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The Greek idea of causes (resumé).

When we make a comparison between cultural worlds very different and distant from our own culture, as ancient Greece and Far East are, we use, more or less consciously, three terms of comparison. For instance, if we make a comparison between Greek and Japanese theatre we start from our idea of theatre or of drama as a sort of semantical bridge. In other terms, we can make a comparison between (A) *tragôdia* and (B) *nô* because in our culture we have the idea of a (C) dramatic performance, and starting from this very idea we can put under the same category items designated in the original language by terms that have an etymology and a basic meaning completely different. The same when we speak of cause and causality. We should start from our conception of *cause* in order to have a conceptual basis necessary to make a comparison between terms such as the Greek *aitia* and the Chinese *gù* (故) or *shǐ* (使).

What means *aitios*? Etymological dictionaries connect *aitios* to the concept of “responsible, the person who makes something happen” and in judiciary language *aitia* means “responsibility” or even “accusation”, to be responsible for something. The thing produced can be designated with the term *aitiaton*, “the effect”, whereas who is not responsible of something is *anaition*, and an accomplice can be designated as a *sunaition* or a *metaition*, adding to *aitios* the prefixes *a-*, *sun-*, *meta-* that here mean non- with and together.

But in V cent. B.C. we find a development of the realm of *aitia/aitios* from the human behaviour to natural phenomena and to involuntary events, in order to find the thing immediately responsible for them. Greek doctors and philosophers wanted to find the cause in the essence or nature of the thing studied. The aim of causal discourses was also to contrast a vision of the world dominated by the miraculous, the magic and the ‘supernatural’.

In Aristotle we have treatises meant to be read in his school and therefore written in a technical language. What means Aristotle by *aitia*? The commentators in late antiquity said that the general meaning of *aitia* is *dia ti* “something because of which”. The idea is not wrong. Thus we can describe the fundamental characteristics of Aristotelian notion of cause as a *dependency relationship*, which has the following characteristics: it is (1) a kind of relation,

and, more specifically, (2) a relation of objective dependence, which is (3) unidirectional, (4) transmissible and (5) necessary. Therefore the word *aitia* indicates an asymmetrical relation which is not reversible.

In Aristotle we have a *dependence account* of causality, which nonetheless includes a *productivity account* as a particular case – i.e. as a case which is confined to just one of the four causes: the mover. Both accounts were a way to put order in the universe and to see it as an ordered mechanism that can be explained in a scientific (i.e. universal and necessary) way.

In the Hellenistic and Imperial ages the idea of a plurality of causes was widely accepted, and to put an order in the universe the philosophers thought the best way to be to accept a multiplicity of kinds of causal relationships. There were polemics in Imperial time between the different schools about what is to be considered truly an example of *aition*, and between rival taxonomies of *aitia*.

The productive account of causation prevailed in modern times, after Galileo, but was criticised by Hume with some arguments derived from Sextus Empiricus' sceptic criticism of the physics. In 20<sup>th</sup> century many people held to a so-called "Humean concept of causality" as a connection of two events under a scientific law sometimes called a "covering law". Here causation means essentially a necessary connection of phenomena, without any ontological implication. This idea of 'cause' was rightly considered not very useful and was criticised at the beginning of XX century by Bertrand Russell who compared it to English Monarchy, both being a relic of a bygone age. He proposed to substitute it with the concept of a function, as in mathematics.

But this is not the whole story. There has been a revival of studies on causation in the last twenty years. New conceptions of cause have been proposed and the concept itself, far from being banished as obsolete from scientific thinking, has been revived and riproposed in many forms. Today the debate on the notion of cause is constantly growing and many different theories compete with each other. So, the field of the enquiry into causation today appears wide open and the debate is extremely lively. Even a so-called neo-Aristotelian tendency of interpreting causation in terms of powers of a substrate is gaining attention in the last years. Instead of a position, like the Humean one, that sees the world as a series of unconnected events in which we find some patters of regularity the proposants of such a position, sometimes called causal

dispositionalism, see in the world natures that act as powers to produce changes and instead of pure necessity they propose a sort of conditional necessity.

Two concluding remarks.

1. Some of the scholars engaged in comparisons between western and Chinese concept of cause still consider the contemporary idea of cause to be the Humean one. But the 'modern' conception of causality quoted by some scholars engaged in comparisons is in fact a very old one, and a more precise knowledge of contemporary debates on causation would be needed to make a real comparison. This must be revised.

2. Which fields in Chinese culture were more interested in causal explanation and why? As in Greece, a major interest in causal explanation is to be found in China in medicine and history. This is not strange, because it is in the nature of those disciplines to be interested in causal factors and causal explanations. As their Hellenistic counterparts, Chinese historians looked for the causes of events in the past, in order to use them as a repository of examples and sources of recommendations, warnings, encouragements or remonstrations. And some scholar tells us that it is difficult to find any discussion of causation in the Chinese classical corpus that is not directly related to political concerns. In China seem to be absent the other main source of the Greek notion of causality, the juridical language, from which the very term (A) *aitia* derives. Also the use of the notion of causality for the aim of a better knowledge of the physical world is a phenomenon very limited, even if not completely absent. The Chinese terms (B) as *gù* (故) or *shǐ* (使), *yuán* (原) and *běn* (本) scholars connect with (C) our modern idea of cause seem to me to oscillate between the more general idea of a *principle* (in Greek: *archê*) from which something derives, and the more specific idea of causation. An *archê* can be, as Aristotle says, that from which each thing would be originated, be it internal or external to the thing itself, whereas the concept of an *aitia* adds to it an idea of responsibility.

It seems that it has been typical only, or principally, of Greek and Roman culture a general extension of the use of causal terms from the juridical context to cosmology. There has been the assumption that for every physical change to be explained there is something which plays with reference to it a role

analogous to that which the person responsible plays with reference to what has gone wrong. So, it seems to me that would be interesting to inquire why only Greece and Rome thought to be possible and useful indagate nature with a cluster of causal concepts born in a judiciary environment.