

SESSION 4
COMPARISON OF COMMENTATORS ON *METAPHYSICS* Λ.3

Aristotle's text 1070a4-9 (Jaeger OCT)

μετὰ ταῦτα ὅτι ἐκάστη ἐκ συνωνύμου γίγνεται οὐσία (τὰ γὰρ φύσει οὐσίαι καὶ τὰ ἄλλα)¹. ἢ γὰρ τέχνη ἢ φύσει γίγνεται ἢ τύχη ἢ τῷ αὐτομάτῳ. ἢ μὲν οὖν τέχνη ἀρχὴ ἐν ἄλλῳ, ἢ δὲ φύσις ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ (ἄνθρωπος γὰρ ἄνθρωπον γεννᾷ), αἱ δὲ λοιπαὶ αἰτίαι στερήσεις τούτων.

¹Christ conjectures that the text in parenthesis crept in from the margin.

Translation

After these things, [it must be stated] that each substance comes to be from a synonymous thing (for natural things are substances, and the other things). For things come to be either by art or by nature or by chance or spontaneously. Now art is a principle in something else, while nature is a principle in a thing itself (for a human being begets a human being), and the remaining causes are privations of these.

Assignment

This brief passage, dealing with Aristotle's principle of synonymous generation, raises many problems: What exactly does Aristotle mean here by 'synonymous', 'natural things', and 'the other things'? How is the principle related to Aristotle's concepts of form and causation? How does the principle apply (or not) to each of the following: a horse? a house? a mule? pond scum? Chance and spontaneity seem to be obvious counterexamples to Aristotle's principle. Does his remark 'the remaining causes are privations of these' solve this problem?

We shall discuss: Where the commentators take up the same problem, do they offer similar solutions, or, if not, which solution is more satisfactory? Does Judson (pp. 113-17) do a better job of handling these problems?

Note that one could write an extensive article on this brief passage so that it won't be possible for us to discuss all the above problems fully. We will, however, try to get a clearer view of why Aristotle mentions the principle of synonymous generation here in Lambda 3 and whether the principle, properly qualified, is defensible within Aristotle's own philosophical system.

Background: Synonymous generation is also discussed in *Metaphysics* VII.7-9. For Aristotle's definition of synonymy see *Categories* 1, and his account of chance and spontaneity see *Physics* II.4-6. Discussions of spontaneous generation of animals include *History of Animals* V1.539a2ff., 19.550b32ff.; *Generation of Animals* II.6.743a35ff, *Meteorology* IV.1.379b6ff.

Ps.-Alexander (675,18-676,4)

Here, too, we ought to understand in addition 'it must be stated'. After the things that have been said, Aristotle is saying that it must be said also that each substance comes to be from a thing synonymous with itself. For it is either by art, he says, that there come to be the things that come to be, or it is by nature (cf. 1070a6), and both [sorts] come to be from things synonymous with themselves. And it is clear that the things that come to be from art come to be from something synonymous with themselves. For instance, a house comes to be from the form of a house which is in the soul of the house-builder and health in the body comes to be from the form (that is, the account (*logos*)) of health in the soul of the healer. And it is very evident that natural things also [come to be] from a synonymous thing. For a human being comes to be from a human being, and a horse from a horse. However, the things that come to be spontaneously or by chance are failures of nature and art.

After saying that it is either by art or by nature that there come to be the things that come to be, Aristotle tells how art differs from nature: namely, art is a principle in the producer but not in the product, whereas nature is a principle which is in the same thing that comes to be. ‘For a human being begets a human being’; and this statement is connected with the statement that ‘after these things’ it must be said that each substance comes to be from a synonymous thing; for a human being begets a human being. And the clause inserted before this, ‘for natural things are substances, and the other things’, is equivalent to saying that not only are things that come to be by nature substances but the other things are too, that is, those that are subjects of the arts. Or else ‘for natural things [are] substances, and the other things’ is equivalent to saying: for the things that come to be by nature come to be from substances, that is, from things synonymous with themselves, and likewise, too, the other things, that is, the things that come to be by art. And the whole passage will be as follows: after these things it must be stated that each substance comes to be from a synonymous thing; for natural things and the other things are substances. And an indication of this is that a human being generates a human being. ‘And the remaining causes’—that is, either chance or spontaneity—are privations and failures and mistakes of things that come to be <from> nature and art.

Themistius (6,1)

We have already made it clear that every natural thing comes to be from its like, falling under its name alone. This is found not only in natural things, e.g. that man comes to be from man, but is found, at times, in things that come to be by art. For the house is indeed created by a house, i.e. the embodied house from a bodiless house. Art is a principle of one [thing] in another, whereas nature is a principle in the same thing. Everything that is created in natural things from an alteration of the natural shape, as well as from the impairments [in artificial things], comes to be when the body from which that which comes to be comes to be is impeded from proceeding according to its natural course. This cause, since it is taken as a privation of a principle, is to a higher degree [to be called a privation of a principle] than to be called a principle. This is like, e.g. a certain impairment that happens to a ship due to its pilot’s weakness in piloting it when he is impeded by a certain impediment.

Alexander in Averroes (*Tafsīr* 1457-61)

[fr. 10F=*Tafsīr* 1457-9] Alexander says: one could add something to that and inquire in what sense animals generated from putrescent matter are generated from their synonym, because these may be thought to be generated naturally, not voluntarily, nor by chance; nor are mules generated from their synonym, because they are not generated from mules.

This remark raises a great difficulty in this theory, because having said that what is by nature comes from synonyms, he adds: “these others are either by art, or by nature, or by chance, or by spontaneity.” For it might be supposed that in this argument, he [Aristotle] is not simply saying about substances only that they come from synonyms, but also that all other things which are from things which are not substances are generated from synonyms. This may be true of things which exist by art, since art is the form of the thing that is generated and which the maker effects in matter, according to what he said in the previous argument, namely that the definition of everything is in the form (cf. III.2.996b8?). But in the case of things which are by chance, of which the agent is undefined, how can anybody understand that they too are generated from synonyms?

But maybe he [Aristotle] is not even saying concerning these, that they are generated, according to what follows. For having spoken of things which are by nature and things which are by art, he goes on to say: “the other causes are privations of these.” But privations are not beings in the primary sense, but are only said (to be) by error and deviation from the aim laid down for them, because even in the arts, things which come to be by way of error and deviation are not existent (cf. *Phys.* II.8.199a33-4). . . .

Then Alexander says: he devoted a great space to that question in book *Zāy* of this treatise [i.e. *Metaphysics* VII.7-9]: he explained what each thing is which is generated from synonyms and talked about things which are generated from putrescent matter in the *Physics*, saying that these things, although they are not generated from synonyms in the strict sense, are nevertheless generated from some action, because the heat existing in the substratum is the cause of the likes of these.

He [Alexander] says: some people understood the words “from synonyms” in the following way, namely that things existing by nature are generated by nature, and that none of the things generated by nature can be generated by art or anything else, but only by nature. Likewise, artificial things are generated by art, and likewise that which is generated by chance or by spontaneity, for none of these things is generated by nature or by art; this is what he has shown here.

[fr. 10bF=*Tafsīr* 1460-1]

. . . Alexander says: . . . he [Aristotle] adds: “for man begets man”; he says: this shows that by saying “is generated”, in the case of things generated by synonyms, he only has in mind the primary sense of “synonym”, for everything that is generated by nature or by art and is not in the same state may be found to be either by chance or by spontaneity, while he calls those which are generated in this way “privations”, not “beings”. . . .

As for the fact that a mule is generated from something like itself, he also explained it in the earlier books (cf. VII.8.1033b34ff); for it is generated from an ass and a horse, and these two are those which have a single concept, as though it were their conventional name [text is corrupt]; this is the synonym from which [the mule] proceeds. He means that the synonymous concept from which the mule proceeds.

Averroes' critical assessment of Alexander (*Tafsīr* 1461-4)

This is what Alexander says in his commentary on this passage. It is altogether a very good commentary, except that it is not obvious to us from the wording of the passage that he (i.e. Aristotle) considered other things than substances to be generated also from synonyms as he (i.e. Alexander) says that it is the apparent meaning of the text; for his (i.e. Aristotle's) words: “all these others” are not connected with “is generated only from the synonym”. It is a subject and its predicate is “are generated by art, or by nature, or by chance, or by spontaneity.” [Note: Averroes punctuates the first two sentences differently from the other commentators: “After these things, [it must be stated] that each substance comes to be from a synonymous thing; for natural things are substances. For all these other things come to be either by art or by nature or by chance or spontaneously.”]

When he [Alexander] says that Aristotle mentions [the spontaneous generation of animals] in the *Physics*, it is something, he imagined, and God knows best. It seems probable that he had mentioned them in book *Zāy* [*Metaphysics* VII] because this book, as it has come down to us, contains lacunae.

If we say that what is generated from putrescent matter is generated from its synonym, it does not mean that it is generated by heat in actuality only . . .; it only means that the putrescent matter from which it is generated is the equivalent of the seeds in procreation; I mean: just as in the seeds there is a potentiality generating a species possessing seeds, which Aristotle compares to craft and art, likewise the potentiality which is in the putrescent matter is similar to the craft which is the seed [cf. *Metaphysics* VII.9.1034a33-4; *Generation of Animals* II.22.730b19-22]. If what results from craft and art results from its synonym, then, what results from the potentiality contained in the putrescent matter proper to each animal must result from its synonym, and there is no difference between the power which is in putrescent matter, similar to a craft, and that in the seed, except that that in the seed comes from a being possessing seed and from the sun, whereas that in putrescent matter comes from the sun only.

Aquinas (2444-5)

. . . he points out that things acquire their form from agents like themselves. He says that every substance comes to be “from an agent having the same name,” i.e. an agent similar in form. For all substances which are generated come to be either by nature or by art or by luck or “spontaneously,” namely, by chance; i.e. they are not directly an object of design. Art differs from nature, because art is a principle of action in something other than the thing moved, whereas nature is a principle of action and motion in the thing in which it is present. Now things produced by art obviously come to be from something similar to themselves in form; for it is by means of the form of the house in his mind that the builder causes the house which exists in matter. The same thing is also apparent in the case of natural things. However, this does not seem to be true in some cases, for some things are not generated by agents similar to themselves in species; for example, the heat found in lower bodies is generated by the sun, not by heat. Yet while there is no likeness in species, there must still be some kind of likeness, even though it is an imperfect one, because the matter of lower bodies cannot acquire perfect likeness of a higher agent. And since this is true in the case of things which come to be both by art and by nature, it is evident that each thing is generated by its like.

For “the remaining causes,” luck and chance, are defects and privations as it were of nature and of art; for luck is intellect producing an effect over and above the one at which it aims. Hence those things which come to be by luck and by chance are not similar to their agents in form, since luck and chance are not causes in the strict sense but only accidentally. Therefore in a sense, animals which are generated from decomposed matter seem come into being by chance inasmuch as they are not generated by agents similar to themselves in species. Nor do they have a definite efficient cause in the realm of lower bodies, but only a higher efficient cause.