From Aristotle to Heidegger: Metaphysics Cannot Die

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Abstract: One could argue that the aim of this article is an existential ontologization of metaphysics, if «metaphysical» is what exists beyond the boundaries of possible experience. This is pursued through a reflection on the reasons which may have led Aristotle to claim, in *Metaphysics Lambda*, that the πρῶτον κινοῦν ἀκίνητον («unmoved mover») is marked by some specific traits, the crucial of which consists in its being an eternal «νόησις» («thinking»). In the article, also Aristotle's «χωριστὸς» («separate») gains a possible meaning, which reveals itself *in its difference* from metaphysical being.
Keywords: metaphysics, unmoved mover, existential, belief, phenomenon.

1. A possible meaning and a possible reason of unmoved mover's metaphysicality

In this paragraph, I would like to present two possible central threads of almost all the features Aristotle ascribes to the unmoved mover, differentiating them from the ones that could appear, at first glance, from the reading of *Physics* or of *Metaphysics*[1]. According to this first-glance reading, central threads determining Aristotle's thesis of the unmoved mover being thinking (nóesis), and thinking of itself, can be respectively found in the Aristotelian doctrine of the impossibility, for a finite-size entity, to be the cause of the eternal rotation of cosmos (in fact, since an infinite-size entity does not exist for Aristotle, this cause needs to be a

[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics Lambda*. Translated with an introduction and commentary by L. Judson. OUP, Oxford 2019. Since Aristotle's fuller doctrine of the unmoved mover, even if concise, is explained in this book of *Metaphysics*, instead of in the eighth of *Physics*, I shall refer to *Metaphysics Lambda* in this article. As for the historical hypotheses on when this book was written, and on its possible later inclusion in *Metaphysics*, cf. G. Reale, *Il concetto di «filosofia prima» e l'unità della metafisica di Aristotele,* Vita e pensiero, Milan 1961, chapter 7.

thinking entity), and in the Aristotelian claim that the

> «most worthy of honour» of all entities can only think the most worthy of honour of all entities, that is, itself[2]. Let us now turn to other possible central threads.

The unmoved mover is no immediate phenomenon, if «immediateness» means the mode of presence, for instance, of these characters in the present page, as well as of what now lies in their background, such as the table I see and on which I am writing. Instead, the unmoved mover is now present as the Eiffel Tower is, given that I am at this moment in Milan. One could say the unmoved mover is, and at the same time *is not*, present. To a certain extent, it is therefore similar to the object of a desire. In effect, I can desire the Eiffel Tower to be in front of me, not thanks to my faculty of *imagining* it, if this means creating a mental object called «the Eiffel Tower». This mental object would in fact be present as well as these characters on the page, and as all the other mental objects I could imagine, such as lines, triangles etc. I can desire the Eiffel Tower to be in front of me, because it is, and at the same time it is *not*, present[3].

This ambiguous mode of «presence-absence» may be considered as the unmoved mover's mode of presence, as the possible meaning of its being «separate» (choristós)[4]. However, what if we ask «separate»[5].

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[2] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b-1073a.

[3] I refer here to Severino's distinction between the «phenomenologically-immediate» and what, even being «present», nonetheless is not «phenomenologically-immediate» (E. Severino, *La struttura originaria,* Adelphi, Milan 2007, chapter 2, pp. 143-172, and 248-251).

[4] «Χωριστὸς» is usually translated with «separate» (also by Judson). St. Thomas Aquinas already used, in his commentary, «separatum» (cf. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. M. R. Cathala, R. M. Spiazzi, 3ª ed., Marietti, Turin 1977). However, G. Reale explains that «choristós» has at least two meanings, since Aristotle would both say that a substance can be «separated» from its accidents, thus existing without them, and that there exist somewhat such an entity is separate from? Or should we ask from *whom* is it separate? What here is «separate» does not seem to be the object (the unmoved mover), or does not seem to be *only* the object, since this is marked by its separateness because of its modality of presence: «metaphysics», understood (for the moment) as «separateness», seems therefore to be a manner of being *human*. It seems that he or she who is «separate» is the human being him- or herself, and that only for this reason the object from which one is separate, such as the unmoved mover, is as-

In any case, while I can verify as well as falsify the existence of the Eiffel Tower at a certain time thanks to its being, in principle, a possible immediate phenomenon (as I have seen, for instance, the Eiffel Tower during my past holiday in Paris), I cannot verify nor falsify the existence of the unmoved mover in any way: it is such that it cannot ever be an immediate phenomenon. Thus, I can only convince myself that the unmoved mover, thinking of itself, exists, without immediate phenomena being able to confirm or to contradict my thought. Why is this so? What does it mean to falsify a conviction?

Let us try to answer this question with an example. If Parmenides has actually claimed that immediate phenomena always display an absolute rest, and if now my hands, which I see on the keyboard, move, then this does not imply Parmenides' words being meaningless, but rather that his thesis is an *erroneous* one. Somehow, his words need to be meaningful, precisely so that they can convey an erroneous perspective. To distinguish such an erroneous perspective from the correct ones about immediate phenomena, we could define it as a *conviction*, which nonetheless is not innocent, because it insists on phenomena showing what they manifestly do not show[6].

Instead, Aristotle's affirmation of the existence of an unmoved mover (or of many unmoved movers) is not contradicted by immediate phenomena since it does not insist on them saying what they do not say, so to speak. It aims rather to claim something that transcends phenomena. If anything, his thesis is then a *falsifiable* one. Such an assertion leads us

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cribed the adjective «separate» substances (cf. G. Reale, *Introduzione, traduzione e commentario della Metafisica di Aristotele*. Bompiani, Milan 2009, p. 1254). This second meaning is the one to which I am referring in this article. (For other translations of Aristotle's «choristós» with «separate», cf. for instance Aristotle, *Fisica*. Translated with an introduction by R. Radice, Bompiani, Milan 2014, as well as Aristotle, *Fisica, Gamma*. Translated, with an introduction and commentary by M. Ugaglia, Carocci, Rome 2012). On the concept of «choristós», cf. also D. Morrison: "Χωριστὸς in Aristotle", in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 89 (1985), pp. 89-105.

5 We refer here implicitly to a Heideggerian perspective, which we will try to develop in this article.

6 This could be the meaning of Aristotle's claims about Parmenides' «μανίαι» (insanities). Cf. for example Aristotle*, Sulla generazione e la corruzione*, ARACNE, Rome 2008, translated with an introduction by G. Giardina, 325 a, p 162.

to the question: is the unmoved mover something metaphysical or something «choristós» (separate)? Does being choristós mean being

> «metaphysical»? Or is the choristós being not able to reach the metaphysical «rank»? If not, on what grounds should one argue that a choristós entity is, in addition, metaphysical? In conclusion, what does being «metaphysical» here mean?

The reason for the metaphysicality of the unmoved mover seems to be its *eternity*, and

> «metaphysicality» seems here to mean that the unmoved mover *as* an eternal entity cannot be an immediate phenomenon, at least for human beings. «Metaphysicality» is therefore the necessity of something being separate from us, or better the necessity of us being separate from something, without any possible encounter. In effect, this appears different from something being separate from us just because it is so, thus remaining, at any rate, the possibility of an encounter, as it happens to those who have never seen the pyramids, for instance[7].

Why is the eternal metaphysical, however? What necessitates this connection? For us, as humans, things flow. Before I started writing on my computer, before this writing became an immediate phenomenon, my breakfast meal has been one, and soon some other immediate phenomenon shall cease and another will appear. Let us now pretend that the unmoved mover became, at this very moment, an immediate phenomenon, and let us furthermore pretend that it remained such for all eternity. Would its eternity have the mode of presence of an immediate phenomenon?

It seems that precisely because the unmoved mover would *begin* to be such a phenomenon, then its eternity *a parte ante*, its having always been, would *not* be an immediate phenomenon. For this reason, its overall eternity itself, so it seems, could not be manifest. Such an eternity could only be the object of a *conviction*, since until now no other thinking, except for our own thinking, has shown itself to us (not even the other human beings' thinking, although our lives are essentially defined by relating to it). Therefore, if we understand eternity, as such, as the ne-

[7] On the different meanings of «eternity» in the Ancient Thought, and therefore on the «eternity» of the unmoved mover, cf. E. Berti, "Time and Eternity", in *Nuovi studi aristotelici, II, Fisica, antropologia e metafisica*. Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, pp. 95-113.

cessity of what has always been *and* will forever exist, then, even if the unmoved mover became an immediate phenomenon from now on, its eternity would always be an enigma. This «unverifiableness» of unmoved mover's eternity is what we have called, in this context, its «metaphysicality».

One might raise an objection: have we not spoken of a falsifiableness of Aristotle's assertion of the existence of the unmoved mover? In effect, if it were something situated at the very edge of the last celestial sphere[8], and if such a sphere existed, we could examine it in order to verify the existence of the unmoved mover. Then, if we found no such an entity, we would thence falsify Aristotle's assertion, not only regarding the eternity of the unmoved mover, but in regard to its existence itself, at least as Aristotle depicts it in his *Physics*. Moreover, even if it existed on the celestial sphere, we could nonetheless witness its destruction over time, which surely would not be certain, but still possible. So far, we can say we could not accomplish the task of verifying the eternity of such an unmoved mover, but we could falsify it instead.

However, the unmoved mover does not seem to be able to be situated on a sphere, since it is pure «thinking of thinking»[9]. Just as we are not able to ascertain nor to contradict that the human bodies, which we see as immediate phenomena, conceal an experience, a «thinking» of the world or not, we are not able to ascertain the existence of a divine «thinking of thinking». In any case, while the metaphysicality of the unmoved mover (now conceived of as a divine thinking of itself) would be necessitated by its eternity, or better by the impossibility for the temporal structure of our experience to witness eternity, the *«separateness»* of the unmoved mover seems to be necessitated by other reasons. Let us now turn to this theme.

If we understand the unmoved mover simply as a thinking which is not mine, its separateness seems to be necessitated by the fact we cannot read other people's mind. In fact, if we began from tomorrow to read others' minds, the existence (or the non-existence) of the unmoved mover would not be «separate» anymore, as we could verify (or falsify) it[10]. Let us ask ourselves if tomorrow we could cease to temporally experience things and start experiencing the eternity of all entities instead. If this happened,

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[8] Aristotle, *Physics*, 267 b.
[9] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072 b.
[10] On this theme, cf. E. Severino, *La struttura originaria*, pp. 126-128.

we would *begin* to experience things non-temporally: the temporal structure would still work in our beginning. This is why what we have called «separateness», with regard to the existence of the unmoved mover, does not coincide with «metaphysicality»: separateness seems in effect to be engendered by our not being able to read others' minds, which is a lack – one could argue – marked by contingency: nothing impedes us from waking up tomorrow and finding ourselves possessing this capacity. Instead, the possibility to loosen our bond with the temporal structure of experience confirms the temporal structure of experience[11].

We are now able to claim something about the central threads of the metaphysical doctrine expressed in *Metaphysics Lambda*. It seems that Aristotle thinks of the unmoved mover not only such that it is necessarily «present-absent», inasmuch as it is eternal, but also such that it is separate from us, insofar as it is another thinking, another mind. Aristotle seems therefore to conceive of such an entity in order to render it «choristós» in many respects, meaning with this term that something is *distant* from us, regardless of its further being metaphysical or simply separate from us. This sense of «distance» appears to contribute both to the sense of «separateness» and of «metaphysicality». However, a question remains to be answered: why does Aristotle conceive of the unmoved mover as thinking *of itself*, given that we are not aiming to ground this trait in its being «the most worthy of honour» of all things?

If someone were an eternal consciousness, an eternal thinking, nevertheless without being the eternal thinking of himself, his eternity would strangely be *to himself* an enigma. If an eternal god were not able to see himself being eternal, then he could only be *convinced* of his own eternity, which seems to be really weird. Moreover, in such a case he could even doubt his eternity. Instead, in order to be aware of it, he should grasp himself as eternal, that is, grasp himself *as an eternal immediate phenomenon*. A second consideration on the central threads we have spoken of could thence be that the unmoved mover is by Aris-

[11] We therefore aim here to distinguish a possible meaning of «metaphysicality» as the contingent circumstance of us not being able to verify or falsify something (for instance, if tomorrow will be a sunny day), from «metaphysicality» as the *impossibility* to verify something (for example the eternity of an entity), to falsify something, or both to verify and falsify it. In this context, we will speak of «metaphysicality» only when there will be a necessity (or an impossibility) to be indicated, while we shall speak of «separateness» in the other cases.

totle thought of in order to render it a metaphysical (and separate) entity, but at least not for itself. This could be the reason of Aristotle's conceiving of it as a «thinking of thinking».

In conclusion, such threads, which here we have tried to deepen, according to which the

«metaphysics of the unmoved mover» is a manner of being human, and of being, as humans, in a metaphysical relation to this object, could be seen as an «existentialisation» of this aspect of Aristotle's metaphysical doctrine. According to this view, we as human beings can only *metaphysically* relate to the unmoved mover, which therefore represents, in this sense, a part of Aristotle's «metaphysics»[12].

Toward the metaphysicality of existence

If Aristotle believed in the existence of an eternal unmoved mover, it would nonetheless be difficult to argue that everyone believes in it, as well as it would be difficult, generally speaking, to argue that everyone believes in the existence of an eternal entity. For this reason, it seems we cannot speak of a «metaphysicality of human existence» itself, i.e. of a metaphysical relating which would define our life. Or does our existence conceal some metaphysical zones, so to speak, which are essential to it?

I am now in my room, writing on my computer. Let us suppose I move to go to the living room, as I know there is a painting in it which I particularly like[13]. One could say that, when I reach the living room and see the painting, my expectation of finding it in its place is confirmed. Would be such a view, nevertheless, an overall view? What was the content of my expectation? In effect, I had two expectations, one of which was that the picture was laying in the sitting room while I still was in my room (being maybe rather a «conviction» than an «expectation»). The other one, which has then been confirmed, was the expectation of find-

[12] On the recent debate on which science studies the unmoved mover, cf. Helen S. Lang, "The Structure and Subject of Metaphysics Λ", in *«Phronesis»* 38(1993), pp. 257-280. As for the type of causality which needs to be ascribed to the unmoved mover, cf. E. Berti, "Unmoved mover(s) as efficient cause(s) in Metaphysics Λ 6", in *Nuovi studi aristotelici, II, Fisica, antropologia e metafisica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, pp. 427-451.

[13] A similar example, to which in this context we aim to refer, is used by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. (Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie. Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985 sect. 44, subsect. A).

ing the painting in the living room. Thence, the first so- called expectation has *not* been confirmed, and it seems instead to be an unverifiable one, an unverifiable conviction, since when I was in my room, I simply could not verify (nor falsify) if the picture was still in the living room.

Even my belief, according to which the picture I see in the sitting room is the same picture which has always been there, does not seem to be verifiable (nor falsifiable) on the basis of immediate phenomena. Since the painting has been in my sitting room while I was elsewhere, and has consequently not been an immediate phenomenon, then I will never be able to verify or falsify such a fact. Should we not therefore speak of a *«metaphysicality»* of this fact? Should we not extend such a metaphysicality, understood as the necessity of both the unverifiableness and unfalsifiableness of a given circumstance, to all those things we now find ourselves *believing* in? Furthermore, should we not ascribe metaphysicality to all past entities and facts which have not been immediate phenomena, at least for us, and which therefore have the destiny of never showing themselves?

To claim such a thesis does not seem to imply, in effect, to erase our thinking of that painting in the sitting room as being the same painting which yesterday was there. We almost all live thinking so, and the metaphysicality of things does not imply that we do not relate to entities which we recognize as metaphysical. This thinking, however, seems not to be grounded on immediate phenomena, but on our conviction. Otherwise, we should assert we actually were in the living room and could thus experience the picture as an immediate phenomenon, alongside with its having remained in the sitting room throughout the whole time. Then, if in the past there was something which was not an immediate phenomenon, which did not show itself to us but was rather the object of a belief, it appears to be necessary that it has become a metaphysical entity.

In this case, one could ask: when have we not *believed* in the existence of something, with all its traits, without being able to *witness* it as an immediate phenomenon? Is there a time in which no object was experienced in an indirect modality? It seems that we are always accompanied in our lives by some objects of belief. In this sense, one could argue that «metaphysics cannot die». Nonetheless, this is just a perspective I aim here to suggest, but that would require to be developed elsewhere.