

Book Reviews

Sten Ebbesen (ed.), *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis. Commentarium in Sophisticos elenchos Aristotelis* (Scientia Danica, series H; *Humanistica*, 8, vol. 19) Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters 2019. 407 pp. ISBN 9788773044247.

Background

In hindsight, it is not surprising that the exegesis of Aristotle's *Sophistici elenchi* developed into one of the most substantial parts of the Latin commentary tradition. To make a long story short, in its customary capacity as the art of arts and the science of sciences, medieval logic was primarily concerned with discerning the true from the false in arguments as they occur in natural, ordinary speech as opposed to the more formalised parlance later logicians will resort to. It makes perfect sense, then, that medieval logicians paid special attention to everything that threatens sound reasoning and that prevents us from speaking the truth. Indeed, they were second to none and better than most at exposing and elucidating arguments' flaws and shortcomings. After all, as John Buridan – faithful to a long and illustrious tradition – aptly put it, «rooting out errors» is logic's first order of business.¹ As early as the 1140s, Aristotle's *Sophistici elenchi* provided the most fertile ground for such keen interest in fallacies; which, in turn, explains etc.

1 John Buridan, *Summulae De propositionibus, Prooemium*, 7¹¹⁻¹²: «⟨Logica⟩ habet enim unam partem sophisticam quae est exstirpativa falsarum rationum,” so we read at the very beginning of Buridan's handbook of logic, where the elimination of false arguments provides the main ground for the commander metaphor John Buridan was fond of.

Relevance

This much is uncontroversial or, at any rate, can withstand any amount of scrutiny we care to throw at it. Courtesy – first and foremost – of Sten Ebbesen, whose long-standing interest in medieval writings on bad arguments has turned the Byzantine and Latin aftermath of Aristotle's *Sophistici elenchi* into well-charted territory, by all standards. The *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* has played no small part in shaping this picture. As a matter of fact, time and again over the last forty years or so, quotes and insights from the anonymous work have kept showing up in Ebbesen's editions and studies: since he first discovered the commentary in the late 1970s and brought it to the general attention, Ebbesen has routinely drawn on the *Anonymus* as an early witness of the circulation of Aristotelian logical works and related texts, as a convenient illustration of major trends and distinctive features of the Latin literature on fallacies, and as a sensible interpreter in his own right.²

Readership

Not only has the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* been on Ebbesen's radar for many years, but the commentary itself has circulated freely amongst his pupils and colleagues as early as August 2009 – it being, in all likelihood, the main if not the only reason why it took him about ten years to see it through the press.³

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- 2 A perfunctory background check will have to suffice for our present purposes. In addition to contributing a number of fragments to the so-called "Alexander" collection (Ebbesen, *Commentators*, 3: 145, 149, 194, 244, 246, and 259, with the additional item in Ebbesen, "New Fragments" 115) the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* figures prominently in his reconstruction of the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Latin reception of Aristotle's *Prior* and, most notably, *Posterior Analytics* (cf. respectively Ebbesen, "The *Prior Analytics*," 99, and Ebbesen, "The *Posterior Analytics*," 17). Besides exemplifying both borrowings from traditional logical doctrine (e.g., the distinction between a syllogism's matter and its form, as recalled in Ebbesen, "Analyzing Syllogisms," 6) and Latin innovations (like the "cause of appearance" vs. the "cause of deficiency" device applied to the analysis of arguments, as expounded in Ebbesen, "The Way," 116), the views of the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* are studied for themselves in connection with topics as diverse as context-sensitive arguments (Ebbesen, "Context-sensitive Argumentation"), ill-formed sentences (Ebbesen, "The Present King of France," 95–96), and issues with Aristotle's typology of disputations (Ebbesen, "Demonstrative Disputation").
- 3 It is only fair to mention as a matter of record that the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* is neither the first nor the only commentary Ebbesen has virtually edited and generously made available to people in or with links to the Copenhagen School of Medieval Philosophy (Ebbesen, "Doing Philosophy"). A provisional list of these in-all-but-name editions should include at

Good things come to those who wait: the final result – a complete edition of the extant text (pp. 53–376), preceded by a lengthy introduction (pp. 9–50) and followed by an *index locorum* (pp. 377–380) and an *index verborum* (pp. 381–407) – is everything one can expect from a veteran editor of logical texts and a fine connoisseur of the commentary tradition.

Introduction

Ebbesen's edition is preceded by a substantial introduction, which tackles both doctrinal and philological issues. A thorough survey of the early Latin commentaries on the *Sophistici elenchi* is carried out first. The place of the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* within this tradition is discussed next. New internal and old anecdotal evidence is carefully weighed and, on account of the former being fully available for the first time, Ebbesen's conclusions are quite different from those he previously reached, most notably in his pioneer essay on the origins of British logic.⁴ The *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* is still depicted as a conservative, old-school logician, but he is no longer hailed as a late twelfth-century Englishman having taught for a while somewhere between Paris and Rouen before shipping back to England with his precious library. In fact, rather than one of the forefathers of the British logical tradition – as initially suggested by Ebbesen himself showcasing the “Oxynat” hypothesis (where “‘Ox’ stands for Oxford, ‘nat’ for native, ‘y’ for y”⁵) – what we are looking at now is a learned Parisian master well past his novice days who has been there and done that long enough to bring into the next century a sound knowledge of the old Paris sects and a repeated involvement in lecturing on Aristotle's work on fallacies. Nostalgic readers might wonder whether the ancestral hero Ebbesen had conjured back in the day deserved to fall into oblivion without further adieu. Be it as it may, no one will fault the portrait which has replaced it for lacking in depth and accuracy. Ebbesen paints it down to the last detail through a comprehensive assessment of the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis*'s familiarity with the Latin translations of the writings of Aristotle and his late ancient and byzantine commentators (a puzzling echo of Zeno's paradoxes of motion, as discussed in *Physics* VI.2 and 9, adds a little mystery to an otherwise conventional, albeit extensive,

least five more items in Ebbesen 1993's catalogue (Ebbesen, “Medieval Latin Glosses and Commentaries”), that is: *Anonymus Laudianus* [SE24], *Anonymus Marcianus* [SE45], *Anonymus e Musaeo* 33 [SE39], *John of Felmingham* [SE79] and *Anonymus G&C* 668 [SE83].

4 Ebbesen, “Oxynat.”

5 Ebbesen, “Oxynat,” 4.

acquaintance with the usual sources). In addition, he draws a detailed comparison between the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis*'s own views and the positions he must have learnt as a student (as far as scholarly allegiances go, Ebbesen is inclined to favour a residual affiliation to the “nominal” school).

Text

The commentary survives in one codex only: Cambridge, St John's College Library, MS D.12 (C), which Ebbesen describes in detail (C's history, fabric and layout, contents, etc.). Emendation is the only way out of trouble when dealing with the oddities and flaws of a text which has been handed down in a single manuscript. Accordingly, Ebbesen marks out C's most confusing features such as the idiosyncrasies of C's handwriting and the scribe's tendency to mis-read, omit, and slip. He also assesses the nature and extent of textual corruption brought about by C's misguided corrections. This is where Ebbesen's craftsmanship as a specialist of Aristotelian commentaries and logical texts stands out. As a case in point, one only has to refer to the way he has dealt with one of the most common and yet one of the trickiest features of the kind of texts the anonymous commentary belongs to, namely the fact that C's text is extensively abbreviated – many abbreviations being virtually undistinguishable and, hence, open to more than one interpretation (p. 41):

Anyone not familiar with the abbreviation system of the time may find many of my emendations implausibly far-fetched, but I have, in fact, refrained from emending if I could find no paleographically plausible path from my assumed original text to the one actually found in C.

As Ebbesen's maxim makes it clear, neither ingenuity nor expedience should guide editors caught between the conflicting imperatives of either following a single manuscript's readings to a fault or changing the facts of the text to fit the best sense one can squeeze out of it. Restoration (through the painstaking process of tracing back an error to its most probable cause) should be the editor's guiding principle and the “paleographically plausible path” out of the text's conundrums what keeps him honest at every turn. The question whether Ebbesen has followed his own advice is a rhetorical one, as demonstrated by a hundred footnotes where the evidence is presented and occasionally spelled out in detail.⁶

⁶ A typical example is 323ⁿ, n. 5, where – as Ebbesen explains in the “Introduction,” 41 – it is not

**A Glimpse into the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis*'s Mind:
Weird Questions and Astute Answers**

As every teacher will tell you, there are no dumb questions, only dumb answers. While being no exception, “How come that Aristotle quoted Vergil’s and Horace’s verses as examples of his fallacy of accent?” has nonetheless an odd ring to it ... Moreover, the issue is not likely to shed much light on anything relevant or important either by itself or by proxy (except maybe for the identification of Boethius as the culprit): after all, it is not so much the translations that advertised themselves as something else or looked suspicious that got Latin commentators into any trouble worth mentioning. Still, some of them took Aristotle’s baffling knowledge of Latin poets seriously enough to challenge the authenticity of the work they were commenting on. In the words of the early Parisian gloss, dated by De Rijk around the mid-twelfth century:

Notandum est quod quidam ob hoc dicunt Aristotilem non fecisse Elenchos, quia non exempla Grecorum, sed Latinorum in Elencis apposit. Nam, si ipse Elencos fecisset, Grecorum exempla pretenderet.⁷

It goes without saying that the suspicion had no sooner been voiced than the author made short work of it:

Sed dicimus ipsos mentiri, quia Boetius, qui hoc opus de greco in latino transtulit, exempla Latinorum, et non Grecorum, dedit, ideo scilicet quia, veluti voces apud Latinos et Grecos sunt diverse, sic et ipsarum accidentia, idest accentus quibus ipse voces modulantur.⁸

The explanation soon became the standard story, as attested by the following passages:⁹

so much the first mistake (a “q^a” read as a tironian note, i.e., as if it were an abbreviation for “contra” rather than for “qua”) that got C into trouble, but his attempt to cover up the problem (the accusative form “argumentatione-m” added to match the “contra”). This prompted Ebbesen’s emendation: “*si praesumpserit*, i.e. *si noverit qua argumentatione* debeat uti interrogans” of the transmitted text, that runs as follows: “*si praesumpserit*, i.e. *si noverit contra argumentationem* debeat uti interrogans.”

7 Anonymus, *Glose in Aristotilis Sophisticos elenchos*, 1: 326¹⁻⁴. For the dating, see De Rijk, *Logica modernorum*, 1: 82–88.

8 Anonymus, *Glose in Aristotilis Sophisticos elenchos*, 1: 326⁴⁻⁸.

9 For similar examples, see Anonymus sF, *Quaestiones super Sophisticos elenchos*, q. 73, 168²⁰⁻²¹, and Giles of Rome, *Expositio super libros elenchorum*, 4^{rb}.

[A] Orationum autem in quibus secundum accentum est causa deceptionis duo exempla ab Aristotele ponuntur, unum Horatii, alterum Vergilii. Unde quidam sunt qui coniectant hoc opus non esse Aristotelis, cum illi multo tempore posteriores fuissent illo tempore. Quibus dicendum est quod latinus interpres necessitate coactus est, vel obscuritate graecorum vel difficultate, ponere latina exempla.¹⁰

[B] Propter haec exempla non videtur liber iste compositus ab Aristotele, nam primum exemplum ab Horatio, secundum scriptum est a Vergilio, quorum uterque posterior fuit Aristotele. De primo dici potest exemplo quoniam non sumptum est a Vergilio, sed ab Homero quem imitatur Vergilius in opere suo; sed non hoc de exemplo secundo dici potest; dicendum ergo est quod ideo latina ponit exempla quia graeca de verbo translata non idem ostenderent.¹¹

What about the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis*? What did he have to say about Vergil's and Horace's verses occurring as tokens of fallacies of accent even though neither were around at the time Aristotle wrote the *Sophistical Refutations*?

Ex hiis exemplis a latinis sumptis volunt quidam convincere hunc librum <non> ab Aristotele graeco compositum esse. Sed forsitan latini nostri graecos imitantes multa dicta a graecis in latinum sermonem transtulerunt, unde non est mirum si in Vergilio et Horatio inveniantur aliqui versus in latinum translati et in graecis †uno† ab Aristotele positi. Vel potest verisimilius dici quod translator huius operis commoda nostrae doctrinae a nostris auctoribus sumpsit exempla, forsitan enim exempla ab Aristotele posita si transferrentur ambiguitatem non reciperent.¹²

There is probably no way around the crux “†uno†” – reading “im<m>o” instead of “uno” would not help us much anyway. In contrast, on account of “coniectant” in [A], one just might be tempted to favour “connicere” over “convincere” (and accept Ebbesen’s alternative emendation instead, that is “conicere”). Be that as it may, the overall meaning of the solution proposed by the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis* is clear: besides stating the obvious (“vel potest verisimilius dici ...”), he got a bit inventive and, along with the right explanation, he came up

10 Anonymus Parisiensis, *Compendium Sophisticorum elenchorum*, 84^{23–28}.

11 Anonymus Aurelianensis I, *Commentarium in Sophisticos elenchos*, 123^{26–33}.

12 Anonymus Cantabrigiensis, *Commentarium in Sophisticos elenchos*, 146^{16–24}.

with the brilliant suggestion (passage [B] had done only half the job and got the Vergil Homeric appropriation wrong) that there is nothing wrong to begin with! Insofar as “Latini nostri” often borrowed from their Greek predecessors, it would not come as a surprise that the disputed examples are the same because the same verses have simply been picked up twice. *Se non è vero, è molto ben trovato*.

A Look into the Future of Fallacies Studies

While argumentation theorists have become of late more and more enthralled with flawed arguments, they have shown but little interest in the way fallacies were treated in the Middle Ages. As a matter of fact, without notable exceptions, most specialists have been working under either one of two assumptions. (a) For all practical purposes, fallacy studies have come to prominence in the early 1970s, courtesy of a most influential book by computer science pioneer and distinguished logician Charles Leonard Hamblin.¹³ (b) For no apparent reason, after Aristotle provided the discipline with a tentative start, it barely held its own until people at Port-Royal, John Locke or – according to most accounts – Richard Whately first and John Stuart Mill soon afterwards resurrected it in a spectacular way.¹⁴ Both pictures are, of course, inaccurate, if not altogether mistaken, and they should be dismissed or, better still, replaced with a new narrative, which does justice to the many accomplishments of medieval treatments of fallacies, possibly across more than one linguistic tradition. Ebbesen’s reliable edition and in-depth study of the *Anonymus Cantabrigiensis*’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Sophistici elenchi* constitute a giant leap in the right

13 The Hamblin-connection has become very popular amongst hard-core logicians who, if they look back at all, seldom refer to anything older than Hamblin, *Fallacies*. Cf., e.g., Visser, Budzynska and Reed, “A Critical Discussion Game.”

14 The narrative of a gap between Aristotle, on the one hand, and either Richard Whately or John Stuart Mill, on the other, requires little comment here (cf., e.g., Tamarkin, “Issue with Fallacies”). A few scholars go back a little further and are particularly fond of Locke’s naming inventiveness (cf. Mura, “Le fallacie”) and Port Royal’s distinction between “scientific” and “everyday” fallacies (cf. Dufour, “Old and New Fallacies”), but their ignorance of pre-modern literature remains intact, as Woods, “Fallacy Theories,” 164, has most powerfully demonstrated: “put bluntly, there is no deep theory of fallacious inference to be found in Aristotle. Although over the centuries fallacies have remained part of the project of logic, this lack of theoretical depth has persisted, albeit with some rare exceptions. Although there was much logical sophistication in the Middle Ages, mediaeval logicians made comparatively little headway with the fallacies. John Locke (1690), etc.”

direction. Others will likely follow in his footsteps. Should their work turn out to be even only half as good as his, then we are in for a major turnaround in a field which could certainly use one right now.

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