

A History of Philosophy

12 Aristotle's God

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Now, let's turn our attention back, if you will, to Aristotle's account of God. We moved into this, as he does, following a discussion of his metaphysics, pointing out how every kind of thing that is, every kind of process of change or becoming, has to be explained in terms of four factors or four causes. Not only the matter or material cause that's the subject of change, not only the efficient cause that exerts the force, but the formal cause, the essential nature of what is going on, and the final cause, the purpose.

Now, if that is true of every process of change and everything that is, it's also true of every kind of movement within the larger cosmos. Hence, it's true not only of changes taking place on the Earth, but it's true of the rotation of planets, it's true of those fixed stars on the outer perimeter of the universe, each of which is spinning around on its own axis. It's true, in other words, of the cosmos in its entirety, that its endless motion, spatial motion, circular spatial motion, rotating, spinning, rotating, must have itself an adequate causal explanation.

The material nature of the thing is spelled out in terms of basic elements, plus the ether, which fills the space between the outer perimeter of things and the planets. The material cause is there. The efficient cause within the cosmos is plain.

It's the movement of those fixed stars that produces changes in the ether, that maintains the rotation of the planets, that maintains changes in the Earth's atmosphere, that maintains the processes of change on the Earth. So efficient cause runs all the way through. Formal cause in the nature of things, including the nature of the fixed stars, because it is their nature to spin.

If somehow or other, that spinning can be not just a potency, a potential, but something which is actualized, what maintains that actuality of the motion of the cosmos and boiling it down to the outermost efficient cause, the motion of the fixed stars? What maintains that? And you recall the conclusion that he comes to, namely that beyond the perimeter of the universe, you have an unmoved mover. The fixed stars move. The unmoved mover does not move, but moves things which are moved.

In itself, it doesn't change, but it is the ultimate cause of all kinds of change. By virtue of its influence on those fixed stars, which is the ultimate outer efficient cause of everything going on in the cosmos. Now, did you follow that line of thought from last time? It's simple enough to get a hold of.

But once you realize his view of the geocentric universe, the planets around, rotating around the earth, okay, and the fixed stars out on the perimeter here, each spinning on its own axis and way beyond the unmoved mover. Everything else is moved, except for the unmoved mover. No change, no forces acting on it.

So that's the picture he is developing. And in the remainder of book 12 of the *Metaphysics*, chapter 6 and following, he goes over one aspect or another of this picture. There have been all sorts of literary criticism done on the literary composition of Book 12.

Was it all written at once? Is it a collection of things put together? Is it genuinely Aristotelian? You know, the sorts of things that literary criticism does. Well, all that sort of stuff has gone on with book 12. But there is the picture, at least, which has been transmitted as Aristotle's, and I'm inclined to think it is.

There's much more unified testimony in the manuscripts and versions that it's Aristotle's than for much ancient literature. But in chapter 6, page 373, 374 in the Kaufman Anthology, in chapter 6, he dwells on this assertion that this God is the Unmoved Mover. And draws from that a further implication that the unmoved mover is pure actuality.

Now, you're acquainted enough with the terms potentiality and actuality to get the force of this. For Aristotle, every change is the actualizing of some potential. It's the actualizing of some potential.

I'm potentially over here, now I'm actualizing that potential. I'm potentially back by the lectern, now I'm actualizing that potential. Every process of change is the actualization of some potential that the thing has.

But to say that God is pure actuality is to say there is no unactualized potential. You see? No unactualized potential. There is no change possible in God.

There is no change possible. The unmoved, unchanged, unchanging ultimate source of change. The unmoved mover, pure actuality.

Now that's crucial. Why would he go that route? Well, I think one purpose is when you take a look ahead, it always helps to read the last page, the last chapter of a novel. When you look ahead and see where he's going to come out, this God is altogether good.

And if altogether good, then there's no room for improvement. And if altogether good, then it wouldn't change for the worse. So, how could there be change, you see? So if you look ahead, all right, like Plato's form of the good, change is, in that sense, not possible.

But more significantly, I think, it goes back to the fact that in that argument from the nature of the cosmos, he's trying to account for the everlasting, that age-long, unchanging process of change. You remember in terms of different kinds of locomotion, linear, rectilinear, circular, there's only one unchanging process of locomotion, the circular locomotion, that has neither beginning nor end. No turning point where you have to stop and turn.

But it's an everlasting circular locomotion that characterizes the planets and the fixed stars. So, you want something then as the ultimate cause of that which has an unchanging nature. And to have a completely unchanging nature means that the thing has to be either nothing, without even potentiality, or else pure actuality.

Pure actuality with no unactualized potential, so that no change is possible. Now, Plato, of course, had seen his transcendent forms as immune from all possible change, eternal, as well as the form of the good. Aristotle has, yes, the form of the good.

But this notion of a God beyond all process of change is deep-rooted in Plato and Aristotle. Yeah? Perhaps I'm misunderstanding the concept of actuality, because it seems, if God is fully actualized, then he must have come from somewhere, developed into a fully actualized... No, I didn't. Yeah, you notice he says unmoved, meaning there has been no process of motion either.

So, the eternal is one who always has been what it is. Okay, pure actuality. Yeah.

Okay? Along those lines of what it is, you said that he either has to be nothing or else pure actuality. Is that the same thing, sort of the same? He either has to be nothing or everything. Yeah, either has to be perfect or nothing at all. Okay.

Yeah. So is that sort of a pantheistic idea, that he is everything? Not necessarily. Somebody else asked last time, after class, or was it before, is Aristotle sort of pantheistic? As you read this book 12 of the Metaphysics, no, it sounds as if the unmoved mover is a transcendent being, but the perfection of being.

But I say that hesitatingly because in De Anima, on the soul, he talks of a rational soul, not only individual rational souls, but he talks as if there is some cosmic rational soul. Like Anaxagoras, noose, mind, reason. Now, if he intends to identify that with the unmoved mover, you see where he's going? It would sound as if that either is a platonic world soul or else the unmoved mover, and maybe that one.

But he never makes in any of the literature that survived any connection between the two. So that leaves us in the air. But at least his influence on those who have

followed the Aristotelian tradition has been more in theistic and deistic directions, you see, than in pantheist directions.

Now, having said that, however, Kristen, notice that this god of Aristotle's is really not a creator. He's not a creator, at least not in the Judeo-Christian sense, in which the act of creation brings things into existence. He creates out of nothing things that are.

He gives existence to things. Now, that's not the case with Aristotle's god. He's very explicit and develops this in chapter 7, I think it is, or is it chapter 8, chapter 7, that this god is not an efficient cause, does not exercise power, doesn't exercise force, is not the moving efficient cause of anything, you see.

Doesn't push things around. Doesn't force things to exist. So forth.

In fact, he doesn't need to. Because the cosmos, the materials of the cosmos, at least, always did exist. The material elements for the Greeks were eternal, everlasting.

Always were. And Aristotle gives the impression that the cosmos and its overall structure is everlasting. After all, those fixed stars have everlasting linear locomotion.

Everlasting, everlasting, always were, always will. You see. The notions of eternal and everlasting are roughly the same for Aristotle.

So all that you need in this god is one by virtue of whom the motion continues. Continues unceasingly. This everlasting circular locomotion.

Now, if you are thinking in terms of modern physics, by virtue of the principle of inertia, that would hardly be necessary. Bodies continue in the state of motion or rest, which they naturally are. But not in Greek physics, you see, where change is regarded as something artificial.

Motion is something that has to be produced and maintained. And so you have to have, then, a being to maintain the everlasting motion. But not as an efficient cause.

Why not? Well, a further reason. To act as an efficient cause, you have to do something. Exert force.

And in exerting force, you are going through a process of change. Changing from not exerting force to exerting force. And if there is to be no change, there can be no exertion of force.

So no efficient cause. So, how is he going to explain it? Well, the answer is, of course, in terms of final cause. God is the final cause, but not the efficient cause.

And he's very explicit about that. God is the final cause, not the efficient cause. So that the very nature of this unmoved mover is so amazing, so wonderful, that things are moved by wonderment.

Notice the term wonderful gets to you in your wondering at it. Oh, he uses not only the term wonder but the term love. The move by love.

Desire to be like it. That's Grigero's notion, you see. By wanting to be as actualized, you go on actualizing the motion.

And in order to talk about the stars' love, he has to ascribe something to the stars that is more than just inert matter. After all, of the Greeks, there is only one person like Democritus, the atomist, who thought of matter as inert. The rest, all one way or another, seem to have agreed with Thales that the world is besold, alive, you see.

A much more organic conception, if you like. A living cosmos. And so the souls of the fixed stars are moved to want to be like this, at which they wonder.

Now, whether he means that the souls of the fixed stars are conscious is another question. After all, lots of living things are moved without being conscious. How on earth did the daffodil bulbs know when to produce their daffodils? Buried in the dirt as they are.

Well, if you like, he sees something analogous to that. And so the stars maintain their motion. And God is simply the final cause.

Now, there is a further corollary that has to be drawn. And he does this in chapter 9. This is chapter 6. Let's see, am I getting that straight? Chapter 6, Chapter 7. Let's see, let's see. Yes, 6 is pure actuality.

7 is the final cause, sorry. Let's clear that up. Chapter 6, Chapter 7. Chapter 9. Chapter 8 simply brings in the details of the cosmology and the fixed stars and so forth.

But chapter 9. Well, if this divine being is pure actuality, this unmoved mover, this final cause, doesn't have to do anything, how are you going to characterise its actuality? And his description is simply that it does nothing but think on its own thinking. Now, you know what it is to think on your own. To muse, ponder, think of your own thoughts, meditate on them, enjoy them, so forth.

But why only that? Well, for the simple reason that if this unmoved mover was getting perceptual input or any other kind of input from outside into his thinking, you see, he would be moved by those external stimuli to think certain things. And being an unmoved mover, pure actuality, there is nothing that hasn't been actualised or could be actualised. So there's no input to his thinking from outside.

He does not see the sparrow fall. So forth. And if he were coming up with brand new ideas, coming up with imaginative worlds, then there would be an activity going on that hadn't gone on before.

You see? There would be unactualized potential involved there, too. So the only mental activity that the unmoved mover can possibly have is self-consciousness. Reflection on his own thoughts.

Thinking on his own thinking. He knows his own thoughts all the time anyway. He doesn't find anything new in them.

But thinking on his own thinking. Now, a being like this, in whom there is no possibility that it is unactualised, is perfectly good. Perfectly good.

Because the good for any kind of being is the actualisation of its potential. For a dog to be good is to be the best kind of dog it can be. By virtue of its potential is the kind of dog it is.

That's it. For you to be a good student is to actualise your potential as a student to the best that you can, being the kind of human being you are. The actualisation of your potential is your good.

And so, for one who is pure actuality, is pure goodness. No warts. No wrinkles.

No lack. No privation of being a goodness. And so here you get Aristotle's God.

If you like, this is a classic early attempt at what we call natural theology. A theology based on inferences from what we know about nature. A theology based on inferences from what we know about nature.

Yeah. And it provides the basic framework within which a lot of later Judeo-Christian, Islamic, and natural theology worked. As we'll see when we get to Thomas Aquinas, his classic arguments for the existence of God.

Work with this kind of scheme. Modified to suit a doctrine of creation. But the natural theology that Aquinas follows is the same kind of thinking that goes on here.

Well, questions? Comments? Yeah. Bob. How does a person become actualised? Can you become like God? Yeah, I want to get into his ethics shortly.

But certainly the actualisation of a human being is in likeness to God. The highest activity in which we can engage, according to Aristotle, is the contemplation of God. Yeah.

So you're on the right track, then, in seeing inferences to be drawn. Do those flower bulbs that you were talking about, in order to be actualised, wouldn't they have to have some way of knowing about the unmoved mover? I mean, like, in the inner, in order to be part of the sense of wonder. Yeah, it's not a good analogy.

It's kale, isn't it? It's not a perfect analogy, the analogy of bulbs. The point of the analogy, as I used it, was to say that bulbs are unconscious. Yet somehow or other, they respond.

That's my question. What would Aristotle say that, I mean, if the soul of an inner object, like a bulb or a stalk, is not conscious, then by what virtue does it wonder? Yeah, well, does he mean conscious wonder? You see? Does he mean conscious love? Conscious wanting, desiring? Or does he simply mean there is a natural tendency? You see? A natural tendency towards some kind of activity that is native to those things. He's very explicit that you don't have to ascribe consciousness to all teleological processes.

Teleological is oriented towards final causes. No. He's equally insistent on that in the section on nature from the physics that you've been reading.

He's equally insistent that final causes operate in every natural process. Some consciousness in humans and to some extent in animals, but otherwise unconscious. But there are still final causes.

Why? Well, the final cause is intrinsic to the thing. Because of its nature, its form, you see, comes loaded with that potential. With that tendency, that drive.

You see? You remember the picture in the Timaeus that Plato gives you of God winding the universe up? Letting it go, and it sort of runs down? Well, it's as if Aristotle is saying it never needed winding up in the first place. But it never runs down because God continues to exert some sort of magnetic attraction. You see? Like, in order to maintain it, don't you have to use force? No, not if the natural process has sufficient force within itself, which, properly actualized and directed, produces the goods.

All you have to do is free that up. David? Is Aristotle's God a good God in the sense that we use the word good as an adjective? Or is it a Good as a capital G? Yeah, he's

using it as an adjective, as Plato did, as well as a noun. Perhaps your question is whether it means some sort of metaphysical perfection.

Or whether it means moral perfection. Get the distinction? Metaphysical perfection, the most perfect kind of being there could be. You see? Well, certainly he means the first, the metaphysical.

And the way he talks in chapter 10 and one or two other places in his writings, I think he means the second, moral. I think he means the second. I used to criticize Aristotle's view of God by saying that the concept of God has various functions.

It has a metaphysical function in grounding or completing a metaphysical scheme. And Aristotle's God certainly does that. The concept of God also has a moral function as embodying the ideal of what it is to be morally good.

Good in nature, in character, in action. And Aristotle says enough that I think he implies that. In fact, all of the Greeks seem to think that that which is metaphysically good is by definition morally good, if the moral value is grounded in the metaphysical.

Now, the other function that a God concept has, of course, is as an object of religious adoration. An object of religious devotion. And I used to criticize Aristotle by saying that his God is no object of religious devotion.

But over the last two or three years, as I've been rereading Aristotle, I don't think that's right. Take this term wonder, love, wanting to be like, and the concept of the imitation of God is there. To say the contemplation of God is our highest activity sounds awfully like religious language.

And in one place in his politics, he says the government should support religious temples. Fund them. As if religion, which is supportive of the moral good, is in the interest of the state, whose function is to achieve a good life, which is morally good, and religion, Aristotle sees, is supportive of that.

So, yeah, I think that Aristotle's God, as presented in the metaphysics, of course, is going to be forming a metaphysical function primarily, but still has in his thinking a moral and religious function. So I've had to change my mind on that. One thing that bothers me about this unmoved mover is God.

He seems almost kind of pointless and silly in the fact that he just sits around and thinks about his thinking. And it seems like perhaps he, and maybe this is because I've been brought up in a different era, that he doesn't have any basis or reason for romantic virtues. Passion and love.

Yeah, I'm not sure the word silly is the right word. Remote, detached, unconcerned. You know, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

No, there are no four spiritual laws in Aristotle. No, nothing of that. I suppose you might want to say impersonal, in the sense of not being personally concerned.

Though if conscious thought and moral character are essentials in defining personhood, then it does sound as if Aristotle's God might, the way he talks, be personal in that sense. But he's a long way short of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Further short of the God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Loving and giving himself. Oh yeah, far, far short of that. As is usually true of the God of natural theology.

After all, if you're trying to derive some sort of understanding of God from what you know of the natural order, what is it Romans 1 tells us we can know, his eternal power and Godhead? There are limits to this, certainly. And most people who try to do natural theology say there's a lot, lot more about God that has to come from revealed religion. The thing is, Aristotle wasn't satisfied with the religions of their day.

Yeah? When you talked about the God of the five, the experience of the five, yeah, you're right on. You see, what happens in the developing thought of the, what, next thousand years? Well, in the next two or three, well, 500 years, within 500 years of Aristotle, is that this business of how to relate the world of eternal ideals, whether Plato's forms or Aristotle's God, to the natural world, to what we are and what we do, that issue becomes crucial. You see? It's one thing to say there are eternal patterns to imitate, even a God to imitate.

But where's the exertion of power in the natural world or in the human world, in history, in human life? Well, the thing that cracked that possibility wide open was the coming into Greek thought of the Judeo-Christian conception of God as almighty creator. Now, the Apostles' Creed is one of the earliest Christian confessions. I believe in God the Father, almighty maker.

Now, no Greek could say that. Plato couldn't. Almighty? Maker? Yeah, demiurge.

But almighty? You see? No, right away, the very first line of the Apostles' Creed is asserting that God is the efficient cause of creation. You see? Wow, that was revolutionary! You see? Well, we'll have to talk about that as we get to it. It's going to have far-reaching implications for every other topic.

It generates conflict of worldviews in patristic times. Naturalism, dualism, pantheism, Judeo-Christian theism. Yeah.

Okay. One person who is very much an Aristotelian today, and has written quite a bit on Aristotle, is a man by the name of Henry Veitch, who taught for many years at Indiana University, then at Georgetown, and is now retired. Delightful person.

He's a Christian, a very warm-hearted individual. But he makes the point, in talking about Aristotle's God, that Aristotle is telling us that man is not the measure of all things. Gods.

And I guess it takes somebody like a Christian to see that and say it so bluntly. Yeah, if you remember the sophist who said man is the measure of all things. No, Aristotle is plainly saying he's not.

God is. And he's saying that the most important end for which we do things is not ourselves, because we're not the most important things in the universe. So this is getting to the ethical implications, but the highest end of man is not the actualization of man.

Though in the actual, in relationship to God, there may be actualization. But God is our highest end. Yeah, well, Aristotle sees that sort of direction.

Well, let's see. I want to move now from Aristotle's metaphysics, including his natural theology, to look at his logic and epistemology. And this is going to be relatively brief, but I think it's very, very important.

By way of preamble, let me point this out: Aristotle's writings on logic and epistemology were brought together by his commentators and students after his death, under the general rubric, the organon, which means simply method. Okay. And within the organon, you find a whole variety of works.

One called the Categories. Another on Interpretation. Another, the Prior Analytics.

Another, the Posterior Analytics. Yet another, the Topics. And finally, Sophistical Refutations.

Now, we have in our anthology just a little bit from the Categories and a little bit from the Posterior Analytics. But let me just indicate the general subject matter of each. So that you can see the range of what he was up to.

The categories deal with the way in which terms, words, and terms function in our thinking. I'll come back to that in just a little while. On Interpretation deals with the logic of propositions.

Not terms, but propositions. And as by now you're well aware, a proposition is something which asserts or denies something. A proposition has the form S is P or is not P, subject, predicate, joined by a copula.

Predicating something of a subject. So he's talking about the logic of propositions in our interpretation. The Prior Analytics goes one step further and talks of the logic of syllogisms.

A syllogism is composed, of course, of propositions. As propositions are composed of terms. You see.

Typically, a syllogism has a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. From the logical relationship from which you deduce the conclusion, a proposition. So he's developing his logical scheme, his logical system, which has endured from that day until this.

Aristotelian logic is still the basic logic that is taught in logic courses. And underlies much of later logical developments. In the Posterior Analytics, he's talking about what he calls scientific reasoning.

Which is how we get to our first premise. How can we know our first premises, basic premises, are true? That's very, very important.

In the Topics, he's talking about dialectic. That was an earlier work written before he discovered the syllogism. But it's about dialectical kinds of arguments, valuable for debate, so forth.

Used in rhetoric. And the Sophistical Refutations is about logical fallacies that the sophists, he thinks, wantonly commit. In what they're doing.

So you have, really, in the Organon, an entire logic textbook. And if it were not so tediously written, well, tediously read at least, it would probably make a pretty good logic textbook. And many intro to logic textbooks have precisely that kind of chapter outline.

Or something very much like it. Now, I want to say a few words, however, about the categories. Because we've referred to that before, and you have a selection from the categories on page 282.

For five pages or so. And a selection I want you to read with care. Actually, it's the opening section.

Selection. In the Aristotle materials. And you should thank me for not opening our discussion of Aristotle with that.

I suspect you would have been frustrated, wondering why on earth this was important. Perhaps bored. And so forth.

The metaphysics is much more gripping. But in the categories, there are several things I want you to notice. One of them is the way in which he uses terms like species, genera, and differentia.

Now, there are standard terms in our day. But it's Aristotle who introduced that kind of classification of things into species. Classification of species into larger genera.

Singular genus. And larger families and groups and so forth. So this is simply his means of classification.

Differentia refer to the essential properties that differentiate one species from another. Which differentiate one genus from another. So when Aristotle speaks of humans as being rational animals or social animals, he does both.

Within the genus of animals, what differentiates the human species is rationality and sociality. Those are the differentia. What differentiates the human species from other animal species?

So that's his terminology. And you'll find that terminology is important when he gets to asking how we know the true first premises. Because unless you know the truth about some genus or species, you can infer nothing whatsoever about anything else in that genus or species.

You see? How can you argue about being unless you know something about the nature of being? How can you argue about human beings and what is good for them, morally, unless you know something about the differentia of human beings? What makes them human? You see? So in order to get the premises that he needs, he has to get at the essence, the nature, of the kinds of things he's going to be discussing. That's the first thing. Secondly, in Chapter 4, on 283, he comes back to the various categories which we initially met in metaphysics as categories of being.

Only here they're introduced as categories of thought. And he gives very clearly the list that he wants on 283, Chapter 4, of things said without combination, just by themselves as terms. Each signifies either; any word is going to signify one of these.

Either substance, or quality, or some qualification, or relationship, relative, or where, or when, or being in a position, or having, or doing, or being affected. Aristotle's categories. And his point is going to be, in logical reasoning, you don't switch in the middle of a discussion from one category to another.

You see? In the 20th century, some British philosophers in the 1950s started accusing people of making category mistakes. A category mistake is where, in the middle of a discussion, you switch categories. The classic example was when Gilbert Ryle called Descartes' mind-body dualism, two entities, mind and body, a category mistake.

Body, of course, is a substance. That's the right category there. But speaking of mind as a substance, a thing, rather than simply a quality or a function, is a category mistake.

And so the whole mind-body problem arises from a category mistake, according to Gilbert Ryle. Aristotle is concerned that in a chain of argument, you keep your terms meaning the same, rather than switching them and equivocating. Now, some of you have heard my favourite example of that before.

It goes like this. I love you, therefore I'm a lover. All the world loves a lover.

You are all the world to me; you love me. Now, guys, it doesn't work, logically or any other way. But notice the fallacy of equivocation, using one word in two different senses, is involved in the term, and it functions as one term, all the world.

All the world loves a lover, empirical generalization. You are all the world to me, value judgment. Okay? The second is a value term.

The first is a substance term. Category mistake. Okay? Confusing categories.

Now that's the kind of mistake that he wants to avoid by pointing out, if you want the middle term in a syllogism, the link between the propositions, to stand firm, it's got to mean the same thing both times. You can't switch categories. So it's part of his logical apparatus, then, to introduce those categories.

Then, in chapter five, he comes back to two senses of the word substance. Remember that? Primary substance and secondary substance. And in case you've forgotten since last week, primary substances are particulars, secondary substances are forms.

So he's doing that sort of thing, setting it up and elaborating on that primary, secondary substance distinction in the material we have from the categories. Now, what I really want to concentrate on is the posterior analytics. And this is important stuff.

Even more important. Let me say it again, just briefly, and then we'll pick it up further next time. The problem that he is facing is how we can know unchanging truths for certain. Unchanging truths about classes of things, general truths.

Now, obviously, if you want to know some general truth about a species, what you need to do is to know something about the essential nature of that species. It's differentia. It's essence.

It's form. So the question really is, how can you know the forms? How can you know the forms? Because you want your premises to be about the forms. The essential nature of something.

In order to draw further inferences that follow with equal certainty. Now, he rings the changes on the possibilities. Can we know the forms simply by sense observation? No, why not? Yes, sense observation gives us just particulars, and sense perception of particulars is relative to the angle of vision and umpteen other considerations.

So, sense observation doesn't tell you about the forms. What about innate knowledge? Plato's proposal. Well, you see, that was a good option for Plato.

Good thinking, Plato. Because if the forms are transcendent and you knew them in another realm in a previous existence, so that the memory of them is hidden in your subconscious, then it is innate. Good thinking, Plato.

But Aristotle doesn't think the forms are transcendent and doesn't think you had a previous existence when you knew them. So Plato's innate knowledge doesn't help. If they're innate, we would expect people to know them, but they don't.

Then how can we know these forms?