

## IMMORTAL OR EVERLASTING? BOOK 3 OF THE COMMENTARY ON ARISTOTLE'S *DE ANIMA* ASCRIBED TO PHILOPONUS\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article focusses on a hitherto underappreciated distinction between immortality and everlastingness in a Greek commentary of disputed authorship on Aristotle's De anima Book 3. This article argues that this distinction calls into question the attribution of the commentary to Philoponus.*

**Keywords:** Philoponus; Aristotle; *De anima*; immortality; everlastingness; authorship; ancient commentary

The authorship of the two commentaries on Aristotle's *De anima* Book 3 has long been controversial.<sup>1</sup> The first is a Greek version printed in the *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* (hereafter *CAG*) vol. 15; the second, a Latin translation of a lost Greek commentary on *De an.* 3.4–8, made by William of Moerbeke (traditionally known as the *De intellectu*).<sup>2</sup> According to the traditional view, the first, though often transmitted under the name of John Philoponus, is by Stephanus of Alexandria; the second (Latin) version is a translation of Philoponus' commentary on *De an.* 3.4–8, which is actually an ἀπό φωνῆς commentary derived from the lectures of Ammonius, with Philoponus' own ἐπιστάσεις (critical observations or criticisms),<sup>3</sup> just as the Greek commentary on *De anima* Books 1 and 2 printed in *CAG* vol. 15. Therefore, scholars generally do not take the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3 into consideration when they discuss Philoponus' philosophy, calling the author of this commentary 'Ps.-Philoponus' or

\* I am most grateful to John Dillon for valuable suggestions; and to *CQ*'s Editor and the anonymous reader for their helpful comments. This paper was supported by the Zhishan Young Scholars Programme of Southeast University.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. W. Charlton, *Philoponus: On Aristotle On the Intellect (de Anima 3.4–8)* (London, 1991), 1–12; W. Charlton, 'Philoponus': *On Aristotle On the Soul 3.1–8* (London, 2000), 1–12; P. Lautner, 'Philoponus, in *De anima* 3: quest for an author', *CQ* 42 (1992), 510–22. D. Searby, 'Stéphanos d'Alexandrie', in R. Goulet (ed.), *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques VI* (Paris, 2016), 439–55, at 442–5 and A. Kakavelaki, 'The authorship of Philoponus' *Commentary On the Soul iii*', *AncPhil* 42 (2022), 291–301, at 291–6 review earlier literature.

<sup>2</sup> Fragments from the lost Greek model have been discovered by C. Steel, 'Newly discovered scholia from Philoponus' lost commentary on *De anima* III', *RecTh* 84 (2017), 223–43; cf. C. Steel and B. Strobel, *Ioannes Philoponos, Kommentar zu Aristoteles, "De anima" III: Quellen zur Rekonstruktion des verlorenen griechischen Textes* (Berlin, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> This fact, unfortunately, was often neglected until Golitsis and Sorabji made it explicit, together with the new proposal: P. Golitsis, 'John Philoponus' commentary on the third book of Aristotle's *De anima*, wrongly attributed to Stephanus', in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Re-Interpreted: New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London, 2016), 393–412; P. Golitsis, 'Μετά των ιδίων ἐπιστάσεων: John Philoponus as an editor of Ammonius' lectures', in P. Golitsis and K. Ierodiakonou (edd.), *Aristotle and his Commentators* (Berlin and Boston, 2019), 167–93; R. Sorabji, 'Dating of Philoponus' commentaries on Aristotle and of his divergence from his teacher Ammonius', in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Re-Interpreted: New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London, 2016), 367–92. As a result, most earlier scholars think that the *De intellectu* simply reflects Philoponus' own position; the same holds true for the commentator of the Greek commentary on *De anima* Books 1 and 2 printed in *CAG* vol. 15.

‘Stephanus’. However, recently Golitsis and Sorabji have argued that the Greek version of Book 3 is by Philoponus himself, while emphasizing the often-overlooked fact that the Latin version is made up of Philoponus’ notes taken at the lectures of Ammonius, with the addition of Philoponus’ ἐπιστάσεις. Therefore, they conclude that the Latin version reflects Ammonius’ views, whereas the Greek version should be treated as Philoponus speaking in his own voice.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I focus on a hitherto-neglected but idiosyncratic distinction made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> (this is how I indicate the author of the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3), which cannot be held by the real Philoponus. This tells against the attribution of the authorship of the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3 printed in *CAG* vol. 15 to Philoponus himself.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to address a methodological concern. One may object that there is no need to focus on this idiosyncratic distinction, because our commentator could be merely explaining a piece of text, and need not himself adopt this distinction and its implications. It may be further claimed that the positions of Philoponus<sup>G</sup> (or of any other ancient commentators) are conditioned by ‘the expository nature of commentary’ and by the audience.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> can offer an interpretation without accepting it. However, there is hardly any textual evidence where an ancient commentator is just explaining the text without adopting that exegesis. Since it is natural to believe that an ancient commentator should accept—at least from a philosophical point of view—an interpretation proposed by him, the burden of proof lies upon those who deny this point.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if this scepticism is pressed too hard, there will be a danger of underrating the philosophical value of ancient commentaries and the philosophical sincerity of ancient commentators.

Admittedly, Philoponus once suggests that a commentator should first (πρῶτα) interpret the doctrines of Aristotle, and then (ἔπειτα) go on to give his own judgement on how things actually are (Phlp. *in Cat.* 6.30–5).<sup>7</sup> But this contention does not imply that Philoponus himself would simply provide an interpretation without passing his own judgement about the truth of it. This is particularly not the case for the commentary on *De anima* Book 3, if it were by Philoponus himself. Philoponus<sup>G</sup> takes issue with Aristotle openly in Book 3, contending that Aristotle was simply wrong, when he does not accept Aristotle’s positions.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, if Philoponus<sup>G</sup> (whether the real Philoponus or not) were merely explaining Aristotle’s text without being committed to this strange distinction, he must have posited his objections explicitly, as is his custom. As noted below, however, there is no hint in the immediate context that

<sup>4</sup> Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]); Sorabji (n. 3). Although the attribution to Philoponus has been defended (e.g. by Lautner [n. 1]), most people still ascribe this commentary to Stephanus. See also Kavelaki (n. 1) for a defence of Philoponus’ authorship.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sorabji (n. 3), 367; R. Sorabji, ‘Introduction to the second edition: new findings on Philoponus’, in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Philoponus and the Rejection of Aristotelian Science* (London, 2010<sup>2</sup>), 1–40, at 15.

<sup>6</sup> Elias, David and Stephanus might have been Christians while also holding pagan philosophical views in their commentaries on Aristotle. But this does not imply that these Neoplatonic commentators merely pay lip service to pagan doctrines in their philosophical exegeses, since one’s religious beliefs need not always interfere with their philosophical ideas. See L.G. Westerink, *Prolégomènes à la philosophie de Platon* (Paris, 1990), xxxvi, xxxviii; also Elias, *in Cat.* 122.28–32.

<sup>7</sup> See P. Golitsis, ‘Simplicius and Philoponus on the authority of Aristotle’, in A. Falcon (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristotle in Antiquity* (Leiden, 2016), 419–38, at 434–5. Similar claims can be found in other ancient commentaries on the *Categories*: e.g. Ammon. *in Cat.* 8.11–19; Simpl. *in Cat.* 7.23–32; Elias, *in Cat.* 122.25–123.11.

<sup>8</sup> Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 406, 411; cf. *in De an.* 464.13–14, 466.27–35.

Philoponus<sup>G</sup> does not accept this distinction; and this distinction is related to the immortality of the soul and the Neoplatonic intelligible triad—not trivial issues in the Neoplatonic tradition—so Philoponus<sup>G</sup> would hardly omit his disagreement if he refused to adopt the distinction. Arguably, this is an argument *ex silentio*; but since this distinction concerns significant issues in Neoplatonism, employing an argument *ex silentio* would not be illegitimate here. Therefore, it is unreasonable to hold that Philoponus<sup>G</sup> was just offering an interpretation of Aristotle's words without accepting this idiosyncratic distinction.

## I

At the beginning of his commentary on *De an.* 3.5, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> provides a doxography of four different views on the intellect, which more or less corresponds to the *De intellectu*.<sup>9</sup> When criticizing others' views, he makes a remarkable distinction between 'being immortal (ἀθάνατος)' and 'being everlasting (ἀίδιος)' (*in De an.* 537.2–7, transl. Charlton, modified):<sup>10</sup>

He [Aristotle] does well to add that intellect is 'immortal and everlasting' (τὸ ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀίδιον). For the non-rational soul also and the vegetative soul are immortal, but they are not everlasting. For they bring along life, and nothing receives the contrary of what it brings along, so it follows that if they have life they are also immortal. They are not, however, everlasting. A thing is called 'everlasting' for being always in existence (κατὰ τὸ ἀεὶ ὑπάρχειν), but 'immortal' for being always living (κατὰ τὸ ἀεὶ ζῆν). So intellect alone of the things in us is both always in existence and always living; the non-rational soul and the vegetative soul are always alive but not always in existence.

Similarly, when Philoponus<sup>G</sup> is later commenting on *De an.* 3.5, 430a23, where Aristotle characterizes the active intellect as immortal and everlasting, he again appeals to the same distinction (*in De an.* 541.5–13, transl. Charlton, modified):

[430a23 And this alone is immortal and everlasting.]

Look! Again he [Aristotle] states another property: intellect is immortal and everlasting. By 'this alone' he means [alone] of the constituents of the human being. For only this is everlasting and immortal. For the non-rational soul and the vegetative soul, as has been said, are immortal but not everlasting. They are called 'immortal' even if he is of the opinion that they are destructible (κἄν φθαρητὴ δοξάζηται), since it is not by virtue of being soul that they are destroyed (οὐ καθὸ ψυχῆ φθείρεται) but by virtue of them being in a body (καθὸ ἐν σώματι). For that reason Plato too says that all soul (πάσαν ψυχήν) is immortal [*Phdr.* 245c5], saying this of the vegetative soul and the non-rational soul too. Matter, in contrast, is everlasting but not immortal (ἢ δὲ ὕλη τὸ ἀνάπαλιν ἀίδιος μὲν, οὐκ ἀθάνατος δέ). That is why intellect is said to be imperishable as it is also said to be everlasting and immortal.

In these passages Philoponus<sup>G</sup> calls for a clear-cut distinction between 'being immortal' and 'being everlasting', which has no parallel in the *De intellectu* (cf. 60.60–5).

<sup>9</sup> The four views are attributed to Alexander, Marinus, Plotinus and Plutarch of Athens. For this doxography, see H.J. Blumenthal, 'Neoplatonic elements in the *De anima* commentaries', in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), 305–24, at 311–20.

<sup>10</sup> I render ἀίδιος 'everlasting', αἰώνιος 'eternal': M. Share, *Philoponus: Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World 1–5* (London, 2004), 7; I.L.E. Ramelli and D. Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidios in Classical and Christian Texts* (Piscataway, 2013), especially 14–28.

According to him, ‘what is immortal’ means ‘being always living’, ‘what is everlasting’ means ‘being always in existence’. More importantly, these two notions are independent from each other: one thing can be immortal without being everlasting, and one thing can also be everlasting without being immortal, as Philoponus<sup>G</sup> indicates explicitly.<sup>11</sup> It is this non-entailing relationship between ‘what is immortal’ and ‘what is everlasting’ that gives rise to our problem.

This distinction has roots in Plato’s *Phaedo*, where a confusion may exist between ‘what is immortal’ and ‘what is indestructible’.<sup>12</sup> Although Socrates in the final argument of the *Phaedo* defends the proposition that the soul would not admit death, and thus is immortal, one may wonder whether the soul would be destructible in any way, so that it cannot be always in existence and cannot be everlasting. To put it another way, by establishing the immortality of the soul, Socrates may succeed in demonstrating that the soul will never die *per se*, but it is less clear as to whether Socrates also succeeds in blocking the possibility that the soul might die *per accidens*.<sup>13</sup> This worry in the *Phaedo* has provoked further debates in later Peripatetics and Platonists, such as Strato, the Peripatetic Boethus, Porphyry and Damascius.<sup>14</sup> The important lesson is that there was no other Platonist (or the Neoplatonists particularly) in antiquity who would accept this distinction between ‘what is immortal’ and ‘what is indestructible’, as it is made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>. On the contrary, they defend the thesis that immortality amounts to indestructibility. Generally, according to the ancient Platonists (especially the Neoplatonists), what is immortal should also be everlasting and indestructible: thus Proclus in his *Elements of Theology*, and he adds that ‘what is everlasting’ does not always amount to immortal (§105, transl. Dodds, modified):

All that is immortal is everlasting; but not all that is everlasting is immortal.

For if the immortal is that which always participates Life, and such participation of Life involves participation of Being [see Prop. 101], then the ever-living is ever existent (καὶ τὸ ἀεὶ ζῶν ἀεὶ ἔσται): thus whatever is immortal is everlasting (τὸ ἀθάνατον πᾶν αἰδίου), the immortal being that which excludes death and is ever-living, while the everlasting is that which excludes not-being and is ever existent.

But if there exist many things both above life and below it which are ever existent but insusceptible of the predicate ‘immortal’, then the everlasting is not of necessity immortal. Now it is plain that there are many things ever existent but not immortal: some are devoid of life although ever existent and imperishable (ἀεὶ δὲ ὄντα καὶ ἀνώλεθρα). For as Being is to

<sup>11</sup> One may wonder whether ‘even if’ (καὶν) at *in De an.* 541.9 indicates that Philoponus<sup>G</sup> was only making a concession here, and did not actually accept this distinction. However, the first passage and the overall context of this passage go against this interpretation: Philoponus<sup>G</sup> believed that one thing can be regarded as immortal while also being destructible.

<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, ‘what is indestructible (ἀνώλεθρος or ἄφθορος)’ does not necessarily amount to ‘what is everlasting’. See Ramelli and Konstan (n. 10), 14–17 for further discussions. However, the ancient Platonists deny this possibility and simply regard ‘being indestructible’ as having the same connotation as ‘being everlasting’ (cf. e.g. *Pl. Resp.* 546a1–4, *Phdr.* 245c6–246a2; also *Arist. Cael.* 282a30–283b22).

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the formulation from S. Menn, ‘Self-motion and reflection: Hermias and Proclus on the harmony of Plato and Aristotle on the soul’, in J. Wilberding and C. Horn (edd.), *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature* (New York, 2012), 44–67, at 62.

<sup>14</sup> See D. O’Brien, “‘Immortel’ et ‘impérissable’ dans le *Phédon* de Platon”, *LJPT* 1 (2007), 109–262. For later debates in antiquity, see e.g. G. Karamanolis, ‘Porphyry’s notion of *empsychia*’, in G. Karamanolis and A. Sheppard (edd.), *Studies on Porphyry* (London, 2007), 91–109; S. Gertz, *Death and Immortality in Late Neoplatonism* (Leiden, 2011), 143–70; F. Trabattani, ‘Boéthos de Sidon et l’immortalité de l’âme dans le *Phédon*’, in R. Chiaradonna and M. Rashed (edd.), *Boéthos de Sidon – Exégète d’Aristote et philosophe* (Berlin and Boston, 2020), 337–59, at 346–59.

Life, so is the everlasting to the immortal, since immortality is inalienable (ἀναφάρετος) Life and inalienable Being is everlastingness; but Being is more comprehensive than Life: therefore, everlastingness is more comprehensive than immortality.

According to Proclus' intelligible triad of 'Being—Life—Intellect' (probably first formalized by Porphyry),<sup>15</sup> it is not difficult to understand that everything immortal will be everlasting, but not vice versa. Although Proclus has also appealed to Pl. *Leg.* 904a8—according to which the combination of body and soul is indestructible (ἀνώλεθρον) but not eternal (οὐκ αἰώνιον)—several times in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, his point is rather that the soul is not *eternal* (αἰώνιος, which implies a kind of non-temporal eternity), rather than not *everlasting* (ἀίδιος, my focus here).<sup>16</sup> However, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> agrees to hold that the soul can be immortal without being always existent. This point, which violates Proclus' proposition, can hardly be accepted or defended by the late Neoplatonists, who largely adhere to Proclus' basic ontological scheme.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, the distinction proposed by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> would make him sound like the Peripatetic Boethus, whose view—as is reported by Ps.-Simplicius' commentary on the *De anima*<sup>18</sup>—can never be accepted by a Neoplatonist.<sup>19</sup> As argued above, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> would not merely explain the text from a Peripatetic point of view without adopting the distinction himself, because he does not shy away from criticizing Aristotle openly in his commentary on *De anima* Book 3 when he disagrees with Aristotle's views. The passage on Boethus runs as follows (Ps.-Simpl. in *De an.* 247.23–8, transl. Blumenthal, modified):

He [Aristotle] has done well to add 'everlasting', as Plato added 'indestructible' in the *Phaedo* [106d2–4], so that we should not, like Boethus, think (ἵνα μὴ ὡς ὁ Βοηθῶς οἰηθῶμεν) that the soul, like the *empsychia*, is immortal in so far as it does not stand firm in the face of advancing death, but departs when death advances on what is alive and is destroyed (ἀπόλλυσθαι). But why 'and this alone is everlasting'? It is because, as he indicates clearly, the passible intellect is perishable (φθαρτός).

Here Boethus is reported to question the immortality of the soul.<sup>20</sup> And it seems that neither Ps.-Simplicius nor his sources (most likely Porphyry) would agree with

<sup>15</sup> Procl. in *Ti.* 3.64.8–65.7; D. Baltzly, *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 5, Book 4: Proclus on Time and the Stars* (Cambridge, 2013), 129 n. 245. If so, then Porphyry may have already established Proclus' idea that everything immortal must also be everlasting, but not vice versa. Cf. J.M. Dillon, 'The early history of the noetic triad', in D. Calma (ed.), *Reading Proclus and the Book of Causes, Volume 3: On Causes and the Noetic Triad* (Leiden, 2022), 391–405.

<sup>16</sup> 1.235.17–19, 2.99.29–30, 2.125.8–9, 2.148.30, 3.59.12–13. See D. Baltzly, *Proclus. Commentary on Plato's Timaeus: Volume 3, Book 3: Proclus on the World's Body* (Cambridge, 2007), 162 n. 320.

<sup>17</sup> One may propose that, unlike the Athenian Neoplatonists, some late Alexandrian Neoplatonists forget or even abandon Proclus' metaphysical system. It is possible that these Alexandrian Neoplatonists did not adopt all the complexities of Proclus' metaphysical system, but it is unlikely that they would also leave behind the basic triad 'Being—Life—Intellect'.

<sup>18</sup> Although there always exist dissenters, I assume that this commentary is not composed by Simplicius.

<sup>19</sup> The early Stoics hold a similar position, contending that the intra-cosmic gods, such as the sun and the moon, are both immortal (do not admit death) and perishable (will be destroyed at a conflagration): A.G. Long, 'The immortal and the imperishable in Aristotle, early Stoicism, and Epicureanism', in A.G. Long (ed.), *Immortality in Ancient Philosophy* (New York, 2021), 118–42, at 134–40.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Karamanolis (n. 14) for a discussion of this passage. If we follow his interpretation, then the distinction between the soul and the *empsychia* characterized here is similar to the distinction between 'by virtue of being soul' (καθὸ ψυχή) and 'by virtue of being in a body' (καθὸ ἐν σώματι) proposed by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> at in *De an.* 541.10. Cf. also H.B. Gottschalk, 'Boethus'

Boethus' view. First, this distinction between 'what is immortal' and 'what is everlasting' is brought up for a 'preventive' function in this passage: it is raised by the commentator as a warning, in case anyone misunderstands Aristotle's point as something being immortal without being everlasting.<sup>21</sup> Thus the commentator declares approvingly that Aristotle and Plato did well to add a further clarification in blocking a possible objection. Second, Ps.-Simplicius earlier mentioned that the active intellect 'is shown not only to be incapable of receiving death and destruction but also to be predominantly the bearer of life and being, and *thereby immortal too*' (ζωῆς τε καὶ οὐσίας οἰστικὸν καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἀθάνατον, Ps.-Simpl. in *De an.* 246.39–247.2, transl. Blumenthal, my emphasis; cf. Ps.-Simpl. in *De an.* 247.7–13). Here, for Ps.-Simplicius, being indestructible amounts to being immortal. Furthermore, it is implausible that Porphyry would explicitly accept that only the rational soul is both immortal and everlasting, while the lower soul can be immortal but non-everlasting.<sup>22</sup> That being said, one may propose that, when Porphyry and other Neoplatonists speak of 'immortality', they use that term to mean 'being both immortal and everlasting', whereas they would consider 'what is immortal but not everlasting' as 'being mortal'. Although there do exist some pieces of evidence for an understanding of 'immortality' in different senses, discussed below, no Neoplatonist has made such a bold move as the one made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>. And he did not mention the different senses of immortality, but spoke as if the distinction was made without qualification.<sup>23</sup> It would thus be artificial to apply this distinction made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> back to Porphyry and other Neoplatonists, since we can hardly find any evidence for interpreting it in this way.

Therefore, it is hard to believe that Philoponus himself—imbued as he is with the Neoplatonic tradition—would make such a distinction, treating 'immortal' and 'everlasting' as independent notions. And this doctrinal concern will cast serious doubts on the recent attribution, according to which Philoponus<sup>G</sup> should be identified as the real Philoponus. However, one may object that as an 'unorthodox' and innovative Neoplatonist, Philoponus can easily go beyond the conventional Neoplatonist view and deny what Proclus has said in the *Elements of Theology*; after all, he wrote the *De aeternitate mundi contra Proclum*. One may thus further claim that Philoponus might agree that something can be immortal without being always existent.

## II

However, it is implausible that Philoponus would insist on this distinction, even if he was a highly original philosopher. To begin with, if the real Philoponus were adopting

psychology and the Neoplatonists', *Phronesis* 31 (1986), 243–57, at 245–6, 248–9; Trabattani (n. 14), 349–54 on Boethus' position.

<sup>21</sup> One might think that Porphyry (Ps.-Simplicius' source here) and Boethus could agree that something can be immortal (in an attenuated sense) without being indestructible, but Porphyry criticizes Boethus as equating the soul with the *empsychia*; cf. Karamanolis (n. 14), 96. However, Porphyry finds fault with Boethus on both points: Boethus is not only wrong in equating the soul with the *empsychia*, because only the former is immortal while the latter is mortal and destructible, he is also wrong in thinking that one thing can be called immortal without being indestructible.

<sup>22</sup> The report from Proclus on Porphyry's view on the immortality of the soul at *in Ti.* 3.234.18–32 (cf. also Iamblich. *De an.* §37; Dam. *in Phd.* I.177) does not imply such a distinction: see J.M. Dillon, *Iamblichus Chalcidensis In Platonis dialogos commentariorum fragmenta* (Leiden, 1973), 272–3 on this testimony.

<sup>23</sup> If Philoponus<sup>G</sup> did intend the different senses of immortality, his otherwise clear line of reasoning would be muddled or even in danger of equivocation.



this distinction, then we would at least expect him to employ it more broadly; yet we cannot find it in his other undisputed commentaries on Aristotle. Moreover, in his polemics against Proclus in his *De aeternitate mundi*, Philoponus could have played on this distinction, at least dialectically, to object to Proclus' view that the universe would never perish. For instance, in the seventeenth argument of Proclus, Philoponus reports Proclus' argument as follows (*De aet.* §17, 589.21–590.8, transl. Wilberding):

For He [the Demiurge] is a creator, Plato says [*Ti.* 41c2–3], of immortal things, and what is immortal is imperishable (τὸ δὲ ἀθάνατον ἀνώλεθρον), as is said in the *Phaedo* [106d2–4]: something else could hardly be imperishable, if what is immortal were not of this sort, said Cebes, and Socrates agreed. If, then, the universe which has come to be by the agency of the creator is imperishable (for what comes to be by Him is immortal, and that means imperishable [τοῦτο δ' ἀνώλεθρον]), it must also be ungenerated on account of what has been shown to follow from the two principles above, of which the first is 'Everything generated is destructible' and the second is 'Everything ungenerated is indestructible'.

Proclus as reported by Philoponus did not adopt the distinction made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>; rather, he adhered to the idea that 'what is immortal' simply amounts to being 'imperishable and everlasting'. If we suppose that Philoponus<sup>G</sup> is the real Philoponus, then we expect that he would appeal to this distinction in his criticism, to the effect that, even if one grants that the universe is immortal, it does not imply that the universe will be imperishable, because not everything immortal would be everlasting and indestructible. However, Philoponus (*De aet.* §17.2–4) draws on a distinction between 'what is indestructible and immortal' by nature (ἐκ φύσεως) and 'what is indestructible and immortal' by acquisition (ἐκκτήτως), and does not distinguish 'what is indestructible' from 'what is immortal' explicitly (for example *De aet.* 596.1–10; cf. 599.12–16). Philoponus' distinction here may be based on Proclus' discussion of immortality and indissolubility (τὸ ἄλυτον)<sup>24</sup> at *in Ti.* 3.215.25–218.21. Here Proclus elaborates on the different senses of being immortal and being indissoluble. According to this scheme, being immortal in the primary sense means being immortal 'from within itself' (παρ' ἑαυτοῦ), and being immortal in the secondary sense (or 'not immortal', which is still different from 'mortal') means 'receives limitless life from another' (τὸ παρ' ἄλλου ζῶην ἄπειρον ὑποδεξόμενον). Similarly, what is indissoluble in the strict sense is so described by virtue of its simplicity (μετὰ ἀπλότητος), whereas what is indissoluble in the secondary sense is said to be so by virtue of its composition (μετὰ συνθέσεως) and is still not dissoluble in time. However, this understanding of immortality does not imply that Proclus would adopt such a clear-cut distinction between 'what is immortal' and 'what is everlasting' made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, which neglects the subtleties of immortality described above.

Let us return to whether Philoponus<sup>G</sup> could be the real Philoponus. According to Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, matter is everlasting but not immortal (*in De an.* 541.12). This view, if taken as Philoponus' own, sits uneasily with the chronology of his works. Suppose Philoponus<sup>G</sup> is the real Philoponus. According to Golitsis, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> refers back to Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Book 3,<sup>25</sup> and Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2 are composed earlier than his commentary on *Physics*

<sup>24</sup> There is no need to worry about the distinction between 'indissolubility' (τὸ ἄλυτον) and 'indestructibility' or 'imperishability' (τὸ ἀνώλεθρον or τὸ ἀφθαρτον), as it will not affect the point made by these commentators.

<sup>25</sup> Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 409–10; Golitsis (n. 3 [2019]), 182.

Book 3,<sup>26</sup> hence the commentary of Philoponus<sup>G</sup> on *De anima* Book 3 should be later than Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2. However, already in his commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2, Philoponus casts doubts on the everlastingness of matter. And he raises the possibility of the generation of matter (*in Phys.* 54.10–55.26, 191.9–192.2),<sup>27</sup> a view defended in great detail in his *De aeternitate mundi* (for example §11.9–15). Now, with regard to the problem of the generation of matter, how do we make the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3 fit into this chronology? It is unlikely that Philoponus would first raise the possibility of the generation of matter in his commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2, then forget it and accept the everlastingness of matter without hesitation in his commentary on the *De anima* (the everlastingness of matter at *in De an.* 541.12 is introduced as a further illustration of his exegesis; if the commentator already has doubts about the everlastingness of matter, he need not introduce it for the context which he comments on), and finally again defend the generation of matter in his *De aeternitate mundi*.

One may appeal to the notion of ἐπιστάσεις, maintaining that the passages on the generation of matter in Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2 were added by Philoponus after he finished his commentary on *De anima* Book 3 (that is, the Greek version printed in *CAG* vol. 15).<sup>28</sup> However, if this were so, it would be difficult to explain away the different attitude to Aristotle between Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2 and the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3. Philoponus' ἐπιστάσεις in the former commentary are milder than in the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3, where 'Aristotle's authority is repudiated'.<sup>29</sup> In Philoponus' commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2, when he shows his disagreement with Aristotle, he often uses expressions like 'but I say ...' or 'but we say ...',<sup>30</sup> without declaring that Aristotle is wrong. However, as noted above, in the commentary on *De anima* Book 3, Philoponus<sup>G</sup> often criticizes Aristotle overtly, claiming that Aristotle's view is simply false.<sup>31</sup> It is more reasonable to think that Philoponus' attitude to Aristotle (which may be indicative of his tone in different commentaries) becomes more critical, as he feels increasingly independent from the Alexandrian Neoplatonic school—if Philoponus' philosophy does evolve (whether or not his religious belief changes). If Philoponus' ἐπιστάσεις on the commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2 were added after he finished the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3, these ἐπιστάσεις would have been more extensive, and would have exhibited a more polemical attitude to Aristotle.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, there is no solid evidence that these

<sup>26</sup> Golitsis (n. 3 [2019]), 184–9, a view shared by Sorabji (n. 3), 391.

<sup>27</sup> See C. Osborne, *Philoponus: On Aristotle Physics 1.1–3* (London, 2006), 13–16; Sorabji (n. 3), 379; Golitsis (n. 3 [2019]), 187, 188 n. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Golitsis (n. 3 [2019]), 187–9; but he may not think that Philoponus' ἐπιστάσεις were added at a later time. K. Verrycken, 'The development of Philoponus' thought and its chronology', in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Transformed: The Ancient Commentators and their Influence* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), 233–74 proposes that Philoponus later revised his commentary in the light of his Christian beliefs, but Verrycken does not associate the notion of ἐπιστάσεις to his revision thesis particularly.

<sup>29</sup> As is put by Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 411.

<sup>30</sup> Osborne (n. 27), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 406, 411.

<sup>32</sup> Both Sorabji (n. 3), 391 and Golitsis (n. 3 [2019]), 193 put the commentary on *De anima* Book 3 later than almost all other commentaries. Apart from Philoponus' commentary on the *Meteorology*, generally treated as the latest, Sorabji puts the commentary on *De anima* Book 3 just before the commentary on *Physics* Book 4 (including the *Corollaries*), where Philoponus expressed his



ἐπιστώσεις on the generation of matter were added after the composition of the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3.<sup>33</sup>

I have argued that the distinction between ‘immortal’ and ‘everlasting’ made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> can hardly have been proposed by the real Philoponus. It cannot be found in his later polemical treatise against Proclus, nor in his commentaries on Aristotle. Moreover, the doctrine on the everlastingness of matter, introduced as an example of his exposition of this distinction, sits ill with the chronology of Philoponus’ works. However, one may contend that the view regarding the everlastingness of matter could be added cursorily by a pagan pupil (if he were a Christian, it would be strange for him to add an example which neither fitted his own worldview nor came from the mouth of his teacher) who made this very commentary; thus it did not reflect the position of Philoponus himself, who in this case was lecturing on the *De anima*. It is hard to exclude this possibility completely. However, if this were the case, then why did this pupil not tamper with other (perhaps more overt) Christian allusions in this commentary?<sup>34</sup>

### III

Finally, who is the author of this commentary? Should we return to the traditional view, attributing it to Stephanus, recently identified as Philoponus’ pupil and from the sixth century C.E.?<sup>35</sup> I prefer to leave this question open. Granted Golitsis’s arguments (n. 3 [2016]) for the attribution to the real Philoponus, we can submit that the author used Philoponus’ materials, but also reworked the commentary to the extent that his product would no longer be considered as an ἀπὸ φωνῆς commentary derived from Philoponus’ lectures.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, there is no hint of such a distinction between ‘what is immortal’ and ‘what is everlasting’ in Stephanus’ transmitted works. And the

disagreement with Aristotle strongly and ‘truculently’ (Sorabji [n. 3], 378); Golitsis, however, puts the commentary on *De anima* Book 3 only before the *Meteorology* commentary.

<sup>33</sup> According to Verrycken (n. 28), 252–4, a second revision after Philoponus finished his *De aeternitate mundi* could explain the back-reference at *in Phys.* 55.24–6, where Philoponus announces that he has already discussed the topic of the non-generation of being (τὸ μὴ γεγόνενα τὸ ὄν) elsewhere. If so, these ἐπιστώσεις on the generation of matter in the commentary on *Physics* Books 1 and 2 will indeed be added after the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3, since the commentary on *De anima* Book 3 is regarded as earlier than the *De aeternitate mundi* (Golitsis [n. 3 (2016)], 412). However, this back-reference does not necessarily refer to the *De aeternitate mundi*: Sorabji (n. 3), 379.

<sup>34</sup> For the Christian elements of the commentary of Philoponus<sup>G</sup> on *De anima* Book 3, see Westerink (n. 6), xxxix; Charlton (n. 1 [2000]), 11–12; Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 407; Kakavelaki (n. 1), 298–9.

<sup>35</sup> R. Sorabji, ‘Introduction: seven hundred years of commentary and the sixth century diffusion to other cultures’, in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Re-Interpreted: New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London, 2016), 1–80, at 72–3, 78; M. Roueché, ‘A philosophical portrait of Stephanus the philosopher’, in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Re-Interpreted: New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London, 2016), 541–64.

<sup>36</sup> Arguably, the dividing line between an ἀπὸ φωνῆς commentary and a commentary *in propria persona* is often obscure in Late Antiquity. In my view, since the difference between ‘what is immortal’ and ‘what is everlasting’ proposed by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> constitutes a whole section of exegesis of a particular lemma (Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, *in De an.* 541.5–13), Philoponus<sup>G</sup> should not be regarded as the *reportator* of an ἀπὸ φωνῆς commentary. Cf. P. Golitsis, ‘Who were the real authors of the *Metaphysics* commentary ascribed to Alexander and Ps.-Alexander?’, in R. Sorabji (ed.), *Aristotle Re-Interpreted: New Findings on Seven Hundred Years of the Ancient Commentators* (London, 2016), 565–87, at 567–77.

traditional reasons in favour of Stephanus' authorship, such as the manuscript titles and the stylistic concerns, are not as persuasive as normally thought.<sup>37</sup> To be sure, the distinction proposed by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, together with his view that both the non-rational soul and the vegetative soul can be called immortal but perishable and not everlasting at the same time, is unparalleled in the Neoplatonic tradition.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore difficult to name a particular author from this troublesome distinction. One may still object that Stephanus might interpret *De an.* 430a23 without accepting the distinction between immortality and everlastingness. However, as argued above, it is unreasonable to insist on such an 'insincere' attitude to our commentator without independent evidence.

Although we cannot determine the true identity of Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, some pieces of evidence may pave the way for the distinction which he makes. In what follows I examine three texts which may assist our quest for the authorship of the Greek commentary. (1) Hermias (in all likelihood reporting Syrianus) in the commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus* claims that being everlasting is being immortal in the strict sense ("ἀίδιον" εἰώθαμεν λέγειν, ὃ ἐστὶ κυρίως ἀθάνατον, in *Phdr.* 125.29 Lucarini and Moerschini; cf. in *Phdr.* 118.21–30). (2) When Aristotle ridicules the question of 'why the soul in the air is better and more immortal (ἀθανατωτέρω) than the soul in animals' (*De an.* 1.5, 411a11–13), Ps.-Simplicius seems to take this question seriously. He supposes that the reason why the soul in the air is more immortal than the soul of wholes (that is, the composites of soul and body)<sup>39</sup> is that the soul in the air 'endures by stricter standards of immortality than does the soul of wholes' (κατὰ κρείττονα μέτρα ἀθανασίας ἐστῶσης τῆς τῶν ὅλων ψυχῆς, in *De an.* 74.22–3, transl. Urmson). Both Hermias and Ps.-Simplicius speak of the different senses or degrees of immortality, which may be traced back to Proclus, as discussed above. However, there is no reason to imply that Hermias and Ps.-Simplicius would accept the distinction made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, and treat the lower soul as immortal but not everlasting. Hermias disagrees with the interpretation by Philoponus<sup>G</sup> of the sentence 'All soul is immortal' at *Phdr.* 245c5: Hermias takes 'all soul' as referring to the rational soul only (in *Phdr.* 108.4–14),<sup>40</sup> but Philoponus<sup>G</sup> takes it as indicating both the rational soul and the lower soul (in *De an.* 541.10–12). In other places, Hermias still does not distinguish 'what is immortal' from 'what is indestructible' (for example in *Phdr.* 109.27, 113.24–5, 118.18–20). As for Ps.-Simplicius, he relates the criterion of being more immortal not to everlastingness but to the object's simplicity or composition (in *De an.* 74.15–19), which may derive from Proclus' characterization of the different senses of indissolubility (see especially in *Ti.* 3.216.20–217.14). And in his commentary on *De anima* Book 3, as already indicated, Ps.-Simplicius does not accept that one thing can be immortal without being everlasting, but rather warns against a potential misunderstanding, such as the one proposed by Boethus. Therefore, although these two

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Golitsis (n. 3 [2016]), 394 and Lautner (n. 1), 511–13 for doubts about these traditional grounds.

<sup>38</sup> It contrasts particularly with the view presented in the *De intellectu* and in the Greek commentary on *De anima* Books 1 and 2 transmitted under the name of Philoponus and ascribed to Philoponus (or Ammonius). According to the commentator, the non-rational soul and the vegetative soul are mortal (e.g. in *De an.* 11.29–31, 12.10–12, 193.8–10; *De intell.* 60.60–5). Therefore, it is not an argument *ex silentio*, to the effect that neither Philoponus, in his other undisputed commentaries, nor other Neoplatonists have proposed such a distinction. Rather, they adopt views hardly compatible with this distinction and its implications.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J.O. Urmson, *Simplicius: On Aristotle On the Soul 1.1–2.4* (London, 1995), 177 n. 296.

<sup>40</sup> See Menn (n. 13), 56–7.

Neoplatonists suggest a subtler understanding of immortality, neither goes as far as Philoponus<sup>G</sup>.

(3) When the real Simplicius comments on Aristotle's words 'the immortality and everlastingness of the universe' at *Cael.* 2.1, 284a1, he also mentions a distinction between being immortal and being everlasting (*in Cael.* 369.4–6, transl. Mueller, modified):

'Immortal' is said with respect to the uninterruptedness of life (κατὰ τὸ ἀνέκλειπτον τῆς ζωῆς), 'everlasting' with respect to the uninterruptedness of substance (κατὰ τὸ ἀνέκλειπτον τῆς οὐσίας), as we have also learned in Plato's *Phaedo*.<sup>41</sup>

Simplicius' formulation is similar to that of Philoponus<sup>G</sup>.<sup>42</sup> But Simplicius does not treat immortality and everlastingness as independent notions. There is no reason to believe that he would accept this point and forget Proclus' teaching in the *Elements of Theology*, claiming that one thing could be immortal without being everlasting. For instance, at *in Cael.* 403.23–9, Simplicius points out that the heavenly body, being immortal, must have 'everlasting' (ἀίδιον) life, and thus must move 'everlastingly' (ἀιδίως). Here Simplicius may gloss 'always' (ἀεί) as 'everlasting',<sup>43</sup> and should think that 'being immortal' amounts to being everlasting and indestructible (cf. *Simpl. in Ench.* H 194/D 1.47–2.14, H 212/D 12.12–15). By introducing this distinction, Simplicius indicates the different aspects of emphasis, with regard to the notions 'immortal' and 'everlasting': by 'immortal' Aristotle emphasizes that it is always living, by 'everlasting' Aristotle emphasizes that it is always in existence. Yet Philoponus<sup>G</sup> goes further than Simplicius' distinction, by stating that 'being immortal' does not entail being everlasting at all. Through an examination of these three passages, we may suppose that Philoponus<sup>G</sup> was aware of and inspired by these commentaries or oral traditions in later Neoplatonism, especially the one made by Simplicius;<sup>44</sup> but he was more radical and had been far removed from the Neoplatonic triad of 'Being—Life—Intellect', by proposing that one thing can be immortal without being always in existence. Stephanus' use of Simplicius' commentary on the *De caelo* in his philosophical commentaries<sup>45</sup> lends support to the attempt at identifying Philoponus<sup>G</sup> as Stephanus, but there still lacks compelling evidence to accept this attribution.

<sup>41</sup> The reference should be *Phd.* 106d2–4, rather than a commentary on the *Phaedo*: O'Brien (n. 14), 252–5.

<sup>42</sup> See also Damascius, *in Phd.* 1.256.1; Olympiodorus, *in Phd.* 11.3.6–11.4.1. But their formulation is briefer, and proposed in a different context: L.G. Westerink, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo. Volume II: Damascius* (Amsterdam, 1977), 154.

<sup>43</sup> See Aristotle's wording at *Cael.* 286b9, κινεῖσθαι ἀεί, on which Simplicius is commenting. Cf. Philoponus<sup>G</sup> and Proclus' formulation of 'being everlasting': τὸ ἀεί ὑπάρχειν (Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, *in De an.* 537.5); ἀεί ἔσται/ὄν/ὄντα (Procl. *ET* 105.3, 105.5, 105.7).

<sup>44</sup> We do not know whether Simplicius relies on some earlier sources in making the distinction at *in Cael.* 369.4–6. Although we have seen that Damascius (*in Phd.* 1.256.1), Olympiodorus (*in Phd.* 11.3.6–11.4.1) and Proclus (see e.g. *ET* §105) expressed a similar position, they mentioned it in different contexts, and did not focus on the exposition of the expression 'immortal and everlasting' at *De an.* 430a23. If it is Simplicius' own idea, then we have more reason not to identify Philoponus<sup>G</sup> as Philoponus himself. The reason is that Simplicius' commentary on the *De caelo* was composed later than Philoponus' *De aeternitate mundi* (R.J. Hankinson, *Simplicius: On Aristotle On the Heavens 1.1–4* [London, 2003], 1–2), and the Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3—if by Philoponus—should be written before the *De aeternitate mundi*. It is more reasonable to suppose that Simplicius' distinction inspired the distinction made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, rather than the reverse.

<sup>45</sup> See Roueché (n. 35), 557–8, 560.

I have examined a hitherto unnoticed distinction between immortality and everlastingness made by Philoponus<sup>G</sup>, arguing against a recent attempt to identify Philoponus<sup>G</sup> as the real Philoponus. Although unable to give a conclusive answer to the question of the authorship of this Greek commentary on *De anima* Book 3 preserved in *CAG* vol. 15, I am drawing attention to this and perhaps more idiosyncrasies of this commentary. This puts us in a better position to investigate the issue of authorship further, and to appreciate the complexities of the composition of ancient commentaries.

*Southeast University, China*

TIANQIN GE  
[getianqin@seu.edu.cn](mailto:getianqin@seu.edu.cn)