

Aristotle on Notion of Chance and Fortune

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Abstract

Aristotle, in his *Physics* 2.4-9, argued that chance is an accidental cause, which he divided into two types: luck or fortune, which functions in the domain of practice, and the spontaneous, which operates in the natural world. He stated that both luck and the spontaneous are causes by accident and belong to the category of efficient causes. According to Aristotle, chance is considered a cause in the sense that people invoke it to explain what happens not only in the practical realm but also in the natural world. The fundamental question is how chance can be defined within the framework of the four causes. Chance is also rightly described as indefinite, obscure, and uncertain. Aristotle rejected the view held by some that chance is itself a cause - something unclear to the human mind, as if it were divine or a mysterious power. The problem is whether chance and fortune can be seen as causes and considered a fifth cause. This study examines how chance and fortune are neither a substantial reality nor merely a subjective notion; rather, they possess real and meaningful status as accidental causes. They are not additional causes but function within the schema of the four causes, particularly as substitutes in the realm of material explanation.

Keywords: Aristotle; accidental causes; natural world; chance; fortune

1. Introduction

Aristotle's notion of chance and fortune play significant roles in his philosophy of science. Some things exist by nature and others exist through other causes. Fundamentally, he argues

that nature is a source of motion and change (*Phys III. 200b12*).¹ He points out that three principles explain the phenomenon of change as a realm of change which are matter, privation, and form. This analysis of change challenges several aspects of the experience of change. Aristotle's accounts of change are mindful considering his predecessors' views on change. Heraclitus, for example, one of the pre-Socrates philosophers believes that the universe is in an eternal flux, a constant process of changing. The world consists of many processes like changing from one side to its opposite: war to peace, day to night, and even motion to rest. The process of change unites them all. Parmenides denies this idea and views the universe as stable and unchanging. Human beings can experience change because change is impossible. Aristotle agrees with the idea of Heraclitus that change certainly exists, but he rejects the view of Parmenides and his challenges to change. He argues that change is possible because there exists to form and matter; change is actual, and hence possible, therefore, because of form and matter.² According to Aristotle change takes place according to four different kinds of causes involved in any natural change, and they are the material, formal, efficient, and final causes. However, if he states that nature is the source of motion and change involves four causes, then the problem is how to understand the notion of chance and fortune. Can chance or fortune be regarded as a cause and to be considered as a fifth cause? If this claim is true, it would ruin not only his fourfold scheme but his whole teleological hypothesis. From the general concept of nature, he indicates that chance was subject to laws because he maintains that these laws without exception dictate that "nature is everywhere a cause of order".³ He investigates the exceptions by asking the question what truth lies behind the expression's "chance" and "fortune"? For this reason, this paper will demonstrate what the notion of chance and fortune are, whether they are the same or different, and how they fit into the division of causes. Secondly, this paper also will show that chance and fortune can be regarded as a cause but are never a *per se cause*, but accidental ones. It means that they are not additional causes, but they are involved as substitute material only.

2. Research Method

The research method used in this writing is library research. The main source of research is Aristotle's work in his book *Physics*, especially in chapters 2, 4-9. The main focus is the idea of chance and fortune. The fundamental question is whether chance and fortune are an additional cause or whether they are a substitute for material. To answer this question, the

¹ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Physics a Guide Study*, trans. Joe Sachs (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 124

² Christopher Shield, *Aristotle, Second Edition* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 234.

³ Helen S. Lang, *The Order of Nature in Aristotle's Physic Place and Elements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

researcher will analyze Aristotle's thoughts in the book physics and Metaphysics by providing the solid argumentation.

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1. Chance and Fortune in Pre-Socratic Thought

Aristotle reflects that certain events occur due to chance and fortunes have been used by his predecessors in their accounts of nature. Aristotle agrees that Leucippus and Democritus who believe both in a universal necessity and in chance occurrences (*Phys.196a11-17*). However, he considered that his predecessors failed to recognize the consistency of chance (*Phys.19a16-17*), especially when they made use of this concept at crucial points in their cosmology.⁴ Aristotle mentions that several of the pre-Socratics explain the orderly nature of things, but only abandon it in specific explanatory contexts, usually where it is most required. They find spontaneity where things are most orderly and reject it where it most clearly occurs.

Aristotle also claims in *Physic. 11.4*, where he writes: "There are some who think the chance is a cause, on the one hand, however, is not clear to the human mind, as if it were something divine and a mysterious power (*Phys 11.4,196b 6-7*). It refers to a divine or providential origin. For instance, St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the Medieval Philosophers states that chance and fortune as an unknown cause, namely divine providence.⁵ However, Aristotle is guided by his nominal definition of chance has two terms and distinctions. He holds a chance that is secondary, i.e. dependent kind of causality and chance is dependent on nature. He believes this notion becomes intelligible and concerns apply to events typically described as by chance. He points out that a general characterization of chance is applicable in the domains both of human action and natural process. It means that chance can be understood both as natural and artificial.⁶ In the sense that things caused by human intelligence can even have final causes. Some events for "the sake of something" happened incidentally or by chance and so things can be caused incidentally. Aristotle acknowledges that he is concerned about nature, like art, but what interests him more is how a living creature could be produced without parents, the regular agents of birth. However, the most interesting thing for him is when he examines the question of whether one can consider causality for such sequences of events. For instance, a man goes to the market for some purpose about his own business, and he meets

⁴ James G. Lennox, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Biology' Studies in the Origins of Life Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 237.

⁵ Sharon M. Kaye and Paul Thomson, *On Augustine* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning, 2001), 19. For Aquinas, chance also refers to a cause unknown to man, which may be either an angel or God (divine providence). Chance and fortune are seen as a doctrine of divine providence only tells us that everything unfolds in accordance with God's plan. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 200.

⁶ Lang, *The Order of Nature in Aristotle's Physic Place and Elements*, 40. Aristotle argues those who exist by nature include animals and their parts, plants, and simple bodies like earth, water, fire, and air. All these obviously differ from things that have not come by nature; for each of them has in itself a source of movement and rest.

another man who owes him money, he collects the debt, but this is not the purpose for his having gone to the market (*Phys II. v*). Can we express any causal connection, if any, between his going to the market and his getting the money, which would be ordinarily described as a chance or the result of fortune? What he did serve the purpose of collecting the money which he did. Although he did not necessarily go to the market to collect the money, in fact, the collecting of the money was not a type of cause that is present in itself, but the kind of cause that is the result of a deliberate choice. For Aristotle, fortune has twofold occurrences, sometimes considered good, sometimes considered not good, it depends on the circumstances. According to Aristotle, chance and fortune are closely linked to each other; all incidents of fortune are "also an effect by chance, but not every effect by chance is an effect by fortune" (*Phys II.5 197a36-38*). Fortune is to be used only for events that are due to the causal agency of a person. For instance, it refers to the subjects who are capable of thought and choice. He also asserts that fortune events are a subset of chance events. He assumes that chance encompasses every outcome of fortune and certain events within the realm of nature. Moreover, the relation between chance and fortune is when fortune events apply more widely to every happening that is due to chance. He made a definite distinction between chance and fortune.

3.2. Aristotle on Understanding of Fortune

Aristotle defines fortune, on the one hand as "an accidental cause in the sphere of those actions for the sake of something which involves choice" (*Phys II.197a*). He indicates that fortune is an accidental cause (*Phys II.197a-10*). Since Aristotle concerns a cause in the unqualified sense as something that holds always or for the most part, we know that, unlike the four causes, fortune is not a cause in the unqualified sense. Rather, whether or not an event is said to happen by fortune is relative to the description of the event. Aristotle illustrates this with the example of a house built by a man who is a house builder and a flute player. Since the flute player is the house builder, it is fair to say that a flute player built the house (*Phys. II.196b.20*). This makes it the case that accidentally a flute player is the cause of the house's being built, whereas the cause without qualification is a house builder. We can understand that the flute player meets the condition of being an accidental cause of the house since it does not always, or for the most part mean that flute players are capable of building houses. So, it is by fortune that the flute player can build the house. The event involves fortune only if it contains a sequence of events such that one event is supposed to be in some sense related to another event. The other event is considered fortune becoming things of this sort falling under the description of the cause do not always or for the most part bring about things falling under the description of the effect.

Although, Aristotle considers that fortune comes about incidentally, he also explains that there are "some are nearer those others among incidental causes" (*Phys II. 197a-20*). It means that not just any two events can be related as accidental cause and effect. He offers the example by saying that "the cause of health can be fresh air or sun-heat, but not having had a haircut". It would be hard to give an account of just what it is that makes two events sufficiently "near"

one another for one to be an accidental cause of the other. Therefore, Aristotle calls fortune indefinite. However, he states that there are innumerable accidental causes of something that come by fortune (*Phys 11.196b28-29, 197a15-17*). There are descriptions of innumerable events that can correctly be mentioned that the event happened by fortune. Fortune is understood to be unaccountable, since any events that can be described as an accidental cause do not hold always or for the most part, are not the sort of thing that has some rational organized basis, and because these accidental causes in this context are identical with fortune.

3.3. Aristotle on Understanding of Chance

Chance, on the other hand, is defined as an accidental rather than *per se* cause". Guthrie W.K.C (1981) states that Aristotle uses the word '*automaton*', In the Greek word, which means *occurrence* or *coincidence*. In *Metaphysis*, the word '*automaton*' mainly referred to the spontaneous generation of new substances⁷; while in Aristotle's *Physic* subject is the events and their causes.⁸ Since these are often attributed to chance and spontaneity, Aristotle establishes his argument based on the distinction between what is something natural and only accidental. In *Physics 11.5*, Aristotle offers significant understanding by classifying events in nature to understand the meaning of *tyche* and *automaton* according to two distinctions. The first division is events related to their frequency, comprises two categories: (a) events that always occur in the same way, which he associates with events that happen of necessity and constantly, and events that take place for the most part in the same way; (b) events that occur neither always nor for the most part—that is, events that happen infrequently. Events in this latter category are those that take place *per accidens*. In more complicated situations, several different combinations can be considered accidental, and several different ways of describing each: getting to market at the same time as your debtor or going to where your debtor is. Each accident involves a relation between two items that have come together, but things of this kind do not come together always or for the most part.⁹ In this study of type, uncommon is a necessary and distinguishing condition of events whose cause is chance (*tyche* and *automaton*) (*Phys.196b5–17*). The second division relates to the goal or purpose of events - their finality. This breaks down events into those accomplished "for the sake of something," that is, with a particular end in view, and those that have no purpose. Actions and things with a purpose may be caused by choice and mind or by nature, but also by *tyche* or *automaton*. *Tyche* and *automaton* seem to be the final causes but are not: they have no goal of attaining their result.

⁷ Lennox, *Aristotle's Philosophy of Biology' Studies in the Origins of Life Science*, 223. In his biological works Aristotle presents his notorious theory of spontaneous generation. Aristotle admitted that many living things were not sexually generated, but arose "spontaneously", including many insects, certain fish, and certain plants.

⁸ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy' VI Aristotle: An encounter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 237.

⁹ Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame - Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 4.

They only have the appearance of purposefulness because their outcomes could have been the result of actions caused by nature or by choice.

Aristotle states that every chance occurrence is the product of an accidental encounter between two series of actions, each caused by nature or choice, each of which has its own intended goal. This encounter creates a result that was not intended by either of these causes independently (*Phys.* 196b17–197a35). Aristotle offers the example in the *Physics* of a man walking in the *Agora* and meeting someone who owes him money. Under this heading, he adds another distinction, between events whose causes are inherent (a *per se* cause) and those that are caused by accident as an “incidental cause” (*Phys II* 196b23–25). Chance is an incidental cause. Inherent causes are determinate causes; incidental causes are indeterminate. An event caused by chance may have many different possible causes. Aristotle adds a distinction between *tyche* and *automaton*. *Tyche* is a cause produced by acts or events in which mind and choice are involved, that is, of voluntary purposeful human action (*Phys II.5* 197a5). However, its end is not the chance event that is produced, but something else entirely. *Automaton*, which is broader than *tyche*, encompasses actions triggered by mind and choice as well as those carried out by nature (that is, without mind and choice); it applies equally to animals, children, and inanimate objects.¹⁰ Like *tyche*, such actions did not take place with their outcomes in view. Aristotle states that *automaton* is considered as an incidental cause in the sphere of purposive events in general and includes the teleological operations of all nature. They may be suitable for the behavior of lower animals or the inanimate objects. He offers the example of a horse that escaped harm by trying to run to a safe place and the example of a stone that fell and struck someone. Aristotle argues that these two examples have fulfilled a purpose. The essential purpose was nature seeking its natural place. These arguments indicate that the result is not additional to the essential one but replaces it. We can argue that it is unnecessary if the horse runs because he wants to drink the water and, therefore, there is no reason why it should not have achieved this as well as its safety. We could understand that if the horse moves by chance, and then he moves not for the sake of avoiding the explosion that is about to take place, but because he moved and was saved as a result, we say that he was one lucky horse. He moved spontaneously. Aristotle also uses the example of the stone that struck a man as he walked under a bridge. We could understand that the stone did not fall for the purpose of striking him, but it fell spontaneously because it might have been dislodged by someone for the sake of striking him. (*Phys II.5* 197b31). For this reason, Aristotle suggests the new meaning of *automaton* from *auto* and *maten* which means ‘itself in vain’ (*Phys II.197b.30*)

According to Aristotle, the characteristic of chance events has as possibilities infinite causes or indefinite causes in number. For instance, someone went to the market to collect his money, and he got it. This could show essential causation, and the cause would be single, recognizable, and appropriate to the effect. However, since he went there for another reason,

¹⁰ Aristotle employs *automaton* in two senses: sometimes he uses it as an inclusive term for chance, including *tyche*, and sometimes in a narrow sense, for what is not *tyche*.

we could say that it was only incidentally the cause of collecting his money. Although this passage presents numerous difficulties of interpretation, because he might have come for the sake of debt-collecting, or he did not come for the sake of debt-collecting, or he happened to come and to do what was for the sake of debt-collecting, we could consider causes are infinite and are an incalculable number, if he went there to meet his friends, purchase goods, or doing other business. On one hand, one might conclude that things do happen by chance, in the sense that they happen incidentally to the primary purpose of an action, and this makes them incalculable.¹¹ On the other hand, it is a mistake to say that there is such a thing as pure chance if the term is used in the sense of an irresponsible agent. It is acceptable if we understand chance as an incidental result from a regular chain of causations that was directed at some other one. The reason is that the debtor had his motivation for going to the market, and then it can also be explained as the crossing of two lines of essential causation.

Having this understanding of chance and fortune as mentioned above, it will now be clear that chance and fortune differ from each other. Aristotle defines fortune as something that results from the actions of a rational agent (human being) that was not intended by the individual taking that action. He also determines that this category of fortune is included within the broader spectrum which he calls chance but that it is limited to human beings, capable of cognitive thought. Chance is described as an event that takes place without force. In other words, if something happens contrary to nature, we can say that it happens not by fortune but by chance (*Phys 11.197b.30*). It seems that it involves inanimate objects such as rocks and stones. Chance also involves animals, such as horses all of which have no volition (*Phys 11.5, 197b14-15*). Chance also is an accident occurring only occasionally and can be considered an indefinite possibility in natural occurrences (*Phys 11.5, 197a34-35*).

Aristotle indicates that although chance and fortune can be regarded as a cause, it is never a *per se* cause, but only an accidental one. Aristotle states that both chance and fortune are incidental causes, as we said, among the things which may come to be neither without qualification nor for the most part, and among these, whichever might have come to be for the sake of something (*Phys 197a32-35*). He makes clear that he thinks of these causes as accidental when the fortune accident of catching one's debtor in the marketplace is considered to have many possible causes, such as wanting to meet someone or going to do his own business (*Phys.11.5, 197a12-21*). He describes all of them as 'indefinite'. He also says at the same time that though fortune accidents can be said to be due to fortune, this is only to describe them as an accidental cause. *Metaph. V.30* is similar accidents have only indefinite cause (*Metaph. 1025a24-5*).¹² He gives an example where a man meets someone coincidentally who owes him

¹¹ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 240. (see also: *Phys 11.4.196a 4-5, 197a17-18*) In Greek, Market means "Agora", which probably served many purposes besides buying and selling goods.

¹² Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, transl. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Green Lion Press, 2002), 107. Aristotle defines "incidental means what belongs to something and is true to say of it but is not so either necessarily or for the most part". He offers the example of someone who dug the hole to plant the seed and found the treasure (*Metaphysic. V.30.1025a20*)

money. In other words, this man did not go to that place with the intention of getting his money. With the knowledge that chance and fortune are accidental causes, we could analyze that fortune and chance are causes of effects. They might result from nature or intelligence that has been caused by something incidentally. Since nothing incidental is prior to what is *per se*, it is evident that no incidental cause can be prior to a cause *per se*. Therefore, chance and fortune are understood as posterior to intelligence and nature. However, there is any possibility that the universal evolved by chance, even though Aristotle is convinced that an “intellect or nature may have caused its evolution since chance is always a possibility in any natural change” (*Phys 11.6.198a10-11*). It will still be true that nature and intelligence will be prior causes of this and many other things besides.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that the problem of chance and nature is applicable in the realm of human actions and natural processes. Aristotle argues that chance is neither a substantial reality nor a purely subjective notion but has the real and meaningful status of an accidental cause. Therefore, in terms of the schema of the four causes, chance and fortune are not additional causes, but they are a substitute for material. Chance refers to coincidences, where two separate events, which had their causes, coincidence in a way that is not explained by either set of causes.

In the light of the arguments presented, this paper would agree with Aristotle who argues that there are four essential causes involved in any natural change. In other words, chance and fortune can't be the first cause or causes of the universe and all that happens therein. It means that causes are four in number and chance cannot constitute a fifth cause. Both chance and fortune will not be a cause on the level of the four causes, the principles on which nature habitually works. They are not additional causes, but they involve a substitute of material.

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