Aristotle's definition of motion

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"Motion," says Aristotle, "is the actualization of what potentially is, as such — ἡ τοῦ δυνάμει ὄντος ἐντελέχεια, ἡ τοιούτων."¹ If we are to believe Aristotle, this definition speaks to a problem which was perplexing and refractory to his predecessors, and it is itself complex and subtle, employing concepts which are, as he says, "difficult to grasp."² Given the intricacy of many of Aristotle's technical concepts, this claim might seem outrageous; for on the usual understanding, his definition of motion is straightforward and pellucid. I shall try to show that that understanding is wrong, and that Aristotle's definition is more subtle than it is usually taken to be.

I

"Actualization" is an inelegant and in many ways misleading rendering of "ἐντελέχεια"; I have used it because it incorporates an interesting ambiguity about which we must become clear. Like other terms used to translate "ἐντελέχεια," "actualization" may refer either to a process or to the result of a process. In one sense, the actualization of a man's hopes may be said to be taking place in the unfolding of some event; in another, it may be said to exist as a result of that event. When Aristotle says that motion is the actualization of the potential, in which sense is he using that term; does he mean a process or a product?

There is an immediate temptation to suppose that he means the former. For he is defining motion, that is, the process by which the potential to be something or other is actualized. In any case of motion, it is obvious that the product is not this process, but its result. For example, in the building of a house, the product is not the act of building or of being built,³ but the building, that is, the house itself, which

¹ Physics III, 2, 201a11. Similar versions are in the same chapter at 201a29, 201b5, 202a7 and at Physics VIII, 1, 251a9 and Metaphysics Kappa, 1, 1065b16, 1065b23. As so often in Aristotle, "is" is here used as a predicate variable; read "of what potentially is so-and-so ...".

² Physics III, 1, 202a1.

³ Like Aristotle, I have been indiscriminate in my use of building and of being
results from this act. So it is not in this sense that the actualization of bricks and stones *qua* potentially a house is said to be motion; it must therefore be actualization in the sense of process, the actualizing of bricks and stones *qua* potentially a house, which Aristotle defines as the motion of building.

So Aristotle's definition has often been taken. W. D. Ross writes that for Aristotle "motion is 'the actualization of that which is potentially, as such.' I.e. if there is something which is actually *x* and potentially *y*, motion is the making actual of its *y*-ness."⁴ And in commenting directly upon Aristotle's central formulation of the definition, Ross is more explicit; "ἐνεκλέψεω," he writes, "must here mean 'actualisation', not 'actuality': it is the passage from potentiality to actuality that is χίνησις."⁵

But this answer is wrong. I do not mean that Aristotle would have been unhappy with the description of motion as the actualizing of a potentiality, but only that this is not the definition which he offers at the beginning of Book III of the *Physics*.

In the first place, the definition on this account becomes astonishingly vacuous. For to say that motion is the process of actualization by which a potentiality is actualized is to attempt to define motion in terms of the very concept in question, that of the process of actualization. The reason that the definition of motion is, as Aristotle complains, so difficult, is that it is unclear just what sort of thing a process of actualizing a potentiality is. Aristotle's definition might, on this account, be helpful in exhibiting important connections between motion and the potential-actual distinction, but it could be an illuminating definition (if at all) only of one or both of these latter concepts; as a definition of motion, it is empty and uninformative.⁶

There is a parry to this objection; for there is a broad sense of "actualization" in which not every actualization, according to

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⁶ Aquinas voices just such an objection, arguing that those who define motion as *exitus de potentia in actum* have committed a fallacy of definition, since *exitus* is itself a species of motion; *Commentaria in Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, Lib. III, Cap. I, Lec. II, n. 2.