The Desire for God:
Movement and Wonder in Aristotle's Metaphysics

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Abstract

In book Λ. of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle suggests that an unmoved, unmoving being (God) is the source of all movement in the cosmos. He explains that this being instigates movement through desire. But how does desire affect movement? And what would make Aristotle's God an object of desire? I attend to both questions in this paper, arguing that God's existence as pure actuality (*energeia*) is crucial to understanding God's status as the primary and ultimate source of wonder, and that it is as the ultimate source of wonder that we can make sense of how God affects desire.

In book Λ. of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle argues for the necessary existence of a substance that is eternal, separate from sensible things, and immovable (*Metaphysics* 1073a5). The substance that he has in mind is God: the *arche* of all being, the primary cause of motion in the cosmos. But this assertion creates an aporetic tension. If God is immovable, how can God be the cause of motion in all other beings? Is it not the case that every mover is itself moved? This is certainly true for human beings. I am cause of the soccer ball curling into the goal, but in causing the ball to move I must move as well – I swing my leg, I turn my hips. Aristotle notes that this way of thinking "has led some people to suppose that every mover is moved" (*Physics* 201a25-26). And yet Aristotle's God, for reasons we will see, cannot move or be moved, hence God cannot move other beings in the way that I move the soccer ball. How, then, does an unmoved and unmoving God affect movement? Aristotle's answer: through desire (*orexis*).

It is peculiar to suggest that an unmoved God causes movement through desire. I wish to illuminate Aristotle's peculiar suggestions by attending to two questions: (1) How does desire affect movement? (2) What makes God an object of desire? I want to show that Aristotle is not

relying on a *virtus dormativa* explanation such that he could only explain God's ability to provoke desire by asserting that God has the power to provoke to desire.[1] To properly address these questions, however, and eliminate any suspicion of a *virtus dormativa* explanation, I must first explain why, on Aristotle's terms, God must be eternal, separate, and immovable. It is crucial to understand these divine characteristics if we are to see why God cannot move beings as I move the soccer ball and thus why it is that Aristotle makes use of the concept of movement through desire.

Aristotle's argument for a substance that is eternal, immovable, and separate from sensible things is tied to his beliefs about causation and motion. As mentioned, Aristotle first attends to the *endoxa* and considers the idea that everything that moves something else is itself moved. I move the soccer ball, but only by moving myself. Aristotle notes that such a view is problematic. "For everything that changes does so in some respect, and by something, and into something, and out of something….The process will go on to infinity if not only the bronze becomes round, but also roundness or the bronze is generated; there must be a stop" (*Metaphysics* 1070a1-4). If every mover is moved then we cannot avoid an infinite regress of motion and change. If we have an infinite regress of motion and change, then there can be nothing immovable and nothing unchangeable. But, as Aristotle argues, such an idea is contrary to argument and to fact (*Metaphysics* 1072a-25-27).

By "contrary to argument" he means that it leads to logical absurdity and a situation in which the world becomes unintelligible. It is clear that things are moved by efficient or first causes; I am the efficient cause of the movement of the soccer ball. Yet, "besides these [efficient causes] there is that which, as first of all things, moves all things" (*Metaphysics* 1070b34-35).

[1] The *virtus dormativa* explanation is satirized by Moliere in his play "*La Malade Imaginaire*". In the play a doctor attempts to explain that a certain medicine has the ability to cause sleep because it contains sleep-inducing power.

We cannot look to the efficient causes to fully explain motion and change, for we will always be faced with the problem of explaining the origin of the efficient cause. The world is not intelligible if we rely on an infinite regress of efficient causes as we will never be able reach an ultimate *arche*. For Aristotle, we must have a final cause that, *qua* final cause, needs no causal explanation.

From his discussions on the primacy of substance in *Metaphysics,* Z. and the *Categories*, Aristotle believes that this final cause must be substance in the highest degree. Primary substance is that which is separable (*choriston*). It is also that without which the other categories of being could not be; therefore, it is prior. Since the final cause must be prior to that which it causes, and able to exist independently of them, the final cause must be substance, as only substance is prior and separable.

In *Metaphysics*, Λ.1, Aristotle lists three kinds of substances: sensible destructible (e.g. rocks, plants, animals), sensible eternal (celestial spheres), and non-sensible eternal. Of these, he argues that only the non-sensible eternal could be the final cause. As eternal, there never was and never will be a time when it was not, therefore it always was and always will be prior to everything else. As a non-sensible being it is impervious both to change and motion, generation and destruction. There will be no asking after the source of its change or motion, no asking how it came to move without moving or ever having moved (which appears impossible for sensible things). Moreover, as form is substance to a higher degree than matter (*Metaphysics* 1029a29-30), the substance of the final cause must be non-sensible (non-material).

Aristotle further argues that "there must be some eternal substance which is immovable" because "substances are the first of all things, and if they are destructible, all things are destructible. But it is impossible for motion either to be generated or to be destroyed; for it

always existed" (*Metaphysics* 1071b4-9). If motion has always existed, then there must be something eternal that was the cause of that motion (or maybe *is* that motion). This is where Aristotle's account relies on the evidence of "facts."

Aristotle's observation of the heavens convinces him that the stars and other celestial bodies have always existed, and always existed in motion (an understandable inference for an inquirer relying on recorded history and making observations with the naked eye). From this he concludes that there must be a first substance that was not only the potential cause of movement in eternal things but the actual cause of movement. In other words, the existence of eternally moving sensible things forces us to conclude that the first substance must be pure actuality (*energeia*) (*Metaphysics* 1071b20-21). And as pure actuality this substance must be eternal, immovable, and separate from material things – only a substance with these characteristics could be void of all potentiality.

It will be helpful to elaborate on the concept of *energeia* before focusing on desire. In *Metaphysics,* Θ.6, Aristotle tells us that *energia* is the existence of a thing, but "not in the way in which we say that something exists potentially (*dunamis*)" (*Metaphysics* 1048a34-35). A thing exists potentially when it merely *could be*, whereas a thing exists actually when it *has become* and therefore *actually is* that which it could be. For example, the Hermes exists potentially in the block of wood, but it exists in actuality when it has been carved. Similarly, a human is potentially a scientist when he is not investigating something, but he becomes a scientist in actuality when he takes up an investigation. The salient point seems to be that *x* is potentially *y* if it has within itself (though always independently, as in the case of the Hermes) the capacity or capability of becoming *y*, whereas *x* is actually *y* if *y* becomes *x*'s way of being-at-work in the world.

Aristotle notes the distinction between a human engaged in building a house and a human capable of building a house, between an animal that is seeing and that which is capable of seeing but has its eyes shut (*Metaphysics* 1048b1-4). The former signifies *energeia*, and the latter signifies potentiality. In both analogies, the term "*energeia*" is identified with the thing that is realizing or doing that which its potentiality makes it capable of. *Energeia* appears to involve action. The builder is only a builder in actuality when she is in the act of building. Even the inanimate, wooden Hermes is only a Hermes in actuality because of action: first the act of craftsman who carves it, and second the sculpture's own act (albeit unintentional) of presenting itself as a Hermes, the act of being-at-work-in-the-world in such a way that it *does* that which a wooden statue of Hermes is meant to do.

After using analogies to help us "see" what he means by actuality, Aristotle makes a distinction between two kinds of action (*praxis*). There are limited actions that are not themselves an end (*telos)* but merely a means to an end, and then there are complete actions that are ends in themselves (*Metaphysics* 1048b18-25). The former he calls "motions" (*kinesis*), while the latter is "*energeia*" (*Metaphysics* 1048b28). Weight-loss is an example of a *kinesis*. A person does not lose weight for the sake of losing weight. Rather, it is done for some other *telos* such as health, or beauty, or athletics. It is a limited action in that it is has a beginning (overweight) and an end (the desired weight). It is an incomplete action in that it does not contain its own *telos;* the action, therefore, is not also necessarily and simultaneously the *accomplishment* of the action as is the case with actions that are *energeia*. The act of seeing is an example of an *energeia*, for "we are seeing, and at the same time have seen" (*Metaphysics* 1048b23-24). The moment we engage in the action of sight we have already achieved the action's *telos*, that is, we have already seen. It is the completeness of an action, the simultaneity

of seeing and having seen, living well and having lived well, that marks an *energeia* and distinguishes it from a *kinesis*.

The argument for God as pure *energeia* goes as follows:

P_1) There is a logical necessity for an eternal, unchanging Being.
P_2) This being cannot contain any potentiality, for if it did, it would have the potential for change.
P_3) The potential for change would make this being susceptible to motion, that would mean that it existed temporally, for change and motion exist in time (*Physics*, 219b2).
P_4) But this is impossible, for logic and empirical facts necessitate the existence of an eternal and unchanging Being.
P_5) Only a being that is pure *energeia*, a being that is always already at-work in its characteristic way, would be impervious to potentiality (and thus change and motion and time).
C) Therefore God is pure *energeia*.

Having presented the sufficient rudiments of Aristotle's arguments for the characteristic existence of God-the-unmoved-mover, I now address my two questions: (1) How does God move through desire? (2) What makes God an object of desire such that God is able to affect this kind of movement? The first question is good deal easier to address than the second.

We know that God cannot cause movement by moving (*Metaphysics* 1072a26). If God did cause movement in this way, God would be susceptible to change, possess potentiality, and would not be the pure the *energeia* that Aristotle believes God must be. This is why God must cause movement through desire (*Metaphysics* 1072a27). An object of desire has the power to move other beings without itself moving. On a hot summer day, the cold beer in the refrigerator stirs my desire and "moves" me open the fridge, pop the cap, and drink. The beer itself, the object of desire, did not move, and yet it was the cause of my motion. Aristotle is suggesting that God causes movement in a similar way.

The notion of movement through desire is straightforward. Which one of us has not been excited to move here or there by our desire for this or that? We might even suppose that desire is

the primary source of all movement. Such an idea is entertained by Aristotle in *De Anima*: "It is manifest, therefore, that what is called desire is the sort of faculty in the soul which initiates movement" (*De Anima*, 433a31-b1). But this is not the last word on the subject.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle is very clear that desire alone cannot be the sufficient cause for all motion (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102b26). All people desire, and yet not all people are always and necessarily moved by their desires. While the incontinent or *akratic* person may jump each time desire pricks him, the continent person experiences desire but restrains himself if he judges that the movement from desire would be contrary to right reason (*orthos logos)*. The ability to act or not act on desire informed by deliberation is called choice (*proairesis*)[2], and it is one way that humans are distinguished from the lower animals. Humans, the rational animals, can be moved by desire, but by infusing our desire with intellect or thinking, we need not always be moved by it (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139b4-5).

The fact that humans, when characteristically acting *as* rational animals, ought to be moved by desire informed by deliberation rather than by raw desire slightly augments my second question. We have seen how desire may be the cause of movement; my second question, as initially formulated, involved understanding how God can be considered an object of desire. However, if God is the final cause of movement in all beings, rational animals included, then it is not enough for God to be any object of desire. God must be the very best object of desire, that which would be and is chosen because of desire informed by deliberation. So my reformulated second question is: (2a) What makes God that which ought to be desired by the rational animal in light of deliberation? What makes God a proper object of desire for human beings?

[2] I've taken this understanding of *proairesis* – choice that is desire informed by deliberation –from Joe Sachs. See: Sachs, Joe. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Focus Publishing: Newburyport, MA, 2002.

Recall that God is supposed to be pure *energeia*. In a way, then, what we really want to know is why *energeia* would be the object of a person's deliberative desire. Aristotle gives us a clue when he writes that God stirs desire by virtue of being "something which is loved" (*Metaphysics* 1072b3). Yet objects of love and objects of desire are not coextensive. It may be that all that is loved is desired, but surely not all that is desired is loved. For example, I love my brother and that love includes an aspect of desire (for his company, affection, loyalty, approval); but while I desire a cold beer, I do not seriously say that I love it. To say that God is "something which is loved" suggests a Being that is no ordinary object of desire. Alas, God is not a separate, eternal, unmoving cold beer.

To love something is to recognize it as a thing of worth, a thing that in some sense, and to varying degrees, is *to kalon*, where *to kalon* is understood as an amalgamation of the fine, the noble, and the beautiful. Aristotle tells us that God is *to kalon* (*Metaphysics* 1072b12). If this true, if God is fine, noble, and beautiful, then his status as something which is loved – and thus as object of desire – makes sense. But why should we think that God is *to kalon*?

We must understand why God is *to kalon* if we are to understand why he is an object of love and desire. First, though, let avoid confusion by getting clear on the ways God is not *to kalon*. God's beauty, whatever it is, is not aesthetic – aesthetic beauty is sensed beauty, and God, lacking matter, cannot be an object of sense. Aristotle's God cannot be beautiful in the way that Aphrodite and Apollo are beautiful. Similarly, God's fineness or nobility cannot be a result of fine deeds or noble comportment because God's only activity is to be thought thinking thought (*Metaphysics* 1074b34). Aristotle's God is not afield in the world in the way that, say, Zeus and Christ and Krishna were supposed to be. It would be a mistake, then, to think of Aristotle's

metaphysical God as being beautiful, fine, and noble in the fashion of a Homeric, Christian, or Hindu deity In what sense, then, is Aristotle's God *to kalon*?

I suggest that Aristotle's God is *to kalon* inasmuch as, and because, God is the ultimate source of wonderment. Aristotle writes: "For it is because of [the act of] thinking that honor belongs to him [God]" (*Metaphysics* 1074b21-22). And later: "Cleary, then, He is thinking of that which is most divine and most honorable" (*Metaphysics* 1074b26-28). God deserves honor because God is thinking; moreover, God is thinking the best possible thing. The most honorable thing to think is God, so God is thinking God (*Metaphysics* 1074b34). And since God is eternal and necessary, God is eternally and necessarily God thinking God.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* book 10 Aristotle argues that philosophical thought is the highest and most pleasant form of human activity. And how does philosophical thinking arise? It arises from wonder (*Metaphysics* 982b14), and wonder is inspired by our observations of the created world, i.e., nature. We behold nature (or existence) and wonder at how it works, why things are one way rather than other, and even why there is anything at all. If God is the *arche* of nature, of existence, then God is the source of wonder. As the source of wonder, God is also the source of the highest and most pleasant form of activity that there is – philosophical thinking. Following this reasoning, God is *to kalon* because God is the source of wonder and the cause of the ultimate *entelecheiac* pleasure that is philosophical thinking.

My suggestion – that God is desired because God is *to kalon*, and God is *to kalon* because God is the source of wonderment – accords well with the famous opening line of the *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire understanding" (*Metaphysics* 980a1). In fact, this opening line seems to support my interpretation of our desire for God. Aristotle infers that people, by nature, desire understanding from the fact that we take pleasure in our senses even

when they do not serve a utilitarian purpose. We do not *only* enjoy seeing when it allows us to detect the food on our plate so that we can stab it with a fork. Seeing, hearing, touching and the like are simply enjoyable. The reason for this is that the senses are our first means of gathering knowledge. Furthermore, Aristotle contends that our preference for a sense bears a direct relationship to that sense's ability to bring us knowledge. Most of us prefer sight to touch because, on the whole, sight is a more valuable instrument of knowledge.[3]

The desire to understand (*eidenai*) that Aristotle speaks of is in essence the desire to know through causes (*dia ti*) (*Metaphysics* 981a21-30). Experience can give us knowledge of individual facts and help us learn how to do this or that task, but only understanding can supply the universal principles underling those facts, the *why* needed to explain the *how* of experience. Only people of understanding have knowledge of causes. If all humans by nature desire understanding, and if the desire for understanding is the desire for knowledge of causes, then the opening line of the *Metaphysics* is announcing that all humans by nature desire God. God is the final cause of the cosmos, the being which ends a possible infinite regress of causes and thus makes the world intelligible. To desire knowledge of causes, then, is ultimately to desire knowledge of the final cause, for all other causes ultimately rely on the final cause for their own explanation.

A comprehensive explanation of the human desire for understanding, i.e., God, would require a recounting and assessment of Aristotle's idea that the goal of life is happiness (*eudaimonia*) and that the happiest life is that of philosophical activity. I cannot give an account or assessment of either idea here. However, granting Aristotle these admittedly controversial premises, I hope to have illuminated the puzzling Aristotelian assertion that an unmoved and

[3] Of course, a masseuse might prefer touch, a sommelier taste, a musician hearing, and so on. But overall, sight does seem to be our most immediate and oft-used mode of gaining knowledge.

unmoving being instigates all movement in the cosmos through desire. Additionally, I hope to have provided a plausible and textually consistent explanation as to why we desire God: God is the fount of wonder; wonder instigates philosophy; philosophy leads to the best, happiest life – and all people desire the best life.

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