

A note on the use of *aitia* and *aition* in the Metaphysics of Aristotle

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In the texts of his Metaphysics Aristotle uses two terms to express the meaning of "cause": the feminine substantive *αἰτία* and the adjective *αἴτιος/αἴτια/αἴτιον* substantivized. The very helpful DELATTE, L. et alt. (eds.), *Aristoteles Metaphysica. Index Verborum* (Olms-Weidmann, Hildesheim-Zurich-New York, 1984) counts 114 occurrences of the first noun and 110 of the second. This last amount is not big enough for a quiet reader to avoid checking every occurrence of the substantivized adjective. Its eight orthographic forms that are found in the Metaphysics (*αἴτιά*: 2 times, *αἴτια*: 37 t., *αἴτιοις*: 1 t., *αἴτιόν*: 1 t., *αἴτιον*: 51 t., *αἴτιου*: 2 t., *αἴτιώ*: 1 t., and *αἴτιών*: 15 t.) are always in correspondence with variations due to phonetic rules, case and number, never to gender. To be more accurate, ninety per cent of the occurrences are clearly of the neuter adjective substantivation, while nothing –neither the grammar nor the sense of the contexts– may incline us to think differently of the rest.

It seems plausible, therefore, to perceive a clear-cut duality in the Aristotelian vocabulary related to the notion of cause. We think that the texts implicated in these occurrences show that the use of *ἡ αἰτία* and *τὸ αἴτιον* in the Metaphysics is subjected to a very strict code that involves not only philological problems but some very central questions of Aristotelian thought. Thus, our thesis is:

- a) When the author mentions some thing that plays the role of cause, he always uses the neuter adjective substantivized.

b) When mention is made of the role or manner of being a cause, the feminine substantive is used.

After a visit to the well-known Bonitz index, we learn that this projection from the obvious logical distinction between things and functions to the Aristotelian vocabulary's elements has not a great past in Aristotelian studies. We find the two terms together in the general lexical entry, and no one of the six (from a to f) meanings of this family of words is used to observe a criterion of difference in the universe of sense raised by the mixed set $\eta\; \alpha\iota\tau\iota\alpha$ / $\tau\circ\; \alpha\iota\tau\iota\circ\circ$. No track of our thesis, that seems unknown not only to the Bekker and Bonitz's 19th century, but also to the secondary literature of the 20th. We will come back to this question below.

At the moment, our proposal for translation is "the causative thing" (where "thing" means nothing but a neuter position after the predicate) for a, and "the cause" for b. There will, then, exist an indefinite number of causative things (in the a sense, the neuter adjective in Greek) which play some one of the four roles of cause (in the b sense, the feminine noun in Greek) that we could discover by exploring those causative things. That is to say: in a proper sense, there are only four ways of acting as a cause for the innumerable causative things.

This is plain to see in some passages where both manners of referring to cause –and of course the two words– appear:

Met. 983 a 24-28: $\dot{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\dot{\iota}\;\delta\dot{\epsilon}\;\phi\alpha\nu\epsilon\rho\dot{\delta}\nu\;\ddot{\sigma}\tau\iota\;\tau\dot{\omega}\nu\;\dot{\epsilon}\ddot{\xi}\;\dot{\alpha}\rho\chi\dot{\eta}\iota\;\alpha\iota\tau\iota\omega\nu\;\delta\dot{\epsilon}\dot{\iota}\;\lambda\alpha\beta\dot{\epsilon}\dot{\iota}\nu$
 $\dot{\epsilon}\pi\iota\sigma\tau\dot{\eta}\mu\eta\nu\;[\dots],\;\tau\dot{\alpha}\;\delta'\;\alpha\iota\tau\iota\alpha\;\lambda\dot{\epsilon}\gamma\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota\;\tau\epsilon\tau\dot{\rho}\alpha\dot{\chi}\dot{\omega}\dot{\varsigma},\;\dot{\omega}\nu\;\mu\dot{\iota}\alpha\nu\;\mu\dot{\epsilon}\nu\;\alpha\iota\tau\iota\alpha\nu\;\phi\alpha\mu\dot{\epsilon}\nu\;\epsilon\dot{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota\;\tau\dot{\eta}\nu\;\dot{\alpha}\nu\dot{\sigma}\iota\alpha\nu\;\kappa\dot{\alpha}\dot{\iota}\;\tau\circ\;\tau\dot{\iota}\;\dot{\eta}\nu\;\epsilon\dot{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$

Ross translates: «Evidently we have to acquire knowledge of the original causes [...], and causes are spoken of in four senses. In one of these we mean the substance, i.e., the essence»

Modified translation: «But, as we evidently have to acquire knowledge of the original causative things [...], and causative things are spoken of in four senses, we declare that, in one of these, cause is the substance and the essence»

Commentary: Ross' translation is in fact good because he avoids the translation of the last occurrence of the noun with the pronominal structure. However it is easy to perceive the difference between causative things and the way they are spoken of. In the next examples we can see this clearly because of the counter-sense that we find there.

Met. 1043 a 2-4: φανερὸν δὴ ἐκ τούτων ὅτι εἴπερ ή οὐσία αἰτία τοῦ εἶναι
ἐκαστον, ὅτι ἐν τούτοις ζητητέον τί τὸ αἴτιον τοῦ εἶναι
τούτων
ἐκαστον.

Ross translates: «It is clear, then, from these facts that, since its substance is the cause of each thing's being, we must seek in these differentiae what is the cause of the being of each of these things.»

Modified translation: «It is clear, then, from these facts that, since its substance is the cause of each thing's being, we must seek in these differentiae what is the causative thing of the being of each of these things.»

Commentary: Even if we suppose that the text has as its central point the study of substance, the redundancy of Ross' translation makes Aristotle unintelligible. How could we conclude from the premise that substance is the cause of the being of each thing that we have to look for the cause of the being of each thing in some determinate differentiae or elsewhere? Since substance is the cause, we have to look for the cause; why, if we already know it? But if we put a distance between the first concept of cause and the second one, we will of course need the context to understand Aristotle's intentions, but we will not fall into a too evident absurdity. Of course this is not said to criticize the generous distribution of the word "cause" in Ross' very solid translation —we find very similar problems, for instance, in the resourceful French translation of Tricot—, but only to show the verisimilitude of our thesis.

Met. 1044 a 32-34: ὅταν δή τις ζητῇ
τὸ αἴτιον, ἐπεὶ πλεοναχῶς τὰ αἴτια λέγεται, πάσας δεῖ
λέγειν τὰς ἐνδεχομένας αἰτίας.

Ross translates: «When one inquires into the cause of something, one should, since "causes" are spoken of in several senses, state all the

possible causes.»

Modified translation: «Whenever one inquires into the causative thing, one should, since causative things are spoken of in several senses, state all the possible causes.»

Commentary: We find here the same lack of sense of the last passage, increasing now its misleading effects with the dissimulation observed in the use of "something" —it is impossible to find this word in the Greek text, *τις* ("one", or "somebody") never being a neuter nominative. By using the inverted commas to underline some special use of the word "causes", Ross shows his perception that something doesn't work in his text. Our solution, then, becomes more and more useful in understanding what is really a simple idea: a question about the causal character of a causative thing is a question that, to be well formulated, has to involve all kinds of causes.

E. Berti (Aristotele: dalla dialettica alla filosofia prima, A. Milani, Padova, 1977, pp. 304 ss.), following the Einteilungsgesichtspunkte's doctrine of W. Wieland (Die aristotelische Physik, Gottingen, 1962, 1970², pp. 232-233), insists emphatically on the interpretation of the four causes not as entities but as points of view. In fact, this idea is nothing but a trivial modern translation of what was an obvious Aristotelian thought, still imagined perhaps under the shadow of the Christian exegesis —whose also very Greek proclivity to put a divine person in the place of a logical concept might explain the necessity felt by Berti of underlining the danger of this really improbable confusion. We are far from a new trial of this kind of illuminations. But, in spite of the simplicity of our thesis, it would be interesting to compare some passages where Aristotle tries to distinguish the approach to things from the approach to ideas. If we have the first one in the text that suggested to us the possibility of a radical distinction between *ἡ αἰτία* and *τὸ αἴτιον* (that of Met., 983 a 24-28), we find even more delicate and well-known the sentence about the so-called —perhaps improperly—"analogy of the being":

1003 a 33-34: *Tὸ δὲ ὅν λέγεται μὲν πολλαχῶς, ἀλλὰ πρὸς ἐν καὶ μίαν τινὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐχ ὄμωνύμως [...]*

Ross translates: «There are many senses in which a thing may be said to "be", but all that "is" is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to "be" by a mere ambiguity.»

Commentary: More evidence of the faithfulness of our thesis is found in the

comparison between the treatment of *αἰτία/αἴτιον* and that of *ὄν/εἶναι* under the question on their plural senses. *Τὸ αἴτιον* is to *ἡ αἰτία* as *τὸ ὄν* is to *τὸ εἶναι*, and *τὸ αἴτιον* is to *τὸ ὄν* as *ἡ αἰτία* is to *τὸ εἶναι*. The immediate and interesting consequence of this proportionality is: if *αἰτία* is not said in many senses but is the very plural way said of causative things, then *εἶναι* is not said in many senses but is the true plural sense in which things (*τὰ ὄντα*) are spoken of.

Hence, we have to suppose that the use of the verb *λέγω* must change when the plurality of ways in the speaking is related to *αἰτία/εἶναι* and when it is related to *αἴτιον/ὄν*. We can, then, class the items depending upon what formula suits them as an interpretation of the variables A and B:

πολλαχῶς A λέγεται

πολλαχῶς B λέγομεν

The texts quoted above show that *τὸ αἴτιον* and *τὸ ὄν* belong to class A, while *ἡ αἰτία* belongs only to B (B includes of course all A occurrences). An example of *τὸ εἶναι* as falling also only under B (i.e., *τὸ εἶναι* is not said, but we say it of the things or beings whose multiple manners of being are also said by *τὸ εἶναι*) is that of Met. 1077 b 17. A case of *τὸ ἔστι* as A is seen in 1042 b 25-26. Examples that may help to illuminate this metaphysical question are really very diversified. We are likely to be halted by some vague occurrences of a kind of passive or realistic use of what seems a B case (i.e., an only B case; B and not A; a thing or things that cannot be said, that cannot be a support for the saying):

1 ... συμβαίνει δὲ πολλαχῶς λεγομένων τῶν αἰτίων... (Met. 1013 b 4-5),

2 ... τὰ δὲ τῷ τοὺς λόγους πλείους τοὺς τί ἦν εἶναι λέγοντας... (1017 a 6),

3 ... τὰ μὲν οὖν κατὰ συμβεβηκός εἶναι λεγόμενα... (1017 a 19-20),

4 (ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ εἶναι πολλαχῶς... (1019 a 4-5),

5 Τὸ ἔχειν λέγεται πολλαχῶς (1023 a 8).

In spite of first appearances, we realize that, in the worst case, the common final formula might always be represented, for instance, with structures like [πολλαχῶς] [τὸ] B λεγόμενον, that is to say: "The thing

said (or said by) B is spoken of in several ways"; or [πολλαχῶς] [article] X [article] B λέγ-[ων] [(ἐστί/εισί/...)], that is to say: "X is meaning B in several ways", "X are saying the multiple senses of B" (X being here therefore not an A but a B case -a trivial one at least- too). This is clear in inoffensive examples like 2 and 3; in 1 we suppose of course αἰτίων to be the neuter adjective; in 4, against the usage, we have the right to imagine λέγομεν instead of λέγεται; and in 5, the continuation of the text shows not only that a τὸ ἔχον could perfectly be understood in the place of τὸ ἔχειν, but also that we are in the context of the definitions whose structure is proposed below. Thus, B is here again nothing but a manner, an abstract form, something without a proper consistency, far from the character of the things that we see while B speaks of them. Aristotle, then, —it seems to us— tends towards a scheme that forbids class A (i.e., the class of the things we speak about) to what we speak. The formula πολλαχῶς A λέγεται B: "A is said B in several ways" (e.g., "causative things are said cause in four ways") would therefore be acceptable. A formula very close to this one is that of the Book Δ's definitions: B λέγεται A, where B is the adequate abstract name of things described in A (i.e., a name of the real passive subject of the sentence, and a name of what this subject is). Οὐσία λέγεται τά τε ἀπλὰ σώματα («Simple bodies are called substance»; «We call "substance" the simple bodies» —symptomatically translates Ross—) is a good example in 1017 b 10.

Although it is not usual, some counter-example to the A / B rule exist (e.g., οὐ τὸν ἡ παρουσία αἰτία τῆς σωτηρίας —1013 b 14-15—). But these are not necessarily to be interpreted in the opposite sense to our thesis, whereas we have also a B opportunity for παρουσία. On the contrary, these indicate a true difficulty in the Aristotelian thought. And in fact the παρουσία/ἀπουσία case is a paradigm.

We are actually very close to the largest metaphysical considerations: the general name of the plural manners of being things of things (τὸ εἶναι) and these manners (categories, or, in the case of causative things, the four causes), their name (like τὸ τι τὸν εἶναι) and their general name (like αἰτία) are nothing but what is not a thing, and are something without which things are not conceivable as things. In the Ross's very clever translation of the last quoted text (τὸ ὅν λέγεται πολλαχῶς) we feel this

sort of identity between "the thing that is" and "that the thing is" (or between "the thing" and "to be thing") as two inseparable faces of discourse, the shadow of B always present in A cases and vice versa. But we are also called to assume the great difficulties of thinking the ways of speaking about things as, at the same time, things. *Αιτία, εἰναι, ούσια*, never being a thing, always resting in B, and forms or sense renouncing with such subtle expressions to the absolute and linguistically neuter reality (*τὰ ὄντα*), this is perhaps the only path for Aristotle to escape from Platonism.

So as we have pointed out above, in the Book Δ the general structure of this philosophical view invades at least the beginning of almost every paragraph: «΄Αρχὴ λέγεται ἡ μὲν ὅθεν ἀν τις τοῦ πράγματος κινηθείη πρῶτον» (1012 b 34-35), «ἰσαχῶς δὲ καὶ τὰ αἴτια λέγεται» (1013 a 16-17), «Αἴτιον λέγεται ἔνα μὲν τρόπον ἐξ οὐ γίγνεται τι ἐνυπάρχοντο» (1013 a 24-25), «Στοιχεῖον λέγεται ἐξ οὐ σύγκειται πρώτου ἐνυπάρχοντος ἀδιαιρέτου τῷ εἴδει εἰς ἔτερον εἶδος» (1014 a 26-27), «Φύσις λέγεται ἔνα μὲν τρόπον ἡ τῶν φυομένων γένεσις» (1014 b 16-17), «Ούσια λέγεται τά τε ἀπλὰ σώματα» (1017 b 10)... There you are: the same style to express a difference between things and words to speak about them, and between words and their sense; the same way of asking language to organize the inquiry.

This sort of distinction is in effect near the heart of what Plato tried to resolve when he fell in love with the doctrine of ideas. But everybody knows the difficulties that the Aristotelian system would experience if it was obliged to acknowledge the existence of a special place to be occupied only by the forms or meanings. All the intellectual fancies of Aristotle go precisely in the direction of avoiding this possibility and resting in the truth of sensible impressions (man is equal to a man). Then, it is not actually too far-fetched to consider that the author made a very clear discrimination not only between the significances but also between the words that he employed in this endeavour. When, for instance in the Metaphysics, the discourse becomes really heavy and abstract, we have often in the vocabulary survey a trail to follow the rectitude of Aristotle's reason and a tool to put an end to our dogmatic flights.