The Necessary and the Contingent in the Aristotelian System

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The distinctions taken between the necessary and the contingent, in philosophical discussion no less than in common life, are ordinarily supposed to be so definitive and are permitted so deeply to influence our conceptions that it seems well worth one's while to examine them in their origin. And the Aristotelian system² will best serve our purpose as a corpus vile for very obvious reasons. In the first place, Aristotle is the earliest systematic philosopher who essayed to treat consistently of all the greater problems of life and thought, and whose works remain to be studied. His method, too, was such that, standing as he did just on the verge of formalism, the definitions which he attempted still bear definite traces of the purely functional meaning of those terms, while his formulation of their significance has led naturally to their solidification as objective facts in the world. For Aristotle we are wont to preface his own conclusions by inquiring, rather superficially to be sure, into the psychology of the conceptions in question; yet, while the inadequacy of his psychology is now admitted on all hands, the inferences as to fact which he deduced therefrom are even now in part accepted as conclusive. When one reflects upon it this state of the question strikes one as absurd. For this reason there appears to be the greater justification for an analysis of the presuppositions on which these conceptions rest. If one grants their validity, the conclusions and the resultant contradictions of the system must be accepted as ultimate. But I am convinced that Aristotle's presuppositions and his real problems were wholly unreconcilable with each other, and

¹ Professor Dewey's article on "The Superstition of Necessity" in The Monist, III, 362-379, has given a very acute analysis of Necessity, which I take as my point of departure.

² I say "the Aristotelian system" rather than "Aristotle," because I do not wish here to discuss the genuineness of some of the works which I shall have to cite. This is the more justifiable because, even if spurious, they merely develop Aristotle's position.
so his contradictions serve all the better to point out the direction in which their solution lay.

Plato made the acute observation that surprise is the beginning of philosophy, and Aristotle appropriated and further applied the thought. 1 The full sweep of the truth contained in these words is vastly greater, however, than they knew. The feeling of wonder is indeed the point of departure for philosophy; but what precisely does it mean? It indicates first of all that an old habit has been broken up. Old conceptions, like the proverbial old bottles, have become so surcharged with the new wine of meaning that they have burst. But to say this is to describe the phenomenon merely as a brute fact without according it any symbolic value. This state of surprise must acquire an ideal worth, an indicative function, if it is really to become the parent of philosophy. Briefly, then, we may say: surprise indicates the need of reconstructing our supposed facts. And this statement is to be taken at its full value, with all its implications, if philosophy is to be achieved.

First, then, as to what is implied in this demand for a reconstruction of fact. Most assuredly, what is required is not the mere multiplication of facts. Multiplication of facts will serve to diversify the world, but not to unify it; and unification of meaning is the goal of philosophy. What we need, therefore, is not so much more facts as a richer fact. Truth, I suppose, and reality are synonymous, and Truth is not many, but one. Truth and reality are present, if anywhere, in concrete experience; and through the functional (not abstract) definition of this concrete experience a richer, but still unitary and concrete reality is attained in experience. The falsity, the abstraction, results from the multiplying of words,—a darkening of counsel with words without knowledge. Why, then, this multiplicity, if multiplicity is false? The true multiplicity is that of division, not that of multiplication. It comes about naturally and legitimately in the definition of experience, just as, and for the same purpose as, in scientific experimentation. In order that we may get control of the fact, in order that we may make it symbolical or serviceable, it needs to be made out in detail as to its value. We have, therefore, to single out this phase and that,—these

1 Vide Plato, Theaetetus, 155 D, and Zeller, II, A, 610, n. 3; Aristotle, Metaph., 982 b 12: διὰ γὰρ τὸ γενέσθαι οἱ παράγοντες καὶ τὸν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἔρετον φιλοσοφεῖ.
phases to be understood as the construction of selecting mind under the direction of interest,—and to apply to each certain definite tests, according to the end which for the time we have in view. When we have finished our survey of the fact thus analyzed and have definitely noted it as answering to such and such particular ends, we hasten to recompound it in the completer definition. To each of these phases or aspects, thus abstracted from the concrete whole for practical purposes in the definition of fact in terms of means and end, we apply a name; and after we have practically restored the unity in our enriched experience of fact, our functionally erected abstractions remain, as fossilized in the words, to haunt us as so many "things" or as "qualities" which merely "inhere" in them. The mind's economy is such that when it has once found an "open sesame" with which to unlock one of life's multitudinous doors, it tends to hold it fast and to use it on all occasions rather than trust to finding it again on occasion.

But we must insist that this multiplication of words and so of "things" is purely a practical device for practical—not theoretical—ends, and is, therefore, justified only of its children; justified, that is, only in the service it actually performs in the enrichment of experience. Yet this practical enrichment results in theoretical embarrassment, if it merely erects new facts instead of reconstructing the one fact. From this point of view we may judge the folly of that inane practice which endeavors to cashier every new experience by merely naming it. My sophisticated friend, for example, who dashed my youthful rapture at the sight of an extraordinary meteorological phenomenon by calmly labeling it "sun-dogs" rendered me thereby, if possible, somewhat less a philosopher without making me a better scientist. If he could have shown me how those four seeming suns were one, and how the presence of ice-crystals in the atmosphere was just the meaning of that gorgeous pageantry of rival parhelia and broken solar halos, he might have accomplished something more worthy of his vaunted knowledge.

1 Something like to this is indicated in Royce's *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*. See particularly the example drawn from the experience of St. Paul on Malta, *ibid.*, p. 402. The case well admits of further analysis. If Paul's companions had solved the question suggested by the natives calling him a god, they would have stated fully the relation of man to God in the universe and thus have solved the problem of religion by realizing it.
If, then, surprise is thus the beginning of philosophy, its goal must be the elimination of surprise: for this feeling, as we have seen, indicates the need of reconstructing the fact. And this is probably just what Aristotle intended by saying that this state must revert into its opposite in such wise that wonder would be excited if such were not the fact, that is, if a further reconstruction were required.\(^1\) He states this problem in terms of possibility: if this hypotenuse were commensurable with the sides of the triangle, if a common unit could be found for them in terms of which it could be directly measured. Even here then the implication is that we have attained a necessary truth, which could not be otherwise.\(^2\) It is, however, sufficiently clear at the outset that nothing is gained by denominating it a necessary truth over and above what is meant by stating it to be the truth. When we have attained the complete definition of the truth, it is clear that everything inconsistent with it is false: and then we say with perfect assurance that nothing else can be truth, since this is precisely the truth. Every stage short of this of completed description reveals its functional value in the elasticity or ambiguity of its reference; it characterizes itself as opinion relatively well or ill founded. When knowledge is achieved, when the fact is fully made out in all its details, it merely is the truth; before its attainment this or that definition or statement regarding it may or may not be true: as certainty grows upon our minds, while as yet we have not quite adjusted all the elements which go to make up the whole, we say it must be so. Hence “contingent” and “necessary” truths relate not to objective fact at all, but merely register the degrees of adjustment in our judgments of fact previous to their settling down into a simple categorical assertion. To say, therefore, that opinion or empirical experience attains the “that,” while scientific knowledge gives the “why,” is to utter a partial truth as viewed from the subjective side, but is

\(^1\) Aristotle, *Metaph.*, 983 a 12 ff., esp. 17: *δεὶ δὲις τὸντυπταίον . . . ἀποστειλήσαι, καθότερον οὐ τοῦτον διὰ μάθησιν· ὡδὲν γὰρ ὑπερθύμην τὸν καὶ θαυμάσθης ἡ γεωμετρίατοις ὃς ἐν γέφυροτῷ διάμετρος μετρηθή.

\(^2\) Aristotle calls such truths ἄδικα, μὴ ἐπιθυμητὰ ἄλλοις ἔχειν. More of this anon. Knowledge is thus made coextensive with the necessary: cf. *Anal. post.*, ch. 4: *εὖ καὶ ἐνοπίου ἄλλως ἔχειν οὐ ἐπιθυμητὰ ἄκλοτος, ἀναγκαῖοι δὲ ἐγὼ τὸ ἐπιθυμητὸ τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιθυμητὴν ἐπιθυμητὴν . . . ἐξ ἀναγκαίως δει τυλικοσιμίας ἄτιν᾽ ἡ ἀποδείξει.
wholly false when the distinction is objectified. That is to say, the “that” and the “why” are more truly applicable to the degrees of deliberate assent than to characteristics of outward things. Opinion does indeed apprehend a fact, but only an incomplete and hypothetical one; knowledge merely goes on to state it as a fact more fully defined and assured. Aristotle draws the same distinction between sensation and intellection, but this, too, holds good only with the same limitations, namely, as expressing the truth that the percept, as well as the concept, has meaning only in so far forth as it is symbolical, that is to say, when it becomes a means to an end. In its implication that the sensation is not itself a construct, and as such possessed of a meaning or reference, it is radically false. To be sure Aristotle inclines to view even the concepts, especially the more generic, as mere facts there once for all, which the mind has no power to transcend because it merely intuits them; and so he comes to regard them, despite his opposition to realism, as opposed to concrete fact.

To return to our starting point after this apparent digression: I have said above that Aristotle’s presuppositions were fundamentally in contradiction with his real problems. In order to make clear the meaning of this assertion, as well as to prepare the way for a somewhat detailed examination of the Aristotelian system, it will perhaps be well to sketch in as few words as possible the preceding course of Greek thought which defined and conditioned the direction of the further advance.

Greek philosophy began with speculation rather than with experiment. It may facilitate the taking a comprehensive view if we state the progress in logical terms and employ the scheme of the judgment. In this form the subject will be the world or “things”; the predicate will be represented by the ἀρχή, or principle; and the copula will be the method of mediation by which you pass from subject to predicate or from predicate to subject. It is clear that in logical terms the former movement is that of induction, and the latter that of deduction. In the practical sphere, or rather in its true inner meaning, induction is only the process of setting up an end by a provisional survey of the means, in such wise that the quality abstracted and expressed in the predi-

\[ \text{See Anal. Post. I, 31.} \]
cate is precisely that mark which you are interested to realize in the fact, or the subject. Deduction, then in turn, is the reversal of the process, in that you begin with the end as accomplished or conceived as accomplished, and define the means in terms of it; see, in other words, whether this particular is a means to that generic end. Thus viewed, it is at once apparent that the movement pursued by the Milesians, the Pythagoreans, and the Eleatics, is that of a hasty induction. Very little effort is made to elaborate the copula or the problem of the cosmic process. It is even quite possible that Anaximenes was the first to assert that this process was that of condensation and rarefaction, and even here we are dismissed when we attain what were later called the “elements.” Anaximander, indeed, seems to mark the dawning consciousness of a deeper problem for philosophy; that, namely, of attaining a predicate from which it is possible to explain or derive the subject. His ἀναγεννήσις therefore, and the process of ἐξάπλωμα are rightly to be considered as among the first truly significant problems of philosophy; for they point out the need of a fruitful method of deduction. It is at least interesting, and perhaps not wholly wanting in deeper suggestiveness, that the first consciousness of this demand should have been accompanied by the original though extremely meager sketch of organic evolution, which applies just this method of deduction.

As for the Pythagoreans, it is needless to insist that they made no serious effort to explain or derive “things,” and the Eleatics employed dialectic, their copula, only as a means to explain away or annihilate the subject, which was too infinitely rich to be accounted for by the blank conception of immovable space-filling matter.

Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and the Atomists occupy much the same logical position as Anaximander. They address themselves

1 Windelband, pp. 47 ff., Engl. Transl., has brought together the conceptions which relate to the copula in section 5, under the caption “Conceptions of Cosmic Processes.”

2 If Anaximander really was the first to employ ἡπόκτωρ as a philosophical term (cf. Zeller, I, p. 217, n. 2) this fact would fall in very well with his logical position. At all events it is clear that Thales was far more interested in the question “What is the world?” than in the problem “How is the world? This very fact marks the abrupt breaking away from the merely temporal ἡπόκτωρ as it was set forth in the cosmogonies.
equally to the working out of the predicate and to the derivation from it of the subject. But as they allow only for quantitative change they cannot account fully for things as they appear in perception, and consequently they are driven to denounce sense as fallacious. Thus they come in the end to agree with the Eleatics; the inductive movement is assured, but the deductive lags. Heraclitus, however, holds a place apart; for in his system the copula, the cosmic process, has absorbed all that is real. Subject and predicate, taken as permanent entities, both completely disappear, and in their room stands the eternal law of change. This, his only reality, he calls ἰδιαρθρόν, Fate, or Logos. Amid all the endless flux of things there runs an adamantine thread of rationality, and when he calls this Fate, it is sufficiently clear that necessity stands with him only for the insistent “is” which defies the vanity of nothingness. And when the Atomists assert that the tumultuous motion of the atoms in the void is regulated by ὀρμάει, this expression means precisely what has been said above: it marks the growing assurance of definiteness with a residue of the unexplained. This residuum is indeed taken account of in the same breath, in the confession of something “tumultuous” or “irregular” in their motion. Anaxagoras is doubtless to be regarded as the originator of conscious teleology* in Greek thought, and to him we must look as the source of that most fruitful conception which met with great favor on the part of the dramatic poets, chiefly of Euripides, and through Socrates passed over into the systems of Plato and Aristotle only to become the plaything of the Stoics.

The Sophists then appeared, “men of no system but surveying all,” only to find a multitude of ineffectual predicates applied to the world. By the rivalry between the schools and the publication of hand-books of dialectics like those of Zeno and Melissus, the weaknesses of the several philosophies became known to the general educated public, and the appearance of the τέχνη ὑπογραφῆς, which form a complete parallel to this dialectic, disseminated still more the art of logic-chopping which served only practical purposes and defeated theoretical ends. Then came the application of the

*See Heinze, Die Lehre vom Logos, pp. 1-57.

*Dümmler in his Ἀκαδημία has treated of this subject, but his work is unfortunately not trustworthy.
Heraclitic doctrine to the subject after the predicate had been summarily dismissed. Protagoras, indeed, still regarded some feelings\(^1\) as valid, but he proceeded quite evidently on the supposition that a state must exist; that is, he accorded to these data of experience, as he thought, an absolute reality, but still he could not vindicate it for them except as they were accepted as means toward an end. And herein he laid bare the only satisfactory criterion of truth and reality. But his successors disclaimed this or any end as valid, and so reduced νόμος and φόρος, particular and universal, to one, namely, the unmeaning brute impulse of the moment. Thus there is neither predicate nor copula: only a would-be subject remains to which is denied all valid ulterior reference, and so in a true sense not even a subject is left.

It was just here that Socrates took his stand. For he accepted the challenge of the Sophists to fight the battle on their own ground, conscious that in order even to defend their position they must have a real subject and eo ipso a real predicate. In other words, Socrates had seized upon the logic of Protagoras' demand for the validity of certain data of consciousness, and, being an intensely practical man as well as a philosopher, he saw that in order to right action knowledge is necessary, and a real predicate in order to knowledge. "Granted," we may conceive him saying, "granted that we have only the subject, the percept, our problem is then to find the predicate, the concept." Socrates, that is to say, represents purely and simply the attitude of the mind in surveying the means at its disposal with a view to finding the end.\(^2\) This is precisely the

\(^1\) These, according to Plato's Protagoras, 320 C ff., were αλήθεια and δίκη.

\(^2\) All of the characteristic expressions and aims of Socrates fall definitely into line with this position. His self-examination (αὐτὸν ἑαυτόν), his intellectual midwifery (μαστεύειν), his irony, his confession of ignorance, clearly indicate his being occupied with the subject. So, too, his favorite injunction γνῶθι σεαυτόν and its correlate νομός characterize the need of keeping close to the means in order to find out just what they are or stand for. We readily see why it was that Socrates did not hypostatize the concept, as Aristotle tells us; for he had not fairly attained it: he was just seeking it. Even his definitions were only tentative, like those in the minor Platonic dialogues. Socrates' conviction that virtue is knowledge likewise represents just this stage in the development of judgment. Intellection is not coextensive with right action, but is only a moment in it. It comes in at the point when the self is defining itself as means to ascertain its legitimate end and defining the means, in turn, in terms of the end. It can, therefore, be made synonymous
meaning of his search for definitions, and Aristotle was certainly right in singling out induction and definition as the specific contribution of Socrates to the history of thought.

Necessary and helpful as Socrates' procedure was, it was undeniably fraught with serious consequences for all subsequent thought. In order to prove that certain conceptions were valid, he thought it necessary to discover them in the minds of all: but this inevitably led to seeking out these notions by eliminating as non-essential every mark which was not everywhere present.\(^1\) The result was the abstract and relatively contentless concept.\(^2\) This view completely dominated ancient thought, and even now it is not wholly a thing of the past. Socrates, however, did not hypostatize the concepts, but this, as we have said, was chiefly due to his not having fairly attained them. In like manner, he regarded the Good as purely functional and relative, giving it no precise definition;\(^3\) for his position, as we have seen, was on the side of the means, or subject. But his followers did hypostatize both the Good and the Ideas, the Megarians calling Virtue or the Good the only real. Hence it is clear that the standpoint of his successors was for the most part on the outcome of his search, on the predicate, and their problem will be seen to be just the reverse of his. Aristippus and Antisthenes are the only real exceptions, and Aristotle fitly classed the former as a Sophist.

It is quite common to suppose that there was a period in Plato's philosophizing when he had not reached the standpoint of his with right action, which it assures, only if the concrete act is broken up and this one phase is set off as the whole. This appears to me the truth that underlies the rather complicated criticism of Socrates' views of the \(\deltaικτηρισμος\) in the third book of the \(Νικομахεαν\) \(Εθικα\).

\(^1\) This is the natural consequence of admitting, as Socrates virtually did, the correctness of the Heraclitic views of sensation. \(Cf.\ \{\textit{Sext. Empir.}, VII, 131 ff.\)

\(^2\) Hence Aristotle must unite the \(εαθ' \\alpha\varepsilon\rho\) and the \(εαθ' \\piαρτικος\) or \(εαθ' \\piαι\); in every true \(εαθ' \\thetaοδην\). \(Cf.\ \textit{Prantl}, \textit{Grundzüge der Logik}, I, p. 167.\) The confusion thence arising regarding general or universal notions is rather pathetically illustrated in Locke's polemic. Occasionally Aristotle employs the word \(εαθ' \\thetaοδην\) in the sense of "indefinite" \(Cf.\ \textit{Zeller}, II, B, p. 199, n.) and it is a pity that he did not see that that is its precise meaning. Had he recognized this point, we should probably not have been afflicted with a "formal" logic.

\(^3\) \(Cf.\ \textit{Xen. Mem.}, III, 8.\)
theory of Ideas. This may be true so far as concerns his hyposatizing the Ideas, but it must be plain that from the outset he assumed, in common with other Socrates, the result of Socrates' enquiry, to wit, the concept as something real and of all things most important. This position once attained, the further consequence was a mere matter of detail; and after the bearings of the new standpoint were canvassed and brought fully to consciousness, there was but a single choice to make. Either Plato had to deny utterly the reality of all individual things, as did the Megarians, or else his life problem must be the mediation of the Ideas back to the world of sense. The mere fact that he refused to assent to the Megarian Good or the undifferentiated unity of abstract Being, and insisted on postulating a multiplicity of Ideas only teleologically, not logically, subordinated to the Idea of the Good, shows unmistakably which alternative he accepted. Henceforth the direction of his philosophy was clearly determined. He did not indeed succeed in bridging the chasm created by the dialectic of Socrates, but he spared no effort in his desire to do so. Thus in the Sophist he endeavors to annul the blank negation of the concrete and to charge the Ideas with causality in order to make them serviceable for explanation. To be sure this abstract logical effort failed; for indeed it was predestined to failure from the moment that Plato accepted the Socratic concept for his Idea. But in the practical sphere, where futile abstractions do not acquire so firm a footing, Plato, like other philosophers, came nearer to a solution of his problem. In the Republic and the Laws he made a very considerable advance toward mediating the Idea of the Good to the concrete world of fact, and in the

1 This supposition appears to me to be very doubtful. It could only apply to the minor dialogues, in any case; and in calling them "Socratic" we already exhibit their real character as dialogues of search in which, in imitation of Socrates, Plato stated no definite conclusions. Yet, even here, it must be owned that he always suggests a doctrine which he does not elaborate.

2 Altogether the hyposatizing of the Ideas was not Plato's absorbing interest, as some take it to be. It was really only the consequence of his accepted standpoint, and where other enquiries are prominent the Ideas are treated merely as general notions. Cf. Shorey, De Platonis Idearum Doctrina, etc., Munich, 1884.

3 It appears to me that this is precisely the position in Plato's philosophizing which the Parmenides represents. The attacks directed against its genuineness are all based upon a failure, I think, to comprehend just what Plato had to do.

4 See Heine, Lehre vom Logos, p. 65 f.: "Wie in der Republik die Gestaltung