Alexander’s Sea Battle: a discussion of Alexander of Aphrodisias De Fato 10

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The tenth chapter of Alexander of Aphrodisias’ De Fato\(^1\) contains a treatment of fatalism and future truth which clearly harks back to Aristotle’s famous ‘Sea Battle’ discussion in De Interpretatione (DI) 9.\(^2\) Alexander’s discussion has not yet been satisfactorily interpreted: this paper is intended to help remedy this lack.

On the traditional interpretation of Aristotle’s argument, he accepted the fatalist’s inference from the truth of a statement about a future contingency (which I will call a future contingent statement, FCS for short) to its necessity, but sought to counter necessitarianism by denying the principle of bivalence (PB) on which the fatalist’s inference rests.\(^3\) This interpretation has in recent times been challenged from two quarters. According to one view (the ‘modern’ interpretation), Aristotle does not seek to restrict PB; rather, he rebuts fatalism by distinguishing between the truth/falsity of a FCS and its necessity, allowing the former but refusing the latter, and in particular banning any inference from a necessary disjunction of FCSs (such as ‘There will be a sea battle tomorrow or there will not be a sea battle tomorrow’) to the several necessities of the disjuncts.\(^4\) Others

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\(^1\) The text of the De Fato is available in Supplementation Aristotelicum II.ii. 164-212, ed. I. Brun, Berlin, 1892. Brun’s text is reproduced in the commentary of R. Sharples: Alexander of Aphrodisias on Fate (London, Duckworth, 1983).

\(^2\) The literature on DI 9 is vast: the references in the following footnotes are no more than highly selective samples: I am myself preparing a study of the chapter.


have proposed a statistical approach to the chapter: on that approach, Aristotle responds to the fatalist by shifting the domain of the debate from temporally definite sentences or statements (i.e. sentences as assessed at times\(^5\)) to temporally indefinite sentences: he then points out that the temporally indefinite sentence ‘There will be a sea battle tomorrow’ is sometimes true, sometimes false, and so not necessary (necessity being construed as truth at all times).\(^6\)

The interpretation of Aristotle which became standard in late antiquity, and which finds its clearest expression in the commentators Ammonius\(^7\) and Boethius\(^8\), held that it is wrong to suppose, as the traditional interpretation does, that Aristotle denies PB in respect of FCSs. Rather, he adapts it in this way: while a disjunction of FCSs does divide truth and falsity between its disjuncts, it does not do so in a definite way.\(^7\) This interpretation is at least suggested at the end of a work attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Quaestio* 1.4,\(^9\) but it makes no explicit appearance in his *De Fato*. Chapter 10 of that work contains a fascinating discussion of the Sea Battle problem; rightly understood, it indicates that Alexander does not subscribe either to the modern or to the statistical reading of Aristotle. That means he must have read Aristotle as seeking to restrict or adapt PB in some way. Whether he favoured a restriction along the lines of the traditional interpretation, or an adaptation along the lines canvassed by Ammonius and Boethius, cannot be deduced from *De Fato* alone, and I shall not here address the question: I shall confine myself to seeking to show that Alexander understood Aristotle in at least a traditionalist way, it being thereby left open that

\(^5\) See note 27 below.


\(^7\) Vol. 4.5 of *CAG* (ed. A. Busse, Berlin, 1897).


\(^9\) This interpretation of Aristotle is defended by D. Frede, *Aristoteles und die Seeschlacht* (Göttingen, 1970). She calls it traditional, with some justification, but I follow the standard terminology.

\(^10\) Sharples, Commentary, pp.11-12; ‘An Ancient Dialogue on Possibility’, *AGPh* 64, 1982, 23-38. The commentators go further than the explicit text of *Quaestio* 1.4 in their claim that the disjuncts of an antiphasis of FCSs are *indeterminately* true/false. (The author of *Quaestio* 1.4 may have in mind that FCSs are not true/false at all.) See here Sharples, *Alexander of Aphrodisias: Quaestiones 1.1*-2.15* (London: Duckworth, 1992), p.35 n.81.