II.
LA FISICA ARISTOTELICA NELLA RIFLESSIONE FILOSOFICA

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NATURE AND FATE ACCORDING TO THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION: ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS’ EXEGESIS IN LATE ANTIQUITY DEBATE

One of the most important late antiquity themes which have majorly involved Aristotle’s Physics is that of Fate. For the Aristotelian doctrine on Fate, has determined the identification between Nature and Fate, as attested by the peripatetic tradition from Theophrastus onwards. This identification will become, in turn, one of the most heated late antiquity debates among the Hellenistic schools of philosophy.

First of all, my intent in this article is to present its ethical implications and, in particular, to maintain that Aristotle’s Physics influenced Alexander of Aphrodisias’ doctrine on freedom and his vigorous antideterministic polemics. So, it is necessary to historically reconstruct what could be the meaning of Fate.

From the third century B.C. onwards the term heimarmene ceases to be used just within epic poetry and drama; instead, it enters the higher spheres of the physics doctrine; according to Cicero, «by fate, I mean what the Greeks call heimarmene – an ordering and sequence of causes, since it is the connection of cause to cause which out of itself produces anything»2. Hence the term heimarmene may, at times, mean the sole divine cause, the connection from cause to cause, the sequence of external occurrences. According to Alexander of Aphrodisias On fate it is necessary to «naturalize» Fate3. He quotes many passages directly from Aristotle’s Physics and maintains that

[Then] we are left with saying that fate is in the things that come to be by nature, so that fate and nature are the same thing. For what is fated is in accordance with nature and what is in

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1 Cfr. ALEX. De anima II (Mantissa), tr. it. a cura di P. Accattino - P. Cobotto Ghigia, Edizioni dell’Orso, Alessandria 2005, 25, 30; in this passage, Alexander mentions Theophrastus’ Callistene and Polizelo’s On fate: both philosophers identified «nature» and «Fate». Cfr. also P.L. DONINI, Tre studi sull’a Aristotelismo nel II secolo d. C., Paravia, Torino 1974.
accordance with nature is fated. For it is not the case that man comes to be from man, and horse from horse, in accordance with nature but not in accordance with fate; rather, these causes accompany each other as if differing only in name. It is for this reason, too, that men say that the first causes of the coming-to-be of each thing in accordance with nature (that is, the heavenly bodies and their orderly revolution) are also causes of fate. For the beginning of all coming-to-be is the heavenly bodies, in their motion, being in one type of position or another in relation to things on earth⁴.

The example of generation of man and horse is very common in Aristotle, particularly in the second and third book of Physics⁵. These occurrences are the proof that we need to relate to a physical treatise in order to understand an ethical issue. Maybe it seems strange that Alexander tackles this subject with an ethical approach to the human faculty of deliberating and acting, thus, ultimately, self-determinism. Nonetheless, Alexander’s reference may be explained through the accuracy of the Commentator and his intention (in a systematic and overparticular fashion) to return to the official Aristotelian position. Furthermore, he adds that «as Fate is located in these things and is of such a nature, it is necessary that, as are the things that come to be in accordance with nature, so should those be too that come to be in accordance with fate»⁶. This cannot be pure encyclopaedism, given the extreme accuracy of the Aristotelian quotation⁷. In fact, a little further on, Alexander introduces a very meaningful argumentation, but also an important expression to suggest that «the things that come to be in accordance with nature do not do so of necessity (ananke), but the coming to be of the things that come to be in this way is sometimes hindered; for which reason the things that come to be in accordance with nature come to be for the most part, but not of necessity»⁸.

Now, it is very hard not to sense the words of the fifth book of Physics echoing behind this passage, in addition to the third book of the Nicomachean Ethics, in which Aristotle defines both physical nature and human reality as the realm of for the most part, becoming thus not a place for absolute necessity and always, but limited by the nature of chance and free will⁹. Indeed, Alexander is moving progressively from the analysis of natural phenomena and their ramifications to human actions;

⁴ Ibidem.
⁵ Cfr. Phys. II 1, 193 b 8, in D.W. Ross (ed.), The works of Aristotle, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1930: «The form indeed is “nature” rather than the matter; for a thing is more properly said to be what it is when it has attained to fulfilment than when it exists potentially. Again man is born from man, but not bed from bed. That is why people say that the figure is not the nature of a bed, but the wood is – if the bed sprouted not a bed but wood would come up. But even if the figure “is” art, then on the same principle the shape of man is nature. For man is born from man»; Phys. 2, 194 b 13: «Man is begotten by man and by the sun as well»; Phys. 7, 198 a 26: «for the “what” and “that for the sake of which” are one, while the primary source of motion is the same in species as these (for man generates man)»; Phys. III 2, 202 a 11: «The mover or agent will always be the vehicle of a form, either a “this” or a “such”, which, when it acts, will be the source and cause of the change, e. g. the full-formed man begets man from what is potentially man».
⁶ Cfr. ALEX. De fato, 169 b 19 - 170 a 5.
⁷ Alexander is quoting an Aristotelian passage of the fifth book of Physics on natural (and so «fated») processes: «are there then also some becomings that are violent and not the result of natural necessity, and are therefore contrary to natural becomings […]?»; cfr. Phys. V, 5, 230 a 32.
⁸ Cfr. ALEX. De fato, 170 a.
more precisely, his own aim consists in to applying the interpretative scheme of nature to the latter, as confirmed by:

For that which is contrary to nature, too, has a place in them, and comes to be when nature is hindered in its proper working by some external cause. It is for this reason that man does not come from man of necessity but for the most part, and neither does each of the things that come to be in accordance with nature always comes to be in accordance with the fixed time that seems to be laid down for the things that come to be in this way.\(^\text{10}\)

If violations of the necessary arrangement of Nature are possible and exist, i.e., if the necessary order of nature is itself strictly non deterministic but a predetermined for the most part, then this will come about with the faculty of choice, human purpose and behaviour; this is why Alexander adds that

If there is in the things that come to be in accordance with nature that too which is contrary to nature, as also in the things in accordance with craft [that which is contrary to craft], what is contrary to fate will also have a place in the things that come to be in accordance with fate, so that if what is contrary to nature has a place and is not an empty expression, what is contrary to fate, too, will have a place in the things that come to be.\(^\text{11}\)

The end point is: if Nature and Fate are perfectly interchangeable and the for the most part law of necessity both for natural processes and human actions is shared, then human behaviour will be interpreted as a result according to our by and large expectations based on predetermined data; in fact, by and large, which is different to necessary and deterministic. One could certainly ask why Alexander would want to strongly underline this point; a convincing answer can be found in the On fate: not only is it a polemic treatise addressed to a non-specific public, but it also embodies the most spirited denunciation and accusation of the Commentator against determinism – the Stoics in particular. Albeit Alexander gives no mention of the Stoics and, specifically, of Chrysippus, they are certainly the aim of his j’accuse.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, the Stoics would have somehow removed self-government and free will from human actions; they would have suggested that «making a choice rather than another» is the expected effect by the connection to a cause. The question is how every behaviour and/or deliberation could be truly free; the awareness of the individual assent is more important, rather than the act of merely assenting. Making a choice does not automatically mean being free: the absence of external conditioning does not involve that some inner conditioning could affect the moral agent. Maybe he is not able to recognize them or to meditate and be aware of the influence of his own nature and education on his choices and behaviour. Thus, he would

\(^{10}\) Cfr. Alex. De fato, 170 b 5.

\(^{11}\) Ibidem.

act automatically. Indeed, according to Alexander, the Stoics would admit the existence of free assent and «something dependant on ourselves», but they would use these words «through homonymy»; they would suggest that occurrences happen «through us» rather than by us having the power of making an unconditional choice.\textsuperscript{13} We do not know whether Alexander’s reconstruction of the Stoic point of view is more trustworthy than tendentious and if an unconditioned choice is indeed possible or not (and, if yes, in which way).\textsuperscript{14} According to Cicero’s testimony, Chrysippus would have maintained that Fate can be regarded as Necessity for future events; they would be both God, and the divine force can likewise be found in the Logos operating within Nature; indeed, the very same world would be God inasmuch as the effusion of the divine Logos.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, a common ground seems to exist between Aetius, who claimed that the Stoics described Fate as a sequence of everlasting causes, and Gellius. According to Gellius, Chrysippus viewed Fate as an order of all things defined by Nature in such a way that one thing follows the other through an inviolable connection.\textsuperscript{16} Stobaeus’ testimony seems to follow the same lead by asserting that Chrysippus would have defined the substance of Fate as the «power of breath» in On fate, the second book of On the world and the second book of On seasons treatise. Moreover, according to Stobaeus, Chrysippus would have freely introduced terms like «truth», «cause», «nature» and «necessity» as synonyms of «rational».\textsuperscript{17} The question is whether Alexander had a poor understanding of Stoic determinism and, furthermore, if Chrysippus’ cosmology and ethics are really coherent and compatible.\textsuperscript{18} Surely, On fate evokes the echoes of a lively controversy between hard and soft determinists on one hand, indeterminists and libertarians on the other.\textsuperscript{19} Both factions agree upon the variety of causes but freedom is not at all a logical consequence of this multiplicity:

\textsuperscript{13} Cfr. ALEX. De fato, XIII 181. Alexander introduces ‘epi plus genitive’ for «something depending on us» because of the possibility of choosing consciously and so unconditionally. On the contrary, from the Stoic point of view «something depending on us» grammatically would have been ‘dia plus genitive’; indeed, the Stoics try to grant any autonomy to the individual but, nonetheless, he would be no more than an executor predetermined by the sequence of causes.

\textsuperscript{14} On this issue, cfr. Alexandre D’Aphrodisie, Traité du destin, éd. par P. Thillet, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1984 where Alexander allegedly reconstructs the Stoic concept of world unity as a chain of causes through which destiny is defined. Nonetheless, he interprets it as if the events could be simultaneously both cause and effect; this is not in line with the orthodox Stoic doctrine which is in no way comparable to a mechanistic determinism of modern science; cfr. MAGRIS, Trattati antichi sul destino and C. NATALI (a cura di), Alessandro di Afrodisia. Il destino. Trattato sul destino e su ciò che dipende da noi. Dedicato agli imperatori, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin 2009.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibi, 1.28.4, SVF 2.917 and 7.2.3 = SVF 2.1000, p. 863.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibi, 79.1-12, SVF 2.913.


\textsuperscript{19} Cfr. S. Bobzien, Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998, pp. 282-286 on the interpretation of Alexander’s libertarian polemich against the Stoics. According to the scholar, «depends on us» and «within our power (in nostra potestate)» have been indeterministically interpreted as «depending on the free choice of each of us»; «us» here would refer to a causally non-determined moral agent and to the model of «decision-maker» of the mind founded on a libertarian assumption.
Alexander’s assumption is that the issue would run the risk of always being determined by the numerous combinations among the causes themselves. Even though Alexander refers to the Stoic doctrine on the unity of the cosmos and the idea that Fate would consist in a chain of causality, he then interprets this chain as a result of cause and effect. This kind of determinism is in line with modern causal determinism, but has no connection with the Stoics. Alexander himself compares the sequences of causes with the links of a chain. They are connected to each other but not through a causal relationship and in fact they are distinct; none of the links may be considered the starting point and cause of the next.

On the other hand, if the Stoics are right, and everything must conform to Fate, the universe must behave according to its own nature and determine the coincidence between individual logos and universal logos; the individual must give his assent to the latter with no reservations. Plutarch had already pointed out the risk of transforming Fate into the unique cause of moral actions; on the other hand, if it is the preliminary (and thus preceding) cause of an outcome, maybe it is weaker than any other one, whole or not. Most probably, it may have seemed paradoxical to Alexander to try and find the place of individual morality within an ipso facto cosmos which has a moral structure based on Fate. Alexander refuses this Stoic issue and the existence of any primary or universal cause but, alternatively, does not maintain that human deliberations, choices and actions are lacking in cause (uncaused movements).

20 Cfr. ALEX. De fato, XXII 192 18-19: «In setting out the difference which exists among causes they list a swarm of causes – preliminary causes, joint – causes, … sustaining causes, and others (we need not prolong our account by including all the ones they name, we need only indicate the intention underlying their fate doctrine); but, given this plurality of causes, they say that it is equally true with regard to all of them that it is impossible, where all the same circumstances obtain with respect to the cause and that to which it is cause, that a result which does not ensue on one occasion should ensue on another. For if this happened, there would be an uncaused motion». Cfr. ALEXANDRE D’APHRODISE, Traité du destin, pp. CXII-XIII, compares the succession of causes to the links in a chain and thus to well-defined elements, albeit connected to one another. Nonetheless, each link of the chain is a body and surely it does not cause the following link. According to Bobzien, it is impossible to fully understand Stoic determinism without making the distinction between a global perspective of the kosmos and a partial perspective of particular entities; each entity would, in fact, correspond to a degree of complexity and to a principle structuring of organization that would reach its peak in rational animals; cfr. BORBZIEN, Determinism and Freedom, p. 16. An interesting contribution to the understanding of the connection between determinism and Stoic compatibilism is given by R. SALLES, Compatibilism: Stoic and Modern, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie», 83 (2001), pp. 1-23.

21 On this issue cfr. ALEXANDRE D’APHRODISE, Traité du destin, pp. XCVI-VII.

22 Cfr. Ibi, pp. CXII-III.

23 Cfr. ibi, pp. CXIV-V.


25 Cfr. BORBZIEN, Determinism and Freedom, pp. 245-254 e pp. 268-269; according to the scholar, Chrysippus does not regard Fate as «hypercosmic superperson», nor would he make it reliant on any external force. Rather, for him Fate would represent a causal network and not a causal chain. As far as the moral agent is concerned, the differences among individual natures would depend on the «tension (tonos)» level and the «pneuma-mind». Moreover, Sharples has pointed out that the libertarian position of Alexander – clearly distinct from the «soft» determinism of the Stoics – is due to a different perspective of the universe and its unity; Alexander would reject the compatibility between human responsibility and determinism (also) on a physical basis. In particular, cfr. R.W. SHARPLES, Alexander of Aphrodisias: Scholasticism and innovation, in W. HAASE - H. TEMPORINI (hrsg.), Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, de Gruyter, Berlin - New York 1987, pp. 1218-1219, who shows Aristotle and Theophrastus’ heritage in Mantissa 25.

26 On this issue, cfr. ALEX. De fato, III 166; VI 169 22-23; VIII 172, 19-23; 173, 3-4; 174, 1-2.
Alexander is claiming something radically different from the Stoics: they suggest that no uncaused movement could exist and so the universe rises from a unique cause but Alexander’s assumption is that the human capability of being our own beginning and cause motivates us into action. Moreover, the Stoics would agree on this issue: they consider everybody’s assent the logical outcome of a mental *habitus* deriving from our daily routines and the fruit of learning and experiences, rather than the consequence of a banal predetermined chain.

As a matter of fact, Alexander does not posit this at all. Firstly, there must have been a kind of original choice, an *arché* created with difficulty on the past (not yet existing, at this point) rather than on our own building blocks. Secondly, according to Alexander

And for this reason one might reasonably say, too, that it is the proper nature of each thing that is its beginning and cause of the ordered pattern of the things that come to be in it in accordance with nature. For it is from this, for the most part, that the lives of men and their deaths derive their pattern. At any rate we see that the body, through being like this or like that in nature, is affected both in disease and in death in accordance with its natural constitution, but not of necessity; for treatments and changes of climate and doctors’ orders and advice from the gods are sufficient to break such a pattern. And in the same way in the case of the soul too one would find the choices and actions and way of life of each individual differing from, and contrary to, his natural constitution. For «men’s character is their guardian spirit», according to Heraclitus, that is, their nature. For men’s actions and lives and endings can for the most part be seen to be in accordance with their natural constitutions and dispositions. The man who loves danger and is by nature bold meets some violent death for the most part (for this is the fate in [his] nature). For the man who is licentious in nature what is in accordance with fate is spending his life in licentious pleasures and the life of the incontinent, unless something better comes to be in him and shakes him out of the life that is in accordance with [his] nature.27

Indeed, to emancipate oneself from one’s own Fate would mean, therefore, to separate ourselves from our very own nature and become, initially, conscious of the same; this would filter our choices based on what one has become.28 Freedom of choice can not therefore be a simple subject of Fate and, consequently, Nature; on the contrary, it represents the ability to emancipate itself from them. This is the only way we can become the self-determined cause of our actions.

This assumption is clearly founded on another issue: the structure of reality is not operating out of necessity but predetermined for the most part, although the everlasting and continuous movement of heavenly bodies seems to be the indispensable cause of

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28 Cfr. P.L. Donini, *Alexander’s De fato. Problems of coherence*, in *Id., Commentary and tradition*, de Gruyter, Berlin 2011, pp. 139 ff. Maoris, *Trattati antichi sul destino*, p. 15, also agrees with him. He faces the issue of an Alexandrian rereading of the Aristotelian works; he believes that Alexander, and before him Aristotle, do not sustain in any way that it is possible to change well-established habits thanks to a sudden «conversion». Instead, both philosophers focus on the initial choice, which is neither determined by the history nor by the experiences of the future events, and on the possibility – be it only theoretical – that we behave differently from what our characters and habits would require. The scholars disagree about the issue of the Aristotelian perspective on determinism; according to Natali, today’s prevailing opinion is that Aristotle had not dealt with the problem in the same way which will then be discussed in Hellenistic times; cfr. C. Natali, *Aristotele e il determinismo*, in M. De Caro - M. Mori - E. Spinelli (a cura di), *Libero arbitrio. Storia di una controversia filosofica*, Carocci, Roma 2014, pp. 39-57.
the alteration and change in the sublunar world. Usually, the Peripatetics accepted this belief; in a passage of *On providence* we can read that just one of the preceding things could not be the cause of the one which follows; on the contrary, it would be true that many things occur without any reason and that which depends on another thing does not rise simply from the preceding one. In the previous section Alexander had claimed that the universal constituents subsist in the individual and incorruptibility of the species depends on the reproduction of non eternal things; so, no primary difference among individuals of the same species exists, apart from the physical, depending on their material substratum. Indeed, with regards to the Stoic assumption, from a Peripatetic point of view Nature and Fate are connected in a very different way; particularly, Alexander explains the perpetual character of the species in accordance not just with Nature but also with the interference of Fate. So, Nature and Fate become the genesis and stars and the planets are the motor-causality of living beings; they generate Fate, as well as what is produced *kata physin*. Therefore, Fate assures the perpetual character of the species.

According to Alexander, one of the meanings of *nature* is *individual nature* but, on the other hand, he claims that change means being beginning and cause for ourselves in an unexpected (and not predetermined) way. The practice of philosophy and the ability to marvel allows us to consider everything as if we were looking at it for the first time. Philosophy changes us, just like Socrates; he said he had a very lazy and indolent disposition but despite this he made drastically different choices from his nature. Indeed, thanks to philosophy, he became better than he was predetermined to be.

**Abstract**

The identification between Nature and Fate is one of the most important issues in which Aristotle’s *Physics* has been involved by late antiquity philosophers. My purpose is to prove that the Aristotelian occurrences about the structure for the most part of natural ordering influenced Alexander of Aphrodisias’ conception about freedom and his antideterministic polemics. According to Alexander’s *De fato*, violations of the necessary arrangement of Nature exist both for physical nature and human behaviours; so, against the Stoics the individual assent is not the logical outcome of a mental *habitus* in a rational *kosmos*. Free will entails the capacity of keeping the conditioning of our fate (habits, teachings, past experiences) at a distance. This is the only way we may actually be principle and cause for ourselves because of the features of our acts predetermined not fatally but for the most part.

**Keywords**: Fate, nature, Physics, necessity, freedom

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30 *Ibi*, 89 5.


32 Cfr. **DONINI**, Alexander’s *De fato. Problems of coherence*, pp. 139 ff., G. VERBEEK, Aristotélisme et stoïcisme dans le De fato d’Alexandre d’Aphrodise, «Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie» 50 (1968), pp. 73-100 and C. NATALI, La causa dell’azione umana secondo Alessandro d’Afrodisia Mantissa 23 e De fato 15, «Philosophia» (Atene), 37 (2007), pp. 72-91 on the consistency between fate and nature (not operating out of necessity but for the most part) and nature as individual nature.

33 Cfr. **ALEX. De fato VI 171 a.**