

Ilsetraut Hadot, Simplicius the Neoplatonist

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Simplicius the Neoplatonist in Light of Contemporary Research: A Critical Review by Ilsetraut Hadot, with two contributions of Philippe Vallat

Translated from the French by Ian Drummond. Baden-Baden: Academia Verlag, 2020. Pp. 262. ISBN 978-38-96658-94-4. Paper €54.00

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Ilsetraut Hadot belongs to those few scholars who have changed the status of Simplicius from that of merely a mine for Presocratic studies and revealed his value, not only for making out Neoplatonic doctrine but also for understanding the ways of commenting and philosophizing in late antiquity. Since her first article on this author in 1969, she has never ceased to show her interest in him by publishing studies, editions, and translations, as well as by organizing the first international conference dedicated to him (Paris, 1985). At the end of such a journey, it is not surprising that she published her book *Le néoplatonicien Simplicius à la lumière des recherches contemporaines. Un bilan critique* [2014], a synthesis of which this book is the English translation, introducing the central debates that have animated the studies devoted to this philosopher for some 40 years. As I have already had the opportunity to give an account of this book [Gavray 2016], I will refer the reader to it for a detailed summary. On this occasion, then, I will only recall the main lines of Hadot's argument and raise general questions before mentioning the main changes from the French version.

Throughout her career, Hadot has been especially interested in three texts attributed to Simplicius: his commentaries on Epictetus' *Handbook*, on Aristotle's *On the Soul*, and on Aristotle's *Categories*. She has also devoted much energy to retracing Simplicius' life after his exile, i.e., after the School of Athens was closed by an edict of the emperor Justinian [529]. Therefore, it is quite natural that she dedicates this book to these aspects, leaving aside the two most extended preserved commentaries on the *Physics* and on the

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treatise *On the Heavens*. The book thus contains three parts of unequal length—

- (1) the biography [11–112],
- (2) the preserved commentaries [113–225], and
- (3) the lost works [226–239]

—taking as a driving force the famous polemics in which Hadot has engaged for several decades.

The first part will surprise the reader by its length. Rare are the biographical studies that take up so much space. Rare also are those that raise so much discussion. At the heart of the debate lie the questions, Where did the Athenian philosophers go after 529? and Where did Simplicius find the material necessary for his voluminous commentaries? After sweeping aside the old hypotheses (i.e., Paul Tannery’s and Alan Cameron’s contention that Simplicius came back to Athens after a short exile in Persia), Hadot takes up in detail Michel Tardieu’s thesis that Simplicius returned to the empire to settle in Ḥarrān, a second-rate intellectual center near the Persian border. According to P. Vallat’s first study [85–107], which concerns the addressee of a commentary on the *De anima* in the Arabic tradition,¹ this would be supported by reports in Syriac and Arabic sources of the survival of a Neoplatonic philosophical school in Ḥarrān. However, we should note, as numerous as the arguments in favor of this are, they are not yet unanimously accepted, with notable objections in Luna 2001 and Golitsis 2008. So the problem remains unresolved.

The second part roughly consists of two polemics concerning the date of the commentary on Epictetus’ *Handbook* [contra Praechter 1927] and the authenticity of the commentary on the treatise *On the Soul* [contra Bossier and Steel 1972; Perkams 2005 and 2008]. Once again, the questions will seem anecdotal. However, they mobilize real issues. On the first point, Hadot argues in favor of a late dating, contemporary with the other commentaries, which allows her to see in the *In Ench.* a text in which the Neoplatonic content does not suffer any wrinkles. The second point concerns the authorship of the *In De an.*, unanimously attributed to Simplicius by the manuscript tradition, but first questioned by F. Piccolomini in 1608, then by Bossier and Steel in 1972 (who attribute it to Priscian). On this issue, as on the previous ones, Hadot’s position can be explained by the attention that she pays to the

¹ Vallat’s second study [205–223] concerns the Arabic posterity of *In Cat.*

In Ench. from the very beginning of her reading of Simplicius. This has allowed her to appreciate other aspects of Simplicius' thought, vocabulary, and relation to tradition or sources, more than scholars who rely more on *In de an.*, *In de caelo*, *In phys.*, or *In cat.* Showing the thoroughly Neoplatonic character of *In Ench.*, she perceives more parallels with *In de an.*, which in her eyes stand in favor of a single author. Here again, the debate remains open. If Steel's thesis seemed to have won some years ago, voices have recently been raised in favor of Hadot's [e.g., [de Haas 2010](#); [Gabor 2014](#)].

The last part is much shorter [267–284]. It mainly presents a polemic with M. Rashed about a possible commentary by Simplicius on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The rationale for the debate comes from the doubts cast on the authenticity of *In de an.* insofar as the main grounds for attributing such a commentary on the *Metaphysics* to Simplicius appear there—or derive directly from it.

All in all, this book retraces a career full of controversies, taking stock of previous works, and taking up the threads of discussions that sometimes go back several decades. In a way, it explores the content of Simplicius' doctrine less than it evaluates the research on it. While it will not put an end to old quarrels, it will give the reader who is unaware of them a glimpse of the theses at stake.

Let us now turn to the changes made in the English translation. They are three in number. First, typos have been corrected in bibliographical references ("Lieu & Shelden" has become "Lieu & Sheldon"). Second, the layout is clearer and more pleasing to the eye, with slightly larger pages and, above all, indented quotations. Finally, Hadot has taken into account in different ways the bibliography that has appeared since the French version, that is, by discussing in the references those publications that confirm her claims and by including relevant studies and translations. On this last point, one could add other works that have escaped the author, particularly those concerning the *In cat.* Let us think of Hauer's work on several aspects of this commentary: predication [[2015](#)], ἐπιτηδείότης [[2016a](#)], qualitative properties [[2016b](#)], or its general composition [[2017](#); see also [Gabor 2014](#); [Gavray 2011](#)]. On the other hand, one will be pleased to see the announcement of the forthcoming publication of the French translation of the end of *In Ench.* However, one will regret that, unlike the French version, the bibliography no longer refers to the pages where the studies mentioned are discussed. In the absence of an index, this makes the volume under review a little less convenient to consult. Finally, we should note that the English translation is of excellent quality, and typos are rare.

To conclude this survey, let us note a point that has not changed in the English version but remains confusing. Hadot speaks of herself in the third person, referring to herself as “I. Hadot” when she presents her work. If the volume perhaps aims at a neutral and objective assessment where the author places herself in the same rank as the researchers whose theses she discusses, the fact remains that only one name appears on the cover—that of an author who is a stakeholder in all the polemics that she summons. That point emerges from her often-repeated indictment of the modern university and the recent evolution of the research world. Beyond the attempt at synthesis, this book testifies to bygone ages when a philosopher could embark on writing monumental works and when, more recently, a researcher could tackle such a study alone. The evolution of knowledge and, above all, of research conditions makes such projects impossible today. Readers will judge for themselves.

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