

History of Philosophy

12 Aristotle's God

By Dr. Arthur Holmes of Wheaton College

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes provides a comprehensive analysis of **Aristotle's metaphysical and logical systems**, focusing specifically on his concept of **God as the Unmoved Mover**. Aristotle identifies God as **pure actuality**, a being devoid of potentiality and change who serves as the **final cause**—the ultimate source of attraction—rather than an efficient cause that exerts force. The text clarifies that this divine figure is not a creator but a **self-thinking mind** whose perfection inspires the eternal motion of the cosmos. Shifting toward epistemology, Holmes examines the **Organon**, explaining how Aristotle uses **categories and syllogisms** to structure human thought and scientific reasoning. A central challenge discussed is how humans can achieve **certain knowledge of essential forms** without relying on Plato's theory of innate ideas. Ultimately, the source illustrates how Aristotle's theories of **causality and logic** established a foundational framework for later Western natural theology.

Briefing Document:

Briefing Document: Aristotle's Metaphysics, Theology, and Logic

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the philosophical teachings of Dr. Arthur Holmes regarding Aristotle's conception of God and his logical framework (the *Organon*). Aristotle's metaphysics posits that the cosmos is an eternal system of motion requiring an ultimate explanation. This explanation culminates in the "Unmoved Mover"—a being of pure actuality and the ultimate final cause. Unlike the Judeo-Christian creator, Aristotle's God does not exert force or create matter but moves

the universe through "wonderment" and "love." Complementing this metaphysics is Aristotle's logic, which provides a methodology for identifying essential natures (differentia) and avoiding "category mistakes" in the pursuit of certain, unchanging truths.

I. The Metaphysical Foundation: The Four Causes

Aristotle argues that every process of change or "becoming" must be explained through four distinct factors. These causes apply to individual objects on Earth and to the cosmos in its entirety.

- **Material Cause:** The underlying matter or substance (e.g., basic elements and the "ether" filling cosmic space).
- **Efficient Cause:** The force that exerts change (e.g., the motion of fixed stars producing changes in the atmosphere and Earth).
- **Formal Cause:** The essential nature or "essence" of the thing (e.g., the nature of stars to spin).
- **Final Cause:** The purpose or "end" toward which a thing moves.

The Cosmic Motion

Aristotle views the universe as a geocentric system where the planets and fixed stars engage in "everlasting circular locomotion." Because this motion is continuous and unchanging, it requires an ultimate causal explanation beyond the perimeter of the universe.

II. The Unmoved Mover as Pure Actuality

The "Unmoved Mover" is the conclusion of Aristotle's cosmological inquiry. This entity is the ultimate source of change but remains unchanged itself.

Key Characteristics:

- **Pure Actuality:** Every change is the actualization of a potential. Because the Unmoved Mover is the ultimate source and is perfectly good, it has no "unactualized potential." It is "pure actuality" with no possibility of change.

- **Immutability:** As a being of pure actuality, God cannot change for the better (being already perfect) or for the worse.
 - **Transcendence:** While there is debate regarding whether Aristotle was pantheistic, his writings generally suggest a transcendent being that serves as the perfection of being.
 - **Eternal Existence:** The Unmoved Mover did not "become" actualized through a process; it has always been what it is.
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III. God as Final Cause, Not Efficient Cause

A critical distinction in Aristotelian theology is that God is not a "creator" in the Judeo-Christian sense.

- **Rejection of Efficient Power:** To act as an efficient cause (exerting force) would require a process of change—moving from not exerting force to exerting it. Since God is unchanging, God cannot be an efficient cause.
 - **The Power of Attraction:** God moves the universe as a **Final Cause**. The cosmos is moved by "wonderment" and "love."
 - **A Living Cosmos:** Aristotle suggests the universe is "besouled" or alive. The souls of the fixed stars desire to be like the Unmoved Mover; their "wanting to be as actualized" maintains their eternal motion.
 - **Teleology:** Final causes operate in all natural processes (teleological). While humans are conscious of these ends, other natural entities (like flower bulbs) respond to these drives unconsciously.
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IV. The Divine Intellectual Life

Aristotle describes the mental activity of the Unmoved Mover as "thinking on its own thinking."

- **Self-Consciousness:** God cannot receive "perceptual input" from the outside world, as that would constitute being "moved" by external stimuli.

- **No New Ideas:** If God generated new imaginative ideas, it would imply an unactualized potential. Therefore, God's only activity is eternal reflection on His own perfect thoughts.
- **Detachment:** This God is "remote" and "detached," lacking personal concern for individuals (e.g., He "does not see the sparrow fall").

V. The Organon: Logic and Epistemology

Aristotle's writings on methodology, collected as the *Organon*, establish the rules for scientific reasoning and the classification of knowledge.

Components of the Organon:

Work	Subject Matter
Categories	How terms and words function in thinking.
On Interpretation	The logic of propositions (assertions/denials).
Prior Analytics	The logic of syllogisms (deductive reasoning).
Posterior Analytics	Scientific reasoning and identifying "first premises."
Topics	Dialectical arguments and debate.
Sophistical Refutations	Identification of logical fallacies.

Classification and Definition:

- **Genera and Species:** Aristotle classified the world into broad groups (genera) and specific subgroups (species).
 - **Differentia:** These are the essential properties that differentiate one species from another (e.g., "rationality" is the differentia that distinguishes humans within the genus of "animals").
 - **Category Mistakes:** In logic, one must not switch categories (e.g., moving from a "substance" term to a "quality" term) mid-argument. This "equivocation" undermines the validity of a syllogism.
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VI. Ethical and Religious Inferences

Though primarily a metaphysical construct, Aristotle's God serves moral and religious functions:

- **The Measure of All Things:** Contrary to the Sophists, Aristotle asserts that God, not man, is the measure of all things.
- **The Highest End:** The actualization of a human being is found in likeness to God. The "contemplation of God" is considered the highest human activity.
- **Metaphysical vs. Moral Perfection:** For Aristotle, that which is metaphysically perfect (complete in being) is by definition morally perfect.
- **Natural Theology:** Aristotle's work is a classic attempt to derive knowledge of God through inferences from the natural order, providing the framework for later thinkers like Thomas Aquinas.

Study Guide:

Aristotle's Metaphysics, Logic, and the Nature of God: A Study Guide

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of Aristotle's philosophical system as presented in Dr. Arthur Holmes' analysis of *Metaphysics* Book 12 and the *Organon*. It explores the nature of the Unmoved Mover, the mechanics of the cosmos, and the foundations of Aristotelian logic and epistemology.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Aristotle apply the four causes to the rotation of the cosmos?
2. Why does Aristotle conclude that God must be "pure actuality" rather than having any potentiality?

3. Explain the distinction between the "Unmoved Mover" and the "fixed stars" regarding motion.
4. Why is Aristotle's God considered a "final cause" rather than an "efficient cause"?
5. According to the text, what is the specific nature of God's mental activity?
6. How does Aristotle define "the good" for any given being, such as a dog or a student?
7. What is the "Organon," and what are its primary components?
8. Distinguish between "primary substance" and "secondary substance" as defined in *The Categories*.
9. What role do "differentia" play in Aristotle's system of classification?
10. Why does Aristotle reject Plato's theory of innate knowledge as an explanation for how we know the forms?

Part II: Quiz Answer Key

1. Aristotle argues that every process of change, including the circular motion of the planets and fixed stars, requires an explanation via material, efficient, formal, and final causes. The material cause includes the elements and ether, while the motion of fixed stars serves as the efficient cause that maintains changes throughout the atmosphere and Earth.
2. God must be pure actuality because any potentiality implies the possibility of change, and Aristotle posits an ultimate source of change that is itself unchanging. If God were not pure actuality, he could change for the worse or require improvement, which contradicts the concept of a perfect, everlasting source of motion.
3. The fixed stars are located on the outer perimeter of the universe and are in a constant state of spinning on their own axes, serving as the ultimate efficient cause for the rest of the cosmos. In contrast, the Unmoved Mover exists beyond this perimeter and does not move or change, yet it acts as the ultimate cause of the stars' motion.

4. An efficient cause must exert force, which involves a process of change from not acting to acting, a state impossible for an unchanging God. Instead, God acts as a final cause, moving the cosmos through "wonderment" or love, as things in the universe naturally desire to imitate his perfection and actuality.
 5. God's activity consists solely of "thinking on his own thinking" or self-reflection, as he cannot receive external perceptual input without being "moved" by external stimuli. Any new or imaginative ideas would imply unactualized potential, so his mental state is limited to a constant, unchanging self-consciousness.
 6. For Aristotle, the "good" is the actualization of a being's specific potential according to its essential nature. Therefore, a good dog is one that best actualizes the potential inherent in being a dog, and a good student is one who actualizes their human potential for learning.
 7. The "Organon," meaning "method," is the collection of Aristotle's works on logic and epistemology, including *Categories*, *On Interpretation*, *Prior Analytics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Topics*, and *Sophistical Refutations*. These texts provide a systematic framework for reasoning, moving from the study of individual terms to propositions, syllogisms, and scientific demonstrations.
 8. Primary substances are individual particulars, such as a specific person or object, that exist in the world. Secondary substances refer to the "forms" or the essential natures and classifications (species and genera) to which those particulars belong.
 9. Differentia are the essential properties that differentiate one species from another within the same genus. For example, while humans belong to the genus "animal," the differentia of "rationality" or "sociality" is what distinguishes the human species from other animals.
 10. Aristotle rejects innate knowledge because he does not believe the forms are transcendent or that humans existed in a previous realm where they knew them. He argues that if knowledge of the forms were innate, people would already know them, but since they do not, another explanation for acquiring knowledge is required.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes and data points from the source context to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Mechanics of the Aristotelian Universe:** Discuss how Aristotle uses the four causes to bridge the gap between the physical motion of the Earth and the metaphysical existence of the Unmoved Mover.
2. **The Limitations of Natural Theology:** Analyze the characterization of Aristotle's God as "remote" or "detached." Compare this to the "Judeo-Christian" conception of a creator mentioned in the text.
3. **Logic as a Tool for Truth:** Explain the progression of the *Organon* from terms and propositions to "scientific reasoning." Why is it vital for Aristotle to avoid "category mistakes" in this process?
4. **The Definition of Perfection:** Evaluate Aristotle's argument that "pure actuality" is synonymous with "pure goodness." How does this metaphysical definition influence his view of human ethics and the "contemplation of God"?
5. **The Epistemological Dilemma:** Aristotle rejects both sense observation and innate knowledge as sufficient means to know "unchanging truths." Based on the text, outline the problem he faces in identifying the "first premises" of scientific reasoning.

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Category Mistake	A logical error occurring when a term is switched from one category (e.g., substance) to another (e.g., quality) in the middle of an argument, often involving equivocation.
Differentia	The specific essential properties that distinguish one species from another within a broader genus.

Efficient Cause	The agent or force that exerts power to produce change or motion.
Ether	The material substance that fills the space between the planets and the outer perimeter of the fixed stars.
Final Cause	The purpose, end, or goal for which a change or process occurs; in Aristotle's theology, God serves as this cause.
Fixed Stars	Stars on the outer perimeter of the universe that spin on their axes and serve as the outer efficient cause of motion in the cosmos.
Formal Cause	The essential nature or "form" of a thing that determines what it is.
Genus	A broader classification of things that contains multiple species.
Material Cause	The physical matter or subject that undergoes change.
Organon	Meaning "method"; the collective title for Aristotle's works on logic and epistemology.
Primary Substance	Individual, particular entities (e.g., a specific person).
Pure Actuality	A state of being with no unactualized potential and therefore no possibility of change; the defining characteristic of Aristotle's God.
Secondary Substance	The forms or essential natures of things (e.g., "humanity" or "animal").
Syllogism	A logical argument consisting of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion deduced from their relationship.
Unmoved Mover	The ultimate, unchanging source of all motion in the cosmos, residing beyond the perimeter of the universe.