

The Initiation of Action: *De Anima* 3: 9-10

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Aristotle (Phil 5081, Shields)

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Introduction

- Subject is Aristotle's account of what capacity of the soul initiates action. III:9-10.
- Very typical Aristotelian methodology, including survey of wrong views, two apparent self-contradictions, and baffling analogy. But all makes sense if look closely at structure of the argument. Plausible account. Note paragraph citations.

The Structure of the Argument

Propose question: What is it in the soul that initiates locomotion? (B3:C9:P1)

- Soul of animals defined with respect to capacities of perception and locomotion.

Note implications for a wider issue: How should the soul be divided? (B3:C9:P2-3)

- Our options include:
 - Platonic: appetitive, spirited, and rational parts or rational and irrational parts
 - Aristotelian: nutritive, perceptual, rational parts
- Imagination and desire seem different from all of these parts both "in account and in... potentiality," i.e. its essence and function. (B3:C9:P2-P3)

Consider and exclude possible answers: Three wrong, two incomplete. (B3:C9:P6-P9)

- Three wrong explanations:
 - Nutritive: Responsible for motion of growth and decay. But plants not mobile, so nutritive powers not sufficient for locomotion. (B3:C9:P6)
 - Perceptual: Some animals immobile, but not defective or incomplete. Think sponges and barnacles. So same problem as with plants. Capacities of locomotion do not come bundled with perception. (B3:C9:P7)
 - Contemplative: Mere contemplation of facts doesn't command action. $2+2=4$. So what? [DMH: Many movers do not share in the rational part of the soul.]
- Two incomplete explanations with counter-examples:
 - Practical reason: Can practically reason in the abstract (Aquinas), e.g. what to do if attacked. Incontinent man shows (possible) disconnect between reason and action, as reason is overpowered by desire. Smoking doctor. (B3:C9:P8)
 - Desire: Desire is not "in charge" of motion. The continent have desires but follow reason instead. Fearful soldier on battlefield. (B3:C9:P9)

Propose a theory: Two sources of motion: practical reason and desire. (B3:C10:P1-P2)

- Confusion #1: Seems like just excluded reason and desire as initiators of action. Not quite right. Reason and desire not excluded, just ruled inadequate explanations on own due to counter-examples. Plausible that could explain both continence and incontinence through interactions between reason and desire, if one not always dominant over other.
- Not just practical reason, but also imagination for non-rational beasts and humans. Some imaginings have same functional role as practical reason in that both "impel action in the absence of sense-objects" (Aquinas). Choose restaurant based on location versus smell.

Essentialize the theory: Motion is initiated by single source: desire. (B3:C10:P3)

- Confusion #2: Thought that had two explanations, now just one! What happened to practical reason/imagination? One ruled more fundamental. Aristotle observes that both are “always for the sake of something,” namely object of desire. But practical reason/imagination requires desire to go from first to second actuality, so desire primary.
- So have picture of action. Object of desire is “the starting point of practical reason, while its final stage is the beginning of action.” (B3:C10:P1) An object arouses desire → Practical reason or imagination determines an action or a course of action achieve the object of desire → The organism acts to obtain the object of desire. What it’s not:
- Causalism of sufficient antecedent causes. Object of desire is final cause, so regulates throughout. In sailing boat to shore desire keeps you on course.
- Humean theory of desires ruling over reason. In short term, reason can overrule desires, as in continent man who wants cake, but eats salad. And knowledge can vacate desire, like when learn cake contains rat poison. In long term, desires can be shaped by reason through habituation, so learn to like salad better than cake. From *Nicomachean Ethics*. So desire is essential due to chronological and logical priority, not super-strong overriding powers.
- So now have answer to opening question: Faculty of desire is “the sort of capacity in the soul which initiates motion.” (B3:C10:P5)

Note implications for the wider issue: Capacities best individuate soul parts. (B3:C10:P5)

- If distinguish parts of soul by capacities, then “there will turn out to be a great many,” including nutrition, perception, thought, deliberation, and desire. That’s no problem. As individuate capacities, discover parts of the soul.
- Not so for Platonic theories. Basis for distinction between parts not clear.

Work out some side issues: Conflicts, moved and unmoved, and body. (B3:C10:P6-P8)

- Explains conflict between reason and appetites by different time horizons. Appetites concern immediate pleasures, which seem like unqualified pleasures. Cake! Reason focused on future, so counsels forbearance. My thighs! (B3:C10:P6)
- Differentiates between unmoved and moved aspects of action. (B3:C10:P7)
 - What initiates motion: the object of desire (unmoved).
 - That by which it initiates motion: the faculty of desire (moved).
 - What is moved: the animal.
- Desire common to both body and soul because motion is in the body. (B3:C10:P8)

Baffling analogy: The hinge. (B3:C10:P8)

- Strange analogy to the hinge offered as summary.
 - “For now, though, to summarize: something initiates motion instrumentally when the starting point and the end point are the same, for instance in a hinge—since here the convex is the end point and the concave the starting point (for which reason the one is at rest and the other is moved), and though differing in account, they are inseparable in magnitude.” (B3:C10:P8)
- Basic point is that object of desire, as final cause, is both starting point of action (as initiator) and end point (as goal). Understand two aspects differently, but really the same.

Summarizes conclusions: The connection between desire and self-motion.

- True summary: Capacity of desire entails capacity of self-motion. Capacity of desire requires imagination (either perceptual or rational).

Picture of the Soul

Basic Type of Soul	Associated Imagination	Associated Desire	Associated Range of Action
Nutritive	None	None	Growth, decay, and reproduction
Perceptual	Imagination in images	Desire as appetite	Local movement
Rational	Imagination in thought	Desire as wish	Long-range purposeful action

- Might wonder whether forms of imagination and desire are subordinate to basic classifications of the soul into nutritive, perceptual, and rational. But two senses of subordinate:
 - Associated desire and imagination is just part of perceptual or rational soul. Aristotle doesn't seem bound to three basic categories. Happy to extend, as quote indicated.
 - Associated desire and imagination are just associated. Maybe logical or physical reason for connection. Self-movement in developing depth perception in kittens.
- So seems clear that second sense of association, not parts.

Questions for Aristotle

- Is there a hard and fast distinction between locomotion and other forms of self-generated movement, e.g. a barnacle waving its tentacles?
- What do naturally (i.e. non-defective) non-moving animals lack? Imagination? In 3:11, suggests that if have imagination, then perhaps only "present indeterminately."
- Is the object of desire just the final cause or also the efficient cause of action?