History of Logic
История логики

VALERIY V. VOROBYEV

Stephanus Alexandrian Is a “Successor” of Ammonius *

Vorobyev Valeriy Vladimirovich
Russian Christian Humanitarian Academy,
15, Fontanka River Front,
Saint Petersburg, 191011, Russian Federation.
E-mail: voiborov@mail.ru

In this paper the author analyzed the commentary on Aristotle’s Chapter 9 of “De Interpretatione” by Stephanus Alexandrian (the second half of VI – first half of VII c.) — the philosopher of late neoplatonic school. Stephanus Alexandrian was supposed to be the pupil of Johannes Philoponos who was one of Ammonius Hermiae’s (435/445 – 517-526 a.â.) pupils and has not attracted special attention of philosophy historians till now though his philosophical works have survived. Stefanus’s commentary is not large and its content is quiet similar to Ammonius’s commentary.

The corresponding fragment of Stephanus’s text was translated and analyzed. The author marks that Stephanus accepts the so called “traditional” or “standard” interpretation of the problem of “the sea battle tomorrow”. Generally speaking, its meaning consists in that there are differences in defining the truth of tensed propositions. We consider that propositions about past and present events are true or false but propositions about contingent future events have different truth values. Stefanus (following Ammonius) introduces the expression “definitely (horismenos) true” to characterize such propositions.

The Stephanus’s text containing the well known “reaper paradox” has been translated as well. This paradox was mentioned by many ancient authors, but it has survived only in the works of Ammonius, Stephanus and one more anonymous author. In Diogenes Laertius’s edition there is the note which contains the reaper paradox translation. However this translation is very clipped that’s why it is very misrepresented.

Lately the reaper paradox attracts attention of contemporary authors and requires further investigations.

Keywords: Aristotle’s “De Interpretatione”, Ammonius, Stephanus, Reaper Argument

* The paper is supported by Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project № 18-011-00669.

© Valeriy V. Vorobyev
Modern scholars ([6] and others) are confident enough to argue that in Alexandria’s Byzantine period, a real “commentator” neoplatonic school was formed by the beginning VI c. AD the founder and head of which was and head was Ammonius “whose lectures on Plato and Aristotle where virtually repeated by two more generations of professors” [4, p. 273]. By this time the school members were mainly Christians (although the teaching was still delivered in quite a “pagan” way), and John Philoponus, Olympiodorus, Simplicius, Damascius and a number of others known as the Aristotelian commentators were more or less involved or directly participated in it. But Ammonius “gave a model for the Aristotelian and Platonian interpretation method” and “his commentary on Aristotle’s On Interpretation was especially important and served as a source for Stephanus and other commentators” [16, Ammonius, part 4].

Stephanus of Alexandria (late 6th century — early 7th century) was a student of Ammonius Hermiae’s students (ca. 435/445–517/526). He has not yet attracted the attention of philosophy historians despite the fact that his essays on philosophy (commentaries on Aristotle and Plato) published by a well-known Berlin publisher (Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca) have been preserved. A number of scholars state that Stephanus’ high degree of scientific knowledge was confirmed when Heraclius (Emperor of the Byzantine Empire from 610 to 641) invited him to teach in the capital. See [5, c. 757]; [6, p. 437–438]. However, this fact, as well as his alleged authorship of essays on medicine, astronomy, alchemy, has been questioned in some recent studies. See [?, p. 541, 552]. Nonetheless, the one thing that leaves no doubt is his compilation of a commentary on Aristotle’s On Interpretation. “Unfortunately, not a single commentary written during the time between Stephanus’ and Photius’ commentaries (second half of the 9th century) has been preserved” [5, c. 757]. Based on this (as well as some other information) it is assumed that Stephanus was the student of Philoponus, who also wrote a relevant commentary that did not survive (this is what Arab authors, as well as M. Psellus mention), see [?, p. 546] “or published Ammonius’ commentaries on Aristotle’s essays that he had listened to” [5, c. 696].

It should be noted that Stephanus’ commentary has a small volume. For example the text of Commentary on Chapter 9 which is of the greatest interest to us, is only six pages long and its contents (as already mentioned) strongly depends on the relevant Ammonius commentary. Naturally, this is not surprising, considering the role Ammonius played in the elaboration and further development of commenting methods in late Neoplatonism, with the ideas of which, especially the fundamental idea to combine, so to speak, “synthesize” the teachings of Plato and Aristotle almost all of the above thinkers were associated.

We should also note that both Ammonius and (respectively) Stephanus adhere (as one can see from their texts) to the so-called “traditional” or
“standard” interpretation of chapter 9 problematics, that are sometimes designated as “tomorrow’s sea battle”. In general, the problem presented by Aristotle is that to prevent fatalistic conclusions it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of differences in determining the truth of propositions that have time characteristics. We regard propositions about past or present events to be true or false, while utterances about future contingencies have a different status. In this regard, Ammonius (and Stephanus) introduced the term “definitely (horismenos) true”.

In the beginning of his commentary Stephanus describes normal relations between propositions as they are established according to the logical square. Then the truth of unit statements (utterances) regarding the present and the past is distinguished from the truth of utterances regarding future contingencies in the same way as that found in the Ammonius commentary: “the unit propositions regarding the present and the past times again equally definitely (horismenos) always distinguish [accept] truth and falsity, whereas with regards to the future time it is doubtful that they would equally definitely (horismenos) distinguish [accept] truth and falsity. If this is to be [allowed, then it] will lead to absurdity, possibility will be destroyed and everything will occur by necessity. So that is the thesis that Aristotle put forward; it is also theological as the subject of the study consists in the following: does everything happen by necessity, or do some things happen by necessity, whereas others do not. But [it] is also physiological [natural], as we study objects and the nature of the emerging and the dying things namely; do they have such nature that they emerge by necessity, or such that is sometimes they emerge and sometimes they don’t. [It] is also logical, for this is the subject of study as it is about propositions [premises], and their study is a logical problem. The subject of study is not alien to ethics because if all things happen by necessity, then there will be no need to take care virtue and to prevent evil.

And how Aristotle hesitates and how he settles [doubts] we recognize by Aristotelian words, through raising [objections] from the outside that are contrary, to refute two epicheiremes [reasonings], one of which is logical [verbal], rather obvious and the other one is associated with difficulties” [15, p. 34, 18–36]. Stephanus further sets out a “logical reasoning”, for which he offers the Reaper argument. We believe that it is possible to use the term “argument” and the term “paradox” here, repeating the corresponding text from the Ammonius commentary almost verbatim. Modern scholars consider Stephanus’ and Ammonius’ argument (about the Reaper paradox) as a text adopted from a significantly earlier source that did not survive and to which there are only references. In particular, the history of “acquiring” this “earlier source” by the founder of Stoic philosophy Zeno (i.e., as early as the 4th-3rd centuries B.C.) is rather amusing: “A dialectician once showed him seven logical ways used
for solving the sophism known as “The Reaper”, and Zeno asked how much he wanted for them. Having heard the answer ‘a hundred drachmas’, he paid two hundred; to so great was his love of knowledge”. See [9, VII, 25]. “Logical [reasoning] is conducted through [description] of our actions such as. ‘If you will reap’, it says, ‘then it is untrue that you possibly will reap and possibly will not reap, [and] but you will reap in any case’. And, in turn, there is [such] assertion: If you will not reap, it is untrue that you possibly will reap and possibly will not reap, but you will not reap in any case. Since [the expression] ‘whatever happens’ introduces necessity, and by introducing necessity we will exclude possibility. To that, of course, one could easily object that the subject of study (is considered to be accepted beforehand). Indeed, the thesis ‘if you will reap’ is not yet ascertained, since it is the subject of study itself. And any thesis should be ascertained by an affirmative proposition. Who does not see that if ‘I will reap’ then I ‘will always reap’? But from where is it clear that ‘I will reap’? This is not yet ascertained by an affirmative proposition. In these [words], there is [the first] epicheireme” [15, p. 35, 1–10]. We should note that Stephanus’ text of the Reaper itself practically matches Ammonius’; however, the explanations as to why the result of this argument is the “exclusion of possibility” differ. Then Stephanus moves on to presenting the second argument, and here as Ammonius’ diligent follower, right after the Reaper he gives (just as Ammonius did in his commentary) argumentation that should clarify the status of propositions about future contingencies, but in a specific meaning important to certain aspects of Christian ideology. “The other epicheireme is offered like this. Deity, he says, either has or does not have knowledge about the future. Of course, it is ungodly and impossible to say (that [God] does not have [knowledge]. If, however, we say that [God] has [knowledge] but it is uncertain, this will be not too far from ungodliness: for what makes our knowledge different? When actions are the same, it is clear that essences are also the same” [15, p. 35, 10–15]. Let us leave here the theme of divine prescience and foreknowledge (which was broadly discussed later by medieval thinkers) as it requires a special consideration.

With regard to the Reaper argument (paradox), it should be noted that paradoxes (Aristotle used the term “aporia”). We use the terms ‘argument’ or “paradox” considering them to be interchangeable here. See [15, p. 33, 34]) in ancient philosophy were very popular ways (just as they often were in further philosophical development) to offer problems and to substantiate decisions. Let us at least remember how many difficult problems arose this way in the history of world philosophy. For example, see [3] where twenty-four well-known paradoxes have been described in great detail, starting from Anaximander, including “the liar paradox”, to Russell’s and Quine’s paradoxes. Up to now, “the reaper argument” has attracted less attention than other themes related to the interpretation of alethic modalities, time-dependent propositions and the
problem of the status of future contingencies. This is related possibly to the fact that Aristotle did not have the appropriate text (The Reaper) and did not even mention it.

There is a translation of The Reaper (with a reference to Ammonius) in the notes to the Russian translation of Diogenes Laertius. Unfortunately, this translation is abridged and very distorted. To see this, we can quote “the sophism” (as this argument is called in the notes): “If you reap, then you reap, and not ‘maybe you reap, and maybe you do not reap’; if you not reap, you not reap, and not ‘maybe you do not reap, and you reap’; therefore no ‘maybe’ exists at all, and everything is accomplished by necessity” [9, c. 485–486]. In such a form, The Reaper becomes quite incomprehensible, and the statement about the absence of information about this paradox in our modern literature becomes understandable.

An article [10] has rather recently appeared, in which the Reaper argument (“paradox”) is considered in connection with an even more commonly known theme (Diodorus’ Master argument). In addition, the author makes references to papers (G. Seel) see [12]. “The Reaper argument usually appears in discussions on determinism and the truth of predictions about future contingencies, often accompanied by two other arguments — the [Lazy Argument] and [Master Argument]” [10, p. 361]. The correlation of these well-known texts can be explained by the fact that they are used in the philosophy of the Stoics to prove deterministic statements (and even earlier by the Megarics, whose determinism was even stricter).

Marko writes that references to the Reaper are found in ancient texts (Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, Lucian, etc.), but a detailed account is only present in the writings of Ammonius, Stephanus and in one anonymous treatise. Moreover, the meaning of the premises in all texts is virtually the same, terminology is the same, and apparently these premises have been taken from one common source (possibly from the lost commentary by Porphyry) [10, p. 363–365].

Then Marko considers the structure of reasoning in detail, paying special attention to how the representatives of ancient schools of philosophy (primarily the Megarics and the Stoics) that used the Reaper argument to justify their modal concepts, might reveal its meaning. The interpretation of such components of the argument as “takha” (maybe) and “pantos” (whatever happens), which in the author’s opinion “can be interpreted in several different ways” [10, p. 385], is of the greatest importance.

In this article, several variations of the Reaper are constructed by using elements of modern logical methods. The author’s inference is that “the modern interpretation based on the works of Seel leads to a logically valid conclusion” [ibid]. In another reconstruction that is the closest to the Reaper,
the conclusion is a “simple constructive dilemma”, but its use requires additional “rearrangement and adjusting” of premises. The first premise in this case will look like this: “$p$ does not imply (perhaps $p$ and perhaps $\neg p$), but implies (pantos $p$)” [ibid]

And apparently as a result of the long deliberation of possible interpretations of the Reaper, Marko writes: “It seems that the Dialectician’s merchant sold the argument to Zeno with an incomplete interpretative manual and kept some of the keys to it to himself” [ibid]

The Reaper paradox has lately attracted the attention of modern authors, and a textual examination of this theme as well as broader issues of Byzantine philosophy and logic associated with it is, without doubt, a promising area for further work.

References


В работе рассмотрен комментарий философа поздней неоплатонической школы Стефана Александрийского (вторая половина 6 в. – начало 7 в. н. э.) на 9 главу «Об истолковании» Аристотеля. Стефан Александрийский предположительно был учеником Иоанна Филопона, одного из учеников Аммония Гермия (435/445–517-526 гг.), и особого внимания историков философии до сих пор не привлекал, хотя до нас дошли его сочинения по философии. Комментарий Стефана невелик по объему и по содержанию весьма близок к такому же комментарию Аммония.

Сделан и проанализирован перевод соответствующего фрагмента текста Стефана. Отмечено, что он принимает так называемую традиционную, или стандартную, интерпретацию проблемы «завтрашнего морского сражения». Её смысл, в самом общем виде, состоит в том, что существуют различия при определении истинности высказываний, имеющих временные характеристики. Высказывания о событиях прошлого и настоящего мы считаем истинными или ложными, а высказывания о случайных событиях будущего имеют иной истинностный статус. Стефан (вслед за Аммонием) для характеристики таких высказываний вводит термин «определенно (horismenos) истинно».

Переведен также текст, содержащий известный «парадокс жнеца». Этот парадокс упоминается многими античными авторами, но до нас он дошел только в изложении Аммония, Стефана и еще одного анонимного автора. В издании Диогена Лаэртского имеется примечание, в котором содержится перевод «жнеца». Однако этот перевод, к сожалению, сокращенный, вследствие чего очень искаженный. Парадокс «Жнец» в последнее время привлекает внимание современных авторов и требует дальнейшего исследования.

Ключевые слова: «Об истолковании» Аристотеля, Аммоний, Стефан, парадокс жнеца

Литература

* Исследование осуществляется при содействии РФФИ, проект № 18-011-00669.
[16] Stephani in librum Aristotelis De Interpretatione commentarium // Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca, vol. XVIII, pars III, Berolini, MDCCCLXXXV.