CHAPTER 4

Self-Movement and External Causation

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ARISTOTLE maintains that we are the origins of our voluntary actions (EN iii.1, 1111a22–24; EE ii.6, 1222b19–20). I would like to consider a challenge to this claim that calls into question his account of self-movement in the Physics. Aristotle’s response shows that his conception of voluntary action is defensible within the general framework that he invokes to explain change in the natural world.

1. ORIGINS AND EXTERNAL CAUSES

In EE ii.6, Aristotle indicates that being the origin of an action involves more than simply playing a role in the sequence of causes that brings it about. The causal role an origin plays must not be subordinate to that of any other cause. He makes this point by drawing an analogy with “causation” in geometry:

If the fact that a triangle contains two right angles entails that a quadrilateral contains four, then the cause (αἰτιόν) of this [namely, that the quadrilateral contains four right angles] is clearly the fact that the triangle contains two right angles... And if nothing else is the cause of the triangle’s being like this, then this [namely, the triangle’s having two right angles] is a kind of origin (ἀρχή) and cause of what comes after. (1222b31–41)

Aristotle here states an instance of the general principle: if A is the cause (αἰτιόν) of B, but C is the cause of A, then A is not the origin (ἀρχή) of B. His example invokes formal rather than efficient causes, and he does not indicate here exactly how the principle applies in the domain of efficient causation, where human beings are the origins of actions. His account of self-movement in Phys. viii shows us how it applies to efficient causation.

A self-mover is a kind of efficient cause, for “mover” (ἀναφέρεσθαι) is one of

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Aristotle’s ways of referring to the efficient cause (Phys. ii.7, 198a19, a24). Only a self-mover can properly be called the origin (ἀρχή) of an outcome:

Indeed, if we had to investigate whether the cause (αἰτία) of the movement—
that is, the origin (ἀρχή)—is what moves itself or what is moved by something else, everyone would say the former is. (Phys. vii.5, 257a27–30; cf. vii.1, 241b34–37)

A self-mover has this special causal status because, unlike a moved mover, it does not cause movement (κινεῖν) by itself being moved to do so by anything else:

The stick moves the stone and is moved by the hand which is moved by the man. But he does not do so by being moved by anything else (τὸ ὑπ’ ἄλλου κινεῖται). (Phys. vii.5, 256a6–8; cf. a21)

In other words, a self-mover is properly called the origin of its movement because it is the efficient cause of that movement, and nothing else is the efficient cause of its causing that movement.

Aristotle proceeds to indicate that the aspect of the self-mover playing this crucial causal role fails to be moved by anything else because the moving (κινεῖν) it does is not itself a movement:

So, of the whole, one aspect must be unmoved (ἀείκινητον) and another will be moved. Only in this way can there be something that is self-moved. And since the whole moves itself, the one aspect will move (κινεῖται) and the other will be moved (κινεῖται). (258a1–4; cf. vii.2, 243a14)

The aspect of the self-mover that is “unmoved” (ἀείκινητον) moves (κινεῖν) the aspect that is moved. This “unmoved mover” (ἀείκινητον κινοῦν), 258a7, a9 moves the moved aspect by means of a third thing (ὦ κινεῖ) (256b14–15, cf. b20), which is a moved mover (256b16–20). Let us identify these three aspects of the voluntary agent offered as an example of a self-mover at the beginning of Phys. vii.5 (256a6–8, quoted above). The man is the self-mover, and his hand is the aspect in which he is moved. At De an. iii.10, 433b13–18, and MA 6, 701a1, Aristotle tells us that the man’s desire is “that by means of which he moves himself” (ὦ κινεῖ). These chapters also indicate that the object of desire (ὄςειν) (MA 6, 700b23–24) or “practical good” (πρᾶκτον ὑγιεῖν) (De an. iii.10, 433b15–16) is the unmoved mover. It is not immediately obvious how the object of the man’s desire is an aspect of the self-moving agent. An aspect of the agent to which it is clearly related, however, is the disposition (ἐξετάζει) of the various faculties of desire, which in the case of rational agents is their state of character (ἦθος ἐξετάζει). (The object of desire is intimately related to this disposition because the object of a desire is the agent’s goal [τέλος], and our ethical dispositions determine our goals [EN vi.2, 1139a31–35]).

In addition, according to the feelings, we are said to be moved, while according to the virtues and vices we are not said to be moved, but rather disposed in a certain way (ὑπερασχετούσα προσευχή). (1106a4–6)

Given that an unmoved mover is something that causes change without itself being subject to change, it would not be unreasonable of Aristotle to claim that such a disposition is an unmoved mover of the agent’s faculty of desire. An ethical disposition clearly has causal efficacy over the agent’s faculties of desire; it determines at what objects and to what extent the will will be exercised. Just as clearly, its efficacy is not of the sort that is exercised in a movement or change. A disposition of a set of capacities is not a further capacity added to the set, which then sets about regulating the exercise of the capacities in the way that, for example, the conductor regulates the activities of the different musicians in an orchestra. Rather, the disposition is a capacity of a higher order than those of which it is a disposition. It is more like that acquired by two violinists, a violinist, and a cellist when they become a string quartet. This disposition is not acquired by adding a fifth member, but by accruing the capacities of the individual members to be exercised as an ensemble. It is acquired by the four musicians by playing together. Similarly, the disposition that is a state of character is acquired by exercising, in a particular way, the capacities of which it is a disposition—the capacities for feeling and desire. The disposition of a set of capacities is a standing condition that exercises its causal efficacy over these capacities whenever they operate in their normal and unimpeded way. The disposition of an agent’s capacities for feeling and desire is “at work” whenever the animal is awake. It does not move (κινεῖ) the particular occurrences of desires, by means of which the animal moves itself, by producing a separate motion (ἐξετάζει) that precipitates the desire. Rather, its causal efficacy is continual, both when a particular capacity for desire is exercised and when it is not.

Let us therefore proceed on the assumption that the aspect of the self-moving agent that is the unmoved mover is this disposition. We are now in position to articulate the challenge to Aristotle’s claim that we are the origins of our actions.

1 Aristotle explicitly says here that they are dispositions of our faculties for feelings (τῆθεν), but he offers the list of these faculties in enumeration of the capacities of the soul he initially introduces in EN vi.13, 1102b30 as the faculty of desire.
2. A PROBLEM FOR ARISTOTLE’S CLAIMS ABOUT SELF-MOTION

In claiming that we are the origins of our actions, Aristotle implies that we are self-movers, and this in turn implies that nothing external to us moves us to have the desires by means of which we move ourselves. He seems to think that our moral character (the set of the various dispositions of our faculties of desire) constitutes the internal aspect that causes these desires. Hence he is committed to denying that external objects cause our characters to cause them. But how, given Aristotle’s own conception of states of character, can he consistently deny this? On his view, a moral character is a fully determinate disposition to act and react in certain ways in certain circumstances. For example, it determines at what objects one will become angry, how angry one will get, and what, if anything, one will do as a result of being angry. So the presence of an object toward which one is disposed to be angry in a particular way is sufficient to precipitate that particular manifestation of anger. It is natural, in English, to refer to these objects as the things that “make” us angry, and Aristotle uses an equivalent locution in Greek: these objects of anger are the ἀγαθοῦνικα (inducers) of our anger (EN iv.5, 1125b30). Given the causal influence of these external objects, how can Aristotle deny that they move us to have the desires on which we act?2

One way out of this problem would be for Aristotle to withdraw the claim that voluntary agents are self-moved. There are a number of passages in the De anima, the De motu animalium, and the Physics where Aristotle appears to some commentators to renege on this claim, and to allow that animals (and hence voluntary agents) are in fact moved by the external objects that precipitate the current desires on which they act. So let us first turn to consider these passages, which, on closer examination, will turn out to make no such admission.

In MA 6, 700b24–29, and De an. iii.10, 433a17–21, Aristotle identifies the unmoved mover of the animal’s voluntary movement as the object of desire (ὁμετφρόν). But in so claiming, he does not allow that an external

perceptual stimulus moves the self-mover to have a particular desire,5 for such a stimulus is not the object of desire. Consider the scenario in which, for example, an unlucky lamb wanders into the visual field of a lion, thereby triggering in the lion the desire to pursue and eat it. The object of the lion’s desire (ὁμετφρόν) is not the lamb, but eating the lamb. The object of the desire is its goal (τέλος [cf. MA 6, 700b15, b25–29; De an. iii.10, 433a13–17]), which is a future state of affairs desired by the lion. Though the external object, the lamb, may be the object of the lion’s pursuit, it is not the object of the lion's desire.6

Second, there are two passages in Phys. viii where Aristotle appears to allow that external objects move (ὑπέρφρον) the self-mover’s desire.7 In Phys. viii.2 Aristotle claims that animal self-movement is preceded by bodily changes that are due to external factors, and he explicitly claims that these bodily changes move (ὑπέρφον) the animal’s faculty of desire:

It appears that the animal moves itself from a state of rest with nothing from the outside having moved it. But this is false. For we see that there is always in movement some natural part of the animal, and the cause of this movement is not the animal but presumably the environment. And we do not say that the animal moves itself with respect to every movement, but only in respect to locomotion. So nothing prevents, and presumably it is necessary, that many movements are engendered in the body by the environment, and some of these move (ὑπέρφον) the animal’s thought or desire, which in turn moves the whole animal. This is what happens, for example, in sleep. There occurs in the body some movement, although it is not a perceptual movement, and the animal wakes up (253a9–20).

Aristotle here allows that changes in the animal produced by external factors can move (ὑπέρφον) the faculty of thought and desire, which is the faculty by means of which the animal moves itself (α17–18).8 But he insists

2 So Furley (8–9) interprets these passages.
4 We are misled into identifying the object of desire as the lamb, rather than eating the lamb, because of the spatial metaphors for desire, in particular the metaphors of the hunt and the archer. But it is just as misleading to call the lamb the object of the lion’s desire as it is to call the target the object of the archer’s desire. The archer desires not the target, but rather to hit the target. The temptation to identify the prey and the target as the ὑπέρφον is considerably lessened if we pay attention to the fact that Aristotle says the ὑπέρφον in these cases is the ἅρματον ἀράθον (De an. iii.10, 433b16). A ἅρματον is something that can be done. Although we may be misled by the metaphor of the hunt to think the lamb is the ὑπέρφον (object of desire), it is not so easy to think that it is the ἅρματον ἀράθον. Though the lamb is something that we might colloquially say the lion desires, it is certainly not something the lion can do.
7 Furley discusses both passages in detail.
8 De an. iii.10, 433a10–30, indicates that thought along with desire is involved in self-movement.
(19) that these changes are not perceptual changes. They are the changes that go on during sleep, and that can cause the animal to wake up (19–20).

In Phys. viii.6, in a context that refers back to the present passage (259b1–7), Aristotle describes these changes in more detail:

We must note that animals move themselves with respect to only one motion, and even this one not strictly (ὁὐ κυριοτέρως). For the cause is not from the animal itself. Rather, there are other movements natural to animals that are not due to themselves: for example, growth, diminution, and respiration. Animals are subject to these movements when they are at rest and not experiencing self-motion. And the cause of this is the environment and many things that enter from the outside. For example, the cause of some of these movements is food. When it is being digested animals sleep, but when it is distributed they wake up and move themselves. The first origin is from the outside. (259b6–14)

The external changes that affect the animal are those associated with, for example, digestion. Digestion, when it is completed, wakes the animal. Wakening is the activity that Aristotle in Phys. viii.2 calls moving (κυριοτέρως) the animal's desire (253a17). But to move (κυριοτέρως) the animal's desire in this way is simply to activate the animal's perceptual and conative capacities. This "movement" of desire differs from the movement of desire whereby the lion is moved to pursue the lamb. Aristotle cites an external cause only for the fact that the animal's faculty of desire is active at all—that is, for the animal's being awake. He does not mention the changes that subsequently precipitate the awakened animal to form a particular or current desire that causes a particular self-movement. Aristotle does not claim that the lion is moved by an external cause to have the particular current desire that moves it to pursue the lamb.

Aristotle denies here that animals move themselves strictly (κυριοτέρως; 259b7) because, as in the corresponding passage in Phys. viii.2, he is concerned to defend a very general principle about change that is important to his overall argument in Phys. viii. This is the principle that, for any change that begins at some point in time, there must have been some prior change that brought about the conditions sufficient for it—for example, by bringing the active and passive powers into proximity so that they necessarily interact to produce the change in question (Phys. viii.1, 251a23–b10; viii.7, 260b1–4; cf. viii.2, 253a2–3). This is one of the principles to which Aristotle appeals in his arguments for the eternity of change. His denial that animals move themselves strictly simply reflects his view that self-movement is not a counterexample to this principle. Self-movement, like any other change, presupposes prior change.

Aristotle does not, in these passages, undermine or withdraw his claim that animals are self-movers. He does not allow that an external object of perception that precipitates a particular occurring desire is the mover of that desire. But these passages do not enlighten us any further about how Aristotle can consistently deny this claim. Indeed, we might formulate the objection by appeal to the very principle about change that he defends in these passages. The principle must apply to all noneternal changes—including the occurring desires that, according to the account of self-movement, are the movements by means of which the animal moves itself. So we can ask, of the occurring desire that moves the lion to pursue the lamb, what prior change accounts for the fact that at time t₁ this desire was not occurring, but at time t₂ it was? The answer, presumably, is: the change whereby the unlucky lamb entered the perceptual field of the lion. How then, we must ask Aristotle, can it fail to be the case that the lamb (or at any rate, something external to the lion) moves (κυριοτέρως) the lion to desire the lamb?

3. SELF-MOVEMENT AND CAUSAL DETERMINATION

The Aristotelian exegete Alexander of Aphrodisias suggests a solution to this problem—at least for rational agents. Aristotle insists that a self-mover's actions must be up to it to do and not to do (cf. Phys. viii.4, 255a7–10). In his De fato (XI-XV), Alexander offers an account of what it is for an action to be up to us in this way. He attributes to Aristotle the view that only the actions of rational agents are up to them, because unlike nonrational animals, they need not yield to perceptual impressions, the impulses to action induced in them by external objects (Alex. De fato 183.32–184.1). The capacity for reason allows us to deliberate about whether to act in accordance with such externally produced impulses (178.17–25, 179.8–12, 180.4–7). In exactly the same circumstances, both internal and external, it is possible for a rational agent to choose the opposite of what his deliberation actually decides upon (179.12–18, 180.20–21, 181.5–6, 185.8–9). Alexander's interpretation in effect allows that the disposition of our nonrational desires is perfectly determinate, but denies that the disposition of our rational capacity for making decisions is. Our decisions are caused by our faculty of reason, but there is no set of conditions sufficient to determine whether that faculty will opt for or against a given alternative.

Alexander appears to arrive at this interpretation by connecting Aristotle's account of deliberation (EN ii.13; EE ii.10) with a distinction he introduces in Meta. Θ.2, 1046b4–24, between one-sided and two-sided capacities. According to Aristotle, fire's capacity to heat and its capacity for upward travel are one-sided capacities. Examples of two-sided capacities include skills such as medicine, which, though it is a capacity for causing
causes are only its moved movers. In making these claims, Aristotle expresses the view that the natural changes in an organism, like an animal’s self-locomotion, are cases of self-change. The distinctive feature of natural change, Aristotle insists, is that it is internally caused.

Once we see that the distinction between unmoved movers and moved movers applies to the distinction between form and matter, the indeterminist interpretation of the unmoved mover runs into a serious difficulty. The problem arises from the fact that form and matter are relative notions for Aristotle (Phys. ii.1, 193a9–12), but the property of being wood is itself formal relative to its elemental constituents (193a17–22). This relativity of form and matter holds for both artifacts and organisms. For example, the powers that a bodily part has insofar as it is a hand are formal relative to the capacities of its immediate constituents; but the powers that it has qua hand are material relative to the form of the whole organism of which the hand is a part. Given the relativity of matter and form, the same particular capacity can be both material and formal. If, as Aristotle claims, formal capacities are unmoved movers, and material capacities are moved movers, then the indeterminist account of unmoved movers has the unhappy consequence that the exercise of certain capacities of an organism would both have sufficient antecedent conditions (insofar as the capacity is material) and lack sufficient antecedent conditions (insofar as the capacity is formal). But this consequence is impossible. We therefore have good reason to be skeptical of the indeterminist interpretation of the unmoved mover. Aristotle’s claim, that the agent is unmoved in causing himself to move, does not mean that there are no preexisting causes sufficient to precipitate that activity.

4. SELF-MOTION AND AGENT CAUSATION

A different interpretation that proposes to solve the problem takes Aristotle’s account of self-movement to concern what I will call “agent

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9 For a detailed discussion of whether decision is the exercise of a two-sided capacity, see Freeland 1982.

10 Alexander insists that his view does not entail that there be uncaused change (ἀκατάκτητως κινεῖται). The agent’s decision is not uncaused, he claims, because it is caused by the agent. But in insisting that the preexisting causes (προκαταλαβόμενα αἴτιας (180.27–28)) leave open both the decision and its alternative, he is committed to the view that there is no cause for the particular decision the agent makes. For this reason, I classify his view as indeterministic.
causation." This interpretation focuses on the fact that in cases of self-movement, Aristotle claims that a substance causes an event. In the example of self-movement described at the beginning of Phys. viii.5, the man (a substance) causes his hand to move (an event), and this event in turn causes a sequence of events: the movements of the stick and the stone. At the beginning of this sequence there is a cause that is not an event but a substance—the man. According to the theory of agent causation, substances do not exercise their causality in events, and this is why their causality is not due to antecedent events. If Aristotle’s account of self-movers is an account of agent causation, then it attributes to agents causal powers of a kind completely different from those at work in the rest of nature. In the rest of nature, events are causes, but in cases of agency, a substance, not an event, initiates a sequence of events.14

An immediate problem for the interpretation of Aristotelian self-movement as agent causation is that, for Aristotle, efficient causes in general are substances rather than events. In his general account of efficient causation, his examples of efficient causes are almost invariably substances: the father, the advisor, the sculptor.15 In the example of self-movement that opens Phys. viii.5, not only the self-mover but also all the moved movers are substances. The man moves his hand, his hand moves the stick, and the stick moves the stone. Since all the movers in the sequence are substances, Aristotle cannot think the self-mover has the special causal status it does simply because it is a substance.

Moreover, contrary to the doctrine of agent causation, Aristotle does not deny that the causal activity of a substance is an event. An efficient cause is identified in terms of its capacity for causing change (cf. Phys. ii.3, 195a6, 195b21–25). This capacity (δύναμις) is an "origin of change in something else or in some other aspect of itself" (Meta. A.12, 1019a15–20), and it is by exercising this capacity for causing change that the efficient cause produces the thing of which it is the efficient cause. For example, the builder (οικοδόμος) is the efficient cause of the house (οίκος) in virtue of possessing the capacity of housebuilding (οικοδομική), and produces the house by exercising that capacity (Phys. ii.3, 195b16–21). The exercise of a capacity is an event. Therefore, insofar as a self-mover is an efficient cause, we should expect it to exercise its causality in an event—the event that is the exercise of the capacity in terms of which it is identified.

Of course, the defender of agent causation will point out that the self-mover’s causation of its desire is, on Aristotle’s view, not a movement (κίνησις). This feature distinguishes the causal action of the self-mover from that of the other efficient causes in the sequence, which cause movement (κίνημα) by being in movement (κινούμενοι) themselves. The defender of agent causation may conclude, self-movers, unlike moved movers, do not exercise their causality in events; therefore the bothersome question about the cause of their causal action does not arise.

But would it follow from the fact that the act of self-movement is not a movement or change (κίνησις) that it is not an event? Aristotle regularly distinguishes between two kinds of exercise or actuality (ἐνέργεια) of a causal power: a change or movement (κίνησις) and an activity (ἐνέργεια).16 In denying that the actuality of the unmoved mover is a "movement or change (κίνησις), Aristotle presumably implies that it is an activity (ἐνέργεια). But clearly the act of self-movement, even if it is an "activity" rather than a movement or change, is the exercise of a causal power, and for this reason it would seem to count as an event. And if it is an event, presumably we may ask what change precipitated its occurrence. A defender of the agent-causation interpretation might respond that Aristotle, in claiming that everything that is in motion is moved by something (Phys. viii.4, 256a3), does not claim that every activity (ἐνέργεια) is caused by something, but only that every movement or change (κίνησις) is. This response is unsatisfying, however, for it does not explain why the features that distinguish an activity from a movement should exempt "activity" (ἐνέργεια) from the principle that everything that happens happens as the result of the causal activity of something. Although Aristotle in Phys. viii states the principle in a form that applies explicitly only to movement or change (κίνησις), the very general thesis about change that he defends17 seems to commit him to the stronger view that something must be responsible for the fact that at one time the agent is not exercising this faculty, and another time he is. Call this exercise something other than change if you will, but the principle surely implies that some change preceded its occurrence. Agent causation therefore fails to provide a satisfactory model for understanding Aristotle’s account of self-motion.

5. ARISTOTLE’S DISTINCTION BETWEEN CAUSES

The problem about self-motion that we have been considering is generated by the assumption that if there is a set of antecedent conditions sufficient for the exercise of a capacity, such as the agent’s capacity for desire, then we

14 This view is developed by Chisholm (1964) 1982, who calls causation by a substance “immanent causation” and causation by an event “transient causation.” He explicitly takes Aristotelian self-movement to be an instance of immanent causation (30).
15 Phys. ii.3, 194a30–32, 195a21–22, 332–33, ii.7, 198a21–27; Meta. A.2, 1013a30–32. Occasionally he refers to events as efficient causes: the invasion is the cause of a war (Po. an. ii.11, 94a37; Phys. ii.7, 198a19–21), an insult the cause of a fight (Meta. A.1, 1013a10). In the latter examples, Aristotle refers to the causal activity of the substance that makes it the efficient cause. For different views on this question, see Fine 1987 and Annas 1982.
16 Meta. B.1, 1045b34–1046a6; De an. ii.5, 417a21–b28.
17 The principle that, for any change that begins at some point in time, there must have been some prior change that brought about the conditions sufficient for that change (Phys. viii.1, 251a23–b10; viii.7, 260b1–4; cf. viii.2, 253a2–3).
must accept that the capacity has been moved by something in those conditions. Both the indeterminist and the agent-causation interpretations accept, and indeed are motivated by, this assumption. They propose to solve the problem by in effect denying that such sufficient antecedent conditions exist. An alternative approach to the problem would be to challenge that assumption. This is what the ancient Stoics did. They were rigorous determinists; yet they insisted that our actions are up to us. They defended this conclusion by making a distinction between causes.

In response to the claim that external stimuli cause our actions in a way that makes our actions not up to us, the Stoic Chrysippus drew a distinction between two types of cause. There are on the one hand, he claimed, "perfect and principal" causes, and on the other hand, "auxiliary" causes. The external stimulus that "makes" the agent have a particular occurrence desire is only the auxiliary cause of his action, whereas the agent is the perfect and principal cause. Only if the external stimulus were the perfect and principal cause of the agent's response would it follow that his action is not up to him. Chrysippus illustrates the point of this distinction by appealing to the different reactions a cone and a cylinder would have to the same push from an external force: the cylinder rolls in a straight line, whereas the cone rolls in a circle. The external push is only an auxiliary cause of the cone's or cylinder's activity; the nature of the cone or cylinder is the perfect and principal cause. Similarly, the external object (e.g., a pot of gold) whose perception "makes" the vicious person decide to steal it will not have this same effect on the virtuous person. Hence it is only the auxiliary cause of the vicious person's theft, whereas the person's vice is its perfect and principal cause.\footnote{Cicero De fato 40–43; Aulus Gellius Noct. Att. 7.2.6–13.}

Does Aristotle have a distinction between causes to which he might appeal in a similar argument? He does. In his natural philosophy he regularly distinguishes between intrinsic (καθ' αυτά) and accidental (κατὰ συμβεβηκός) causes (e.g., \textit{Phys.} 11.5, 196b24–29). An accidental cause is not properly attributed causal responsibility for a result.\footnote{Po. An. 1.4, 73b10–16; \textit{Phys.} 11.3, 195b3–4; 11.4, 255b24–27; \textit{Meta.} Δ.30, 1025a25–27. I discuss in more detail the application of this distinction to Aristotle's claims about moral responsibility in Meyer 1994, chs. 4 and 6.} But not every set of conditions sufficient to precipitate a given result contains an intrinsic cause. For example, the creditor and debtor who meet in the marketplace, when neither intended this result or had any knowledge that it would occur, meet by accident; the meeting has no intrinsic cause (\textit{Phys.} 11.5, 196b33–197a14). Aristotle explicitly applies the distinction to the case of agency, indicating in \textit{En.} v.8 that the voluntary agent is the intrinsic cause of his action, not simply its accidental cause (1135a17–28). So perhaps Aristotle might appeal to this distinction to defend his claims about self-

movement. Perhaps he thinks that the external antecedents of the self-mover's activity are only its accidental causes, and for this reason denies that the self-mover is moved to act by these external factors. In the final section of this essay I will evaluate whether such an argument can respond to the problem about self-movement. But first I will argue that we have reason to attribute such an argument to Aristotle.

Aristotle nowhere claims explicitly that the external antecedents of desire are only the accidental causes of the desires they precipitate. His discussion of the causes of elemental motion in \textit{Phys.} 11.4 gives us reason to think, however, that such an assumption underlies his claim that the self-mover is not moved by external causes. Aristotle discusses at length the causes of the natural movements of the elements because he thinks these movements present an apparent counterexample to his thesis that everything in motion is moved by something (254b33–255a3). The natural upward movement of fire and the natural downward movement of earth appear to be counterexamples because they are not self-motions (255a1–18); yet, at the same time, it is not clear that these elements are moved by anything else (255a31–33), for they will be subject to these motions as long as nothing impedes them (255a33–b13). Aristotle solves the apparent difficulty by claiming that the elements are moved by whatever removes the impediment. But the remover of the impediment, he insists, is only accidentally the cause of the elemental movement:

What removes the support or the impediment is in one way the mover but in another way not. I mean, for example, the person who removes the pillar, or who removes the stone from the wineskin in the water. For he causes the movement accidentally (συνεπεξεργασάτω). (255b24–27)

Aristotle here distinguishes two ways in which one thing can be said to move (συνεπεξεργασάτω) another: accidentally and nonaccidentally. The external entity, which brings about the change that precipitates the elemental movement, is only the accidental cause of the elemental movement, and hence is not really its efficient cause in the proper sense of "cause" (\textit{Phys.} 11.3, 195b3–4).\footnote{Why does Aristotle go to the trouble to point out that such external causes are only accidentally responsible for the elemental motions? Presumably because he would find it hard to defend his claim that such movements are natural (11.4, 254b12–23, 255a18–23) if he allowed that they have nonaccidental external causes. For the distinctive feature of natural change is that it is due to an origin that belongs to the natural entity nonaccidentally (11.1, 192b8–32).}
and its interpretation disputed, but I think that at least the following things are clear. The chapter defends the thesis that not every occurrence is the result of a nonaccidental cause. After introducing the thesis (1027a29–32), Aristotle proceeds to indicate that if it is false, then the causal chain of anything that happens can always be traced indefinitely far back into the past (1027a32–b7); but that if it is true, then some causal chains go back only so far—to an origin that cannot be traced back to anything else (1027b11–12). Such an origin is one for which there is no cause of its coming into being (1027b13–14). But the accidental is what lacks an origin of coming into being.22 As in Phys. viii.4, Aristotle here defends the claim that X is the origin of something by claiming that X's causal antecedents are only its accidental cause.23

These two passages give us reason to suppose that Aristotle would defend his thesis that we are self-movers by arguing that external objects, although they induce in us the desires on which we act, are only the accidental causes of our decisions and actions. So let us now turn to evaluate the success of this response to the problem about self-movement.

6. SELF-MOVEMENT AND NONACCIDENTAL CAUSES

Aristotle routinely identifies the nonaccidental efficient cause of a result in terms of a causal power that "naturally produces" it. For example, the skilled builder (οἰκοδόμος) who builds the house (οίκος) is the nonaccidental cause of the house (Phys. ii.5, 196b24–26; Meta. E.2, 1026b6–10) because he exercises a causal power (οἰκοδομή) that is productive (ποιητική) or "naturally produces" (πρὸς τοὺς ποιεῖν) such a result (Meta. E.2, 1026b10, 1027a1). Aristotle often explains what makes the nonaccidental cause "naturally productive" of an outcome with the claim that the cause produces it "always or for the most part" (Meta. Δ.30, 1025a14–19; E.2, 1026b27–37). I take such claims to mean that the nonaccidental cause produces the result by exercising a causal power that will succeed in producing something of this type unless it is impeded.24 An accidental cause of

21 I follow Sorabji's interpretation of this chapter (1980, 7–11), although I disagree with his contention that Aristotle there denies determinism. The thesis of necessity that Aristotle here claims would be true if his thesis about accidents is false is not that of causal determinism, but is a much stronger thesis.


23 De int. 9 admits of a similar interpretation. There Aristotle rejects a thesis of necessity quite similar to that of Meta. E.3, on the grounds that it entails, among other things, that (a) nothing happens accidentally, and (b) human deliberation is not the origin of action. I propose that (a) and (b) are related in the way the analogous claims are related in Meta. E.3. Aristotle is not claiming that the outcome of deliberation is by chance, but rather that its external antecedents are only its accidental causes.

24 I defend this interpretation in Meyer 1992.

a result, by contrast, exercises a causal power that, in its normal and unimpeded exercise, is no more likely than not to produce a result of the type in question.

We can see why Aristotle thinks the voluntary agent is the nonaccidental cause of his voluntary action. Such an agent acts on a motivation that is reliably productive of actions of this type. Let us now consider why Aristotle would think that the external antecedent of the occurrence desire on which the voluntary agent acts is only the accidental cause of that desire. Let us consider the example discussed in the previous section, in which a vicious person sees an untended pot of gold and decides to steal it. This external object, given the agent's dishonest disposition, precipitates in the agent the occurrence desire to take the gold.25 But is the pot of gold the sort of thing that reliably precipitates such desires in agents? Considered in itself, does it have the power that, if unimpeded, will reliably induce in agents the desire to steal it? Clearly not, for it will only induce such a desire in agents with a particular vicious disposition. In itself, it is no more a cause of desires for stealing than of desires for not stealing. Which sort of desire results from perceiving the gold depends on more than the unimpeded exercise of the causal powers of the gold. Hence the gold is only the accidental cause of the desire to steal, and hence of the theft.26

One might object that although the pot of gold does not have the capacity reliably to produce in human agents the desire to steal, it still is reliably productive of such desires in agents of this type. That is, it has the power, if unimpeded, to induce, in agents with the disposition to steal if they can get away with it, in situations in which they can get away with it, the occurrence desire to steal. Just as the shoemaker has the power, if unimpeded, to turn nails and leather into a pair of shoes, the pot of gold has the power to turn such situations with such agents in them into situations in which the agent has the desire to steal.

Aristotle agrees that any request for an explanation—that is, any search for a cause—asks why one thing belongs to another (Meta. Z.17, 1041a10–b9). On the objection we are considering, the external object of perception is nonaccidentally responsible for the fact that the agent, who is disposed to pursue such objects if she perceives them, has the additional property of actually desiring to pursue the object. But is this explanation

25 It does not matter whether this desire issues from deliberation or from simple perception. If it results from deliberation, it is still a result of the agent's deliberative disposition, and hence is "triggered" by the external object in a way relevantly similar to the triggering of the desire unmediated by deliberation.

26 By contrast, an external object of perception that is the nonaccidental cause of a desire it precipitates would be an object that any human being would react to in the same way. The naturally fearful things that any sensible person would fear (EN iii.7, 1115b9–10) would be examples of external causes that do move the agent to have the desire of feeling they "make" (ἐπιτρέψει) him have.
the same as the one assumed by Aristotle’s claim that the agent is the origin of his action? In claiming that the vicious agent is the origin of the theft, surely Aristotle is thinking that the agent is responsible for the fact that, in a situation in which such an external object is present, the object is stolen rather than not. While we may be able, with sufficient ingenuity, to specify some situation involving the agent for which an external perceptual stimulus is the nonaccidental cause, it is not within our power of stipulation to make the external object the nonaccidental cause of the explanandum that is relevant to the claim that the agent is the origin of the action.

Aristotle can appeal to the distinction between nonaccidental and accidental causes to support his claim that the agent’s desire is not moved by an external object. The external object is only the accidental cause of that desire, whereas the agent’s character is its nonaccidental cause. Aristotle therefore can defend his claim that voluntary agents are self-moved without subscribing to either indeterminism or agent causation. His claims about self-movement are defensible without attributing to agents causal powers discontinuous with, or radically distinct from, those he thinks are at work in the rest of nature.


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