

THE PROOF OF THE FIRST MOVER IN *PHYSICS* VII, 1

demonstrate the existence of an unmoved mover? You say, How could one get so much from so little? And of course by it, likewise, one begins to approach further conclusions, since it's fairly reasonable that body doesn't move except by contact and being itself in motion, then the unmoved mover that we were talking about, *even here*, is not a body. So it opens the door to further conclusions as well. But just considered in and of itself it's something kind of wonderful to think that starting from that simple and obvious fact you can prove that there are beings that are not natural beings. It's amazing to me. That's all I have to say.

THE CREATOR IN ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS*

Michael Augros

For those seeking truth, my topic—what Aristotle thought about God—is a secondary matter, but one worthwhile to the extent that he had theological wisdom to impart. Wonder pursues a worthy object with desire to know it and with a certain reverence—docility, in a similar way, pursues a wise teacher with desire to understand him and with a certain fear of misunderstanding him.

My thesis is that Aristotle held that God is a creator—that God is the cause of the being of all things other than himself, in the mode of an agent, by an act of his will. One must infer this from a careful reading of his *Metaphysics*; it is not simply a matter of pointing to a single explicit and unambiguous passage. In fact, in some passages he seems to say things incompatible with my thesis, which is why the mainstream reading of Aristotle is that his God is not a creator at all.

There are three main “opposition” texts I have in mind:

[1] First there is *Metaphysics* 12.6 and 7, the principal place in all his writings where Aristotle forms a distinct argument for the existence of God—but there he appears to argue to God only as a cause of the existence of motion, not as a cause of the being of things, let alone as the cause of matter.

Michael Augros was graduated from Thomas Aquinas College in 1992 and obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Boston College in 1995. He was a tutor at Thomas Aquinas College from 1995 to 1998, and returned there as a tutor in 2009.

[2] Second there is the specific passage in *Metaphysics* 12.7¹ where Aristotle says that God must be the cause of motion in the mode of an end or object of love, since all other things cause motion by being moved in some fashion. There he seems to say that God is not an agent at all, never mind an agent responsible for the being of things.

[3] Third there is the famous text of *Metaphysics* 12.9 in which Aristotle appears to say that God has no knowledge of things outside himself, from which it would follow that he cannot be the cause of other things by willing them.

*Does Aristotle's God Know
Things Other Than Himself?*

I'll begin with the reading of Aristotle most radically opposed to my own, the one that says Aristotle's God has no knowledge of things other than himself. The main source of this reading is the following passage of his *Metaphysics*:²

Those matters which pertain to the divine understanding admit certain problems. Now of course among observable things understanding seems the most divine. Still, how it can be [divine] admits of difficulties.

For . . . whether intellect is its substance or the act of understanding is, what does it understand? Either itself or something else, of course, and either always the same thing, or sometimes something else.

Well, does it make any difference or not, whether it is understanding something good or any chance thing? Is it not rather incongruous for it to think about certain things?

Thus it is plain that it understands the most divine and honorable thing. And it does not change. For a change would be for the worse. And that would already be a certain motion.

¹ 1072b1-5.

² Book 12, Ch. 9, 1074b15-34.

First, then, if it were not an act of understanding, but a potency for that, it would be reasonable for the continuation of understanding to be laborious for it.

Second, it is plain that something will be nobler than the intellect, namely the thing understood. For understanding and thinking will belong even to the most unworthy one who is thinking. Hence this is to be avoided. For of course not seeing is nobler than seeing certain things. Which would not be if mere understanding were the best thing. Therefore it understands itself, since it is indeed the best.

And its thinking is a thinking of thinking.

There is a similar passage in his *Eudemian Ethics*.³

When Aristotle says "of course not seeing is nobler than seeing certain things," he seems to say that it is simply better not to know certain things than to know them. Were that true, then since whatever it is simply better not to be than to be must be denied of God (for instance it is simply better not to be a body and not to have the sense of smell), one would have to deny that God knows things inferior to himself, or at least one would have to deny that God knows base things which it is simply better not to know.

But this reading cannot stand. Aristotle maintains that all knowledge is honorable,⁴ and he specifically defends the knowledge of lowly natures.⁵ And even if someone were to say that such knowledge is not beneath us, but it is beneath God, that cannot stand, either. When he critiques Empedocles'

³ "The fact that God is not of such a nature as to need a friend postulates that man, who is like God, also does not need one. Yet according to this argument the virtuous man will not think of anything; for God's perfection does not permit of this, but he is too perfect to think of anything else besides himself. And the reason is that for us well-being has reference to something other than ourselves, but in his case he is himself his own well-being." *Eudemian Ethics*, 7.12 1245b13-16, H. Rackham translation, Loeb Classical Library 285, edited by G. P. Goold, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992 reprint, p. 445.

⁴ *De Anima*, opening line of the whole book.

⁵ *Parts of Animals* 1.5 645a5-35.

theory of knowledge, Aristotle makes it plain that on his own view God knows things other than himself, and indeed knows base things like strife. Here is one passage from *Metaphysics* 3.4:

Hence it also follows on [Empedocles'] theory that God most blessed is less wise than all others; for he does not know all the elements; for he has in him no strife, and knowledge is of the like by the like. *For by earth*, [Empedocles] says, *we see earth, by water water, by ether godlike ether, by fire wasting fire, love by love, and strife by gloomy strife.*⁶

Here is a similar passage from *De Anima* 1.5:

[According to Empedocles' theory of knowledge,] each of the principles will have far more ignorance than knowledge, for though each of them will know one thing, there will be many of which it will be ignorant. Empedocles at any rate must conclude that his God is the least intelligent of all beings, for of him alone is it true that there is one thing, Strife, which he does not know, while there is nothing which mortal beings do not know, for there is nothing which does not enter into their composition.⁷

Aristotle finds fault with Empedocles' theory since one of its consequences is that mortal beings can know all things whereas God cannot, and another is that we can know strife but God cannot. This is no mere argument *ad hominem*, as though Aristotle himself thought the consequence to be true, but Empedocles did not wish to admit it; the absurdity is not that Empedocles contradicts himself, but that "God most blessed is less wise than all others," and this absurdity follows from saying that "he does not know all the elements." Clearly Aristotle thinks we must say that God knows all things, or at least all things that we can know.

⁶ *Metaphysics* 3.4 1000b4-8, Ross translation.

⁷ *De Anima* 1.5 410b3-7, J. A. Smith translation, as found in McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, op. cit.

How, then, should we understand *Metaphysics* 12.9 where Aristotle says that there are some things it is better not to see than to see? We can understand it as follows. The difficulty about the divine thought is that it must be the most perfect and blessed, and yet it is not easy to say how this can be so. One difficulty is that thinking is laborious for us, in part because we must apply our power of understanding to the act of understanding, since in us the power is not the same as the act. We must therefore deny this distinction between power and act in God, lest his thinking be laborious. This simplicity is already rather strange to us, but a greater difficulty arises from the divine immobility. Since Aristotle's God is altogether immune from change, he can think of only one thing forever—any change of his mind is both impossible and undesirable (since it would be a change from the best condition). But how can his thought be perfect, how can it be complete and self-sufficient, if it is only of one thing? We ourselves achieve a kind of completeness in our contemplative lives by a succession from object to object—were we to think of only one thing forever, like a triangle, or a horse, or a star, we would be far inferior to someone able to think of these and of many other things besides, or of all things, even if he had to think of them in succession. Someone might object that the only thing that matters is the mode of the understanding itself. As long as God is understanding *something* perfectly well, through and through, it does not matter what it is he is thinking about—as if the mode of understanding alone mattered, and the object made no difference. But that is plainly false. We ourselves are better off when thinking less perfectly about more perfect things than when thinking more perfectly about less perfect ones, and we are better off not thinking of baser things at all if that can be done only at the expense of thinking about nobler ones—none of which would be true unless the dignity of thinking derived principally from the object. We must therefore assign to the divine thought a single object which

is entirely self-sufficient and universal, so that understanding it will be an adequate principle of complete understanding. That object is nothing else than the divine thought itself—or the nature of thought itself subsisting by itself. If one understood the whole nature of being itself, one would thereby understand all things; so too, in understanding the whole nature of understanding, Aristotle's God understands all things able to proceed from understanding (which is the same as all things simply), but not by any other thought than the thought by which he knows the nature of his own subsisting thought.

This reading of Aristotle's God completes a general pattern one finds in his ranking of various kinds of knowledge. It is typical in Aristotle that the higher knows both itself and the lower better than the lower knows either itself or the higher. Such is the relationship between 1. man and beast, 2. reason and sense, 3. statesmanship and the various arts, 4. wisdom and the particular sciences.

Of course reason does not know the singular as the senses do, and man does not, in knowing himself, know each species of animal distinctly, and the statesman does not (as such) possess every art, nor does metaphysics reach every conclusion of the particular sciences—but this is due not to the perfections of man, of reason, of the statesman, and of human wisdom, but to their limitations. Wisdom without qualification is described by Aristotle as a *knowledge of all things*—but when he is speaking of human wisdom he has to add the qualifier: *as far as possible*.⁸ We cannot know all things in their full distinction and particularity, but must be content to know them all in general. Here it is important to remember that general knowledge is not perfect in Aristotle's view, but imperfect.⁹ And it is partly for this reason that Aristotle regards wisdom

⁸ *Metaphysics* 1.2 982a9: "We suppose first, then, that the wise man knows all things as far as possible, although he has not knowledge of each of them in detail."

⁹ *Physics* 1.1.

without qualification as a divine possession, since God alone can have it, or God more than anyone else.¹⁰ No one else can know all things simply and without qualification.

It is also a universal pattern in Aristotle that the being with superior knowledge governs the inferior and directs it to its end. One of the marks of the wise which he enumerates is that they are fit to give orders, and others less wise should obey them.¹¹ Then if God is the wisest of all,¹² as Aristotle says he is, he must be the most fit to govern all things, which Aristotle says he does.¹³ But it makes no sense to say that God governs all things if he does not know all things. Hence it is Aristotle's view that God knows all things.

Does Aristotle Say God

Is a Cause Only as an End, Not as an Agent?

Let's move now to the next common interpretation of Aristotle which would preclude his God from being a creator. It is commonly believed that his God is a cause only in the manner of an end, as an object of love pursued by movers and agents, while he himself actively produces no motion or becoming or being. The passage usually cited for this reading is this one, drawn from the *Metaphysics*:¹⁴

That there is "that for the sake of which" in unchangeable things is shown by a distinction. For "that for the sake of which" is (a) some being for whose good [an action is done], or (b) something at which [the action aims]; and of these the latter is [found in unchangeable things] but the former is not. And it causes motion as being loved, whereas all other things cause motion by being moved.

¹⁰ *Metaphysics* 1.2 983a10.

¹¹ *Metaphysics* 1.2 982a19.

¹² *Metaphysics* 1.2 983a10.

¹³ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a15.

¹⁴ *Metaphysics* 12.7 1072b1-5.

It sounds as though Aristotle is saying here that anything which causes motion in any sense other than in the manner of an end must be a moved mover. Hence God, who is an unmoved mover, does not cause motion except in the manner of an end.¹⁵

But there is a logical misstep in reading Aristotle thus. What he says is "All other things cause motion by being moved," that is, all things other than the final cause, or the ultimate final cause. He does not deny that this immobile final cause might also be called a cause in some other sense. In a similar way, one might say that the principal soldier must be the one whose will all the other soldiers desire to carry out, and whose will is therefore the end of all military action—otherwise, we will be stuck with the principal soldier being someone whose action is for the sake of executing the will of some other soldier, which is absurd. But it does not follow that the will of the principal soldier, since it is the end, cannot be also the power which sets other soldiers in motion by giving them orders. (Or we might say that the soul must be that for the sake of which the body does all that it does, since it is as it were the unmoved mover of the body; but it does not follow that the soul is not also the active principle of all animate motion in the body.¹⁶)

What Aristotle really intends to show is that the first mover, the first active principle of motion, must also be the same as the ultimate end. This is the solution to a specific problem he sets up at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*,¹⁷ namely whether there is one wisdom, one science of first causes, or many. It is hard to see how there could be one science of first causes if the first causes were simply many and mutually independent—and yet it would be strange if wisdom, the supreme know-

¹⁵ Cf. *De Anima* 3.10 433b12–20.

¹⁶ *De Anima* 2.4 415b10. Aristotle maintains that the soul is the mover of the body, the end of the body, and the form of the body.

¹⁷ *Metaphysics* 3.2 996b1–25.

ledge, did not also have the greatest unity, since the movement of the mind is from reasoning to understanding, from the particular to the universal, from the many to the one. On the other hand, each of the kinds of causes seems to have a claim to being the object of wisdom—especially the first mover and the ultimate end. But we cannot collapse these two causes into each other, it seems, since the *beginning* of movement seems to be opposed to the *end* of it.¹⁸

Aristotle resolves the difficulty by identifying the first agent with the last end, or the source of motion with its goal. He avoids the problem that the source of motion and the end of motion must be opposed by distinguishing the meanings of "end." When the "end" for the sake of which a motion takes place means a good *produced or provided* by the motion itself, the mover and the end cannot be the same thing, since the mover is there at the beginning of the motion, but the end is not. But if the "end" of a motion means a good already existing before the motion, and for the sake of proximity to which something else is moved toward it, such an "end" can be the same as the first mover producing the motion.

For Aristotle, then, there is only one wisdom after all, since his God is both the source of all motion in the sense of an agent and the end for the sake of which it all takes place.

Aristotle is fairly explicit about this when he explains the superiority of his view to that of prior thinkers:

We must not fail to observe how many impossible or paradoxical results confront those who hold different views from our own, . . . *how* the good is a principle they do not say—whether as end or as mover or as form. . . . Anaxagoras makes the good a motive principle; for his Reason moves things. But it moves them for an end, which must be something other than itself, except according to our way of

¹⁸ Aristotle sets up this problem in *Metaphysics* 3.2 996b1–25.

stating the case, for, on our view, the medical art is in a sense health.¹⁹

Anaxagoras' *nous*, recall, was a primordial mind who segregated the things mixed up in matter and ordered them, but *nous* was not trying to satisfy some desire in all things to become like *nous*. That is because *nous* was not the cause of matter, but only came upon it—so that matter could not be essentially a desire to be like *nous*. *Nous* was therefore more like the Demi-urge in the *Timaeus*, who acted by “looking to the forms,” and so acted for the sake of and in imitation of something other than himself. Such a state of affairs divorces the first agent from the last end, and would leave us, as it were, with two wisdoms, one for each kind of cause. Moreover, we are left with a first being which is not self-sufficiently good, whose goodness is derived, which Aristotle deems an impossibility.²⁰ And, of course, such a *nous* could not be a first mover after all, if it is acting for the sake of an end outside itself, since its desire to act is moved by another.

How does Aristotle's understanding avoid these impossibilities? By allowing the first agent to act for the sake of itself. It does not seek to benefit itself, since that is impossible, seeing as it is altogether unchangeable, but it is the end of its own action in the sense that it is a good somehow communicable to other things, to which other things can take on some resemblance, and it is for the sake of this communication that it acts. Aristotle's God, then, is the freest of all beings, the only thing whose outgoing action is purely for its own sake, or self-referential. It is at once the alpha and the omega, the beginning of all motion, and the end for the sake of which it takes place.

Aristotle boasts that he is not stuck with a first being which moves things “for the sake of an end which must be some-

¹⁹ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a25–1075b10.

²⁰ *Metaphysics* 14.4, 1091b15–20.

thing other than it,” since on his view “the medical art is in a sense health.” What does he mean by this? He means that the mind behind all motion is not moved by a desire for something other than itself, but rather, “the medical art is in a sense health,” that is, the knowledge which is the mover is also in some way the good toward which that knowledge moves other things. The medical art is the source of medical action, it is the mover, but it also consists in a form which it is the goal of that art to communicate to others, namely the form of health. Aristotle must be saying, then, that God, the knowledge which is that toward which all motion tends, is also the knowledge from which all motion proceeds. Otherwise he is no better off than Anaxagoras, who has divorced the First Agent from the Last End, and we could take Aristotle to task thus: “Anaxagoras was wrong to make the first agent something other than the last end, since an agent cannot act except for an end, and so an agent acting for an end other than itself must be moved by something other than itself—but you are equally wrong to make the last end something other than the first agent, since the last end cannot even BE an end unless there be some action toward it.”

In order to preserve the self-sufficiency of the first agent, Anaxagoras would have to place the ultimate end of its action within it. Aristotle sees this, and sees that conversely, to preserve the self-sufficiency of the ultimate end, he cannot place it outside the first agent capable of making it an end.

Even his choice of example is telling. Wishing to show that the mover and the end can coincide, he chose an *art* as his example.²¹ Such a cause belongs to a Mind and proceeds by knowledge and consists in the form to be conferred upon some matter. Is he not insinuating that this is how God is a

²¹ That he thinks art can be a mover is plain from many passages, e.g. of “health, disease, body; the moving cause is the medical art.” (*Metaphysics* 12.4 1070b28.)

cause? He is an artist, as it were—an artist who, because he is altogether self-sufficient, is also the model for his self-portrait, the universe.

The language is reminiscent of *De Anima* 3.8, where Aristotle says that the soul is “in a way” all things: “*hé psuché ta ónta pōs esti pánta.*” This “*pōs*”, or “somehow,” or “*quoddammodo,*” must be put in as an important qualifier, since the human soul is not all things materially (nor actually, for that matter, nor by one power is it all things), but it can possess all kinds of forms immaterially and intelligibly. Likewise when he says

hé gar iatriké estí pōs hé hugíeia,

The medical art is somehow health,

he means that the art is not a material form, like health in a body, but an intelligible form—and yet on the other hand it is the very same form, just existing in a different manner.

So too, then, are the natural forms in this world likenesses of the divine form or actuality—but only “somehow,” because they do not have the same mode of existence in the first mover as they have in matter (nor are they separate, there, since they are all thought in the one divine thought).

Even more explicitly, Aristotle elsewhere says:

For the medical art is in some sense health, and the building art is the form of the house, and man begets man; further, besides these there is that which as first of all things moves all things.²²

Here he again compares the way the first of beings moves all things to the way medical art produces health, and to the way the art of building produces a house. Could he more explicitly have said that the first being is a Mover who acts like an artist? And that natures therefore are nothing but a sample of the divine art?

²² *Metaphysics* 12.4 1070b30–35. See also 12.3 1070a30, “the medical art is the form of health”.

Is Aristotle's God

a Cause of Motion Only, Not of Being?

Very well, but on this reading Aristotle's God might still be thought to be a cause of motion only, not of being, and hence he would not be a creator.

In fact, it might seem that since he believes the world of bodies and matter never came to be, therefore it needs no cause for its being. But one could just as well reason thus: “Since Aristotle thought motion never began, and certain motions are necessary, therefore he did not think that there was a reason why motion exists, or why necessary motion exists, but only why this or that contingent motion exists.” That is plainly false! Aristotle's argument for God's existence is founded on the premise that there must be a universal cause for the existence and necessity of motion, not just a cause for each particular contingent motion.

It is also often said that for Aristotle form is the cause of being, and that was sufficient, so that it was not necessary in his view to posit an agent cause of being but only of coming to be. In *Metaphysics* 8.6, for example, he says that things which are a unified multitude, such as a number or a composite of matter and form, need a cause, but he identifies no other cause for these than the mover²³ responsible for the matter or components going from potency to act, and he says that each of the things separate from matter (whether sensible or intelligible matter) has no “reason outside itself for being one, nor for being a kind of being.”²⁴ So he appears to say that composite beings need an external cause for their coming to be, but not for their being, while simple forms or separated substances do not need any outside cause at all.

Actually, he is saying no such thing. He is only address-

²³ 1045b22.

²⁴ 1045b5.

ing the question "What is the cause of unity in a composite thing?" If we are asking, for example, "What unites wood with the form of a house?", the answer is "A builder," and if we are asking "What unites this part of the plane with the form of a circle?", the answer is "A geometer." But if we ask "What unites the parts of what-it-is-to-be-a-circle?", there is no builder or mover or maker responsible for that—the genus and the differences are of themselves one nature. One might as well seek an agent cause which made 3 into an odd number, as though it were in potency to that. Again, if we ask "What makes the canine nature into one individual?", the answer is "the generators, who form this matter." But if we ask "What makes a separated substance into one individual?", the answer is "it is one through itself, since such a nature cannot be multiplied in many individuals, since it is not in matter."

In other words, such passages in Aristotle simply do not speak to the question whether a substance might depend upon an outside cause for its being.

That Aristotle thought one substance can be the cause of being in another can be gathered from what he says about the necessary. For example, he says

Some things owe their necessity to something other than themselves; others do not, but are themselves the source of necessity in other things. Therefore the necessary in the primary and strict sense is the simple; for this does not admit more states than one. . . . If, then, there are any things that are eternal and unmovable, nothing compulsory or against their nature attaches to them.²⁵

From this it is plain that Aristotle thinks one necessary being can be the cause of necessity in another, not only in a logical sense,²⁶ but even among beings outside the mind which are

²⁵ *Metaphysics* 5.5 1015b10–15.

²⁶ As one geometric or logical truth can be the cause of necessity in another.

eternal and unmovable. Still, one might suppose he is thinking here that unmovable separated substances, which have a necessary being, are the cause of the necessity of motion, and are not the cause of the being of any substances. But Aristotle also says that the substances studied in natural philosophy have causes of their being which are studied only in metaphysics (or first philosophy) when he says

[First] philosophy is rightly called the science of the truth. For the end of theoretical [philosophy] is truth, and [the end] of practical [philosophy] is the work. . . . And we do not know the true without the cause. But compared to others each thing is called the most, by which the univocation inheres also in other things. For example, fire is the hottest, just as it is the cause of heat for other things. So too the most true [is] that which is for posterior things the cause that they are true. On account of which it is necessary that the principles of things always existing be most true. For [they are] not sometimes true, sometimes not true, nor for them is there any cause that they are, but rather they [are] for others. Wherefore as each thing relates to [the fact] that it is, so also to [its] truth.²⁷

Aristotle is here arguing that wisdom, or first philosophy, is rightly called "the science of the truth." To show this, he must show that the title belongs most appropriately to first philosophy, since every science studies truth and can in some sense be called "a science of the truth".

To do this, he first shows the title belongs more to first philosophy than to any practical part of philosophy because practical philosophy does not study truth as its end or purpose, whereas theoretical philosophy does—and first philosophy is theoretical, as he showed in the first book of the *Metaphysics*.²⁸

²⁷ *Metaphysics* 2.1 993b19–31.

²⁸ *Metaphysics* 1.1 981b19, 1.2 982b11–27.

Second, he must show that the title "the science of the truth" belongs more to first philosophy than to the other parts of theoretical philosophy, namely mathematics and natural philosophy. He does this by showing that the things considered in first philosophy, which studies first causes, are *the most true*—hence it is "the science of truth" most of all. And he shows that the things it studies are "most true" from the fact that the things it studies are the *causes* of the being and truth of the things studied in the other sciences. The argument makes no sense unless Aristotle believes that the first causes studied in metaphysics are the causes of the being and truth of all the things studied, for example, in the philosophy of nature—including the human soul and the celestial bodies.²⁹ Hence he says that the causes studied by metaphysics are "most true" since they are the principles and causes of being even for "things always existing."

But the chief substances studied in metaphysics are not the forms of bodies,³⁰ and hence they must cause the being of bodies not as forms, but as outside causes, that is, as agents. Hence when Aristotle here invokes the general premise that "when something belongs to many things, but to all of them because of one, it belongs most to the cause,"³¹ he bolsters it by using fire and heat as an example. This is not an example of formal causality, nor of final causality, but of agent causality.

Particular passages aside, Aristotle's whole understanding of the universe and its order to God makes little sense except

²⁹ That celestial bodies pertain to natural science, according to Aristotle, is plain from *Metaphysics* 12.1 1069a30–40, and from many other passages.

³⁰ See *Metaphysics* 12.7 1073a4, where Aristotle concludes to the existence of substance which is eternal, unchangeable, and separate from sensible things.

³¹ I am paraphrasing his statement that "among others each thing is called the most by which the univocation inheres also in the other things."

on the supposition that he holds God to be the cause of the being of all things.

The highest celestial sphere, for example, has no active power of its own to move as it does,³² but it is moved by the first being, the first and unmoved mover, God,³³ and yet this motion is natural to that first mobile.³⁴ So the outermost sphere *wants* to be moved in the manner in which God wishes to move it. Now why should that be so, if God is not the author of that sphere? Here we have a perfect matching of mover and mobile, a matching which is the basis of all subsequent natural order—but the matching itself is a pure coincidence, if God is not the author of it.

Let's descend further into Aristotle's universe, bearing in mind his categorization of substances. According to him, there are corruptible mobile substances (such as plants and animals), there are incorruptible mobile substances (the celestial bodies), and there are incorruptible immobile substances (the unmoved movers).³⁵ Among the unmoved movers or immobile substances, of course, he distinguishes between those whose desire to move things is itself moved by love,³⁶ and the substance which is simply the object of love and whose desire is not moved by some good other than itself. The latter he considers to be separate from the order of the universe, the principle of that order, and not a part of it, and he calls this substance the leader³⁷ of the universe, the first being,³⁸ and God.

³² *Physics* 8.10 267b18–27. The motion is eternal, and requires an infinite power (according to Aristotle), and no infinite power can reside in a body (again, according to Aristotle).

³³ *Metaphysics* 12.8 1073a25.

³⁴ *De Caelo* 1.2–3.

³⁵ *Metaphysics* 12.1 1069a30, 12.6 1071b1–5.

³⁶ *Metaphysics* 12.7 1072b1–5.

³⁷ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a12–16.

³⁸ *Metaphysics* 12.8 1073a24.

Such a being is certainly not the form of a celestial body,³⁹ or the form of the universe,⁴⁰ and it does not take orders from anyone, but only gives them, and there is only one such substance, not only in kind, but in number as well.⁴¹ Aristotle is certainly willing to call all the separated substances "gods,"⁴² but even for him there is only one principal deity, and this is the one we are accustomed to call "God" (with a capital "G"). The inferior gods or separated substances were, according to Aristotle, at the service of the one God, executing his will by moving the series of concentric celestial spheres, with the outer ones containing and governing the more inner ones, and the inner ones containing and governing and causing eternal generations in the sublunary world of corruptible bodies.

Now, the very imagery in this Aristotelian universe suggests that his God has knowledge of all beings and is the cause of the being of all things. Eternal and circular motion is an image of everlasting and self-dependent and immobile actuality, that is to say eternal being, which for God is the same as his eternal self-thinking. The divine mind is activity—hence motion. But it is also unchanging and always about itself—hence circular motion, motion by which a body does not change its place, and by which it moves around itself or within itself. The sphere is also an image of completeness and containment. That is appropriate because the divine mind contains in its own substance the actuality or form of all things, as the art of medicine in some way contains all that it aims to impart;

³⁹ In *Metaphysics* 12.8 1073a24–25, Aristotle says that the first mover and first being is not movable either *per se* or *per accidens*, whereas even "the musical" is movable *per accidens*, just because it belongs to something in motion (*Metaphysics* 11.11 1067b1).

⁴⁰ It is plain from *Metaphysics* 12.10 that Aristotle distinguishes between the order of the universe and the leader or principle of that order.

⁴¹ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1076a1–5, and also 12.8 1074a35–40.

⁴² *Metaphysics* 12.8 1074b10.

accordingly, the outermost sphere moved by God,⁴³ in order to complete the image, should also contain all other things—which it does. In turn each mover of each inferior sphere imitates the divine thought by making its own circular movement with an eternal body; and as each contains fewer things, so too the sphere of its knowledge has complete mastery over fewer things, and it knows the things above itself only imperfectly—it has *contact* with what is above itself, but does not *comprehend* it.

Now if we were to suppose, as some do, that the God of Aristotle neither knows nor actuates anything outside himself, this behavior of the separated substances becomes all but unintelligible. In what will their love for him consist, such that it should move them to cause motion in spheres and generations in lower bodies? If we suppose that God knows nothing other than himself, and is quite unaware of the existence of the universe, of motion, of lesser intelligences, then surely they do not act for the sake of pleasing him or keeping friendship with him. He gives them no orders. And if he is unchangeable, they do not act for the sake of benefiting him. Then for what? To imitate him? But on this account, they would be more like him if they were to ignore things inferior to themselves entirely, and if they were to refrain from moving things, and thus become more like God, the most indifferent and ineffectual of all beings.

Even after allowing that God knows himself and other things and issues orders, the life of the separated substances and the will of God still make little sense unless God not only knows all things, but gives being to them all. After all, we have seen that he cannot act except for the sake of conferring a likeness of himself upon other things, as the medical art acts for the sake of producing a likeness of itself in things. So

⁴³ That God moves the outermost of the spheres is clear from *Metaphysics* 12.8 1073a25–33.

either the natures of things are likenesses of God which come forth from him, or else they are not and God cannot possibly care for their being or perpetuation. But plainly Aristotle's God cares for the perpetuation of beings, as is plain in this passage, drawn from *Generation and Corruption*:

Now generation and corruption will be continuous forever . . . And this happens reasonably; for in all things we observe that nature always desires what is better, and it is better to be than not to be . . . , but since it is impossible for all things to exist on account of their being far away from the principle, God completed the universe in the remaining way, producing continuous generation. For in this way would being be perpetuated most of all, because always becoming by generation is close to substance.⁴⁴

One can argue also from the opposite end of the universe, from the bottom, from the desire of all other things by their very nature to imitate the divine and to share in immortality. There is no doubt that Aristotle conceives of all things in this fashion. Subrational natures have no knowledge of their own and yet, according to Aristotle, they strive to be as godlike as possible.⁴⁵ Why on earth should that be? It seems an absurd cosmic coincidence that all things, neither made by God nor directed by him nor even known by him, nor (in most cases) capable of knowing him, somehow fall into one single ordered universe because they "desire" him. That they should have unconscious tendencies toward divine resemblance is indeed intelligible if the natures themselves are likenesses of the divine, having been produced by God. Otherwise, the position becomes incoherent, and Aristotle's unified universe falls to pieces.

⁴⁴ *Generation and Corruption* 2.10, 336b25-35.

⁴⁵ See, for example, *De Anima* 2.4 415a25-415b8, where Aristotle says that the most natural act for living things is to reproduce, and this is for the sake of their partaking as much as they can in the eternal and the divine.

One indication that Aristotle thinks natural forms are produced by God comes up in his discussion of the principles of nature, namely form, matter, and privation. Contrary to the Platonists, he distinguishes between matter and privation. In arguing against their view, he draws upon a premise which he shares with them, namely that every natural form is something divine, good, and desirable.⁴⁶ How can we understand this premise? A host of similar occasional statements in Aristotle, such as "All things by nature have something divine in them,"⁴⁷ become unintelligible if we suppose that the divine mind is not the producer and governor of all natures. That each thing might be forced from the outside to imitate the divine—say, by the separated intelligences who move the celestial spheres yet are themselves beneath the God who is pure act, and whom they all "desire"—that might remain intelligible in some way. But to say that each thing has something divine in it "by nature" is absurd, or a mere figure of speech signifying nothing in particular, if God does not produce the natures of things other than himself and if—stranger still—the natures of things need no cause at all (according to the "essentialist" view commonly attributed to Aristotle).

"God and nature make [*poiousin*] nothing that is pointless,"⁴⁸ says Aristotle in the *De Caelo*. Presumably, he does not mean that God "makes nothing pointless" simply because God makes nothing at all. Rather, he is saying that, like nature, God makes all things for a purpose. So God is not just an end, but he also makes things for an end (namely himself). And to put these two together as he does, saying "God and nature make nothing pointless," is to say that the same things are made by both—such as the natural bodies he is discussing in that context in the *De Caelo*—and hence nothing in the

⁴⁶ *Physics* 1.9, 192a17.

⁴⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.13 1153b33.

⁴⁸ *De Caelo* 1.4, end.

world is pointless, according to Aristotle, since everything is made by nature and by God, neither of which do anything without a purpose.

Aristotle probably thought that the lesser separated substances were incapable of causing the being of material things, but he makes them imitate the divine cause by producing motion, as though they were incapable of being universal causes of being, like God, but at least they could be universal causes of becoming in some pre-existing matter, and could thus impart a share of immortality upon inferior species. This fits with his general premise that the one to whom being and truth belongs most is the cause of these in all other things.

It does not appear tenable, then, that Aristotle could have believed that matter exists independently of God. Were that so, the tendency toward likeness to God, found in all things, would either be an accident—which is an idea utterly foreign to Aristotle—or else it would be imposed on them by God, whereas Aristotle sees the tendency as written into the very natures of things. All substantial form, for Aristotle, imitates and strives for the divine as such. And prime matter is itself a desire for form and hence for the divine. The very principles of beings, then, seek the divinity, not by knowledge and choice, but simply by what they are, and this can be for no other reason than that they derive from him.

At the outset I said that there is no single, explicit passage in the writings of Aristotle in which he declares that God is the cause of all beings in the mode of an agent and by an act of his will. But there is one passage that comes close. It is this:

On the one hand, the principle and first of beings is immobile both according to itself and according to what is incidental; on the other hand, it produces the first, everlasting, and single movement.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Metaphysics* 12.8 1073a24–25.

It is easy to brush by such a passage. But attend closely to the words, and they prove to be very telling. Aristotle has just called the first mover “the principle of beings,” *hé arché tōn óntōn*, and “the first of beings,” *tō prōton tōn óntōn*.

Let's consider first “the principle of beings.” *Arché* or “principle” is the first entry in Aristotle's philosophical lexicon, *Metaphysics* 5. After distinguishing several meanings of the word, he concludes that “it is common to all principles to be the first from which something is or comes to be or is known.” When Aristotle calls the first mover “the principle of beings,” he is therefore saying that God is the first thing from which all beings are. This could mean that all beings exist for God's sake—that is certainly true. Aristotle in fact ends his explanation of the word *arché* by remarking that it can mean the final cause, since the good and the beautiful begin the knowledge and movement of many things. But this is the last major sense of the word, the last to come to mind, since it is surprising to say that one meaning of “beginning” is “end”. And even on this rather forced interpretation, one is left wondering why all beings have God as their end—the answer can only be because they also have God as their beginning, that is, they come forth from him as from an agent cause.

So too when Aristotle calls God “the first of beings,” this might be interpreted to mean first in dignity or first in time. Certainly God is first in dignity—but then why say “*first* of beings” rather than “*noblest* of beings”? And while God is first in time in some sense, this would not (for Aristotle) make God the “first of beings,” since the other unmoved movers also always were, and even the celestial bodies always were. We can get a clue to what Aristotle means by “first of beings” by noting that “first” is defined by “before,” and there is a sense of “before” which refers precisely to *being*. When explaining the chief meanings of “before” in *Metaphysics* 5.11, Aristotle says

THE CREATOR IN ARISTOTLE'S *METAPHYSICS*

Other things [are called 'before' and 'after'] . . . with respect to nature and substance, that is, when these things can be without those, but not those without these, a distinction which Plato used.⁵⁰

So when Aristotle calls God "the first of beings" the most natural reading is this: God is the being which can be without any others, but they cannot be without him. This is at least compatible with saying that God causes all other beings by his choice. And he says explicitly about the order of the universe that God does not depend upon the order, but the order depends on him.⁵¹

Coming back to *árché*, there is another sense of that word which Aristotle distinguishes in *Metaphysics* 5.1 that he might wish to bring to mind when he calls God the *árché* of beings. He says:

that at whose will mobile things are moved and changeable things are changed, such as the political authorities and oligarchies and monarchies and tyrannies, are called *archai*, and also the arts, and especially the architectonic ones.

Both arts and rulers are called *árchai*. But Aristotle has called God the ruler of the universe,⁵² and so when he calls him the "*árché* of beings" he gives us to understand that God is the "prince of beings" or the "king of beings," at whose mere will things are and come to be. And Aristotle has also called God an art, that is, a knowledge which aims to communicate its form to other things, like the art of medicine. In calling God the "*árché* of beings," he therefore gives us to understand that God is the "architect" of the universe. On both understandings, God is a voluntary agent with knowledge of things other than himself.

⁵⁰ *Metaphysics* 5.11 1019a1-5.

⁵¹ *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a15.

⁵² *Metaphysics* 12.10 1075a15, 1076a5.