Introduction

Xenarchus of Seleucia is best known for his vigorous criticism of Aristotle's thesis that the celestial bodies are made of a special simple body, unique to them: the fifth substance, also known as the fifth body, fifth element, *quinta essentia*, or *aither*. However, his activity was not confined to the study of physics, let alone celestial physics. Although the surviving evidence is slim, and at times frustratingly so, there is no doubt that Xenarchus was concerned with issues of ethics and psychology as well as of physics. In this book I consider all areas of his activity in order to offer as complete a picture of Xenarchus as our sources permit.

For two reasons, particular emphasis is placed on Xenarchus' criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth substance. The first reason is that the sophistication and ingenuity involved in this criticism presuppose a close textual study of Aristotle's works. This study led Xenarchus to a brilliant revision of the conceptual apparatus developed in Aristotle's writings on natural philosophy. Xenarchus elaborated a creative interpretation of Aristotle's theory of natural motion which made the celestial simple body expendable. There is conceptual discontinuity between this creative interpretation and what we know about the Hellenistic theories of motion. Xenarchus developed his theory of natural motion as a direct response to Aristotle's theory of motion. His critical engagement with Aristotle strongly suggests that his activity is best understood in the context of the return to Aristotle which took place in the first century BCE. While some of his views are rooted in the philosophical debates of the late Hellenistic period, his activity as a whole presupposes the distance from Aristotle that confronted post-Hellenistic philosophers. In Xenarchus' case, this distance prompted direct attention to Aristotle's text.

Our extant sources describe Xenarchus as a Peripatetic philosopher. The epithet "Peripatetic" is best explained as an indication of his commitment to a careful study of Aristotle's works. Xenarchus looked back at Aristotle and regarded him as an authority and a starting point for his own

genuine philosophical theorizing. In other words, Xenarchus was a Peripatetic philosopher engaged in exegesis without the overriding goal of fidelity. His criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth substance cannot be fully understood unless we dissociate fidelity to Aristotle's ideas from critical engagement with his works.

This leads to the second reason for placing particular emphasis on Xenarchus' criticism of the doctrine of the fifth substance. As I try to show in the pages to come, an important segment of the commentary tradition in antiquity found its orientation by dealing with Xenarchus and his objections to Aristotle's views on the material composition of the heavens. Alexander of Aphrodisias played a crucial role in the transmission of these objections and was ultimately responsible for their integration into the commentary tradition. In the *De fato*, Alexander describes himself as a teacher (*didaskalos*).[1] His official post was *diadochos* at Athens. That is, Alexander was a professor of philosophy and an appointed holder of one of the four philosophical chairs in Athens.[2] As a professor of Aristotelian philosophy, Alexander was concerned not only with explicating this philosophy but also with defending it in the context of the ancient debates between philosophical schools. Celestial physics was an especially controversial area of Aristotle's thought. In his commentary on the *De caelo*, Alexander was not content with presenting and clarifying this physics; he also defended it from attacks coming from within as well as from without the Peripatetic school. In this frame of mind, Alexander recalled and discussed Xenarchus' objections to the doctrine of the fifth substance in order to reaffirm the theoretical necessity of a special simple body alongside earth, water, air, and fire.

Alexander's commentary on the *De caelo* is now lost. However, thanks (mostly) to Simplicius we can still form a fairly good idea of its content. Simplicius used this commentary not only as his primary source of information but also as his exemplary model in his extant commentary on the *De caelo*. In the choice of topics, structure, and exegetical style, he was profoundly influenced by Alexander.[3] Unlike Alexander, however, Simplicius considered the philosophy of Plato superior to all the systems of thought that came later. Moreover, like the vast majority of philosophers of late antiquity, Simplicius was convinced that Aristotle's philosophy could be integrated, if not even assimilated, into a Platonic framework. His

[1] *De fato* 164.20.
[2] For the epigraphic evidence, see Chaniotis (2004): 79–81. A discussion of the significance of this evidence can be found in Sharples (2005): 47–56.
[3] Helpful remarks on the role that Alexander played in shaping Simplicius' exegesis can be found in Baltussen (2008): 107–135, and Golitsis (2008): 65–80.

exegetical goal is to be understood in light of his philosophical commitment to finding substantial agreement between the doctrines of Aristotle and Plato. In his commentary on the *De caelo*, Simplicius is working especially hard to reconcile Aristotle's physics, including the scandalous thesis that the heavens are made of a special simple body, with Plato's *Timaeus*.

In dealing with Xenarchus' objections to the doctrine of the fifth substance, Simplicius is following Alexander very closely – so closely that it is tempting to think that he had access to Xenarchus only through Alexander and his commentary on the *De caelo*. But the exegetical activity of Simplicius was not just a repetition of that of Alexander. Simplicius had at least one independent reason to engage with his criticism of Aristotle. When Simplicius wrote his commentary on the *De caelo*, the debate on the doctrine of the fifth substance was far from being closed. On the contrary, John Philoponus had just engaged in a systematic criticism of this doctrine in his *De aeternitate mundi contra Aristotelem* (hereafter *Contra Aristotelem*). Although the *Contra Aristotelem* has not survived, we can still form an idea of its content thanks to the excerpts that Simplicius incorporated into his commentaries on the *De caelo* and the *Physics*.[4] The explicit goal of the *Contra Aristotelem* was to demonstrate that the world is perishable. The criticism of Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth body was regarded as a necessary step toward this goal. Interestingly enough, Simplicius suggests that this criticism was the result of a reworking, if not even outright plagiarism, of the objections advanced by Xenarchus.[5] But it is not obvious that Philoponus stole part of his objections from Xenarchus – at least not on the basis of the information preserved by Simplicius.[6] In addition, it is far from clear that Xenarchus' criticism had the ambition of being a systematic demolition of Aristotle's physics of the sort attempted by Philoponus. Consequently, we should refrain from projecting what we know about Philoponus back onto Xenarchus and his criticism of Aristotle.

By the time Simplicius wrote his commentary on the *De caelo*, Xenarchus already stood as an outsider within the commentary tradition. It is telling, I think, that Xenarchus is never described by Simplicius as a Peripatetic philosopher. Embedded in the pro-Aristotelian exegesis that

[4] For a collection and translation of the "fragments" of the *Contra Aristotelem*, see Wildberg (1987).

[5] Simplicius, *In DC* 25.22–25, 26.31–3, and 42.19–20. For a study of the rhetorical apparatus used by Simplicius in his polemical engagement with Philoponus, see Hoffmann (1987): 183–221.

[6] Cf. Wildberg (1988): 109–111 and 136. It is, nevertheless, safe to assume that Xenarchus' criticism of Aristotle was known to Philoponus. See Wildberg (1988): 110: "the fact that neither the fragments of the *Contra Aristotelem* nor any of the other works of Philoponus mention Xenarchus explicitly may suggest that he never used Xenarchus' polemic directly. Nevertheless, it is certain that the arguments were known to him at least through Alexander's commentary on the *De caelo*."

ultimately goes back to Alexander of Aphrodisias and his commentary on the *De caelo*, Xenarchus appears to be anti-Aristotelian. In reality, Xenarchus was neither pro- nor anti-Aristotelian. He was simply impervious to this dichotomy. This brings me back to the importance of looking at all the extant evidence concerning Xenarchus, including the evidence that goes beyond his criticism of the fifth substance. Xenarchus engaged not only with Aristotle's physics but also with Aristotle's ethics and Aristotle's psychology. Interestingly enough, in the case of Aristotle's ethics, this engagement did not result in a rejection of Aristotle's thought. Rather, it resulted in an attempt to make this thought hospitable to the doctrine of the first appropriate thing (*prôton oikeion*). Although it seems to have been introduced by the Stoics, the idea that we are born with a pre-rational tendency toward something that belongs to us, motivates us, and explains our behavior is quite common in our sources. In this case, Xenarchus responded to theoretical pressures that were essentially post-Aristotelian by returning to Aristotle and developing an Aristotelian doctrine of the *prôton oikeion* out of Aristotle's treatment of love (*philia*).

In the *Vorwort* to the first volume of his superb history of Aristotelianism from the first century BCE to the beginning of the third century CE, Paul Moraux describes this segment of the Aristotelian tradition as striving for orthodoxy.[7] This interpretation was anticipated in the Charles De Koninck lectures that Moraux delivered at Laval University in the Spring of 1969.[8] His first lecture, 'Trois siècles d'aristotélisme grec', is a crisply clear introduction to the narrative of his monumental *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen*. In this lecture, Moraux describes post-Hellenistic Aristotelianism as a period of orthodoxy.[9] By his lights, the intense exegetical labor on the text of Aristotle that began in the first century BCE eventually culminated in an orthodox interpretation of Aristotle. Moraux does not stop to define what he means by an orthodox interpretation of Aristotle, but it is fairly clear that he has in mind the interpretation defended by Alexander of Aphrodisias. One problem with this narrative is its teleological character. What may be perceived by us as an orthodox interpretation of Aristotle is in place only at the end of a process that unfolded over a period of three centuries. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the earlier exegetical work on Aristotle's writings, to the extent that it can be reconstructed from our sources, contributes greatly to our understanding of Alexander of Aphrodisias and his interpretative goals. Alexander was

[7] Moraux (1973): xii–xx, especially xvi–xvii.
[8] These lectures are published in Moraux (1970).
[9] Moraux (1970): 17. Cf. Moraux (1973): xvii.

not only aware of the first-century engagement with Aristotle; he was also in an intense and fruitful conversation with the Peripatetic interpreters of Aristotle whose activity is to be placed in the first century BCE. In fact, some of his most distinctive and influential views are best explained as direct responses to the early discussions of Aristotle.[10] On the other hand, it is far from clear that the engagement with Aristotle in the first century BCE is best understood in light of what is achieved by Alexander of Aphrodisias in the late second and early third centuries CE. More directly, it is not obvious that the early engagement with Aristotle was motivated by a concern for orthodoxy. For one thing, it is not obvious what might have constituted orthodoxy in the first century BCE. We know very little about the Hellenistic Peripatos, but the little we know strongly suggests that the Peripatetic tradition in Hellenistic time was rich, complex, and open to a variety of philosophical positions. I hope to be able to show that openness to a variety of philosophical positions remained a conspicuous feature of the post-Hellenistic Peripatos by looking at the case of Xenarchus of Seleucia.[11]

In *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen* Xenarchus is cast as a figure of opposition within the Aristotelian tradition. It is telling that the title chosen by Paul Moraux for the chapter on Xenarchus is *Die innere Opposition*. This role makes Xenarchus a voice that stands out from the chorus, or even a rebel challenging Aristotle's authority. But it also creates a slight distortion of reality in at least two ways. First, it may seem to us that his criticism of Aristotle is a point of tension within the Aristotelian tradition because of the reception of this criticism in the commentary tradition. However, there is no evidence that Xenarchus, even when he is opposing Aristotle as in the case of the fifth substance, regarded his activity as a rebellion against the Aristotelian establishment. Second, there is more to Xenarchus and to his philosophical activity than a mere opposition to Aristotle. Xenarchus was a creative philosopher. His views are best understood as an attempt to revise Aristotle's philosophy and thus improve on it. At times this revision may result in a break with this philosophy. But even when Xenarchus

[10] This interpretation is developed in connection with Alexander's doctrine of the substantiality of the *eidos* in Rashed (2007).

[11] I am pleased to see that Sharples has accepted my point on the dangers of reading back into the first century BCE the philosophical concerns that may have motivated Alexander of Aphrodisias. See Sharples (2010): 3. I note, in passing, that very few scholars have resisted adopting the powerful narrative proposed by Paul Moraux. For a notable exception, see Donini (1978): 237–251. In the second volume of *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen*, Moraux introduced the distinction between *de facto* orthodoxy and intentional orthodoxy. Cf. Moraux (1984): xxi–xxii. But I do not see how this distinction is a step toward addressing the problem I have highlighted.

breaks with Aristotle's philosophy, his break is always the consequence of a serious engagement with Aristotle's works. This engagement is the most conspicuous aspect of Xenarchus' philosophical activity. It strongly suggests that the home for this activity is the post-Hellenistic return to Aristotle. Hans Gottschalk has argued that this return to Aristotle was hospitable to both change and continuity.[12] In the pages to come, by looking at how Xenarchus negotiated different aspects of Aristotle's philosophy, I try to highlight not only elements of rupture but also strands of continuity within the Aristotelian tradition.

Part I of this study introduces the reader to the historical and philosophical significance of Xenarchus' work. I begin with a discussion of his affiliation to the Peripatetic school. I use this discussion as a framework for a brief presentation of the surviving evidence, so as to give a synoptic view of his activity in all areas of philosophy. In this context, I offer a reconstruction of Xenarchus' revision of Aristotle's doctrine of natural motion.

All the extant evidence concerning Xenarchus' life and work is collected in Part II, which contains all the relevant Greek texts as well as English translations and a set of explanatory notes; the testimonies are arranged as [T1], [T2], etc. – see the list on pp. 55–57. I have not attempted to offer a new critical edition of these texts; however, I have indicated in the footnotes where there are important textual variants in a textual tradition.

Xenarchus' objections to the doctrine of the fifth substance presuppose direct attention to the text of the *De caelo*. To help the reader in the study of these objections, I have offered a translation of Aristotle's arguments for the existence of a celestial simple body in addition to the four sublunary elements. Where possible I have indicated how the objections raised by Xenarchus relate to the arguments by printing in italics the relevant portion of text.

I have refrained from distinguishing between testimonies and fragments because all the putative fragments come from the book that Xenarchus wrote against Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth substance. As we are not able to reconstruct a text that is independent of Simplicius' citations, it is simply impossible to evaluate how many liberties Simplicius took in reporting Xenarchus' words. The fact that Simplicius introduces some of his citations with *phêsi* (*legei* or even *graphei*) is significant but does not suffice by itself to establish that we are reading the actual words of Xenarchus.[13]

[12] Gottschalk (1997): 109–115.

[13] The same point can be made with respect to Simplicius as a source of information for Alexander's commentary on the *De caelo* (or, for that matter, Philoponus' *Contra Aristotelem*). There are a

Things are complicated by the fact that the commentary tradition is by its very nature derivative. In the case of Xenarchus, Simplicius derived most, if not all, of his information from Alexander of Aphrodisias. But this does not mean, I hasten to add, that this information is to be treated with suspicion. Simplicius has a reputation for being a scrupulous and accurate witness. In the absence of indications to the contrary, there is no reason to doubt that he proceeded with the same scrupulousness and accuracy in the case of Xenarchus. In other words, his citations are neither literal quotations nor unfaithful paraphrases. Rather, they are reliable testimonies. In light of these considerations, I have also refrained from setting out the putative words of Xenarchus from their embedding. Such editorial practice would have fortified the impression that we can extract the actual words of Xenarchus from the fabric of Simplicius' commentary.

Since the emphasis of this study is not – and cannot be – on recovering the actual words of Xenarchus, but is rather on understanding the historical and philosophical significance of his views, the analysis of the extant evidence is followed by three short essays in Part III, and a conclusion. In the first essay, entitled "Xenarchus and the reception of Aristotle's physics in antiquity," I return to the reception of Aristotle's physics by Xenarchus. I contend that the novelty and audacity of Aristotle's physics are fully revealed by investigating the often mixed reception of this physics in the early stages of the Peripatetic tradition. If recovering Xenarchus' actual words may be difficult, if not even impossible, tracing the influence of his criticism of the doctrine of the fifth substance is not only possible, but it is also important for a study of the development of a specific segment of the commentary tradition. This is why both the second and the third essay are concerned with the *fortuna* of Xenarchus in antiquity and beyond. The second essay, "Xenarchus and Plotinus," deals with the reception of Xenarchus' revision of Aristotle's doctrine of natural motion. This revision was quite successful in late antiquity. It provided the conceptual resources to incorporate the Aristotelian notions of natural place and natural motion into a conception of the sensible world informed by Plato's *Timaeus*, while at the same time disposing of Aristotle's thesis that the heavens are made of a special simple body. Note that I am not saying that Xenarchus shared the conception

few passages where Simplicius claims that he is quoting the actual words of Alexander (or those of Philoponus). Unfortunately we rarely have an independent way to evaluate how accurate his quotations are. For an illuminating study of the ancient art of (mis)quotation, I refer the reader to Whittaker (1989): 63–95. For an examination of the particular way in which Simplicius marks his quotations, see Wildberg (1993): 187–199. A discussion of the role that quotations play in Simplicius' exegetical activity can be found in Baltussen (2002b): 174–189.

of the natural world informed by the *Timaeus*. I am only saying that his revision of Aristotle's theory of natural motion was endorsed by philosophers who regarded themselves as Platonists and accepted a conception of the natural world that is best understood in light of what Plato says in the *Timaeus*. The third essay, entitled "Vestiges of Xenarchus in the Middle Ages," introduces the reader to the subsequent reception of Xenarchus' objections against the doctrine of the fifth substance. In the conclusion, I return to the question of the place of Xenarchus in the Peripatetic tradition and the nature of his Aristotelianism.

I would like to end with a note on my terminology. In this introduction, as well as in the rest of the book, I often use the label "post-Hellenistic" to describe philosophy in the first century BCE. Some may find this label empty or find that it has negative connotations. I find it useful to the extent that it conveys the message that the concerns motivating the philosophical activity in the first century BCE have their origins in the Hellenistic period but are addressed in a new way. What is new is that these concerns are addressed by way of a critical engagement with Aristotle and Plato. In other words, it is in the first century BCE that Aristotle and Plato begin to be regarded as philosophical authorities. The attempt to explain the transition to a new era by invoking the notion of authority is not new.[14] In the pages to come, I try to elaborate on this idea by looking at the evidence concerning Xenarchus and his critical engagement with Aristotle. For the time being, I am content to stress that when I speak of Aristotle as a philosophical authority, I am invoking a relatively thin concept of authority. More explicitly, so far as Xenarchus is concerned, there is emphatically no evidence that his critical engagement with Aristotle was grounded in, or linked to, a view about Aristotle's infallibility.[15]

[14] See, for instance, Frede (1999): 782–785. On Plato's *auctoritas*, I refer the reader to Sedley (1997): 110–129. In passing, I note that philosophers were, relatively speaking, slow in finding their authorities. In other fields of knowledge, critical engagement with authorities began much earlier. In the medical tradition, for example, Hippocratic exegesis started as early as the third century BCE. For a survey of the evidence concerning the critical engagement with Hippocrates in the third and second centuries BCE, see von Staden (2006): 15–47.

[15] For the emergence of a thick concept of philosophical authority, see Boys-Stones (2001): 102–105; 115–122. Boys-Stones studies the way in which, starting in the first century CE, Platonists attributed authority to Plato. His claim is that, with respect to Plato, authority did not just mean the right to be taken seriously; it also meant the unquestioned possession of the truth (104). This concept of authority implied infallibility. It also implied an argument for the unique position that Plato has in the history of philosophy. Boys-Stones sees the origin of this argument in the notion that Plato is authoritative because he has better (i.e. more direct) access to an original (i.e. ancient) wisdom.

PART I