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*Alessandro d'Afrodisia (Tito Aurelio Alessandro), Il Destino. Trattato sul destino e su ciò che dipende da noi. Dedicato agli Imperatori*  
by Carlo Natali and Elisa Tetamo

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Alexander of Aphrodisias (*flor. ca* AD 200) is known mostly as the last Peripatetic commentator on Aristotle, but among his works there are also several school treatises and opuscula in which he examines some of the central philosophical issues of his time from an Aristotelian perspective. For a long time, following Zeller, scholars have labelled these works as 'personal', thus suggesting that only here Alexander abandoned what was considered the non-committal stance of the commentator to express his own original views. Recent research [Rashed 2007], however, has made such a label obsolete by challenging the assumption that was responsible for its introduction in the first place, namely, the view that Alexander's commentaries are to be assessed as mere line by line exegesis rather than as philosophical contributions. School treatises and *opuscula*, then, can no longer be considered as a privileged place in which to look for Alexander's own philosophical agenda. They are to be read, rather, as philosophical works which, in contrast to the commentaries, aim to engage non-specialists.

This is in fact the goal of the *De fato*, a treatise written as an epistle to the Emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla that can be dated between AD 197 and 211 (on the grounds of its dedication) and that was likely composed shortly after Alexander's appointment to the state-endowed chair of Aristotelian philosophy in Athens. By that time, fate had become a standard topic of philosophical discussion; and the issues that were addressed under this heading were those of freedom and determinism. Every major philosophical school

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(Platonist, Peripatetic, Stoic, Epicurean) was expected to have something to say on the subject; but the Stoics' theory of fate, and especially Chrysippus' (ca 280–207 BC), had undoubtedly a central role in shaping the debate.

Gellius reports [*Noct. att.* 7.2.3] that for Chrysippus fate (εἰμαρομένη) is 'a natural arrangement of the universe' according to which things are inexorably 'woven together' and follow upon each other from eternity. But the standard definition of fate ascribed to the Stoics in late sources says that fate is 'a series of causes' [see, e.g., Nemesius, *Nat. hom.* 108.15–17]. As these definitions suggest, the Stoics' theory of fate is rooted in their physics and cosmology; and it consists primarily in a theory of causal determinism according to which what happens at any given time is entirely determined by antecedent causes so that nothing could have happened other than that which did. This form of causal determinism may resemble, but is not to be confused with, modern accounts of causal determinism. Modern theories of causal determinism treat causes and effects as belonging to the same ontological category; and it makes no difference to them whether causes and effects are events, bodies, or properties of bodies. In contrast, for the Stoics, causes and effects belong to two different ontological categories, causes being bodies and effects being incorporeal things. Thus, whereas in a modern *series causarum* every link in the chain is both the effect of an antecedent cause and the cause of a subsequent effect, in the Stoics' *series causarum* a body (a knife, say) is cause of an incorporeal effect (being cut) in another body (flesh) and it is this body, rather than the effect, that in turn is cause to another body of a further effect.

The main physical and cosmological aspects of the Stoic theory of fate go back to Zeno (344–262 BC) but Chrysippus is probably the first to address the problem of reconciling universal causal determinism with human freedom and moral responsibility [Bobzien 1998, 3]. On most readings today, Chrysippus finds a way to make human responsibility compatible with determinism by pointing to the causal power of the mind which, for the Stoics, is πνεῦμα, i.e., a type of body. What we are morally responsible for in his view is what is 'in our power' or 'depends on us' (ἐφ' ἡμῖν), namely, assents and actions. Assents and actions are 'in our power' because they do not depend on any causal factor external to us but rather on the nature of our mind, that is, on the qualities and dispositions that account for who we are

and the moral character we have. These qualities and dispositions of our mind are to be accounted for on the basis of predetermined causes (e.g., our family, education, past experiences, and so forth) and, thus, are part of the *series causarum* that fate consists in. But, no matter how we came to acquire the moral character we have, in so far as assents and actions depend on our mind, they depend on us and we, according to Chrysippus, are entirely responsible for them.

Chrysippus' compatibilism, then, seems to make autonomy not merely a necessary but also a sufficient condition for moral responsibility [Bobzien 1998, 279]. It is sometimes described as a form of 'soft determinism' as opposed to both 'hard-determinist' and 'libertarian' positions [Sharples 1983, 9]. In contrast to soft determinists, hard determinists and libertarians maintain that determinism and responsibility are incompatible; but, whereas hard determinists give up responsibility, libertarians give up determinism.

It is a libertarian conception of responsibility that, on most readings, we find in Alexander's *De fato* [Sharples 1983, 9; Bobzien 1998, 401: cf. D. Frede 1984, 287]. If we exclude the first and the last chapters, which mainly fulfill a rhetorical purpose, the *De fato* can be divided into two parts. In the first part, chapters 2–6, Alexander presents the Peripatetic conception of fate; in the second part, chapters 7–38, he develops a series of criticisms against Stoic determinism that aim at showing the superiority of his theory of fate over that of the Stoics. Oddly, he never refers to the latter by name in the treatise; but it is largely agreed that, if they may not be the only polemical target, they are at least the main one.<sup>1</sup>

The main difficulty that Alexander faces in the *De fato* is fairly obvious: fate was not one of Aristotle's main philosophical concerns and he had not developed any theory of it. To be sure, in Aristotle one can find several observations that point to a rejection of determinism [*De interp.* 9, 13; *Meta.* 6.3, 9.3] and one can also find a discussion of voluntary action and responsibility [*Eth. Nic.* 3.1–5]. But, in order to offer a Peripatetic theory of fate that can compete with the Stoics', Alexander must piece together Aristotle's remarks and try to make them fit into a coherent whole.

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<sup>1</sup> For a different view, see Long 1970; Donini 1974, 185.

He begins by observing that, as a matter of universal consensus, fate is a cause [ch. 3] and this leads him to examine it against the background of Aristotle's theory of the four causes. He maintains that fate is an efficient cause and he identifies it with the nature of each individual thing. He thinks that everything that happens by nature happens by fate [ch. 6] but, since what happens by nature, for Aristotle [*Phys.* 2.8], happens only for the most part rather than always and inexorably, he concludes that the determinists' claim that whatever happens at any given time is completely determined by antecedent causes is false. As far as human beings are concerned, he observes first of all that their nature is twofold. On the one hand, it consists in a certain bodily constitution and, on the other, in a certain character, so that one of us, for instance, is naturally choleric, another enduring in the face of bad luck, and so forth [ch. 6]. Character determines our actions, he argues, though only for the most part; but the rational faculty of our soul, crucially, can oppose our character and is thus entirely free in respect both to causal factors that are external to us and to causal factors that are internal to us. This last point is developed at greater length in the polemical part of the treatise, and especially in chs 11–12.

It is against the background of this philosophical debate on freedom and determinism that one is to assess Carlo Natali's second and revised edition of the *De fato*. The Italian translation, followed by a commentary, is by Elisa Tetamo but has been revised by Natali. The introduction is by Natali. As I have less to say on the translation, I will start with it.

Tetamo's translation is the first and only Italian translation of the treatise, and just for this it is worthy of applause. The Greek text it is based on is that established by Ivo Bruns [1892] but with the changes suggested by Sharples in his classic edition of 1983. In Sharples' edition the photographic reprint of Bruns' text, with asterisks indicating the emendations, is placed after the translation; in Natali's edition, the Greek text, reconstructed according to Sharples' suggestions, accompanies the translation side by side. This makes for a considerably easier reading.

The translation itself is mostly clear and easy to follow, although I disagree at times with some of Tetamo's and Natali's choices. Thus, at 166.25–26 and *passim*, one finds « οὗ χάριν », used for the Aristotelian final cause, rendered by 'in grazia di cui', which is a fairly

odd and archaic expression in Italian (one that as far as I know is no longer in use today) that means something like ‘thanks to which’. Although it is a literal rendering of « οὗ χάριν », ‘in grazia di cui’ fails to convey any sense of finality to an Italian reader. Later on, one finds « χάριν » with the genitive, always used to refer to the final cause, translated by ‘in vista di’ (‘with a view to’) [see, e.g., 168.22]. This seems to me a better choice, but the fact that one and the same technical expression is rendered in two different ways may cause problems for the reader who has no Greek. At 178.25, the aorist participle of « ἐλέγγειν » is rendered by ‘rifiutato’, i.e., ‘rejected’, whereas it should be ‘tested’. Perhaps this is only a typographical error (‘rifiutato’, i.e., ‘rejected’ for ‘refutato’, i.e., ‘refuted’); but the sense of the passage is compromised by it (it would be compromised, I think, even if we substituted ‘refutato’ for ‘rifiutato’). Finally, there is one passage that needs some revision—170.25–171.7: here the translation is mostly unintelligible to me.

Natali’s introduction is substantial (almost 100 pages long), and one of its greatest merits is that it offers an overview of the debate over freedom and determinism from Homer to Alexander that takes into account several scholarly traditions. There is a discussion of the Stoic theory of fate [16–48], an analysis of Alexander’s theory of fate and action and of his arguments against determinism [49–91], an assessment of Alexander’s theory of action in the light of some contemporary discussions [92–96], and a short biographical note [97–98]. This introduction, then, provides a valuable starting point for those interested in pursuing further research on the ancient debate on freedom and determinism. The downside of such a comprehensive approach is that one cannot expect to find worked out answers to the philosophical problems under examination. But Natali explicitly warns the reader [7] that he will try to stir a middle path between a broad overview of the literature and his personal, philosophical contribution to the discussion.

Natali’s approach to the Stoics’ and Alexander’s theories of fate rests on the analysis of their respective theories of causality. The difference between the Stoic and the Peripatetic conceptions of causation is in fact the most fully developed subject in the book and the whole discussion of determinism and freedom is organized around it. This emphasis has the merit of bringing to the fore what Natali considers the most important contribution of Alexander’s treatise to

contemporary debates in philosophy of action. Philosophers such as Ricoeur, Natali points out, believe that in order to find an adequate explanation of human action we need to rethink the conceptual structure of the notion of cause. Alexander, he suggests, could help them in carrying out this project [96].

Rather than summarizing the introduction, I will concentrate on two points where Natali's personal philosophical contribution to the study of ancient theories of freedom and determinism is most prominent: his assessment of the relation between character and determinism in Aristotle and the Stoics [42–48], and his analysis of Alexander's conception of deliberation and of what is 'in our power' [73–83].

All those familiar with the Aristotelian and Stoic discussions of human responsibility are aware that neither Aristotle nor Chrysippus seem to have been sensitive to the problem raised by what may be called 'ethical determinism' [D. Frede 1982], that is, the view that our actions are predetermined by our character. The problem is the following: If what we do is predetermined by who we are and the character we have, how can our actions be free and to what extent are we really responsible for them? Natali argues that the reason why this problem did not arise for Aristotle and Chrysippus is to be found in their understanding of the causal role of character in actions, and, ultimately, in their respective conceptions of causality. For Aristotle, he observes [43], there is no absolutely necessary series of causes because

- (1) for him there are four different kinds of causes rather than only efficient causes (i.e., the sole causes admitted by the Stoics), and
- (2) he admits of interruptions in the chains of causes, such as those brought about by accidental events and human choices.

With these observations in mind, Natali approaches Aristotle's analysis of action in *Eth. Nic.* 3.1–5. Here, he remarks, Aristotle introduces a notion of voluntary (*ἑκούσιον*) according to which for an action to be voluntary its efficient cause must be in the agent rather than external to it, as it would be if, for instance, one were carried by a wind [1109b35–1110a4]. The efficient cause of a voluntary action, Natali goes on, is a desire; and this desire is oriented to an end, which

is the action's final cause. Thus, Natali concludes, for Aristotle, a human being acts by having a desire for something or other which he represents to himself as good; and the fact that he views some things rather than others as good depends on the character he happens to have [1114a31–b3]. Natali admits that this seems to suggest that character determines our actions but he invites us to resist this conclusion by drawing a distinction between desire, which he views as the efficient cause of our actions, and character, which he views as their formal cause. If I understand his point correctly, he argues that, in Aristotle's view, we are responsible for our actions only in so far as we have in us their efficient causes in the form of our desires, whereas our character, being merely a formal cause of our actions, is irrelevant to responsibility. For Aristotle, he suggests, character cannot determine action because desires are the only efficient cause of action; and neither our goals (final causes) nor our characters (formal causes) can in turn be efficient causes of our desires.

Natali's suggestion sheds new light on an old problem but I am not entirely convinced by it. In particular, I am not sure whether the distinction between different types of causes in fact eliminates the problem of ethical determinism. It seems to me that the suggestion would work better if one were of the view that Aristotle's causes, apart from the efficient one, are to be understood in terms of explanations [e.g., [M. Frede 1987](#)]; but Natali rejects this possibility [see 38]. If one holds, as Natali does, that all four Aristotelian causes are causes in some robust sense of the word, then one should conclude, I think, that, even though it is a formal cause, character can and does determine actions in such a way as to make the Aristotelian notion of responsibility problematic and elusive. Natali is aware of the difficulty, it seems, and he adds that, even if one were to concede that for Aristotle character determines our actions, this in his view would not exempt us from being responsible for what we do. For Aristotle maintains that we are responsible even for our character, Natali goes on, since we came to acquire it little by little since childhood by acting voluntarily in certain ways [45–46].

But I think that this further suggestion too is problematic. First of all, actions are not the only things that contribute to the formation of one's character; at a minimum, past experiences must have a role too. But the main problem with it, I think, is that it could lead one to conclude that, in assessing responsibility, Aristotle draws no

distinction between human and animal actions. This is because in Aristotle's view even non-rational animals can act voluntarily. Probably in order to avoid this conclusion, Natali points out that the voluntary actions through which children build their character are not morally significant [46] so that his suggestion does not amount to saying that, in Aristotle's view, we are morally responsible for our character. But, if at some point we do become morally responsible for something or other, and if our moral choices depend on a character for which we are not morally responsible, is it not legitimate to question the extent to which we can be held morally accountable for what we do?

In any case, even if one agrees to bracket the issue of moral responsibility and to deal exclusively with causal responsibility, I wonder whether one can avoid discussing Aristotle's distinction between animal and human action. Natali's analysis of *Eth. Nic.* 3.1–5 here makes no reference to this distinction. Yet adult humans, for Aristotle, as opposed to animals and children, are not merely capable of acting voluntarily; they can also act deliberately, by rational choice (*προαίρεσις*); and this should make a difference, I think, to the way in which they are held responsible for their actions, even if moral responsibility is set aside.

I have similar remarks concerning the discussion of ethical determinism in Stoicism. Here Natali's suggestion is that the Stoics avoid ethical determinism because, on their view, the proper cause of something cannot be present without the effect being also present [Long and Sedley 1987, 55A]. Natali interprets this as meaning that only the most immediate cause or, in other words, the ultimate cause in a chain is the proper cause of something, whereas any other cause merely contributes to the effect in some other, more indirect way. Then, on the grounds of Clement, *Strom.* 8.9.27.3–5 and Cicero, *De fato* 34–35, he concludes that the Stoics do not view character as the most immediate cause of our actions but rather assign this causal role to 'the subject' ('il soggetto') of the action [47]. What I find problematic in this suggestion is precisely this distinction between subject and character. It is not clear to me that such a distinction could be ascribed to the Stoics. As far as I can see, for Chrysippus, and also for later Stoics such as Epictetus, the subject just is the individual's mind with its character and the specific qualities it has at the time at which the action takes place. Thus, one would like to



read more about Natali's interpretation of the role of character in the Stoics' theory of action. He addresses this topic when he examines Chrysippus' famous cone analogy [26–32] but I did not find his examples (namely, 'the good housekeeper' and 'the young absent-minded bride' on page 32, which are examples of stereotypes) very helpful.

I will pass now to the second point of Natali's introduction that I would like to examine: Alexander's account of deliberation and of what is 'in our power'. The most sustained discussion of these topics is to be found in chs 11–15. Here Alexander's observations rest ultimately on *Eth. Nic.* 3.1–5 but what is interesting is that the polemic against the Stoics leads him to rethink the notions of deliberation and rational choice with which Aristotle operates. Alexander develops several arguments in these chapters but his main points, I take it, are the following: the determinists, he says, view deliberation merely as a step in a chain of causes that necessitate a certain action. But, if this were the case, deliberation would be pointless, as in the end one would never be able to act otherwise than he did [ch. 11]. Yet deliberation cannot be pointless, or else nature would have given us the ability to deliberate in vain. In order to avoid the conclusion that deliberation is pointless, Alexander says that we need to grasp what is central to it, namely, the fact that it makes us able to choose either to do or not to do something. This two-sided concept of deliberation—which is absent (or at least not prominent) in Aristotle—leads Alexander to a likewise two-sided concept of rational choice (*προαίρεσις*) and of its object, i.e., that which is 'in our power' (*ἐφ' ἡμῖν*) [ch. 12]. The determinists, he observes, think that what is 'in our power' is merely what happens by fate 'through us', where 'through us' is to be spelled out as 'following an impulse (*hormē*)' [ch. 13]; but they confuse what is 'in our power' with what Aristotle calls 'voluntary' [ch. 14]. To act according to impulse is the same as to act voluntarily, Alexander suggests; but even animals are capable of acting voluntarily, whereas only humans have control over their actions. Every action that is 'in our power', then, is voluntary for Alexander, in so far as it is done according to impulse but not *vice versa*; and this is because what is 'in our power' is something more than what is merely voluntary: it is 'that over which we have control both to do and not to do' [ch. 12, 180.5–6] as a result of deliberation.

Scholars have often noted that Alexander's analysis of the Stoic notion of what is 'in our power' in ch. 13 may be unfair. But Natali points out, and rightly in my view, that he does have a strong point against the Stoics in so far as he suggests that their conception of what is 'in our power' does not fit our ordinary intuitions [also [Sharples 1983](#), 142]. For we tend to believe that when something is 'in our power' this is not merely because we act as instruments of fate. Natali observes that Alexander's criticism of the Stoics here rests on his own conception of rationality and deliberation as two-sided; and so far I agree. But he also suggests that Alexander's peculiar conception of deliberation as two-sided is to be explained ultimately in the light of a theory of action, the Peripatetic one, which is radically different from that of the Stoics, for whom in fact deliberation is not a central concept; and here I no longer entirely agree. For a Peripatetic, Natali says, representations are the data of a problem on which one needs to deliberate in order to act, whereas for a Stoic a representation is the impact that the world has on a subject; this subject can react in an appropriate or an inappropriate way but in either case he does not need to deliberate [78]. The Stoics, he goes on, conceive of actions as reactions that can be either correct or not, whereas the Peripatetics conceive of them in a goal-directed perspective, which leads them to ascribe a more important role to deliberation [83]. Although Alexander does make an important point against the Stoics [ch. 15] that rests on an appeal to the plurality of ends one may strive for in action [185.21–27], I am not convinced by Natali's way of framing the difference between the Peripatetic and the Stoic theories of action. Deliberation does have a role in the Stoic theory of action, and even though it is true that it does not have a prominent role, this is not, as far as I can see, because the Stoics conceive of an action as a mere reaction to a representation but because they believe that only an imperfect mind needs to deliberate, whereas the sage can and should do without deliberation. As I understand it, Alexander's main point against the Stoics in chs 11–15 is not that they neglect the role of deliberation in action, as Natali suggests, but that, though granting deliberation an important role, they fail to see that it must rest on a two-sided capacity to do or not to do something.

That this is Alexander's point emerges in particular from the following passage where he explains why deliberation is not pointless:

It is agreed by everyone that man has this advantage from nature over other living creatures, that he does not follow representations in the same way as they, but has reason from her as judge of the representations that impinge on him, concerning certain things as deserving to be chosen. Using this, if, when they are examined (ἐξεταζόμενα), the things that appeared are indeed as they initially appeared, he assents to the representation and so goes on in pursuit of them; but if they seem different or something else [seems] more deserving to be chosen, he chooses that.... At any rate [there are] many things [which], having seemed different to us in their first appearances [from what they seemed to us subsequently], no longer remained as in our previous notion when reason put them to the test (οὐκέτ' ἔμεινεν ἐπὶ τῆς προλήψεως ἐλέγξαντος αὐτὰ τοῦ λόγου); and so, though they would have been done as far as concerned the representation of them, on account of [our] deliberating about them they were not done—we being in control of the deliberating and of the choice of the things that resulted from the deliberation. [Alexander, *De fato* 11.178.7–28: [Sharples 1983](#) slightly modified]

Here Alexander describes deliberation as a rational activity that consists in examining (ἐξετάζειν) and testing (ἐλέγχειν) our ordinary notions (προλήψεις). But this account of deliberation is Stoic rather than Aristotelian and it can be found time and again in Epictetus [see, e.g., *Diss.* 1.17, 2.8 and [Sharples 1983](#), 139]. In this passage, Alexander does not suggest that the Stoics neglect the role of deliberation in action; rather, he argues that their own conception of deliberation (or what he takes to be their conception), which he by and large shares, requires or presupposes that we have control over whether to do something. This means that, in contrast to the Stoics, Alexander maintains that we are free to act even against our character, as in any given circumstance we could have always chosen to act otherwise than we did. Natali's reading rests on the assumption that Alexander operates with the Aristotelian conception of deliberation as an inquiry in which a rational subject with a certain end in mind reasons backwards so as to determine the means that will lead him to reach that end. Such a conception of deliberation seems indeed foreign to the Stoics. But, although Alexander does refer to the Aristotelian account of deliberation [180.12–23], this is not the

only account with which he works. In general, Natali is interested in the Aristotelian background of Alexander's theses but he does not examine them in the light of late Stoic thinkers such as Epictetus or, for ch. 13, Philopator. He does discuss [80] Bobzien's suggestion that in ch. 13 Alexander may be relying on a late notion of what is 'in our power' that differs in part from Chrysippus' and that may go back to Philopator [Bobzien 1998, 359 ff.]. But he concludes that we just do not have enough evidence for a proper assessment of this matter.

Unfortunately, there are several typographical errors in Natali's introduction. Most of them are minor<sup>2</sup> but some are more serious. This holds in particular for the citations in the footnotes that sometimes do not match the entries in the bibliography.<sup>3</sup> There is a potentially misleading observation on page 24 where, while discussing the Stoics' commitment to logical determinism, Natali remarks (but the point is made only in passing) that Chrysippus links the existence of fate to the Law of Excluded Middle; but I think that what is meant is Bivalence.

These are minor problems in any case, and Natali's edition of the *De fato* is a most welcomed contribution to the growing debate on the development of the notions of freedom and determinism in antiquity. Natali's target readers are the advanced student and the non-specialist but his book will be useful to anybody interested in Alexander and in his contribution to the ancient debate on freedom and determinism.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., 'protokatartikē' instead of 'prokatartikē' on p. 31; 'ma' instead of 'mai' in the quotation on p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Huby 1964 on 16n14, and Huby 1970 on 29n38 have no corresponding entries in the bibliography where one finds only Huby 1989; the same holds for Burnyeat 1984 on 68n81.

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