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The Accident and its Causes: Pseudo-Alexander on Aristotle (Metaphysics E 3)

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(Article begins on next page)

Section 02. Ancient Greek philosophy:

02.ii Classical Greek philosophy

Language: English

The accident and its causes: pseudo-Alexander on Aristotle, Metaphysics E 3

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Pseudo-Alexander's commentary on *Metaphysics* E 3 is one of the three ancient commentaries which came down to us, together with Ascepius's commentary and pseudo-Philoponus's one in Latin. Pseudo-Alexander's work in particular constitutes the source of interpretation of the Aristotelian text for many modern scholars.

In chapter 3 Aristotle shows that there are causes of accidental being, which are generable and destructible without ever being in course of being generated or destroyed. This problem is one of the most difficult and controversial for Aristotle.

The thesis is explained by Aristotle with examples concerning past and future events. Pseudo-Alexander considers them as referring to accidental causes.

The exegete's explanation of both cases introduces some elements which are totally extraneous to the Aristotelian text, but nevertheless it could be helpful to cast some light on the understanding of the most controversial passages.

In the final passage Aristotle raises the question of what kind of cause the accident leads to, whether to the material or to the final or to the efficient cause. It is apparently left without an answer. Pseudo-Alexander gives a plausible solution, which is nonetheless probably only partial. The chapter was also examined with reference to the problem of determinism in Aristotle.

Keywords

Accidental; cause; being; generable; destructible.

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The accident and its causes: pseudo-Alexander on Aristotle, *Metaphysics* E 3

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In chapter 3 of *Metaphysics* E Aristotle deals with the accident's causes, after having defined the accidental being in chapter 2. The text is one of Aristotle's most difficult and controversial; it contains several unclear points and textual problems, which modern scholars still discuss today, but which were much disputed also in the ancient commentary tradition.

The following three commentaries on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* E which came down to us are: the Asclepius's commentary, the pseudo-Philoponus's one in Latin, and the pseudo-Alexander's commentary, which has been ascribed to Byzantine Michael of Ephesus. The latter is the most complete preserved work. It contains a long *excursus* consisting of preceding sources and which is itself the source of modern interpretations of the Aristotelian text. For these reasons I will consider the pseudo-Alexander's commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* E 3 as helpful for shedding some light on the most controversial Aristotelian passages.

Let us begin by referring to the general debating point of *Metaphysics* E 3. We can distinguish three parts. Aristotle begins by pointing out the purpose of the chapter: to show that there are causes of the accidental being. He indeed asserts that «there are principles

and causes which are generable and destructible without ever being in course of being generated or destroyed»¹. The thesis is demonstrated by a *reductio ad absurdum*: if there are not any accidental causes, all things will be of necessity, *i.e.* they must have a cause which is not accidentally its cause, but that is a *kath'auto* cause². In the second part Aristotle shows that this is against the evidence and gives examples drawn from past and future events, where an event is originated by a series of other events³. These are causes of the final event, not *per se*, but in a fortuitous way: this is the accident, for «of things which are or come to be by accident, the cause also is accidental»⁴. The chapter ends with the question regarding what kind of cause the accident leads to, whether to the material or to the final or to the efficient cause⁵.

Therefore Aristotle immediately begins with the thesis he wants to prove: the thesis that «there are principles and causes which are generable and destructible without ever being in course of being generated or destroyed»⁶ is followed by the addition that this is obvious (*phaneron*). The reason is that the fact is attested by the experience: if this is not the case, all things will be of necessity, *i.e.* if it is true that all things which are being generated or destroyed, must have a cause which is not an accidental cause, but a *kath'auto* cause⁷. The meaning of the passage is that there are no eternal causes which come to be and become corrupted without any process of coming to be and being destroyed.

Pseudo-Alexander compares the accidental causes with the contacts and the instants and explains that the builder is *per se* cause of the house and as such he is generable and destructible; but he is also the accidental cause of the house, for example of the fact that

the house gives shade, and this happens not because of some generation or learning, as for the first case⁸. The pseudo-Alexander's explanation has been accepted by most of the modern scholars⁹: the meaning of Aristotle's text would be that the accidental causes are generable and destructible in an instant without a process.

This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the *demonstratio ad absurdum* which follows in the text: there are no principles and causes which are being generated or destroyed without ever being in course of being generated or destroyed; whatever comes to be and is destroyed necessarily has some non-accidental cause; all things are of necessity. But the conclusion is against what Aristotle previously demonstrated, *i.e.* that there is an accidental state of things. So in *Metaphysics* E 3 the aim is to show that there are also causes which are themselves accidental causes¹⁰ and which are without generation and corruptibility as the accident in general, as Aristotle said in chapter 2¹¹.

Pseudo-Alexander explains the passage again with the case of the builder: if there is a house, it is of necessity, and it has been built by the builder as its necessary cause. But – goes on the exegete – all things should exist of necessity, if of all things which are generable and destructible the cause has to be a non-accidental cause; therefore Aristotle's aim would be to show that there are accidental causes without process of coming to be and being destroyed¹². This means that, for pseudo-Alexander, the examples which follow in the Aristotelian text are examples of causes by accident.

The examples are nevertheless unclear. They are introduced by the conjunction *gar*¹³, that pseudo-Alexander takes as referring to accidental causes¹⁴. Aristotle is firstly referring

to future events. He puts forward the question if *this* will be or not and the answer is that it will happen if *this* happens and it does not happen if *this* does not happen, and *this* will happen if something else happens. Aristotle goes on to say that in this way it is plain that as time is continually substrated from a limited period of time, one will come to the present¹⁵. Pseudo-Alexander introduces a case that is recurring in the ancient commentaries tradition¹⁶ and then in modern scholars. The example is that of a man which pseudo-Alexander names 'Nicostratus' who will either die or not die depending on if he leaves the city or not, since in the first case he will be captured and killed by the enemies. The event is completely extraneous to the Aristotelian text. Aristotle simply says that a man will die by violence if he leaves, and he will leave if he is thirsty; and he will be thirsty if something else happens. Finally Aristotle adds that the man will be thirsty if he is eating something salty and that if this is the case he will die of necessity; otherwise he will not die¹⁷.

It has been pointed out that, in case of death by violence, it is not clear which is, according to pseudo-Alexander, the accidental cause of Nicostratus's death, the enemies or his thirst¹⁸. R. Sorabji follows pseudo-Alexander by reporting the case of a man named 'Nicostratus'. He argues that Nicostratus's death results from two independent series of causes, *i.e.* Nicostratus leaving the city and the presence of the enemies, and that is precisely the simultaneousness of these two events which have no cause¹⁹. The explanation has been criticized by a few scholars, but it is probable that Sorabji meant that accidental causes do not have any causes as accidental being, and that they results from two events, each of them having a cause²⁰. Anyway pseudo-Alexander seems to take as an

accidental cause of Nicostratus's death the fact that he ate something salty, since one – he asserts – can also be thirsty without eating salty food, for example because he drank a lot of wine²¹. Thus Aristotle would be putting a series of *per se* causes in which an accidental cause has been introduced, that determines the death of the man.

The same argument applies to past events. Aristotle affirms that something which has just happened is already present in something; consequently everything which is to be will be of necessity, for example it is necessary that he who lives dies, since already something happened, that is the presence of contraries in the same body. However, Aristotle adds that whether he dies by disease or violence is not yet determined, but depends on the coming to be of something else²².

Pseudo-Alexander explains that the *kath'auto* cause is what is already present in something, like the contraries in living beings, and recognizes the accidental cause in something as what is going to happen to determine the death by disease or by violence. He reports the case of one who becomes ill with dropsy *if* he drinks water, so that he will die because of this disease. For the commentator dropsy is not the *kath'auto* cause of his death but an accidental cause, since to drink water is the cause of the disease and the disease is cause of the death. However, he who does not drink water can also become ill with dropsy²³. Thus the accidental cause is something that comes to be in the chain of the *kath'auto* causes, without ever being in course of being generated or destroyed, and that determines the event. The pseudo-Alexander's interpretation seems to shed some light on the Aristotelian text: Aristotle would admit that the accidental cause is something which

appears in the series of the *kath'auto* causes and originates a particular event. The event is determined by a cause which is not its necessary cause, but which is one of its possible causes, *i.e.* an accidental cause.

Later on, Aristotle affirms that «the process goes back to a certain starting-point, but this no longer points to something further»²⁴. Pseudo-Alexander explains the passage arguing that we will not go back to an infinite series of causes, but there will be a principle without anything else as the cause of its coming to be, for instance to have eaten something salty. This would be the principle of what can happen one way or another, *i.e.* the fact that this man is dead. For pseudo-Alexander the cause of the accident, *i.e.* of what can happen one way or another, is itself an accidental cause, since it happened that a man who is eating something salty is thirsty²⁵.

Finally Aristotle puts the question of «what sort of cause we thus refer the fortuitous — whether to matter or to that for the sake of which or to the motive power»²⁶, adding that the problem must be carefully considered²⁷. According to pseudo-Alexander and Asclepius it is clear that the accidental cause must be counted among efficient causes²⁸. But it is also possible that Aristotle is referring to the single situation that needs to be analysed in order to determine what sort of cause the individual accidental causes must be referred to. Sorabji raises the question of how it is possible to conciliate the determinism he ascribes to Aristotle with human responsibility, which the Stagirite would admit in the Ethics works²⁹. The thesis has been rightly criticized by a few scholars, who recognize that *Metaphysics* E 3 does not state any deterministic Aristotelian position³⁰. The admission of the existence of accidental

causes cannot contrast in any way the admission of human responsibility. It leaves room for human actions, which remain totally independent from being by accident.

¹ Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1026 a 29-30 (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by W.D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. The Revised Oxford Translation, ed. by J. Barnes, II, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984, p. 1622).

² Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1026 a 30-32.

³ Cfr. *ivi*, 1027 b 1-11.

⁴ *Ivi*, 2, 1027 a 7-8 (see Ross, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* cit., p. 1621).

⁵ Cfr. *ivi*, 1027 b 14-16.

⁶ *Ivi*, 3, 1027 b 29-30 (see Ross, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* cit., p. 1622).

⁷ Cfr. *ivi*, 1027 b 30-32.

⁸ Cfr. Alexandri Aphrodisiensis in *Aristotelis Metaphysica commentaria*, edidit M. Hayduck, CAG 1, Reimer, Berolini 1891, pp. 453, 14-454, 5.

⁹ See, for example, C. Kirwan, in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Books Γ, Δ and E, translated with notes, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998², pp. 71; 195-196; J. Hittinka, *Time and Necessity. Studies in Aristotle's theory of Modality*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1973, pp. 174-175.

¹⁰ Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 2, 1027 a 7-8.

¹¹ Cfr. *ivi*, 1026 b 22-24.

¹² Cfr. Ps. Alex., In *Metaph.*, 454, 18-33.

¹³ Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 a 33.

¹⁴ Cfr. Ps. Alex., In *Metaph.*, 454, 33-34.

¹⁵ Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 a 32-1027 b 1.

¹⁶ Cfr. Pseudo-Johannis Philoponi *Expositiones In Omnes XIV Aristotelis Libros Metaphysicos*, übersetzt von F. Patritius, Ferrara 1583, rist. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1991, p. 25 r.

¹⁷ Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 b 1-6.

¹⁸ Cfr. E. Berti, *Commentaire à Aristote Metaphysique E ch. 3*, forthcoming.

¹⁹ Cfr. R. Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame. Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory*, Duckworth, London, 1980, pp. 10-13.

²⁰ Cfr. Berti, *Commentaire à Aristote Metaphysique E ch. 3* cit.

²¹ Cfr. Ps. Alex., In *Metaph.*, 454, 39-455, 2.

²² Cfr. Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 b 6-11.

²³ Cfr. Ps. Alex., In *Metaph.*, 456, 1-14.

²⁴ Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 b 12-14 (see Ross, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, cit., p. 1622).

²⁵ Cfr. Ps. Alex., In *Metaph.*, 456, 16-22.

²⁶ Aristot. *Metaph.* E 3, 1027 b 14-15.

²⁷ Cfr. *ivi*, 1027 b 16.

²⁸ Cfr. Asclepii *In Aristotelis Metaphysicorum libros A-Z Metaphysicorum commentaria*, edidit M. Hayduck, CAG 6.2, Reimer, Berolini 1888, p. 373, 22-26; Ps. Alex., *In Metaph.*, 456, 24-25.

²⁹ Cfr. Sorabji, *Necessity* cit., pp. 251-256.

³⁰ Cfr. for example G. Fine, *Aristotle on Determinism: A Review of Richiard Sorabji's* Necessity, Cause and Blame, "The Philosophical Review", 90 (1981), pp. 561-579.

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