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EDITED BY

JAMES ALLEN

EYJÓLFUR KJALAR EMILSSON

WOLFGANG-RAINER MANN

BENJAMIN MORISON

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WHY ARISTOTLE'S GOD IS NOT THE UNMOVED MOVER

MICHAEL BORDT, SJ

1. Aristotle's God is not the unmoved mover

THE aim of this essay is to show that the view—popular among certain philosophers and theologians—that Aristotle's God is the unmoved mover is incorrect, or at least leads to serious misunderstanding. In a nutshell: among other things, the project of the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* is to determine what the first *ousia* is. This first *ousia* is not identified with God in so far as it is an unmoved mover, but in so far as it is the actual activity (*energeia*) of thinking.¹ To put matters differently, the actual activity of the first *ousia* does *not* consist in moving anything. Its activity rather consists in the exercise of reason, in thinking. Since, however, thinking is without qualification the best activity, and since God is that being who just *does* engage in the best activity, the first *ousia*, in so far as it is the same as the activity of thinking, must be God.

To express the same thought more in the terms of Aristotle's technical vocabulary: being an unmoved mover is not an essential feature of the first *ousia*. The first *ousia* is an unmoved mover only *qua* its relation to the sensible world of changeable things. But since, according to Aristotle, relational properties never constitute the essence of a thing, the property of being an unmoved mover in relation

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Anyone familiar with Michael Frede's interpretation of the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* will realize how much the following discussion owes to his thinking. Prior to his all too untimely death, I had the opportunity to discuss with him my thoughts about the identification of the first *ousia* with God. Since he encouraged me to develop them further, I venture to publish them here. I would also like to thank Wolfgang Mann ('W.M.' below) for translating my essay into English.

¹ [*Energeia* is of course frequently translated as 'actuality'. In his text, M.B. favours 'wirkliche Tätigkeit' and similar expressions. To capture the flavour of those renderings, I have used 'actual activity', 'is actually active', and so on—W.M.]

to the sensible world cannot be an essential property of God. But engaging in the activity of reason, exercising reason, is something which the first *ousia* does in virtue of its essence. And since the first *ousia* is not identified with God because it is an unmoved mover but because it is an exercise of reason, saying that God is the unmoved mover is at least misleading, if not downright false. It is misleading because one might be tempted to construe this as a claim expressing an essential predication, specifying Aristotle's conception of God. But so construed, the claim would be downright false.

The view that God *is* the unmoved mover, of course, ended up becoming something of a commonplace over the course of the history of philosophy and the history of theology. Thomas Aquinas, among others, is responsible for this state of affairs. In the first of his proofs for the existence of God (*Summa theol.* 1, qu. 2, art. 3 resp.), he contends both that there must be something which is the origin and source of every motion without, however, itself being subject to motion, and that everyone would call this first cause of motion God: 'Thus it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, which is itself moved by nothing. And all understand this to be God.'

Now, the details of this proof are disputed, and its cogency depends on the interpretation of those details. For all that, though, the identification of an unmoved mover with God could not be expressed any more unambiguously than it is here. Thus Aquinas is a good example of a philosopher who identifies the unmoved mover with God.

One way of arguing that what it is to be God is not to be an unmoved mover involves turning to relevant texts other than the twelfth book of the *Metaphysics*, in which Aristotle speaks of God. Richard Bodéüs, for example, has argued that Aristotle nowhere else (besides in *Metaphysics A*) says that God is an unmoved mover.² Thus in important texts such as *Eudemian Ethics* 8, or in the fragment from *On Prayer*, God is identified as *nous*, as reason, but not as an unmoved mover. Bodéüs draws far-reaching conclusions from this (conclusions which, in some respects, seem reminiscent of Kant): Aristotle's actual conception of God is not to be found in the *Metaphysics* but in his ethical works. Thus if we are interested in learning about Aristotle's own conception of God, we should turn

² See R. Bodéüs, *Aristote et la théologie des vivants immortels* (St-Laurent, 1992), in English as *Aristotle and the Theology of the Living Immortals*, trans. J. E. Garrett (New York, 2000).

to his ethics, not to the *Metaphysics*. I shall not here follow Bodéüs's lead, since Aristotle clearly identifies the first *ousia* as God in *Metaphysics A 7*: that is, he does so in the course of a metaphysical, not an ethical, enquiry. But we shall see that the interpretation of *Metaphysics A 7* in fact confirms one of Bodéüs's observations.

One could, in addition, point to one genuinely important detail of Aristotle's linguistic usage: nowhere in the Greek text is there any mention of an unmoved mover in the masculine, as a *he*. The expression 'unmoved mover' always occurs in the neuter. In the relevant passages Aristotle is thus concerned to show that there must be an unmoved something-or-other that moves, an *it* that is unmoved and moves (other things). Speaking of an unmoved mover in the masculine—as one can readily do in Greek or German—is thus already a first step on the path towards identifying *him* with God, who in Greek (= *ho theos*), as in English or German, is commonly referred to as *he*. Thus if we are to say anything along these lines at all, we presumably should say that God is such an unmoved something that moves, not an unmoved mover who is a *he*. But this is not what Aristotle says.

However, my argument for the thesis I wish to defend does not depend on this linguistic observation. For even if Aristotle had, in the relevant places, used the masculine forms and spoken of an unmoved mover as a *he*, we should still insist that it would be misleading (in the sense indicated earlier) to hold that God is the unmoved mover. Someone who claimed, on the basis of *Metaphysics A*, that Aristotle's God was the unmoved mover would not be understanding the text correctly.

2. The philosophical project of *Metaphysics A*³

Aristotle begins his philosophical project in this book of the *Metaphysics* with the observation that what is to follow is devoted to an enquiry into *ousia*,⁴ and that the principles and causes of *ousiai* are

³ For a far more detailed account see M. Bordt, *Aristoteles' Metaphysik XII: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Darmstadt, 2006).

⁴ Both here and in the rest of the essay, I shall leave the term *ousia* untranslated, which, depending on the context, one could render either as 'substance' or as 'essence'. In any number of instances, however, neither 'substance' nor 'essence' will help us to become clear about what is of interest to Aristotle. One kind of case makes this especially evident. In certain places in the *Metaphysics* Aristotle maintains that

what is being enquired into:

(A) *Ousia* is what our theoretical investigation concerns; for it is of *ousiai* that the principles and causes are being sought. (1069^b18–19)⁵

Aristotle is not the first philosopher to enquire into *ousia*. From what follows upon (A) in the first chapter, it emerges clearly that he sees himself confronting a whole range of different attempts to determine what *ousia* is. Various of his predecessors enquired into *ousia*, even if they themselves did not use that expression. Which things, or what kind (or kinds) of things, have the status of being *ousia*? How many different kinds of *ousia* are there? How, in turn, are these kinds to be specified? If we wish to gain an initial, intuitive entrée into this nexus of questions, we should perhaps ask: What actually exists? What is reality like? How is reality structured? What is it that most fundamentally constitutes reality?

In response, Aristotle maintains that there is *one* answer which is wholly uncontroversial: natural things, entities which we can perceive with our senses—such as plants, animals, and human beings, but also the heavenly bodies⁶—are the things that constitute our reality (1069^a30–2). This observation does not render unnecessary all further questions about the constitution of reality. Quite the contrary. We can, for example, ask if there are elements or elementary

there is such a thing as the *ousia* of an *ousia*, or of several *ousiai* (pl.). The sentence quoted as (A) already points in this direction. For it invites the question ‘What exactly is an investigation of *ousia* supposed to be?’ Are we meant to investigate *ousia*, or are we meant to investigate the principles and causes of *ousiai*? If the project is investigating the principles and causes of *ousiai*, then the first part of the sentence is, at the very least, misleading, and Aristotle would have done better just to write that his (upcoming) investigation will concern the principles and causes of *ousiai*. Now, the issue dissolves if we understand the investigation of the principles and causes of *ousiai* as being an investigation of *ousia* itself, and indeed being so in two respects: first, enquiring into *ousia* just amounts to enquiring into the principles and causes of *ousiai*; secondly, the principles and causes of an *ousia* themselves have the status of being *ousiai*. But since speaking either of the substance of substances or of the essence of essences at best makes for quite awkward formulations—perhaps one can speak of the essence of a substance, but this would seem to mean something rather different—it is best to leave *ousia* untranslated and to turn instead to the substantive question of what it is that the investigation of *ousia* investigates.

⁵ [In providing translations of Aristotle, I have drawn on W. D. Ross’s translation of the *Metaphysics*, modified, at times substantially, so as to reflect M.B.’s own, German translation—W.M.]

⁶ In 1069^a30–2 I am following ps.-Alexander; cf. M. Frede, ‘*Metaphysics A 1*’, in id. and D. Charles (eds.), *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Lambda [Lambda]* (New York and Oxford, 2000), 53–80 at 80.

principles⁷ (and if so, how many), which then in turn are the constituents of those various natural things (1069^a33–4). Pointing to natural things in answering our question about reality thus does not put an end to that question. Indeed, once again, quite the contrary. In agreeing that natural things are *ousiai*, we first of all reach a starting-point from which to raise the question concerning *ousia*.

At the end of *Metaphysics A 1* Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of *ousia* (1069^a30–^b2). And it is the aim of *Metaphysics A* both to show that these three kinds do in fact need to be distinguished from one another and to explain how the particulars that belong to these different kinds are nevertheless connected with each other. There are certain complications in the actual distinction; still, it is clear that the following three kinds are to be distinguished. First, there are perceptible, perishable natural things, i.e. items that are all subject to coming to be and ceasing to be; and secondly, there are eternal, perceptible natural things (Aristotle is here thinking of the heavenly bodies). These two kinds have something in common: each comprises things that *move*. But Aristotle distinguishes yet a third kind of *ousia*, differing from these first two: it is characteristic of the things belonging to this kind that they are *unmoved*. The suggestion that there might be unmoved *ousiai* will come as no surprise to anyone even vaguely familiar with ancient philosophy. For example, one need only think of Plato's middle dialogues and his conception of Forms: they are *ousiai* because they constitute reality (everything there is depends on the Forms), and they do not move. What does not move is also not perceptible by the senses; for we can only perceive something that has a body, and it is characteristic of bodies to move in some way or other. Aristotle thinks that this is so because every kind of change depends on some kind of motion. Thus without motion, there is no change; without change, nothing corporeal; and without bodies, no sense-perception.

Aristotle also tells us that there is little agreement among philosophers concerning this third kind of *ousia*. At the end of the chapter he lists a range of views about it. There are philosophers who claim that these *ousiai* can exist on their own. Others distinguish two realms of such unmoved *ousiai*, Forms and mathematical 'objects'; then there are those who maintain that mathematical 'objects' and Forms are one and the same in *ousia*; and there are still

⁷ Cf. LSJ, s.v. στοιχείον, II.4: 'elementary or fundamental principle'.

others who hold that only mathematical ‘objects’ are *ousiai*. Thus it is necessary to ask not only if there are any such unmoved *ousiai*, but also, how these *ousiai* are to be characterized: that is, what features do they have?

3. Chapters 2–5

These chapters are among the most difficult of all Aristotelian texts. Many details are obscure, but the following, at least, seems to be clear. Aristotle is concerned to work out a conceptual framework for the analysis of those things which are subject to motion, i.e. which are changeable. He is thus concerned to understand the first two kinds of *ousia*. And he proceeds by investigating which principles and causes we need to posit if we wish properly to understand these two kinds of *ousia*. Here Aristotle distinguishes three principles: the form, the matter, and the moving cause.

The first principle is form. The form is that which accounts for the being of a thing. The second principle on the basis of which we are to understand the two kinds of sensible *ousia* is *hylē*, the matter. Whatever exactly the material principle proves to be in any individual case, this much is clear: it is that which is responsible for the possibility of change in the individual item. Hence, if something lacks matter, it cannot change at all.⁸

The third principle is the principle of motion, or, as we could also say, the cause of motion, and thus the cause of all (the other kinds of) change as well. All perceptible things are subject to change; and everything that changes requires a cause for that change. We only understand *why* something is changing if we can identify a *cause* of the change. Interpreters have frequently noticed that the fourth kind of principle, the one which indicates the goal or end (*telos*), is conspicuously absent from chapters 2–5, even though it is al-

⁸ One difficulty here is the following. If an object changes in quality, e.g. comes to have a different colour from the one it had had before, or if it changes in place (i.e. moves to a different location from where it had been before), then that in which, or with respect to which, the change occurs is simply the object itself. But now it seems that the whole object, *qua* underlying the change, is playing the role of the material principle; perhaps, then, we ought here to speak of the material principle in a *broad* sense. When, however, an object itself comes to be or perishes, it is the material principle in the *narrow* sense in which, or with respect to which, the change occurs, for it is the matter *of* the form–matter compound (which is, or will be, or was, the object) which underlies the change, *not* the form–matter compound as a whole.

ways mentioned in relevant parallel passages, both elsewhere in the *Metaphysics* and in the *Physics* and the *De generatione et corruptione*. I shall not say anything more about these chapters. What is important for us now is, first, that the final cause is not mentioned here, and secondly, that the material principle is identified as the principle of change. Why these two points prove significant for what comes next in Aristotle's text will soon emerge clearly.

In chapters 6–10 Aristotle investigates whether we need to posit a third kind of *ousia*, and how, if we do need to posit such a kind of *ousia*—i.e. an unmoved kind of *ousia*—it is to be characterized. The central theses and arguments are presented in chapters 6 and 7. chapters 8–10, by contrast, are actually more detailed elucidations of, and supplements to, what is worked out in chapters 6 and 7. In what follows I shall thus for the most part restrict my discussion to these two earlier chapters.

4. On chapter 6

The first sentence of the chapter picks up on the end of chapter 1 and its distinction between the three kinds of *ousia*; at the same time, however, it also goes beyond what was said in the first chapter:

(B) Since there were three kinds of *ousiai*, two natural ones and an unmoved one, we must now speak of the latter and show that it is necessary that there be some eternal, unmoved *ousia*. (1071^b3–5)

The thrust of this sentence is not that the *ousia* which we are seeking is unmoved. That this *ousia*, if it exists at all, must be unmoved is something we already know from the end of chapter 1. For there Aristotle raises the question of whether, beyond the perceptible and thus moved *ousiai*, there must be another kind of *ousia* which is not perceptible and hence must be unmoved. The thrust of the first sentence of chapter 6 is rather that, as a matter of fact, it is necessary that there is such an *ousia*, and necessary that it is eternal. Now, while we have not yet, in chapter 1, learnt explicitly that this *ousia* must be eternal, the assumption that it is so fits well with the overall flow of the argument in chapters 6 and 7. Aristotle not only aims to show that there is an unmoved *ousia*—or, more precisely, that there are several unmoved *ousiai*—he is also seeking to discuss the various features which can be attributed to the sought-after *ousia*. We have

already seen that Aristotle, near the end of chapter 1, recounted several quite divergent views on what the characteristics of this *ousia* are. Here he now turns to the task of spelling out his own view.

The proof for the eternity of the unmoved *ousia* presupposes something familiar from chapter 1: there is one eternal *perceptible ousia*, namely the sphere of the heavens. The motion of the sphere of the heavens is an eternal and continuous circular motion. In the case of every motion it is necessary that there be a cause to explain that motion. What sorts of characteristics, then, must the moving cause of an eternal and continuous circular motion have?

The first feature this principle needs to possess is that it must be eternal. For only something that is itself eternal can wholly guarantee the eternity of the motion.

The second feature for which Aristotle argues in chapter 6 is that this eternal *ousia*, which is now being understood as the principle of the eternal motion, must be wholly actual, must be actually active (1071^b12–20). In order to explain the motion of the sphere of the fixed stars we need a principle which explains not only the eternity of its movement but also its continuousness. In order to explain the continuous motion, the principle must be wholly active; indeed, all potentiality needs to be excluded from this principle, since the first principle cannot be thought of as the realization of any more basic potentiality. For in that case we would require a still further principle to explain why something that is (or was) potentially (*dunamei*) is now being realized—that is, to explain why it is actually active.

The third feature this eternal *ousia* possesses is a lack of matter—indeed, it *cannot* have any matter (1071^b20–2). The reason for this is, presumably, that in any item possessing any potentiality matter is the source (*archē*) of that potentiality. Now, if all potentiality is excluded from this principle, it follows that it is immaterial. Thus the principle is nothing less than actual activity itself, where this activity cannot be understood as the realization of any more basic or prior potentiality. So much, then, by way of comments on chapter 6.

5. On chapter 7

The seventh chapter begins with a summary of some of what had been shown in chapter 6:

- (C) Now since it is possible that things are so . . . , there is something which always moves in an unceasing motion; but this motion is circular motion. And this is clear not only from the argument, but from the fact itself. Therefore, the first heaven must be eternal. (1072^a19–23)

There is, then, something that always moves in an unceasing circular motion. This conclusion, our opening sentence tells us, was reached (in chapter 6) exclusively on the basis of argument; but that conclusion is equally evident when we simply examine the facts of the case. The first heaven, i.e. the sphere of the stars, is eternal. Now, this first sentence of chapter 7 is not really a *proper* summary of what was shown in chapter 6. For Aristotle has already shown precisely that there must be an origin (*archē*) of this motion which is eternal and wholly active and immaterial. We thus need to ask why at the start of the seventh chapter Aristotle, with this remark about the circular motion of the sphere of the heavens, refers us back to the *beginning* of the sixth chapter.

One possible answer is that he wants once more to remind us of the eternal *motion* because he is about to take motion as his point of departure for specifying the next feature of the sought-after unmoved *ousia*. For only now, after being shown that this *ousia* must be eternal, wholly actual, and immaterial, are we given the central argument for the claim that this *ousia* is in addition an unmoved mover. The first three features determine merely one aspect of what the eternal continuous motion must be like, namely its eternity and continuousness, but they leave out another aspect: the motion itself. Let us examine the crucial passage, which follows directly on (C):

- (D) Thus there is also something that moves it. But since that which is moved and moves is intermediate, there must also be something which, without being moved, moves, and is eternal, an *ousia*, and an actual activity. (1072^a23–6)

The key element in Aristotle's argument is clear. In the case of everything that moves, there is a cause of its motion. Hence, there must also be a cause of the eternal circular motion of the sphere of the fixed stars. This cause of motion, however, cannot in turn be moved; otherwise it would be intermediate, and so we would need to seek a further cause for the motion of this cause. Thus we must posit something which, despite being itself unmoved, is able to move other things. Hence, in order to explain the eternal motion

of the sphere of the fixed stars, we need a cause which is eternal, wholly active, immaterial, and which can be the moving cause of the motion of the heavenly sphere.

The claim that something unmoved is able to cause motion, of course, immediately gives rise to the question of how this is even possible. The answer is: it moves (whatever it moves) in the way in which an object of love moves that which it moves (sc. a lover) (cf. 1072^b3–4). Since, however, there is considerable controversy surrounding the interpretation of this sentence, I shall turn to it separately, in Section 7. In chapter 7 there follows a further passage which shows that this principle is necessary, and in what sense it is so. This stretch of text closes with the famous remark:

(E) On such a principle [*archē*], then, depend the heavens and the world of nature. (1072^b13–14)

6. The unmoved *ousia* is God

In effect, (E) is the beginning of a new paragraph. And it is here that Aristotle introduces the conception of God:

(F1) And this way of living [*diagōgē*], however, is such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is always in this state, which is impossible for us, for its actual activity [*energeia*] is also pleasure). And on account of this, being awake, perceiving, and the activity of reason [*noēsis*] are most pleasant, and hopes and memories [sc. are pleasant] through these. (1072^b14–18)

(F2) And the activity of reason in itself is about what is best in itself, and the activity of reason in the fullest sense is about what is best in the fullest sense. But reason [*nous*] thinks [*noei*] about itself in grasping the object of thought [*kata metalēpsin tou noētou*]; for it becomes an object of thought [*noēton*], in coming into contact with and thinking [*noōn*] its object, so that reason [*nous*] and the object of thought [*noēton*] become one and the same. For reason is the capacity for receiving the object of thought [*to noēton*], that is, the *ousia*. It is fully active [*energei*] by having [sc. the object of thought], so that this [sc. being fully active] more than that [sc. the object of thought] is what appears to be divine about reason; and theoretical investigation [*theōria*] is the most pleasant and best. (1072^b18–24)

(F3) Now if God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better one, it compels our

wonder still more. But he *is* in a better state. And life belongs to him; for the actual activity [*energeia*] of reason is life, and it is that activity. Its actual activity is the best, and eternal, life. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, and most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this *is* God. (1072^b24–30)

I cannot here address the many difficult questions of detail this passage gives rise to; but I do want to clarify the most important steps of the argument. The opening sentence of (F1), at first glance, no doubt delivers something of a jolt to modern readers, for Aristotle presupposes that the first *ousia* is *alive*. The way in which the principle on which the heavens and whole of nature depend spends its life is the very best way of living. Now, if we look back at the arguments aimed at ascribing the various features to the unmoved *ousia*, there is one point where it might already have occurred to us that the *ousia* which Aristotle is enquiring into is alive, viz. where he says that the first *ousia* must be actually active, and that all potentiality must be excluded from it (cf. 1071^b20–1). The first *ousia* evidently *does* something; and passage (F) sheds light on what it is that the first *ousia* does.

The *ousia* being enquired into is engaged in the very best activity; and this very best activity is the activity of reason, i.e. the exercise of reason.

The next step of the argument (F2) is controversial in its details, but again, one thing is clear. Aristotle is committed to asserting an identity, namely the identity of reason and the object of thought. This identity need not obtain in all cases; but evidently it holds in that case where the object of thought is the highest and very best thing there is.

As for the question of how we are to specify the *ousia* into which we are enquiring, we learn here, above and beyond what Aristotle had said before, not only that the activity of this *ousia* consists in the use of reason, but also that this *ousia* must itself *be* the activity of reason. In addition, it is because this *ousia* is the activity of reason that it leads the best kind of life; and because it leads the best kind of life, it follows that this *ousia* must be identified with God, for God is that which is always living in the best possible way.

Here we can see that the argument that the first *ousia* is something that moves (other things) while (itself) being unmoved in fact plays no role in identifying the first *ousia* with God, and is in fact wholly independent of that identification. Aristotle identifies the

first *ousia* with God only *after* identifying the first *ousia* with reason and determining that the activity of reason is the best kind of life. For his next step (equating the best kind of life with God, or with God's life), Aristotle draws on traditional *polis* religion: the gods are the happiest and most blessed of all beings; it is they who lead the best possible life. Thus if a metaphysical investigation establishes that the first principle leads the best possible life, then the further conclusion, that this first principle is identical to God (or to a god), is wholly unproblematic within the context of Greek *polis* religion. There are structural similarities between this identification and the one Thomas Aquinas seeks to establish in the Five Ways. One begins by developing a conception of the first principle and then maintains that this conception corresponds exactly to that which everyone would agree is God. Of course, Aquinas' goal is very different from Aristotle's. In *Metaphysics A* Aristotle is not aiming to establish a conception, or the proper conception, of God. But his investigations lead to the conclusion that the first principle on which the heavens and the whole of nature depend must be God.

I have tried to show that in chapters 6 and 7 of *Metaphysics A* Aristotle discusses the various features of the first *ousia*. Being something unmoved that nevertheless moves other things turns out to be only one feature among several others. Moreover, it is a feature that belongs to the first *ousia* only in so far as something else—the moved world—stands in a particular relation to it. Considered on its own, that is, *not* in relation to the moved world, other, different features belong to this first *ousia*: being eternal, being actual activity, more precisely, always thinking (where this thinking cannot be regarded as the transition from a potentiality to the realization of that potentiality). That the first *ousia* is called God is not due to the fact that the moved world stands in a particular relation (*viz.* that of being moved) to the first *ousia*, it is rather due to the fact this first *ousia* engages in the best and most pleasant activity: thinking. Looked at this way, establishing that the first *ousia* is an unmoved mover, and establishing that the first *ousia* is God, are independent of one another. The first *ousia* is not an unmoved mover *qua* being God.

This conclusion can be further strengthened by two observations regarding texts other than *Metaphysics A*. First, consider *Physics* 8. This book is devoted to the issue of the proper conception of an unmoved mover. If we seek to understand the world together with the

motion of the sphere of the fixed stars, we must posit an unmoved mover as the moving cause of the eternal motion of the sphere of the stars. Even if we set aside all questions about the relative chronology of the two works, it is clear that the sketch of an unmoved mover which we find in *Metaphysics A 7* is worked out in considerable detail in *Physics 8*. We learn a great deal about the unmoved mover in this book of the *Physics*, e.g. that it must be eternal, uniform, incorporeal, and without parts. But nowhere does Aristotle say that this unmoved mover is the primary *ousia*. Nowhere does he identify this unmoved mover with reason (*nous*). And nowhere does he say that it is divine, or is God. Here one could counter that it would have been wholly clear to any reader in antiquity that the principle on which the whole of nature depends must be divine, or must be God—and indeed, there is something importantly right in such an objection; none the less, it is of significance that Aristotle precisely does *not* draw this conclusion as part of his account of motion. He rather introduces the identification of the first *ousia* with God in an entirely different setting, one which the context of Greek religion makes entirely natural, namely after showing that the first principle lives the best kind of life.

My second observation concerns philosophical theology in the time before Aristotle and also in Aristotle himself. The fact that the *ousia* in question is not God in so far as it is an unmoved mover, but is God in so far as it thinks and is identified with *nous* itself, fits seamlessly into a philosophical tradition of reflection about God. We can first clearly identify this strand of thinking in Anaxagoras. Plato then develops it further in the *Timaeus* and in *Laws 10*. And Aristotle himself advocates it in his presumably quite early work *On Prayer*; for in the fragment from *On Prayer* preserved by Simplicius we read that God is *nous* or is something beyond (*epekeina*) *nous*⁹—an obvious allusion to Plato's *Republic* (see 509 B). In identifying God with reason, there is, then, significant continuity in philosophical reflection on God; and it is in this context that Aristotle, wholly in agreement with the earlier tradition, introduces his conception of God in *Metaphysics A*. And in this respect the conception of God presented in the *Metaphysics* does not differ from the one encountered in Aristotle's ethical works, where, as I noted at the outset, God is also identified with reason.

⁹ fr. 49 Rose.

7. An objection to my thesis: Enrico Berti

I now need to address an objection against this way of interpreting Aristotle, which Enrico Berti has presented on several occasions.¹⁰ Berti's reflections are along the following lines. The activity of the first *ousia* which is God is not exhausted by thinking (which is what I have thus far been claiming), it rather also consists in moving the world—but, on account of the *simplicity* of the first *ousia*, 'the act of moving coincides with the act of thinking'.¹¹ If Berti were correct, my thesis would obviously be false. This is because he establishes, via his claim, a direct link between being the unmoved mover and being God. The argument for the thesis that the relevant *ousia* is God depends substantially on the appropriate characterization of the *activity* of this *ousia*. Now, if this activity consists in thinking, and if the *ousia* is God in so far as it thinks (because it is only in so far as it thinks that it leads the best kind of life), then the argument for identifying the first *ousia* with God does not at all rely on the fact that the first *ousia* also has the further feature of being the mover of the visible world. But if this activity consists in moving (sc. the world), as Berti holds, and thus if leading the best kind of life in addition involves moving the world, then the *ousia* in question will of course also be identified with God on account of its moving the world. And so my claim would need to be retracted.

By way of elucidating how Berti arrives at his position, I shall examine a bit more closely passage (G), which I have thus far passed over and in which Aristotle explains how the unmoved *ousia* moves the heaven of the fixed stars. At the end of (G) there is a famous and frequently quoted sentence: the first *ousia* moves the heaven of the fixed stars *as* (or *in the manner of*) an object of love. But first, let us consider the stretch of this difficult text as a whole:

(G) (G₁) It moves [sc. whatever it moves] in the way an object of desire [*to orekton*] or an object of thought [*to noēton*] does: they move without being moved. The primary objects of reason and of desire are the same. For that which appears good [*to phainomenon kalon*] is the object of appetite [*epithumēton*], and that which is good [*to on kalon*] is the primary object of rational wish [*boulēton*]. But we desire something because we

¹⁰ e.g. E. Berti, 'Unmoved Mover(s) as Efficient Cause(s) in *Metaphysics A 6*' ['Unmoved Mover(s)'], in Frede and Charles (eds.), *Lambda*, 181–206.

¹¹ Berti, 'Unmoved Mover(s)', 188.

judge it to be good, rather than judge it to be good because we desire it; for the activity of reason [*noēsis*] is the origin [*archē*]. (1072^a26–9)

(G2) But reason [*nous*] is moved by the object of thought, and one side of the list of opposites is itself the object of thought; and in this *ousia* occupies the first place, and in *ousia*, that which is simple and exists in accord with actual activity [*kat' energeian*] . . . , but the good [*to kalon*] and that which is desired for its own sake are also on the same side of the list; and the first in any class is always best, or analogous to the best. (1072^a30–^b1)

(G3) But that the purpose [*to hou heneka*] belongs among the unmoved things is shown by the distinctions of its meanings: for it is both some being for whose [*timi*] good the action is done and something at which [*tinōs*] the action aims; and of these, the latter is among unchangeable things, the former not. It moves as an object of love [*hōs erōmenon*], and by means of what is moved, it moves the other things. (1072^b1–4)

The standard interpretation of this passage, which Berti wishes to challenge, is the following. The way in which the *ousia* we are enquiring into is a cause of motion is fundamentally different from the way in which most other things in our world are causes of motion. Put very roughly, one can say that most other things are causes of motion on account of a motive impulse emanating from those things themselves. But if a motive impulse emanates from something, then the thing from which the impulse emanates is itself in motion, it is itself a moved mover. Hence, it cannot be in this way that the unmoved *ousia* is a cause of motion.

In what way, then, is it a cause of motion? We are told that the *ousia* in question is a cause of motion on account of being loved. We are familiar with examples of something loved bringing about motion without itself moving or changing. Think of someone who loves, but whose unhappy love remains unrequited. The lover is, so to speak, set into motion through his or her love of the other person; but the loved person does not thereby him- or herself change. Or we might think of aesthetic experiences. One can be gripped or transported by the beauty of another person or of a painting. The beautiful object gives rise to various motions, but in doing so, it does not itself change.

It is possible to express the locus of disagreement with Berti in somewhat more technical terms. The standard interpretation and Berti are wholly in agreement on one particular point: the unmoved *ousia* is the ultimate cause of motion. They differ on *how* the un-

moved *ousia* can be a cause of motion. The standard interpretation holds that it is a cause of motion by being the final cause for the sphere of the fixed stars. The sphere of the fixed stars—or probably better: the *soul* of the sphere of the fixed stars¹²—loves or strives towards the unmoved *ousia*, and this love or striving then effects the circular motion of that celestial sphere.

Now, Berti does not wish to deny that Aristotle clearly speaks of the first *ousia* as a final cause. He rather denies that the first *ousia* is the final cause *for the sphere of the fixed stars*. His claim is that the unmoved mover is not the moving cause for the first heaven on account of its being the final cause of the first heaven, but rather that the unmoved mover is *directly* the moving cause of the first heaven, but is the final cause *for itself*. How, then, does Berti accommodate (G₃), the sentence which says that the first *ousia* moves the first heaven as (or in the manner of) an object of love? His key contention is that talk of an object of love needs to be understood as a mere metaphor; it must not be taken literally.

We should agree with Berti that the final clause of (G₃)—‘It moves as an object of love, and by means of what is moved, it moves the other things’—can be read as a metaphor that ought not to be taken literally. Moreover, the fact that Aristotle uses the verb *eraō*, and thus speaks not so much of love as of erotic desire, even erotic craving, might seem to provide additional support for this approach.

It is, however, not the case that Aristotle simply says that the unmoved mover moves as (or in the manner of) an erotically desired object. He says substantially more about how the first *ousia*, *qua* final cause, can be a moving cause; and the fact that he does say substantially more counts against Berti. Aristotle begins, in (G₁), with the observation that the unmoved mover moves (sc. whatever it moves) in the way in which objects of desire and objects of thought can move: it moves, i.e. causes motion, without itself being moved. If one reads and understands this sentence in the light of the last sentence from (G₃), where we find the comparison to erotic desire, one could still seek to downplay this as a mere analogy. One might think that Aristotle is simply aiming to show that something which is itself unmoved *can* move something else. However, that he has

¹² This question is discussed by Sarah Broadie, in ‘Que fait le Premier Moteur d’Aristote? (Sur la théologie du livre Lambda de la *Métaphysique*)’, *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, 183 (1993), 365–411.

something considerably more substantial in mind is shown by the next sentence and the argumentation which follows.

Aristotle asserts that in the case of objects of desire and objects of thought, the *first* or *primary* ones are *identical* to one another. The argument he presents in (G₂) serves to justify such an identification. This identity, it is important to note, obtains only in one very special instance, in the case of an *ousia* that is itself simple and actually active. There can be no doubt that Aristotle is here thinking of the *ousia* he has described in chapter 6. Quite independently of how, more precisely, these arguments for the identity are to be understood—and this is something with which I am here not at all concerned—it is clear that in (G₂) Aristotle is not interested only in some general claim to the effect that there are cases where something unmoved can move something else; rather, he is aiming to show that one very particular state of affairs actually obtains, namely that the unmoved mover *in fact* does move (what it moves) as an object of thought and desire, and that, on account of this, its way of being the moving cause (of the circular motion of the sphere of the fixed stars) consists in its being the final cause. It is unfortunate that Aristotle leaves one crucial question unanswered in our passage: how is the *kalon* (the beautiful or the good), i.e. the object in so far as it is an end, related to the first principle? Aristotle says the first principle is either the best (thing), or analogous to the best (thing)—but at this crucial juncture we of course wish that he had not left the matter open, but had provided arguments to show that in fact the ultimate ends of desiring and of thinking are, in a way that would still need to be spelt out, identical.

Aristotle's remark in (G₃) that the purpose (*to tou heneka*), i.e. the end, is unmoved thus serves to ward off a possible objection. Someone could say that if something is an end, it must itself be moved. Aristotle responds to such an objection by distinguishing between two conceptions of an end. On one of these conceptions—being the end at which something aims—an end is not itself moved.

Even if we may have any number of further questions about passage (G), and even if various details may remain obscure, what Aristotle is seeking to show seems clear enough. He wants to show that in one special case—that of the highest object of thought—the identity of it with the highest object of desire obtains. Thus the unmoved mover does *not* of itself, *qua* moving without being moved, move anything—in the sense of *actively* moving something by im-

parting motion to it. Rather, the unmoved mover moves only by being desired or striven towards.

If this interpretation is correct, Berti's proposed account should be rejected. The unmoved mover is a moving cause in virtue of being the final cause. This also suffices for showing that the context which makes possible identifying the first principle with God is independent of the context in which Aristotle establishes that if we are to be in a position to understand motion at all, there must be something along the lines of an unmoved mover as a first principle of motion.

This result also sheds light on the issue of the extent to which *Metaphysics A* is a work of philosophical theology. By reading other parts of the *Metaphysics*, especially books *A* and *E* 1, we learn that the quest for wisdom or first philosophy is identical to the quest for a science, an *epistēmē*, which has God as its subject-matter and which God himself exercises. Thus we perhaps expect that, at the summit of ontology, God himself will be the object of this first philosophy. *Metaphysics A* meets such an expectation only in a very limited way. The limitation is the following: that which, so to speak, stands at the summit of metaphysics is not God, but the activity of reason. While this activity is identified with God, it is not so identified directly or immediately, but only as mediated by way of the conception of the best possible life. The twelfth book of the *Metaphysics* thus provides to an even lesser extent than is usually assumed the outlines of a theology. By way of recompense, however, Aristotle offers us a truly breathtaking metaphysics.

Hochschule für Philosophie, Munich

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