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1. Introduction

One of the debated questions concerning Aristotle's theory of causation is whether it presupposes anything like a necessitation of the effect by its cause. Some texts in the corpus suggest that there is no necessitation in any familiar sense of necessity; others imply that there is ‘simple’, ‘unconditional’ necessity operating in natural processes. In this paper I attempt an analysis of a relatively little studied chapter of Posterior Analytics, II 12, which may prove useful for our understanding of the problem.¹ This chapter is devoted to the question whether all kinds of causation involve necessitation. Aristotle’s main concern is specifically with the case where the cause precedes its effect in time. The term ‘conditional necessity’ is not used, but Aristotle’s discussion sheds some important light on the ways in which this concept is used elsewhere in the corpus, notably in the last chapter of the treatise On Coming-to-Be and Perishing (GC II 11) that is devoted to the question whether there is necessity in the world. The paper falls into two parts. The first contains an analysis of Aristotle’s argument according to which inferences about a causal process where cause precedes its effect in time should conclude from effect to cause, and not from cause to effect, if they are to be valid. The second part of the paper uses this argument as a background for the

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¹ The recent commentary by Detel (1993) is an outstanding contribution that almost makes up for the lack of critical studies; it provides bibliographical references to each chapter.
analysis of the discussion of conditional necessity in natural processes in GC II 11, and in the work of two ancient commentators, Alexander of Aphrodisias and John Philoponus.

2. ARISTOTLE’S HUMEAN DOUBTS

The difference between the Aristotelian and modern concept of cause is generally well appreciated: Aristotle’s causes, unlike modern, are taken to be reasons or ‘becauses’, ‘explanatory items’ rather than causal factors (events or objects) necessitating their effects. However, in several places Aristotle does speak of causes in the meaning close to modern; and in APo. II 12, this way of speaking is put in a full-fledged theoretical perspective as Aristotle raises a problem similar to Hume’s problem of whether there is a ‘necessary connexion’ between cause and effect.

2.1. The Problem

Aristotle begins by drawing a distinction between the causes of being and the causes of coming to be and perishing:

(T1) What explains why something is coming about (and why it has come about, and why it will be) is the same as what explains why it is the case: it is the middle term which is explanatory. But if something is the case, the explanatory item is the case; if it is coming about, [the explanatory item] is coming about; if it has come about, it has come about; and if it will be, it will be. (APo. II 12, 95a10–14, trans. Barnes.)

The purpose of this distinction between the causes of being (henceforth, B-causes) and the causes of coming to be (G-causes) is to draw attention to the explanations of particulars, which, as Aristotle rightly suspects, may involve some differences compared to the explanations on the level of essences.

The logical form of a full B-causal statement is that of a syllogism, where the explanatory item (the cause proper) is expressed by the middle term.2 In APo. I 13, Aristotle gives us an example of causal demonstration:

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2 Aristotle explains this in detail in APo. I 13 and then again (for different types of cause) in II 11. I use the term ‘syllogism’ loosely, referring to a deduction via a middle term, irrespective of quantification over the terms (what some authors call ‘proto-syllogism’ or ‘deduction’ in order to distinguish this form from the syllogism proper discussed in APr.).