

## IV. Dynamis and Being



# The *Kinêsis* of Being in Plato's *Sophist* and the Motivation for Aristotle's Notion of *Energeia*

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Many scholars have proven as resistant as the 'Friends of the Forms' to the Visitor's protest in the *Sophist* that life and intelligence should not be excluded from what most fully or completely is. The reason is the assumption that life and intelligence are motions and that motion is incompatible with something being complete and therefore unchanging. Yet Plato's characterization of the soul as a 'self-moving motion' would suggest a different conception of motion while, on the other hand, his explicit analysis of motion restricts it to being either 'alteration' or movement from place to place. This problem of how to understand a motion that both defines life and can be attributed to what completely is, a problem seemingly left unsolved by Plato, is arguably the motivation for Aristotle's distinction between motion, as by definition incomplete, and 'activity' (*energeia*) as by definition 'complete' in possessing its own end. Attributing 'life' interpreted as 'activity' rather than motion to what 'completely is' avoids the difficulties raised by the *Sophist*, as is evident in Aristotle's account of the active but unmoved mover.

motion, life, activity, Aristotle

In a well-known, indeed notorious passage of the *Sophist*, the Visitor, faced with the insistence of the 'Friends of the Forms' that no kind of acting or being acted upon, in short, no *kinêsis*, can be attributed to 'what truly and fully is', exclaims:

What, by god? Will we be easily persuaded that motion (*κίνησιν*) and life and soul and intelligence do not truly belong to what completely is (*τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι*), that it itself neither lives nor thinks (*μηδὲ ζῆν αὐτὸ μηδὲ φρονεῖν*), but remains motionless (*ἀκίνητον*), austere (*σεμνόν*) and holy, possessing no intelligence? (*νοῦς*) (248e7-249a2).

This exclamation implies that thinking is a motion and that it must be attributed to, or included in, what truly or completely is. Yet the exact meaning of the passage has always been a subject of controversy. A common strategy, ironically, is to assume with the 'Friends of the Forms' that motion cannot possibly belong to 'what completely is' and to interpret the Visitor's exclamation in a way that avoids this conclusion. After critiquing interpretations of this kind, I will focus on what I consider the truly important and

difficult question raised by the passage: *what kind of a motion must thinking, and indeed life as such, be so as to belong to what completely is?*

One strategy for minimizing what the Visitor says is to interpret his words as suggesting only that *kinêsis* is to be included in being as a whole, *not* that it is to be attributed to what most fully is, i.e., the Forms. Such a reading, however, completely defuses the Visitor's critique of the 'Friends of the Forms' since the latter are happy to include *kinêsis* in *what becomes*,<sup>1</sup> insisting only on a sharp separation between becoming and true being ( $\chi\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ ; 248a7). If the Visitor is clearly challenging them here, the challenge must be to admit the power to act and be acted upon, and therefore *kinêsis*, into that which truly and fully is and not just into what is subject to becoming.<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars have sought to restrict *kinêsis* to the soul, taking the innovation of the *Sophist* to be that now the soul is included in 'true being' *along with the Forms* which themselves would remain motionless. J. B. Skemp has expressed this interpretation most succinctly: "'True Being" is more than the Forms' (1967, 21). Yet once *kinêsis* is identified with a movement of the soul, why it should be denied to the Forms themselves becomes less clear. De Vogel describes the movement of the Forms as a 'mouvement spirituel' (182). Indeed, a whole tradition of interpretation has interpreted the *Sophist* passage as attributing life itself, and therefore the movement that characterizes it, to the Forms. Michele Abbate thus suggests that being itself, as intrinsically dynamic and relational, is 'ensouled' (2016, 229). To attribute such spiritual *kinêsis* to the Forms themselves in their association with the soul, with sensible objects and with each other, is not necessarily to make them subject to becoming or change.<sup>3</sup> As for why we *should* attribute such motion to the Forms, De Vogel already expressed the answer as clearly as could be wished: 'c'est de l'Intelligible que parlaient les Amis des Idées, c'est donc à ce même Intelligible que Platon dit qu'on ne saurait refuser la vie et le mouvement, l'âme et l'intellect' (182). Finally, we must note, against a current fad, that the *kinêsis* attributed to the Forms cannot be identified with a so-called 'Cambridge change' precisely because it is explicitly identified

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1 As rightly argued by Mesch 2011, 105-6.

2 De Vogel already argued that the translation of  $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\epsilon\lambda\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  ὄν as the totality of being presupposes an 'extensive' meaning of the adverb that it is not seen elsewhere to possess (1970, 182). See also Mesch 2011 for the view that *pantelôs on* is the Idea (114-5).

3 Diès likewise insists of the passivity of the Ideas in being known that 'cette passivité n'est pas mutabilité; ce mouvement n'est pas changement. Notre connaissance des Idées y découvre des caractères ou des lois: elle ne les y crée ni ne les y modifie' (1909, 57). See also Mesch 2011, 113.

instead with the *kinêsis* that constitutes the being of life and the soul.<sup>4</sup> It is *real* motion, which is not to say it is *physical* motion.

But how exactly, then, are we to understand this *kinêsis* that belongs to the soul *and* to what completely is? Plato appears to be in genuine difficulty here and this because of an inability to get beyond an understanding of *kinêsis* as alteration or change. This is evident, first, in the opposition asserted in what follows between *kinêsis* and *stasis*, with the claim that *stasis* must be included in what truly is to prevent a kind of unlimited change that would undermine the possibility of knowledge (249b8-c9); note the association here of being moved with being *carried away* (φερόμενα καὶ κινούμενα). Secondly, this restrictive understanding of *kinêsis* as change is also evident in the claim that *kinêsis* and *stasis* are the only great kinds to exclude each other absolutely (250a8-9; 252d2-11). Specifically, what is ruled out here as being 'impossible with the greatest necessity' is that 'motion should come to stand' (κίνησιν τε ἴστασθαι) and that 'rest should be moved' (στάσιν κινεῖσθαι), *even though kinêsis as one of the greatest kinds would clearly need to be at rest, remaining always the same as itself, while stasis would need to be in motion in interacting with other kinds*. In short, while the critique of the 'Friends of Forms' for denying motion, life and intelligence to what completely is, as well as the definition of the soul's very essence as motion, requires an understanding of motion that would distinguish it from change in the sense of alteration, the discussion appears simply to fall back into this more limited understanding of motion.

The limitation is evident in both the *Theaetetus* (181d5-6) and the *Parmenides* (138b-c) where *kinêsis* is allowed only one of the two following meanings: alteration (ἀλλοίωσις) and change in place (φορά). It is hard to see how *kinêsis* in either sense not only could be attributed to what completely is, but could even characterize life, intelligence and the soul. In the *Phaedrus* (245e3-246a1) and the *Laws* (896a1-2), the very being of the soul is identified with a self-moving motion that explains and indeed guarantees the soul's eternity and incorporeality. But how could such motion be any kind of alteration or movement in place? The fundamental problem with attributing life to 'what completely is' is understanding what kind of *kinêsis* could be said to belong to *either*, where the answer clearly cannot be 'change' or 'movement in place'.

We have here, I suggest, the motivation for Aristotle's development of the notion of *energeia* as *distinct* from *kinêsis*: with this notion he can fulfill

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4 See Mesch 2011, 117.

the Visitor's wish to attribute life, intelligence, and in general activity to 'what completely is' without attributing to it change.<sup>5</sup> It also solves another fundamental aporia that the Visitor acknowledges as such. Simply wishing like children that being encompass both things in motion and things at rest (249d3-4) leaves the nature of being itself completely opaque as a mysterious 'third' that is neither in motion nor at rest (250c1-10). *Energeia* is Aristotle's positive characterization of this neither/nor. Being is activity, where 'activity' is to be understood neither as motion nor as the cessation of motion, but as something altogether different and more complete.

The key text here is *Metaphysics* Θ6 1048b18-35. I will not here provide the detailed analysis of this text I have provided elsewhere (Gonzalez 2019). I will only note three points concerning its relation to the *Sophist* passage. First, the examples this text gives of *energeia* as distinct from *kinêsis* are 'seeing' (ὄρασις), 'intelligence', 'thinking' (both φρόνησις and νόησις) and, more generally, 'living' (ζῆν). With the exception of 'seeing' if understood literally, we have in these examples precisely what the friends of the Forms are said to deny to 'what completely is' in the Visitor's criticism. Secondly, while these are identified with *kinêsis* in the *Sophist* passage, they are explicitly opposed to *kinêsis* by Aristotle. Finally, and most importantly, what Aristotle claims to distinguish an *energeia* from a *kinêsis* is the fact that it is its own *telos* rather than moving towards a *telos*; this completeness at every moment is what enables one to assert simultaneously that 'I am living' and 'I have lived (in the sense of "completed living").' But then there can be no difficulty in attributing such complete activity to 'what completely is' (τῷ παντελῶς ὄντι). In contrast, it seems impossible to attribute to 'what completely is' a motion that is by definition 'incomplete' (ἀτελής). While there is no way of proving that Aristotle was responding directly to the *Sophist* passage, it seems highly unlikely that he was not.

Aristotle must furthermore have seen that Plato's notion of 'the motion capable of moving itself' (τὴν δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν, 896a1-2), as which the soul is defined in the *Laws*, makes no sense on either of the senses of *kinêsis* recognized in the *Theaetetus* and the *Parmenides*: i.e., it is senseless to speak of an *alteration capable of altering itself* or a *movement in place capable of moving itself in place*. Aristotle would also find it problematic to claim, as the proof for the soul's immortality in the *Phaedrus* does, that what moves itself will never desist from movement because to do so it would need to *abandon itself* (μόνον δὴ τὸ αὐτὸ κινουῦν, ἅτε οὐκ ἀπολείπον ἑαυτῷ,

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5 Cf. Beere 2009, 14.

οὔποτε λήγει κινούμενον, 245c7-8): motion is by its very nature 'ecstatic' (*Physics* 222b6), so that what moves must be displaced from what it is; if the soul were essentially in motion, then, as Aristotle argues in *De Anima*, far from remaining with itself, it would inevitably *step outside of its being* (ἡ ψυχὴ ἐξίσταται ἄν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας, 406b15-16). Surprisingly, this argument by which Aristotle attempts to demonstrate against Plato the impossibility of the soul being in motion is one he could have found in Plato himself. In the *Parmenides*, Parmenides argues that if the One moves (κινεῖται), 'there is a great necessity that it *alter its character* [ἀλλοιοῦσθαι], since to the extent that something is moved, it to that extent is no longer disposed in the way it was, but is disposed differently' (162e4-163a2). And just a few lines earlier Parmenides claims that if the One alters from itself (ἀλλοιοῦται που τὸ ἐν ἑαυτοῦ, 162d6), their discourse would no longer be about the One. A similar conception of *kinēsis* is presupposed by Socrates' argument in the *Republic* that the gods cannot change. For something to step outside of its character (εἴπερ τι ἐξίσταίτο τῆς αὐτοῦ ιδέας, 380d8) is for it to be changed either by something else or by itself. But what is best, including the best soul, admits least of all of being 'altered and moved' (ἀλλοιοῦται τε καὶ κινεῖται, 380e3-4). Furthermore, what is best would never alter or change itself (αὐτὸς αὐτὸν μεταβάλλοι ἄν καὶ ἀλλοιοῖ; 381b8) as this would necessarily be a change for the worse.<sup>6</sup> But then on Plato's own conception of motion, one that Aristotle appears simply to make his own, how can the soul be a self-moving motion without continually altering from itself and therefore never remaining what it is, i.e., a soul? How in never ceasing to move could it not leave itself? A possible solution to both this problem and to the general need to attribute life and intelligence to what completely is, is the notion of an activity that is its own end and as such *distinct from kinēsis*. This, of course, is Aristotle's solution, one demanded by the apparent absence of a solution in Plato.

Later Platonists claimed that Aristotle's critique of Plato's characterization of the soul as self-motion was only a dispute about names, with the term *energeia* being substituted for the term *kinēsis*. Thus Simplicius explains that 'the disagreement came about insofar as Plato acknowledges all change of whatever sort (πᾶσαν τὴν ὅπιανοῦν μεταβολήν), both active and passive (τὴν τε ἐνεργητικὴν καὶ τὴν παθητικὴν) to be motion (κίνησιν) . . . Aristotle by contrast, judging that only physical changes are to be called motions

6 Note also the claim later in Book 8 that, while it is difficult for a city so ideally constituted to be moved (κινηθῆναι), there will nevertheless be a dissolution of it as with all things generated (546a1-3). Being moved is implicitly identified here with being destroyed.

(κινήσεις), believes that the soul is active but is not moved (ἐνεργεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ κινεῖσθαι)' (*On Aristotle Physics* VIII, 5, 258b4-9 [Diels 1248, 22-31]). Simplicius can therefore go on to say that 'the disagreement between these philosophers is not about the thing itself, but about the name, as in many other matters' (ὥστε οὐ περὶ πράγμα νῦν, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὄνομα, Diels 1249, 12-13).<sup>7</sup> Themistius in his *Paraphrase on the Soul* agrees that we should not argue about the name, though he adds that Aristotle's terminology is more accurate in reflecting the real and vast difference that exists between an imperfect and a perfect entelechy.<sup>8</sup>

This view is of course part of the Neoplatonic project to reconcile Plato with Aristotle. The reality seems rather different. While it is true that both the definition of the soul as self-motion and the attribution of motion to intelligible reality demand a new concept that would express a type of activity distinct from motion in the sense of change or alteration, no such concept is found in Plato. Plato continues to operate with an indiscriminate notion of *kinêsis* which leads to the incoherence of a 'motion of motion' and of Forms that are and are not capable of movement. To claim that Aristotle simply introduced a new name for a notion Plato already had is not to do justice to Aristotle's radical innovation: so radical that it was largely ignored by later Hellenistic and Neoplatonic philosophers who went back to making no fundamental distinction between activity and motion.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, it is not hard to see in Aristotle's unmoved mover, described as active in being alive and intelligent without being in motion, an answer to the Visitor's wish that would nevertheless have surprised the Visitor (and Plato!). If Aristotle appears to mimic the Visitor's words in insisting that life belongs to the first *ousia* that is god (ὥστε ζωὴ ὑπάρχει τῷ θεῷ, 107b26-30), it is with the important difference of insisting that the god is nevertheless *unmoved*.<sup>10</sup> This is possible because of the distinction,

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7 On this passage and on the attempts by both Simplicius and Hermeias to reconcile Plato and Aristotle on this point, see Long 2020.

8 See Gertz 2010, 82. Cherniss clearly takes the Neoplatonist perspective in seeing Plato as introducing a non-physical, psychical self-motion (1944, 437) into the real being of the Ideas and, in doing so, rejecting Aristotle's more narrow conception of motion as necessarily involving change in one of the categories (440-441).

9 For Plotinus' critique of the sharp distinction between ἐνεργεια and κίνησις, see Enn. VI 1 [42], 16. 4-19, and the excellent discussion in Chiaradonna 2008.

10 Aristotle did well to insist on this point since not only the Friends of the Forms, but contemporary scholars have a hard time accepting that life could belong to what is motionless, matterless, and perfect. For example, both Aubenque (2009, 90-91) and Laks (2000, 236), characterize the identification of god with life as 'metaphorical'.

not found in Plato, that enables Aristotle to say that the god can be *active* without being *in motion* (ἀκίνητον ὄν, ἐνεργεία ὄν, 1072b7-8). Furthermore, we can see a retort against the Visitor in Aristotle's claim that there would be nothing 'austere' (σεμνόν) in the unmoved mover if it were *not* thinking and active (*Met.* Λ 9, 1074b17-18). For the Visitor, as we saw in his objection to the Friends of the Forms, what is most fully real is *either* austere because motionless *or* alive, intelligent and in motion: for Aristotle, thanks to the notion of *energeia*, it is austere because *both* motionless *and* intelligent/alive.<sup>11</sup> What indeed could be more awe-inspiring than what Aristotle calls in the *Nicomachean Ethics* the 'activity of motionlessness' (ἐνέργεια . . . ἀκινήσις, NE 7.15, 1154b26-8) and in the context of describing the most pleasurable activity of god? The Visitor's critique of the Friends of the Forms is thus likely to have inspired and provoked Aristotle in his attempt to restore to life its dignity and to perfect being its life.

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11 See Brunschwig 2000, 279n23, and Hadot 1960, 114.

