GENERAL INTRODUCTION

LLOYD P. GERSON

I

The present work is a successor to *The Cambridge History of Late Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (*CHLGEMP*) which appeared in 1967 under the editorship of A. H. Armstrong. Since the publication of that work, an enormous amount of fundamental philological and historical scholarship pertaining to the philosophical works of late antiquity has appeared. New critical editions, commentaries and translations of important philosophical texts have made this vast complex of material more accessible to historians, who in turn have made considerable advances in the understanding of the last phase of ancient philosophy. Although this more than forty years of labour seems justification enough for a new survey of the period, it should not be supposed that all or even most of the assessments made in the earlier work have been summarily invalidated. Hence, the sense in which the present work is a 'successor' to the earlier work does not indicate that it is a replacement. Students of this period will no doubt continue to profit from consulting the earlier work, which deserves to be recognized as groundbreaking.

It will be useful to point out how *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (*CHPLA*) differs in some obvious ways from its worthy predecessor. First, the reader will notice that the subtle change in title presumes that much of what was once labelled – no doubt with a certain amount of diffidence – 'early medieval' is now more properly brought within the ambit of ancient philosophy. The reasons for this will be discussed below in this introduction and in various places throughout the volume. Here, it may simply be noted that the new title indicates a vigorous recognition of the extension of the canon of ancient philosophy far beyond the all-too-narrow confines of the fourth century BCE. Whatever assessment one wishes to make of the value of ancient philosophy, there is today less justification than ever for the truncated view that ignores philosophical writing between Aristotle and Descartes or even between Aristotle and Aquinas. This extension was just beginning for Hellenistic

philosophy – especially Stoicism, Epicureanism and forms of Scepticism – at the time of the publication of *CHLGEMP*. The present volume aims to dispel the notion that the philosophy of late antiquity is little more than an appendix to the singularly enduring works of Plato and Aristotle.

Second, whereas the previous work devoted a substantial amount of space to tracing the sources of late Greek philosophy back to its beginnings in Plato's Academy and in Aristotle's Lyceum, the present volume does not focus on that material, which is in any case extensively treated in other histories. Rather, its treatment of the 'background' to the principal subject of the book is limited to what we might call 'the state-of-the-art' in philosophy around 200 CE. What, we may ask, would a student coming to philosophy at that time be presented with in a survey of the field? The date 200 CE is neither arbitrary nor precise. Since the dominant philosophical movement in late antiquity is Platonism, and since the leading figure of this movement is generally recognized to be Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), it seemed appropriate to make roughly 200 CE our *terminus a quo*. As for our *terminus ad quem*, it has actually been divided into three strands: (a) in the West, it is the Carolingian Renaissance and the philosopher John Scotus Eriugena; (b) in the Christian East, it is philosophy in Byzantium; and (c) in the Muslim East, it is the initial wave of the Islamic philosophical appropriation of Greek philosophy. A concluding chapter takes (a) into the treatment of ancient philosophical themes by philosophers of the Latin West who used to be known as Scholastics. In addition, we have, in comparison with the *CHLGEMP*, provided relatively concise treatments of the giants of our period – Plotinus and Augustine – mainly because there are many excellent full treatments available.

The earlier volume divided up its work among eight scholars; the present volume contains the work of some fifty. The dramatic shift signals only an acknowledgement of the complexities of our period and the varied specialized skills that its comprehension requires. It may be noted, however, that in the study of late antiquity, as indeed in the study of all early periods, philosophy follows philology and history. Whereas in Armstrong's volume only one of the authors was identified as a professor of philosophy, in the present volume many more trained philosophers with the requisite technical skills have been involved. This is I think an indication that ongoing groundwork studies have opened up our period more and more to the possibility of philosophical analysis. For example, an abundance of technical labour in the intervening years has allowed the scanty treatment of the major philosophical figure Damascius in the earlier volume to be superseded by a fuller philosophical discussion in the present volume. What is true for Damascius is to a lesser extent true for many others treated here including, for example, Hierocles of Alexandria, one of the

leading philosophers of the first half of the fifth century CE. Hierocles is hardly mentioned in the previous work, perhaps a function of the fact that the seminal editorial and historical work on Hierocles dates from the 1970s and 1980s.

The reader will also note that hitherto the standard way of referring to the philosophy of our period is to use the term 'Neoplatonism'. This is in fact an artefact of eighteenth-century German scholarship; no follower of Plato in our period would have embraced a label suggesting innovation. Unfortunately, in the eighteenth century the label was intended mostly as a pejorative and that situation has not changed much even today. It was assumed that 'Neoplatonism' represented a muddying of the purest Hellenic stream. This assumption probably tells us more about the romanticism in early Germanic classical scholarship and its political milieu than it does about early and late elements in ancient philosophy. On behalf of a more neutral or at least less tendentious stance, I have by editorial fiat abolished the pejorative label from this volume. We refer throughout to 'Platonism' or 'late Platonism' or 'Christian Platonism' when discussing Plotinus, his successors and those Christian thinkers who were in one way or another shaped by the dominant tradition in ancient philosophy. In doing so, however, we make no presumptions about fidelity or lack thereof to Plato's own philosophy. It is enough, at least initially, to recognize that there were varieties of Platonism, just as there were varieties of Christianity in our period and varieties of various philosophical movements in earlier centuries. Those eager to grade these according to their proximity to the intentions of their founders will no doubt suppose that they have discovered a means of ascertaining exactly what those original intentions were, independent of the traditions of thought they inspired. The decision regarding the term 'Neoplatonism' does not quite mandate a similar decision for the mostly empty term 'Middle' Platonism, which routinely indicates a wide variety of Platonist philosophy between the late first century BCE and the time of Plotinus. We use this term in a completely anodyne sense, indicating the varieties of Platonism between the early or old Academy of Plato and his immediate successors and the late Platonism found in Plotinus and afterward.

The parallelisms between Platonic and Christian thought alluded to here bring us to one of the most difficult aspects of a project such as this one. The rise and eventual dominance of Christianity in our period resulted in the intertwining of philosophy and the theology of a religion rooted in revelation and in a non-Hellenic tradition. 'Pagan' Greek thinkers encountered Christianity as the ideology of an increasingly hostile opponent; Christian thinkers encountered ancient Greek philosophy as the ideological core of those resistant to the Gospel. In fact, a good deal of the philosophy in our period was generated by those who either subordinated philosophical reflection to religious faith or by those who

found themselves cast in the role of apologists, not for the value of philosophy itself, like Socrates, but solely for the doctrinal content of Platonism. The resulting complexities are substantial and they set our period apart from an earlier period that was innocent of or indifferent to the claims of the Biblical religions and from a later period in which Christian assumptions were ubiquitous and so largely unquestioned. Thus, our work, like the previous one, treats a number of thinkers such as Origen, Augustine and Boethius, who might be regarded as equally philosophers and theologians, as well as a number of others such as Justin, Nemesius, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa in whom the proportion might well be thought to favour theology over philosophy. If I have erred in my selection, I hope it has been on the side of inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. The Christian theologians who have been excluded from consideration, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus, are those whose writings contain little or no philosophy; and even in those included, concentration has been on the philosophical side of their thought, leaving more strictly confessional issues aside. Perhaps some readers remain sceptical that the writings of someone like the unknown author whom we call Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite deserve to be considered in a history of philosophy. The increasingly lucid picture of our period that has emerged over the last two generations, owing in part to original philological and historical analysis, has in my view made this scepticism less and less justified. So, too, the 'religious side' of Platonism – the side that provoked the pejorative label 'Neoplatonism' – can now be seen not of course as unrelated to the philosophy, but as distinguishable from it.

The encounter between philosophy and religion – specifically, Platonism and Christianity – was, we know, situated amidst the political and social currents flowing back and forth between Rome and Constantinople, and to a lesser extent Athens and Alexandria. It seemed useful for the reader to have at hand at least the basic historical facts in order to provide some context for the philosophical discussions. To this end, each main section of this work is introduced with a short account of the world in late antiquity in which our philosophers were living and working. This is a self-conscious attempt to add to this history of philosophy something like a sketch of the continuous narrative that the intellectual history of the period aims to provide.

2

It is not uncommon in philosophy departments to hear it proclaimed that the history of philosophy is to philosophy approximately what the history of medicine is to medicine; indiscriminate reading in the history of medicine is hardly necessary for medical practice and might at times even impede it. Yet even

among those who accept this analogy, there are probably few who would go on to argue that a philosopher ought actually to avoid reading at least certain works in the history of philosophy. To acknowledge the value of reading enduring works in the history of philosophy is, I would suggest, to allow the pertinence of asking about the purpose and value of *reading* a history of philosophy. And this question of course leads us to another: what is the purpose and value of *writing* a history of philosophy?

Since this work aims in a way to rewrite the history of philosophy in late antiquity, I have in my editorial capacity tried to rethink the very idea of what a history of philosophy is supposed to be. Aristotle argued, rightly in my view, that history was not a science because a science aims at knowledge of universal and necessary truth whereas history is by definition composed of particular, contingent events. The non-scientific nature of history does not, however, prevent Aristotle from applying his scientific explanatory framework to historical events. Thus, he can inquire into (and he thinks it worthwhile to inquire into) the explanation for a revolution or constitutional change or into the reason for a particular historical figure engaging in a particular action. He is ready to explore the material conditions for happiness or political stability or the nature of social artefacts. We might suppose that the applicability of Aristotle's fourfold schema of explanation – formal, material, moving and final cause – could be similarly deployed in writing a history of philosophy. Unfortunately, however, although the history of philosophy is full of 'events', it is not these which attract the primary attention of scholars. That attention is rather focused on arguments, claims, doctrines and so on. How events are related to these is an extremely difficult question to answer, whether these events occur so to speak internally in a philosopher's life or whether they are external. Two hoary quasi-Aristotelian explanatory concepts are 'influence' and 'development'. To speak about the 'development' of, say, Plato's thought as if it were something like the development of a organism in the direction of its natural mature state is a kind of travesty of the category of final causal explanation. To speak about Plotinus' influence on Augustine as if the thought of the former were a real moving cause of the thought of the latter is not only patently false on Aristotle's account of the nature of moving causes but also of minimal explanatory value for a historian of philosophy, even if it were true. In ancient philosophy especially, where we are often lacking more of a philosopher's works than we possess, it is not surprising that we sometimes grasp at straws; if, say, we cannot reconstruct Porphyry's thought from Porphyry's extant writings, perhaps we can do so with the help of Plotinus' writings which, so the story goes, surely *influenced* Porphyry. Or to take another sort of example, to say something like 'conditions were ripe for the appearance of a particular philosophical view' when one is supposedly referring

to an Aristotelian material cause is, on reflection, and unlike real material causes, quite empty of explanatory content. What, then, ought a history of philosophy in late antiquity aim to do?

In my view, such a history ought to be oriented first and foremost towards the positions or doctrines held by the leading philosophers of late antiquity and it ought further to contain elements of an account of ancient Greek philosophy's encounter with Christianity (and to a much lesser extent with Judaism and with Islam). The disparagement of histories oriented towards the positions held by philosophers is unreasonable – indeed, it is sometimes stigmatized as mere 'doxography' in some circles. This disparagement seems to me to arise from a failure to distinguish clearly the history of philosophy from philosophy itself. Those immersed in the history of ancient philosophy are I suspect much less inclined to fail to make this distinction than are those who reflect on philosophical matters from a contemporary perspective. I mean that the effort to represent accurately the views of those who wrote a generation or two ago is usually attempted within an explicitly non-historical, philosophical context which emphasizes the reasoning which may have led to the holding of those views and an analysis of why they are wrong (or why they are still correct, in the rare case where the writer still accepts the views of his or her predecessors). Such representations are usually undertaken within the typical dialectical framework for addressing one's contemporaries or intellectual competitors on particular philosophical problems. Although the representation of ancient philosophical views is sometimes undertaken with the same intent, it is in these cases rarely achieved without falling prey to one of the horns of the following dilemma: either the representation is defective because it is not properly contextualized or else the representation is contextualized but it then fails to achieve the sought for commensuration of ancient and contemporary positions. I am far from suggesting that contextualization and commensuration are unattainable goals; I am urging only that they are different activities and that they are not usefully attempted simultaneously when the views represented are far removed from us in time or cultural distance.

Good history of ancient philosophy is harder to accomplish than it might seem. But despite its formidable problems of contextualization – the difficulty of the ancient languages used, missing or defective texts, and distorting or plainly inaccurate reports given by our ancient sources – it is an advantage for the historian of ancient philosophy that he or she is not obliged to strive unduly for commensuration with contemporary thought (though many scholars do so, to the detriment of their strictly historical work). The first requirement, in my opinion, is to achieve successful contextualization for one's account of the views held by the ancients. On this basis, the reader of works in the history of philosophy then has a better chance at genuine commensuration.

To claim that the central mission of a history of philosophy is to establish, descriptively in an appropriate context, the views held is at the same time to take a negative view of the Hegelian identification of philosophy with its history. But this negative view hardly precludes the relevance of the history of philosophy to philosophy itself; nor does it free the historian from the obligation to employ careful philosophical analysis. Indeed, one who rigidly separates philosophy and its history will either have to accept the mantle of the antiquarian or else acknowledge the fact that in time she, too, will only be antiquarian fodder.

A useful history of the kind aimed at in this volume, then, aims to see historical filiations as the philosophers themselves saw them. Proclus, for instance, thought that Plotinus was a great exegete of the 'Platonic revelation', reaffirming what Plotinus himself thought he was doing. The great historian of medieval philosophy, Etienne Gilson, thought that Proclean metaphysics was the self-evidently absurd conclusion reached by consistently adhering to that 'revelation'. Thus in a way, and apart from judgements about philosophical truth, Gilson indirectly confirms Proclus' point. Proclus certainly believed that the most authentic systematic expression of the wisdom contained in Plato's dialogues would be found in his own personal writings. Unlike Hegel, however, he was not making a historical claim. The present volume of the history of philosophy in late antiquity aims to provide a contextualized account of philosophers and their 'schools', philosophers who for the most part did not see themselves as being in need of historical contextualization. I would suggest that while we can and should distinguish philosophy itself from its earlier history, thinking through that history becomes a philosophical enterprise when we inquire into, for example, what grounds Proclus has for his belief regarding the connection between Plato, Plotinus and his own work. A similar claim can be made about the inquiry into the opposing arguments made by pagan and Christian philosophers of our period: who was and who was not an authentic inheritor of the ancient philosophical tradition? It seems to me hard to maintain, for example, that reflecting on the debates between Simplicius and John Philoponus on whether or not the universe had a temporal beginning is not a work of philosophy. Such work could not be undertaken effectively without the sort of sober, contextualized account of views held that this volume aims to provide. Thus, the defence of the value of the history of philosophy is substantially the same as the defence of the value of philosophy itself.

3

The present volume is divided into eight parts. The first part includes chapters providing a broad survey of the philosophical 'scene' around 200 CE. The reader will notice that 'philosophy' is here understood to include the scientific, literary

and religious appropriation of the ancient philosophical tradition. Throughout the subsequent sections, it will be evident that the entire intellectual world of late antiquity is constantly engaged with ancient philosophy – above all the philosophy of Plato. One facet of this engagement consists in addressing some of the perennial philosophical problems that arose within Plato's Academy itself and later became the common ground of the ancient philosophical 'schools'. Another consists in the employment and refinement of a philosophical vocabulary appropriate for the treatment of contemporary issues. The refinement is variously evident: in 'pagan' philosophers themselves who aimed to assess the conflicts among the schools and to advance one philosophical position or another; among the early Christian thinkers who searched for a technical philosophical vocabulary to express a systematic representation of Scriptural texts; and among the burgeoning scientific enterprises, especially astronomy, medicine and mathematics, all of which needed an exact philosophically refined vocabulary for expressing the principles of these sciences. In all of these cases, an additional level of complexity is evident in the translation of the Greek philosophical vocabulary into Latin.

In parts II, V and VII will be found an account of the Christian and Jewish philosophical thought in our period. Each part represents an 'encounter' with ancient Greek philosophy. The use of this term is meant to indicate the more or less self-consciously critical engagement with philosophical material that both in its particulars and in the very principles that animate its production provides an implicit challenge to Christianity and to Judaism. Much later, a similar encounter will be found in the earliest phase of Islamic theology. The growing confidence of Christian theologians, owing in part to the gradual dominance of Christianity in the political realm, can be seen in a sort of evolution of theology from a direct encounter with ancient Greek philosophical thought to a rather more internal debate regarding specific issues.

In parts III, IV and VI are treated the philosophers of late antiquity who all explicitly or implicitly rejected the Christian message. For the earliest among these, Christianity was indistinguishable from other 'mystery' religions of the Greek and non-Greek world. Gradually, it became clear that Christianity was *the* threat to the preservation of the ancient tradition. Some of the more creative work among these philosophers is no doubt inspired by an ardent desire to respond critically to the Christian message, to demonstrate that the legacy of Plato's philosophy, itself nourished by even older philosophers, was in no way inferior to that singular alternative increasingly dominant in every centre of learning. Part VIII offers a map of the main intellectual roads leading from our period into what is chronologically the medieval period, but which is in the Greek East and in the world of Islam something quite different from what it

became in the Latin West. This last part might serve as an introduction to the history of philosophy subsequent to that found here.

One of the most difficult problems faced by scholars of our period is that a significant portion of the material or 'data' necessary for accurate analysis is missing. It is all the more frustrating that we sometimes know of the existence of works with titles that at least make them sound extremely important, though the works themselves are completely lost. This, of course, leads us to consider that there may be works completely unknown to us, even by title or fragmentary content. In an Appendix, we have tried to provide a compendium of all the works of the philosophers and of the philosophically engaged theologians of our period whether these are fully extant, or extant only in part or in fragmentary form, or known only by their titles or by references to their content. At least, this should convince the reader that the historian of the philosophy of this period is at times doing something analogous to the archaeologist who is engaged in a theoretical reconstruction of remains based on shards or ruins or the outlines of foundations.

In my editorial capacity, I have tried to limit the use of footnotes in this work, particularly in order to enhance something like a narrative unity in the overall work. Footnotes are generally employed for the elucidation of technical points and for the indication of controversial issues. Full bibliographies are provided at the end of this work for further investigation of the details of each chapter.

I would like to acknowledge here the advice I have received from John Rist regarding every phase of this project. He is also responsible for the translation of the chapter on Origen from Italian. Raymond Geuss helped with the translation of the chapter on Cicero. I would also like to mention the astute counsel of colleagues and friends including George Boys-Stones, Christia Mercer, Hindy Naiman, Richard Sorabji and James Wilberding. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz provided astute advice on all phases of the chapters dealing with the Church Fathers. The indexes were prepared with the very considerable help of graduate students Michael Siebert, Daniel Bader, and Kathleen Gibbons. Additional able editorial assistance was provided by two other graduate students, Emily Fletcher and Alessandro Bonello. Generous financial assistance for this project was provided by the Government of Canada through the Canada Research Chairs program and by the Department of Philosophy in the University of Toronto. I regret that the untimely death of my friend John Cleary prevents me from thanking him personally for his own critical engagement with this project. I note here with sadness that as this work was in the final stage of completion, our colleague and the author of the chapter on the Peripatetics, Bob Sharples, passed away.

A note on style and format: Although I have as editor striven for a measure of consistency in style and format across the chapters in this volume, the imposition of total uniformity seemed neither desirable nor necessary. Differences in capitalization (e.g., Demiurge vs demiurge or Platonic Forms vs Platonic forms, *Logos* vs *logos*, World Soul vs world soul or soul of the universe) sometimes reflect substantive though subtle differences in interpretation. I have tried not to occlude these differences.