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Philosophy of Being

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The Argument for the Fifty-Five Unmoved Movers

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that there are fifty-five gods, otherwise known as Unmoved Movers[1]. In this paper, I intend to show how Aristotle comes to this conclusion by beginning with his argument for the existence of the Unmoved Mover, and examining its characteristics. Then I address the question of why there are fifty-five of them.

Aristotle begins his argument for the Unmoved Mover with the statement that there is a need for an eternal substance which is immovable[2]. (In Aristotle's language, the term movement includes any kind of change, therefore, he is saying that there is a need for a substance that is unchangeable) This immovable substance must be eternal because Aristotle wants to account for the eternity of time. Aristotle believes that time has always existed because if time was not eternal, we would need to address the question of what comes before or after time. The problem is that the terms "before" and "after" are expressions of time, so Aristotle concludes that we cannot conceive of a time when there is no time, implying that time must be eternal[3].

Aristotle links time and motion together; we know that time is passing because we experience motion or change. Since we experience time as continuous, which means that it doesn't stop and start, Aristotle reasons that there must be a corresponding motion that is

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1. Λ8, 1074 a 14
2. Λ6, 1071 b 5
3. Λ6, 1071 b 9

continuous[4]. The type of motion that can go on forever is a change in place, or locomotion, along a circular path[5]. Additionally, Aristotle states that the existence of eternal circular motion is supported by the fact of the seeming eternal motion of the heavenly bodies[6]. Indeed, essential to Aristotle's theory of the gods is this eternal motion of the heavenly bodies, and he believes that this motion is the cause for the motion we experience in the world around us. However, the heavenly bodies are not the ultimate cause of motion. Since the heavenly bodies are in motion, there must be something causing their motion. Therefore, the heavenly bodies are only intermediate causes[7]. Whatever is the ultimate cause of motion must not itself be in motion because then something else would be needed to cause its motion. Therefore, at the top of the causal chain, there must be a mover which itself is not moved, which Aristotle calls the Unmoved Mover[8].

The next question is how does the Unmoved Mover cause motion without being in motion itself? If I throw a ball, I'm causing the ball to move, but my arm must also move to throw the ball. The engine that makes a car move has motion within it. However, there is one way something can cause motion or change in another, without itself actually moving. It is by being the object of love or desire. For example, a beautiful woman could cause a man to do all kinds of things without even knowing he exists. Or, a beautiful diamond sitting in a museum could cause the actions of a burglar without the diamond doing anything at all. The way that the Unmoved Mover causes motion in the heavenly bodies is that it is the most noble object of

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4. Λ6, 1071 b 10
5. Λ6, 1071 b 10
6. Λ7, 1072 a 23
7. Λ7, 1072 a 24
8. Λ7, 1072 a 26

desire[9]. The stars are moved by love for the Unmoved Mover, and their movement causes movement in everything else[10].

Why does love for the Unmoved Mover result in circular motion in the stars? The answer is that the activity of the stars is in imitation of the activity of the Unmoved Mover. What is this activity which the stars imitate? Since the Unmoved Mover is the most noble substance, it must always be engaged in the most noble activity. The most noble activity that we engage in, according to Aristotle, is thinking, and we are only able to do this some of the time. Therefore, Aristotle's concept of the most noble being is that which is always thinking[11]. The object of the Unmoved Mover's thought must also be noble, and the most noble object it could contemplate would be itself. Therefore, the activity of the Unmoved Mover is thinking itself, which is a kind of circular thought, and it is that circularity that inspires the circular motion of the stars[12]. That is, the stars move in circles to imitate the circular nature of the Unmoved Mover they love.

Now that we have made the case for the Unmoved Mover that moves the stars, we must move onto the question of why there are fifty-five Unmoved Movers. Although the fixed stars appear to exhibit perfect circular motion, there are other heavenly bodies, including the planets, the Sun and the Moon, which appear to move along a path other than a perfect circle. Some of the planets have very complex motions which include a reversal of direction from time to time. However, Aristotle wants to apply the same model of eternal circular motion used for the fixed stars to explain the motion of all of the heavenly bodies. At this point, Aristotle turns to the astronomy and mathematics of his day, which had a stationary Earth nested within a number of circularly rotating transparent spheres, and the heavenly bodies were all on the surface of one of

9. Λ7, 1072 a 28
10. Λ7, 1072 b 4
11. Λ7, 1072 b 19
12. Λ7, 1072 b 21

these spheres. The outermost sphere is the sphere containing all of the fixed stars, the circular motion of which is visible to us. The movement of the outer sphere affected the movement of all of the spheres within. The inner spheres all had different rates of rotation, and angles of declension. They also were eccentric, meaning that the centers of the spheres were in different places. Also, the motion of any given sphere affected the motion of all of the spheres inside of it. All of these variations contributed to the creation of the very complex motion that is observed from the perspective of an observer on Earth, but within its own sphere, each of these heavenly bodies is still moving in a perfect circle. After looking at the best model the astronomers have to offer, Aristotle comes up with a total of fifty-five spheres[13]. For each of these spheres, Aristotle says that there is needed an Unmoved Mover to cause its motion, resulting in the same number of Unmoved Movers[14].

In summary, Aristotle's argument is that time and the motion of the heavenly bodies is eternal. There must exist something to cause the eternal motion of the heavens which itself is not moved, and this is the Unmoved Mover. The complex movement of the planets that we observe on Earth is explained by a model where the heavenly bodies are in fifty-five spheres, each moving in perfect circular motion, but at various angles and eccentricities. For each sphere, there is an Unmoved Mover, resulting in fifty-five Unmoved Movers.

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13. Λ8, 1074 a 13
14. Λ8, 1074 a 16