

Alexander of Aphrodisias’ *De fato*: Problems of coherence reconsidered

Tomohiko Kondo (Hokkaido University)

1. Problems of Coherence

‘The earliest unambiguous evidence for the awareness of any kind of “free-will problem” occurs in Alexander of Aphrodisias. It resembles the problems modern philosophers discuss in that it is concerned with a theory of universal causal determinism which contains a principle of the type “same causes, same effects,” and in that it involves a concept of indeterminist freedom without invoking a concept of the will. (Bobzien 1998b, 136)

‘In any case, it is in Alexander that we find the ancestor of the notion that to have a free will is to be able, in the very same circumstances, to choose between doing A and doing B.’ (Frede 2011, 100)

T1 ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλεῖστον γὰρ ταῖς φυσικαῖς κατασκευαῖς τε καὶ διαθέσεσιν τάς τε πράξεις καὶ τοὺς βίους καὶ τὰς καταστροφὰς αὐτῶν ἀκολουθῶς ἰδεῖν ἔστι. τῷ μὲν γὰρ φιλοκινδύνῳ καὶ θρασεῖ φύσει βιαίως τις καὶ ὁ θάνατος ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πλεῖστον (αὕτη γὰρ ἡ τῆς φύσεως εἰμαρμένη), τῷ δὲ γε ἀκολάστῳ τὴν φύσιν τό τε ἐν ἡδοναῖς τοιαύταις καταζῆν καὶ ὁ τῶν ἀκρατῶν βίος, ἂν μὴ τι κάλλιον ἐν αὐτῷ γενόμενον ἐμποδίζῃ, [...]

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 accordance with [his] nature; [...]

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch. 6, 170.19–25, tr. Sharples)

‘[Alexander] thus also places himself in the worst possible position from which to start a defense of the concept of τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῶν against the determinism, a defense to which he will devote the whole second half of the treatise, from chapter VII onward; [...]. If our actions are mostly determined by natural character, then the scope of what is in our power will be confined to those rare situations in which, paradoxically, we will be free because we will be acting against our own natures. However, Alexander will later show that he is perfectly aware of Aristotle’s real convictions, and in XXVII 197.17ff. correctly limits the contribution of natural endowments to just the “capacity to receive virtue,” assigning the greater weight in the formation of moral character to training, education, and instruction.’ (Donini 1987 (2010), 161; cf. Donini 1974, 127–185)

T2 [...] (αὕτη γὰρ δυνατῷ τε καὶ ἀδύνατῳ μέτρον· τελειότης μὲν γὰρ ἡ ἀρετὴ καὶ [ἡ] ἀκρότης τῆς οἰκείας φύσεως ἐκάστου, ἀδύνατον δὲ ἀτελές τι ὄν ἐν τελειότητι εἶναι, ἀτελές δὲ τὸ γενόμενον εὐθὺ τῷ γενέσθαι) [...]

[...] (For [nature] is the measure of the possible and the impossible: virtue is the perfection and culmination of the proper nature of each thing, but it is impossible that anything incomplete should be in a state of perfection, and what has come to be is incomplete immediately it has come to be. [...])

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch. 27, 197.31–198.3, tr. Sharples)

2. Character and Action

Cf. πᾶσι γὰρ δοκεῖ ἕκαστα τῶν ἠθῶν ὑπάρχειν φύσει πως· καὶ γὰρ δίκαιοι καὶ σωφρονικοὶ καὶ ἀνδρεῖοι καὶ τᾶλλα ἔχομεν εὐθὺς ἐκ γενετῆς· ἀλλ' ὅμως ζητοῦμεν ἕτερόν τι τὸ κυρίως ἀγαθὸν καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ἄλλον τρόπον ὑπάρχειν. καὶ γὰρ παισὶ καὶ θηρίοις αἱ φυσικαὶ ὑπάρχουσιν ἕξεις, ἀλλ' ἄνευ νοῦ βλαβεραὶ φαίνονται οὕσαι.

For all men think that each type of character belongs to its possessors in some sense by nature; for from the very moment of birth we are just or fitted for self-control or brave or have the other moral qualities; but yet we seek something else as that which is good in the strict sense – we seek for the presence of such qualities in another way. For both children and brutes have the natural dispositions to these qualities, but without intelligence these are evidently damaging.

(Arist. *EN* 6.13, 1144b4–9, tr. Ross modified; cf. Donini 1996 (2010), 184–186)

T3 εἰπόντος γοῦν Ζωπύρου τοῦ φυσιογνόμου περὶ Σωκράτους τοῦ φιλοσόφου ἄτοπὰ τινα καὶ πλεῖστον ἀφεστῶτα τῆς προαιρέσεως αὐτοῦ τῆς κατὰ τὸν βίον καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις ὑπὸ τῶν περὶ τὸν Σωκράτη καταγελωμένου οὐδὲν εἶπεν ὁ Σωκράτης ἐψεῦσθαι τὸν Ζώπυρον· ἦν γὰρ ἂν τοιοῦτος ὅσον ἐπὶ τῇ φύσει, εἰ μὴ διὰ τὴν ἐκ φιλοσοφίας ἄσκησιν ἀμείνων τῆς φύσεως ἐγένετο.

At any rate, when Zopyrus the physiognomist said certain extraordinary things about the philosopher Socrates which were very far removed from his chosen manner of life, and was ridiculed for this by Socrates' associates, Socrates said that Zopyrus had not been at all mistaken; for he would have been like that as far as his nature was concerned, if he had not, through the discipline that comes from philosophy, become better than his nature.

(Alex. *Aphr. Fat.* ch.6, 171.11–16, tr. Sharples)

T4 εἰ, φασίν, ταῦτά ἐστιν ἐφ' ἡμῖν, ὧν καὶ τὰ ἀντικείμενα δυνάμεθα, καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς τοιούτοις οἱ τε ἔπαινοι καὶ οἱ ψόγοι, προτροπαὶ τε καὶ ἀποτροπαὶ, κολάσεις τε καὶ τιμαί, οὐκ ἔσται τὸ φρονίμοις εἶναι καὶ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἔχειν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔχουσιν, ὅτι μηκέτ' εἰσὶν τῶν ἀντικειμένων κακιῶν ταῖς ἀρεταῖς δεκτικοί, ὁμοίως δὲ οὐδὲ αἱ κακίαι ἐπὶ τοῖς κακοῖς· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτοις τὸ μηκέτ' εἶναι κακοῖς· ἀλλὰ μὴν ἄτοπον τὸ μὴ λέγειν τὰς ἀρετὰς καὶ τὰς κακίας ἐφ' ἡμῖν μηδὲ τοὺς ἐπαίνους καὶ τοὺς ψόγους ἐπὶ τούτων γίνεσθαι· οὐκ ἄρα τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν τοιοῦτον.

'If', they [Alexander's opponents] say, 'those things depend on us of which we are able [to do] the opposites too, and it is to such as these that praise and blame and exhortation and dissuasion and punishments and honours apply, being wise and possessing the virtues will not depend on those who possess them, because they can no longer admit the vices which are opposed to the virtues. And similarly vices, too, will no longer depend on those who are vicious; for it does not depend on them [is not in their power] not to be bad any longer. But it is absurd to deny that virtues and vices depend on us and are the objects of praise and blame; so what depends on us is not like this [sc. That of which we are also able to do the opposite].'

(Alex. *Aphr. Fat.* ch.26, 196.24–197.3, tr. Sharples)

'These critics of the 'Middle-Platonist' two-sided concept of what depends on us were [i.e. Alexander's opponents in ch.26] most probably the Stoics Alexander criticizes most in this treatise, i.e. orthodox Stoics of the second century, belonging to the tradition of PHILOPATOR.' (Bobzien 1998a, 399)

T5 *"Quamquam ita sit," inquit "ut ratione quadam necessaria et principali coacta atque conexa sint fato omnia, ingenia tamen ipsa mentium nostrarum proinde sunt fato obnoxia, ut proprietates eorum est ipsa et qualitas. Nam si sunt per naturam primitus salubriter utiliterque ficta, omnem illam vim, quae de fato extrinsecus ingruit, inoffensius tractabilisque transmittunt. Sin vero sunt aspera et inscita et rudia nullisque artium bonarum adminiculis fulta, etiamsi parvo sive nullo fatalis incommodi conflictu urgeantur, sua tamen scaevitate et voluntario impetu in assidua delicta et in errores se ruunt. Idque ipsum ut ea ratione fiat, naturalis illa et necessaria rerum consequentia efficit, quae fatum*

vocatur. Est enim genere ipso quasi fatale et consequens, ut mala ingenia peccatis et erroribus non vacent. [...]”

“Although it is the case”, [Chrysippus] said, “that all things are constrained and bound together by fate through a certain necessary and primary principle, yet the way in which the natures of our minds themselves are subject to fate depends on their own individual quality. For if they have been fashioned through nature originally in a healthy and expedient way, they pass on all that force, which assails them from outside through fate, in a more placid and pliant manner. If however they are harsh and ignorant and uncultured, and not sustained by any supports from good practices, then even if they are pressed on by little or no necessity from an adverse fate, through their own perversity and voluntary impulse they hurl themselves into constant crimes and errors. And that this very thing should come about in this way is a result of that natural and necessary sequence which is called fate. For it is as it were a fated consequences of their type itself, that bad natures should not lack crimes and errors. [...]

(Gellius 7.2.7–10, tr. Sharples; cf. Cic. *Fat.* 40–42)

‘We can, however, not rule out completely that Alexander’s opponents in this chapter are not Stoics but “dissident” Peripatetics’. (Bobzien 1998a, 399)

‘This means for Aristotle that a wise and virtuous person cannot but make the choices he makes. This is exactly what it is to be virtuous. Hence the ability to act otherwise or the ability to choose otherwise, if construed in a narrow or strong sense, is not present in the virtuous person, because it is a sign of immaturity and imperfection to be able to act otherwise, narrowly construed. So long as one can choose and act otherwise, one is not virtuous.’ (Frede 2011, 29)

T6 εἰ δέ τις τὰ ἡδέα καὶ τὰ καλὰ φαίη βίαια εἶναι (ἀναγκάζειν γὰρ ἔξω ὄντα), πάντα ἂν εἴη αὐτῷ βίαια· τούτων γὰρ χάριν πάντες πάντα πράττουσιν. [...] γελοῖον δὲ τὸ αἰτιᾶσθαι τὰ ἐκτός, ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτὸν εὐθήρατον ὄντα ὑπὸ τῶν τοιούτων, καὶ τῶν μὲν καλῶν ἑαυτὸν, τῶν δ’ αἰσχυρῶν τὰ ἡδέα.

But if someone were to say that pleasant and noble objects have a compelling power, forcing us from without, all acts would be for him compulsory; for it is for these objects that all men do everything they do. [...] It is absurd to make external circumstances responsible, and not oneself, as being easily caught by such attractions, and to make oneself responsible for noble acts but the pleasant objects responsible for base acts.

(Arist. *EN* 3.5, 1110b9–15, tr. Ross modified; Meyer 1998, 230–234)

3. Aristotelian and Non-Aristotelian Arguments

T7 οἱ συγχωρήσαντες ἀναποβλήτους τὰς ἀρετὰς τε καὶ τὰς κακίας εἶναι, ἴσως προχειρότερον λαμβανόμενον λέγομεν ἂν κατὰ τοῦτο τὰς ἕξεις ἐπὶ τοῖς ἔχουσιν εἶναι, καθόσον πρὸ τοῦ λαβεῖν αὐτὰς ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς ἦν καὶ μὴ λαβεῖν. οἱ τε γὰρ τὰς ἀρετὰς ἔχοντες καὶ τοῦ τῶν βελτιόνων ἀμελεῖν ἐλόμενοι τὰ βελτίω αὐτοῖς αἴτιοι τῆς τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐγένοντο κτήσεως, οἱ τε τὰς κακίας ἔχοντες παραπλησίως.

Granting to them that virtues and vices cannot be lost, we might perhaps take [the point] in a more obvious way by saying that it is in this respect that dispositions depend on those who possess them, [namely] in so far as, before they acquired them, it was in their power [depended on them] also not to acquire them. For those who possess the virtues have, by choosing what was better instead of neglecting it, become the causes of their own acquisition of virtue; and similarly with those who possess the vices.

(Alex. *Aphr. Fat.* ch.27, 197.3–8, tr. Sharples)

‘Alexander’s withdrawal, I think intimates that when he concedes to the Stoics in chapters xxvii and xxviii that character may necessitate, he is not really endorsing the thesis. His concession should perhaps be understood as a mere dialectical move intended to attack the Stoics in their own terrain: “even if one *were* to grant to the Stoics that character necessitates,

it still would not follow that responsibility is compatible with rigid determinism”.’ (Salles 1998, 79)

T8 τὴν μὲν οὖν ἕξιν μηκέτ’ ἔχει ὡς ἐπ’ αὐτῷ (ὥσπερ οὐδὲ τῷ αὐτὸν ἀπὸ ὕψους ἀφέντι τὸ στήναι καίτοι τοῦ ρῖψαί τε καὶ μὴ τὴν ἐξουσίαν ἔχοντι), ἐπ’ αὐτῷ δὲ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν ὧν τὴν ἕξιν ἔχων ἐνεργεῖ καὶ μὴ ποιῆσαι τινα. καὶ γὰρ εἰ ὅτι μάλιστα εὐλογον τὸ τὸν φρόνιμον <τάς> κατὰ τὸν λόγον καὶ τὴν φρόνησιν ἐνεργείας ἐνεργεῖν, πρῶτον μὲν οὐχ ὠρισμένως αἶδε τινὲς τοιαῦται ἢ μέχρι τοῦδε ἐνεργούμενα, ἀλλ’ ἔστιν ἐν πλάτει τινὶ πάντα τὰ γινόμενα τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον, καὶ τὸ παρὰ μικρὸν ἐν τούτοις οὐκ ἀναιρεῖ τὸ προκείμενον·

[The wise and virtuous man] does not then possess the disposition any longer as [something that] depends on him (just as [it is no longer in the power of, depends on] the person who had thrown himself from a height to stop, though he did have the power both to throw himself off and not to); but it *is* in his power also not to perform some of the activities which he performs through possessing the disposition. For even if it is pre-eminently reasonable that the wise man should perform the activities which are in accordance with reason and wisdom, firstly [it is not a question of] definitely performing particular [actions] of such a sort [and not others] and doing so to a certain extent, but all the things that come to be in this way admit of a certain breadth, and a slight difference in these matters do not do away with what was proposed.

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch.29, 199.27–200.2, tr. Sharples)

‘Alexander’s point in the present passage may plausibly be interpreted as a claim that, though a courageous man (for example) must perform courageous rather than cowardly actions, it does not therefore follow that he must perform *this* particular courageous action rather than that [...]’ (Sharples 1983, 163)

T9 ἔπειτα δὲ οὐ κατηναγκασμένως ὁ φρόνιμος ὧν αἰρεῖται τι πράττει, ἀλλ’ ὡς καὶ τοῦ μὴ πρᾶξιαι τι τούτων αὐτὸς ὧν κύριος. εὐλογον γὰρ ἂν δόξαι ποτὲ τῷ φρονίμῳ καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ δεῖξαι τὸ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν ἐλεύθερον καὶ μὴ ποιῆσαι ποτὲ τὸ γινόμενον ἂν εὐλόγως ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, εἰ προείποι τις αὐτῷ μάντις ἐξ ἀνάγκης αὐτὸν τοῦτο πράξειν. [...]

Next, it is not by compulsion that the wise man does any one of the things which he chooses, but as himself having control also over not doing any one of them. For it might also sometimes seem reasonable to the wise man *not* to do on some occasion what would reasonably have been brought about by him—in order to show the freedom in his actions, if some prophet predicted to him that he would of necessity do this very thing. [...]

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch.29, 200.2–7, tr. Sharples)

‘It is true that even the wise man acts differently than he normally would do if he is challenged that he has to act in a certain way. The situation is not the same!’ (Frede 1984, 290 n.20)

T10 κατὰ φύσιν μὲν γὰρ τοῖς πρακτικοῖς τε καὶ λογικοῖς ζώοις τὸ καὶ ἁμαρτάνειν καὶ κατορθοῦν δύνασθαι τῷ μηδέτερον αὐτῶν ποιεῖν κατηναγκασμένως, καὶ τοῦτ’ ἀληθές ἐστι καὶ τοῦτον ἔχει τὸν τρόπον. [...] οὐ γὰρ τὸν ὅπως οὖν χαρίεν <τι> ποιοῦντα καθορθοῦν τις λέγει, ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ἁμαρτάνειν τὸν ὅπως οὖν φαῦλόν τι πράττοντα, ἀλλ’ εἰ ὅπως οὖν ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ τις ὧν τῶν χειρόνων αἰρεῖται καὶ πράσσει [ἢ] τὰ βελτίω τοῦτον λέγομεν κατορθοῦν.

It *is* according to nature for living creatures that are capable of action and rational that they are able to act both wrongly and rightly, because they do neither of these compulsorily; and this is true and this is how it is. [...] It is not the man who does something nice in just *any* way that one says acts rightly, nor the man who does something base in just any way that [one says] acts wrongly; but if in any way someone who has the power [to do] what is worse chooses and does what is better, it is this man whom we say acts rightly.

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch.34, 206.5–7, 12–15, tr. Sharples modified)

T11 [...] (οὐ γὰρ τοὺς πάντας οὐδὲ τοὺς πλείστους ὀρθῶμεν τὰς ἀρετὰς ἔχοντας, ὁ τῶν κατὰ φύσιν γινομένων σημεῖον ἐστίν, ἀλλ’ ἀγαπητὸν ἕνα που λαβεῖν τοιοῦτον, ὃς δι’ ἀσκήσεώς τε καὶ διδασκαλίας δείκνυσιν τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων πρὸς τὰ

ἄλλα ζῶα φυσικὴν πλεονεξίαν, δι' αὐτοῦ προστιθεὶς τὸ ἀναγκαῖον¹ ἐνδέον ἡμῶν τῇ φύσει), [...]

[...] For we do not see everyone or even the majority possessing the virtues, this being a sign of the things that come to be in accordance with nature, but we are content if we find one such person, who through practice and instruction displays the natural superiority of men to the other living creatures, through himself adding what is necessary but lacking to our nature. [...]

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch.27, 198.19–23, tr. Sharples modified; cf. Donini 1996 (2010), 182–183)

4. Origins of Alexander's Dissident Arguments

T12 *Athenis tenue caelum, ex quo etiam acutiores putantur Attici, crassum Thebis, itaque pingues Thebani et valentes. Tamen neque illud tenue caelum efficiet, ut aut Zenonem quis aut Arcesilam aut Theophrastum audiat, neque crassum, ut Nemea potius quam Isthmo victoriam petat. [...] Nunc vero fatemur, acuti hebetesne, valentes inbecilline simus, non esse id in nobis. Qui autem ex eo cogi putat, ne ut sedeamus quidem aut ambulemus voluntatis esse, is non videt, quae quamque rem res consequatur. Ut enim et ingeniosi et tardi ita nascantur antecedentibus causis itemque valentes et inbecilli, non sequitur tamen, ut etiam sedere eos et ambulare et rem agere aliquam principalibus causis definitum et constitutum sit.*

At Athens the air is thin, and for this reason the people of Attica too are thought to be more sharp-witted, while at Thebes it is dense, and for this reason the Thebans are stupid but strong. However, that thin air will not make anyone listen to Zeno or Arcesilaus or Theophrastus; nor will that thick air make anyone seek victory at Nemea rather than at the Isthmus. [...] As it is, however, we assert that it does not depend on us whether we are sharp or dull-witted, strong or weak; but the person who thinks that from this it can be proved that whether we sit or walk is not a matter of our will either, does not see what follows from each thing. Granted that the talented and the slow are born like that from antecedent causes, and similarly the strong and the weak; still it does not follow that their sitting and walking and doing anything is also defined and decided by primary causes.

(Cic. *Fat.* 7, 9, tr. Sharples)

T13 διὸ <οὐκ> ἀναίτιως τὰ οὕτω γινόμενα γίνεται, παρ' ἡμῶν τὴν αἰτίαν ἔχοντα. ὁ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία τῶν δι' αὐτοῦ γινομένων πράξεων, καὶ τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ εἶναι ἄνθρωπος τὸ τοῦ πράττειν οὕτως τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔχειν ἐν αὐτῷ, ὡς <τὸ εἶναι (?)> τῇ σφαίρᾳ τὸ κατὰ τοῦ πρᾶνουῦς κυλιομένη φέρεσθαι. [...] οὕτως οὐδ' ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλοτ' ἄλλως ὑφ' ἡμῶν γινομένων ἐπὶ περιεστῶσι τοῖς αὐτοῖς² ἄλλην τινὰ αἰτίαν ἀπαιτητέον παρ' αὐτὸν τὸν ἄνθρωπον. τοῦτο γὰρ ἦν τὸ ἄνθρωπος εἶναι, τὸ γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία εἶναι τῶν δι' αὐτοῦ γινομένων πράξεων.

And for this reason the things that come about in this way do not come about without a cause, having their cause from us. For man is the beginning and cause of the actions that come about through him, and this is what being is for a man, [i.e. it is] to have the beginnings of his acting in himself in this way, as for a sphere it is to be carried rolling down a slope. [...] So neither in the case of the things that are brought about in different ways at different times by us in identical circumstances should any other cause be demanded beside man himself. For this is what being was for a man; for [it was] to be a beginning and cause of the actions that come about through oneself.

(Alex. Aphr. *Fat.* ch.15, 185.14–18, 185.30–186.3)

T14 *Rursus autem, ne omnes physici inrideant nos, si dicamus quicquam fieri sine causa, distinguendum est et ita dicendum, ipsius individui hanc esse naturam, ut pondere et gravitate moveatur, eamque ipsam esse causam, cur ita feratur. Similiter ad animorum motus voluntarios non est requirenda externa causa; motus enim voluntarius eam*

¹ I read ἀναγκαῖον (VO Bruns), not ἀναγκαίως (Cyr. ?lat. Sharples).

² I read αὐτοῖς (fort. Bruns in app., Sharples) for ἄλλοις.

naturam in se ipse continet, ut sit in nostra potestate nobisque pareat, nec id sine causa; eius rei enim causa ipsa natura est.

So that all the natural philosophers may not ridicule us, if we say that something comes about without a cause, we must make a distinction and say that it is the nature of the individual atom itself to be moved by weight and heaviness, and this itself is the cause for its being carried along in this way. Similarly in the case of the voluntary movements of mind an external cause is not to be looked for; for *voluntary movement* has this nature in itself, that it is in our power and is obedient to us. And this is not without a cause, for the nature of that thing itself is the cause of that thing. (Cic. *Fat.* 25)

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