CHAPTER 10

The First Mover and First Moved Body Again

Introduction to Chapter 10

Ph. 8.10 seems like the culmination of the book, given its proof that the prime mover is immaterial (begun in Part A, 266a10–b27, concluded in Part D, 267b17–26), a result prefiguring the theology of Metaph. 12 (see especially 12.7, 1073a5–11). Aquinas (8.1141, 1160, 1164) regards Ph. 8.10 as primarily an account of the prime mover, and Simplicius (1358.1–2) summarises the chapter’s results as that this is proven to be one, unmoved and without parts (i.e., immaterial); cf. also Zekl (p. xlv).

Yet perhaps this conclusion is rather a deferral: it shows that the prime mover’s nature and attributes do not come within the scope of physical science, since physics is a μέθοδος (methodos) concerning beings in movement, and so corporeal (cf. Wagner, p. 667, on Ph. 8.1, 251a5–8). The only divinity properly within its scope is the everlasting sphere continuously rotating at the cosmos’s edge. Note also Alexander (fr. 788 Rashed), differing subtly from Simplicius’ paraphrase (1321.3–5) in emphasising equally (with the proof of the first mover’s immateriality), as Aristotle’s aim in Ch. 10, to demonstrate the manner of the first movement (n.b. Alexander’s μέν ... δέ ..., where Simplicius subordinates the latter). Aristotle argues in Part C (267a21–b17) that this sphere, and so implicitly not the whole cosmos, as Plato had written (Ti. 34a, 36e, 37c; cf. 38e–40b, Lg. 10.893c, Phdr. 246b–c), is the location of the primary everlasting movement; in effect Aristotle here recognises its divinity in its everlastingly simple movement, as the only object on which the prime mover directly acts (267b9). Immediately previously, leaving the proof of the immateriality of the first mover incomplete in Part A, in Part B (266b27–267a20) he detours to solve a particular problem for his theory of movement, the case of things thrown (see further below here).

Kouremenos (ch. 1) regards this chapter as a fresh start concerning the prime mover. According to him the arguments for the prime mover’s immateriality, and unity as the cause of continuity of movement, and also the explanation of projectile motion, are all involved together in the disproof of a precise alternative conception of a prime mover, as air. For this Kouremenos (pp. 29, 33–34, 41) appeals to the claim at Cael. 3.2, 30b23–30 that air is the cause of elemental forced movement. He argues air plays a role in Aristotle’s system equivalent to that of elemental interaction in Plato’s Timaeus (esp. 57d–58c),
which is treated as a cause of cosmic movement, something Kouremenos thinks is the fundamental target.

But Aristotle has already identified the prime mover as motionless (Ph. 8.5–6), and the first movement as rotation (Chs. 7–9); so air cannot now be a candidate. Kouremenos (p. 34) resists this objection, claiming that the argument at 267b9–17 for an unmoved prime mover implies that previously in Ch. 10 Aristotle has not taken for granted earlier results; that is an extreme and unnecessary assumption without textual basis. The argument of 267b9–17 is sufficiently explained by its own context (see below on Part C), addressing the new question, what body undergoes the first movement. Overall Kouremenos’ argument depends on interpreting Aristotle’s general characterisations of rejected views as allusions to particular theories; but, if he had meant such theories, he could easily have referred to them directly, so as to make his points clearer, as he does elsewhere. Kouremenos also overlooks alternative possible targets for the doctrines Aristotle rejects (e.g. the atomists), and the likelihood that Aristotle’s arguments are normally sufficiently explained by their role in establishing his own positive doctrines. On Kouremenos see further especially Commentary on 266a10–24 (A/D.a.I, p. 313); 266a24–b5 (a.II.i.I, p. 323); and 266b8–20, Subargument II (pp. 329–330).

Both Simplicius and Aquinas assume unquestioningly that throughout this chapter Aristotle conceives positively of his prime mover as possessing infinite power (δύναμις, dunamis). Where Ph. 3.4–8 rejects an actual infinite, the only examples relate to magnitudes and their attributes, but as Apostle (p. 340 n. 7) argues, Aristotle restricts his positive conception of the infinite to the incompleteness of processes of becoming (cf. Ph. 3.6–7, esp. 207a7–15, b21–35). If so, the Neoplatonic and Christian theologies of Simplicius and Aquinas, respectively, must misrepresent Aristotle’s views.

The concept of infinite power here (see esp. 266a25, b5–6, cf. b14–15, 267b23–25) thus requires explanation, since it is plausible to think that an infinite potential to be moved requires for activation an infinite power to incite movement. Apostle (loc. cit.) suggests Aristotle uses the concept of an infinite power here only dialectically, as a concession to the opposed position, presumably that the prime mover is a body with motive power. In addition we can expand what Alexander, cited by Simplicius (e.g., 1358.18–26), said to explain the first body’s infinite potential (passive δύναμις) to be moved, that this is only homonymously a δύναμις: just as this is not a potential in the same sense as a potential to undergo a finite change, since only a finite potential may be inactive, equally the prime mover’s power is only homonymously an active δύναμις, since unlike an active power to cause a finite change, whose activation makes the mover weary and so is finite, the power (so called) of the prime mover is