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Determinism and deliberation in Alexander of Aphrodisias

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I

In this paper I defend a minority position in contemporary scholarship on Alexander of Aphrodisias with regard to the theme of determinism and his theory of what is up to us. Many modern scholars agree about the following basic points. The first point is that Aristotle did not develop a specific stance on the problem of determinism, given the fact that at the time this problem was not considered a central theme in the philosophical debate. Second, Alexander's position on indeterminism was influenced by the debate in the imperial period rather than that he offers an exact account as to what Aristotle had maintained. In the third place, indeterminism is a slightly embarrassing position to hold; therefore, it is better to liberate the ancient philosophers from it, in so far as possible. What is more, a strong tendency can be discerned to attribute some form of compatibilism to most of the ancient philosophical schools – which cannot be easily reconciled with the polemics that existed between the schools.

As for me, I think that already in Plato's Academy philosophers began to reflect on the problem of determinism, freedom and human responsibility, starting out from certain statements in Plato's *Republic* and in book 10 of the *Laws*.¹ As far as Alexander is concerned, I think that his position can be characterised as a kind of 'creative orthodoxy', which consists in trying to show the vitality of the Aristotelian view point in the debate in imperial times. In order to make this clear, I will concentrate on the problem of deliberation and the Peripatetic notion of causality, particularly in relation to chapters XI-XV in Alexander's *De fato*. Moreover, I would like to make the point that the fact that in contemporary theory of action some form of determinism prevails should not be a reason for having at least an historical interest in a different position held by ancient philosophers.² Few philosophers today accept the independent existence of ideas, but that does not prevent us to study Plato's doctrine of the Ideas with profit. Hence, without wanting to give even a preliminary judgment on the theoretical value of Peripatetic indeterminism, I think that it might be interesting to offer a reconstruction of certain elements in the ancient debate on necessity and what is up to us, in order to get a better understanding of the underlying reasons for the clashes between the different schools and for their opposing views.

¹ I argued in favor of this point in Natali 2014, pp. 39-57

² See for instance Davodson 1992, pp. 127-28.

In this paper I will not deal with all problems relating to the texts I mentioned above. I will more in particular not deal with the question whether the account Alexander gives of Stoic thought is reliable, such that what he states is trustworthy.

Here I will restrict myself to describing the logical structure of Alexander's argument, for the simple reason, so it seems to me, that many of the objections put forward in modern scholarship against his position follow from the fact that the internal logical structure of his argumentation has not been taken into account. On this theme it would already be a step forward if one were to accept that Alexander does not contradict himself as often as some commentators are inclined to think and that his critique of determinism follows a certain logic which can be understood better if placed with an Aristotelian framework (see Natali 1994).

II

In chapter VII of *De fato* Alexander starts the second part of his discussion of fate, thus:

«A clearer foundation (κατασκευή) of what has been stated will be obtained if we place the absurdities (ἄτοπα) that follow for those who say that all things come in accordance with fate alongside the preceding demonstration of our position» (171,18-20).³ (tr. Sharples)

He continues with a series of refutations of the views of the determinists; he starts with an analysis of the notion of τὰ ἀπο τύχη τε καὶ τοῦ αὐτομάτου, 'the things that occur by luck and by accident'; he continues with the notion 'of the contingent, and of the fact that some things happen 'in whichever way', (τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον) or 'the possible' (δυνατόν), which cannot be saved by the determinists, unless in a Pickwickian sense;⁴ the third notion, which cannot be saved by the determinists is that of βουλευέσθαι ('to deliberate').

Here arguments are presented, which as Alexander states himself in his commentary on the *Topica* are most suitable to the theme at hand. Commenting upon a passage from the *Topica* he puts it thus:

«Clearly, then, an argument is not open to the same criticism when taken in relation to the proposed conclusion and when taken by itself. For there is nothing to prevent the argument being open to reproach in itself, and yet commendable in relation to the problem, or again, vice

³ Ἡ δὲ κατασκευὴ τῶν εἰρημένων ἔσται φανερωτέρα παρατιθέντων ἡμῶν ταῖς προηγουμέναις τῶν κειμένων ἀποδείξεσιν τὰ ἐπόμενα ἄτοπα τοῖς πάντα καθ' εἰμαρμένην γίνεσθαι λέγουσιν. The text is Sharples (1983).

⁴ At lines VIII 171,18-174,28; IX,174,30-176,13; X,176,14-178,7.

versa, being commendable in itself, and yet open to reproach in relation to the problem» (161b38-39).⁵ (tr. Pickard-Cambridge)

He maintains that several instances of this rule can be given, including that of an argument that may not be worthy of criticism in itself, but which becomes so if applied to a certain problem. For example, so Alexander adds, the argument on the basis of which it is established that praise and blame happen in vain is not bad in itself, but becomes bad if it is used to establish that not everything happens necessarily and by destiny.

«The argument that does away with the generation of all things in accordance with fate and reason on the basis the praise and blame will be in vain [...] in relation to the question at issue would seem inadequate. The question at issue can be demonstrated by using more premises and more accepted, as the thesis that everything that is contingent is done away with that position as is also what depends on us, so that deliberating too is in vain (*in Top.* 570,4-10)⁶ (transl. Sharples, modified).

Alexander appears to criticise Carneades' position on fate, while proposing a better antideterminist strategy.⁷ In *On fate* he starts with the arguments he considers to be strongest, and thereafter adds the weaker ones. He thus begins to discuss the question of the contingent, then moves on to deliberation, and finally also argues that if fate exists, praise and blame are in vain.

The argument about deliberation occupies four chapters, XI-XIV, with chapter XV as an appendix, that is eight pages in Bruns' edition; on the contrary there are two and half pages for the first refutation and a little over three pages for the second one. It is a really long section, which shows Alexander's interest for this argument, and the importance he attributes to it.

III

⁵ Φανερόν οὖν ὅτι οὐδὲ λόγῳ ἢ αὐτῇ ἐπιτίμησις πρὸς τε τὸ προβληθὲν καὶ καθ' αὐτόν· οὐδὲν γὰρ κωλύει καθ' αὐτόν μὲν εἶναι τὸν λόγον ψεκτόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ πρόβλημα ἐπαινετόν, καὶ πάλιν ἀντεστραμμένως καθ' αὐτόν μὲν ἐπαινετόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ πρόβλημα ψεκτόν.

⁶ Alex. *in Top.* 570,8-11: ὁ γὰρ ἀναιρῶν τὸ τὰ πάντα καθ' εἰμαρμένην γίνεσθαι καὶ λόγον διὰ τὸ μάτην εἶναι τοὺς τε ἐπαίνους καὶ τοὺς ψόγους [...] οὐκ ἂν ἄξιος ἐπιτιμήσεως φαίνοιτο. εἰ δέ τις αὐτὸν ἐξετάζῃ πρὸς τὸ πρόβλημα ἐνδεεστέρας ἂν ἔχειν δοκοῖ τῷ διὰ πλειόνων καὶ ἐνδοξοτέρων δύνασθαι τὸ προκείμενον δείκνυσθαι· διὰ γὰρ τοῦ ἀναιρεῖσθαι πᾶν τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν· οὕτω δὲ καὶ τὸ μὴ εἶναι τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν κακίαν ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἀναιρεῖται, ὡς μάτην εἶναι καὶ τὸ βουλευέσθαι.

⁷ The argument based on the inutility of praise and blame are at the core of Carneades' critique, according to Amand (1945, pp. 143-148); Alexander uses these arguments as well, but only in a subordinate way (*De fato* XVI-XXI)

Modern scholars usually confront Alexander's position with Aristotle's in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, underlining the differences between Alexander and his master (Long 1970, Donini 1974, Sharples 1983, Bobzien 1998), but ethics is not Alexander's starting point. It is very likely that the starting point of *De fato* is a part of his lost commentary of Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, and that the *Nicomachean Ethics* plays a somewhat subordinate in the treatise. In other words, Alexander also uses doctrines from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but does not start out from the ethical-political problems, which with it deals; on the contrary: he starts out from the logical and ontological questions that lie at the core of the argument in *De interpretatione*.

In chapter 9 of *De interpretatione* Aristotle states:

(1) These and others of the same kind are the absurdities that follow if it is necessary that of every affirmation and negation, either about universals spoken of universally, or about individuals, (2) that one of the opposites must be true and the other false, and that nothing of what happens is as chance has it, but everything is or takes place by necessity. (3) So, there would be no need to deliberate or to take trouble, thinking that if we do this, this other thing would follow, while if we did not, it will not follow [...] (4) for we see that both deliberation and action are principles of the future events, (5) and that, more generally, in those things which are not always actual there is the possibility of being and not being, and consequently of coming to be and not coming to be. (18b26-33 and 19a7-11)⁸ (tr. Ackrill)

In *De interpretatione* Aristotle moves from (2) the negation of the contingent to (3) the thesis of the uselessness of deliberation, and the same does Alexander (*De fato* IX-X: doing away with the contingent; XI-XV: doing away with deliberation and what is up to us).

That at the origins of the manner of argumentation that can be found in *De fato* lies a commentary on *De interpretatione*, and that this is not a simple coincidence, is suggested by the fact that Boethius in his Second commentary on *De interpretatione* uses material that stems from Alexander of Aphrodisias, and sticks to the same order of argumentation.⁹ When he comes to commenting upon *De interpretatione* 9, 18b26-33 e19a7-9, Boethius extends the horizon of his treatise considerably and presents a whole series of arguments against determinism, which

⁸ Τὰ μὲν δὴ συμβαίνοντα ἄτοπα ταῦτα καὶ τοιαῦθ' ἕτερα, εἴπερ πάσης καταφάσεως καὶ ἀποφάσεως, ἢ ἐπὶ τῶν καθόλου λεγομένων ὡς καθόλου ἢ ἐπὶ τῶν καθ' ἕκαστα, ἀνάγκη τῶν ἀντικειμένων εἶναι τὴν μὲν ἀληθῆ τὴν δὲ ψευδῆ, μηδὲν δὲ ὅποτερ' ἔτυχεν εἶναι ἐν τοῖς γιγνομένοις, ἀλλὰ πάντα εἶναι καὶ γίνεσθαι ἐξ ἀνάγκης. ὥστε οὔτε βουλευέσθαι δεοὶ ἂν οὔτε πραγματεῦσθαι, ὡς ἂν μὲν τοδὶ ποιήσωμεν, ἔσται τοδί, ἂν δὲ μὴ τοδί, οὐκ ἔσται. [...] Εἰ δὴ ταῦτα ἀδύνατα, ὁρώμεν γὰρ ὅτι ἔστιν ἀρχὴ τῶν ἐσομένων καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ βουλευέσθαι καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πράξαι τι, καὶ ὅτι ὅλως ἔστιν ἐν τοῖς μὴ ἀεὶ ἐνεργοῦσι τὸ δυνατόν εἶναι καὶ μὴ, ἐν οἷς ἄμφω ἐνδέχεται καὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ μὴ εἶναι, ὥστε καὶ τὸ γενέσθαι καὶ τὸ μὴ γενέσθαι.

⁹ Cfr. Sorabji 1998, p. vii.

closely resemble, also in the words chosen, those of Alexander's *On Fate*.¹⁰ Hence the sequence I would like to propose is the following: from Alexander's commentary on *De interpretatione* are derived a) his *De fato*, b) Boethius' *Second Commentary*, and the resemblances between the arguments of a) and b) make clear that the two treatises have a common source, that is the commentary on *De interpretatione*. As a matter of fact, Alexander's manner of working consisted in 'recycling' parts of his commentaries in other treatises, often repeating them literally. Here are some examples: in his *De anima* passages from his commentary on Aristotle's *De anima* can be found: unfortunately the commentary is lost, but the passages survived in the work of Simplicius and others¹¹; in his commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Delta 2 a passage is repeated in an abbreviated manner from his commentary on *Physics* II 3, which is also lost, but extensively quoted by Simplicius (*in phys.* 310,25-31)¹². So we can assume that rather than a simple parallel between Alexander's and Aristotle's treatise these chapters of *De fato* contain sentences that are derived from the commentary on the *De interpretatione* relating to 18b26-33 and reflect the same polemical spirit. In the same manner it can be inferred that the chapters IX-X probably contain material from that same commentary on *De interpretatione* that relate to other sections of the text, presumably 18b23-25, 19a27-32. This observation is not only of antiquarian interest, but can serve to get to a clearer account of some of Alexander's arguments, which are at times misunderstood.

In his discussion in chapters XI-XV Alexander does not simply use the particular theory of deliberation that can be found in book 3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; on the contrary: he partly modifies it, adapting it to new circumstances and to the philosophical debate of his time. In principle he uses a more general notion of deliberation, while defending in an overall manner Aristotle's theory, for whom factual necessity deriving from the admission of a truth value for singular contingent propositions about the future eliminates both deliberation and what is up to us. Also the very polemical aspect of the *De fato* could go back to the drift of Aristotle's account, when he states that the determinist position is *absurd*.

IV

In *De fato*, chapter IV Alexander gives a definition of 'deliberation', which is not Peripatetic, but rather a definition which 'is agreed by all' (ὁμολογεῖται δὴ πρὸς πάντων, 178,17), and hence also by his adversaries:

«It is agreed by everyone that man has the advantage from nature over all living creatures that

¹⁰ See II, 220,8; 236, 16; 196,19, and 148,11 respectively.

¹¹ Cfr. Donini 1994, 5027-5099 and 1996, VII-XI.

¹² Cfr. Natali 2003, 157-162.

he is not forced to follow the appearances in the same way as they do, but he has reason as judge of the appearances that impinge him, about the choice of some things. Using this reason and examining the appearances, if they are indeed what they seemed at the beginning he *assents* to them and goes in pursuit of them. But if they appear different or if something else appears more deserving his choice, he follows it, leaving behind what at the beginning looked choiceworthy» (178,17-24).¹³ (tr. Sharples)

He then affirms, on the basis of this definition, that we are in control (*kurioi*) of the deliberating and of the choice that is the result thereof (178,27-28), and hence concludes that deliberation is put into practice only when it not done in vain (178,28-179,12).

The definition of ‘deliberation’ is presented as a thesis about which all philosophers are in agreement, and is formulated in terms that can also be accepted by determinists.

In this definition the notion of ‘assent’ is present (*συγκατατίθεται τε τῇ φαντασίᾳ*), which has stunned Verbeke and others, and taken particularly serious. It is true that at times Alexander uses Stoic terminology in his treatises, but in this case, they say, the use of Stoicising terms is not innocuous and makes Alexander hold a theory of choice that is rather different from that of Aristotle.¹⁴ This observation leaves one perplexed, given the fact that Alexander here wants to present a position that is acceptable for all schools, not just the Peripatetic school, and for this reason makes consciously use of a Stoicising vocabulary. This does not hinder him from stating what for him is the most important point. He posits as the central element of deliberation the fact that one can choose a thing, or something else (178, 22) if that is more preferable. In choosing something, in his opinion, it is not just a matter of refusing to assent to a presentation, but to prefer one good over another.

In short, the argument from deliberation, in *De fato* XI, is a fairly complex type of *modus tollens*. It can be found in the first lines of the chapter:

«If all things that come to be follow on some causes that have being laid down beforehand, people deliberate in vain about the things to be done. And if deliberating were in vain, people

¹³ ὁμολογείται δὴ πρὸς ἀπάντων τὸ τῶν ἄλλων ζῶν τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτο παρὰ τῆς φύσεως ἔχειν πλέον τὸ μὴ ὁμοίως ἐκείνοις ταῖς φαντασίαις ἔπεσθαι, ἀλλ’ ἔχειν παρ’ αὐτῆς κριτὴν τῶν προσπιπτουσῶν φαντασιῶν περὶ τινῶν ὡς αἰρετῶν τὸν λόγον, ὃ χρώμενος, εἰ μὲν ἐξεταζόμενα τὰ φαντασθέντα, οἷα τὴν ἀρχὴν ἐφάνη, καὶ ἔστι, *συγκατατίθεται τε τῇ φαντασίᾳ καὶ οὕτως μέτεισιν αὐτά, εἰ δὲ ἄλλοῖα φαίνεται ἢ ἄλλο τι αὐ αἰρετώτερον, ἐκείνο αἰρεῖται καταλείπων τὸ τὴν ἀρχὴν ὡς αἰρετὸν αὐτῷ φανέν.*

¹⁴ Verbeke 1968, 93; Long 1970, 259. The introduction at this point of assent is not causal; it can also be found in his other writings, e.g. *De anima* 73,10-12: ‘Assent that can be given to doing or not doing something, and of which the cause is reason, is up to us. In fact, it is up to us to prefer something by means of deliberation and assent to this.’ ἢ δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς πρακτέοις ἢ μὴ πρακτέοις γινομένη, ὧν συγκαταθέσεων ὁ λόγος αἴτιος, ἐφ’ ἡμῖν. See also 99,3-6; *Quaest. phys.* III 13, 107,6 -37;

would have the power of deliberating in vain; but nature does nothing in vain, among the principal things, and it is a primary product of nature people's capacity of deliberating [...] the conclusion would be that people do not have the power of deliberating in vain» (178,8-15).¹⁵ (tr. Sharples, modified)

This can be formalised in the following manner:

1. if p, then q
2. if q, then z
3. but w, hence non-z
4. non-z, hence non-q, non-p

(p = 'all events follow from antecedent and determinant causes'; q = 'all human beings deliberate in vain about their actions'; z = 'man is given the capacity to deliberate in vain'; w = 'nature does nothing in vain')

The first two steps of the argument recall what Aristotle stated in *De interpretatione* 9, 18b29-33. But whereas Aristotle restricts himself by stating that this position entails absurdities (ἄτοπα), Alexander searches for a reason as to why this is so. Applying the rule of interpreting Aristotle with Aristotle, he then refers to the principle 'Nature does nothing in vain', which occurs several times in the *corpus aristotelicum* (Bonitz 1870, p. 836b, 28-38).

Deliberation is not something done in view of itself, but it is an instrumental procedure of our mind, and is aimed at the selection of an action that is both possible and dependent on us. If the future is predetermined we do not deliberate, just as we do not try to break an iron bar with a wooden hammer.

That this argument was originally formulated in Alexander's commentary on *De interpretatione* is suggested by the fact that in Boethius, after an explicit quote from Alexander (219,30), the same argument can be found:

«Nothing that is by nature is in vain, but deliberating is something that humans have naturally. But if necessity alone has mastery over all things, deliberation is for no reason. But deliberation

¹⁵ τῷ πάντα τὰ γινόμενα προκαταβεβλημέναις καὶ ὀρισμέναις καὶ προουπαρχούσαις τισὶν αἰτίαις ἔσεσθαι τὸ καὶ βουλευέσθαι τοὺς ἀνθρώπους μάτην περὶ τῶν πρακτέων αὐτοῖς. εἰ δὲ τὸ βουλευέσθαι μάτην, μάτην <ἂν> ἄνθρωπος εἴη βουλευτικός. καίτοι εἰ μηδὲν μάτην ἢ φύσις ποιεῖ τῶν προηγουμένων, τὸ δὲ βουλευτικὸν εἶναι ζῶον τὸν ἄνθρωπον προηγουμένως ὑπὸ τῆς φύσεως, ἀλλ' οὐ κατ' ἐπακολούθημά τι καὶ σύμπτωμα τοῖς προηγουμένως γινομένοις γίνοιτο, συνάγοιτο ἂν <τὸ> μὴ εἶναι μάτην τοὺς ἀνθρώπους βουλευτικούς.

is not in vain, therefore there cannot be full necessity in all things» (*in de int.* 2, 220,8-15).¹⁶

At the end of the same chapter, 179,8-20, Alexander presents a second argument with regard to deliberation that can be captured in the form of a *modus ponens*:

1. if y, then p
2. but y
3. thus p

(y = ‘deliberation is not useless’; p = ‘not all events follow from antecedent and determinant causes’)

In defending the second premiss, Alexander makes reference to the common opinion that deliberating is considered useless if it is not presupposed that it is up to us to do or not do something: «What advantage comes to us from deliberating about what we should do, as far as our action is concerned» (τί πλέον ἡμῖν εἰς τὸ πράττειν ἐκ τοῦ βουλευσασθαι περὶ τοῦ προαχθησομένου γίνεται; 179,14). In fact, we do not deliberate in cases where the action of the result thereof appear predetermined.

The next chapters are dedicated to the notion ‘what is up to us’. Logically this would precede the discussion of deliberation, and the fact that Alexander starts out from deliberation shows that he primarily follows the order of the arguments in *De interpretatione*, and then moving on to what is up to us, comes to a more profound understanding of Aristotle’s words, going from the theme of deliberating to a more fundamental notion.

V

The chapters XII-XV of *De fato* discuss the notion of ‘what is up to us’, which Aristotle had introduced for the first time in his discussion of the responsibility for one’s actions (*Eudemian Ethics* 1223a6-9)¹⁷ and which Alexander uses as a technical term.

After having defined ‘what is up to us’ as ‘that over which we gave control both to do it and not to do it, not following some causes which surround us from outside or giving up to them’

¹⁶ Omne quod natura est non frustra est; consiliari autem homines naturaliter habent; quod si necessitas in rebus sola dominabitur, sine causa est consiliatio; sed consiliatio non frustra est; non igitur potest in rebus cuncta necessitas. Cf. also 195,10ff.; 196,19-197,4; 217,23-5; 236,16ff.

¹⁷ ‘So it is evident that all the actions which a man controls and of which he is the origin can either happen or not happen, and that their happening or not happening – those at least for whose existence or non-existence he is authoritative – is in his power. But for what is in his power to do or not to do, he is himself responsible (ἐφ’ αὐτῷ.)’ (tr. Barnes and Kenny)

(180,5-7)¹⁸, Alexander argues as follows:

«Deliberating is done away according to them, as has been shown, and so clearly what depends on us [...] Choice does not apply to the things that come to be necessarily»¹⁹ (180,3-4+9-10).

The argument is a *modus tollens*.

1. if q, then n,
2. but m, thus not-n,
3. thus non-q.

(q = human beings deliberate in vain over their actions; n = nothing is up to us; m = the choice that can)

Alexander defends the second premiss in the lines 180.7-23. His thesis is the following: as Aristotle states in the Nicomachean Ethics II 4, choice, which has as its object that over which ‘we have control both to do it and not do it’ (τοῦ πραχθῆναι καὶ τοῦ μὴ πραχθῆναι κύριοι, 180,5-6), is ‘the peculiar activity of man’ (ἡ προαίρεσις τοῦ ἴδιον ἔργον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 180,7-8). In a certain sense Alexander accepts the idea that faced with a choice made necessary by events, a human being reacts according to his nature²⁰, in the same way as a cylinder and a cone which, when pushed on a slope, move according to their own nature, as in the famous Stoic example. Determinists take the nature of subject to be his actual moral disposition, either that of a sage or a fool, whereas Alexander take it to be more profound, which consists in being in control over choosing something or its opposite; this nature precedes the moral disposition, and cannot be annulled by this disposition. In order to show this, Alexander summarizes in the remainder of the chapter, ll. 180,9-20, Aristotle’s notion of deliberation, esp. as set out in EN III 5, 1112b19-27.

Hence for Alexander the more profound nature of a human being consists in being able to choose in each situation between something and ‘its opposite’ (τὰ ἀντικείμενα, 181,6). To establish this he relies on Aristotle, who often insists on the idea that we can do something or its opposite.²¹

¹⁸ οὐ ἡμεῖς μὲν καὶ τοῦ πραχθῆναι καὶ τοῦ μὴ πραχθῆναι κύριοι, οὐχ ἐπόμενοί τισιν ἔξωθεν ἡμᾶς περιστάσιν αἰτίοις οὐδὲ ἐνδιδόντες αὐτοῖς.

¹⁹ Ἀναιρουμένον δὲ ὡς ἐδείχθη τοῦ βουλευσασθαι κατ’ αὐτοὺς ἀναιρεῖται καὶ τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν προδήλως [...] οὐδὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀναγκαίως γινομένοις ἢ προαίρεσις.

²⁰ Cicero, *De fato* 39-43, LS 62C.

²¹ EN 1113b5-7; EE 1223a2. Some scholars (e.g. Bobzien 1998, pp. 396-412) have insisted on the fact that a difference exists between the possibility of *doing* something and its opposite on the one hand and

According to the Peripatetics, one's moral nature is only a 'second nature', and it is for this reason that the virtuous person can always choose not to follow his acquired moral disposition and do something contrary to what is expected, as Alexander states later, *De fato* XXIX, 200,2-12.²² Aristotle himself states that

«it is possible to have deliberated well either generally, or in reference to a particular end. Good deliberation in general is therefore that which is correct with reference to the end absolutely understood, good deliberation of a special kind is that which is correct with reference to a particular end» (1142b28-31).²³

So with regard to a particular end, for example in order to show the freedom of action in the case that a fortune-teller predicts to do something (see *De fato* 200,4-7), it is possible to deliberate in order to do something which one otherwise would not have done. The different choices that can be made depend on the differences between the final causes, which however do not have a necessitating force. I will come back to this below.

By contrast, modern scholars who do not read Alexander from an Aristotelian point of view, but from a Stoicizing perspective, have difficulties at this point. They think that being virtuous or vicious is a quality that always determines someone's conduct, rather than most of the time.

A final argument can be found in ll. 184,20-185,1. Here Alexander denies the thesis that deliberation is an indispensable element of an action, like the Stoics' assent. In fact we often act without having deliberated, because even deliberation is something that is up to us; it is not absolutely necessary in order to be able to act.

In chapter XV Alexander applies Aristotle's theory of the four causes against the determinist thesis, which goes like this:

«If in the same circumstances someone acts now in a way and now in another, a motion without a cause will be introduced» (185,8-9)²⁴

Against this thesis he makes use of the different causes, which had already been the basis of the positive treatment of fate in chapters I-VI. He distinguishes between the moving cause, which is in us and makes that something is up to us, and the final cause (σκοπόν, 185,22),

the possibility of *choosing* between something and its opposite on the other hand. This is an interesting point that I cannot deal with in this paper.

²² On this chapter see now also Zingano 2014, pp. 207-16.

²³ ἔτι ἔστιν καὶ ἀπλῶς εὖ βεβουλευθῆναι καὶ πρὸς τι τέλος, ἢ μὲν δὴ ἀπλῶς ἢ πρὸς τὸ τέλος τὸ ἀπλῶς κατορθοῦσα, τὶς δὲ ἢ πρὸς τι τέλος.

²⁴ εἰ δὴ τῶν αὐτῶν περιστάσεων ὅτε μὲν οὕτως ὅτε δὲ ἄλλως ἐνεργήσῃ τις, ἀνάιτιον κίνησιν εἰσάγεσθαι.

which determines the moving cause with a necessity that is hypothetical only (cfr. EN 1110b9-12). The first cause is examined at ll. 185,11-21, the other at ll. 185,21-28. With regard to the moving cause Alexander underlines the fact that it is *first* cause and that human beings, unlike all other animals, are not moved by other, external moving causes. With regard to the second cause he states that the end is variable, and that it determines the judgment on the basis of which we make our choices. But for the variations in the judgment about the end, the responsibility lies with the human being, without an intervening external cause, in a single act of choosing. The discussion is somewhat simplified and not very technical.

The reference to human nature does not explain how the final cause can have an indeterminist origin, and can even be contraproductive, because it brings Alexander back to the Stoic example: under given circumstances each being acts according to its nature. That human nature is the origin of variation is stated, but is not developed further. It can thus leave behind the reader in doubt.

The reference to human nature offers yet again a connection between this chapter and §25 of Cicero's *De fato*, according to whom voluntary movement is our natural movement; it has the quality of being up to us, since this is its nature (*motus enim voluntarius eam naturam in se ipse continet, ut sit in nostra potestate nobisque pareat, nec id sine causa; eius rei enim causa ipsa natura est*).

The one typically Aristotelian argument offering a somewhat deeper understanding can be found in the final part of chapter XV, when Alexander states that a human being does not assent to a presentation, because through deliberation he can also take as point of reference some things that take 'the cause of their appearing through reason.'²⁵

This is due to the exoteric nature of the treatise, which is addressed to a non-specialist audience, as the dedication of *De fato* to the emperors Severus and Antoninus makes clear. A more careful analysis can be found in *Mantissa* 23, which I discussed elsewhere (Natali 2007). Here I will restrict myself to the conclusion of my discussion of that text. In the *Mantissa* Alexander, or his pupil, maintains:

«[The human being] having in himself the power of deliberating about the circumstances, has also the ability not to make the same choice from the same things. And this is not asserted unreasonably, nor what is said is an empty presupposition. For if he had one goal to which he *referred* this decision, it would be reasonable that he should always choose the same thing, if at least he had and preserved the same position in relation to the goal set before him, towards which he *looked* in his judgement of them. But since there are several ends, *looking* towards

²⁵ 186,9: φαίνεται δέ τινα καὶ διὰ λόγου τε καὶ παρὰ συλλογισμοῦ.

which he makes his judgement and choice of the things he should do, for he has both the pleasant and the advantageous and the noble *before the eyes*, and these are different from each other, and not all the things surrounding the agent are in the same position in relation to each of these ends, he makes his judgement between them and choice among them at one time with regard to the pleasant, at another with regard to the noble, at another with regard to the advantageous, and will not always do or choose the same things when the circumstances are the same, but in each occasion he will do those things which seem to him most conducive to the goal which he has selected» (*Mantissa* XXIII, 174,11-24).²⁶ (tr. Sharples, modified)

The difference between the efficient and the final cause is already enough to break the necessity in the chain of causes. In this passage the relation between the goal and the means, which can be chosen, are described in a precise and complex manner. Someone who chooses has the goal (σκοπος, τὰ τέλη) as a given, to which he will make reference, and looking (ὄρων, βλέπων) at it, he will make his choice. The circumstances (τὰ περιεστώτα) will also be given; they will be in a certain relation, a position (τὴν σχέσιν) with regard to the goals, which obviously can be – to put it metaphorically – either closer or further away, that is having a greater or lesser capacity to reach the goal. The circumstances are at the same the things from which and about which the choice is made, which is a choice to act.

The goal is related to the agent, not in terms of moving cause, but in terms of being presented, coming from another faculty, and of being contemplated. It is a relation of dependency, but not one in which one is the moving cause of the other; it is rather a relation of hypothetical necessity, as described in *Physics* II 9. With its being watched, and therefore being visible, the goal attracts: like any motionless motor, it moves as a final cause. The goal is a cause that does not precede the choice but is simultaneous with it, it is present in each of the steps made by the agent towards bringing something about. At each step the goal guides the choice and gives the reason for the choice made.

The vocabulary chosen by Alexander is significant, because it indicates that in deliberating, the goal is something that ‘shows itself’, in the same way that the circumstances show

²⁶ ἔχων ἐν αὐτῷ τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ βουλευέσθαι περὶ τῶν περιεστώτων, ἔχει καὶ τὸ δύνασθαι ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν μὴ τὰ αὐτὰ αἰρεῖσθαι. καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἀλόγως τίθεται, οὐδέ ἐστιν αἴτημα τὸ λεγόμενον. εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν εἰς ὁ σκοπὸς αὐτῷ, πρὸς ὃν τὴν ἀναφορὰν τῆς κρίσεως ἐποιεῖτο, εὐλόγον ἦν ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν αἰεὶ ταῦτὸν αὐτὸν αἰρεῖσθαι τὴν αὐτὴν γε σχέσιν ἔχοντα αἰεὶ καὶ φυλάττοντα πρὸς τὸν προκείμενον αὐτῷ σκοπὸν, πρὸς ὃν ὄρων ἐποιεῖτο τὴν κρίσιν αὐτῶν. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐστὶ πλείω τὰ τέλη, πρὸς ἃ βλέπων τὴν κρίσιν καὶ τὴν αἴρεσιν τῶν πρακτέων ποιεῖται (καὶ γὰρ τὸ ἡδὺ καὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ καλὸν ἔχει πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν), ταῦτα δὲ ἀλλήλων διαφέρει, οὐ πάντα δὲ τὰ περιεστώτα ὁμοίαν τὴν σχέσιν ἔχει πρὸς τούτων ἕκαστον, τὴν κρίσιν αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν ἐξ αὐτῶν αἴρεσιν ποιούμενος ποτὲ μὲν πρὸς τὸ ἡδύ, ποτὲ δὲ πρὸς τὸ καλόν, ἄλλοτε δὲ πρὸς τὸ συμφέρον καὶ οὐκ αἰεὶ ταῦτα πράξει οὐδὲ αἰεὶ ταῦτα αἰρήσεται τῶν αὐτῶν περιεστώτων ἀπάντων, ἀλλ’ ἐκάστοτε ταῦτα τὰ πρὸς τὸν κριθέντα σκοπὸν μάλιστα συντείνειν δοκούντα.

themselves to the decision maker. The goal is thus is not an external *input*, like the push that sets the cylinder and the spinning-top down the slope, to use Chrysippus' classic example, but it is a term in the intellectual process of decision making, functioning in the search for an answer as an unmoving motor. For thinking beings the goal is thus not a moving cause.

The goal is not only something imagined; for Alexander, there are also real relations, in the world between the possible goals and the given circumstances, and these relations help to make the choice. According to Alexander the circumstances do not stand in the same relation to the goal, which could be described as a 'state' (σχέσις) relative to the end: depending on the chosen end some circumstances may prove to be more useful than others. When the agent deliberates, he does not hold a single representation, an appetitive and immediate impression of what ought to be done, that is whether to assent or not to assent, as in the Stoic account of the mental process that leads to action. According to Alexander, the agent in his imagination has before him a more complex framework, in which the fixed points are the circumstances and the preferred goal among the possible goals. Starting out from these the agent develops his courses of action: the characteristic of the goodness and the preferability of the different possible courses will vary, in relation to the given circumstances, the courses of action, the different ends deliberated, and the effectiveness of the course of action envisaged. Circumstances may be more favourable with regard to one end than with regard to an other, but this does not exclude the possibility that the goal that is most difficult to achieve goal may be the best. The practicality and the goodness of the action vary from case to case, in this extremely complex model. With the help of Aristotle and the *Mantissa* one can infer that the 'fruits of reasoning', that is the outcome of the practical syllogism, can be programmes of action, that are contrary to what a first superficial assessment of the state of things would suggest.

In comparison with the version in the *Mantissa*, the argument in *De fato*, chapter XV appears simplified and abbreviated in such a manner that it loses essential elements which affect its persuasiveness and validity. The arguments have been placed in a different order,²⁷ and *De fato* contains various polemical attacks against the Stoics, whereas the *Mantissa* above all offers a detailed account of the different kinds of causes involved and how they operate. For an overall evaluation of Alexander's position it is thus necessary to look into the smaller treatises, too, and not only in his *De fato*.

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²⁷ *Mantissa* 23, 172,24-24 = *De fato* 186,4-5; 173,7 = 186,15-16; 174,3-4 = 185,8-9; 173,7-9 = 185,31; 174,13-15 = 185,21-28.

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