Aristotelian and Stoic Conceptions of Necessity in the De Fato of Alexander of Aphrodisias

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In chapter IX of his treatise De fato Alexander of Aphrodisias (fl. c. 200 A.D.) argues that the occurrence of some things contingently is incompatible with the view of those who say that everything occurs of necessity (174.30-175.2). The whole of this part of the treatise is devoted to pointing out the difficulties in the view of

1 Supplementum Aristotelicum II.ii 164-212, ed. I. Bruns, Berlin 1892; cf. also pp. 169-186 Bruns of the de anima libri mantissa, in Supplementum Aristotelicum II.i (1887). All references will be to these editions.


There is one translation of the de fato into English, by A. FitzGerald (London, 1931), but this is in places rather inadequate; I hope myself to produce a translation at a later date. P. Thillet has indicated in the introduction to his edition of the medieval Latin translation attributed to William of Moerbeke (Études de Philosophie Médiévale 51, Paris, 1963, p. 61) that he intends to produce a new edition of the Greek text.

Reference will be made in this article to passages from the mantissa and also to some from the Quaestiones attributed to Alexander (Supplementum Aristotelicum II.ii). It is very possible that not all the texts in these collections are by Alexander (cf. P. Moraux, Alexandre d’Aphrodise: Exégète de la Noétique d’Aristote, (Liège-Paris 1942), 19-28; P. Merlan, ’Zwei Untersuchungen zu Alexander von Aphrodisias’, Philologus 113 (1969) 85-88; R. B. Todd, ‘Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Alexandrian Quaestiones 2.12’, Philologus 116 (1972) 293-305), but it seems generally agreed that they show his influence, and even texts which may not be by Alexander himself may serve to bring out tensions in the Peripatetic position on the issues to be discussed in this article.

I am particularly grateful to Professor Todd for sending me a copy of a bibliography on Alexander that he has prepared.
those who assert a theory of universal causal determinism; and, just as Alexander claims that those who hold such a view cannot preserve chance or 'what is up to us' (τὸ ἦμα ἢμοιον) except by giving these terms strained and unusual meanings (172.4-16, and cf. 172.20-6; 181.7-12), so here he asserts that the occurrence of some things contingently is incompatible with the assertion that everything occurs of necessity, if the proper (καθορίζεται ... λέγεται, 175.2) sense of 'contingently' is that those things occur contingently which can also not happen (175.2-3).

However, when Alexander goes on to give examples of what is and is not contingent, we may well be somewhat perturbed. For at least some of the examples seem to indicate that what he has in mind is the distinction between those things that are always in one certain state and those that are not. Thus, fire cannot be cold, and snow cannot be hot and remain snow, but water can be either hot or cold (175.18-21). But surely Alexander's opponents do not assert that every-

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2 It is true that in 174.30 Alexander represents his opponents as saying that everything occurs of necessity, while at 171.19 they are described as saying that everything occurs according to fate. But it is hardly reasonable to suppose that Alexander intends the view that he is criticising in ch. IX to be taken as a different one from that referred to in 171.19. In fact, it seems that Alexander does not distinguish between 'everything occurs according to fate' (de fato 166.4, 171.19, 176.14, 186.13), 'everything occurs of necessity' (172.8, 173.16, 175.1, 178.16, mantissa 184.27), 'everything occurs of necessity and according to fate' (de fato 164.18, 171.26), and 'the things according to fate do not occur of necessity' (de fato 169.28, by implication; and cf. the discussion of whether or not 'fate is necessary' at mantissa 182.21, etc., and also de fato 166.1-3). All these descriptions alike are applied to his opponents' position and contrasted with his own, which is that not everything occurs according to fate, or that the things according to fate do not occur of necessity (cf. de fato 169.26 ff. and section III of this paper). It is not clear that 'everything occurs according to fate, but not of necessity' would mean anything to Alexander in the context of this discussion. It is true that the Stoics did draw a distinction between what is fated and what is necessary (cf. n. 17 below) and that this expression would be meaningful to them; but since everything in their system was determined it is not clear that Alexander's applying the expression 'everything occurs of necessity' is wrong in itself, though the use he makes of it may well be another question. Cf. further below. – It has been noted that Alexander nowhere in the de fato refers to the Stoics by name, but they are almost certainly his chief target (cf. Long. 247 f.; and my n. 24 below).

3 For the examples of fire and snow cf. Plato Phaedo 103 d, Aristotle de int. 13 22 b 39 (referring to fire's heating, rather than being hot), Ammonius in de int. 9 153.18, 29 Busse, and Boethius in de int. comm. ed. sec. 187.29, 236.7, 13 Meiser; the last-mentioned passage also has the example of water (236.24). In the mantissa, where 184.13-27 presents a similar argument to de fato IX in a