

Byzantine Philosophy Revisited (a decade after)

KATERINA IERODIAKONO

It is exactly ten years ago that the volume *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources* was published (Ierodiakonou 2002). In the introduction to that volume my aim was to give a short guide to the basics of Byzantine philosophy, and at the same time a partial list of the unsettled questions concerning its dates, sources, and character. No definitive answers were given then; in fact it was argued that no definitive answers could be given, since more scholarly research needed to be done in this neglected area of the history of philosophy. A decade after, do we have answers to those questions? Is it time to reassess our somewhat dated, though still prevailing, standard views on the fundamental issues of Byzantine philosophy?

During the last decade there has been increasing interest in Byzantine philosophy, which has resulted in the appearance of critical editions of Byzantine philosophical texts, systematic studies of specific topics in Byzantine philosophy, as well as general surveys of the discipline as a whole. It is also indicative that the recent volumes and websites of the *Cambridge History of Late Antique Philosophy*, the *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, the *Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, the *Oxford Handbook of Medieval Philosophy*, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the *Geschichte der Philosophie* (Bd. 5, C. H. Beck), the *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle*, the *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques* and others have included entries on Byzantine philosophy and on the more illustrious Byzantine thinkers. But does the implicit acknowledgment that among the periods of the history of philosophy a place should also be reserved for the study of Byzantine thought imply that we are now in a position to draw a more accurate map of this formerly ignored field?

It rather seems that, although some of the issues previously raised have been adequately scrutinized, many remain undecided or controversial. Moreover, it seems that new issues constantly open up and challenge our preconceived ideas about how we are to approach the philosophical writings of Byzantine times. In particular, the three main questions discussed in the introduction of the 2002 volume are still central and debated: ‘Is there philosophical thinking in Byzantium? Isn’t it all theology?’; ‘When does Byzantine philosophy actually begin?’; ‘Who counts as a philosopher in

Byzantium?'. To these, further intriguing topics have been added in the meantime. For instance, a lot of attention has recently been given in workshops and conferences to the cultural exchanges between the civilizations of the Middle Ages, and this has of course brought into focus the interplay of Western medieval and Byzantine philosophy.¹

This introductory chapter, too, is not meant to supply conclusive answers to our questions concerning philosophical literature in Byzantium. At specific points I may sound less aporetic here than the last time around, but my aim is again to provoke further research rather than to settle the open issues once and for all. And I want to start by bringing up anew the crucial topic of the distinctive character of Byzantine philosophy. That is to say, I want to reconsider the expressed views on whether or not we can talk about an essence of Byzantine philosophy, an essence which clearly distinguishes it from Byzantine theology, as well as from ancient philosophy, and secures for it an autonomous status. Indeed, this topic has been at the centre of the latest controversy among the new generation of scholars working in this discipline. Furthermore, it best elucidates the general theme and title of the present volume. For Byzantine philosophical thinking, in my opinion, has many faces in the sense that it encompasses, just as ancient philosophy does, many different philosophical doctrines and many different ways of philosophical life. As to whether this polyprismatic character of Byzantine philosophy is as interesting or as thought-provoking as that of ancient philosophy, or for that matter of any other period in the history of philosophy, my contention is that it remains to be judged on the basis of sustained and systematic scholarly research.

Autonomy and Essence

It is perfectly reasonable that the scholars who were the first to establish Byzantine philosophy as an academic discipline also raised the issue of the particular characteristics that distinguish this period in the history of philosophy from what proceeds and what comes after it. The chief characteristic that was singled out, effectively demarcating Byzantine from ancient philosophy, was none other than the religious affiliation of the authors

¹ I could mention, for example, the following conferences and workshops: 'Greeks, Latins and Intellectual History 1204–1500' (University of Cyprus, May 2008; cf. Hinterberger & Schabel 2011); 'Renaissance Encounters: Greek East and Latin West' (Princeton University, November 2009), 'Knotenpunkt Byzanz' (37. Kölner Mediaevistentagung, September 2010; cf. Speer & Steinkrüger 2012) 'Convivencia in Byzantium? Cultural Exchanges in a Multi-Ethnic and Multi-Lingual Society' (Trinity College Dublin, October 2010).

whose texts were to form the philosophical canon of Byzantine times; and there is little doubt that, perhaps with the exception of George Gemistos Plethon, the Byzantine authors of philosophical texts all confessed themselves to be Christians. Therefore, Byzantine philosophy was conceived and presented as the Christian philosophy of the medieval East (Tatakis 1949). However, concerns were soon raised with respect to the extent to which this Christian character permeates Byzantine philosophical thought in such a dominant manner that philosophy becomes indistinguishable from theology in the period. So, right from the start of Byzantine philosophy as an academic discipline, there was an attempt to clarify its relationship to theology. The way this issue was formulated was by reference to the theoretical and practical autonomy of Byzantine philosophy (Benakis 1991).

The subordination of philosophy to theology, implied by the conception of philosophy as the servant or handmaiden of theology (*philosophia ancilla theologiae*), originating from the theological tradition of Alexandria (Origen, Clement), was influential in the medieval West, but never the prevailing view among the Byzantines. Theology in Byzantium did not have the systematic character that we encounter in the Western theological tradition and did not to any comparable extent use rational argumentation to support its claims. The theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church was very much based on revelation, and few arguments were accepted other than those drawn from the authority of Christian dogma (Podskalsky 1977). Hence, the theoretical boundary between philosophy and theology is easy to defend in the Byzantine context; philosophy did not serve theology's aims, and even if it had similar aims to theology it used a different and independent method to achieve them, namely rational argumentation. As to the practical autonomy of Byzantine philosophy, it was safely secured by the fact that, at least for the most part and to the best of our knowledge, Byzantine philosophical education took place at institutions which did not fall under the auspices of the Orthodox Church. Hence, Byzantine philosophy was proclaimed to be 'an authentic philosophical tradition', influenced by but still distinct from both ancient philosophy and contemporary theology (Benakis 1998: 162; Kapriev 2006: 6).

However, the very idea of autonomy was criticized as misleading and of no use; for it is indeed too difficult to find in Byzantium, or for that matter in the Middle Ages in general, authentic philosophical thought without the direct or indirect interference of faith and revelation. So, if we search for unrestricted autonomy, we may be asking too much from Byzantine philosophy, and from Byzantine civilization in general. Of course, as long as Byzantine scholars commented on ancient philosophical texts, the purpose

of their enterprise was clearly distinct from that of Byzantine theology. But philosophical discourse in Byzantium also aimed at finding demonstrative reasons for things that the Byzantines were already certain about on non-philosophical grounds, namely on the basis of their Christian beliefs. Moreover, philosophy was not supposed to inquire into the ultimate truth, and this *prima facie* restrained its freedom; for if human reason has its limits, philosophy has to work within these limits. So, it may have been the case that Byzantine philosophy developed its own aims and methods, but nevertheless its conclusions had to be in agreement with theology and was compelled to remain silent in front of what is beyond comprehension. It has been persuasively argued, therefore, that it is only a weak sense of autonomy that we can apply in the case of the philosophical discourse of Byzantine times (Zografidis, unpublished).

Having said that, I think there is also a stronger sense of autonomy that can be detected in the works of certain Byzantine thinkers, namely John Italos and George Gemistos Plethon. For philosophy in Byzantium seems to have regained with Italos its autonomy as a purely rational endeavour and one that even sought clear answers to questions concerning human destiny and the higher mysteries of Christianity. It is telling, I believe, that in doing philosophy Italos decided to talk about topics which nowadays, but also at the time, would be considered as belonging to theology as understood and taught by the Christian Fathers. In this Italos obviously followed the ancient conception of philosophy, according to which theology is part of philosophy, since it is supposed to culminate in the attempt to understand the first principles of everything. And it was, most probably, this supposed arrogance on the part of philosophers who reversed the order of priority between philosophy and theology that the Orthodox Church refused to accept, when it decided to condemn and anathematize Italos' doctrines (Ierodiakonou 2007). In the case of Plethon, on the other hand, irrespective of whether it is historically accurate to regard him as a pagan or not, it was the exaltation of reason, his 'cult of reason', that led him to his secular utopianism and justified his claim that philosophy could guide man to happiness. This is perhaps the strongest pro-rationalist claim ever expressed during Byzantine times, but it is interesting that it was made right at the end of the Byzantine period (Zografidis 2008; Siniosoglou 2011a).

Whether autonomous in an absolute or in a restricted sense, Byzantine thought still needs to prove what it offers the history of philosophy that is new. And the younger generation of scholars working in this area have tried to meet this challenge by reopening the discussion about the distinctive character of Byzantine philosophy, now phrased in terms of the 'true face'

(Cacouros 1998: 1364) or, more often, the ‘essence’ of Byzantine philosophy. That is to say, the issue that has recently been at the centre of scholarly debate is whether we can actually talk of a single essence of Byzantine philosophy or whether it is preferable to talk of many different Byzantine philosophies. After all, the Byzantines themselves had half a dozen definitions of philosophy which they inherited from the Neoplatonic tradition. Philosophy is defined throughout the Byzantine philosophical literature as: (i) knowledge of being as such; (ii) assimilation to God as far as humanly possible; (iii) knowledge of divine and human things; (iv) preparation for death; (v) art of the arts and science of the sciences; and (vi) love of wisdom. Furthermore, the term ‘philosophy’ seems to have acquired two very different senses in Byzantine usage (Dölger 1953; Hunger 1978, vol. 1: 4–10): it referred to the engagement with the philosophical questions of antiquity, an engagement which resulted in the production of commentaries, paraphrases and synopses, but also to Christian doctrines that were believed to offer the true answers to many of those questions, as well as to the practice of the Christian life, i.e. to ascetic monasticism. As Anthony Kaldellis argues in this volume, these different senses of the term ‘philosophy’ sometimes reinforced each other, as when ancient philosophy was used to support Christian faith, but at other times they came into conflict and then ancient philosophy was perceived as a threat to the integrity of Christian faith. In fact, Christian authors often opposed their own ‘true’ philosophy to the pagan or ‘external’ one, so that a philosopher in this sense was simply a monk.

Taking into consideration the different definitions and senses of Byzantine philosophy, Michele Trizio (2007) wrote an article in which he aptly expresses a widespread concern among contemporary scholars working in this field, claiming that the common tendency to attribute a modern conception of philosophy that hardly fits Byzantine intellectual history results in Byzantine philosophy becoming a category so narrow that it includes a very small number of thinkers and texts, while leaving uncategorized the vast majority of Byzantine intellectual endeavours. He thus argues that we should not take for granted that Byzantine philosophy can be defined in terms of an invariable, constant and unchangeable essence; for neither the set of Neoplatonic definitions as a whole, nor any one of them taken singly, can be univocally used for the definition of Byzantine philosophy. The more we study the texts of the Byzantine philosophical tradition broadly construed, the more we realize how discontinuous and multi-form this tradition is, and we detect a variety of meanings and functions attached to the term ‘philosophy’. Trizio’s suggestion is that we should not try to provide at all costs an image of Byzantine philosophy as a whole, but

we should attempt to figure out the different meanings and manifestations of the term ‘philosophy’ in Byzantium, i.e. the different Byzantine philosophies and social practices that cohabit and sometimes even clash in the same context.

Trizio’s position has already come in for criticism. In a recent article Niketas Siniosoglou (2011*b*) fiercely criticizes the anti-essentialist approach that refuses to define Byzantine philosophy; he considers it as a relativistic move that tends to hide the dependence of Byzantine thought on what he calls ‘the Christian hegemony of discourse’, i.e. the manipulation of Byzantine intellectuals on the part of the Church. Siniosoglou argues that, at the time of its establishment as an academic discipline, the history of Byzantine philosophy was intended to have as its core the thought of the Christian fathers; what the scholarly world has since anachronistically come to understand and present as philosophical thought in Byzantium cannot unconditionally qualify as the Byzantine engagement with philosophical discourse. This scholarly attitude, according to Siniosoglou, inadvertently suppresses the rise of the hegemonical role of the Church in the intellectual life of Byzantium, which instituted a hermeneutical monopoly in direct contravention to the qualifications of genuine philosophical discourse. Rather than being subservient to the Christian theological establishment, philosophical discourse in Byzantium reverted to calculated dissimulation that occasionally acquired an anti-authoritarian character; in other words, rather than Byzantine, philosophy in Byzantium was profoundly anti-Byzantine.

Siniosoglou’s proposal, too, has not been left unchallenged. Pantelis Golitsis (2011) has published a reply to Siniosoglou’s article in which he gives the following three arguments that seriously question the almighty presence of the Christian hegemony of discourse and the anti-Byzantine character of philosophy in Byzantium: (i) There is enough evidence to prove that the Eastern Orthodox Church did not defend, right from the start, a fully-fledged authoritative dogma, but developed it gradually over a long period of time. In fact, as late as the period of the Hesychasts, there were fervent debates over Christian dogma among members of the Christian establishment. (ii) There is no way of ignoring the fact that many Byzantine philosophers were actually part of the Christian establishment. For instance, Eustratios, who advocated the use of syllogisms in proving the two natures of Christ, was metropolitan of Nicaea. (iii) Even those Byzantine thinkers whom Siniosoglou portrays as dissidents opposed to the Church were often involved in articulating central theological doctrines, as is exemplified by Psellos’ theological writings. Thus, Golitsis backs up Trizio’s position that

it is not possible to give a definition of Byzantine philosophy. He suggests that, instead of reducing Byzantine philosophy to a single concept or tradition, we should pay attention both to the discontinuities as well as to the small continuities that can be found in Byzantine philosophical activity; in this way, we can examine it within its changing historical context and according to its twofold nature both as a Christian ascetic way of life and as part of the Hellenic *paideia*.

I agree with Golitsis that Siniossoglou's analysis is problematic when he ascribes to philosophy in Byzantium an anti-Byzantine character. There is no incontrovertible evidence that philosophers in Byzantium dissimulated adherence to paganism; on the contrary, most of them were well integrated and worked comfortably in the Christian milieu of the Byzantine state. Indeed, they were clearly influenced by this background and often engaged themselves in contemporary discussions of a theological rather than philosophical nature. At the same time, they were also influenced by the philosophical traditions of antiquity, inquiring into the same topics that ancient philosophers had been interested in and making use of the same syllogistic methods that had been advanced by the ancients. In fact, it is this inextricable continuity with ancient philosophy that, I think, chiefly justifies treating the Byzantine philosophical discourse as philosophical. For it is reasonable to claim that the Byzantines did philosophy as long as they were investigating the logical, ethical and physical questions that had puzzled ancient philosophers, some of which are still preoccupying contemporary philosophers.

Of course, it is important to recognize, too, that philosophical thinking in Byzantium was not merely a continuation of ancient philosophy, as Klaus Oehler (1969) stated. Reading Byzantine philosophy in this light would deprive us of the opportunity to detect the particularity of philosophical thought in Byzantium (Kapriev 2006: 5–6; Ivanovic 2010: 371–72). Moreover, it is important to recognize that what the Byzantines called 'philosophy' and what we nowadays call 'philosophy' are sometimes strikingly different. After all, part of the interest of Byzantine philosophy is precisely the various conceptions found in Byzantine texts of what philosophy itself should be, conceptions which may sometimes seem to conflict with each other but still constitute Byzantine philosophy as a whole (Bradshaw 2005). Does this mean, though, that we should regard as Byzantine philosophy whatever the Byzantines called 'philosophy'? Let me briefly explain what I have in mind.

The question as to whether we should follow our own perspective and consider as Byzantine philosophy what we nowadays understand as philosophy rather than what the Byzantines, or for that matter the Christian

Fathers, did become particularly intricate in the case of philosophy being conceived of as the ascetic way of life. Would a Byzantine monk, for instance, be regarded as a philosopher just on the grounds that he led an ascetic life? It is worth noting that this issue does not emerge only in connection with Byzantine times. Jonathan Barnes (2002a) discussed the evidence from inscriptions and texts which suggest that in late antiquity many men, and interestingly many women, too, were called ‘philosophers’, though their contribution to the philosophical discourse of their time is obscure.² Should we include them in our canon of ancient philosophers just because their contemporaries called them ‘philosophers’? Also, some of the people called ‘philosophers’ seem to have been involved in practices completely foreign to what we would now consider as philosophical. Should we think of such practices as philosophical, just because they were done by people who were at the time called ‘philosophers’?

Barnes discusses the example of Evagrius, the leader of a group of Christians in Beirut at the end of the fifth century, to whom our sources refer as a philosopher who led a paradigmatically ascetic life. But does this imply that it was by virtue of his asceticism that Evagrius was called ‘philosopher’? Though tied to philosophy, asceticism may have been simply a sign or concomitant of the feature by virtue of which Evagrius was called ‘philosopher’. For the relation between philosophy and asceticism, to use Barnes’ own analogy, is like the relation between health and exercise; just as ‘healthy’ does not mean ‘taking exercise’, so ‘philosopher’ does not mean ‘recluse’. Evagrius as well as all those people who were called ‘philosophers’ at the time were considered as such because they interested themselves in and studied the sort of things which had been discussed by Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and Chrysippus; moreover, because sometimes they may have had their own views and developed theories about certain traditionally philosophical subjects, like for instance the immortality of the soul or causal determinism. It would not, therefore, be difficult to recognize them, Barnes argues, by the congruence between their intellectual interests and those of the Great Masters.³ Similarly, as Pantelis Golitsis shows in his contribution in this volume, George Pachymeres’ praise of Nikephoros Blemmydes as a philosopher was not on the basis of his ascetic life as a monk. On the contrary, Pachymeres conceived of Blemmydes’ philosophical life as a philoso-

² The classic study for the use of the relevant Greek terms is by A.-M. Malingrey (1961), whom Barnes criticizes in his article for her methods and inferences.

³ I think that Siniosoglou (2011), who also refers to this article, misinterprets Barnes’ position, when he attributes to him the view that, due to the lack of a clear criterion, everyone in late antiquity could have been characterized as a ‘philosopher’.

phically trained intellectual life that induced suspension of judgment on human affairs, and thus liberation from mundane human concerns. For it is this sort of life, according to Pachymeres, which may constitute the foundation to real devoutness to God, a devoutness that has to be reflective and can hardly be combined with the anti-intellectualist faith of monastic life.

It seems, therefore, that the term 'philosophy' does not acquire in Byzantium an altogether different sense from that which we find in antiquity, though there are cases in which Byzantine thinkers may have been called 'philosophers' for reasons that cannot be considered as philosophical either from the perspective of ancient philosophers or from our own modern perspective. But this does not mean that Byzantine philosophy is philosophy in a different sense than ancient philosophy is, or for that matter than any other period of philosophy, when it comes to its objects of philosophical study and ways of pursuing them. At the same time, this does not mean that we should not be open to detecting aspects of the Byzantine philosophical discourse which are peculiar to this historical period, and to which we must be particularly sensitive if we want to pinpoint the distinctive characteristics of Byzantine philosophy. For as part of Byzantine civilization, which was undeniably influenced in most of its manifestations by Christianity, Byzantine philosophy developed certain concepts and relied on certain premises that were molded by the religious affiliation of Byzantine philosophers; and it is exactly such concepts and premises that may not be found in, or may be peripheral to, other periods of philosophy; moreover, it was such concepts and premises that were to promote a different conception of philosophical life in Byzantium. Needless to say, this applies in all periods of philosophy. Philosophy is a historical phenomenon, both in the sense that one does philosophy, or one is a philosopher, when one does what previous philosophers have done (i.e. one discusses the same issues and makes use of the same methods), but also in the sense that whatever a philosopher does may be crucially determined by the specific historical context in which she or he is immersed.

Philosophy cannot be said to have a well-defined single essence, and Byzantine philosophy cannot be said to share with other periods of philosophy such an unchangeable essence. We recognize someone as being a philosopher by comparing what he or she does with what past philosophers were doing; so, we recognize Byzantine philosophers as philosophers because they are typically concerned with questions inherited from the preceding philosophical tradition, namely ancient philosophy. As to those features which distinguish Byzantine philosophy from what past philosophers were engaged in, they should be closely studied but should not mis-

lead us into talking of Byzantine philosophies. For although it may be the case that many different doctrines and approaches were advanced by Byzantine philosophers, doctrines and approaches that were sometimes even in conflict with each other, we can still regard them as part of Byzantine philosophy as a whole. Besides, we do not talk of ancient or modern ‘philosophies’, though we are well acquainted with the variety of philosophical theories and attitudes presented by ancient and modern thinkers. Due to the fact, I think, that research in Byzantine philosophy has not been developed as much as in other fields, we tend to focus on certain standard texts and philosophical positions which we identify as the core of Byzantine philosophy, so that any divergences from these seem to create the need to talk of different philosophies. We should keep in mind, however, that although the Epicureans, for instance, were hardly interested in logic, they are still categorized as what we standardly think of as Hellenistic philosophy. Hence, I do not agree that Byzantine philosophy has a true face, nor that there are many Byzantine philosophies; it is preferable, in my view, simply to talk of the many faces of Byzantine philosophy.

But before I bring to a close the topic of the autonomy and essence of Byzantine philosophy, let me add something concerning the argumentative techniques of Byzantine philosophers, for this has been another area that has caused considerable concern to those scholars who refuse to subordinate Byzantine philosophy to the theological thinking of the time. To put it briefly, the issue is the following: if Byzantine philosophy depends on divine revelation in order to reach its conclusions, can it be considered as philosophy? It is true that serious criticisms were voiced against the use of rational argumentation in different periods of Byzantine history; logic was thought of as suitable for mediocre minds, but not as adequate for reaching the ultimate truth. There is also no doubt that Byzantine philosophers often used arguments that were not completely open-ended; rather, they were clearly designed to protect and support Christian dogma against heretical views. Finally, it cannot be denied that in their philosophical endeavours the Byzantines did not devote much space to testing or doubting the doctrines defended by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Nevertheless, important though the notions of revealed truth and illumination may have been, the majority of Byzantine philosophers made ample use of Aristotelian syllogistic even in explaining Christian dogmas and in defending them against objections. Also, it is worth noting that most of the arguments the Byzantines used in their philosophical reasoning were usually based on premises that were argued for and not God-given (Ierodiakonou 2007). And even if in certain cases Byzantine thinkers were influenced by

their religious predilections in formulating their arguments, how much different in this respect is Byzantine philosophy from Western medieval, Jewish or Arabic philosophy? After all, in all periods of philosophy there is good and bad philosophy, and reaching conclusions that are not well-grounded is definitely one of the characteristics of bad philosophy. In his paper in this volume Börje Bydén discusses the issue of how it was possible for Byzantine philosophers to pursue cosmology as a demonstrative science and to insist at the same time on the infallible truth of the Christian revelation. John Philoponus, whom many Byzantines closely followed in this as in other cases, seems to have opted for a ‘Harmony View’, according to which there can be no contradiction between natural philosophy, as correctly practised, and the Christian revelation, as correctly interpreted. So, in order to establish that creationism is true, Philoponus undertook to show, in his treatises *Contra Proclum* and *Contra Aristotelem*, that the premises of ancient philosophers either do not support their conclusions or else are false. No doubt the main aspiration of his programme was to defend the Christian cause, but Philoponus tried to fulfil it by means of rational argumentation, and in particular by substituting the false premises with true ones and drawing the inferences correctly.

Tradition and Innovation

Having argued that the interaction between Byzantine and ancient philosophy is at the heart of the problem concerning the philosophical status of the works of Byzantine thinkers, it is time to have a closer look at two aspects of this interaction. The first concerns the dates of these two periods in the history of philosophy, and the second the general character of the influence of ancient on Byzantine philosophy.

The problem of deciding what characterizes Byzantine philosophy and the recognition of its close connections with ancient philosophy are also reflected in the difficulty to determine when exactly ancient philosophy ends and Byzantine philosophy starts. In other words, we are still faced with the question raised at the introduction of the 2002 volume: ‘When does Byzantine philosophy actually begin?’ Of course, it is also difficult to ascertain the end of Byzantine philosophy, since its impact cannot be said to have vanished immediately with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, but the issue of the beginning of Byzantine philosophy seems to be even more problematic. For there are significant objections to positing as the starting point either a suitable political event or an important incident in the intellectual history of that period; that is to say, there are significant objections to

attributing to Byzantine philosophy an early start in the fourth century (the foundation of Constantinople), or in the sixth century (the closing of the Neoplatonist Academy by Justinian), or a later start in the eighth century (the appearance of John of Damascus' *Dialectica*), or even in the ninth century (the flourishing of Byzantine 'humanism').

Whatever one decides, however, there should be no doubt that the preferred date is nothing but conventional, just like most historical hallmarks. More importantly, there should be no doubt that it is extremely useful to study Byzantine philosophy in close association with the philosophical, theological and scientific thinking of the earlier centuries. For we are often reminded while studying the works of Byzantine scholars that Byzantine philosophy is a seamless continuation of ancient philosophy, and especially the philosophy of late antiquity. In this volume, for instance, Börje Bydén shows that, when it comes to the problem of the eternity of the world, most Byzantine cosmological writers borrowed both their rationalistic approach and the specific arguments in favour of creationism from John Philoponus. In fact, it is worth noting that it is particularly difficult to decide whether to classify Philoponus as belonging to late antiquity or Byzantium, and admittedly this does not become less problematic by taking into consideration what the Byzantines themselves thought. For when George Gennadios Scholarios listed the Greek commentaries on Aristotle's logic, he grouped Philoponus together with Leo Magentenos and Michael Psellos, rather than with the commentators of late antiquity, namely Alexander of Aphrodisias, Porphyry, Themistius and Simplicius, without indicating his criterion in a clear way (Ierodiakonou 2012).

But wherever we place the break between ancient and Byzantine philosophy, there is still a lot to be done in order to specify the extent to which Byzantine philosophers were influenced by their ancient precursors. The most controversial topic concerns the end to which, according to the Byzantines, the study of ancient philosophy was meant to contribute. Scholars mostly tend to see in Byzantium a more or less harmonious synthesis of ancient philosophy and the Christian background of Byzantine thinkers. For instance, Pantelis Golitsis claims in his paper that, in composing his *Philosophia*, Pachymeres aimed at challenging the misconception of ancient philosophy as being incompatible with the heart of Christian doctrine, by transforming Aristotle into a forerunner of the Christian truth. Anthony Kaldellis, on the other hand, focuses on the cultural dynamic of Christian authority and the opposition of certain Byzantine thinkers, whom he considers as dissidents, because they self-consciously, even if only covertly, came to certain philosophical positions that were incompatible with

Orthodoxy. Byzantine dissidents, according to Kaldellis, were not ‘pagans’ (at least not so long as that term requires cult or belief in the ancient gods), but their intellectual journeys were helped along by the study of ancient, non-Christian philosophy.

To settle this and similar differences of scholarly opinion, it would be helpful to gather more information about the actual knowledge Byzantine thinkers had of ancient philosophical theories, as well as about the actual use they made of them. That is to say, it would be helpful to gather more information about who the ancient philosophers were whose works the Byzantines read, to what degree they were acquainted with the ancient philosophical literature, and through which channels they came to be familiar with the ancient philosophical views. To start with, it would be of great use to future research to collect, in a systematic and critical manner, the Byzantine references to ancient philosophers, just like David Runia (1989) did in his investigation of how much the Greek Fathers knew and made use of Aristotle’s treatises. Besides, the collection of such evidence could also assist us in specifying preferences of Byzantine thinkers with regard to the various philosophical traditions of antiquity. For the Byzantines have often been thought of as generally adhering to Neoplatonism, but it becomes more and more clear that it is not that simple to categorize even individual authors as Platonists or as Aristotelians (Bydén, forthcoming). Indeed, Byzantine philosophers could be seen as advocates of the kind of eclecticism that is also found in late antique authors; that is to say, they do not seem to have been consistently loyal to one of the ancient philosophical schools, but rather preferred to combine doctrines developed by different ancient traditions.

What is true, moreover, is that Byzantine philosophers do not seem to have aimed at originality, another feature which they share with authors of late antiquity, and in particular with the Aristotelian commentators. However, even in their role as commentators, the Byzantines, just like the ancient commentators, managed to express their own views, which were sometimes heavily influenced by their Christian perspective. It is really surprising, as Michele Trizio points out in his paper in this volume, that Paul Moraux accused Eustratios of Nicaea of being a pedantic, repetitive and boring commentator at the same time as he condemned him for introducing in his commentaries his own views, as if such a practice was against the rules of how a commentator should work. Fortunately, Trizio adds, this negative evaluation of Eustratios’ philosophical comments is constantly losing ground among modern scholars. Besides, the fact that Eustratios’ commentaries were not poorly written seems to be corroborated by their

later fortune, in so far as they were not only read by many Byzantine authors, for instance Theodore Prodromos, George Pachymeres and Nikephoros Gregoras, but also translated into Latin and used extensively in the West. So, by George Gennadios Scholarios' time the commentator's task was both to unravel and explain the ancient text by offering interpretations of obscure passages, as well as to take the views of his predecessors seriously and comment upon them, often regarding the previous commentaries as a continuation of the Aristotelian work. For it seems that, in Gennadios' view, the role of the commentator was to transform Aristotle's thought for pedagogical purposes, but most importantly to expand on it. And it makes sense to suggest that such a development was closely connected to the fact that Gennadios consulted, as he himself was proud to admit, both the established ancient and Byzantine commentary tradition as well as the tradition inaugurated by the Latin scholars (Ierodiakonou 2012).

Authors and Texts

The third of the main questions raised in the 2002 volume, 'Who counts as a philosopher in Byzantium?', opens up another area in which Byzantine philosophy can be said to exhibit many faces. For it is not only that in Byzantine thought we detect different philosophical doctrines and ways of philosophical life, and it is not simply that Byzantine philosophers were influenced by different philosophical traditions to different degrees; the figure of the Byzantine philosopher can also be said to be complex. For most Byzantine philosophers were not professional philosophers in the way their counterparts were in the medieval Western universities. Byzantine philosophers may have been teachers of philosophy, but they were also high officials, clerics, monks, even patriarchs.

Unfortunately, there has not been very much discussion about the distinctive characteristics of the Byzantine philosopher, i.e. whether there is something peculiar and special about philosophers in Byzantium that distinguishes them from philosophers of other periods and cultures. To investigate this subject adequately one would need to examine carefully the lives and deeds of philosophers at different junctures in Byzantine history. No doubt this is a vast and far-reaching inquiry that would be difficult to carry out in an exhaustive way, even if one decides to focus only on the most renowned and distinguished of Byzantine thinkers; but, I think, it would be worth pursuing. More difficult, though, is to determine whom one should include in the list of Byzantine thinkers who can rightfully be called 'philosophers'. For it seems important not to rely exclusively on our own mod-

ern preconceptions of what it takes to be a philosopher, but also to take into account how Byzantine thinkers were portrayed both by their contemporaries and by the immediately following generations. Moreover, it is equally important to examine how Byzantine thinkers themselves viewed and presented their role as philosophers. Hence, one needs to analyse systematically the autobiographical texts as well as all relevant biographical material concerning those who were considered in Byzantium as philosophers in order to reach a better understanding of the figure of the philosopher at that particular period in the history of philosophy. In this volume, for instance, Dominic O'Meara throws light on the two facets of Michael Psellos' personality as it emerges in his historical and his philosophical writings; namely, the political thinker and actor of the *Chronographia* on the one hand, and the teacher of the philosophical treatises and commentaries on the other. O'Meara shows that, by reading Psellos' history in relation to comparable ideas in his philosophical works, we can reach a better understanding of the political thought in the *Chronographia*, and of its relation to the political philosophy of antiquity.

Indeed, Psellos serves as a good example of a Byzantine thinker who not only succeeded in different careers, but also composed works belonging to different disciplines and genres: philosophical treatises and commentaries, theological, legal, geographical, historical and medical works, as well as poems, works on music and many letters and speeches. Thus, in order to give a comprehensive account of the intellectual contribution of Byzantine philosophers, it is crucial to take into consideration what they had to say about philosophy when writing in different disciplines employing different genres of writing. In Psellos' case, in particular, it is not only that his writings exhibit a sophisticated rhetorical style for which he became famous, we also find in them the theoretical justification of the close combination of philosophy with rhetoric as the ideal philosopher's discursive practice. For as Stratis Papaioannou argues in this volume, Psellos advocated, for the first time in the history of the philosophico-rhetorical debate, the indissoluble mixture of philosophy and rhetoric 'as if in a single mixing bowl'. After all, it is this mixture which he propagated consistently in his philosophical teaching and letters, and for which he praised intellectual figures of the past and the present.

Finally, Byzantine philosophers explored different areas of philosophy; they seem to have been interested not only in logic and metaphysics, but also in cosmology, natural philosophy, ethics, and political philosophy. George Arabatzis, for instance, presents to us, in this volume, Michael of Ephesus' comments on the biological works of Aristotle, for which there is

no ancient commentary. In this way, Michael's commentaries, just like other Byzantine commentaries and paraphrases, become an invaluable source for ancient views on this hitherto underexplored but intriguing area of natural philosophy. Also, Dimiter Angelov's paper introduces us to yet another area of philosophy that seems to have captured the attention of Byzantine thinkers, namely political philosophy. Angelov analyses the notion of the royal science, i.e. the knowledge possessed by a philosopher-king, as it is discussed by Nikephoros Blemmydes and Theodore II Laskaris. In the preface to his *Epitome logica*, Blemmydes claimed that kingship is similar to philosophy, since they both preside over their respective spheres; kingship is the highest political dignity, while philosophy is the art of arts and science of sciences. When kingship and philosophy converge, the ruling power reaches perfection and secures a good life for the ruled. Blemmydes' politically powerful student, Theodore II Laskaris, developed further this notion of royal science, explaining at length the importance of philosophy in the education of an imperial prince.

Reception and Historiographical Approaches

Byzantine philosophers defended different doctrines and attitudes to philosophical life, showed different degrees of preference to different ancient philosophical schools, played different roles in the political and intellectual world of Byzantium, produced writings of different genres in different disciplines and in the different areas of philosophy. Interestingly enough, this multifaceted Byzantine philosophical output has been received in different ways at different periods by scholars working in different fields, such as philosophy, theology, classics, history, history of ideas. Michele Trizio (2007) assumed the task to chart the historiographical approaches to Byzantine philosophy, and to explain the recent increase of interest in its study, by associating it to the increase of interest in the study of the medieval Latin, Arabic and Jewish philosophical traditions. I think he must be right, although another factor should also be taken into consideration for the explanation of the phenomenon; namely, the increase of interest in the study of another until recently neglected area, namely the Aristotelian commentaries.

The conclusion of Trizio's survey of the historiography of Byzantine philosophy was that there is an urgent need to replace Basil Tatakis' handbook (1949) with a new, more comprehensive history of Byzantine thought. He disagreed about this with Linos Benakis, who expressed the opinion that we are not yet ready to compose such a history (2002: 285), but approved

Georgi Kapriev's statement that today we are not only ready but obliged to do so (2006: 10). Personally, I also agree that several of the interpretations suggested by Tatakis are obsolete; that since the publication of Tatakis' book, the number of scholars in the field of Byzantine philosophy has significantly increased, and so has the quantity and quality of editions and bibliographical contributions; that a handbook is particularly needed for introducing to non-experts as well as prospective scholars the basics of Byzantine philosophical thought. But there are still, I think, important gaps in our knowledge of Byzantine philosophy. Despite the work of the last ten years, there are simply too many Byzantine texts that remain unedited, and it is not even clear which of them should be regarded as philosophical. Consequently, I have repeatedly expressed the view that it may be too early to produce an introduction to Byzantine philosophy. Nevertheless, I also recognize that there are good enough reasons not to dismiss this idea.⁴ After all, no work, and especially not an introduction, is expected to be the last word; it may rather give us a chance to realize what has been accomplished and what more needs to be done in this field. I still believe, though, that such general works should go hand in hand with specific studies that scrutinize the Byzantine philosophical texts themselves; and it is such scholarly endeavours as well as collaborative projects that I consider to be more promising in delivering significant results at this relatively early stage of research.

This volume constitutes the outcome of such scholarly endeavours and collaborative projects. It should be noted, however, that in its initial conception it had a different character from the present. It was meant to come out as the proceedings of a panel in the 21st International Conference of Byzantine Studies (London, August 2006) with the general title 'The autonomy of Byzantine philosophy'. The aim was to study the place philosophy occupied in Byzantine society and culture; in particular, the aim was to deal with the question of whether there is such a thing as philosophy in Byzantium clearly demarcated from theology and resistant to the pressures of religious orthodoxy and political authority. The speakers were Dimiter Angelov, Börje Bydén, George Zografidis and myself, and the areas of philosophy covered were logic, metaphysics, cosmology and political philosophy. At the end of the conference we decided to publish a volume on this central topic, which would include relevant contributions from more col-

⁴ For instance, I welcome the decision of Acumen Publishing to entrust George Zografidis with the writing of an introduction to Byzantine philosophy.

leagues and thus cover, in a comprehensive and systematic way, other areas of Byzantine philosophy. That project was never realized; instead, this volume now appears, containing some of the heavily revised presentations of the 2006 London conference together with other papers that were presented and discussed at a conference at the Norwegian Institute of Athens in December 2008.

Like the 2002 volume, this volume is not an introduction to Byzantine philosophy. It is a collection of articles on specific texts and themes of Byzantine philosophy and does not purport to deal with any of them in an exhaustive way. Moreover, it is not a collection of articles intended for the general public; rather, it is meant to whet the appetite of historians of philosophy, Byzantinists, classicists, historians of ideas and philosophers for a largely unexplored period in the history of philosophy. But since this volume shares some features with the 2002 volume, it makes sense to wonder whether it might be vulnerable to the same criticisms that reviewers have raised in the meantime. Is it the case, for instance, that it ‘offers very little for any non-specialist seduced by the title into thinking this to be a systematic and general treatment of the transmission and development of ancient Greek philosophy in the Byzantine Middle Ages’ (Searby 2002)? Or, does it fail ‘to some extent in its intention to introduce Byzantine philosophy to a wider audience’ (Sellars 2004, 344)? Such remarks would have been perfectly justifiable, I think, if it were not the case that in the introduction of the previous volume, as here, an attempt was made to outline clearly the limitations regarding the scope and purpose of these volumes. For our intention was not and is not to present either of these volumes as handbooks of Byzantine philosophy or general treatments of the influence of ancient thought on Byzantine philosophy; and as for their titles, though admittedly vague in their generality, it is far-fetched to regard them as misleading in this direction, or for that matter seductive.

A more challenging criticism of the 2002 volume referred to the fact that it rested on the assumption that Byzantine philosophy was understood as what could be connected to canonical ancient sources such as Plato and Aristotle (Bradshaw 2005); and the same can certainly be said about this volume, too. As I tried to explain at the beginning, I cannot but agree with the claim, which David Bradshaw elaborated in his book published in 2004, that Byzantine philosophy should be treated as much as a way of life as a form of understanding, and should therefore not be separated from its revealed source. Nevertheless, just as in the case of the 2002 volume, we also prefer in this volume—and I write here also on behalf of my co-editor—to focus on those Byzantine texts and authors that most closely relate, con-

sciously or otherwise, to the concerns of the ancient philosophical texts and authors; and the reason for this preference is, as we have previously stated, not that ‘we believe that an account in which the religious dimension is largely ignored is sufficient to grasp Byzantine intellectual history in its organic entirety, but because we think that a clearer conception of this part of Byzantine intellectual history is both desirable in itself and necessary for the understanding of the whole’ (Ierodiakonou & Bydén 2008).

This volume, therefore, intends to follow the tradition of the previous one in presenting some more ‘trial sections in a ground almost unknown to historians of philosophy’ (Zografidis 2003: 414); some more useful ‘preliminary explorations of a largely unmapped terrain’ (Bradshaw 2005: 236); some more scholarly studies which focus on details in anticipation that this may be ‘the likeliest way of reaching the still-distant goal of a broad, deep understanding of Byzantine philosophy’ (Livanos 2003: 260). For this volume principally aims at persuading its readership that Byzantine philosophy is worth investigating; and I am not of the opinion that there is only one way in which a period in the history of philosophy may be worth investigating. I perfectly understand, of course, that philosophers could insist that the degree of originality characterizing the ideas introduced in a period of philosophy should be an important criterion. In this respect, the previous volume received some damning criticisms; for instance, it was argued that for the most part Byzantine philosophers seem to have been not only unoriginal but ‘uninterestingly unoriginal’ (Hankinson 2003), or ‘not particularly engaging philosophically’ (Bradshaw 2005: 236).

Could the same criticism be raised against this volume, too? It remains to be seen. For the time being, I want to underline the fact that, even if it is once again proved that Byzantine philosophers did not present original philosophical theories, or developed those of their predecessors in philosophically exciting ways, this should not be regarded as a good enough reason for its sweeping condemnation. For as Jonathan Barnes wrote in the 2002 volume, originality or lack thereof should not determine whether one should study Byzantine philosophy or not: ‘Originality is the rarest of philosophical commodities. It is also an over-rated virtue: a thinker who strives to understand, to conserve, and to transmit the philosophy of the past is engaged in no humdrum or unmeritorious occupation’ (Barnes 2002*b*, 98). Indeed, it is important, I think, to realize the extent to which Byzantine thinkers help us in our attempt to understand better ancient philosophical texts; they provide us with information about ancient doctrines that have since been lost; they play a significant role in the history of Platonism and Aristotelianism in the West and, thus, they form part of the background for later philosophical de-

velopments. To appreciate Byzantine philosophy we simply need to make an effort to explore its multifaceted character.

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