INTRODUCTION: AUTHORSHIP AND AUTHORITY IN ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

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Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy is often characterised in terms of competitive individuals debating orally with one another in public arenas. In this respect it is perhaps surprising to think about any notion of philosophical authority besides what is generated by the force of a simple argument, conclusion or piece of persuasion. But it also developed over its long history a sense in which philosophers might acknowledge some other particular philosopher or group of philosophers as an authority and offer to that authority explicit intellectual allegiance. This is most obvious in the development after the classical period of the philosophical 'schools' with agreed founders and, most importantly, canonical founding texts.[1] And there also developed a tradition of commentary, interpretation, and discussion of texts – written by such 'authorities' – which often became the focus of disagreement between members of the same school or movement and also useful targets for critics interested in attacking a whole tradition. Discussions of the meaning, force, precise wording, and even the very authorship of these texts – for example: attempts to undermine the authority of a work by arguing that it is spurious or excluding it from an agreed corpus – became modes of philosophical debate. As time went on, the weight of a growing tradition of reading and appealing to a certain corpus of foundational texts began to shape how later antiquity viewed its philosophical past and also how philosophical debate and inquiry was conducted.

[1] For an account of the varieties of allegiance in the Hellenistic period, see Sedley (1989).

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The essays in this collection consider aspects of the relationship between authorship and authority across a wide chronological and doctrinal range of ancient philosophical texts and schools. They also consider a wide range of relationships between ancient readers or pupils and the various philosophical authorities concerned. Certainly by the first century BC, there came to be explicit appeals in discussions of ancient philosophical works to *auctoritas* – a Latin term with a broad meaning connoting an individual's prestige, political weight, and power, and even the warrant for a particular action or decision – in philosophical writings. That same term also connoted the sense of originating an action or decision – being its *auctor* – and therefore combined the notions of founding a particular idea or argument and lending weight to that idea such that it deserves serious consideration.[2] Consider, for example, this brief comment from Cicero's *Academica*:

> Platonis autem auctoritate, qui uarius et multiplex et copiosus fuit, una et consentiens duobus uocabulis philosophiae forma instituta est Academicorum et Peripateticorum, qui rebus congruentes nominibus differebant.
>
> Following Plato's complex and eloquent lead, a single and concordant system of philosophy developed under two names: the philosophy of the Academics and Peripatetics. Despite their difference in name, they agreed in their doctrine. (Cicero, *Academica* 1.17, trans. C. Brittain)

Charles Brittain's translation here emphasises the notion that Plato's *auctoritas* marks him out as the originator of a general philosophical outlook that later became the shared Academic and Peripatetic tradition. But Cicero also remarks here that Plato was complex, varied, and eloquent, terms most easily associated with the variety and complexity of his written output and therefore descriptions of his standing as an author. That variety of the Platonic *corpus* is precisely what is at the root of what the speaker here, Varro, takes to be the merely apparent or verbal differences between the Academic and Peripatetic schools. His philosophical output is such that it lends not

[2] Sedley (1997) 111: 'Just because the Greek language could not express the notion of *auctoritas*, it does not follow that the phenomenon which it describes was absent from Greek philosophical schools.'

only an authoritative weight to his views but also allows for the various interpretative squabbles between its readers and followers.[3] In that case, Plato's *auctoritas* does indeed refer both to his particular mode of philosophical writing – 'authorship' – and the way in which he stands as an acknowledge source of philosophical insight and truth – 'authority' – while also neatly showing how these two are closely related to one another. It is in part because of Plato's authorial choices that he is a philosophical authority, and, more specifically, Cicero notes that the varied forms of his textual output are why Plato has been able to become a philosophical authority for both his own sceptical Academy and also the dogmatic Peripatos.[4]

Nearly 600 years later, the Neoplatonic commentator Simplicius offers the following advice for anyone interested in writing about Aristotle:

τὸν δὲ ἄξιον τῶν Ἀριστοτελικῶν συγγραμμάτων ἐξηγητὴν δεῖ μὴ πάντῃ τῆς ἐκείνου μεγαλονοίας ἀπολείπεσθαι. δεῖ δὲ καὶ τῶν πανταχοῦ τῷ φιλοσόφῳ γεγραμμένων ἔμπειρον εἶναι καὶ τῆς Ἀριστοτελικῆς συνηθείας ἐπιστήμονα. δεῖ δὲ καὶ κρίσιν ἀδέκαστον ἔχειν, ὡς μηδὲ τὰ καλῶς λεγόμενα κακοσχόλως ἐκδεχόμενον ἀδόκιμα δεικνύναι μηδὲ εἴ τι δέοιτο ἐπιστάσεως, πάντῃ πάντως ἄπταιστον φιλονεικεῖν ἀποδεῖξαι, ὡς εἰς τὴν αἵρεσιν ἑαυτὸν ἐγγράψαντα τοῦ φιλοσόφου. δεῖ δὲ οἶμαι καὶ τῶν πρὸς Πλάτωνα λεγομένων αὐτῷ μὴ πρὸς τὴν λέξιν ἀποβλέποντα μόνον διαφωνίαν τῶν φιλοσόφων καταψηφίζεσθαι, ἀλλ' εἰς τὸν νοῦν ἀφορῶντα τὴν ἐν τοῖς πλείστοις συμφωνίαν αὐτῶν ἀνιχνεύειν.

The worthy exegete of Aristotle's writings must not fall wholly short of the latter's (i) greatness of intellect (*megalanoia*). He must also have (ii) experience of everything the Philosopher has written and must be (iii) a connoisseur of Aristotle's stylistic habits. (iv) His judgement must be impartial so that he may

[3] Tsouni also discusses this passage in her contribution to this volume on p.268. See also Schofield's contribution. Compare Cicero *Acad.* 1.34: 'Speusippus and Xenocractes, however, were the first people to take over Plato's theory and authority (*Platonis rationem auctoritatemque susceperant*), and after them Polemo and Crates, along with Crantor – all fellow Academics – diligently preserved the doctrines they had received from their predecessors (*ea quae a superioribus acceperant*)' (trans. C. Brittain).

[4] Compare the advice for readers of Platonic dialogues offered in Diogenes Laertius 3.65, which may derive from Thrasyllus. See Tarrant (1993), esp. 1–30. The simple matter of the availability of texts and the way in which a corpus is presented and organised will also affect the manner in which later readers can engage with them. For the history of the texts of Plato and Aristotle through to the first century BC, see Hatzimichali (2013b).

> neither, out of misplaced zeal, seek to prove something well said to be unsatisfactory nor … should he obstinately persist in trying to demonstrate that [Aristotle] is always and everywhere infallible, as if he had enrolled himself in the Philosopher's school (*hairesis*). [The good exegete] must, I believe (v) *not* convict the philosophers of discordance by looking only at the letter (*lexis*) of what [Aristotle] says against Plato; but he must look towards the spirit (*nous*), and track down the harmony which reigns between them on the majority of points. (Simplicius *In Arist. Cat.* 7.23–32, trans. M. Chase)

Here again we see the idea, present also in Cicero, that there is an underlying harmony to be found between Plato and Aristotle. And, although that particular assumption may not win over the majority of modern readers, Simplicius' other points of advice still sound worthwhile.[5] They are based upon an intellectual encounter with Aristotle that is textual rather than personal. That text is to be accorded an appropriate level of care and attention: it is worth taking seriously and taking it seriously involves reading widely and carefully. Aristotle deserves serious thought because Aristotle has *megalonoia*: he is a great and serious thinker, something reflected in Simplicius' reference to him simply as 'the philosopher'.[6] He is not an unassailable and infallible authority, however, and a good interpreter should be ready to point out where errors are made. Simplicius does not want to encourage any of us to become slavish disciples of Aristotle and that attitude must be reflected in our engagement with Aristotle as an author.[7]

A good example of Simplicius putting this advice into practice is the well-known opening to the so-called *Corollary on Place*, a digression within his commentary on the *Physics.* There, Simplicius notes that Aristotle's account of place contains a number of difficulties that exercised his successors

[5] See Baltussen (2008) 33–8.
[6] Aristotle could be invoked as a moral authority too: Aulus Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 19.2.5.
[7] Compare Ammonius *In Cat.* 8.11–19, who similarly instructs us to read Aristotle carefully and closely but also critically. He concludes: 'One must examine each point closely and, if it should turn out that way, prefer the truth to Aristotle' (trans. Cohen and Matthews), presumably recalling Aristotle's own preference for the truth over his friends who posit Forms: *NE* 1096a16–17.

to such a degree that Simplicius feels moved to set out these objections and 'bring to light the cause of [Aristotle's] faulty argument about place' (καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦ παραλογισμοῦ τοῦ περὶ τὸν τόπον ὑποδεῖξαι: *In Phys.* 601.1–4, trans. J. O. Urmson). This will also allow Simplicius to discuss and examine the views on place that emerged after Aristotle: something he is sure that Aristotle himself would appreciate and welcome, since it is doubtless what Aristotle would have done had he encountered these ideas (*In Phys.* 601.6). So Simplicius takes very seriously the task of critically examining and explaining Aristotle's views but not to the extent that he feels it necessary to overlook their difficulties or failings; rather his job is to show how and why Aristotle's reasoning went astray. Moreover, he takes Aristotle's own practice itself to be licensing this endeavour and attitude to Aristotle's own work; here Aristotle's method as revealed in the source text is taken to be an authoritative guide to the proper attitude to take to Aristotle's own views.[8]

That same part of Simplicius' text also sheds some light on the way in which Aristotle's text was treated by the very earliest Peripatetics. Simplicius notes at *In Phys.* 604.5–7 (FHSG 146) that Theophrastus too (or perhaps 'even Theophrastus') raised various *aporiai* about Aristotle's account of place.[9] So Aristotle was certainly not beyond criticism and correction even from someone who knew him personally and was engaging closely with his works. Theophrastus' own *On the soul*, for example, which appears to be a close commentary on Aristotle's work of the same title, raises various concerns and questions about Aristotle's account of the intellect (see FHSG 307–27). As he discussed these areas of Aristotle's philosophical output, Theophrastus evidently felt free to raise problems, point out weaknesses or discrepancies between passages, and exercise his own independent judgement. Aristotle and Aristotle's texts are to be taken very seriously but once again

[8] See Hoffman and Golitsis (2016).

[9] ἰστέον δὲ ὅτι καὶ ὁ Θεόφραστος ἐν τοῖς Φυσικοῖς ἀπορεῖ πρὸς τὸν ἀποδοθέντα τοῦ τόπου λόγον ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους τοιαῦτα. See Sorabji (1988a) 186–201.

the method of philosophical engagement they promote licences a critical attitude to their own contents.[10]

The appropriate balance between charitable and careful interpretation and critical engagement is difficult to strike and that balancing act is familiar to all of us who think and write about ancient philosophy even now. There are examples also in ancient engagements with earlier philosophical texts of both deliberately uncharitable interpretations and also of the slavish insistence on the infallibility of a particular author, although most examples will fall somewhere between these two extremes. Much will depend, of course, on the reader's own prior relationship to the target text. If, for example, the reader is someone Simplicius might have in mind as already 'enrolled in the school', the interest and goal of engaging with an authoritative school text is going to be very different from that even of Simplicius' charitable and careful exegete, let alone that of someone from an opposing philosophical school or with perhaps no prior philosophical allegiance at all. And even members of the same school can sometimes find reason to question or correct their foundational texts, albeit in perhaps more deferent tones. All of these different stances nevertheless point to the important sense in which ancient Greek and Roman philosophy was, almost from the very outset, aware of constructing for itself a tradition of repeated engagement with previous generations, thinking of them either as sources of great wisdom and insight which later readers need to study and appreciate or else as adversaries to be pulled apart, criticised, and undermined.

This story of the gradual textualisation of ancient philosophical practice and the accompanying changes in later authors' attitudes to their predecessors is certainly an important theme that has received significant recent scholarly attention and is the place where the two aspects of *auctoritas* – authority and authorship – most obviously intersect. To offer some context for the various contributions in this volume, we can

[10] For more discussion of Theophrastus' engagement with Aristotle, see Sharples (1998) and Gottschalk (1998) 284–8.

begin by outlining three broad changes discernible between the very earliest periods of Greek philosophical activity and later antiquity. First, there is certainly some truth in the general picture of a gradual shift from early philosophers and poets making bold claims for their personal originality and – sometimes even divinely granted – authority to a later picture of more or less stable philosophical schools and movements with their own preferred foundational and authoritative texts; claims to originality give way to clear accounts of one's place within an intellectual tradition. Second, this change is accompanied by a gradual dispersal of philosophical activity from the central focus on Athens in the classical and earlier Hellenistic period to a more scattered picture in later antiquity.[11] Third, it is doubtless true that the way in which engagement with predecessors and teaching came to be dominated by studying and commenting on certain corpora of texts rather than face-to-face discussion is a significant contributor to the nature of ancient philosophical practice as it developed over time.[12]

These three broad changes are of course related to one another. For example, in very simple terms, geographical distance makes personal contact harder and philosophers separated by physical and chronological distance are more likely to be encountered as authors than in any direct personal encounter. Moreover, the gradual accumulation of a set of philosophical texts and ideas and the gradual construction of an acknowledged history of philosophy encourage each new generation to set their own views explicitly in relation to what has gone before and, as time goes by, much of that tradition becomes accessible solely through a corpus of texts. The passage of time generates a weight of tradition, exerted principally through texts, for this emerging intellectual practice to acknowledge and work with in various ways.

However, there are important qualifications that should be added to that simple general picture. In particular, it seems

[11] See Sedley (2003).
[12] Hatzimichali (2013b) 1: 'One of the main developments that characterise first-century BC philosophy is that the detailed study of texts became an autonomous and often central philosophical activity in its own right.'

wrong to conclude that there is a clear and smooth movement from an earlier period in which philosophical authority was in the main acquired and wielded in face-to-face oral encounters to a later period in which texts were the principle means by which philosophical authority was won and demonstrated. Certainly, by later antiquity the great classical philosophers – Plato and Aristotle above all – had acquired a central role in philosophical education and the interpretation of their texts had become central to philosophical practice most generally. Nevertheless, the overall picture of authority in ancient philosophy is still best tackled on a case-by-case basis bearing in mind the particular historical and institutional context. For example, although the vibrant philosophical culture of classical and early Hellenistic Athens no doubt did encourage close-quarter face-to-face encounters both between philosophical mentors and pupils and also between adherents of opposing schools, it is not obvious that this personal acquaintance had previously been the principal model for philosophical engagement. Throughout this history of ancient philosophy, it is likely that intellectual authority was won as much by the circulation of texts as by personal connections and influence. In other words, it is possible that the knowledge that Parmenides had of Heraclitus, for example, was primarily through indirect engagement with the text – in whatever form – of Heraclitus' book and not through personal interaction. Similarly, it is likely that the atomist philosophy of Leucippus and Democritus was developed in part as a reaction to Eleatic arguments. The most likely way in which these philosophers in Abdera were acquainted with the works of Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus is through their writings. And Melissus' engagement with Parmenides and Zeno was itself probably via their written works.[13] Socrates himself, we might note, is depicted in Plato's *Phaedo* as having encountered Anaxagoras' philosophy through purchasing his book after hearing it trailed by public performance in the agora; there was no face-to-face

[13] Zeno complains about the circulation of unauthorised copies of his book at Plato *Parmenides* 128d6–e1.

engagement there either.[14] And it is perhaps worth mentioning that in general the world of ancient philosophy prior to the impact of Socrates and his followers on the scene was geographically rather dispersed. Of course, ties of guest-friendship and visits to and performances at Panhellenic festivals may have led some of these thinkers to come to know each other. And the early Ionian natural philosophers presumably enjoyed some kind of personal acquaintance. But we should imagine that in this earlier period too a great deal of philosophical interaction took place via the reception of written works, whether performed or read. The distinction between oral philosophical interaction and encountering philosophical ideas through the transmission of texts is not in itself, therefore, likely to be the most important factor for understanding how issues of authority developed through the long history of ancient philosophy.

Next, we should distinguish between doctrinal and methodological authority. Some philosophers acquired an authoritative status based on their adoption of a certain manner of doing philosophy rather than the articulation of a certain set of dogmatic views, and a number of the essays in this collection are interested in ways in which ancient philosophers were interested in challenging as much as generating or accepting forms of doctrinal authority. This methodological authority may in fact point to a fracture between authorship and doctrinal authority because it is a useful tool for understanding how certain philosophers who wrote nothing (or whose works were inaccessible) nevertheless acquired and continue to enjoy a certain authority in the absence of being authors and, sometimes, in the absence of offering any dogmatic philosophical position at all. Socrates, most notably, but also Pyrrho, for example, came to stand for and recommend certain ways of doing philosophy rather than particular philosophical views and therefore were able to attract detractors and supporters in a fashion analogous to but distinct from their more textually

[14] Plato *Phaedo* 97b8–c6.

productive colleagues.[15] The lesson to draw from examples such as Socrates and Pyrrho is surely that the phenomenon of philosophical authority in antiquity does not line up in any straightforward fashion with dogmatic versus sceptical or written versus unwritten philosophy.

Third, there is also a strong anti-authoritarian tradition in philosophy as a whole and in ancient philosophy in particular. There is, after all, something curious about an intellectual practice devoted to the clear-eyed scrutiny of every argument and conclusion and the acceptance of no authority other than the truth which finds itself dealing with certain authoritative individuals and texts as accepted sources of insight. That tradition too is well exemplified by Socrates and by those who followed in his wake as independent arbiters of others' claims. The Academic tradition, for example, was sometimes keen to stress how the *auctoritas* of the proponents of various views should be granted no weight when exercising one's independent intellectual judgement.[16]

Here, Plato's authorial choice of a dialogue form might also be invoked as a sign that it is important to dissociate one's admiration for a particular individual's intellectual standing from the question of what the most plausible and convincing argument might be.[17] Plato is therefore a particularly interesting case for exploring notions of ancient philosophical *auctoritas* in so far as he is himself responding to and depicting an unusual and charismatic philosopher – Socrates – who showed no deference to any philosophical authority besides whatever argument seemed to him at the time to be the most convincing. And, whatever his own personal approach to his pupils, through his writings Plato himself became an inspiration and an authority both to philosophers minded to take the dialogue form as an invitation to liberate themselves too from any particular personal philosophical authority and also

[15] Diogenes Laertius 1.16 gives a list distinguishing between those philosophers who left behind their writings and those who wrote nothing at all: καὶ οἱ μὲν αὐτῶν κατέλιπον ὑπομνήματα, οἱ δ' ὅλως οὐ συνέγραψαν.
[16] See e.g. Cicero *Tusc.* 1.55; Sedley (1997) 118–20.
[17] See also Frede's contribution in this volume.