Evidence, Externality and Antecedence: Inquiries into Later Greek Causal Concepts

R.J. HANKINSON

I want to tackle two related problems in the analysis of later Greek causal concepts. Firstly, what is the distinction, in Hellenistic theory (in particular medical theory), between aitia προκαταρκτικά and aitia προηγούμενα, between antecedent and preceding causes? And secondly, what exactly is the connection between the three notions of the title, evidence, externality and antecedence, in relation to the concept of antecedent causation? Both these issues have provoked puzzlement; and the resolution of that puzzlement should contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of later Greek causal taxonomy.

Causes and Time

One of the things that strikes the student of Aristotle’s causal schemes\(^1\) is that they make no reference, implicit or otherwise, to the temporal features of the causal relation. Causes, one is inclined unreflectively to think, are events or actions in time\(^2\), and the time at which something brings something else about seems to be a matter of some importance\(^3\); and surely it is a

\(^{1}\) Classically expounded at Phys. 2 3, 194b16-195b30.

\(^{2}\) I shall not here get embroiled in the contemporary debate concerning the nature of the proper candidates for causal status: whether the causal relation holds between events only, or between actions and events, agents and events, facts and other facts, or whatever: it is clear that the Stoics, for instance, thought primarily in terms of agents and agency, as Michael Frede’s magisterial paper “The Original Notion of Cause” (published in Barnes, Burnyeat and Schofield, edd., Doubt and Dogmatism, Oxford, 1980) demonstrates; but, as we shall see, originally at least aitia συνεκτικά, containing causes, weren’t agents, and were not responsible for events. In ancient, no less than in modern times, ordinary causal language ranges over a multiplicity of differing items.

\(^{3}\) Difficulties encountered in accounting for the temporal aspects of causation were the nub of a celebrated series of Sceptical attacks on the coherence of causal notions: Sextus, PH 3 13-30; for an analysis and critique of these arguments, see J. Barnes, “Ancient Scepticism and Causation”, in M.F. Burnyeat, ed., The Skeptical Tradition, Berkeley, 1983; see also M 9 232-36, and Galen, De Causis Procarcticos (CP), XVI 199 CMG Supp. II, p. 54.8-10.

feature of at least some of the things that we want to call causes that they precede their effects. Of course, it is not difficult to find in Aristotle plenty of examples of causes that are supposed to precede their effects; and the lack of concern with the matter of temporal sequence in Physics 2 3 is perhaps grist to the mill of those who want to deny that what is really at issue in Aristotle is causes as such at all, rather than types of explanatory category, or the like⁴.

Antecedent causes, on the other hand, fairly clearly have some temporal features: where and when in the history of causal analysis does this temporal concern make itself felt?

The distinction between antecedent and containing causes is standardly fathered on the Stoics; and that standard attribution is confirmed by Galen, at least as far as a'íta svvëkêxwv are concerned⁵. But the sense of the term a'ítov svvëkêxwv⁶ altered between the time of its Stoic origins and Galen’s medical theorising. As the word might suggest, a containing cause is something that binds something together; and in its original usage, this is taken very literally. A containing cause of something is that which holds it together, accounts for it staying the way it is. This is made clear in Galen’s account of the original Stoic doctrine in CC, which is worth quoting at some length:

Stoycos philosophos novi primos contentivam causam que et conjuncta dicitur nominare. Volunt enim ex quatuor quidem elementis facta esse vocata ab Aristotele quidem omiomera corpora, primogenita autem a Platone, ex his autem alia corpora componi. Elementorum autem quedam quidem materialia nuncupant, quedam autem activa et virtuosa, et contineri [i.e. svvëxêxathai] dicunt a virtuosis materialia, et esse ignem quidem et aerem activa, terram vero et aquam materialia, et pertransire tota per tota in concretionibus, scilicet virtuosa per materialia, ut aerem et ignem per aquam et terram, et esse aerem quidem frigidum, ignem vero calidum, et congregari et impilari substantiam ab aerea natura, extendi vero et effundi et multum accipere locum ab ignea et esse leptomerea activa, grossiparcia vero reliqua. Spiritum [i.e. nveîma] autem vocant leptomeream substantiam omnem, et eius opus esse continere [i.e. svvëxêxai] alia corpora physica et ea que animalium. Nomino autem physica, quorum generatio non ab hominibus, sed a natura fit; talia autem sunt es et ferrum et aurum et ligna et particularum que in animalibus prime et omiomera vocate, scilicet nervus et vena et

⁴ For such views, see M. Hocutt, “Aristotle’s Four Becauses”, Philosophy, 49, 1974, 385-99.