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PhD Thesis

Protreptic Discourse and Way of Life in Ancient  
Philosophy: Classical Sources and Christian Receptions

Abstract

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Iași, 2015

# Contents

Introduction (p. 3)

1. The protreptic genre: the history and the developments of an ancient rhetorical and philosophical tradition (p. 9)

1.1. Ancient theories of the protreptic (p. 9)

1.2. Modern scholarly debates concerning the protreptic genre (p. 20)

1.3. A short history of ancient protreptic literature (p. 32)

2. Two illustrious examples of the protreptic genre: the *Protrepticus* of Aristotle and the *Hortensius* of Cicero (p. 41)

2. 1. Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (p. 41)

2.1.1. The reconstruction of the *Protrepticus* (p. 41)

2.1.2. Conflicting interpretations on Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (p. 50)

2.1.3. The addressee and the content of the *Protrepticus* (p. 63)

2.1.4. The place of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* in the history of ancient philosophy (p. 75)

2.2. Cicero's *Hortensius* (p. 75)

- 2.2.1. Greek philosophy in Rome: the avatars of a *doctrina adventicia* (p. 75)
  - 2.2.2. The sources of Cicero's *Hortensius* (p. 87)
  - 2.2.3. The structure, the characters and the date of the dialogue (p. 96)
  - 2.2.4. The reception of Cicero's *Hortensius* (p. 100)
  - 2.2.5. New contributions to the reconstruction of Cicero's *Hortensius* (p. 109)
3. The meanings of philosophy in ancient protreptic writings (p. 121)
- 3.1. A still recent expression: "philosophy as way of life" (p. 121)
  - 3.2. The protreptic function of the philosophical discourse (p. 131)
  - 3.3. *Homo optans* and the philosophy as conversion experience (p. 142)
4. Influences of the philosophical protreptic on the Christian literature from second and third centuries (p. 151)
- 4.1. *Status quaestionis* (p. 151)
  - 4.2. Influences of the protreptic genre on Latin Christian literature (p. 153)
    - 4.2.1. St. Justin and the tradition of the philosophical protreptic (p. 153)
    - 4.2.2. Pseudo-Justin: *Cohortatio ad Graecos* (p. 162)
    - 4.2.3. Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus ad Graecos* (p. 167)
  - 4.3. Influences of the protreptic genre on Greek Christian literature (p. 183)
    - 4.3.1. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* (p. 183)

4.3.2. Cyprian of Carthage: *Ad Donatum* (p. 189)

5. *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen*: a Christian protreptic discourse? (p. 197)

5.1. Preliminary issues (p. 197)

5.2. The protreptic features of the *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen* (p. 197)

5.3. The consequences of a reading of the *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen* as a protreptic (p. 208)

Conclusions (p. 213)

Bibliography (p. 216)

## Abstract

The aim of the PhD thesis entitled “Protrepitic Discourse and Way of Life in Ancient Philosophy: Classical Sources and Christian Receptions” is to provide an approach of ancient philosophy from a perspective still insufficiently explored in the bibliography available at the moment. More exactly, our purpose is to show to what extent the various examples of philosophical protrepitic (a large part of which has survived only in fragmentary form) could reveal to the modern exegesis the ancient meaning of philosophy as “way of living” or “care of the self”. This aspect of ancient philosophy was stressed in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Pierre Hadot and others, but a comprehensive analysis of such an aspect from the perspective of the protrepitic writings have never been made so far.

Therefore, our first intent is to point out the relevance of the protrepitic writings in recovering the meaning of ancient philosophy as a way of live. Secondly, we will try to point out some aspects of the influence which the philosophical protrepitic has had on Christian literature from the second and third centuries. We shall examine, inter alia, to what extent pagan protrepitics have transmitted to Christian authors the ancient meaning of philosophy as a way of life, together with a set of spiritual exercises and practices of the self. Our intent will be to show that this meaning of philosophy was adapted and perpetuated in the protrepitic writings of early Christian literature.

The study of the protrepitic writings represents an important topic for contemporary research, as also demonstrated by the studies published on this subject. Apart from the attempts to reconstruct and interpret some of the most famous examples of this genre, such as Aristotle’s *Protrepiticus* and Cicero’s *Hortensius*, researchers have become more and more interested in emphasizing the way in which the ancient tradition of philosophical protrepitic influenced some of the early Christian writings. In the past few years, the influence of this genre upon the Christian literature has made the object of systematic researches, a fact also proven by a series of studies dedicated to writings such as Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*, St. Justin’s *Apologies*, the *Protrepiticus ad Graecos* of Clement of Alexandria, St. Basil’s Homily *On the Words ‘Give Heed to Thyself’* or Augustine’s *Confessions*.

However, there is still much work to be done to more clearly understand the evolution and the development of this genre not only in Greco-Roman Antiquity, but also in the middle Ages and pre-modern literature.

Sadly, in the Romanian culture, this topic has been scarcely discussed so far. Although there is an available translation in Romanian language of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* as well as a translation of Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Greeks*, we still not have a comprehensive monography on this topic. There are also still lacking translations of some important protreptic works, such as Cicero's *Hortensius* and Iamblichos' *Protrepticus*, as well as systematic studies dedicated to them. From this perspective, our contribution is intended to give an impulse to the researches on this topic in the Romanian cultural area. Approaching pagan protreptics as well as Christian, our PhD thesis could serve as an introduction to further studies on the issue of the protreptic literature.

The present thesis contains five chapters, in addition to an Introduction, some Conclusions and a Bibliography. The first chapter focuses primarily on the ancient theories about the protreptic genre, investigating some key passages from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Pseudo-Aristotle's *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, and Epictetus' *Diatribes*. In addition to this survey of ancient theories concerning the protreptic discourse I will provide an overview of the modern scholarly research on this topic, analyzing the main statements one can use in identifying and interpreting an ancient text as protreptic. Based on these statements I will conclude the first chapter of our thesis by sketching a brief history of the protreptic in Greco-Roman antiquity.

In chapter two I will devote a particular attention to probably the most famous protreptic writings from the whole of ancient philosophy, namely Aristotle's *Protrepticus* and Cicero's *Hortensius*. I will provide a survey of the history of the reconstruction of these two works and I will critically examine the solutions and the interpretations which have been proposed by various researchers throughout time. I also will try to offer some new suggestions for the reconstruction of these two philosophical protreptics, especially in the case of Cicero's *Hortensius*. At the same time, I will read these texts as sources for the modern interpretation of ancient philosophy as 'way of life', 'care of the soul' and 'spiritual exercises'.

In the third chapter, I will investigate more extensively to what extent the ancient texts which can be assigned to the protreptic genre can be used to recover the ancient meaning of philosophy as "way of life", "conversion experience" or "spiritual exercise". I will read some

passages from Plato's dialogues, Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus*, Teles' *Diatribes*, Seneca's *Letters*, etc., paying a particular attention to motifs such as "philosophy as medicine of the soul", "care of the self" and "moral improvement".

In the fourth chapter of my thesis I will discuss some texts from the first three centuries of Christian literature, in which can be recognized the influence of the philosophical protreptic tradition. Such texts will include: St. Justin's *Apologies* and *Dialogue with Trypho*, Pseudo-Justin's *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, Clement of Alexandria's *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, and Cyprian of Carthage's *Letter to Donatus*. As I shall try to demonstrate, in writing their works all these authors have made use of the categories of the protreptic genre, in exhorting the pagan audience to convert to Christianity, defined as a "true philosophy" and promoted as the only valid way of life.

In the last chapter of this thesis, I will provide a new reading and interpretation of Gregory Thaumaturgus' *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen* by relating it to the ancient tradition of the philosophical protreptic. The features which Gregory's speech shares with the protreptic writings have been largely neglected by modern scholars so far. However, as I will try to demonstrate in my analysis, such a reading could offer new perspectives for a better understanding of this text. With this aim in mind, I will analyze some passages from Gregory's *Address* by confronting them with other protreptic texts from Greco-Roman philosophy, and I will try to show to what extent it shares the features of philosophical protreptic tradition. Such an approach will allow me to offer a new answer to the controversial issue of the literary genre of this discourse. Thus, I will suggest that this text may be read not only as a speech of thanksgiving (*logos charisterios*), as a farewell discourse (*logos suntaktikos*), as an address (*logos prosphonetikos*) or as a panegyric (*panegyrikos*), but also as a protreptic discourse (*logos protreptikos*). Though Gregory does not refer to his speech as being a protreptic, its structure, themes and recurring motives, as well as the vocabulary used make me consider this text *also* as a protreptic one.

Based on such an analysis, I will try to offer certain clarifications regarding an equally disputed question, which concerns Gregory's avoidance of specifically Christian terminology in his speech. I will critically discuss the solutions previously proposed by various researchers concerning this issue and I will provide my own answer, thus taking part in this contemporary debate. In my thesis, I will argue that Gregory's preference for a language specific to

philosophical schools can be explained precisely by taking into account the protreptic aim of his text. The author adjusts his speech to the public constituting his addressee; for this public, he presents Origen's school as a school identical in many respects with the philosophical schools of the time. This way, he tried to persuade the pagan intellectuals into converting easier to the education and the way of life taught by Origen.

In conclusion, it can be stressed that the ancient protreptic texts are of great importance in understanding the nature and the specificity of ancient philosophy. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of philosophy defined as "way of life" could not omit a discussion about the ancient tradition of the philosophical protreptic. Equally important, this tradition of protreptic writings has largely influenced the early Christian literature, as demonstrated by works of many authors, such as Justin the Martyr and Philosopher, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus, Minucius Felix, Cyprian of Carthage and others. All these Christian authors are largely indebted to the pagan and philosophical tradition of the protreptic genre. As I have tried to show throughout my thesis, quite often, these authors have recovered in their own protreptic works the ancient meaning of philosophy as "way of life" by adapting it to a Christian framework.



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