack Aristotle from higher ground, simply expounding to him, and to us, the correct Platonist doctrine. Elsewhere, though, he goes toe-to-toe with him, swapping sarcasm for sarcasm. There are, however, other occasions also when he seeks to confute Aristotle from his own mouth, quoting Aristotle against Aristotle. I will select examples of all three procedures in turn, as they each possess their own interest.

It should be borne in mind in all this that Syrianus, though primarily a philosopher, is also thoroughly proficient in the arts of rhetoric. His only other surviving work, in fact,³⁶ is a commentary on the two handbooks of Hermogenes, *Peri ideôn* and *Peri staseôn*, in the course of which he reveals a comprehensive and intimate knowledge of all the wiles of the rhetorician. We must not therefore be surprised if we find him using various rhetorical devices throughout this commentary.

We may take our start from a passage where Aristotle is accused of misrepresenting Platonic-Pythagorean doctrine. Aristotle starts out in

Book 13, as we recall, by raising the question of the mode of existence of the objects of the mathematical sciences. In the course of ch. 1, at 1076a33-6, he propounds the following division: 'If the objects of mathematics exist, they must necessarily exist either in perceptible things, as some say, or separate from perceptible things (there are some too who say this); or, if neither one nor the other, either they do not exist at all, or they exist in some other way.'

This division, of course, is intended to expose the contradictions of the Platonist position, a fact to which Syrianus is very much alert. His comment on this is as follows (84,10ff.):

Now he is right in employing this division, except in so far as he has postulated that there are some who have left mathematical objects as inherent in perceptible things, and he has very well discerned and expressed the conclusion to his hypothesis; for if they are neither separate nor inseparable from perceptible things, either they do not exist at all, or they acquire whatever degree of existence they possess in some other way – that is, they are generated in us by abstraction (*aphairesis*), which is in fact his own view. He attacks both the position that they are inseparable from perceptible things and that they have a separate existence, in order that they may not exist in any way at all, like the notorious 'thingummybob' (*skindapsos*), or precisely his own position may prevail, that they are derived from perceptible things by abstraction.

Syrianus then turns to the beginning of ch. 2, 1076a38-b13, where Aristotle demonstrates to his own satisfaction that the objects of mathematics cannot be in sensible things, because (a) it is impossible for two solids (*stereá*) to occupy the same space at the same time, and (b) on this same theory all other potentialities and characteristics would exist in sensible things, and none of them would exist separately. To this Syrianus responds as follows (84,20ff.):

Whether he constructs a strong or a weak argument in this passage is nothing to the point; for neither any of the Pythagoreans nor Plato himself nor any of the Platonists of his time postulated that geometrical figures and volumes inhered in perceptible objects; if Severus, or some other of those who commented on Plato in later times, basing themselves on the teachings of Aristotle himself, have made illegitimate use of mathematical entities in their explanation of physical causes, that has nothing to do with the ancients, whose doctrines he is here attempting to refute; so that I will direct no response to him on this question from the perspective of such sources.

So, as far as Syrianus is concerned, Aristotle is attacking straw men, and does not deserve a response. His reference to the second century AD

Platonist Severus is most interesting, but its rhetorical purpose is to suggest that if Severus came up with a theory like this, it is only because he is himself influenced by Aristotle.³⁷

In any case, continues Syrianus, it is not true that two 'solid' (in the sense of three-dimensional) bodies cannot occupy the same space. To buttress this assertion, he adduces (84,32ff.), rather interestingly, the example of extension (*diastêma*) in general, which permeates the whole physical universe,

neither cutting up other things nor itself cut up as it is divided along with the air and the rest of bodies, but extends throughout the cosmos steadfast, firm, unmoved, and exempt from any alteration, providing a place and receptacle and bound and circumscription and everything of that sort to the sum-total of the visible cosmos.

One aspect of this that is interesting is that he does not absolutely claim this doctrine of *diastêma* as an extended, but not physically resistant, body as main-line Platonism, but refers it rather (84,31ff.) to 'those who postulate this theory', so the question presents itself as to who these persons might be. It becomes plain as the text proceeds that this 'extension' is closely connected with the World Soul, and may in fact be taken as its 'pneumatic vehicle'. At any rate, he speaks of it (85,7ff.) as 'possessing its substance (*skhein tèn hupostasin*) in co-operation with the will and intellect of the cosmic Soul, Soul making it spherical through its vision of Intellect'. It is plain that this is Soul's vehicle for its direction of the physical cosmos. Its interpenetration with the cosmos is compared a little further down (19-22) to the light of various lamps pervading a room. This use of light as an analogy is of considerable significance.

In this connection, Wilhelm Kroll (in a note in the apparatus ad loc.) has acutely drawn attention to a passage of Proclus' *Commentary on the Republic* (2,196,22ff.) – a work heavily dependent on Syrianus, as Anne Sheppard has amply demonstrated³⁸ – in which he reports the identification (which he attributes originally to Porphyry, but endorses himself), of the pillar of light seen by the souls in the Myth of Er during their perambulations (*Rep.* 10, 616B) with the *okhêma* of the cosmic Soul, which is to be taken as 'a body prior to the body of the cosmos, immediately attached to the Soul of the Universe'.

Kroll is very probably correct here to make the connection. I dwell on this curious piece of Neoplatonic lore in the present context just to illustrate one strategy which Syrianus employs in his confutation of Aristotle: the exposition of 'true' Platonic/Pythagorean doctrine in order to demonstrate Aristotle's inadequate grasp of the 'realities'. Against Aristotle, this strategy has to be accounted entirely futile, since Aristotle would have had nothing but contempt for these Pythagorean 'realities' (especially such an entity as a cosmic pneumatic vehicle!), had they been expounded to him;

but we may be grateful for the various insights into the development of later Platonist doctrine afforded to us by Syrianus' expositions.

Another characteristic passage occurs rather later, at 160,23ff., on 13, 1086a29-35, where Aristotle is taking one of his many digs both at Speusippus (though Syrianus does not recognise this; he thinks rather of the Pythagoreans), and at Plato himself: 'The people who posit only numbers, and mathematical numbers at that, may be considered later; but as for those who speak of the Forms, we can observe at the same time their way of thinking and the difficulties which befall them. For they not only treat of the Forms as universal substances,³⁹ but also as separable and as particulars; but it has already been argued that this is not possible.' Syrianus responds as follows:

It is not surprising that they seem to you to say this, since you postulate that individuals are the only substances.⁴⁰ They, on the other hand, rising to an almost incomprehensible superiority over your sort of substances, postulate as substances the Forms, and declare that they actually embrace universals and in a unitary mode comprehend at a higher level the causes of both universals and individuals, being neither universals in the manner of the reason-principles on the level of soul nor individuals and mathematically one in accordance with the appearances of the lowest level of images in Matter.

Once again, the point is that Aristotle is simply oblivious to the higher levels of reality; he is therefore not in a position to engage meaningfully with those in the Pythagorean tradition.

A second strategy employed by Syrianus is plain old knock-about sarcasm – which is, after all, only dealing out to Aristotle a taste of his own medicine, Books 13 and 14 being pervaded by mischievous and sophistical arguments. To take one example, let us look at his response to the passage 1079a14-19, where Aristotle is presenting a rather obscure, because very allusive, argument against the Platonists, to the effect that, in propounding the theory of Forms, they actually undermine their own theory of First Principles – presumably the One and the Great-and-Small, or Greater-and-Smaller:

And in general the arguments for the Forms do away with things which are more important to the exponents of the Forms than the existence of the Ideas themselves; for the consequence is that it is not the Two (*or Dyad*) that is primary, but Number, and of this the relative (*to pros ti*), this in turn being prior to the absolute (*to kath' hauto*) – and all the other ways in which people, by following up the views held about the Forms, have gone against the first principles.

It sounds here as if Aristotle is trying to extract some illegitimate mileage

out of the denomination of Plato's second principle as 'the Greater and Smaller', being regarded a sort of relative number, but one cannot be sure. At any rate, Syrianus is not going to let him get away with it. He first sets out the true Platonist doctrine (112,14ff.):

Now these men (sc. the Platonists) claimed that, after the single First Principle of all things, which they were pleased to term the Good and the supra-essential One, there were two principles of everything, the Monad and the Dyad of infinite potency (*apeirodunamos*), and they apportioned these principles at each level of being in the mode proper to each. For this an element analogous to the Good in each realm of being and likewise entities assimilated to the primary Monad and Dyad.

This, of course, is not either old Pythagoreanism or early Platonism, but rather an exotic amalgam developed first, so far as we can discern, by Eudorus of Alexandria in the first century BC, on the basis of two alternative versions of early Pythagoreanism, and an interpretation of Plato's *Philebus*, and then taken up by a Neopythagorean sheltering behind the name of Archytas – which latter, rather than Eudorus, appears to be Syrianus' source. He then turns to deal with Aristotle:

But our friend Aristotle declares that, in postulating the Essential Dyad and the Essential Monad among the Forms, first of all, since they are prone to award the highest honours to the formal causal principles (*eidêtikai aitiaï*), in declaring these to be primary, they do away with the Monad and the Dyad among the first principles (for what monad and dyad could be superior to the primal Monad and Dyad?); and then, since the Essential Tetrad (*hê autotetras*) is double the Essential Dyad, and indeed the Essential Dyad is double the Essential Monad, and all these are numbers, not only is absolute number superior to the first principles, but even relative number; and in general he says that there are many such instances, in which they, in their desire to preserve their position about the Forms, all unwittingly find themselves in conflict with their own principles.

Aristotle is here trying to score points by systematically confusing Form-numbers (in which he does not believe) with mathematical or unitary numbers – the 'real' Tetrad, so to speak, is not double the 'real' Dyad, nor yet four times the Monad; it is simply 'Fourness', or what it is to be Four. Syrianus now turns on him (112,28ff.):

Now that this is pretty sorry stuff (*phortikôs eirêtai*), and hardly comes to grips in any serious way with the position of those divine men, will be plain even before any argument to anyone of reasonable acuity. Nevertheless, it might well be demanded of us that we make an adequate response to this fallacious line of reasoning.