nullum corpus nisi divisibile intelligamus, contra autem nullam mentem nisi indivisibilem
(R. Descartes, AT VII 13.20–21)

I. Introduction: motion in the physical and spiritual realms

Radically different as they may be,1 Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories of motion were harmonised and integrated into an encompassing theory by Proclus and other late Neoplatonists. In a nutshell, whereas Aristotle substituted the notion of an unmoved mover for Plato’s self-moving soul, Proclus incorporates both principles of motion and makes the self-movers subordinate to unmoved movers, assigning them to the levels of soul and intellect, respectively.

Both Plato and Aristotle start from the fundamental premise that there can be no infinite series of extrinsically moved movers: a causal series needs to have a beginning, i.e. needs to be headed by a moving cause that is not itself moved by anything external to it. In Plato’s view this first principle of motion is moved by itself,2 according to Aristotle it is not moved at all.3 It is often believed that Aristotle simply substituted unmoved movers for Platonic self-movers, but that is to make things simpler than they are. At Phys. VIII.5 258 a 3–21 Aristotle argues that self-motion is (non-eliminatively) reducible to an unmoved mover within the self-mover; it is this unmoved mover that is then the true moving cause. Yet the unmoved part of self-movers is not strictly speaking unmoved, since it is moved accidentally. And that is why self-movers

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1 Vuillemin (1991) 29 systematically compares both theories of motion, yet given the unclarity of Plato’s view he has to rely on reconstructions that may be open to debate.

2 Phaedr. 245 d 7: κινήσεως μὲ νόθο τὸ αὐτὸ κινοῦν.

cannot constitute the first principle of change—more precisely because they are unable to cause a continuous motion. What is needed to stop the causal regress, according to Aristotle, is a mover that is unmoved in an absolute sense.

Aristotle restricted motion to the physical world, as for him there is no other world than the physical. The unmoved movers do not belong to this world (they do not intervene in it nor are they touched by it), and they are, as their name makes plain, not in motion. That is different for Platonic souls, which, though being incorporeal, are immanent and, more importantly, in motion. This means that Plato, contrary to Aristotle, accepts spiritual motion, e.g. for souls. In the Sophist he moreover counts motion among the five greatest kinds, thus introducing motion, i.e. dynamism, in the realm of Forms.

Proclus essentially combines Plato’s and Aristotle’s arguments in favour of a first cause of motion, adopts the Platonic notion of spiritual motion, and accepts Aristotle’s kinematics as an analysis of the

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5 This addresses the question asked by Sorabji (1988) 222–223.

6 I take Metaph. XII.8 to be an integral part of the Aristotelian theory, and shall not here complicate matters unnecessarily by speculating about different stages of Aristotle’s thought. See also Phys. VIII.6 258 b 10–11:

7 Vuillemin (1991) 198 claims that for Plato ‘3. Selfmotion precludes in itself any distinction between mover and moved, or action and passion. 4. Selfmotion is a purely spiritual motion without relation to space or to any motion which proceeds in space and is a possible object of sensation.’ These specifications would make Plato’s view virtually immune to the main criticisms formulated by Aristotle and would make self-motion almost indistinguishable from the activity of an unmoved mover. If self-motion is not motion in a physical sense at all, there would be no reason for Aristotle to call it motion and the disagreement between the two thinkers would turn out to be essentially terminological. Yet it is questionable whether Plato really held the view which Vuillemin accredits to him. Phaedr. 245 cd certainly suggests a distinction between active and passive motion within the self-moving soul (245 c 7–8: τὸ σὰρξε τὸ κινοῦν...οὔποτε λήγει κι αὔμε αὖ, and d 7: κινήσεως...ἀρ το σὰρξ τὸ κινηθοῦν) and in the Timaeus the moving soul is undeniably spatially extended (36 b–37 c). This notwithstanding, a denial of a distinction between activity and passivity (in the Aristotelian sense) within self-movers seems to me to be exactly what Plato would need.

8 Simp., In Phys. 404.16–33, reports that for Proclus the only important difference between Aristotle’s and Plato’s theories of motion consisted in the latter’s doctrine of the five highest forms in the Sophist.

9 Cf. White (1992) 32: ‘[K]inematics deals with motion of bodies without reference to either masses or the forces acting on them. That is, kinematics is the study of the geometrically or topologically possible motion of a body or system of bodies.’ According to the customary classification kinematics is one of the three parts of mechanics, besides statics and dynamics (the latter is concerned with the relation between the motion