SHORT DESCRIPTION

The topic for Fall 2016 will be Aristotle on possibility and necessity. We will not give a close reading of the (very technical) modal syllogistic of Prior Analytics I,8-22, but will look at necessity and possibility and related notions as they appear in different Aristotelian treatises and disciplines: in general logic, in epistemology (scientific knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] and demonstration are always of necessary objects), in physics, and in metaphysics (maybe, if there's time, ethics). We will try to sort out, conceptually and lexically, the different things that Aristotle means by ἀνάγκη [necessity] and its cognates, and by δύναμις [power? potentiality?] and δυνατόν [possible? able?] and their cognates; we will look more briefly at the notion of ἐνέργεια [activity? actuality?] which Aristotle contrasts with δύναμις. It is not clear that ἀνάγκη and δύναμις were precisely modal terms before Aristotle took them over, but Aristotle, by analyzing how the different meanings of these terms and their cognates are related, brings out their implicit modal force, and brings out the logical connections between possibility and necessity. But he also wants to give a non-modal foundation for modality, arguing that possibility is causally dependent on powers, where a power is a principle of motion in something else, by contrast with a nature, which is a principle of motion in the thing that has the nature. He tries to use this as the basis for arguing, in Metaphysics Θ, that every power is for opposites and that everything that is possible through a power is two-sidedly possible, i.e. its opposite is also possible. And he tries to use that as the basis for arguing that powers are causally insufficient to explain actual existence or actual motion, and that—by some version of the principle of sufficient reason, but it is not obvious what formulation Aristotle is using—there must instead be a first cause which is not a power or the bearer of a power but is essentially acting, or (a stronger claim) is essentially actually everything that it is able to be. Aristotle infers that this first cause is necessary, and that it transmits necessity to its effects; but this requires investigation both of the kind of necessity that the first cause has, and of the ways that necessity can be transmitted. Things he says about necessity in the Metaphysics and in physical and logical works are all supposed to help. It is not too hard to see the broad outlines of Aristotle's picture, but there are many conceptual issues that need to be explored in order to evaluate how, and whether, his argument works.

The seminar is open to Philosophy graduate students and final-year undergraduates, and to others with the instructor's permission. Students mainly interested in modern discussions of modality are welcome. Since Avicenna makes necessity and possibility/contingency fundamental concepts of his metaphysics, and since Avicenna is here drawing on Aristotle's discussions but also differing from him or reinterpreting him or going "deeper" than him, the seminar would also be appropriate for anyone working on Avicenna (or later philosophers replying to him), in the Institute of Islamic Studies or elsewhere in the university. The prerequisite is one course on Aristotle *not* limited to his ethics and politics. Students must know (or rapidly learn) the Greek alphabet and must be willing to listen to discussions of the meanings of Greek words, but no further knowledge of Greek is presupposed. We will meet for a weekly three-hour session with a short break in the middle.