

A NOTE ON TWO WORKS OF GEORGE OF TREBIZOND

EDITED BY JOHN MONFASANI

LUCA BURZELLI
UNIVERSITÄT SIEGEN

RICCARDO SACCENTI
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI BERGAMO



At the meeting of the Philosophical Review Club in March 2022, John Monfasani's volume *Vindicatio Aristotelis* was the subject of a discussion.¹ The book brings together a critical edition and a doctrinal study of two major writings by George of Trebizond, namely the *In perversionem Problematum Aristotelis quodam Theodoro Cage editam et problematice Aristotelis philosophiae protectio*, and the *Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*. This note presents a critical discussion of Monfasani's edition of these two texts. It first considers the *Protectio*, discussed by Riccardo Saccenti; then the *Comparatio*, reviewed by Luca Burzelli.²

I. *The In perversionem Problematum Aristotelis protectio*

On 17 June 1452 George of Trebizond left Rome for Naples. The sharp contrast with figures such as Poggio Bracciolini and Giovanni Aurispa, as well as the open disagreement with Cardinal Bessarion and his intellectual circle, led George to give up his role in the Papal chancery to accept a position at the court of Alfonso of Aragon. Nicholas V's pontificate had seen a progressive deterioration of George's position in Rome, which was due not only to the changing political and

¹ *Vindicatio Aristotelis. Two Works of George Trebizond in the Plato-Aristotle Controversy of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. and trans. John Monfasani, Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe (Arizona) 2021 (Medieval and Renaissance Text and Studies, 573).

² The first chapter of this review-article is by Riccardo Saccenti, while the second is by Luca Burzelli. Any reference to Monfasani's edition in the course of the paper is made by using the two sigla *Protectio* (from *Vindicatio Aristotelis*, part I) and *Comparatio* (from *Vindicatio Aristotelis*, part II), with the page number.

ecclesiastical balance within the papal curia. The cultural policy of the Papacy had switched its orientation: the arrival in Roman circles of humanists such as Giovanni Tortelli and Lorenzo Valla as secretaries to the Pope, had marked a clear turn towards a humanistic culture which was quite alien to George's attitude. Not surprisingly, this latter returned to Rome only in 1455, after Nicholas V's death. During these tormented years of his biography, Trebizond was involved in a diatribe concerning the translation of the *Problemata* attributed to Aristotle. It was Nicholas V himself who had requested George to prepare a new Greek-Latin translation to provide a new reading of the text with respect to the medieval one. The final work of George of Trebizond had been the subject of radical criticism from Cardinal Bessarion and the authors close to him, who had instead exalted the much higher quality of Theodore Gaza's translation of the same text.

John Monfasani's volume *Vindicatio Aristotelis* provides a careful study of this phase of George of Trebizond's intellectual biography, framing it within the broader context of the doctrinal, rhetorical and philological disputes that animated the central decades of the fifteenth century. The story of the translation of the *Problemata* is an integral part of the struggle between alternative ideas of culture and understandings of the relationship between the *Christianitas* and the Classical heritage. Trebizond's place in this moment of the fifteenth-century intellectual history is shown by his *The Protection of Aristotle's Problematical Philosophy against the Perversion of Aristotle's Problems published by a certain Theodore Cages* (*In perversionem Problematum Aristotelis a quodam Theodoro Cage editam et problematice Aristotelis philosophie protectio*), a text of which Monfasani provides a critical edition in his volume.

The scholar deals with the study of the *Protectio* as a part of a larger research project concerning Trebizond's role in one of the central controversies of the fifteenth-century culture. In this light, the scholar carefully repositions George's text both in the chronology of its author's life and in the intellectual tensions to which he was subject. A crucial point was the delicate relationship with Cardinal Bessarion, that dated to the years George spent following Eugene IV's court between Ferrara, Florence and Rome. The connection with Bessarion was initially marked by the Cardinal's appreciation of George's culture and the commissioning of the Latin translation of Basil the Great's *Contra Eunomium* and *De Spiritu Sancto*. Later on, the relation between the two men deteriorated, arriving at open cultural dissent and contrast.

In addition, Monfasani also highlights the more narrowly cultural nature of the *querelle* at the origin of the *Protectio*. Dedicated to the king of Naples, the text marks George's clear stance in the dispute over the translation of the *Problemata* and is configured both as a harsh and violent criticism of Theodore Gaza's version and as a vindication of the goodness and quality of his Latin version of the Greek text. In particular, in the introduction to the edition, Monfasani stresses the issue around

which George sets up his argumentative strategy, which is to outline what is meant by the expression *fidus interpres*. Thus, the discussion revolves around the theory of translation and the need to carry out a transposition into Latin that can combine doctrinal adherence to the contents with philological and grammatical care for the letter. On these criteria, George makes his fierce criticism of Gaza's version, which in his opinion profoundly alters the text as well as the consolidated Latin lexicon of philosophy. According to George, this operation is evident in the misunderstanding of various technical terms, starting with the word *quaestio*. Gaza employs the term as a translation of the Greek '*problema*', which Aristotle uses to identify the issues dealt with in the books of the *Problemata*. According to George this is an erroneous translation, because the Aristotelian '*problema*' does not carry a dubitative sense: on the contrary, it has the sense of indicating a solution rather than a discussion.

In addition to this, the *Protectio* is also a precious historical witness. On the one hand, it preserves one of the leading voices of humanistic discussions on crucial matters such as the relation between Plato and Aristotle and the theory of translation. On the other hand, the *Protectio* records the memory of George's meeting with Pletho at the Council of Florence.

Monfasani's historical and doctrinal relocation of the *Protectio* also supports the philological discussion at the basis of the critical set-up of the text and also justifies the editorial choices. The *recensio codicum* presents the screening of the sixteen handwritten witnesses of the work, carefully described and collated. Monfasani identifies three different families: α , β , and γ . It is a distinction that identifies three different phases in the textual transmission of the *Protectio*, because while α appears directly linked to George's drafting work and his subsequent revisions, β and γ are rather two successive stages that only partially incorporate the revisions made by the author. According to Monfasani's enquiry, α has greater value for a critical edition of the text. This is because the explicit intention of the publisher is to publish the version that Trebizond fixed between 1456 and 1457 and that contains his latest revisions. Indeed, α appears to be internally articulated in a progression of three editorial stages. The first draft (α^1) is present in T (Salamanca, Biblioteca Universitaria, 95), a manuscript that Alfonso de Palencia copied in 1465 probably on the basis of a text in the possession of Trebizond himself.

The revision of this first version (α^2) is testified by the codex R (Roma, Biblioteca Casanatense, 77), copied by Theodericus Buckinck in 1456 in Rome, after George's return from Naples. The final redaction of the text (α^3) is present in manuscripts L (Leiden, Bibliothek der Rijksuniversiteit, BPL 151) and W (Vienna, Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, Lat. 218), both copied between the end of 1456 and the first months of 1457. Monfasani's evaluation of the *recensio codicum* explains the distancing from the edition of the *Protectio* published by Ludwig

Mohler, which is based on γ , which is to say, the manuscript family that emerges as the most distant from George's drafting of the text.

The critical apparatus developed by Monfasani is perfectly coherent with this critical evaluation of the manuscript tradition. Indeed, the editor records the variants that highlight the differences among the three families of manuscripts and those within the α family that highlight the different editorial phases directly ascribable to Trebizond. Then there are the 'plausible' variants of β and those of β and γ which have value for the reconstruction of the editorial history of the text. Finally, Monfasani records the variants with respect to Mohler's edition, aiming to show the philological preferability of the new edition.

As regards the features of the edition, the edited text presents the division into chapters attested by three manuscripts of the γ family and which probably dates back to Trebizond himself. Monfasani adds a series of rubrics that are distinguished from the text by the use of square brackets and that explain the contents of each chapter. In addition to the critical apparatus, a series of notes makes it possible to highlight the main textual references present in the *Protectio*.

Monfasani's work also includes six textual appendixes: a concordance between Trebizond's translation of the *Problemata* and the Greek text of the work in modern editions; the list of problems discussed in the *Protectio*; the two *Tabulae Problematum* drawn up by George and contained in the manuscript **U** (Sevilla, Biblioteca Capitular y Colombina, Capitular 57-2-16); an edition of books 1, 4 and 30 of the *Problemata* following George's translation; the edition of Theodore Gaza's preface to Nicholas V; the preface of Nicolaus Gupalatinus to Sixtus IV on Gaza's translation. In this way, Monfasani brings together a precious dossier of documents linked with the *Protectio* and the controversy about the translation of the *Problemata* that opposes George of Trebizond and Theodore Gaza.

The critical edition of the *Protectio*, with the accompanying texts and historical-critical evaluations, offers a precious tool to reconsider some of central questions in the history of fifteenth-century philosophical culture. The necessary historical relocation of Trebizond's writing, which Monfasani himself introduces, brings out the full weight of the philological, rhetorical and philosophical arguments deployed in the *Protectio*, both relative to the author's production and relative to the disputes in which he was involved. Some preliminary notes in this direction may be mentioned by way of example.

Alongside the extremely violent tone towards Theodore Gaza, George articulates the text as an examination of the problems of translating the text of the *Problemata* from Greek. In the immediate background of this intellectual struggle there is the discussion about *translatio* that involved several humanists already in the early decades of the fifteenth century. Leonardo Bruni, in his *De interperetatione recta* composed in 1425, had addressed the theoretical and methodological questions connected with the Greek-Latin transfer of

philosophical and literary texts³. Bruni's discussion questioned the use of a single approach to translation and claimed the need to arrive at solutions in which truthfulness deriving from fidelity to the translated text stands together with the stylistic elegance of the translator's language. He highlighted how translation could not be approached only as linguistic transfer of terms, expressions and sentences. A broader approach was needed, capable of taking more general considerations into account. Translating one of Plato's dialogues, for instance, certainly requires an evaluation of the specific features of the text, together with an overall understanding of Plato's entire work.

The confrontation between Theodore of Gaza and George of Trebizond, twenty-five years after Bruni's *De interpretatione recta*, focuses again on the various problems of the translation as a leading intellectual form of humanistic culture. Therefore, George first discusses a range of lexical matters and then moves on to a sequence of textual comparisons between his own version and that of his opponent. George's intention is clearly to mark the distance between his own approach and that of Gaza, starting from the very *ratio* of translation. George conceives of the controversy in, so to speak, epistemological terms but in doing so he means to underline the greater effectiveness of his approach to the Greek text. These considerations emerge from the first lines of the *Protectio*, i.e., from the criticism of Gaza's translation of the Greek '*problema*' with the Latin term *quaestio*⁴. As Monfasani himself notes in the commentary notes, George recalls Gaza's preface to Pope Nicholas V, where it is explained: « Now the questions of the philosopher Aristotle, which set out problems of all sorts, I add them as a sort of last course so that you may be more satisfied with whole and solid food that others have prepared ».⁵

George questions the semantic equivalence between the Greek *problemata* and the Latin *quaestiones*, noting that: « a question, as everyone says, is a doubtful proposition ».⁶ Here, the implicit reference is to the definition of question that Boethius establishes in his commentary on Cicero's *Topica*, therefore to an essential text from the point of view of the rhetorical and philosophical heritage

³ See JOHNNY L. BERTOLIO, *Il trattato De interpretatione recta di Leonardo Bruni*, Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, Roma 2020 (*Antiquitates*, 52).

⁴ On the technical value of the term *quaestio* see the synthesis provided in ELISA CODA (ed.), *Insegnare e disputare. La vita intellettuale e universitaria nel Medioevo*, Carocci, Roma 2023.

⁵ Theodori Graeci Thessalonicensis ad summum pontificem divum Thomam, Nicolaum V, praefatio in Problematibus Aristotelis, in *Vindictio Aristotelis*, p. 326, II. 6–8: « Nunc Aristotelis philosophi quaestiones, quae Problemata inscribuntur Encyclia, quasi tragemata quaedam subiungo ut, ubi integro solidoque cibo, quern ceteri paraverant, satiatus es ».

⁶ *Protectio*, p. 86: « Problema questionem esse ait, cum questio, ut omnes aiunt, propositio sit dubitabilis ».

mediated by scholastic culture.⁷ George highlights how the Latin term *quaestio* has a technical sense, referring to both a specific rhetorical structure and to the practice that is linked to it, namely, scholastic disputation. Otherwise, the Greek term *problemata* refers not to the doubt between opposite alternatives but rather to the search for the *ratio* of something that is evident to the senses. Trebizond will reiterate this crucial argument in his approach to the Greek text of the *Problemata*, in the 1457 preface of his translation to Cardinal Prospero Colonna, where he explains: « The *Problemata* are nothing more than the search for reason of a thing that is manifest to the sense ».⁸

From this point of view, George's claim against Gaza's mistake cannot be reduced only to an erroneous translation: it is a matter of a radical cultural divergence concerning rhetorical and philosophical convictions. This core of the discussion can be evaluated from the continuation of the lexical analysis developed in the first chapters of the *Protectio*. Here George examines the correspondence of the Greek particle *ή* and the Latin conjunctions *an* and *vel*. George insists that the Greek conjunction, in the case of the *Problemata*, does not have a disjunctive value and therefore cannot be understood as equivalent to the formulation of a question in the Latin formula *Utrum... an ...* with the verbs in the subjunctive, i.e., as an indirect interrogative preposition. From a grammatical point of view, the same formula is correct, he explains, when used with indicative verbs, since the pseudo-Aristotelian text indicate things evident to the senses.

Beneath this grammatical and rhetorical discussion, there emerges George's cultural and philosophical concern, which is to highlight Gaza's lack of understanding of the nature of the scholastic *quaestio*. According to George, Theodore Gaza does not observe the radical difference between the dubitative formula of the question, which introduces a questionable matter, and the indicative formula, which rather describes a state of affairs and introduces an argumentative and inquisitive procedure, aiming at understanding the *ratio* of things. In this way, the textual passage from Greek to Latin is problematised in terms of the need to establish the correct relationship that links the internal coherence of Greek with that of Latin. George explains this point criticizing one of the peculiar features of Gaza's translation, namely the frequent use of transliterations of Greek terms. This practice is seen as misleading and it is rejected by recalling Cicero's argument about the value of transliterations as a

⁷ BOETHIUS, *In Ciceronis Topica*, in JOHANN CASPAR VON ORELLI (ed.), *Ciceronis Opera*, Band 5, Teil 1, Füsslini et Sociorum, Zurich 1833, p. 277, l. 19: « Quaestio vero est dubitabilis propositio ». See PETER BOSCHUNG, « Boethius and the Early Medieval *Quaestio* », *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales*, 70/2 (2004), p. 233–259.

⁸ BAV, Vat.lat. 5790, fol. lr-v: « Presertim cum ipsum esse hominis rationem susistat problemataque nihil aliud sit quam rationis rei sensu patentis inquisitio, quia ergo et sensum habemus et rationis particeps sumus ».

means of making Greek terms more intelligible and not as a strategy for transferring words that have no corresponding term in Latin.

The Ciceronian reference serves George's argumentative strategy, because it explains how the search for a stylistic quality of the Latin of the translation cannot prevail over the faithful rendering of both the content and the semantic value of the original Greek wording. In this way, George establishes the limits within which the definition of the translator as 'faithful interpreter' (*fidus interpres*) is set: a rigorous adherence to the lexicon of the original text as well as to its rhetorical form, so as to be able to restore both these aspects to the Latin reader. And these features are even more essential when translating a philosophical work such as the *Problemata*. In the case of a text of this kind, George notes, it remains crucial to transfer into Latin both the clarity and ambiguity of Aristotelian prose, insofar as this makes the text the potential object of philosophical analysis.

Thus, translation is seen as the first essential step in approaching the study and discussion of the Aristotelian text and so as an unavoidable precondition for teaching philosophy. In this sense, George explains that the translation of *scholia* to the pseudo-Aristotelian text fulfills an essential function: distinct from the body of the text, these glosses support the study of its philosophical contents and therefore engage the translator to the extent that they provide potential arguments for the exegesis of the text. George stands clearly against Gaza on this point. While the latter, in the preface to Nicholas V, rejects the *scholia* to the *Problemata* as non-Aristotelian additions that confuse and corrupt the Greek text and its elegant and readable Latin translation, George stresses that they are precious tools for dealing with the most complex and obscure passages of the writing.

The hiatus that Trebizond marks with respect to Theodore Gaza is not just a matter of the stylistic form of the translations. The dispute over the theory of translation highlights a radical difference also in terms of the conception of philosophy and the relationship between this discipline and the textual corpus on which its practice is based. George stresses the desire to place his work as a translator within the limits of the philosophy of the university *studia* of the time. This intention emerges from textual comparisons between the translations of the *Problemata* that George lists in the *Protectio* and that constitute the most substantial part of the work. Indeed, George always takes care to bring his own translation together with the medieval one produced by Bartholomew of Messina in the 1260s, stressing the proximity between the two texts as well as their radical difference compared to Gaza's version. The insistence on the conceptual and lexical concordance between his own translation and that of Bartholomew certainly aims to confirm the correctness of his work as opposed to that of Gaza. Moreover, George proposes his translation as a clear adoption of Bartholomew's work, at times placing it as an updating of the longstanding medieval version rather than

as a new one. This cultural orientation is consistent with the explicit adoption of a definition of philosophy, which George mentions in the preface to Prospero Colonna, echoing Cicero and combining elements of the scholastic tradition that are fully present, for example, in the approach to philosophy in force in the *studium* of Padua or in the school of Rialto in Venice.

« Philosophy – he explains at the opening of the preface – is the impetuous love for the knowledge of human and divine things. ‘Sophia’, that is wisdom, is the very knowledge of all things: of all, I mean, those that can be understood by human beings. In fact, those that we are not able to grasp with human ingenuity, either because they surpass it or because they are surpassed by it, since they are not contained by human wisdom, not even their knowledge can be desired by the philosopher; or if it can certainly must not ».⁹

George’s approach to the text of the *Problemata* and to its translation appears to be consistent with Peter of Abano’s *Expositio* of the pseudo-Aristotelian text, which already in the course of the fourteenth century, had affirmed itself as the canonical interpretation in the European universities. Indeed, in the prologue Peter observed how: « ‘Problem’ is the Greek <term> which stands for the Latin ‘evidence’; for it is a difficult question that contains something that must be resolved with a dispute ».¹⁰ And again: « From what <has been said> we deduce that this book cannot be fully understood except by the one who has studied philosophy in all its parts; for this reason, the glossators had been lazy in explaining it ».¹¹

This scholastic background on which George bases his translation becomes explicit in the closing of the *Protectio*, where he recalls the essential importance of the medieval interpreters of the Aristotelian philosophy. According to George, the literalism of the Aristotelian medieval translations made possible the flowering of philosophy in Latin-speaking Europe, thanks to the contribution of authors such as Albert the Great, Giles of Rome and above all Thomas Aquinas. The *Protectio*

⁹ BAV, Vat.lat. 5790, fol. lr: « Philosophia est uehemens amor cognoscendarum humanarum diuinarumque rerum. Sophia uero idest sapientia ipsa cognitio rerum omnium est, omnium dico que ah homine capi sciriue possunt. Nam que capere humano ingenio nequimus uel quia nimium excedant, uel quia nimium excedantur, ea cum humana non contineantur sapientia, nec cognitio eorum desiderari a philosopho potest, aut si potest certe non debet ». Cf. CICERO, *Tusculanae* IV, 26, 57: « Philosophia est rerum humanarum diuinarumque cognitio cum studio bene vivere iuncta ». See also AUGUSTINUS, *De Trinitate*, XIV, 1.3.

¹⁰ PETRI DE ABANO *Expositio Problematum Aristotelis*, ed. PIETER DE LEEMANS (in PIETER DE LEEMANS, MAARTEN HOENEN, *Between Text and Tradition*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2016, p. 21–52), p. 49, ll. 63–65: « ‘Problema’ quidem est grecum latine probationem importans; est enim questio difficilis aliquid continens quod disputatione soluendum ».

¹¹ PETRI DE ABANO *Expositio Problematum Aristotelis*, p. 49, ll. 69–71: « Ex quo quidem deducitur quod liber hic non potest plene intelligi nisi ab illo qui philosophiam secundum omnem partem eius inspexerit ».

claims the full dignity of Latin as a philosophical language and thus stresses the need, when undertaking new translations from Greek, to remain faithful to the consolidated philosophical lexicon that had been developed by the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century university masters. From this point of view, the *Protectio* can be considered also as influential in the philosophical and theological discussion of the value of Scholasticism to which belongs, with a radically different perspective, Lorenzo Valla's *Encomium of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, composed just a few months after the final version of the *Protectio*.

In *The Magic Mountain* Thomas Mann makes the Jesuit Naphta the icon of an antihumanistic culture, the champion of a medievalism that rests upon a rigid subordination of philosophy to theology. In this way Mann exemplifies one of the two cultures that fought for the soul of Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. The struggle between medievalism and humanism, between Naphta and Settembrini, is both an ironic and tragic, leading to the roar of cannon with which the novel ends¹². The polarization of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that the German novelist places at the centre of the story of the individuals gathered in the Davos Dorf sanatorium transposes into a contemporary key some of the themes that emerge from the fifteenth-century diatribes involving authors such as Trebizond, Theodore Gaza and Bessarion.

Despite the distance that separates Mann from fifteenth-century Italian culture, the philosophical battle enacted in *The Magic Mountain* re-elaborates a crucial aspect of that close intellectual confrontation to which Trebizond's *Protectio* belongs. This text certainly takes the form of a heated and violent indictment concerning the form and features of the correct translation of Greek texts into Latin. And yet George clearly shows how his rhetorical and philological convictions are of a piece with adherence to a precise philosophical orientation: that of the university *studia*. In his approach we find the construction of an explicit link between the faithful translation of the Greek text and the *communis opinio* which he had learnt from university masters in philosophy. In this sense the *Protectio*, as well as Trebizond's Latin version of the *Problemata*, appear as witnesses to a fracture in fifteenth-century culture that deserves to be re-considered in the

¹² On how Thomas Mann outlines the humanistic culture in comparison with the Middle Ages, Jacob Burckhardt's notorious study on the culture in Renaissance Italy (see JACOB BURCKHARDT, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, Schweighauser, Basel 1860), certainly had a significant impact. For a detailed examination of the various sources on which Mann drew for the elaboration of the relationship between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, see Luca Crescenzi's study dedicated to Mann's novel, available in THOMAS MANN, *La montagna magica*, ed. LUCA CRESCENZI, Mondadori, Milan 2010.

light of Monfasani's editorial work. For, it marks a clear divergence that deals directly with philological and grammatical questions, but is rooted deeply in the philosophical substratum of the fifteenth century.

However, the use of the historiographical paradigm of the radical opposition between Scholasticism and Humanism is by no means absolute, and the case of the *Protectio* clearly shows both its usefulness and its limits. Such a reading certainly enlightened Trebizond's acquaintance with the cultural milieu of the *studia* and the scholastic heritage of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century authors. At the same time, the *Protectio*'s appreciation of philological attention to the Greek letter and the critical evaluation of the doctrinal tradition fixed in the *scholia*, the rationale of the argument it develops and of George's translation of the *Problemata*, all these elements place the text within the cultural flourishing of Humanism in the central decades of the Italian Quattrocento. This coexistence of different attitudes in one and the same author or text is not a contradiction. On the contrary, it reveals how the alternative between Scholasticism and Humanism as cultures and doctrinal perspectives stands as a scholarly reading of the magmatic cultural development of the fifteenth century, whose crucial importance should not be considered in absolute terms. The rise of Humanism did not obliterate Scholasticism but rather led to a plurality of approaches for questioning, debating and overcoming the differences between these 'two cultures'.

Monfasani's work suggests that the *Protectio* presents one of the cultural perspectives that emerge in the mid fifteenth-century cultural debates. George of Trebizond's text is, indeed, plainly rooted in this milieu and its contents reveal a deep acquaintance with the major issues discussion of which proved to be a crucial turning point. The matters with which the *Protectio* deals, namely the theory of translation, the Plato-Aristotle controversy, and the handling of the scholastic heritage, reveal the emergence of a *novitas* that Trebizond clearly identifies in the writings and ideas of figures such as Theodore Gaza, Cardinal Bessarion and Lorenzo Valla. He understands the groundbreaking value of such a new perspective, and he throws himself with force against it.

II. *The Comparatio philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis*

The composition of the *Comparatio* (around 1457–1458) can be hardly understood if we leave aside its background. As Monfasani clearly reconstructs, a 'controversy' between Plato and Aristotle had been launched some years earlier, when Pletho in his *De differentiis* (1439) praised Plato's philosophy and theology, while harshly criticising Aristotle. In the following years, the debate extended to include other intellectuals. Even though Cardinal Bessarion wrote an opuscle to conciliate the two Greek philosophers (perhaps in the spirit of Aquinas' *De substantiis separatis*

§ 3), up until the 1450s Plato and Aristotle could count on real partisan groups fighting against each other.¹³

In 1456 (one year before the *Comparatio*), Trebizond had a dispute concerning Aristotle's *Problemata* with Theodore Gaza, the famous translator defended by Bessarion. On that occasion, Trebizond wrote his *Protectio*. In this work, there is no strong condemnation of Plato, who is even quoted at the very beginning of the text for arguing that philosophers should rule the state. But, while Plato is mostly passed over in silence, the same cannot be said of Gemistus Pletho, who is accused of pagan idolatry and religious impiety. Pletho, indeed, « left behind a book against Christ. The book is called *On the Republic*, and it lays out the foundation of a heathen regime » (*Protectio*, p. 35, probably referring to Pletho's work titled *Νόμων συγγραφή*). Between 1457 and 1458, Trebizond expanded this issue in a new work, titled *Comparatio*, with wider purpose and broader targets. Once more, Pletho was fingered as the most recent case of moral corruption, as he not only had mixed Christian theology with paganism and Platonism, but he had also permitted Plato's *Republic* to circulate. However, in this new treatise the criticisms were primarily directed against Plato, who was no longer ignored but rather charged with every possible sort of wrongdoing: falsity, impiety, moral depravity, incoherence, philosophical inconsistency. The main target of these attacks was Plato's *Republic*.

The word *Comparatio* is almost deceptive, as we may believe that we are dealing with a comparison – perhaps on a textual basis – of the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. Actually, the treatise was designed to be much more than a textual comparison. First, it is an apologetic work, where Trebizond highlights the priority of Aristotle over the other philosophers and discusses his conciliation with Christian faith; second, it is a theoretical work, where Trebizond deals with several issues and debates of his age, mostly deriving from the scholastic tradition. The author openly declares that the two contenders in this comparison are not at all equal: indeed, Aristotle stands as a model of thought and behaviour, while Plato is charged with every sort of moral depravity and philosophical nonsense (*Comparatio*, p. 351). Hence, the most peculiar aspect of the *Comparatio* is its hybrid structure: it is not only a comparison, but also a tribunal of moral virtue and a work of condemnation (of course, against Plato).

Before discussing the contents of the treatise, it is useful to spend a few words on two important aspects of Monfasani's book, namely the *recensio codicum* and Trebizond's education.

The text of the *Comparatio* is conserved in 12 manuscript witnesses and one printed edition (1523). We also know a few further excerpts that were quoted in

¹³ EVA DEL SOLDATO, *Early Modern Aristotle. On the Making and Unmaking of Authority*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2020; LUCA BIANCHI, « Aristotle Redivivus and His Alter-Egos », *Mediterranea. International journal on the transfer of knowledge*, 6 (2021), p. 209–234.

Bessarion's and Perotti's own answers to Trebizond. John Monfasani divides the *stemma* into four families (α , β , γ , δ). For the constitution of the text, he declares that he follows the family β , in particular the ms. *Salamanca, University Library 95*, copied in Rome around 1465 by Alfonso de Palencia who – according to Monfasani – had access to authoritative manuscripts of Trebizond himself (*Comparatio*, p. 379–380, p. 439).

Monfasani has done huge work in reconstructing the *stemma codicum*, even though this was pretty complex and some aspects still remain unclear. If I may, I would like to underline two problems. Firstly, the *recensio* of the four branches of the *stemma* does not always rely on a complete collation of the witnesses. For instance, in the case of β and γ families, Monfasani collated only partially the witnesses **N, P, Y, X, W**. This, he says, was enough to establish that they are *descripti*; however, the reader finds no evidence of this dependence in the description. Perhaps it would have been useful to adduce some brief evidence in support of these *recensiones* – which Monfasani only does for codex **Q**, a *descriptus* of **R**. Of course, this absence does not invalidate the *stemma* as presented; however, it would certainly have helped to strengthen it. Moreover, I do not fully understand why Monfasani inserts an *interpositus* **n** in the *recensio* of the δ family. According to Monfasani, all the witnesses of δ family rely on **n**; but then he says that « **n**, in turns, derives from β » (p. 417). Is this a case of *contaminatio*? Or are **n** and its *descripti* dependent on the β family? Any of these alternatives should be proved in the *recensio* and portrayed in the *stemma*.

Secondly, Monfasani states that the four branches of the *stemma* correspond to as many 'redactional stages' of the text, in which Trebizond personally intervened to amend his working copies (p. 391, p. 404, p. 413). However, the evidence adduced in support of this *recensio* is not entirely conclusive. Monfasani (p. 391) supposes that the α family (**BEG**) derives from an *interpositus* **c**, that acted as a working copy for Trebizond. However, there is not enough evidence to establish that this *interpositus* (like the others, mentioned in the *stemma*) correspond to a working copy. Furthermore, the shared errors of **BEG** seem more likely to be the result of a bad copyist than the effect of authorial intervention. The same applies to the eleven variants listed by Monfasani in the β family (**TN**), all of which appear to be interpolative and polygenetic, rather than authorial (p. 404–405). For example, I have the impression that the oscillations *distinguuntur/distinguuntur, earum/eorum, diligimus/delegimus* could be more likely explained as errors of the copyists. The only significant case of authorial intervention might be the insertion of a quotation from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in the δ family (**V**).

A further interesting point of the philological introduction concerns the circulation of the text. Because five of the extant manuscripts were produced outside Italy (**NQVWX**), Monfasani states that the treatise was « more attractive to non-Italians than it did to Italians » (*Comparatio*, p. 425). It is true that **NQWY** are

all *codices descripti*, as they descend from **V**, copied outside Italy. However, **V** seems to descend from Matthias Corvinus' personal copy (*Comparatio*, p. 383), *scil.* the *interpositus n.* Corvinus was well known for being very close to many Italian humanists and for owning plenty of Italian manuscripts.¹⁴ Therefore, it cannot be excluded that Corvino's copy came from Italy, and that the circulation of the text abroad was subsequent to an earlier Italian circulation.

The second aspect to consider is Trebizond's education in Italy. Trebizond had spent the 1420s in the Northern Italy, between Mantua and the university of Padua, where he had personal contacts with Vittorino da Feltre and Paul of Venice; in addition, it is not to be excluded that he had the chance to meet with Paolo della Pergola and Gaetano da Thiene, both working in Venice and Padua in those very years. This intellectual background is crucial to understanding the essence of the *Comparatio*, which is not only a work of comparison but also a work of theoretical discussion. At the core of book II, indeed, we find some typical issues of the scholastic natural debate, which were widely studied by Paduan (and European) professors of that age. John Monfasani states that «it is not unreasonable to suppose that he had read these authors», meaning Albert the Great, Giles of Rome, Walter Burley, Thomas Aquinas (*Comparatio*, p. 345). In fact, it is certain that Trebizond read some of them, and he made some arguments his own. Monfasani stresses that in many cases Trebizond seems to be in conflict with Aquinas and he wonders whether this may derive from the influence of Albert the Great or the Franciscan tradition. In this respect, the text offers some significant pieces of argumentation to establish that Trebizond was deeply influenced by Albert the Great, in particular concerning the constitution of the human soul and the so-called *inchoatio formarum* (as we shall see in the exposition of the contents).

The *Comparatio* comprises three books, each different in style and contents. While books 1 and 2 consist of a theoretical comparison between Plato and Aristotle arranged on a thematic basis, book 3 provides a harsh attack against Plato, entirely relying on arguments about Plato's morality. Going into detail, book 1 represents a sort of introduction to the general treatise. It presents all the questions that will be addressed in the following books, and it focuses on one particular aspect of the Plato-Aristotle polemic: namely, the philosophical methodology of enquiry carried out by Plato and Aristotle. While the former composed his works without following any standardised procedure of thought, the latter invented a standard structure of argumentation (which is informed by rhetoric and logic). Hence, Plato is portrayed as a naïf philosopher, who «thought without thinking» [*inconsiderata exercitatione*, in *Comparatio*, p. 781]. Aristotle, on

¹⁴ GIANLUCA MASI, «Nuovi manoscritti corviniani a Firenze. Ancora su Mattia Corvino e gli archivi Fiorentini», in CHRISTIAN GASTGEBER et al. (eds.), *Matthias Corvinus und seine Zeit: Europa am Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit zwischen Wien und Konstantinopel*, Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 2011, p. 195–208 (Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung, 27).

the contrary, provided every field of human knowledge with a proper method of investigation and exposition of results. The benefits of this method are evident, he says, in natural philosophy (*Comparatio*, p. 493 ff.), the doctrine of the soul (*ibid.*, p. 503 ff.), mathematics (*ibid.*, p. 505 ff.), metaphysics (*ibid.*, p. 513 ff.), and ethics (*ibid.*, p. 541 ff.).

From a philosophical standpoint, book 2 of the *Comparatio* is the most original and interesting part of the treatise. Trebizond displays great philosophical erudition and, above all, an uncommon capacity to mix different ideas and interpretations to form new and original views – even though not always well supported by good arguments. The main assumption, which is enunciated at the beginning of the book, establishes that Aristotle is coherent with Christian theology, while Plato is not. With this aim, Trebizond presents a long sequence of questions on which he believes he can prove the concordance of Aristotle and Christianity. First of all, Aristotle had a correct intuition concerning the nature of divinity: God is one, is the cause of everything and must be considered separately from the creatures; but it is the sole cause of the entire Created universe. On the contrary, Plato and a certain Neoplatonic tradition linked to Areopagite and to *Liber de causis* had employed ‘secondary gods’ to explain contingent phenomena (*Comparatio*, p. 555).¹⁵ In this respect, Trebizond never considers that the Aristotelian God likewise does not operate directly upon contingent phenomena, but indirectly through ‘ministers’ of its causal power, as Averroes clearly states in the commentary on *Physics* VIII, t.c. 15.

The second important issue concerns the causal power of God from the point of view of motion. Trebizond discusses the notion of *vigor Dei* in a way that is reminiscent of the Paduan debate that occupied some Aristotelian professors up to the early sixteenth century, and he seems to take a position close to that of Aquinas.¹⁶ Those who know the different positions presented by the Paduan professors might find it surprising to see that Trebizond was one of the very few – together with the Scotist Gabriele Zerbi, some years later –¹⁷ to attribute infinite power to God (*Comparatio*, p. 597).¹⁸ Trebizond does not seem to be aware of the theoretical consequences of his position, which he never discusses in detail. He merely rejects the notion of instant infinite motion (*Comparatio*, p. 597, n. 196).

¹⁵ Cf. AQUINAS, *In De divinis nominibus*, cap. 11 l. 4; *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 1 co.; *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1 ad 18.

¹⁶ AQUINAS, *In Physic.*, lib. 8 l. 21 n. 9.

¹⁷ GABRIELIS ZERBI *Quaestiones metaphysice*, per Iohannem de Nordlingen et per Henricum de Harlem, Bononie 1482, l. XII, q. 11 p. [ee]6v–ffv.

¹⁸ PAULI VENETI *Summa naturalium*, impensis Iohannis de Colonia et Iohannis de Manthen de Gherretzen, Venetiis 1476, p. II, cap. 10; GAIETANI DE THIENIS *Recollecte super physicorum*, per Henricum de S. Urso, Vicentie 1487, l. II, q. 6. Cf. ANTONINO POPPI, *Causalità e infinità nella Scuola Padovana dal 1480 al 1513*, Antenore, Padova 1966, p. 124–129.

However, admitting an infinite power implies that God's power cannot have a temporal manifestation and is concentrated in an instant, hence making the description of the causal motion of the heavens even more difficult – as Jandun stated, efficiency and infinity seem to be incompatible from a physical point of view.¹⁹ Moreover, the world is described as coeternal with movement (*Comparatio*, p. 651), and it is eternal only extensively (*Comparatio*, p. 655). Finally, God creates the world by an act of free will, in a process of continuous generation where the secondary causes act as instruments of God (*Comparatio*, p. 661, p. 673). Therefore, on closer inspection, Trebizond's positions seem to be mostly opposite to the Paduan Averroists (both on the efficiency and on the necessity of the First Principle).

Trebizond devotes a long section of book 2 to showing that Aristotle had some intuition of the Christian Trinity (*Comparatio*, p. 617). Indeed, the Greek philosopher based the composition of the bodies upon three aspects: height, length, and width. These geometrical dimensions correspond to the parts of the Trinity: the Father is the line, as it comes from nothing; the Son is height, as it comes from the line; the Holy Spirit is width, as it comes from both. Trinity is therefore considered as an essential sequence of numbered entities (*Comparatio*, p. 627), and it is applied both to the Divinity and to the human world as well. Some influences of this position about the Trinity might still be found in Nicholas of Cusa's *De ludo globi*, at the beginning of the 1460s.

At the core of book 2 we find the doctrine of the soul. According to Trebizond, Aristotle provided Christian theology with the strongest argument to establish the immortality of the soul with his enquiry into the faculties independent of the body (*Comparatio*, p. 681). Thus far, Trebizond's argument derives from the traditional scholastic position according to which intellect and will do not depend on the body and represent the immaterial part of the soul – thus proving its immortality.²⁰ What is characteristic of Trebizond's interpretation is rather his description of the constitution of the soul, which clearly reveals his debt to Albert the Great (*De Natura et origine animae*, I, 5). Indeed, Trebizond divides the development of the soul into steps, each of which is a sort of progression and 'perfection' of the previous one: from the vegetative to the sensitive soul; from the sensitive to the intellective one. Trebizond ignores – it is hard to say whether deliberately or not – Aquinas' criticism of this theory, which is commonly known as the *inchoatio formae*: namely, this constitution through steps calls for the positing of ever new substances within previous substances.²¹ On the contrary, Trebizond says that the intellective soul

¹⁹ IOANNIS DE JANDUNO *Super octo Physicorum*, apud haeredem Hieronymi Scoti, Venetiis 1586, p. 224; *In duodecim Metaphysicae*, apud haeredem Hieronymi Scoti, Venetiis 1586, p. 317.

²⁰ Cf. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 27 a. 5 co.

²¹ On this, see BRUNO NARDI, *Studi di filosofia medievale*, Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, Roma 1960, p. 96–105.

has a divine origin, and it arises from the development of the foetus, hence it might properly deserve the name of 'sperm' (*Comparatio*, p. 731). As is easily predictable, this view of the constitution and the nature of the souls was one of the points on which Bessarion harshly criticised Trebizond.²²

The last significant issue of book 2 concerns providence and fate. Through the action and the movement of the spheres, the First Principle rules generation and corruption of every contingent being (*Comparatio*, p. 737). Following Boethius, Trebizond defines providence as « the simple, stable, and eternal plan of future things in the intellect of God ». Then he reduces all contingent phenomena, even the human acts of will, under the causal influence of divine providence (*Comparatio*, p. 743). In this respect, Trebizond states that God's providence « incites » [*incitat*] the behaviours of rational creatures towards good actions. However, human moral and material capabilities are not so powerful, and they don't always put into practice what they should morally do. Therefore, Trebizond admits a continuous, frequent intervention of God within nature in order to establish the harmony of the creation – thus becoming a sort of Hegelian *List der Vernunft* ante litteram. Finally, Trebizond rejects the Platonic opinion, according to which Aristotle had limited the influence of providence up to the sphere of the moon, as this providence reaches also the human world.

At the end of book 2, Trebizond believes he has gathered significant arguments to conclude that Aristotle deserved eternal salvation (*Comparatio*, p. 769). When Christ was crucified, he spent three days in Hell, and saved all those damned who manifested their conversion.²³ Trebizond concludes that Aristotle must have been one of them, due to his arguments in support of Christian theology. This conclusion permits us to link Trebizond to the broader medieval tradition discussing the salvation of Aristotle [*utrum Aristoteles fuerit salvatus*].²⁴

With book 3 we observe a radical change of style and contents. The title is explicit: the author will no longer compare the two philosophers, but rather will praise one (Aristotle) and condemn the other (Plato). Despite being as long as book

²² SERGEI MARIEV, *Bessarion's Treasure. Editing, Translating and Interpreting Bessarion's Literary Heritage*, De Gruyter, Berlin – Boston 2021 (Byzantinisches Archiv – Series Philosophica 3).

²³ GREGORII NAZIANZENI *Oratio 40*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 40, 657a.

²⁴ MARTIN GRABMAN, « Aristoteles im Werturteil des Mittelalters », *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben: Abhandlungen zur Geschichte der Scholastik und Mystik*, vol. III, Hueber, München 1936, p. 63–102; RUEDI IMBACH, « Aristoteles in der Hölle. Eine anonyme Questio 'Utrum Aristoteles sit salvatus' im Cod. Vat. Lat. 1012 (127ra–127va) zum Jenseitsschicksal des Stagiriten », in ANDREAS KESSLER, THOMAS RICKLIN, GREGOR WURST (eds.), *Peregrina Curiositas: Eine Reise durch den orbis antiquus*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Freiburg (Schweiz) 1994, p. 297–318; SILVIA NEGRI, « La quaestio 'De salvatione Aristotelis' del tomista Lamberto di Monte », in ALESSANDRO PALAZZO (ed.), *L'antichità classica nel pensiero medievale*, Brepols, Porto 2011, p. 413–440; WILLIAM DUBA, « Aristotle in Hell and Aquinas in Heaven: Hugo De Novocastro, Ofm, and Durandus De Aureliaco, Op », *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale*, 56 (2015), p. 183–193.

2, book 3 is almost devoid of significant demonstrative arguments. Argumentation takes a back seat while an enthusiastic, radical criticism of Plato's moral philosophy comes to the fore. This accusation is carried forward with impetus and often leads to exaggerated conclusions. Plato is portrayed as a corrupt man, who promotes a community of women and young students, as his old age does not allow him to practice sexual activities anymore (*Comparatio*, p. 851). One legend goes that also Aristotle, when old, had an affair with a slave (the so-called *Aristoteles cavalcatus*, often portrayed by medieval and Renaissance painters). However, according to Trebizond, Aristotle's affair was acceptable, because it was not against nature – rather, only against Aristotle's wife.

The consequences of Plato's moral corruption spread over the Greeks, then over the Byzantines, who are portrayed as addicted to luxury; and more recently over the Turks: even Mehmet – the 'third Plato', according to Trebizond – apparently followed Platonic and Epicurean teachings (*Comparatio*, p. 933–937). The last knight of this Platonic depravation is Pletho, who is accused by Trebizond of spreading pagan worships, subverting both Christ and Mehmet and theorizing a new religion of the Antichrist. The charge against Pletho is bound to some warnings to Western countries, such as Italy, not to follow such immoral teachings (*Comparatio*, p. 913).

There is one remarkable aspect of Trebizond's *Comparatio* of Plato and Aristotle, namely what he does not speak about. Indeed, a significant part of the fifteenth-century comparative debate was notoriously focused on topics in metaphysics. No matter how we consider the works of Nicholas of Cusa, or those of Ficino and Pico at the end of the century, metaphysics was the main field on which the two Greek philosophers were compared and discussed. The major issues under discussion regarded the convertibility of One and Being, the essence of numbers, the (proportional) analogy among beings, the hierarchy of emanation of created beings from the Principle, and – last but not least – the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides* (famously epitomised by Pico's motto: *Plato ludit in Parmenide*, that scandalised Ficino). Nothing like this will be found in Trebizond's comparative works. In these treatises Platonic philosophy is concerned with topics in politics and ethics, and especially as regards how to rule the city and to organise the education of children. The few topics not regarding Plato's *Republic* are very close to the standard scholastic debates of the early fifteenth century, i.e. those Trebizond could have heard in Padua. Trebizond totally ignores Plato's *Parmenides* in the *Comparatio*, and he anticipates nothing of the ontological debates of the following years.

This aspect of Trebizond's works explains also the importance, the originality, and the interest of this philosopher. He stands in between two ages, which means that he conceived the topics and the methodologies of the philosophical debate in a twofold manner, sharing part of the medieval approach and part of the

humanistic one. His texts show much more medieval scholastic knowledge than humanistic culture; nonetheless, he translated texts for humanists, and he participated in their debates and community. In the work of George of Trebizond we can see the last scholastic tradition, passing the baton to a new age of philosophy.